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The Role of Narrative, Plot, and Abstract Discussion in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*

Thomas Hedges, 2012

The Russian social critic Dmitry I. Pisarev writes in his essay *Bazarov* that "Turgenev's novel, in addition to its artistic beauty, is remarkable for the fact that it stirs the mind, leads to reflection, although, it does not solve a single problem itself". The novel's brilliance does not reside in the situations we witness, but in the author's attitudes toward those situations. Pisarev notes that the author's attitude "leads to reflection precisely because everything is permeated with the most complete and most touching sincerity" (Pisarev 186).

Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* is not a complete story. The novel does not recount a remarkable event, its ending is ambiguous and after having finished the book the reader does not experience a catharsis. Nothing is resolved. Pisarev says that "the events" in the novel "are not particularly entertaining and that the idea is not startlingly true. The novel has neither plot nor denouement, nor a particularly well-considered structure" (185). But *Fathers and Sons* does not rely on the plot to make any of the over-arching arguments. Similar to the central character Bazarov's view of life, the novel is made up of abstract scenes that do not hold any particular significance. These scenes, instead of adding to the storyline, develop the characters' personalities. But after having finished the book, the reader is touched by what the narrator has to say about the condition of life. The abstract discussions in *Fathers and Sons*, however disjointed they seem, imitate life's inconsistencies.

"One will observe a queer feature of Turgenev's structure," writes the famous Russian literary critic Vladimir Nabokov in his book *Lectures on Russian Literature*. "He takes tremendous trouble to introduce his characters properly," notes Nabokov, "endowing them with pedigrees and recognizable traits, but when he has finally assembled them all, lo and behold the tale is finished and the curtain has gone down whilst a ponderous epilogue takes care of whatever is supposed to happen to his invented creatures beyond the horizon of his novel" (Nabokov 73). Turgenev spends much of his time setting up his scenes and illustrating his characters' personalities rather than making them act. The core of the novel is located in the characters' emotions and features, not in their life story.

This is not to say that there are no events in *Fathers and Sons*. "On the contrary, this novel is replete with action", admits Nabokov.

There are quarrels and other clashes, there is even a duel—and a good deal of

rich drama attends Bazarov's death. But one will notice that all the time throughout the development of the action...the past lives of the characters are being pruned and improved by the author, and all the time he is terribly concerned with bringing out their souls and minds and temperaments by means of functional illustrations, for instance the way simple folks are attached to Bazarov or the way Arkady tries to live up to his friend's new-found wisdom. (73)

Turgenev includes these events only to better illustrate his characters' traits and mannerisms. They demonstrate the characters' personalities, and don't serve to develop a fluid narrative that captivates the reader. The reader is almost dissatisfied with the novel's ending. There is no resolution. There is no answer.

Turgenev's narrator is the vehicle for conveying the "sincerity" that Pisarev mentions. The narrator does not fully understand the conversations we hear throughout the novel. He will often admit that he knows even less than the reader and the characters, suggesting that these characters have broken away of Turgenev's control. During Anna Sergeevna's discussion with Bazarov in chapter XXV, the narrator says that "they both thought they were telling the truth. Was the truth, the whole truth, contained in their words? They didn't know, and the author knows even less" (Turgenev 134). By admitting that he does not understand the motives of Anna and Bazarov, the narrator adds a level of unsolved depth to his characters. And this accurately reflects reality, for we will never understand people's motives

and experiences. Since the characters in the novel retain human mystery, they come to life. The human emotion in their dialogue "is deeply felt; this feeling breaks through against the will and realization of the author himself and suffuses the objective narration, instead of merely expressing itself in lyric digressions" (Pisarev 186).

The narrator does not understand the psychology of his characters and can only describe their conversations objectively. He says that their motives and intentions are foreign to him as well as the reader. The narrative, according to Pisarev, is not particularly entertaining or important. And perhaps the very lack of a structured narrative is a point in itself. The abstract discussions and dialogue between the characters reveal what we do not comprehend in life. The author, in depicting these seemingly random circumstances, points out that our lives will not solve any problems. The characters struggle with the same questions of love and suffering as any other human being. Turgenev depends on the reader's ability to feel for the characters and understand their condition, not their psychology.

One could say that the novel consists of vignettes, little discussions characters have with one another. In each vignette we are exposed more and more to each character's personality. We then begin to form an image or picture that encompasses all of the people in the novel. We consider their anger, pain, love, happiness and philosophies on life. The narrative in these vignettes does not tell the story of someone's life or of a noteworthy episode, but of several people in the countryside that happen to

be struggling with the meaning of existence.

We could then consider *Fathers and Sons* a work of existentialism. Turgenev presents to us these abstract scenes without explaining their importance. The clarity and meaning of the novel is in the decisions the characters make. The reader can concretely observe one person's actions in response to life's absurdity. Bazarov tries to make sense of life in chapter XXVI, when he is talking to Arkady before his death:

It turns out there's empty space in my suitcase and I'm stuffing hay into it. That's just how it is in the suitcase of our lives; it doesn't matter what you stuff in, as long as there's no empty space. (Turgenev 140)

Bazarov has chosen a life that faces a hard truth. Those who seek happiness he says abuse themselves; "but we find all this boring—give us someone else! We've got to smash someone else! You're a soft, liberal gentleman," he says to Arkady, who has taken the route of happiness and love. In this way choices govern people's essence. The situations we are put in are neutral. They are abstract. We can either chose to live in comfort like Arkady or to live in defiance of the establishment like Bazarov.

Vladimir Nabokov says in his lecture on *Fathers and Sons* that in letting Bazarov die, Turgenev "takes his creature out of a self-imposed pattern and places him in the normal world of chance." This world does not follow our conventional narrative. It defies human expectation. Nabokov continues in saying that Turgenev "lets Bazarov die

not from any peculiar inner development of Bazarov's nature, but by the blind decree of fate" (Nabokov 71). Turgenev understands that life is random and absurd. The reader would not expect Bazarov to die from typhus but from some consequence of his nihilistic view on life.

Nabokov mentions in his lecture the irony in Bazarov's death from typhus. Earlier in the novel, Turgenev describes a relationship that forms between Bazarov and Fenechka, the charming mistress. It is that "casual flirtation that brings on a duel" between Bazarov and Pavel Kirsanov, Arkady's uncle. "However, not Fenichka but typhus" writes Nabokov, "will be the cause of Bazarov's death" (73). In a world where the author has control over what happens to the characters, it seems paradoxical that Bazarov's death comes not as a result of his nihilism, but from his efforts to help a dying man.

Turgenev, however, takes a position in between the young Bazarov and the old Pavel and Nikolai. He acknowledges life's confusion like Bazarov, but points to love as a place of stability like the older generation. It is what has given meaning to the relationships between the sons and their fathers. In the last scene we see that Bazarov's life has not been in vain. His parents have come to visit his grave:

They can't forsake this place where they seem to feel closer to their son, to their memories of him...Can it be that their prayers and tears are futile? Can it really be that love, sacred, devoted love is not all-powerful? Oh, no! However passionate, sinful, rebellious the heart

buried in this grave, the flowers growing on it look out at us serenely with their innocent eyes: they tell us not only of that eternal peace, that great peace of "indifferent" nature; they tell us also of eternal reconciliation and life everlasting... (Turgenev 157)

For the first time in the novel the narrator asserts his opinion in saying "Oh, no!" to the nihilism of Bazarov. Bazarov's interaction with his parents before his death, while it neither formed a considerable narrative nor deciphered any mysteries of our existence, embodies life's essence. The image of these "two feeble old people" who "walk with a heavy step" and then "fall on their knees...weeping bitterly, gazing attentively at the headstone under which their son is buried" touches the reader because it is nothing extraordinary, yet it captures the pain and compassion that define pure essence (156-157).

The moments in both the novel and life that do not hold any particular significance create its meaning. In the midst of the confusion of life, individuals must act in some way. Bazarov, while he rejects attributing any value to his existence, has made decisions that establish meaning between his parents, Arkady, Anna Sergeevna and even Pavel. Dmitry I. Pisarev writes at the end of his essay that the Bazarovs in life do not know how to suffer. They will only feel that life is "empty, boring, drab and meaningless". They understand that their existence is not accompanied with a magnificent narrative that will replace their boredom. Pisarev then asks "What is to be done? We must live while we are alive", he answers, "eat dry bread if there

is no roast beef, know many women if it is not possible to love a woman, and, in general, we must not dream about orange trees and palms, when under foot are snowdrifts and the cold tundra" (206).

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