

BAZAROV'S NIHILISM- "FATHERS AND SONS"



The word nihilism comes up in the conversation of Bazarov, the protagonist of Turgenev's novel, Fathers and Sons. As Turgenev himself was later to write of the book, he first got the idea on visiting a seaside resort in August of 1860. The character of Bazarov was modeled on the personality of a young country physician of quite unusual character who had died shortly before. It was the inchoate constellation of a number of traits in this man to which Turgenev would give the name nihilism. He writes;

The impression given by this person was extraordinarily intense.

At first I was unable to define him to myself clearly, but I sharpened my ears and eyes as much as possible and carefully observed everything around me. I set my mind on relying only on my own perceptions. What surprised me was that I have never encountered [in our entire literature] a figure who

*would have given me any hint concerning the circumstance
that met my eyes from every aspect.*

Turgenev takes pride in the fact that as early as 1860 he had intuited signs of nihilism which nobody noticed during that period. Turgenev's "idea for a character in whom various elements are harmonized" eventually became Bazarov, the type of an individual who was beginning to appear at the time. For Turgenev, then, nihilism was imagined as the center of a personality around which a chaotic unity of traits revolved.

Firstly, one of the most evident of Bazarov's traits is a concern with science—in particular, the German science of that time. This was not the science that had been subordinated to philosophy, but a science that had broken free of theology just as philosophy had at the beginning of the modern period. German science thus represented the pure and independent scientific spirit. Now the liberation of science from philosophy was a major event that affected the foundation of the spiritual history of Europe. Out of it there emerged a destructive criticism of previous religion and philosophy as well as of the social ethics, culture, and everything else that had been based on them.

The scientific spirit which had become purely scientific began to assume a kind of philosophical authority, in effect rejecting all philosophy that was not scientific, and was on the verge of hardening into an anti-religious posture resembling nothing more than a religious fanaticism fueled by its bias toward mechanistic materialism and atheism.

Bazarov dismisses all philosophy as romanticism; his favorite catch-phrase is "reality." The trend to realism, prevalent at the time, combined in his case with a nihilistic and negative spirit. Feuerbach, the philosopher of realism, claimed that philosophy must be reconnected to the natural sciences, and vice-versa, that the unity of the two is a matter of internal necessity, and that they mutually demand one another.

As we saw in chapter two, he went on to advocate a new anthropology and a society of humane love based on realism . But no sooner was the scientific spirit freed from Hegelian metaphysics by Feuerbach, than it went beyond realism to work a radical change in the idea of nature. In Feuerbach, certain features such as the love of nature or seeing nature as a living thing remained; after him, nature was transformed into a completely material and mechanical world, dragging the human nature of which Feuerbach spoke along with it. For the new scientific spirit, talk of "human nature" was mere sentimentalism. The shift from the traditional ideal natural science to an analytical natural science went beyond the idea of nature to influence the ideas of humanity and, morality as well. (The reason Goethe, in his later years, engaged with his color theory in so persistent and passionate a confrontation with Newton may have been that he sensed the deep crisis coming in the shift to the scientific standpoint.)

Furthermore, Bazarov's scientific realism has nihilism at its ground. Not only did he shock the people around him by dissecting a frog in his own guest-room, but he repudiated everything "unscientific" such as poetry, art, love, love of family, the traditional social system, and so forth.

His nihilism is also tied in with the socialist spirit, which counts as the second ingredient in his nihilism. Bazarov negates everything: religion, the morality derived from religion, and the social system based on such a morality. At the same time, he is depicted as disconnected from the common people, in spite of his attempts to make contact with the local peasants and the pride he took in being a native of a farming village. Dostoevsky says in his *Writer's Diary*, criticizing the intelligentsia of the period who advocated a love of "the people," that the people they loved were not real but only an idealized fiction, closer perhaps to the rioters in Paris in 1793. It may be too much to say this of Bazarov, The egoist Bazarov is acutely aware of the distance between himself and his followers. While he and his friend Arcady are staying at the house of the beautiful widow, Madame Odintsov, the following exchange takes place between them.

Arcady asks: "What the devil made that idiotic Sitnikov turn up here?" Bazarov replies: "I can see you're still a fool, my boy. The Sitnikovs of this world are essential to us. I need such louts . It is not for the gods to have to bake bricks!" On hearing this, his friend suddenly began to understand the fathomless depths of Bazarov's conceit. "So you and I are gods, are we? Or rather you are a god while I'm one of the louts, I suppose?" "Yes," repeated Bazarov gloomily, "you' re still a fool".

Bazarov's followers, including his close friend Arcady, will bake bricks for the new palace where the new gods are to reside, while Bazarov himself is the new god, or one of the gods, who is to direct its construction and become master of the palace . Soon afterwards, as soon as his love for Madame

Odintsov founders, he says self-contemptuously the following:

*“Everyone hangs by a thread, at any moment the abyss may open beneath our feet, and yet we go out of our way to invent all sorts of trouble for ourselves to spoil our lives
we’ve*

both of us behaved like fools.”

Bazarov feels like a fool, and the distance between the gods and those who bake bricks disappears . The love in which his folly showed up was the only point at which his inner nature could have broken through his nihilism.

From a certain point of view, Bazarov’s nihilism is still naive in a number of respects, a kind of nihilism “in itself.” There are still things in which he can believe fanatically, such as science, socialism, or the ego, and this fanaticism conditions his nihilism. His nihilism has not yet developed to the point of negating the fanatical beliefs it harbors; it has not become a nihilism “for itself.” A nihilism that supports science, socialism, or ego merely helps him to believe in these things, but has not yet become a true, selfconscious nihilism. It has yet to negate the nihilism “in itself” that grounds these things and his own belief in them. The feeling of hollowness that rings through Bazarov remains no more than a vague premonition echoing from the depths of the unconscious .

In contrast, a nihilism that has become self-conscious knows

itself as despair and as the spirit of radical revolt, doubt, and freedom. It is a nihilism prepared to purge the nihilism latent in science, socialism, and the ego; and then to go beyond these things deep into the interior of the soul, there desperately to confront God, ideals, morality, love of one's neighbor, and the rest. This kind of nihilism does not come about merely by opposing religion, philosophy, morality, the social system, and other things external to the self.

This standpoint of the "in itself" merely negates other things, never touching the interior of the self that does the negating. The self continues to possess something that can be believed in.

A nihilism no longer able to believe in itself, an introverted nihilism that has become an X for itself, ceases to provide a source for feelings of nihilism. When this happens, nihilism itself gradually turns into a kind of fanaticism. Science, socialism, and the ego lose all credibility, offering no more than temporary playthings for the desperate fanaticism of a nihilism that has become self-conscious.

This is the standpoint of a nihilism that has passed from the stage of science to that of philosophy, from the realm of "understanding" [Verstand] to the realm of "reason" [Vernunft] .

In Hegelian terms, when reason becomes self-conscious as "reason" that has united the inner and the outer, it becomes a new task or problem for itself, becomes an X for itself, with a dynamic of self-inquiry or self-disclosure .

In this nihilism, then, the confrontation with religion or metaphysics (with God or the world of ideals) has become an internal matter for the self. One does not simply place matters outside the self, there to negate them, but penetrates to the same depth as religion or metaphysics to confront them on their own ground . In so doing, nihilism begins to long for these things within itself, to demand new gods and new ideals. Only at this stage does the nihilism born of the modern scientific spirit come to term and begin to show signs of a change. For an author, this means fighting with both the believer and the nihilist within him, standing his ground to confront the God within himself. This applies more to Dostoevsky than to Turgenev.

Turgenev has Bazarov die from an infection contracted from a small wound inflicted by mistake while performing surgery on one of the peasants . The very scalpel of science he wielded on others proves his own undoing. But the irony in this hardly amounts to anything like a full confrontation with science and its nihilism. *Fathers and Sons* concludes by speaking of "the vast repose of 'indifferent' nature" and of "everlasting reconciliation and life which has no end"; and yet it is not clear how "indifferent nature" can provide reconciliation. In Turgenev's case, the issue of nihilism has not become a thorn in the side of the author's own soul.

Fathers and Sons apparently caused an extraordinary furor when it was first published, and Turgenev immediately lost credibility with the "progressives" with whom he had been close. The Slavophiles, on the other hand, welcomed him. Turgenev is supposed to have said: "At this point only two

people have understood my intentions: Dostoevsky and Botkin." At the time, Dostoevsky had not dug down to the level of truly nihilistic nihilism . His "thoroughgoing" realism was clear from the beginning already in Poor Folk, not a vulgar realism, but an extraordinary world of souls and spiritual forces deep within, which vulgar realism might well call pathological or exaggerated. This realism was what he called a "higher-level" or "spiritual realism." In Poor Folk he tries to portray the suffering and evil of real life without describing the dream of an ideal world .

His characters are helpless people who are forced down by the power of society and, lacking the strength to resist, fall into despair. Dostoevsky seems to have been venting his own rebellious spirit through the characters he created, while keeping a firm hold on his own idealism.

The subsequent experience of having been sentenced to death and then sent into exile must have worked a radical change on Dostoevsky's soul. Meantime, the trend of thought in Russia was changing rapidly. A character from the older generation who appears in Turgenev's Fathers and Sons says: "It used to be Hegelians, and now there are nihilists" . In between came Feuerbach and Proudhon, of whom Belinsky, who supported Dostoevsky before his exile, was an enthusiastic admirer. During his exile Dostoevsky planned a "great novel" which would later crystallize as Crime and Punishment. This leads us to suspect that already at that time he was concerned with nihilism and its overcoming. In a letter to his older brother Dostoevsky asked to be sent Kant's Critique of Pure Reason and also some texts by Hegel (the History of Philosophy in particular), remarking that his entire future depended on it. Behind this one may surmise a confrontation with nihilism going on.

In Notes from the House of the Dead, the issue of nihilism does not yet appear. In The Insulted and the Injured we find an egoist who becomes in a sense even more nihilistic than Bazarov. When criticized for his misconduct, Prince Varkovsky replies : "Don't talk nonsense. Let's speak more frankly." "Well, frankly what is there that isn't nonsense?" "The individual, the ego," is his response. "All things exist for me; the entire world was made for me I can continue to live on happily on this earth . This is the best faith

Since long ago I have thrown off all shackles and all duties." Varkovsky's nihilism is not yet a nihilism that has become reflective in the sense we spoke of earlier. The egoist still behaves comfortably, following where his selfish desire leads him. He seems to have the same spirit of reliance on nihilism (because there is no God or morality everything is permitted) that the Christians in the Middle Ages had toward God when they despoiled the heathens . It is a kind of faith in nihilism, not yet a form of reason . Nihilism had not yet become an X, a task for itself, a fate that would question itself.

Therefore, in this egoist there is neither a struggle against nor a yearning for God or morality; there is neither a desperate persistence in nihilism nor a drive toward a new God. There is only a cynicism of understanding that tries to enjoy life by fulfilling carnal desires to the utmost, without knowing self-splitting or torment.

There is a recognition of positive evil, but no desperately affirmative will to evil . Like the characters of his novels, Dostoevsky himself is not yet possessed by nihilism . Nihilism

has not entered into him. Although he pursues a reality filled with suffering and evil, and is in this sense a defiant realist, he still retains the standpoint of an idealist who opposes critically from the outside . To brand evil as evil implies a standpoint of goodness. It is not a situation in which one can speak of "beyond good and evil," and consequently the distinction between good and evil becomes ambiguous.

In the case of Dostoevsky, the embracing of nihilism as true nihilism, surpassing Turgenev and indeed himself up until then, and taking the characters in his novels beyond Bazarov or Varkovsky to make them truly nihilistic nihilists, begins from Notes from Underground.

From that point on, Dostoevsky moves in a variety of directions: toward a nihilism that stands in abyssal nihility after the negation of religion, metaphysics, and morality by science and socialism (a kind of cosmological nihilism), a demonic nihilism emerging from the excavation of the ground of socialism, and a nihilism of the egoist struggling with God . At the same time, a series of issues- among them God, Christ, the great earth, the homeland of Russia and its peasants- emerge as opposing elements to confront nihilism in its manifold of forms. In the nihilism of Ivan in The Brothers Karamazov, these various elements are for the first time radically integrated and profoundly pursued.