

# Child of the Age or Little Napoleon? Two Russian Responses to *The Red and the Black*

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In the early 1830s a new character emerged in the European novel: the social aspirant, who is passionately driven yet also disciplined and cunning. Ralph Waldo Emerson would later dub the real-world models of such characters “little Napoleons,” reflecting their frequent devotion to the original parvenu of postrevolutionary Europe.<sup>1</sup> Epitomized by Julien Sorel in Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, the little Napoleon can be seen as an evolutionary link between the Byron’s titanic outcasts (not to mention romantic images of Napoleon himself) and the transgressive, would-be “superman” that fascinated writers and philosophers later in the century. In the Russian tradition, the two works that first responded to Stendhal’s innovation are Pushkin’s “The Queen of Spades” (1833) and Lermontov’s unfinished novel, *Princess Ligovskaya* (1836).

Numerous scholars have noted the resemblances between “The Queen of Spades” and *The Red and the Black*.<sup>2</sup> Pushkin praised Stendhal’s novel in a letter soon after it appeared in 1830, and his story can be connected to it on a number of levels.<sup>3</sup> The strongest textual reminiscence—hard to miss, one thinks, considering the proximity of the texts’ publication—occurs when Hermann plagiarizes love letters during his underhanded courtship of Lizaveta, the old countess’ ward. Stendhal’s hero, Julien Sorel, also copies out letters to woo a

<sup>1</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Napoleon, or Man of the World,” <http://user.xmission.com/~seldom74/emerson/napoleon.html> (last accessed July 26, 2017). See also Georg Lukács, “Dostoevsky,” in *Marxism and Human Liberation: Essays on History, Culture, and Revolution*, trans. René Wellek (New York, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>Viktor Shklovskii, “Spor o Pushkine,” *Znamia* 1 (1937): 233; Robert Louis Jackson, “Napoleon in Russian Literature,” *Yale French Studies* 26 (1960): 108; Paul Debreczeny, *The Other Pushkin: A Study of Alexander Pushkin’s Prose Fiction* (Stanford, 1983), 209; and Larisa Vol’pert, *Pushkin i Frantsiia* (St. Petersburg, 2009), 316.

<sup>3</sup>Letter to E. M. Khitrovo, May 18–25, 1831, in Aleksandr Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 16 tt.* (PSS) (Moscow-Leningrad, 1937–59) 14: 166.

woman he does not love. While there is no direct evidence that Lermontov knew *The Red and the Black*, Larisa Vol'pert makes a strong case for the novel's influence on *Ligovskaya*.<sup>4</sup> She notes a textual parallel in Lermontov's opening scene, in which the ambitious clerk Stanislav Krasinsky is nearly crushed under the carriage of the novel's main protagonist, Georges Pechorin. When Sorel has just arrived in Paris, he falls off his horse in the middle of the street. The young Count Norbert advises him to be more careful: "there are too many carriages, and all with reckless drivers too! Once you're down, their tilburys will roll right over you; they're not going to risk their horses' mouths by pulling up short."<sup>5</sup> Lermontov may have taken this image of inequality and indifferent violence in the bustling capital and used it to motivate the conflict between his two characters.

This article addresses how the reception of the little Napoleon figure in these two Russian works is contaminated with a second figure, which emerges before Byron's titans but also develops under their influence—the romantic archetype of the "child of the age" (*enfant du siècle*).<sup>6</sup> If Stendhal's Sorel can be understood as developing in dialectical opposition to the child of the age, Pushkin's Hermann appears to reject and undermine this literary historical development. In *Ligovskaya* Lermontov makes a quite sincere attempt to incorporate aspects of the little Napoleon, but the experiment proves a failure. Nonetheless, the end result is extremely productive, as Lermontov retreats to a more traditional portrait of the child of the age in his masterpiece, *A Hero of Our Time*.

This question stretches beyond the confines a genre study would allow. Generically, all three of these texts are hybrids that defy simple categorization. Stendhal's novel, for example, shares much with the *Bildungsroman* tradition but also resists it. A more appropriate definition would position *The Red and the Black* within what Lionel Trilling called the "young man from the provinces" novel, the roots of which lie in the picaresque.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, while "The Queen of Spades" owes much to the gotho-freneticist tradition, it also parodies this trend, which was so fashionable in the 1830s, and is in many ways closer to a society tale.<sup>8</sup> Finally, most readings of *Ligovskaya* examine it from a generic perspective, focusing on Lermontov's awkward fusion of elements from the society tale and the poor clerk tale

<sup>4</sup>Larisa Vol'pert, *Lermontov i literatura Frantsii* (St. Petersburg, 2008), 149–59. Although she does not examine the reception of Stendhal, Priscilla Meyer presents an excellent overview of Russian internalization of French literary motifs, character types, and plot structures in *How Russians Read the French: Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy* (Madison, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir: Chronique du 1830* (Paris, 1854), 247; Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. Robert Adams (New York, 1969), 200.

<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting that the child of the age bears a close genetic connection to the little Napoleon in that both characters are depicted as suffering from a "disease of modernity." During the Restoration period, the earlier "malady of the age" (*mal du siècle*)—ennui, pessimism, and excessive self-consciousness—gives way to something rawer and simpler—the disease of ambition. See Kathleen Kete, "Stendhal and the Trials of Ambition in Postrevolutionary France," *French Historical Studies* 28:3 (2005): 468–70.

<sup>7</sup>See A. K. Chanda, "The Young Man from the Provinces," *Comparative Literature* 33:4 (1981): 321–41. On the popularity of this type of novel in Russian literature see also Julie Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityscape* (Princeton, 2005), chap. 6.

<sup>8</sup>See R. L. Busch, "Pushkin and the Gotho-freneticist Tradition," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 29:2/3 (1987): 165–83; and S. Dalton-Brown, "Pointing Out the Power Paradoxes: Pushkin's Society Tale Parodies," in *The Society Tale in Russian Literature: From Odoevskii to Tolstoy*, ed. Neil Cornwell (Amsterdam, 1998), 21–41.

(which launched the great theme of the “little man” in Russian literature).<sup>9</sup> But such studies miss the characterological questions that occupy Lermontov in this text, and which in many ways lie at the core of its peculiar composition. Taking a characterological approach, one gains a better sense of how metaliterary structures and polemics steer the representation of desire within these narratives. As I argue, the problem of desire’s authenticity (the spontaneity of passion) is central in all three texts. Moreover, the painful “mediation” of the modern subject’s desire, to use René Girard’s term, is ultimately linked to a fundamental violence that literature enacts upon life, imprisoning it in circuits of reading, reception, and imitation.

### STENDHAL’S SOREL

*The Red and the Black* represents one of the first cracks in the child of the age tradition—that great literary edifice built on the grave of Goethe’s young Werther and including Chateaubriand’s René, Byron’s Childe Harold, Constant’s Adolphe, Musset’s Octave, and countless others. Indeed, such characters are in fact child to several different ages, though their ever “contemporary” maladies remain more or less constant. These include the child’s own complaints—alienation, frustrated superiority, objectless passion—as well as flaws that are more often observed by others—vanity, artificiality, and crippling self-consciousness. The weight of the tradition itself contributes to our sense of the child’s artificiality—recall Onegin reading *Adolphe* and Byron with a pencil in his hand, for example.<sup>10</sup> But when Tatiana wonders if Onegin might be an imitation or even a parody, the question concerns not only Russian mimicry of Europe. The child of the age, wherever he comes from, is always in some sense a parody, both of himself and of the literary institution he represents.

Pushkin’s image of Onegin’s reading habits is in fact only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to depictions of reading and reception in the child of the age tradition. Such narratives often take the form of a found manuscript—a device Lermontov borrowed from *Adolphe* for *Hero of Our Time*, for example. Constant and Lermontov also both append the reactions of the manuscripts’ first readers, a move that Chateaubriand also makes at the end of *René*, when the priest pronounces his judgment on the world-weary protagonist’s tale. Goethe presents *Werther* as a collection of documents and reports, gathered to offer “comfort” to those readers who might suffer pressures similar to what drives his hero to suicide. One may also note the frequent use of prefaces warning against confusing the living author with his fictional hero—always an ambiguous relationship in such novels. In the narratives themselves, representations of reception may take a form subtler than Onegin’s pencil, such as intertextual reminiscences (for example, Octave’s contemplation of suicide in

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Helena Goscilo, “The First Pečorin en Route to *A Hero*: Lermontov’s *Princess Ligovskaja*,” *Russian Literature* 11:2 (1982): 129–61; and Robert Reid, *Princess Ligovskaia and Princess Mary: The Society Tale Goes to the Caucasus*, in *The Society Tale in Russian Literature*, 41–58. Krasinsky in fact bears little resemblance to the pitiful, often grotesque clerks of the tradition that Gogol’s “Diary of a Madman” (1835) first raised out of the journalistic fodder penned by Faddei Bulgarin and his ilk in the early 1830s. Gogol’s Poprishchin may harbor a wild ambition, but his are the fantasies of a man wholly invisible to society. Krasinsky, by contrast, exhibits the passionate, compelling *ressentiment* of the more successful aspirants bequeathed to European literature by Stendhal and Balzac.

<sup>10</sup>Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*, in *PSS* 6:149.

*Confessions of a Child of the Age*, gazing up at a brace of pistols on the wall, recalling Werther), the hero's awareness of his availability for imitation by susceptible youths (as in *Adolphe*), or the desire of women to read the hero like a character in a novel (*Hero of Our Time*). Through such devices, modern subjectivity is dramatized in a way that makes identity and desire appear irredeemably mediated by imitation. The child of the age is trapped in the drama of reception and its networks of intertextual association. However he attempts to renew the worn-out character type, it always appears at least half parodic, and never productively so. He never fully destroys and revitalizes the model, whether in the Bakhtinian or formalist sense. Rather, he remains a copy of a human being, condemned to spawn countless other copies—in literature or life—cruel repetitions, always at some level aware of their inextricability from circuits of reading.

For the bulk of *The Red and the Black*, Julien is spared such self-conscious literariness, even though representations of reading are just as important in Stendhal's novel. Girard is again useful here—now with his distinction between internal and external forms of mediated desire. Stendhal, for Girard, is the original master of depicting internal mediation—where imitation of other people's desire is volatile and contagious, and where rivalry with a mediator both leads and blocks the way to the object. Julien's attraction to the haughty aristocrat Mathilde de la Mole is defined by this structure. Even though he is at first unimpressed by Mathilde's beauty (which he finds crass and exaggerated), Julien pursues the young woman because he soon realizes the desire she provokes in others. In a quite comical literalization of internal mediation, Stendhal places his hero in the middle of a crowd of men discussing Mathilde's success at a ball. “‘She's the belle of the ball, there's no doubt about it,’ said a moustached young man whose shoulder was firmly lodged in the middle of Julien's chest. ... Julien made vain efforts to catch a sight of this seductive creature; seven or eight men taller than he prevented him from seeing her.”<sup>11</sup> As Julien's and Mathilde's relationship develops, it takes the form of what Girard calls “double mediation,” where each subject's desire is enflamed or dissipated depending on the intensity of the other's narcissism. If Julien debases himself with a declaration of love, Mathilde immediately finds him repulsive; it is only his narcissistic sense of superiority that quickens her pulse. Julien's victory thus requires asceticism, staging indifference, and this means true enjoyment is impossible. As soon as he succeeds in making Mathilde his slave, he loses interest in being her master: “the desiring subject, when he takes possession of the object, finds that he is grasping a void.”<sup>12</sup> This subject harbors a void within his own breast as well, in the place from which authentic passion should flow.

At the same time, however, Julien's indifference is not entirely feigned. Masked by his hypocrisy and simulation is a loftier desire formed through reading and thus, according to Girard, free of rivalry. Like Don Quixote or Emma Bovary, Julien models the hidden part of his passion on books—his main primer being Napoleon's memoirs. The novel's famous irony is largely based on the tension between these two forms of mediation. While constantly measuring himself against the external, heroic model of Napoleon, Julien's

<sup>11</sup>Stendhal, *Le rouge*, 281; *The Red*, 228.

<sup>12</sup>René Girard, *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, 1965), 164.

concrete, “internal” pursuits—wealth, status, and the love of beautiful women—are all fully in keeping with the petty, unheroic values of the Restoration period. He sees grasping a married woman’s hand as a great duty—requiring suicide should he succumb to a lack of will. He carries firearms with him when scaling a ladder to his beloved’s chamber. When his false letters have done their job, reigniting Mathilde’s desire by presenting her with a rival (the addressee of the letters, Mme. de Fervaques), Julien compares “himself to a general who has just won a great battle.” Then, “on a passionate impulse,” he opens Napoleon’s memoirs and forces himself to read them for two hours, even though he is so excited that he cannot focus enough to register any of the words.<sup>13</sup>

A child of the age could never display this kind of ironic tension, because all his rivals and mediators are either literary models or other readers. If he is jealous or expresses hatred for his beloved, it is not the fires of internal mediation catching but only a symptom of his illness—an illness we know he has caught from the heroes that came before him. Significantly, Stendhal’s irony also introduces a second, higher level of exteriority, sharing the ironic perspective only with the reader and not with Julien himself, who always appears somewhat innocent and naïve as a result. For the child of the age, by contrast, irony is universal, closely related to the romantic irony described by the Jena Romantics. In Gary Handwerk’s summary, romantic irony—which is far more than rhetoric—“is a response to the unrealizability of the Absolute as a tangible presence for self-consciousness. The gulf between the Absolute and the mind that seeks to actualize it ... is complete and definitive. ... Nonetheless, the ironic human situation is secondly defined by the necessity of striving to portray the Absolute.”<sup>14</sup> Romantic striving thus takes the form of negation and apophasis, shifting infinitely among multiple points of view, suspending the distinction between the serious (*Treue*) and the playful (*Scherz*), and tolerating contradiction in the world of objects as in the speaking subject’s non-coincidence with herself. The child of the age and his longing for an authentic and spontaneous passion, impossible in the fragmented world of modernity, is characterized by a similar negative movement. Irony does not envelope him (as Stendhal’s irony envelops the naïve Julien); it cuts through his consciousness. Nonetheless, for the child of the age, this infinite striving is typically far less sanguine than it appears in the writings of Schlegel or, for that matter, in a text like *Evgeny Onegin*, which in fact participates in the child of the age lineage only partially. For the child of age, infinite striving becomes a source of profound suffering. Universal irony only illuminates the fact that the child is always a parody of himself, forever imitative and artificial, fatally entangled in circuits of reading and reception. The masks of his all-too-serious imitative practice (as much self-conscious as it is ironic) ultimately dissolve the distinction between reality and fiction, and the tradition plays off this undecidability with all its prefaces, allusions, and autobiographical hints.

The question is whether the child of the age still wanders in pursuit of the Absolute. Here it is worth recalling Paul de Man’s analysis of romantic irony, “The Concept of Irony,” in which he cites Schlegel’s *Lyceum* Fragment 42 as a definition of the ironic subject: “There are ancient and modern poems which breathe in their entirety, and in every detail,

<sup>13</sup>Stendhal, *Le rouge*, 420; *The Red*, 343.

<sup>14</sup>Gary Handwerk, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan* (New Haven, 1985), 20–21.

the divine breath of irony. In such poems, there lives a real transcendental buffoonery. Their interior is permeated by the mood (*Stimmung*) which surveys everything and rises infinitely above everything limited, even above the poet's own art, virtue, and genius; and their exterior form by the histrionic style of an ordinary good Italian *buffo*.<sup>15</sup> For de Man, this buffoonery results in a "permanent parabasis," a logic of interruption that pervades and undoes any narrative impulse. But in child of the age novels, narrative tends to push back. However fragmentary, these plots exhibit a focused energy (or, in Peter Brooks' terms, narrative desire), pursuing a way out of the imitative trap to unleash an authenticity typically conceived as a return to some prelapsarian condition. But because the exilic condition of modernity is inescapable and return to harmony impossible, desire becomes barren, often taking the form of a slow, gratuitous destruction of the beloved (most dramatically in *Adolphe*). Here a different narrative logic—that of tragedy—constrains the freedom of the romantic ironist. The futile, infinite pursuit of authenticity becomes an impulse toward the purgative sacrifice of the child himself, a sacrifice that can never be realized. As a result, the impulse takes the distorted form of an impotent masochism, projected outward as dispassionate sadism toward the beloved. The child of the age wanders endlessly, wreaking destruction wherever he goes, never finding the quarry he really seeks—the quarry of himself.

The relentless victimization of the beloved by the child of the age stands in sharp contrast to Julien's sudden explosion of violence—like a "storm"—when he tries to murder his first lover, Mme. de Rênal, whom he blames for his final failure and fall.<sup>16</sup> But it is precisely this act that brings Julien closest to the child of the age. After he is sentenced to death, Julien develops an ironic attitude to his own life, which is associated with Goethe's Mephistopheles in the narration. While he continues to compare himself to Napoleon and other historical figures, he also begins to mock himself, his ambition, and his concern for the opinion of others. At one moment his irony even touches the external mediator, and he accuses Napoleon of "charlatanism." In this same passage, Julien senses the hypocrisy of his own "powerful idea of *duty*," and he laughs at himself, framing his behavior as a symptom of the age: "Talking in solitude to myself two steps away from death, and I am still a hypocrite. ... O nineteenth century!"<sup>17</sup>

The connection to *Faust* and the ironic "spirit of negation" would thus seem to endow Julien with his own form of parodic self-consciousness.<sup>18</sup> Julien peels away one layer of hypocrisy to reveal another, dissolving the distinction between heroic and unheroic, external and internal mediation that was so essential to his success in high society. Still, Julien is never reduced to the kind of spiritual destitution the child of the age typically endures. And, in fact, there is one moment where we are encouraged to contrast his fate with that of Chateaubriand's René. Julien's old friend Fouqué, a firewood dealer, visits him in prison and offers to sell everything he owns in order to bribe the condemned man's way to freedom.

<sup>15</sup>Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis, 1996), 177.

<sup>16</sup>Stendhal, *Le rouge*, 441; *The Red*, 359 (translation modified).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 494–96; 401–2.

<sup>18</sup>Here the figure of Mephistopheles embodies the doubt and self-consciousness that blocks romantic striving. Unfortunately, the role of the Mephistophelean hero (or demon) in the child of the age tradition and its reception by Stendhal, Pushkin, and Lermontov is beyond the scope of this essay.

Touched by the gesture, Julien compares his provincial friend to the rich young men of Paris, noting that none of them would be capable of such a “sacrifice,” despite their affected imitation of René. This subtle reference naturally draws our attention to Julien’s own status as the hero of a novel. Indeed, the narrator breaks in at this very moment to praise Julien, calling him “a fine plant.” Were he not to be killed, the narrator says, Julien would become softer with age, less cunning and distrustful, rather than the other way around like most men.<sup>19</sup>

This passage exhibits a peculiar ambivalence. On the one hand, Julien’s literary nature is laid bare, and this pits him against the child of the age in a rivalry at once internal and external to the text. The safe haven of external mediation, which has heretofore protected Julien from corruption, now includes his own literary image, suspended between author and reader, just like every child of the age. Yet, on the other hand, he is also being held up as a finer specimen. The predicted transition from hardness to softness reverses the trajectory typical for a child of the age. René’s “great soul” seeks but fails to find perfection in life, and so it becomes a burden to him, making him despise society and desire death. Eventually, though, it is his sister who is quite theatrically sacrificed, joining a convent to escape her incestuous passion for René, and the rite (*le sacrifice*) requires her to “pass through the tomb,” covered in a funerary shroud and surrounded by torches. After the ceremony—disturbed by a last-minute illicit embrace—René finds a new stability in his exilic condition, deriving even “a kind of unexpected satisfaction” from the ability to weep over the concrete loss of his one true love.<sup>20</sup> In a sense, through his sister’s sacrifice, René becomes unsacrificeable, bloodless—consigned to wandering through his endless age, forever a child, forever imitated and imitating.

When Julien develops his new sense of irony in prison, he is awaiting his own ceremony on the guillotine, and the reference to *René* in the context of sacrifice (however veiled) gives us the opportunity to consider its sacrificial meaning. Between the ritual he subjects his beloved to—the attempted murder also takes place in church—and the one society plans for him, Julien’s desire is progressively diminished, as he abandons all mimetic models, first the internal and then the external ones as well. As Girard notes, in the end Julien’s only mediator is the recovered Mme. de Rênal, now more a mother than a lover, enabling Julien to love himself through her.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, Julien’s withdrawal from imitation seems to be more regression than maturation. He ends up even more infantilized than the child of the age. If desire in the child of the age tradition is characterized primarily by an impossible striving for authenticity, Stendhal instead dramatizes the futility of such a posture. Julien also longs to overcome his imitative, hypocritical self and unleash his heroic desire, but the source of this desire is itself imitation of books. His ideal is washed in the same sepia tones of nostalgia as the prelapsarian perfection that haunts the child of the age, but both author and reader recognize its impurity from the beginning. Because Stendhal shows both Julien’s inner and outer worlds to be worlds of mediation, his desire cannot be framed as the infinite, forever frustrated pursuit of the Absolute.

<sup>19</sup>Stendhal, *Le rouge*, 455–56; *The Red*, 370–71.

<sup>20</sup>François René de Chateaubriand, *René* (Paris, 1991), 46, 70, 72; Chateaubriand, *Atala: René*, trans. Irving Putter (Berkeley, 1952), 93, 107, 109.

<sup>21</sup>Girard, *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel*, 22.

In fact, Julien succeeds in his ambitions again and again; he does achieve his goals, and he does find the quarry of himself. Nonetheless, this does not make his death a proper sacrifice, and his execution brings little in the way of catharsis. The irony that both links and divides Julien's two levels of desire simply collapses after his attack on Mme. de Rênal. He is no longer naïve, and the narrator stops sharing his winks of light mockery with the reader. At the same time, Julien's self-consciousness has nothing to do with the alienation of imitateness; on the contrary, it demonstrates his untapped originality, a fact highlighted by the flowering of an authentic (if utterly filial) love in Julien's heart as he approaches death. Unlike the hardened René, Julien—had he been spared his tragic fate—would have softened and matured. Meanwhile, beyond the walls of the Besançon dungeon, the circuit of imitation continues. Mathilde steals Julien's decapitated head and uses it to reenact a scene from her own external, heroic narrative: a medieval intrigue, in which a queen buries the head of her lover—Mathilde's ancestor, Boniface de la Mole—with her own hands. But now seeing Mathilde's melodramatic delusion through Julien's Mephistophelean eyes, the reader will resist any inclination to imitate him.

#### PUSHKIN'S HERMANN

Throughout "The Queen of Spades" Pushkin frames his protagonist with representations of reading, particularly contemporary novels. Tomsy describes Hermann as "a truly novelistic figure" (*litso istinno romanicheskoe*), and Lizaveta reads him in much the same way: "The portrait sketched by Tomsy was similar to the image she had formed herself and, thanks to the latest novels, this already hackneyed figure frightened and captivated her imagination."<sup>22</sup> Julien's plagiarized letters are now copied from a novel, and Hermann's own passion derives from a moment of reception—the "fairy tale" Tomsy tells of his grandmother and St. Germain's three winning cards at faro. Pushkin's story is thick with intertextual allusions, primarily to the French frenetic school, which is explicitly addressed in the dialogue between Tomsy and the countess about "drowned bodies" and sons strangling their parents. The reference to Hermann as an already hackneyed figure also invokes the frenetic school within the larger context of French Byronism. This is the literary current that mediates Lizaveta's desire, transfiguring Hermann into a man with "the profile of Napoleon and the soul of Mephistopheles"—and sharing little with Julien's much more complex (and certainly not hackneyed) association with these same two figures.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it would seem Lizaveta is not one of the "happy few" to have read *The Red and the Black*.<sup>24</sup> There is no reason to assume that Hermann has read Stendhal either, since he copies his letters from a German novel.

But Pushkin has read it, and so have we—and this produces some interesting effects. First of all, the plagiarized letters appear to have made their way across half of Europe.

<sup>22</sup>Pushkin, *Pikovaia dama*, in *PSS* 8:1:144; Robert Chandler, ed. and trans., "The Queen of Spades," in *Russian Stories from Pushkin to Buida* (London, 2005), 19–20 (translation modified). All translations from "Queen of Spades" are from this edition.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 229, 232, 244; 7, 9, 19.

<sup>24</sup>Stendhal dedicated his novel to "the happy few."



Lizaveta does not recognize them, since she reads French literature, not German. But those who have read Pushkin's source, which is in fact French, recall that Julien's letters are actually provided by a Russian—the dandy, Prince Korasoff, a kind of mock guru of internally mediated desire in Stendhal's novel. We can only imagine how Pushkin's patriotic feelings would have been pricked by Julien's conversation with Korasoff, which sends the Russian prince into ecstasy: "Never had a Frenchman listened to him for such a long time. So, I've finally arrived, the delighted prince said to himself, I'm ... giving lessons to my masters!"<sup>25</sup> When Pushkin's Russified German ends up composing his own letters, it reads as a veiled retort to Stendhal. Unlike Julien's wholly indifferent, imitated passion for Mme. de Fervaques, Hermann shows a real creative spark: "[The letters] were no longer translations from German. Hermann wrote with the inspiration of passion, and he was speaking a language that came naturally to him: one that expressed both the relentlessness of his desires and the disorder of an unbridled imagination. Lizaveta ... revelled in them."<sup>26</sup>

Still, even though Hermann is no longer copying the letters, his passion can hardly be called spontaneous; indeed, the layers of mediation are multiple. His feigned desire for Lizaveta channels a real interest in the countess and her secret. But this desire is also impure, and here Pushkin's engagement with Stendhal reveals itself to be remarkably devious. If the letters position Lizaveta in the role of Mme. de Fervaques, then, in a bizarre gerontophilic twist, the octogenarian countess occupies the place of Mathilde. Hermann's courtship of the young ward is clearly not designed to excite the countess' desire for him, but the result is nevertheless the same as Julien's: He gains entry to the noble woman's chamber. At the same time, Hermann pointedly eroticizes the old woman, turning his attentions to Lizaveta only after deciding it will take too long to seduce the countess herself. The effect of this peculiar attachment is most apparent when Hermann hesitates at the top of the stairs outside the countess' room on his way out of her house. Believing his dream of wealth irrevocably lost (because the countess has died without revealing her secret), Hermann imagines "a lucky young man" (*molodoi schastlivets*) some sixty years earlier, emerging from the same room to descend by the same secret staircase.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, Hermann is still reading Tomsy's tale at this moment, imagining the countess as she was when the cards were previously played—"La Vénus Moscovite," object of desire to all the great men of Paris.<sup>28</sup> But, on the other hand, Hermann's frustrated identification with this imagined lover reveals the extent to which his desire has been internally mediated by rivalry with the noblemen around him. Just as Julien pursues Mathilde in order to advance in the world and get the better of the rich Parisian youth he despises, so too does Hermann dream of overcoming his lowly status by conquering the heart of a beautiful, socially successful woman. It just happens that his love object's moment of beauty and social power occurred sixty years in the past.

This strange temporal disjuncture may also be a response to *The Red and the Black*. During the Korasoff sequence, the narrator jokes: "Russians copy the manners of the French,

<sup>25</sup>Stendhal, *Le rouge*, 391; *The Red*, 320.

<sup>26</sup>Pushkin, *PSS* 8:1:238; "Queen of Spades," 15 (translation modified).

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 235; 21 (translation modified).

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 228; 6.

but always at a remove of fifty years. They are now in the age of Louis XV.”<sup>29</sup> Stendhal is referring to the end of Louis XV’s long reign (1715–74), rounding down to fifty years from fifty-six (the action of the novel takes place in 1830). Pushkin, writing three years later, raises the figure to sixty years but refers to the same time frame. St. Germain served as a diplomat in Louis XV’s court; the Duke of Orleans (Louis Philippe I), against whom the countess loses at faro, was also an influential courtier at the time; and the Duke of Richelieu (Armand de Vignerot du Plessis), who pursues the beautiful countess, was a famous rake, considered by some to be the model for Laclos’ Valmont in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Much of the uncanny magic of Pushkin’s story derives from Hermann’s captivation by this epoch, still embodied by the aged countess, who appears as a kind of living fossil of the 1770s.

The countess is thus both a character in Tomsy’s tale and a still-living index of the historical moment in which it is set, and this fact makes the tension between external and internal mediation in “The Queen of Spades” utterly different from that of *The Red and the Black*. Instead of cultivating the ironic difference between poetic passion and social alienation as Stendhal does, Pushkin undermines this distinction throughout his narrative. It may primarily be the miraculous cards that transfigure the countess into an object of desire for Hermann, but the erotic and social elements of Tomsy’s tale have clearly also affected him—the countess’ beauty, her entanglements with high-placed Parisian courtiers, the struggle with her (likely cuckolded) husband, and so on. The effulgence of Hermann’s passion in his letters to Lizaveta thus represents a mix of “unbridled imagination,” stirred by Tomsy’s tale (external mediation), and “relentless desire” for the countess as the bearer of wealth and social power (internal mediation). Enthralled by the play of sex and power in the tale, Hermann longs to join its network of intrigues—so much so that he begins to ignore the effects of time’s passage upon the countess, suspending his dream of “luck” or “happiness” (*schast’e*) undecidably between wealth and erotic conquest:

Why shouldn’t I try my **luck** (*schast’e*)? I could be introduced to her, win her favor, maybe become her lover.<sup>30</sup>

You have the power ... to make me a **happy** man (*sostavit’ schast’e moei zhizni*). ... If ever ... your heart has known the feeling of love, if you can remember its ecstasies; if you have ever smiled at the cry of a new-born son ... then I implore you by your feelings as a wife, as a mistress, as a mother. ... Only tell me your secret. Think: a man’s **happiness** (*schast’e*) lies in your hands.<sup>31</sup>

With this deep investment in the countess’ erotic past Hermann literalizes Stendhal’s derisory comment about Russia’s belated imitation of Paris. So fierce is his passion for wealth and status that he treats the decrepit countess as if she is still in her prime in the 1770s, when he might also have been her “lucky young man.” He, too, is living in the epoch of Louis XV. The play of irony here is extremely slippery. Are we meant to laugh at Hermann’s fantasies about the countess or to imagine their perverse realization? It is impossible to say, since

<sup>29</sup>Stendhal, *The Red*, 389.

<sup>30</sup>Pushkin, *PSS* 8:1:235; “Queen of Spades,” 12.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 241–42; 17–18.

the young man has completely blurred the line between her two temporal hypostases—the one based on his reception of the tale, the other on his projection of its internal dynamics upon the present. Instead of the sharp—and often comic—tension between the two levels of Julien’s desire, Hermann’s is marked by a kind of “entropic” slippage, collapsing the distinction itself.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, despite his engagement with *The Red and the Black*, Pushkin does not follow the dialectical movement of Stendhal’s characterological innovation. In fact, instead of accumulating tension between the child of the age and the little Napoleon, Pushkin reduces and slackens it. Consider, for example, the moment after Hermann’s remorseless confession to causing the countess’ death: “Lizaveta Ivanovna ... wiped the tears from her eyes and glanced up at Hermann: he was sitting on the window-seat, arms folded, frowning grimly. In this pose he looked astonishingly like a portrait of Napoleon. This likeness amazed even Lizaveta Ivanovna.”<sup>33</sup> Now because of the word “even” (*dazhe*) here, we see the Napoleonic features of our hero from two perspectives—first, that of the narrator (who has read Stendhal) and second, that of Lizaveta (egged on by Tomsy), who sees a French Byronic Napoleon. Behind Lizaveta’s perspective is also the auto-remembrance of chapter 7 from *Onegin*, mentioned above. Alongside *Onegin*’s underlined novels, Tatiana also finds the iron statuette of a cross-armed Napoleon, and this adds to her suspicions about his parodic nature. We may look at Hermann here with the combined eyes of Lizaveta and the narrator as a hybrid of a Byronic child of the age and a little Napoleon. But neither image really sticks. Instead, we are again caught in a moment of slippage between two positions. Just as Pushkin undermines the distinctions between internal and external mediation, so too does he collapse the “already hackneyed” hero into one still “nascent,” to borrow Robert Jackson’s words.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Hermann slips right between.<sup>35</sup>

To be more precise, what slips through is, in Lacanian terms, the Real of Hermann’s desire—that intensity, which, despite all the layers of mediation, lends his relentlessness and his unbridled imagination the characteristics of an “inspired” passion. To continue with Lacan, one might say that he pursues the countess from one perspective in the Imaginary, as an other with a small “o”—a mirror in the narcissistic funhouse of his various rivalries—and from another perspective in the Symbolic (the Big Other), as a link in the signifying chain of Tomsy’s tale, leading ultimately to the master signifier of the final winning card. But Hermann’s passion for the countess and her secret also reeks of the Real, and this is the cornerstone of Pushkin’s rejection of Stendhal. Unlike Julien, for whom attempted murder leads to an awareness of the imitative nature of his desire, Hermann shows no sign of resignation after he accidentally causes the countess’ death. He does not sacrifice his beloved

<sup>32</sup>See Jonathan Brooks Platt, “Between Thought and Feeling: Odoevsky, Pushkin, and Dialectical Doubt in 1833,” *Pushkin Review* 12–13 (2009–10): 45–63.

<sup>33</sup>Pushkin, *PSS* 8:1:245; “Queen of Spades,” 20.

<sup>34</sup>“Like his contemporary, Julien Sorel, he is the emblematic hero of his time. Sketched as in a fine line drawing, Hermann is the sparse image of a nascent bourgeois type” (Robert Louis Jackson, “Napoleon in Russian Literature,” *Yale French Studies* 26 [1960]: 108). Notably, Hermann appears as somehow simultaneously emblematic and yet still unformed.

<sup>35</sup>Similar slippages can be seen in Hermann’s oscillation between expressions of erotic and filial love for the countess and the undecidable question of whether his vision of her is a drunken hallucination or a genuine visitation.

but continues his pursuit, remaining enthralled with her even after her death and his descent into madness. What does he see in her? According to Girard, when the transfiguring fantasies of mediated desire dissipate, the lover is left grasping a void. But the indefatigable intensity of Hermann's passion suggests that he is ultimately pursuing not those fantasies but the void as such—the “revolting mysteries” he catches a glimpse of when the countess is undressing.<sup>36</sup> This is the level of his passion which escapes mediation, which can never be reduced to the secondary effects of a fairy tale or a love triangle. Hermann's parapraxis (playing the queen instead of the ace) reflects his refusal to surrender this passion, much as he rejects the fresh, young Lizaveta for the decrepit countess on the fateful night of her death.<sup>37</sup> As Hermann then relives this choice again and again in the madhouse, forever oscillating between ace and queen in a hallucinatory haze, he remains faithful to his impossible passion, confronting the countess's revolting mysteries without end.

It is clear that Hermann's tragic fate, like Julien's, offers nothing in the way of sacrificial purgation. The difference, however, is that Hermann's destruction also leaves no untapped potential for the narrator and reader to mourn. If anything, Hermann has realized himself more perfectly than any child of the age or little Napoleon could ever hope to. By remaining faithful to the Real of his desire instead of pursuing its “realization” (as ambition), Hermann simply drops out of the tortured dialectic of mediation, whether internal or external. This is, of course, the very definition of psychosis. But, perhaps, Pushkin produced this psychotic anti-tragedy with a specific metaliterary aim in mind. By severing the link between the child of the age and the little Napoleon, Russian literature might finally escape the circuit of reception that leaves it forever indebted to its French “masters.”

## LERMONTOV'S PECHORIN AND KRASINSKY

Although *Princess Ligovskaya* is an unfinished (and immature) work, it remains a central document in the history of Russia's reception of the little Napoleon. Lermontov's main reason for abandoning the novel was undoubtedly his arrest and exile over “The Death of the Poet” in 1837.<sup>38</sup> However, *Ligovskaya* is also simply an awkward text, both because of its generic hybridity, noted above, and the peculiar character conflict that dominates the narrative. At the level of the plot, the connection between the poor clerk Krasinsky and the socialite Pechorin is entirely unmotivated—indeed, pointedly so. Before finally becoming properly acquainted, the two characters encounter each other three times through pure coincidence.<sup>39</sup> This unlikely compositional design imparts a sense of near-supernatural

<sup>36</sup>Pushkin, *PSS* 8:1:240; “Queen of Spades,” 17.

<sup>37</sup>For more on Hermann's choice see Sergei Davydov, “The Ace in the ‘Queen of Spades,’” *Slavic Review* 58:2 (1999): 309–28.

<sup>38</sup>Lermontov explained the decision to abandon the novel in a letter to his collaborator on the text, Sviatoslav Raevskii: “The novel you and I began together has drawn on too long and will doubtfully ever be finished, since the circumstances that lay at its foundation have changed, and, as you know, I cannot depart from the truth in this case.” Mikhail Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 6 tt. (SS)* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1954–57), 6:445.

<sup>39</sup>Pechorin nearly crushes Krasinsky with his carriage in the opening scene. Then, in the second chapter, the two meet by chance at the opera, when Krasinsky overhears Pechorin joking about the morning's near-fatal accident. Krasinsky creates a scene and demands an apology, but he cannot accept Pechorin's offer of a duel

fatality, as these two engines of narrative desire appear inexplicably destined for a violent collision. After the near miss on Voznesensky Avenue that opens the novel, the reader is led to anticipate the deadly closure of this narrative loop. But we never see the promised duel. The manuscript simply breaks off, never to be resumed.

What outcome was Lermontov planning? Here one can only agree with Vol'pert's hypothesis that Pechorin would be the last man standing.<sup>40</sup> But since the novel is unfinished, one can really only interpret this likely denouement from the perspective of literary evolution. This is not to say that such a reading is limited or reductive. Overall, the artificial plot gives the novel a provisional, experimental quality not unlike that of Lermontov's juvenile poems (many of which are mere collages of quotations from other poets), and this brings its status as a work of reception to the foreground, a quality further compounded by the novel's autobiographical character. In this sense, it seems natural to read *Ligovskaya* as little more than a testing ground for the still nascent Russian novel and its hero. Should we take the path of the little Napoleon to overcome the child of the age? A resounding "no" seems to be the answer Lermontov was approaching. But instead of slipping past the character through subtle irony and the blurring of perspectives, as Pushkin does, Lermontov feels compelled to destroy him. And the result of his experiment can only be seen as a success. Pechorin is reborn as the prototypical Russian child of the age in *Hero of Our Time*, a character that some of the most important Russian novels would subsequently take up and develop, from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and Goncharov's *Oblomov* to Dostoevsky's *Devils*.

It is also worth noting that while both Stendhal and Pushkin frame the conflict between the little Napoleon and the child of the age as turning fundamentally on issues of imitation and reception, Lermontov does not follow them here. In *Ligovskaya* the sparse evidence of Pechorin's reading habits points only to Byron, while references to the kind of reading found in society tales are much more common. The high society ne'er-do-wells, particularly the women, all borrow their tiresome affectations from novels.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, the impoverished Krasinsky is linked only to a more profane book, a self-help manual titled *The Easiest Way to Be Rich and Happy Forever*, which he has purchased at the request of his mother.<sup>42</sup> In terms of representations of reading, Lermontov would only achieve a level of sophistication similar to his predecessors in *Hero of Our Time*. Perhaps the *Ligovskaya* experiment also helped him understand how literary models contribute to the mediation of desire.

Apart from this lack of susceptibility to external mediation, Krasinsky fits the mold of the little Napoleon in all the most important ways. He is a lowly aspirant, desperate to

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for fear of how his death would affect his mother. Finally, in chapter seven, Pechorin agrees to intercede in a complicated business dispute on behalf of the powerful husband of his former lover, now princess, Vera Ligovskaya. Lo and behold, Krasinsky happens to be the clerk in charge of the case.

<sup>40</sup>See Vol'pert, *Lermontov i literatura Frantsii*, 158.

<sup>41</sup>Consider, for example, the description of the ladies at the ball and their "sonorous phrases, borrowed from a popular novel" (Lermontov, *Kniaginya Ligovskaia*, in *SS* 6:185). There is a painting in Pechorin's house that recalls the demonic image from Gogol's "Portrait"—its terrible eyes seem to follow the viewer around the room—and he refers to it as a portrait of Byron's Lara (Lermontov, *SS* 6:128). For more on this See Il'ia Serman, *Mikhail Lermontov: Zhizn' v literature, 1836–1841* (Jerusalem, 1997), 203.

<sup>42</sup>Lermontov, *SS* 6:172.

make his fortune, and his passion and fine looks open doors for him in high society, much as they do for Sorel. Krasinsky also bears strong similarities to Pushkin's Hermann. For example, when he rejects Pechorin's offer of a duel during their second meeting, he says that "success would be too uncertain," recalling Hermann's refusal to gamble until he knows the mystical sequence of winning cards.<sup>43</sup> Pechorin, by contrast, is a more ambiguous type. His alienation and destructive impact on women link him to the child of the age, but his amorous machinations also recall the little Napoleon.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in the existing manuscript, it is only Pechorin who understands the social benefits of sexual rivalry—how women can be used as stepping stones, or as he puts it, "a pedestal, upon which he could stand and force the crowd to look at him."<sup>45</sup> He is the one forced to project narcissistic indifference to quicken the desire of others: "Pechorin swore to himself that he would be the victor: following his system and arming himself with intolerable outer composure (*khladnokrovie*) and patience, he could crush the cunning subterfuge of even the most experienced coquette." Krasinsky only enters the erotic battlefield just before the manuscript breaks off. He makes a strong impression on Pechorin's former lover and now married princess, Vera Ligovskaya, and he seems close to realizing the opportunity this gives him. In his last appearance in the novel, he even develops a "secret enmity" toward the princess that strongly recalls the hidden *ressentiment* driving Sorel's affairs.<sup>46</sup>

Krasinsky is also depicted as profoundly naïve in the novel, and Lermontov's narrator, much like Stendhal's, frequently comments on the lack of experience that distinguishes him from the wealthier members of society. In the opening pages, we learn how he often bumps into women on the street but fails to notice when they take an interest in his beauty: "The devious pink hat would get angry, and then she would look under his cap and, taking a few more steps, turn around as if expecting a second apology, but in vain! The young clerk was completely imperceptive (*nedogadliv!*)" Similarly, toward the end of the manuscript, when Krasinsky swears he will become rich and force the haughty socialites to pay him his due, the narrator breaks in: "The poor, innocent clerk! He didn't know that for this society, aside from a pile of gold, one must also have a name decorated by historical memory."<sup>47</sup> For most of the manuscript Krasinsky remains in the shadow of the more experienced and cynical Pechorin. As a result, his naïveté strips him of all the advantages his status as the more "modern" hero would presumably give him. Indeed, it seems reasonable to read the relationship between the two characters as not unlike the later Pechorin's one with the impoverished Grushnitsky in *Hero of Our Time*. Like Grushnitsky, Krasinsky possesses a less corrupted, more sensitive soul, and this marks him as irredeemably naïve. The difference between the two foils lies, once again, in their imitativeness or lack thereof. While Krasinsky is driven by ambition, Grushnitsky is an inveterate *poseur*, and his naïveté derives from his

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>44</sup>David Powelstock argues that Lermontov was attempting to move from a passive, Byronic model of the self to an active, Napoleonic one—from "words" to "deeds." See Powelstock, *Becoming Mikhail Lermontov: The Ironies of Romantic Individualism in Nicholas I's Russia* (Evanston, 2005), 102, 110.

<sup>45</sup>Lermontov, *SS* 6:143. Pechorin chooses the aging debutante Lizaveta Negurova for this role, and his feigned courtship and final destruction of her by means of an anonymous letter—based on Lermontov's own intrigues with Ekaterina Sushkova—closely resemble the kind of deceit practiced by Sorel.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 183.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 123, 183.

unconscious and unsophisticated imitation of literary models (as compared to Pechorin's more conscious and complex imitative practice).

Despite Lermontov's neglect of his characters' reading habits in *Ligovskaya*, the theme of authentic, spontaneous passion and the obstacles to its expression are just as central as they are in Stendhal's and Pushkin's texts. But since Pechorin lacks a personal myth like those that enflame Sorel and Mathilde in *The Red and the Black*, he exhibits none of the tension between internally and externally mediated desire. Nor is there anything resembling the subtle undermining of this tension found in "The Queen of Spades." The narrator may use military metaphors to describe Pechorin's affair with Lizaveta Negurova—"in our pitiful society the phrase: 'he has destroyed  $x$  number of reputations' almost means the same as: 'he has won  $x$  number of battles'"—but the bilious irony of this statement is directed at society and not at Pechorin himself.<sup>48</sup> In *The Red and the Black* such comparisons are always playful jibes at Sorel. Nonetheless, Pechorin does share Sorel's awareness that displays of passion are dangerous and must be kept hidden. "Victory" requires their suppression. Stendhal provides an example of this awareness very early in the novel: "Once, in the midst of his new piety, when Julien had been studying theology for two years, he was betrayed by a sudden outburst of the passion that was devouring him inwardly ...: he found himself babbling frantic praises of Napoleon." To prevent such slips in the future, Julien punishes himself: "He strapped his right arm to his chest, pretended that he had dislocated it while shifting a tree trunk, and carried it in this painful position for two months. After this judicial penalty, he pardoned himself."<sup>49</sup> Continuing the passage cited above about the need for composure and patience, Pechorin expresses a similar conflict: "he could say for sure that he would reach his goal ... if passion, almighty passion did not destroy, like a storm, the scaffolding of his calculation and effort in a single burst."<sup>50</sup>

Again, the crucial difference between these passages is that Sorel's hidden passion is not actually authentic, since it derives from his worship of Napoleon. According to Girard the romantic (*romantique*) hero differs from his novelistic (*romanesque*) successor in that the former "always wants to convince himself that his desire is written into the nature of things ... that it is the emanation of a serene subjectivity, the creation *ex nihilo* of a quasi-divine ego."<sup>51</sup> Pechorin clearly shares such a belief, and by the end of the manuscript, he begins making daring declarations: "If you asked me what I would prefer: a minute of total bliss or years of ambiguous happiness... I would sooner choose to focus all my feelings and passions on one divine moment and then suffer as long as you want, instead of dragging out times of boredom and sorrow little by little, ranking them numerically."<sup>52</sup> But this *cri du coeur* in favor of a Faustian moment of bliss is still a step removed from the painful consciousness that haunts the child of the age. The child is constantly confronted by the incontrovertible, universal irony of his exilic condition, which makes such a release of passion impossible. The Pechorin of *Hero of Our Time* knows this pain all too well, but the Pechorin of *Ligovskaya* is still only learning it. Indeed, this is the peculiar result that the

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>49</sup>Stendhal, *Le rouge*, 20; *The Red*, 23.

<sup>50</sup>Lermontov, *SS* 6:180.

<sup>51</sup>Girard, *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel*, 15.

<sup>52</sup>Lermontov, *SS* 6:181.

literary evolutionary perspective brings to a reading of the novel. Through his naïveté and *lack* of development, the more advanced little Napoleon type, embodied by Krasinsky, effectively guides the characterologically muddled Pechorin *backward* to the romantic *terra firma* of the child of the age.

Pechorin's narrative arc in the novel is divided, much like in "Princess Mary," between his deceitful manipulations of Negurova, and his bitter memories of the youthful, innocent love he shared with Vera. As these two plotlines progress, Krasinsky gradually emerges as a rival for Vera's love, providing the grounds necessary for a final duel. Krasinsky's class hatred is firmly established from the moment of the near-fatal accident, and by the time of his third meeting with Pechorin, he declares the wealthier man his "mortal enemy," speaking of a mysterious premonition that they will meet again—"and not as coolly as we have just now."<sup>53</sup> However, Pechorin does not begin to assess Krasinsky as a rival until the penultimate chapter: "Before he had himself admired the noble beauty of Krasinsky's face, but when this woman, who had occupied all his thoughts and hopes, began paying special attention to his beauty ... he realized she was making a comparison murderously insulting to him. ... And from that moment he, in his turn, also began to hate Krasinsky."<sup>54</sup> Significantly, the establishment of this mutual hatred coincides with the peak of Pechorin's bitterness over Vera's betrayal of their love, and it is in this context that Krasinsky's own passion takes on a kind of pedagogical role for Pechorin. The naïve aspirant, who lacks control over his emotions, serves to remind his rival of an alternative to the vacuous exchanges, exhausting discipline, and cruel deceit that dominate Petersburg society. And, assuming Pechorin eventually kills him, he thus also represents the impossibility of ever living this other life of spontaneity and authenticity.

Pechorin is fascinated by Krasinsky's passion, particularly as expressed in his beautiful face—his dark-blue eyes and the "splendid storm" of his indignation. At the same time, he knows his own success will only be secure *if* he can contain the similar storm brewing in himself. "But that *if*, that terrible *if*, is almost like the 'if' of Archimedes, who promised to raise the earthly globe, if given a place to stand."<sup>55</sup> Although it comes across somewhat awkwardly, this reference to Archimedes is in fact very telling. The proposition, "if I do not expose my passion, I will achieve mastery over society," is paralleled to Archimedes' "if you give me a fulcrum, I will move the world." But the terror of that "if" is its impossibility; there is no point of leverage outside the world that would grant mastery to those within it. The impossibility of mastery is directly paralleled to the impossibility of pure passion. One can neither stand coolly outside one's own subjectivity nor dissolve into it as desire. And this conflict, trapping Pechorin within the irreconcilable rift between inner and outer aspects of the self, is the fundamental conflict of the child of the age. Anticipating the final duel, one can imagine how Krasinsky might come to occupy the role

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 174. Having learned that Krasinsky detests coachmen (because he cannot afford the services they are constantly offering him), the reader sees him redirect his *ressentiment* more appropriately toward the rich after the accident. "Bitter thoughts took hold of his heart, and from that minute he transferred all the hatred his soul was capable of producing from coachmen to bay coursers and white plumes [referring to Pechorin's fine horse and elaborate headwear]" (ibid., 123).

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 135, 180.



of yet another non-cathartic sacrifice, similar both to Grushnitsky and the sundry beloveds who fall victim to the child of the age. After gratuitously exterminating the upstart clerk, Pechorin would be forced to wander in exile (perhaps even to the Caucasus), never atoning for his crime.

### **MODERN DESIRE AS SACRIFICE WITHHELD**

To understand fully the significance of these two Russian responses to Stendhal and the little Napoleon, it is worth delving somewhat deeper into the philosophical concerns surrounding this central innovation in the European novel. The literary lineage that connects the little Napoleon to Byron's outcasts, on the one hand, and the Nietzschean superman, on the other, unites the revolutionary tumult of modernity with its promises of social mobility. At the same time, however, it also reflects modernity's failure to live up to these promises, suggesting a sense of unease about the illegitimate power that founds it. In his "Critique of Violence," Walter Benjamin relates our fondness for "great criminals" to the myth of Prometheus. By challenging fate (and suffering at its hands), the criminal lays bare the violence of law, reaffirming the frontier between men and gods and reminding us of the sovereign place of power that founds the social order. In the modern age, however, such transgression loses its luster, as the "rotten" core of law (oscillating endlessly between law-making and law-preserving violence) becomes ever more apparent.<sup>56</sup> The Byronic titan, at once aggrandized and scarred by revolt, gives way to the social aspirant's mere nostalgia for the possibility of such heroic transgression. When the little Napoleon inevitably fails in his attempt to breach the confines of law, it is because the fatal place of violence, and the border it marks between sovereignty and subjection, is no longer accessible but withheld. No doubt this explains the attachment to Napoleon—the first great criminal of modernity, but also the last. After him, all others are mere imitators, laying bare the "charlatanism" that retrospectively clouds the image of the emperor himself. There is no true sovereignty, no mythic place of power accessible to the modern world.

The withholding of mythic violence also colors the child of the age tradition. When the child destroys his beloved, he is generating a burden of guilt in anticipation of a second, consummating sacrifice—that of the hero himself, although this consummation is never achieved, even if he does commit suicide. Here the child of the age is akin to the heroes of modern tragedy and the lyric subject of the pre-romantic elegy. His malady derives from the impossibility of sacrificial purgation. The tragic fall of a "new man" like Hamlet—self-conscious, cunning, divided against himself—fails to restore the providential wholeness of the pre-modern age. The elegiac subject, lingering in sweet delectation of death and doomed love, always withdraws from the transgressive frontier, persevering in his alienated condition. Similarly, the child of the age seems bent on self-destruction, never satisfied with the pain he causes others, but he always defers the final sacrifice, continuing the outward projection of impure violence. If he could only sacrifice himself and not the other—paradoxically

<sup>56</sup>Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), 281, 294–95.

both enacting and suffering the purgative act—he would find the wholeness he seeks, but this is impossible.

The little Napoleon and the child of the age are both criminals who fail the test of “greatness,” in other words, fail to catch more than a glimpse of the place of power, authenticity, and mythic violence. Where they differ is in their experience of withheld sacrifice. The child of the age becomes a model of infinite desire, forever wandering, striving, navigating the ironic pathways to the Absolute. Yet, all the while, he longs only for the “good death” that would redeem him. As a result, he is unable to assume the ironic posture of the romantic *buffo* that would truly free him from despair and alienation. The wandering of the little Napoleon, by contrast, is always at least partly comic, rooted in the picaresque, as the fiery aspirant makes his way from one adventure to another, scaling the ladder of his improbable career. When the house of cards finally collapses, however, and the little Napoleon gains insight into the artificiality of his desire, he is released from the circuits of mediation, and he does find rest. He abandons his quest for authenticity and the free expression of passion, dying “simply, decently, and without the slightest affectation,” as Stendhal writes.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, the reader is left to marvel at the profanity of a world from which tragic greatness has been banished.

In “The Queen of Spades,” Pushkin rejects these two approaches to modern desire as a false choice. He slackens the tension between them, as between Imaginary (internal) and Symbolic (external) forms of mediation, allowing the Real of desire to emerge between the cracks. But this does not mean he has recovered the sovereign, unmediated violence of sacrifice that modernity withholds. Rather, one can say that Pushkin replaces Stendhal’s distinction between internal and external mediation with a third form—the mediation of Russian belatedness. Here it is useful to recall Yuri Lotman’s influential essay on “The Queen of Spades,” in which he summarizes the effects of belatedness in Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

Beginning with the Petrine reforms, the life of educated Russian society developed on two planes. Intellectual, philosophical development followed the course and tempos of Europe, while the sociopolitical foundation of society changed slowly and according to a different logic. This resulted in a sharp increase in the role of chance in the motion of history. Each factor from one sphere appeared irregular and accidental in the other, and the constant mutual penetration of elements from the two spheres led to a sense of events being spasmodic and seemingly unfounded, forcing contemporaries to declare entire aspects of life to be “inorganic,” spectral, and unreal.

This atmosphere particularly characterized the aristocracy’s sense of upward mobility in the second half of the eighteenth century, when a rise in fortune came not from hard work and struggle but as something utterly unpredictable. As Lotman writes: “such concepts as ‘luck,’ ‘fortune,’ and the actions that brought them about—‘favor’—were not understood as the realization of inviolable laws, but as an excess—an unpredictable violation of the rules.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, despite the narrator’s disdain for Russian culture in *The Red and*

<sup>57</sup>Stendhal, *Le rouge*, 407; *The Red*, 501.

<sup>58</sup>Iurii Lotman, “‘Pikovaia dama’ i tema kart i kartochnoi igry v russkoi literature nachala XIX veka,” in *Pushkin* (St. Petersburg, 1995), 794, 795.

*the Black*, the sense of belatedness for educated Russians was more a matter of dissonance between modern culture and somewhat less than modern politics. In Benjamin's terms, the sovereign excess of law-making violence remained a tangible presence in Russian life, even as the educated classes followed their European "masters" through the Enlightenment. The result, however, was a shift of perspective on that place of excess. Instead of "fate," the manifestation of power came to appear as the inscrutable workings of "chance."

By the 1830s, this peculiar state of affairs was already on the wane in Russia. Even if the empire remained politically "backward" in comparison to Europe, the sovereign excess of power characteristic of Catherine's age no longer manifested itself in the same way. Much of Hermann's passion for the 1770s can be read as a kind of nostalgia for such wild excesses of chance. While his worldview is marked by the calculation, discipline, and industriousness of the bourgeoisie, his fantasy leads him again and again to the image of the "lucky young man," upon whom fate—as chance—might descend at any moment.<sup>59</sup> Yet for Hermann the excess of chance is no longer a subjective force. Rather, it has become the object of desire, thus taking on an inverted, uncanny form. Behind his (Symbolic) quest for the three cards and his (Imaginary) fantasy of touching the mysterious power of the 1770s, Hermann is in fact merely pursuing, quite perversely, the "revolting mysteries" of the countess' decrepit body (Real). Sovereign excess has been turned inside out. The temporal gap between culture and politics is no longer productive; it no longer pours forth as an exuberant excess. Instead, it has become the putrid excess of a living death, the uncanny endurance of a power life itself has long since moved beyond.<sup>60</sup>

In *Princess Ligovskaya*, Pechorin's torturous "if," questioning the possibility of an external, Archimedean point of mastery over the self, reflects a similar entanglement of subject and object. Here it is important to recall how the dream of gaining an impossible external view on the self is one of the central myths of Lermontov's oeuvre—most visible in the motif of paradoxically viewing one's own corpse, which recurs from juvenile works like "Night I" (1830) up to "Dream" (1841). It also coincides structurally with the core aspect of Pechorin's character in *Hero of Our Time*, who at once causes the plots of the novel, as if acting from an external position, while also becoming embroiled in them. Pechorin sums up this awkward duality by describing himself as a kind of tragic inversion of the *deus ex machina*: "Through all my active life fate always seems to have brought me in for the denouement of other people's dramas. As if nobody could die or despair without my help. I've been the indispensable figure of the fifth act, thrust into the pitiful role of executioner or traitor."<sup>61</sup> The impossibility of maintaining this position becomes clear at the climax of "Princess Mary." Pechorin kills Grushnitsky, and his horror at seeing his friend's corpse ("I involuntarily closed my eyes") opens a motific loop that closes in the following scene, when he receives a long letter—a declaration of impossible love—from

<sup>59</sup>See also Luba Golburt, *The First Epoch: The Eighteenth Century and the Russian Cultural Imagination* (Madison, 2014), 222–38.

<sup>60</sup>One should note that in Tomsy's story of his grandmother's experience of chance salvation in the 1770s, the men are all significantly older than her (in Richlieu's case, by at least fifty years), thus inverting the young Hermann's gerontophilic attraction to her in the 1830s.

<sup>61</sup>Lermontov, *Geroi nashego vremeni*, in *SS* 6:272. Translation is from Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Paul Foote (London, 2001), 110.

Vera (who, like her namesake in *Ligovskaya*, is his married former lover, both recalling Lermontov's childhood love, Varvara Lopukhina, and Tatiana Larina from the end of *Onegin*).<sup>62</sup> In his attempt to return to Pyatigorsk before Vera leaves, Pechorin drives his horse to death. As he lies on the ground, raw passion pouring forth, he again describes the impulse to look away: "I lay there a long time, weeping bitterly, not attempting to hold back the tears and sobs. I thought my chest would burst; all my coolness and composure vanished like smoke. My heart wilted, my reason went silent, and if anyone had seen me at that moment, he would have turned away in contempt."<sup>63</sup> The explosion of passion, combined with the inability to look at the body left behind, precisely expresses that longing for a final sacrifice of the self—an impossible renewal of mythic violence in modern times—that defines the child of the age and his destructive wandering across the earth.

In *Ligovskaya*, this extreme version of the child's duality never appears. However, there is a moment in which Pechorin projects an interesting fantasy of violence while interpreting a painting at a society gathering. The canvas shows a young woman in the embraces of a drunken old man, while a younger man with fiery eyes and a dagger lurks in the background behind a door. The woman is gesturing to the younger man to be quiet; Pechorin claims she is keeping her betrayed lover's rage in check with false promises. When she gets what she wants from the old man, "she will open the door herself and will be a cold-blooded witness to murder."<sup>64</sup> Pechorin's reading is designed to cause Vera pain, accusing her of base manipulations and mercenary interests in her marriage. However, it is also telling that Pechorin positions himself as utterly weak and deprived of agency in the fantasy. Within the painting he is on the verge of a violent outburst of passion, ready to commit the most horrible of crimes. But from the external perspective of his interpretation, this passion is plainly futile, rendered impotent by its degrading submission to the evil woman's cunning. Finally, his drunken victim hardly occupies a place of power himself. There will be no purification of violence here, no exposure and renewal of sovereign power through transgression. Will the likely murder of the naïve Krasinsky prove any different? Certainly not. All one can expect is a scenario similar to "Princess Mary." Pechorin will project his own self-loathing onto a more innocent rival, coldly exterminating him and yet unable to gaze upon his corpse.

Indeed, the theme of the duel is perhaps the most revealing in terms of the way these texts approach the withholding of mythic violence. Exhibiting his Mephistopheles side, Julien compares his appointment with the guillotine to a duel with a man who never misses his mark. The narrator of "The Queen of Spades" also likens Hermann's final card game to a duel.<sup>65</sup> But the two comparisons carry very different semantic associations. In *The Red and the Black*, the cold precision of the guillotine appears as a modern (and thus dysfunctional) version of fate's mythic violence. Julien's death is a bloodless sacrifice—disavowing all the passions and rivalries that have produced it—and thus cannot bring purification. On the contrary, it reveals the irredeemable impurity of modern law as such.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 288; 141. However, in a peculiar twist, Lermontov gives Vera Ligovskaya's surname to Princess Mary.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 301; 144 (translation modified).

<sup>64</sup>Lermontov, *SS* 6:165.

<sup>65</sup>Pushkin, *PSS* 8:1:261.

At the same time, the noble dueling tradition is no alternative, since it too has become a farce. We learn this early in Book Two of the novel, when Julien fights an utterly dispassionate, in fact altogether friendly duel with an obliging young gentleman after a quarrel with his coachman. The irony of the scene is that Julien's temper and naïveté force a duel to be fought over what was in fact an ignoble squabble between two plebeians. The duel itself is an empty ritual, as class hierarchies—and the notion of honor to which they are attached—appear utterly contingent. When Julien meets the guillotine, we understand that the empty law of non-purgative, “democratic” violence has replaced the noble, sovereign collectivity of blood. As Robert Nye writes on the French duel: “It was said to be a ‘sacrifice,’ a ‘purification,’ and a sign that ‘vengeance’ had been wrought. It was a symbolic and a literal ‘baptism,’ a rite of passage for a class of men whose blood was the precious mark of their distinction, but who must shed it negligently to prove they were worthy to have it course in their veins.”<sup>66</sup> If the spilling of blood in a duel once restored honor—like the descent of fate upon a tragic victim—now it is a mere formality. The fall of the guillotine's blade has replaced its purifying violence with something impersonal and exterminatory.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, Julien merely laughs at his predicament, exhibiting no nostalgia for a more tragic, heroic death. This position is reserved for the ridiculous Mathilde, whose fetishization of Julien's decapitated head reads as pure folly. History (like the novel) has moved beyond the dramas of sacrifice.

Lotman too emphasizes the semantic dissonance of the duel metaphor in “The Queen of Spades.” The card game lacks the central element that enables a duel to reestablish honor when it has been threatened—again, the rivals' equality within a hierarchical system of social differences. In faro, the positions of the two combatants are manifestly uneven: “the player—the one who wants to win everything and risks losing everything to do so—behaves like a man forced to make important decisions without possessing necessary information. ... The dealer has no strategy at all. ... He is like a dummy in the hands of the Unknown Factors behind his back.”<sup>68</sup> But this uneven battle between human rationality and the irrational powers of chance also differs from Julien's duel with the guillotine's cold exterminatory force. Hermann approaches the card game from a position of rational calculation. Possessing the secret of the three cards, he is the one who should have no risk of missing his mark. Yet, his passion for the excess of sovereignty is too great, and he chooses the queen instead of the ace, as if reaffirming the power of the Unknown Factors. Still, Pushkin preserves the ambivalence of his tale to the end—is this choice a manifestation of Hermann's unconscious will or a cruel joke played by the countess from beyond the grave? The undecidability of Hermann's action means that it cannot be ascribed either to will or chance, let alone the mythic law of fate.

We never see the duel that Lermontov seems to promise us in *Ligovskaya*. However, the one we do see—the duel with Grushnitsky in *Hero of Our Time*—is patently devoid of honor, with Pechorin doing everything in his power to show his rival's actions as paramount to murder. When Pechorin survives, his responding shot annihilates Grushnitsky as if by

<sup>66</sup>Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Berkeley, 1998), 26.

<sup>67</sup>On capital punishment and the “rotten” core of law see Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 285–86.

<sup>68</sup>Lotman, “‘Pivoaia dama’ i tema kart,” 798.

firing squad. But the scene in the novel closest to Hermann's final card game—as many scholars have noted—comes in “The Fatalist,” when Pechorin takes up a wager with Vulich about the existence of predestination, and the latter fires a pistol at his head, winning the bet when the gun misfires.<sup>69</sup> As David Powelstock notes, this story takes the novel's central concern with reception and imitation to the metaphysical level of our “hesitation between the complete, unique meaning of ‘text’ (predestination) and the absurd arbitrariness of ‘life’ as we are doomed to live it.”<sup>70</sup> But the question of whether our fates are “written in the stars” of some divine order is never truly resolved. Instead we are left with the more profane imitativeness of the child of the age and his alienated desire: “when I came into this life, I had lived it through already in my mind, and I became bored and disgusted, like someone reading the poor imitation of a long familiar book.”<sup>71</sup> When Pechorin stumbles over a dead pig immediately after these thoughts—foreshadowing the similarly bestial demise of Vulich—the reader is again confronted with the exterminatory, non-purgative violence that dominates the novel.

PUSHKIN'S ENCOUNTER with Stendhal ends with an undecidable question about the lingering, uncanny presence of sovereign power. Lermontov's, by contrast, ends in a productive retreat away from the little Napoleon to the fragmentary subjectivity of the child of the age, accepting the inaccessibility of mythic violence and wandering forth into the exile of modernity. Once again, sovereign power, like spontaneous desire, exists only as a place of withheld negativity—nothing like the Real of desire that Hermann touches with his pursuit of the dark queen. Instead of Pushkin's meticulous and devious interplay between epochs, Lermontov reduces the question of fate to a quarrel of ancients and moderns—those “wise men” of the past, who believed the stars played a role in their lives, and “we, their pitiful descendants ... [who] can no longer make great sacrifices.”<sup>72</sup> Pechorin presents himself as “the axe in the hands of fate,” but even if this renunciation of responsibility were true, the law of that fate is manifestly empty and absurd—a hackneyed imitation rather than a mythic script.<sup>73</sup>

Nevertheless, Lermontov is ultimately the last man standing in the literary historical duel with Pushkin. His alienated, imitative hero becomes the national type at the heart of the Russian novelistic tradition. Turgenev's Bazarov and Goncharov's Oblomov both

<sup>69</sup>The most extensive analysis is M. A. Aleksandrova and L. Iu. Bol'shukhin, “‘Pikovaia dama’ v retseptsii Lermontova (‘Fatalist’),” *Novyi filologicheskii vestnik* 4 (2010): 41–55.

<sup>70</sup>Powelstock, *Becoming Mikhail Lermontov*, 360.

<sup>71</sup>Lermontov, *SS* 6:343; “Hero,” 153 (translation modified).

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 343; 152–53

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 321; 131. It is worth noting that in *Ligovskaya*, Lermontov describes the fashions of those attending a dinner party given by the princess as absurdly eclectic—drawn from all ages—and he quotes Pushkin's *Robber Brothers*: “What a mix of clothes and faces!” (Lermontov, *SS* 6:160). There may also be a hint of Lermontov's reluctance to pursue Pushkin's “revolting mysteries” in his description of Negurova undressing: “Lizaveta Nikolavna told the maid to take off her stockings and shoes and unlace her corset, while she, sitting on the bed, carelessly flung her bonnet on the dressing-table (*tualet*) and let her black hair fall upon her shoulders; but I won't continue this description—no one is interested in admiring faded charms, a scrawny foot, a veiny neck, and dry shoulders with red marks from a tight dress. Everyone has no doubt seen enough of such things” (*ibid.*, 140).

develop through a dialectical relationship to Pechorin (and neither escapes his orbit). Even Dostoevsky, whose *Crime and Punishment* engages with “The Queen of Spades” more directly than any other novel, pushes his little Napoleon deep into the world of the poor clerk (perhaps following Lermontov’s *Ligovskaya*) in order to avoid direct confrontation with the erotic power of Pushkin’s tale.<sup>74</sup> And when Dostoevsky perfects the novelistic representation of mediated desire in *Devils*—providing one of Girard’s central examples—his Stavrogin is yet another child of Pechorin. Dostoevsky may cite Aleko and Onegin as the archetypal Russian “wanderers” in his 1880 Pushkin speech, but it is only the return to the child of the age with Pechorin, ignoring Pushkin’s idiosyncratic resistance of Stendhal, that allows the Russian wanderer to reach literary (if not personal) maturity, filling the pages of the modern novel with his own emptiness.

<sup>74</sup>See Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence, Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Literature and Culture* (Stanford, 1999), 215, 223.