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Anti-Nihilism in Ivan Turgenev's Last Novel *Virgin Soil* and Ba Jin's Early Novellas *Destruction and New Life*

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Abstract. The fiction of Ba Jin (1904–2005) is most closely associated with the legacy of Ivan Turgenev. For a comprehensive understanding of the Russian classic in China, it is necessary to conduct a comparative analysis of Turgenev's works and Ba Jin's *Destruction* (1929) and *New Life* (1936) from the point of view of the anti-nihilistic component. The authors examine the problem of nihilism in Turgenev's *Virgin Soil* (1877) and Ba Jin's novels in order to identify similarities in the fates of revolutionary nihilists. Only by determining the specific character of the main characters, comparing them with each other, comparing the development of the plot and common themes, it is possible to explain the author's intention, to trace Turgenev's influence on Ba Jin's creative methods and worldview.

Keywords: reception, Nihilism, plot, theme, character, concept, technique

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Антинигилизм в романе И.С. Тургенева «Новь» и ранних повестях Ба Цзиня «Гибель» и «Новая жизнь»

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Аннотация. Творчество Ба Цзиня (1904–2005) наиболее тесно связано с наследием И.С. Тургенева. Для всестороннего понимания русского классика в Китае необходимо провести сравнительный анализ произведений Тургенева и ранних повестей Ба Цзиня – «Гибель» (1929) и «Новая жизнь» (1936) – с точки зрения антинигилистической составляющей. Авторы рассматривают проблему нигилизма в романе «Новь» (1877) Тургенева и повестях Ба Цзиня с целью выявления сходства в судьбах нигилистов-революционеров. Только определяя специфику характера главных героев, сопоставляя их между собой, сравнивая развитие сюжета и общие темы, можно объяснить авторский замысел, проследить, как Тургенев повлиял на творческие приемы и мировоззрение Ба Цзиня.

Ключевые слова: рецепция, нигилизм, сюжет, тема, характер, замысел, прием

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Introduction

Ivan S. Turgenev wrote his novels as an artistic chronicle of Russian society (Korovin, 2012, p. 173). The nihilist Bazarov from *Fathers and Sons* is undoubtedly his most famous personage. Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) and Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) introduced the new phenomenon of nihilists as people who wanted to bring down the government, renounced the authorities, and criticized the conservative traditions, moral standards, and religion (Zavyalova, 2010, p. 64). However, *Fathers and Sons* with its conflict of generations is actually an anti-nihilistic text. Officially declared by critics as Turgenev's earliest anti-nihilistic novel, it is by far not his only one: his last novel *Virgin Soil* (1877), is also anti-nihilistic. Yet, it remains understudied in the shadow of *Fathers and Sons*, the novel where the word 'Nihilism' as an intellectual and moral movement came from.

The China of the early XX century was semi-colonial and semi-feudal. The national crisis loomed over the country as the social contradictions grew more and more acute. Like Ivan Turgenev, Ba Jin lived in the interesting times of changes and challenges. The historical context he found himself in was the main subject of his creative writing. Looking for ways to save China and its people, Ba Jin apparently drew inspiration from the anarchism of Pyotr Kropotkin, but it was the Narodnik movement aka Populism of Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Alexander Herzen that was the real focus of his attention (Mansheng, 1981, p. 127). Herzen and Chernyshevsky obviously shared the ideology of Nihilism. In fact, Nihilism, first defined as such by Russian and then by Western journalists, was organically inherent in Populism as its super-external and supra-socialist coating (Troitsky, 2002, p. 73). During the crisis of Nihilism in the late 1860s, Populism, in its turn, showed the nihilists the way to the grassroots. Logically, Populism cannot be ignored by Nihilism studies.

Despite his deep faith in revolutionary ideas, Ba Jin gradually realized their futility and impracticality. As a result, he started sublimating in literature and wrote his first novella, *Destruction* (Wan Yinggou, 1985, p. 64) and *New Life* later. Ba Jin's China was very similar to the Russia of the second half of the XIX century, both socially and historically. Chinese youth even had their own *Going to the People* movement. This historical

environment yielded the plot and nihilistic protagonists for Ba Jin's *Destruction* (1929) and its sequel, *New Life* (1936).

This article compares Turgenev's last novel *Virgin Soil* and Ba Jin's early short prose *Destruction* and *New Life*, as well as the writers' attitudes toward Nihilism, nihilists, and their revolutionary activities.

Results and Discussion

Despite the distinct love theme, *Virgin Soil* is an ultimately political novel. Part I triggered an avalanche of social disputes, which made it a real challenge for Turgenev to publish Part II. However, the love line was not merely a trick he used to outsmart the strict censorship: the story of individual people helped the writer to tell the story of the entire country. Nezhdanov and Marianna loved each other by the canons of revolutionary ideals: their affair was a knot of love and revolution. When Nezhdanov began to question his revolutionary aspirations, he got disillusioned in his feelings for Marianna as well. Eventually, their love crumbled down, like their revolutionary ideals. The love story of Nezhdanov and Marianna told the story of Russian revolution. When Marianna broke up with Nezhdanov the Narodnik and turned to Solomin, who advocated gradual changes "from the bottom up", it was the reflection of Turgenev's own opinion and his bold prediction about the reforms in Russia (Wu Xiaoting, 2023, p. 226).

The love theme was important both for Turgenev and Ba Jin: 'the themes of love and death dominated their works, and the love stories were mostly tragic' (Shang Bofei, 2022, p. 277). Ba Jin openly admitted Turgenev's influence on his fiction: like Turgenev, he used love to test his personages and reveal their personalities (Wang Liye, 2019, p. 22). For instance, Du Daxin, the protagonist of *Destruction*, grew cold to love and women after his childhood love had obeyed the will of her parents and married another man. When Du Daxin met Li Jingshu, the sister of his friend Li Leng, his heart woke up again. This story explains Du Daxin's views of love: his was a contradictory personality that yearned for love but was hesitant to love. The same contradiction was part of Du Daxin's attitude toward revolutionary path, which brought him to his death. Similarly, in *New Life*, it was love that guided Li Leng from rejecting the revolution to joining it.

Both Turgenev and Ba Jin made their female characters stronger in love than the male ones. At first, the women were passive personages, enlightened by the male protagonists. As their self-awareness grew, they showed a true strength of character. Marianna believed in their love more than Nezhdanov; Li Jingshu inspired Du Daxin to live on and fight; Wenzhu convinced Li Leng to join the revolution. As the men and women changed roles, the men died, and the women continued the fight. On the one hand, it could be Ba Jin's sympathy for his female personages and their strong personalities, who did not give up looking for a path to national salvation. On the other hand, such scenario could reflect the idea of equality, advocated by nihilists. The protagonists saw women as comrades-in-revolution, not as damsels in distress: for them, women were as much revolutionaries as men, they moved forward together, and, be the need, women could replace men in the revolutionary fight.

In fiction, revolutionaries usually awaken courage and strength in other people. They are brave, determined in their cause, firm, and overall positive. However, the image of Nezhdanov does not fully correspond to this revolutionary canon. Nezhdanov is the *Russian Hamlet*, and this semantic quintessence of his image speaks volumes about his personality (Belskaya, 2020, p. 55). He was often indecisive, doubting, and confused. Nezhdanov was an aesthete who appreciated poetry and art. However, he hated these qualities in himself: "Nothing offended or insulted Nezhdanov more than a slightest hint at his poetry, which he believed to be an unforgivable weakness of his". Self-rejection prevented him from finding happiness in love. Despite his deep feelings for Marianna, he passed her on to Solomin and told him that there was no love between them (Turgenev, 1982, pp. 156, 372). Nezhdanov's complexity, duality, and tendency to question everything went far beyond his love life. As a result, he could not give himself entirely to his righteous cause and hesitated to tread the chosen path. He was engaged in nothing but political and social issues. He boldly professed the most extreme opinions and diligently worked for the good of the common cause. However, he said he did not believe in it (Turgenev, 1982, pp. 156, 371).

Du Daxin and Li Leng are torn apart by the same contradictions. Du Daxin is the Chinese Bazarov: he denies everything, hates everything,

and stands only for the cause of the revolution. He loves Li Jingshu, yet suppresses his emotions. Just like Bazarov, he dares not look straight into his own heart. Ultimately, he gives up his love in favor of the revolution (Yu Meijiu, 2014, p. 24). Du Daxin was torn between love and hate, life and death. This polarity makes his character far too complex. On the one hand, he longed for love and was happy when it appeared in his life; on the other hand, he was obsessed with the thoughts of death and hate, which prevented him from giving himself fully to love: he considered himself a doomed man who deserved no love.

Li Leng had a natural love for humankind. He longed to find a way out for himself and others in a world full of pain. When his friend Du Daxin died, he understood that “no matter how much we struggle and suffer, the destruction is inevitable”. As a result, Li Leng began to “hate everything, deny everything, and resist everything” (Ba Jin, 1987, pp. 174, 198). When his younger sister Li Jingshu “went to the people”, Li Leng found it foolish (Ba Jin, 1987, p. 181), although in his heart he wished he had joined her. In the end, this self-torture brought him to destruction.

Although the protagonists reject the authorities and the old order, they are full of doubts about the revolutionary ideas that they themselves promote. They waver between love and hate, reason and emotions. Confused by their own ideals and reality, they become too contradictory, which ultimately leads them to self-destruction. Both writers showed these inner contradictions through diaries and letters. Nezhdanov opened his heart in a letter to his friend Silin, who remained outside the frame of the novel. Du Daxin described his internal struggle in his four postmortem diaries. The entire *New Life* is a first-person narrative of Li Len’s journal.

Fiction reflects reality as a set of life phenomena organized by the author in line their own ideological and emotional background (Tong Qingbing, 2015, p. 261). Turgenev and Ba Jin wrote about the world around them. Separated by space and time, they shared similar social environment and wrote about the same historical phenomenon, i.e., the revolutionary movement of *Going to the People*. Their personages represent this movement: Nezhdanov, Du Daxin, and Li Leng are close to each other in background and social status, i.e., they belong to petty-

bourgeois intelligentsia. On their life path, they go through similar stages: they abandon their families, they *go to the people*, they intend to join the revolution and contribute to the common cause. The deeper they immerse themselves into the ideals of the revolution, the more confused they get because they start to comprehend the huge gap between these ideals and reality.

Nezhdanov and Marianna joined the revolution after escaping from the house of Marianna's uncle, Sipyagin. Unfortunately, the mission of *Going to the People* turned out to be a fake. Eventually, wearing rags, imitating rural accent, and drinking vodka in order to blend in with the peasant crowd began to feel strange. In a letter to his friend, Nezhdanov admitted that it was all as stupid as stupid could get, but immediately added that it was his own fault, not that of the revolution (Turgenev, 1982, p. 325). He even blamed the organs he inherited from his aristocratic father. After several failed propaganda attempts, Nezhdanov started to doubt the expediency of it all, but stubbornly continued *going to the people*. However, something that happened to his comrade Markelov made it impossible for him to ignore the absurdity. Markelov, who also propagated socialism to peasants, was beaten, seized, and brought to the police by these very peasants. Realizing the ignorance of the common people, Nezhdanov understood that it was too early for a truly proletarian revolution and broke down. Unable to comprehend the failure of the cause he had believed in and fought for, he decided to commit suicide.

Du Daxin was sure that the pioneers of revolution were its first martyrs: he regarded death as his duty (Ba Jin, 1987, p. 143) and braced himself for the inevitable tragic end. When he fell in love, hope rose in him again. No matter how hard he tried to ignore the feeling, he craved for his beloved. When his friend Zhang Weiqun was killed, Du Daxin reassumed his fatal mode. Inspired by Du Daxin, Zhang Weiqun joined the revolution only to be arrested. His arrest was as ironic as that of Markelov: his comrades were too busy saving themselves and abandoned him. The execution turned into a festival of beheading: all those peasants and workers Zhang Weiqun so desperately wanted to enlighten gathered on the central square not to say goodbye to the revolutionary hero, but to entertain themselves. Zhang Weiqun was executed, and Du Daxin

failed to answer the question his friend had asked so often: “Is the revolution here yet?” The absurdity of it all made Du Daxin seek revenge: he decided to kill the military officer who had killed his friend and thus crowned ‘the long and endless struggle of his life with his own death’ (Ba Jin, 1987, p. 143). The author discredits Du Daxin’s revolutionary path that ended with destruction, as is clear from the title itself (Mansheng, 1981, p. 126)

New Life was contemplated as a sequel for *Destruction*. Initially, Ba Jin wanted to depict the revival of Li Leng and his revolutionary ideals, but, being loyal to realism, depicted nothing but just another revolutionary failure. After Du Daxin’s death, his beloved Li Jingshu continued his fight, but her elder brother, Li Leng, started to doubt its ideals. He questioned the expediency of *Going to the People*: “I do not understand why you keep looking for trouble? Do you really think that your suffering will bring salvation to all those people and yourself?” (Ba Jin, 1987, p. 180). Torn by doubts, he finally joined his sister and his girlfriend in their revolutionary struggle, but he did it out of fear of loneliness: “I don’t want to be alone anymore; I’m sick and tired of loneliness and suffering!” (Ba Jin, 1987, p. 259). After Li Leng agreed to *go to the people*, his beloved Wenzhu said to Li Jingshu: “We should send him to work as soon as possible, or he could change his mind” (Ba Jin, 1987, p. 261). It is obvious that Li Leng still doubted the way of revolution. Yet, he was ready to do whatever his loved ones asked of him, even sacrifice his life.

After *New Life*, Ba Jin intended to finish the series with the final novel he wanted to call *Sunrise*, which would show his vision of the future. He never did because it was no time for utopias (Ba Jin, 1993, p. 413).

Ironically, the champions of the old regime, whose way of life Nezhdanov, Du Daxin, and Li Leng tried to overthrow, got off with a whole skin, and the brave revolutionaries sacrificed their lives for nothing. After his brother-in-law Markelov was arrested, Sipyagin received a promotion; the military officer Du Daxin tried to assassinate recovered in a fortnight and was given a large bribe for silence. Perhaps, the tragic end illustrates the futility of the revolutionary struggle, the revolution being just a beautiful utopia. The death shared by Nezhdanov, Du Daxin, and Li Leng was a metaphor for their doomed common cause.

Conclusion

Ba Jin was so fascinated by the sense of social responsibility for the great mission expressed by Turgenev's protagonists that it could not but affected his worldview and creative writing. The anti-nihilism of Ba Jin's early novellas *Destruction* and *New Life* had roots in Turgenev's last novel *Virgin Soil*. It is no wonder that its most popular Chinese translation belongs to Ba Jin. Both authors used the love line as a plot engine and a test that revealed the personality of their revolutionary protagonists, whose complex and contradictory characters provided a dynamic narrative. The love line, the controversial nature, and the plot let to the only outcome possible, i.e., the failure of revolutionary struggle.

In *Demons*, Fyodor Dostoevsky was quite direct in his criticism of the revolutionary movement: the novel was in fact an anti-nihilist pamphlet. Turgenev and Ba Jin, on the contrary, were not so radical in their assessments: they depicted the inevitable tragedy of Nihilism without false praise or embellishments. Turgenev and Ba Jin ridiculed the inconsistency and impracticality of the nihilistic deeds and thoughts, but they sympathized with the nihilists themselves, e.g., their gender equality, their spirit of resistance and courage, and their devotion to the common cause. Although both writers strongly rejected Nihilism, their main goal was to study and analyze the paths of revolution.

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