

Title: Beyond Heaven and Earth: Romantic Gnosticism and the Overcoming of Byron in Mikhail Lermontov's *Demon*

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Abstract:

Mikhail Lermontov's 1841 narrative poem *Demon* owes an indisputable debt to the poetry of Lord Byron, particularly to Byron's 1821 drama *Cain*. This paper examines the presence of gnostic discourses in *Demon*, and in doing so it considers Byron, and especially *Cain*, to be the primary source for gnostic currents in Lermontov's thought. It argues that *Demon* both assimilates and moves beyond *Cain*'s heterodox engagement with the Biblical temptation narrative, and suggests that Lermontov ultimately revises the nihilistic Gnosticism of Byron in a move that is itself gnostic in the Bloomian sense—that is, as the creative rewriting of a great predecessor's work.

Significantly, *Demon* takes place primarily in the interstitial space of the Caucasus, a region whose mountainous peaks form a halfway point between earth and heaven. The poem's landscape imagery thus serves as a reflection of the gnostic cosmology that informs its metaphysics. In discussing the role that nature imagery plays in the poem, I consider the specificity of the Caucasian landscape as a uniquely Russian setting, in which the plots and characters of Byron are necessarily transformed. My paper thus addresses the much-debated problem of Byron's reception and influence in Russia and the ways in which Byronism, as a foreign phenomenon, was adapted to fit a specifically Russian Romantic aesthetic.