

DMITRY PISAREV

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Pisarev, Dmitry Ivanovich (1840-1868) was a noted literary critic, radical social thinker, and proponent of “rational egoism” and nihilism. Born into the landed aristocracy, he studied at both Moscow and St. Petersburg Universities, concentrating on philology and history. From 1862 to 1866, Pisarev served as the chief voice of the journal The Russian Word (*Russkoe Slovo*), a journal somewhat akin to The Contemporary (*Sovremenik*), which was published and edited by the poet Nikolai Nekrasov (1821-1878). In 1862 Pisarev was imprisoned in the Petropavlovsk Fortress for writing an article criticizing the tsarist government and defending the social critic Alexander Herzen, editor of the London-based émigré journal The Bell (*Kolokol*). Ironically, Pisarev’s arrest marked his own rise to prominence, coinciding with the death of Nikolai Dobrolyubov in 1861 and arrest of Nikolai Chernyshevsky in 1862. During his incarceration for the next four and a half years, Pisarev continued to write for the The Russian Word, including several influential articles exhibiting his literary panache: “Realists” (1864), “Notes on the History of Labor” (1863), “The Historical Ideas of Auguste Comte” (1865), and “Pushkin and Belinsky” (1865). His articles on Plato and Metternich, and especially the article “Scholasticism of the XIX Century” brought him fame as a literary critic.

Pisarev differed from other, more liberal, social reformers of the first half of the decade, since he stressed individual-ethical aspects of socio-economic reforms, with family problems, and the difficult position of women in society. When Chernyshevsky's novel What is to Be Done (*Chto Delat'?*) came out in 1863, Pisarev praised it as a utilitarian tract focusing on the positive aspects of nihilism (generally, the view that no absolute values exist). At the same time, Pisarev criticized Chernyshevsky for his intellectual timidity and failure to develop his ideas far enough. According to Pisarev, a functional society did not need literature ("art for art's sake"), and that it should simply merge with journalism and scholarly investigation as descriptions of reality. He even assaulted the reputation of Alexander Pushkin, claiming that the poet's work hindered social progress and should be consigned to the dustbin of history.

Rather than scorn Ivan Turgenev's novel Fathers and Sons (*Ottsy i Deti*), written in 1862, as Chernyshevsky did, claiming it castigated the radical youth, Pisarev strongly identified with the novel's hero Bazarov—a nihilist who believes in reason and has a scientific understanding of society's needs, but rejects traditional religious beliefs and moral values. "Bazarov," Pisarev wrote, "is a representative of our younger generation; in his person are gathered together all those traits scattered among the mass to a lesser degree." To Pisarev, Bazarov's "realism" and "empiricism" reduced all matters of principle to individual preference. Turgenev's hero is governed only by personal caprice or calculation. Neither over him, nor outside him, nor inside him does he recognize any regulator, any moral law. Far above feeling any *moral* compunction against committing crimes, the new hero of

the younger generation would hardly subordinate his will to any such antiquated prejudice.

Pisarev's readers gleaned in the author himself some of these same extremist, "nihilist" tendencies. However, while Pisarev was an extremist intellectual, he was an honest one. He eloquently advocated such practical social types as Bazarov—activists for the intelligentsia, i.e. people who could play the role of a "thinking proletariat." Yet Pisarev himself did not advocate a political revolution. He believed society, and above all the mass of the people, could be transformed through socio-economic change. He simply denounced whatever stood in the way of such peaceful change more trenchantly than any of his predecessors had. Thus this urging to attack anything that seemed socially useless *sounded* more revolutionary than it really was.

Upon his release from prison, Pisarev contributed articles to the journals The Task (*Delo*), and Notes of the Fatherland (*Otechestvennyye Zapiski*). Although he drowned in the Gulf of Riga in 1868, at the age of 28, his ideas continued to influence other writers, notably Fyodor Dostoevsky. In Crime and Punishment (*Prestuplenie i Nakazanie*) Dostoevsky's hero Raskolnikov (from the word *raskol* or "split") shows what occurs when one flaunts moral principles and takes a human life. In The Possessed (*Besy*) Dostoevsky shows his reader the worst ways in which human beings can abuse their freedom. Several characters in this novel act on horrifying beliefs, leaving numerous dead bodies in their wake. Raskolnikov's views pale next to the shocking behavior of the "demons" that Dostoevsky feared most:

human beings who lose their perspective and let the worst side of their natures predominate.

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