

# Rudin

*I. Turgenev*

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We have the usual setting. An estate in the provinces, managed by a competent steward and with an army of serfs, leaving the proprietor lots of free time to pursue worthwhile projects be it shooting or engaging in intellectual conversations with like minded neighbors. In this case the formidable lady Daria Mikhailovna Lassunski, a rich Muscovite holds court in her provincial salon at her country house, always on the outlook for clever men, and now looking forward to the visit of her most recent catch – a Baron to boot. This one does, however, not show up, instead a stranger by name of Rudin delivers a message from him and is invited to partake of the intellectual seance. He strikes everyone by his eloquence and his easy ways with words holding forth in a captivated manner on topical issues in contemporary politics and philosophy. He impresses, but his impact is not one of undiluted admiration, a local intellectual by name of Pigasov is ravaged by resentment provoked by jealousy and tries to oppose him hoping to reveal the emptiness behind his striking facades. Aggressively holding forth that what Rudin contributes is nothing but words. His point of attack is to claim that Rudin's proclamations are based on unproven sentiments and amount to nothing. Give me facts, he tells him, not just abstract theorizing and specious convictions. He himself holds that all convictions are false and that he subsequently holds none. Are you convinced of that, Rudin asks him provokingly, and Pigasov assents willingly without hesitation nor with any awareness of the obvious trap he is falling into. Rudin shrugs his shoulders, noting the obvious, and asserts that nothing is easier to maintain than excessive doubts and nothing less fruitful. Pigasov sulks, retreats into silence and soon leaves the gathering at which Rudin is king.

The unexpected guest is prevailed upon by the landlady to stay overnight, and in fact he will stay on for months on end. In those idyllic times generous hospitality was easy to provide. As to Rudin opinion is split in the community, the landlady under whose auspices intellectual life lives on, holds him obviously in high regard, and the young tutor of the family adores him, sitting by his feet and lapping everything up. Pigasov hates him of course, having been humbled, and Lezhnyov, another neighboring landowner, known for his eccentric manners, is careful to hold himself aloof from such gatherings in the salon. But it turns out that he had known Rudin in his youth; in fact having been an intimate friend of his and joined him in the obligatory sojourn to Western universities. A friendship which had soured and whose details he is loath to reveal, even to the young widow who serves as his confidant.

Now there has to be a love component in the story, and this is provided by the eldest daughter of Mme Lassunski, who at seventeen is at the verge of sexual maturity. She is courted by the timid brother of the young widow, but her attention is quickly turned to Rudin, who takes her under his wings and takes responsibility for her neglected education. At some stage Rudin imagines that he loves her, makes a rather wooden disclosure of his love during a clandestine meeting in the garden. She is perplexed but can only agree in

her innocence and profess a reciprocal feeling. The whole scene is however, unknown to the two, observed by a young hanger-on whom Mme Lassunski keeps around, and who has gained her trust and he predictably spills the beans. Lady Lassunski, is not amused, she summons her daughter for a serious tête-à-tête with her, forbids her to have any romantic involvement with the man, who obviously is of a lower rank, and no matter how brilliant, his brilliancy can hardly make up for the gap in social standing. The daughter, being out of her depths, is devastated, and despondent she sends a message to Rudin to meet her at a secluded spot in the large garden of the estate early the next morning. There follows a brief interview in which the young girl informs him about her meeting with her mother and turns desperately to him for guidance and support. Rudin gets cold feet and immediately calls it all off, to the shock and consternation of the young maiden, who had obviously expected some more mainly response, rather than such a feeble display of cowardice, and so easily submitting to fate as if grasping at a welcome excuse. The result is that Rudin has to beat an ignoble retreat the same day, and during another brief interview with lady Lassunski, conducted on her part with the greatest politeness, he announces his immediate leave due to an unexpected crisis at his estate. The reasons for his leaving are soon becoming known in the small community, to the gleeful satisfaction of many, not the least to the humiliated Pigasov. Rudin was clearly nothing but a pathetic windbag.

The story has a succession of epilogues, Turgenev being sensitive to the naive desire of the ordinary reader to learn what happened later on. We learn that Rudin's life took a turn for the worse afterwards, that it degenerated into obscurity. Lezhnyov, who has married the young widow (whose brother predictably wedded the young girl he had always coveted) in the meantime, many years later accidentally encounters him. Lezhnyov overcome by pity for his old friend, turns the chance meeting into an occasion, if not for a renewal of friendship, but at least a reconciliation after years of estrangement. He treats him to dinner and they have a long conversation not only sharing old memories, but also catching up on subsequent developments, which further gives Lezhnyov reason to pity and commiserate with his former friend and in the magnanimity of his superiority acknowledge his undeniable talents, which have been wasted. In the final page, we learn that Rudin meets with his death waving a red banner and brandishing a saber on top of a Parisian barricade in the faithful year of 1848. Thus at the very end having his life vindicated, by an heroic death, be it mostly symbolic and anonymous to boot (by his comrades he is referred to as the Pole).

Vintage Turgenev, yet also somewhat wooden. Charming in its evocation of an era irretrievably gone, still somewhat contrived. Mirsky, in his famous treaty on Russian literature (up to 1900) finds his depictions of intellectual conversations deplorable and pointless, but I am not so sure, but believe that they have their points. Turgenev was educated as a philosopher, a Hegelian in fact, having probably had no choice, his pursuit of philosophy being motivated more by fashion than penetrating interest; so his philosophical ruminations are competent if neither inspired nor original. The love story appears almost embarrassingly contrived, but Turgenev may have been more ironical than inept. Supposedly Rudin is based on Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76), the famed anarchist with whom Turgenev was befriended during his student days in Paris, and even courted his sister Tatyana, possibly with the ineptness and the insincerity which comes with literary models (one thinks

of Onegin). Pigasov, on the other hand, is assumed to be based on Nikolay Stankevich (1814-1840) another student friend at the time who died young from tuberculosis.

Reading the novel one is struck by how similar to a play it is (and Turgenev had tried his hands at plays as well with some modest success). It is structured as a sequence of scenes where the main action takes place through verbal interchanges. To rework it as a play would not be very difficult.

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