

The Eternal Stranger:
The Superfluous Man in Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature

A Thesis Submitted to
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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1: Introduction.....5

Chapter 2: Epiphany and Alienation.....26

Chapter 3: “Yes—Feeling Early Cooled within Him”.....42

Chapter 4: A Soul not Dead but Dying.....67

Chapter 5: Where There’s a Will.....96

Chapter 6: Conclusion.....130

Works Cited.....134

PREVIEW

Introduction

The superfluous man is one of the most important developments in the Golden Age of Russian literature—the period beginning in the 1820s and climaxing in the great novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. To understand the superfluous man is to understand a key cultural struggle, the battle for self-understanding of a Russian intellectual elite looking for solid ground along the fault between sophisticated Western philosophy and a Slavic heritage understood more instinctively than intellectually. The superfluous man is the bastard child of a volatile, centuries-long love affair between the Western mind and the Slavic soul. And yet it would be hard to imagine a term more loosely applied or more inadequately defined. Turgenev's Rudin and Bazarov, Goncharov's Oblomov, Dostoevsky's Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, and Tolstoy's Andrei Bolkonsky are just a few characters who have made the register of superfluous men simply by not fitting in or evincing a general disillusionment with life, the system, or the status quo. If being a misfit or a rebel, however, adequately defined the character type, why not expand the list to include Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge, Hugo's Enjolras, or Byron's Don Juan? It is what makes the superfluous man a peculiar phenomenon of the Russian mind, a representation of a particular cultural conflict in a particular place and time, that sets him apart from other more or less socially awkward or dissatisfied members of the literary canon. The superfluous man is the dual product of Russian culture and Western education, a man of exceptional intelligence who is increasingly and painfully aware of his failure to synthesize knowledge and experience into lasting values, whose false dignity is continually undermined by contact with Russian reality, and whose growing alienation from self and others leads to an unabashed exhibition of and indulgence in cowardly, ludicrous, and sometimes destructive instincts.

To understand the development of the superfluous man, it is crucial to understand a little of the history of Russia's troubled relationship with the West—or, initially, their lack of a relationship. James Billington, in *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture*, points out that the early ties between the West and Kievan Rus' (the pre-Muscovite center of Russian civilization) loosened over time, as Russia turned its attention in the direction of the rising sun, toward which its civilization was moving (4). Centuries of relative isolation and internal struggle would lead to the cultivation of a unique culture, not merely divergent from that of the West, but in many ways ideologically incompatible with it. Most important, of course, was the form and content of Russian religion. Orthodoxy, while imported from Byzantium in the tenth century, took on distinctive attributes in Russia. In the first place, as Billington points out, "The unity of Kievan Russia was above all that of a common religious faith. The forms of faith and worship were almost the only uniformities in this loosely structured civilization" (13). Religion, in other words, provided stability and a sense of community for Russians as their civilization developed, until it became more or less equivalent to national identity: to be Russian Orthodox was to be Russian. And if Orthodoxy was the cement which held together the urban Muscovite, the hunter in the Urals, and the homesteader on the Central Asian steppe, it was also what separated all of them from the Roman Catholic West, a civilization in which (comparatively speaking) religious ties were increasingly more political than cultural. Later, after the Protestant Reformation and ensuing religious wars tore Western Europe apart, Western religion no longer meant unity in any sense, and such a religion would be, to the traditional Russian mind, as meaningless as the secularization that followed in its wake.¹

¹ This general emphasis on religious unity did not, of course, mean that religious conflict was completely unknown in Russia. But as Riasanovsky and Steinberg point out, the rebellion of

During its years of isolation, Russia also cultivated a unique approach to aesthetics. According to Billington, this approach predated the introduction of Christianity into Russia, since ultimately “[t]he early Russians were drawn to Christianity by the aesthetic appeal of its liturgy, not the rational shape of its theology” (9). One might almost say that the Russian had not so much a unique approach to aesthetics as an aesthetic approach to life and truth—an approach with several important effects on the Russian mind. In the first place, as the same source indicates, the task of Russian theology was not primarily to delve into the complexities of doctrine, not to explain or to systematize, but rather to render spiritual reality more accessible and immediate (Billington 8-9). It was this approach to understanding that would make the painting of icons, those two-dimensional windows into a higher spiritual world, possibly “the most remarkable artistic development in Russian history” (Riazanovsky and Steinberg 56). It is also the reason why Russian Orthodoxy, in both theory and practice, became what many a Westerner would disparagingly call “anti-intellectual.” This accusation involves a misunderstanding of the function of Russian religious aesthetics. There is, within Orthodoxy, a sense that the path to union with God is not through an analysis of various aspects of his nature and the nature of his relationship with mankind but rather through an appreciation of the beauty of his nature and of this process as unities. Hence, Leonid Ouspensky argues that “beauty, as it is understood by the Orthodox church . . . is a part of the life to come, when God will be all in all . . . [and t]his beauty can be a path or a means of bringing us closer to God” (42). Drawing a diagram of such a path, labeling its various parts and explaining its progress through the

“Old Believers” against the seventeenth-century reforms of Patriarch Nikon “constituted the only major schism in the history of the Orthodox Church in Russia” (185), and even that conflict did not result in the exponential multiplication of sects that the Reformation spawned in the West.

mysteries of divine reality will, in the Orthodox mind, be not merely pointless but potentially harmful, as it commits what one may call the “fallacy of means,” or the idea that when one has indicated how something operates, one has a greater knowledge of its essence. In reality, one has lost sight of the essence altogether. To preserve the connection of the believer to this essence is the function of the icon, as is indicated by the popular legend of the Orthodox priest explaining the relative lack of systematic theology in Orthodoxy by saying “Icons teach us all we need to know.”² For many in the Western traditions, “to know” means to understand, as one understands a mathematical theorem; for those in the Orthodox tradition, “to know” means something much deeper, the type of knowledge one has of a person rather than of an idea.

Only such an understanding of the religious aesthetics of Orthodoxy can enable one to perceive why, when Peter the Great dragged his country kicking and screaming into renewed contact with the West at the turn of the eighteenth century, many Russians would be so resistant to the analytical, pragmatic, and even reductive approach to reality developing out of the Western Enlightenment. In the traditional Russian mindset, “[m]an’s function was not to analyze that which has been resolved or to explain that which is mysterious, but lovingly and humbly to embellish the inherited forms of praise and worship—and thus, perhaps, gain some imperfect sense of the luminous world to come” (Billington 7). Hence, the Western drive to discover and explain, with its spirit of unrestrained inquiry, grated against the Russians’ inherited instinct for the preservation of mystery and distrust of unbridled curiosity. It is not that understanding was irrelevant to Russians but that certain things demanded a different kind of understanding than an

² This story is often told, with inadequate attribution or none at all to a particular source. But its basis in fact is, perhaps, irrelevant to its importance as an expression of the Orthodox religious framework.

Enlightenment approach would allow. To someone with a traditional Russian—that is, Orthodox—sensibility, the Western methods of analysis must seem to trample on the sacred and destroy beauty through dissection and explanation, whether for its own sake or for the sake of religious dogma, just as vivisection snuffs out the life it seeks to understand. The essential quality of the being, or truth, is given up in the very process of inquiry.

Another facet of traditional Russian understanding that the increasingly secular West would come to challenge is the Orthodox fondness for metanarrative. Billington speaks of the Russians' "extraordinary sense of history" and of the importance of passing on the memory of "[l]ocal and contemporary saints" (8-9). Russian hagiography illustrates the importance of maintaining a context both spiritual and tangible, in space as well as time. To lose touch with this dual context is to lose sight of both identity and direction, to suffer historical dislocation. George P. Fedotov speaks of early "Russian chroniclers" having "not only the sense of the concrete, the love for artistic shaping of historical events, but also the sense of larger connotations, the desire to find the meaning of history as a whole" (382). Hence, the Russian approach to history is also defined by the Russian mind's privileging of beauty and its drive to make meaning tangible and accessible to human understanding, the same tendencies that governed Russia's characteristic approach to religion. It is therefore no surprise that, as Fedotov points out, "ancient Russian theology was entirely historical," or, one might rather say, apocalyptic (qtd. in Billington 11), so that from the very beginning, the destiny of the Russian people became inseparable from Orthodoxy. Several facets of Orthodox belief and practice make it exceptionally adept at cultivating a Russian sense of national destiny that Western skepticism would have difficulty eradicating. One of the most important is summed up well by Zenkovsky in his article "The Spirit of Russian Orthodoxy":

[I]n Eastern Christianity it is the idea of the resurrection that predominates Easter, whereas in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism [it is] Christ's crucifixion and sufferings In the West the recognition of sin has and does overshadow the awareness of God in the world In the Orthodox approach this is not so. Instead there is a fundamental realization that the world is saved through Christ's resurrection. In summary, the Church accepts the world and seeks to find its truth. I would call this idea the message of 'luminous reception,' of Christian cosmism. (49)

In other words, the reality of the kingdom of God on earth is not as far away from an Orthodox believer as it might be from a Protestant or a Roman Catholic. As Zenkovsky puts it, "The Russian Church lives in the awareness that it makes everything different" (49). And yet, ironically enough, it does so by guarding its traditions against dangerous innovations from within and dangerous new ideas from without: "Russian Orthodoxy and Eastern Christianity in general are characterized by two particular features: strict devotion to Church tradition and the use of the national language in the liturgy" (Zenkovsky 38). The purpose of the first is, as Billington points out, to keep untarnished the sacred traditions of the Church in anticipation of the return of her Founder (11-2). The second, whatever its original purpose, served to create a historical consciousness in which religious conviction and historical identity became irrevocably intertwined.

Yet another important facet of Russian civilization is its general tendency to privilege the community over the individual, a tendency that also has its roots in Russian Orthodoxy. Zenkovsky points out that the choice of the word *соборность* for the Greek *καθολον* in the *Credo* takes the idea of "one universal church" to an entirely new level:

The notion of *sobornost* took deep roots in Russian thought. Prince Serge Trubetskoi's theory of *sobornaya*, or the congregational nature of man's conscience, is its most remarkable derivation. According to Trubetskoi, our conscience is not personal because it contains many elements which are not from us but only in us. It is also not impersonal because it is a part of the personality. Therefore, the conscience is supra-personal, it binds us with all men. (44)

To lose one's moral sense is to be cut off from the Church and, hence, the community—and vice versa. It was the influence—even the residual influence—of such ideas on Russians that would make Western individualism so difficult to swallow. Ellen B. Chances, in spite of the emphasis in her scholarship on cross-cultural patterns, recognizes this distinctive attribute in the Russian cognitive framework when she points out that “[i]n Russia, we see that Boris and Gleb, the first saints to be canonized by the Russian Church, were admired for their refusal to rebel” (“Superfluous Man” 112). She also nods to the concept of *соборность*, remarking that “Russian Orthodoxy condemns the human being's attempts to lead an isolated or independent existence” (112).³ Thus, if to be Orthodox was to be Russian, to join the increasingly individualistic West in

³ Chances, in this article as well as in her book *Conformity's Children: An Approach to the Superfluous Man in Russian Letters*, attempts to define the superfluous man by his refusal to conform to conventional social expectations and the various authors' instinctive drives to vilify him for daring to be an individual. Such an approach is insightful, in that it recognizes the Russian emphasis on submission to the needs of the community, but it is ultimately insufficient. Simply defining the superfluous man as a non-conformist is not enough, for the same reason that one cannot stop at defining him as a misfit. Both definitions beg the question. Chances has

dividing communal and private interests into separate spheres was to call into question the religious and national foundations of one's very identity.

To speak of all these ideas as being distinctively Russian is, of course, to generalize, but even so, Orthodoxy—with its emphasis on historical momentum, national destiny, and communal responsibility—left an imprint on Russian culture that would far outlast the days when it reigned supreme, largely unchallenged by foreign influences. After the reign of Peter the Great, with his determination to build a gateway to the West in a swamp on the Gulf of Finland—and, as Billington points out, to ensure that Russian learning and political discourse would absorb Western language and ideas (214)—Russia could no longer ignore the progressive culture of its “sophisticated” neighbors. Before long, the upper classes spoke more often in French than in Russian, until many of them could no longer express themselves adequately in their native tongue. The unapologetic rationalism of the Western Enlightenment, as well as the respective manifestations of Romanticism in Rousseau, Byron, and Schiller that followed in its wake, came to fascinate educated Russians. Poets like Zhukovsky and Vyazemsky wrote Romantic works in Russian and gained much popularity. Yet as Vladimir Nabokov caustically—and rightly—notes, Zhukovsky's verses were merely glorified paraphrases of Western originals (*Verses and Versions* 38). This slavish imitation of Western subjects and expressive vehicles would prove troubling to patriotic Russians like Alexander Griboedov and Alexander Pushkin, as would the fact that the individualism of the Romantic movement was a challenge to traditional Russian values. Billington suggests that the men and women of the new French-speaking elite were increasingly alienated from their own fellow Russians (210), and they must have had a

simply provided a synonym for *superfluous* without indicating what makes this character type's particular brand of superfluity (or non-conformity) unique, significant, and ultimately disturbing.

troubling sense of the separation, even if they superficially adopted the prevailing European scorn for the supposed backwardness of their own country. Such a psychological move involves a degree of self-hatred, and the hated part of the self would necessarily resent its strutting Westernized counterpart. Noted historian A. J. Toynbee indicates that such is the usual struggle of an emergent “intelligentsia”:

[A]n essential characteristic of an intelligentsia is that it acts as a channel for the introduction and acclimatisation in its own country / of an alien culture; to which I would add: [that] the intrusive culture is recognised as in some sense superior to the native culture and yet the native culture is not just submerged, but persists as a living force seeking to come to terms with the intrusive culture. (para. in Seeley 92-3)

Russian values would not give way to Western challengers without a fight, and eventually the lingering influence of these values would lead to the polarization of the Russian intelligentsia during and after the reign of Peter the Great, as an enlightened society no longer fully in tune with traditional Russian ideas nor wholly reconciled with imported alternatives became increasingly dissatisfied with the impossibility of integrating the two on anything more than a superficial level. The splitting of these dissatisfied intellectuals into Westernizers and Slavophiles largely exacerbated the problem, since the reaction of the Westernizers against traditional Russian values merely drew attention to those values’ continued influence and ensured their lasting place in the discourse; similarly, the attempts on the part of the Slavophiles to return to traditional Russian values merely underscored the fact that they had lost touch with those values to begin with.

The problem thus became one of identity, since Russian intellectuals were unable to establish a stable self/other binary. They were just Western enough to step outside their heritage and feel pained by its “backwardness” and just Russian enough to sense that the West had no satisfactory substitute for the spiritual and communal dimensions of those “backward” traditions. Post-colonial discourse speaks of the hybridity of societies imperialized and overwhelmed by the influence of colonizing cultures, and though Russia was never technically imperialized by the West, the invasion of values created just the sort of identity problems found in, say, India in the wake of the British occupation or South Africa in the throes of competing British, Dutch, and native cultural paradigms. Homi Babha, in *The Location of Culture*, speaks of the process of constructing selfhood in such “in-between spaces”: “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (2). Russians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found themselves operating along just such a fault between divergent ways of processing reality, and they found themselves generally unable to articulate a coherent cognitive framework, since they were caught in the intervening space between Western and Russian halves of a self that resisted integration into an understandable whole. If articulating the self/other binary was so problematic and painful, if not impossible, then the least the troubled intellectuals could do was to express what the growing awareness of their position meant—to develop a character illustrating the disturbed condition of someone no longer able to fool himself about his alienation from both others and the self: enter, the superfluous man.

The first attribute of the superfluous man is, of course, that he is the embodiment of cultural hybridity, too Russian to be truly Western, too Western to be truly Russian, a foreigner

both abroad and at home. Thus far he merely reflects the situation of nearly all Russian intellectuals of his day. He must, however, represent a peculiar concentration and hence powerful expression of the problem, and therefore he is presented as not merely well-educated (most often either in the West or by Western/Westernized tutors, of course) but also exceptionally intelligent and perceptive. Tragically, what the union of such an education and such a powerful mind would normally accomplish—that is, the equipping of a person to face both personal and occupational problems with discernment and the empowering of the same against, not vice perhaps, but folly—fails miserably. The superfluous man is not empowered by his education and intelligence, but rather crippled by both on a number of different levels. As Chances says, speaking of Mikhail Lermontov's representation of the superfluous man, "his mind will not let him live" (*Conformity's Children* 45). In the first place, he fails to synthesize education and experience, since a Western education hardly arms one against Russian reality or gives one the means to process residual Russian instincts. Joanna Hubbs points out how, even after many decades of Russian exposure to the West, Russian children underwent on the individual level the abortive process of developing these native instincts as a precursor to their ultimate loss:

Westernization of the upper classes, which proceeded through the eighteenth century and resulted in a forcible divorce from their traditional culture, was repeated with each generation through the customs of child-rearing: The higher ranks of the nobility continued to place their infant offspring at the breasts of peasant nurses. . . . It is perhaps for this reason that the idyllic memory of childhood floats over the writings of a number of nineteenth-century gentry intellectuals. It expresses their deep emotional attachment to those nurses and the

ever-remembered stories and customs of the *narod* with which the nurses surrounded their masters' infants. (208)

It is no surprise that the systematic undermining of nursery values in the Westernized schoolroom produced generation after generation of conflicted Russians. Of course, many refused to acknowledge the conflict on a conscious level, making possible the superficially Westernized society of the St. Petersburg salons and provincial drawing rooms that so characterized the nineteenth century. Many upper-class Russians could draw at will from contradictory sets of values, feeling but not ultimately acknowledging the ludicrous no-man's-land in which they operated. The superfluous man, however, has penetrated the illusion, being forced by his superior intelligence to recognize and despise the hypocritical intelligentsia from which he emerges. His characteristic attitude is sheer, unadulterated contempt—an initially passive contempt which, in later representations, turns into active spite.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the superfluous man is that he is superfluous to the very society that he understands better than anyone else does. His growing awareness of the problem does not equip him with the motivation or the ability to engage it constructively. Those around him might content themselves with incoherent values, but he has seen through them and yet has nothing more solid with which he might replace them. He will end up with no values whatsoever and, hence, no direction, no productive outlet for his understandable frustration with the surrounding world. This absence of value and direction is a crucial point, since it separates the superfluous man from all the literary embodiments of the intellectuals of the 1840s and even the radicals of the 1860s. The listless idealists of the 1840s had many values—most of them

aesthetic and abstract, and few of them practical,⁴ as illustrated by the endearing, blustering, and ultimately pathetic Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's *Demons*. Such values might have been as difficult to apply to Russian life as any others born of Western Romanticism, but the fact that such men had values at all clearly separates them from the superfluous man. Similarly, the generation of the 1860s, as exemplified by Stepan Trofimovich's radical son, Pyotr Stepanovich (and more famously by Turgenev's Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*), adopted for their values a sort of anti-value, a hatred of the previous generation's tenets that might not have provided them with a positive alternative but nonetheless gave them the capacity for action, gave them a negative agenda. The superfluous man has no agenda because he has no values, positive or negative. It is for this reason that the central concern of Dostoevsky's incomparable *Demons* is neither Stepan Trofimovich, who is still alive enough to undertake a spiritual journey, nor his son, who is still alive enough to undertake a mission of destruction, but rather the dark, enigmatic Stavrogin, who ultimately posits that he is capable of nothing, "not even negation" (Dostoevsky *Demons* 676).

The superfluous man's awareness—or, more accurately, hyperawareness—of the cultural conflict that has given birth to him becomes increasingly painful, festers, and turns him into one of the most bitter character types in all of literature. Not only is he unable to connect with Western Europeans or the Russian people, the *народ* who would inflame the imaginations of alienated intellectuals trying to "return" to an only partially understood heritage, but he is also unable to connect to those who, like him, are caught between the two worlds. He is incapable of joining them in comfortable self-deceit, and eventually he loses even the desire for human

⁴ The volatile socialist critic Belinsky might be an exception, as might Herzen, notwithstanding his ultimate exile.

connection. Pyman, speaking of Dostoevsky's representation of the superfluous man, offers a description that might apply to his literary predecessors as well: the superfluous man "has lost the ground from beneath his (or her) feet, . . . has become a spiritual 'wanderer', an 'outsider' Totally withdrawn into self, indifferent to others, amnesiac towards the need for the absolute, the loss of the 'positively beautiful', [he moves] inexorably from dialogue to monologue to self-destruction" (112). The progression is thus from alienation from others toward alienation from the self and, eventually, the dissolution of the self altogether. In his later manifestations, the superfluous man is more an absence than a presence, operating according to a dialectic that disrupts every attempt to synthesize the self until he is faced with his own moral insubstantiality.

The various representations of the superfluous man underscore the cultural dimensions of the problem he represents. In the first place, he is represented as having not merely a strong mind but, increasingly with later developments of the character type, a remarkably strong will as well. This quality is brutally ironic, since the hollowness of his soul makes certain that the superfluous man will be able to find no lasting channel for his will, nor will he maintain action toward any conceivable end. Freedom of action becomes its own end, and this lack of an external object, of a goal outside the will itself, will chip away at inhibition until all restraint collapses. Such a will must assert its own freedom to follow any arbitrary impulse, and since no coherent values govern the superfluous man's impulses, his actions will chase these impulses in increasingly erratic and outlandish directions. It is this dialectic in the character type that turns the bitter listlessness of his earlier representations into the destructive, dangerous, and frightening dimensions of his later representations. With each fresh treatment, the character becomes more aware of his own hollow nature and compensates by indulging unpredictable, vindictive drives against the relatively happy, self-deceiving occupants of the contradictory world through which he moves, forever an

exile. This turn of the character type toward darker dimensions is recognized by Seeley when he describes Lermontov's Pechorin, the first of the later representations, as having a "will to power"⁵ [which] he experiences as 'an insatiable thirst devouring all that crosses his path'" (105). Speaking of the "cruelty" (105) of this will, Seeley goes on to describe how this later character "revels in regarding himself as an instrument in the hands of destiny, as the 'axe' or 'executioner' of fate striking down men or their happiness 'often without malice, but always without pity'" (106). And yet even the destructive actions of the superfluous man will take place in fits and starts. He will enact no awe-inspiring effort toward world domination but rather offer the occasional impulsive slap in the face of whoever happens to be standing nearby. For it is notable that the conscientious, ingenious, seemingly unstoppable doer of evil—or, to put it in nineteenth-century terms, the passionate nihilist—can inspire even in virtuous readers a little awe alongside the more socially validated response of fear and loathing. Even the hateful Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky of Dostoevsky's *Demons* is still human enough to care passionately about a cause, to worship someone (Stavrogin), and to motivate men (albeit weak men) to action. But the superfluous man is neither consistently⁶ awe-inspiring nor, any longer, fully human, and it is for these reasons that he represents a problem much deeper and more disturbing to the Russian imagination.

It is here, in fact, that a key difference emerges between the modern, Western concept of evil and the traditional Russian concept of evil, a difference crucial to the context of the

⁵ To perceive this "will to power" as Nietzschean *avant la lettre* would not be amiss. It has the same capacity to turn its exerciser into a monolith.

⁶ Initially, he might be very attractive, but his façade of dignity dissolves on closer examination.

superfluous man. Some might trace the development of this Western understanding of evil to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which the rebellion of Satan and the demonic horde is described with epic imagery that lends tragic dimensions to their position and, some would argue, a residual majesty to the character of Satan. This reading might be anachronistic,⁷ a product of the uninhibited imaginations of the English Romantics, but whatever its origin, it is a reading that has taken over the discourse since the early nineteenth century. More significantly, Western representations of evil since the Renaissance and particularly since the Romantic era have manifested an emphasis on the awe-inspiring, majestic dimensions of evildoers that increasingly individualistic readers must find simultaneously attractive and repulsive—from the sharp, perceptive mind of Iago, to the daring of Faust, the “noble” suffering of Childe Harold, and even the seductive brilliance of Hannibal Lecter. This is, of course, to speak of a trend and not an absolute, and it is possible to gain much from encountering such guises of evil—provided that they are recognized as just that, guises. It would seem, however, that the bestial and grotesque

⁷ Actually, a holistic reading of Milton's epic reveals a situational undermining of Satan's pretensions, which are made ridiculous by his continual failure to overshadow the figure of Christ, who lets him take over the plot for a while and then demolishes his army with ease—a device reminiscent of the reader's gradual disillusionment with Hector in *The Iliad*, whose prominence in the plot and heroic reputation merely serve as a foil to highlight the greater prowess of Achilles, who, when he finally enters the fray, is unstoppable. But the Western critical tradition tends to gloss over the cracks in Satan's (and Hector's) armor in favor of an arguably unhealthy fixation on the mystique of the rebel or, in the case of Homer's epic, the so-called “underdog.”

side of evil—as represented in, for instance, the monstrous Grendel of *Beowulf*—has been largely subsumed in later Western works by characters who through their façade of glory and complexity suggest that the forbidden fruit might make one like God after all, albeit at a terrible price.

The trend in Russian folklore, cultivated over centuries and passed on to nineteenth-century gentry by household servants, has been the opposite. Russian folk depictions of evil—and specifically of the devil—have tended to preserve an awareness of farce. The forbidden fruit is more likely to turn one into a beast, or even an insect, than into a god. To the Russian mind, the Satan of Milton (or more accurately Shelley) and his various literary descendants must have seemed strange. One can encounter such a figure and feel fear, loathing, or even hatred, but it will always be mixed with awe. As author Simon Franklin points out in his article “Nostalgia for Hell: Russian Literary Demonism and Orthodox Tradition,” it is not possible to respond in such a way to the devils of Russian folklore: “[D]emons are . . . morally unambiguous. They are not tragic or avuncular or nobly doomed free spirits. They are not Miltonic or Byronic. They can of course make themselves appear attractive . . . [but t]heir essence is thoroughly nasty. They are ceaselessly hostile. Their purpose, in their dealings with mankind, is to bring souls to damnation” (32-3). They are also less glamorous than their Western counterparts. Faith Wigzell draws attention to this distinctive treatment of devils, saying, “Folk *bylichki* and folktales often depict the devil as prankster, playing nasty tricks on men Hence the common euphemism *shut* (joker) for the devil” (“Dostoevskii” 37). A joker might inspire fear, but it will be a different kind of fear than that elicited by the powerful Satan of Milton, who has a “master plan” to conquer heaven and earth; he would be above such antics as getting someone lost in a snowstorm—as the evil spirit does, seemingly for fun, in Pushkin’s poem “Demon.” This work,

apart from indicating the interest of Russia's greatest poet in his country's folklore, also underscores another aspect of what Wigzell calls "the folk demonic"—that is, that the trademark of Russian folk devils is "mirthless, cruel or destructive laughter" ("Dostoevskii" 37). The devil that would lure a traveler off the road to his death—and that would do so for amusement, on a whim—embodies an evil just as real as that of the cosmic rebel in Milton, but the grossness of his evil is more obvious. And it is the habit of Russian folklore to continually draw attention to this grossness, to cultivate contempt alongside the fear evoked by evil spirits in any culture.

This foray into Russian devil folklore is important for several reasons. In the first place, for generations of *мушкетеры*, the peasants largely responsible for the oral tradition that eventually gave birth to Russian literature, it was far from a passing interest. It is possible to say, without the slightest exaggeration, that Russian peasant culture was not merely fascinated by devils but obsessed with them. Wigzell points out that the typical Russian serf was more aware of the devil's presence than he or she was of God's ("Dostoevskii" 34). The devil was an immediate threat, and all the more frightening because, as Franklin notes, he had a thousand masks (35). It is likely then that the peasant nurses whose bedtime stories and superstitions left their mark on generations of the Russian intelligentsia would have communicated at least part of their awareness of such a central figure of the folk heritage. That they did so accounts for the number of devils who make their appearance, disguised or otherwise, in the pages of nineteenth-century Russian literature. Pushkin's "Demon" was followed by a poem of the same title by Lermontov. The most famous depiction is perhaps the petty, bureaucratic devil who manifests himself to the tortured consciousness of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's last novel. But beneath these obvious examples are a multitude of more subtle invocations, many of which tellingly surround the various representations of the superfluous man.

Most obviously, the superfluous man is a betrayal of traditional Russian values, particularly the exclusive belief in Orthodoxy and the accompanying faith in Russia as a stronghold for the sacred. Thus, it seems only natural for an author seeking a more authentic connection with his own culture (understood through its folklore) to indict his character through deliberate association with the demonic. On a less obvious and more interesting level, however, given the juxtaposition of such a character and such a context, the association seems somewhat unavoidable. One might take, for example, the implication of the following observation by Wigzell:

In Russian folk belief, certain places or times were designated as liminal. It was here that the unclean force in its various manifestations (including that of the devil) might be encountered; such times and locations, therefore, presented particular danger. Liminal places included cemeteries, crossroads and thresholds; times included Yuletide, midsummer and midnight. In folk belief pausing on a threshold brought dire consequences. (“Dostoevskii” 33)

The superfluous man, as a lost soul caught between two worlds, is in the most metaphysically compromising position imaginable. He is caught in the threshold between his native culture and the culture of the West, and therefore he must be either vulnerable to the devil or a devil himself—more likely the latter, since he is forced to operate in his liminal space indefinitely. As Wigzell indicates, it was through such spaces that devils might move freely between the underworld and the world of live beings. Thus, “[f]olk belief linked them [devils] with fissures in the earth’s surfaces, caves, abysses, or ravines; it was devils’ love of gaping holes that explained their proclivity for crawling into yawning mouths or through open doors” (“Russian Folk Devil” 65). Secondly, the superfluous man has no coherent self, and therefore he can manifest himself