

2008

“I’m NO Byron”: Lermontov, Love, and the Anxiety of Byronic Influence

Diana Koretsky
Bucknell University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr>

Recommended Citation

Koretsky, Diana (2008) "“I’m NO Byron”: Lermontov, Love, and the Anxiety of Byronic Influence," *Comparative Humanities Review*: Vol. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr/vol2/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Humanities Review by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

~*~

“I’m NO Byron”: Lermontov, Love, and the Anxiety of Byronic Influence

*Diana Koretsky,
Bucknell University*

Do not swear at all.
Or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry,
And I'll believe thee.
~William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1, ll. 154-7

Let not my love be called idolatry.
~William Shakespeare, Sonnet 105

As one of history’s seminal love poets, Shakespeare teaches us that there is a fine line between love and idolatry, and that to cross that line is to cross into the territory of sacrilege. These views imply a tension between the worship of an ordinary human being and the worship of the divine; but what happens when the divide between humanity and divinity is eliminated, and a *mortal* object of idolatry becomes the ultimate ideal? More specifically, what effect does this kind of worship—more typically known to our society as “fandom”—have on the development of an aesthetic philosophy that is already culturally imbued with considerations of divine ideals? Two centuries after Shakespeare, Lord Byron begins to address these questions even as he himself, the first major celebrity in Western culture, raises them. He self-consciously plays with his status when he writes to his publisher, John Murray,

They made me without my search a species of popular Idol – they –

without reason or judgment beyond caprice of their Good pleasure – threw down the Image from its pedestal – it was not broken with the fall – and they would, it seems, again replace it – but they shall not. (Byron, *BLJ*, 6, 106)

The intersections between love, idolatry, fandom and worship really begin to play themselves out when a fellow poet becomes enamored of Byron's work and comes to establish himself as not only one of the preeminent writers of his day, but also one of Byron's all-time greatest fans.

Mikhail Yur'evich Lermontov made no secret of his affinity for Byron. Byronic echoes permeate Lermontov's poetry, and a myriad of studies have compared and contrasted Byron's and Lermontov's literary legacies. However, the extent to which Lermontov's artistic development is directly correlated to Byron's legacy constitutes a considerable debate in Russian literary studies. According to some, Byron's influence on Lermontov is so pervasive that it has come to be "taken for granted" by scholars (Diakonova 80). Conversely, some studies have recently proposed that a focus on the differences between the poets finds that Byron's influence on Lermontov has been overstated. In this paper, I argue precisely the opposite to be true, finding in Lermontov's Romantic poetry more than simply an incorporation of Byronic elements; the fundamental struggle between Lermontov's desire for an autonomous literary identity and his aspiration to write like Byron weaves its way into most, if not all, of Lermontov's poems. This is the point at which this paper departs from previous scholarship that compares Byron and Lermontov. Lermontov's obsession with Byron ran much deeper than his invocation of typically "Byronic" tropes would suggest. Certainly, Lermontov strove to find his individual voice, but he found it only when he wrote his magnum opus, *A Hero of Our Time* – a work of prose Realism – and even here, he does not fully separate himself from Byron. A close study of his Romantic writings reveals a writer perpetually struggling against the influence of Byron, who was indisputably the principle "god of [Lermontov's] idolatry."

Lermontov's adoration of Byron is made apparent in the numerous lyric poems in which he compares himself to the British poet. Most famously, Lermontov undermines his poetic abilities in a famous lyric, written in 1832, which begins, "No, I'm not Byron" ("Нет, я не Байрон"). He writes, "I began younger, I will finish younger, / My mind will not produce a lot" ("Я раньше начал,

кончу ране, / Мой ум немного совершит," SS, Vol. 1, 361). In this poem, as in numerous others, Lermontov, compares his soul to the soul of his idol by invoking the image of the ocean, a trope commonly associated with Byron in Russian Romantic poetry¹ : "In my soul, as in the ocean / A heap of broken hopes lies dashed" ("В душе моей, как в океане, / Надежд разбитых груз лежит," SS, Vol. 1, 361). A little further down, Furthermore, Lermontov refers to himself and his idol interchangeably as he meditates on the public's perceptions of their poetic legacies:

Who, gloomy ocean, can
Learn your secrets? Who
Will tell the crowd my thoughts?
I alone - or God - or no one!

Кто может, океан угрюмый,
Твои изведать тайны? Кто
Толпе мои расскажет думы?
Я - или бог - или никто! (SS, Vol. 1, 361)

These lines, which conclude "No, I'm not Byron," signify what will become the most significant of Lermontov's artistic struggles – the relationship between the artist, his art and the public that receives it.

This relationship is given closer consideration in the longer lyric, "Death of a Poet" ("Смерть поэта," SS, Vol. 1, 412-415), in which Lermontov invokes the Byron legend to bring to light the ways in which the phenomenon of celebrity and the public's tendency toward idolatry (making no explicit reference to his own) has essentially killed the poet and turned him into an abstract celebrity figure. The poem largely presents the poet as a victim "by rumor slandered," referring to the mob mentality often associated with Byromania in England. Byron, in this sense, was both the sufferer, and, in some cases, instigator, of perpetual gossip. As many scholars have noted, the public so deeply conflated the Byronic hero with the poet, himself, that it knew virtually nothing of Byron, the man, whom we know from his correspondences and journals to have been insecure and paranoid—quite unlike his fictional protagonists. Lermontov, himself, notes this in his novel, *A Hero of Our Time*, where he discusses the Byronic attitude as becoming a trend in the higher levels of society, asserting that "those who were really and truly bored strove to

conceal their misfortunes as if it were a vice" (*A Hero of Our Time* 35-36) ("впрочем, разочарование, как все моды, начав с высших слоев общества, спустилось к низшим, которые его донашивают, и что нынче те, которые больше всех и в самом деле скучают, стараются скрыть это несчастье, как порок," SS, Vol. 4, 317). Thus, he writes, "Byron was nothing more nor less than a drunkard" (*A Hero of Our Time* 36) ("Байрон был больше ничего, как пьяница," SS, Vol. 4, 317). However, I have mentioned, *A Hero of Our Time* reflects Lermontov's ultimately coming to his own narrative voice. In his Romantic poetry, Lermontov is still very much a poet struggling to find it. Thus, in "Death of a Poet," rather than undermine Byron, he elevates him to the level of a martyr, and then proceeds to lash out at the reading public for misconstruing his work and exploiting his legacy, concluding with an allusion to some possibility of retribution: "But justice also comes from God, corruption's friends! / The judge most terrible awaits you" ("Но есть и божий суд, наперсники разврата! / Есть грозный суд: он ждет," SS, Vol. 1, 415).

Based on this and other instances in which Lermontov mentions divine judgment in like terms, as well as the prominence of Kant and other German idealist philosophers in Russia at this time, it seems likely that "God" here may refer to a definitive judgment of art, an ideal Form of Beauty. If this is the case and a standard exists for art, it is only logical to conclude that, for Lermontov, Byron set that standard.

We know that for Lermontov, art and the aesthetic experience were heavily tied to some notion of the divine. This is most prominently expressed in the 1831 lyric, "The Angel" ("Ангел"), in which a newborn soul, having heard the music of the heavens, must find a way to exist on Earth without it:

Long it languished on Earth,
Full of dreams and desires,
And the sounds of the heavens could not be replaced,
By the dull songs of earth.

И долго на свете томилась она,
Желанием чудным полна;
И звуков небес заменить не могли
Ей скучные песни земли. (SS, Vol. 1, 239)

In "The Angel," Lermontov implies the possibility for reconciling

the fundamental divide between the spiritual and the earthly through art. That is, the young soul in the poem is spiritually bound to the heavens but physically rooted in the material; however, its memory of the aesthetic experience – the heavenly music – bridges the gap between the two realms, raising the question, what are we to do in the face of this state of things? One might strive to regain the lost paradise through art which, in the view of Kant and Schelling, the two most widely read philosophers during Lermontov's time, brings one closer to nature and love. However, as one critic puts it, "the upward striving contains the germ of its own dissolution. When frustrated, its own inner momentum can lead to a reverse swing of the pendulum, to a dynamic embracing evil" (Davidson 177), opening up the possibility for art to have a demonizing effect, an idea with which Lermontov's poetry often engages. Generally speaking, it seems unlikely that art could be intrinsically demonic in this schema, because it is fundamentally tied to divinity. However, I would argue that for Lermontov, there is a fine line between his Christian God and Byron, the "god of his idolatry." To some degree, Lermontov is perpetually walking the very thin divide between fandom, idolatry and religious worship. These elements find their most complete consideration in his most important and most Byronic narrative poem, *The Demon* (Демон).

Written between 1829 and 1841, *The Demon* was revised eight times, apparently never quite meeting Lermontov's vision for what he felt it should be. In point of fact, there is no evidence to suggest that the eighth revision of the poem was meant to be final, as Lermontov was killed in a duel shortly after completing it. Lermontov's obsessive revising of the poem, which really spanned most of his short literary career, in itself, highlights his neurotic attitude toward his art, which is only compounded by the poem's highly Byronic undertones. Not incidentally, the brooding protagonist is reminiscent of many of Byron's characters. On a rudimentary level, *The Demon* might even be viewed as a reworking of *The Giaour* in that it centers on the same basic elements: a woman, her fiancé (or her master, in Byron's poem) and the demon who loves her. However, unlike *The Giaour*, which is primarily oriented around the title character's internal suffering, Lermontov's poem is plot-driven. In the "final" version of Lermontov's poem, which is the one most widely read, the lonely Demon falls in love with Tamara, a young woman who represents the epitome of beauty and purity. Perceiving her as his greatest

challenge, he attempts to seduce her. This scene, written in dramatic verse form, rings with reminiscences of Byronic seductions, and, I will show, recalls episodes of Romantic vampirism from the British canon (Russia had no strong tradition of literary vampires at this time). Ultimately, Tamara resists the Demon's advances and he rapes and kills her. As he prepares to take her soul, an angel suddenly descends from Heaven and saves it, preserving her honor.

Taken as an extended metaphor of the conflict between art and the artist, the Demon can be viewed to represent Lermontov himself and Tamara, his art. The Byronic elements of the Demon's character can arguably stand for Lermontov's aspiration to be Byron, and Tamara's purity represents Lermontov's desire to write like the English Romantic whom he idolized. The Angel, then, represents the ultimate judgment of art that we saw in "Death of a Poet," the Kantian Form of Beauty, or, for Lermontov, the Byronic aesthetic, itself. Lermontov as the Demon tries to achieve the Byronic aesthetic in taking over Tamara's soul, but to no avail. Lermontov views his aspiration as a corruption of the Byronic and therefore undermines himself by writing his Demon to ultimately fail in his seduction of Tamara. The Angel pulls Tamara back to her pure state, her Byronic perfection, and the Demon – Lermontov – is left alone, without an aesthetic to call his own.

The seduction scene becomes instrumental to reading the poem in these terms. As I have mentioned, the scene reverberates with images of literary vampirism. The figure of the vampire, particularly the Romantic vampire, has been equated with the relationship of the artist to his work. James B. Twitchell, one of the seminal critics of the vampire, writes of the Romantic artist:

In no other movement has the artist been so aware of his inner self and of his exchanging of energies, not only with those around him, but with the work or art as well. He is both enervated and energized by the art of creation...Hence, vampirism, simply as a process of energy exchange, is implicit in the creative process...For the Romantic artist this 'process' usually involves four relatively stable parts: the artist, the audience, the object of art (artifact), and the subject of art (Twitchell 142).

In Twitchell's terms, if the Demon is the artist, then the Angel, who sees the Demon's transgressions against Tamara and eventually stops them, is the audience within the poem (which is not to say that the Angel represents Lermontov's audience, as I will explain). The subject of the work is Lermontov's perception of himself as

fundamentally corrupting the Byronic aesthetic, and the object becomes the poem, itself, which is then read by a real audience. The real audience will, of course, judge the work for themselves, but, given Lermontov's views on the public in "Death of a Poet," we know that he does not trust his readers to understand art. Thus, the final outcome of Lermontov's poem will circle back to his notion of a definitive aesthetic judgment, which has nothing to do with the public and everything to do with the degree to which Lermontov achieves the Byronic. In this sense, Lermontov's relationship to Byron might be called vampiric, or at the very least, parasitic, as Lermontov relies on the Byronic aesthetic as a host of sorts, through which he will validate himself as a poet.

Indeed, vampirism manifests itself in *The Demon* in a more direct way, which becomes instrumental to understanding the implications of my reading of the title figure as representing Lermontov himself. Vampirism is heavily implicated in the language that the Demon uses to attempt to convince Tamara to join his world. We know that the Demon is immortal, but during his exchange with Tamara, he qualifies his immortality by hinting that he is actually "undead," the kind of immortality typically associated with vampires: "And secretly, suddenly, I began to hate / My undeath and my power" ("И тайно вдруг возненавидел / Бессмертие и власть мою," SS, Vol. 2, 525). This line is more commonly translated as "'My immortality and my power,'" but as I will show, the word "undeath" seems to be closer to the implications of the Russian "бессмертие." Several lines later, he says, "To not live, like you, began to pain me" ("Не жить, как ты, мне стало больно," SS 525). The word "immortality" literally means "not dying" or "unending life," whereas a state of immortal "not living" denotes the "undeath" characteristic only of vampires in folklore and literature. The Russian word, "бессмертие," itself means immortality, though it literally breaks down into "without death," a somewhat closer variant to "undeath" than the English "immortality." It is possible that because of the potential for confusion here, Lermontov qualified the state of the Demon's immortality by having him state that not only does he never die, he does not live – thus, he is not simply immortal, but actually undead – a vampire.

The association between the Demon/vampire and the figure of "the author" is made explicit at the very end of the poem. In wrapping up the tale, the narrator tells us that the hands of time

have swept away any traces of the story that we have just read; the paradox being that the author has allowed for the perpetuation of the story in spite of the passage of time. Implied, then, is that, like the Demon, the author represents the eternal force of the world. To reinforce the poet's association with the Demon, in his third revision of the poem (1931), Lermontov begins with an epigraph from Byron's *Cain*, followed by a short prologue which reads:

Like a demon, calm and severe,
I would amuse myself with evil-doing.
Deceits were not new to me,
And poison was on my heart.

Now, as this gloomy Genius,
I, near you, have again revived,
For pure pleasures,
Both for hopes, and for the heavens.

Как демон, хладный и суровый,
Я в мире веселился злом.
Обманы были мне не новы,
И яд был на сердце моём.

Теперь, как мрачный этот Гений,
Я близ тебя опять воскрес,
Для непорочных наслаждений,
И для надежд, и для небес.

(SS, Vol. 2, 566-7)

On the surface, Lermontov directly compares himself to a demon, telling his readers that his life felt full of evil until he discovered some unnamed force which "revived" him because it possessed some other "gloomy Genius." Given Lermontov's idolatry, coupled with the epigraph that immediately precedes this prologue, one can only take the "gloomy Genius" to be Byron, which leaves the act of writing poetry as that which revived the "demonic" Lermontov.

Though Lermontov's relationship to his work is explicated for us in *this* version of the poem, as it progresses, and subsequently with each revision, Lermontov consistently problematizes it. Despite various changes to the plot, the Demon's multifarious Byronic traits serve to tie him to Lermontov's idolatry of Byron, and his ultimate failure to seduce the object of his affection can be read as Lermontov's feeling of inferiority to the

British poet. There is only one version of the eight revisions in which the Demon successfully takes over Tamara's purity. However, Lermontov changed it back in the last revision before his death in 1841. In point of fact, *The Demon* is not the only instance in which Lermontov invokes Byronic tropes only to undermine them in the end. In the following statement, Elizabeth Cheresch Allen, one of the major critics on the subject, summarizes Lermontov's tendency to step down from creating a truly Byronic work:

Lermontov would adopt Byron's favorite form, the narrative poem, and yet subvert its drama; he would extensively employ exotic settings and impassioned plots but somehow deflate them; he would portray seemingly typical Byronic characters and then complicate them by showing them falling short of their expected scale and vitality; he would manifest a Byronic awareness of the threats of the human spirit posed by self-consciousness, passivity, and dependence, while only partially endorsing Byron's ideals of activity and transcendence. (Allen 15)

So, if the Demon represents Lermontov, his struggle with Tamara is necessarily analogous to Lermontov's attempts to formulate his art in Byron's style.

Interestingly, in 1841, while still working on *The Demon*, Lermontov completely reconceived his female protagonist in a lyric poem titled "Tamara" ("Тамара," SS, Vol. 1, 535). Whereas in every version of *The Demon*, Tamara was the epitome of chastity, purity and honor, in this poem, she becomes an extension of the cruelty and corruption of the Demon himself, described as "Like a demon, treacherous and evil" ("Как демон, коварна и зла," SS, Vol. 1, 535). I take this to be a moment unabashed frustration with himself as a writer, in which Tamara no longer represents the Byronic aesthetic with which Lermontov struggles, but rather becomes, completely, the fundamentally corrupt work that he sees himself to have created. Viewing himself to have fallen short of achieving Byron's poetic abilities, Lermontov thus places himself among the mob that misconstrues and kills the poet in "Death of a Poet." So, in as much as he tries to write his poetic identity, he ultimately fails and must turn the pen on himself, poetically undermining *The Demon* by reworking his view of his art in "Tamara."

Significantly, the role of the Angel was also drastically reworked. In his seventh revision of *The Demon*, Lermontov eliminates the struggle with the Angel altogether, leaving

Tamara's soul to the Demon in the end. Of particular interest is the fact that Lermontov intended this version of the poem to be read aloud to some friends (Tomashevskij, 696-697). Prior to this, the poem had not been released to the public in any form. (It was first published posthumously, in 1843, based primarily on the eighth and final revision). Lermontov's allowing the Demon to triumph at the end of the seventh revision may be read as an attempt to assert control over his art for the purposes of presenting it before an audience. That is, with no Angel to stand in his way, the Demon is allowed to triumph completely – or, Lermontov's art is not judged against an aesthetic ideal, and therefore does not have a chance to fall short of the Byronic. Clearly, however, this ending did not fulfill Lermontov's poetic vision for *The Demon*, and he ultimately did change the story back, allowing the Angel to redeem Tamara's soul and leaving the Demon to wander the earth alone for eternity.

Lermontov's revisions of *The Demon* span almost the entirety of his literary career. It was in the midst of writing and revising *The Demon*, with the shadow of Byron perpetually looming overhead, that he wrote most of his other poetical works. I have shown the possibility of reading *The Demon* allegorically, as an expression of Lermontov's corrupting his art (Tamara) with the anticipation of being rebuked by a standard of aesthetic judgment (The Angel). As a result, I argue that most, if not all, of Lermontov's poetry should be understood, at least on some level, as an expression of his frustration with his inability to rise to the level of his idol. Thus, although his 1831 assertion, "Я не Байрон," has been typically translated into English as "I'm *not* Byron," perhaps it is more appropriately read, "I'm *no* Byron."

ENDNOTES

1. For more on the manifestations of this motif, see Catherine O'Neil's "Byron's Sea in Pushkin and Lermontov" in *The Byron Journal*, 32.2 (2004): 101-13.

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

PRIMARY TEXTS

Byron, George Gordon, Lord. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols.

- Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1976.
- Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. Transl. Marr Murray and J.H. Wisdom. 05-01-1997. Project Gutenberg. 10 Apr. 2007. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/913>>
- "Death of the Poet." *From the Ends to the Beginning: a Bilingual Anthology of Russian Poetry*. Transl. Dana Fuller. Northwestern U. 10 Apr. 2007. <http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/demo/texts/death_poet.html>.
- *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, 2nd ed. 4 vols. Ed. B.V. Tomashevsky, et. al. Leningrad: Nauka, 1980.
- Shakespeare, William. "Romeo and Juliet." *The Norton Shakespeare*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997.
- "Sonnet 105." *The Norton Shakespeare*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997.

SECONDARY TEXTS

- Allen, Elizabeth Cheresh. "Lermontov's 'Not-Byronism': A Reconsideration." *Romantic Russia*, Vol. 2 (1998): 9-34.
- Allen, Elizabeth Cheresh. "Unmasking Lermontov's Masquerade: Romanticism as Ideology." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Spring 2002): 75-97.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Boym, Svetlana. *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Davidson, Pamela. "Divine Service or Idol Worship? Russian Views of Art as Demonic." *Russian Literature and its Demons*. Ed. Pamela Davidson. New York: Berghahn Books, 2000. 125-166.
- "The Muse and the Demon in the Poetry of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Blok." *Russian Literature and its Demons*. Ed. Pamela Davidson. New York: Berghahn Books, 2000. 167-214.
- Diakonova, Nina. "Byron and the Evolution of Lermontov's Poetry 1814-1841." *Renaissance and Modern Studies*. Vol. 32 (1988): 80-95.
- Diakonova, Nina and Vadim Vacuro. "Byron in Russia." *Byron's*

- Political and Cultural Influence in Nineteenth-Century Europe: A Symposium*. Ed, Paul Graham Trueblood. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1981. 333-52.
- ." "No Great Mind and Generous Heart Could Avoid Byronism': Russia and Byron." *The Reception of Byron in Europe, Volume I: Southern Europe, France and Romania*. Ed. Richard A. Cardwell. London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004. 143-59.
- Henderson, Denise M. "The Promise of Mikhail Lermontov." *Fidelio*, Vol. XII, No. 4 (Winter 2003): 28-41.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "The Critic as Host." *De-construction & Criticism*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1979, 217-253.
- O'Neil, Catherine. "Byron's Sea in Pushkin and Lermontov." *The Byron Journal*, Vol. 32, Issue 2 (2004): 101-13.
- Reid, Robert. "Lermontov's The Demon: Identity and Axiology." *Russian Literature and its Demons*. Ed. Pamela Davidson. New York: Berghahn Books, 2000. 215-240.
- Tomashevskij, B.V. "Demon." *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2. Leningrad: Nauka, 1980. 693-700.
- Twitchell, James B. *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 1981.