

Introduction: “The most quintessentially Russian of writers”

THE CENTRAL theme of this book on Nikolai Leskov is simple: his concern with manifold cultural borderlands and confrontations. As fictional texts referring to our metafictional world, each novel, each tale of his describing the multiethnic world of the nineteenth-century Russian Empire can also tell us something about our own lives and worlds. This is so because every time one of his works is experienced by us as readers, it becomes recreated anew, not merely as an experience within the reading subject, but rather as something occurring as subject and object converge; in this process, the work's external references are being made part of the work as a whole. That said, in order to read Leskov “aesthetically” and with pleasure, it is neither possible nor necessary to know everything about the way his literary works fit into nineteenth-century life, about how and why they were written and read, and what relation they had to other competing texts and cultural institutions.¹ What *is* necessary is an awareness of the Russian Empire's cultural multiplicity as well as of the many intricacies contained in the language Leskov uses to represent it; the numerous infelicities, errors and misunderstandings caused by unaware translators responsible for “handing him down” testify to this. Tellingly, the research carried out during the past half-century does

¹ By implication, therefore, I disagree with Malcolm V. Jones and Robin Feuer Miller, who, amongst others, suggest that Leskov would be counted among the “classics” only by readers with a very intimate knowledge of the literary and cultural tradition. Cf. Malcolm V. Jones & Robin Feuer Miller, 1998, “Editors’ Preface,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel*, eds. M.V. Jones & R.F. Miller, Cambridge, p. xiii. See, also, Hugh McLean, 1977, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and His Art*, Cambridge, Mass., pp. ix–x, and Kenneth Lantz, 1979, *Nikolay Leskov*, Boston, p. 7.

not really address the problem of Leskov's accessibility, nor does it question to a serious degree why his fiction has more or less slipped from the curriculum (and from many scholars' minds), or why it remains largely undiscovered.² If he is read at all, he is often categorized as delightfully exotic, but secondary—that is, noteworthy within the Russian tradition, but not canonical in the Bloomian sense.

Whether or not Leskov's "charming" prose works will speak to a modern student of literature, be it in the Russian original or in translation, depends, I believe, on the choice of perspective, on the questions asked and the tools employed in order to achieve one's critical purpose. It is one thing to observe the different formal properties of a given literary text; it is quite another to implement the knowledge drawn from discourse analysis, so that the text tells us something of importance about human nature and human relationships. Here my delving into "the most quintessentially Russian of writers"³ has a double focus: one stylistic, probing the texts' rich structure and broad scope with regard to the generation of cultural meaning; the other anthropological, exploring the image of humankind and its origins, institutions, social relationships, religious beliefs and identities, as construed in Leskov's "Russian" prose. Scholarship on this writer's place in the context of one of the world's great literary cultures and on his so-called Russianness boasts a fairly long and varied tradition, and a definite statement on this has yet to be written. This is not that book. The present study proposes instead something at once more modest and more challenging: to examine the multiculturalist tendency in five of Leskov's works (1870–75) from the perspective of what might be called *a twofold styling*. Surely, Leskov himself is the literary craftsman who directs himself to the medium of words, working and reworking them into an intriguing texture, as well as an instrument of subtle communication in the face of an absent and indeterminate audience. However, the relationship between what his heroes say and do and what Leskov as *styler* really thinks about his fellow Russians in the multiethnic Empire remains a matter of our interpretation. This renders us in turn

2 James Muckle rightly considers Leskov "probably the least well known of all the great Russian 19th-century prose writers." James Muckle, 1998, "Nikolai Semenovich Leskov 1831–1895: Prose Writer," *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, ed. N. Cornwell, London, p. 499.

3 David McDuff, 1987, "Introduction," N. Leskov, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk and Other Stories*, trans. D. McDuff, London, p. 7.

complementary “stylers,” and privileged ones at that; in order to win the maximum prize, we, who are among his readers, must participate with our entire repertoire of knowledge, reason, will and sensibility. In so doing, we can describe and interpret Leskov’s texts in relation to the stylistic conventions which generate them and the historical and sociocultural situation which brought them into existence,⁴ but our individual minds will always be inhabited by a large number of ideas that determine our own interpretation of the cultural voices in his works. My own reader’s mind is inhabited by (among others) ideas of Leskov’s multicultural representation of Russia that caused me to write this book. In addressing readers who are newcomers to Russian literature, history and culture as well as those who are well versed in the field, I hope to convey some of the “human” meanings inherent in Leskov. But I shall return to the issues of styles, cultures and multiple readings in a moment.

It has been asserted elsewhere that everyday life (*byt*), as the source of all social change and activity, forms the basis of an unsystematizable or “prosaic” literary creative process.⁵ If so, few Russian works of literature would seem more creatively prosaic than those of Leskov, whose first-hand experience of folk culture, provinciality, and the multifarious aspects of Russianness is generally considered to be a well-established fact.⁶

4 See Roger Fowler, 1981, *Literature as Social Discourse*, London, pp. 174ff.

5 Designating a theory of literature that favours prose in general over the poetic genres, the Bakhtin-inspired neologism of *prosaics* pertains to a form of thinking that presumes the significance of *byt* or the daily grind, of the habitual and ordinary, the “prosaic.” See Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, 1990, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, Stanford.

6 See Leonid Grossman, 1945, *N.S. Leskov: zhizn’—tvorchestvo—poetika*, Moscow; V.Iu. Troitskii, 1974, *Leskov-khudozhnik*, Moscow; Irina Stoliarova, 1978, *V poiskakh ideala: tvorchestvo N.S. Leskova*, Leningrad; and Aleksandr Gorelov, 1988, *N.S. Leskov i narodnaia kultura*, Leningrad. For a more recent examination of Leskov’s provinciality as “something fundamentally Russian,” consider Nina Kaukhchishvili’s “Provintsiiia v nekotorykh povestiakh N.S. Leskova,” *Russkaia provintsiiia: mif—tekst—realnost’*, eds. A.F. Belousov & T.V. Tsiv’ian, Moscow, 2000, pp. 233–40. As to the view that provinciality was to remain a key component of Russian identity, see also Anne Lounsbury who argues that for nineteenth-century writers even the Empire’s urban centres may become “province,” as “only a place that felt itself to be forever on the margin could so persistently question the very idea of a center.” Anne Lounsbury, 2005, “No, this is not the provinces!’: Provincialism, Authenticity and Russianness in Gogol’s Day,” *The Russian Review* 64, pp. 259–80; p. 279.

Opinions and approaches

Now firmly established among specialists as one of the most original nineteenth-century Russian prose writers, Leskov is regarded as an accomplished creator of short stories and novellas rather than long novels. To be sure, he wrote several novels, but what characterizes his oeuvre is his predilection for experimenting within the shorter genres which, in turn, bear witness to an incessant generic search: “biography” (*biografiia*), “rhapsody” (*rapsodiia*), “anecdote” (*anekdot*), “paysage and genre” (*peizazh i zhanr*), “feuilleton-story” (*rasskaz-fel’eton*), and so on. A multitude of narrative forms and a rare, innovative approach to language and narrative style come together in a complexity which, according to D.S. Mirsky, makes him stand out “in striking contrast to the habits of almost every other Russian novelist.”⁷ From this vantage point, three prevailing lines of inquiry may easily be distinguished.

Firstly, Leskov’s literary talent is described above all as narrative. Among the Russian and Soviet scholars, Boris Eikhenbaum (1964) declares that without Leskov’s narrative art, “there would not have been what Leskov himself liked to call *zhanr* (by analogy with genre painting), and this ‘genre’ would not have been created so colourfully, with such diversity, and, in its own way, so poetically.”⁸ The ability to depict vivid scenes from daily, ordinary life is also stressed by Leonid Grossman (1945) and re-emphasized by Aleksandr Gorelov (1988), while Irina Stoliarova (1978) believes that the writer’s individualized form of storytelling was nurtured as a result of Leskov’s personal contact with the common people of the Empire.⁹ In the Western tradition, too, the impact of Leskov’s fiction is explained in relation to its “liveliness,” “colourfulness,” and sheer excitement, the “hallmark of his narrative art.”¹⁰ As early as 1921, Thomas Mann brands him as an “amazing yarn-spinner,”¹¹ a label that anticipates

7 D.S. Mirsky, 1949, *A History of Russian Literature*, London, p. 316.

8 Boris Eikhenbaum, 1964, “N.S. Leskov (K 50-letiiu so dnia smerti),” *O proze: sbornik statei*, Leningrad, p. 348.

9 Cf. Stoliarova, 1978, pp. 3–8.

10 For these epithets, see Adolf Stender-Petersen, 1957, *Geschichte der russischen Literatur*, Munich, p. 450; Lantz, 1979, pp. 147ff; Richard Freeborn, 1989, “The Nineteenth Century: 1855–80,” *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, ed. C.A. Moser, Cambridge, p. 298; Victor Terras, 1991, *A History of Russian Literature*, New Haven, p. 362; Faith Wigzell, 1998, “Cathedral Folk. Soboriane,” *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, ed. N. Cornwell, London, pp. 501–503; Muckle, 1998, pp. 499ff.

11 Thomas Mann, 1961, “Russische Anthologie,” *Thomas Mann: Altes und Neues*, Frankfurt

Walter Benjamin's well-known essay (1936); here the Russian writer is hailed as one of the last great storytellers, his technique being equated with the *Ur-Erzählung* and with the craftsmanship of Herodotus, "the first storyteller of the Greeks."¹² North American voices have added to this legacy: Kenneth Lantz (1979) concludes that Leskov's main concern was "to capture and hold the attention of his audience"; Hugh McLean (1977) states that in making the sphere of the ordinary acceptable material for literature, he "always had an eye for a good story"; Victor Terras (1991) restates that "never at a loss for a good story," Leskov would create "a narrative voice and let the story speak for itself."¹³

Secondly, and more specifically, Leskov's fiction has been established as stylistically original. Both scholarly traditions emphasize the writer's unique knowledge of the Empire's dialects and sociolects, his skilful use of folk etymology to reinvent words and phrases or to create idiosyncratic macaronics and hybrids, which often result in different kinds of non-existent words (*slovechki*), that is, neologisms. Maxim Gorky (1953) refers to Leskov's "subtle knowledge of the Great Russian language (*velikorusskii iazyk*)," proclaiming that his prose is free of any foreign linguistic influence. The implication seems to be that linguistic originality is closely linked to an all-pervasive, perhaps undefinable, yet distinctly Russian quality. Here, Grossman (1945), allowing for a possible "foreign" influence, expresses his admiration for the breadth of the writer's lexical and stylistic material, such as Medieval Russian, Church Slavonic, Ukrainian and Polish, officialese, religious literature, archaisms and colloquialisms; in a similar vein, Thomas Eekman (1986) suggests that Leskov combines the old and time-honoured with the new and original, Russian and non-Russian, in such a way that his "stylistic innovation" becomes the main attraction of his prose for readers and writers alike.¹⁴ Perhaps one of the most significant and well-established characteristics of Leskov's verbal artistry is his predilection for the *skaz* (literally, "tale"; from *skazat'*, to tell); defined by the Russian formalists as a technique modelled on the

am Main, p. 449.

12 Walter Benjamin, 1992, "The Storyteller: Reflections of the Works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, London, pp. 89ff.

13 Lantz, 1979, p. 147; McLean, 1977, pp. 95–96; Terras, 1991, p. 362.

14 Maksim Gorkii, 1953, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 24, p. 235; Grossman, 1945, pp. 270–94; Thomas Eekman, 1986, "Ob istochnikakh i tipakh stilia N.S. Leskova," *Revue des Études slaves* 58 (3), p. 306.

storytelling manner of an oral narrator of the simple folk, representing the argot of a profession or a craft, or rather styled according to the hypothetical notion of such a narrator.¹⁵ In this respect, Irmhild Christina Sperrle (2002) highlights the interrelational aspect of Leskov's stylistics, explaining that "in his *skaz* stories, he re-creates the atmosphere of a fictional oral performance; his 'listeners' will interrupt, ask for clarification, make comments, and thus redirect the story."¹⁶

Thirdly, and most importantly, Leskov's fiction is considered to be quintessentially Russian. With his knowledge of the multifarious aspects of Russian everyday life, the writer emerges in the minds of many as the indisputable master portraitist of "the depths of the Russian people," of national types, mores and manners. Bearing witness to Leskov's popularity among Russian modernists,¹⁷ the poet Marina Tsvetaeva writes in 1930 that "of all Russian writers, he is my favourite, he is a native force, a native source," his prose is "a force greater than magic—it is sanctity." Following Gorky, who provided the canonical Soviet view of Leskov as a writer who was "Russian through and through" (*naskvoz' russkii*) and had a privileged understanding of "that ungraspable thing called 'the soul of the people'," the majority of Soviet and Russian scholars has since adopted and elaborated the Russocentric stance: most notably, Dmitrii Likhachev, the late specialist on Russian medieval literature, asserts that Leskov is "a Russian family writer (*russkii semeinyi pisatel'*), even very Russian," that without him "Russian literature would have been deprived of a significant share of its national colouring and national way of defining problems" (1997);¹⁸ Vladimir Zakharov, in an article on "Russian

15 See Jurij Striedter, 1989, *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered*, Cambridge, Mass., p. 44. For two most instructive discussions on the various aspects of Leskov's technique (phonetics, morphology, syntax and lexicon), consider Hugh McLean, 1954, "On the Style of a Leskovian *Skaz*," *Harvard Slavic Studies* 2, Cambridge, Mass.; and, Irmhild Christina Sperrle, 2002, *The Organic Worldview of Nikolai Leskov*, Evanston, Ill., pp. 159–64.

16 Sperrle, 2002, p. 161.

17 It is commonly acknowledged that twentieth-century Russian Modernist writers with a penchant for the unconventional, especially for the imaginative, religious world of the "folk," found inspiration in Leskov's stylized narrative discourse (consider Sologub, Remizov, Zoshchenko, and Zamiatin). See, for example, Mirsky, 1949, p. 476, and Jean-Claude Marcadé, 1986, "Les premières versions du *Clergé de la collégiale* de Leskov: *Ceux qui attendent le bouillonnement de l'eau* et *Les Habitants de la maison de Dieu*," *Revue des Études slaves* 58 (3), p. 364.

18 Marina Tsvetaeva, 1995, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, Moscow, vol. 6, p. 388; Ma-

national ethnopoetics” (1997), holds Leskov forth as an “expert” on the Russian religious consciousness;¹⁹ Gorelov, focusing on the role of folk culture, explains that Leskov creates “a portrait of an old Russia (*Rus*) which is disappearing,” whilst, at the same time, expressing “traits of an old Russia which is not fading;” while Stoliarova (1996) appears to settle the matter in stressing that Leskov “comes from the very heart of Russia,” and thus “depicts Russia in all its social diversity.”²⁰ On a very different note, Aleksandr Kuz'min (2003), speaking of Leskov's “washing out of national stereotypes by means of carefully considered literary patterns,” argues that his high concentration of both *non*-Russian characters and multinational encounters is unique in Russian literature.²¹

In the West, where until recently there has existed a firm belief that the essence of “enigmatic Russia” is best laid bare in an aphoristic formulation, normally as contradiction and paradox—the wild and the tame, violence and the cult of beauty²²—Leskov has been approached in terms of his (quint)essential Russianness in various ways. William B. Edgerton (1954) emphasizes the universal traits of “this most Russian of Russian writers,” V.S. Pritchett (1962) writes that Leskov, with all his knowledge of Russian life “is Russia, as Gorky was Russia or as the elder Breughel was medieval Europe,” and Geir Kjetsaa (1979) insists that Leskov is “the most Russian of all Russian writers” and that “no one has equalled his

rina Tsvetaeva, 1994, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, Moscow, vol. 5, p. 313; Gorkii, 1953, pp. 237, 228. See also Maksim Gorkii, 1939, *Istoriia russkoi literatury*, Moscow, p. 279; Dmitrii Likhachev, 1997, “Slovo o Leskove,” *Literaturnoe nasledstvo: neizdannymi Leskov*, Moscow, vol. 1, pp. 16, 18.

- 19 Focusing on what he regards as the “undeniably Orthodox nature” of Russian literature, Vladimir Zakharov proposes “the study of national peculiarities as exemplified in different literatures, and of their place in the global literary process.” Cf. Vladimir Zakharov, 1997, “Orthodoxy and the Ethnopoetics of Russian Literature,” *Cultural Discontinuity and Reconstruction: The Byzanto-Slav Heritage and the Creation of a Russian National Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. J. Børtnes & I. Lunde, Oslo, pp. 28, 13.
- 20 Gorelov, 1988, p. 283; Irina Stoliarova, 1996, “Leskov i Rossiia,” in N.S. Leskov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, Moscow, pp. 7, 9. As to the established view of Leskov's oeuvre being part and parcel of Russianness, it is tempting to cite Mikhail L. Gasparov who suggests that the Russians themselves are no more than “a group of specialists on the Russian language.” Quoted in Catriona Kelly, 2001, *Russian Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, p. 117.
- 21 Aleksandr Kuz'min, 2003, *Inorodets v tvorchestve N.S. Leskova: problema, izobrazheniia i otsenki*, St Petersburg, pp. 115–18.
- 22 For a sophisticated and more nuanced approach, see Catriona Kelly et al., 1998, *Russian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, eds. C. Kelly & D. Shepherd, Oxford.

ability to depict the peculiarities of the ways of the Russians.” More significant issue-related contributions have been made by James Muckle (1978), who claims that Leskov’s work is “free of the sententious drivell about the sacred destiny of Russia, or the unique quality of the Russian peasant, but it is accompanied by an awareness that these questions are vital for the society in which he and his readers live”;²³ Faith Wigzell, who traces the influence in Leskov of imported hagiography (Byzantine) and seventeenth-century prose tales (West European), as well as the indigenous folkloric and oral traditions (1985, 1988, 1997);²⁴ and by Sperrle, who argues that “the nature of [Leskov’s] ‘Russian mind’ is lurking in the notion of organicity,” indicating a close link between the writer’s mind and Russian religious philosophy as well as the Eastern patristic tradition.²⁵ Moreover, Vera Tolz (2001) reminds us that Leskov’s works were written at a time when the idealization of the “common” or “simple” people (*narod*) in populist art reached its peak; and Catriona Kelly (2001), in a similar vein, maintains that his treatment of the Russian provinces is “an extraordinary retrospective Utopia.”²⁶

But although Leskov’s prose is praised for its storytelling, stylistic and national qualities, its “verbal wizardry” still raises some problematic issues. The nineteenth-century idea of an exuberant prose writer who “could not keep his talent in bounds,” whose stories consist of “too many good things” (Leo Tolstoy),²⁷ has been largely accepted with acquiescence by modern scholars.²⁸ Many of his longer prose works are considered

23 William B. Edgerton, 1954, “Introduction,” *Nikolai Leskov: The Intellectual Development of a Literary Nonconformist*, doctoral thesis, Columbia University, New York, p. 15; and 1980, “[Review of] H. McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and His Art*,” *Comparative Literature* 32, p. 313; V.S. Pritchett, 1962, “Leskov,” *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 10, p. 18; Geir Kjetsaa, 1979, “Leskovs kjærlighetsdrama,” in N. Leskov, *Lady Macbeth fra Mtsensk*, Oslo, p. 7; James Muckle, 1978, *Nikolai Leskov and the “Spirit of Protestantism*,” Birmingham, p. 152.

24 See Faith Wigzell, 1985, “The *staraya skazka* of Leskov’s *Soboryane*: Archpriests Tuberozov and Avvakum,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 63 (3), pp. 321–36; 1988, “Leskov’s *Soboryane*: A Tale of Good and Evil in the Russian Provinces,” *Modern Language Review* 83 (4), pp. 901–10; and 1997, “Bludnyie synov’ia ili bluzhdaiushchie dushi: ‘Povest’ o Gore-Zlochastii’ i ‘Ocharovannyi strannik’ Leskova,” *Trudy otдела drevnerusskoi literatury* 50, pp. 754–62.

25 Sperrle, 2002, p. 204.

26 Vera Tolz, 2001, *Inventing the Nation: Russia*, London, pp. 70, 87–88; Kelly, 2001, p. 146.

27 Mirsky, 1949, p. 316.

28 Many of Leskov’s contemporaries, aspiring to give the reader the illusion that he or she was experiencing the events described (“high realism”), were dismissive of Leskov’s “ob-

brilliantly narrated, but weakly composed; generically composite, they come across as either too leisurely, too uneventful, too placid, or diffuse and incoherent.²⁹ Grossman holds that Leskov's disregard of the unity of style and "the wholeness of artistic writing," as well as "the mixed character and the heterogeneity of material infringes upon the artistic manner";³⁰ certainly, if we consider Leskov's bricolage from the point of view of his blatantly complex language, current criticism is similarly influenced by the opinion that a disunity of style somehow undermines the unobtrusive stylistic standard that is assumed to be characteristic of mainstream nineteenth-century Russian realism.³¹ On the whole, due to their verbal compositeness, or "mosaic," his works are usually regarded as less accessible, thought-provoking and relevant-to-life than the canonized masterpieces of Russian literature, say, the novels of Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

On this I take an altogether different view. If treated as an essential poetic and rhetorical feature, the many-levelled amplitude of Leskov's works becomes a crucial factor in producing a fuller experience on the part of the reader.³² Our heteronomous experience of Leskov's wide compass can transform each one of his texts into a different work; to be sure, our literary experience of Leskov must not rest only on the work itself and be supported by other experiences and works, but also, I believe, be part of our experiences as such, that is enter into and blend with our general feeling for life. Thus my total experience of Leskov's Russia may be both uniquely mine and something I share with other readers experiencing the same event. To many readers Leskov has created the pithiest image of

trusive style" which they considered to be "stylistic reactionism" (cf. William B. Edgerton, 1969, "Introduction," N.S. Leskov, *Satirical Stories of Nikolai Leskov*, New York, p. 11).

29 These phrases are used by Mirsky (1949, p. 317) and Terras (1991, p. 362), respectively.

30 Grossman, 1945, p. 159.

31 Cf. Victor Terras: a "genius" of linguistic originality, whose prose takes on an "ephemeral quality, so that people no longer read him." Here Terras (1991, p. 364) seems to subscribe to the opinion of Tolstoy, whom he half-paraphrases.

32 Consider here Walter Benjamin (1992, p. 89ff.), who championed Leskov as the prime example of how narrative, as opposed to mere "information," is productive and inexhaustible already from its conception, since it "achieves an amplitude that information lacks." Conversely, dealing with Leskov's texts primarily in terms of a "syntagmatic" narrative system, where the writer's creative imagination is considered to focus "more on the story line than on the structure and the meaning of the whole," Terras (1991, p. 362) seems to miss the point.

the Russian national character and culture which are distinct from their West European counterparts; here I am inspired by Hugh McLean, who, whilst refuting Dostoevsky's view that Leskov's language is "unrealistic, too perfect, too quintessential," indicates its many differing voices in terms of cultures and mentalities.³³ In a word, I am interested in Leskov's multiculturalism—his focusing on the problems which different, clearly distinguishable cultures have within one society, that is within multiethnic Russia.³⁴

It is perhaps time to recognize that the Russianness of Leskov's fiction cannot simply be subsumed under such oppositional categories as typicalness-atypicalness, innovation-conservatism, fortuitousness-plannedness, East and West, the kindred and the alien, but should rather be approached in terms of *an original, aesthetic disharmony*. In view of Leskov's portrayal of Imperial Russia, where ethnic identities are almost always unstable and permeable, I would like to ask, therefore, whether his texts may not be styled so that they conceal their multicultural secrets in other, sometimes more subtle ways—and need to be examined, or "co-styled," accordingly.

Multiculture and the resonance of styles

When dealing with styles, we are, as shown by Robert Alter, establishing "a mental set in which we as readers imaginatively reconstruct the personages, their actions, their motives, the moral and psychological meanings of the narrative." Of course, no style can absolutely determine my response; different readers will pick up different emphases and draw different inferences. Nevertheless, styles will always elicit a certain way of thinking and feeling about the narrative data, "a certain predisposition toward the distinctive pleasures of the verbal medium provided by the writer in question."³⁵ By implication, therefore, when Benjamin concentrates on Leskov as being a master who allows the reader to organize matters and establish the psychological connection between events as he or she understands them, who keeps a story free from interpretations

33 Hugh McLean, 1967, "Russia, the Love-Hate Pendulum, and *The Sealed Angel*," *To Honor Roman Jakobson: Essays on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday, 11 October 1966*, eds. M. Halle et al., The Hague, vol. 2, p. 1334.

34 Wolfgang Iser, 1999, "Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today," *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, eds. M. Featherstone & S. Lash, London, pp. 194–213.

35 Robert Alter, 1989, *The Pleasures of Reading in An Ideological Age*, New York, p. 91.

while telling it, he bespeaks an interpretive potentiality which reflects the author's collation of stylistic registers.³⁶

It is paramount that Leskov's fictional universe unfolds on an axis between two stylistic extremes. First, there is a positive tendency, which takes the form of affirmation or edification, where the focus is on the confirmation of something as "true," authentic and beneficial. Second, there is a negative tendency, which takes the form of social criticism, where the focus is on the discrediting of something as false or harmful. As I will show in the following chapters, elements of these two tendencies, of *both* the sociocritical and the affirmative-edificatory, coexist in Leskov's works, so that his various modes of writing—for example, sentimentality (appealing to romantic feelings), comedy (playing with such emotions) and irony (destabilizing the text's potential for truth and meaning)—bring about a corresponding vacillation between different worldviews. Although a verbal-ideological centre to Leskov's fictional texts does exist, the lack of a unifying language or style should be viewed as a higher order of style, a "style of styles."³⁷ The diverse languages of everyday life are orchestrated into a heterogeneous whole, whilst the author, as the creator of this whole, cannot be found at any one of the text's language levels; the author is, as Mikhail Bakhtin insists with regard to the novel, "to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect."³⁸ Understood in this light, the stylistic mixing and confrontation in Leskov must be perceived as part of a fundamental heterogeneity, as a textual *modus operandi* pertaining to various levels of design and designation.³⁹ Also, his two stylistic tendencies account for the fact that these works have left themselves open to diverse interpretations.

36 To be sure, it was not Benjamin's intention to contribute to Leskov criticism in particular, let alone to the discussion on Leskov's style (which would require a knowledge of Russian). Cf. Paul Kefler, 1983, "Walter Benjamin über Nikolaj Leskov," *Zeitschrift für Slavistik* 28 (1), p. 95.

37 Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 17.

38 Mikhail Bakhtin, 1990, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Austin, pp. 48–49.

39 Here, accumulation—inventories of stylistic qualities listed according to some predetermined scheme—concerns me very little, partly because such extensive analyses are available elsewhere, and partly because my ambition is to provide a more "synthetic" account, to examine the heterogeneity of styles which underlies Leskov's representation of multiculturalism in the Empire. For in-depth analyses, see, for example, Wolfgang Girke,

As products of an author, Leskov's fictional texts evidence particular stylistic attitudes and operations which point to a purpose, although this purpose may not be verbalized in the text itself. Rather, any one of his texts has a context which may be understood to comprise immediately neighbouring signs, that is, the biographical, social, cultural, and historical circumstances in which it was made, including the intended reader. In this connection, I would like to cite two well-known and related contextualist concepts, both of which involve the prevailing sociocultural forces that dominate all linguistic discourses, including literature. As opposed to the primary representation of reality in language, Bakhtin's secondary speech genres are characterized by their double-voicedness—the word of the other is refracted in the speech of one's own.⁴⁰ This implies a dialogic communication process, the aesthetic experience of which lies in the other's vision of reality. More importantly, the same dialogic principle can be applied to the writer-character relation within the fictive world of prose: the word of the writer describes his work as simultaneously representing the other from the inside—as the other sees himself or herself—and from the outside—as the other appears to his surroundings. The “message,” however, is always ambiguous; it always presupposes participation on the part of the reader, on his or her experience of the work, its functions and intentions. In a similar manner to Bakhtin and his theory of secondary speech genres, Iurii Lotman takes complex sign systems to exemplify secondary modelling systems.⁴¹ His definition of literature as *model* implies a reevaluation of the traditional notion of literary art as *Abbildung*: structured as a semiotic text, a work of literature is a means of both cognition and of communication. In this way, with the emphasis on the opposition

1969, *Studien zur Sprache N.S. Leskovs* (Slavistische Beiträge 39), Munich; and Robert Hodel, 1994, *Betrachtungen zum skaz bei N.S. Leskov und Dragoslav Mihailović* (Slavica Helvetica 44), Bern.

40 See Mikhail Bakhtin, 1986, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, trans. V.W. McGee, eds. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Austin; and 1990, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, eds. M. Holquist & V. Liapunov, trans. V. Liapunov, Austin. Bakhtin's dialogic “speech interference” is based on the fundamental linguistic phenomenon of quasi-direct discourse (*erlebte Rede* or *style indirect libre*), that is, a form of statement which allows a third-person narrative to exploit a first-person point of view, often with a subtle effect of irony. Cf. Jostein Børtnes, 1993, *Polyfoni og karneval: Essays om litteratur*, Oslo, pp. 55ff.

41 Jurij Lotman, 1977, *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (Michigan Slavic Contributions 7), trans. R. Vroon, Ann Arbor, pp. 50–92.

between text and context, literary inquiry may be directed towards the forms of understanding that constitute the basis of Leskov's representations of Russia, as well as of our interpretations of these representations.

Moreover, it is not surprising that Lotman focuses on the rhetorical trope as a minimal model for the text as a "generator" of meaning. In order to function as such, a text must consist of at least two subtexts principally different in structure, and a mechanism on the metalevel which connects both subtexts and their mutual translation. Every text is dual in that it represents at least two languages; for example, it may be doubly coded and therefore appear now in one, now in another organization, depending on the perspective of the reader. As is particularly clear in cases of stylistic hybridization and confrontation, the literary text becomes a semiotic space where different, hierarchically organized languages interact and interfere with each other, and where the result is a play of meanings. Within a heterogeneous structure similar to that of human consciousness or a given text, the tropes may thus be seen in relation to the basic, meaning-advancing principle of juxtaposition which is operative in any discourse.⁴² For example: in Leskov's works, when the resonating style, or discourse, of an Archpriest, a Bishop, a monk, a serf or a sectarian⁴³ is juxtaposed with elements of "other" resonating styles (national, religious, ethnic, social, and so on), the rhetorical level of the text as a whole is activated, creating a destabilizing effect: the "other" styles that are mounted into the discourse function as codes and contexts for the reinterpretation of the hero's "own" word, providing it with additional, often unexpected meanings.

Although Bakhtin does not elaborate on the relationship between rhetoric and culture, we may conceive of rhetoric dialogically by linking it to his key concepts of "otherlanguageedness" (*inoiazychie*) and "multi-languageedness" (*mnogoizaychie*).⁴⁴ Just as the idiolect and sociolect of an

42 Yuri M. Lotman, 1990, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. A. Shukman, London, pp. 11–17, 36ff.

43 The protagonists of *Cathedral Folk*, *On the Edge of the World*, *Childhood Years*, *The Enchanted Wanderer* and *The Sealed Angel*, respectively.

44 For an interpretation of the dialogue and its role in literature from the point of view of rhetoric, see Renate Lachmann, 1994, *Die Zerstörung der schönen Rede: Rhetorische Tradition und Konzepte des Poetischen*, Munich; 1999, "Die Rhetorik im dialogischen Denken Bachtins," *Dialogue and Rhetoric: Communication Strategies in Russian Text and Theory* (Slavica Bergensia 1), ed. I. Lunde, pp. 102–24.

individual may be understood as a focusing on the word of the other and on the reproduction of the speech of the other (the word of the other being refracted in one's own speech), so too the simultaneous presence of two or more national languages (for instance, Russian, Polish and German) interacting within a single cultural system (the multiethnic Empire) may be said to govern *the operation of multicultural meaning*. Different languages, or cultures, do not exist independently in mutual isolation, but open up, influence and enrich each other. Similarly, while a work of literature is a model, and the creative work of the writer a modelling of reality, the same work of literature is an open system where ambiguousness rules and the reader is the co-creator of meanings. The aim of the text is not semantic unambiguousness, but to create an inner conflict, thwarting any reading based on a single meaning. Having thus set out the governing concept of the rhetorical trope as a mediating force between themes, styles and cultures, involving both the author and the reader, I will now elucidate my multivoiced understanding of culture and cultural analysis.

Whereas a field of culture is typically perceived as a spatial whole with borders and an inner territory, I would like to focus on the relational position of a given culture within Culture perceived as a global, open system. Indeed, culture may be viewed as a phenomenon altogether situated on the borders, depending on its in-between existence in order to be alive and thrive; for "removed from its borders it loses its fertile soil, becomes empty, arrogant, degenerates and dies."⁴⁵ As to my exploration of Leskov through the lens of anthropology, the main target will therefore be "Russian" culture in the context of other, "neighbouring" cultures, the way in which it collides and acts in close relation with several other different perspectives upon the world. Significantly, the Empire's social and ethnic diversity—which provides a myriad "zero-points for human perception"⁴⁶—determines Leskov's heroes as multicultural beings, as individuals capable of both possessing, creating and participating in multicultural.

45 Mikhail Bakhtin, 1975, *Voprosy literaturny i estetiki*, Moscow, p. 25.

46 In conceiving of cultures not as empirical unities but as "perspectives upon the world" or "zero-points for human perception," Kirsten Hastrup, 1995, *A Passage to Anthropology: Between Experience and Theory*, London, p. ix, emphasizes the investigation into how such cultures, with all their differences, meet through contiguity, blending, dominance or destruction.

Conceiving of semantic forms as dynamic and interactive, Bakhtin suggests that words and utterances move in groups resembling living populations: “[...] the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads.”⁴⁷ It should be emphasized here that the multitude of utterances or voices refers not just to living things but to *social* things, which interact and recombine to create sequences of larger entities which we recognize as cultural forms. From the perspective of such heteroglossia, Russian literature cannot easily be seen as a surface manifestation of Russian culture or as an unchanging essence (as implied, for example, by the notion of a Russian “ethnopoetics”). By the same token, Leskov’s prose fiction cannot be said to express positively the nation’s soul or some “quintessential” Russianness. As the anthropologist Lars Rodseth has suggested, cultures as such are not stable but changeable “populations of meaning” and therefore “historically particular and internally diverse.” Components of culture are variably distributed within a given cultural group, and every person “carries but a varying fragment of the meanings distributed in the larger collectivity.”⁴⁸ Such a distributive and personalistic model of culture offers a radical alternative to any traditionalist and essentialist reading of culture in Leskov’s works.

National romanticism and national literature

With their motley collection of people and societies, Leskov’s works constitute a fictional representation of the Russian Empire. I stress fictional, because my concern is not with how Russia actually worked, or how imperialism and nationalism should be understood as “tangible” entities with regard to literature, but with the imaginative world of Empire and the emergence of Russia through stories, views and explanations that are invented and become acts of fictionalization. Central to my attention are the processes of imperial thinking—the so-called “practices of Empire”⁴⁹—the voices of religious and cultural minorities, the signifi-

47 Bakhtin, 1981, p. 57.

48 Lars Rodseth, 1998, “Distributive Models of Culture: A Sapirian Alternative to Essentialism,” *American Anthropologist* 100 (1), p. 56.

49 Jane Burbank & David L. Ransel (eds. 1998) use this apt term in their “Introduction,” *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire*, Bloomington, Ind., p. xv.

cance of various kinds of borders and frontiers, the definition of social and cultural identities, above all on the Empire's outermost boundaries, the peripheries. Obviously, for such an undertaking the emphasis will be on the image of Russia as a *Vielvölkerreich*, that is, on ethnic diversity rather than on similarity, on cultural multiplicity rather than on Russianness qua Russianness.⁵⁰

For nineteenth-century Russians, two notions were inextricably intertwined: that of "nation" (*narod*), which could mean both "nation" and "people" (in the sense of the "common" or "simple" people, *prostoi narod*), and that of "empire" (*imperiia*), reflecting the prototypes of both Western Rome and Eastern Byzantium. The Empire conceived of itself as a "Russian" state (*gosudarstvo*) with a hegemonic Russian people, national language, culture and religion. At the same time, however, non-Russian peoples were thought of as being fully incorporated into the state, meaning that policies of Russification and conversion to official Orthodoxy were conducted in a rather haphazard manner; all the peoples of the Empire were already supposed to be symbolically integrated into the Russian state.⁵¹ In turn, these circumstances are reflected in what have been the three predominant ways of defining Russia and the Russians: the Russian encounter with the West; Russians as members of the community of Eastern Slavs; and, Russians as creators and preservers of a unique multiethnic community. It should be emphasized here that the Russian Empire referred to a Christian empire and to the heritage of the Byzantine emperor as the defender of Orthodoxy. Therefore, the expansion of empire (in Leskov often represented by missionaries), both literally and symbolically, confirmed the image of supreme power and justified the unlimited authority of the Russian emperor (*tsar*), his moral dominion being enhanced by a strong religious, eschatological element. As we shall see, this notion of a Christian *quasi-unified* culture is significant in Leskov's rendering of human activity in various corners of the Empire.

As the action is set mainly in locations remote from the urban capitals, it follows that the portrayal of Leskov's Russian heroes relies heavily

50 Andreas Kappeler proposes to look at the history of Russia through a "multiethnic lens" so as to challenge, or broaden, the Russocentric view ("to complement the Russocentric approach to the history of Russia with a multiethnic one"). Andreas Kappeler, 2001, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, trans. A. Clayton, Harlow, UK, p. 6.

51 Catherine Evtuhov et al., 1997, "Introduction," *Kazan', Moskva, Peterburg: rossiiskaia imperia vzgliadom iz raznykh uglov*, eds. C. Evtuhov et al., Moscow, pp. 11–14.

on the dramatization of various sociocultural differences found in the provinces, drawing, as it were, on the ethnic heterogeneity of the Empire at large. For instance, official Orthodox churchmen come into close contact with local government officials who are of Polish or German extraction; or, they are “wanderers” (*stranniki*), who encounter during their travels representatives of various minorities (Gypsies, Tatars, Greeks, and Ukrainians). Here, Russia as a multinational Empire becomes a semantic interface, where any one-sided meaning concerning Russianness and the national character of the Russian people (*narodnost'*) is challenged.

It is important to bear in mind that Leskov nevertheless shared the aspirations of many Russian nineteenth-century writers and thinkers, the so-called “national romantics,” who took upon themselves the revitalization of what they considered to be genuinely Russian and traditional values. Russian culture always appeals to “the old ways” when it makes its most radical and definitive breaks with the preceding period; as a reaction to the continuous translation of Western European cultural institutions inaugurated by Peter the Great about 1700, Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev and Chekhov would all turn, in various ways, towards the remnants of the marginalized pre-Petrine Orthodox cultural heritage, which by then had come to lead a rather anonymous existence in the form of a *gesunkenes Kulturgut* among the lower, uneducated layers of society. Inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder’s theory that every nation has its own national spirit and culture, the highest expression of which is found in language and folk poetry, the aim of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, too, was to contribute towards the creation of a literature in which *narodnost'*, the national character of the Russian people, could find its expression. In this sense, Leskov belongs to the creators of a Russian national literature (*Nationalliteratur*) in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Small wonder, therefore, that when tracing the “national romantic” undercurrents in Leskov’s texts, the idea of Russian society as a world apart and different from that of all other nations frequently reverberates. Hence the characteristic simplicity (*prostota*) and the sensibility (*chuvstvitel'nost'*) of so many of his provincial heroes. Pertaining to a lifestyle where religion is paramount, these ideas seem, however, to encompass *both* what is considered to be most distinctive about Russian culture and institutions *and* to embody an ideal model for contemporary society based on and extrapolated from such elements. As these two meanings

are inseparable, the “Russian Idea,” as a phenomenon of culture, is perhaps better viewed as *a set of ideals*;⁵² suffice it here to say that the friction between the ideal and the real is reflected ideologically in the division between “Westernized” and “native Russian”—in traditionalist, so-called Slavophile sentiments on the one hand, and liberalist views, on the other. Of course, Russia’s agonizing ambivalence over its relationship with the West inevitably raises the question of its relationship with the East, the “Orient.” Our writer’s perception of Russia’s relationship with Asia is determined by his perspective on Europe, only that whereas many Russian artists and intellectuals in the nineteenth century regarded the Empire as a European nation, viewing themselves as culturally and politically superior, Leskov, amongst others, would seem to assert Russia’s equally close affinity with Asia.⁵³ Common to the thinking of all nineteenth-century Russians, however, the future of the Empire was closely linked to the understanding of the potentially antagonistic relationship between things past and present, to having *faith* in Holy Rus’ or in a secular and more civilized, modern Russia (*Rossia*).

The centrality of belief yields a cultural and social paradigm of tremendous currency in Leskov’s fiction, where a main theme is that of Christianity. Exposed from an early age to various aspects of Russian Orthodox life and tradition, as well as to a variety of religious sects and minorities, the writer appears to have struggled with the question of faith throughout his life.⁵⁴ A close reading of his texts reveals an active concern for Russia’s future as well as for another, and related issue: the state of the contemporary Russian Church. In this respect, Leskov’s “national romanticism” would seem to indicate a profound awareness of the Orthodox heritage or—to use Pushkin’s definition—“the Greek creed,” as being the *differentia specifica* of the Russian national quality or character.⁵⁵ Writers and thinkers also raised these problems against the back-

52 Tim McDaniel, 1996, *The Agony of the Russian Idea*, Princeton, p. 24.

53 As put by Tolz (2001, p. 151), “throughout the nineteenth century, most Russian nation-builders regarded Russia as a European nation, and looked at Asia from a position of unquestionable cultural and political superiority.”

54 See Andrei Leskov, 1984, *Zhizn’ Nikolaia Leskova po ego lichnym, semeinym i nesemeinym zapisiam i pamiatiam*, Moscow.

55 Jostein Bortnes & Ingunn Lunde, 1997, “Foreword,” *Cultural Discontinuity and Reconstruction: The Byzanto-Slav Heritage and the Creation of a Russian National Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Slavica Norvegica 9), Oslo, p. 9.

ground of a mainstream nineteenth-century literary criticism whose tenets were “revolutionary,” anti-religious, atheistic, and did not consider *narodnost*’ to be a cultural phenomenon but something innate, just like the physiological characteristics of a nation. But despite Russia’s embracing romantic ideas from the 1820s onwards and its keenness to dispose of the predominance of French culture, enlightenment elements of Western European Baroque and neo-Classicism seemed to linger in the “Russian” cultural memory throughout the century.⁵⁶ In this connection, Leskov’s portrayal of the multicultural Empire, with all the independent and ambiguous views of its Russian heroes, stands out in bold relief against the traditional understanding of the early nineteenth-century preoccupation with “the language question.”

Why was the language so important? Because within the realm of theological thinking language is directly linked to the most essential characteristics of reality. And the “language question,” with all its ideological divisions and subdivisions, emerged from the millenarian idea that Russia needed a radical and definitive change, which would create a new order and a new language at the cost of a total removal of the olden times or a full restoration of them.⁵⁷ Briefly stated, the linguistic and literary debates hinged on the difference of opinion concerning the Enlightenment (*prosveshchenie*), especially as introduced by the Lomonosov legacy of the preceding century.⁵⁸ At the same time, however, the attitude of every Russian writer sprang from the sense that he was engaged in a common nation-building project as well as a great cultural enterprise.

On the one hand, there was the conservative and Slavophile “Symposium of Lovers of Russian Literature” (*Beseda liubitelei russkogo slova*),

56 Børtnes & Lunde, 1997, pp. 7–8.

57 Boris Uspenskii, 1994, “Spory o iazyke v nachale XIX v. kak fakt russkoi kultury (“Proisshestvie v tsarstve tenei, ili sud’bina rossiiskogo iazyka”—neizvestnoe sochinenie Semena Bobrova),” *Izbrannyye trudy*, Moscow, vol. 2, p. 343.

58 Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–65), for whose odes the empire and the nation of Russia (its greatness, its promise) were the main topic, was not only inspired directly by liturgical texts, but also built his grandest poetic edifices on the foundation of the literary language, Church Slavonic. Moreover, Lomonosov perceived the world as divided and irreducible to one single, all-embracing principle; also, he believed that harmonious beauty in nature was derived from atoms, while *in society there are only conflict and contradictory interests*. On this and most other points, he parted company with the neo-classicist Aleksandr Sumarokov (1718–77), who insisted on literary norms, a system of rules and taboos, stylistic simplicity, a particularly strict view on genres as well as for literature in general.

whose members included its founder Aleksandr Shishkov (who, incidentally, was not a professional linguist) and the poet Gavriila Derzhavin. According to their view, the Russian national literature should take its direction from Church Slavonic, “the root and foundation of the Russian language,” and from medieval Russian liturgical books, folklore and the oral narrative tradition, these being the main prerequisites for all literary creativity in Russian as well as an important bulwark against the damaging Western influences. Here they praised Russia’s great past, advocated the principles of tsardom and Orthodoxy as an integral part of Russian nationality from time immemorial—while rejecting the ideas of the Enlightenment, as expressed, especially, in the Western “mannerist” literature which was too concerned with the trivialities of the heroes’ inner lives. On the other hand, there was the liberal group which has gone down in history under the name of “Arzamas,” whose literati were connected more or less closely with the anti-government Decembrist movement, a revolutionary liberal effort and an expression of social protest. Among them were the nestor of Russian prose Nikolai Karamzin (author of the famous novella “Poor Liza” (*Bednaia Liza*, 1792)), Vasilii Zhukovskii and Aleksandr Pushkin, writers who were either too individualistic or too talented for their Western-oriented group ever to become such an established union of literary allies as the patriotic and nationalist-oriented Symposium. Most Arzamassians shared in the enlightenment ideals of cosmopolitanism, education, and justice. Commonly perceived as lucid and clear-cut, the ideological struggle between the “archaic” Symposiasts and the “innovative” Arzamassians should, however, be understood in less dualistic terms than simple affirmation of Russophile traditional values or promotion of liberal Western ones, or their mutual exclusivity.

Before we examine Leskov’s styling of Russia, we should observe that there was a third grouping in Russian intellectual life, one which found its bearings in the continuation of the enlightenment tradition, notably in the Rousseauan belief in the goodness and sociality of human nature, as well as the high moral and aesthetic value of man’s natural condition. Standing outside the Empire’s status-advancing professional and social networks, these writers often felt compelled to join ideological groupings whose views they could not fully espouse. Hence the many cases of vacillation and transition from one antagonistic camp to another, as well as the constant search for various “centrist” programmes; indeed, many

nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals were neither consistently pro-Symposiast nor pro-Arzamassian, but criticized Derzhavin, Karamzin, the Church-Slavonicist traditionalists and the cosmopolitan liberalists in equal measure. In fact, such in-betweenness is evidence that the exact nature of the great linguistic schism, which Boris Uspenskii calls “a fact of Russian culture,” was never entirely clear to many writers.⁵⁹ And thus the “language quarrel” likewise resonates throughout the second half of the century: we could say that henceforth “literary language finds its bearings in the individual text, which is distinctly undefined and potentially open, not in a system of normative rules”; also, that the problem of stylistics, naturally and predominantly, tends to orient itself towards *speech* or towards “text” in the wider meaning of the word.⁶⁰ Bearing in mind the above considerations, Leskov would seem to be just another Russian voice of “centrist” vacillation. Or would he?

An autodidactic writer with strong Slavophile leanings, well-versed in the Orthodox tradition, liturgical books, folklore and the spoken language of *byt*—Leskov is also a liberal “enlightener” with a keen interest in Protestantism, Catholicism and the religions of the East, as well as an avid student of eighteenth-century Western European fiction. True, in contrast to many Slavophiles who took a romantic view of the unconditional originality and cultural exclusivity of every individual nation, our writer opts for a middle ground; here Leskov, like many *moderate* Slavophile writers, in looking back to “Eastern” Russia before the time of Peter the Great, did not seem to be concerned about the fact that imaginative literature itself was a Western concept, since he felt it was possible to combine pragmatically the best features of Western and Russian “Enlightenment.” (Considering his fascination with the capricious and cosmopolitan split vision of Laurence Sterne, we may note that the Symposiasts ridiculed the English “sentimentalist” because they considered literature to be a

59 More precisely, Uspenskii argues that the two circles influenced each other mutually, while neither of their leading figures was any more defined and consistent than the other in his likes and dislikes, and that the antitheses “Russian” and “the West” on the one hand, and Church Slavonic (that is, bookish, written language) and Russian (that is, colloquial, oral language) on the other, were not absolutes in the contemporary understanding of the key issues in the language and literature debate (besides, Church Slavonic and Russian elements were tied up with West European in an interrelationship of fluidity).

60 Uspenskii, 1994, p. 393.

serious matter best served by the traditional epic genres).⁶¹ As to the more specific question of his “national romanticism,” we shall see that Leskov’s fictional prose reflects strong identification with an Orthodox Christian anthropology, that is, with the idea of the salvation of the soul, the concepts of suffering, atonement and transfiguration, *but also* with a wide range of heterodox, non-Orthodox and even *un-orthodox* views of humankind and culture. Thus, with respect to the Slavophiles’ anti-historical “historicism”—or their aspiration to rebuild the Russian national character on the basis of an Orthodox churchdom—he takes a different path.

In fact, there are two areas of contention which distinguish Leskov of the early 1870s and his representation of Christianity in the Empire from that of his contemporaries:

1. multiethnicity is thematized as a religious problem; that is, *multi-culture* or cultural conflicts are viewed in a religious context
2. Orthodoxy is placed in a series of oppositions:
 - i. external: to Oriental, non-Christian cultures; to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism
 - ii. internal: where the institutionalized Russian Church is opposed to sectarians (the Old Believers, the *starobriadtsy*), where official Orthodoxy is opposed to the idea of a “natural” and more spiritual Christianity

On the whole, the idea of a “real” essential Christianity is part of the lay theology which was characteristic of Russian religious thought in the nineteenth century and which in many ways opposed the institutionalized, official Russian Church and its “imperialistic” Orthodoxy (consider the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky). But as I have already mentioned, the Leskovian hero is often a representative of the official Church who, through his contact with the members of his multicultural parish or society, experiences a conflict of conscience with regard to the doctrinal teachings of the Church; or, he belongs to that particular set of protago-

61 According to Neil Cornwall and Faith Wigzell, textual production in medieval Russia was wholly dominated by ecclesiastical needs. See their “Literaturnost’: Literature and the Market-place,” *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881–1940*, eds. C. Kelly & D. Shepherd, Oxford, 1998, pp. 37ff.

nists who, as we shall see, most richly express the multivalent and contradictory understanding of Russian identity elaborated by the writer: the wanderers and simple yet emotional inhabitants of distant provincial places. Therefore, to conceive of Leskov's representation of Russia in terms of a "Russian national ethnopoetics," to use Vladimir Zakharov's essentialist coinage, seems to me rather inadequate. Instead of asking what renders the writer's literature specifically Russian, I therefore propose to look into how its Russianness participates as an important semantic category in the generation of cultural meaning.

What this book does

My reading of Leskov's works rests on two assumptions already mentioned in the Preface: first, that they are repositories of mental representations, "cultural objects," to be interpreted by us as interdisciplinary readers; and, second, that the author is a moderate ("centrist") conservatist who never represents ethnic identity as something solid, absolute and one-sided, but always as something fluid and permeable. To my knowledge, Leskov's characteristic heterogeneity has never been seriously considered in terms of its anthropological implications. Likewise, the relationship in his fiction between styles, rhetoric and cultures has hitherto been hidden or read in an inconclusive or too conventional way. Following in the footsteps of Kelly, Kuz'min, McLean, Rodseth, Sperrle, Tolz and others, I feel the need to address the multitude of social and cultural voices in Leskov's texts, which are difficult to understand or to tackle productively for many modern readers. In the course of the following pages, I shall argue that Leskov challenges the contemporary view of Russia as a multiethnic state as well as a homogeneous nation held together by the hegemonic force of Orthodoxy.

As to exactly how this is brought about, I will consider four significant *styling strategies* which further distinguish Leskov's fiction of the early 1870s: the making and the un-making of national myths; the invention of the imperfect idyll; the processing of multiethnicity; and, the adaptation of Christian texts. The ambiguous workings of mythopoeia, idyllization, ethnic and religious diversity will first be examined separately, as signposts or indicators of multiculturalist itineraries, with reference to Leskov's chronicle-novel (*Cathedral Folk*, 1872), then jointly, as an interactive assemblage, in relation to four of his tales (*povesti*). It is imperative

here to consider each work's intertextual intention, that is, the way in which various textual elements are buried in a given text (quotations, allusions, reminiscences, and so on) and relate to one another. Moreover, as each of Leskov's texts also participates in, repeats and constitutes *an act of memory*, it exemplifies being a "product of its distancing and surpassing of precursor texts."⁶² Thus their intertextuality reflects the inner movement of a culture as such: by organizing, storing and transforming diverse information in the collective consciousness of a people, a culture continually rewrites and retranscribes itself.⁶³

The rhetorical function of the Orthodox heritage is particularly revealing here: whilst Leskov's characters typically combine components from various Christian texts (the Scriptures, the lives of the saints, sermons and so on) to suit their own interpretation of the provincial environment to which they belong, their remembering and forgetting of national myths—Russian as well as non-Russian—contribute to an ambivalent representation of culture.⁶⁴ Throughout this book, my main concern will therefore be with the creative potential of Leskov's synchronization of heterogeneous styles. I will concentrate on the semantic and cultural experience accumulated within them, or rather: on the resulting "lines of uncertainty" that help create fluid frontiers in his Russia⁶⁵—a generative quality which dominates the five texts to such an extent and on every narrative level that we may speak of *an ambiguous stylistics of confronta-*

62 Lachmann does not consider Leskov's fiction, but she describes the interrelationship between "old" and "new" texts following the presentation of three inseparable models of intertextuality: participation, troping, and transformation. Renate Lachmann, 1997, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*, trans. R. Sellars & A. Wall, Minneapolis, p. 17.

63 For the organization of culture as collective intellect and the non-heritable memory of a social group, see Iurii Lotman, 1985, "Pamiat' v kul'turologicheskom osveshchenii," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 16, pp. 5–9.

64 In this process, the hybridization of cultures is reflected in the confrontation of various stylistic and rhetorical patterns; multiethnicity is mirrored by "multilingualness."

65 For a sociohistorical perspective on such a "middle ground," see Thomas M. Barrett, who, in his article on the frontier and the Empire in process of formation, does not discern the starkly dichotomized conflicts evoked by the rhetoric of colonization and anti-colonial struggle, but conceives instead of peripheral Russia as an arena of shifting possibilities for individuals and communities. Thomas M. Barrett, 1998, "Lines of Uncertainty: The Frontiers of the Northern Caucasus," *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire*, eds. J. Burbank & D. L. Ransel, Bloomington, Ind., pp. 148–73.

tion.⁶⁶ In thus charting the different contextual relations between styles, rhetoric, and cultures, my ambition is to provide a “synthetic” account of Leskov’s representation of the Empire where I try to explain the nature of the multicultural interrelationship between Russianness and other, non-Russian cultures as portrayed in his literary efforts.

The five core texts have been selected according to two main criteria: first, a dramatic energy must result from the “alien in Russia” theme, that is, from the confrontation of the dominant culture with at least one non-dominant or “foreign” one; and second, the main action must take place within Imperial Russia but away from its urban capitals of St Petersburg and Moscow, in more or less remote areas, and/or in a multitude of places.⁶⁷ In turn, the prerequisites of foreignness and provinciality have led me towards the years 1870–75, a period of great social and political upheaval in the Empire. It was then that the revolutionary movement first became prominent; that the anarchic creed of “nihilism,” stressing total personal emancipation, especially for women, combined with the new religion of populism (*narodnichestvo*); that writers-thinkers Aleksandr Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevskii presented their political programme of “critical realism”; and, that young members of the intelligentsia decided to “go to the people” (*khodit’ v narod*), eventually forming an empire-wide conspirational organization.⁶⁸ For Leskov, too, the first half of the 1870s was a time of great intellectual tension and change. Indeed, we may surmise that our five texts reflect, partly in response to this social and political upheaval, a gradual transition in the author’s own mindset: after a well-documented intellectual and religious crisis in 1875, he betrays more scepticism not only towards the Russian State Church, but towards Orthodox Christianity as such. In the end, after 1887, he was to become a Tolstoyan, having arrived in fact at many of Tolstoy’s positions

66 Renate Lachmann (1997, pp. 122–36) has shown how the mixing of styles, or syncretism, prevents the consolidation of any one meaning.

67 For this reason alone, such well-known works as “Lady McBeth of Mtsensk” (*Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda*, 1865), a gory story of deceit and murder which is eternalized by Shostakovich’s opera, and “The Left-Hander” (*Levsha*, 1881), about a left-handed blacksmith who is sent to England by Tsar Nicholas I to impress the British, are not included.

68 The latter event marks the climax of the Russian populist movement, whose revolutionary strategies for “reknitting the torn fabric,” for “bringing state and people closer together,” had largely failed by 1877. Cf. Geoffrey Hosking, 1997, *Russia: People and Empire*, Cambridge, Mass., pp. 345–66, 390.

before Tolstoy himself did. With these extratextual elements in mind, I intend to show how a semiotic web is created in each one of Leskov's texts through the interplay of the four multicultural strategies mentioned above, all of which point in many different directions and produce an unfinalized universe of national, religious and cultural meaning.

This book is organized as a running narrative in chronological order. In the course of two main parts, each consisting of four chapters, I examine five of Leskov's better known works of fiction from the early 1870s from various positions reflecting an anthropological sensibility in literary scholarship. Inasmuch as the selection of texts has also been guided by the availability of material in English, it is a compromise between practical and aesthetic considerations. Following this Introduction, Part One examines four fundamental styling strategies in Leskov's prose fiction with examples taken from the chronicle-novel *Cathedral Folk* (*Soboriane*). In continuation, Part Two turns to the following tales: *The Sealed Angel* (*Zapechatlennyi angel*), *The Enchanted Wanderer* (*Ocharovannyi strannik*), *On the Edge of the World* (*Na kraiu sveta*), and *Childhood Years* (*Detskie gody*). An Epilogue, in which I expand on the challenges of cultural and religious diversity as portrayed by Leskov, suggests some themes for further inquiry and proposes hypotheses based on the conclusions of this book.