'WHY EXACTLY WOULD YOU WANT to go to see something that isn't there?' Daniel asked.

He did have a point. I'd just finished explaining to him over a deliciously crunchy *sandwich jambon* (the coffee was dishwater) that there was nothing left to see at Courtavenel, and now here I was trying to talk him into driving me there. Daniel, I might say, was still in his Buddhist phase that summer, so, strictly speaking, if I'd correctly understood the thrust of his Himalayan guru's teachings, he wasn't *completely* there himself. But I decided to let that pass.

'Ah, well,' I said, 'that's what I'd like to find out, you see.'

'What would you like to find out?' Daniel wasn't being difficult, he was quite simply curious.

'Well, I'd like to find out what, if anything, happens – of course, nothing at all might happen – when you go to a place where so many things have occurred, things you know about, things you've imagined vividly, and just stand and look.'

He nodded thoughtfully and swallowed another spoonful of his leek soup. I've always admired that mixture of intensity

and utter calm in Daniel. Then he said: 'Are you expecting spirits? *Des fantômes?*'

We'd met in Kuala Lumpur, of all places, a few years before, when he'd been in his Sufic phase. He'd asked me to take his photograph in the butterfly house at Lake Gardens – we'd had to wait for a trembling, iridescent blue creature to alight on his shoulder – then we'd run into each other again in one of those crowded, aromatic streets around Bukit Bintang and had a meal together under a sign which read: REFLEXOLOGY CLINIC. IN DOOR AND OUT DOOR. FOR THE HEALTHY FOOT. Those are the kinds of trivial things one remembers about pivotal moments. What we actually talked about now escapes me. Sufism, butterflies, Baudrillard, tie-dyeing – with Daniel it could have been absolutely anything. He had a moderate interest in everything. The only forbidden topic was the Louvre, where he did something mysterious with computers.

In Kuala Lumpur he'd had a head of tight, black curls, but in Paris he was looking more monastic. His shaven skull was bent over his soup. He was thinking as he sipped.

'Where exactly is this Courtavenel?' he said, with the smallest of smiles.

'It's near a town called Rozay-en-Brie,' I said. 'East. In Brie. Not far. An hour or two away at the most.'

'Flat as a pancake, the country around there,' he said, reaching for some bread. 'Funny place to have a castle.'

In a way it was. Whenever I'd pictured the castle at Courtavenel, I'd pictured it (pennants flying from the turrets, drawbridge down) in proper castle country with crags, ravines, forbidding forests – that sort of thing. But as we got closer to Rozay-en-Brie that afternoon – we'd left straight after lunch ('*Okay, let's do it*', he'd said in English, '*let's hit the road*') – the

countryside stretched out in every direction as flat and featureless as Kansas. Or as most of my own country, for that matter. The sky that day was completely Australian: a dome of flawless blue enamel, scoured by the rains the night before.

We'd got lost, as one always does, trying to get out of Paris. A single wrong turn on one of those roundabouts, a moment's hesitation as you zoom towards one of those spaghetti-like tangles of fly-overs and off-ramps, and you find yourself careering off to Nogent-sur-Marne instead of Chennevières-sur-Marne or some other triple-barrelled town with 'Marne' in its name, and, before you can turn around, you're caught in a traffic-jam, staring crabbily at a Pizza Hut for half an hour. Or a brand new housing estate, used-car yard, petrol station, hypermarket, high-tension powerline, Buffalo Grill . . . Even Daniel got a little snappish and began correcting my French.

Then, at the wave of some wand, it all disappeared. Emptiness. Soothing expanses of maize and barley ready for harvesting, patches of forest and here and there a farmhouse. Far away on the horizon a church steeple or two. In Rozay-en-Brie, a few streets of sleepy shops and a jumble of pinched houses, some half-timbered, above a river, we made some enquiries of passers-by about Courtavenel. There seemed to be no signs to it and it wasn't marked on our map.

'Are you sure it was Rozay-en-Brie it was near and not some other en-Brie?' Daniel asked after a lot of blank smiles and puzzled looks. 'There are lots of them.'

'Of course I'm sure,' I said. 'It's where they all caught the coach to Paris. The castle was a stone's throw away from here, practically within walking distance. I'm amazed nobody has heard of it. The Viardots, Turgenev, Gounod, Berlioz, Charles Dickens . . .'

'Charles Dickens came to Courtavenel?'

'Half of Europe did, it was a mecca. It was a huge castle with a moat. How can these people never have heard of it?'

'Well, you said there was nothing there.'

'There must be *something*,' I said. 'A brick, an old gate-post, a cherry-tree, *something*.'

Eventually a blind man watching a wedding at the town hall told us to go on to Pécy, a few kilometres further east, and ask there. Now the land was really flat, like a breadboard strewn with a few clumps of greenery. What on earth had possessed the toast of Europe to buy a castle way out here on this plain of beetroots and barley, a long day's bumpy ride in the early 1840s in a diligence from Paris? Why not on the Loire or over towards Dijon, which is where the Viardots supposedly came from?

Then, away on the horizon ahead of us, as we came out of a patch of beech, we caught sight of Pécy, a few black scratches and squiggles etched against the blue.

'He wasn't a hunter, this Viardot fellow, was he?' Daniel asked. 'See all these signs to watch out for deer? I'll bet he wanted to hunt.'

He certainly did. Like his friend Turgenev, Louis Viardot was a passionate killer of wild birds and animals. All his life, both in France and Germany, he roamed the forests with his dogs slaughtering the wildlife. Nothing gave this studious, withdrawn and kindly man more pleasure than killing living creatures. As lord of quite a vast domain here at Courtavenel, spreading out from his medieval *château* across fields and forests teeming with wild boar, roe deer, pheasant, partridge, snipe and quail, he could escape his role as sparkling diva's dullish husband and play the *grand seigneur* to his heart's

content. He was only just over forty when they bought the old castle and started to do it up. At that age he could spend all day on his blood sport and still enjoy a long evening of conversation and music around the piano with guests from all over Europe.

His young guest Ivan Turgenev shared his pleasure in hunting to the full. 'I will only ever feel truly happy,' he wrote to Louis on his return to Russia from Courtavenel (a little too effusively), 'when I can again roam the much-loved plains of Brie at your side, my gun in my hand . . .'

No wonder Turgenev felt inspired to write most of his *Hunter's Notes* here, early in his three-year sojourn at the castle, although all the stories in the collection (his first real book) were set in Russia. It's a book I've never taken to very strongly, although it remains one of his best-known and best-loved. Even Daniel, who has no particular interest in things Russian, vaguely recalled having read bits and pieces of it years before, possibly in an earlier incarnation. What had stayed in his mind, as in mine, were the pictures, not so much of hunting, which is often incidental to the stories he tells, as of the peasants (the serfs), all those Yakovs, Yermolais, Arinas, Nikolais, Petrushkas and Pavels, each one drawn with the same delicacy and depth as the serf-owners themselves. The whole book smells unforgettably of dogs, water, rotting thatch, wormwood, buckwheat, dead game, mud, drink and campfires. It rings to the sound of gunshot, shouting, flogging, birdcalls, peasants singing and frightened voices telling terrible stories. Already, at the outset of his writing career Turgenev had mastered the art, as Virginia Woolf noted in one of her delicately intelligent essays on the Russian writer, of combining the photograph and the poem. Others, as she says, are

much better storytellers than Turgenev, but nobody surpasses him in this particular skill.

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I didn't want to discuss hunting with a Buddhist, however, not feeling up to a monologue on karma or the doctrine of rebirth (Daniel wouldn't even swat flies), so I let the subject of hunting drop. As far as I'm concerned, slaughtering animals and birds for sport is simply an incomprehensible abomination, like child abuse or rape – in fact, very like child abuse and rape. The stalking of innocent prey in the company of a pack of excited males, the joy in shared animality, the targeting, the craving to pierce and possess, the ecstatic consummation, the subsequent relief and mournful languor . . . any description of a hunt as sport brings to mind sexual pursuit of the innocent.

Gunning down game has always been a gentleman's occupation, of course, and Turgenev was, after all, born a medieval squire with vast domains teeming with both wildlife and serfs to transport him from lair to lair, tend to his horse and fix broken axles on his cart. Even the troubadours hunted between bouts of mooning – right here, presumably, a short ride from Provins, where Countess Marie of Champagne held court. What else was there for them to do when they weren't wooing the lady of the castle? After all, they weren't about to plough or scythe or fight. Nevertheless, one might have expected that Turgenev of all people would have seen through and recoiled from this aspect of medieval life as he did from so many others – autocracy, slave-ownership and religious obscurantism to name just three.

The sort of hunting Ivan Sergeyevich so enjoyed was not

the gruesome formal chase with hounds, conducted like a military campaign, even in Russia before the emancipation of the serfs, with thousands of hunters and armies of (sometimes liveried) peasants fanning out across the countryside, in some cases for weeks at a time. He hunted alone with a serf companion, as many Russian gentlemen did, almost on an equal footing with him, dressed almost indistinguishably from him, sharing meals with him and talking with him deep into the night less like a master than a friend. The pleasure of these escapes from his everyday life is no mystery. But why did they have to climax in an orgy of slaughter?

Anyone can understand the hunter's joy in feeling at one with nature, blissfully yielding to her in all her moods – tempestuous, smiling, sultry, mysterious, gay, buzzing with life. In fact, Turgenev makes you feel only half-alive sometimes, sitting (as you probably are while you turn the pages of *A Hunter's Notes*) in a chair in a room in a house in a suburb with nothing more natural for your eye to rest on than the family dog or a vase or flowers. But when a partridge flies up out of a birch-tree, or a flock of lapwings, crakes or orioles swoops by overhead, why does a gentle man like Turgenev, who went into raptures over Beethoven, Brahms and Romantic poetry, urgently want to kill them? Why does feeling at one with nature entail a desire to wipe it out?

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In his slightly mawkish *Poems in Prose*, written over several years towards the end of his life, Turgenev reflects more than once on Nature as the mother we all share – birds, animals, human beings, even worms. There's nothing too remarkable

about that. What is revealing, however, is his insistence that this common mother is also the pitiless exterminator of life, both human and animal – and that to her there is absolutely no distinction. A man, a worm – it's all the same to Nature. As part of nature, Turgenev may well have believed that he had no more moral obligation to cherish animal life than a wolf or bird does, although killing his own species for sport was obviously another matter.

Free to kill, he became an erotically aroused predator once he was out in the fields or the forest on the track of game. Although the erotic frenzy of much writing about killing wild animals is missing in his *Hunter's Notes*, there is definitely joy there. It's 'jolly fun' (*veselo*), he tells us, to watch dead ducks tumbling head over heels through the air and slapping down into the water. He kills '*dlya potekhi*' – 'just to have a bit of fun' – an expression which has the same sexual shading to it in Russian as it does in English. His heart is in an agony of longing and suspense (*tomitsa* – the word lovers use) as the woodcock, with a cry, swishes through the air towards the jutting barrel of his gun.

'He lived here for three years?' Daniel asked, a little incredulously, eyes on the road as the scratches and squiggles of Pécy turned into solid houses just ahead of us.

'On and off, yes. He went back and forth to Paris, of course, for the theatre and the opera and to see friends . . . and the revolution, he was in Paris for the events of 1848.' (Did young Frenchmen still know what had happened in 1848?)

'Still, three years is a long time. How old was he?'

'Thirtyish. He dropped in briefly for the first time while he was on a grand tour and then came back two years later and stayed. It was like a railway station, Courtavenel, everyone said

so, with all the comings and goings. But no one stayed as long as Turgenev. He wrote several plays here – *A Month in the Country*, for example, have you seen it?'

He wasn't sure he'd ever heard of it. But before we could pursue it, like everyone else he had to get one thing straight: were Ivan Turgenev and Pauline Viardot lovers? What sort of a *ménage à trois* was this?

'Nobody knows,' I said.

'Somebody must know.'

'From their letters you really can't tell. If they ever did . . . you know, have relations' – a snappier phrase seemed inappropriate – 'then it probably *was* here at Courtavenel about two years after he arrived, most biographers seem to think. Some people believe one or two of her children might even have been his, but nobody knows. I actually find it quite hard to imagine, somehow. I suppose one sultry evening when Louis was away a kiss could have turned into . . .' (And here I thought of Litvinov and Irina in that luggage-room in the hotel in Baden-Baden, the loosened hair, the tinkling comb.) 'But – how can I put it? – I think it's the wrong question to ask.'

'What's wrong with it? It seems quite a reasonable question to me.' Eyes still on the road. Shaven head gleaming in the sun. I didn't know what to say.

'Okay, it's not the wrong question, but I do think it's beside the point. Or was for Turgenev. Or soon was – at least by the time he left Courtavenel. I'm not sure that for him love always needed to take that form. Or not first and foremost.'

Daniel didn't say anything, but I could tell he thought I was being wishy-washy and evasive. A passionate, strikingly good-looking single man in his early thirties who felt no need for sex with the woman he was crazy about?

'And the husband? Louis, was it?'

'Well, they seem to have stayed very good friends, judging by the letters they wrote to each other. Men's letters, you know . . . about *things*, mostly – hunting, music, money, politics. But there was a real warmth to them.'

Daniel, I suspect, had been hoping for something a little spicier, a little more inventive. Muddling about like most of his friends in the space between the lifelong twosome and libertinage, he was always canvassing options. I'd have liked to bring up triangles, but people usually bristle when you mention triangles – they automatically think of betrayal, rivalry, smirking winners and bitter losers – and I wasn't sure I was ready with the kind of nuanced vocabulary I'd need to discuss them at that moment. I'd wait until we were in a more relaxed setting.

I DOUBT THAT much active canvassing of options, apart from a spot of adultery, has ever taken place in Pécy, but I could be wrong. It was another very old town clustered, like Rozay-en-Brie, around an ancient church in the middle of the empty plain. It must have been like Siberia in winter. When we asked them about Courtavenel through the car-window, four very old men sitting in the sun beside the road burst into a hubbub of explanations, jabbing with their walking-sticks back the way we'd come. We'd just passed it, apparently, a minute or two before. I felt my whole body tighten with excitement. This was it! This was *the cradle of his fame* – as Turgenev himself called it. This is where he'd stopped scribbling derivative verse and become a real writer, where he'd felt a mad infatuation turn into love and first savoured 'civilisation' at any length . . . right here, somewhere near the white stone farmhouse slipping by across the field on our right. (Yet, maddeningly, not really 'here' at all, as I knew all too well.)

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All of a sudden we both saw the sign to Courtavenel where the road to the farmhouse we'd just passed turned off ours. Swinging onto this straight, white country road, we made our way respectfully back across the fields towards the farmhouse and pulled up, a little gingerly, outside the yawning gateway in the high stone wall surrounding it.

There was utter silence when we stepped from the car, just the scrunching of our shoes on the gravel. And then a soft chirruping somewhere nearby. And I thought of something Turgenev once wrote about 'the fresh, bitter smell' and 'the serene melancholy' of the woods and fields around Courtavenel at the close of summer.

'I hope there aren't any savage dogs about,' Daniel said, looking around warily, but there were no signs of life at all. 'So is this what's left of the "castle", do you think? Is this Courtavenel?'

With its massive stone wall, high shingled roof and gateway leading through a tunnel to a courtyard inside, there was certainly something medieval about it to my eyes. The gateway only needed a portcullis to whisk you back eight hundred years. At the same time it managed to look brand spanking new. Which is what it was, more or less, as we were soon to find out.

While we were wondering what to do next, out of the shadows of the yawning portal emerged the farmer's wife – not, I hasten to add, a farmer's wife with so much as a whiff of the peasant about her. This was a Brie farmer's wife, who strode towards us beaming, every inch the lady of the manor. In a flash Daniel reinvented himself for the encounter.

In a flurry of subjunctives and courteous circumlocutions, he explained charmingly – his sunglasses held at the angle once reserved for those long, old-fashioned *fume-cigarettes* –

that we were simply wondering if there was anything to see of the old Viardot *château* . . . we were both *amateurs* of the Russian novel, adored *Tourguéniev*, had seen the sign to Courtavenel and been quite unable able to resist the temptation to intrude. Well, what a transformation! Thirty seconds earlier he'd been, if not exactly taciturn (Daniel was never that) or even aloof, at least the very embodiment of peaceful detachment. I was actually quite surprised to hear him get 'Tourguéniev' right. I smiled and nodded in the background, trying to look as unlike a roving axe-murderer as I possibly could.

Madame couldn't have been more delighted to show us around. Just back herself from a brief trip to St Petersburg – 'Do you know it? *C'est un bijou!*' – she seemed eager to talk to us about Turgenev and the farm's links with Russian literature. Given the blank expressions we'd encountered in Rozay-en-Brie, I'd expected a frosty reception when she first appeared, but our guide was enthusiastic and knowledgeable. She led the way back through the tunnel into the enclosed courtyard. Just before he settled his sunglasses back on his nose, Daniel gave me one of his 'Well, I hope you're pleased' looks.

As a typical Briard *ferme au carré*, modern-day Courtavenel is basically a small, handsome fortress, a courtyard enclosed on four sides by living-quarters, stables, storerooms . . . well, farms are not my forte, so I'm not quite sure what was inside these tall, ancient-looking oblongs with steep shingled roofs and dormer windows.

In any case my attention was focused as we crossed the courtyard on the gateway opposite, because, according to the farmer's wife, beyond this second gateway was where the original castle of Courtavenel had once stood. I was beginning to

feel so keyed-up I could scarcely speak. Daniel and the farmer's wife were walking in front of me, exchanging friendly bursts of vowels and consonants. When they passed into the shadow of the second tunnel ahead, just two silhouettes now against the bright square of green at the far end, I stopped for a moment to enjoy in silence the excitement welling up inside me. Then I stepped into the tunnel and walked towards the green.

THERE WAS INDEED NOTHING THERE. Instead of the fairytale castle I knew from Pauline's sketch, instead of elegant sixteenth-century turrets and conical spires, a grand entrance and drawbridge on the northern side (the 'noble' side, as Pauline called it) and respectable country estate façade to the south (the 'bourgeois', 'good-natured' side), there was nothing at all. In an even earlier sketch I'd seen of Courtavenel it had actually looked more like a busy village than a mere castle. All that remains is an empty mown square with bushes and trees around the edges, lining what was left of the old moat. We all stood on the old stone bridge over the moat (a dry ditch now), thinking our own thoughts and staring into the sunlit emptiness. Then, abruptly, I wanted to laugh.

It was here, not in Baden-Baden or the rue de Douai, but here, where there was nothing left at all, no plaques or busts or ruins or painstaking restorations, that I felt – *at last really felt* – and here I must tread very carefully to avoid the minefield of necromantic gobbledygook – that I was alive to Turgenev. *He* had not come alive – I had. And so I laughed.

'What's so funny?' Daniel asked with a grin, wanting to

share the joke. I just shook my head. I couldn't explain. Not right then or right there.

What was I so suddenly alive to? It wasn't so much a matter of feeling prompted by this green emptiness to imagine even more vividly than before the life the young Turgenev had once lived there – rearranging Louis' library while a servant waxed the furniture; exercising the dogs; rowing yet another famous guest around the moat; dancing at one of the parties in the banquet hall (Ivan Sergeyevich loved to dance); telling stories to the family in the evening as they sewed and knitted, with Gounod working on a new score over by the fire; setting off with Louis to hunt quail on a fine autumn morning; waking up from one of his blood-freezing nightmares about monsters rising from the deep to devour him; brushing against spirits on the staircase in the night; spiralling up (or down) into a love that had no proper name – no, it wasn't a matter of feeling prompted to imagine any of this more vividly, although it made me dizzy just to look at that green square. I'd pictured all those things to myself before. I'd needed to, obviously, in order to listen to his voice with understanding as I read him.

No, what I felt suddenly alive to was something else. Now in Courtavenel I could sense why, when he arrived here for the first time as a young man in 1845, he must have felt both that *he had come home at last, yet at the same time belonged not here, but somewhere else.* And this contradiction coloured every syllable he later wrote.

Civilisation – here it was, at last! He'd been to Berlin and Paris by this time, of course, as well as Rome and dozens of other great cities from Bordeaux to Naples, but Courtavenel – way out on this plain of beetroot and barley! – must have

struck him as the distillation of every notion of civilisation to enter a European head since the Greeks. Not in those words, naturally, but I could imagine him rattling along that last straight stretch of road in his tilbury, chestnut hair flying, eyes fixed on the *château* directly ahead, every inch the young troubadour approaching his unapproachable lady, thinking to himself: here it is at last – this is it, *in a nutshell*. If there was no lion and unicorn carved above the portal, then there should have been.

You may have to be antipodean, or at least Russian – from beyond the boundary stones of the civilised world, at any rate – to feel this contradiction in your very bones. I can recall my own emotions in 1965 when for the first time France appeared through the clouds far below me. I hadn't yet seen Paris, Berlin or Rome. I had seen New York and Los Angeles, but they had turned out to be merely larger, wealthier versions of what I already knew, they weren't *civilisation*, as the patchwork of fields, roads and townships with spires below me were. *Civilisation* was something else, and had been since the days of Periclean Athens. I'd know it when I saw it and I saw it when the plane crossed the coast of France. When the young Turgenev first set eyes on Courtavenel, he, too, must have been convinced that he was looking at its very embodiment.

IN GREEK TERMS, both Ivan Sergeyevich and I were Persians – or, in my case, something even more outlandish: a Phrygian, let's say, or even a Scythian from beyond the Black Sea. After all, I came quite literally from a land of monsters, a continent thought until quite recently to be teeming with half-hounds, one-eyed freaks and men who used their feet as umbrellas. There are pictures of them on old maps. Turgenev came from a land much closer to the boundary stones than mine, but still from beyond that belt of half-civilised Slav tribes on the edges of Europe – Poles, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and so on. Or is Russia beyond a belt of Lapps and Turks? The geography can be confusing. As the Marquis de Custine reported after a journey to Russia in 1839 (the year after Turgenev had first left for abroad), 'Russia in the present age is only 400 years removed from the invasion of barbarian tribes' – he meant the Tartars – 'while it is 1,400 years since Western Europeans went through the same crisis. Civilisation which has lasted over a thousand years longer [in one place than another] will naturally put an immeasurable distance between the manners of nations.' Even before the Tartar invasion, the Marquis

reminded his readers, 'Russia had received its rulers from Scandinavia and they in turn had adopted their tastes, arts and luxuries from the emperors and patriarchs of Constantinople.' In the end, civilisation always turns out to be Greek.

According to the Greeks in the fifth century BC, civilisation was first and foremost about speaking Greek, not babbling away in some outlandish foreign tongue, such as Persian. (Turgenev and I both made it our business to learn 'Greek' well when we were small children. You never quite pass, of course – a 'Persian' vowel here, a 'Scythian' construction there. You can never erase all trace of your barbarian origins.) Civilisation was also about the close-knit *rootedness* of your culture, so it was about stone cities, paved streets and palaces, not muddy settlements of wooden huts. It was about cultivated fields, not untamed nature.

Barbarians, on the other hand, tended to wander mindlessly about their wild landscapes, indulging in a spot of rapine from time to time, with their families packed into carts, followed by herds of sheep and cattle. In Australia our nomadic past is so recent you'll occasionally even see one of these carts going for a song in a country junk-shop.

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In Russia, even in Turgenev's day, nomadism was always lurking just beneath the surface, the towns being little more than flimsy stage-sets. Even the palaces – copied, by the way, from Italians inspired in turn by their classical heritage – were basically just stucco on wood. No wonder the fire that broke out the night Napoleon marched into Moscow reduced three-quarters of the city to ashes in under a week. In 1829, when

Turgenev was just eleven, the thinker Chaadayev famously wrote in the first of his *Philosophical Letters*: 'We [Russians] all have the appearance of people on the move . . . We have no sense of hearth and home, there's nothing to attach us to anything . . . In our houses we live as if we were billeting, in our own families we seem like people from somewhere else, while in our towns we are even more like nomads than the nomads themselves, grazing their flocks on our steppes, because they are more closely bound to their wilderness than we are to our cities.'

A civilised society valued learning, too, as well as honed intellects, contemplation and the arts, rather than the unrefined emotions and mere brute strength a pillaging barbarian needed to survive. It encouraged set virtues in its citizens – temperance, a sense of justice, wisdom – although the Greeks did make allowances for unruly behaviour in young men. To my youthful perception, the country I came to France from, constantly characterised as 'young', had rather too much respect for extravagant displays of physical prowess, its heroes usually being footballers, cricketers and men of action, while our poets, intellectuals and artists, anyone who might want to contemplate the drift of history and ideas, were little more than a frivolous sideshow to the main events. To this day, needless to say, the Australians whose names are most likely to appear in the European press are our tennis players, swimmers and popular entertainers, not our scientists or thinkers. Our most famous cultural export to Great Britain is almost certainly Barry Humphries, the civilised barbarian who became a superstar by aping barbarians aping the civilised.

In terms of honed intellects and the arts, Russians have been much more successful than we have at beating the

civilised at their own game – or appearing to do so, despite the firestorms of inhumanity that swept the country in both tsarist and modern times. When most people think 'Russia' these days, I imagine they think Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, *Swan Lake* at the Bolshoi, Prokofiev, Rostropovich, Eisenstein, Tarkovsky, the Trans-Siberian railway, the first sputniks . . . God knows what they think, actually, but I doubt they begin by thinking 'White Sea Canal', 'Magadan', 'death-camps', 'slave labour'. And if the thought of 'mass murder on a scale never before seen on the face of the planet' pops into their heads, they can always think 'Solzhenitsyn', 'Akhmatova' or perhaps 'Pasternak', vaguely recalling unpleasantnesses over his *Doctor Zhivago*.

In a word, from the Greek point of view civilised men and women are rational adults inhabiting a rationally organised landscape, while barbarians are irrational children, always on the verge of running wild. Ultimately, it's an argument about time. To be civilised means not to be confined to your own time, but to be aware of time's sweep and convolutions. Yet, as Chaadayev wrote about Russians in his 1829 letter: 'Standing as it were outside time, we have not been touched by humankind's cultivation of knowledge . . . everything flows on, everything passes away, leaving no trace either in us or our surroundings.' In *The Coast of Utopia* Stoppard has the revolutionary, Herzen (one of Turgenev's friends, until they quarrelled), put it slightly differently: 'Civilisation passed us by,' he says to Bakunin, 'we belonged to geography, not history . . .' When I went to school in Sydney, my country was also just 'geography', a space. There was no such subject as Australian history. History meant the French Revolution, the American Civil War, the British kings and queens, even recent

upheavals in China, but it was not a concept that we applied to Australia. 'So we escaped,' as Stoppard's Herzen says about his generation of Russians.

You had to.

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Growing up as Turgenev and I both did, beyond the boundary stones of civilisation, beyond time, if you could read and think, you realised in your teenage years that, however well-fed you were, however available all the conveniences of modern life, however pleasant the life you were leading beyond the purview of the Greeks of the day, you were nevertheless at best a Persian – not necessarily barbaric, mind, not personally an out-and-out savage, but, compared to the Greeks, uncivilised.

Nowadays the whole notion of boundary stones has begun to fade, along with distance in general. Barbarians are now simply the folk from the wrong side of the tracks, whatever country they live in, not from the wrong side of the Black Sea or the Danube. Even now, though, in the twenty-first century, I am conscious of how little 'Greek' attitudes have changed since the days when Agatha Christie could write without blushing (it was 1922): 'My own sketchy ideas of Australia comprised kangaroos in large quantities, and a great deal of waste desert.' In the same year D.H. Lawrence wrote to his sister-in-law back in England: 'You never knew anything so nothing, nichts, nullus, niente, as the life here . . . your inner self dies out, and you clatter round like so many mechanical animals.' Not a society, but a collection of animals in a wasteland. Even today Greek taxi-drivers who can barely read and write will assure me that Australia 'has no

culture' – it's sunny and good for getting rich in, but hardly 'civilised'. Some Russians, too, arriving in Australia to take advantage of the high standard of living, can be just as withering: '*Odno beskulturye*' ('A complete lack of culture'), they'll say, drifting off on some neo-classical Soviet dream they were brought up on of the civilised society. It's a country run by philistines, naturally, as most countries seem to be, but it's not in the outer darkness, unlit by the sun shining down on 'Greece'. Some suburbs are, but not the country. We've been globalised.

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Forty or fifty years ago, however, by the time you reached adulthood, you had to run with the herd or else, like Herzen, escape. What you were escaping from was often as much the rude opinions of other people as any real lack of civilisation: if you had any pretensions to civilised thought, you were usually seen by those around you as a misfit – an ugly duckling, a fop, an effete poseur, someone with ideas above his station. Turgenev, too, at the age of twenty was widely thought of as a 'dandy' – an amusing raconteur, quite brilliant in his way, but a butterfly, a mere aesthete, lacking in substance. He for his part found Russian society, with its feudal system of masters and slaves, inhumane and disgusting. 'Nearly everything I saw,' he wrote later, 'roused feelings in me of shame and indignation – of revulsion, in fact.' So he fled, initially, at least, to Berlin to study, Germany in the 1830s being where Europe's most highly honed intellects did their thinking.

Apart from anything else, we were impatient at twenty to get to the source of all those things that made the civilised what they were and us something else. We were tired of living

in a hand-me-down world. As Chaadayev noted in desperation in 1829: 'we've never bothered to think up anything for ourselves, yet, from what others have thought up, we've only taken over the deceptive, external things and useless luxuries.' No wonder Turgenev, homing in on the artistic aspect of civilisation, believed that the sign of a civilised country was the autonomy of its art. Absolute autonomy is surely a mirage, even the folk-dancing on some remote Pacific atoll will turn out to have been influenced by the folk-dancing on another atoll, which, in turn . . . and so on. But a civilised country does not simply fill its bookshops, art galleries, theatres, cinemas and airwaves with some other society's cultural product. You know what Turgenev meant.

Where we fled to in those days depended on where we came from and what we'd been reading. When another misfit, Katherine Mansfield, was a young girl in Wellington at the turn of the century, for instance, dreaming feverishly of escaping the provincial tedium of the New Zealand capital (and her unhappy home life), she fixed romantically on Russia as the place where her turbulent inner life would find the appreciation it deserved and be allowed to express itself in suitably exotic surroundings. (Restless young barbarians generally talk a lot about 'being appreciated'.) It was in fact the novels of Turgenev and Tolstoy, as well as the music of Tchaikovsky, Anton Rubinstein and a host of other 'Slavonic' composers, which gave Russia its aura of 'civilisation' for the adolescent Katherine Mansfield. (Her passion for Chekhov came later.) In other words, it was Europe, filtered through the culture of Russia's refined elite, which promised escape.

What drew Katherine most powerfully to the Russians was the sense that in them she had found larger, more articulate,

more self-possessed versions of who she thought she really was – an irresistible illusion when you're young. When Diaghilev brought a dazzling exhibition of Russian modernist art to Paris in 1906, she must have felt rapturously vindicated. A year later he pulled Chaliapin, Rachmaninov and Rimsky-Korsakov out of a hat, and soon after that Anna Pavlova and Nijinski. Savagery plus sensibility – Europe was agog. If Potugin (Litvinov's grumpy friend in *Smoke*) had been in Paris at that time, he'd almost certainly have dismissed the Diaghilev circus with an arthritic wave of his walking-stick as no more 'Russian' than harpsichords or Haydn – or than Turgenev, for that matter. Ivan Sergeyevich himself, though, if he'd lived to see it, might have thought it was all 'autonomously' Russian to just the right degree. As Stoppard has him put it in *The Coast of Utopia*: 'The only thing that'll save Russia is western culture transmitted by . . . people like us.'

It's hard at this distance for me to recall in any detail what I thought of the country I was leaving in 1965 or what I thought I was 'coming home to' as the plane came in to land at Orly. I did not feel anything akin to Turgenev's revulsion for my native land – why would I have? It was hardly a feudal autocracy with 'not a single useful idea' to its credit, as Chaadayev claimed Russia was at the time. Nor did I feel a complete alien in my own land, as Katherine Mansfield seems to have done in New Zealand, a stray piece of jetsam from a passing British liner. Not at all. By the same token, when I came across that passage in *Kangaroo* recently where Lawrence describes some boys on a beach near Sydney in the early 1920s 'lunging about' (it's the 'about' that's so telling) like 'real young animals, mindless as opossums', I was struck by how deftly he had captured in just a few words the way in which Europeans once

thought of my country: a space devoid of intellect, empty of meaning. It was much the way I once thought of it myself. 'Vacant' (Lawrence's word) except for a few disorderly children making shrill noises in the lap of nature. His central character, the Englishman Somers, says he'd feel more at home with any lout on the streets of Naples than with these barbarians. (Many of us, too, have made fools of ourselves with Neopolitan louts we wouldn't have given a second thought to if they'd been home-grown Australians.)

In short: this was Phrygia in every respect. In one letter home Lawrence wrote that being in Australia was 'rather like falling out of a picture and finding oneself on the floor, with all the gods and men left behind in the picture'. Not by nature a real young animal, mindless as an opossum, I was desperate by the age of twenty-one to get up off the floor and back into that picture – back into time and history.

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None of this would have been easy to explain to Daniel, for all his trips to the civilisations of the East, when he asked me 'what was so funny'. Perhaps I would try on the way back to Paris in the long twilight. It was the laughter of connivance, I would have to say to him – with Turgenev, not with you. It was a tacit accord between two young barbarians. I laughed because that moment of recognition which I think Ivan Sergeyevich must have experienced on the approach to Courtavenel was one I knew all about. In both our cases, love had been, if not blind, then at least short-sighted. And, like him, I eventually had to leave because I actually belonged somewhere else.

'Barbarian? But you're not a barbarian,' Daniel would say

(I hoped). 'You speak French and Russian, you write books, you've read Diderot and Dante and Dostoyevsky, you live in a democratic country with opera houses and . . .' *(Slight pause.)*

'Airports? Law courts? Cappuccinos?'

'Why are you taking that tone?'

'Because all you're saying is that I can pass for one of you.' And now I imagined him thinking to himself: *Not quite, my friend.* And that would peeve me (because it was true, although that shouldn't matter, but it did), and I would lapse into a sulky silence. Was I starting to play Dostoyevsky to my own Turgenev?

Why even bother trying to explain to a Parisian why somebody like me, forty years earlier, would have felt he was a barbarian; why I'd felt I was coming home when I stepped onto the tarmac at Orly airport; why I'd *recognised* the Paris I'd never seen in a way he obviously could never recognise Sydney or Hobart; why I was so elated by the rootedness in Paris of all the transplanted things I'd taught myself to love; why I also knew I did not belong there and would one day have to leave; and why I now thought the boundary stones of civilisation were just a mirage. He was a Greek, I was a Phrygian, and that was that. This particular game was played by his rules.

Dostoyevsky proposed playing a different game altogether in order to sort out the sheep from the goats: instead of Civilisation vs. Barbarism, he suggested Orthodoxy vs. Paganism (socialism, Catholicism – anything that wasn't Russian Orthodox, it was all essentially the same). I could hardly play that game and win, though, having had no training in it. At the Muslim vs. Christian game, another possibility, I was hardly even a spectator. That interesting Greek librarian, Eratosthenes of Alexandria, who calculated the earth's circumference 200 years before our era, mischievously suggested that it would be

better to divide people into the Good and the Bad, surely, rather than Greeks and Barbarians, 'since many Greeks are bad, and many barbarians civilised, particularly the Indians and the Arians, as well as the Romans and Carthaginians, who enjoy such admirable forms of government'. But do you in fact have to play team sports at all?

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'Would you like to take a walk over there where the castle stood?' The farmer's wife was smiling at me, wondering where I'd drifted off to. We were still standing on the stone bridge across the moat. I'd forgotten where I was. Daniel had turned his head to look at me, too, with a quizzical expression on his face.

'No, no, thank you,' I said, immediately sure I did not want to step onto the green square. What would be the point? Even if I did trip over a piece of the grey marble fireplace they'd all gathered around of an evening, or stumble into a tangle of gooseberry bushes from the old front garden, what would be the point? I wasn't looking for holy relics.