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Back Home: The Provincial Lives of Turgenev’s Cosmopolitans

Let us imagine a man who lives in Akron, Ohio, and teaches the history of the Italian Renaissance. It is dreadful to think what he has to reconcile.

—Saul Bellow, 1957

For us . . . the real present was not in our own countries. It was the time lived by others, by the English, the French, the Germans. It was the time of New York, Paris, London. We had to go and look for it and bring it back home.

—Octavio Paz, 1990

Ivan Turgenev is a supremely cosmopolitan writer. It is difficult to imagine anyone more worldly—less provincial—than this multilingual aristocrat who spent decades of his life abroad, moving easily across borders and involving himself in contemporary European intellectual life, ever aware of European civilization and “progress” as standards that had to be acknowledged, whether they were to be embraced or rejected. Merezhkovsky called Turgenev “the first Russian writer to be discovered by Europe,” the writer in whom the West “first sensed that Russia is also Europe.” Indeed Turgenev was so worldly that in Russia he was at times mocked as a rootless and effete Euro-aristocrat, forever running off to Baden-Baden in a fit of pique (hence a series of anecdotes in the style of Kharms, all ending with the words “Turgenev took fright and that very night ran off to Baden-Baden”). But Turgenev’s peculiar version of worldliness was not straightforwardly Eurocentric, and the symbolic geography of his work, which is almost always more complex than a simple capital-centric model, reflects his ambivalence.
In fact his oeuvre forms a crucial part of the provincial trope, with its focus on the relationship between provintsia and the problem, or the hope, of a specifically Russian temporality. When Turgenev is writing about Russian space, he often seems to be thinking just as much about Russian time, often posing or implying the question, “Is Russia ‘behind’?” Analyzing spatial relationships in his texts (between centers and peripheries, for instance) requires us to think about how these relationships condition ways of thinking about historical time (what counts as ahead and what counts as behind, for example). In Turgenev’s view, it seems, Russia is not “modern,” but it is not simply “backward,” either. Hence his focus on the gentry estate: estates were places where Russian elites could work to rethink their relationship to historical time, moving beyond the assumption that centers (capitals) are ahead and peripheries (provinces) are behind. Turgenev’s interest in different versions of the gentry estate and their different temporal modes signals his awareness that even to articulate the problem in such terms (modern vs. backward) risks tacitly accepting what Arjun Appadurai calls “Eurochronology”—an assumption that “the West” will always provide the standard units for measuring progress and time, and thus the normative version of modernity.

Despite his thoroughgoing cosmopolitanism, Turgenev does not stake out the position of a (proto-modernist) déraciné, the kind of cosmopolitan intellectual who tends to think art is best when it is most “universal,” and that what is most universal happens in the center. On occasion Turgenev’s texts indict provincial cultural failings, and at times they enact a stolitsa/provintsia binary in a way that would seem to correspond to Pascale Casanova’s center/periphery schema (see chapter 1): such is the case in “Hamlet of Shchigrov” (1848), A Provincial Lady (1850), and Diary of a Superfluous Man (1850), for instance. But in his major novels—Nest of the Gentry (1859), Fathers and Sons (1862), Smoke (1867), Rudin (1856), and Virgin Soil (1877)—categories like “ahead” and “behind” rarely carry the same straightforward meanings that they do in other European traditions. Similarly, for Turgenev, simply making it to the capital—whether literally or symbolically—will not solve Russians’ problems, nor will a worldly education guarantee their assimilation into European culture (with European culture understood to be cosmopolitan, modern, and “universal”). Indeed, for many of Turgenev’s characters, a Europeanizing education lies at the root of the most grievously damaging forms of provincialism.

Countryside and Provinces, Mimesis and Imitatio

If we think of geographic space in Turgenev, what might come to mind first is not the stolitsa/provintsia binary, but simply rural Russia, especially as it appears in A Hunter’s Notes: forests and fields, gentry estates, tiny villages, and long passages of
nature description that students must be induced to read. These sketches (which appeared in *The Contemporary* between 1847 and 1851 and in a separate edition in 1852) rarely reproduce the standard capitals-vs.-provinces opposition that was already structuring so many literary texts by this time, and they certainly do not represent the provinces as a series of interchangeably blank spaces defined solely by their opposition to the capitals. Rather, *A Hunter’s Notes* often attends to decidedly local details, and even insists on their localness—noting almost pedantically, for instance, that a sketch’s setting is the *eastern* part of Orel Province, not the western part. The sketches are saturated with specific, and specifically located, natural phenomena.

If, as Michel Jeanneret writes, artistic representation encompasses both *imitatio* (“the operation of rewriting which legitimizes all classical literature,” “art as an autonomous mechanism”) and *mimesis* (“art as a reflection of the world”), then most of *The Hunter’s Notes*—those parts that focus on countryside and nature—fall clearly on the side of mimesis. But at the same time Turgenev was lavish- ing attention on the flora and fauna of a particular Russian subregion, he was also writing works that reproduced the familiar capitals/provinces binary, works shaped by a pointedly Gogolian worldview—and these texts tend much more toward the practices of rewriting that characterize *imitatio*. It seems that as soon as Turgenev writes about *provintsiia* and *provintsial’nost’* (rather than about, say, the eastern part of Orel *guberniia*), we enter *imitatio*’s “operation of rewriting”: in other words, the provinces appear as a trope.

I have in mind here the play *A Provincial Lady (Provintsial’ka)*, the novella *Diary of a Superfluous Man*, and the sketch “Hamlet of Shchigrov,” a story that was collected in *A Hunter’s Notes* but has little in common with the volume’s dominant focus on peasants and nature. In *Diary of a Superfluous Man* Gogol’s influence is felt everywhere in the anonymous district (*uezdnyi*) town of O__, which meets all the criteria of a Gogolian provincial backwater (an “amazingly filthy town square,” soul-crushing boredom, and outlandishly bad taste, 4:175). Turgenev’s narrator even echoes the by now familiar claim that there is no need to describe the ineptly staged ball, since “everything about it was just as it usually is,” right down to the “provincial lions with their convulsively distorted faces” (4:194).

*A Provincial Lady*, too, openly reprises Gogolian themes: one might even read it as a rewriting of *The Inspector General* with the focus squarely on the mayor’s conniving wife and daughter, or as a reimagining of the ninth chapter of *Dead Souls* from the point of view of the Pleasant Lady and the Lady Pleasant in All Respects. In Turgenev’s text as in Gogol’s, the provincial’s main task (beyond trying to escape the provinces) is to keep an eye trained on all things *stolichnye*; as Turgenev’s heroine puts it, “we poor small-town dwellers [*uezdnye zhiteli*]—we do not forget . . . we forget nothing” (2:408). In fact *A Provincial Lady* is so
dependent on the essentialized difference between stolitsa and provintsiiia that there is little to say about the action (the wife of a small-town landowner plots to charm a visiting Petersburg count into finding her husband a job in the capital) that is not already said by the title. The provintsialka’s husband objects to leaving his estate—“My place is here! I’m master here!”—but his attachment to his own place, so inconsequential it is never named, cannot overcome the centripetal pull exerted by the capital.

In Gogol’s world, so complete is the symbiosis between provincial characters and provincial settings that it would be difficult to describe these characters (whose interior lives are mostly unavailable to us) as “products” of their milieu. Even the just-arrived outsiders Chichikov and Khlestakov are of a piece with the provincial environment; they adapt immediately to its ways, and these ways make no demands on them that they are not prepared to fulfill. While Gogol’s reader may feel profoundly alienated by these texts’ estates and Towns of N, his characters are right at home. Not so in Turgenev’s world: in Diary of a Superfluous Man, the provincial setting serves to highlight, if not cause, the narrator’s alienation, what he famously calls his superfluousness (lishnost’)—the only trait, he claims, that distinguishes him from other people. As a result, even as we recognize in Diary of a Superfluous Man another iteration of the Gogolian provincial town (imitatio ad nauseam), in fact the town signifies somewhat differently: here the distorted culture of provintsiiia and the alienation it produces in the narrator serve as the beginning of an explanation for social and moral pathologies, most notably the narrator’s debilitating self-consciousness, his unnaturalness, his “agonizing strain.” And this strain, he insists, is not just the appearance of artificiality, but actual artificiality: “I did not just seem to be so, I really did become unnatural and strained” (4:173).

Turgenev is raising the possibility that for provincials, a comfortably authentic, “natural” relationship to culture might be forever out of reach. Here we recall Lotman’s classic analysis of the post-Petrine nobility: ideas and behaviors that were neutral in Europe “took on value” once transferred to Russia, Lotman explains, thereby accentuating (rather than replacing) “the non-European aspects of daily life.” “A Russian was not supposed to become a foreigner,” Lotman continues, “he was merely supposed to act like one”—but only sometimes, and only while remaining carefully aware of which codes he was deploying at a given moment. In such a context, “natural” behavior can be as marked as “unnatural” behavior (see: Tatiana Larina); you can act natural, but you cannot be natural. Remaining unconscious of one’s relationship to one’s own culture was a luxury that educated Russians could rarely afford.

The same poisonous inauthenticity we saw in Diary of a Superfluous Man is the subject of “Hamlet of Shchigrov.” The story points forward to many of the concerns that will animate Turgenev’s later novels, including not just the skuka
(oppressive boredom) of provincial life, but also a strangely disordered relationship to culture and to historical time, a disorder that threatens to empty provincial lives of meaning. “Hamlet of Shchigrov” is set on a remote steppe estate at a gathering of markedly local characters—“our steppe brothers,” in the words of one guest, who conform to dismal provincial types (3:253). When one guest describes himself as someone who “[passes] here for a wit,” the quip confirms what has been implicit in the opening passage: “here” is provincial in its constant awareness of an external standard to which it aspires but which it fails to attain (thus the host’s wines are imported from Moscow, the guests’ suits are made by a Moscow tailor, etc.). If, as was explained in this book’s introductory chapter, a few estates managed to become stolichnye by successfully reproducing or reflecting the capital’s culture, this one clearly does not: in “Hamlet of Shchigrov,” estates are provincial.

Having established that there is a center toward which this periphery is always looking, the narrator recounts his conversation with a small landowner, a widower identifying himself only as “Hamlet,” who tells the story of his life—a life he insists is absolutely typical for men of his time and class. As the stranger puts it in the last lines of his monologue, “as an unoriginal [neoriginal’nyi] person I do not deserve a name of my own. . . . If you really want to give me some title, then call me . . . call me Hamlet of the Shchigrov District. There are many such Hamlets in every district” (3:273). He is at once a provincial Everyman and a thoroughly ersatz specimen.

Here as in Diary of a Superfluous Man, we are invited to draw a connection between a certain cultural pathology—never clearly defined, but closely related to neoriginal’nost’—and a certain place. The role of milieu is highlighted in Hamlet’s description of the isolated estate where he once lived with his wife, rendered with an abundance of detail (a fact to which the storyteller draws our attention—“note in what detail I’m describing it,” he says; 3:167). If Gogol’s detailed descriptions of provincial places are characterized by a stifling material thickness, Turgenev’s specifics in “Hamlet” serve mainly to underline the meagerness of this life: a few knickknacks from Catherine’s time, busts of Goethe and Schiller, awkwardly drawn portraits on the wall. The same phrases of Beethoven are played again and again on an out-of-tune piano, over which hangs “a well-known portrait of a blond maiden with a dove on her breast and her eyes raised up” (3:167). Withered garlands, yellowing albums, clichéd images—the manor house is clearly meant to encapsulate the thinness, derivativeness and stasis of what passes for culture in the deep provinces.

What happens to such artifacts of high culture when they end up not merely on a provincial estate, but out on the steppe, the vast Southern Eurasian flatlands? Russian elites from Radishchev, Chaadaev, and Sollogub to Gorky, Berdiaev, and Trotsky tended to see the steppe not just as empty, but as irretrievably empty, a
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space that actively resisted being “filled up” with culture; they worried about the steppe’s capacity to “swallow up,” disperse or dilute the achievements of civilization. Where culture is spread so thin, artifacts risk losing their connections with each other. No energizing encounters or webs of meaning seem possible, and thus no models for transformation or development; whatever has ended up out here is now inert, going nowhere. In “Hamlet of Shchigrov,” the steppe estate’s version of provintsial’nost’ is paltriness and insufficiency, a few objects largely shorn of context but carefully, almost fetishistically, preserved and displayed. The bust of Goethe, the yellowed sheet music—these are clearly scarce goods, defitsitnye produkty.

Of course the steppe is far from inherently provincial, imitative, or stagnant—like any place or any person, it can be experienced as provincial in these ways only after it has been brought into contact with, and forced to submit to, another power, another discourse. Take, for instance, Turgenev’s later tale King Lear of the Steppe (1870), in which Russia’s vast open plain is represented as not having undergone “provincialization.” Here as in Aksakov’s Family Chronicle, the steppe is the dominion of a larger-than-life premodern hero—the nobleman Martyn Petrovich Kharlov, a virtual bogatyr who submits to no outside power at all. There are no busts of Goethe on Kharlov’s steppe estate, no washed-up vestiges of European high culture: the manor house walls are decorated with whips, horse collars, and sabers—objects with their own meaning and use, entirely appropriate to their setting. We are not told the estate’s precise location because all we need to know is that we are in Kharlov’s sovereign domain, the domain of a brutally “authentic” steppe nobleman who looks out the window of his rude manor house and declares, “There it is, my kingdom! . . . It’s all mine!” (8:166–67). Kharlov dresses like a Cossack and confidently devises an implausible family tree that places him and his clan not on any periphery, but at the originary center of all that matters to him, including history. We could hardly be further away from the etiolated “European” culture of the estate drawing room in “Hamlet of Shchigrov,” a place “so stifling [one] could hardly breathe” (3:267).

And indeed, in “Hamlet of Shchigrov,” Hamlet tells us that not long after his marriage, his wife wasted away and died—supposedly of consumption but in reality, it seems, of a specifically provincial form of ennui, a “hidden wound at the bottom of her soul” that was caused, “perhaps, by living so long in the countryside [v derevne]” (3:268). Clearly derevnia here signifies not the life of the countryside or village (peasant huts do not display busts of Goethe), but rather that of a steppe estate in its fully provincialized form. (See chapter 2 for an account of the historical and cultural process that transformed the steppe’s meanings, thanks to which the steppe went from being exotic frontier to being boring provintsiiia or derevnia.) And Hamlet’s wife’s “festering wound” that can be neither named nor cured is a literalization of what many texts describe as the deleterious and sometimes even
lethal boredom of provincial life—as Turgenev puts it in *Smoke*, in the remote provinces “people vomit from boredom” (7:389).

The steppe manor house, with its petrified cultural dross, is the material manifestation of a particular relationship to culture, and much of “Hamlet” is devoted to establishing how such a relationship might have come about. To that end, we learn about Hamlet’s upbringing and education, which took place on yet another isolated and uncultured estate (the third in the story, counting the one where Hamlet and the narrator meet). His mother hired a “French” tutor who was actually an incoherent jumble of European labels (“a German named Filipovich who came from the Nezhin Greeks”: here as in many other texts, the steppe seems to attract failed and déclassé Europeans, just as it attracts busts of Goethe) before shipping him off to Moscow University. There he learned to parrot received ideas, repeating dreamy verses, meditating on “the beautiful,” and joining a circle (*kruzhok*), which he identifies as the place where his own fatal “lack of originality” would become undeniable (a *kruzhok* is the end of all “authentic development,” he says). In fact, the circle gives rise to the chief attributes we have learned to associate with *provintsiiia*: “pretentions,” “vulgarity and boredom,” and constant, intrusive surveillance (3:262–63).

And even when Hamlet finally goes to study in Germany, he remains “the same unoriginal creature” he was at home. Rather than overcoming his provincialism, he further immerses himself in copying, pretension, banality, and ennui—reading philosophy alone, socializing only with “dimwits” from Russia’s “grain-producing provinces,” enjoying little contact with Germans or with any form of daily European life beyond a few “strained” conversations with the natives. So isolated is he that even a genuine “thirst for knowledge” leads him nowhere (3:263–64). One might expect an educated man to be well enough prepared to take advantage of Europe’s richest intellectual environment, but Turgenev’s hero instead lives out the tragedy of the autodidact—less Shakespeare’s Hamlet than Hardy’s Jude the Obscure, who can accumulate knowledge but for whom this accumulation will never cohere into an intelligible whole, simply because it bears no proper relationship to any life he has ever lived. In effect he brings the steppes with him to Europe—and on the steppes, ideas and art objects are forever deprived of the contexts that give them meaning. As a result, Turgenev’s hero is afflicted with a version of the psychic wound he has diagnosed in his wife.

Hamlet’s autobiographical monologue pivots on the repetition of a particular word: “originality” (*originalnost’*) and its cognates recur over and over in his self-analysis (twenty-two times in the course of a relatively short text). The word functions as an attempt to sum up the complex pathology of his own character: “I am literally perishing because in me there is absolutely nothing original.” Everything he has ever done has been marked by this fatal absence of originality, he says; “I
was born in imitation of another.” What exactly is this crucial, elusive “originality,” and how did it come about? While we might initially assume that we know what the word means, once we have heard it invoked time after time, it begins to feel slippery. The definitions offered by the speaker are too tautological to be of much help: what is missing in the unoriginal person, he says, is “something uniquely one’s own, something individual, personal” (svego-to, osobennogo, sobstvennogo); lacking this mysterious “something,” a person is “just one more storage room full of clichés.” “I’m no provincial [provintsial],” “I’m no steppe bumpkin [stepniak],” Hamlet declares, assuring us that he speaks French and German fluently and “purely,” has spent three years abroad, “knows Goethe by heart,” etc. (3:257–59).

These protestations signal to us what he later says outright: his lack of originality stems from his outsider—or perhaps better, semi-outsider—relationship to European culture, which for him is the only culture that counts. This is the same problem that finds material expression in his wife’s manor house, where the décor represents a doomed attempt to transplant ideas and artifacts to a place where they can never signify as they are meant to. Hamlet’s most passionately spoken utterances concern the utter incompatibility of Hegel, of all German philosophy, indeed of all “learning” (nauka) with “Russian life” and “our daily existence”: his exposure to European culture has poisoned his experience of his homeland. So, he asks rhetorically, why bother learning about all these things—why not just stay in Russia? His answer is that staying at home would have been no solution either, since his native place would nonetheless have remained unintelligible. Staying in Russia would not have solved his problem any more than making it to Petersburg or Moscow would have helped Gogol’s small-town bureaucrats or Chekhov’s Prozorov sisters. The problem, Hamlet says, inheres in Russian life itself, which refuses to disclose its significance: “I would’ve been glad to take lessons from her—from Russian life, that is—but she just keeps mum, my little dove” (3:260).

One thinks again of Hardy’s Jude, the gifted working-class man who makes his way to a university town: he tries to decipher the signs of the intellectual life surrounding him, tries to force them to yield up their meaning, but such meaning will never be available to people like him. And just as it does not matter how perfectly Gogol’s provincial ladies manage to copy Petersburg fashions, neither does it matter how fluently Turgenev’s Hamlet speaks French and German or how much Goethe he knows by heart. His provinciality is an irremediable condition, and he is forever precluded from what he calls “authentic development” (3:262). To occupy such a relationship to culture is to be a native of nowhere: this is what Mikhail Epstein calls the provinces’ “alienation from themselves,” leaving provincials forever yearning for something that is somewhere else, “not here, not at this place, but ‘there.”10
The Provincial Lives of Turgenev’s Cosmopolitans

Fathers, Children, and Estates

The steppe estate that figures in “Hamlet of Shchigrov,” with its vestigial and incongruous culture, is by no means typical of all Turgenev’s estates. Far from it: three estates figure in Fathers and Sons, and not one of them embodies this kind of provintsial’nost’. Bazarov’s parents’ home is isolated and poor (in a “far-off region,” a boondocks [zakholustia, glush’, 7:109, 112] decisively set apart from the rest of the world in both space and time), but it is not strewn with washed-up fragments of a distant civilization. Rather, it is a space of quiet labor, where Bazarov learned to see the world as a workshop. Marino, the Kirsanovs’ estate, is a slightly shabby version of the idyll (“not an area that could be called picturesque”: as Arkady approaches his childhood home he sees roofless huts, tattered peasants, trees resembling “beggars in rags”; 7:15). It is old-fashioned and perhaps even retrograde—the elder Kirsanovs’ habits and tastes, like those of Pushkin’s Larins, recall an earlier generation’s, and patriarchal norms have not yet completely decayed—but it is not at all provincial: far from being imitative or culturally incoherent, Marino is self-sufficient and self-respecting. (In fact the narrative’s dramatic effect requires that Marino represent not a brittle, syncretic culture but a relatively intact and coherent one, precisely so that Bazarov can come and break it open.)

Like the Larins’ estate-world in Eugene Onegin, Marino is one of those settings where literature occasionally permits members of the Russian gentry to experience their lives as “natural” (see my remarks above on Lotman’s analysis of the post-Petrine nobility). But the status of the Kirsanovs’ estate is not stable in the same way the Larins’ is (and as I discuss in this book’s introduction, for an estate to succeed in representing its way of life as “natural,” “simple,” and “timeless,” the appearance of stability and permanence was required). Indeed Marino’s status is quite precarious, not only because of the historical moment when the story takes place (immediately before the serfs’ emancipation), but also because Fathers and Sons invites us to compare it to two very different estates, Bazarov’s (described just above) and Anna Sergeevna Odintsova’s.

Odintsova’s estate resembles the Kirsanovs’ in that it is by no means provincial. But it differs crucially from Marino in that it is consciously not provincial—and its nonprovinciality is due not to any vestigial patriarchal regimen, but rather to the heroic, even despotic efforts of its mistress, a wealthy young widow who single-handedly staves off the entropic provincialism of country life. There is nothing natural about living at Odintsova’s. We are told in passing that her estate is called Nikolskoe, and that is located “about forty versts from the town of ***,” “on the slope of a bare hill” (7:73).11 That is all we learn about its location, and that is all we need to learn: like each of the estates in Fathers and Sons, Nikolskoe is a world unto itself. And what is important about it is not its location, but the fact that the
mistress’s money, intellect, and iron will are keeping provincial disorder at bay by imposing strict discipline on every aspect of life. Anna Sergeevna Odintsova—like Tatiana as she glides into the ballroom at the end of Eugene Onegin—is defined above all by a “serenity” (variations of spokoino—peacefully—occur repeatedly in reference to her) that she herself has willed into being. Her bearing is “dignified”; her dress is “simple”; she speaks very little. Her gaze is “serene and intelligent—precisely serene, not pensive,” with “serene” here signifying the appearance of effortlessness (an appearance she sustains by invisible force of will; 7:68–70).

Though Odintsova’s house was built by a local (gubernskii) architect, there is absolutely nothing provincial about it: no awkward mixing of styles, nothing “frivolous or pointless,” just a plain—but not too plain—house, with the usual columns, gables, and coat of arms. The furnishings are “rather elegant”—but not too elegant—in an entirely conventional, predictable, comme-il-faut manner: “in the usual formal way,” “without any particular sort of taste” (7:76). What is meant here by the words “without any particular sort of taste” is certainly not bad taste; it is, rather, the opposite of a provincial’s tastelessly visible striving. Odintsova’s house encapsulates a kind of anti-aesthetic aesthetic that is available to those who have ample economic and cultural capital but no interest in taste as creative self-expression or as overt political statement. It is about predictability, order, and efficiency: the sooner Odintsova’s rooms are furnished, the sooner she can move on to learning the Latin names for plants, as is her plan.

“Order is needed in all things,” she says: because only extreme regimentation can stave off what she repeatedly calls the boredom that would otherwise overcome anyone living in the countryside (v derevne). To that end, time at Odintsova’s is subjected to a “measured, somewhat imperious punctuality,” one that establishes what Jane Costlow calls “a model of absolute order.” So measured and controlled is the flow of time at her home that it is impossible, the narrator tells us, to sense its passage. Time here is cyclical in the sense that footmen serve dinner at precisely the same hour every day, but this cyclicity is far removed from that of the idyll, which is nature-based and essentially agricultural (needless to say, there is no talk of farming at Odintsova’s dinner table). Life at Odintsova’s is structured around habits that offend Bazarov’s “democratic sensibility” (like servants in livery), and the mistress does not deny that yes, “in that sense [she is] perhaps an aristocrat”—but nonetheless there is nothing retrograde about this place, nothing backward looking (7:85).

Neither is there anything particularly modern: temporality here is unrelated to progress; rather, it is organized as a defense against the monotony and chaos assumed to be threatening on all sides. Odintsova understands that nothing “in the countryside” can be left to chance, lest provincial tedium and purposelessness overwhelm all of life. But she expresses no desire to inhabit progressive history, history
in the sense of Pocock’s “public time” (see chapter 2): instead she uses her estate to make time orderly and meaningful on a small scale, creating a local temporality that allows for clear and deliberate ways of thinking. Odintsova is thus entirely free of the disabling anxiety that characterizes provincials, the apprehension that deforms those Turgenev characters who are always painfully aware they inhabit a periphery, a behind-the-times place that resists being dragged into real time.

In *Fathers and Sons*, the epicenter of provinciality is not the gentry estate, but instead an anonymous provincial city, another Town of N. Toward the middle of the novel, in the strangely unmotivated interlude when Bazarov and Arkady decide to go “take a look” at this N, they seem to be anticipating the possibility of a freak show. In this sense the town does not disappoint: the governor’s nickname is “slops,” guests at a ball speak in nonsensical “French” exclamations (“ah fichtrrrre,” “pst, pst, mon bibi,” etc. [7:68]). The two young men learn that this “city like any other” (Bazarov’s dismissive formulation) regularly burns to the ground and must be built anew (“it is a well-known fact that our provincial towns burn down every five years,” 7:64, 62).

In town Turgenev’s protagonists meet the *provintsialka* Avdotya Nikitishna Kukshina, a coarse woman, vaguely promiscuous and semi-educated in Europe, who is introduced to them as “an *émancipée*” (7:61). Kukshina serves as perhaps the most complete (and misogynistic) embodiment of predictably ugly provincial phenomena in all of Turgenev’s oeuvre, perhaps in all of Russian literature. She longs to be known as a “progressive woman” (*peredovaia zhenshchina*, 7:61), a person who is decidedly modern, moving forward in step with History. But how is “progress” possible in a city that is regularly reduced to ashes and must be reconstructed from nothing? What does it mean to live in a house that has to be rebuilt twice every decade? It is difficult to imagine a more apt symbol of a failed attempt to join the linear, progressive temporality that Kukshina longs for, the kind of temporality that characterizes modernity’s view of itself.

Her house, her clothing, her habits and facial expressions—all announce, even before she speaks, a repellently incoherent quality, one that is diametrically opposed to Odintsova’s disciplined orderliness. Kukshina’s material environment is marked by slightly unwholesome forms of hybridity and mixing, a failure to establish the boundaries necessary to keep things and ideas in their proper places: is that person with her a servant or a companion, and is this room a drawing room or a study? Why is she “half-reclining” and “a bit disheveled” in a silk dress, and why are there cigarette butts mixed in with her papers? Her piano is out of tune; her fingernails are “blunt”; she sings a mix of gypsy songs and romances.

Kukshina’s ideas reflect the same kind of disorder as does her house, a disorder that dooms her to triviality: thanks to a “passion for chemistry,” she has invented a resin “to make dolls’ heads that won’t break,” and she has resolved to
go to Heidelberg to meet the inventor of the Bunsen burner (“why of course!”). In one brief, breathless statement, Kukshina refers to George Sand, embryology, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (7:63–64). When her talk jumps from German chemists to Macaulay to James Fenimore Cooper, we are meant to understand that her culture is a jumble of imported ideas, materials that have no more organic relationship to their current location than did the busts of Schiller and Goethe stranded on the steppes in “Hamlet of Shchigrov.” Kukshina is provincial not because her materials are outdated or meager (they are in fact quite up-to-the-minute and copious), but because they lack the coherence—the clear interrelationships—that would allow them to make sense. Indeed, her thoughts signal the same radical indiscriminateness as do the physical objects in *Dead Souls*.

Kukshina must be made a laughingstock not only because her ideas are derivative and incoherent, but also because she has failed to make her relationship to these ideas look effortless. This is perhaps the ultimate source of her provinciality: she is obviously trying, and her *effort* renders her fatally unnatural. If Odintsova is rigorously serene (as well as “simple,” “intelligent,” and “dignified”), Kukshina is the opposite: “She was forever tense. She spoke and moved in a very casual and yet awkward manner. . . . No matter what she did, she always seemed to be doing precisely what she did not want to be doing. *Everything she did appeared to be done on purpose, as children say, not simply, not naturally*” (7:63, emphasis mine). As we have seen before, to be provincial is to be an imitator in whose imitations the marks of labor remain shamefully visible—and Kukshina will never be able to “manifest by [her] ease and naturalness that true culture is nature.” A provincial, like a parvenu, cannot attain to “the privilege of indifference to [her] own manner.”

**Rudin and Nest of the Gentry:**

The Provinces and Historical Time

Odintsova creates her own version of time by ordering her own strictly delimited space, outside of which it is almost impossible to imagine her existing at all. By contrast, in *Rudin* (1856), the eponymous hero—one of Russian literature’s paradigmatic “superfluous men,” full of fancy talk but incapable of work or action—inhabits no space of his own. Rudin drifts around: born in the provinces (Tambov), educated in Moscow and then abroad, he has returned to Russia a rootless wanderer. When the book opens he is in effect already a stray; having just arrived at a sophisticated country estate, he demonstrates his unreliability (talking too much while saying too little) before leaving to drift around Russia and Europe until finally he dies.
Rudin’s superfluousness is inseparable from his desultory movements through space, particularly in the novel’s final chapter and epilogue. We learn of his years covering ground—Moscow, Simbirsk, Germany, various provincial towns, other unnamed places—seemingly in search of a livelihood (e.g., a vague project involving “making a river in __ Province navigable”; 5:315), but really for no clear reason; he has “gone around various places,” as he puts it, “wandering around [skitalsia] not only physically but spiritually too” (5:311). When he encounters an old friend in yet another provincial town (the gubernskii gorod S__), Rudin can give no clear reason for being here rather than in some other place (his presence in the town is “quite by chance,” he says; 5:310). It is impossible to tell exactly what motivates his movements, why he chooses one destination over another. When told—while traveling through “one of the remote provinces of Russia”—that no horses are going his way, his response is, “It doesn’t matter. I’ll go to Tambov” (5:309). No wonder those who know Rudin expect that “he’ll end up dying in some Tsarevokokshaïsk or Chukhloma” (5:302). Tsarevokokshaïsk and Chukhloma are names that signify a kind of namelessness: they are real towns, but they stand in for unreal towns, towns where nothing of significance could possibly happen.

In the end, however, Rudin does not die in such a history-less or placeless place—at least not in editions of the text published after 1860, when Turgenev added a few crucial last lines. Early redactions of the novel conclude with Rudin wandering off from the town of S__, followed by the line, “And may the Lord help all homeless wanderers!” (or “pilgrims,” skitalt’sam; 5:322). But on the last page of the version we read today, the hero does not drift off to expire in some backwater; rather, he perishes dramatically, on a specific and highly meaningful date and spot. He dies, but he dies at the very epicenter of historical significance, on the barricades of the June Days uprising in Paris. A French sharpshooter kills him “on June 26, 1848, in Paris, when the rising of the ‘national workshops’ was already nearly defeated”; he falls while waving a sword and a red flag (5:322). This death is usually read as granting Rudin a degree of redemption, presumably not only because it demonstrates courage, but also because it incorporates his life into a larger and markedly historical narrative, one that implies a redeeming teleology.

Such an ending—of Rudin’s life and of the novel—works to shift both hero and text decisively out of the zone of the provincial and closer perhaps to that of “public time” and even “world literature.” In Rudin’s last, long conversation with his friend Lezhnev, which takes place in Russia, we notice a distinct rhetorical heightening surrounding the topic of his peregrinations. Rudin’s inconstancy is now presented not as a character flaw or even as a symptom of Russia’s problems, but as a deep mystery (“solve this riddle for me!”), the solution to which may lie in the fact that “the love of truth burns more strongly in [him] . . . than in many others” (5:319–20). Lezhnev, recalling that Rudin has called himself a Wandering Jew, raises the
possibility that his “eternal wanderings” serve somehow to “fulfill some higher purpose, the meaning of which remains unknown to [Rudin himself]” (5:321). If so, then maybe all this roaming around has been something akin to a pilgrimage, and Rudin is himself a pilgrim, like the hero of Leskov’s “Enchanted Wanderer” (the ocharovannyi strannik, with strannik meaning both wanderer and pilgrim). Read in this light, Rudin’s movements serve to call our attention to the potential for significance in all the seemingly insignificant spaces he has traversed—even places like Tsarevokokshaisk and Chukhloma.

_Nest of the Gentry_, too, raises the hopeful possibility that provintsiia might end not be divorced from historical time. Like Rudin and _Fathers and Sons_, the text opens with a return (“Fyodor Ivanovych Lavretsky has arrived,” 6:11) and then goes on to consider the relationship between provintsiia and the nation's place in capital-H History. Rather than representing Russia’s heartland as the periphery of some far-off and aspired-to center (like Kukshina’s Town of N in _Fathers and Sons_ or the steppe estate in “Hamlet of Shchigrov”), _Nest of the Gentry_ explores the possibility—also present in _Fathers and Sons_, though less explicitly developed—that a gentry estate, or maybe even a provincial town, could be its own center, a “nest” rather than an appendage to a distant metropole it aims only to imitate. The homecoming it stages leads to no happy ending, but it does suggest that a version of progressive history might be possible in “deep” Russia.

The novel’s geography encompasses a series of locations in the Russian provinces—the estates of Lavriki, Vasilevskoe, and Petrovskoe, and the town of O__—each of which is a place in its own right, its identity not determined by distance from or proximity to anywhere else. Nothing in the text allows us to determine exactly where these places are, though it is clear that the capitals are not only far away but also of no great importance (Lavretsky, we are told, does not even stop in Moscow or Petersburg on his way home from Paris): _Nest of the Gentry_ is not reprising the provintsiia/stolitsa binary. But it does illustrate once again the pernicious effects of imposing European ideas on Russian youth. The novel’s hero, Fyodor Ivanovich Lavretsky, is unfit for (Russian/real) life, as was his father before him, thanks to émigré tutors who have “sown confusion” in their young minds (6:41). Lavretsky père was educated by a “retired abbé and encyclopédist” who poured into his head “the undiluted wisdom of the eighteenth century,” wisdom that failed to “mix with his blood or penetrate to his soul” (6:31). After living a while in London, he returned (“reeking of Great Britain,” 6:38) to his estate to impose rational farming practices on his peasants. He then imposes on his son, who will be the novel’s protagonist, a garbled “European” upbringing. Young Fyodor Ivanovich, raised alone on the steppes, is made to wake at four a.m. and “run around a pole” before writing French dithyrambs and shooting crossbows under the supervision of a Swedish lady and a young Swiss, all while dressed in Scottish
garb (6:41): compare the childhood tutor of Turgenev’s Hamlet, “a German named Filipovich who came from the Nezhin Greeks” (3:262–63).

The education of Lavretsky fils was perhaps meant to make him a citizen of the world, but he ends up as isolated as any provincial who has been deformed by an idiosyncratic body of knowledge haphazardly transmitted. The results of “capricious education” and “artificial isolation” are what a reader of “Hamlet of Shchigrov” would expect: Fyodor Ivanovich Lavretsky is awkward, “some sort of queer pedant”: “any professor would have envied him some of what he knew, but at the same time he did not know many things that any schoolboy had learned long ago” (6:43–44). Despite a lucid mind (and “a healthy air of the steppes” attributable, it seems, to his peasant mother; 6:26), despite having read widely and thought deeply, Lavretsky is an eccentric. Moreover, he is tormented by this fact, and feels as painfully self-conscious as any provincial: “Lavretsky was conscious that he was not free” (6:43).

What does it mean to be “not free” as a result of one’s relationship to knowledge? Lavretsky’s miseducation has enclosed him in an “enchanted circle” (6:43) where he is unable to link ideas together in patterns or juxtapose them in fruitful encounters—much in the same way the isolated artifacts of culture in “Hamlet of Shchigrov,” adrift on the steppe and shorn of context, become inert and meaningless. Ultimately it is the discontinuity between what Lavretsky knows and what others know that leaves him paralyzed, always “[standing] in the same place, locked up and constrained within himself” (6:43). Knowing the wrong things, or even knowing too much, is as bad as knowing nothing, because the autodidact or the “outsider artist,” brilliant though s/he may be, will always be “a culture of one,” an exception that proves the rule.16

In short, to know the wrong things is to be in the wrong relationship to one’s own place and time. This makes Lavretsky provincial in a way that Liza—the lovely and markedly Russian girl with whom he falls in love, a girl who has never left her home—clearly is not. More than once we are told that Liza “has no words of her own” (6:83–84), but her wordlessness, I would emphasize, is the opposite of provincial imitation or diffidence; rather, it is a sign that what she knows is too important to be articulated.17 Her wordlessness is also the opposite of provincial garrulosity like Kukshina’s: in Nest of the Gentry, it is not Liza but Varvara Pavlovna (Lavretsky’s unfaithful wife) who never stops talking, and constant wit and chatter are key to her impersonation of a Frenchwoman (she styles herself “une vraie française par l’esprit”).

Liza, like a peasant, cannot be provincial because she is simply not modern enough: and provinciality, as I have discussed elsewhere, is a decidedly modern phenomenon, tied up with imitation, fashion, and (incipient) consumer culture. Varvara Pavlovna, recently returned from Paris, incarnates what is most modern
and most shallow in the Russian apprehension of European culture—Europe as the site of entertainment, consumer goods (she talks a lot about things like savon à la guimauve) and a breathless, trivializing print culture. Her male counterpart is Panshin, a visiting Petersburg bureaucrat whose smooth manners accord with his glibly cosmopolitan opinions. Panshin declares complacently that “all nations are in essence the same,” and that Russia—“lacking inventiveness” and having “fallen behind Europe”—has no choice but to “borrow willy-nilly” from the West” (6:101).

Together Varvara Pavlovna and Panshin represent a modernity of debased dilettantism that Nest of the Gentry locates not in the provinces, but rather in a certain version of “Europe”: the Europe of ever-changing fashions, middle-brow theater, and the newest perfumes (like “Victoria’s Essence,” 6:125). The serious, idea-freighted Europe aspired to in “Hamlet of Shchigrov” is present in Nest of the Gentry only in the somewhat marginal figure of the German music teacher, Lemm, who carries with him a thoroughly authentic high culture wherever he wanders in search of a living. No matter how far he penetrates into the Russian outback, Lemm’s relationship to this version of European culture remains intact—which is what allies him with Liza, who has her own version of an organic culture, one capable of encompassing Bach, folktales, and saints’ lives.

It is mainly Liza—a classic sweet young thing, what Russians call a Turgenevskaiá devushka (Turgenev girl), but with an extra infusion of Orthodox spirituality—who provides the counterpoint to the text’s various examples of cultural distortion. Liza escaped Frenchification at the hands of a frivolous and cynical Parisian governess, Mlle. Moreau, and was shaped instead by her Russian (and very Orthodox) peasant nanny, Agafia Vlaseevna. Mlle. Moreau’s dismissive and leveling refrain “tout ça c’est des bêtises”—“that’s all nonsense!”—is directly countered by Agafia Vlaseevna’s luminous spirituality, which infuses all experience with depth and imprints on Liza’s soul “the image of an ever-present, omniscient God” (6:112).

It is this version of Russia, the Liza version, to which the hero Lavretsky aspires to return. And we experience Russianness in this book not through Liza (for whom it is simply the air she breathes, not an “experience” at all) but rather through Lavretsky, who comes home after long expatriation. Passages of nature description, for example, serve to call attention not simply to nature, but to a markedly Russian version of nature—a Russianness that would of course not be visible to one who had never left it. Naked steppe lands, peasant huts, and shimmering birches all present to Lavretsky (whose act of looking is repeatedly emphasized) a “Russian picture” (6:50). An entire chapter is devoted to his experience of sensual and sensory immersion in this environment: for a whole day he sits at the window, “plunged into a kind of peaceful stupor” as he listens to varieties of near-silence. Here forms of the word silence (tikho, tishina) occur seven times in one paragraph, where virtually the only sound is the buzzing of insects (6:64–65).
As Lavretsky immerses himself in this torpor, he imagines it as a charmed “circle” (krug) to which one must be resigned upon entering (“whoever steps inside—must submit!”). Having struggled to escape one “enchanted circle” (that of his deforming education; 6:43), he now sees an alternative in another closed circle: a version of Russia that approximates “the bottom of a river” (this phrase occurs twice), where one can be engulfed in an utterly “idle peace.” There is no progress here, no history—all of that is happening elsewhere: “At that very moment in other places on earth, life was seething, hurrying, thundering along; here the same life was flowing on noiselessly, like water through marsh grasses.” History does exist, in other words, only not here, not at the bottom of the river; here time stands still.

At this moment such a life suits Lavretsky, who has not been treated well by the modern, “outside” world. Not only does he submit, willingly if temporarily, to the “boredom,” “idleness,” and “dead silence” of this place, he finds himself thoroughly “enchanted” by it (6:64–65).

Lavretsky finds life in deep Russia to be not only “mysteriously pleasing… cheerful and wonderful,” but also “unexpectedly strange and at the same time so long and so sweetly familiar” (6:84). The passage might have been devised to illustrate Benedict Anderson’s argument about how “national identity” functions in modernity: “nationalness” must be experienced as a feeling that is at once “unexpectedly strange” and “sweetly familiar.” This sensation is what is needed to underwrite the narratives of “identity” that become necessary once we are embedded in what Anderson calls the “secular, serial time” of modernity, the de-enchanted time that all moderns inhabit—the kind of time into which Lavretsky (like Oblomov and not a few other nineteenth-century Russian heroes) has been dragged against his will.

But I would argue that in the end Nest of the Gentry is able to imagine a version of provintsiia that is not only native and authentic, but also productive and portable: the provincial estate as it is envisioned here will be carried into the future, even if Fyodor Lavretsky’s generation will not be the one to do it. Liza, the Slavophile ideal, ends up immured in a convent “in one of the remote regions of Russia” (6:152), suffering a fate that suggests she is perhaps not such an ideal after all, and Lavretsky himself simply lives out his life honorably, accomplishing little. But in the book’s epilogue, set eight years later, Lavretsky contemplates the younger generation now living on the estate—happy, active “young people” who were educated in the capitals but are entirely at home in provintsiia—and he thinks, “Enjoy yourselves, grow up, you forces of youth… life is ahead of you, and for you things will be easier: you won’t have to seek your path as we have done, to struggle… in darkness; we had to work hard just to remain whole, and how many of us failed?—but for you there’s work to do” (6:158).

This ending is of course characteristic of Turgenev in its careful moderation, its repudiation of two extremes. It rejects the glib argument for Europeanization
offered earlier by Panshin (to modernize is to westernize, since “all nations are in essence the same”). But for all the book’s Slavophilic undertones, the ending of Nest of the Gentry also questions the timeless, autarkic Orthodox ideal that would leave Liza stranded in a remote convent to atone for everyone’s sins. In other words, the epilogue manages to foresee, if dimly, a generation for whom “provincial” Russian culture will be neither a cacophony of imported Europeanisms nor an authentically-atrophied “charmed circle.” Rather, to adopt once again Anderson’s terms, it will become part of a “narrative of identity” that can be enlisted to do the work of modern life.

Smoke and Virgin Soil: Expatriation and Itinerancy

Fyodor Lavretsky leaves Europe and returns to provincial Russia so that Nest of the Gentry can imagine a future Russian identity that would make it possible for Lavretsky’s countrymen to join history on their own terms. The book can be read as a rejection of cosmopolitanism, or at least a rejection of the notion that “all nations are in essence the same.” Smoke, a pointedly satirical novel of 1867, is set a world away from Nest of the Gentry’s Russian heartland, but it reveals a similar skepticism when it comes to the virtues of worldliness. Smoke’s setting is the international watering hole of Baden-Baden, a milieu that highlights what has often been represented as the Russian propensity for borrowing and mixing: a willingness, as Monika Greenleaf writes, to adapt ideas that were “sometimes up-to-the-minute but more often chronologically out of sync with European fashion,” conflating these ideas and making use of them “simultaneously,” regardless of their temporal or geographic origins. We have already seen Turgenev’s critique of this phenomenon in Fathers and Sons (Kukshina’s Town of N, with its culture that keeps burning itself down), and in “Hamlet of Shchigrov” (the steppe estate’s “culture” consisting of a few hollowed-out and fetishized artifacts).

In “Hamlet of Shchigrov,” characters cast adrift in the flat calm of steppe time sit in silence; their provincial culture has no content, and therefore it has no words—there is only the sound of spoons striking against teacups. By contrast, the expatriated Russians in Smoke never stop talking. Their version of provinciality, like Kukshina’s, is marked by excess and garrulousness, thanks precisely to their willingness to mix elements from wildly incompatible cultural and chronological registers. “One moment holding forth on the role of the Celts in history, the next transported into the ancient world,” their expatiations range dizzyingly from one place and time to another (7:258). They speak in much the same way Kukshina does, and to the same effect. Over and over in Smoke again we encounter passages like the following, some of which continue for pages:
Voroshilov suddenly exploded, naming in a single breath, almost choking, Draper, Virchow, Mr. Shelgunov, Bichat, Helmholtz, Stahr, Štúr, Reumont, Johannes Müller the physiologist and Johannes Müller the historian, clearly confusing the two, Taine, Renan, Mr. Shchapov, then Thomas Nashe, Peele, and Greene. (7:266)

Both the self-styled radicals and the conservatives (the two Russian political camps at the spa) spew a mind-numbing and hilarious mélange of up-to-the-minute “ideas” (“the titles of just-published pamphlets and, in general, names, names, and more names,” 7:258), almost silly enough to make Kukshina seem like a model of systematic thinking. Like hers, their discourse is macaronic to the point of incomprehensibility; page after page of Smoke features a jumble of languages, politics, social classes, fashions, music, and nationalities.

These people are in what they take to be a worldly setting (a spa town, which is at once everywhere, “Europe,” and nowhere) engaged in what they take to be worldly conversations, but they remain unmistakably provincial. Once again Turgenev’s Russians have brought their provinciality with them to Europe because their ideas are not rooted in a clear history or social reality. Thus they treat utterly disparate phenomena as if they were interchangeable, allowing themselves to pass without transition from the Aeginetan marbles to reflections on the peasant commune (7:258–59, 249). But at the same time they remain cognizant of their own tenuous grip on “Europe,” and are therefore seized with “reverential tremors” in the face of anything French, ever prepared to concede “the overwhelming superiority of a clever foreigner” (7:270, 250).

And always in the background of their chatter is an awareness of the “deepest steppe” and its “blind darkness,” out of which all Russians, Turgenev suggests, have only recently emerged. When the protagonist Litvinov receives a letter from his family estate outside Ryazan, his father’s complaints (his grain is selling poorly and his coachman has been bewitched: the end of the world must be near) serve as a jarring reminder of the obscurity and torpor of darkest provintsia, a place that seems to Litvinov to exist in an entirely different historical moment, or perhaps in no historical moment at all. Indeed life back home is so blatantly incommensurate with life in Litvinov’s current location that reading his father’s letter here—“in Baden of all places”—strikes him as positively “bizarre” (chudno), as if, he thinks, he had turned a corner and stepped into some long-ago time (7:278–79).

The ostensibly modern time that these Russians try to inhabit in Baden makes no more sense than the stagnant timelessness of the deep steppes. Like Kukshina in her provincial city that has to be rebuilt every five years with whatever materials are at hand, Turgenev’s Russians in the European resort town do not have the luxury of living in a coherent or even a clearly identifiable historical moment, in which ideas would have roots in real history and real places. Though they talk
constantly about “the future of Russia” (e.g., 7:266), they are no better positioned than is Kukshina (who so longs to be “progressive”) to move forward. Reflecting on his compatriots who come to Baden to absorb the latest ideas, Litvinov thinks mournfully that soon enough “the wind will change, and the smoke will blow in another direction... smoke... smoke... smoke!” (7:399). Thus Smoke ends with neither forward movement nor unity, but with dispersal and a slow falling apart.

Likewise Virgin Soil, Turgenev’s last novel, ends with dissolution and is set among deracinated seekers, though Virgin Soil’s seekers (the “populists” and “nihilists” of the 1870s) remain mostly in Russia. They are trying to drag their country into progressive time by way of capital-R Revolution, but instead they themselves end up melting away into trackless and timeless space. And because one of the book’s goals is to imagine how Russia’s vastness might be incorporated into a coherent and progressive vision of history, Virgin Soil incorporates settings that are virtually unmentioned in the rest of Turgenev’s oeuvre, encompassing not only capitals and estates, a sizable provincial capital (gubernskii gorod), villages and countryside, but also a factory, railroads and roads, and even (in references at the novel’s end), Perm and the Urals. As we follow a loosely affiliated group of revolutionaries who move around Russia in search of the common people (the narod, who occupy space in their own way), the novel invites us to think about what their fruitless search bodes for the nation’s historical trajectory.

The geography of Virgin Soil is shaped by the itinerancy of these would-be revolutionaries. First we follow the hero Nezhdanov from Petersburg to the provinces, a trajectory quite typical for an 1870s populist (and directly opposed to that of the Balzacian hero, whose goal is to make it to Paris (monter à Paris). We track other characters as they move from Petersburg to various estates, and from town to town throughout Russia. Unlike in Dostoevsky’s Demons, in which the wanderings of revolutionaries also figure prominently, in Virgin Soil there is little sense of any far-off mastermind who might be directing all this movement: Turgenev’s radicals appear to be more or less adrift. The taciturn and unsophisticated nihilist Mashurina, for example, has left her impoverished family in Southern Russia for no ideological reason we can discern and has traveled to Petersburg, where she ends up being radicalized, somehow, in a process we do not witness (9:139).

Turgenev’s revolutionaries believe that in order to “know” the common people, one must “go to” them, and this belief motivates their attempts to penetrate Russia’s far-off places. But to go to the people, one character declares, is to enter a dangerous dark “forest”: the narod is “just as obscure and dark [glukh i temen] to us as any woods!” (9:153). The adjective glukh, translated here as “obscure,” also carries implications of voicelessness and deafness, impenetrability and occlusion; the emphasis is on the common people’s imperviousness. The main
character—Nezhdanov, a bastard son of the aristocracy who has thrown in his lot with the radicals—is charged with “getting close to the peasants,” but he finds himself able to do nothing but “study” them. The “chasm” dividing them from himself is simply too wide to be breached (9:213–14).

The revolutionary politics of all the characters, with the exception perhaps of the preternaturally wise factory worker Solomin, seem to have been shaped at least as much by their experiences in Russia’s capital city as by any coherent ideological agenda or far-reaching political network. In fact the novel’s plot would be inconceivable without the metropolis, the capital’s explicitly modern, urban space. Turgenev’s innovation here—that is, what we do not see in his other novels—is not so much to incorporate the metropolis into the story (only the early chapters are set in Petersburg), but to reveal how characters who have been shaped by urban modernity are moving across and into Russia, changing the country as they penetrate far-off places (and in so doing helping to disrupt the provinces/capitals binary).

What happens to Nezhdanov, Mashurina, and their comrades in Petersburg is something that simply could not happen in another place: they mix with all different sorts of people. Nezhdanov the radical meets Sipiagin, the wealthy aristocrat, in a box at the theater—something that is possible only in a city large enough to provide the venues (theaters, cafés, train station waiting rooms) where truly disparate groups come together, and not always by choice. At first Nezhdanov is baffled to find himself chatting with “this aristocrat” (“How did we manage to come together? And what does he want from me?” 9:150), but the radicals are learning that their cause demands such physical spaces. As one of them declares sententiously, “we must establish ties with all levels of society, starting with the highest!” If Russia’s revolutionaries intend “to act, to turn the world upside-down,” he continues, “we must not live apart from that world . . . in our own narrow little circle” (9:154, 152). Virgin Soil suggests that such an “establishing of ties” might be possible, but probably only in a metropolis. Once outside of Petersburg (and nearly all the action transpires outside of Petersburg), opportunities for class mixing are rare.

In the provinces, unlike in the capital, the revolutionaries’ activities tend to segregate and isolate them, putting them at risk of losing each other and melting away into Russia’s untrackable spaces. The streets of the provincial town—empty “even on a Saturday evening,” with only the taverns full of people, and all of them drunks—are lined by tumbledown shacks and the grim, dull façades of merchants’ houses locked down for the night; the market square reeks, and the newly planted trees lining the main boulevard are already dying (9:192). The villages (sela, dereven’ki, derevnia, 9:338, 192, 301), too, are poverty-stricken, decayed, and above all cut off from contact with outsiders; again the only gathering places
are taverns, which are full of raucous and violent peasants. Outside of Petersburg, *Virgin Soil* suggests, Russia is a series of nonoverlapping or even noncontiguous worlds where different sorts of people are unlikely to come together. Even the factory that features prominently in the narrative offers no space for inter-class communication, let alone revolutionary agitation; the radicals have no real contact with the factory hands and are left bemoaning the workers’ intractability and passivity.

*Virgin Soil* concludes with dispersal and a kind of petering out, much as *Smoke* does, and much as *Rudin* would have if Turgenev had not added the final passage and had instead allowed the protagonist to drift off toward “some Tsarevokokshaisk or Chukhloma.” By the last chapter of *Virgin Soil*, the cabal of would-be revolutionaries has been broken up, Nezhdanov has killed himself, and those who have escaped arrest seem to be wandering around Russia and Europe with no aims that make any sense to the reader. Like Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, *Virgin Soil* ends without resolution or “wrapping up”; instead the characters simply scatter, melting away to parts unknown. A year and a half after this dispersal, in what amounts to a postscript, a minor character named Paklin meets Mashurina, by chance, on a bleak, insignificant Petersburg street. Mashurina, whom we last saw being sent off to Geneva to deliver a cryptic note in a language she could not read, is now traveling here and there on the passport of an Italian countess. When Paklin asks who “directs her movements,” she gives no answer, and when he asks where she lives, she responds, “wherever I end up” (9:339).

The last words of *Virgin Soil* are spoken by Paklin as he watches Mashurina depart: “Nameless Russia!” he says—“Bezymiannaia Rus’!” (9:339). *Bezymiannaia* here might also be translated as anonymous, unknown: it suggests provincial places like Tsarevokokshaisk and Chukhloma, whose names stand in for namelessness. Here as elsewhere, Turgenev hints that such places will tend to resist attempts to enlist them in a grandly “historical” narrative. In *Fathers and Sons*, Kukshina’s desire to graft European time onto provincial Russian reality results in a pandemonium both semiotic and chronological and a town that burns down every five years (7:62). The protagonist of *Smoke*, too, senses that Russia’s “deep steppes” do not inhabit European temporality; likewise the main characters in “Hamlet of Shchigrov” and *Nest of the Gentry* are unable to integrate what they have learned from their ostensibly up-to-date European educations with how they must live in Russian places and times.

For Turgenev as for other Russian writers, a preoccupation with inorganicism and a focus on policing various forms of perceived authenticity (by, say, shaming a *provintsialka* like Kukshina) are responses to failed attempts at imposing a normative (European) chronology on Russia. Such failures are best highlighted
in provincial places, which, as we have seen, often inhabit a disordered kind of time. And while a Balzacian provincial stands a chance of making it to Paris, thereby joining his life to progressive history, for Turgenev’s Russians such a task can prove impossible. Hence the provinces’ role in Turgenev’s oeuvre: provintsiiia highlights Russians’ struggle join to modern time in a way that would not require them to burn down their own houses—their own cultures and histories—twice every decade.