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MOL 316-101

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October 5, 2003

**Bazarov: a lunatic or a visionary?**

“And the castle made of sand

Melts into the sea,

Eventually.”

- James Marshall Hendrix

Ivan Turgenev’s attempt at creating a new Russian contemporary “hero” has yielded a figure of extremely high complexity, contradiction, and divergence. This character, a man named Evgeny Bazarov and the enigma of his person have fueled limitless debates on the true essence of this figure, as it was intended by the author. As Socrates said, “Amid the argumentation, the truth is found”, so let this modest contribution to the seemingly endless discussion of Bazarov bring us perhaps one small step closer to the truth about this mysterious man and his true essence. What is Bazarov? Was he doomed to purgation of his theories, or was he a luminary worthy of respect and credence?

Evgeny Bazarov was born into a family of a modest provincial doctor. Turgenev provides no information about Bazarov’s life before his arrival in Maryino, but it can be guessed that the life of a less-than-richly endowed medical student in St. Petersburg must have involved innumerable hardships. Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* has provided considerable insight into the life of young scholars at that time, and it is more than reasonable to suspect that Bazarov’s life was no less of a challenge than it was for Dostoyevsky’s Rodion Raskolnikov. This austerity of lifestyle, combined with his dedicated academic pursuits, has made Bazarov into a strict empiricist, a staunch practician, and a merciless skeptic. Personal experience became his only acceptable form of discovery. His actions were governed by nothing other than rational reasoning; sentiments and passions were trampled by the ironfisted behemoth of his unyielding intellect.

Unfortunately, the power of Bazarov’s mind played a rude joke on the young pseudo-philosopher. His refusal to acknowledge any authority also meant his failure to recognize that perhaps he was not the wisest person in the world. “When I meet a man who can hold his own beside me, then I’ll change my opinion of myself,”- says Bazarov. Clearly, he is blindly infatuated with the idea of his own greatness. Pavel Kirsanov remarks this trait in Bazarov’s character as “Satanic pride”. Perhaps, this super-egotistic obsession with self-righteousness was fueled by his companion, Arkady.

The young Kirsanov, barely twenty-three years of age, apparently had not yet formed a sound system of morals and values and was drawn into discipleship of nihilism primarily by the power of Bazarov’s charisma and the “freshness” of the nihilists’ ideas, rather than their sensibility. Arkady is a person lacking character and devoid of an independent intellectual backbone. He constantly needs someone’s support and Bazarov just happens to be vivid enough a personality to attract such a simple life form as Arkady. Over the course of their friendship, Arkady breathes every word spoken by his sensei, seldom displaying signs of independent thought. He delightfully rejects authority, but his nihilistic fervor is not sincere; Arkady semi-consciously follows his friend, who softly and ambiguously ridicules him as a phony, for Bazarov knows that Arkady’s subscription to nihilism is very strongly contradicted by his demeanor, and his frequent displays of feelings and emotions. But why does Bazarov not renounce this friendship? Why does he tolerate the company of Arkady, this dim hypocrite, and why does he agree to travel to Maryino? Well, there was no reason not to. As devoted to work and science as Bazarov was, he saw no harm in spending a little time in the mellow and pleasant country estate of his young friends’ parent. Moreover, Bazarov yet again pursues a selfish motive by agreeing to travel to Maryino: he dreads boredom, which would probably consume him at his true destination, his own parents’ homestead.

Although it appears to be understandable why such an intelligent and developed figure as Bazarov would try to avoid extended periods of exclusive contact with simpler people – they bore him. But it also seems that Bazarov, in general, feels most comfortable around people who inherently have no capability to confront him and question his maximalistic slogans. He enjoys the company of the local kids in Maryino and delightfully explains his work in dissecting frogs; Arkady is his friend because he is harmless; he even tries to seduce Fenechka, that shy and timid woman, during his final visit at the Kirsanovs’. One way to explain these gravitational tendencies is by a hypothesis that Bazarov felt vulnerable as a nihilist. The ordinary people around him constantly challenged his ideas, and Bazarov’s two rudimentary reactions were to either withdraw and avoid these debates, as it usually was in his encounters with Pavel Kirsanov, or to engage in all-out verbal melees with his attackers, who oftentimes sound more reasonable than the belligerent nihilist.

Bazarov becomes consumed by his own lies. By so fiercely renouncing authority, principles, and norms, he contradicts himself. According to him, poetry is a nothing but romantic nonsense, music is a waste of time, admiration of nature is next to hallucinating. Consumed by his fictitious theories, Bazarov fails (or refuses) to realize that by arbitrarily denying these and other naturally existing attributes of the society and people, he disaffirms his own dedication to empiricism. Bazarov’s belief in chemistry attests to the exact opposite of what he asserts. Chemistry is merely a science that examines the interaction between atoms; it does not write the laws of these interactions. Similarly, the world is constructed with its principles of interactions between people within the society. Therefore, by refusing to recognize the underlying order of the society and becoming a nihilist, Bazarov puts himself in danger of someday facing a painful revelation.

His relentless struggle against the ideals and the idealists has transformed his very self into an idealist. By attacking all principles already so solidly embedded in the society, he makes himself an author of just another set of ideals, values, and principles. “Thou shalt not enjoy the nature, music, poetry, or love! Thou shalt enjoy *Stoff und Kraft* and chemistry!” is a possible quote relatable to Bazarov through paraphrasing of his loud claims. But it is strange that such an intelligent man as Bazarov could not understand that by depriving people of their common sources of enjoyment and happiness, he was sermonizing about a world bound for self-destruction. For it is quite clear that the more harmless sources of happiness every person finds in his or her life, the better and safer the world will be for the society as a whole.

Strongly intoxicated by his own brilliance and without understanding his mistake, Bazarov found the audacity and temerity to question and ridicule the natural order of his society at the time. His quest for reform essentially was a trip to the dawn of human race, to the prehistoric times of laissez-faire ethics (or absence thereof) and an attempt to redesign the law of the world, the law that constructed itself over the centuries and evolved as an environmental force much too strong for a simple idealist like Bazarov to engage.

“Fathers and Sons” is similar to a Sophoclean tragedy, in which the main character, Bazarov, follows a line that involves most of the attributes of a real tragic hero, as outline in Greek drama: hubris, an anagnorisis, and a catharsis. His hubris was the titanic pride and contempt for too many of the world’s principles. His unsuccessful relationship with Odintsova, however, forced him to acknowledge the foolishness of his rash evangelizations. Consistent with his own previous statement that “he will review his own person when he finds someone who can face him”, Bazarov experiences his anagnorisis when he undergoes a radical change of philosophy after all of his nihilistic ideas are put to doubt. Bazarov the Empiricist witnesses *empirically* the dismantling of his longtime theories when he falls in love with the first person capable of standing up to him, Anna Odintsova. But tragically, the revelation comes to Bazarov only when he is on his deathbed, losing grip of his mighty intellect. Too late! he acknowledges the truth about his feeble “castle made of sand that melted into the sea” when he confessed love to Anna.

Even after yet another version of the interpretation of Bazarov’s story is presented, it is still unclear whether Bazarov’s death was an accident or the unshakable nihilist’s deliberate departure from the world he refused to respect and recognize as his. But what would happen if the doctor whom Bazarov was assisting during that autopsy *did* have the antibiotic to save Bazarov from the typhus infection? Would he abandon his audacious nihilistic ideals? The answer, I believe, is yes. Bazarovism is an absolutely unsustainable school of thought in human society, and Bazarov’s own example serves as solid evidence for that. Through extrapolation of Evgeny’s persona onto the background of the twentieth century, it becomes even clearer that elements like Mr. Bazarov would find themselves dysfunctional and rejected by the society. Moreover, a Bazarov-like person who believes in nothing but the empirical would be exposed to too many adverse and destructive influences that only our parents’ guidance can help avoid: drugs, unprotected sex, etc. Therefore, if Turgenev allowed Eugeny to live as an equal member of the society, then just like Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov, he, too, would have abandoned his youthful rage and joined the society of reasonable people.