

A Hero of Our Time

M.Lermontov

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This is a translation by Nabokov collaborating with his son. Nabokov claims that in fact this is the first translation, earlier attempts were mere paraphrases. Any hack can do that and provide a pleasant readable rendering with flourishing elaborations, thus avoiding the real problems facing a translator. A translation that reads well is bound to be inexact, even inaccurate, he warns us. Many things are untranslatable, but the translator has to do his best and an awkward rendering is better than a dishonest one, he seems to imply. And indeed the translation reads awkwardly. Russian prose was not well-developed at the time of Lermontov, it still was in its teens Nabokov reminds us, and Lermontov is a crude stylist, whose language and compositions, show many defects. However, Nabokov points out, what it lacks in grace it makes up for in verve and accumulative power.

The story is about Pechorin, whom we first meet very obliquely through a character the main narrator encounters on his travels through the mountains. A fellow who when prompted relates the story of Pechorin and how he abducts the native girl Bela to satisfy his physical desires, and how she later is once again napped by a rival, who kills her in an act of revenge. In the next story, the narrator meets the fabled character himself, albeit very briefly and receives into his hand the diary kept by him, and which he decides to publish after news of Pechorin's death reaches him, thus providing the main part of the book.

The main story is titled 'Princess Mary' and concerns Pechorin's cynical flirtation with this young innocent girl, while he at the same time carries on a more mature affair with an ex-lover under the nose of her older husband. The only reason for this dallying seems to be to annoy a pal of his, whose earnest and ineffectual pursuit of the very same princess appears ridiculous to him. Pechorin is a character very much in vogue during the time, a so called Byronic character, torn between contradictory impulses and split by inconsistent traits. A character of great intelligence, but with no worthy project to exercise it on, capable of emotional sensitivity, yet at the same time relentlessly cynical. Capable of passion, dismissed as a mere initial idea, yet incapable of true sustainable love, except that of egotistical freedom. Friends he has none, but pals many. Thus in spite of all his good qualities and obvious gifts and talents, he is bored with life, capable only of amusements, and thus finding existence a bore. In other words a most romantic character haunted by the emptiness of existence. A character who has the power of attraction without being attracted himself. The novel hinges on the ambiguity of the central character, is he a scoundrel or a saint. He himself decides neither, disdainful of such reduction. Fittingly we are told that he dies on his way back from Persia. Had Lermontov lived longer, he may very well have elaborated on the story of Pechorin, revealing to us what he did, and why and how he died. But that was not to be, the author himself perished in one of those pointless duels, which incidentally, or maybe even prophetically, forms the dramatic focus of the main story.

The technical execution of the novel is, as already noted, poor. The language is crude, often repetitive and slapdash. He does not shy away from stock phrases and hackneyed expressions, nor from worn-out novelistic tricks, such as eaves-droppings, a sin Nabokov counts to occur eight times in the central novella. Yet, it is readable, even engaging. Why? For one thing it all takes place in the Caucasus with not only spectacular scenery, which Lermontov does his best to convey, but also replete with proud and willful tribes, such as the Chechens and the Ossetians, whom are seen to the invading Russians as no better than bandits. This has of course obvious modern connections. Arm those bandits with modern weapons and they will turn into modern age Jihadists. In fact Russia fought two Chechen wars after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and many years in Afghanistan, which may have triggered the aforementioned implosion. Wars which now have been inherited by the West. Bandits or not, there is the appeal of heroism, something admittedly hard to appreciate when encountering them as adversaries, but so much easier to extol, when they are fighting on your side, as in the proxy encounter in the 1980's.

The main characters of the book are of course Russian military men out of the best families transported from the fashionable saloons of St-Petersburg and Moscow, to the outposts of the empire. The fact that a large piece of the action takes place at the Spa at Pyortigorsk, makes the connection between the two worlds so much more tangible.

The life of an officer is one of enforced idleness punctuated by moments of absolute terror. This breeds an attitude of boredom and recklessness, the very attributes that reductively characterizes Pechorin himself. It is a life in youthful exuberance under the shadow of sudden and brutal death. A life of gambling, drinking, womanizing, and the intermittent duel. A society which puts a premium on personal pride, more liable than not to degenerate into mere vanity and conceit. But it is also a society in which intelligence can flourish, but with no worthy object to be exercised on, it merely feeds cynicism. Thus one is struck by the cleverness of the protagonists pronouncements, and is led to believe that his conversation is up to the same standard, without the author having to exemplify. But where does all this cleverness lead to, except mischief?

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