

## CHAPTER 9

## NIHILISM

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NIHILISM emerged in Russia in the mid-nineteenth century. The term, which derives from the Latin *nihil*, nothing, signals its negating stance, which assumed two interlocking forms. One, which I will call practical, consisted in the rejection of all existing political, social, and religious authorities and came to the fore in the 1860s. A second, more theoretical, emerged in the 1840s and denied the directive power of all abstract principles as guides to action, along with the ability of signifiers such as good and evil to capture and account for human experience, especially suffering. Faith in a providential God and in a beneficent plan that organizes worldly events was to be discarded. In its most extreme form, theoretical nihilism asserted that history and life itself contain no inherent meaning, recognizing value only in the individual's momentary drives and inclinations. Although these propositions proved difficult to sustain, several of Russia's most influential writers experimented with them, including Vissarion Belinsky, Alexander Herzen, and Ivan Turgenev, followed by Dmitrii Pisarev. Of these four, Pisarev came closest to combining nihilism's practical, largely life-affirming iconoclasm with the grimmer implications of the theoretical position.

The term 'nihilism' had always expressed opprobrium. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it served French and German philosophers and literary theorists as a cudgel to disparage their opponents and was largely directed against philosophical idealists and literary romantics. Both were faulted for taking representations generated from within the mind—as opposed to the material world—as their starting point, constructing a system on the basis of nothing: nihilism (Riedel 1978, 380–5). It was in this pejorative sense that nihilism first entered Russian vocabulary in the late 1820s (Aleksseev 1927, 415–16). In Western Europe, 'nihilism' grew ever more elastic, easily combining accusations of philosophical and aesthetic heterodoxy with religious free-thinking and atheism, as well as with social and political non-conformism. The word further described a spirit of disenchantment, boredom, and alienation from society. Contrariwise, during the 1840s, and especially after 1848, nihilism would denote destructive furore and was used to discredit social and political rebellion and revolutionary violence (Riedel 1978, 390–9).

Nihilism gained greater currency and coherence after the publication of Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* in 1862. Turgenev put the word into the mouths of radicals of the 1860s generation, asserting that they both (a) discarded abstract 'principles' unattached to empirical data as meaningless, and (b) stridently defended their right to criticize every social and political defect without recognizing the obligation to offer positive solutions (Turgenev 1981, 25, 51). While Pisarev welcomed Turgenev's novel and the designation nihilist, most of his peers rejected it as a calumny (Kirpotin 1933, chapter 8; Pozefsky 2003, chapters 3, 6). Contrary to Turgenev's assertions, most radicals continued to view positive principles such as truth and justice as the lynchpin of their movement, which aimed to resolve existing social problems. Despite radical remonstrance, the label 'nihilist' stuck, creating a terminological pitfall for scholars.

Secondary literature on Russian nihilism has concentrated on its practical side, treating 1860s radicalism and nihilism as synonymous. As participants in a subculture or counterculture, we are told, young nihilists rejected established authorities—from teachers, parents, and priests to the police, state officials, and the autocrat himself, developing a strong identification with other members of their generation (Brower 1975, 35–6; Confino 1990, 518–20). Commands were no longer to be obeyed; truths were no longer to be accepted without empirical verification. Historians have attributed these changes to Russia's crushing defeat in the Crimean War, to Nicholas I's death and Alexander II's liberalizing reforms, as well as to the growing self-assertion of commoners, *raznochintsy*, among students and journalists. Nihilists' insistence on empirical verification was further ascribed to the spread of philosophical materialism, which developed in Germany in the mid-1840s and early 1850s (Rogers 1960, 12).

Highlighting practical nihilism's performative flavour, historians pointed to the importance of dress and comportment: 'rudeness and curt manners, negligent styles of dress and even untidiness became meaningful, ideologically weighted signs that immediately distinguished nihilists from the members of the opposing camp (the traditionalists, the reactionaries)' (Brower 1975, 15–16; Paperno 1988, 18; Ely 2016, 76–9). Radical literature, including novels and works of literary criticism, provided some behavioural models, but so too did 'anti-nihilist' novels, which portrayed radicals as rude, crass, slovenly, conceited, even as driven by a personal will to power (Moser 1964, chapters 3, 6). Nihilists picked up these stereotypes in provocative gestures of defiance, relying heavily on the irreverence with which they delivered their gestural 'no'. Pisarev's pithy formulation has often been used as a summation for nihilism itself: 'what can be smashed should be; what stands up under the blows is acceptable; what flies into a thousand pieces is trash' (Brower 1975, 15; Pisarev 2000a, 284).

Nihilist irreverence, however, rested on more than pithy phrases. Considering its theoretical basis apart from the overall culture of radicalism of the 1860s—instead of treating them as identical—allows us to engage its fundamental assertions about the relationship between the individual and society, about personal commitments and obligations. These are not adequately explained by invoking the immediate social and political circumstances of Alexander II's early reign, or even the influence of philosophical materialism, despite the latter's overt revolutionary implications. Materialists believed

that science would bolster the political force of concepts such as equality and justice; that historical progress was underwritten by these principles; and that these should serve as directives for action (Frede 2010, 71). Nihilists, properly speaking, recognized neither principles nor progress.

This chapter explores the lineage that connected the theoretical nihilism of the 1840s to that of the 1860s. The continuities have garnered scant attention (Plotkin 1945, 194–7; Novikov 1972, 81–8; Confino 1990, 494, 499), partly due to reservations about theoretical nihilism itself. As Charles Moser wrote, it was philosophically incoherent and socially unacceptable. If it were consistent, nihilism would stand for ‘intellectual negation and the sheer destruction of whatever may in fact exist, be it material or spiritual’ and would permit ‘no positive philosophical or religious beliefs at all. In its pure form, a doctrine of this type has been held by very few people; no society could tolerate a man who attempted seriously to put such theories into practice’ (Moser 1964, 18–19). As we will see, there were indeed inconsistencies in the negating views that Belinsky, Herzen, Turgenev, and Pisarev expressed, but these contradictions should not exclude them from historical consideration.

## THE OBJECTS OF DENIAL

The negating spirit that took hold of Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev in the 1840s took aim at two propositions, theological and philosophical. One target was the view that the individual is obliged to navigate between good and evil as transcendent categories, which endow life with moral meaning, and that the function of the will is to choose between them. A second target was the assertion that events in an individual’s life and in history are significant only insofar as they contribute to a grander scheme of development.

Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev all studied at Moscow University during the early reign of Nicholas I, matriculating between 1829 and 1833. Reforms had recently been initiated to ensure that students—future state servitors—would be politically reliable and pious. In 1827, Holy writ (*zakon bozhii*) became a mandatory subject at entrance exams, overseen by Petr Ternovskii.<sup>1</sup> His lectures, too, were mandatory for first-year students. While Ternovskii’s lecture notes have not been preserved, his textbook, *Dogmatic Theology*, first published in 1838 and reissued in 1839 and 1844, may offer insights into his teaching. Its core message was that faith and morality are coterminous, because conceptions of good and evil can only come from God. Humans had been endowed at birth with an ‘idea’ or ‘representation’ of God and of abstract concepts such as infinity and eternity, prompting them to strive for perfection (Ternovskii 1839, 2, 4). They were also endowed with the freedom to choose between good and evil. Adam and

<sup>1</sup> On Ternovskii, see *Biograficheskii slovar’*, 479–82. Individuals who passed his exam included Nikolai Stankevich, Mikhail Bakunin, Alexander Herzen, Nikolai Ogarev, Vissarion Belinskii, Konstantin Aksakov, Iurii Samarin, Afanasii Fet, Mikhail Lermontov, Ivan Goncharov, Boris Chicherin, and Ivan Turgenev. Many remembered Ternovskii’s entrance exams and the fear they inspired (Esin et al. 2005, 132, 138, 179, 182, 199, 208, 227, 233, 272, 285, 315, 323).

Eve's defiance of God's will had constituted an 'abuse of freedom' (Ternovskii 1839, 108, 162). After the Fall, their offspring inherited free will, but the capacity to choose was compromised both by a weakened faculty of reason and corrupted body. Reason had grown 'errant', adopting a 'false notion of the good' and thus provided the will with false counsel, directing it towards evil. Evil became an inclination that emanated from inside the person and was almost impossible to resist (Ternovskii 1839, 154, 106). Though humans never lost the ability to distinguish good from evil, they must first 'rein in' sinful inclinations. Only faith in God and God's grace itself could grant this power. Humans could accomplish nothing good by their own strength (*sobstvennymi silami*), but must act in the faith that God would aid them (Ternovskii 1839, 187, 172, 195).

What Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev made of Ternovskii's lectures is unclear, though both Belinsky and Herzen spoke of him with contempt (Poliakov 1950, 314, 350–2; Esin et al. 2005, 132). Yet, Ternovskii's theology would furnish them with an important point of departure, namely the conception of freedom as an endowment that exists only to enable a choice between transcendent values of good and evil. More poignantly, they would recapitulate Ternovskii's representation of reason and the will as standing at loggerheads with one another: opting for the good must involve something other than rational choice.

A second body of knowledge that all three reacted to (and against) was German idealism. Herzen began studying idealism—mediated by Schelling—while at Moscow University; Belinsky and Turgenev followed suit in the mid-1830s thanks to their burgeoning friendship with Nikolai Stankevich and Mikhail Bakunin, who introduced them to the philosophy of Fichte and Schelling, as well as to the grand master, Hegel. Turgenev travelled to Berlin in 1838 and studied philosophy there, returning to Moscow to complete a master's degree. Turgenev was tied to Belinsky through Stankevich, and he would also befriend Herzen.

German idealism taught them to view the natural world and human history as imbued with spirit, as manifestations of a transcendent idea, developing through time to reach perfection. The individual who seeks knowledge and insight participates in the development of the idea. Reason allows him to grasp the logic of its development, constituting the process of discovery whereby spirit attains self-knowledge. Human history, too, must be understood as part of the unfolding of the idea, passing through various stages from despotism to freedom. In this manner, reason, trapped in the frail shell of individual cognition, passes by tumultuous stages from darkness to light. In his highly influential *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel drew on these metaphors to describe the dialectical process of discovery. Embodying mind or spirit in its male pronoun (*der Geist*), Hegel wrote,

He is ever striding forward, for only spirit is forward movement. Often, he appears to have forgotten himself, gotten lost; but his inner opposition is inner labor, as Hamlet says of his father's ghost [*Geist*], 'well done, old mole.' Then, having gained inner strength, he breaks open the earth's crust that had separated him from his idea, the sun, so that the crust collapses in on itself.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> These lines, found in Michelet's edition (Hegel 1836, 685), are absent in later, scholarly editions and are thus not reflected in most English translations.

This demanding formula subordinated the individual's affirmative beliefs and doubts to a grand scheme. Individuals and their insights were but tools; only the willingness to partake of each particular stage of recognition would allow truth to reign.

Hegel's Russian students soon became familiar with his 'left' acolytes. Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* cast aside the transcendental to identify in humanity, in its earthly and fleshly forms, the seeds of becoming. Humankind held every promise that God had broken: of a loving nature, that knew best how to care for its own; and of an infinitely powerful mind that contained wisdom within the bounds of the flesh, and that must only return to itself to grasp its full power. Drawing on the revolutionary potential of Hegel's dialectic, Bakunin showed how negation could lead to positive ends in 'The Reaction in Germany'. Invoking Hegel's old mole, he asserted that the ground was eroding beneath Europe's conservative forces, as new springs of life gathered below. The revolutionary's task was to look away from the ruins of the past—let the dead bury the dead—to embrace a new, egalitarian present and future. 'The passion for destruction is also a creative passion!' (Bakunin 1842, 1002).

Left Hegelianism exerted a strong influence among many Russian intellectuals, facilitating the rise of atheism (Frede 2011). Yet, atheism and nihilism were not coterminous. In their moments of absolute negation, Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev reprised neither Bakunin nor Feuerbach, but would, to the contrary, negate the very power of the individual to transcend human bounds. In their nihilistic moments, they could not identify in human flesh the seeds of a new goodness, only inclinations that humans must follow for lack of an alternative. Faith in a better future—even in this world—was as a chimera.

## THE NEGATING MOMENT OF THE 1840S

Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev knew one another well, yet each elaborated his negating stance independently: their letters to one another are remarkably devoid of the ideas that unfold below. Nevertheless, their positions overlapped in key respects. Human will could not be confined by abstract principles, particularly those of good and evil. Nor could one make meaning of human life under the aegis of higher principles: neither the dialectic of history, nor reason itself, could order chaotic and grim realities. The rejection of hope, even embrace of death, was the only truthful and intellectually honest position to occupy. Articulating these views, all three invoked a more permanent historical truth, namely that there is no transcendent meaning in history and human life, only fragments of a worldview that was coming apart before their eyes.

### Belinsky

As is well known, Belinsky had, in his idealist phase of the late 1830s, adopted an idealist system in which each individual thought, together with every development in society

and politics, must be accounted for as part of a grand, transcendental plan (Zenkovsky 1953, 261–7). In the early 1840s, at the height of his commitment to Hegelianism, Belinsky began to question this plan. Confronting the dismal circumstances that surrounded him, Belinsky denied the capacity of faith in historical progress or a better future to account for—and therefore to justify—human suffering. Indeed, any act of reasoning would seem to explain away what it needed to reckon with, namely pain. Good and evil were themselves inadequate as conceptual categories to capture what was at stake in the act of judgement and could not define individual volition. Belinsky did not reflect on these concerns coherently, rather they clashed with one another, periodically cancelling one another out, even within a single text. While defying the capacity of moral categories to capture suffering, he insisted that individuals reckon with it, an inherently moral demand.

Belinsky's descent began in 1841 with reflections on the world's ugliness. Writing to a friend, he described his immediate environment and responses to it:

Grief, a deep grief takes hold of me when I see [...] the ragged poor, the drunken cabman [...] and the beggar asking for a penny. Having given [...] the poor woman a penny, I run from her, as if I have done some bad deed, as if I could not stand to hear the patter of my own footsteps. And that is life, to sit in the street with an idiotic expression and in rags, to collect a few pennies, and to drink them away in a tavern at night, while people watch, and nobody cares!

Belinsky reflected on the whore and her senseless smile, on his neighbour's wife, whose teeth and had been knocked out by her self-satisfied husband, a government official, and he wondered at himself. How could one, in the face of these realities, still glory in knowledge? To look for a logic that explained the disorder was misguided. Reason was no help, for it could account for suffering only by subordinating it to some higher scheme, while pain itself was the problem at hand: 'What do I care if the universal (obshchee) lives [...] while the crowd tosses in the mud?' No moral gesture would allow him to set this world to rights. The will rebelled against the narrowness and futility of its choices. 'I am embittered against all substantive principles, which bind as objects of faith the will of man! Negation—that is my God' (Belinskii 1956, 69–70).

Reason continually worried Belinsky as a source of false hope in the future, itself leading to all-too-convenient conclusions about the present. Even if a better future lay ahead, he himself could witness only chaos, brutality, and the 'triumph of accidents' (Belinskii 1956, 23). Reason might be nothing more than dishonesty, creating patterns where none were visible, mere fictions of a self-serving imagination. These considerations provoked self-condemnation: previously, Belinsky had viewed his own suffering and protest in the face of inequality as sacrifices towards the attainment of a higher goal; now they seemed laughable, empty manifestations of a desire for self-glorification: 'I am embarrassed to recall that at some point I thought to see on my head a crown of thorns of suffering, when it was only a fool's cap with bells' (Belinskii 1956, 129). The alternative was utter hopelessness, which seemed more honest. As late as December 1847, shortly before his own demise, Belinsky reflected: 'It is distressing and sad! The devil take it,



sometimes, in truth, one feels a certain lightness and jollity in the thought that life is a phantasmagoria, and a time will come when our bones will be transformed into dust. Quoting Lermontov, he invoked death's power to silence the human heart, proving the meagreness of passions and hope (Belinskii 1956, 454).

The 'substantive principles' that bound the will, too, remained a concern. Ternovskii had instructed that the will was fragile, subject to impulses, but this instability necessitated discipline, the binding of one's inclinations in submission to God. Belinsky viewed such binding as a false exercise. The human drama, as he wrote in 1841, consisted in the collision between individuals' dispositions and the circumstances in which they find themselves, and between inclination and a reasoned understanding of duty. Reason and awareness of moral obligation determined neither one's outlook, nor one's actions. Shakespeare's heroes, including Hamlet and Macbeth, served as examples. Hamlet's nature was ill suited to the act of revenge that circumstances and moral norms demanded. As a result, 'Hamlet ceased to believe in virtue, morality'. Though Hamlet avenged his father's death, this resulted not from a 'free decision of the will', but from a series of coincidences beyond his control. *Macbeth* prompted similar reflections on the disjuncture between reason, inner impulse, and chaotic circumstance. 'We are outraged by Macbeth's crime and by the demonic nature of his wife; but if one were to ask the former, why he committed his villainous deed, he would probably answer: "I myself do not know"; and if one were to ask the latter, why she was such an inhumanly awful creature, she would probably answer, that she knows as little of it as her interrogator, and that if she followed her nature, it was only because she possessed no other [nature]' (Belinskii 1954, 55–6). Reflecting on his article, Belinsky concluded: 'Taken by himself, man knows nothing, everything depends on the glasses that the disposition of his spirit— independently of his will—puts on him, the caprice of his nature' (Belinskii 1956, 23). The problem was not that people lack a will, or fail to understand their moral obligations, but that the thoughts and dispositions that form individual character are not subject to will and explanation.

By 1847, Belinsky was prepared to draw what he called the 'anti-theological' implications of his views. Mind or spirit—Belinsky used the word, *dukhovnoe*—must be freed from the imaginary bounds of religion, the 'phantoms of transcendentalism and theology'. Philosophy must 'tear from it everything fantastical and mystical once and for all'. The notion of perfection must itself be cast aside. 'Perfection is the idea of abstract transcendentalism, and that is why it is the basest thing in the world.' Instead, humanity must embrace its physical and mental limits, reassess the bounds of its nature, and value them: 'Man is mortal, subject to illness, hunger, he must defend his life by struggle—and that is his imperfection, but it is precisely what makes him great, what makes his life both sweet and precious to him' (Belinsky 1956, 330–1). Here, pain was the essence of personhood, lending individuality inherent value. The conclusions that each bounded individual must reach were unique; each must therefore 'think, as he thinks, and not as I like that he should think'. It was therefore pointless to judge others for their opinions (Belinskii 1956, 404).

By honouring the human individual in this way, Belinsky stepped back from nihilism's ultimate conclusion—and the interim conclusions that he was inclined to draw at times—namely that human suffering and life itself hold no transcendent meaning. Implicitly, moral categories maintained their place in this scheme.

## Herzen

While Belinsky denied the ability of an unfolding transcendent ideal to give life meaning, Herzen continued to fret over the meaning of history. Belinsky applauded Herzen's essays, but in 1843, felt that Herzen still lacked the courage of his own convictions. Something about him 'reeks of moderation and worldly wisdom, of the onset of degradation and decomposition' (Belinskii 1956, 130). Within three or four years, however, Herzen's views changed dramatically, outstripping Belinsky's in their stridency. Reason could not impose sense on history, which was not unfolding in any particular direction, for the world was but a chaotic 'game of accidents'. Doubting whether suffering could be justified in the name of a higher historical order, Herzen came to question the significance of suffering and death itself. In the life of nature, pain and extinction might not matter. Ideals and ideas lost their validity as behavioural imperatives.

Herzen's negating moment found fullest exposition in *From the Other Shore*, a series of articles written after his emigration to Europe in 1847. Responding to the unfolding of revolutionary movements and their collapse in 1849, he faulted participants for their failure vigorously to defend their principles. *From the Other Shore* first appeared in 1849 in German translation, followed in 1855 by an expanded Russian edition. Because he wrote the original set over two years, and because some essays took the form of a dialogue, they presented shifting viewpoints. Like Belinsky's writings, they also contained internal inconsistencies, as some commentators have noted (Zenkovsky 1953, 290–8; Kelly 1998).

Reflecting on political circumstances, Herzen found the claim that history was heading in some particular direction empirically unsustainable. If anything, the entire old world, its religion, its politics, and its society, appeared to be collapsing. From the very outset, however, the chaos so evident in history—and nature—also led Herzen to question the wisdom of arranging events into neat patterns with a fixed trajectory (Gertsen 1955, 31). We may have opinions about how history progresses and ought to progress, but 'abstract norms', constructed with the help of reason, do not necessarily tally with developments. Indeed, events may constitute nothing more than a 'capricious game of accident' (Gertsen 1955, 67, 90).

The vision of history as development was also morally disturbing, for it implied that humans are mere 'puppets' or 'cogs in a machine', controlled by a 'Moloch', depriving them of their status as 'people', 'morally free beings'. People should be conscious of their surroundings, and their awareness constitutes a sort of 'progress', but it is not to be mistaken for political and social progress (Gertsen 1955, 33–4). Having conceded that history was going nowhere, the honest stance was either to admit this state of chaos and



destruction and spread this knowledge as a new gospel (Gertsen 1955, 76, 84–5), or to withdraw into oneself, a form of ‘internal emigration’ (Gertsen 1955, 28).

The will remained important as an internal sense of reckoning, but it exerted minimal influence on ‘nature’ and ‘peoples’. In this connection, Herzen expressed his own ‘anti-theological’ inclinations. Christianity inculcated into people a false sense of the ‘power of ideas’ and ‘force of spirit’; it was time to reject such beliefs as a life beyond the grave, miracles, and God himself (Gertsen 1955, 449, 101, 104–5). They had created a false sense of the capacity to influence events and stunted the mind. ‘I hate the phrases, to which we have habituated, like Christians to the Nicene Creed; no matter how moral and good they might appear, they bind thought, subjugating it’ (Gertsen 1955, 99). The phrases, or principles Herzen rejected included ‘virtue’, ‘freedom’, ‘justice’, and ‘humanity’. All had proven deficient. Rousseau’s claim, for example, that ‘man was born free’ was nonsense, belied everywhere by social realities (Gertsen 1955, 94). The ruins of the past, mere ‘garbage’ (*musor*), block our steps (Gertsen 1955, 26).

Following Belinsky, Herzen argued that decisions, including thoughts and feelings, which had been stifled by beliefs, are not the product of moral directives, but of ‘instinct’ (Gertsen 1955, 67). Events result from ‘dark impulses’ and ‘passions’, and there is no point in assigning moral value to them. Moral judgements, castigating events and people for failing to live up to one’s expectations, are useless. ‘I do not become angry, because I expect nothing of people, other than what they do; I recognize neither the motivation nor the right to demand anything else of them’ (Gertsen 1955, 89).

In some passages, Herzen went so far as to imply a stance of indifference towards the destruction occurring around him. Prefacing ‘Vixerunt!’ with Goethe’s verse, he cast his insights as timeless wisdom, as if life’s senselessness had long been known and understood:

Come here, let us sit down to dine  
Who should be moved by such foolery?  
The world is coming apart like a rotten fish  
Let us not try to embalm it.

(Gertsen 1955, 115)

Following this logic, despair was to be shrugged off as a casualty of living. In the dialogue, ‘Consolatio’, a doctor argues that there may be no purpose to life. ‘Believe me, people have no destiny (*liudiam nichego ne predznacheno*).—Why, then, do they live?—Just so, they are born, and they live. Why does anything live?’ Biological life lives for its own sake, and there is no point in looking deeper. ‘Everything essential is on the surface’ (Gertsen 1955, 93). The old mole was beginning to see the light of day.

As Belinsky predicted, Herzen never quite committed to his most extreme conclusions. Higher principles crept back into *From the Other Shore*, as Herzen pointed to a minority of conscious individuals, who pursued ‘knowledge, truth, moral strength, and the aspiration to independence, a love of the beautiful’. Even ‘freedom’ squeezed through as an attribute of the ideal, ‘authentic’ (*samobytnaia*) personality (Gertsen 1955, 101–2). The

full benefits of attaining inner freedom are visible in 'After the Storm' (1848), where Herzen assumed his own voice, promising that the 'living person' who was prepared to divest himself of false beliefs and hopes, to eradicate old institutions, might reap rewards. In this future, a liberated, 'new person' would emerge (Gertsen 1955, 46–8).

Herzen's conflicting statements left his successors with a dual legacy, of Herzen as defender of individual rights and dignity, and of Herzen as searing critic of established norms. One might claim that the former was not possible without the latter, but the conflicting nature of his assertions also freed his readers, including Turgenev and Pisarev, to pick and choose.

## Turgenev

Despite his later reputation as a moderate and as an inventor of the 'anti-nihilist' tradition in Russian literature, Turgenev was as subject to the negating spirit in the 1840s as Belinsky and Herzen, asserting that history and nature have no fixed end, and that abstract concepts are of limited value as directives to action. Stepping further, Turgenev argued that the will manifests its greatness by rebelling against its subjection, and that self-assertion entails a right to happiness.

Turgenev rejected the proposition that nature and human history contain an inherent purpose or end. Visiting Paris in 1848, where he overlapped with Herzen, he concluded that history is not underwritten by abstract principles: 'man was not born to be free' (Turgenev 1982, 304–5). Similarly, he denied that nature prescribes an aim to living beings. The human imagination might assign importance to natural phenomena, but human terms, such as greatness, smallness, and glory, were empirically irrelevant. How nature is *for us* really does not matter at all to nature, which is 'indifferent, imperious, insatiable, egoistical, and intrusive' (Turgenev 1982, 311).

Concepts such as good and evil were rejected as excessively confining, a position that Turgenev explicitly identified as anti-Christian, as a rejection of God's grace: 'This denial of all that divine will recognizes as human dignity; this profound indifference to everything we call virtue and vice with which grace endows its elected—is a triumph for human spirit. Negation was a source of greatness for the individual, especially when it took the form of self-negation. By accepting its own 'nothingness,' the will found solid ground on which it could stand up to its imaginary creator, God. 'This being, who so audaciously declares his own nothingness, thereby makes himself the equal of that fantastical divinity, knowing all the while that he is its toy'. Admitting to human impotence in the face of chaos had, to Herzen, been an admission of frailty. To Turgenev this admission was an act of self-assertion. More attentive than Belinsky and Herzen to the theological implications of his views, Turgenev overtly represented self-assertion as a challenge to God's charity. 'I am my own master,' he boasted (in French), 'I want truth, not salvation, and I expect it to come from my [own] understanding [*intelligence*], not from grace' (Turgenev 1982, 243–4).

Turgenev re-evaluated selfish human impulses in his 1845 review of Goethe's *Faust*. Individual greatness manifested itself in defiance of personal and societal boundaries. Goethe's play defended the 'rights of the particular, passionate and limited individual'. Faust was deeply flawed, characterized by 'the poverty of his belief and convictions', but it was precisely in light of Faust's frailty, that Turgenev underlined his 'right and ability to be happy without being embarrassed of his happiness'. Significantly, this happiness was predicated on indifference to others' opinions and societal norms. Goethe himself had performed such indifference, in personal life—he led a 'wild and debauched life' (*buinaia i razgul'naia zhizn'*)—while writing part one of *Faust*. The play's unresolved ending, so dissatisfying to his readers, too, displayed his disregard for the fulfilment of reader expectations (Turgenev 1960, 234–9).

Core aspects of Turgenev's negating stance of the 1840s found their way into *Fathers and Sons* (Brumfield 1977, 499). Primary among them was the rejection of principles as guides to action (Turgenev 1981, 25). Words hold no authority and cannot command the loyalties of the novel's central protagonist, Bazarov, who defies the expectations of his hosts, especially Pavel Petrovich Kirsanov. Pavel Petrovich continually issues Bazarov propositions, convinced that he must assent, while the latter categorically refuses. A physicist, Bazarov rejects faith in science and does not recognize the authority of leading scientists (Turgenev 1981, 27–8). A critic of the social and political order, he denies the obligation to propose and implement solutions. Enraged, Pavel Petrovich belittles him, but again fails to elicit the expected reaction:

'Alright,' Pavel Petrovich interrupted him, 'alright; you have convinced yourself of all this and decided not to undertake anything in all seriousness?'

– 'And decided not to undertake anything,' Bazarov repeated, grimly. He was suddenly annoyed with himself; why had he spoken so freely in front of this nobleman?

– 'And decided simply to scold?'

– 'And simply to scold.'

– 'And that is what is called nihilism?'

– 'And that is what called nihilism,' Bazarov again repeated, this time with special brazenness. (Turgenev 1981, 51).

In this dialogue, Bazarov's limitations are the basis of his self-assertion. Further, his refusal to counter Pavel Petrovich's belittlement is a powerplay, displaying utter disregard for the latter's moral judgement.

Turgenev also recurred in *Fathers and Sons* to the absence of a grand scheme in nature, which remains indifferent to individual suffering and even to survival. Observing an ant that is 'dragging along a half-dead fly', Bazarov cheers it on. 'Drag it, brother, drag! Don't concern yourself with its struggles, take advantage of the fact that you, as an animal [*zhivotnoe*], have the right to disregard feelings of sympathy, unlike our kind, who has broken himself' (Turgenev 1981, 119). The poignancy here hinges on the disjuncture between nature's insouciance, human inclination to sympathy, and the

human impulse to inscribe meaning into even trivial events. In this moment, Turgenev acknowledged his debt to traditions of the 1840s, for the collision between knowledge and inclination drags Bazarov himself into what Belinsky had called the ‘sphere of tragedy’. If sympathy is a symptom of humans’ ‘broken’ nature, then Bazarov himself has been infected, and he faults himself for participating in the drama he has authored.<sup>3</sup>

The continuities between Bazarov’s statements in *Fathers and Sons* and Turgenev’s earlier writings escaped most of his readers. Even Herzen failed to trace the genealogy until years later, in his 1869 publication, ‘Bazarov Once More’ (Pozefsky 2003, 151). Partly, this was because Turgenev figured his protagonist, Bazarov, as a quintessential social outsider, thereby encouraging readers to conclude that nihilism did not belong to the fathers’ generation of the 1840s, only to the sons of the 1860s.

## THE NIHILISM OF THE 1860S

The spirit of negation that dominated the generation of the 1840s went into partial hiatus in the late reign of Nicholas I. Upon his death in 1855, a new generation of writers and critics emerged, forcefully expressing their opposition to the autocratic state and to an unjust social order. *The Contemporary*, where Herzen, Belinsky, and Turgenev had published, was now dominated by Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Nikolai Dobroliubov. Writing for *The Russian Word*, Dmitrii Pisarev represented himself as a member of their camp, casting all of them as equally defiant of the previous generation. In so doing, Pisarev effaced important differences between their stance of practical negation and the theoretical nihilism he adopted from Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev. He scarcely acknowledged the old mole, whose digging activities allowed the light to shine all the more brightly on his assertions.

Pisarev promoted the notion that young journalists at *The Contemporary* and *The Russian Word* formed a single phalanx, representing Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov as philosophical allies against a host of irate antagonists, liberals and conservatives. Accused of wanting to ‘knock some idol of its pedestal’, Pisarev defended iconoclasm as entirely natural, for changing times required the reinterpretation ‘of nature and man, of state and society, of thought and action, of morality and beauty’. By overturning all these concepts, each ‘succeeding generation razes the worldview of its predecessor to the ground’ (Pisarev 2000a, 282–3).

Important commonalities indeed united Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, and Pisarev such as the absolute priority of individual inclinations over a bankrupt hierarchy of norms. Yet, for Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov, there remained a moral imperative to

<sup>3</sup> For a less sympathetic treatment of mortality among flies, see Turgenev’s 1864 letter to Valentine Delessert: ‘It is cruel not to know the key to the puzzle; perhaps even more cruel to say to oneself that there is no key, because there is no longer any puzzle. Flies, beating incessantly against a pane of glass—that, I believe, is the most perfect symbol for what we are’ (quoted in Kelly 1998, 97).

offer solutions to social and political problems, showing readers the path towards a better future. Pisarev would deny both the imperative and the capacity of individuals to discern what the future might hold, drawing more fully than they on the viewpoints of his 1840s predecessors and pushing nihilism to its logical conclusion.

Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev had emphasized the embodied nature of the mind, defending it from the ‘dream of logic and dead abstraction’. Experiences and impulses were messy and conflicting, defying the neat categories of reason and morality. Accordingly, moral judgement lost value: there is no point in condemning others—or even oneself—precisely because actions and beliefs are so thoroughly bound up in contingent circumstance. Asserting the rights of the individual, Turgenev went so far as to identify a ‘right to be happy without being embarrassed of one’s happiness’. Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, and Pisarev agreed, adopting the label of ‘rational egoism’.

Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov promoted a utilitarian system of ethics that became central to the radical culture of their generation. Their system denied Orthodox beliefs, such as of good and evil as transcendent categories, the existence of free will, and an immortal soul. Instead, as Irina Paperno noted, Chernyshevsky ‘maintained that every act or impulse of the individual human being arises as the direct realization of the calculus of pains and pleasures, which prevails over spontaneity and emotional immediacy of any kind [...] Reason, which is capable of calculating the interplay of pain and pleasure, becomes a governing force in human behavior’ (Paperno 1988, 108). For Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov, the terms good and evil became synonymous with pleasure and pain. As moral labels, they did not apply to individuals, whose misguided actions were mere products of circumstance and miscalculation. The duo’s emphatically affirmative approach was intended to liberate the individual from inner conflict. ‘The role of free choice is limited, if not eliminated; with it, painful doubts about matters that cannot be controlled or accounted for are eliminated as well’ (1988, 108).

Pisarev adopted rational egoism as a prescription for human behaviour, but painful doubts remained a prominent theme in passages reminiscent of Belinsky and Herzen. Moral norms and expectations were engrained in the mind, dominating it. ‘We live and develop beneath the influence of this artificial system of morality; [it] oppresses us from birth, and that is why we habituate entirely to its pressure; [...] Because this mental and moral slavery remains imperceptible to us, we do not see how it poisons our life’. We intentionally ‘divide our being’, treating the ‘self like a dangerous enemy’ that must be tricked, entrapped, and conquered (Pisarev 2000a, 272). Notably, all concepts and ideas posed this risk for Pisarev.

Like Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov, Pisarev held that, having cast aside moral doctrines, individuals should live purely on the basis of inclination, as carefree rational egoists. Unlike them, Pisarev questioned whether an individual’s inclinations could ever entirely be understood, since each was entirely unique. No individual could experience what another had experienced, even if he replicated each event step by step (Pisarev 2000b, 238). Passing moral judgement on others was therefore a fruitless exercise. For the same reasons, individuals most not submit to the expectations of others,

but organize their ‘activities, habits, and whole way of life’ with ‘full independence. The very recognition of social obligation was anathema to ‘individual will’ (Pisarev 2001b, 176).

These discrepancies also led Pisarev to question the bright future promised by Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov. As Paperno pointed out, Chernyshevsky had wished to liberate the individual from subjection to the triumph of accidents. Individual mastery over contingency had been central to his construction of ‘rational egoism’, offering ‘a mental mechanism through which reality could be brought under control’. This ‘mental mechanism’ was more than a thought process, it was a prescription for the creation of a new society, a ‘new social arrangement, a harmonious paradise on earth’ (Paperno 1988, 173, 158). Working towards a better future remained a powerful impetus for Chernyshevsky and his radical readers.

For Pisarev, the capacity to triumph over life’s contingencies was an illusion. Individuals could only shore themselves up by refusing to commit to any particular vision of the future. In his review of *Fathers and Sons*, Pisarev praised Bazarov for having stripped himself of aims, career goals, and plans for the future, not striving for anything at all, and living without hope. This was nihilism in its fullest iteration. Bazarov and his ilk were ‘people of the present’. They ‘do not rush about, do not look for anything, [...] do not yield to any compromises, and they do not hope for anything.’ In these passages, one hears echoes of Herzen’s dictum that people need no reason to live (‘Why, then, do they live?—Just so: they are born, and they live.’) Pisarev would label his position, affirmatively, as ‘cold despair, approaching complete indifference and simultaneously developing the individual to the outermost limits of hardness and independence’. Such ‘indifferentism’ was precisely what permitted Bazarov to cast off the demands and expectations of others, including the demand that he match his negating stance with positive prescriptions for the future (Pisarev 2001b, 167, 175).

The future was difficult to cast aside, as Pisarev acknowledged. The human mind is innately inclined to draw inferences, looking ahead on the basis of current events and composing laws out of patterns in nature and society (Pisarev 2000c, 153). It was possible, in analysing human physiology, to posit equality between physical organisms, and yet the conclusions one might draw about human nature and its ‘fundamental laws’ permitted any number of ‘practical and theoretical mistakes’. Historical attempts to found ‘political systems’ and ‘social utopias’ on the basis of such laws had produced a great deal of ‘real pain’. It was probable that humanity would ‘grow wiser’, but such wisdom lay too far off to permit the comforting anticipation of success in the present. Political leaders incurred Pisarev’s most ardent blame, for they imposed their solutions on others, forgetting that their formulations were based on current circumstance, including the hierarchies of the political order to which they belonged. ‘They all violated human nature, binding people and leading them to some dreamed-up goal, they all played with people as in a game of draughts; consequently, not one of them respected the human person (...) each and every one can be called an enemy of humanity’. Having used the word ‘enemy’, Pisarev remembered not to cast judgement. ‘Where everyone is to blame, no one in particular is to blame’ (Pisarev 2001c, 227–8).



The temptation to formulate prescriptions was particularly strong among intellectuals. Carried away by their ‘need for love’, their need to sacrifice themselves for ‘some principle or another’, they failed to see their own limitations. Echoing Herzen’s call for internal emigration, Pisarev argued that the only honest position would be to ‘stand aside, preserving one’s mental independence amid the chaos of ignorance, violence, and prejudice’, to embrace the ‘joylessness of the present while doubting in the possibility of a better future’ (Pisarev 2001a, 98). These thoughts hardly resembled the confidence of Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov in the advent of a better day.

Had the old mole, then, succeeded in its task, digging beneath the earth’s crust until it collapsed in on itself, to unite him with his concept, the sun? Within the self-enclosed world of Pisarev’s writings, it had. Pisarev negated the foundations of intellectual discourse. Ideas and ideals were not to be recognized as more or less accurate representations of reality, whose modification might produce better outcomes in society and politics. The very activity of debating them rested on the assumption that agreement might be reached. Yet, ideas and principles that were true for one individual were not true for another, and might never be. What, then, was the sun with which the mole wished to unite? For Pisarev, as for Hegel, it was freedom, but only freedom as constituted by and for the individual.

## CONCLUSION

Early articulations of nihilism, in the writings of Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev, were far more discriminating and defensive than those manifested by Pisarev. Yet, the negating statements issued by the 1840s generation remained forceful. Their mission had been to shore up the individual against a set of demands—abstract, and therefore artificial—that constituted an attack on human nature itself. The negating spirit that moved them was generated out of the intellectual systems in which they were socialized as young men, namely Orthodox theology as propounded at Moscow University, and German idealism as propounded by Hegel. Pisarev’s insouciant irreverence was partly a product of the fact that they had performed their task so well.

Surveying Pisarev’s writings of the 1860s against this background, it is easier to identify the sources of nihilism as a practical, gestural stance. Contempt for political, religious, and parental authorities was more than the product of dissatisfaction with the current order. It reflected the view that no person had the right to issue directives to others, and indeed that such directives violated the very essence of the individual. The refusal to enter into a dialogue about the resolution of political and social problems with members of the older generation also came more easily to those who had abdicated any sense of moral responsibility for others. Rudeness was more than a fad; it expressed unwillingness to submit oneself to others’ expectations as to how a conversation ought to unfold. Nihilism, in these respects was far more extreme than radicalism, which

rested on the assumption that there were universal principles, such as equality and justice, which formed the bedrock for the construction of a better political and social order.

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