

Vter und Shne

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I first came across the novel in a Swedish translation, which had belonged to my mother. I must have been in my late teens, probably about 18 years old. As it must have been the first Russian novel which I came across, it made a deep impression on me, especially the character of Bazarov. What I remember from the novel was the character Bazarov getting up early in the morning to collect frogs and dissect them. It impressed on me the existence of a character who was overflowing with activism due to the fact of being very purposeful, something I was not but wished to be. I also remember vividly the discussions he had with his hosts, especially that of the uncle Pavel, a dandy who was holding on to ideas contrary to the radical and nihilistic ones of Bazarov. What happened to that character Bazarov, filled with life and purpose? Succumbing to typhoid fever. What an anti-climax I thought, and what a shame. More than that I do not remember, although the mood of the work remained. This is remarkable, namely that you remember so little from fiction, especially when you grow older, it is somewhat different with children's stories, maybe because you encounter them again and again, and because you are even some susceptible to the charms of the imagination. Mathematical and scientific texts which you read, stay deeper in memory, probably because you engage stronger with them, if not emotionally so at least factually. The great impression fiction makes on you, and yet the ephemeral retaining of factual details, you also encounter in connection with dreams. They can be very vivid and also enjoyable as stories, but they fade by awakening (with a few notable exceptions) maybe because they have little direct connections with your real life, just as pieces of fiction, the reading of which can in many ways be likened to that of a dream.

I do not know what happened to my mother's book. It must have stayed in her library from which it must have parted ways and thus escaped me when I went through it after her dementia necessitated the obliteration of her home. I regrettably read no Russian, and I do not have an English translation, but for some reason a German one. To read it in German, actually in the original translation into German, was not such a bad idea, on the contrary. The German becomes a substitute for Russian in a way Swedish and especially English could not be. It separates it from the ubiquitous Anglo-Saxon world, and gives it a desirable strangeness which somehow adds to its authenticity.

I do not know whether I have ever read it in the interim during the fifty years hiatus. Could it be that I bought and read the German version, and if so sometime in the 80's, (the book was printed in 1981). I have no recollection of it, and reading it now was almost like reading it anew, except for the few scattered recollections I have preserved from my first teenage reading. It goes without saying that reading something in your teens is very different from reading it in old age. The emotional impact might be less, but the literary appreciative one, may very well be greater. And in fact I found it unexpectedly good on my late reading, in a way I probably would not have been capable of initially. In fact it

presented such a pure pleasure of reading which I nowadays seldom encounter in fiction. The fact that it was 'an old friend' may also have contributed to it, making it easier to accept the contract with the author any reading of fiction entails. Somehow most of the characters were already known to me, so my interest was there from the start and did not have to be provoked.

The plot is straightforward. A widowed father Nikolai, living on his country estate, named Marino after his deceased wife, along with his older brother Pavel, joyfully anticipates the arrival of his son Arkady from the university. But with him is a friend of his, the above mentioned Bazarov the pivotal character of the novel. He is a modern, scientific man, styling himself a nihilist, but materialist would perhaps be a more appropriate characterization. His rejection of all authority not founded on rational reasoning and an open experimental mind, grates on the hosts, especially the uncle, who feels threatened by this rejection of traditional core values. Bazarov is a no-nonsense man, contemptuous of anything that smacks of romanticism, finds the uncle a stupid, not to say ridiculous character, living a useless life of outdated vanities (such as putting an excess attention to his appearance and clothing). Bazarov has no ear for music nor sight for the visual arts, and no poetic temperament. At least so he arrogantly claims. Nature is no temple, it is just a place of work, wherein men are mere workers; he admonished his friend Arkady, the son of the house. There are some complications on the domestic scene, I have no recollection of from my first reading. The father had befriended a young and pretty servant girl Fenechka, making her pregnant in the process, resulting in the issue of a half-brother. Arkady, however, does not regret this appearance of a half-brother, let alone resent the diminution of his future inheritance, such considerations would be well below him, instead he takes a romantic, if naive, view of it all, which also seems to be the case of the author.

Then there is a change of scene, Bazarov suggests that they take advantage of an invitation to a distant relative of his hosts residing in a town not too distant, and also conveniently close to the village of Bazarov parents, whom he has not visited for three years, although being an only child and their one happiness in their life. Bazarov is bored, one presumes, and wants to move on. It is a provincial town and they quickly sample what it has to offer in terms of intellectual stimulation. There is a ball thrown by the governor where they encounter Anna Odinzova, a young beautiful widow (who had married an older man for money). Arkady is very taken by her and is thrilled that she consents to talk to him. He refers to his friend Bazarov repeatedly and she seems to be intrigued and curious of him. Bazarov, takes of course a cynical attitude, and emphasizes her beauty, especially her shoulders. They are both invited to her place - Nikolskoye - and they lose not much time in showing up.

Bazarov is supposedly a friend of Arkady, but it seems not to be a friendship on equal terms, Bazarov being so dominant and Arkady so much in awe of him. Arkady is of course a nihilist too, but that is only the emulation of a puppy, parroting the ideas and expressions of his mentor. Arkady is torn between irreconcilable loyalties, that to his new friend and that to his father and uncle, taking Bazarov's side in the disputes, but privately pleading for them when alone with Bazarov. The gulf between the two becomes very apparent during the visit to Madam Odinoza, where it is clear that it is Bazarov who is the adult, and Arkady is quickly dismissed to engage with the younger sister Katja, a

rather shy and awkward girl still in her teens, competent at the piano. The stay meant to be short drags on for two weeks, and obviously meant to be central to the novel, but of which I remember nothing. Anna is very much intrigued by Bazarov, his originality and his dominance, filled with energy and aggressive self-confidence, and of course also a bit scared of him, so different from men she has previously met. Anna tries to draw him out, to learn more and more about him. She is an independent young woman, but with no purpose in life, save that of satisfying her private curiosities and hence with a propensity for getting bored. Bazarov is not boring, he fascinates. Finally he cannot contain himself and expresses his love for her, a complication he has fought against, as a sworn enemy of romanticism and such concerns. His confession comes to her, perhaps not so much of as a surprise as a shock, and she does not really know how to handle it. She does not reject him, instead she shows him tenderness, yet withdraws, and Bazarov understands that she is unable to reciprocate. The emotions he has admitted to, are far too daunting for her to live up to. Shortly thereafter they leave and Arkady decides at the last minute to join him in visiting his parents, rather than to return to his father. The visit to Bazarov's parents turns out to be very touching, but also very short, after only a few days Bazarov has had enough, and to the great consternation of his parents, he takes his leave. His plan is to return to Marino where he can work undisturbed by his parents incessant solicitation for his welfare and presence, and Arkady does of course join him. But both of them harbor an irresistible urge to revisit the beautiful young widow, but this time they are received rather coldly. Their stay is short and they continue to Marino where Bazarov settles down to steady work, while Arkady restless returns to Nikolskoye. Things work out fine enough at Marino, there are not much interaction between Bazarov and his hosts, except that they are being intrigued by his work and occasionally ask permission to be present, even Pavel, the critical uncle. However, Bazarov takes an interest in the young maid Fenechka, who feels more and more comfortable in his presence, and once even steals a kiss, which is noticed by Pavel walking by. This might be the reason that he later challenges Bazarov to a duel, refusing to give a specific reason, beyond that of a mutual deep antipathy. Bazarov is puzzled but willing enough to meet the challenge. Pavel aims to kill him, Bazarov is content with hitting him in a leg. Pavel insists on a second shot but is obviously too weak. His wound is superficial though, not even having hit any bone, just some muscle, but enough to make the victim momentarily lose consciousness, changing Bazarov from duelist to concerned doctor. Anyway, it is an occasion as good as any to leave, and he leaves for Nikolskoye, where he finds Arkady already in love with Katja, while he and Anna has it out and he apologizes for his profession of love. Anna is still intrigued by him and pleads that they can remain friends. He leaves for his parents, who are now very conscious of not getting in his way. But somehow, he has left all desire to work, instead he whiles away his time, but then starts to assist his father, the old army surgeon, in his medical tasks. One thing leads to another, and then he has an accident, cutting a finger, during a post-mortem of a patient who has just died from typhoid fever. The regular procedure at the time would have been to immediately treat the wound with lapis¹. But the district doctor he worked with had none available, and there is a crucial delay of several hours before he gets one. Bazarov fears that he will have caught the poison, and a few days later

¹ silver nitrate AgNO₃, *Höllenstein* in German, адский камень meaning 'Hell stone' in Russian

he loses his appetite, takes to bed, and diagnoses himself with blood-poison (sepsis) and is rapidly, to the desperate consternation of his parents, succumbing. An old man has at least had time to wean himself out of life, but he, he has not but is in the very middle of it, he reamrks sadly to himself. He wants to send an express message, to his friend Arkady, his father innocently asks, the friend who has spoken so highly of his son and promised him a bright and distinguished future. No, with that friend of sorts, Bazarov made a formal breach while leaving Nikolskoye, yet it is to Nikolskoye his express message is to be sent. Anna promptly arrives with a German doctor and they see themselves for the very last time, Anna planting a kiss on his forehead and leaves. The next morning he dies, after having opened one eye during the last rites performed by the local priest. And the book is at its end as well. Not quite, the author indulges the reader by giving an epilogue, which reveals in a rather idyllic manner the combined wedding of Arkady to Katja, and his father to Fenechka; that Pavel retired to Dresden, that the estate of Marino improved under the custody of Arkady, and that Anna married rich again. The final scenes of Bazarov dying had basically escaped my memory, thinking that he had caught cholera, but of course what I read now rings a bell. So in many ways the most important part of the plot seems to have been blotted out in memory, probably because I was young and inexperienced and had little appreciation of what occupies the adult mind.

But many other things charm me now, which probably were not really noticed at the time back then. The subtle descriptions of nature are masterfully done, and to a modern reader, the evocation of country estates, is seductive. Morally of course, the social stratification of an upper crust served by serfs, is hardly excusable; bit nevertheless times were very pleasant to the upper crust, it is so much nicer to be served by real human beings, than by machines and robots. But of course in fiction you may secretly indulge in what would in reality be unacceptable². Russia was, like most of Europe, a Third World country, but of course much more primitive and third world than the West. The country estates were oases spread out, in which higher culture could thrive, and pieces of the sophisticated world, be it in fashion or science, could get an isolated and intriguing foothold. Liveried servants and fancy wagons, it all makes you think of a time long gone, for better or for worse, and thus blending with the world of fairy tales. Other small details, to give local color, are given by the телега a simple four-wheeled horse-drawn carriage, usually uncovered and meant to transport goods or agricultural produce such as hay or grain, on which Bazarov travels on his last leg to his parents. A far more luxurious carriage, which also figures is another four-wheeled carriage referred to as a 'tarantas', which essentially consists of a covered gondola suspended between two long poles with a pair of large wheels at either end. Those contraptions became familiar to regular Western readers of Russian novels, just as hansom cabs to aficionados of Sherlock Holmes stories.

In conclusion a true delight.

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² But can of course be still 'enjoyed' would you go to India say