

TURGENEV AND THE
CONTEXT OF
ENGLISH
LITERATURE 1850–1900

Glyn Turton

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TURGENEV AND THE CONTEXT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE 1850-1900

How well does one country really understand the literature of another? What part does translation play in that understanding? Glyn Turton sheds new light on the well-documented influence of Turgenev upon Anglo-Saxon culture of the late nineteenth century. First, by exploring the timing and quality of the contemporary English translations of Turgenev's works, he identifies the cultural and ideological factors which determined the reception of those translations. Second, he examines the influence of Turgenev on Henry James and George Gissing, among others, and argues that each found in the work of the Russian novelist a vindication of his own distinctive attitude towards art and social reality. In doing so Turton exposes the tensions between the search for an aesthetics of fiction and the processes of historical change at work in late nineteenth-century English society.

By engaging with both the linguistic and the literary aspects of the reception of Turgenev's novels in the West, *Turgenev and the Context of English Literature* embraces the literature and cultural histories of England, America and Russia in a single perspective. It demonstrates how the reception of a foreign writer is determined by a complex combination of cultural, historical and economic factors in the host country and offers fresh insights into the intellectual climate of the times.

The cultural historian is not the only potential beneficiary of this study; for its illuminating comment, its methodological ingenuity and its rich insights it will be welcomed equally by the literary comparativist as well as by specialists in the work of the individual writers discussed.

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For my mother and father

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A NOTE ON EDITIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

I have used throughout the complete Soviet edition of Turgenev's works and letters, published during the 1960s. Although a revised and enlarged edition of Turgenev's works is currently being published, it remains, at the time of writing, substantially incomplete. I have therefore preferred the earlier version for reasons of consistency. Except for those written outside Russia, the dates of Turgenev's letters are given in Old Style.

Despite the fact that it excludes some of Henry James's novels, I have chosen to use the New York edition of his works. Where textual differences occur between that edition and the earliest published forms of James's work, I have noted them whenever they may be considered relevant to my argument.

Normally, works by Turgenev are referred to initially by title, volume and page reference and thereafter by title and page reference only. A system of abbreviations, given on the following page, is used for the *Full Collected Works and Letters* of Turgenev and for other publications and writings to which frequent reference is made.

Translations from Russian in the text are my own, unless otherwise indicated. My own English translations of French versions of Turgenev's works, where it has been thought necessary to supply them, are given in the end-notes to the chapters in which they occur.

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

Periodicals

ATH	<i>Athenaeum</i>
BQR	<i>British Quarterly Review</i>
ECL	<i>Eclectic Review</i>
FM	<i>Fraser's Magazine</i>
HW	<i>Household Words</i>

Works

AOF	Henry James (1963) 'The Art of Fiction', in <i>Selected Literary Criticism</i> , ed. M. Shapira, London: Heinemann.
AON	Henry James (1937) <i>The Art of the Novel</i> , New York: Scribner's Sons.
FON	Henry James (1956) <i>The Future of the Novel</i> , ed. L. Edel, New York: Vintage Books.
NAR	Henry James (1874) 'Ivan Turgenev', <i>North American Review</i> 118: 326-56.
PP	Henry James (1919) <i>Partial Portraits</i> , London: Macmillan.
PSS	I. S. Turgenev (1960-8) <i>Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem</i> , 28 vols, Moscow and Leningrad: Nauka.

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most rewarding comparisons are those that writers themselves have accepted or challenged their readers to make – those that spring from the ‘the shock of recognition’, where one has become conscious that an affinity exists between another and himself. Henry James felt this about Turgenev, Pound felt it about Propertius, Pushkin about Byron. To explore ‘influence’ here leads quickly into situation, and the reason why the example of one author should mean so much at a particular time and place to another. These are matters of inquiry which have their own clear justification.

(Gifford 1969: 73)

At almost every point, then, comparative literary studies lead over into, or presuppose, studies in cultural history and the history of ideas.

(Prawer 1973: 141)

So much has been written about Turgenev’s impact on the English-speaking world that any additional enquiry into the subject requires particular justification. My own debt to existing scholarship is considerable, and I must acknowledge at the outset the importance of Royal Gettman’s *Turgenev in England and America* (1974) and Patrick Waddington’s *Turgenev and England* (1980). No one writing on Turgenev’s reputation in the West could avoid some reliance upon these two exemplary works of scholarship.

At the same time, the use which I have made of previous studies has been as ‘navigational aids’, directing me to areas of the subject which I believe have been inadequately explored. Gettman’s work is a history of the critical reception of Turgenev in the West. It deals

in passing with the quality of the translations of his work, but it does so without reference to the original Russian source, relying for its judgements on the translations of Constance Garnett. Waddington's more recent book is essentially an exhaustive biographical and bibliographical study of Turgenev's personal connection with England. In the gap between these two works, I have discerned two lines of enquiry which need pursuing.

First, the uneven quality of the nineteenth-century translations of Turgenev's fiction has been more often remarked upon than studied. I have therefore chosen to examine the texts of translations from Turgenev in the two decades when a coherent group of his works was translated – the 1850s and the 1890s. Additionally, I have examined the relationship of these translations to the climate of English culture in which they were undertaken. The nature and reception of translations at a time when publishing was still very far from being internationalised may be taken as indicating both one nation's perception of another and, *ipso facto*, the cultural and ideological preoccupations of the 'host' nation. I consider this to be peculiarly true of the English versions of Turgenev's works which appeared in the two decades to which this study addresses itself. In the 1850s hostility towards Russia during the Crimean War and the habitual insularity of English culture produced a selective curiosity which, in its distortedness, made possible the publication of translations that were themselves distortions. Forty years later far-reaching changes had occurred which facilitated the efforts of Constance Garnett to attempt a scrupulous translation of the bulk of Turgenev's work. By the early 1890s an aesthetics of fiction had emerged which favoured the reputation of a discriminating stylist like Turgenev, while English literature had become infinitely more open to foreign influences in general. These, and a range of other factors, I have adduced in chapters 1 and 5 of this book. In doing so, I hope to have performed the dual task of illustrating a general shift in the outlook of English culture by showing the changes in approach to the intrinsic linguistic and literary qualities of one foreign writer in particular.

My second aim has been to open and explore a comparative perspective upon Turgenev and two writers of the late Victorian period who, in Henry Gifford's words (1969: 73), experienced 'a shock of recognition' upon reading Turgenev. Studies of the impact of Russian fiction on English literature such as Gilbert Phelps's *The Russian Novel in English Fiction* (1956) have already recognised the

importance of Turgenev to George Gissing and Henry James. However, such works have tended to concentrate upon a point-for-point comparison of plot, theme and character, without exploring some of the deeper implications of either structural similarities in the fiction, or the precise nature of the affinity felt for Turgenev by his devotees. Therefore, while my own enquiry has been partly directed towards identifying specific signs of tangible influence, the main effort of chapters 2, 3 and 4 has been to establish a unified critical perspective, within which Gissing and James, on the one hand, and Turgenev on the other, may be viewed in comparison and contrast to each other.

In order to do this, I have tried to locate Turgenev, Gissing and James in a framework bounded by the two ideas of culture as an autonomous activity with its own self-generated values and determinants, and history as a blind force, bearing down on all aspects of human reality, including culture. The tension between these two concepts I take to be a central preoccupation of modern Anglo-Saxon literature, which we may trace from Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) through to T. S. Eliot's contemplation of 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' (Eliot 1923: 483). The disturbed history of nineteenth-century Russia thrust upon Turgenev recognition of the potential conflict between a humanist aesthetic and the force of an ascendant materialism in science and ideology. My reason for choosing to study James and Gissing in relation to him, and not, for example, other devotees such as George Moore,¹ is that together they form a balanced contrast in their differing awareness of this important dimension of Turgenev's fiction. Gissing wrote discursive and unwieldy narratives which bear no formal resemblance to Turgenev's. Nevertheless, his works rehearse conflicts of meaning and value that correlate with Turgenev's own dramatisations of the clash between history and culture. James, by contrast, saw Turgenev as the supreme exponent of an independent, freely discriminating 'art' of fiction, without ever fully appreciating the sense of history and ideology, and their continual challenge to the 'freedom' of literature, which informs Turgenev's work, just as it haunts Russia's culture. I have argued in this study that only in *The Bostonians*, a settling of accounts with America unique in James's work, does he come close to Turgenev's awareness of the momentum of historical change. More typically, James's highly refined sensibility either excludes the nature and processes of history, or

else – as in *The Princess Casamassima* – it conjures the victory of cultural values over political ones.

Extreme though James's case may be, in one sense it typifies the predominantly apolitical character of the English culture to which James so readily affiliated himself. Bernard Bergonzi has written of the 'essentially conservative and innocent nature' of English cultural life as 'both its limitation and its privilege' (1970: 45). James, in his perception of Turgenev, exemplifies that limitation and privilege, while Gissing, by his recognition of the intellectual and ideological tensions at work in Turgenev's fiction, is marked out as curiously at odds with that tradition of 'innocence'.

In the last analysis, though, my intention has not been to magnify or diminish the reputation of either James or Gissing. What I hope to have illustrated is the extraordinary protean quality of Turgenev's art, by virtue of which it meant different things to radically differing writers. In this respect, the shared enthusiasm of Gissing and James for Turgenev, and their difference in practically everything else, seem to me to bear out James's description of his master as 'the novelist's novelist'.

TURGENEV IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 1850s

SOULS – DEAD AND LIVING

The appearance of the first translations of Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* in English at the height of the Crimean War signalled a moment of political conflict and symbolised one of cultural convergence. Anti-Russian feeling, endemic in England for a generation, gave rise to a propaganda campaign of jingoistic fervour. As one study of the war puts it, 'even in the most moderate of circles . . . the war was welcomed as the culmination of an ideological struggle which had been going on for many years' (Anderson 1967: 4). Consequently, there arose in the press and periodicals an urgent need for information about the domestic condition of an enemy whose external ambitions might be represented as an extension of internal repression and injustice. Among the variety of sources relating to Russia that appeared in England between 1853 and 1856 – some of them of doubtful provenance and authenticity – a French-language version of *A Sportsman's Sketches* was published in English, in both book and extract form, between August 1854 and November 1855.¹

Ironically, this introduction of Turgenev to England, in a climate of ignoble curiosity, also affords an example of that convergence of national literatures in the pan-European literary development of realism. For the 1850s are not just a decade of conflict between the European powers; they are also the years in which realism first emerges as a recognisable artistic movement across the continent. Culture, it appears, flows through channels unstoppable by the ideology of nationalism. Indeed, nationalism may even carry forward unwittingly those processes and values which it exists to deny.

At its most virulent, the attitude of the English periodicals

towards Russia during the Crimean War can be described as one of curiosity, tempered by loathing. The *British Quarterly Review* (BQR) in particular was assiduous in both seeking out material on Russia and in using it to denounce the whole structure and fabric of its society. During 1855, the *British Quarterly Review* regularly 'rounded up' books on Russia, favouring those that had been, or purported to have been, written by authors with first-hand experience of the country. In its 'Epilogue on Books' section for April 1855, the *British Quarterly Review* praises *Russia and the Russians* by J. W. Cole for its concentration upon those historical, economic and military aspects of Russia which it judges to be most pertinent to the current situation. It concludes by using the book as a stick with which to beat the anti-war lobby at home: 'Mr Cobden would make Nicholas a virtuous and magnanimous prince. . . . We commend this little volume on Russia and the Russians to Mr Cobden's perusal. It will afford him a succinct history of the crimes of Russian princes past and present' (BQR, 1855, 21: 568-9).

Moving on directly to a dismissively brief notice of James Meiklejohn's translation of the French version of *A Sportsman's Sketches*, the *British Quarterly Review* registers disappointment that *Russian Life in the Interior; or the Experiences of a Sportsman* fails to offer the right kind of material:

the work is not so descriptive of national manners and customs as we expected to find it. The persons described, the Country Doctor, the Sportsman, the Bourmistr or Steward, the Forest Ranger, the Serf, etc., are not exactly the classes whose domestic history and customs we wish to learn something about at this moment.

(BQR, 1855, 21: 569)

Such deprecation must be put down to the fact that the fundamental humanitarianism of Turgenev's sketches might have weakened the grounds for the Russophobia which the *British Quarterly Review* took to be self-evidently justified. The journal's attitude to Russia and its eagerness for propaganda fodder are baldly stated in the opening paragraph of a review of eighteen works relating to Russia published in 1855, shortly before the notice quoted above:

Everything relating to the home life, or intimate history of our bitter enemy – and we may add to the enemy of liberty and the enemy of humanity – is at this moment deeply and painfully

interesting. Seen at a distance or abroad, or in the fulfilment of functions high, and out of their own country, Russians are ever playing a part or wearing a mask, more especially if they be in the pay or in the confidence of the emperor. Their object then is to delude and to deceive by false representations, by magnificent descriptions, and by toning down the colouring so as to suit the taste of more civilised countries.

(BQR, 1855, 21: 130–1)

Whatever adverse criticism of his country Turgenev's sketches might contain, they evidently lacked sufficiently violent colouring for the purpose of showing up Russia as a 'rude and barbarous kingdom', threatening to throw civilisation 'back to a worse condition than in the third century'.

In such a climate, with chauvinism dictating the direction of curiosity, truth proved the first casualty of war in more ways than one. Predisposed to believe the very worst about Russia and largely ignorant of its literature, London publishers and editors laid themselves open to what might punningly be called the blatant ruse. The publishers Hurst & Blackett brought out in 1854 a work entitled *Home Life in Russia* by 'A Russian Noble', purporting to be a true account of the life of masters and serfs in contemporary Russia.² In fact, the book was an adulterated version of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, foisted upon the publishers by a Russian noble whose name they were not at liberty to disclose:

In conclusion, we may regret that we are not at liberty to mention the author's name – not that the work itself requires any further verification, for its genuineness is avouched by almost every line – but the truth is, that the writer is still anxious to return to his native country, and is perfectly well aware that the avowal of his handiwork and such a display of his satirical powers will not serve as a special recommendation except, possibly, as a passport to the inner-most regions of the Siberian wilds.

(Russian Noble 1855, I: iii)

Avid though they were for sources which would portray Russia in a bad light, most of those English periodicals which noticed the book also noticed the deception which had been perpetrated upon Hurst & Blackett. *The Athenaeum* (ATH) the *Leader* and the *Eclectic Review* (ECL) all reviewed the work. To the suggestion that

the anonymous author might be sent to Siberia for his unpatriotic revelations, the *Eclectic* responded with the words, 'Coventry we should think the more likely destination' (*ECL*, 1855, 9: 200). Both the *Eclectic* and *The Athenaeum* proved the fraudulent nature of *Home Life in Russia* by juxtaposing extracts from it with translations of *Dead Souls*. *The Athenaeum*, in its exposure, made use of extracts from a version of Gogol's novel published by Prosper Mérimée in Paris in 1852. It quoted the claims for authenticity made in the preface to *Home Life in Russia* and ended by noting the irony of this deception within a deception:

The proposal to purchase dead serfs could not be made to any honest man in his senses, without occasioning some enquiry as to its purpose, and leading in consequence to its detection. That the general tone of the work in regard to swindling is not sufficiently distasteful to swindlers is proved by the circumstances that the adventures of one Russian impostor have, as we have seen, been introduced into England by another.

(*ATH*, 2 December 1854: 1455)

The *Eclectic* was both more thoroughgoing and more caustic in its unmasking of the 'Russian Noble'. After derisively quoting a letter which had been elicited from the anonymous author by Hurst & Blackett and forwarded to *The Athenaeum* as proof of the work's authenticity, the article 'Modern Russian Literature' continued in sardonic vein:

This must be considered a triumphant vindication of the originality of 'Home Life', for the work, still under that title, and the shady name of its Russian noble author, continues to be publicly advertised with the addition of some critical puffs on behalf of its original merits.

Whatever the author's knowledge of Gogol's 'poem', and we suspect it must be like our own, rather mythical, memory must have failed him as to the existence of Gogol's novel, or there has been a miracle more astounding than any enshrined in the Tsar's own holy church. To speak plainly, we have compared Gogol with the nameless noble, page by page, sentence by sentence, through the whole of the anonymous first volume, which includes Chapters 1, 12, 2, 3, 4 and a portion of the fifth chapter of Gogol; we have examined the second volume, not continuously, but not the less closely, and