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Talking Back to Nabokov: A Commentary on a Commentary

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[R]eaders are generally not concerned with moral purposes or with attacks in reviews, and in result, they do not read prefaces. It is a pity that this should be so, particularly in our country. Our public is still so young and naïve that it fails to understand a fable unless it finds a lesson at its end.

—Mikhail Lermontov,
A Hero of Our Time

It is unnecessary to discuss here Pechorin's character. The good reader will easily understand it by studying the book; but so much nonsense has been written about Pechorin, by those who adopt a sociological approach to literature, that a few warning words must be said.

—Vladimir Nabokov,
A Hero of Our Time
(Translator's Foreword)

The enterprise of writing a preface, at least according to Lermontov and Nabokov, seems to be a thankless one: the bad or "naïve" reader is unlikely to bother reading it, and the good reader doesn't need it anyway. Nothing daunted, however, they proceed to festoon *A Hero of Our Time* with prefaces: in Lermontov's case one "Introduction" written in the voice of the novel's traveling narrator, and another in his own; in Nabokov's, a fifteen-page "Translator's Foreword," wherein—

" All quotations from *A Hero of Our Time* and Nabokov's critical apparatus thereto are taken from the Ardis edition of *A Hero of Our Time*, tr. V. with D. Nabokov (see Works Cited). For consistency, I have retained Nabokov's idiosyncratic spellings of character names. My own footnotes are

together with 129 endnotes—he adds himself to the series of narrators already attempting, from within the text, to control the reader’s response to it. Nabokov’s signature rhetorical weapon is the image of “the good reader,” a paragon whose virtues he helpfully models for us by drawing our attention to alleged flaws in Lermontov’s plotting and prose style, polemicizing with narratorial asides that rub him the wrong way, making up additional backstory for Lermontov’s characters, and generally, as Nicholas O. Warner says, “establish[ing] himself as an authority and a presence in the work that the reader will be hard put to ignore” (169). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the infamous note 38, wherein Nabokov denounces a bit of “fuzzy math” proffered by the narrator:

marked with letters (a, b, c, etc) to distinguish them from Nabokov’s endnotes, which are numbered (1, 2, 3, etc.). In indented quotations only, page numbers from *A Hero* are cited in square brackets and italicized, to distinguish them from Nabokov’s page references.

Lermontov:

[I]n simple hearts, the sense of the beauty and grandeur of nature is a hundred times stronger than it is in us, enthusiastic tellers of tales, oral or written.³⁸ [30]

Nabokov:

³⁸ This is, of course, a Romanticist notion. It is completely untrue. [200]

Stanton:

This is, of course, an utterly unnecessary admonition, since the observation about “simple hearts” issues from a narrator whose frequent generalizations and aphorisms of this sort are self-evidently fatuous (like those of Grushnitski, later in the novel. This particular remark, indeed, is not even internally logical, since the “simple heart” in question—Maksim Maksimich’s—belongs to the very “teller of tales, oral” of whose narrative the tale we are reading chiefly consists). This is the only observation to which Nabokov takes such violent exception, however, presumably because it touches him personally: how dare this jumped-up young Byron epigone impugn his, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov’s, “sense of the beauty and grandeur of nature”? Why, I

oughta... but then again, surely stooping to argue with this benightedly “Romanticist”—and fictional—narrator is rather beneath Nabokov’s dignity? Would Nabokov himself not sneer at a translator who annotated the ramblings of Humbert Humbert this way? The “good reader” cannot help but smell a rat: Why is Nabokov prepared to go to such lengths to dictate the reader’s response to Lermontov’s text? Why is he so determined to enforce a “good” reading (or peremptorily to foreclose “bad” readings)—and what considerations, exactly, shape the reading he has selected for us as the correct one?

It is tempting to conclude that Nabokov is competing here not just for the title of “good reader,” but for, as it were, the top job—that of the author himself. As Warner puts it, he adopts the “stance [of] a creative rival to Lermontov” (168)—and he does so at his own risk, for (as the good reader will know) in a work of Romantic literature, rivalries have a tendency to end fatally for one of the parties involved. To be sure, Nabokov, writing in the 1950s, has a clear advantage in that his “rival” has been dead for over a century already. But we should remember that, structurally speaking, *A Hero of Our Time* is the story of a man who rises from the dead to take the reins of his own narrative. Pechorin, the “hero” of the title, has to die before his story can be presented in his own words, rather than mediated for us by others; but the last words of the novel are his, and he uses them to turn the tables on the narrator who first introduced him to us, Maksim Maksimich.^b We should not be surprised, therefore, if Lermontov’s authority proves similarly hard to kill—especially since the game is being played, as it were, on his turf and by his rules. In fact, Nabokov’s position here is akin to that of Lermontov’s own characters, Russian soldiers extending the authority of the state they synecdochically represent over alien territory—the Romantic landscape of the Caucasus, where the behavior of the natives all too frequently departs from the script approved by their civilized overlords:

^b The last words of the novel are (in Nabokov’s translation): “Nothing more could I get out of him [Maksim Maksimich]: he does not care, generally, for metaphysical discussions.”

Lermontov:

“Take the Circassians, for instance,” [Maksim Maksimich]

went on. “As soon as they get drunk on *buz̄a*,¹¹ at a wedding, or at a funeral, the knife-play begins. I barely escaped once with my life, and at the house of a neutral prince¹² at that.

“How did that happen?”

“Well. . .” (He filled his pipe, inhaled the smoke, and began his tale.)¹³ [9-10]

Nabokov:

¹³ It will be noted that the story Maksim Maksimich eventually tells has little to do with his promise of it here, just as farther on (p. 14) the fact of Kazbich’s wearing a coat of mail is not significant in the sense at which Maksim Maksimich darkly hints. [197]

Stanton:

It will also be noted that Nabokov carefully hedges his language here (“has little [but not *nothing*] to do with. . .,” “is not significant in the sense at which. . .” [but not *insignificant* either]), gently shouldering “the good reader” into an interpretation (and evaluation) of Lermontov’s text that coincides with his own. In fact, Maksim Maksimich does eventually tell precisely the story he has set out to tell—that is, the story of which his conversation with the traveling narrator has reminded him; but (surprise!) the main interest of the story turns out not to reside in the romantic-Orientalist detail that first caught the traveling narrator’s (and Nabokov’s?) interest, the drunken Circassian “knife-play,” but in the actions of Pechorin with regard to Bela. Neither the traveling narrator nor Maksim Maksimich knows yet, however, that Pechorin will turn out to be the focus of the book. On the other hand, Maksim Maksimich explicitly delivers the promised (if no longer crucial) goods a few pages later, when violence does break out at the neutral prince’s house, and Maksim drags Pechorin away with a near-verbatim repetition (or premonition) of his words to the traveling narrator:

“You may be sure that the end will be bad: it is always so with these Asiatics: they get tight on buza, and then the knife-play starts!” We mounted and galloped off home. [18-19]

Further, the coat-of-mail at whose insignificance Nabokov so darkly hints in note 13 returns to vex him further with its alleged irrelevance in the passage elucidated—or obfuscated—by note 23:

Lermontov:

That night Kazbich was gloomier than ever, and I noticed that under his *beshmet* he wore a coat of mail. “It is not without reason that he has that coat of mail on,” I reflected. “He must be planning something.” [14]

Nabokov:

²⁴ Neither this, nor the “I recalled the coat of mail” (p. 15) is followed up. [198]

Stanton:

Neither this, nor the preceding note about the coat of mail, is strictly fair; the references to Kazbich’s coat of mail are motivated on a couple of different levels in the text (though not, apparently, “in the sense at which Maksim Maksimich darkly hints”—or in the sense at which Nabokov wants us to believe Maksim Maksimich, “stolid, gruff, naïvely poetical...” [xvii] is hinting). First, in terms of pure plot, Kazbich’s coat of mail may be seen simply as his equivalent of Maksim Maksimich’s care “to note where they had put our horses—just in case, you know” (12). After all, having grown up among “these Asiatics,” Kazbich is probably well aware of their propensity to “get tight on buza” and start in with “the knife-play.” Secondly, and more importantly, the coat of mail is part of Kazbich’s theatrical costume—a note of foreboding introduced by the costumier in this very theatrical text.^c Lermontov never lets us forget that our narrators are on stage, or imagine that they are capable of private conversation, out of our sight; over and over again we are reminded that they are both watching and being watched,

^c Maksim Maksimich himself is carefully costumed by the director in an eclectic collection of Russian and tribal accoutrements (4), signifying his ambivalent position vis-à-vis the Caucasian tribes—half-beating, half-joining them (and doing poorly at both).

and that spectatorship is inescapable. Repeatedly, characters spy on each other through windows (both from inside and from outside); take account—as here—of one another’s props and costumes; and listen in on one another’s conversations:

Lermontov:

“As I was picking my way along the fence, I suddenly heard voices.... So I squatted by the fence and began listening, trying not to miss a single word.” [14-15]

...

“Never shall I forget one scene: I was going past her window and glanced in...” [25]

...

“[A]s I stood behind the door, I could distinguish her face through the chink, and I felt sorry...” [27]

Nabokov:

A special feature of the structure of our book is the monstrous but perfectly organic part that eavesdropping plays in it. Now Eavesdropping is only one form of a more general device which can be classified under the heading of Coincidence. . . . [x]

Stanton:

Perhaps so; but to insist on that vague “classification” is to overlook the role of “eavesdropping” as a crucial component of the ethos of looking and listening, or rhetoric and spectatorship, that pervades Lermontov’s text. Moreover, it is quite extraordinary for Nabokov to endorse “classification” as an approach to a literary text. Is this generalizing taxonomist the same Nabokov who, later in his Foreword, criticizes Lermontov for failing adequately to individuate his female characters; and who, in his own novels, habitually disparages thinkers who reduce the infinite variety and individuality of experience to a (necessarily approximate) set of categories?

When one remembers, however, that Nabokov here is in the process of adding himself to the text (much as each of Lermontov’s series of narrators has done before him), one can well understand

why that “cavesdropping” ethos—the uncomfortable possibility of being watched in an unguarded moment or spotted in a revealing costume, of having one’s motives found out or guessed at—might make him uneasy. For (the good reader will notice) the “good reader” Nabokov seeks to train for this text is actually a *terrible* reader by his own usual standards! Not only are we asked to subsume certain uncomfortable particulars (“cavesdropping”) into easier-to-dismiss generalities (“coincidence”), but Nabokov goes out of his way to deflect attention from those aspects of Lermontov’s prose that might be taken to have furnished him with the most inspiration...

Nabokov:

The inconsistencies in the five stories are glaring, but the narrative surges on with such speed and force; such manly and romantic beauty pervades it; and the general purpose of Lermontov breathes such fierce integrity, that the reader does not stop to wonder why the mermaid in “Taman” assumed that Pechorin could not swim, or why the Captain of Dragoons thought that Pechorin’s seconds would not want to supervise the loading of the pistols. [ix]

Stanton:

...instead heaping praise on precisely those qualities with which Nabokov himself, as an author, was scarcely concerned: the “speed and force” with which the narrative gallops roughshod across “numerous and glaring” inconsistencies of plot; the “manly and romantic beauty” purchased at the cost of countless “depressing flaws” (xix) in the prose. The girlish effusiveness (maybe he’s a little rough around the edges, but he’s so *manly* and *forceful*!) of Nabokov’s tone here hardly suggests the deliberative approach of a “good reader”; rather, it marks Lermontov as a writer whose works are best read with the breathless half-attention normally reserved for texts more lurid than literary. By praising Lermontov in these terms, Nabokov undermines his rival twice over: first by drawing attention to specific “problems” in the text, and secondly by exhorting the reader not to attend to them—thus foreclosing the likelihood of an interpretation’s being found wherein the details he finds objectionable might turn out to

make aesthetic sense. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to say that, like Maksim Maksimich in the Caucasus, Nabokov is “in costume” here — assimilating to Lermontov’s territory even as he colonizes it, preserving the intention of beating his rival even as he sets about joining him.

It is noteworthy that Nabokov (following Tsar Nicholas I, a quint-essentially “bad reader” who famously felt that Maksim Maksimich should have been the “Hero” of the book’s title) reserves special, if not unmixed, praise for the junior captain in his “Foreword,” writing:

Nabokov:

The most endearing [of the secondary characters] is obviously the old Captain Maksim Maksimich, stolid, gruff, naïvely poetical, matter-of-fact, simple-hearted, and completely neurotic. [*xvii*]

Stanton:

— for, in a sense, Nabokov stands in the same relationship to Lermontov (his romantic, tragically dead, insuperably alien yet inexplicably attractive protégé) as Maksim Maksimich to Bela, the object (in every sense) of the novel’s opening story. By the time Maksim Maksimich tells her story, Bela is long dead;^d and even in life, she is never given a voice of her own, being given into the power of men who don’t really even speak her language and who have come to take possession of the land she symbolizes. Yet in appropriating and telling her story, Maksim Maksimich reveals himself as well; at every turn of the narrative, his own failings and failures with respect to Bela, her family and tribe, to Pechorin, and to the larger entities he represents — the army, the Empire, Christendom — make themselves felt. Nabokov, however comfortably he may be convinced of his own position of power — both in relation to the narrative and in relation to its author — reveals himself, like Maksim Maksimich, in the act of spectating; while exposing, as he believes, the machinery of Lermontov’s narrative to us, he is himself exposed.

^d In this, of course, Bela resembles not only Lermontov but Nabokov’s own creation, Dolores Haze. The resemblance is perhaps not coincidental.

By writing himself into Lermontov’s text as the final frame around

an already multiply-framed narrative, Nabokov makes himself heir to the thousand natural shocks that beset the novel's other narrators: he is by turns seduced, repulsed, seized by pity or cynicism; irritated when a narrative goes, as he sees it, astray; convinced of his own power and determined to impose his own aesthetics on the story. Like Pechorin, Maksim Maksimich, the traveling narrator, and Lermontov himself, Nabokov is both watcher and watched; like them, he appropriates—or colonizes—the stories of others, and in so doing exposes himself. For is not the germ of *Lolita*—another tale of ruthless predation framed by a didactic preface on contemporary social ills, another meditation on Fate delivered by an incorrigibly “Romanticist” narrator, another novel about duels between rivals who serve as grotesque reflections of each other, another confessional manuscript whose author must die before his words can be published—present in *A Hero of Our Time*?

The point is not that Nabokov gets ideas from Lermontov, which surely is hardly a revelation to anyone who has read *A Hero*. The point is rather that his reading of Lermontov—the “good” reading to be enforced among all readers trained by Nabokov—is an exercise in distraction: by drawing our attention away from certain details and toward others, Nabokov creates an impression of Lermontov's writing that makes it seem far removed from Nabokov's own. By polemicizing with the fictional narrator in note 38 (“This is, of course...completely untrue”) he elides the distinction between the real Lermontov and his invented “Romanticist,” drawing a sharp contrast between this sentimental, impetuous mode of authorship and the meticulous artistry ostentatiously practised by Nabokov himself. We are meant to marvel, not at how close Lermontov is to Nabokov in spirit (and how many brilliant Nabokovian ironies he contrived to invent a hundred years before his illustrious translator), but at how far; and to admire Nabokov's appreciation for this writer whose aesthetics are so distant from his own even as we internalize Nabokov's many disparagements of Lermontov's style and skill. When Lermontov's “hero,” Pechorin, encounters a rival who uncomfortably resembles himself, he responds with lethal force, covering the evidence of the duel so that his double's death appears accidental, unconnected to Pechorin himself. Nabokov's *modus operandi* with respect to Ler-

montov is remarkably similar—perhaps the crowning stratagem in the repertoire of Lermontovian tricks whose inspiration Nabokov is so anxious to obscure.

Author's Note: Although the piece is not mentioned directly, my thinking was extensively influenced by Peter Scotto's wonderful article, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Ideologies of Imperialism Lermontov's 'Bela'," *PMLA*, Vol. 107 No. 2 (March 1992) 240-60.

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