

To the Editor:

Though some of Ms. Layton's applications of Professor Said's theory of "orientalism" are rewarding ("Eros and Empire in Russian Literature about Georgia," vol. 51, no. 2), her attempt to present a generalized picture of Russian literature and its greatest representatives on the basis of such a dubious theory is problematic and her distortion of Lermontov's work is objectionable.

The author is convinced that Russian writers portrayed Georgia as a female, waiting to be conquered by the "indomitable and wary masculine force, totally lacking in Georgia itself" but fully exhibited by the "virile, level-headed, purposeful and westernized Russians." To substantiate such claim Layton refers to Lermontov's comparison of the two Georgian rivers Kura and Aragva to sisters ("Mtsyri") which "illustrates most explicitly how the land itself assumes a feminine character in Lermontov's eyes." Considering that the noun "river," the words "Kura" and "Aragva," as well as the names of numerous Russian rivers are of feminine gender in Russian, it is hardly surprising that they are compared to females. More importantly, Ms. Layton obviously ignores the fact that a few stanzas later Mtsyri encounters the following Georgian scene: "kholmy, pokrytye ventsom derev, razrossikhhsia krugom, shumiaschikh svezheiu tolpoi, kak brat'ia v pliaske krugovoi" (hills crowned with a rustling crowd of thick-growing trees, which are like brothers in a round dance). If one wants to see gender everywhere, as Ms. Layton does, what does one make of the masculine attributes (hills, trees, brothers) of the landscape?

Rather than suggest the gender of Georgia, the metaphors of sisterhood and brotherhood in the poem emphasize the closeness and warmth of the family. The orphan Lermontov makes the orphan Mtsyri attribute to nature the features of loving family (*obniavshis', pliaska krugovaia*; embracing, round dance). Almost a century ago Virginia Woolf complained that the sense of brotherhood that pervaded Russian literature was alien to the west: "we cannot say 'brother' with simple conviction" ("Russian Point of View"). It is clearly still the case if brotherly or sisterly embraces are rendered only in terms of gender or sexuality.

Lermontov's poem "Kinzhal" (1838) contains the following apostrophe to the dagger: "zadumchivyi gruzin na mest' tebia koval" (a pensive Georgian was forging you for vengeance); and this image of the pensive yet militant Georgian forging his dagger hardly fits the claim that "along with the drunkard, Lermontov also shaped images of the Georgian as a rash, timorous, thievish or impotent man."

Layton's misreading of "The Demon" is even more lopsided. To elaborate on her claim that Russian writers present Georgian males as impotent or ineffective, Layton refers to Tamara's father, Gudal, whom she describes as a "figure of impotence who fails to protect his daughter from sexual aggression and death." In the text of "The Demon," however, we read that it is not only Gudal but even the guardian angel who has failed to defend Tamara from the Demon. Clearly, it would be hard for a Georgian male to succeed where an angel fails, but so would it be for anyone. Or is Ms. Layton willing to claim that Lermontov describes heaven as ineffective in order to emasculate its inhabitants and thus pave the way for the Russian empire to conquer it, once its conquest of Georgia is completed?

The author also maintains that upon acquaintance with the Demon "Tamara becomes more helpless and inarticulate than ever. The poet largely deprives her of a voice and reduces her to a quivering vulnerability." It is surprising to encounter such an assertion given that Tamara, enchanted by Demon, sings a song which is compared to the heavenly song of an angel, and which in fact deprives the Demon of all his capabilities: "tosku liubvi, ee volnenie postignul Demon v pervyi raz; on khochet v strakhe udalit'sia. . . ego krylo ne shevelitsia! I chudo, iz pomerksikh glaz sleza tiazhelaia katitsia" (the Demon comprehended the anguish and excitement of love for the first time; terrified, he wants to leave, but his wing does not move! And—a miracle!—from the darkened eyes a heavy teardrop falls).

One is also puzzled by Professor Layton's persistent labeling of Tamara and the *Slavic Review* 51, no. 3 (Fall 1992)

Demon's kiss as a "loss of virginity," "deflowering," "sex" or "intercourse." Whatever, if anything, takes place between the Demon and Tamara after they kiss remains outside the text. In fact, the text suggests that the kiss itself kills Tamara outright: "smertel'nyi iad ego lobzaniia mgnovenno v grud' ee pronik" (the deadly poison of his kiss instantaneously penetrated her breast). Furthermore, Tamara is called a sinner not because "she experiences erotic desire" but because she prays to a demon and not to God and thus becomes a sinner *par excellence* (Cf. "sviatym zakhochet li molit'sia a serdse molitsia *emu*"; when she wants to pray to the saints, her heart prays to *him*). Such unjustified sexualization of Tamara might support the claim that Georgian females are presented as erotic, seductive or wild and needed to be tamed, but hardly does justice to Lermontov's complicated poem.

The key events of both "The Demon" and "Mtsyri" take place in Christian monasteries in Georgia and thus by no means support the assertion that "Russian writers exercised a selective perception which virtually filtered Christianity out of the field of vision." Pushkin's poem "Kazbek Monastery" (1829) attests to the same.

Much of what Ms. Layton says about Lermontov is flawed; the same can be said of other assertions, including her master thesis that "Russian culture's reigning perception of Georgia as 'virgin' territory" is expressed in the portrayal of the land as an "enticing female." Her example, Alexei Meisner's poem in which "Elbrus as a female entity [is] kissed by her lover, the sun" can be undercut by Evdokiia Rostopchina's "El'brus i ia" (Elbrus and I; 1836) which presents Elbrus as the powerful male lover, whose allure the speaker of the poem resists, even though it still haunts her dreams. Cf.

Эльбрус, Эльбрус мой ненаглядный,
Тебя привет мой не почтил, --
Зато как пламенно, как жадно
Мой взор искал тебя, ловил ..
Зато вдали моим мечтаньям
Все снишься ты, гигант Эльбрус

(Elbrus, Elbrus my beloved,/ You were not moved by my greeting,/ But how ardently, how avidly / My gaze sought for you! . . . / And far away, in my dreams,/ You are there, Elbrus the giant!)

Granted that appropriation of foreign models has always been popular both with the practitioners of Russian literature as well as its scholars, I would still insist that a biased and careless application of fashionable western theories obfuscates rather than illuminates.

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The author responds:

Vladimir Golstein accuses me of distortion and obfuscation produced by a desire to run with a pack of post-structuralists led by Edward Said. The irresponsibility of this charge should be evident to any open-minded reader of my article. Golstein avoids the core of my argument about the tendency to feminize and eroticize Georgia—the analysis of Shishkov's depiction of Georgia as a beauty awaiting a Russian male in *Ketevana*, and Odoevskii's allegory about tempestuous Georgia's "marriage" to the Russian giant. What meanings do these texts assume in the context of imperialism? And how do they interact with other Russian writings about Georgia and Georgians? These are the central questions which guided my research and led me to investigate numerous literary works, history, memoirs and documents.

Unable to contend with the heart of the matter, Golstein spars at the periphery. He pretends that I rely heavily on Lermontov's metaphor of the rivers as sisters in "Mtsyri." In fact, of course, I cite it only as one significant detail in conformity with