

Borders in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* and "The Demon"

By: Nicole Gonik

Mentor: Professor Yasha Klots

Mellon Public Humanities and Social Justice Program: Hunter College

Introduction

The narrative poem “The Demon” and the novel *A Hero of Our Time* are two of the most celebrated works by the nineteenth-century Russian poet and prose writer Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841). The poem and the novel share many common traits, and the similarities between the protagonists of the two works, the eponymous Demon and Grigory Aleksandrovich Pechorin, are particularly notable. What underlies most similarities between the two texts and their respective characters is the motif of border crossing, whether physical or metaphorical. In this paper, I explore the motif of borders and border-crossing in “The Demon” and *A Hero of Our Time*, with a focus on how Lermontov’s treatment of borders fits in to the paradigms of Russian culture more broadly.

Making use of Yuri Lotman's theory of cultural boundaries and his concept of “semiosphere,” I focus on how borders manifest themselves within the two texts. After establishing how border-crossing outlined the creation histories of the poem and the novel, I discuss how this motif applies to Lermontov’s sources and influences for both works. Then, I analyze various physical and spatial borders in “The Demon” and *A Hero of Our Time* (such as the binaries of up and down or North and South), and how the traditional semiotic associations of those borders are challenged as the protagonists of both works cross and interact with them. I argue that when the works are read in parallel, the blurring of physical and spatial borders invites the audience to question the metaphorical borders relevant to the protagonists, such as the “border” between what is demonic and what is human. Finally, I situate Lermontov’s treatment of borders in the broader context of cultural theory, returning to Lotman’s theories on the proverbial dominance of binary oppositions in Russian culture and inspecting the extent to which

Lermontov challenges this dominance in his nineteenth-century classics, “The Demon” and *A Hero of Our Time*.

Borders We Live By

The borders discussed here will include physical, geographical borders, but will not be limited to them. For the purposes of this paper, the term “borders” can refer to any binary division or dichotomy. This expanded view of borders is in line with Yuri Lotman’s idea of “boundaries.” Boundaries function as structural components in Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere. As Lotman explains in *Universe of the Mind*, a semiosphere is not just the sum of all semiotic systems, but the precondition for them, or the ability of mankind to create and communicate through semiotic systems in the first place (Lotman 123). Any semiosphere is surrounded and driven by a boundary, but it can also contain internal boundaries and subdivisions within itself. For Lotman, boundaries function not simply as walls of division, but as filters or membranes; they “control, filter, and adapt the external into the internal” (Lotman 140). These boundaries can be spatial (such as geographical borders), but are not necessarily so. A boundary can pertain to any kind of binary: the separation between life and death, night and day, and so on.

According to Lotman, “every culture begins by dividing the world into ‘its own’ internal space and ‘their’ external space.” (Lotman 131). Thus, no culture, as Lotman infers, can exist without the boundaries that define it, and the resulting separation into “us” and “them.” Lotman points out that cultures tend to self-identify their “own” space as civilized and safe, while identifying the space of “the other” as hostile and chaotic. At the same time, what is identified by

one culture as the “other” is always the negative counter image, or the inverted double, of that same culture (this idea forms the basis of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, and Said focuses on the importance of this division for European hegemony). As harsh as the division may seem, Lotman points out that a boundary, like a bridge, not only separates, but also unites, thus “belonging” simultaneously but never fully to both frontier cultures and/or contiguous semiospheres.

Moreover, Lotman emphasizes the dynamism and movement facilitated by boundaries. What is external to a boundary can move inside of it and become internal, perhaps even pushing out what is already internal and central to the periphery. For example, Lotman describes such a process with artistic genres and methods; new genres and methods start out on the periphery but eventually come into popularity, becoming central to the culture, while older genres and methods fall out of favor, moving from the center to the periphery. Lotman even uses Lermontov as a specific example of someone who facilitated movement from the external to the internal, calling Lermontov the Russian “image-equivalent” of Byron, whose function was to bring Byron into Russian culture. Without boundaries to carry new ideas from external to internal, culture would be cyclical rather than growing and developing.

While Lotman’s concept of boundaries goes far beyond the physical, he recognizes that his model is subject to “limitations of real space and time” (Lotman 132). For example, our vertical physical positioning gives us the universal notions of up and down. The boundary of up and down is one to which we can assign semiotic values (for example, the notion of “climbing to the top” as a metaphor for success, or of “descent” into Hell). These moral associations, however automatic they may seem, are simply social constructs and conventions – the results of how humanity has coded “up” and “down.” Furthermore, Lotman uses specific examples of physical spaces overlaid with symbolism; for instance, he notes that cities located on a boundary with

nature (such as St. Petersburg) are defined by a fight against nature, and thus associated with doom and destruction.

Using Lotman's conception of boundaries, we can understand borders in a sense that goes far beyond the customary political or geographical usage of the word. Borders understood broadly, as they will be in this paper, delineate any bifurcation that can create ideas of "us" and "them." These binaries do not have to correspond to national lines or physical topology, although they can, and the binaries created by our physical reality can be coded with symbolic values. Moreover, borders can be thought of not only as walls of separation but as membranes or filters, controlling movement (whether literal movement of people or things or metaphorical movement of ideas) from the external to the internal, thus facilitating the development of culture. To be clear, Lotman's views of culture are not universal truths. His views were likely impacted by his own historical context, and this will be addressed later on. Nevertheless, Lotman's framework can act as a stepping stone to understand how Lermontov challenges borders.

Borders of Creation

Before turning to Lermontov's texts, it is important to gauge how borders may have been relevant to their creation. This would best be accomplished by tracing the history of each work, from conception to publication. Lermontov began working on "The Demon" in 1829, while still a teenager. He kept working on the poem until his premature death in 1841. As a result, there are eight different known versions of "The Demon." Throughout Lermontov's revisions of the poem, the narrative underwent many changes, one of the most significant being a change of setting. In the first editions, the events took place in an unknown location (hinted to be Spain). However,

Lermontov later moved the setting to Georgia: a place that was still “across the border,” but more recognizable for the Russian reader. Furthermore, Lermontov himself crossed geographical borders in the process of creating “The Demon,” as he continued working on it after being exiled to the Caucasus for writing “Death of the Poet” (1837), his controversial poem on Pushkin’s death. In fact, it was in 1838, in the aftermath of his exile, that Lermontov completed the notable sixth revision of the poem. This version was the first edition to contain details of the Caucasian setting, as well as motifs from Georgian folklore. The text was “passed around” and well-known before it was even completed. Scholars assert that even Emperor Nicholas I’s family requested a version to read, and some of Lermontov’s revisions may have been influenced by his awareness of that particular audience. Nevertheless, the poem was initially banned in Russia. It was first published in 1856 in Karlsruhe, Germany. A slightly edited version came out in the same city the following year, with parallel editions published in Berlin. It was not published in Russia until 1860. In that sense, “The Demon” had to cross both geographical borders and the border of its author’s life and death on its way to publication, since it was first published outside Russia and after Lermontov’s death.

A Hero of Our Time had a simpler path. The character of Grigory Pechorin first appeared in 1836, when Lermontov began working on a novel called “Princess Ligovskaya.” This work was interrupted by Lermontov’s exile, and was never completed. In 1838, Lermontov began working on *A Hero of Our Time*, taking the character of Pechorin (as well as certain motifs) from his unfinished work. He completed the novel in 1839, and lived to see it published in Russia soon after. The sections “Bela” and “Fatalist” were both published in 1839, followed by “Taman” in 1840. The same year, an edition containing those sections, along with “Maksim

Maksimich,” “Princess Mary,” and the Foreword to Pechorin’s journal was published. Finally, the canonical version (with the added Introduction) was released in 1841.

It is ironic that a work like *A Hero of Our Time*, exposing as it were the “the vices of [Lermontov’s] generation” was published at home faster and with fewer censorship hurdles than “The Demon,” a Romantic poem with little if any relation to the historical and political reality. While this difference can be attributed to general variation in censorship law and implementation, the border-crossing history of “The Demon” still played a role. One particular German edition of the poem, while being considered for publication in Russia, ended up banned due to the afterword added to the edition by its German translator, Friedrich Bodenstedt. In the afterword, Bodenstedt “expressed hostility towards the Russian government for its persecution and exiling of Lermontov” and “accused the Russian censorship of hindering the development of talent” (Tax Choldin 51). In this particular case, it was the commentary added to Lermontov’s work in the process of its border-crossing history that hindered its publication in Russia. This is not to say that all the censorship hurdles faced by the poem can be similarly explained, but the fact that border-crossing determined the poem’s banning in at least one case remains significant.

Borders of Influences

As he worked on both “The Demon” and *A Hero of Our Time*, Lermontov looked outside of Russia for influences and inspirations; thus, “border-crossing” is built into the subtext of both works. Romanticism came to Russia from Europe, mainly England and Germany, making “The Demon” a work with tangible foreign influences. Even the choice of the word Demon (Демон), a

mere transliteration of the English word, over more familiar Russian synonyms such as *bes*, *chort*, or *d'iavol*, highlights the English influence.

More specifically, Lermontov's portrayal of the Demon inherits from many similar depictions of comparable characters by European Romantics, and it would be prudent to look at a few notable depictions that Lermontov may have drawn inspiration from. The notion of a demon or devil as a fallen angel brings to mind the image of Satan in John Milton's 1667 *Paradise Lost*, a major turning point in the depiction of Satan as a literary figure. Although Satan had been represented in literature far earlier, Milton's work was the first to portray Satan as a figure striving for freedom and autonomy, so much so that *Paradise Lost* was considered heretical at the time it was published. Lermontov's Demon is characterized in a very similar way; at one point in the poem, he describes himself as the "tzar of knowledge and freedom," and the "enemy" of Heaven ("The Demon," 525)¹. It is entirely plausible that Lermontov was aware of and influenced by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as Valentin Boss argues in his book *Milton and the Rise of Russian Satanism*. Boss supports his case with details of Lermontov's biography; for example, he notes that Lermontov (like Pushkin before him), had a teacher who translated *Paradise Lost* (Aleksei Zinoviev, 1801-1884). In connection with this, Boss discusses the general importance of *Paradise Lost* to Lermontov's post-Decembrist generation of writers. Boss then compares the two characters, stating that they share a fate of guilt and pride. Boss also argues that Milton set the precedent for the depiction of angels as sexual beings, and that Lermontov's Demon falling in love with the mortal Tamara stems from Milton's Satan being struck by Eve's beauty (Boss 104). However, Boss also points out important differences; for example, he argues that Lermontov's Demon is "less rebellious and less supernatural" than

¹ Note: All translations for "The Demon" are mine unless otherwise stated

Milton's Satan, being relegated to the role of a "fugitive lover" rather than an "adversary to God" (Boss 112). As evidence, Boss brings up the Demon's answer to Tamara's concern about God: "And God?/ Won't glance at us: eternal/for heaven, but not for Earth, his care." In these lines, the Demon plans to "get away" with an act rather than flaunting it in rebellion. Boss ascribes this difference to the fact that Lermontov's generation was, as a whole, less forceful and militant than Milton's 17th-century English society.

The "status" of Lermontov's Demon is ambiguous. As of the last revision of the poem, it is left unclear whether he should be understood as Satan, or the Devil himself, or as a subservient demon (in contrast to Milton's unambiguous Satan). However, the ambiguity of the Demon's status is similar to that of another notable demonic portrayal, also one of Lermontov's possible inspirations: Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*. Mephistopheles was technically an agent of the Devil rather than the Devil himself, but has come to be treated and understood as interchangeable with the latter. Furthermore, unlike Milton's Satan, Mephistopheles was not rebelling or battling against God, but simply playing his part in the scheme. In this sense, Lermontov's Demon combines elements of both Milton's Satan and Goethe's Mephistopheles: he clearly rebelled against Heaven once, leading to his exile, but came to sow evil and corruption as a "job" rather than a further attempt to undermine God.

Finally, although the idea of an angel in love goes back to Milton, the specific plot used by Lermontov bears significant resemblance to that of an earlier Romantic poem: Alfred de Vigny's "Éloa" (1824). In "Éloa," a female angel is lured to earth by Satan, who appears in the guise of a human boy and tempts the angel to save him. She tries and falls to earth, at which point Satan declares himself sadder than ever. Lermontov's Tamara was in many ways depicted as "angelic" and otherworldly rather than human. Moreover, part of the Demon's speech to

Tamara implied that she could “save” him from evil if she reciprocated his love; manipulating Tamara, he says the following: “To good and Heaven/ You could return me with a word” (“The Demon,” 525). Tamara, like the angel in “Éloa,” dies as a result, and the Demon is left alone and devastated much like Satan in the earlier poem. Nevertheless, Lermontov reverses the roles from “Éloa” slightly; his Demon is the one who sees a human on Earth from a vantage point above and flies down to her. While the Demon’s orientation above Earth will be explored further in the paper, this kind of role-switching from the original story contributes, along with the other mixed elements from aforementioned influences, to the general sense of ambiguity about the Demon. Lermontov invokes enough elements from earlier portrayals to make his character recognizable to the audience, but mixes these elements to ensure that the Demon cannot be pinned down to any single “role” or interpretation.

Cross-border influences are also present in the novel. Much as *A Hero of Our Time* is a work of Realism, Pechorin as a character is a radical deconstruction of the Romantic Byronic hero. This particular cross-border influence is addressed rather ironically throughout the novel. For example, when discussing Pechorin, Maksim Maksimich (Pechorin’s commanding officer and the primary narrator of “Bela,” who at this point in the novel is beginning to discuss Pechorin with the first unnamed narrator) suddenly asks if it was the French who popularized “boredom” (pointing, perhaps, to a cynical disillusionment with both the quintessential Byronic hero and Pechorin, on the one hand, and with the European tradition more broadly). The narrator responds that it was the English, and Maksim Maksimich exclaims: “Well, they have always been inveterate drunkards” (*A Hero of Our Time*, 74). Furthermore, both Byron and Goethe’s Mephistopheles (two figures that, one would think, can be associated with the Byronic and devilish Pechorin) are mentioned in the “Princess Mary” section of the novel, but in reference to

another character – Verner the doctor, who is described as follows: “One of his legs was shorter than the other, as in the case of Byron... the younger men dubbed him Mephistopheles” (*A Hero of Our Time*, 144). These ironic references point to Lermontov mocking elements of the Byronic hero type, even as he invokes them in Pechorin.

Borders of the Setting

Physical and spatial borders are a prevalent motif in both “The Demon” and *A Hero of Our Time*, and the way that Pechorin and the Demon contend with these borders is central to their characterization. These borders are semiotically coded, so the audience has certain expectations pertaining to each kind of border. However, Lermontov constantly plays with these expectations. Some of the borders in the two works are tangibly physical, such as the natural, geographical borders formed by the mountains, cliffs, gorges, and rivers that make up the scenery in both the poem and the novel. Lush and detailed descriptions of this landscape are provided in both works, always emphasizing a juxtaposition of the high and the low. The text takes the audience up to mountains seemingly piercing Heaven and gorges opening into Hell. Thus, the scenery alone invites the audience to ponder the dichotomy of “up” and “down,” which is particularly relevant to the poem. The Demon is always “up” and looking down at the Earth; this is revealed by the opening lines of the poem: “The Demon, soul of all the banished/ flew above the sinful Earth” (“The Demon,” 504). Even the verb aspect of the original lines (“Печальный Демон, дух изгнания,/Летал над грешною землей”) speaks to the fact that the Demon’s exile is a perpetual state of flight: the choice of “летал” rather than “летел” shows that the flight is continuous rather than simply occurring at the point that the narration starts. However, the Demon’s pre-exile past also took place “up” in Heaven. For example, his past is

described as a time when “a falling comet/ smiling gently/ would switch places with him” (“The Demon,” 504). There is little spatial contrast between his past and present state. The Demon’s position above the Earth is reinforced throughout the poem; for example, the line “And over the Caucasian peaks/ Heaven’s exile flew” (“The Demon,” 505) has the Demon flying above the mountain peaks, which pierce the skies themselves. Finally, he flies down to Tamara from this plane above Earth.

Lermontov challenges the semiotic associations of “up” and “down” with the Demon’s orientation in space. As Lotman notes in *Universe of the Mind*, the physical positioning of our bodies gives us semiotic associations with the notions of “up” and “down”; up is morally and socially coded as being “good” and heavenly, while “down” is corrupt and hellish. The Demon is situated “up,” when “up” should be the realm of the good, angelic, and Heavenly, and he is supposedly banished from this realm. Similarly, the Demon is always looking down at Tamara, even though she is the good, uncorrupted, and “angelic” one in their dynamic (this will be discussed further in Section 4). Thus, the semiotic associations of “up” and “down” are broken in the poem with the spatial positioning of the Demon, who has not only not been sent “down” when he was banished from Heaven, but still remains physically “above” the characters that, according to expectation, he should not be above.

In the novel, the directional borders of East and West and North and South are more significant. The border of the East-West orientation is most prominent in “The Fatalist.” As Lotman argues in “The Problem of East and West in Lermontov’s Later Work,” Lermontov used “The Fatalist” as an attempt to identify what it truly meant to be “Western” or “Eastern,” and how Russian culture could fit into this dichotomy. In this part of the novel, Fatalism (the belief in predetermination), and its resulting lack of individuality is presented as the defining Eastern

philosophy. In contrast, Western philosophy is associated with individualism, will, and reason. Pechorin functions as someone caught in between the two, capable of taking elements from both philosophies but never coming down on the side of either, not even at the end of “The Fatalist.” Thus, rather than aligning with East or West, Pechorin represents Russia as a distinct culture, flexible enough to include elements of both the East and the West. There is ample textual evidence to support this reading of “The Fatalist.” For example, as Lotman points out, Pechorin denies predetermination and predicts Vulich’s fate almost in the same breath: “I affirm that there is no predestination... I seemed to decipher the imprint of death upon his pale face” (*A Hero of Our Time*, 255-256). Given how strongly it is emphasized throughout the novel that Pechorin as a “superfluous man” does not have a place in Russian society, it is perhaps surprising that he functions as the representative of Russian culture in “The Fatalist” and indeed the agent of Russian colonialism in the Caucasus. However, there are details throughout the novel that justify this function. For example, one curious aspect of Pechorin is that he is superstitious, in a way that is distinctly associated with “folk” beliefs. To illustrate, in “Princess Mary,” he traces his aversion to marriage back to a childhood experience during which an old woman predicted him a “death from a wicked wife” (*A Hero of Our Time*, 213). Pechorin admits that the experience affected him profoundly. This is somewhat contradictory to his character, as Pechorin is generally characterized by a lack of faith or even beliefs. However, this detail allows Pechorin to be associated with Russia without necessarily fitting into, let alone being the embodiment of, Russian society.

Borders drawn along national lines presuppose a division into “us” and “them,” and in the context of imperialism that binary is especially important. Audiences would expect a Russian officer in the Caucasus to adhere to a clear understanding of this “us” and “them” binary, and

yet, this only goes halfway with Pechorin. It is true that he views himself as separate from and superior to the indigenous people in the Caucasus, as is particularly exemplified by his treatment of Bela. Pechorin views and treats her like a part of the Caucasian landscape: not someone, but something to capture or conquer (as Susan Layton argues in *Russian Literature and the Empire*, the link between Caucasian women and the Caucasian landscape from the imperialist perspective is also present in “The Demon,” with Tamara’s beauty being associated with the beauty of the Georgian landscape). Bela’s first comment to Pechorin (“He stands like a poplar among them, but it is not fated that he should grow and blossom in our garden”) (*A Hero of Our Time*, 47) shows the other side of this dynamic, he falls into the category of “them” compared to her conception of “us.” But Pechorin is not just an outsider in Bela’s world; he is an outsider in principle. This is what breaks the expected dichotomy; Pechorin is clearly an outsider in the Caucasus, but he never aligns himself with the Russian high society either. This is clear from what is revealed about his pre-exile past and from his interactions with others in “Princess Mary” (which takes place within Russian society). So, Pechorin may employ the typical imperialist views in relegating people outside of his ethnicity to the category of “them,” but he has no concept of “us.” Moreover, much as Pechorin looks down on people in the Caucasus, he often seeks to emulate them. For example, in “Princess Mary,” he describes the efforts that he makes to resemble the Caucasian style of horseback riding, and even states that “there is no better way of flattering [his] vanity than to acknowledge [his] skill in riding a horse in the Caucasian fashion” (*A Hero of Our Time*, 162). Even Pechorin’s kidnapping of Bela, an action he gets away with because of his position as a colonizer, occurs through different means than those seen as “acceptable” in imperialist Russia. Layton shrewdly observes that Pechorin displays an “interchangeability with the oriental” because his methods of kidnapping Bela align with those

seen as “savage” by the imperialist power. She supports this argument with reactions of Lermontov’s contemporary critics, who were incensed not by *what* happened to Bela but by *how* it happened (Layton 236-237). These traits are not enough for Pechorin to assimilate into the Caucasus, and he displays no signs of wanting to do so, but they are enough to alienate him from Lermontov’s original readers. Thus, Pechorin occasionally veers into the category of “them” for the Russian audience.

Border-crossing facilitated by imperialism also presupposes a position of power. The expectation is that Pechorin, coming into new places as a colonizer, has all the power and superiority on his side. However, the power associated with the imperial position is questioned in the novel, particularly in “Taman.” In this town, Pechorin is consistently outwitted, robbed, and nearly killed by the locals. Moreover, Pechorin is nearly physically overpowered and drowned by the young local girl he was attempting to “conquer”: Pechorin’s expected victim turns into his biggest threat. As Valeria Sobol argues in *Haunted Empire*, this is best analyzed through the dichotomy of North and South. Throughout literary tradition (particularly Gothic literary tradition, which “Taman” emulates), the North has been associated with the position of imperial power and “core” identity, while the South has been associated with “the other,” the inferior, corrupt space to conquer, and simultaneously the “inverted double” of the North. However, in “Taman,” the traditional representation of this dichotomy is broken. One way this occurs is through Pechorin’s lack of powerful, “heroic” traits. For example, he reveals that he cannot swim. Pechorin’s lack of this relatively simple and common skill calls into question the image that the reader forms of him from the previous sections. Elsewhere in the novel, Pechorin is depicted as someone who both seeks danger and has the physical capabilities to deal with it, which is not the case in “Taman.” Sobol argues that Pechorin faces his biggest threat in this

town, not on the battlefield, because it is in Taman that he experiences what Sobol calls the “imperial uncanny”: a projection of anxiety that the power dynamic may not be as secure as the imperialist core would like to believe. Sobol claims that this anxiety comes from “instability in the categories of one’s own and the foreign, the familiar and the strange, self and other, a confusion resulting from the threatening ambiguity of the Russian imperial space” (Sobol 4). Furthermore, as Alexander Zholkovsky argues in “Semiotics of Taman,” literary works (particularly in the Romantic tradition, which *A Hero of Our Time* deconstructs) that involve a Northerner (or any character from the imperial core) invading the South (or any exotic periphery) often follow a typical formula: the traveling aristocrat gets involved with and seduces a local “wild” woman, and tragedy ensues. However, in “Taman” this formula fails at every step. Pechorin fails to seduce the young woman, and the ending is hardly a tragedy for anyone (other than the abandoned blind boy). Thus, the expected dramatic clash of the powerful imperial representative and “the other” turns into a series of embarrassing blunders, flaws, and failings on the part of the imperial subject, seemingly powerless in this particular section of the novel.

Metaphorical Borders

Lermontov’s treatment of physical and/or spatial borders challenges the associations and expectations that audiences associate with them. This provides an opening for the audience to question metaphorical borders as well. In my parallel reading of “The Demon” and *A Hero of Our Time*, the main metaphorical border that comes into question is the line between the human and the supernatural. This could entail an actual clash between the human and supernatural realms, or the blurring of lines between what it means to be human or supernatural – in this case demonic.

The actual clash of the human and supernatural realms occurs in “The Demon,” but the aforementioned blurring of spatial borders makes it play across unexpectedly. The expectation for this plot is for Earth (represented by Tamara) to serve as a battleground for the forces of Heaven and Hell. Heaven is certainly present in the poem, but Hell, the default location for the Demon, is notably absent except for a brief mention by Tamara, which is quickly dismissed by the Demon. Lermontov’s Demon is not only unconnected to Hell, but his banishment from Heaven seems to have occurred without a significant spatial relocation. And if the Demon has not really been relocated to his “proper” space, is he a “proper” demon?

Moreover, Tamara is not so much a representative of Earth in the poem as she is a representative of Heaven. Though Tamara is human, she is almost always described as heavenly or otherworldly. For example, the narrator states that beauty like hers has not been seen “since the world lost Heaven” (“The Demon,” 509). Another line states that “if the Demon, flying by/were to take a glance at her,” he would be reminded of his “former brothers,” meaning his former fellow angels (“The Demon,” 509). Tamara’s white chador also functions to enhance her “otherworldliness,” forming a kind of pious shield around her – although it should be noted that Tamara is Orthodox Christian, not Muslim, and the mention of this garment is thus evidence of Lermontov mixing various cultural details to create a “decorative” setting that his audience would identify as vaguely exotic (Eikhenbaum 93). Even when the angel arrives to take Tamara’s soul up to Heaven, he exclaims that souls like hers were “not made for this world/and this world not made for them” (“The Demon,” 538). Finally, the Demon is pulled towards Tamara specifically because she reminds him of the heavenly world he was exiled from; he seems to view her as his “ticket” back home, and back to his pre-exile past. The Demon says this himself, telling Tamara that a single word from her could send him back to Heaven. Even if the

Demon's words can be ascribed to his manipulation of Tamara, the same is implied in his first reaction to seeing her, when the Demon starts recognizing "once native" feelings within himself, and asks: "Was this a sign of rebirth?" ("The Demon," 510). Therefore, Tamara is associated with the angelic and heavenly realm despite being human. If the human character in the poem is more angelic than human, why can't the demonic character be more human than demonic?

The blurring of these roles becomes ever clearer if *The Demon* and *Pechorin* are read comparatively. How demonic is the Demon, and how human is Pechorin? One aspect through which this distinction is blurred is their views on exile. The state of exile and the isolation it brings is one of the biggest commonalities between the Demon and Pechorin; they are both eternal outsiders, not only exiled from the place they came from, but incapable of settling anywhere at all. This quality is not simply an integral aspect to both characters – it is arguably the reason they exist as characters. However, their reactions to this state are completely different and counterintuitive to their roles as demon and human. Unlike the Demon, Pechorin is a perpetual outsider by choice. He may have been exiled to the Caucasus, but there is no divine power preventing him from settling into a social group or making a home for himself, as is the case with the Demon. The Demon was forced into exile by God, so he is kept in eternal loneliness by a force more powerful than himself. Pechorin may have been sent to the Caucasus by those who hold power over him as an officer, but there is no one preventing him from connecting with other people and new places. This relationship, in other words, is counterintuitive: the Demon, a supernatural, nearly all-powerful being is a victim of someone else within his story, while Pechorin, an ordinary human, is not. Furthermore, the Demon's exile is his primary cause of suffering: he dreams of his days back in Heaven (or, in his case, back "home") and even clings to the hope that Tamara can help him "return," if not to Heaven, then to

the pre-exile version of himself. In other words, like a human who has been forced to leave home, he yearns to go back. Meanwhile, Pechorin may be suffering, but not because of his exile. In fact, it is quite the opposite; during his monologue to Maksim Maksimich, Pechorin confesses that perpetual travel is the only “remedy” for him (*A Hero of Our Time*, 40), and that the danger and proximity to death offered by his transfer to the Caucasus temporarily relieved his boredom. This difference shows that the very human concept of “home” is virtually missing from Pechorin’s character, while it drives the Demon.

Challenge to Binaries

Lermontov’s treatment of spatial borders and the resulting blurring of metaphorical borders serves as a challenge to the very idea of binary oppositions – a choice that is especially significant considering the dominance of binaries in Russian culture. Lotman and Uspensky identify two main reasons for this dominance: religion (the lack of Purgatory, or a “neutral” state, in Russian Orthodoxy) and historical change (Peter the Great’s reforms and the resulting identification of the West as “new” land, and of Russia as “traditional” land). In the context of imperialism, these reasons branch out and shift; when convenient for the imperialist narrative, Russia can be rewritten as aligned with the “civilized” West as opposed to the uncivilized, traditional East (but traditional, of course, in the “wrong” way – not aligned with Russian Orthodoxy, the source of “good” and “holy” traditions). The concept of rewriting the narrative around the binary is closely aligned with Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. For example, according to Said, in the early 19th century, the Crusades were reframed as being not so much about “the deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre,” but more about “teaching the Orient the meaning

of liberty,” with the author of this particular idea, Chateaubriand, “finding it no paradox that a Western conquest of the Orient was not a conquest after all, but liberty” (Said 172). As Said argues throughout the book, the “very core of traditional Orientalist dogma” is that “these people over there were not like us and didn’t appreciate ‘our’ values” (Said, Preface) – what those values actually are can be rewritten depending on which imperialist power is invoking them and when. Such “rewriting” even occurs within Lotman’s own work – this will be discussed in the conclusion. Regardless, Lermontov’s work challenges all these binaries.

First, the lack of a religious “neutral state” brought up by Lotman and Uspensky is present in the poem. The Demon’s existence may not be Purgatory, but it is in between Heaven and Hell, and the Demon’s goals are not aligned with those of Hell, but instead constitute a personal, futile quest to return to Heaven. Lermontov’s blurring of this particular border consists not only in the creation of a third, neutral state for his Demon, but perhaps more importantly in that this neutral state plays a far greater role in the poem than one of the binary states (Hell). The second reason brought up by Lotman and Uspensky, the identification of Russia as the “traditional” land in contrast to the “new” land of the West, is challenged even in Lotman’s own analysis of “The Fatalist,” in which Pechorin represents Russia as the Northern “third state.”

Lotman’s view of borders is, at the most basic level, about separations of “us” and “them.” The same is true for Said’s Orientalism. He states that this view of the East from the perspective of the West stems from “the universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’” (Said 54). Lermontov’s novel is a striking example of how the border of “us” and “them” can be simultaneously upheld and subverted. On one hand, *A Hero of Our Time* is an example of the “exteriority of representation” that Said identifies as one of the key features of Orientalism.

Exteriority of representation ensures that the East is not allowed to speak for itself; it is the sum of ideas and perceptions gathered and assumed by Western outsiders (Said 21). This is certainly applicable to many aspects of the novel. Lermontov is the outsider creating the representation, but so are all three of the novel's narrators: the traveler, Maksim Maksimich, and Pechorin himself. The Caucasian characters are represented through the sum of these outsiders' perceptions (this is particularly evident through the infantilized depiction of Bela). And yet, the "exteriority" aspect is blurred through the fact that Pechorin is "exterior" to any society, Eastern or not. The idea of "them" is certainly present in the novel, and yet the idea of "us" is arguably absent. In that sense, it is similar to the poem (where one end of the binary, Heaven, is dominant, but the other end, Hell, is virtually absent). Thus, Lermontov not only creates "third" states for his protagonists, but also makes one end of a binary opposition seemingly evaporate, challenging the binary as a whole.

Conclusion

Of course, Lotman's framework is neither universal nor infallible. It is important to note that Lotman, just like Pechorin (and his creator, Lermontov), was a hero of his time. Living and working in the Soviet Union, the rigid framework of binary oppositions that he offers may very well have been influenced by the rigidity and black-and-white mentality enforced by the Soviet Union itself. Moreover, Lotman contradicts himself throughout the works mentioned in this paper. For example, while he and Uspensky situate Russia as the "old, traditional" world compared to the "new, progressive" world of the West in "The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture," he states almost the reverse in his "The Problem of East and West in Lermontov's Later Work," presenting Russia as the new "third" world that is forming

out of elements of the East and the West. This “third” world is not the reverse of either the East of the West, but an amalgamation of both. Perhaps this begs the question: if Lotman’s Structuralist approach is entirely based on binaries, and Lermontov challenges binaries at every step, why is Lotman needed for this analysis?

The answer is that in order to understand how Lermontov challenges borders, it is necessary to identify what those borders are and recognize when they are being blurred, and Lotman’s Structuralist lens provides that crucial first step. In Lotman’s actual writing on Lermontov he focuses primarily on *A Hero of Our Time*, but the same exercise works just as well with “The Demon.” I have mentioned that the audience is encouraged to question *what* the Demon is once we realize that he isn’t *where* he is supposed to be. And that initial realization is enabled by the way that Lermontov describes the Demon’s spatial whereabouts. Hell is hardly mentioned in the poem, but we know that the Demon is not there because of the descriptions of his lonely flight over the world. Lotman’s model tells us that space is symbolically coded, so if the Demon is not in the spatial realm of the demonic, it must be a choice on the part of Lermontov to signify that the Demon himself is not quite so “demonic.” Applying Lotman’s binary framework to the poem highlights the Demon’s ambiguity, and it is clear from all of Lermontov’s choices regarding this character that ambiguity is exactly what he intended. It is easy to say that Lotman’s binaries are restrictive, that everything has more nuance and that no one truly, unequivocally belongs to any rigid category. But when looking at characters like the Demon and Pechorin, who are defined by non-belonging, we can still use those restrictive binaries to identify just where they don’t belong and why.

That inquiry – where these characters don’t belong and why – underlies every aspect of these works. Indeed, every quality the Demon exhibits can be traced back to his exile. It is the

cause of his loneliness, his desire to return home, his obsession with Tamara, and his spite towards Heaven. Meanwhile, Pechorin's every trait and action stems from his true exile – not his formal punishment, but his own fundamental inability to belong. This is perhaps best showcased in “Taman.” The characters that Pechorin encounters in Taman are, in a sense, border-crossers too (in that, as smugglers, they move items across borders). These people, like Pechorin, are outsiders from society. And yet, they are at the very least able to form a group amongst each other. It was a small group, and not a very strong one given how easily Yanko and the woman abandon the blind boy at the end, but it was nevertheless a group. A town filled with outsiders and danger (which Pechorin, as mentioned, claims to enjoy as a temporary reprieve from boredom) would seemingly be Pechorin's perfect chance to belong somewhere. And yet, he cannot get out of Taman soon enough, though not before managing to break up the trio of smugglers. Pechorin can neither find nor create a space for himself in any group, even a group of outsiders. He can only wreak havoc in the groups that he encounters, and this sums up all his interactions in the novel. Thus, if Lotman's binary framework helps us understand non-belonging, it helps us understand every action that the two protagonists take.

A Structuralist approach to Lermontov can also serve as a springboard for future analyses and interpretations. For example, it would be interesting to read Lermontov through the lens of Post-Structuralists like Jacques Derrida. As Derrida states in *Différance*, there can be no presence “before and outside semiological difference”; in other words, in order to be identified, something must be differentiated from what it is not. Both Pechorin and the Demon are defined by what they are not, or – in a Lacanian fashion – by what they lack: Pechorin is not a part of any society, the Demon is not a part of Heaven or Hell. To use Derrida's idea, Pechorin and the Demon are so defined by their difference to their surrounding contexts that they would have no

“presence” if not for this difference. In other words, were these characters not exiles and outsiders, they would not exist. It is Lotman’s approach, however, that helps identify Pechorin and the Demon as exiles, outsiders, and border-crossers in the first place, and consequently identify what makes them such special characters.

Works Cited

- Boss, Valentin. *Milton and the Rise of Russian Satanism*. University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Différance*. Translated by Alan Bass. University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Eikhenbaum, Boris. *Lermontov: Opit Istoriko-Literaturnoi Otsenki*. St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo Leningrad. 1924.
- Layton, Susan. *Russian Literature and Empire*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Lermontov, Mikhail. *The Hero of Our Time*. Tr. Vladimir Nabokov. Ardis Publishers, 2002.
- Lermontov, Mikhail. "The Demon." From *M. Y. Lermontov: Second Volume*. Moscow: Academy of the Sciences of the Soviet Union, 1962.
- Lotman, Yury. "The Problem of East and West in Lermontov's Later Work." V shkole poëticheskogo slova : Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol'. Azbuka, 2015.
- Lotman, Yury, and Boris Uspensky. "The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (prior to the end of the 18th century)." Uspensky B.A. Selected Works 1. 1977
- Lotman, Yury. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Translated by Ann Shukman. Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. First Vintage books edition., Vintage Books, 1979.
- Sobol, Valeria. *Haunted Empire: Gothic and the Russian Imperial Uncanny*. Cornell University Press, 2020.
- Tax Choldin, Marianna. *A Fence Around the Empire: Russian Censorship of Western Ideas Under the Tsars*. Duke University Press, 1985.
- Zholkovsky, Alexander. "Semiotics of Taman." University of Southern California, 1990.