

GENDER, GENRE, AND THE DISCOURSE OF IMPERIALISM IN TOLSTOY'S *THE COSSACKS*

ANTHONY ANEMONE, COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

"Lo naturel e sempre senza errore..."

Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XVII

Although critics have long recognized the importance of the Nature/Culture dichotomy in Tolstoy's *Cossacks*,¹ the precise relationship between Tolstoy's Caucasian adventure novel and Rousseauian anthropology remains problematic and ultimately unresolved. It is particularly important to reexamine this issue in Tolstoy's work because it is related to several themes that play a central role in post-Structuralist criticism and theory. For example, any analysis of the relationship between *The Cossacks* and Rousseau ought to include such issues as Tolstoy's depiction of women and sexual difference, the generic structure of the adventure narrative and its ideological connections with European expansionism and imperialism of the mid-nineteenth century, even the semiotic function of names in the text, all of which can be seen to revolve around a master dichotomy between Nature and Culture. A reading of the interrelationships between these issues in the text of *The Cossacks* will suggest a very different view of the Rousseauian tradition in Tolstoy's work. It may not be much of an exaggeration to say that, from a certain point of view, the most interesting "lesson" of the text is not that Olenin cannot turn his back on Culture and return to the simple innocence of the state of Nature: we already knew that. Rather, Tolstoy's text can be seen to subvert the philosophical tradition which constructs reality through an imaginary and unstable dichotomy between Nature and Culture.

Despite its generally high standing in the canon of Tolstoy's works, *The Cossacks* has always posed special challenges to readers. For if *The Cossacks* presents an almost complete inventory of those binary oppositions which can be said to characterize the Rousseauian tradition--country/city, periphery/center, spontaneous/self-conscious, natural/artificial, virtuous/corrupt, ignorant/educated, happy/unhappy, poor/rich, peasant or worker/aristocrat, and female/male--the nature of Rousseau's influence on the author of *The Cossacks* is still contested, still in a state of development and flux. That the young Tolstoy was attempting to follow a master text supplied by Rousseau in depicting noble savages, who possess the secret of the "right relationship" to reality is a popular and plausible reading,² but one that must ignore some obvious inconsistencies in Tolstoy's

¹Noting the obvious influence of Pushkin and Lermontov, contemporary critics interpreted the conflict in the text between nature and civilization as an anachronistic polemic with Romanticism. Opul'skaia 341-42.

²Cf. Berlin, Mirsky, and Greenwood.

appropriation of Rousseau.³ At the same time, it is impossible to support the prevailing Soviet view that *The Cossacks* maps the process by which the materialist, realist and even proto-Marxist Tolstoy come to reject Rousseau, and with him the entire idealist ideology of Romanticism.⁴ According to this view, Olenin represents a naive Rousseauian, flawed by the "idealist" belief that character, a category ultimately determined by class and economics, can be changed by a conscious act of will (Opul'skaia 345-47).

One way to illustrate the extent to which any reading of *The Cossacks* is dependent upon the Nature/Culture dichotomy is to look briefly at a recent article that analyzes Tolstoy's use of personal names from a semiotic perspective. In "The Semiotics of Names and Naming in Tolstoy's *The Cossacks*," Lewis Bagby and Pavel Sigalov argue that the central theme of Tolstoy's text--the narrative of a young nobleman who rejects his social class and attempts to discover a more natural and harmonious way of life among the Cossacks of the Caucasus--is played out on the semiotic level as well as the level of plot. In the personal names of the story's characters, the authors see Tolstoy moving from a semiotic code based on a conventional or arbitrary relationship of signifier (personal name) to signified (character), to a natural, iconographic code based on a motivated resemblance between signifier and signified. Building on Krystyna Pomorska's argument in "Tolstoy contra Semiosis," Bagby and Sigalov characterize Tolstoy's aesthetic as an attempt "to reduce the verbal sign to as close an unmediated object orientation as possible"(473). They conclude their discussion of what they call Tolstoy's "name generation" with the comment that "the central dramatis personae of *The Cossacks* bear names freed from literary-cultural encumbrances"(478).⁵ What is most interesting about this conclusion is how it directly contradicts the essay's own rich documentation of the complex ways in which Tolstoy's names are, in fact, overdetermined by cultural, linguistic, biographical and historical codes. The contradictions in this argument may actually confirm our contention that Tolstoy's text refuses to be contained within the limits of a facile

³Even as sophisticated and sceptical a reader as Edward Wasiolek has difficulty in unraveling Tolstoy's relationship to Rousseau. Although he quite rightly recognizes that the Cossacks are Rousseauian "noble savages" only in Olenin's native imagination, Wasiolek cannot avoid structuring his reading around the traditional Rousseauian poles of positive and negative signs: heart versus mind, the authentic personal versus the inauthentic social, direct primary experience versus the distorted reworking in reason. Wasiolek 51-55, 62-63, et passim.

⁴For example, Zaborova 138-39. For a more sophisticated reading of the Caucasian stories as Tolstoy's attempt to overcome the Romantic tradition in Russian literature, see Eikhenbaum 75-98.

⁵Compare this to the Proustian "Cratyism of the name" analyzed by Roland Barthes in "Proust and Names": "I also want to insist on the Cratylean character of the name (and the sign) in Proust: not only because Proust sees the relation of signifier and signified as a motivated relation, one copying the other and reproducing in its material form the signified essence of the thing (and not the thing itself), but also because, for Proust as for Cratylus, "the virtue of names is to teach": there is a propaedeutics of names which leads, by paths often long, various, and indirect to the essence of things [...] This realism (in the scholastic sense of the term), which insists that names be the "reflection" of ideas, has taken a radical form in Proust, but we may speculate if it is not more or less consciously present in every act of writing and if it is really possible to be a writer without believing, in some sense, in the natural relation of names and essences" (Barthes 67-68).

deployment of the Nature/Culture dichotomy.

The various ways in which Bagby and Sigalov support their controversial thesis are instructive. For example, having traced the etymology of Eroshka to the Greek names Epifanii and Erofei, "one hallowed by god," they assert, curiously, that "Tolstoy was disinterested (sic) in actual etymologies, and in tracing these two variants it is clear that both have very little to do with Eroshka's character"(477). The authors then proceed to suggest several linguistic references which provide the kind of direct access to his character that they are seeking: *erokha* (slovenly person), *vz'eroshennyi* (wild, sloppy), *ershisty* (quarrelsome), *eropa* (braggart), *erofeich* (alcoholic beverage). They conclude in the following way: "Eroshka and his name indicate each other directly, without the mediation of other (literary) phenomena, and thus fulfill the quest for compactness of *signans* and *signatum* at plot and authorial levels"(476). It is difficult, however, to agree with the authors that the associative logic and philological reasoning which allow them to connect Eroshka with *Erokha*, *ershisty*, *vz'eroshennyi*, *eropa*, and *erofeich* are not quintessentially "literary" techniques which precisely mediate between the signifier and the signified. Conversely, their analysis can be seen as an example of *mise en abyme*, where the signifier "Eroshka" is situated in a chain of signifiers which, rather than providing direct access to his character, endlessly defers the promised moment of contact between signifier and signified. On the level of plot and character, Eroshka himself is not a stable signified, one which can be adequately summed up by the sort of associations generated by his name: Tolstoy is quite clear in showing us how Eroshka signifies different things to different people in the text. If, to Olenin, Eroshka personifies the quintessential Cossack virtues, to the other Cossacks, he is an almost comical figure, a drunken wanderer who happens to be a hunter of genius.⁶ But even if one could ignore this problem, the author's assertion that the historical and cultural associations with the Greek etymology of the name Eroshka play no role in Tolstoy's naming process would still have to be contested. A reading of Eroshka which sees him as a figure "hallowed by God" is certainly conceivable.

The thesis that personal names provide direct and privileged access to the Cossacks is least convincing, however, in the cases of the young Cossacks Luka and Mar'iana. For example, in discussing Eroshka's references to Luka as Marka, Bagby and Sigalov admit, with poorly disguised ill humor, that "the direct use of the Apostles' names suggests a cultural burden inhering in the character and his name. Tolstoy is something of a hindrance here"(476). Further, despite their own admission that spiritual, textual and historical references reside in the name Mar'iana -- a traditional religious name that combines the name of the Mother of God with that of her own mother, Anna -- the authors

⁶See Wasiolek, for example: "Tolstoy makes it abundantly clear that Daddy Eroshka is not representative of Cossack life, and that he is not fully part of Cossack life any longer. In the village he is a useless old man, an object of indifference and occasional mockery, someone given to drunkenness, slovenliness, and long stories. Eroshka romanticizes his past and Olenin romanticizes his present and future. But there are two Eroshkas: the Eroshka of the village, where he is something of a pathetic figure, and the Eroshka of the woods. Tolstoy mocks Eroshka in the village, but he does not mock Eroshka of the woods, suggesting that the elemental sensuousness, which has taken perverted forms in his drunkenness, carousing, and sensuality, has its pure and true form in the woods and away from its civilized forms"(60).

are intent on restoring the Cossacks to a state of primordial and privileged innocence. They insist that, since Olenin is the principal bearer of the cultural codes needed to decode these names, the "cultural burden" that the names seem to represent resides exclusively in his perception. They invite readers to dissociate themselves from Olenin's unnatural reading of Cossack names and reality: "The reader is in effect being asked to separate himself from Olenin's romantic expectations and thereby free Luka from the reading of his character made by Olenin"(477).

This strategic separation of Olenin from Tolstoy is an ingenious, but ultimately unsatisfying, act of repression. In fact, on a theoretical level, Bagby and Sigalov's blindness to the evidence of the text may be seen as characteristic of the entire semiotic project. For, as de Man has written, in its attempt at "grammatical decoding," a semiotic reading will always remain blind to "those elements in all texts that are by no means ungrammatical, but whose semantic function is not grammatically definable, neither in themselves nor in context"("Resistance to Theory" 15-16). The quasi-Rousseauian dichotomy between Nature and Culture in Tolstoy's use of names may be an example of such a grammatically undefinable function.

Reviewing the critical literature on Tolstoy and Rousseau, one finds numerous similar acts of repression and blindness to those textual elements which tend to break down the traditional dichotomy between Nature and Culture. For example, almost all the critics agree, in spite of much textual and linguistic evidence to the contrary, that simplicity, spontaneity, harmony, and the absence of self-consciousness and of social hierarchy constitute the essence of the Cossacks, and represent a way of life superior in most respects to that of the civilized, and therefore unnatural, Russians. Isaiah Berlin, for example, has written that:

Tolstoy constantly defends the proposition that human beings are more harmonious in childhood than under the corrupting influence of education in later life [...] that simple people, peasants, Cossacks, and the like have a more 'natural' and correct attitude than civilized men towards these basic values and that they are free and independent in a sense in which civilized men are not.(37)

In a direct reference to *The Cossacks*, Berlin writes that: "The Cossacks Lukashka or uncle Yeroshka [...] are morally superior as well as happier and aesthetically more harmonious beings than Olenin. Olenin knows this"(37-8). Mirsky summarizes Tolstoy's ideological position in the following way:

The main idea is the contrast of [Olenin's] sophisticated and self-conscious personality to the 'natural men' that are the Cossacks. Unlike the 'natural man' of Rousseau, and of Tolstoy's own later teachings, the 'natural man' in "The Cossacks" is not an incarnation of good. But the very fact of his being natural places him above the distinction of good and evil. The Cossacks kill, fornicate, steal, and still are beautiful in their naturalness, and hopelessly superior to the much more moral, but civilized and consequently contaminated, Olenin"(257).

Yet another critic has called *The Cossacks* "an impressive example of Tolstoy's constant tendency to seek the secret of happiness in Rousseauistic terms of following the 'natural' and turning from the artificial"(Greenwood 45).

If "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire" (Derrida 279), then the history of the critical readings of *The Cossacks* may tell us more about the critics than about Tolstoy's text. Specifically, the "coherent contradiction" in these critical readings tells the story of the critics' overwhelming need, in the face of much evidence to the contrary, to assert the existence of a privileged, natural way of life, one which might contain the solution to the alienation and discontents of modern social life. For this solution to work, however, the dichotomy between the natural and the civilized in the text of *The Cossacks* must be preserved intact. And yet, in many places in the text, those oppositions which should constitute the essential difference between the natural Cossacks and the civilized Russians are shown to exist among the Cossacks as well. Indeed, as we learn from Eroshka's constant privileging of the glorious Cossack past over the "fallen" present, they have always existed among the Cossacks. In other words, the difference which critics attempt to limit to the opposition Cossack/Russian is reinscribed as difference within the Cossacks themselves: rather than making the identification of the Cossacks possible, the difference that counts subverts the very notion of total identity with self.⁷ The identity of the Cossacks, defined in terms of the opposition of their natural essence to the civilized and unnatural nature of Russians, is undercut, subverted, or deconstructed, by the very language which Tolstoy uses to present it.

To illustrate this crucial point, one could choose examples almost at random: for instance, the most common description of Lukashka, that epitome of Cossack manhood, is not as natural or spontaneous, but as "self-conscious." His is conscious, not only of his youth and strength, but of his high standing within the Cossack community as well.⁸ A point made in much Marxist criticism is that a crucial source of Cossack superiority derives from their inherent democratic social structure -- specifically, the historical absence of serfdom as an institution (Opul'skaia 342-43). This is contrasted, not surprisingly, to the strict Russian hierarchy of master and man. And yet, both Luka and Mar'iana clearly embody an apparently "natural" hierarchy which reigns in the Cossack community. The authority of their presence, courage, physical beauty, and spiritual qualities, all serve to differentiate them from ordinary Cossacks like their friends Nazarka or Ustenka. Tolstoy is absolutely explicit with regard to Mar'iana's unique status among the young Cossack

⁷As Barbara Johnson has written in *The Critical Difference*: "A text's difference is not its uniqueness, its special identity. It is the text's way of differing from itself.... Difference [...] is not what distinguishes one identity from another. It is not a difference between...but a difference within. Far from constituting the text's unique identity, it is that which subverts the very idea of identity, infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text's parts or meanings and reaching a totalized, integrated whole [...] Difference is not engendered in the space between identities: it is what makes all totalization of a self or the meaning of a text impossible" (Johnson 4-5).

⁸"В его боковой щегольской посадке, в небрежном движении руки, похлопывавшей чуть слышно плетью под брюхо лошади, и особенно в его блестящих чёрных глазах, смотревших, гордо прищуриваясь, вокруг, выражались сознание силы и самонадеянность молодости" (PSS, VI, 130). "The smart way in which he sat a little sideways on his horse, the careless motion with which he barely touched his horse's belly with his whip, and especially his half-closed black eyes, glistening as he looked proudly around him, all expressed the consciousness of strength and the self-confidence of youth."

women. At one point, for example, in order to differentiate her from the other girls, the narrator calls her a "proud and happy queen among them" ("Она гордою и весёлою царицей казалась между другими." *PSS*, VI, 98). In other words, when he wants to prove the superiority of his "natural" heroine, Tolstoy resorts to the language of civilized, hierarchical society that, in principle, negates the very notion of the natural society of the Cossacks. Rather than relying on a single metaphor, Tolstoy emphasizes this very point in a crucial passage about female morality among the Cossacks.

Nothing, it turns out, proves Mar'ianna's paradoxical "superiority" among the Cossack girls more than her "instinctual" belief in a moral code that would seem to have no place within the Rousseauian system of nature. And, in fact, her sense of morality is perceived as foreign by the other Cossacks, including Eroshka, Lukashka, and Ustenka. This is made perfectly clear when Mar'ianna is talking to Ustenka, a seemingly unambiguous representation of a spontaneous, natural, simple, and unsophisticated Cossack woman. Like Eroshka, Ustenka believes that love cannot be a sin, and that pleasure must be taken when one is young and free, since marriage, children and the hard work of being a Cossack's wife come soon enough.⁹ Contrary to the expectations of readers convinced that the Cossacks represent a lusty and hedonistic amorality in contrast to the sexual hypocrisy of the corrupt Russians, Mar'ianna's response, is that such untrammelled sexual freedom is a sin. And yet, rather than alienating her from the Cossack values of nature, spontaneity, and freedom, her compliance with an external code of morality is precisely the source of her superiority over the other Cossack women. And this superiority is endorsed by everyone involved -- not only by Olenin, Belitskii, Lukashka, Eroshka, and Ustenka, but, apparently, by the author as well. Again, the difference that readers try to limit to the space between Russians and Cossacks is reinscribed by the text itself as a difference within the Cossacks. Sexuality and sexual difference, then, represent one of the main areas where the contradictions of a certain type of reading of the Cossacks are made apparent.

Further, one could argue that the gender-based distinction implicit in Ustenka's own words undercuts the very notions of Cossack freedom and amorality that, on another level, her character embodies. For Ustenka acknowledges that the free and natural, hedonistic Cossack lifestyle is suspended, for the woman at least, by marriage. If Culture can be defined as everything that depends upon a system of norms that regulates social behavior and is capable of varying from one society to another (Derrida 1978: 283), then both Mar'ianna's adherence to a moral prohibition against pre-marital sex, as well as Ustenka's acceptance of the traditional patriarchal structure of marriage, represent direct evidence of the transition from Nature to Culture. Again, in order to establish the "natural," the narrator, and the characters themselves, must use language and concepts which work to subvert that overt intention: language and concepts that reveal the seemingly natural as the product of culture as well. The superior Cossack woman, then, can be defined only in terms of her opposites and inferiors -- the civilized women that Olenin left behind in

⁹"Когда же и гулять, как не на девичьей воле?" (*PSS*, VI, 113) "When can you have a good time if not when you're single and free."

Moscow. The spontaneous Cossack woman is shown to be a part of a culturally constructed patriarchal society, thereby revealing the mythical status of the state of Nature.

Peter Scotto (1992) and Susan Layton (1986) have recently published important articles on the general problem of Orientalism in Russian culture, thus opening for discussion the problematic relationship between Tolstoy's literary discourse and the political ideology of Russian Imperialism. Tolstoy's personal involvement with the Russian army of occupation in the Caucasus between 1851 and 1854, and the many parallels between Tolstoy's and Olenin's experiences in the Caucasus have been well documented. (Eikhenbaum 91-93; Simmons 74-100; Green 187-88). However, there is more at stake here than Tolstoy's ambivalence towards Great Russian Imperialism. The central action of *The Cossacks* -- the hero's flight from civilization to a more primitive world and the dramatized confrontation between civilization and Nature -- reflects the prototypical plot of the European adventure narrative in the age of Imperialism.¹⁰ In the words of one critic, the adventure narrative was "the generic counterpart in literature to empire in politics" (Green 37). Beginning with the publication of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1720, adventure narratives by writers such as Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper and Rudyard Kipling have provided what has been called an "energizing myth" of European Imperialism (Green 3), a blueprint of relationships between civilized Europeans and primitive native peoples.¹¹ The symbolic elements of this mythology and its manifold connections with historical European Imperialism are, by now, largely familiar: Joseph Conrad, perhaps better than anyone else, has captured the complex and contradictory ideology of European expansionism:

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they had all gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred flame. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!... The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empire (Conrad 4-5).

What unites the various national manifestations of "imperialism in literature," to put it bluntly, is a common ideological or propagandistic need to put a disinterested, altruistic or romantic face upon the economic and psychological will to power that operates through

¹⁰For an illuminating study of the adventure narrative and the culture of Imperialism, see Green. The connections between the rhetoric of travel writing and the mentality of European Imperialism are explored in Said and Greenblatt.

¹¹In *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes this relationship in the following way: "Being a White Man was therefore an idea and a reality. It meant -- in the colonies -- speaking in a certain way, behaving according to a code of regulations, and even feeling certain things and not others. It meant specific judgements, evaluations, gestures. It was a form of authority before which nonwhites, and even whites themselves, were expected to bend [...] Being a White Man, in short, was a very concrete manner of being-in-the-world, a way of taking hold of reality, reality, and thought" (Said 227).

the institutions and practices of European expansionism and imperialism.¹²

But even if Tolstoy was complicit, to some degree, in the historical project of Great Russian "empire building" in the Caucasus, his treatment of this problem in texts like *The Cossacks* and *Khadzhi-Murat* betrays a striking ambivalence. For example, Olenin has nothing in common with the traditional value system of the imperialist-adventurer. Not only does he not believe in the inherent superiority of Europe and Europeans over native peoples, Olenin assumes the superiority of the Cossack way of life, which he tries to discover by living among them and trying to live like them. In general, Tolstoy's attempt to develop the narrative in terms of the dichotomy between the Noble Savage and the (overly) civilized European proves untenable, as the traditional oppositions break down in the face of a recalcitrant reality. For example, having fled the moral corruption and decadence of life at the center (Moscow) to discover simplicity, virtue and masculine force at the very edge of Russian civilization, Olenin discovers that the corrupting effects of European culture have already been experienced by the Cossacks.¹³ Tolstoy's debunking of the shallow, pseudo-culture of the Cossack cornet (*kazak obrazovannyi*), who is employed, significantly, as a school teacher, works to transform formerly "decadent" Moscow back into the site of "authentic" culture. The Russian officer Beletsky subverts the Nature/Culture dichotomy by exhibiting, simultaneously, the worst vices of Culture (vanity, affectation, lack of moral seriousness, etc.) and the best virtues of Nature (spontaneity, flexibility, a healthy hedonism, etc.). Nevertheless, to Olenin's baffled amazement, the Cossacks immediately recognize and accept Beletsky as a kindred soul:

Белецкий сразу вошёл в обычную жизнь богатого кавказского офицера в станице. На глазах Оленина он в один месяц стал как бы старожилом станицы: он подпаивал стариков, делал вечеринки и сам ходил на вечеринки к девкам, хвастался победами и даже дошёл до того, что девки и бабы прозвали его почему-то дедушкой, а казаки, ясно определившие себе этого человека, любившего вино и женщин, привыкли к нему и даже полюбили его больше, чем Оленина, который был для них загадкой (*PSS*, VI, 90).

Beletsky immediately entered into the usual life of a rich officer in a Cossack village in the Caucasus. Before Olenin's eyes, in one month he came to be like an old resident of the village; he treated the old men to drinks, organized evening parties, and himself went to parties arranged by the girls; he bragged of his conquests, and things even went so far that, for some unknown reason, the women and girls began calling him grandady, and the Cossacks, who understood a man who loved wine and women, got used to him and liked him better than Olenin, who remained a puzzle to them.

Haydon White has shown how the related concepts of the Wild Man and the Noble

¹²The various ways in which the hegemonic discourse of Orientalism distances the harsh reality of the West's imperialistic appropriation of the East represent, of course, a central theme of Said's *Orientalism*. See also Green 3-37.

¹³"Влияние России выражается только с невыгодной стороны стеснением в выборах, снятием колоколов и войсками, которые стоят и проходят там" (*PSS*, VI, 16). "Russian influence shows itself only in negative ways -- by interference in elections, by the confiscation of church bells, and by the troops who are quartered there or pass through."

Savage have been generated out of premodern European society's ambivalence towards the burden of civilization:

[...] in the Middle Ages the notion of wildness is constantly projected in images of desire released from the trammels of all convention and at the same time in images of the punishment which submission to desire brings down on us. The Wild Man myth is what the medieval imagination conceives life would be like if men gave direct expression to libidinal impulses, both in terms of the pleasures that such a liberation might afford and in terms of the pain that might result from it ("Forms of Wildness" 175).

This dual image of Wildness as positive and negative alternatives to civilized society may help explain Tolstoy's difficulty in projecting a consistent image of the Cossacks as an alternative to Russian civilization. While Tolstoy tends to idealize the Cossacks for being "as yet unbroken to civilizational discipline" ("Forms of Wildness" 170), he cannot repress completely his own deep allegiance to culture and, we might add, to the concept of nobility itself. And if, as Haydon White has argued, the trope of the Noble Savage "represents not so much an elevation of the idea of the native as a demotion of the idea of nobility" ("Noble Savage" 191), we may come even closer to an understanding of the ambiguities and uncertainties in Count Tolstoy's presentation of the Cossacks' wildness. Perhaps the problem lies in Tolstoy's attempt to telescope two historically distinct and, ultimately, mutually exclusive, visions of wildness and the Noble Savage into one narrative; that is, a Rousseauian, wish-fulfilling fantasy of a return to an Edenic state of innocence and purity, with an adventure narrative that is, inevitably, contaminated by an imperialist ideology that necessarily assumes the superiority of Culture ("Forms of Wildness" 154-57; "Noble Savage" 191-95).

The thorny issue of Tolstoy's depiction of women and sexual difference in *The Cossacks* -- as I have already indicated -- is inevitably implicated in this discussion of the Nature/Culture dichotomy. Women play a contradictory, yet central, role in Tolstoy's vision of modern civilization and its discontents. Although Olenin has left Moscow because of an unhappy love affair and his general dissatisfaction with high society Muscovite ladies, he never wavers in his association of true happiness with the feminine principle: the bosom of Mother Nature or the embrace of a native woman. Not surprisingly, women traditionally play a crucial role in the discourse of the adventure narrative (Zweig 61-80). One of the most common tropes of adventure/imperialistic narratives, historical and fictional, is the seduction (and, usually, the political co-optation) of a native woman by the European adventurer (Hyam 34-89). The story of Cortez and La Malinche, who became his translator, spy, and mistress and helped convince Montezuma to seek the protection of the Spaniards, is an early example of this motif (Todorov 100-102; Greenblatt 118-51). Sexual conquest as a symbol of a more general political and military mastery of the native population is also at work in the story of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas (Lubin 14-21; Young 409-15). For a Russian of Tolstoy's generation, of course, this motif would have been familiar, if not a cliché from

poems and stories by Pushkin, Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, Lermontov, and a host of lesser writers.¹⁴

Another impetus of the adventure narrative in history and in fiction seems to have been the covert or unconscious desire to escape from the society of women to an exclusively male world. In fact, one critic goes so far as to argue that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, all adventurers and explorers act on an impulse to flee from women because they "cannot cope with the erotic and social hegemony of women" (Zweig 6).¹⁵ Interestingly, Tolstoy's text acts out both of these contradictory erotic impulses; while Olenin has fled Moscow and his former lover for the mythical male-centered universe of the Cossacks, once in the Caucasus he immediately becomes obsessed with his desire for Mar'iana. As Olenin leaves the Cossacks and the story comes to its circular conclusion, the question of woman's role in Tolstoy's adventure remains contested. On one level, certainly, Olenin's inability to win Mar'iana may represent Tolstoy's ambivalence about the success of Russian imperialism in the Caucasus; in this way, *The Cossacks* may be read as a covert subversion of the accepted ideology of the adventure narrative. And yet a potentially more interesting and complicated issue concerns Tolstoy's use of the Nature/Culture dichotomy to define and situate the relationship between Olenin and Mar'iana.

Before we can adequately address this issue, we must distinguish between several related problems concerning Tolstoy's use of Rousseauian categories in *The Cossacks*. Most critics -- as we have seen -- agree that Tolstoy depicts the Cossacks as superior representatives of Nature in opposition to the civilized Russians (Opul'akaia 342-43; Berlin 37-38; Mirsky 257; Greenwood 45). The central critical problem, then, concerns Olenin's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to remake himself according to the model of the supposedly superior natural people. We have already described how one Soviet critic reads this theme as Tolstoy's critique of Rousseau and Romanticism. The text's circular structure -- it ends as it began, with Olenin leaving the scene of an unsuccessful love affair -- would certainly seem to suggest that Olenin has not changed and may be incapable of remaking himself.

And yet, as I have tried to show, the notion that the text can support a facile Rousseauian division of the world into the superior natural and the inferior social or cultural is simply not borne out by close reading. Even Olenin has difficulty in deciding what constitutes the true Cossack way of life; is it altruism (the lesson of the stag's lair) or self-assertion (Daddy Eroshka's lusty hedonism)? For most critics, this problem is solved -- reasonably enough -- by observing what happens to Olenin when he acts upon his (apparently flawed) understanding of "true" Cossack values. Thus, for example, we see that altruism is not a Cossack virtue when his gift of a horse to Lukashka arouses in

¹⁴For an interesting discussion of the connections between cultural and sexual conquest, see Sandler's discussion of Pushkin's "Prisoner of the Caucasus" (145-65).

¹⁵Hence the not insignificant motif of homoeroticism in the biographies of, for example, T.E. Lawrence (O'Donnell 107-30), Sir Richard Burton (Rice 128-9, 323-24, 394), and the Russian explorer Nikolai Przhevalskii (Karlinsky 3: Green 199-200).

the Cossacks, not gratitude and affection, but rather suspicion and unease (*PSS*, VI, 88-90). But while this ironic approach can tell us what the Cossacks are not, it cannot present an independent positive point of view on *The Cossacks* precisely because it is limited to the Cossacks' reactions to Olenin's actions.

By contrast, another way to articulate the problematic meaning of *The Cossacks* is to look closely at the ethnographic section of the text (*PSS*, VI, 14-18), in which Tolstoy attempts to situate his Cossacks within the political, social and religious context of the Caucasus in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Here Tolstoy complicates the usual dichotomy between civilized Russians and primitive Cossacks by introducing a third ethnographic group into the narrative. The independent Muslim tribes of the hills, called Tatars or Chechens by Tolstoy, live beyond the Terek river, the border of Russian military and political authority, in a state of more or less constant, if low-level, warfare with the Cossacks and their Russian allies. Despite the military alliance with the Russians, the Cossacks' ties to the Chechens are deep and significant:

Очень очень давно предки их, староверы, бежали из России и поселились за Терекон, между чеченцами на Гребне, первом зребте лесистых гор Большой Чечни. Живя между чеченцами, казаки перероднились с ними и усвоили себе обычаи, образ жизни и нравы горцев: но удержали и там, во всей прежней чистоте, русский язык и старую веру [...] Ещё до сих пор казацкие роды считаются родством с чеченскими, и любовь к свободе, праздности, грабежу и войне составляет главные черты их характера (*PSS*, VI, 15-16).

A long long time ago their Old Believer ancestors had fled from Russia and settled among the Chechens of the Greben, the first range of forested mountains of Greater Chechnia. Living among the Chechens the Cossacks intermarried with them and adopted the manners and customs of the mountain tribes, although they still retained the Russian language in all its purity, as well as their Old Believer faith [...] Even today the Cossack clan still claims relationships with the Chechens, and the love of freedom, of leisure, of plunder and of war, still form their chief characteristics.

In several important ways, the Cossacks are closer to their wild Muslim neighbors than to the Russians:

Казак, по влечению, менее ненавидит джигита--горца, который убил его брата, чем солдата, который стоит у него, чтобы защищать его станицу, но который закурил табаком его хату. Он уважает врагагорца, но презирает чужого для чего и угнетателя солдата. Собственно русский мужик для казака есть чуждое, дикое и презренное существо ... (*PSS*, VI, 16).

A Cossack is less inclined to hate the *dzhigit* hillsman who has killed his brother, than the soldier who has been quartered on him to defend his village, but who has defiled his hut with tobacco-smoke. He respects his enemy the hillsman and despises the soldier, who is an alien and an

¹⁶Compare Susan Layton's conclusion concerning *Khadzhi-Murat*: "Tolstoy takes care to establish the cultural identity of his hero, rather than insist upon 'nature' as a determinant of character [...] While Tolstoy characterizes Khadzhi Murat as culturally distinct, his text undercuts traditional notions of the mountain tribesman as an exotic other" (6).

oppressor. In reality, from the Cossacks' point of view a Russian peasant is a foreign, savage, despicable creature....

The specific ethnographic situation of the Orthodox Christian and Russian-speaking Cossacks, located midway between Russian allies (and occupiers) and Chechen enemies (and relatives), is another reason for the instability of any reading of the text that relies on a traditional Rousseauian division between Nature and Culture. In this way, Tolstoy reveals the essentially relational and differential status of the Nature/Culture dichotomy: for if, from a Russian point of view, the Cossacks represent "Nature," the extent to which they have themselves been "contaminated" by civilization becomes immediately clear when they are compared to the Chechens.¹⁷ There are numerous additional examples that show how Tolstoy breaks down the Nature/Culture dichotomy in his portraits of the other characters of *The Cossacks*. For instance, when Tolstoy wants to show the negative effects of Olenin's upbringing in Moscow society, the text clearly reveals that his problems result not from the traditional Rousseauian problem of the artificial and unnatural conventions of social behaviour,¹⁸ but rather from the total absence of moral restrictions. Tolstoy writes that:

В восемнадцать лет Оленин был так свободен, как только бывали свободны русские богатые молодые люди сороковых годов, с молодых лет оставшиеся без родителей. Для него не было никаких--ни физических, ни моральных--оков; он всё мог сделать, и ничего ему не нужно было, и ничего его не связывало" (PSS, VI, 7).

At the age of 18, Olenin was as free as only rich young Russian men of the 1840s orphaned at an early age could be. For him there were no physical or moral fetters; he could do anything he wanted, he needed nothing, and nothing tied him down.

The dualism at the heart of freedom is mirrored by a curious dualism within Olenin himself: his contradictory relationship to freedom splits his personality in half. In the city, for example, he is alienated because of his intuitive nature, his reliance on an inner, Socratic voice for moral guidance at crucial moments.¹⁹ But in the country, Olenin reverts to the opposite extreme: he is alienated from the Cossacks because of his intensely

¹⁷At the same time, a larger issue is at stake here: knowingly or not, Tolstoy has identified an essential connection between the expansionist ideologies of the 19th. century European Romanticism and Imperialism. As the Romantic imagination comes to know the primitive through travel, ethnographic, and fictional narratives, it inevitably transforms the "natural" into its opposite: simultaneously, it posits the existence of another, more authentically natural people who exist beyond the borders of European knowledge and power. The logic of European political expansionism, constantly moving from one site of "virgin territory" to another, in a never-ending "will to power" over so-called primitive societies, is essentially identical to, and often conflated with, the "will to knowledge" expressed in the ideology of Romanticism.

¹⁸As they do, for example, in Tolstoy's *Detsvo* (*Childhood*).

¹⁹"Вспомнил он [...] и общую неловкость, и стеснение, и постоянное чувство возмущения против этой натянутости. Какой-то голос всё говорил: *не то, не то*, и точно вышло не то" (PSS, VI, 9). "He recalled [...] the general awkwardness and restraint and a constant feeling of rebellion against that tension. Some voice would always whisper: 'That's not it, that's not it,' and so it had turned out."

self-conscious, rational, and intellectual nature.

One passage that can serve to illustrate Tolstoy's paradoxical relationship to Rousseau, while simultaneously serving as an allegory for the power of language to subvert the totalizing intent of logic, occurs early in the text. Olenin is travelling to the Caucasus and dreaming of what awaits him there, dreams that revolve around a young beautiful native woman:

Есть ещё одна, самая дорогая мечта, которая примешивалась ко всякой мысли молодого человека о будущем. Это мечта о женщине. И там она, между гор, представляется воображению в виде черкешенки--рабыни, с стройным станом, длинною косой и покорными глубокими глазами. Ему представляется в горах уединенная хижина и у порога *она*, дожидаящаяся его в то время, как он, усталый, покрытый пылью, кровью, славой, возвращается к ней, ему чудятся её поцелуи, её плечи, её сладкий голос, её покорность. Она прелестна, но она необразована, дика, груба. В длинные зимние вечера он начинает воспитывать её. Она умна, понятлива, даровита и быстро усваивает себе все необходимые знания. Отчего же? Она очень легко может выучить языки, читать произведения французской литературы, понимать их. *Notre Dame de Paris*, например, должно ей понравиться. Она может и говорить по-французски. В гостиной она может иметь больше природного достоинства, чем дама самого высшего общества. Она может петь, просто, сильно и страстно (*PSS*, VI, 11-12).

One other dream, the sweetest of them all, mingled with the young man's every thought of the future. This was the dream of a woman. And there, among the mountains, she appeared to his imagination as a Christian slave, a shapely figure with a single long plait of hair and deep submissive eyes. He imagined a lonely hut in the mountains, and on the threshold *she* stands awaiting him when, tired and covered with dust, blood and glory, he returns to her. He imagines her kisses, her shoulders, her sweet voice, and her submissiveness. She is charming, but uneducated, wild crude. During the long winter evenings he begins to educate her. She is intelligent, quick to understand, talented and she quickly masters all the necessary knowledge. Why? She learns languages very easily, can read and understand French literature. *Notre Dame de Paris*, for example, is sure to appeal to her. She can even speak French. In a drawing room she would possess more innate dignity than a lady from the highest society. She can sing, simply, powerfully, and passionately.

Eventually, the fantasy collapses under its own weight as Olenin comes to his senses and cries out "Oh, what nonsense!" ("Ах, какой вздор!" *PSS*, VI, 12). To an educated Russian reader, this passage represents an obvious reference to Pushkin's story, "*Baryshnia-krest'ianka*" ("The mistress-maid"), in which an aristocratic young woman impersonating an uneducated peasant girl feigns the cultural transformation that Olenin fantasizes. In Pushkin's version, after a few days of tutoring, the "peasant girl" is "civilized" and is already reading Karamzin, the leading Russian Rousseauian! In its sophisticated examination of the theatricality of everyday life and of the complex interplay between everyday, "natural" behaviour and cultural codes borrowed from literary models, Pushkin's text is clearly related to the problematic of Tolstoy's *Cossacks*.²⁰

²⁰For two sophisticated analyses of the complex ways that literary conventions influence the behaviour of individual characters in Pushkin's prose, see Todd 106-36, and Bethea and Davydov.

If the passage quoted above parodies Olenin's infantile romanticism, it also foregrounds the problematic status of the Nature/Culture dichotomy within the text of *The Cossacks*. Although in flight from civilized society women, Olenin cannot help but transform his uncivilized Cossack woman into her opposite, a civilized-and therefore, presumably, inferior-woman, one who speaks and reads foreign languages and is able to appreciate high culture. The very act of imaginatively possessing Nature transforms it into its dialectical opposite, Culture. The operation of cultural assimilation is thus seen as a double-bind, in which it is impossible to sustain the presumed superiority of Nature to Culture. For, if by assimilating the master culture, the primitive native loses the critical difference that was its primary source of value (at least in the eyes of the representatives of civilization), the native's inability or refusal to assimilate the cultural code of the master illustrates another, perhaps even more familiar, aspect of the "inherent inferiority" of the primitive.

While Tolstoy is obviously laughing at the inanity of Olenin's romantic dreams, there is a sense in which, throughout the entire text, he appears unable to avoid Olenin's errors. Thus, in asserting the superiority of the natural, Tolstoy cannot help but dress up his "natural" heroes in civilized clothing. This parallel between Olenin and the author is more important than the external biographical similarities that critics have noted: it undercuts the claim of several critics that Tolstoy successfully separates Olenin's consciousnesses from his own (Wasiolek 51-64; Opul'skaia 341-48). In this sense, the text can be said to prefigure or anticipate the various critical misreadings discussed above, as well as my reading.²¹ The blindness of Olenin and his critics, leads to the insight that everyone and everything in the text is, in some essential way, both spontaneous and self-conscious, natural and artificial, the product of both Culture and Nature. But if the anthropology of *The Cossacks* can be shown, on rhetorical grounds, at least, to be untenable, the opposition between Nature and Culture is, apparently, inescapable and everywhere present in the language and in the consciousness of the characters, the author, and, we might add, the readers.

If we define "logocentrism" as a hermeneutic strategy which attempts to restrict, limit, and otherwise control the infinite play of meaning in literary texts through a systematic privileging of spoken voice and presence over written text and absence, one might be tempted to call the premises of *The Cossacks* "logocentric."²² Similarly, Tolstoy can be implicated, along with many of the central figures of the Western literary and philosophical tradition, in an attempt to control the ever elusive and constantly receding dichotomy between Nature and Culture. A more productive approach, however,

²¹"Accounting for the 'rhetoricity' of its own mode, the text also postulates the necessity of its own misreading. It knows and asserts that it will be misunderstood. It tells the story, the allegory of its misunderstanding" (de Man, "Resistance to Theory" 136).

²²Wasiolek emphasizes the importance of the "nostalgia for origins" in Tolstoy. See, for example, the following passages: "What Tolstoy is groping for is some definition that escapes the dichotomous oppositions of sense and consciousness, of civilization and primitiveness, and even that of pleasure and pain"(62); or "What is insistent [in Tolstoy's early works] is the conviction that something good, true, and real exists before it is spoiled by human manipulation"(63).

might be to see Tolstoy as the subject, rather than the object, of this "deconstruction" of the Nature/ Culture dichotomy. While Olenin goes to the Caucasus, not merely because that's where the Cossacks are, but also because of his abiding belief in the special privilege attached to presence and to voice, Tolstoy clearly separates himself from this delusion. Further, the version of romanticism that is ridiculed in Olenin's dream is based on literary texts supplied by Russian authors such as Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, Pushkin and Lermontov. In other words, Olenin's journey from Moscow to the Caucasus is not only a journey through space: it is also a journey from mute text to living voice, from absence into the presence of the Cossacks. But if Olenin, like many of Tolstoy's critics, can freely admit that the literary version of romanticism is a fantasy, he seems unable to stop believing in the Caucasus as a world beyond the contradictions of civilized society, a world of absolute origin and truth, where signifier and signified are identical, and where the critical difference between Nature and Culture can be isolated, suspended, and controlled. But the reading of *The Cossacks* that I am suggesting would go beyond a critique of Olenin's (mis)perceptions to the central problem posed by the theoretical dichotomy between Nature and Culture. In other words, the language and logic of *The Cossacks* not only reveal the untenable and mythical nature of Olenin's romantic vision of the Caucasus, but also undercut the very possibility of the Nature/Culture dichotomy. Viewed from this perspective, the contradictory presentation of Rousseauian motifs in *The Cossacks* should not be seen either as the sign of the author's artistic or philosophical immaturity, or of the unresolved struggle in Tolstoy's early works between Romanticism and Realism. Rather, it should be read as Tolstoy's heroic attempt to think through, and even to transcend, the limitations of the philosophical and linguistic culture into which he was born.

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