Focalization in Pushkin’s "Eugene Onegin" and Lermontov’s "A Hero of Our Time": Loving the Semantic Void and the Dizziness of Interpretation

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FOCALIZATION IN PUSHKIN'S *EUGENE ONEGIN*
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LOVING THE SEMANTIC VOID AND
THE DIZZINESS OF INTERPRETATION

[. . .] distinctions that will follow in due course will depend upon some basic premises that had best be explicit—that narrative form is a way of seeing, transforming, and to some extent re-experiencing reality; that basic as it is, narrative is quite extraordinary in its construction of integral worlds; that when we back away from these worlds and think of them by contrast to the worlds of the lyric or the essay or the picture show we can see how vulnerable we are to the silent epistemological principles of our fictions.

(HAROLD TOLIVER)

*Introduction: Focalization and Literariness*

One of the many similarities between *Eugene Onegin* and *A Hero of Our Time* rests on their preoccupation with the crucial role literature plays in fashioning individuals' lives and guiding their life choices. In both novels the 'literary world' is represented as affecting, shaping, and influencing the 'real world' in an inescapable, all-pervasive manner. As well as being a direct influence of a particular book or literary movement or figure (either a character or an author) on its readership, literature is shown to shape culturally accepted models of behaviour and of behavioural interpretation, indirectly affecting even those who never read the original literary work or indeed were unaware of its existence. As such, literature functions as a cognitive frame and as a filter lens, and the literariness of the characters' perception of the world and of themselves determines what will be perceived and understood of that world and in what manner.

Thus the role of literature in both novels is directly engaged with the processes of focalization, for which I shall here adopt Mieke Bal's definition as 'the relation between the vision and that which is "seen", perceived'.

Focalization is a term widely used to make a distinction between the point of view from which the story is narrated and the narrating voice, or, in simpler terms, between those who see and those who speak. As Bal points out, it is perfectly possible for narrators to adopt the point of view of another and to try and tell the story from their angle. Furthermore (and this is particularly pertinent for my discussion), it is perfectly possible for a narrator to be reliable as a narrator (that is, to try and tell the story as truthfully as he or she can without attempting

3 Ibid., p. 143.

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to deceive the reader) and yet to be unreliable as a focalizer (that is, to have a skewed or limited vision of the events told in the first place). My argument would be that this is part of the reason why the narrative in A Hero of Our Time is riddled with so many ambiguities: it is not that the three main narrators in it are trying to deceive us and each other, but that they are so thoroughly unreliable as focalizers. I have chosen the term focalization among the alternative (and largely synonymous) terminological options, such as ‘point of view’, filter, or perspective, because of its metaphorical link with the notion of the lens, thus allowing for the possibility not just of a particular angle or frame of vision, but also of the modification of perception which can sharpen it, as well as blur or distort it.4 In addition to this, I have here also adopted Boris Uspenski’s idea that, as in visual arts, it is the point of view assumed that determines the composition of an artistic text, structuring it on the ideological, phraseological, spatio-temporal, and psychological plane.5 Following Uspenski’s notion of these different planes of perspective, in this article literature will be seen as acting as an ideological perspective, shaping characters’ psychological attitude to their world and to each other and providing them with the language through which to speak about it.6

Love, Seduction, Ambiguity, and Interpretation

In order to provide a concrete illustration of the idea that in these two novels literariness functions as a cognitive framework and thus establishes the terms of the process of focalization, I have chosen to concentrate on the theme of love. In treating the theme of love and amorous expectations through the prism of literary obsessions, the two novels arguably represent lovers as texts to be read and interpreted by each other, requiring them to choose the most appropriate interpretative frame for their ‘reading’; or, in other words, to select a particular lens through which they view each other and their amorous situation. Thus, in Eugene Onegin Tatiana tries to ‘read’ Onegin through her knowledge of Richardson, and only later realizes that a knowledge of Byron and Constant would have been more useful; whereas Princess Mary in A Hero of Our Time has to choose between two potential Byronic heroes, not realizing that a love affair in that genre could never bring her happiness or result in a marriage. As with real literary texts, the more ambiguous the message, the more effort the


5 Boris Uspenski, Poetika kompozitsii (St Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000).

6 The spatio-temporal plane of the novels is also shaped by the characters’ literary interests, which enable them to see some things around them and make them blind to others; see Cynthia Marsh, ‘Lermontov and the Romantic Tradition: The Function of Landscape in A Hero of Our Time’, Slavonic and East European Review, 66 (1988), 35–46; Elizabeth Cheresh Allen, A Fallen Idol is Still a God: Lermontov and the Quandaries of Cultural Transition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 160–79.
reader needs to put into making sense of it, and in both novels the seductions of the heroines function according to this pattern. Onegin unwittingly seduces Tatiana by appearing as a blank canvas onto which she can project her desires, and (potentially as unintentionally) maintains his hold on her by presenting her with the puzzle of his ambiguous refusal. By telling her that if he were capable of marital happiness, she would have been the woman for him, he offers her hope while withdrawing it at the same time, and ensures that she continues thinking of him and trying to solve the conundrum.\(^7\) In a similar manner, and entirely by design, Pechorin attracts and holds Mary’s attention by presenting himself as a puzzle to be solved and by piling ambiguity on top of ambiguity in his behaviour, betraying her expectations and challenging her to keep reinterpreting him over and over again. As argued by both Monika Greenleaf and Caryl Emerson, seduction in both novels is a cognitive challenge, an ambiguous text asking to be decoded, and the heartfelt tremors of love in it are caused by the dizziness of interpretation.\(^8\) The heroines not only have to try to find the right interpretative code for their seducers, but they also have to come to terms with the possibility that their literary frames of reference are not always going to match the unliterary reality of the social world in which they live and in which they are expected to find husbands. In both cases, the question is largely one of how adequate their chosen ideological-literary point of view proves to be, and how well matched it is to their psychological situation; thus, it is a question of their ability to focalize without disruptive distortion.

In addition, both novels are structured around a rift between perceptive filters created by fictional worlds in which characters immerse themselves through their reading and the unpredictable, complex nature of real events which refuse to submit themselves to genre conventions. Both novels achieve this on various levels, and through two very different structures that nevertheless share basic principles in common. Following the central idea that the process of focalization and narrative structure are closely linked, I shall look at the two in tandem throughout, focusing all the while on the problem of how literariness can be seen as a distorting lens which prevents the characters from seeing the world around them more clearly. In particular I shall here explore the theme of seduction by investigating the role of literariness and ambiguity in the processes of focalization in the two novels. I shall examine the figure of the hero, Onegin and, in more detail, Pechorin, and ask how it is constructed and why it becomes so attractive in the heroine’s eyes, as well as in some readers’. I shall finally ask what the story of literary seduction told in these two novels could teach us about love and literature, and about the seduction that literary stories of love perform upon our imagination.

This article will concentrate mostly on the structural complexities of A Hero of Our Time, using the relatively simple narrative structure of Eugene Onegin as a vehicle for illuminating some of the more obscure and ambiguous elements of

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Lermontov's work. It is beyond doubt that Lermontov wrote his novel inspired by and in response to Pushkin's, and that historically most interpretations of *A Hero of Our Time* have rested on this assumption; but I also wish to argue that as a result of this close intertextuality, Lermontov could allow his text a great deal of ambiguity which nevertheless can be partly resolved when viewed against Pushkin's work.9

**Literariness and Focalization: Seeing the World Through a Filter Lens**

What Briggs and Barratt term 'the over-reliance of *people* on literature' and the power of 'literary values, concepts and expressions [to impinge] on the real lives of the characters' is a well-documented feature of both Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*.10 In both of these novels literature functions as a kind of filter lens through which characters see the world and each other.

As Joe Andrew argues, for Pushkin the theme of the literary nature of character formation was of persistent interest, and, as Sally Dalton Brown and Carolyn Jursa Ayers argue as well, he shared it with the popular genre of the society tale, which he often parodied.11 In *Eugene Onegin* in particular, Pushkin's characters come fully loaded with book lists and reading habits, and their psychological motivation is largely founded on those habits.12 Moreover, Pushkin is very explicit about what these are: we know that Onegin had read Byron (and, judging by his summary of his potential future with Tatiana, Constant's *Adolphe*) and that Tatiana had read Richardson's *Clarissa*; we know that the enduring limitations of Lensky's world-view come from an immersion in German idealist philosophy and Romantic poetry; and we know that the change that Tatiana undergoes is at least partly brought about by a widening of her literary horizons.13 The literary background of character motivation in *Eugene Onegin* is explicit, clear, and unambiguous.

Furthermore, Pushkin's novel also suggests a 'cure' to the 'over-reliance on


literature', which is, of course, not less reading but more of it, and crucially, of a greater variety of texts. The characters who have a problem with being over-influenced by a single behavioural and ideological script contained in a limited number of literary texts from the same school (Onegin's obsession with Byron, Tatiana's early Richardson phase coupled with a hunger for folk tales) can be freed if they start reading outside their habitual sphere; this, according to some critics, is exactly what Tatiana does. According to Todd, for example, through her widening literary horizons Tatiana gains awareness and mastery of her own literariness, becoming able to combine it creatively into new forms, as demonstrated by her ability to maintain a successful salon, as well as by her understanding of the generic nature of Onegin's infatuation. How much meaningful power she gains through this is, however, a matter for some debate. Joe Andrew has argued that, on the one hand, Tatiana through her mature reading learns to distinguish between literature and life, but also that, on the other, even with this cognitive advantage she finds herself unable to fulfil any of her own desires and longings. Paul Debreczeny even argues that Tatiana never stops being blindly guided by her literary models, and merely substitutes Sentimentalism for late Romanticism, while Michael R. Katz in his discussion of the literary sources of Tatiana's concepts of love shows more faith in her future happiness by pointing out that they do not play the sole role, since she also has before her the examples of her mother and nanny, who married without love yet grew to be happy later in life. What is quite clear, however, is that mature Tatiana's assessment that she could never be lastingly happy with Onegin is probably quite accurate, while our knowledge of her married life is scant enough to allow the possibility of later happiness. And in that sense her broadened literary horizons do give her the power to resist Onegin's seduction, which is not such a small victory.

In comparison with Pushkin's luminous clarity on this issue (even allowing for the debate cited above), the waters are considerably muddied in the case of Lermontov's novel. So much so that Todd argues that, in comparison with Eugene Onegin, 'A Hero of Our Time not only limits the role that literature plays in shaping the lives of its characters, even those of the travelling narrator and of Pechorin, who are in some sense writers, it also constricts the forms of literary life that appear in the novel.' This is a rather striking assertion, given that the majority of the characters, most specifically those that share Pechorin's social class and background, including the traveller-narrator, are entirely committed to seeing the world through Byronic eyes and conforming their own lives to Romantic narrative expectations. However, although Todd contrasts what he terms the 'theatricality' of A Hero of Our Time (particularly in the 'Princess

14 Todd, p. 129.
15 Andrew, "[She] was brought up . . .", pp. 20–21, and Women in Russian Literature (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 50–52.
17 Todd, pp. 144–45.
Mary’ section of the novel) with the literary base of Eugene Onegin, his notion of it is heavily indebted to Lotman’s studies of lived theatricality as practised by the Russian nobility in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which relied heavily on literary sources rather than on specifically theatrical ones.²⁹

Nevertheless, Todd’s observation that in comparison with Eugene Onegin Lermontov’s novel ‘limits the role that literature plays in shaping the lives of its characters’ does point to an important relationship as well as the difference between the two novels. Firstly, Lermontov’s novel, following on from Eugene Onegin and assuming a knowledge of it, can allow itself to limit the explicit mention of the role literature plays in people’s conduct and choices in life, and to embed its inspirational and aspirational literariness in the text without always being explicit about what it is doing. Secondly, whereas Eugene Onegin presents us with a clash of literary periods and movements and their takes on love and life, Lermontov’s novel portrays a world so deeply affected by Byronism that hardly any room for manoeuvre or choice remains. The traveller-narrator, Pechorin, Grushnitsky, Princess Mary, Vera, and, by the looks of it, Vulich are all deeply affected by Romanticism of the Byronic type, obsessed by the imaginary exoticism of the Caucasus, by the notion of attractive evil, by a mixture of cynicism and passion. The conflicts are engendered not by misunderstandings between different literary schools and periods, but by a struggle to be the best and the most genuine of Byronic heroes in times and circumstances unsuited to such conduct, with no alternative ideological and behavioural script on offer. This is the world of what Elizabeth Chereh Allen has recently termed the Post-Romantic anomie (lawlessness), where the idealistic synthesis of Romantic irony and Romantic fragment is replaced by nothingness and the meaninglessness of post-Romantic irony and fragment: a world in which old ideals are dead but new ones have not yet been born.³⁰ The ambiguities and fragmentary nature of Lermontov’s novel are thus more likely to produce discordant readings as critics grapple for secure meanings that just might not be there; however, I argue here that the interplay between the novel’s narrative structure and its focalization is also largely responsible for this.³¹ But let us first examine the striking critical disagreement about Lermontov’s hero, Pechorin, as indicative of the extent of ambiguities in A Hero of Our Time, before we return to the


³⁰ Allen, pp. 17–21.

problem of focalization, which is, I would argue, largely responsible for these ambiguities.

**How Ambiguity Produces Discord: The Pechorin Controversy**

The word ‘seduction’ is often employed in critical literature on *A Hero of Our Time*, which points out that the novel’s reader is drawn into what appears to be a gradual psychological striptease of its main character. However, whether the process reveals an admirable body of a hero, even if flawed, or just a hollow play of literary quotations that hide an inner emptiness (similar to how Tatiana comes to view Onegin by the end of Pushkin’s novel) is a matter of considerable debate. If Lewis Bagby is right in his assertion that ‘Pechorin’s portrait is what we might call the novel’s constructive principle’ organizing the generic complexity of the work, then the failure among the novel’s critics to reach any meaningful consensus about the basic qualities of the hero portrayed says a lot about both the portrait and the structure of the novel.

A recent book by David Powelstock argues that Lermontov’s novel presents us with a hero who is the embodiment of ‘a particularly radical version of Romantic individualism’. This assessment, very similar to that of Vladimir Golstein’s in the same book series, continues a long tradition of Belinskian interpretation, based on the assumption of Pechorin’s superiority over the other characters in the novel, of his individuality and oppression at the hands of a conformist and conservative society. The culmination of this tradition is probably contained in the monumental *Lermontovskaia entsiklopedia*, whose entry on *A Hero of Our Time* argues that Pechorin’s tragedy in Lermontov’s ‘psychological novel’ consists of being more individual than anyone else in his surroundings. In this type of interpretation, Pechorin, a well-developed, self-aware personality, is seen as being oppressed by social and historical conditions of his time, and unable to fulfil the potential of his superior intellect, insight, and will, which all results in an equally superior suffering. It is particularly telling that even Vladimir Nabokov, not known for his sentimentalism, considered Pechorin, with ‘his immense store of tenderness, kindness, and heroism behind his cynical and arrogant appearance, [to be] a deeper personality than the cold lean top so delightfully depicted by Pushkin’.

On the other hand, in an example of another, opposite view of Pechorin’s character, Gilroy suggests that this ‘shining example of the values of individualism’

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may in fact be ‘quite ordinary’. This view, often enhanced by the qualifica-
tion that Pechorin’s identity as a self-styled Byronic hero is based on literary
conventions, acted out and inauthentic, is shared by critics such as Richard
Peace, Lewis Bagby, Victor Ripp, C. J. G. Turner, and Elizabeth Cheres
Allen. Further out on this end of the spectrum we find Barratt and Briggs, in
their self-professed anti-Belinskian study, who suggest a reading which views
Pechorin as, effectively, a psychopath, and W. Leatherbarrow, who convinc-
ingly interprets Pechorin as a devil who arrogates to himself the demonic role
of authoring the lives of others.27

My interpretation will tend more towards the second school of interpretation
and try to resist Pechorin’s seduction, with the belief that the novel becomes
much more complex and interesting if viewed as a study of literary seduction
rather than experienced as a performance of it. I shall argue that this rather
striking disagreement is largely caused by the play of focalization and narrative
structure, coupled with narrative power games.

Focalization and Narrative Structure

Before we focus on the specific effects of focalization on the portrait of Pe-
chorin, we first need to examine the relationship between focalization and nar-
native composition in A Hero of Our Time and Eugene Onegin. The narrative
structure of Lermontov’s novel in particular is closely bound with its focaliza-
tion, and it is practically impossible to discuss the two separately. Nevertheless,
I shall at this stage only outline the basic elements of the link between fo-
calization and composition, leaving the more specific problem of focalization,
truth-claims, and power for the next section. The importance of ‘literariness’
and intertextuality in the narrative composition of the two novels is not going
to slip from our mind, though, as both novels play with literary tradition and
readerly expectation in constructing their narratives. As we shall see, both un-
derline and question their own literary nature and its relationship with ‘real
life’, and Lermontov’s novel makes this process even more complex by using
Eugene Onegin as its reference and template, creating an additional refraction
on top of the already richly intertextual nature of Pushkin’s novel.

Eikhenbaum’s suggestion that the choice of the two rivers contained in the
heroes’ names illuminates their differences applies to the structure of the novels
as well: the Onega flows straight towards the sea, while the flow of the Pechora,
a tumultuous mountain river, is changing and sinuous. Even if we speculate that
Pushkin named his hero after that particular river for no specific purpose, and
without any intention of using it to shed light on his methods of characterization
and narrative composition, the same cannot be said of Lermontov’s choice, even
if its logic was largely unconscious. Eikhenbaum’s cautious suggestion betrays

montov’s A Hero of Our Time’, pp. 273–81; Ripp, p. 981; Turner, p. 45; Allen, pp. 152–57; Barratt
and Briggs, p W. J. Leatherbarrow, Pechorin’s Demons: Representations of the Demonic in
Lermontov’s A Hero of Our Time, MLR, 99 (2004), 999–1013. On the demonic theme see also
an intuition too faithful to the relationship of the two novels to be entirely at fault.\textsuperscript{28}

Pushkin’s novel is largely told in chronological order, occasionally disrupted by lyrical digressions of its narrator and by background stories of individual characters. However, the seeming simplicity of the plot is contrasted with the subtlety of its effect; as Lotman argues, the story of Pushkin’s novel effectively consists of narrative non-events, as the situations and characters’ behaviour are not allowed to produce the consequences that the reader expects.\textsuperscript{29} In reality, there is very little overt drama in, for example, Tatiana’s relation to Onegin: she sees him once, and, having been primed by her reading to fall in love with a mysterious stranger, she promptly falls in love with him on the basis of very little. As Joe Andrew points out, the power of the culture is such that ‘the Russian Lovelace is somewhat startled to find that he has no conquest to make’.\textsuperscript{30} Rather than being perceived as a dangerous seducer, Onegin is welcomed in Tatiana’s family as a potential suitor. The highly compromising letter that she writes to him occasions nothing more than a patronizing lecture from Onegin, and there is no loss of honour, no danger to her name and chastity. When he later starts pursuing her, she chooses the generically highly unconventional path of faithfulness to her husband, precluding any possibility of further narrative development, and, as both Lotman and Pushkin himself point out, leaving the novel to appear unfinished in readers’ eyes, as the ending traditionally consisted of either the hero’s death or his marriage. Lotman’s core argument is that, by forgoing literary models and expectations, and writing an unexpectedly undramatic narrative, Pushkin tried to write ‘reality itself’, and show the rift that exists between it and the plots of popular novels. In \textit{Eugene Onegin} references to literary models and expectations, through characters’ interpretation of each other, highlight the difference between literature and life, whereupon the text of the novel acts as life.\textsuperscript{31} Thus the relatively simple and largely uneventful plot rests on a highly complex network of intertextual relations with a range of literary periods and genres, addressing the complex questions of the relationship between literature and life, demands of a culture, and individual desires for a meaningful life.\textsuperscript{32}

In matters of focalization, \textit{Eugene Onegin} is again deceptively simple: it has a single narrator, whose gentle irony towards his characters is rarely if ever bitter and biting. However, as character viewpoints tend to be sympathetic to the focalizing party, no matter how unlovable it may be, they tend to make the motivation of the others seem somewhat obscure. Thus Tatiana’s infatuation


\textsuperscript{30} Andrew, \textit{Women in Russian Literature}, p. 42.

\textsuperscript{31} Lotman, ‘Roman A. S. Pushkina \textit{Eugene Onegin}’, pp. 434–37, 443–49; Lotman’s view of Pushkin’s attempt to write ‘reality itself’ is shared by Ripp, pp. 969–70.

\textsuperscript{32} See e.g. David Budgen, ‘Pushkin and the Novel’, in \textit{Pushkin to Palisandria}, ed. by McMillin, pp. 3–38, on the diversity of Pushkin’s approaches and stylistic and genre experiments in his attempts at writing a novel; and Willem G. Weststeijn, ‘Pushkin between Classicism, Romanticism and Realism’, in \textit{Two Hundred Years of Pushkin}, ed. by Reid and Andrew, iii (2004), 47–56, on the hybrid nature of \textit{Eugene Onegin} in terms of literary periods.
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with Onegin is focalized largely through her, and Onegin’s later infatuation with Tatiana largely through him, so that we are granted direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the lover, whereas all we know of the reactions of the beloved is what is expressed by their words and actions, which are potentially misleading. Moreover, the events causing and prior to the duel between Lensky and Onegin are largely focalized through Lensky, making Onegin’s behaviour somewhat opaque. Todd argues that Onegin’s ‘social self is bereft of its solidity and presented as an enigma’,33 which, I would argue, is only the case if we forget Pushkin’s authorial characterization of his hero, and applies much more to the character of Pechorin, to which we shall return later. Unlike Pechorin, Onegin is introduced to us with a reliable psychological and developmental portrait at the start of *Eugene Onegin*, and we know his background and habits fairly well before the main events begin. The ‘enigma’ of his behaviour really lies in the eyes of Tatiana and Lensky, who cannot comprehend a soul so lifeless and blasé, and who struggle to attribute to it a meaning deeper than it is capable of possessing. At the core of Tatiana’s discovery of Onegin’s library and the suggestion which it brings that he might be just ‘a lexicon full of fashionable words’ or ‘a parody’ of Byronic heroes, rather than the authentic hero for which she took him, is essentially the redisclosure of his shallowness, of which Pushkin has told us from the beginning.34 And yet, the focalization process makes the reader forget that early warning, and potentially succumb to his play of ambiguities as much as Tatiana does.

The playful tone of Pushkin’s novel and its gentle irony are in contrast to the ‘wicked irony’ of Lermontov’s (or, in Allen’s terminology, the post-Romantic irony of the end of an era), coupled with the underlying structural tendency of subtly playing with the readers’ expectations and defying their narrative predictions, which Lotman argues Lermontov’s novel shares with Pushkin’s.35 One of the main textual complexities of *A Hero of Our Time* is its focalization. The story is told by several narrator-focalizers of dubious trustworthiness, who all have an interest not just in portraying the hero and telling his story in a particular way, and who wish to present themselves in the best possible light, but who are also in their capacity as focalizers tightly bound by the perceptive filters of their ideological-literary conditioning. Thus, as Bagby puts it, the novel acts as a challenge to the reader ‘to unravel the perceptual knots tied into the narrative’.36 Several critics use Bakhtin’s terms ‘polyphonic’ and ‘dialogic’ to describe Lermontov’s multi-narrator structure, in which narrators are not only unreliable but also show a tendency for self-contradiction.37 As a result, as Bagby argues, the ‘problem that runs throughout the text’ is ‘its instability as a source of reliable information’, and its hero is subject to so many ‘narrative filters’ that it would be almost impossible for them not to colour the picture almost beyond recognition (as Barratt and Briggs note as well).38 It is important

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33 Todd, p. 123.
37 Gilroy, pp. 14–15; Barratt and Briggs; Aizlewood.
38 Lewis Bagby, ‘Mikhail Yur’evich Lermontov and *A Hero of Our Time*, in Lermontov’s *A Hero
to analyse this process carefully before we return to the questions of literariness and seduction.

It might appear at first reading that *A Hero of Our Time* is structured so as to provide us with gradually increasing levels of proximity to its hero, and with more intimate pieces of knowledge with each new diegetic layer. So, the basic composition at first appears as follows: 'Bela' introduces Pechorin through the story told by Maksim Maksimych (and which presents Pechorin as seen from a distance, since its narrator cannot fully understand or sympathize with his subject); the 'Maksim Maksimych' chapter allows us to see Pechorin up close through the eyes of the traveller-narrator (who is potentially better equipped to judge him fairly), and the diary sections provide us with direct access to Pechorin's mind. However, a more detailed analysis shows the cracks in this initial assessment, casting doubt on the idea that we get to see Pechorin clearly at all, in any of the novel's parts. For example, the portrait that the traveller-narrator paints of Pechorin is, as suggested by the analyses of Barratt and Briggs and of Gilroy, contradictory in its physical description and too reliant on the traveller-narrator’s interpretation of the emotional states supposedly expressed by the physical features to provide reliable characterization. I would argue that this is perfectly in keeping with the rest of the novel’s treatment of its hero. As for the diary, ‘Taman’ and ‘Fatalist’ are merely anecdotes about events that do not seem to have any progressive influence on the development of Pechorin’s character. It is also arguable that the two faces of Pechorin represented in them have little else in common apart from their family name, since one is of a rather rash and inept young man who, consumed by lust, almost gets drowned by a young girl, and the other is of a fairly non-descript officer who makes a very serviceable narrator of Vulich’s strange death, and who is capable of capturing a drunken Cossack. I would agree with Barratt and Briggs that neither of the stories shows Pechorin to be a man of any great heroism or cleverness. ‘Princess Mary’, the longest of the chapters and in many ways the central story in the Pechorin cycle, seems to reveal the most, and to deliver what the traveller-narrator presents in the novel’s parts. For a well-argued opposite view, see Richard Gregg, ‘The Cooling of Pechorin: The Skull Beneath the Skin’, *Slavic Review*, 43 (1984), 387–98. Restoring the chronology of the *fabula* behind the *stuzhet*, Gregg argues that Pechorin hardens and becomes increasingly cynical as the story of his life progresses, treating people with growing coldness and detachment. I would still argue that there is a missing ‘causality of trauma’ that would make Pechorin’s hardness explicable and intelligible, and even if it can be argued that he goes from bad to worse in the course of his life, it is not really much of a character progression.

Turner (p. 24) argues that the Pechorin in ‘Taman’ differs significantly from other Pechorins in the novel.

On this subject, when it comes to the capture of the drunken Cossack, Golstein (p. 122) and Powelstock (pp. 387–88) both argue that this is an act of genuine heroism and fine moral judgement, as it prevents the Cossack’s murder before his mother’s eyes. This is, however, not really explicit as the motivation for Pechorin’s action in the novel; his sudden desire to measure himself against Vulich and his game with destiny, however, are. The motif of the mother, for all we know of Pechorin so far, could be just a narrative detail to add to the picturesqueness and tension of the scene.
narrator in his ‘Preface’ to the journal promises: a completely honest confession of a mature man who has no desire to please or to deceive. However, as I shall argue later in greater detail, this is also hardly the case.

Moreover, the whole structure leaves the central character and his story hanging open: not only are the events told out of chronological order, but the novel also provides only conjectural clues as to how to piece it together.44 It would appear that ‘Taman’, ‘Princess Mary’, ‘Fatalist’/‘Bela’, ‘Maksim Maksimych’ should be the rough order, but that also leaves open the question of the exact sequence of events around ‘Bela’ and ‘Fatalist’, with huge gaps elsewhere. Besides, as Pechorin’s precursor in Lermontov’s unfinished earlier novel Princess Ligovskaya shows by contrast, we are given nothing of Pechorin’s family background and upbringing. What he tells of it to Maksim Maksimych sounds suspiciously like a paraphrase of Onegin’s life, told with the intention to impress and confuse someone unaware of its literary lineage.45 The whole is without any clear character progression and we are instead given a kaleidoscope of several rather different Pechorins who do not seem to be related to each other very closely. In this sense, the open-endedness of Eugene Onegin, which, scandalously, does not end with either the hero’s marriage or his death, is brought to an even higher level: not only do we not know what happens next (apart from knowing that Pechorin does die, but that much can also be assumed of anyone), but we are not even sure what happens throughout the story, or, as we shall see more specifically in the next section, whom to trust.

Focalization, Power, and Literariness

As we saw above, focalization is the point at which Eugene Onegin and Lermontov’s novel part company, at least in method if not in the effect they aim to achieve. In both cases the heroes, their character and behaviour, present themselves as puzzles to be solved, and the novels are left seemingly unfinished and ambiguous in their final meaning and assessment of them. However, whereas Pushkin achieves this by largely obscuring Onegin’s motivation in the eyes of other characters while retaining an authorial position from which things are fairly clear, Lermontov produces a similar final result by multiplying conflicting viewpoints without any authorial voice. It is as if Tatiana’s dilemma of deciding whether Onegin is just a parody or a genuine demonic antihero is in Lermontov’s novel transferred onto the main narrative frame, and into the readers’ relationship with the text. I shall analyse the relationships between Maksim Maksimych and the traveller-narrator in ‘Bela’ on the one hand, and between Pechorin and Grushnitsky in ‘Princess Mary’ on the other, as being particularly indicative of how the relationship between focalization and power works in Lermontov’s novel. Furthermore, I shall argue that a large part of the power struggles at work is centred around the issue of literary compe-

44 John Mersereau notes that the structure of A Hero of Our Time is so complex that, although the novel was influential, its form ‘was never imitated’. See his Mikhail Lermontov (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 77.
45 Mikhail Lermontov, Geroi nashego century, in Sochinenia, 2 vols (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), 11, 455–589 (pp. 482–83).
tence, as interpretation in the case of ‘Bela’, and as performance in the case of ‘Princess Mary’.

As Barratt and Briggs note, the framed narrative of ‘Bela’, the story that introduces the character of Pechorin, is of particular importance for the rest of the novel. 66 Right from the beginning, the tale’s two narrators, Maksim Maksimych and the traveller-narrator, engage in a battle for narrative supremacy, each trying to show the other the superiority of his own understanding. This happens both in the framing story world (for example, in their ongoing contest as to who will give the more accurate weather prediction), as well as through their jostling for position regarding the story of Pechorin, who as a result, as Turner points out, appears ‘at two removes’, in a ‘blurred perspective’. 47 The resulting mise en abyme structure is rather unusual and very complex. Rather than simply giving the storytelling platform over to Maksim Maksimych and letting him tell the tale of Pechorin and Bela in his own words (as would be the more usual and traditional form of this type of story-framing), the traveller-narrator remains in dialogue with Maksim Maksimych throughout, and intersperses his story with his own comments (many of which deal with the problem of narrative expectation) and travel notes. The result of this merging of genres and narrative perspectives is a highly complex, ambivalent, and dynamic power-relations structure and a narrative which is almost impossible to pin down to even a semblance of a single unitary meaning. 48

The most obvious early indication of this ambivalence and ambiguity is the figure of Maksim Maksimych himself: someone who is habitually described as a ‘simple man’ both by the traveller-narrator and by many of the critics nevertheless manages to generate almost as much disagreement about his character as there is about that of Pechorin. On the one hand, Barratt and Briggs view him against the traveller-narrator’s somewhat patronizing assessment as a ‘simple man’ who is unable to understand Pechorin and the story he is telling, and they argue that in the framing story he comes across as strong, brave, and competent. In this line of interpretation, Maksim Maksimych’s inability to comprehend Pechorin is more of a virtue than a failure, and in the final analysis he can be seen as a deep old soul who sees through the Romantic adoration of attractive evil as a moral impasse undeserving of serious consideration. Jan van der Eng argues that, far from being simple, Maksim Maksimych shows critical understanding of Pechorin’s actions, and that even though his unilaterariness is contrasted with Pechorin’s literariness, the way he tells his tale highlights Pechorin’s ‘literary lineage’. 49

On the other hand, Gilroy considers Maksim Maksimych unworthy of the traveller-narrator’s praise, Turner regards him as ‘no adequate counterweight’

66 Barratt and Briggs, pp. 10–12.
68 On how Lermontov ‘refreshed’ the familiar settings and plots through the splicing of different genres (travel notes, Caucasus tale) see Eikhenbaum, ‘Geroy nashego vremeni’, p. 269.
to the image Pechorin projects to the reader, and Powelstock reaches the extreme limit of this viewpoint in his assessment of Maksim Maksimych as egotistical and likely to exaggerate the extent of his familiarity with Pechorin. According to Powelstock, Maksim Maksimych is ‘prone to Sentimentalism’, obsessed with tombs and friendship, and his reaction to Bela’s death is almost comical in its tearful sentimentality.50

Such radically conflicting positions in the interpretation of a character (the same effect that the character of Pechorin creates) are made possible through the double-voiced structure of Bela, which then sets the tone for the rest of the novel.51 The two narrators, Maksim Maksimych and the traveller-narrator, both have their own areas of expertise regarding the character of Pechorin: although Maksim Maksimych was the one who knew him personally and witnessed the events told, the traveller-narrator considers himself to be better equipped to understand both him and them, as he shares Pechorin’s cultural background and has prior knowledge of the psychological type through his familiarity with Byron’s poetry.52 And although the traveller-narrator has control of the framing story and can therefore guide readers in their evaluation of Maksim Maksimych and his story, through his dialogue with Maksim Maksimych as the story is told he nevertheless exposes his own prejudices (such as his desire for the story to have an’ extraordinary’ end) and allows Maksim Maksimych to play with his (and our) expectations and to respond actively to the reactions of his one-man audience throughout.53 In effect, even though the framing first-person narration from the traveller-narrator should logically be that of the main focalizer, both he and Maksim Maksimych take turns to put their perspectives onto the story, and as they do, different elements of it and of their own characters flicker in and out of focus.

How both of these narrators turn out in the final analysis very much depends on whose focalization one chooses to concentrate on. I would, however, argue that the play between them, and the flickering effect produced, is the most interesting aspect of this section of the novel, and that the ambiguity that results is there to prepare us for the rest of the novel and for its multiple views of Pechorin. Furthermore, the voice which is given over to Maksim Maksimych and his ability to represent his own point of view and react to the point of view of his interlocutor should alert us to the fact that, once we enter the diary section, the voice of Pechorin becomes dominant and the other characters are entirely shaped through his point of view. And not only is Pechorin, as Turner points out, a rather unreliable and egotistic focalizer, but he is also cognitively bound

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50 Gilroy, p. 20, Lermontov, p. 489 (the final paragraph of ‘Bela’). Barratt and Briggs read this same paragraph as being condescending and blind to Maksim Maksimych’s true qualities (pp. 18–19). See also Turner, p. 10; Powelstock, pp. 352–53, 356–57.
52 Mersereau, Mikhail Lermontov, p. 87, notes with reference to the genre that through the use of Maksim Maksimych as a narrator of ‘Bela’ a well-worn Byronic tale of exotic conquest is retold afresh.
53 Lermontov, pp. 478–79; see also Kesler, pp. 490–93.
tight by his post-Romantic Byronic obsessions, which considerably restrict his field of vision.  

A character particularly and adversely affected by this is Grushnitsky in the 'Princess Mary' section of the novel. Pechorin's unilateral focalization of him manages to produce the impression that, as Mersereau puts it, Grushnitsky and Pechorin act as ' contrasting reflections of the Byronic hero', with Pechorin genuine and profound, and Grushnitsky a fake.  

Considering that in the rest of the novel Pechorin in his attempts at Romantic machismo is generally out-matched by Kazbich, Ianko, Vulich, and young girls, the assessment of some critics that Pechorin is a genuine Byronic hero can only come from this contrast between Grushnitsky and Pechorin that Pechorin's focalization produces.

Barratt and Briggs take that fully into account, and their analysis leads them to conclude that Pechorin dislikes Grushnitsky because he recognizes himself in his rival. Gilroy, in a similar line of interpretation, argues further that Pechorin even projects himself onto Grushnitsky, down to the desire to become a hero in a novel. Even though Schmid argues that Pechorin is far too sure of the superiority of his own mind to notice any similarities between himself and Grushnitsky, Barratt and Briggs, Gilroy, and Turner are right in noticing their large number, and in suggesting they cannot be accidental. And these are not just generalities: their thoughts on the desired attitude of ladies to soldiers match exactly, they both suffer from boyish good looks while pretending to maturity and experience, they both tend to hint at dark secrets and tainted pasts in their confessions, and both are prone to punctuating their duelling conduct with somewhat dubious maxims. Pechorin's character sketch of Grushnitsky rests to a large extent on interpretation and speculation, following the same pattern as the traveller-narrator's portrait of Pechorin; however, as it is without the traveller-narrator's awareness that all of it could be just a subjective impression, it is arguably even less reliable. In addition, both Pechorin and Grushnitsky are prone to acting out their personas, and even though Pechorin accuses Grushnitsky of having a passion for producing an effect with his (female) audience, he is, as his whole courtship of Mary testifies, equally prone to doing the same (though one could view his awareness of it as a saving grace). Nevertheless, it is undoubted that Grushnitsky has considerable success with Mary at first, and although Pechorin may satirize his crutches, overcoat, and fiery gaze, Grushnitsky is the one who first catches the eye of the Moscow princess. Pechorin has to make quite an effort to turn her attention onto himself, and his strategies for doing so seem considerably more convoluted than anything Grushnitsky gets up to (buying a rug she wanted and parading it in front of her window is one such episode); and yet it is Grushnitsky who is

55 Mersereau, Mikhail Lermontov, pp. 124–25.
56 Andrew, Women in Russian Literature, pp. 63–64; Barratt and Briggs, especially pp. 70–71 and 124; Todd, pp. 158, 163; Golstein and Powelstock, passim.
60 Lermontov, p. 512.
portrayed as being ridiculously over-eager to attract her regard. In fact, such is Pechorin’s intense need to act out various heroic and demonic roles that Turner doubts that the real character can be seen anywhere at all. The mere mention of the possibility of someone possessing a desire to be a character in a novel (even if attributed to Grushnitsky) should make the reader suspicious; perhaps even to the point where one wonders with Reid if Pechorin in ‘Princess Mary’ orchestrates the events so that he would have something to write down, and fulfill this desire.61

Overall, if we try to abstract actual actions from the interpretation Pechorin imposes on them, Grushnitsky does not come out necessarily much worse than Pechorin. Grushnitsky does engage in some rather dubious behaviour (such as his willingness to slander Mary in public or to go along with the plan effectively to murder Pechorin in the duel), but then, this is not much worse than Pechorin’s own conduct (he plays with Mary’s and Vera’s reputations and hearts, and he is the one who elaborates the rules of the duel to turn even a minor wound fatal, and then kills Grushnitsky). But, of course, in the world of this novel the conflict is not between good and bad men, but between convincing and unconvincing Byronic heroes. Grushnitsky’s real fault seems to lie not so much with wanting to act the Byronic hero, and consequently engaging in amoral behaviour (which, unlike Pechorin, he only really does when offended by Mary’s rejection and Pechorin’s mockery), but with not being that good at it, and with being too rigidly bound by clichés to be fully successful in the long run.

However, here lies the rub: one of the similarities is also the two men’s arsenal of clichés that they have at their disposal. Pechorin accuses Grushnitsky of being able to respond to all situations in life with a ready-made phrase; and yet a casual comment reveals him to be perfectly capable of doing the same.62

Moreover, if we look closely at his confessions to various characters in the novel, even his seemingly most confidential moments are largely acted out, and so laden with literary reference and paraphrase that, if we pause to pay attention to this, they can start sounding rather hollow. If we compare two of his confessions, the one to Maksim Maksimych where he outlines the reasons for his ennui (pp. 482–83), and the one to Mary where he paints himself as misunderstood and corrupted by the world’s indifference (pp. 542–43), what is clear in both of them is that they are literary quotations. The former is a combined paraphrase of Onegin’s early life and Byron’s biography, and the latter is, as Meyer notes, a paraphrase of the beginning of Constant’s Adolphe.63 What is interesting in his listeners’ reactions, though, is that the cultivated Mary is moved to tears by his performance, clearly judging it sincere, whereas the allegedly unsophisticated Maksim Maksimych correctly interprets Pechorin’s little monologue as a quotation and asks about its source, by enquiring whether it was the French who had introduced boredom as a fashion.

61 Turner, p. 45; Reid, pp. 58–67.
62 ‘Ia skazal ei oduh iz tekh fraz, kotorye u vseyako dolzhny byt’ zagotovleny na podobnyi sluchai’ (‘I said one of those phrases that everyone should have ready for such occasions’: Lermontov, p. 534).
63 Meyer, pp. 60–62.
Furthermore, if we compare Pechorin’s and Grushnitsky’s confessions it becomes clear that there is not really as wide a difference between them as Pechorin’s point of view leads us to believe, and Pechorin’s ability to imagine Grushnitsky’s confession to a provincial maiden (heavy with hints of a dark past) so accurately is easily explained by his own similar speeches to Mary.\textsuperscript{64} Pechorin and Grushnitsky are both ‘fakes’ to the extent that both are a network of literary reference and paraphrase, and both can be exposed as such by someone who resists the attractiveness of the effect their literary performance produces.

Yet the need of some critics to save Pechorin from the fate of being seen as a cliché leads to some intriguing readings of the novel. Kesler, for example, suggests that Pechorin is aware of the narrative expectations that the traveller-narrator imposes upon his story and that also act as a kind of fate in the narrative told in his own diary, but that he is saved from becoming fully bound to that cliché fate by the convoluted narrative structure of the novel and its play with time and irony. In a similar argument that attributes to Pechorin a greater agency and awareness than any literary character has the right to expect, Inna Arian suggests that Pechorin is not just the character and narrator, but also the author of ‘Tamán’ and therefore aware of the ironies played out in it at a double remove; thus the demonic nature of Pechorin’s seductiveness appears as a theoretically rather implausible triple consciousness: actor, narrator, and author.\textsuperscript{65} Even though I consider these readings rather far-fetched, they are nevertheless indicative of the power of Pechorin’s seduction, which is, I would argue, his main strength. His only real advantage over Grushnitsky is that he is a more successful seducer, since he can act out the ambiguities necessary to keep his ‘victims’ (and critics) intrigued for longer. Pechorin’s performance is more complex, but no less cliché-ridden for that; nevertheless, both Pechorin’s performance and the novel’s narrative structure supply him with enough gaps and ambiguities to make it impossible for well-read young ladies and erudite critics to resist filling them with significance. But what if Elizabeth Chereshev Allen is right, and if these fragments of a portrait do not point to a higher synthesis, but only to a lawless emptiness? What if there is nothing behind the literary pastiche which Pechorin projects onto the world and people around him? Moreover, what if there is no way of escaping the world which consists only of stale literary quotations?

In Pushkin’s \textit{Eugene Onegin} alternative possibilities, even if not ideal, are at least offered; Tatiana does at least escape Vera’s fate of convincing herself that it is her feminine duty to be a slave to her demonic lover.\textsuperscript{66} Arguably, Pushkin in his novel advocated a kind of mastery over one’s literariness, an awareness of

\textsuperscript{64} See Grushnitsky’s overheard and interrupted confession to Mary (p. 529) and Pechorin’s to Maksim Maksimyčh (pp. 482–83); also pp. 542–43, 550.

\textsuperscript{65} Kesler, pp. 494–95.\textsuperscript{66} Inna Arian, ‘Some Aspects of Lermontov’s \textit{A Hero of Our Time}, Forum for Modern Language Studies, 4 (1968), 22–32 (p. 28).

\textsuperscript{66} Miller (pp. 64–66) sees Vera as Lermontov’s response to Pushkin’s Tatiana, requiring complete abandonment in love of his heroine, and not a Tatiana-esque sense of duty. Moreover, Andrew, in his feminist study \textit{Women in Russian Literature}, notes that ‘the collective male point of view in Lermontov, which may render Pechorin’s image complex, shows remarkable unity in depicting women as being controlled, manipulated and victimized by men’ (pp. 73–74).
Focalization in Pushkin and Lermontov

its presence in ourselves and others and a conscious control over its effect on our lives and prospects for happiness. In a profoundly disturbing re-enactment of this theme, Lermontov presents a world where no such mastery exists, and as such his novel can also be seen as a cautionary tale; this is the aspect of the two novels that will be addressed in the final section.

Conclusion and Caution: Abyss, Intertextuality, and Seduction

Meyer argues that, like Pushkin’s Tales of Belkin, A Hero of Our Time is a ‘prose to educate a naïve reading public’, and that both function as encyclopaedias of the genres of their time, showing how different types of narratives can bind characters to a literary stereotypical fate for lack of awareness, or, alternatively, create their own fate by a conscious mastery of genres at their disposal.67

Eugene Onegin in many ways functions in a similar manner. Not only is the characters’ psychological motivation largely founded on their reading habits, but its narrative structure, according to Lotman, is designed to disrupt readerly expectations, and is consequently highly dependent on the readers’ knowledge of contemporary plots and genres. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the influence of literary texts not just upon individual characters, but also on the culture as a whole; so, for example, the influence of Richardson’s novels on the culture of Tatiana’s mother’s youth is so pervasive that she did not even need to read him to feel it.68

As we have seen, a strong common thread between Eugene Onegin and A Hero of Our Time is the exploration of the generic nature of love, of the influence of literature on amorous expectations and patterns of behaviour, as well as of the potentially disastrous consequences of a misapplication of literary models to real life. Tatiana, Mary, and Vera are all subjected to a literary seduction; their seducers are both self-fashioned and perceived as incarnations of novelistic anti-heroes, and their beguilement functions as a series of enacted ambiguities and behavioural and semantic puzzles, drawing them in and seducing them just as a complex and ambiguous novel would, and as these two novels seduce their readers. Both the heroines and the readers are faced with the challenge of the seduction and the need to resist it. The heroines must realize that the Onegins and Pechorins are not only not going to marry them, but that any form of amorous entanglement with them would bring little but misery. In this sense, Mary and Vera are versions of the two Tatianas, the romantically inclined maiden and the married society woman, and they both show the depths of unhappiness that Onegin/Pechorin could bring if unresisted. And yet all of these women, in common with ourselves as readers, have to acknowledge the appeal of the Onegins and Pechorins, and of the interpretative challenge they pose. The mise en abyme of literary quotations and references from which they are constructed is, indeed, as hypnotic as the two abysses that were Princess Mary’s undoing: the first occasioning Pechorin’s long confession which brought

tears to her eyes, and the other, the dizzying ride through a mountain stream, which gave him an opportunity to kiss her for the first time.69

The play of focalization and narrative structure further enhances this complexity. Literature, seen as a cognitive frame that shapes the understanding characters have of their world, leads them to over-interpret and misinterpret, while the actual process of focalization in the novel, designed to distort and mystify, seduces readers into doing the same, though at the same time warning them of the dangers of falling for the seduction.

The abyss, the void, and the gap: the structure of both of these novels rests on a play of genre conventions, on literary reference, on ambiguity and the unsaid. They both possess substantial narrative gaps, their meaning is heavily dependent on intertextual connections, and the behaviour of their heroes is laden with literary reference, inconsistent and often puzzling. They teach about the dangers of reading both too much and too little into something, of focalizing life’s events through the filter lens of the novels read, as well as warning us of the dangers of not reading enough or at all, and thus failing to recognize the moments when life starts imitating art and becoming potentially dangerous or unsatisfying as a result.70 They both expect their readers to be well-read and teach them about the dangers of being too literary. They are both powerful cautionary tales about literature and its power, ambiguous and seductive.

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69 Lermontov, pp. 542–43 and 553–54.
70 See Gilroy, p. 17.