

Introduction

Cultural Transition and Its Quandaries

LERMONTOV AND HIS GENERATION

“Sadly do I gaze upon our generation!” [Печально я гляжу на наше поколенье!].

With these words, the renowned Russian poet, playwright, and novelist Mikhail Iurevich Lermontov (1814–41) begins one of his most famous—and surely most embittered—poems, “Meditation” [“Дума”] (1838). He goes on from there to describe his generation not only “sadly” but angrily, reproaching its members for being “shamefully indifferent to good and evil,” “ignominiously fearful before danger / And before power—contemptible slaves” [К добру и злу постыдно равнодушны/... Перед опасностью позорно-малодушны,/И перед властью—презренные рабы]. A generation without any creative spirit, “its future is either empty or dark” [Его грядущее—иль пусто, иль темно], leading down “a straight path without a goal” [ровный путь без цели] and inducing “some secret cold” that “reigns in the spirit” [царствует в душе какой-то холод тайный]. Devoid of both courage and creativity, his generation, Lermontov declares, will

consequently leave no trace behind it, “not having cast to the centuries either a fruitful idea / Or the work begun by a genius” [Не бросивши векам ни мысли плодovитой, / Ни гением начатого труда]. Instead, aimlessly “fruitless” [бесплодное]—a term Lermontov reiterates—he and his generation will simply “hurry toward the grave without happiness and without glory, / Looking back in mockery” [к гробу мы спешим без счастья и без славы / Глядя насмешливо назад]. And so, Lermontov concludes, “he who follows will disdain / Our dust . . . with a scornful verse, / With the bitter laughter of a deluded son / At a dissipated father” [И прах наш . . . / Потомок оскорбит презрительным стихом, / Насмешкой горькою обманутого сына / Над промотавшимся отцом] (1: 400–401).¹

“Meditation” is both a confession and a critique. And it reveals Lermontov to be an artist who at once identified himself with his generation and rose above it. He shared in that generation’s psychological condition—detached from the past, adrift in the present, and purposeless before the future. But he rose above his generation by diagnosing its disorientation and inadequacies as a historical condition, by giving voice to that condition, and by confronting the quandaries that such a condition posed. His ability to rise above his generation in these ways gives Lermontov an unusual, and insufficiently understood, place in literary history. That place, I will argue, is as an emblematic figure of cultural transition.

To be sure, cultural transition is a very large subject, which Lermontov’s literary career illuminates in a particular and instructive manner. Before elucidating this particularity and its instructiveness, however, I would first like to look briefly at some versions of cultural change in general—from grand theories of patterns in history (albeit no longer in vogue) to more sharply focused interpretations of transitions in and out of specific historical periods. This brief look will provide my discussion of Lermontov’s role in cultural transition with a historiographical context, and it will also provide a theoretical point of departure for my interpretation of Lermontov as both representing his generation and transcending it by leaving his own highly “fruitful” ideas and works of genius for the generations to come.

CULTURAL CHANGE WRIT LARGE

Nothing in history has more causes, complexity, and consequences than cultural change. For cultural change, like culture itself, can encompass

everything created by human beings, from the everyday material circumstances of daily life to political systems, social manners, and structures of belief. Cultural change on this scale will necessarily be gradual, accumulating causes as it goes. And it will not be explained simply. Indeed, its theoreticians tend to dismiss all attempts to simplify it. As literary critic and historian Ihab Hassan puts it, "No universal pattern of transformation applies to all human endeavors; some change seems cyclical, some linear, here dialectical, there dramatic, one kind filiative, another affiliative" ("Ideas," 23).² Yet aspirations to penetrate the complexity of cultural change have nevertheless exercised many a scholar and thinker who has detected in retrospect a dominant pattern that determines how cultures have changed in the past and that may predict how they will likely change in the future.

Social theorists, for instance, particularly in the nineteenth century, have discerned a pattern of evolution in cultural and social change. Auguste Comte notably saw the human mind progressing through three successive stages in the course of a society's development—the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific—in a historical sequence he posited as a fundamental law; and Herbert Spencer found a continuous, organic evolution of culture "from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity" (quoted in Becker and Barnes, 667). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels provided their variation with a dialectical vision of history that explained cultural change through class conflicts that would eventually lead to a classless utopian society.³ By contrast to these "progressive" nineteenth-century theorists of cultural change, in the twentieth century social theorist Pitirim Sorokin, for one, advanced a theory that accounted for cultural change through a historical cycle of "crisis—catharsis—charisma—resurrection." That is, when cultures descend into creative bankruptcy, they eventually reach a "crisis," which is followed by some form of cultural "catharsis" or purification, after which a process of charismatic healing leads to "resurrection," a new life made possible by the "release of new creative forces" (4: 778).

In their own theoretical vein, some anthropologists have seen cultures evolving through "a symbolic, continuous, cumulative, and progressive process" (White, 140), while others have contended that cultures change by diffusion and acculturation, through direct or indirect interaction with other cultures. According to Bronislaw Malinowski's dialectical version of the latter, cultural change occurs via the "clash and interplay of two cultures" that results not merely in "a mechanical mixture" of objects or traits but in

“entirely new products” reflecting “new cultural realities” that entail both “potentialities and dangers” (25, 26, 160). Then there are anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas, who argue that cultures are intellectually constructed systems of symbols imparting order to local experience, and who therefore imply that cultures change either when significant shifts occur in local experience, or when new systems of symbols are fashioned, or both.⁴ In contrast, there are “cultural materialists,” such as Marvin Harris, who carry on the Marxist tradition by maintaining that cultures reflect material conditions and will change as those conditions change.⁵

Numerous philosophers of history have, of course, also tried their hand at theories of cultural change.⁶ Oswald Spengler gained renown in the early twentieth century for his sweeping and poetic version of such change in *The Decline of the West* (1918–22). Spengler describes “the drama of a number of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life-cycle,” and each possessing “its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay, and never return” (21). Some cultural changes, he says, are “willed,” while others just “happen” (133), but they all begin in a formative “pre-Culture” period of creative chaos, which subsequently converts to a triumphant period of true “Culture” characterized by clear forms, ideas, and feelings. It is, however, “the inevitable *destiny* of the Culture” eventually to decline into a lesser “civilization.”⁷ Hence he envisioned “history as a picture of endless formations and transformations, of the marvelous waxing and waning of organic forms” (22). According to this theory, cultures grow and die like plants (and Spengler saw Western culture dying at the beginning of the twentieth century).

Inspired in part by Spengler, Arnold Toynbee poured out a dozen volumes of historical and sociocultural theory in *A Study of History* (1934–61) explaining how all civilizations rise and fall in complex but comprehensible, virtually rhythmic, patterns of challenge and response that first bring an aggregation and then a flagging of spiritual energies among a creative minority or elite that guides a civilization in overcoming the challenges posed to it. When an elite loses its power, the culture disintegrates or petrifies. Thus Toynbee perceived in every civilization a life cycle of birth, growth, breakdown, and final disintegration, which will eventually be succeeded by the birth of some new civilization.

At the end of the twentieth century, another explanation of a culture’s rise and decline appeared with the ambitious *From Dawn to Decadence*

(2000), by the eminent cultural historian Jacques Barzun, as he took stock of the whole of Western culture since the Renaissance. But unlike Spengler and Toynbee, Barzun did not invoke an overarching theory of history to account for what he saw. Instead he subtly traced an arc of creative energies and “liberation” that ascended vigorously in the West from about 1500 and then began descending with enervation and a failure of nerve after World War I. To Barzun’s critical eye, decline and then decadence set in when Western culture lost respect for authority, standards, discipline, society, sacrifice, and so forth, leaving nothing to believe in by the end of the twentieth century except liberated, self-indulgent, dull-witted individualism. Although Barzun does not offer an explicit theory of cultural change, he suggests that cultures thrive on creative energies and demanding value systems, and that they decline when those energies flag, those value systems wane, and self-indulgence reigns.

Subscription to these or any other “grand theories” of cultural change inevitably entails the belief that some overarching pattern informs the course of human lives and the direction of human societies. I will now add one more interpretation of cultural change to this brief survey of such theories because, while this interpretation denies the validity of affirming any such pattern, it points to a different kind of cultural change and a different perception of that change—the subjects on which this book will focus. This interpretation comes from the celebrated literary historian René Wellek, in his essay “The Concept of Evolution in Literary History” (1956). Wellek initially surveys theories of literary historical change and divides these theories into two groups, both of which he deems falsely deterministic. The first, he claims, comprises “evolutionary” theories that explain the twists and turns of literary history as part of “slow, steady change on the analogy of animal growth” through “germination, expansions, efflorescence, and decay” in “an unfolding of embryonic elements to which nothing can be added and which run their course with iron necessity to their predestined exhaustion” (40, 42). The second group is composed of “revolutionary” theories that find only abrupt “changes, reversals into opposites, annulments, and simultaneously, preservations” within the “dialectical alternation of old into new and back again” (45, 48).⁸ However, Wellek then argues, no artist is an agent of either “evolution” or “revolution,” because every artist is an autonomous individual for whom creativity is “a free idea, a choice of values which constitutes his own personal hierarchy of values, and will be reflected in the hierarchy of values implied in his works of art.” Far from submitting to

the forces of history, by freely choosing an autonomous aesthetic “hierarchy of values” the artist “will eventually affect the hierarchy of values of a given period” (51). Wellek thus maintains that cultural changes occur not through impersonal deterministic patterns of history, but through the efficacy of free artistic individuality.⁹

CULTURAL TRANSITION

Wellek might oversimplify allegedly deterministic theories of literary history, and he arguably grants individuals too much freedom from their times. But he brings the issue of cultural change down from grand theories and large-scale historical patterns to the lives of individuals. From this perspective we can see cultural change occurring on a smaller temporal scale, affecting a generation or two along limited lines of thought and behavior. These more limited changes might contribute “causes” to more gradual and broader cultural change, but they might also have lives of their own—and those who experience these changes might lack the grounds to recognize or assert their participation in some larger pattern of change. We see such smaller cultural changes happen most commonly and conspicuously through shifting styles in the arts, and in alterations in values and beliefs that come with the generations at the beginnings and the ends of historical periods. I will refer to these smaller generational cultural changes as *cultural transitions*. The word *transition* itself comes from the Latin verb *ire*, “to go,” coupled with the prefix *trans-*, “over or across,” and it denotes both the act of passing from one point to another and the time during which this passage takes place. Hence the term *cultural transition* designates at once the process of moving away from the styles, norms, values, and beliefs of one historical period toward those of another, as well as the stretch of time in which that movement takes place. Without presuming to advance a universal theory of cultural transition between periods, I will first explore the conceptual parameters of this idea and then address how it applies to a particular time and how it is especially exemplified by a particular individual, Mikhail Lermontov.

The very existence of historical periods has, of course, long been debated. Those historians and others who believe only in particulars, and therefore dismiss periodization as a blinkered distortion of variegated facts, vigorously dispute those who accept historical periods as at least useful generalizations that synthesize cultural affinities or correspondences. Despite

this debate, scholars and critics commonly accept and occupy themselves with historical periods like the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and modernism, even if they date and define them differently. For historical periods are not eras of cultural uniformity but rather times—whether decades or centuries—characterized by, as Weliek puts it, “dominant norms, i.e., conventions, themes, philosophies, styles,” and so on, whatever conflicting ideas might also exist (129). Or, as Barzun observes, historical periods are spans of time during which certain attributes “for one reason or another happen to be stressed, valued, cultivated,” especially, but not exclusively, by cultural leaders among artists and intellectuals (*Classic*, 9). In other words, not everyone will subscribe to the prevailing norms and other cultural attributes of a particular period, but that prevalence will be evident to leading contemporaries—and will become more distinct in retrospect, sufficient to justify the distinction of a cultural period. As that prevalence weakens, or as a new set of cultural norms and attributes arises, cultural transition is underway.

Thomas Kuhn’s well-known, albeit sometimes misused and frequently overworked, description of revolutions in the history of science, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), offers an illuminating analogy to this kind of cultural transition. Kuhn argues that during periods in the history of science a particular “paradigm,” or mental model of how the world works, shapes the theoretical categories and practical traditions of scientific research. This paradigm defines the “normal science” of that period. In such periods of “normal science,” the paradigm is modified, embellished, and refined, but its fundamental tenets are not challenged. Over time, however, empirical “anomalies,” or unanticipated problems, arise in the course of research for which the paradigm offers no solutions. As a result, the old paradigm begins to lose its hold through accumulating inconsistencies, compromises, and doubts in its value. These anomalies accumulate until “normal science” is beset by “a growing sense . . . that an existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately in its explanation of an aspect of nature” (91). “Normal science” then reaches a point of “crisis,” which causes “the blurring of a paradigm and the consequent loosening of the rules for normal research” (84). Such a crisis leads to a period of “extraordinary research,” characterized by “the proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals” (90). Competition among various sets of solutions to the unanswered questions persists until finally a “paradigm

shift” occurs, resulting in a new paradigm that is “not only incompatible but often actually incommensurable with the preceding paradigm” (102). That constitutes a “scientific revolution.” And it happens only after one prevailing view of the world has lost its hold and given way to another.¹⁰

Although Kuhn chiefly treats the intellectual and professional character of “normal science” and “scientific revolutions,” whereas cultural transitions involve many human endeavors and are more often evolutionary than revolutionary, his theory of how science changes does bear on cultural transition. For I would surmise that, like periods in the history of science, periods in culture likely change through phases of doubt and questioning of the prevailing view of the world (“the perception that something had gone wrong”), followed by phases of radical experimentation and anticipation (“the prelude to a discovery” [57]), until a new vision of the world achieves dominance—the “paradigm shift.” The process of change in cultures is more complex and less definitive, but the pattern is probably similar.¹¹

The sociologist Ernest Gellner provides some related analogies to cultural change. And because he deals not with revolutionary change into a new period but with the late stage of doubt in the transition out of a period, his ideas have special pertinence to the kind of cultural transition I will be exploring. In a chapter entitled “Metamorphosis” in his study *Thought and Change* (1964), Gellner trenchantly sets forth what he takes to be both the costs and the benefits of social transition. He finds that societies in what he dubs “transitional states” experience “involuntary, dramatic, and largely uncontrolled openness,” which undermines “norms and styles of perceiving and valuing” (61, 52, 61). This openness induces “disorientation and bewilderment, a sense of chaos and contradiction, and an attempt to restore some kind of order and direction” (50). But attempts to restore that lost order prove impossible, since “reliance on conventional wisdom named ‘tradition’ is worthless” when it requires “a stable environment and a repetition more or less of the situations and problems which had formed that tradition—which is precisely what does not obtain during a fundamental transition.” In fact, Gellner goes so far as to state that “it is only in transitional situations that it is really true that men learn nothing from history: they cannot” (60).

But this is not all bad, Gellner goes on. He recognizes a potentially salutary effect on individuals from the “openness” of those transitional situations. For “the warm atmosphere of a fixed way of life and being” can “obscure the bleaker ultimate truths” of human existence that must eventually be met. By contrast, “the bleak truths . . . become practical and pressing

concerns only in states of transition, when the identity of the believer-agent is uncertain, when the ballasts and dogmas, however unwarranted, that are built into any stable identity have become unavailing" (51). The resulting skepticism, doubt, and hesitancy characteristic of transitional states can therefore help to dispel the illusions of the past and to master the "ultimate realities" of life. Here, he suggests, is the "moral truth" of transitions (60). Consequently, separation from the comforting certainties of the past creates a time of both trial and prospects. As Gellner neatly encapsulates the condition of such a time: "In transition, tomorrow is not *another* day: it is an *other* day altogether" (67; italics Gellner's).

Transitions In

Gellner's depiction of the pure transitional condition is something of an exception among critics and scholars who examine cultural transitions. For unlike Gellner, they incline to concentrate on what we can call *transitions in*, the creative times during which new constellations of styles, values, and beliefs are forming, rather than *transitions out*, the times during which established constellations are in decline—like the late stages of Kuhn's "normal science" prior to the "paradigm shift." One notable exception among historians, Johan Huizinga, remarks this imbalance in his renowned book *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1949): "History has always been far more engrossed by problems of origins than by those of decline and fall. When studying any period, we are always looking for the promise of what the next is to bring" (4). This preference to seek the seeds of the future rather than to sort through the wilted flowers of the past, especially in the study of specific historical and cultural periods, is unmistakable and understandable. And it is worth pausing to consider some of the reasons for this preference, which stands apart from broad theories of cultural change that delineate cycles of cultural ascent and descent across centuries.

Literary critic and theoretician Gary Saul Morson would likely attribute this preference to a basic historical fallacy, which he labels "backshadowing." In *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (1994), Morson describes "backshadowing" as retrospectively discerning in historical events only "signs pointing to what happened" after those events, leading to the conclusion that "history (or some portion of it) fits a relatively neat pattern" and that "what happened later was either inevitable or highly probable" (235, 236, 237). Such backshadowing can impart an anachronistic orientation toward

an as-yet-unknown future to the “portions” of history constituting *transitions out* of a cultural period, when a preceding period’s cultural norms and expectations are in decline and nothing has replaced them. Backshadowing effectively reduces those times to *transitions in*, forerunners of the period to come, and obscures what *transitions out* entail in their own right.¹²

In addition, I would argue that the tendency to focus on “the promise” offered by the transition into a coming cultural period, rather than on the residue of the preceding period during the transition out of it, may derive from the influence, whether acknowledged or not, of the rhetorical and logical conception of transition as a means of directly connecting two points. The emphasis on connection inevitably leads to the conclusion that an endpoint *must* be reached. English usage, extrapolating from Greek and Latin, has made this emphasis commonplace. As far back as 1593 in his rhetorical guide *The Garden of Eloquence*, Henry Peacham defines transition, using the Greek term *metabasis*, as “a forme of speech by which the Orator in a few words sheweth what hath bene already said, and also what shal be said next” (quoted in H. Jackson, 223). “What shal be said next” must have been previously determined by the orator—the transition simply paves the way. In the same vein, Isaac Watts, in *Logick; or, The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth* (1751), recommends to public speakers, “Keep your main End and Design ever in View” in order to avoid “huge Chasms or Breaks,” and “Acquaint yourself with all the proper and decent Forms of Transition from one Part of a Discourse to another, and practice them as Occasion offers” (quoted in H. Jackson, 216).

Similarly, in the eighteenth century Samuel Johnson complained that contemporary poets were feeling free “to neglect the niceties of transition, to start into remote digressions, and to wander without restraint from one scene of imagery to another,” whereas “to proceed from one truth to another, and connect distant propositions by regular consequence, is the great prerogative of man” (quoted in Stabler, 307, 325). Later, Samuel Taylor Coleridge would make using transitions the prerogative in particular of “the educated man,” who “chiefly seeks to discover and express those *connections* of things, or those relative *bearings* of fact to fact, from which some more or less general law is deducible.” By contrast, “the intercourse of uneducated men . . . is distinguished from the diction of their superiors in knowledge and power . . . by the greater *disjunction* and *separation* in the component parts of . . . whatever it is . . . that they wish to communicate. There is a want of that prospectiveness of mind, that *surview*, which enables

a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey" (italics Coleridge's; quoted in H. Jackson, 220, 221).¹³

"Prospectiveness of mind" and the "surview" to "foresee" are virtues indeed. But they can bias the study of cultural transition. The desire to see such transition as part of "the whole" of a subsequent cultural period, just as a phrase or sentence is part of "the whole" of a developing idea or argument, could well be an ingrained habit of thought. And this habit is only reinforced by daily life itself, since, as Alfred North Whitehead remarked, "each moment of experience confesses itself to be a transition between two worlds, the immediate past and the immediate future. This is the persistent delivery of common sense" (405). The impending presence of the future in individual lives can render the presumption of an impending future in cultural history that much easier to make.

In *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), Frank Kermode adds another clue to the tendency to retroject the future into the past. He says that the very idea of historical transition appeared in the West from apocalyptic anticipations of the ultimate destruction of the world. In other words, transition was teleological and eschatological. Kermode calls this idea the "myth of Transition":

Before the End there is a period which does not properly belong either to the End or to the *saeculum* preceding it. It has its own characteristics. This period of Transition seems not to have been defined until the end of the twelfth century; but the definition then arrived at—by Joachim of Flora—has proved to be remarkably enduring. Its origin is in the three-and-a-half-year reign of the Beast which, in Revelation, precedes the Last Days. Joachim, who died in 1202, divided history into three phases, a division based on the Trinity; the last transition would begin in 1260, a date arrived at by multiplying forty-two by thirty, the number of years in each generation between Abraham and Christ.

"These prophesies had a long life," Kermode asserts, since "not only Dante, at the end of the century, but Hegel and others much later took them seriously." As a result, "the notion of an End-dominated age of transition has passed into our consciousness, and modified our attitudes to historical pattern. As Ruth Kestenberg-Gladstein observes, 'the Joachite triad made it inevitable that the present becomes "a mere transitional stage," and leaves people with a sense of living at a turning-point of time.'" "And so," Kermode sums up, "the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world" (12-13, 13-14, 28).¹⁴

Whether Kermode is correct that the apocalyptic “myth of Transition” affects how people typically think about historical transitions, scholars and critics do tend to focus on transitions into future periods rather than to explore the transitions out of past periods. Yet this is not to say that scholars and critics have completely ignored or dismissed times of *transition out*. Most of them acknowledge in some fashion that just as cultural periods arise with the ascendancy of new tastes, norms, and expectations, they decline with a certain loss of confidence, or at least a rethinking of—and sometimes a desire to transform and go beyond—those same tastes, norms, and expectations; Jacques Barzun exemplifies this in *From Dawn to Decadence*. Nonetheless, the scholarly inclination toward the ascendancy and arrival of historical periods as a means of comprehending those periods, rather than toward their descent and departure, cannot be denied—the attraction to *transitions in* is hard to resist.¹⁵ And yet such times of departure, the process of transition out of a period, can reveal as much, or more, about that period as can the previous transition into it. *Transitions out* merit more attention than they have received.

Transitions Out

The most conspicuous exception to this lack of attention is Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But because Gibbon emphasizes political, social, and religious causes of that decline, Huizinga’s magisterial *The Waning of the Middle Ages* represents a more instructive monument to the study of the cultural transition out of a period. Taking as his subject France and the Netherlands during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Huizinga shows how the culture of the Middle Ages waned as honest devotion to the chivalrous conduct of life in this world and to spiritual transcendence in the next lapsed into self-consciously aestheticized, often excessive or manneristic performances, accompanied by spiritual desiccation and malaise. “The mentality of the declining Middle Ages seems to us to display an incredible superficiality and feebleness” (234), Huizinga writes. Rituals were inflated, like the extravagant feasts of Philip the Good that came to appear as “the last manifestations of a dying usage which has become a fantastic ornament after having been a very serious element of earlier civilization” (92). Literature became “enslaved by conventional forms and suffocated under a heap of arid rhetorica” (289). And architecture was encrusted with aimless extravagance: “The flamboyant style of architecture is like the postlude of

an organist who cannot conclude. It decomposes all the formal elements endlessly; it interlaces all the details; there is not a line which has not its counter-line. The form develops at the expense of the idea, the ornament grows rank, hiding all the lines and all the surfaces. A *horror vacui* reigns, always a symptom of artistic decline" (248). Across late medieval culture in the north, Huizinga concludes, "what may be called a stagnation of thought prevails, as though the mind, exhausted after building up the spiritual fabric of the Middle Ages, had sunk into inertia" and spiritless disorder (295). Huizinga's observations of the symptoms of cultural decline and the passage out of the Middle Ages have relevance to any transition out of a period, although those symptoms may present themselves somewhat differently.

Taking his cue from Huizinga, another historian, William Bouwsma, trained his sights on a subsequent era of cultural decline—Europe during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Echoing Huizinga with his title *The Waning of the Renaissance* (2000), Bouwsma also found it "remarkable that historians of early modern Europe have paid so little attention to the problem of the *end* of the Renaissance" (viii–ix). He assigns this particular neglect to "a more or less linear conception of cultural history"—encouraged by Jacob Burckhardt's pioneering and exuberant *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860)—that sees Western culture moving "ineluctably" toward the modern world with no consequential breaks or periods of decline.

To correct this misperception, Bouwsma argues that the culture of the Renaissance did indeed go into decline. This decline occurred when the reigning ideal or value of individuality, which Burckhardt had celebrated, began inducing doubts and discontents. "The dissolution of old boundaries, old categories, old certainties," which is "in the short run liberating," Bouwsma explains, "is in the long run destructive and frightening" (x). As a result, the late Renaissance was characterized by a "pattern of alternation: conflicting impulses were often simultaneously at work, without a clear resolution yet, between the creativity and spontaneity of cultural freedom and a growing tendency toward order and restraint" (260). This made "the age" highly unsettled and "generally ambivalent" (113). Huizinga and Bouwsma thus both describe their respective periods of *transition out* in the generally negative terms of mannerisms and malaise, stagnation and superficiality, ambivalence and doubt. These are attributes, as a recent translation of Huizinga's title phrases it, of a culture in the "autumn" of its years.¹⁶

Of course, not everyone alive in a time of *transition out* will feel belated and autumnal. As literary critic Jonathan Levin notes in *The Poetics of*

Transition, some artists find “a profound and often liberating sense of uncertainty located . . . at the leading edge of a transitional margin” (15). Levin cites Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, as an intellectual who relished transitions without clear conclusions. For Emerson extolled times during which “all that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations, and dance before our eyes” (quoted in Levin, 40). Levin also points to William James, who claimed that “we live, as it were, upon the front edge of an advancing wave-crest,” and therefore that “our experience, *inter alia*, is of variations of rate and of direction, and lives in these transitions more than in the journey’s end” (quoted in Levin, 56). By experiencing life as an endless series of transitions, James goes on, individuals can discover a sense of “indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase” that foster “the will to believe” in something that transcends immediate existence (quoted in Levin, 58, 57). In the same vein, Clyde Ryals notes that Robert Browning wrote to Elizabeth Barrett, “The cant is, that ‘an age of transition’ is a melancholy thing to contemplate and delineate—whereas the worst things of all to look back on are times of comparative standing still, rounded in their impotent completeness” (quoted in Ryals, 2).

These are buoyant responses to the experience of transition. But I would venture that this buoyancy actually comes from a sense of being not at the end of something but at the creative beginning—“at the leading edge,” as Levin says, or in James’s words, at “the front edge of an advancing wave-crest.” These are not really images of *transition out*; they are images of forceful movement forward, closer to the energetic and creative spirit of a *transition in* as it leaves the past behind. For Huizinga and Bouwsma provide strong justification to see *transitions out* of cultural periods as marked less by a feeling of liberation than by a sense of disintegration and disorder, ambivalence and aimlessness, or, as Gellner finds, “disorientation and bewilderment.”

W. Jackson Bate finds such a sense of disorientation and bewilderment among English authors and intellectuals in the eighteenth century, which he considers the “essential crossroad” between the Renaissance and the modern era. In *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970), Bate ascribes these feelings to “the problem of what it means to come *immediately* after a great creative achievement.” In quest of originality, poets were “burdened” by the question, “What is there left to do?” which caused a profound “fatigue to the spirit” and a “loss of self-confidence” because

“the kind of thing expected” in response to “the challenge of the past” was “so completely beyond one’s grasp.”¹⁷ Bate emphasizes that this is an age-old problem, quoting an Egyptian scribe in 2000 B.C.E.: “Would I had phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, in new language that has not been used, free from repetition, not an utterance which has grown stale, which men of old have spoken” (12, 3, 7, 42, 3–4).¹⁸ This aching sense of belatedness belongs to *transitions out*, to those individuals afflicted, like Harry Haller in Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, with the “sickness of the times themselves” that sets in “when a whole generation is caught . . . between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard, no security, no simple acquiescence” (21, 22) to any cultural assumptions.

Novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton remarked this kind of discomfort in the nineteenth century when he wrote: “We live in an age of visible transition. To me such epochs appear . . . the times of greatest unhappiness to our species.” British soldier and memoirist Frederick Roberts echoed the sentiment somewhat later: “It is an awful moment [of transition] . . . when the soul begins . . . to feel the nothingness of many of the traditionary [*sic*] opinions which have been received with implicit confidence, and in that horrible insecurity begins also to doubt whether there be any thing to believe at all” (both quoted in Ryals, 2).

At about the same time, Russian author Alexander Herzen painted a powerful portrait of this autumnal mood of *transitions out* in the essay entitled “*Omnia mia mecum porto*.”¹⁹ There Herzen describes three types of historical periods. The first is characterized by “a whirlpool of events” inspiring energetic struggle in some common cause from which “none retreat because all believe.” The second is “peaceful, even sleepy,” during which “recognized relations remain unshaken” and “people are absorbed in personal concerns.” But the third type of period, Herzen claims, is a sad one, because it is a period

when the forms of social life, having outlived themselves, slowly and painfully perish. . . . It is divorced in equal measure from the past which it despises and from the future which develops according to other laws. . . . The decrepit world has no longer any belief in itself and defends itself desperately because it is frightened. In its desire for self-preservation it forgets its gods, tramples on rights by which it lives, repudiates culture and honour, becomes bestial, persecutes, kills, but all the while power remains in its hands. It is obeyed not out of cowardice alone, but because on the other side all is

uncertain, nothing decided, nothing ready—above all men are not ready. On this other side, the unknown future looms up on a horizon wrapped in a cloud, a future that confounds all human logic. (130–31)

Herzen cites the ancient Romans as representatives of such a period, and he sees himself and his generation in a similar state after the failed revolutions of 1848. “The old, official Europe,” he declares, “is dying,” and “the last frail and sickly vestiges of its former life are scarcely sufficient to hold together for a time the disintegrating parts of its body.” So, he recalls later on, “life was going out like the last candles in windows before the dawn,” and as “the terrible progress of death” proceeded, “the vaster became the desert around us, the vaster grew our loneliness” (123, 135)—the loneliness of an existence seemingly headed nowhere, with nothing to believe in.

CULTURAL INTEGRITY AND CULTURAL ANOMIE

Whether or not *transitions out* of cultural periods exhibit some of this kind of eschatological gloom, one phenomenon common to this type of transition is what I will call a loss of *cultural integration* and *integrity*. That is, during the heyday of a cultural period its dominant norms and attributes are sufficiently integrated to grant that period a high degree of cultural coherence and wholeness, or integrity (befitting the Latin adjectival root of both *integration* and *integrity*, *integer*, denoting complete, entire, or intact). I would also add that at its height a cultural period also has integrity in the more figurative, ethical meaning of the term as moral consistency and authenticity, which it can then impart to the individuals who adhere to its values. When the dominant norms and attributes of a cultural period loosen their hold, therefore, the culture begins to literally *dis-integrate*, losing both the *integration* of its parts and the *integrity* of its wholeness, coherence, consistency, and authenticity. Those norms and attributes then tend to display—as Huizinga, Bouwsma, Bate, Herzen, and others have variously observed and illustrated—symptoms of attenuation and excess, becoming empty conventions or uncertain mannerisms. And while they might continue to elicit ritualistic observance, they lack the power to command honest moral conviction, to lend clear direction, or to inspire fresh and vigorous creativity. As those norms and attributes are increasingly devalued, the culture of a period sinks deeper into decline.

Although the underlying causes of this disintegration and decline are

bound to be plentiful, the very loss of cultural integration and integrity themselves will likely surface as a late cause of this cultural change in its own right. This is because perceptive artists and intellectuals who come to maturity during transitions out of cultural periods will tend to be the first to sense this disintegration and loss of cultural integrity, at least vaguely, if not intensely. In any case, they will feel themselves somewhat historically adrift, with “no security, no simple acquiescence” to any cultural assumptions, as Hesse describes it.

This feeling of being historically adrift might usefully be labeled “cultural anomie,” akin to the social anomie defined by the pioneering sociologist Emile Durkheim in his study *Suicide* (1897). According to Durkheim, anomie, which literally means “lawlessness” (from the Greek *a-*, without, and *nomos*, law), signifies a lack of the norms and constraints that derive from the “regulative force” of society and lend purpose, direction, and meaning to the lives of individuals. Anomie occurs, Durkheim maintains, “when society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions.” During such “transitions,” society loses its “regulative force,” and so “the limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate” (248, 252). At that point,

reality seems valueless by comparison with the dreams of fevered imaginations; reality is therefore abandoned, but so too is possibility abandoned when it in turn becomes reality. A thirst arises for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savor once known. Henceforth one has no strength to endure the least reverse. The whole fever subsides and the sterility of all the tumult is apparent, and it is seen that all these new sensations in their infinite quantity cannot form a solid foundation of happiness to support one during days of trial. . . . [Then] the man who has always pinned all his hopes on the future, and lived with his eyes fixed upon it, has nothing in the past as a comfort against the present’s afflictions. . . . Now he is stopped in his tracks; from now on nothing remains behind or ahead of him to fix his gaze upon. (256)

In this anomic state of mind, equally alienated from the past, the present, and the future, Durkheim concludes, an individual may be primed to commit suicide.

Like Durkheim’s social anomie, cultural anomie inspires a sense of alienation and rootlessness in individuals through the loss of some moral authority. I would distinguish cultural anomie from social anomie, however,

in several ways. First of all, social anomie, as Durkheim describes it, results from the loss of “force” by the aggregate social system owing primarily to marked shifts in economic and material circumstances. But cultural anomie arises from the erosion of the ideals and norms, the values and beliefs, of a historical period, and this might have little to do with the social system or material conditions. Second, the material and economic ruptures that Durkheim has in mind tend to occur relatively abruptly, and to be visible and short in duration, whereas the cultural transitions I am addressing are more complex and occur more gradually, over a span of years. I will call such a span a “post-period.”

Of course, not all cultural periods engender post-periods as I would define them. For by a post-period I mean a stretch of anywhere from a few years to several decades during which a generation or more of artists and intellectuals perceives that the cultural ideals and norms lending structure and constraint to character, under which they grew up and which they had expected to embrace, no longer hold their former authority—and yet no new norms have claimed that authority. Hence I am using the prefix *post-* not simply to signify a chronological sequence but also a historical process of a cultural period’s fading away. The members of those post-period generations consequently find themselves suffering from a deepening sense of normlessness. Pervaded by cultural anomie, post-periods are times of *transition out*.

The anomie of post-periods or *transitions out* converts what might be a moment of maximal cultural freedom into an expanse of dispiriting disorientation and uncertainty. These periods are thus more likely to bring to culturally attuned artists and intellectuals living in them not buoyant liberation from stifling standards, or even a comforting feeling of participation in broad cultural patterns or cycles that would be perceptible in retrospect, but a disruptive loss of stabilizing and inspiring ideals. Instead of seeing unlimited possibilities in the future, those artists and intellectuals tend to feel that they have lost their moorings in the past.

This anomic condition typical of times of *transition out* therefore poses some particular quandaries or predicaments for the artists and intellectuals sensitive to that condition. Paramount among these would be: (1) the artistic quandary of aspiring to originality in the shadow of the preceding period’s greatest figures and aesthetic achievements; (2) the ethical quandary of defining good and evil, right and wrong, when the preceding period’s values have been eroded; (3) the intellectual quandary of differ-

entiating between genuine ideals of an established cultural period and the self-serving ideology into which a transitional period can convert them; (4) the psychological quandary of living with cultural anomie; and (5) the historical quandary of finding truth without a firm set of cultural values or a clear vision of the future. “Caught between ages,” feeling too brief or directionless to seem connected to broad patterns of cultural change, *transitions out* are fraught with quandaries lacking resolutions. And yet gifted artists and intellectuals nonetheless strive to resolve them—or at least to probe the depths of those quandaries and the conditions that give rise to them.

AN AUTHOR OF TRANSITION

This book focuses on one such gifted artist “caught between ages.” That author is Mikhail Lermontov, whose literary career unfolded primarily in the 1830s. Notoriously difficult to place historically, the short-lived Lermontov (killed in a duel at the age of twenty-six) was an exceptional artist of a transitional time—to him, that time was the twilight of Romanticism, or what I will call post-Romanticism. For Lermontov’s works not only reflect his own particular transitional time, they also more generally illuminate the quandaries of cultural transition out of a period as they show Lermontov uniquely grappling with the loss of Romanticism’s cultural integrity. Although confined to his transitional times, he did not succumb to them; instead he plumbed their character and suggested their historical import. And what Lermontov revealed has resonance for our transitional times in the early twenty-first century as well.

My exploration and explanation of Lermontov’s transitionality and its implications will proceed as follows. The next chapter, “Romanticism and Its Twilight in Western Europe and Russia,” sets the stage for my detailed interpretations of Lermontov’s works by surveying aspects of Romanticism and its decline in both Western Europe and Russia and by placing Lermontov in both of these contexts. Succeeding chapters then take up specific works and themes to elucidate Lermontov’s distinctive achievements as an artist occupied with the quandaries of the transition out of Romanticism, who was troubled by the loss of Romantic cultural integrity and the malaise of cultural anomie, and who longed for a cure. In each of these chapters I discuss how Lermontov’s transitional sensibilities manifest themselves

in both the form and content of individual texts, drawing comparisons to works of Western Romanticism that highlight these sensibilities.

Chapter 3, “The Ambivalence of Influence: Lermontov’s ‘Not-Byronism,’” explores the artistic quandaries of an author admittedly influenced by a preeminent predecessor, the towering Romantic figure Lord Byron, in whose shadow Lermontov and other writers of his generation came to maturity. Chapter 4, “The Attenuation of Romantic Evil: A Demon Undone,” addresses the ethical quandaries of identifying evil in transitional times by showing how Lermontov’s long and often-revised narrative poem *The Demon* [Демон] attenuates the Romantic vision of ethics while drawing on Romantic ideas and images of spiritual transcendence and demonic rebellion. Chapter 5, “Ideals to Ideology: Unmasking *Masquerade*,” turns to the intellectual quandaries of guarding against the conversion of a cultural period’s authentic ideals into a post-period’s derivative ideology as portrayed in Lermontov’s most famous play, *Masquerade* [Маскарад].

Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate how Lermontov’s transitionality culminates in his most renowned work, the novel *A Hero of Our Time* [Герой нашего времени]. For here Lermontov explicitly displays his sense that his times were transitional as he confronts the quandaries posed by what I call post-Romantic cultural anomie. Chapter 6, “Post-Romantic Anomie I: *A Hero of Our Time* and Its Hero,” delves into the psychological quandaries arising from the post-Romantic fragmentation or dis-integration of personality as embodied by the novel’s main protagonist, Pechorin. Chapter 7, “Post-Romantic Anomie II: The ‘Post-’ Scripts of *A Hero of Our Time*,” sheds further light on those quandaries by considering how the novel’s subordinate characters and multiple narrators in different ways follow post-Romantic “scripts” that generate frustrated expectations and render conclusions inconclusive for characters, narrators, and readers alike.

The final chapter, “Conclusion: Lermontov’s Last Words,” reveals the historical quandaries of seeking cultural values when none reign as it examines both the author’s introduction to *A Hero of Our Time*—added in response to negative criticism after the novel’s initial publication—and “Shtoss” [“Штосс”], Lermontov’s final, unfinished narrative. In the author’s introduction, we see Lermontov openly diagnosing the transitional condition of his times and implying the need to go beyond that condition by establishing a new cultural integrity. In “Shtoss” we find Lermontov unable to achieve that integrity, futilely reverting to Romantic narrative conventions once more, only to abandon the effort. Lermontov’s “last words” thus

stand as a poignant testimony to the ultimate quandary of post-Romantic transitionality—those who feel the need for integrity most acutely are those most acutely aware of their inability to satisfy that need, or even to envision the shape such integrity would take. This chapter then closes with its own “post-” script, some comments on the affinities between the post-Romanticism of Lermontov’s times and the postmodernism of our times. Underscoring the import of the entire book, this conclusion emphasizes that through his struggles with the quandaries of cultural transition, Lermontov not only spoke of his own times, he also speaks to us today.