Ivan Turgenev

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INTRODUCTION

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Turgenev is an author who no longer belongs to Russia only. During the last fifteen years of his life he won for himself the reading public, first in France, then in Germany and America, and finally in England.

In his funeral oration the spokesman of the most artistic and critical of European nations, Ernest Renan, hailed him as one of the greatest writers of our times: ‘The Master, whose exquisite works have charmed our century, stands more than any other man as the incarnation of a whole race,’ because ‘a whole world lived in him and spoke through his mouth.’ Not the Russian world only, we may add, but the whole Slavonic world, to which it was ‘an honour to have been expressed by so great a Master.’

This recognition was, however, of slow growth. It had nothing in it of the sudden wave of curiosity and gushing enthusiasm which in a few years lifted Count Tolstoi to world-wide fame. Neither in the personality of Turgenev, nor in his talent, was there anything to strike and carry away popular imagination.

By the fecundity of his creative talent Turgenev stands with the greatest authors of all times. The gallery of living people, men, and especially women, each different and perfectly individualised, yet all the creatures of actual life, whom Turgenev introduces to us; the vast body of psychological truths he discovers, the subtle shades of men’s feelings he reveals to us, is such as only the greatest

among the great have succeeded in leaving as their artistic inheritance to their country and to the world.

As regards his method of dealing with his material and shaping it into mould, he stands even higher than as a pure creator. Tolstoi is more plastical, and certainly as deep and original and rich in creative power as Turgenev, and Dostoevsky is more intense, fervid, and dramatic. But as an artist, as master of the combination of details into a harmonious whole, as an architect of imaginative work, he surpasses all the prose writers of his country, and has but few equals among the great novelists of other lands. Twenty-five years ago, on reading the translation of one of his short stories (Assya), George Sand, who was then at the apogee of her fame, wrote to him: ‘Master, all of us have to go to study at your school.’ This was, indeed, a generous compliment, coming from the representative of French literature which is so eminently artistic. But it was not flattery. As an artist, Turgenev in reality stands with the classics who may be studied and admired for their perfect form long after the interest of their subject has disappeared. But it seems that in his very devotion to art and beauty he has purposely restricted the range of his creations.

To one familiar with all Turgenev’s works it is evident that he possessed the keys of all human emotions, all human feelings, the highest and the lowest, the noble as well as the base. From the height of his superiority he saw all, understood all: Nature and men had no secrets hidden from his calm, penetrating eyes. In his latter days, sketches such as Clara Militch, The Song of Triumphant Love, The Dream, and the incomparable Phantoms, he showed that he could

equal Edgar Poe, Hofmann, and Dostoevsky in the mastery of the fantastical, the horrible, the mysterious, and the incomprehensible, which live somewhere in human nerves, though not to be defined by reason.

But there was in him such a love of light, sunshine, and living human poetry, such an organic aversion for all that is ugly, or coarse and discordant, that he made himself almost exclusively the poet of the gentler side of human nature. On the fringe of his pictures or in their background, just for the sake of contrast, he will show us the vices, the cruelties, even the mire of life. But he cannot stay in these gloomy regions, and he hastens back to the realms of the sun and flowers, or to the poetical moonlight of melancholy, which he loves best because in it he can find expression for his own great sorrowing heart.

Even jealousy, which is the black shadow of the most poetical of human feelings, is avoided by the gentle artist. He hardly ever describes it, only alluding to it cursorily. But there is no novelist who gives so much room to the pure, crystalline, eternally youthful feeling of love. We may say that the description of love is Turgenev’s speciality. What Francesco Petrarca did for one kind of love—the romantic, artificial, hot-house love of the times of chivalry—Turgenev did for the natural, spontaneous, modern love in all its variety of forms, kinds, and manifestations: the slow and gradual as well as the sudden and instantaneous; the spiritual, the admiring and inspiring, as well as the life-poisoning, terrible kind of love, which infects a man as a prolonged disease. There is something prodigious in Turgenev’s insight into, and his inexhaustible richness,

truthfulness, and freshness in the rendering of those emotions which have been the theme of all poets and novelists for two thousand years.

In the well-known memoirs of Caroline Bauer one comes across a curious legend about Paganini. She tells that the great enchanter owed his unique command over the emotions of his audiences to a peculiar use of one single string, G, which he made sing and whisper, cry and thunder, at the touch of his marvellous bow.

There is something of this in Turgenev's description of love. He has many other strings at his harp, but his greatest effect he obtains in touching this one. His stories are not love poems. He only prefers to present his people in the light of that feeling in which a man's soul gathers up all its highest energies, and melts as in a crucible, showing its dross and its pure metal.

Turgenev began his literary career and won an enormous popularity in Russia by his sketches from peasant life. His Diary of a Sportsman contains some of the best of his short stories, and his Country Inn, written a few years later, in the maturity of his talent, is as good as Tolstoi's little masterpiece, Polikushka.

He was certainly able to paint all classes and conditions of Russian people. But in his greater works Turgenev lays the action exclusively with one class of Russian people. There is nothing of the enormous canvas of Count Tolstoi, in which the whole of Russia seems to pass in review before the readers. In Turgenev's novels we see only educated Russia, or rather the more advanced thinking part of it, which he knew best, because he was a part of it himself.

We are far from regretting this specialisation. Quality can sometimes hold its own against quantity. Although small numerically, the section of Russian society which Turgenev represents is enormously interesting, because it is the brain of the nation, the living ferment which alone can leaven the huge unformed masses. It is upon them that depend the destinies of their country. Besides, the artistic value of his works could only be enhanced by his concentrating his genius upon a field so familiar to him, and engrossing so completely his mind and his sympathies. What he loses in dimensions he gains in correctness, depth, wonderful subtlety and effectiveness of every minute detail, and the surpassing beauty of the whole. The jewels of art he left us are like those which nations store in the sanctuaries of their museums and galleries to be admired, the longer they are studied. But we must look to Tolstoi for the huge and towering monuments, hewn in massive granite, to be put upon some cross way of nations as an object of wonder and admiration for all who come from the four winds of heaven.

Turgenev did not write for the masses but for the elite among men. The fact that .he has won such a fame among foreigners, and that the number of his readers is widening every year, proves that great art is international, and also, I may say, that artistic taste and understanding is growing everywhere. II

It is written that no man is a prophet in his own country, and from time immemorial all the unsuccessful aspirants to the profession have found their consolation in this proverbial truth. But for aught we know this hard limitation has never been applied to artists. Indeed it seems absurd on the face

of it that the artist’s countrymen, for whom and about whom he writes, should be less fit to recognise him than strangers. Yet in certain special and peculiar conditions, the most unlikely things will sometimes occur, as is proved in the case of Turgenev.

The fact is that as an artist he was appreciated to his full value first by foreigners. The Russians have begun to understand him, and to assign to him his right place in this respect only now, after his death, whilst in his lifetime his artistic genius was comparatively little cared for, save by a handful of his personal friends.

This supreme art told upon the Russian public unconsciously, as it was bound to tell upon a nation so richly endowed with natural artistic instinct. Turgenev was always the most widely read of Russian authors, not excepting Tolstoi, who came to the front only after his death. But full recognition he had not, because he happened to produce his works in a troubled epoch of political and social strife, when the best men were absorbed in other interests and pursuits, and could not and would not appreciate and enjoy pure art. This was the painful, almost tragic, position of an artist, who lived in a most inartistic epoch, and whose highest aspirations and noblest efforts wounded and irritated those among his countrymen whom he was most devoted to, and whom he desired most ardently to serve.

This strife embittered Turgenev’s life.

At one crucial epoch of his literary career the conflict became so vehement, and the outcry against him, set in motion by his very artistic truthfulness and objectiveness, became so loud and unanimous, that he contemplated

giving up literature altogether. He could not possibly have held to this resolution. But it is surely an open question whether, sensitive and modest as he was, and prone to despondency and diffidence, he would have done so much for the literature of his country without the enthusiastic encouragement of various great foreign novelists, who were his friends and admirers: George Sand, Gustave Flaubert, in France; Auerbach, in Germany; W. D. Howells, in America; George Eliot, in England.

We will tell the story of his troubled life piece by piece as far as space will allow, as his works appear in succession. Here we will only give a few biographical traits which bear particularly upon the novel before us, and account for his peculiar hold over the minds of his countrymen.

Turgenev, who was born in 1818, belonged to a set of Russians very small in his time, who had received a thoroughly European education in no way inferior to that of the best favoured young German or Englishman. It happened, moreover, that his paternal uncle, Nicholas Turgenev, the famous ‘Decembrist,’ after the failure of that first attempt (December 14, 1825) to gain by force of arms a constitutional government for Russia, succeeded in escaping the vengeance of the Tsar Nicholas I., and settled in France, where he published in French the first vindication of Russian revolution.

Whilst studying philosophy in the Berlin University, Turgenev paid short visits to his uncle, who initiated him in the ideas of liberty, from which he never swerved throughout his long life.

In the sixties, when Alexander Hertzen, one of the most gifted writers of our land, a sparkling, witty, pathetic, and powerful journalist and brilliant essayist, started in London his Kolokol, a revolutionary, or rather radical paper, which had a great influence in Russia, Turgenev became one of his most active contributors and advisers,—almost a member of the editorial staff.

This fact has been revealed a few years ago by the publication, which we owe to Professor Dragomanov, of the private correspondence between Turgenev and Hertzen. This most interesting little volume throws quite a new light upon Turgenev, showing that our great novelist was at the same time one of the strongest—perhaps the strongest—and most clear-sighted political thinkers of his time. However surprising such a versatility may appear, it is proved to demonstration by a comparison of his views, his attitude, and his forecasts, some of which have been verified only lately, with those of the acknowledged leaders and spokesmen of the various political parties of his day, including Alexander Hertzen himself. Turgenev’s are always the soundest, the most correct and far-sighted judgments, as latter-day history has proved.

A man with so ardent a love of liberty, and such radical views, could not possibly banish them from his literary works, no matter how great his devotion to pure art. He would have been a poor artist had he inflicted upon himself such a mutilation, because freedom from all restraints, the frank, sincere expression of the artist’s individuality, is the life and soul of all true art.

Turgenev gave to his country the whole of himself, the best of his mind and of his creative fancy. He appeared at the same time as a teacher, a prophet of new ideas, and as a poet and artist. But his own countrymen hailed him in the first capacity, remaining for a long time obtuse to the latter and greater.

Thus, during one of the most important and interesting periods of our national history, Turgenev was the standard-bearer and inspirer of the Liberal, the thinking Russia. Although the two men stand at diametrically opposite poles, Turgenev's position can be compared to that of Count Tolstoi nowadays, with a difference, this time in favour of the author of Dmitri Rudin. With Turgenev the thinker and the artist are not at war, spoiling and sometimes contradicting each other's efforts. They go hand in hand, because he never preaches any doctrine whatever, but gives us, with an unimpeachable, artistic objectiveness, the living men and women in whom certain ideas, doctrines, and aspirations were embodied. And he never evolves these ideas and doctrines from his inner consciousness, but takes them from real life, catching with his unfailing artistic instinct an incipient movement just at the moment when it was to become a historic feature of the time. Thus his novels are a sort of artistic epitome of the intellectual history of modern Russia, and also a powerful instrument of her intellectual progress. III

Rudin is the first of Turgenev's social novels, and is a sort of artistic introduction to those that follow, because it refers to the epoch anterior to that when the present social and political movements began. This epoch is being fast

forgotten, and without his novel it would be difficult for us to fully realise it, but it is well worth studying, because we find in it the germ of future growths.

It was a gloomy time. The ferocious despotism of Nicholas I.—overweighing the country like the stone lid of a coffin, crushed every word, every thought, which did not fit with its narrow conceptions. But this was not the worst. The worst was that progressive Russia was represented by a mere handful of men, who were so immensely in advance of their surroundings, that in their own country they felt more isolated, helpless, and out of touch with the realities of life than if they had lived among strangers.

But men must have some outlet for their spiritual energies, and these men, unable to take part in the sordid or petty pursuits of those around them, created for themselves artificial life, artificial pursuits and interests.

The isolation in which they lived drew them naturally together. The ‘circle,’ something between an informal club and a debating society, became the form in which these cravings of mind or heart could be satisfied. These people met and talked; that was all they were able to do.

The passage in which one of the heroes, Lezhnyov, tells the woman he loves about the circle of which Dmitri Rudin and himself were members, is historically one of the most suggestive. It refers to a circle of young students. But it has a wider application. All prominent men of the epoch—Stankevitch, who served as model to the poetic and touching figure of Pokorsky; Alexander Hertzen, and the great critic, Belinsky—all had their ‘circles,’ or their small

chapels, in which these enthusiasts met to offer worship to the ‘goddess of truth, art, and morality.’

They were the best men of their time, full of high aspirations and knowledge, and their disinterested search after truth was certainly a noble pursuit. They had full right to look down upon their neighbours wallowing in the mire of sordid and selfish materialism. But by living in that spiritual hothouse of dreams, philosophical speculations, and abstractions, these men unfitted themselves only the more completely for participation in real life; the absorption in interests having nothing to do with the life of their own country, estranged them still more from it. The overwhelming stream of words drained them of the natural sources of spontaneous emotion, and these men almost grew out of feeling by dint of constantly analysing their feelings.

Dmitri Rudin is the typical man of that generation, both the victim and the hero of his time—a man who is almost a Titan in word and a pigmy in deed. He is eloquent as a young Demosthenes. An irresistible debater, he carries everything before him the moment he appears. But he fails ignominiously when put to the hard test of action. Yet he is not an impostor. His enthusiasm is contagious because it is sincere, and his eloquence is convincing because devotion to his ideals is an absorbing passion with him. He would die for them, and, what is more rare, he would not swerve a hair’s-breadth from them for any worldly advantage, or for fear of any hardship. Only this passion and this enthusiasm spring with him entirely from the head. The heart, the deep emotional power of human love and pity, lay dormant in

him. Humanity, which he would serve to the last drop of his blood, is for him a body of foreigners—French, English, Germans—whom he has studied from books, and whom he has met only in hotels and watering-places during his foreign travels as a student or as a tourist.

Towards such an abstract, alien humanity, a man cannot feel any real attachment. With all his outward ardour, Rudin is cold as ice at the bottom of his heart. His is an enthusiasm which glows without warmth, like the aurora borealis of the Polar regions. A poor substitute for the bountiful sun. But what would have become of a God-forsaken land if the Arctic nights were deprived of that substitute? With all their weaknesses, Rudin and the men of his stamp—in other words, the men of the generation of 1840—have rendered an heroic service to their country. They inculcated in it the religion of the ideal; they brought in the seeds, which had only to be thrown into the warm furrow of their native soil to bring forth the rich crops of the future.

The shortcomings and the impotence of these men were due to their having no organic ties with their own country, no roots in the Russian soil. They hardly knew the Russian people, who appeared to them as nothing more than an historic abstraction. They were really cosmopolitan, as a poor makeshift for something better, and Turgenev, in making his hero die on a French barricade, was true to life as well as to art.

The inward growth of the country has remedied this defect in the course of the three generations which have followed. But has the remedy been complete? No; far from

it, unfortunately. There are still thousands of barriers preventing the Russians from doing something useful for their countrymen and mixing freely with them. The spiritual energies of the most ardent are still compelled—partially at least—to run into the artificial channels described in Turgenev's novel.

Hence the perpetuation of Rudin's type, which acquires more than an historical interest.

In discussing the character of Hlestakov, the hero of his great comedy, Gogol declared that this type is pretty nigh universal, because 'every Russian,' he says, 'has a bit of Hlestakov in him.' This not very flattering opinion has been humbly indorsed and repeated since, out of reverence to Gogol's great authority, although it is untrue on the face of it. Hlestakov is a sort of Tartarin in Russian dress, whilst simplicity and sincerity are the fundamental traits of all that is Russian in character, manner, art, literature. But it may be truly said that every educated Russian of our time has a bit of Dmitri Rudin in him.

This figure is undoubtedly one of the finest in Turgenev's gallery, and it is at the same time one of the most brilliant examples of his artistic method.

Turgenev does not give us at one stroke sculptured figures made from one block, such as rise before us from Tolstoi's pages. His art is rather that of a painter or musical composer than of a sculptor. He has more colour, a deeper perspective, a greater variety of lights and shadows—a more complete portraiture of the spiritual man. Tolstoi's people stand so living and concrete that one feels one can recognise them in the street. Turgenev's are like people

whose intimate confessions and private correspondence, unveiling all the secrets of their spiritual life, have been submitted to one.

Every scene, almost every line, opens up new deep horizons, throwing upon his people some new unexpected light.

The extremely complex and difficult character of the hero of this story, shows at its highest this subtle psychological many-sidedness. Dmitri Rudin is built up of contradictions, yet not for a moment does he cease to be perfectly real, living, and concrete.

Hardly less remarkable is the character of the heroine, Natalya, the quiet, sober, matter-of-fact girl, who at the bottom is an enthusiastic and heroic nature. She is but a child fresh to all impressions of life, and as yet undeveloped. To have used the searching, analytical method in painting her would have spoiled this beautiful creation. Turgenev describes her synthetically by a few masterly lines, which show us, however, the secrets of her spirit; revealing what she is and also what she might have become under other circumstances.

This character deserves more attention than we can give it here. Turgenev, like George Meredith, is a master in painting women, and his Natalya is the first poetical revelation of a very striking fact in modern Russian history; the appearance of women possessing a strength of mind more finely masculine than that of the men of their time. By the side of weak, irresolute, though highly intellectual men we see in his first three novels energetic, earnest, impassioned women, who take the lead in action, whilst

they are but the man’s modest pupils in the domain of ideas. Only later on, in Fathers and Children, does Turgenev show us in Bazarov a man essentially masculine. But of this interesting peculiarity of Russian intellectual life, in the years 1840 to 1860, I will speak more fully when analysing another of Turgenev’s novels in which this contrast is most conspicuous.

I will say nothing of the minor characters of the story before us: Lezhnyov, Pigasov, Madame Lasunsky, Pandalevsky, who are all excellent examples of what may be called miniature-painting.

As to the novel as a whole, I will make here only one observation, not to forestall the reader’s own impressions.

Turgenev is a realist in the sense that he keeps close to reality, truth, and nature. But in the pursuit of photographic faithfulness to life, he never allows himself to be tedious and dull, as some of the best representatives of the school think it incumbent upon them to be. His descriptions are never overburdened with wearisome details; his action is rapid; the events are never to be foreseen a hundred pages beforehand; he keeps his readers in constant suspense. And it seems to me in so doing he shows himself a better realist than the gifted representatives of the orthodox realism in France, England, and America. Life is not dull; life is full of the unforeseen, full of suspense. A novelist, however natural and logical, must contrive to have it in his novels if he is not to sacrifice the soul of art for the merest show of fidelity.

The plot of Dmitri Rudin is so exceedingly simple that an English novel-reader would say that there is hardly any plot at all. Turgenev disdained the tricks of the sensational

novelists. Yet, for a Russian at least, it is easier to lay down before the end a novel by Victor Hugo or Alexander Dumas than Dmitri Rudin, or, indeed, any of Turgenev's great novels. What the novelists of the romantic school obtain by the charm of unexpected adventures and thrilling situations, Turgenev succeeds in obtaining by the brisk admirably concentrated action, and, above all, by the simplest and most precious of a novelist's gifts: his unique command over the sympathies and emotions of his readers. In this he can be compared to a musician who works upon the nerves and the souls of his audience without the intermediary of the mind; or, better still, to a poet who combines the power of the word with the magic spell of harmony. One does not read his novels; one lives in them.

Much of this peculiar gift of fascination is certainly due to Turgenev's mastery over all the resources of our rich, flexible, and musical language. The poet Lermontov alone wrote as splendid a prose as Turgenev. A good deal of its charm is unavoidably lost in translation. But I am happy to say that the present one is as near an approach to the elegance and poetry of the original as I have ever come across.

S. STEPNIAK.

BEDFORD PARK, April 20, 1894.

Chapter One

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