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The Intext of “Superfluous Man” in Contemporary American Fiction

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Russian literary intext of “superfluous man” incorporated in the fiction of two contemporary American authors Thomas McGuane and David Bezmozgis, whose main characters are arguably modelled on Pechorin, the protagonist of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. The intext of “superfluous man” is just one example of the reoccurring dialogue between American and classical Russian literatures echoing the trend of the early twentieth century. Russian texts once again become mediators to transcend boundaries and contribute to translating individual narratives into transcultural stories.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, transcultural intertextuality has become a phenomenon of increasing experimentation. One noticeable trend is the way many contemporary American authors refer to classical Russian literature in their writing. As they do so, they most commonly employ two strategies: incorporating personalia and incorporating concepts. These inclusions can be discussed as (micro)-intexts (texts within texts), a category introduced by Estonian semiotician Peeter Torop to discuss various textual inclusions. Torop describes intext as a “semantically loaded segment of text, whose meaning and function is defined by at least double description” (Torop, 1995: 132) and categorizes allusions, (quasi)citations and other textual borrowings as intexts. The category of intext has become

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an important constituent in intertextuality studies, including their transcultural strand. This paper also relies on Gérard Genette's concept of transtextuality, which he defined as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether isobvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette, 1997: 1). The paper argues that the novels by Thomas McGuane and David Bezmozgis present two varieties of contemporary "superfluous man": one can be described as an "internal outsider" and the other as an "external outsider".

2. "Superfluous Man" as an "Internal Outsider"

Thomas McGuane's fiction has long established his status among the best contemporary American writers. His typical character is a suffering, alienated man such as Patrick Fitzpatrick, a protagonist in *Nobody's Angel* (1982), the novel often estimated as one of the author's best (Bourjaily, 1982; McClintock, 1997). Towards the end of the book Fitzpatrick comes with the following self-assessment: "He thought for a moment, literally thought, about what he had set out for; and he knew one thing: he was superfluous" (McGuane, 1986: 223). Interestingly, a similar self-estimation occurs at the end of *Waiting* (1999), a novel by Chinese American author Ha Jin. Ha Jin's protagonist can perhaps be compared to Oblomov, the "superfluous man" in the eponymous novel by Ivan Goncharov (1859), and deserves separate attention. Vance Bourjaily notes in his review that by this word the character "has been placed by his author in a clear line of literary descent – that of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Lermontov's Pechorin in *A Hero of Our Time* – which creates an interesting subtext, subtle allusion rather than open parallel" (Bourjaily, 1982).

Indeed, Pushkin and Lermontov's characters opened the so called "gallery of superfluous men" in Russian literature, though the type originated in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The term was popularized by Ivan Turgenev's novella *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850) and then retroactively applied to these and other Russian characters of the earlier part of the nineteenth-century. Despite the cultural, temporal and spatial gaps, McGuane's Fitzpatrick can be discussed as a distant descendant of Lermontov's reckless hero on several grounds.

As it is typical for superfluous men, none of the heroes belongs in the state-centered pattern, though they are both military officers. Their actions are often self-destructive, they disregard the social values and standards of their time; they are bored and withdrawn. Patrick Fitzpatrick is older than Pechorin; he is more mature and far less cynical. The novel begins as he retires and comes to settle at his family ranch and take care of his grandfather and mentally unstable sister. However, the obsession with danger, for romantic characters inevitably involving horses and women, leads both characters to disastrous consequences.

The feminine and equine motifs are inseparable in both novels, and the beauty of horses and women is often equaled. In Lermontov one of his narrators, an old soldier Maksim Maksimovich, describes Karagyozy (the exceptional male horse of Pechorin's Abrek adversary Kazbich) as "black as coal, with legs like bow-strings and eyes as fine as Bela's!" (Lermontov, 2006: 19). Kazbich valued his horse more than his life and desired Circassian princess Bela, so Pechorin decided to deprive him of both. For these two men horses counted more. For Kazbich it is straightforwardly so, which is clear in the old song he sings: "Four wives are yours if you pay the gold;/ But a mettlesome steed is of price untold" (Lermontov, 2006: 22). Close readers of Lermontov's original have long noticed that the Russian form of "four wives" [*chetyrezheny*] suggests the object is inanimate. Significantly, this song parallels a passage in which Pechorin says that he keeps four horses [*chetyrekhloshadei*], that is, he speaks of horses as of the animate object (Lermontov, 2006: 96). As David Matual summarized this parallel, Pechorin's "horses are animate while Kazbich's women are not" (Matual, 1995: 13). Consequently, in Pechorin and Kazbich's rivalry for a woman and horse, the horse survives but the woman does not.

Respecting the high status of horses, Pechorin rather cynically comments that "breeding in women, as in horses, is a great thing" (Lermontov, 2006: 72). Quite tellingly, after his meeting with Vera, the woman he supposedly loves, he thinks of the enjoyment of horse riding in the wilderness as preferable over a woman's company: "I love to gallop on a fiery horse through the tall grass, in the face of the desert wind... There is not a woman's glance which I would not forget at the sight of the tufted mountains... the dark-blue sky, or in hearkening to the roar of the torrent as it falls from cliff to cliff" (Lermontov, 2006: 109).

McGuane's character is also quite responsive to the beauty of nature as he could notice, for example, that "the heavy-trunked cottonwoods seemed to hold their dismaying branchloads of greenery in the awkward and beautiful whiteness which at a distance gives the valley bottom of the West almost their only sentimental quality" (McGuane, 1986: 146). Since Fitzpatrick is a native to the surrounding land, he borrows its "sentimental quality" for his attitude

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