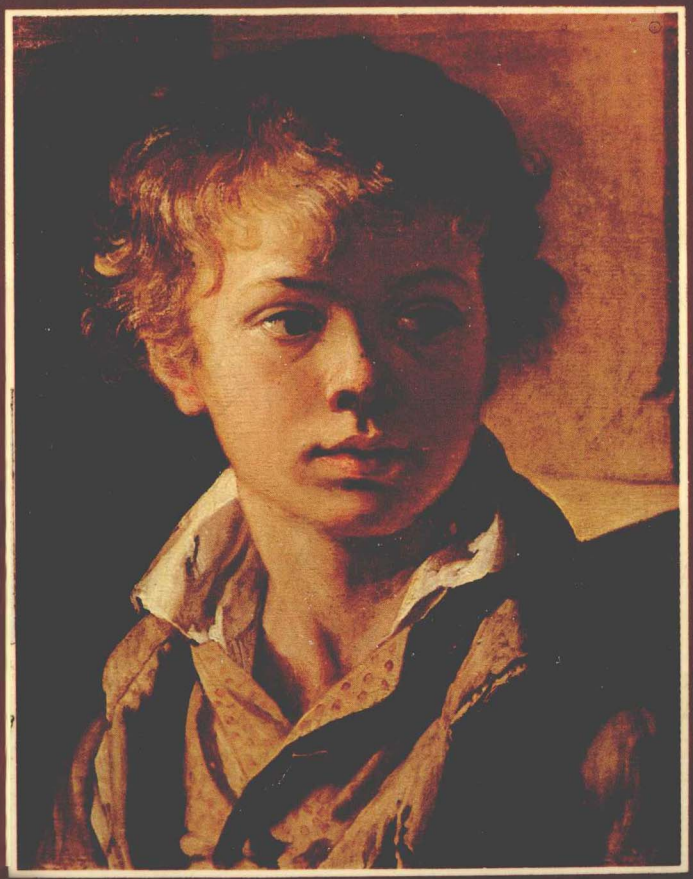
THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

SERGEI AKSAKOV

A RUSSIAN SCHOOLBOY



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SERGEI AKSAKOV

A Russian Schoolboy

Translated by
J. D. DUFF

With an introduction by
JOHN BAYLEY

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INTRODUCTION

AKSAKOV, who was born in 1791, is one of the earliest of the great Russian writers, older than Pushkin, and already a mature man of thirty when Tolstoy was born. In terms of English literature, it is strange to think he was four years older than Keats. Strange, because Aksakov, like Keats, grew up at a time when literature was still dominated by the classical ideal, in which literary expression, both in poetry and prose, had to be squeezed into some appropriately conventional form. Keats's *Ode to A Nightingale* transforms that ideal while still depending on it: in its magical verses we can feel a real young man listening to a real bird singing under the trees in Hampstead. It conveys almost involuntarily the sense of being young, with all its joy and sorrow and romance. Aksakov was fifty when he began to write about his experience of being young, and he wrote in plain and simple prose, but his recollections had for his contemporaries something of the same revelation of freshness and charm that Keats's poems had for an English audience.

It seems so obvious to us that a masterpiece might be written by merely recalling the humdrum events and pleasures and anxieties of one's life as a schoolboy, but it was not at all obvious in 1840, either in England or in Russia. Nor, in all probability, would Aksakov have had the courage to attempt it, if it had not been for his friendship with Gogol, the most extraordinary and original genius in the history of Russian letters. Aksakov had become great friends with Gogol, had indeed set up a sort of cult of Gogol worship among his Moscow friends. Gogol's genius was not in the least like Aksakov's: it was fantastic and theatrical, full of pathos and peculiar humour. But in his first major work, *Evenings on a Farm at Dikanka*, Gogol had conveyed something of the homely charm of Russian rural life.

Ever since he grew up Aksakov had been attempting to

write. But his enthusiasm for the stage, of which we hear a good deal in *A Russian Schoolboy*, proved to be something of a red herring. He translated French comedies, wrote a few poor things himself in the same vein, some essays and articles. He took the job of press censor in Moscow (though conservative, he must, one suspects, have been the most uncensorious man to have held that office) and then retired from the public service in 1839, still without having written anything. He had married and had two sons, one of whom, Constantin, was particularly devoted to his father and lived with him till his death.

Aksakov's life had been remarkably uneventful. But now suddenly, aged nearly fifty and inspired by Gogol, he began to write *A Family Chronicle*, a memoir of his parents and grandparents. Grandfather Aksakov, or Bagrov as he is called in the memoir, was a more than life-sized figure, a Russian patriarch who had removed with all his possessions, flocks, herds and serfs, to the distant province of Orenburg, near Siberia. There he built up a large estate, and there his grandson the writer was born.

Everyone who enjoys *A Russian Schoolboy* would also enjoy this remarkable portrait of a Homeric figure, obeyed unquestioningly by all his family and dependants, in general as kindly as he was dignified and independent, but given to sudden bursts of uncontrollable rage. He was especially fond of his daughter-in-law, the writer's mother, obviously a woman of great energy and character, as we learn from *A Russian Schoolboy*. The portrait in the earlier memoir is more detailed, and Aksakov analyses there with remarkable shrewdness and understanding the relations between his mother and father, which were by no means entirely happy ones. His father was an eminently good-hearted man, but with none of his mother's passionate and affectionate temperament. He had, his son observes, the 'gold' of love but none of 'the small change': he could not be tender and assiduous daily, and over trivial matters. And there was more than that. One passage is so revealing, both of the author's sympathy and understanding, and of how he may have come to have the sort of temperament he did, that it is worth quoting in full.

Alexei Stepanich [the author's father] was a man singularly unable to appreciate excessive display of feeling, or to sympathize with it, from whatever cause it arose. Thus his wife's power of passionate devotion frightened him: he dreaded it, just as he used to dread his father's furious fits of anger. Excessive feeling always produces an unpleasant impression upon quiet, unemotional people: they cannot recognize such a state of mind to be natural, and regard it as a morbid condition to which some persons are liable at times. They disbelieve in the permanence of a mental composure which may break down at any moment; and they are afraid of people with such a temperament. And fear is fatal to love, even to a child's love for his parents. And in point of mutual sympathy and understanding I must say that the relations between Alexei Stepanich and his wife, instead of becoming closer, as might have been expected, grew gradually less intimate. This may seem strange, but it often happens thus in life.

The tone is of course quite different, but for perception and insight, that might be compared with one of Tolstoy's descriptions of domestic life, just as *A Russian Schoolboy* is in the same class of literary achievement as Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*. We may form the impression, too, of which we also get hints in *A Russian Schoolboy*, that though the young Aksakov passionately loved his mother, and was so miserable away from her that he had to be brought home from school, his temperament actually resembled much more that of his father. Or rather, perhaps, that the two extremes were balanced in him, so that strong emotions were held in check by an instinctive placidity and repose. That may well be the clue to the charm of his literary personality, as it is to the secret of his style.

Something like this seems to me to be borne out by the delightful account in *A Russian Schoolboy* of his Aunt Tatyana's marriage to her elderly admirer, the retired Lieutenant-Colonel. Their establishment, neat as a new pin, with its ludicrous lap-dogs and pot-plants and cage-birds that sang 'louder and more gaily' than anyone else's, is just the kind of thing Aksakov most liked:

I wondered whether this was not the true happiness for man—a life without passions and excitements, a life undisturbed by

insoluble questions and unsatisfied desires. The peace and order of their life remained long with me; I felt a vague agitation and regret for the lack of something so near at hand and so easily procured; but, whenever I put to myself the question, 'Would you like to be what your uncle is?—I was afraid to reply, and my feeling of agitation vanished instantly.

That is a subtle passage, of the kind not infrequent in Aksakov's writings. He is attracted by absolute contentment and calm, and the spectacle of it, but when it comes to the point he realizes he cannot live that way. 'Insoluble questions and unsatisfied desires' do remain to haunt him, and us; which is why Aksakov, even at his most idyllic and reposeful, never cloys us, or seems to be aiming at a picture of life which is too pleasant to be true.

The success of *A Family Chronicle*, which first appeared in magazines in the forties, was immediate. Encouraged by it, Aksakov brought out several books on shooting and fishing and sporting activities in his native country and childhood paradise in the province of Orenburg. Turgenev admired them, and Gogol wrote to Aksakov: 'Your birds and fishes are more real than my men and women'. In 1856 the memoirs were published in volume form and confirmed Aksakov's reputation. In the few years that remained to him he produced *Years of Childhood* and *A Russian Schoolboy*, becoming ever more 'himself' in terms of style and manner, giving up any pretence of a fictitional framework—he uses his own name and that of the estate, Aksakovo—and shedding even the kind of speculation that had caused him to invent, for instance, scenes between his parents and grandparents which he could not have known about at first-hand.

In many ways this is a further gain, for no one is more persuasive and convincing about plain facts than Aksakov. Do we want to know how a school for the gentry was run at the close of the eighteenth century; how people travelled in winter across the great rivers and snowbound steppes of eastern Russia; how butterflies were collected and mounted; how fish were caught, and what fish they were; where sporting guns were made and what they looked like; what

subjects were studied in school and at what ages? Aksakov will tell us, and in the most congenial manner, never boring and never obtrusive. Younger readers in particular will respond to this effective simplicity and to all the detailed information about another country and age. But, more than that, they will become entirely absorbed, I think, in the progress of young Aksakov from childhood to young manhood. He is a hero with whom we identify so readily that we hardly know we are doing so. And he is full of quiet humour too, as when he tells us about the play they organized at college in which he played two parts—'an old hermit in the first two acts, and a robber chief, who got killed by a pistol shot, in the third. I distinguished myself chiefly as the hermit.'

There are comparatively few books about being young which can be read with equal pleasure by young and old alike. The probable reason is that most authors in this genre try too deliberately to catch the attention of the young, or to identify with them. One of Aksakov's secrets is that he seems to co-exist equally with himself when young and when old, and never to call attention—in the manner that can be so irritating in Dickens and Thackeray for instance—to the difference between them. In my category of books for both young and old would come Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Kipling's Puck stories, Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, even such tales avowedly written for the young as Hardy's *Our Exploits at West Poley*, or Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*. (Ransome, who knew Russia well, was incidentally a great admirer of Aksakov's work.) All these are masterpieces in a rare genre, and though it does not resemble them *A Russian Schoolboy* will be appreciated by the same readers and in the same sort of way.

JOHN BAYLEY

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Oxford

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

JAMES DUFF DUFF was born on 20 November 1860, the son of a retired army officer living in Aberdeenshire. He and his twin brother were among the first boys at Fettes College, Edinburgh. He came as a scholar to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1878, and was elected a Classical Fellow in 1883. Teaching Latin and Greek at Trinity, and also at Girton, was the main work of his life; and he is best known to classical scholars for what A. E. Housman praised as his 'unpretending school edition' of Juvenal.

He was over forty when he taught himself Russian, in order to read in the original the novels of Tolstoy and especially Turgenev, which he had greatly admired in French translations. He never visited Russia, but had Russian friends, with whom he talked and corresponded in their own language: notably Aleksandra Grigoryevna Pashkova, the wife of a Russian landowner, whose two sons were Trinity undergraduates.

His admiration for the autobiographical writings of Sergei Aksakov led him to translate them, in three volumes: *Years of Childhood*, *A Russian Gentleman*, and *A Russian Schoolboy*, published by Edward Arnold in 1916 and 1917, and later republished by Oxford University Press in The World's Classics.

The translator died on 25 April 1940.

P. W. DUFF

NOTE ON RUSSIAN NAMES

This list of the principal Russian names in the text indicates the stressed syllable (ë is pronounced *yo* and always stressed).

Aksákovo
Alexéi Stepánich
Balyásnikov
bátyushka
Boltunënok
Buguruslán
Chufárovo
Dëma river
Dmítriev
Efrém Evséich
Elágin
Grigóry Kartashévsky
Gúry Lástochkin
Iván Zapólsky
Kamá river
Kamáshev
Kazán
Kivátsky
Knyazhévich
Krasnóv
Levítsky
Likhachëv
Manaséin
Matrëna
Mazán
Mësha river
Nadézhda
Nikolái Ibrakhímov
Panáev
Panteléi Grigórich
Parásha
Pelagéya
Plavílshchikov
Praskóvya Ivánovna Kurolésova
samovár
Serëzha (Sergéi)
Shurán
Sófya Nikoláevna
Tanaichënok
Tatyána (Tanyúsha)
Ufá
Upadyshévsky
Vasíly Uglichínin
Yákovkin

CHRONOLOGY OF SERGEI AKSAKOV

1791	20 Sept. Born in Ufa, province of Orenburg.
1799–1807	School and university, Kazan.
1807–11	Employed as translator in government service, St Petersburg.
1811–27	Gentleman of leisure, Moscow and country estate.
1816	Marries: two sons, the future Slavophils Konstantin (b. 1817) and Ivan (b. 1823).
1827	Returns to government service: censorship office.
1831	First meeting with Gogol.
1839	Finally retires from government service.
1840	Begins to write 'A Russian Gentleman', called in Russian *A Family Chronicle*.
1846	Two fragments of 'A Russian Gentleman' appear in *Moskovsky sbornik* (Moscow Miscellany).
1847	*Notes on Angling* published.
1852	*Notes on Shooting in Orenburg Province* published.
1856	'A Russian Gentleman' published in book form, together with 'A Russian Schoolboy', called in Russian *Recollections*.
1858	'Years of Childhood' published, called in Russian *The Childhood Years of the Bagrov Grandson*.
1859	30 Apr. Dies in Moscow.
1890	*Recollections of Gogol* published posthumously.

CONTENTS

Introduction by John Bayley vii
Note on the translator by P. W. Duff xii
Note on Russian names xiii
Chronology of Sergei Aksakov xiv

A RUSSIAN SCHOOLBOY

I. My First Term at School 1
II. A Year in the Country 53
III. My Return to School 77
IV. Life at College 127

I

MY FIRST TERM AT SCHOOL

In the middle of winter in the year 1799, when I was eight years old, we travelled to Kazan, the chief town of the Province. The frost was intense; and it was a long time before we could find out the lodgings we had taken beforehand. They consisted of two rooms in a small house belonging to a Mme Aristov, the wife of an officer; the house stood in Georgia Street, a good part of the town. We arrived towards evening, travelling in a common sledge of matting drawn by three of our own horses harnessed abreast; our cook and a maid had reached Kazan before us. Our last stage was a long one, and we drove about the town for some hours in quest of our lodgings, with long halts caused by the stupidity of our country servants—and I remember that I was chilled to the bone, that our lodgings were cold, and that tea failed to warm me; when I went to bed, I was shaking like a man in a fever. I remember also that my mother who loved me passionately was shivering too, not with cold but with fear that her darling child, her little Serezha,* had caught a chill. She pressed me close to her heart, and laid over our coverlet a satin cloak lined with fox-fur that had been part of her dowry. At last I got warm and went to sleep; and next morning I woke up quite well, to the inexpressible joy of my anxious mother. My sister and brother, both younger than I, had been left behind with our father's aunt, at her house of Chufarovo in the Province of Simbirsk. It was expected that we should inherit her property; but for the present she would not give a penny to my father, so that he and his family were pretty often in difficulties; she was unwilling even to lend him a single rouble. I do not know the circumstances which induced my

* A pet-name for Sergei.

parents, straitened as they were for money, to travel to Kazan; but I do know that it was not done on my account, though my whole future was affected by this expedition.

When I awoke next morning, I was much impressed by the movement of people in the street; it was the first time I had seen anything of the kind, and the impression was so strong that I could not tear myself away from the window. Our maid, Parasha, who had come with us, could not satisfy me by her replies to my questions, for she knew as little as I did; so I managed to get hold of a maid belonging to the house and went on for some hours teasing her with questions, some of which she was puzzled to answer. My father and mother had gone off to the Cathedral to pray there, and to some other places on business of their own; but they refused to take me, fearing for me the intense cold of that Epiphany season. They dined at home, but drove out again in the evening. Tired out by new sensations, I fell asleep earlier than usual, while chattering myself and hearing Parasha chatter. But I had hardly got to sleep when the same Parasha roused me with a kind and careful hand; and I was told that a sledge had been sent for me, and I must get up at once and go to a party where I should find my parents. I was dressed in my best clothes, washed, and brushed; then I was wrapped up and placed in the sledge, still in Parasha's company. I was naturally shy; I had been caught up out of the sound sleep of childhood and was frightened by such an unheard-of event; so that my heart failed me and I had a presentiment of something terrible, as we drove through the deserted streets of the town. At last we reached the house. Parasha took off my wraps in the hall, and repeating in a whisper the encouragement she had given me several times on our way, led me to the drawing-room where a footman opened the door and I walked in.

The glitter of candles and sound of loud voices alarmed me so much that I stood stock-still by the door. My father was the first to see me; he called out 'Ah, there is the recruit!' —which alarmed me still more. 'Your forehead'—cried someone in a stentorian voice, and a very tall man rose from an

armchair and walked towards me. I understood the meaning of this phrase,* and was so terrified by it that I turned instinctively to run away, till I was checked by the loud laughter of all the company. But the joke did not amuse my mother: her tender heart was troubled by the fears of her child, and she ran towards me, took me in her arms, and gave me courage by her words and caresses. I shed a few tears but soon grew calm.

And now I must explain where I had been taken to. It was the house of an old friend of the family, Maxim Knyazhevich, who, after living for several years at Ufa as my father's colleague in the lawcourts, had moved with his wife to Kazan, to perform the same duties there. In early youth he had left his native country of Serbia, and at once received a commission in the Russian Horse Guards; later he had been sent to Ufa in a legal capacity. He might be called a typical specimen of a Southern Slav, and was remarkable for his cordial and hospitable temperament. As he was very tall and had harsh features, his exterior was at first sight rather disturbing; but he had the kindest of hearts. His wife, Elizabeth, was the daughter of a Russian noble. Their house in Kazan was distinguished by this inscription over the entrance: 'Good people, you are welcome'—a true expression of Slav hospitality. When they lived at Ufa, we often met, and my sister and I used to play with the two elder sons, Dmitry and Alexander. The boys were in the room, though I did not recognize them at once; but when my mother explained, and reminded me of them, I called out at once: 'Why, mamma, surely these are the boys who taught me how to crack walnuts with my head!' The company laughed at my exclamation, my shyness passed off, and I began in good spirits to renew acquaintance with my former playmates. They were dressed in green uniforms with scarlet collars, and I was told that they attended the grammar school of Kazan. An hour later, they drove back to school; it was Sunday, and the two boys had leave to

* i.e. 'Present your forehead' to be shaved. In those days the hair on the forehead of recruits for the Army was shaved as soon as they were passed by the doctors.

spend the day with their parents till eight in the evening.

I soon grew weary; and, as I listened to the talk between my parents and our hosts, I was falling asleep, when suddenly my ear was caught by some words which filled me with horror and drove sleep far from me. 'Yes, my good friends, Alexei Stepanich and Sofya Nikolaevna,'—M. Knyazhevich was speaking in his loud positive voice—'do take a piece of friendly advice, and send Serezha to the grammar school here. It is especially important, because I can see that he is his mother's darling; and she will spoil him and coddle him till she makes an old woman of him. It is time for the boy to be learning something; at Ufa the only teacher was Matvei Vasilich at the National School, and he was no great hand; but now that you have gone to live in the country, you won't find anyone even as good.' My father said that he agreed entirely with this opinion; but my mother turned pale at the thought of parting with her treasure, and replied, with much agitation, that I was still young and weak in health (which was true, to some extent) and so devoted to her that she could not make up her mind in a moment to such a change. As for me, I sat there more dead than alive, neither hearing nor understanding anything further that was said. Supper was served at ten o'clock, but neither my mother nor I could swallow a morsel. At last the same sledge which had brought me carried us back to our lodgings. At bedtime, when I embraced my mother as usual and clung close to her, we both began to sob aloud. My voice was choked, and I could only say, 'Mamma, don't send me to school!' She sobbed too, and for a long time we prevented my father from sleeping. At last she decided that nothing should induce her to part from me, and towards morning we fell asleep.

We did not stay long at Kazan. I learnt afterwards that my father and the Knyazheviches went on urging my mother to send me as a Government scholar to the school in that town. They pressed upon her that at present there was a vacancy, and there might be none later. But nothing would induce her to give way, and she said positively that she must have a year

at least to gain courage, to become accustomed herself and to accustom me to the idea. All this was concealed from me, and I believed that I should never be the victim of such a terrible calamity.

We started on our long journey, taking our own horses, and travelled first to the Province of Simbirsk where we picked up my brother and sister, and then across the Volga to New Aksakovo, where my infant sister, Annushka, had been left. In those days you might travel along side-roads in the Province of Ufa for a dozen versts* without passing a single village; and a winter journey of this kind seems to me now so horrible that the mere recollection of it is painful. A side-road was merely a track over the snow-drifts, formed by the passage of a few sledges; and the least wind covered it entirely with fresh snow. On such a road the horses had to be harnessed in single file, and the traveller had to crawl on for seven hours without a break, the stages being as much as thirty-five versts or even longer; and the length of each verst was by no means a fixed distance. Hence it was necessary to start at midnight, to wake the children from their sleep, wrap them up in furs, and pack them into the sledges. The creaking of the runners on the dry snow was a constant trial to my nerves, and I always suffered from sickness during the first twenty-four hours. Then the stoppages for food and sleep, in huts full of smoke and packed with calves and lambs and litters of pigs, the dirt, the smell—Heaven preserve any man from even dreaming of all this! I say nothing of the blizzards which sometimes forced us to halt in some nameless hamlet and wait forty-eight hours till the fierce wind fell. The recollection is bad enough. But we did at last reach my dear Aksakovo, and all was forgotten.

I began once more my life of blissful happiness in my mother's company and resumed all my old occupations. I read aloud to her my favourite books—*Reading for Children, to benefit the Heart and Head*, and also *Hippocrene, or the Delights of Literature*—not, indeed, for the first time but always with fresh satisfaction. I recited verses from the

* A verst is approximately two-thirds of a mile