

# What Reason Promises

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Essays on Reason, Nature, and History

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Michael D. Gordin

## Crab Nebulous

**Abstract:** This essay begins with a bizarre excerpt from Turgenev concerning a large black crab, a spiritualist, and a gambling scene in Baden-Baden. But from this marginal crab the reader may peer into a Russian world of intermixed religion, science and politics.

A puzzling incident happens in an old Russian book. A man arrives at an evening gathering in Baden-Baden. The room is filled with Russians, with a stray American in their midst. All the servants are, naturally, German, and about half the conversation (especially with the American) takes place, naturally, in French. Some in the corner are playing cards for money, since gambling is always in the air in Baden-Baden. A self-proclaimed musical genius sits at the piano and ceaselessly bangs out cacophonies. A noblewoman who goes by the informal (and Frenchified) “Lise” speaks with the American, Mr. Fox, who is a spiritualist medium (characterized by long blond locks and heavily accented French), and a Russian obsessed with interpreting Revelation and the Talmud in order to predict the future. (About this Russian, the narrator tells us that even though “not one of these events has ever taken place, he wasn’t embarrassed and continued to prognosticate” [334].)<sup>1</sup> Lise asks whether any animals can be influenced by the magnetic forces of spiritualism. “There are in fact such animals,” Mr. Fox replies, “for example crabs; they are very nervous and fall into catalepsy easily” (335).

A large, black crab is immediately ordered and brought out on a serving platter. The narrator describes what follows:

The waiter set the dish on a round table. A small movement coursed through the guests; a few heads popped up; the generals at the card table imperturbably maintained the solemnity of their poses. The spiritualist ruffled his hair, frowned, and—approaching the table—began to wave his hands in the air: the crab bristled, scuttled backwards, and raised its pincers slightly. The spiritualist repeated and quickened his movements: the crab bristled as before.

Lise, the countess, asks, “*Mais que doit-elle donc faire?*,” to which the spiritualist answers, “*Elle doâ rester immobile et se dresser sur sa quiou*” (336). But, stub-

bornly, the crab doesn’t sit on its rear. The spiritualist declares he is not in power, and forlornly retreats, consoled on the way by Lise, who assures him that even the great Daniel Dunglas Home—recently a sensation on his visits to St. Petersburg—also experienced such moments. The waiter, fighting to maintain a straight face, returns the crab to the kitchen, whereupon he and his colleagues burst into laughter “*über diese Russen*” (337). It is 1867.

I first read this about fifteen years ago, and it has always nagged at me. What could this incident possibly mean? It would be easy to dismiss it as nothing at all, just a bit of silliness trapped in the pages of a book no one opens anymore. But I have been reading Lorraine Daston’s work avidly for two decades now (from the moment I began to study the history of science), and I do not believe she would appreciate such complacency. She has always been a great historian for the marginal episode, the weird, the moment or the object that evokes wonder—and that sometimes can, with the patina of time and hindsight, come to resemble foolishness. There are other Dastonian elements here as well: careful observation, a speculation about the powers of mind, an attempt to think with animals, an international engagement in search of knowledge (however frivolous) on German soil... In fact, I do not for a second doubt that if she were to come across an episode like this in John Locke’s notebooks or Condorcet’s letters, she would seize upon it and turn it into a virtuoso exemplar of wonder, observation, nature, and rationality. But she hasn’t, and so in a fit of second-order ventriloquism, I will attempt to do so here (minus, regrettably, the virtuoso part).

This failed mesmeric experiment with the crab did not, of course, take place before the eyes of Locke or Condorcet. As far as I can discern, nothing like this particular scene ever took place at all. It is entirely the product of the imagination of Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev (1818–1883), one of the greatest Russian novelists from an epoch of great Russian novelists. The crab séance occurs relatively early in his 1867 novel *Smoke (Dym)*, which is a difficult novel to like. The work as a whole is a lampoon of the Russian emigration, ranging from the high nobility to the overly earnest and no less absurd students and nihilists, which is why it takes place at Baden-Baden and nearby Heidelberg. Turgenev’s goal was to expose the pretentiousness and loose morals of this motley crew of expatriates—the novel’s plot tracks youthful true love descended into shabby adultery—and the whole story brims with authorial bile.

Turgenev was a skilled observer of both nature and humanity, and he typically drew his material from meticulous attention to actual behavior, in the process often anticipating broader trends in Russian culture and thought. Our unfortunate crab, for example, represents the first significant appearance of spiritualism in Russian literature. It would be far from the last: table-turning, efforts at spirit communication, manipulative mediums, metaphysical disquisi-

<sup>1</sup> All page numbers in the text refer to I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh*, 2d. ed., volume 7 (Moscow: Nauka, 1981). All translations are my own.



tions on the soul—these would persist throughout some of the most memorable (as well as the most forgettable) Russian literature of the 1870s and beyond. Turgenev in *Smoke* opted for satire, and had an insider's knack for the telling detail. (In this, the name "Fox" is a nice touch, since the American Fox sisters had started the whole table-rapping phenomenon in upstate New York in the late 1840s.) Fedor Dostoevsky went a similar route in his mostly overlooked novel *The Raw Youth* (*Podrostok*) of 1875 and as a periodic butt of witty asides in his autojournal *Diary of a Writer*, the best selling periodical of its day. Not everyone took spiritualism as a laughing matter. In Leo Tolstoy's magnificent *Anna Karenina*, which appeared as a stand-alone book in 1878, the baleful influence of a manipulative—and, by Tolstoy's implication, clearly fraudulent—medium is heavily responsible for inducing the cuckolded Karenin to deny Anna any access to their child. Dostoevsky, too, would pick over the topic with newfound seriousness. The famous "Grand Inquisitor" scene from *Brothers Karamazov* (1880) contains numerous traces rooted in the mocking *Diary* entries of previous years, demonstrating how deep philosophical views about spirituality were intimately tied to what seemed a superficial repulsion from the spiritualism fad.

The very ubiquity of spiritualism in these works deserves our attention. It wasn't simply ubiquitous, it was *marginally* ubiquitous. There is no "great Russian novel" about spiritualism; there isn't even a significant novel that takes it on as a central theme. It is present here, there, and everywhere, but more as a glimpse through an open side door as you walk down a hallway—something that catches your eye as you are propelled forward to your destination. This marginality is not a consequence of the triviality in which we might join with Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev in belittling aristocratic naïveté. There are a host of deeply serious leitmotifs that stud the literature of this era—suicide, for example, or dueling—alongside others (such as children's games) which resemble spiritualism in their lightness. These are almost never the central plot device or focus of attention (*pace* the duel in *Eugene Onegin*), but function as a resonance for the overarching themes of these novels: the clash of generations, the state of the peasantry, the relation of Russia to the West, violence, political liberty, and so on. Yet over and over again the deepest philosophers, greatest writers, most prolific hacks, and most confused pundits constantly paired mediumism with Momentous Drama. Following Carlo Ginzburg's inspirational analysis in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (1989), we can adopt the strategy of one who exposes forgeries, looking at how the pinky finger is depicted rather than the eyes. In the ubiquitous marginalia of these Russian novels, the writer can let his guard down, throwing into relief repeated patterns that had earlier languished in seemingly random scenes.

We have, after all, a crab to deal with. Marginality doesn't just manifest in side scenes, but in entire novels as well. Pretty much nobody reads *Smoke* these

days, and I cannot say I blame them. Yet, however clunky *Smoke* is taken to be now, Turgenev intended it as the thematic sequel to his finest novel, *Fathers and Children* (*Ottsy i deti*), published in 1862. Tracking the themes raised by the mesmeric arthropod brings out the place of scientific observation in Russian culture and the role high literature played in actively transforming the cultural debates of late Imperial Russia, in the wake of the so-called Great Reforms that began with the Emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and restructured the entire society. To see, we must observe.

*Fathers and Children* is a novel about generations, artfully sketching the burgeoning conflict between the idealistic nobility of the 1840s (saturated with complacent Hegelianism) and the hard-scrabble materialism of their scions, the "men of the sixties" (*shestidesiatniki*). The novel is artfully structured, intricately plotted, and beautifully written—but I set all that aside for the sake of its central character, the chief element that most people retain from the novel: Evgenii Bazarov. Bazarov is utterly magnetic, and the book snaps to attention as he moves through a scene, serving as both a principal and catalyst for the love affairs, dramas, and the sole duel that punctuate the story. Bazarov is the first prominent nihilist in Russian fiction. As he tells his ennobled hosts (the "fathers" of the title) on a visit to a friend's ancestral country estate, "We act in support of what we consider useful. At the present time the most useful thing is rejection—so we reject." He rejects everything in the name of cold inspection: conventional morals, the political order, received commonplaces about nature. When his hosts recoil from the recklessness of Bazarov's indiscriminate rationalism, protesting that things need to be built, not just torn down, he confidently responds: "That's not our affair... First the ground needs to be cleared" (49). A medical student, nurtured on the inspiration of such works as Ludwig Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff*—interestingly, also one of the books presented to the young Albert Einstein a few decades later when the boy manifested an interest in science—Bazarov subjects all of Russian society to a clinical rationality.

As Isaiah Berlin noted in 1973 in an essay entitled "Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament," the fictional Bazarov incited a firestorm of comment and controversy among the chattering classes of Great-Reforms Russia. There were four possible positions—comprising, if you will, all the spaces of a 2×2 matrix—and all spaces were occupied in *intelligentsia* discussions: Turgenev was either endorsing Bazarov's radical views or he was condemning them; Turgenev's position (mockery or valorization) was either commendable or deplorable. It is a testament to the artistry of *Fathers and Children* that all these views are sustainable, and readers continue to grapple with their attraction to and discomfort with Bazarov. But the heady intellectual circles of St. Petersburg and Moscow had no truck with ambiguity, and Turgenev was judged from all sides and found wanting.



The most wounding reaction came from the radical youth, and this is the nub of the “liberal predicament” that Berlin outlined. Turgenev’s sympathies were with the liberals, broadly construed, and he certainly did not wish to be seen as a stooge of tradition, yet the crassness of the young firebrands who powered the intellectual opposition to conventional order discomfited him. He wanted to support the children, but he preferred the genteel methods of the fathers—and when push came to shove, he recoiled from the shoving and the very students whose admiration he coveted. As it happened, they rejected him first. A bit of context: *Fathers and Children* closes with the exodus of some of the book’s nihilists to Heidelberg—the chemical *genius loci* Robert Bunsen is specifically invoked as the town’s primary attraction—and they are presented as lazy and somewhat ditsy. Heidelberg’s storied university was indeed a Mecca for Russian students, especially in the natural sciences, and they took umbrage at Turgenev’s characterization of them and their ideals. In September 1862 a group of students demanded an explanation from the author himself, then staying in Baden-Baden. In October (the precise date is hard to pin down), Turgenev traveled to Heidelberg and was subjected to a sort of “trial” where he was found wanting. The novelist was disgusted, and wrote about the incident to several of his friends. He was skewered on the prongs of the liberal predicament.

He skewered back. Hence, *Smoke*: it is his answer to the accusations of infidelity to progress the Heidelberg students laid at his door. Turgenev was a gifted writer, but his sense of humor was so impregnated with pique in this instance that the whole satire becomes muddled. Yet if we follow not the author, and not the characters, but rather the animals who are subjected to intense observation—that is, if we read our crab episode the way I imagine Daston would—we see how the parody was supposed to work. The question for us is not whether the novel is good or bad, or who is to blame in this tempest in a teapot, but rather: why is there a crab at all?

The bristling crustacean is not the only aquatic animal to star in Turgenev’s fiction. Its closest relative appears, as you might have guessed, in *Fathers and Children*, and it is an omen of tragedy rather than comedy. In chapter 5 of the earlier novel, we find Bazarov traipsing through the ponds surrounding the country estate, where he attracts the notice of a cohort of boys exploring the countryside for their own amusement. A towering medical student is hardly usual fare in those parts, and so they ask him what the blazes he is doing. Looking for frogs, naturally. The children are nonplussed, and continue to press Bazarov.

“I slice open the frog and look what is going on inside it; and since you and I are just like frogs—except that we walk on two legs—I will thus know what is going on inside us,” he answers.

But why on Earth would you want to know that?, the children reply.

“So as not to make a mistake if you fall ill and I have to heal you” (21–22).

Perfectly sensible: close observation allows one to reason up from animals to humans, and back down again. This charming vignette presents Bazarov in the kindest of lights, with his rationalism generous and productive and his attitude to children tolerant and nurturing. It also foreshadows disaster. In the book’s final pages, Bazarov offers to help dissect the corpse of a man who recently died of typhus. In his haste, he nicks his finger. Ever hopeful in his nihilism, he reaches for carbolic acid to disinfect the cut, but even he knows it is too late. There is no way to heal him, and no comfort except the knowledge of what is happening, *à la* Büchner.

Heidelberg, Baden-Baden. Frog, crab. Bazarov, Fox. In both novels, Turgenev intimately linked the cultural diagnosis of the Russian elite to the scientific observation of animals—for the abortive mesmerizing in the drawing room can surely be taken as an experiment, complete with hypothesis and explanations for a null result. Other forms of reasoning are on display, including the classically Dastonian subject of gambling and chance, but the reader is consistently pointed to the animals. This makes sense, for in the touchy censorship climate of 1860s Russia, conversations about the fate of the Russian people were predominantly presented in the pages of literature or literary criticism, where the reader would have to parse the allusions instead of reading explicitly political treatises. This is what we gain by paying attention to a whole variety of documented episodes—real but especially invented—exploring the preternatural and wondrous within the pages of literature. For in a novel, rationality never appears as an abstraction; it is always embedded in a character, a person.

I did not cherry-pick this particular example in a fashion analogous to the made-to-order demands of the aristocrats attending on the mystical Mr. Fox; rather, it came to hand much like Bazarov encountered his frog: plucked from the stream of words flowing across pages, cascading across the mental world of the Russian *intelligentsia* in the late nineteenth century. It is quite straightforward to pick dozens, even hundreds of kindred instances, linking together different novels and different authors through the marginal episodes that decorate their pages, as reflective of both their individuality and their embedding in a cultural milieu as an artist’s signature: distinctively personal, but also a mark of attention to the market. The intersection of science and literature in late Imperial Russia is particularly rich in such connections, but the overlap between natural knowledge and art has lingered close to the surface in every culture and time period with which I am familiar. The peculiarities of the reverberations of science in the Russian Golden Age—the mid-century moment marked by the dominance of literature, much as today’s driving forces might be espied in Silicon Valley or



genomics laboratories—are simply an exceptionally clear site for analytic purposes. The structures of both the market for literature and the patterns of cultural sociability encouraged precisely the kind of cross-fertilization we observe Turgenyev enacting here.

Both crucial features of the Russian cultural landscape were conditioned by the remarkably small size of the *intelligentsia*, however broadly defined. Literacy was not especially broad in a land of recently emancipated serfs, but where it could be found it was strikingly deep. In the 1860s, educated Russians, whether the children of clergymen or individuals of the middling ranks who became students, translators, Grub Street impresarios, or scions of the nobility, could often claim competence in reading two or three modern European languages besides Russian, in addition to the obligatory Greek and Latin bludgeoned into them by a rigidly classicizing school system. This was a culture of *readers*. Whenever the spotty censorship and the even spottier mails allowed it, foreign books and journals crossed the border, providing both stimulus and fodder for commentary, appropriation, remixing, and vitriol, out of which the heady brew of the European-though-distinctively-Russian literary form emerged.

The writers were concentrated mostly in the center of St. Petersburg, the Imperial capital, and certain neighborhoods in the commercial metropolis of Moscow, and if the *intelligentsia* was not quite minuscule enough that every scholar and writer—be they novelist, chemist, musician, painter, or what have you—knew everyone else, it is no exaggeration to say that one degree of separation spanned the entire topography. The distinctive organizational feature of this culture was the *kruzhok*—literally, “circle”—informal gatherings of like-minded individuals who discussed philosophy, music, sculpture in different gatherings organized in different homes. You got into a *kruzhok* by personal recommendation, and friendship overlapped with influential connections and raw talent, weaving a tapestry of networked producers of texts. Physiologist Ivan Pavlov never seemed to have met chemist Dmitrii Mendeleev, but they both hosted salons of painters in their apartments, with quite a few double-dippers among the attendees, and Petersburg Mendeleev never met country squire and mostly-Muscovite Tolstoy, though they communicated through the latter’s son, a student of the former. And so it goes: Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov composed his music while working as a naval architect and served as a node among military, musical, and technical circles, and even the perpetually penurious and cantankerous Dostoevsky was linked into a vast web of those-who-produced-culture through multiple ties (he knew Pavlov’s wife, for example). Is it any wonder that in this world science and literature would constantly draw from each other, with psychologists building upon novels and novelists cribbing mathematical analogies? Spiritualism—defined by small groups of individuals united around a common point of

interest in someone’s parlor—was no accidental topic of discussion in many a *kruzhok*.

The readers, on the other hand, except for metropolitan winters “in town,” were dispersed in country estates across the largest land empire of any era, encompassing one-sixth of Earth’s land surface. For readers to reach writers, bookstores were a poor solution—not enough demand in any given locality to sustain a literary marketplace. In a pattern reminiscent of the sciences, the market shifted from monographs to periodicals. Russian written culture of the nineteenth century was circulated by a dozen or so “thick journals” (*tolstye zhurnaly*), monthlies that ran to hundreds of pages an issue, featuring *belles lettres*, history, political commentary, poetry, philosophy, literary criticism, and more besides. Eager readers would subscribe to several and while away the long summer days and long winter nights with a mail-delivered cross-section of what was the rage in many a *kruzhok*. The offerings were also segmented by political persuasion (conservative, liberal, radical, reactionary), so you could subscribe to whatever suited the range of beliefs in your household, unified only by the literary offerings, which were serialized to the highest bidder.

Of course, literature was serialized in many contemporary contexts—the case of Charles Dickens is probably the most widely noted—yet there are features of the Russian case that reward closer attention. Take, for example, spiritualism. In 1875, a thick journal named *The Messenger of Europe* (*Vestnik Evropy*) published a piece by Nikolai P. Vagner, professor of zoology at St. Petersburg University, in which he proclaimed his conviction that humanity was on the verge of tremendous new scientific advances by exploring the phenomena elicited by mediums in the darkened anterooms of the nobility. Reaction among the public—that slim but vocal stratum of readers and writers—was electrified, and furious at what many took to be a display of inanity by a leading naturalist. *The Messenger of Europe* walked away, but the more politically conservative Moscow-based *Russian Messenger* (*Russkii Vestnik*) leapt into the breach, broadcasting over the next two years a scintillating debate about the reality or crackpottery of spiritualism featuring Vagner, his detractors, and his supporters, including fellow spiritualist Aleksandr M. Butlerov, Mendeleev’s colleague and rival at St. Petersburg University and also a member of the Academy of Sciences and one of the greatest organic chemists of the day. You could follow the debates month by month, and then turn the page and read the new novel-in-chunks, something about unhappy families called *Anna Karenina*. The author of the latter certainly read up on them, and the incorporation of both spiritualism and the controversy over Christians in the Ottoman Balkans (the so-called “Eastern Question”) appear in later chapters of Tolstoy’s work as he integrated the milieu of the thick journal into the plot of his book. This is not an isolated case: every Golden Age Russian novel you have likely

ever heard of, with the exception of two, appeared in installments rather than as a stand-alone volume. The two outliers were Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842), and... Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*. Part of Bazarov's punch was that he arrived undiluted by the periodicity of the thick journals. He was packaged alone.

The packaging matters, and our science and our literature arrive at our doorsteps through various routes, each sensitively dependent on a cultural moment, an economy of communication, and a network of influences and appropriations. Sometimes, as in the Russian case, we are able to grasp all of the strands and follow them back to their cultural origins. In the process, the biggest of abstractions—the soul, rationality—appear to us in their wrappers, and those casings are the very stuff of cultural history. This, to my mind, is the central lesson that Lorraine Daston's sparkling oeuvre teaches us: that there is no rationality in the abstract, only rationality expressed in a particular time and place; that there is no view from nowhere by which we can apprehend it without doing the difficult work of history; and that if we want to understand the Bazarovs of the world we should, on occasion, consider the crab.