

Litvinov (In Turgenev's *Smoke*) **Agreeable**

Overview Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) was born in Moscow, son of a reasonably prosperous landowner, who was at the same time a serious philanderer, and of a mother who, left alone without spousal support, became increasingly abusive. It is no surprise that Ivan was especially drawn to living and studying in Western Europe, which was the source of fashionable ideas in Russia, and where his intellectual heroes, like Flaubert and Hegel, came from. Turgenev excelled in the novel, short story, and in drama; *Fathers and Sons* (1862) and *Smoke* (1867) are rich expressions of his fascination with new and progressive 'scientific' attitudes.

Character When first we meet Grigory Litvinov, he is on his way home to Russia from Europe, to meet his fiancée Tatiana, who will soon be arriving from Dresden. Litvinov is at this moment arriving at the watering spa of Baden Baden, where many Russians, especially of the aristocracy, gather to enjoy themselves and gossip. Litvinov soon falls into conversation with Russians of many viewpoints—Slavophiles, nihilists, Europeanists. Interchanges with these figures absorb much of the novel, as does Litvinov's romantic life—he is engaged, and he will meet an important old love. The novel comes together around honest social critique and satire, and about Litvinov's endless search for the right woman.

Parallels Critique of one's own culture is the intersection point, for Turgenev's Litvinov, with any number of post-Renaissance texts, that delve into the mysteries of the new national cultures. One thinks of *Swift's Gulliver's Travels* (1726), with its raw satire of 18th century British culture; of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930), with its caricatures of the golden and privileged Uxbridge young, or, for that matter, of the later (1975) British self-excoriation in Martin Amis' *Dead Babies*, which has added drugs, crime and nihilist to the scenarios Waugh described; or of Henry Miller's *Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, with its ruthless just post-WW2 scouring of an America which Miller had been lucky enough to be absent from for the previous ten years.

Illustrative moments

Observant We first meet Grigory Litvinov 'bending forward and leaning on his cane with both hands' at a table near one of the watering spot restaurants frequented by Russian visitors to the fashionable spa of Baden Baden. Thirty years old, 'his large expressive eyes, brown with a tawny tinge, gazed slowly about him, now blinking a little with the sunlight, again suddenly following some eccentric figure that passed by...' The last detail counts, for it marks Litvinov not only as a people-watcher, but as a culture-watcher, for ultimately that is his inclination, to probe cultures and to review his own Russian inheritance.

Critical The Litvinov we meet is self-satisfied, having a stable engagement ahead of him, a good university education behind him, and a reasonably comfortable income. Yet the question remains why he finds himself in Baden? It seems the perfect place to meet his fiancée and her mother, the latter of whom, a sworn democrat and foe of aristocracies and watering spots, shares Litvinov's interest in people-watching, and wishes to indulge it in this self-exposing spot. No place could better have opened Litvinov to the variety of Russian cultural types he loved to satirize.

Romantic In a series of conversations, which unfold around him that evening in Baden, Litvinov hones his sense of positions he despises: that of Russian aristocrats whose sense of their own national value is completely myopic, that of blind worshippers of what they take to be contemporary modern 'Western culture'; and that of romantic Slavophiles, who dream of the great days of Tsarist power and magnificence. Of even more importance to Litvinov, than the voluble representatives of these view-points,

whom he meets in Baden, is the bouquet of heliotrope which he finds awaiting him in his hotel room, on return from an evening of conversation.

Disgusted The sweet smelling heliotrope pervades Litvinov's hotel suite, and keeps him awake most of the night, trying to guess who left this previous gift. Having asked the bell boy who had left such beauty, all the lad can offer is something like 'a stately Russian countess,' an account which almost, but not fully, seems a possible fit to the lovely Irina who had been Litvinov's first love, ten years earlier. Litvinov is haunted by the guessing game, for in fact his truest frontier of susceptibility is romance. He determines to leave Baden, the next day; the self-centered comfort of the idle Russian community there finally disgusts him.

Discussion questions

Is *Smoke* a study of the anatomy of romance, or a cultural criticism of the New Russia which was forming? Or is the book both of those things?

Is Litvinov himself one of the idle ex pats who gather in Baden Baden? That is, for all Litvinov's scorn of this group, does he belong to them himself?

What is the author's own view of Litvinov? Does the author agree with Litvinov that smoke is the ultimate condition of the new emerging Russia?

Reading

<http://www.mirror-service.org/sites/ftp.ibiblio.org/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/4/0/8/1/40813/40813-h/40813-h.htm>