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Dan Kubala

Bazarov's Nihilism in Turgenev's *Fathers & Sons*

"Whoever has once in his life, if only for a few minutes, looked at things with the eyes of a Bazarov

- such a person remains a Nihilist all his life" - Dmitry Pisarev

Introduction

The character of Bazarov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* had a complicated relationship with the Nihilist movement in Russia at the time, with some of the movement's proponents criticizing Turgenev for his negative portrayal of Bazarov's nihilism and others heralding Bazarov as a positive model for a nihilistic individual. In this paper I aim to understand the nature of this relationship and arrive at a clearer understanding of the peculiarities of Bazarov's nihilism.

To do so, I will first present a brief history of the Russian Nihilist movement and a summary of Nihilist belief, and then engage in an overview of some of the scholarly understanding of the peculiar flavor of Bazarov's nihilism. Specifically, I will compare the approaches of Ronald Hingley, Geoffrey Clive and Keiji Nishitani, demonstrating how each of the three provides different reasons for Bazarov's nihilistic shortcomings. Finally, I will present my own conclusions regarding the subject. I claim that despite Bazarov's monumental importance for the Nihilist movement he fails to be a perfect Nihilist in many ways, and furthermore that it is precisely these imperfections that make Bazarov such an attractive and sympathetic character.

A Brief History of Russian Nihilism

Russian nihilism was “born as a fashion in clothing, manners and reading-matter, only to mature as revolutionary terrorism and reach its climax with the slaughter of the autocrat” Tsar Alexander II in 1881 (Hingley 14). The movement, however, did not always possess this radical and violent nature, nor was the Tsar himself so despised. Indeed, the advent of Alexander II’s reign in 1855 brought about a period of legal and governmental reform and of increased openness and a relaxation of tyranny, inspiring high morale and hope in many. This newfound freedom allowed for the first time the formation of corporate student activities in the universities and the possibility to travel and form student colonies abroad (26, 29). But the depletion of Alexander II’s reforming impetus and his shift towards more oppressive policies inevitably birthed unrest.

The early Nihilists attracted attention through their appearance, frequently sporting blue spectacles and long beards, smoking cigarettes and talking rudely and loudly in their refutation of traditional beliefs (17). Most were university students or teachers, though many of the former never graduated, having been expelled or voluntarily leaving and thus attaining the ‘Nihilist diploma’ (28). Some merely wanted to shock their elders, while others fought for palpable change. Many felt that the emancipation of the Serfs in 1861 only helped the newly emancipated in name only, leaving them poorer than before. This same year saw the first of many significant student riots by the prototypes of the Nihilists - the ‘New Men’. This unrest was eventually dealt with by the government, but its anti-Nihilist measures frequently backfired and provoked more opposition.

The interplay between increasing Nihilist resistance and increasing government oppression continued for a little over a decade and was rife with trials, assassination attempts, schemes, secret

societies, censorship, and riots. Highlights of this era include the publication of Chernyshevsky's controversial *What is to be Done?* in 1863 and the trial of the '193' in 1878. (35, 79). The former introduced one of the key texts of the Nihilist canon, and the latter incensed Nihilists to the point where assassination of the Tsar became a significant vision.

The Nihilist movement lost most of its weight following this climactic assassination in 1881. This radical action had its roots in sheer frustration more than in logic. There was little to no plan for the future, and "the Nihilists were, alas, blissfully ignorant of the lengths to which tyranny can go," assuming wrongly that any future was preferable to the present (97). Five of the most prominent conspirators in the assassination were publicly executed soon after, and the new Tsar Alexander III severely cracked down on the Nihilists, ending their prime era.

The Beliefs of Russian Nihilism

Any effort to pin down what Nihilists in 19th century Russia actually stood for and believed is necessarily difficult due to the nebulous nature of the movement. The historian Ronald Hingley simply defines the Nihilists in a historico-political manner as the "Russian radicals and revolutionaries in the reign of Alexander II" (121), believing that "Nihilist theory was a vague assortment of ideas, not a coherent body of doctrine" (40). George Clive presents a list of thirteen alternative philosophical definitions of nihilism, including: "The belief in Nothing on instinct", "no sense of values arising from the feeling that God is dead", "indifference to what moves people most of the time", and "the practice of destruction for its own sake," among many others (Clive 221). Despite the extreme variance in the possible definitions of Nihilism, politically or philosophically, there are common strains to the

movement's thought, and it is useful to summarize these strains here so that I may later see how Turgenev's Bazarov lives up to them.

I will begin with the movement's practicable beliefs. Possibly due to their common root in academia, the Nihilists believed in the beneficence of education (Hingley 27). In addition, they took strong interest in the rights of women, promoting their freedom in the domains of careers and sexuality (30). Some, such as Chernyshevsky, went as far as to encourage their partners to pursue affairs, believing that equality was not sufficient and that men need to be underdogs for a while. Not surprisingly, they often despised the institution of marriage. Nihilists also took professed a love and affinity for the peasant, even going so far as making so-called "pilgrimages to the people" and spending summers sleeping and living with their countrymen (75). They have been accused of being peasant lovers in the same sense that people are animal-lovers, because the gap between these literate, atheistic and anti-Tsarist intellectuals and the illiterate, orthodox and Tsar-supporting peasants was too big for any real connection to take place.

Now for the movement's common ideological stances. Nihilists were very frequently atheistic, although this is explained by the fact that most students at the time were atheistic and most Nihilists were students (28). Coupled with their atheism was a stalwart belief in a Germanic science, one that was decidedly post-theological and post-philosophical. This science supported positivism and materialism, and emphasized above all else realism (Nishitani 133). Thus it makes sense that Nihilists opposed themselves against Romantic idealism at all costs, and in particular against senseless aestheticism. There was a common saying of at the time that a good pair of boots was worth more than the entire works of Pushkin, and it is this spirit that the Nihilist attempts to capture (Hingley 45).

It is a widespread view nowadays that nihilism is a belief in nothing at all, or something akin to Clive's characterization of nihilism as "the practice of destruction for its own sake" (Clive 221). But if not entirely untrue this common understanding is at least very nuanced. Perhaps Hingley puts it best:

"Deriving as it does from Latin *nihil*, the name Nihilist seems to imply a belief either in nothing at all or in destruction for its own sake. In fact, as has been seen, Nihilists were not men of little or no faith. Far from it: they mostly believed passionately in something, if only in a hotch-potch involving revolution, the Russian peasant, Chernyshevsky, some kind of Socialism, the idea of progress, science, materialism and so on. They preached destruction often enough, but chiefly as a means to an end, the necessary prelude to some dimly conceived, but fervently desired new order." (Hingley 57)

Nihilism manifested itself as a destructive force in Russian society as it attempted to tear down political and social institutions, but that doesn't make it an entirely negative movement. As I have described, there is much that the Nihilists stood for.

Bazarov's Nihilism

With this understanding of Russian nihilism I can now properly explore Bazarov's relationship with the movement. Before I begin, however, I must note that it's inherently difficult to separate "nihilism" from "Bazarov" and discuss the two as separate entities because it was Turgenev himself who in writing *Father & Sons* first popularized this label and applied it to Bazarov. But this doesn't make efforts at analyzing the relationship between the two meaningless, since there was a spirit of the time and a kind of person that Turgenev was attempting to depict through Bazarov, and indeed there are good

reasons for labeling Bazarov as a “bad Nihilist”. I will present three scholarly understandings of Bazarov, and each of them has unique reasons for describing Bazarov’s nihilistic failings.

First, I’ll begin with the historian Ronald Hingley. He describes Bazarov as “the original Nihilist” (and Dmitry Pisarev, the owner of the radical journal *Russian Word*, as “his chief prophet”), but at the same time he maintains that “Bazarov is not the complete Nihilist” (45, 49). Hingley gives much support for this claim: the fact that Bazarov fell hopelessly in love with Madame Odintsov makes him a failure at the women problem, as he is more concerned with her attractiveness than her theoretical possibilities. Furthermore, Bazarov never states his atheism outright, nor does he self-identify as a revolutionary. Indeed, despite being described by Turgenev as a “man of action”, we never see Bazarov do much of anything other than strike a pose in Hingley’s opinion, and he often sits around the Russian countryside feeling very bored. His emphasis on death and his sentimental love diminish his stature, and for this reason he can’t be a complete Nihilist. Hingley feels that although Bazarov played a crucial role as a figure in the history of the Nihilist movement, there is much about him that goes against the movement’s beliefs (46). We shall see this sentiment echoed in the other two scholars.

Geoffrey Clive, in his essay “Romanticism and Anti-Romanticism in the Nihilism of Bazarov”, analyzes the relation Turgenev’s character with Romanticism to arrive at a similar conclusion. He first notes how unconventional Bazarov is as an “outsider of modern literature”, since “he is neither demonically evil in practice nor morbidly garrulous in theory” (Clive 216). He is strangely quiet, desires to cure the sick, and is surprisingly civil even to those who disagree with him. Clive, as mentioned before, takes a more philosophical definition of Nihilism, and thus if this school of thought vouches for the implication that ‘if God is dead, then everything is permitted’, Bazarov’s Nihilism constitutes an

important piece of contradictory evidence (217). Here is a man who “never [gazes] up to heaven except when [he wants] to sneeze” (Turgenev 107), yet at the same time wishes nevertheless to help his fellow man. “Bazarov dissects his frogs not in order to murder the Czar but to become a good doctor” (Clive 222). This gives Clive the first hints that Bazarov has a very unique interpretation of Nihilism.

For Clive, the uniqueness of Bazarov’s Nihilism stems from the conflicting strains of Nihilistic anti-Romanticism and Romanticism within him. There is certainly much evidence in *Fathers & Sons* of Bazarov’s passion for Realism and animosity towards Romanticism. His materialism and anti-aestheticism are rampant throughout the novel, as he believes that “a good chemist is twenty times as useful as any poet” and that “Raphael’s not worth a brass farthing” (Turgenev 20, 43). Bazarov is disgusted with philosophical abstractions that make no substantial difference to the predicaments of being human, and only is concerned with the useful and the real. He wants an understanding of the way the world truly works, and that means placing himself against the Romantics who loved the enigmatic and encouraged mystification (Clive 225). At the same time, however, Clive feels that although Bazarov abhors Romanticism, there is much in him that identifies him as a Romantic. His friendship with Arkady is a very Romantic friendship, and of course he very notably falls in love. In his love for Madame Odintsov he moves from wanting to “see [her body] on the dissecting table” (Turgenev 63) to viewing her as an actual person. Furthermore, despite his consistent posturing about not really caring about anything and his constant nonchalance, it is evident that he does care about much. On an important level, “not to care about authorities, public opinion, etc. is to care about *something*” (Clive 227). Part of Bazarov’s suffering in *Fathers & Sons* stems from his awareness of the Romantic in himself. “In his conversations with Anna Sergyevna he expressed more strongly than ever his calm contempt for

everything idealistic; but when he was alone, with indignation he recognized idealism in himself' (Turgenev 74). Bazarov has streaks of Romanticism within himself and it torments him greatly. Thus for Clive Bazarov's anti-Romantic Nihilism is tempered by his Romantic tendencies.

Finally, Keiji Nishitani devotes a good segment of his book "The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism" to Bazarov in order to argue the claim that Bazarov is not a practitioner of true Nihilism. On one level he does agree with some of Clive's claims, specifically that Bazarov's love for Odintsov is the "only point in which his inner nature could have broken through his nihilism" (Nishitani 136), and that he suffers greatly due to a questioning of the authenticity of his Nihilism. But ultimately, Nishitani's primary reasoning is much different from that of Hingley or Clive in his attempts to establish the inauthenticity of Bazarov's Nihilism. For Nishitani there are two stages of Nihilism. There is firstly a fanatic kind of Nihilism, one "latent in science, socialism, and the ego" (136). This kind of Nihilism places matters outside the self in order to negate them, and manifests itself as a fanaticism for the beliefs of Nihilism. But there is a deeper, truer form of Nihilism, one which negates even the naive version of Nihilism above. This deeper level is an "introverted nihilism which has become an X for itself" and rather than externalizing and negating matters confronts them on their own ground deeply inside the self (137). Nishitani characterizes the difference between two as the difference between a naive Nihilism "in itself" and a truer Nihilism "for itself".

For Nishitani, Bazarov's particular form of Nihilism is entirely the first kind of Nihilism. Indeed, Bazarov's defining characteristics are his extreme egoism, his belief in science and the scalpel, and his opinions on society. "He despises the aristocracy and at the same time is unable to throw in his lot with the people. The only course left open to him is to assert himself in every situation. There is a strong

element of egoism in his nihilism; and yet as a nihilist who negates everything, he still entertains possibilities and ideals. In his egoism the scientific spirit of realism is conjoined with the socialistic spirit of idealism in a chaotic blend, over which there hovers, as a fourth moment, the dark mood of fanaticism so peculiar to the Russians. These apparently contradictory features that appear in Bazarov have as the sole focus of their connection the core of nihilism in his person” (135). He never attains the deeper form of Nihilism because he still does believe fanatically and passionately in things, and this is his fundamental shortcoming and an eternal source of suffering for the character.

Conclusion

Despite the different lenses that Hingley, Clive, and Nishitani use to analyze Bazarov’s Nihilism, they all seem to come to a common consensus that Turgenev’s character was in some sense not a true Nihilist. Examining his behavior in *Fathers & Sons* and seeing his friendship, his falling in love, and his desire to help others shows that there are things Bazarov does care about, and sometimes cares about fanatically, despite his posture. It’s possible that when Clive points to Bazarov’s Romantic tendencies as the source of the uniqueness of his Nihilism, it’s the same thing as Nishitani pointing to his fanaticism as that which conditions his Nihilism and prevents it from attaining a deeper level. Regardless of the specifics of the reason, all sources analyzed point to the same conclusion: even though he is a prototype of the Nihilist and a critically important figure in the movement, Bazarov is not a ‘true Nihilist’.

This goes very far in explaining the violent reactions against Turgenev’s character from all sides. “Some of those who found Bazarov’s attitudes and behavior repugnant damned Turgenev for seeming to admire the character he had created. Meanwhile, those who shared the outlook and goals

that Turgenev attributed to Bazarov were enraged at being, as they thought, lampooned and vilified in the novel” (Turgenev vi). Bazarov is nihilistic enough to outrage some, but not radical enough to garner the support of others. “Turgenev’s attitude is altogether too indecisive” (Hingley 46), and thus his character was alienated from both generations. We see this alienation from older and younger camps within *Fathers & Sons* as well, as Bazarov fights with Pavel and the older generation constantly yet despite his efforts is unable to relate with the peasantry.

Perhaps the imperfections of Bazarov’s Nihilism are precisely what make him attractive and compelling as a character. “Bazarov is existentially serious without being dogmatically committed, romantically individualistic without ceasing to care for others, nihilistically spirited without wallowing in absurdities. He is neither ambitious nor apathetic. In his refusal to play the game according to the rules of society he exhibits a distinctively modern form of heroism” (Clive 229). There is much to be admired about Bazarov: his authentic attempt to hold things accountable to reality and not to principle or authority, his desire to help others, and particularly his valuation of human existence over abstract theory. This last point is poignantly brought about in the moment in *Fathers & Sons* where Bazarov and Pavel Petrovich duel. After Pavel Petrovich misses his shot and Bazarov lands a bullet in Pavel’s leg, the latter desires to continue the duel based on an abstract commitment to honor and tradition, whereas the former immediately rushes over to help. Bazarov says that he’s “not a duellist, but a doctor” (Turgenev 128) and in this moment establishes everything that’s beautiful about his commitment to reality over abstraction.

Indeed, there was much that was abrasive and off-putting about the real, historical Nihilists that we do not find in Bazarov. They were frequently rude and uncivil in their behavior and talk, and as

previously noted, even though Bazarov does not hesitate to disagree and voice his opinion, he is surprisingly non-violent and accepting in his disagreement. More importantly, the Nihilists were often accused, with reason, of taking things too far. Nishitani notes that the Nihilists show “a predilection for arguing ‘Why shouldn’t it be that way?’ no matter how drastic a conclusion they may end up in, pursuing the logic of an idea to the point where it loses all contact with actual reality” (Nishitani 129). Hingley’s summary of the history of the movement provides many examples of this observation in action. He notes that Chernyshevsky’s love life “so richly illustrates the common Nihilist tendency to regard human conduct, even in the most intimate personal relationships, as something subject to mechanical *a priori* regulation on the basis of abstract principles” (Hingley 35), and despite the Nihilist profession to abhor all principles, we frequently have seen many occasions in which they sacrifice reality for principle themselves.

So perhaps Bazarov is not a true Nihilist, despite the fact that he was the ‘original Nihilist’. But that might be exactly what makes him attractive. He does believe in things fanatically, and this might make him less than ideal as a Nihilist. Nevertheless, Bazarov’s cares mean he is not someone who mechanically believes in extremes and abstractions, but rather a human.

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