Preface

In 1837, the twenty-three-year-old Russian author Mikhail Lermontov wrote an untitled two-quatrain lyric poem now familiar to most students of Russian literature:

> We have parted, but I treasure
> Your portrait in my heart.
> Like a pale phantom of better times
> It delights my soul.
>
> And though devoted to new passions,
> I could not cease to love it,
> For an abandoned church is still a church,
> A fallen idol is still a god.

> Расстались мы; но твой портрет
> Я на груди своей храню:
> Как бледный призрак лучших лет,
> Он душу радует мою.
>
> И новым преданный страстям,
> Я разлюбить его не мог:
> Так храм оставленный – всё храм,
> Кумир поверженный – всё бог! (1: 382)[1]

Although this poem expresses a lover's feelings for his beloved, it contains a metaphor that more generally captures Lermontov's relation to the cultural movement with which he is most often identified: Romanticism. For his works consistently express an attitude toward Romanticism as a "fallen idol" that to Lermontov was nevertheless "still a god." In other words, Romanticism might have lost its authority to command unquestioned allegiance, but it still merited a certain reverence and respect. Those

works thus retain many of the trappings of Romanticism, incorporating numerous Romantic images and ideas, but they do not wholly affirm those images and ideas. Lermontov could find inspiration in Romanticism, but he could not find unequivocal conviction. So he was left with ambivalence.

This ambivalence and the metaphor of the fallen idol that mirrors it betoken not just a particular attitude toward Romanticism. They also reflect Lermontov's distinctive place in literary history as an author at the time when Romanticism was on the wane but when nothing had emerged yet to replace it. No one exemplified that transitional time more suggestively, or portrayed the cultural quandaries it posed more provocatively, than Lermontov himself. For whether he knew it or not, Mikhail Lermontov was an artist of the twilight of Romanticism, and he filled his works with the shadows of its passing.