

Title: The Lie That Tells the Truth: Lermontov's *Shtoss* Between Text and Performance

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In spring 1841 Lermontov announced that he would read his "new novel" *Shtoss* at an evening gathering. He requested that only the core salon habitués be invited, asking that they arrive unusually early for a reading of at least four hours. On the appointed evening, when the select audience of about thirty had gathered, Lermontov entered with an enormous notebook, plunked it down on the table, and began to read. After about fifteen minutes, he stopped, and that was it. All but the first twenty pages of the notebook were blank.

The performance of *Shtoss* as a hoax, together with its uncharacteristically fantastic plot, has led some scholars to discount its significance. However, as one of Lermontov's last texts, it has tempted others to read a great deal into it. Yet one can hardly agree with the conclusion voiced by prominent Soviet scholars that the story represents Lermontov's conversion to the Natural School. In places, the story, despite its fantastic plot, describes Petersburg in the naturalistic terms of the *fiziologicheskii ocherk*. And one might see the plot as a pastiche of the Romantic fantastic. But why not consider the "naturalistic" parts as pastiche, also?

I approach *Shtoss* as a hoax with a serious literary purpose. I examine the story's significance by reciprocally superimposing the "unfinished" literary text itself and the "unfinished" behavioral text of its salon performance as dual manifestations of a single Lermontovian characteristic: his lifelong tendency toward provoking his audiences into rethinking their aesthetic and moral norms. I readdress the story's (and Lermontov's) relation to the secondary interpretive question of the Romanticism-Naturalism-Realism debate, connecting the piece to contemporary literary historical processes, as Lermontov saw them. I conclude that Lermontov's "practical joke" was indeed practical. It used naturalistic and fantastic devices allegorically, to make a statement about "literary interest" that was critical toward contemporary literary practices, but far from anti-Romantic.