Life Is Elsewhere
Lounsbery, Anne

Published by Cornell University Press

Lounsbery, Anne.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/71068

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2458239

[Thu Oct 19 08:45:46 2023] Access provided at 18 Oct 2023 14:45 GMT with no institutional affiliation
Inventing Provincial Backwardness, or “Everything is Barbarous and Horrid” (Herzen, Sollogub, and Others)

Elle avait de beaux yeux pour des yeux de province.
—Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset, 1747

Torzhok after Petersburg is like a dark night after a bright fine day.
—Ivan Mikhailovich Dolgorukov, 1810

The provincial ball has been described a thousand times”: by 1840, when Alexander Herzen writes “Notes of a Young Man” (sketches based on his experience in exile in the Russian provinces), he feels obliged to assume that his reader already knows what to expect from any description of “provincial” mores.¹ The same assumption will be implicit in his 1846 novel Who Is to Blame?, which has its origins in the sketches. Here Herzen claims there is no need to specify the location of the town where the action takes place (it “resembles all the others”),² though he nonetheless enters into a fairly detailed account of daily life in the unnamed gubernskii gorod. From the 1830s through the 1850s, many writers followed this pattern: they rehearsed what they themselves repeatedly acknowledged to be clichés of provincial life, trotting out the same topoi even as they insisted that everybody already knew all about what they were describing, even to the point that insisting on the banality of the trope became part of the trope itself—and they did this despite the fact that this way of conceiving provintsiiia was in fact quite new.
The current chapter considers not only how a new image of the Russian provinces took shape in literary texts, but also how these texts insisted that the image was *old*: by the 1830s, not only is it assumed that the provinces epitomize all that is grimly familiar, it is further assumed that such has always been the case, and that everyone has always known it. In the texts analyzed here, the supposedly timeless, ahistorical nature of *provintsia* becomes both a stereotype and a preoccupation. And in a slightly later period, this is the image of *provintsia* that will come to serve as a static non-modernity against which other forms of time and historicalness take on value.

In order to understand the novelty of the conception, consider what came before: before the idea of provincial stasis and anonymity took hold, Russian writings about places outside Petersburg and Moscow assumed neither temporal stasis nor an undifferentiated wasteland characterized by repetition, imitation, and distortion. It was once possible to see *provintsia* as a series of diverse and particular places, and to do so in a variety of ways. A 1769 poem by Mikhail Chulkov, for example, lists Russian cities according to the products for which each was famous. A few of these associations still make sense to us today (e.g., metalwork from Tula), but most are now opaque references requiring explanation (candles from Vologda, soap from Shuia, etc.).³ Chulkov might well have been baffled by Vladimir Sollogub’s assertion that in the provinces “everything’s the same, the same, the same,” or by Anton Chekhov’s later claim that a traveler might easily mistake “Sumy for Gadyach, or Ekaterinburg for Tula.”⁵

By the second third of the nineteenth century, thanks to a shift traceable in part to the Catherine-era policies discussed in the introduction (e.g., legislation aimed at standardizing provincial architecture and urban planning), even an ancient city with a distinctive and well-documented past—a clear identity based in history—could be reduced to just another *gubernskii gorod*. Take Vladimir: once a capital in its own right, undeniably “a center of political and symbolic power,” under Catherine it became merely one of the empire’s many administrative towns.⁶ After being designated a provincial capital (*gubernskii gorod*) in the autocracy’s reformed administrative structure, the town was rebuilt to reflect its new status: streets were laid out on a grid that replaced the crooked medieval pattern, for instance, and only those merchants who could afford to build houses conforming to new architectural guidelines were permitted to reside on the main avenue. Vladimir was on its way to becoming not a place that was famous for its cherries (as it had been) or its glorious medieval past (which the current autocracy preferred to ignore), but rather what Turgenev’s Bazarov would later call “a town like any other,” *gorod kak gorod*. By 1836 a visiting Moscow nobleman would direct his attention mostly toward the town’s unfashionable ways (“they
still wear wide sleeves ... retired men parade in their old uniforms ... few speak French").

A few years later in Sollogub’s *Tarantas* (1840–45), a tourist seeking information about local history is told that there are no books about Vladimir: the Vladimir bookseller offers him a book about Tsargrad instead, clearly assuming that the difference between two provincial towns is negligible. Finally, in his memoirs Herzen takes Sollogub’s non-description of not-Vladimir as a way of explaining why Vladimir requires no description: in recounting his experience there as an internal exile, Herzen assumes that readers already know exactly what this provincial town looks like, since the inn has already been “faithfully described in Sollogub’s *Tarantas.*” In Herzen’s account as in others’, nothing about Vladimir is particular to Vladimir; the place is merely another iteration of the provincial town—“the land of silence and dumbness,” as he calls it in his memoirs, above all preoccupied with conforming to directives received from Petersburg’s Ministry of Home Affairs, most of which seek to impose ever stricter forms of standardization on provincial life. By the time Herzen takes the town as a model for the mind-numbing *gubernskii gorod* of *Who Is to Blame?* he says explicitly that “there is no need to specify the time and place with chronological or geographic accuracy”: the town where the novel is set “resembles all the rest.”

I am not arguing, however, that literature’s new insistence on provincial same-ness and dullness is simply a result of Catherinian policies, a “reflection” of changes in historical circumstances. Rather, this image of *provintsiia* takes on significance because it meets a larger need: insisting on the monotony of provincial places allows Russians to think about the consequences of centrality and peripherality more generally, and thus (eventually) about modernity and non-modernity—all crucial issues at a time when educated elites are increasingly worried about their relationship to European ways of measuring both time and space. *Provintsiia* starts to be experienced as banal and monotonous because it is perceived as backward; as a scholar of British India puts it, “an overwhelming sense of the banality of one’s life is a damning marker of economic and ideological subordination.” Russian writers tend to depict provincial backwardness as a permanent condition, not even in the process of “modernizing”: to be in the provinces is to be static, stuck. Again we see a parallel with colonial and postcolonial literature: in representations of the British imperial periphery, for example, “being able to move contains the potential to thwart the pervasive banality of the local space that imprisons its dwellers through the misfortune of their birth.” Much as in Russian depictions of the provincial town, stasis itself comes to be associated with “impoverished natives” and their lack of freedom.

While the texts analyzed in this chapter span the years between approximately 1820 and 1845, most are from the 1830s and 1840s, the period when a newly
anonymized, homogenized, and static image of provintsiiia—an image that was to persist in literature up to our own time—was taking definitive shape. Since this book’s larger topic is provintsiiia as trope, I focus mostly on prose fiction. But I also refer to memoirs by Herzen and Ivan Dolgorukov, whose nonfiction writings are valuable for understanding the evolution of certain now-familiar ideas. Dolgorukov’s travel accounts are particularly notable because they represent, in a sense, a road not taken: these texts attend to the specificities of life in real and diverse provincial places, and as such they reveal what might have gone into the development of a Russian version of literary regionalism—a development that never happened. In prose fiction what proved to be far more productive than the realities of regional difference was the fantasy of provincial equivalence—in Sollogub’s words, “everything the same, the same, the same.”

The idea of sameness underlies virtually every (post-Dolgorukov) text analyzed in this chapter, in addition to others that will be addressed only briefly. Orest Somov’s A Novel in Two Letters, Vladimir Odoevsky’s “The Sprite,” Vladimir Dal’s The Unlucky One, Aleksei Pleshcheev’s Everyday Scenes, Sollogub’s “Serezha,” The Apothecary’s Wife, and Tarantas, and finally Herzen’s “Notes of a Young Man” and Who Is to Blame?—all depend on a certain shared idea of provintsial’nost’. And in them we see developed not only the character of the anxiously aspiring province-dweller, preoccupied with fashion, taste, and up-to-dateness, but also a more disturbing, far darker vision: the provinces are starting to appear not merely as unfashionable or sleepy or behind the times, but as a place of immurement and blight—“this backwater . . . this prison, this exile, this confinement,” says Sollogub—a “desert” where “unbearable melancholy” reigns alongside cultural incoherence and dead materiality. While these texts are less well-known than Gogol’s works (which occupy the next chapter), in them we begin to see the possibility of imagining the provinces in terms that are bizarrely paradoxical and thus, it seems, aesthetically productive. In the 1830s and 1840s literature begins to represent provintsiiia as a place at once forbiddingly unknown and familiar to the point of banality, at once a barren void and the domain of an oppressively dense materiality.

Dolgorukov and the Road Not Taken

“...I would have gone to Paris, since I like sensation, uproar, theater, luxury, et cetera, et cetera, and where is there more of all that than in France? But he who has neither estate nor money lives as God decrees”: thus does Prince Ivan Mikhailovich Dolgorukov (1764–1823) explain his eccentric decision to travel within Russia for pleasure. The prince took a number of such trips (in 1810, 1813, and 1817), which resulted in a series of lively travel narratives focused on the specificities of various—clearly differentiated—provincial places. His decidedly domestic voyages were
undertaken “without any goal, just to travel”;\textsuperscript{16} clearly, Dolgorukov would have laughed at the character in Tarantas who declares “travel” to be impossible inside Russia (in Russia, says Sollogub’s stolid landowner, one merely “drives to one’s destination”).\textsuperscript{17} Yet Dolgorukov himself, though he served as governor of Vladimir guberniia from 1802 to 1812, claimed never to have seen an actual “provincial town” until he was twenty-seven years old: “I had known Tver and Novgorod for a long time, but the former of these could be called an outpost of Moscow, and the other of Petersburg. Volodomir [Vladimir] is the real provinces.”\textsuperscript{18} Here, then, is an example of a well-educated and sophisticated Muscovite—a courtier, poet, and playwright—who decided that provincial places were worth seeing. In Russia’s far-flung cities and towns, Dolgorukov always sought, and often found, material for historical and aesthetic contemplation, as well as the distinctive qualities that served to differentiate these places from one another.

Describing dozens of Russian towns and villages, Dolgorukov certainly speaks as a stolichnyi (capital) sophisticate who directs his assessing gaze toward the local sights, but he does not dwell on the obvious opposition between stolitsa and non-stolitsa. Instead he judges each place on its own merits, noting which towns have interesting churches and historical landmarks, where the views are more and less picturesque, etc. While some towns prove inconsequential, each is allowed to be inconsequential in its own way.\textsuperscript{19} Not once does he invoke any formulation along the lines of “a town like any other”—the sort of truism without which it would soon be almost impossible to write about provincial places.

Nor does Dolgorukov automatically assume that culture, daily life, or polite society outside the Russian capitals will be painfully second-rate. He acknowledges when efforts are strained (one local ball evokes first laughter, then pity),\textsuperscript{20} but he also praises the polite society of Kharkov, for example, for its delicacy and good taste (combining the “sweet simplicity [of a small town] with the gentle fastidiousness of a large city”).\textsuperscript{21} Even the balls he attends in places like Saraisk and Nizhnii Novgorod are decidedly not ridiculous, whereas by the 1840s, Herzen and others will assume their readers share the belief that such events will inevitably showcase provincials’ comical failure to meet a standard set by the capitals. Dolgorukov, by contrast, assumes that he himself will be judged by local norms: his memoirs recall his careful efforts to learn “all the customs of provincial [provintsial’noi] life” when he arrives for state service in Vladimir.\textsuperscript{22} He is simply not very interested in seizing opportunities to indict locals for falling short of some external stolichnyi paradigm. Even when recounting how the provincial governor’s wife in Tver insists on adhering to tedious protocol in order to maintain a grand appearance,\textsuperscript{23} the prince does not take this as an opportunity to indict the provincial governor’s wife (gubernatorsha) for pretension or social striving, as would surely be the case in a later text. (Indeed, a reader of Russian
fiction of the 1830s and 1840s would have little trouble predicting more or less what was likely to follow the words "the wife of the provincial governor of Tver."

However, even in Dolgorukov's naïve descriptions—naïve in the sense that they are relatively unmarked by the conventions that would soon begin to shape literary depictions of provincial life—we see signs of what is to come. In a Tula gymnasium, Dolgorukov expresses astonished distaste at the teacher's garbled French, which the schoolmaster defends as "today's taste and beauty of style." And in a tiny schoolhouse amidst the "empty fields" outside Kursk, he watches as a drunken teacher requires pupils to memorize lines from the torn-out pages of a long-outdated court calendar: here the visitor from the capitals experiences provintsiia as wasteland, a place so remote that "culture" can reach it only in the form of meaningless debris, which is then recycled (memorized, imitated) despite its meaninglessness.

When Dolgorukov finds himself repulsed by some bewildering instance of cultural abjection or meanness, it almost always stems from the "Europeanizing" pretension that would later be thought to epitomize provintsial'nost', even if he is not (yet) judging it in precisely these terms. And when we look at provintsiia through the eyes of the worldly prince, not only do we see the "raw material" that fed the provintsiia trope, we also begin to understand why this trope, with its insistence on the absurdity and deformation occasioned by acts of copying, was to prove useful for diagnosing what would later be seen as the ills afflicting all of Russian culture. In the decades to come, it would always be in the act of imitating that cultural inadequacies would be exposed.

One should remember that this was not generally the case in the eighteenth century: according to that era's neoclassical literary standard, imitation was not in itself problematic. If, in the eighteenth century, "you rigorously applied the normative requirements for writing an ode or an epic . . . you were making literature": and therefore, thanks to this "conception of literature [as] so abstract and yet so normative that it could be used to certify texts as literature," copying did not automatically signal degradation. Thus eighteenth-century Russians who aspired to high culture (not only in the literary realm but in other realms too, such as estate design) did not find imitation especially worrisome. Copying becomes a problem at the same moment in the early nineteenth century (the age of Romanticism) when originality and national distinctiveness become cultural problems as well—at the same time, not coincidentally when the idea of provinciality began to preoccupy Russian writers.

Dolgorukov's consternation is more often provoked by provincial towns than by estates. He tends to experience the latter as oases of ease and culture: arriving at a "large manor house with a balcony and a rotunda," he exclaims, "how cheerful to meet such comforts [pokoi] after a storm on a dark night!" But of a provincial town he can only note glumly, "Torzhok after Petersburg is like a dark night after
a bright fine day.” For Dolgorukov, an estate can serve as true culture’s mirror and emissary in the provinces, an image of order and *comme il faut*. The town is more likely to appear as the opposite; for him as for later writers of prose fiction, it was in towns that the provinces’ disturbing motleyness—*pestrota*—was most clearly on display. In the provinces townspeople of varying backgrounds and classes tended to mix more freely than in the capitals, and this looseness of social boundaries struck outsiders, including Dolgorukov, as distasteful, improper, and vaguely promiscuous. In Dolgorukov’s memoirs we get a glimpse of the phenomenon when the prince recalls bringing his young bride (brought up in Petersburg’s elite Smolny Institute) to visit her native village, which she had not seen since early childhood. Both are shocked and, it seems, somewhat repelled by the strange crowd that comes out to meet “the daughter from the capital.” “My God, who was not there?” the suddenly fastidious prince exclaims, listing the mishmash of guests, “all sorts of riff-raff,” from district judges to scriveners.

Though Dolgorukov rarely thinks in terms of a strict provinces-capital binary, he is well aware of the role played by a particular hierarchy of imitation in Russian life, a system that dictates who copies whom. “Moscow is the model for all cities!” he writes, “Whatever you see there is what they want to imitate everywhere, whether appropriately or not; and Moscow, in its place, looks toward the City of Peter [grad Petrova].”

He describes how the governor of Poltava, with ample resources at his disposal, has attempted to make of his city “a small-scale Petersburg”; but resources notwithstanding, the end result of these top-down improvements is something “incongruous with the place, poor, low, and as the French say, *mesquin*.” The adjective *mesquin* (shabby, petty) points forward to what provincial culture will signify in so many later texts—something trivial and second-rate, falling short of a grandeur to which it too obviously aspires. All this is evident in Dolgorukov’s description of the architectural ensemble “in the newest taste” that has recently and awkwardly been “stitched onto” the edge of Poltava, a collection of fancy buildings and one trompe-l’oeil painting on a large wooden panel. The painted panel stands in for a structure that has not yet been built, as if to acknowledge the façade laws governing provincial cities even while conceding that the standard being imposed by the far-off capital had proven impossible to meet.

Dolgorukov senses that when it comes to grandeur, context is everything—which is why imitation proves risky out on the steppes. In the center of Poltava’s new square stands a new monument to Peter the Great, which is, in Dolgorukov’s judgment, an adequately impressive piece of work. But the monument’s position—its “unfortunate location” on the edge of a town on the edge of a steppe, “a bare, unpopulated steppe that assaults the gaze without relief,” an “enormous and unwooded expanse”—this position somehow renders a satisfactory monument incongruous,
even vaguely ridiculous. Outside another provincial town Dolgorukov reacts similarly when coming upon a bustling marketplace “in the middle of an open field,” where he is struck by the juxtaposition of “empty field” and commerce; “imagine that someone sliced off Il’inka [a busy shopping street] from Moscow . . . and stuck it here,” he writes.\textsuperscript{32} In Dolgorukov’s usage the adjective \textit{stepnoi} carries a sharply negative tinge, and the noun \textit{step’} is likely to be preceded not just by modifiers like “empty,” “vast,” and “wild,” but also by words like “terrible.”\textsuperscript{33} For him this landscape is characterized strictly by lack (\textit{no} woods, \textit{no} towns, \textit{no} fields, \textit{no} bushes);\textsuperscript{34} it actively resists being civilized and tends to obliterate even the memory of civilization. Dolgorukov writes, “Anyone like me, who has never been anyplace but Moscow and Petersburg or other such cities . . . and is traveling a long road through the steppe,” will certainly “cry out” once he finally reaches a town, “‘Thanks be to God! There still exist for me life and people!’”\textsuperscript{35} Here Dolgorukov’s account echoes those of many others who found the Russian landscape not only monotonous (with its “exhausting uniformity,” “desolate wastes,” etc.), but an impediment to culture of any kind.\textsuperscript{36} Pyotr Chaadaev, in his famous remarks on Russians’ exclusion from capital—History, seems at times to blame the landscape—the barren steppe where “all resemble travelers . . . leaving no traces”—for its role in draining meaning from human beings’ civilizing labor.\textsuperscript{37} In the words of the historian Kostomarov, Russia’s “excessive geographic space” posed a threat to the human spirit.\textsuperscript{38} One passably grand statue is not enough to bring “civilization” to such a setting.

### Ryleev and Zagoskin: The Provinces Take Shape

Around the time Dolgorukov was publishing his memoirs, Mikhail Zagoskin and Kondratii Ryleev both wrote fictional works featuring characters who are labeled “provincials” (in literature “the figure of the \textit{provintsial} predates the image of \textit{provintsiiia}”),\textsuperscript{39} but in the end neither author is particularly concerned with the provinces as such. Zagoskin’s 1817 comedy \textit{Mr. Bogotonov, or a Provincial in the Capital (Gospodin Bogotonov, ili provintsial v stolitse)}—based loosely on Molière’s \textit{Le bourgeois gentilhomme} (1670)—is perhaps the first title of a Russian literary work to feature any form of the word \textit{provintsiiia}. But while Bogotonov is “a provincial,” it is not clear that he is meant to be a \textit{representative} provincial. The words \textit{provintsiiia} and \textit{provintsial’nyi} do not appear in the play, and the play does not really call attention to the \textit{stolitsa}-vs.-\textit{provintsiiia} divide; in fact the most important opposition at work in Zagoskin’s comedy is not capitals vs. provinces, but simply enlightenment vs. ignorance, or perhaps good morals vs. bad.\textsuperscript{40} Zagoskin makes his character a \textit{pomeshchik} (landowner) who has abandoned his rural estate for Petersburg not because the playwright wants to make a point about the provinces,
but because in a Russian comedy, someone from outside the capital must be called upon to play a role that in Molière can be filled by a (Parisian) bourgeois.

In other words, Zagoskin uses a geographic overlay to make points (about social climbing and the virtues of knowing one’s place) that Molière can make without recourse to geography, since everyone in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* is thoroughly Parisian. Molière’s main character, Jourdain, is a crude but rich cloth merchant who, as a bourgeois aspiring to join the aristocracy, makes inept attempts at the gentlemanly arts. In France there is no need for such a character to originate in the provinces; the oxymoron of the French title (it is not possible to be a “bourgeois gentleman”) does the job of setting up the conflict. Jourdain allows himself to be swindled by a cunning nobleman whose status he idolizes; Bogotonov, like Jourdain, is being fleeced by a high-ranking nobleman in need of cash. But in Zagoskin’s version, the swindler-aristocrat is heavily marked as *stolichnyi*: not only is he both from and of Petersburg, he has just come from frittering away his own money in Paris.

Clearly, geography signifies in the Russian play in a way it does not in the French. Thus while there is nothing in Zagoskin’s play that is really about the provinces or provinciality, it does point toward a kind of semi-latent geographic symbolism, a series of images that are in a sense waiting to be filled with content. A similar dynamic is discernible in Ryleev’s feuilleton entries of 1821, which appeared under the title “A Provincial [*provintsial*] in Petersburg.” Ryleev adopts the point of view of someone visiting Petersburg from a “little district town” in a “steppe guberniia,” though he too has little interest in the provinces or provincialism as they would later come to be understood. His aim is simply to say something about “human nature,” with the *provintsial* standing in for a more or less generic outsider.

Commenting on this newcomer’s experiences in the capital serves as a way of making quasi-universal points (e.g., “people are easily bamboozled” and “women like expensive hats”), as Ryleev’s narrator makes explicit (“people are always people, in all times and places!”). And yet, here as in Zagoskin’s comedy, the provinces-capital divide is in effect waiting to be activated. It is present, for example, in the fact that Petersburg is where newcomers encounter consumer goods and novelties unheard of back home, like the Parisian hats that the provincial’s wife insists on buying (as always, Paris is where the best stuff comes from), or the whole range of kaleidoscopes—German, French, English—that he discovers in a shop on Nevsky Avenue. When the saleswoman asks, “is it true you’ve never seen [kaleidoscopes] before?” Ryleev’s *provintsial* responds, “Where would we have seen them, miss? We live in the boondocks [*v glushi*], far from the capital. No such rarities ever make it out there to us.” Here we begin to perceive the link between being provincial and failing to be modern, which will be more fully developed in the next decade.

If Ryleev’s feuilleton and Zagoskin’s *Mr. Bogotonov* use the figure of the provincial to help make points that are not chiefly about place, by the time Zagoskin writes
his 1835 prose narrative “Three Suitors (Provincial [Provi nzial’nye] Sketches),” he is clearly drawing our attention to the provinces and provinciality as (negative) phenomena in their own right.⁴⁷ No longer are these labels overlaid on top of other categories as a form of shorthand or convenience, and neither can such terms be understood as neutrally geographic. In “Three Suitors,” provinci ality has come to evoke something that is simultaneously more negative and more significant than in earlier texts. Note the full version of a passage cited partially in this book’s first chapter, in which Zagoskin opens “Three Suitors” by calling our attention to specifics of vocabulary meant to signal that the provinces themselves have become an object of scrutiny:

Have you ever lived in the provinces [v provintsii]? Not in the countryside [v derevne], not in a little district town [v uezdnom gorode], but in a provincial town [v gubernskom gorode]—among people who speak with pride, and almost always in French, about their high society, about their sense of good and bad taste, even about the different circles into which their society [obshchestvo] is divided. If you . . . want to know, even in a superficial way, what a provincial town really is [chto takoe provintsial’nyi gorod]—not twenty years ago, but now, in our time—then listen.⁴⁸

This passage, in addition to drawing a distinction between the provintsiia and the countryside or village, also assumes an equivalence between the adjectives gubernskii and provintsial’nyi—thereby confirming that at this time the two words were being used almost interchangeably (with the exception that gubernskii was required for official state designations—e.g., gubernskii gorod for “provincial capital,” gubernskii sekretar’ for “provincial secretary,” etc.).⁴⁹ Such clear vocabulary distinctions were by no means observed in all texts of this period, or of any period; for example, as I noted in chapter 1, Somov’s 1832 Novel in Two Letters uses the adjectives sel’skii, derevenskii, uezdnyi, oblastnoi, and provintsial’nyi more or less indiscriminately. Nonetheless, the precision we find in the opening lines of “Three Suitors” puts us on notice that Zagoskin is depicting what he expects his readers to recognize as a distinct phenomenon, even if the vocabulary used to designate the phenomenon is unstable. In fact the instability of the vocabulary reminds us that understanding what the provinces mean in literary texts is not a matter of tracking certain words, but rather of attending to a recurring topos.

“Everything the Same, the Same, the Same”

“All our provincial towns are the same. If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all”⁵⁰—such is the verdict of Sollogub’s traveler in Tarantas. In fact, Sollogub seems to devote nearly as much space (page after page) to insisting on the sameness of “all
provincial towns” as Dolgorukov devoted to their various distinguishing features: in the span of two decades, it had become not only possible but virtually obligatory to dwell on such places’ absolute equivalence. While Dolgorukov rarely measured provincial places against the capitals, these later texts tend to remind us, early and often, that they are looking at the provinces from the far-off center. Almost every work addressed here opens with an explicit reminder of the provinces-capital divide (“The district town of S. is one of the saddest little towns in Russia,” “In an imaginary provincial town,” etc.), a framing gesture ensuring that whatever comes after is marked as provincial before it is allowed to be anything else. Thus in prose fiction of the 1830s and 1840s, the capital is immediately established, and steadily maintained, as the standard against which everything and everyone will be judged. Stolitsa is becoming necessary as point of view, and when seen from the far-off center, everything in the provinces looks identical. (This point of view will remain typical of Russian novels for decades: when a character in Crime and Punishment asserts that “to see everything and see it clearly, one must be in Petersburg,” we know exactly what he is talking about.)

We are warned not to expect novelty: Aleksei Pleshcheev opens his novel Everyday Scenes (1852) by noting that “the physiognomy of the town of Bobrov was among the most ordinary, with ‘everything as it was supposed to be,’” just as Herzen’s provincial town in Who Is to Blame? is introduced by a row of government offices “painted the usual yellow color.” Often we encounter long lists of nouns—and often the same nouns from one text to another—serving to underscore predictability and tedium. In Tarantas, the list includes “public offices, the Assembly of the Nobility, an apothecary, a river, a town square, a shopping arcade, two or three street lamps, and the governor’s house.” In Everyday Scenes, we read about “public offices painted a dull yellow, the governor’s house with Venetian windows and a balcony, a club where people played cards on Saturdays and danced on Thursdays,” all “there as everywhere.” Such passages enumerate the attributes of provintsia in ways meant to imply that we might easily have drawn up the same lists ourselves. “Always the same stationmasters, the same post coaches,” Sollogub writes in “Serezha,” concluding with a list of conveyances—dormeuse, calèche, diligence—that one will “always” encounter on the streets.

If the capitals stand for constant change and movement—“life in the capital is like a torrent, carrying everything away with itself,” says a character in Tarantas—the provinces stand for pure stasis: “flat on the left . . . flat on the right . . . everywhere just the same.” Time here is as monotonous as space, and space is almost lethal in its monotony:

The surroundings are dead; land, land, land, so much land that your eye tires of looking at it; the road is wretched . . . carts are pulled along . . . the peasants curse—and that’s it. And there—either the caretaker is drunk, or cockroaches crawl along the
ceiling, or the soup smells of tallow candles . . . how can a decent person occupy himself with such filth? And most desolate of all is that over this whole vast space there reigns some sort of horrible uniformity that exhausts you and won’t let you rest . . . There’s nothing new, nothing unexpected. Everything the same, the same . . . and tomorrow will be as it is now. Here is the station, there again is the same station, and there yet again is the same station; here is the village elder who begs for vodka, and there again to eternity are all the village elders who beg for vodka.

The provinces are frozen in time, outside of history (“nothing new, nothing unexpected”); like the colonial peripheries of European empires, they are experienced as static and meaningless because they are believed to be “left out, existing on the margins of events that powerful people represent as central to what matters in the world.” Thus in an epilogue of sorts attached to the end of The Apothecary’s Wife, a year has passed since the story’s events, but we are told that nothing has changed here because nothing can change here, except perhaps the buildings might become even more decrepit and the sidewalks even more impassable. The people are as predictable as the built environment: from one town to the next, says Sollogub, “local society is even more alike than are the buildings”; from one estate to the next, says Herzen, you meet identical people with different last names.

In such places nothing happens just once; everything is iterative. “As it was last year, so it is this year, and so it will be next year. Just as once you met a fat merchant in a magnificent caftan,” accompanied by his wife with blackened teeth, so will you meet him again. “And you will keep on meeting him”— same caftan, same black teeth—until you may wish to “lock yourself up in a room” and withdraw from life itself. Herzen’s inescapable merchant and his wife with her inescapably black teeth—such images point toward what we will encounter in Gogol’s provincial abyss of repetition and stasis.

Even as the provinces are depicted as nauseatingly repetitive and familiar, constant assertions of their always-already-known-ness are accompanied by descriptions of the people who live there as exotics and even freaks, rare specimens of the barely human. In Tarantas Sollogub notes that the Russian peasant might be compared to “a savage from the Aleutian Islands”; for Zagoskin, provincial social structures call to mind India’s caste system. In Herzen’s memoir of his 1830s exile in “the slough of provincial life,” we encounter a whole catalogue of bureaucrats so spiritually deformed that they are virtually monstrous—the kind of people who in Who Is to Blame? will make a show of killing a rabbit under a bell jar “in the name of science.” The governor of Perm guberniia is “a peculiar sort of beast that is met with in the forest, in the wild, a beast that ought to have been studied,” and ladies in Vyatka flock around the visiting tsarevich “like savages around a traveler.” “Notes of a Young Man” likens provincials to the Japanese and (most inexplicably) to “albinos”; Who Is to Blame? looks even further afield for images
to convey provincial alienness, comparing the inhabitants of a tiny district town to “the wild men of Australia” (“as if they too had gone unrecognized, placed outside the law by mankind”).

As a way of pleading with readers not to reject what he has “uncovered” in the far-off provinces, Herzen even dedicates the “Notes” to two French naval explorers; the grotesqueries of Russian provincial life are worthy of our attention, Herzen suggests, just as the intrepid naval explorers did not disdain even those islands “whose only inhabitants were loathsome slugs and a few strange-beaked birds.” In this strange parallel ( provincials = loathsome slugs) we note that a geographic space described as provincial and thus unambiguously Russian can at times play a role similar to that of colonies and imperial peripheries in other literary traditions: provintsia for Herzen is a space that must be penetrated by explorers from the metropole before it will yield the sorts of “discoveries” that might make it somewhat interesting. But this “interestingness” will always be the fleeting product of metropolitan eyes and wit; at any moment, provintsia is likely to revert to being banal and static, and always all too familiar.

Imitation, Unnaturalness, Constraint

Provincials crave anything that makes its way to them from the capitals—whether consumer goods, journals, gossip, or people—with almost equal intensity. Hence these texts’ insistence on the provincial person’s devouring gaze, greedily directed toward everything stolichnyi. In The Apothecary’s Wife, an avidly curious “provincial dandy” serves as a kind of chorus, tracking the main character (a baron from Petersburg) in order to remark on his waistcoat, his carriage, and his stationery, asking questions about the provenance and cost of his fashionable belongings, and complaining that it is impossible to procure or even to imagine such goods in a small town. The passion for any sort of intelligence believed to originate in the capitals leaves provincials vulnerable to deception (a fact that will be key to the plots of Dead Souls, The Inspector General, and Demons); thus, in A Novel in Two Letters, the visiting Petersburg aristocrat invents ridiculous dance moves (“pas de chamois, pas de gazelle, pas de Bedouin,” he calls them) and convinces the “little local dandies” that such is the latest style. When the provincial dandy in The Apothecary’s Wife smells a perfumed letter sent from Petersburg, he reacts ecstatically (“oh the fragrance! . . . One knows immediately it’s from the capital!”). This young man’s clothing reveals “clear signs of a provincial dandy,” but he has not given up trying. Rather, his failures induce him to try harder; he begs the baron, for example, to make available his fashionable jacket for copying.

But when the aspiring fop inquires as to whether a certain look is currently being worn in Petersburg, the baron’s cool response is, “I don’t know, to tell the truth.
People dress as they wish”—which is, of course, untrue. In reality no one, in any place, who aspires to stylishness can dress “as he wishes”; there is no “fashion” without imitation and assiduous following. When Herzen asserts that in Italy, unlike in Russia, everyone simply “dresses as he pleases” (“in Europe people get dressed, but we [Russians] dress up”; “our own clothing is alien to us”), he is imagining a European naturalness only to highlight what he sees as Russian unnaturalness.

Somov’s fastidious narrator (in \textit{A Novel in Two Letters}) concedes that there is really nothing wrong with the way one pretty provintsialochka (little provincial maiden) is dressed, but nonetheless he finds himself put off, reminded of a “fashionable Parisian doll.” Only those in the world’s various centers have perfected the delicate balance of conformity and deviance that is essential to appearing “effortless” in the deployment of what we know as fashion.

Provincials know that to be provincial is to be behind; by 1821, Ryleev’s visitor to the capital senses that he will always be trying to catch up. And as I discuss in chapter 1, you can only be behind if your world believes in things like progress, fashion, and the march of enlightenment (whereas, as we will see in chapter 8, literary regionalism imagines static “folk” worlds that are immune to fashion’s seductions). Thanks to modern technologies of communication, reproduction, and dissemination, the capital can begin to impose on the rest of the country “every day, by telegraph or train, . . . its ideas, its wishes, its conversations, its ready-made revolutions, its ready-made clothing and furniture.” And in modernizing Russia as in Tarde’s France, attaining to fashionability becomes a serious matter indeed, since fashion constitutes “one of the main routes of access to modernity.”

All fashion is copying, but fashion in the provinces is copying that is obvious and arduous: no provincial would even pretend to be free to dress “as he [or she] wishes.” Somov’s gentry maidens in their steppe town are condemned to “pitiful, ugly imitation of the misbegotten fashion plates spread throughout the provinces by Moscow journals”; in \textit{Who Is to Blame?} “provincial lady aristocrats” speak strictly in clichés lifted from sentimental literature (e.g., “feminine hearts,” “tender feelings of the soul”). Maintaining the correct \textit{ton} in the provinces, Somov says, is possible only for those living on a few of the very grandest estates (places that are not really \textit{in} the provinces, as I discuss elsewhere). For the rest, mimicry results in a conspicuous lack of naturalness, as Somov and Sollogub note in their repeated references to provincial affectation (as Somov puts it, “all those pretty pretensions to artfulness, grace, with, and so on”).

The provincial ball is the best venue for showcasing failures of taste because a highly choreographed social ritual, one that is supposed to come off as effortlessly graceful, will inevitably highlight acts of imitation, almost always appearing, in Herzen’s words, “stupid, awkward, exceedingly poor and motley”; awkwardness is simply unavoidable, he says, “in a little town under such rare
circumstances.” Over and over writers focus on balls in the provinces even as they insist that everyone already knows all about them: in *A Novel in Two Letters*, a detailed description of such an event immediately follows the words, “don’t expect from me a detailed description of a village ball: just read the fifth chapter of *Onegin*” (though Pushkin’s Larins are not provincial in the way this word comes to be used by the 1830s). Despite such demurrals, as a setting for literature the provincial ball proves irresistible: it allows writers to expose not only failures of taste, but also the excruciating effortfulness that comes to be associated with the provinces, where “everything is done with such pretensions, so unnaturally,” that it seems no authentic life is within reach.

Once provincials are seen to be expending effort, they are immediately marked not only as unnatural (the opposite of Tatiana Larina, whose perfect naturalness and “simplicity” are discussed in the previous chapter) but also as unfree. Thus among the chief signs of provinciality are watchfulness and anxious servility, as we see here in Somov, who asserts that “pathetic imitation” has the effect of depriving [provincials] of their freedom of movement, subjugating the young ladies to a sort of mincing ceremoniousness and evoking melancholy in the experienced observer, who in the capitals has become used to triumphs of taste and subtlety. Add to this the forced and unwilling quality of conversation that is poor in thought or even wit, the statue-like expressions on the faces, the frozen or the vacantly wandering gaze, the unvarying and unpleasant grimaces, the constrained gait . . . woe, woe is our brother who finds himself at a ball or a party among the rural gentry, especially where there is dancing! It is no festivity, but rather sheer torture, and the ultimate abasement for provincial maidens!

Deprivation, subjugation, force, unwillingness, abasement—the vocabulary here underscores the extraordinary degree to which provincials are thought to be constrained. At the same time, Somov’s description of the baron—“the experienced observer, who in the capitals has become used to triumphs of taste and subtlety”—directs our attention to the kind of expertise that is absent in the provinces because it can only be developed by way of ample opportunities for comparison—opportunities that are available only in the metropole (a process Goncharov highlights in *An Ordinary Story*, the topic of chapter 5).

“Everything is Barbarous and Horrid”

Inexperience, isolation, and copying generate the spectacular failures of taste—especially the inept mixing of styles and registers—that mark the provincial milieu. Sollogub writes in “Serezha,” for example, that “in our enlightened time
everyone knows what architecture is”—with the exception of those in the paradigmatic provincial town of Zubtsovo, where the concept “means nothing.” See, for example, Sollogub's description of the grotesquely overgrown mansion of a local landowner, who has spent decades building on additions, ornaments, and flourishes:

Some sort of undefined, indefinite heap of roofs, corners, chimneys, planks, and windows. For a long time the traveler can't imagine what it is: is it an unfinished ship, or some other sort of phenomenon, or a monument to Noah's Ark; then finally he begins to suspect that it is perhaps a house. He gets closer—yes, it really is a house. But what a house, what an original house among houses! The façade is indented at the corner, like the legs of a dancing instructor in third position. On the walls, sometimes with upholstered panels, little windows are sprinkled around in apparent competition with each other, first bumping into each other, then withdrawing to a respectable distance. To this façade on all sides had been added little houses, outbuildings, and wings with the same romantic disorder.

The same kind of meaningless flourishes are added onto the interior of an inn in Tarantas, where “the ceiling is painted with various little flowers, peaches, and Cupids,” and everything is marred by “pretensions to filthy foppery.” The inn’s menu, too, is so distorted by francophone affectation (and garden-variety misspellings) that it is incomprehensible: diners can choose, for example, between sup lipotazh (soupe le potage, i.e., “soup the soup”) or kuritsa s rys’iu (“chicken with lynx [rys]”)—no doubt intended as chicken with rice [ris]). In Who Is to Blame?, the all-pervading pretension in a small town leads to cultural deformation, with “tutelar counselors behaving like Roman senators” and schoolchildren made to line up and chant in garbled French (a “Celtic-Slavonic” or “Franco-ecclesiastical dialect”). What Herzen emphasizes above all is the resulting incoherence: motley uniforms, strange frock coats, confused gossip; a church that combines Byzantine, classical, and Gothic elements; and carriages of every conceivable shape and size, including one that resembles “a pumpkin from which one quarter has been sliced off.”

Carriage, church, manor house, inn, menu—all underscore the indiscriminate nature of provincial taste, a chaos that results from ignorance of what things and words might actually mean. This is the version of provinciality that will later be highlighted—and indicted for its failings, both aesthetic and moral—in characters like Fathers and Sons’ shallow, babbling provintsialka Kukshina. What Turgenev’s nihilistka (female nihilist) has in common with Sollogub’s menu and manor house is a “culture” that is overflowing with importations and thus disordered to the point of unintelligibility. If in some texts provinciality signifies chiefly meagerness (as in Turgenev’s “Hamlet of Shchigrov” or Shchedrin’s The Golovlyov Family),
here it is marked by the promiscuous mixing of incompatible elements, what Somov calls provincials’ “incongruous dandyism of attire, the motleyness of their bad taste.”

Incoherence can be worse than meagerness, worse than mere poverty or cultural scarcity. Herzen muses that “in small, patriarchal German towns” one might live a life that is simple and “limited” but also “pure” and “moral,” unlike in provintsia. And Sollogub’s poor apothecary’s wife (aptekarsha), who has been forced to move from her wholesome German hamlet to the Russian provinces, recalls that back home she was poor, but her father’s house was full of books and peace, both expressions of a cultural order that infused life with meaning: “everything in the little town [breathed] intellectual activity and youthful spiritual revelry.”

In her Russian “Town of S.” she finds “the same poverty but without poetry, the same cares but without consolations, the same spiritual loneliness but without hope”: “Everything is barbarous and horrid.” Sollogub makes the same point in the Slavophilic dream scene toward the end of Tarantas, in which the narrator imagines the utopian future of a town that is currently characterized by filth, lack, and brokenness.

The streets were not standing like sad wastes [pustyniami] but instead teemed with movement and people. Nowhere were there fences in place of houses, no houses with mournful exteriors, broken windows, or ragged house serfs at the gates. There were no ruins, tottering walls, or filthy shops.

What is not there in the future is, of course, exactly what is there now—rags and dirt. As Herzen puts it in “Notes of a Young Man,” the locals live “up to their necks in filth.” Filth, swamp, slime, dust (griaz’, boloto, tina, pyl’)—such words recur constantly in descriptions of the provinces, suggesting not only degradation but also the kind of messy category confusion and disorder associated with provintsial’nost’. If dirt is “matter out of place,” then the provinces are where nothing can ever be where it should be.

Unredeemed Materiality and Feminine Detail

If Sollogub’s Town of S. is indeed “barbarous and horrid,” as the aptekarsha would have it, perhaps this is so because S. hints at the provinces’ unredeemed materiality, all of that horrifying stuff that will crowd Gogol’s towns and estates. Consider the opening passage of Sollogub’s tale:

The district Town of S. is one of the saddest little towns in Russia. Both sides of its one dirty street are lined with submissively stooped little houses, dark gray-ish
brown, practically covered over and half weighed down by boards, little houses that rather resemble beggars in their rags, pitifully beseeching passersby. Two or three churches—lofty luxury of the Russian people—are sharply distinguished from the dark background. And an old wooden bazaar, repository of nails, flour, and lard, gazes sadly at itself in an enormous puddle that never dries out. From two or three low little houses, the drunken faces of clerical workers are peeking out. On the left a tavern shows itself with the inevitable fir tree; behind it, the jail with its lattice fence; and on the right, tacked onto the dilapidated gable is a black board with the inscription “Apteka, Apotheke.”

Here as in so many texts, provintsiia is characterized by a density that is merely physical—nails, flour, lard, rags, boards. The street is almost—but not quite—devoid of life (we briefly glimpse a few drunken faces); for the most part things have replaced people as what we need to know about the town. Gogol’s lists will go much further in this direction (refusing, for instance, to differentiate between the animate and the inanimate: “a string of pretzels, a woman in a red kerchief, a crate of soap, a few pounds of bitter almonds, shot for small arms, half-cotton cloth, and two salesclerks”), but already in the writers considered here, we see the beginnings of this persistent association: the provinces are linked to a noticeably thick version of materiality. Things here are just things, and they strike us as repellent not so much due to their own qualities (because what after all is wrong with pellets or pretzels?), but rather due to their quantity (which suggests grotesque accumulation) and their apparent resistance to being made meaningful.

Tarantas sums up provincial “culture” with yet another list (samovar, grinding mill, thresher, cold fish soup, meat pies), concluding that provincials need only “cabbage soup and a bathhouse, a storage cellar, a tarantas, and rural rot.” “Serezha” gives us “the same pastries, fish, cookies, cutlets . . . your hard rolls, your morocco boots, your cabbage soup so thick it can barely be poured from the bowl.” These recurring catalogues of mundane nouns suggest not only predictability but also a certain equivalence, even interchangeability, thanks to their flat one-after-another iterativeness. Enumerated for us in ways that conspicuously refuse order, related by little besides contiguity, invested with no significance capable of drawing our attention away from their materiality—one might understand the material culture of provintsiia (if one can even call it culture: it looks more like debris) as the opposite of Mandelshtam’s Acmeist yearning for a “Hellenized” world, where every object would be a “utensil,” filled with purpose and meaning:

Hellenism is a baking dish, a pair of tongs, an earthenware jug with milk; it is domestic utensils, crockery, the body’s whole ambience . . . any personal possession
that joins part of the external world to a man . . . Hellenism means consciously surrounding man with utensils [utvar'] instead of with indifferent objects; the metamorphosis of these objects into the utensil; the humanization of the surrounding world; the environment heated with the most delicate teleological warmth.  

By contrast, in the version of provintsia under consideration here, almost every object strikes us as “indifferent,” and we find nothing that might “unite the external world to humanity.”

One passage in Tarantas takes the listing technique to an extreme: the carriage (tarantas) that is itself described in quite minute detail is also stuffed with an implausibly large quantity of objects, all of them tallied up in a paragraph full of nouns. A partial census would include boxes and containers of all kinds, an enormous featherbed, seven feather pillows in cotton cases, meat pies, anise vodka, roast fowls wrapped in paper, cheesecakes, ham, bread and rolls, a tea service, rum, glasses, a milk pitcher, clothing, children’s books and toys, gifts for the landowner’s wife, lamps, kitchen vessels, and finally “three monstrously large trunks,” each stuffed with still more “rubbish” and tied up with ropes. (By contrast, the young stolichnyi dandy who aspires to sophistication carries almost nothing: one thinks of the strenuous minimalism of our own time’s fashionable pretensions.)

Given provintsia’s association with this sort of petty detail and miscellany, the provincial might be described as a kind of anti-sublime. The sublime is meant to strike us with a combination of grandeur and uniformity, and to do so at one stroke. Details will always resist being perceived as a unified whole; the detail “acts as a brake on perception,” slowing us down and threatening to mire us in what is ordinary and low—and, especially in the case of provincial details, what is feminine.

Clearly, if we were to locate such binaries as masculine/feminine, high/low, abstract/concrete, unitary/fragmentary, form/formlessness, sublime/not-sublime, etc., each on the same continuum as capitals/provinces, the provinces would always occupy the same pole as would the fragmentary, the feminine, and so on. Take Sollogub’s tarantas, symbol and repository of things provincial: by filling the vehicle with bits of “rubbish” (khlam) virtually all of which is domestic in nature, the text brings together the provinces, petty detail, and femininity.

The tarantas thereby enacts what Naomi Schor calls “the unchallenged association of women and the particular”—an association which in turn has its roots in the enduring link between femininity and an often degraded version of the material world (as opposed to the spiritual world, the domain of masculinity). Indeed the terms in which critics have denigrated provintsia and women’s writing (and sometimes regionalist writing too, as I discuss in chapters 7 and 8) prove to be strikingly similar: female writers, not only in Russia, are supposedly guilty of an unseemly preoccupation with detail, of producing “‘pointless’ or ‘plotless’
narratives stuffed with strange minutiae,” texts that are “obsessed with things we do not understand, perhaps even grotesque.”\textsuperscript{108} And like the female body, the space of the tarantas/provintsiiia seems to be infinitely subdividable, always subject to being even more chopped up into even more little nooks, which can then be filled with even more bits of domestic trash.

Writers often insist on the insignificance of such details by invoking the word \textit{meloch'}—(a feminine noun meaning trifles, trivialities), which recurs in descriptions of specifically provincial places. See, for example, Odoevsky’s story “The Sprite” (1837), which is about what happens to a man who leaves the capital to go live on his estate:

\begin{quote}
The more a man attends to his material needs—the more highly he values his domestic (\textit{domashnie}) affairs and domestic (\textit{domashnie}) woes, other people's opinions, their attitudes and behavior toward him, his own trivial (\textit{melochnye}) pleasures, in a word, all the trifles (\textit{meloch'}) of life—then the more he is unhappy. These trifles (\textit{melochi}) become for him the whole of existence . . . and since such trifles (\textit{melochi}) are innumerable, his soul is subject to innumerable irritations . . . and the interior of his own soul becomes for him a hell.\textsuperscript{109}
\end{quote}

Odoevsky’s character comes to share the exclusively corporeal preoccupations of his stolid neighbors, whose thoughts never waver from dogs, lunch, and the other “innumerable trivialities” that occupy them in the absence of higher concerns.

In the provinces, the narrator informs us, one encounters the same human vices and weaknesses as one does in the capitals but in forms both more powerful and more petty, simply because provincials lack the loftier distractions that might prevent them from spending “every minute of their existence in an entirely debased state.” In a place where all concerns are material, a degrading power accrues to minutiae, and life becomes a “bestial dream” (\textit{zhivotnyi son}).\textsuperscript{110} Just so Herzen identifies the “bestial desires” (\textit{zhivotnye zhelaniia}) and pervasive triviality of provincial life—the indolence, the “food that would kill anyone accustomed to a European diet,” etc.\textsuperscript{111} In the absence of all “theoretical interests,” a few people may preserve vestiges of an intellectual life, but even they are stunted by “provincial stagnation.”\textsuperscript{112}

Herzen’s “Notes of a Young Man” and \textit{Who Is to Blame?} rehearse virtually every provincial cliche, from filth and vulgar clothing to bureaucracy and bad French, in order to drive home the point that the provinces deaden mind and soul, leaving intact only the body and its wholly predictable demands. But when Herzen dwells on this kind of base corporeality, he does something that most other writers considered here do not: he conceives of the provinces as a \textit{milieu} in the sense of an environment that shapes character. This is especially evident in \textit{Who Is to Blame?},
a text that is preoccupied with the human losses—the failures of development—occasioned by provincial culture. The point is made bluntly and repeatedly: “Nothing on earth can ruin a man like life in the provinces.”

Herzen’s understanding of environment is much closer to Balzac’s than to, say, Sollogub’s (or for that matter to that of Gogol, whose characters cannot be shaped by milieu because they are hardly “characters” at all). Thus Herzen concedes that one sometimes encounters provincials who would have been better—would have been human—had they not been stunted or dissipated by the conditions under which they lived: “One met with people who had at first possessed some kernel of a human soul, some sort of possibility—but they had fallen fast asleep in this pitiful, narrow life.” This is a possibility for which most of the writers treated here do not allow, and one that mitigates the moral fault of Herzen’s provincials (“Poor people! . . . are they to blame that with their mother’s milk they imbibed inhuman ideas, that they were deformed by their upbringing, that all their higher needs were stifled?”).

You Can’t Get There from Here

Despite Herzen’s understanding of place as milieu, there is a certain placelessness to his conception of provintsiia. In Who Is to Blame? he explains that “there is no need to specify the [setting’s] time and place with chronological or geographic accuracy,” not even a need to distinguish much between, say, a tiny district town (uezdnyi gorod) and a larger one (gubernskii gorod). If a landowner from some “RR” were to arrive in some “NN,” he says, those in NN would immediately recognize Mr. RR as one of their own. Even more tellingly, for Herzen Moscow itself can stand in for provintsiia: life there is dirty and coarse, rigid and unchanging, with a “deep-seated hostility to anything new.” Much as Goncharov’s aging Oblomov will recreate Oblomovka on the outskirts of Petersburg, Herzen’s crude landowner Negrov manages to inhabit Moscow in what is described as a thoroughly provincial manner, recreating the life he once lived on his estate—“an endless succession of days and nights, monotonous, empty, and dull.”

If, for Herzen, Moscow can be provincial, perhaps this is because he perceives that all of Russia might be provincial. This is a point he makes explicitly in My Past and Thoughts (“We look on Europeans and on Europe just as provincials [provintsialny] look upon those who live in the capital, with deference and a feeling of inferiority”), and one that will be developed by later writers. Herzen’s provincializing of Moscow calls to mind Mikhail Epstein’s claim that both of Russia’s capitals have at times been figured as provincial “in relationship to an imperial power that is always [both] elusive and transcendental.” One might say that Russia’s provinces, too, are elusive (if not transcendental): like the capitals
in Epstein’s formulation, the provinces often seem to occupy no fixed location; indeed they are sometimes placeless to the point of nonbeing. Herzen suggests as much when he writes about the paradigmatic town he calls Malinov (described in detail in “Notes of a Young Man” and later taken as the basis of NN in Who Is to Blame?). Even in travel accounts encompassing everything on earth, Herzen claims, you will not find Malinov, because it “lies outside the circle of the world.”

Herzen’s Malinov does not exist—but nonexistence does not keep it from being “the worst city in the world,” since “it’s impossible to imagine anything worse for a town than total nonexistence [nesushchestvovanie].” Elsewhere Herzen says the same of a very real city, the gubernskii gorod of Perm in the Urals: “Perm is a strange thing. . . . Perm is government offices + a few houses + a few families,” but it is “not a center, not a focus”; it is instead “the decided absence of all life.” Other writers echo Herzen’s negation: having a name and an administrative function and even a history does not, it seems, guarantee existence once one is located in provintsiia. Throughout the nineteenth century, Perm—a city with quite a distinctive location and history—is variously described as a “deathly emptiness,” an “empty place” without meaning or reason to exist, characterized by “utter silence all around”: “nothing but carrion!” (and it is described in such terms even as writers call attention to its grubby materiality—muddy streets, drunken merchants, etc.). Such passages—in which provincial places waver on the edge of nonbeing—call to mind the worlds of Dead Souls and The Inspector General, characterized as they are by “emptiness, eventlessness, and nonbeing [nebytie].”

In a footnote to “Notes of a Young Man” (the same note in which he draws a parallel between provincials and “loathsome slugs”), Herzen again gestures toward the idea of the provinces’ nonexistence, this time by linking his representative provincial town (“outside of the circle of the world”) to another work, Dal’s 1839 tale The Unlucky One (in Russian Bedovik, from beda, misfortune or disaster), which turns out to be the source for the invented toponym Malinov. Herzen writes that before he himself reached Malinov, only one other traveler had preceded him: “and he brought back from there an example of a tailless ape, which he called in Latin ‘Bedovik.’ [This ape] almost disappeared between Petersburg and Moscow.” Herzen then cites the issue of Notes of the Fatherland in which Dal’s story appeared.

The Unlucky One is about a typical “little man” of the period, a clerk named Evsei Stakheevich Lirov whose haplessness and forbearance recall Gogol’s Akaky Akakievich in “The Overcoat.” But unlike Akaky Akakievich, Lirov lives in the provinces, in a stagnant, petty town (Malinov) that is precisely as we have learned such a town must be: people there fill their time with pointless and repetitive visits, conversation is limited to gossip and weather, and a rigid decorum governs social relations (“In a narrow circle, thoughts become narrow as well”). While
Akaky Akakievich’s fatally audacious act is the purchase of a new coat, Lirov’s is an ill-conceived decision to go to the capital.

The idea of leaving Malinov seizes Lirov when he is mocked by a passerby (“with such strange habits why bother serving in the provinces? . . . You might as well go to the capital, give people a good look at you!”). But we sense immediately that the capital will prove both elusive and illusory:

He repeated to himself: to the capital! And a new thought flashed like lightening in his tangled head. “To the capital” he thought, “To the capital . . . no, there’s definitely no place in the capital for such an eccentric or unlucky type [chudak, bedovik] . . . but what if I were just to go there and find myself a place? If I were to be lucky, if I were to find myself a really powerful patron . . . after all I’m my own master . . . well, what if?”

The rest of the narrative consists of Lirov’s protracted and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to make his way from the provinces to either Moscow or Petersburg. His first goal is Moscow; the possibility of Petersburg is initially too daring to occur to him (“The thought of Moscow alone was already spinning his head . . . and now the two capitals [were] like two fairytale visions”). Unable to decide on a destination (“Moscow or Petersburg—it’s all the same to me”), swept back and forth by indecision, misfortune, and bad counsel, Lirov repeatedly changes direction. In the end, as the chapter titles indicate, he is not permitted to reach either city:

Ch. 1: Evsei Stakheevich decides to go to the capital ( . . . )
Ch. 4: Evsei Stakheevich sets out for Petersburg
Ch. 5: Evsei Stakheevich sets out for Moscow
Ch. 6: Evsei Stakheevich sets out for Petersburg
Ch. 7: Evsei Stakheevich really sets out for Petersburg
Ch. 8: Evsei Stakheevich sets out for Moscow
Ch. 9: Evsei Stakheevich arrives somewhere
Ch. 10: Evsei Stakheevich, in expectation of further blessings, sits in one place ( . . . )
Ch. 12: Evsei Stakheevich has enjoyed his trip and has returned

Approaching Moscow, the clerk makes it as far as the village of Chernaia griaz; approaching Petersburg, he gets as close as Chudovo, but no further. His time is spent repeatedly passing through Tver, Novgorod, Valdai, Torzhok, etc., often only half aware of where he is.

Had he ever thought, when he was sitting home in Malinov, idly tracing his finger back and forth on the map between Moscow and Petersburg, that he’d be fated to
wander between those two points not just with his finger but in actuality . . . for weeks in succession, here and there, in the end reaching neither? \(^{133}\)

While his servant berates him for time spent “racing senselessly back and forth between Petersburg and Moscow,” “never setting eyes on either,” \(^{134}\) Dal’s little provincial man covers and re-covers the same ground, seemingly trapped in a kind of feedback loop, all the time dreaming of the glorious capitals that he will never see. The story ends with his return to Malinov.

If in Herzen the provincial town verges on nonexistence, in Dal it is the capitals that seem to occupy the threshold of reality, or at least reality as it exists for provincials. Lirov can dream of the capital all he wants (either capital, since both are “the same to him”), but the narrative is structured to suggest that in *The Unlucky One* the capital—not unlike Petersburg in *The Inspector General*, or Moscow in *Three Sisters*—is an unreachable place for a provincial, because it stands for a strictly unrealizable ideal. Thus Lirov is “fated,” as Dal says, to vacillate back and forth between two points, neither of which is attainable from where he begins. Here as in many works of literature, capitals and provinces would seem to be in a relationship of mutual nonexistence, or perhaps occupying different ontological levels: you can’t get there from here.

“The Highest Degree of Emptiness”

The works treated here make it clear that the *provintsia* trope did not originate with Gogol, whose work is the subject of the next chapter. But it was Gogol’s art that was to make *provintsia* speak so powerfully and enigmatically to “Russianness” in a larger sense, and it was thanks to his radically original reworking of the trope—his ability to associate *provintsia* with a range of meanings it had not previously evoked—that the image became such an enduring one. One might say that Gogol activated certain contradictions that were more or less latent in the idea of *provintsia* as it appears in the texts addressed in the present chapter.

We have seen how literature insists on *provintsia*’s materiality (nails, flour, lard)—and yet, at the same time, literature’s provincial places are empty. *Provintsia* is crammed full of material things, and yet barren—the “sad wastes” of *Tarantasia*, the “empty” life of Herzen’s landowners, etc. We expect as much on the steppe (“no matter where you go or what you do you get nowhere”), \(^{135}\) but it is striking to read the same insistence on the emptiness of provincial towns and estates, which are in fact crowded with disparate artifacts of human activity. Here too Herzen sees “the same emptiness everywhere,” “an absolute and multifaceted emptiness,” emptiness so profound that one cannot understand “why these people got out of bed, why they moved, what they lived for.” \(^{136}\)
Dead Souls will take this paradox—the idea that in the provinces, emptiness coexists with a surfeit of merely physical objects—to surreal extremes, dwelling on provincial materiality (the interiors of Korobochka’s and Pliushkin’s houses, the Pleasant Ladies’ obsession with fabric) while also insisting that the defining feature of gorod N is what it describes as a desolate void. In the writers surveyed in this chapter, the paradox is registered only as a vague contradiction, one that it is implicitly acknowledged but not addressed or exploited. For Gogol, however, it will become the basis of a new and unsettling artistic vision—“a sense of boundless superfluity that is soon revealed as utter emptiness”—as well as a powerful way of imagining Russian national identity. It is left to Gogol to explore—or perhaps better, to invent—the relationship between “the desolation of the gigantic country and its hidden inner dynamics,” between Russia’s apparent brokenness and its sublime promise.