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Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov

An unwavering romantic lyricist of Russian literature

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Abstract: Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov, the unique Russian romantic lyricist, embodies the grey experiences and relationships of his tattered life in the anthologies of poetry. Being a true protege of Byron, he unveils his deep-rooted feelings and emotions ridden with anger, hatred, disgust, scorn, revenge, and unrequited love. The wild beauty of Caucasus and its mysterious tranquility all the while swelled in the deep recess of his heart. Dichotomies ditched his poetic self for several times but he remained undeterred on the perilous journey of life and hence, he can be deemed as an iconoclastic romantic poet of Russian as well as the world literature.

Key Words: Russian Romanticism, Arsenal of misanthropy, Caucasus mountains, Byronic fashion, Aesthetic judgement.

From writing “Hero of Our Time” to being one, Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov is the rara-avis of Russian literature who charted a path that some dared to; but not with the grit and succour he had. His is a poetic diary that documents his personal experiences, bitter, turmoiled personal relationships, anguish, love for nature, and pain endured throughout his life. Pain is embalmed in almost every verse revealing the troubled young man who was misunderstood, lonely, and suffered all through his life. His poetry abounds in imagery ranging from nature to caricatures of people from every stratum of society. With the Romantic movement making the right noise all over Europe from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century; it did not make its presence felt in Russia until the early decade of the nineteenth century. Through Vasily Zhukovsky and Pushkin, romanticism blew its trumpet in Russia for all the reasons; shaping how literature is looked at and how it should be shaped. Then came the poster-child of Russian romanticism, Mikhail Lermontov who like his contemporary Gogol, confused his readers and contemporaries alike with his dichotomous attitude towards poetry, life, politics, nature, etc. Deeply personal, with glorification and personification of nature, explicit descriptions of personal relationships and experiences, and spiritual and supernatural elements- make up for the ethos of what romanticism stands for. While Pushkin loved life, Lermontov treasured the pain life inflicted upon him, almost craving for it all his life, and derived poetic inspiration from it too:

I want to love and I pray to heaven to send me new torments. (11th June 1831).

The true romantic fear of ordinary life was allayed by something extraordinary and yet painfully negative. His love for Byron and imitation of his verse style creates a different level of an arsenal of misanthropy that abounds in deeply personal negative emotions such as anger, hatred, disgust, scorn, revenge, and unrequited love against the backdrop of beautiful, picturesque Caucasus- makes him a true protégé of Byron in his own right who utilizes Byronic revolutionary zeal, attributes of Byronic hero also deviate from them when he considers.

Born in 1814 in a rich and illustrious family, his life was nothing short of abundance but lacked happiness, warmth and love which constitute a family. His parents had a tumultuous marriage and when his mother died, he was only three, his maternal grandmother decided to bring him up while making sure to keep his father away from him due to a bitter family feud. His grandmother made sure he had the best education possible at home providing him with erudite educators who taught him French, English, etc. This introduced him to Western literature which established his idea of poetic genius, creative writing, society, peace, and attitude towards life.

In cognizance of the Romantic movement, his verses are deeply personal and bare his soul and feeling to his readers and countrymen. Confessional in tone, during the first period of his literary career, at the tender age of nine, he travelled to the Caucasus for health treatment. He fell in love with the mystifying beauty and greenery of the mountains exclaiming "Caucasus mountains for me are sacred". From being a nature lover to falling in love for the first time, the romantic in him kept growing along with his dilemma, and pain. In Byronic fashion, almost all his verses had a romantic hero who displayed all the qualities the poet had and the beliefs the poet stood for. As an exalted dreamer, the Byronic hero in Lermontov's verses was at once a rebel, a prophet, a fighter, a poet, a sufferer, and above all, a lover. In the poem "The Prophet", a continuation of Pushkin's poem, he deviates from his protégé by painting the verse in a darker colour. He considered a poetic gift as manna from God. He deified creative gift in almost all of his verses; "The Prophet" was no further from this. The poetic hero, i.e., Lermontov is the messiah sent to earth by God: "the creature is submissive to me there". While Pushkin began with the poetic hero being gifted the literary gift, Lermontov picked up from this point. Hopelessly, the poetic hero will tolerate the brunt of people's anger for their incomprehensibility as they accuse him of pride. He will silently take refuge in nature and truly understand his vocation and the "burnt fire" or poetic gift will be nurtured in harmony there - away from the crowd, mirroring the experiences of the poet himself. In the poem "The Poet" the romantic hero reveals the reason for being sent to earth by God- to move people towards the truth of life, that is, the love for one's land, the love for one another in compassion and understanding. But people dissuade from the truth and live like a "useless toy" in exile which the poet detests. Despite coming from an affluent background, Lermontov loathed the superficiality, fashionable rich society who whiled away their time in gossiping, drinking, and in so-called intelligent conversations.

In true Byronic fashion, Lermontov rebelled against the Tzar's reign, cry for help for his countrymen to gather and raise their voices against the establishment by asking questions and finding out the true purpose of their being on earth. Every word of the verse constitutes a sharp critique of autocracy and contempt for the younger generation which helps its sustenance. Most of his contemporaries did not use their intelligence and power to the right effect and lived peacefully in inertia making them unable to direct their skills. In harrowing anger, he arraigned for their killing in the poem "Duma". Poems like "Borodino", and "Motherland" reverberates the patriotic side of Lermontov while carefully exposing the pseudo-patriotism of the upper-class Russians who are only after titles, and wealth. But he swells with pride when he thinks of the peasants at work who bring nothing but pure merriment and smile. Byronic disillusionment and despair enticed him so much that he scripted his Byronic moments in his existence:

Though, young, sounds boil within me,
And it is Byron I wish to emulate
For me inheriting one soul like torments,
Oh, could but our fate also be the same.
(Child Harold's Pilgrimage, Lord Byron)

For Lermontov, worshipping Byron is not merely a fandom but slowing progress of 'an aesthetic philosophy that is already culturally imbued with considerations of divine ideals'. While championing western literature, Lermontov tried to delve into the eastern mindset which remains a mystery not only to the westerners but to the easterners themselves. As Lermontov told Krayevsky, "The East is a bottomless well of revelations". In Lermontov's verses, we find a careful amalgamation of Byronic elements along with Lermontov's constant inner struggle to find his autonomous poetic identity while matching the poetic finesse of Byron. In a famous lyric written in 1832, he begins by saying: "No, I'm not Byron/I began younger, I will finish younger,/ My mind will not produce a lot." These reveal the artistic struggles between Lermontov, the artist, the art and the readers.

In later years he served in the army and spent a good many years in the forlorn savage Caucasus Mountain. Living an exotic life in the lap of the wild nature, he composed some of his brilliant romantic poems such as 'The Captive Knight', 'The Cross on the Rock', 'My country on a Bare Hill Top' and so on, but 'The Demon' excelled in all of them by delineating a Georgian Princess Tamara's unfulfilled love, hatred of the Demon, fascinating mountain and the supernaturalism we find in Coleridge's 'Christabel', creates a magical world throughout the poem:

I hid where the ravines run deep;
I started, meteor-like to sweep
On course through midnight's darkest glooming
A lonely wayfarer was looming enticed by a near lamp. (Tr. Charles Johnston)

Art and aesthetic experience are intertwined with the notion of demon, at least in Lermontov's case. In the poem "The Angel", he laid down the difference between spirituality and divinity as he declared that the young soul was already linked to the heavens while he was physically rooted in the material. Lermontov walked on the thin line between idolatry and religious worship in the poem "The Demon". In this poem, the figure of the romantic vampire has been equated with the poet in his work. As James B. Twitchell, one of the seminal critics of the vampire writes of the Romantic artist has observed:

In no other movement has the artist been so aware of his inner self and his exchanging of energies, not only with those around him but with the work of art as well. He is both enervated and energized by the art of creation... Hence, vampirism, simply as a process of energy exchange, is implicit in the creative process... For the Romantic artist, this 'process' usually involves four relatively stable parts: the artist, the audience, the object of art (artifact), and the subject of art (Twitchell 142).

As Lermontov does not rely on his readers to understand his art, vampirism manifests itself in a straightforward manner where the vampire is the poet himself. As the demon is immortal trying to convince Tamara to join his world, he realizes he is already 'undead', i.e., immortal. From an allegorical point of view, Diana Koretsky points out that:

The Demon span almost the entirety of his literary career. It was writing and revising *The Demon*, with the shadow of Byron perpetually looming overhead,... as an expression of Lermontov's corrupting his art (Tamara) with the anticipation of being rebuked by a standard of aesthetic judgment (*The Angel*). As a result, I argue that most, if not all, of Lermontov's poetry, should be understood, at least on some level, as an expression of his frustration with his inability to rise to the level of his idol.

The medievalism and supernaturalism of Lermontov transported us to the unnatural world of Coleridge's "Rime of Ancient Mariner", "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan". The five tenets of Romanticism – imagination, intuition, individualism, idealism, and inspiration are prominent features in his poetry but imagination and intuition haunted him throughout his life and created his poetic persona in himself. He was residing as a stranger in an unknown hostile land but hoped for a better motherland, being free from despotic as well as oppressive rule of the Tsar, as P. B Shelley always did for his "Golden Millennium". When his Russian Literary idol Alexander Pushkin was killed in an unjust duel, he expressed his profound grief for his untimely demise and a bitter protest against the gibberish explanations in "Death of the Poet": "And you will not wash off with all your bloody poison,/The Poet's righteous blood!"

Paradoxically he too suffered the same fate and received a premature death being shot dead in a duel at the age of twenty-seven in 1841. However, this poem fetched him wide recognition as it was circulated from hand to hand and consequently, he had to confront the rage of the Tsar who exiled him to the Caucasus thereafter. He was a man of immense potential

who was way ahead of his time but ultimately was taken out by his vices. He mingled with high society and had meaningless sexual encounters with multiple women only to ruin their reputation in society to avenge his broken heart. He was forlorn, suffered in silence all his life for not having a father figure in life, or getting ditched multiple times by his beloveds. In his biography, John Garrard (1982) wrote: "The symbolic relationship between love and suffering is, of course, a favourite Romantic paradox, but for Lermontov, it was much more than a literary device. He was unlucky in love and believed he always would be: fate had ordained it." All his life he ached for acceptance, love, and to find the true purpose of life on earth and spread the truth among his countrymen too. But unfortunately, the opposite happened, through detailed analysis of his verses, one can sense the frustration of the poet to rise above his idol, Lord Byron. He incorporated the Byronic romantic ethos in his verses along with his independent philosophical and aesthetic judgement; hoping that he would establish himself as a romantic writer in his own right. To sum it up, he did create a literary legacy in Russian literature which was deeply autobiographical in tone.

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