

## Nihilism and the Dilemma of the Liberal Intellectual: From Turgenev to Berlin and back

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"Well, and Monsieur Bazarov, what is he?" he asked in a leisurely tone.

"What is Bazarov?" Arkady smiled. "Would you like me to tell you, uncle, what he really is?"

"Please do, nephew."

"He is a nihilist!"

"What?" asked Nikolai Petrovich, while Pavel Petrovich lifted his knife in the air with a small piece of butter on the tip and remained motionless.

"He is a nihilist," repeated Arkady.

"A nihilist," said Nikolai Petrovich. "That comes from the Latin nihil, nothing, as far as I can judge; the word must mean a man who . . . who recognizes nothing?"

"Say--who respects nothing," interposed Pavel Petrovich and lowered his knife with the butter on it.

"Who regards everything from the critical point of view," said Arkady.

"Isn't that exactly the same thing?" asked Pavel Petrovich.

"No, it's not the same thing. A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered."

"Well, and is that good?" asked Pavel Petrovich. "That depends, uncle dear. For some it is good, for others very bad."

"Indeed. Well, I see that's not in our line. We old-fashioned people think that without principles, taken as you say on faith, one can't take a step or even breathe. *Vous avez changé tout cela* [You've changed all that]; may God grant you health and a general's rank, and we shall be content to look on and admire your . . . what was the name?"

"Nihilists," said Arkady, pronouncing very distinctly.

"Yes, there used to be Hegelists [Hegelians] and now there are nihilists. We shall see how you will manage to exist in the empty airless void; and now ring, please, brother Nikolai, it's time for me to drink my cocoa."<sup>1</sup>

Please allow me to introduce Mr. Yevgeny Vasil'evich Bazarov, the hero (or anti-hero, depends on one's reading) of Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev's 1862 novel *Отцы и дети* (*Ottsy i Deti; Fathers and Sons*). Who is Bazarov? He is absent, on purpose, from the scene we have just quoted from chapter 5, the chapter in which

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<sup>1</sup> Turgenev, Ivan Sergeevich, *Fathers and Children*, tr. Richard Hare (Hutchinson & Co., Publishers, Ltd., 1948 [orig. 1862]), chap. V.

Turgenev first introduced the term nihilism. Bazarov is a young and radical rebel with a cause. Like Arkady Kirsanov, who we find here occupied more with butter than with philosophy, Bazarov is also a student at the Moscow University, training to be a doctor, but unlike his moderate friend Bazarov retains that science and rigid materialism will solve all of society's ills and problems. He is interested in neither art nor history, neither in religion nor in literature. He is an angry young man, socially alienated and extremely unsentimental towards too many things he finds as no more than 'romantic rubbish'. He is the prototype of the nihilist. Or so, at least, thought Turgenev.

The purpose of my talk today is to examine the use of the term 'nihilism' in Turgenev's classic liberal novel and compare it to another famous liberal text which returned to Bazarov and read against an entirely different context: Isaiah Berlin's 1970 Romanes Lecture entitled *Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament*.<sup>2</sup> More than 100 years separate these two texts from each other. The first was written in Russia at a critical period of radicalization of the intelligentsia that opened with the 1861 Emancipation of serfs and ended in 1866, when a failed assassination of the tsar Alexander II; the second, written in England, addressed indirectly not only the heated debates among liberals themselves about American military involvement in Vietnam but also aimed at a younger generation of protesting students who took philosophy from the campuses out to the streets in attempt of shaking up 'old society'. Both texts were considered by many, for good or for bad, as seminal landmarks of liberal humanist prose. These texts are 'liberal', first and foremost, in a negative sense, that is, it is easier for their readers to grasp what the authors stood *against*, more than it is clear what they stand *for*. Ironically, what both Berlin and Turgenev feared from were the 'new men of the sixties' – the 1860s *raznochinets* in Turgenev's case and the Thaw generation, and especially the rebellious New Left students of 1968.

I examine these texts in attempt to answer the following questions: First, and most crucially: What does the term 'nihilism' and the adjective 'nihilist' mean in the liberal imagination of Turgenev and Berlin? Is there a consistency of meaning and use

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<sup>2</sup> Romanes Lecture for 1970, given at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, 12 Nov. 1970. Originally published as *Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament* (Oxford, 1972 :Clarendon Press) reprinted in Berlin's *Russian Thinkers*, eds. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 260-305. Hereafter: Berlin, 'Fathers and Children'. The quotes from Berlin's lecture which appear in this lecture are taken from this edition.

of the term? Or, on the other hand: can it be simply replaced by alternative terms? One can think of 'extremism', 'radicalism', 'materialism' or 'positivism' as candidates to replace the nihilist. Second, what are the philosophical underpinnings and political implications of nihilism for each author? And, finally, what, if at all, these two liberal authors suggest will be the cure of the nihilist zeal? To be clear: although this is not a formal exercise in *Begriffgeschichte* (history of concepts) I read these texts as a historian. Therefore I try to understand concepts in their social, discursive and political contexts. Let us turn first to Turgenev's text.

### I. *Nihilism explained by Turgenev*

It is frequently noted by historians that thanks to Turgenev's novel the term 'nihilist' not only began to gain currency in public discourse in pre-revolutionary Russia but also provided a prism from which members of the intelligentsia themselves, as well as their future historians, could describe themselves and especially the generation gap that separated the younger iconoclast radicals of the 1860s from the older Russian *intelligenti* of the 1840s. And indeed, the strand that runs through the whole novel and offers it its title is the generation gap. It is represented by, on the one hand, Bazarov, the emblematic symbol of a new type of man – the *raznochinaia intelligentsia*, the 'new men' as they were called in Russia, who were the younger iconoclast members of the intelligentsia calling for more drastic measures against the Tsarist regime and, on the other hand, the middle-aged liberal land-lord Pavel Petrovich Kirsanov, Arkady's father.<sup>3</sup> Turgenev masterfully builds up the contrast between these two figures, which reveals itself and turns into a personal antagonism as the plot thickens. Thus the initial understanding of nihilism is in contrast to what Pavel Petrovich stands for.

Pavel Petrovich is an idle man of the Gentry, who thinks highly of one's pedigree, values art and good manners, and remembers the days he visited the university, not in order to become physician or scientist, but in order to be educated as

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<sup>3</sup> Ripp, Victor, *Turgenev's Russia : From Notes of a Hunter to Fathers and Sons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), esp. chap. 9; Schapiro, Leonard Bertram, *Turgenev, His Life and Times*, 1st American ed (New York: Random House, 1978); Seeley, Frank Friedeberg, *Turgenev : A Reading of His Fiction, Cambridge Studies in Russian Literature* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). I would also like to thank Raphael Tzirkin-Sadan for allowing me to read his "The Nihilism in Russian Literature, 1862-1866 [in Hebrew]," (Jerusalem: Hebrew University [unpublished MA Thesis], 2003) from which I've learned a great deal.

“gentlemen”. In his political orientation he is a liberal democrat who sympathizes with the reformist voices and this is not disconnected from his anglophile biases, for he considers Britain (like, according to several commentators, Turgenev himself<sup>4</sup>) to be a fine example of preservation of fine aristocratic manners and liberty at the same time. He is sensitive and intelligent and therefore quickly senses Bazarov’s despise of aristocratic snobbery and becomes more and more irritated by the young man’s “complete nonchalance disgusted his aristocratic nature.”<sup>5</sup> Bazarov, on the other hand, detests aristocracy, resents the old reformist ideals and renders the whole political language Pavel Petrovich retains to be outdated, superfluous. Pavel also reads Pushkin and remembers faintly the days Westernizers found much inspiration in the romanticism of Schiller and Schelling. All this means nothing to Bazarov. He finds interest in neither Pushkin nor “the Germans”, excluding, of course, the German scientists, whom he considers to be “very clever”, recommending his university buddy Arkady to start reading Ludwig Büchner’s *Matter and Force (Stoff und Kraft, 1855)* at once. Pavel continually finds himself in a siege in his own house, trying to defend his ‘old’ ideals. “Kindly remember, sir,” he confronts Bazarov at some stage of the novel, “the English aristocracy. They did not abandon one iota of their rights, and for that reason they respect the rights of others; they demand the fulfillment of what is due to them, and therefore they respect their own duties. The aristocracy gave freedom to England, and they maintain it for her.”<sup>6</sup> This did not change one iota in Bazarov’s conviction. “Your father is a good fellow,” Bazarov tells his friend, “but his day is over; his song has been sung to extinction.”<sup>7</sup> Alienated and angry, unsentimental and cruel – these are the primary characteristics of the nihilist according to Turgenev.

No doubt, the meaning of nihilism remains obscure here. But we can provide a list of ‘secondary’ characteristics, so-to-speak, of the nihilist according to Turgenev’s novel, especially if we read it against its historical background. First, the nihilist is a *positivist*, i.e. a great believer in science who strictly retains that ‘real’, authentic knowledge is based on actual sense experience. He does not stand, nor does he understand, Hegelian philosophy and jargon and prefers ‘materialism’ and ‘realism’

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<sup>4</sup> On Turgenev’s ‘anglophilism’ see Waddington, Patrick, *Ivan Turgenev and Britain, Anglo-Russian Affinities Series* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Turgenev, *Fathers and Children*, chap. VI

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. X

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. X

on German Idealism. To be sure, the science he adores is not one branch of human knowledge in a tree has many other branches we label using terms like ‘history’, ‘metaphysics’, ‘human sciences’ and so on. For the science he adores is a rational epistemic system that he considers to be total, for everything, he believes, should be established on its rational methods. He is a modernist who envisions a well-conducted society that depends on replacement of old sciences (‘metaphysics’) by a hierarchy of new sciences in an almost a Comtian positivist manner.<sup>8</sup> He is an extreme believer in utilitarian ethics of rational egoism. Positivism and utilitarianism coupled together equates a technocratic admiration of the applied science. “A good chemist is twenty times as useful as any poet” he declares when he hears the names Schiller and Goethe [very much like students, I must add]. When Pavel speaks with Bazarov of love the latter silences him, declaring abruptly:

And what stuff it all is, about these mysterious relations between a man and woman? We physiologists know what these relations are. You study the anatomy of the eye; where does the enigmatical glance you talk about come in there? That’s all romantic, nonsensical, æsthetic rot. We had much better go and look at the beetle<sup>9</sup>.

These are not merely idiosyncratic personal traits. When portraying Bazarov in this way Turgenev was in fact describing a generational gap that separated the Russian Hegelians of the 1840s – people like Vissarion Belinsky, young Bakunin, Alexander Herzen and others – from the younger generation that found no interest and had no patience whatsoever in the lengthy endless discussions on the possibility of action. The term ‘the generation of the 1840s’ is almost synonymic to the Russian fascination in Hegelian philosophy.<sup>10</sup> The key thinkers of this decade, Turgenev included, were exposed in youth to Byron, Schiller, and Schelling, and gradually discovered Hegel, who they interpreted as an anti-Romantic who forced them to ‘reconcile with reality’ in a rationalistic way. The revelation of Hegel meant, to use Andrzej Walicki’s words, that “‘Real life’ as an ideal was to be an antidote to the vicious circle of ‘reflection’”.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless it was also the generation which was

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<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the word positivism is absent from Turgenev’s text. In addition I did not find any evidence in literature that he was familiar with Auguste Comte’s philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> Chap. VII

<sup>10</sup> The classic study on this still remains Walicki, Andrzej, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1979), chap. VII. See also Berlin’s *Russian Thinkers* (op. cit).

<sup>11</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 123.

highly disappointed in 1848, disillusioned from Western Europe that forced them to confront a failed prophecy that they found in Hegelian dialectical historicism.

Another tactic we can use to try to decipher what Turgenev meant by nihilism is to find who are the ‘real’ – that is historical rather than fictional – figures on whom he based the character of Bazarov. Turgenev’s letters, as well as a long list of monographs and biographies, points at several figures from whom he borrowed ideas and personal traits that helped him to construct Bazarov’s figure. Some critics point to the two famous editors of the literary and political magazine *Sovremennik* (lit. “Contemporary”; published in St. Petersburg, 1836-1866) Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) and Nikolai Dobrolyubov (1836-1861). But the man Bazarov resembles more than anyone else is Dimitri Ivanovich Pisarev (1840-1868). Pisarev was a radical writer and social critic who broke away from the old liberal camp. He worked under strict police supervision and spent his most productive years incarcerated, forcing Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov, who feared his temperament as well as censorship policies, to restrain his writing. Pisarev did not believe that Russia’s salvation would come from the *narod*, the common folk, that would gain lay education, but from universities. Literature, he believed, had the social progressive task to fill – to foster political change and enlighten the individual reader. In a programmatic 1861 article titled “Nineteenth century Scholasticism” Pisarev explained that “literature should be directed towards one single target: emancipate the person from the trammels imposed on him by the timidity of his own thoughts, by tradition, by a common ideal”.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Pisarev believed, there was no room for aesthetic analysis in literature. They are inescapably subjective, Pisarev believed, and therefore irrelevant. We may assume that Turgenev aimed to refute Pisarev’s criticisms when writing a very subjective melancholic novel a year after he had written his realist-positivist pamphlet. Ironically, however, once Turgenev’s novel was published Pisarev was quick to accept the label ‘nihilist’ as a description of his own position: advocate of rational emancipation of the individual from all irrational bonds imposed by society, family, and religion that would accomplished through a popularization of the natural sciences.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Pisarev quoted in LeGouis, Catherine, *Positivism and Imagination : Scientism and Its Limits in Emile Hennequin, Wilhelm Scherer, and Dmitrii Pisarev* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1997), 87.

<sup>13</sup> Pozefsky, Peter C., *The Nihilist Imagination : Dmitrii Pisarev and the Cultural Origins of Russian Radicalism (1860-1868)* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, chap. IX. For an interesting (although extremely a-historical) discussion that follows our discussion on the

Turgenev, Isaiah Berlin would come to write, could not bear the “fanatical rejection of all that he held dear – liberal culture, art, civilized human relationships.”<sup>14</sup> It was important for Berlin to defend Turgenev from accusations of being a pure aesthete who believed only in the idea of art for art’s sake and for lacking civic sense. Let us jump now, then, a century forward in time. Don’t worry: we’ll land on another Russian liberal anglophile.

## II. *Nihilism explained by Berlin*

I do not provide a biographical sketch of neither Berlin nor Turgenev due to brevity of time, but I will mention two biographical details that are crucial, I believe, for understanding of Berlin’s position. First, when looking at Berlin and Turgenev, we should take into our account the difference between young Berlin of the 1930s and the Berlin of 1960s and 1970s in terms of philosophical orientation. During the 1930s Berlin, together with J. L. Austin, ‘Freddie’ Ayer and to some extent also Gilbert Ryle (Berlin’s former tutor) had a substantial role in forming what came to be known as the Oxonian Analytic philosophy. They considered themselves champions of ‘matter-of-fact-ness’ and promoters of a more ‘professional’ – that is scientific, non-metaphysical, approach to philosophy which they considered to be dominated by British Idealism. What young Berlin and his philosophical peers were especially interested in is the demarcation between meaning and meaninglessness: they were deeply influenced by Moore and especially Russell’s theory of types, and with the discovery of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* they felt philosophy was at last revolutionized. The problem of metaphysics, Ryle argued in a programmatic article in 1931, is that it contains too many ‘Systematically Misleading Expressions’.<sup>15</sup> The ideas expressed in Berlin’s early lectures in philosophy bear much resemblance to his tutor’s. In his 1936 *Language Truth and Logic* the 26-years-old Ayer went even further, and he could do so thanks to the ideas he borrowed from Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970) and other members of the Vienna circle. (Berlin, by the way, was the

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relation between literature and positivism see Allen, Elizabeth Cheresch, *Beyond Realism: Turgenev's Poetics of Secular Salvation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Fathers and Children,” 275.

<sup>15</sup> Ryle, Gilbert, “Systematically Misleading Expressions,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 32 (1931), 139-170 ; Reprinted in Ryle, *Collected Papers*, 2 vols., (Bristol, Thoemmes, 1990) vol. 2, 39–62. Quotes throughout this passage are taken from my PhD dissertation.

one who helped him find a publisher). At the center of the book stood the verification principle, which argues that in order to be meaningful a given proposition must be empirically verifiable. If a statement is "unverifiable" in Ayer's terms it is literally meaningless.

The second fact worth mentioning about the young Berlin is his close association with what came to be known as Maurice Bowra's "Immoral Front" and his friendship with the young leftist poets of his generation such as Stephen Spender, W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, and Day Lewis. Much was written on the Auden group and it is unnecessary to repeat it here: these young poets were revolting against the arch-conservative intellectual climate of their university, family and class, and created their own voice when separating themselves from T.S. Eliot and others who found much inspiration in British Idealist philosophy, Christian moralism and, to great extent, a considerable degree of neo-medievalist nostalgic yearnings. If Eliot was the father, Auden et. al were definitely the sons. While they were drifting leftwards Eliot became further convinced that he lives in a world in which a titanic clash between virtuous Christianity and amoral Communism takes place, a clash he described as no less than rivalry between religions.<sup>16</sup> Spender (1909-1995) in particular is important for our story not only because he was Berlin's lifelong close friend but also because his ideological conversions and transitions are make him a typical representative of this generation: Revolting against his arch-conservative aristocratic family, Spender joined the Communist Party in 1935 and later went to Spain to assist the International Brigades in their fight against fascism, and established his voice, thanks to his poems and the programmatic *Forward From Liberalism* (1937), as the leading voice of the young Left intellectuals.<sup>17</sup> He changed his mind drastically after WWII, producing in 1949 together with Arthur Koestler an essay collection whose title provided the slogan for the disappointed young men of the thirties: *The God that Failed*. He became key member in the CCF (Congress for Cultural Freedom) and editor (1953-1966) of the CIA-funded *Encounter* magazine, in which Berlin published for the first

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<sup>16</sup> Eliot, "Christianity and Communism", *The Listener* 16 March 1932, 382-3. The essay was written in response to Spender's pro-communist poem "After They Have Tired".

<sup>17</sup> Sutherland, John, *Stephen Spender a Literary Life* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

time many of the essays that were later re-collected in the volume *Russian Thinkers* (1978).<sup>18</sup>

I mention these facts because it was in the context of the 1930s that Berlin first began thinking in Turgenevian terms about his own generation, distancing himself from his immediate social milieu. At the time his illuminati friends were becoming heavily politicized Berlin took refuge in Turgenev's novels. He wrote to Spender (December 1932) that he had "suddenly begun to read Turgenev in Russian and am now reading him wildly in a sort of intoxication,"<sup>19</sup> and in a letter to Bowra he described his closest friends as "obeying the laws of Turgenev".<sup>20</sup> The young, in other words, were radical nihilists rejecting all forms of authority and tradition. The understanding of the ideological schisms in generational terms appears time and again in Berlin's private letters. He translated Alexander Blok's essay "The Collapse of Humanism" for the *Oxford Outlook*, the university's student magazine, while adding an introduction of his own in which he declared that part of the problem of Blok and the modernist art is that they became "a very effective weapon against the intellectual and moral organization" and, in essence, "our Western forms of life".<sup>21</sup> What stood behind Berlin's interest in the Russian pre-revolutionary situation in the 1930s is the collapse of the liberal middle-ground in English intellectual life in the 1930s, and the gradual crystallization of a Manichean imagery of world of politics that seemed, especially after Abyssinia and Spain, to be constituted of division between 'Red' Bolshevism vs. 'Brown' Fascism, a division that left no room for a liberal middle-ground. The attempt to find some sort of middle way between the Auden-Spender mixture of art and politics and T. S. Eliot's conservative approach to poetry stood behind 'Literature and the Crisis', an article Berlin offered in early 1935 to the editor of the *London Mercury*, in which he compared Britain of his time to pre-revolutionary

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<sup>18</sup> Saunders, Frances Stonor, *The Cultural Cold War: The Cia and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co., 2000). Spender always insisted that he was unaware of the ultimate source of *Encounter's* funds. See Noel Annan's beautiful portrait of his generation in his *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah Berlin to Stephen Spender, 5 December 1932, in Berlin, Isaiah, *Flourishing: Letters 1928-1946*. Ed. Hardy, Henry (London: Chatto & Windus, 2004), 42.

<sup>20</sup> Berlin used this expression in a letter from January 1937 to Maurice Bowra, in reference to Thomas ('Tony') Hynderman (1911-1980) and Giles Samuel Bertram Romilly's (1916-67) participation in fighting in the international brigades in Spain. See "Supplementary Letters, 1928-1946", in *IBVL*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> The quote appears in Berlin, 'Alexander Blok', editorial, *Oxford Outlook* 11 (1931), 73-6, at 76. See also Berlin's translation of Alexander Blok, 'The Collapse of Humanism', *Oxford Outlook* 11 (1931), 89-112. It seems that Berlin was the first to translate this manifesto into English. In fact it seems that English-speaking readership was entirely unfamiliar with Blok's writings until the 1960s. Berlin omitted, however, the third section of the tract.

Russia, “troubled and spasmodic, everything is dominated by a widespread feeling of insecurity and alarm”, filled with writers who feel they live “on the edge of a volcano”, turning their art “into a party weapon”.<sup>22</sup> The aim of Berlin’s comparison with Russia was obvious: to warn his own generation and intimate social milieu from a too sharp transition from aestheticism to politization. When Spender joined the communist party, Berlin wrote to him (February 1936) that the

so called communists, who are mostly liberals like you, i.e. do not expect an actual bloody revolution, & wouldn't know quite what [to] do if it happened, but feel that socialism is ineffective, imposes no burdens, is bureaucratic & discredited, & is a highbrow revolt in a way, of high-minded individualistic ideologists... [a] pure intelligentsia movement, only thinly modified by genuine workers.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Berlin’s ideological drift away from the Left towards an uncompromising anticommunist stand in postwar years, what remained constant was his insistence that separation of arts from politics is a precondition of humanism. The Russians played a central role here: a year before his death Berlin dedicated an essay to the ideal of artistic commitment in which he summarized his view on the subject, and similar ideas appeared during the 1950s in his writings at the *Encounter* on Belinsky,<sup>24</sup> he hailed Igor Stravinsky for being “a committed cosmopolitan in music” who “sharply reacted against the whole populist, politically committed tradition of Russian art”,<sup>25</sup> and I could bring more and more examples which I will refrain from doing not to exhaust my time and your patience. Turgenev was retrieved from the storage, re-read and even translated (Berlin translated Turgenev’s *First Love* in 1950) in this context.<sup>26</sup> All these make Berlin’s essay on Turgenev a veiled autobiographical account of a Cold War liberal who, on the one hand, dwells in memories of his own juvenile years and, on the other hand, sees himself as a ‘father’, ridiculed by a new

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<sup>22</sup> see R. A. Scott (of the London Mercury) to I. Berlin, 8 March 1935, MS. Berlin 104 fol. 41b.

<sup>23</sup> Berlin, *Flourishing: Letters*, 154 (February 26, 1936). See also Berlin to Spender, 25 April 1936: “...the C[ommunist].P[arty]., is as you say neo-liberal. It is a radical intellectual revolt against the bureaucracy & stale corruptions of the labor party, i.e. those who were socialists in the 1920 are now communists, they don't really hope for a revolution, & are more highbrow than Socialists, & more intelligent & less vulgar.” *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Artistic Commitment: A Russian Legacy’, in Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 194–231; compare also with the essay ‘Herzen and his Memoirs’ in Berlin, Isaiah, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Hary, Henry (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), esp. p. 524.

<sup>25</sup> Berlin interviewed by John Amis “Stravinsky Died a Year Ago”, transmitted 6 April 1972, in *IBVL*

<sup>26</sup> See Berlin’s translation of Ivan Turgenev, *First Love* (London, 1956: Hamish Hamilton); repr. with an introduction by V. S. Pritchett (Harmondsworth, 1978: Penguin).

generation of 'nihilists'. This may explain, for instance, why he finds it important to emphasize in his lecture to defend the miserable Turgenev, who was vehemently criticized from both Left and Right, and to stress that "the natural inclination of liberals has been, and still is, towards the left, the party of generosity and humanity, towards anything that destroys barriers between men."<sup>27</sup>

But what also happened in post-WWII years, and is important for our understanding of what Berlin thought about when attacking nihilism, was Berlin's intellectual re-orientation, the move away from analytical philosophy and its replacement with political thought and history of ideas. There is a number of 'farewell essays', so-to-speak, Berlin wrote when turning his back on analytical philosophy which are crucial for understanding what bothered him in positivism. First is the very idea that empirical-minded philosophy could be based on *translation*. In two articles from the 1950s Berlin made it clear that he rejects the idea that linguistic meaning is capable of being reduced to a set of propositions constructed solely on real or possible sense-data.<sup>28</sup> The very premise that there is some sort of direct correspondence between words and some basic units of analysis such as sense-data or 'atomic facts' was highly discredited and thus also the notion of 'verifiability' was thrown away. Secondly, Berlin began talking about "The Ionian fallacy", the name he gave to a millennia-long tendency of philosophers – "from Aristotle to Russell" – to "search for the ultimate constituents of the world in some non-empirical sense".<sup>29</sup> I repeat: *non-empirical* sense. Berlin seems to be contradicting himself here, but in fact his argument is quite consistent. The Ionian fallacy was the codename he gave to the belief in the ability of philosophy to discover a firm and indisputable foundation of all knowledge that is certain and common to all things. This belief is, in essence, metaphysical. Put otherwise: the fact that analytic-linguistic philosophy and especially logical positivism emerged out of a desire to produce a better empirically-minded 'realist' depiction of the world did not, in itself, provide an immunization from metaphysical thinking. What Berlin considered himself doing is providing a rejection of positivist epistemological certainty, not of empiricism as a whole.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Berlin, "Fathers..", 297

<sup>28</sup> See "Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements" and "Logical Translation", both rep. in CC.

<sup>29</sup> IB Logical...in CC p. 76

<sup>30</sup> Much of this move is based on Popper.

This is a crucial point, for here Berlin's 'philosophical unease' provided him with the insights he would use in his anti-totalitarian political writings. In "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" (1961), for example, we find Berlin openly describing totalitarianism as "a form of the ancient fallacy of the Ionian philosophers, who wanted a single answer to the question 'What are all things made of?'".<sup>31</sup> These ideas stand in the background of his Romanus lecture on Turgenev.

"Turgenev, and liberals generally, saw tendencies, political attitudes, and functions of human beings, not human beings as functions of social tendencies. Acts, ideas, art, literature were expressions of individuals, not of objective forces of which the actors or thinkers were merely the embodiments. The reduction of men to the function of being primarily carriers of agents of impersonal forces was as deeply repellent to Turgenev as it had been to Herzen or, in his later phases, to his revered friend Belinsky... he believed – this was his 'old-fashioned' liberalism in the 'English dynastic [he meant constitutional] sense' – that only education, only gradual methods ... could improve the lives of men ... he went on believing – perhaps this was a relic of his Hegelian youth – that no issue was closed for ever, that every thesis must be weighed against its antithesis, that systems and absolutes of every kind ... were a form of dangerous idolatry."<sup>32</sup>

We have good reasons to suspect there is another specific text which provoked Berlin to write an essay on Turgenev: "The Politics of Hesitation" from 1957 by the literary critic Irving Howe (1920-1993). Very much like Georg Lukács (1885-1971) before him,<sup>33</sup> Howe was guided by a Western-Marxist perspective and revolted against literary formalism which secured the autonomism of the text and disregarded the relationship of literature to objective reality. One of the main questions which bothered him as a New York intellectual was the question of political apathy and especially the way in which intellectuals like Berlin provided excuses for it. Turgenev became for him a thinker caught in quandary, who refuses to see issues in black-and-white terms, and inevitably leads to his being exposed to charges of indecision, sitting on the fence, lack of commitment. The politics of Turgenev's novels, Howe argued, is

a politics of hesitation, reflecting the dilemmas of a cultivated man whose training and instincts lead him to despise politics ...but whose intelligence and almost feminine receptiveness to the moods of his day lead him to circle about the world of politics, neither plunging in nor cutting himself off [...] For all that Bazarov's nihilism accurately

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<sup>31</sup> Does Political Theory Still Exist?"

<sup>32</sup> 295.

<sup>33</sup> See Lukács, György, *The Historical Novel*, tr. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. (London: Merlin Press, 1962). Interestingly, Lukács does not mention Turgenev at all in his text.

reflects a [post-1848] phase in Russian and European history, it must be taken as a symptom of political desperation than as a formal intellectual system. Bazarov is a man ready for life, and cannot find it. Bazarov is a man of the most intense emotions, but without confidence in his capacity to realize them. Bazarov is a revolutionary personality, but without revolutionary ideas or commitments. He is all potentiality and no possibility. The more his ideas seem outmoded, *the more does he himself seem our contemporary*.<sup>34</sup>

Berlin's mentions Howe's piece briefly in his own essay, and like him also stressed the relevance of Turgenev to the dilemmas of his own age. "This painful conflict, which became the permanent predicament of the Russian liberals for half a century", Berlin argued, "has now grown world-wide".<sup>35</sup> Thus, like Turgenev, what Berlin actually tried to do is to depict a clash between two generations. Moreover, Berlin noted, Bazarov had won: What Bazarov stood for – quantitative method, technological management, reliance on utilitarian calculus in making decisions that affected vast numbers of human beings, "the calm moral arithmetic of cost effectiveness which liberates men from qualms, because they no longer think of the entities to which they apply their scientific computations as actual human beings who live the lives and suffer the deaths of concrete individuals", and, along with it, the suspicion of "all that is qualitative, imprecise, unanalysable, yet precious to men," has become the property of a centrist "technocratic establishment" which "ignore[s] and despise[s] what men are and what they live by."<sup>36</sup> A year after writing his essay on Turgenev Berlin wrote a lengthy study on Georges Sorel, which was also aimed to confront the quandaries of the New Left.<sup>37</sup> We should couple the two essays together, I believe, if we wish to understand the sort of dialogue Berlin tried to establish with the younger generation. Berlin was not only accusing them of being Bazarovs, but tacitly accepted, as we have seen in the quote above, some of their Herbert Marcuse-inspired critiques of 'post-industrial capitalist society'. What Berlin tried to do is provide an ample warning and tell this generation that it has a choice to make – they

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<sup>34</sup> Howe, Irving, "Turgenev: The Politics of Hesitation" in *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), 114-138 on 122, 132.

<sup>35</sup> Berlin, "Fathers and Children", 300. Section III of Berlin's lecture is dedicated to the 'relevance' of Turgenev to the conflict of his day.

<sup>36</sup> Berlin, "Fathers and Children", 300-301. Berlin was referring to the political, social and cultural trends of the Cold War period; but his words are remarkably prescient in characterizing much of the study of political science as it is now practiced.

<sup>37</sup> Berlin, "Georges Sorel", Creighton Lecture, *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 December 1971, 1617-22; rep. in Berlin, Isaiah, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Hardy, Henry (New York: Viking Press, 1980).

can either embrace anarchist violence like Sorel and Bazarov, who believed society is too rotten to be healed or, alternatively embrace the reformist and pragmatic piecemeal engineering.

Here, I think, Berlin's understanding of nihilism is already far away from Turgenev's intentions. It is not only because Berlin could not avoid reading Bazarov from the perspective of 1917 and see him as the prototypical Bolshevik. Paradoxically, nihilism was understood by Berlin at the same time both as a revolt against Hegelianism and, at the same time, as a passionate Hegelian desire to resolve all antinomies dialectically. It is a paradox, no doubt, but much of it has to do with the way Hegel was read by Popper, Berlin, Sidney Hook and other Cold War liberals who interpreted him through a new prism that was not available to Turgenev – namely totalitarianism. Nihilism was above all a faith in the inevitable historical progress along the lines of Hegel or Marx. The nihilist for Berlin is the totalitarian.

Berlin's remedy to nihilism was to differentiate the good old British common-sense empiricism from positivism. The nihilist lost touch with the "sense of reality" when he searched for models to describe reality. The emphasis on the particular was key. Berlin believed that "the concrete situation is almost everything,"<sup>38</sup> that "what is real is always particular; what matters is the unique, the individual, the concrete, that wherein a thing differs from other things." Each particular predicament requires its own specific treatment; it is vital to be sensitive to "the day-to-day play of circumstances...the individual nature of each case."<sup>39</sup> The quixotic effort of Turgenev is to compel his readers to be more skeptical about models and abstractions and be more attentive to real actual human being. Ironically, Berlin believed, the novelist does a much better job in fulfilling this important empirical mission than the philosopher. For Turgenev, abstractions were "substitutes for reality...doctrines which life, with its uneven surface and irregular shapes of real human character and activity, would surely resist and shatter." His vision therefore was always "delicate, sharp, concrete, and incurably realistic."<sup>40</sup> This is what made Turgenev the most admirably clear-eyed and truthful of writers.

One of the key characteristics of reality is the plurality of human way of seeing it. There are "overlapping sides of every question," that there is a complexity

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<sup>38</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Hardy, Henry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 18.

<sup>39</sup> Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," *Liberty*, p. 238

<sup>40</sup> Berlin, 'Fathers and Children', 269, 271, 292–3

and diversity of goals, attitudes, beliefs and that, at times there are also antinomies. The remedy to nihilism is to abandon the dialectical imagination and accept the irreducibility of tensions characterizing the relations “between reason and unreason, universalism and particularism, inclusion and exclusion”.<sup>41</sup> These various antinomies lie at the heart of the modernity Berlin chronicled as a historian, and provided the foundation of his normative theory: The idea that certain tensions and oppositions are not remediable and could not be transcended.

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<sup>41</sup> I am indebted to Katznelson, Ira, "Isaiah Berlin's Modernity," *Social Research* 66 (1999), 1079-2002.