

# SYNOPSIS *THE COAST OF UTOPIA PART I: VOYAGE*

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Our first image in Stoppard's trilogy is Premukhino, a timeless Russian country estate in 1833, early in the reign of the despotic and reactionary Tsar Nicholas I. It is the home of the prosperous Bakunin family, and we quickly follow their son Michael Bakunin, a young Artillery School cadet, through his rebellion from the military to his escape to a new life in Moscow University circles where he embraces exciting discoveries in philosophy and politics, newly minted in Berlin and France. German Idealism, the sensational novels of George Sand, a flirtation with a pretty family friend – a whirl of new ideas comes back through young Bakunin to his eager, more cloistered sisters, destined for respectable marriages to local noblemen. As the scenes fly by in *Voyage's* Act I, we meet Michael's new friends from the University who come to Premukhino for summer visits, and watch the lives of his sisters change. First to arrive is Nicholas Stankevich, leader of the students' philosophy circle, "a gentle and idealistic personality with exceptional sweetness of character and a passion for metaphysics" who lives in the world of Kant and Hegel, as well as the minor philosophers Fichte and Schelling. Stankevich is followed by the awkward and compelling Vissarion Belinsky, their only university friend not from the upper class, whose passion for literature will give him an immortal place in Russian history. "We have no literature!" is Belinsky's rallying cry. "Folk tales and foreign models, that's our lot... We will have our literature. What kind of literature and what kind of life are the same question... But we have produced Pushkin." And it is Pushkin's presence that hovers in the air of *Voyage*. With such strong censorship in place and an aristocracy in the sway of foreign fashions, Russia had no literature. At the time of *Voyage*, Russia's sole writer of greatness was Pushkin, whose life was cut short by an ill-fated duel. Pushkin (who appears silently in two small interludes in *Voyage*) is a hero to Belinsky and to the Bakunin sisters at Premukhino and an inspiration to all who sought to follow him in creating a free portrait of Russian life. At the end of the act, the insouciant young sportsman Ivan Turgenev pays a call. Later in his life, grateful for Belinsky's early support, Turgenev will follow Pushkin and Gogol to write masterpieces of Russian literature such as *Fathers and Sons* and *A Month in the Country*, and along with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, bring Russian literature and its people to the attention of the world.

*Voyage's* Act II rewinds our time machine, and we return to 1834 to watch the action unfold during these same years in Moscow itself. The friends meet in Moscow cafes, in parks and at skating parties, and the Bakunin family comes from the country to visit their son in his new world. Here he – and we – meet the last two friends Stoppard's trilogy will follow: our central character, Alexander Herzen, and poet Nicholas Ogarev. The latter, jaunty and ebullient in a revolutionary tricolor, appears only briefly in *Voyage*, but he will play a memorable role in *Salvage*, the trilogy's final part. Herzen and Ogarev are the nucleus of the University's political circle and they joust with their friends Stankevich, Belinsky, Turgenev and Bakunin about ideas and ways to change Russia and the world. Herzen recalled many years later, "...We sat side by side on a bench in the amphitheatre, looked at each other with the consciousness of our dedication, our league, our secret, our readiness to perish, our faith in the sacredness of our cause – and looked with loving pride at the multitude of handsome young heads about us, as at a band of brothers... We gave each other our hands and à la lettre went out to preach freedom and struggle in all the four quarters of our youthful 'universe'... we preached a constitution and a republic, the reading of political books and the concentration of forces in one society. Most of all we preached hatred for every form of violence, for every sort of arbitrary tyranny practiced by governments." For this circle of students, the decade of the 1840's was a dangerous time." At Moscow University, teaching philosophy is forbidden as a threat to public order." Censorship is absolute and even an oblique reference in a literary review can result in jail or exile. Herzen is banished to Perm, 1000km east of Moscow on the border of Asia, when informers for the Tsar report that he is harboring subversive political ideas. Bakunin is stripped of his noble rank and escapes into exile. Stankevich and Belinsky suffer from tuberculosis and will both be dead by their early thirties. At close of *Voyage*, we bid farewell to Russia, and move with the friends into their new lives in the West. It will be in the thrilling days of the Revolution of 1848, in Paris, that they will meet again.

# SYNOPSIS *THE COAST OF UTOPIA PART II: SHIPWRECK*

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As *Shipwreck* opens, the friends from *Voyage* have passed through their twenties and the harsh realities of this difficult decade, the 1840's, have warped their lives. Those who are still in one piece gather to spend summers outside of Moscow. These are the "superfluous" men, whose education, upbringing and talents make them a threat, not an asset, to their country. They can look forward to a future of idleness. They cannot travel. They have no need to work. They argue about coffee. At the center are Alexander and Natalie Herzen, whose astounding lives are described by Herzen in his great memoir *My Past and Thoughts*. The illegitimate son of a Russian nobleman of ancient lineage with a great fortune and close family ties to the Tsar, Herzen was given his name because he was a child of the heart (from the German word *Herz*.) His mother – Madame Haag in *Shipwreck* – was the daughter of a minor German court official his father met on a youthful trip abroad. At his father's death, Herzen inherited a fortune of such size that it later took the help of the Rothschilds to leverage it out of Russia. Natalie Herzen was his first cousin, herself also illegitimate – one of a half dozen children of Herzen's unmarried uncle, who kept a serf harem in the rooms of his vast Moscow mansion. After the uncle's death, the children were paraded past his sister, the Princess Khovansky, on their way to live as serfs on the family's country estates. The pretty eight-year-old Natalie was pulled out on a whim by her aunt and raised as a gentlewoman.

Ivan Turgenev and Herzen's childhood friend, poet Nicholas Ogarev, are spending the summer with the Herzens, arguing about coffee, too. Turgenev has already met the love of his life: the fabled opera singer Pauline Viardot. Despite the fact that she is married, he will follow her for the rest of his life. Ogarev's first marriage, to Maria, a grasping provincial social climber we meet in a memorable scene in a Parisian garret, will relieve him of a third of his inheritance. Following his beliefs, Ogarev will free his serfs and give them the remainder of his lands. His own life will end in destitution. News comes suddenly that Herzen's family has been given permission to travel abroad to seek medical care for their son Kolya, who is deaf. They will never set foot on Russian soil again. "I left Moscow with Natalie and the children and my mother, packed into a carriage hung with furs against the January cold. Half a dozen sledges with our friends came to see us off as far as the staging post, and then we were on our way. I came to Paris as people used to come to Jerusalem or Rome..."

Paris in 1848 was the epicenter of change in the world. Following the Revolution of 1789, which ended in the First Empire under Napoleon, and the failed student uprising of 1832 portrayed by Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*, Paris in 1848 was finally poised to lead Europe into a new age. And in *Shipwreck*, everyone has come to Paris to be a part of it. Only Vissarion Belinsky, futilely seeking a cure for his consumption in German spa towns on his way to Paris with Turgenev, feels out of place when he arrives. Karl Marx called the February 1848 overthrow of King Louis Philippe "the beautiful days," when workers and the bourgeoisie fought together for enfranchisement. George Sand herself had been on the barricades, and her example of the freedom "to follow our heart wherever it leads us... to let love be our guide to the greater good!" was avidly followed by all the characters in our play. Natalie Herzen and her visiting friend Natasha Tuchkov are especially drawn to its siren call. The sensationally famous rebel German poet George Herwegh is there too, with his rich Jewish wife Emma, daughter of a Berlin merchant family. The new French Republic spread the flame of revolution to Saxony, Rome, Berlin, Baden, Vienna and Greece. Michael Bakunin is in his glory, setting Europe afire, with friends such as the composer Richard Wagner at his side.

The June days which brought the Republic to its climax, and which end *Shipwreck's* Act I, saw the revolution betrayed as the nine million newly enfranchised French voters returned a monarchist Assembly, which harshly put down the workers who had made the new Assembly's existence possible. "In a free vote, the French public renounced freedom," Herzen observed. Within three years, the newly elected Prince Louis Napoleon staged a coup d'état and proclaimed himself Emperor. The dream of a Republic died in the ashes of the Second Empire. In *Shipwreck's* second act, Herzen's private life mirrors the descent from the exhilaration of 1848 to the disillusionment and tragedy that followed this tumultuous time. "I came to Paris as people used to come to Jerusalem or Rome and found the city of the plain. It made one half-hearted effort to be worthy of itself and then collapsed satisfied under six feet of dung."

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