



The Gentle Genius: Turgenev in His Letters

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

The Gentle Genius: Turgenev in His Letters

Review of *Turgenev's Letters*, selected, trans. and ed. A. V. Knowles (New York, 1983), *New York Review of Books*, 27 October 1983, 23–33



N. V. Ievlev, *The Children and Fathers are Both Out of Control!*, *Osa* [The Wasp, a satirical supplement to the conservative weekly magazine *Yakor'* – The Anchor], 12 June 1863, [4]. The slogans on the nihilists' banners on the left read, from left to right, 'Yes to the emancipation of suckling baby girls', 'We don't need railways' and 'Cut it down to nothing!!', and the word hovering above the demonstrators is 'children'; the banner on the right reads 'Fathers'.

IVAN TURGENEV died one hundred years ago.¹ His letters contain some of his best writing; yet save for quotations in specialist studies, they have been somewhat neglected in English-speaking countries.²

¹ Written in 1983. Notes are editorial, except for the next two.

² Apart from a late Victorian translation of E. Halpérine-Kaminsky's edition of some of Turgenev's letters in French [E. Halpérine-Kaminsky, *Ivan Tourguénéff d'après sa correspondance avec ses amis français* (Paris, 1901); *Tourguénéff and his French Circle*, ed. E. Halpérine-Kaminsky, trans. Ethel M. Arnold (New York, 1898)] and two collections of his letters to the actress Savina three years before his death [one is *Letters to an Actress: The Story of Ivan Turgenev and Marya Gavrilovna Savina*, trans. and ed. Nora Gottlieb and Raymond Chapman (London, 1973); what is the other? – does he mean the 1918 Russian edition, even though he is ostensibly discussing only English translations?], I know of nothing else in English save Edgar H.

Consequently, the appearance of two new editions of English versions of some of the most interesting of his letters should be a literary event of some importance.³ But this is scarcely likely to happen: it is the fate of gentle and yielding characters to be overshadowed by more formidable contemporaries. And, indeed, Turgenev was after his death duly overshadowed by the gigantic figures of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky; and even now, the centenaries of Marx and Wagner, not surprisingly, have left little room for the worldwide critical appraisal of Turgenev's writings and personality for which this centenary offers a natural occasion.

There are, Mr Knowles tells us, 6,550 published letters by Turgenev in existence (some still remain unpublished). The life, wit, sharpness of observation, evocative power of his letters, and the lyrical quality of his descriptions in some of them of the sounds and sights of nature, sky, trees, leaves, the changing light and darkness, birds and small animals of field and woodland in his part of the country, seem to me to be as remarkable as anything he ever wrote. So, too, are his sharp literary and psychological judgements and his comments on social and political events and issues. It must, therefore, have been a particularly painful experience for Mr Knowles to have had to choose fewer than two hundred and fifty letters from this vast treasure house of writings.

His judgment, on the whole, is very dependable. All the letters selected by him are of some significance, if only for the light they shed upon the author; none could have been written by anyone else. The translation is alive, precise, occasionally anachronistic, but a good deal closer to the style and tone of this most sensitive of authors than, for instance, that of Professor David Lowe, whose two-volume edition does, however, provide versions of well over three hundred letters of equal, at times even greater, interest. Mr Knowles's notes are clear, succinct, scholarly and most informative. It is strange that Anglophone readers should have had to wait so long for the reception of even so small a portion of these riches.

One of the strongest impressions conveyed by these letters is that of Turgenev's profound and lifelong lack of confidence in himself

Lehrman's selection of 1961 [*Turgenev's Letters: A Selection* (New York, 1961)], the fullest to date, but long out of print. [This list is incomplete.]

³ In addition to Mr Knowles's edition, there is *Turgenev's Letters*, ed. and trans. David Lowe (two volumes; Ann Arbor, 1983: Ardis).

both as a writer and [23b] as a man. Success and fame may please him but he is not deceived. He is clear that he is no master: compared to the writers he regards as truly great – Pushkin, Gogol, Goethe, not to speak of Shakespeare or Molière – he is no more than a minor figure. He tells his familiar friend, the critic Pavel Annenkov, in 1852 (the letter is not included here), that one cannot begin to compare the ‘free, swift brushstrokes’ of the men of natural genius with the ‘thin squeak’ of his own pen, with its puny ‘insect sounds’.⁴ At times, when his work receives praise beyond what seems to him to be its due, he tends to protest that a real masterpiece is far beyond his powers. Great writers are noble, tranquil spirits, and create in sweeping, wholesale fashion; you and I, he tells Annenkov, sit in retail shops and supply the day’s passing needs. Unfriendly reviews almost always seem to him convincing: he is grateful for praise by discriminating friends and admirers, but he is not persuaded.

A Sportsman’s Sketches gained him immense celebrity in Russia; the acclaim was immediate and virtually universal. He was made happy by the favour with which the left-wing intelligentsia received his work; he felt pride when told on all sides that he had played a decisive part in the movement for abolition of serfdom. He was particularly pleased when this was referred to by James Bryce, who presented him for an honorary doctorate at Oxford in 1879. He believed, plausibly enough, that his brief incarceration after his glowing obituary of Gogol had partly been caused by the government’s displeasure with the effect of the *Sketches* on Russian public opinion.

Yet ‘I have reread it’, he writes in the same letter to Annenkov. ‘A lot of [23c] it is pallid, fragmentary, merely hinted at. Some things are wrong, oversalted or else undercooked – still, some notes [...] do not sound false,’ and these, he thinks, will save the book. After *Rudin*, he knows that as a ‘writer of *belles lettres*’ he is finished: ‘*Rudin*’, he writes to the critic Druzhinin in 1855, ‘will have settled that.’⁵

The hostile reaction by the young radicals to *Fathers and Children* convinces him that he has failed to achieve what he wanted. The

⁴ Letter of 14/26 September 1852.

⁵ Letter of 20 August/1 September 1855 (Knowles 25; letters in the English editions by Knowles, Lehrman and Lowe are referred to by the no. of the letter in the relevant edition).

friendly reception of the novel by Dostoevsky, and still more by the left-wing critic Pisarev (who identified himself with the ‘nihilist’ Bazarov), gave him great pleasure; but this could not, as the letters show, begin to make up for the wounds inflicted upon him by the stern young Jacobins, attacks which, he thought, might be deserved. *Smoke* was on the whole ill received, and not by Dostoevsky alone. Turgenev knew that he had enraged both the right and the left; he shook like an aspen leaf in the storm he had aroused, but, as in the case of *Fathers and Children*, did not retreat, although the criticism hurt him deeply.

The ultimate defeat came with his last novel, *Virgin Soil*. He wrote to one of his correspondents that in his ‘heart of hearts’ he agreed with the unanimous condemnation of it by the Russian reviewers; in a letter to his brother, he spoke of it as a fiasco.⁶ He was grateful to the historian Kavelin for his sympathetic letter about the novel. He sought to explain to one of his editors what he had wished to achieve; but he knew that it was all useless. ‘I am one of the writers of the interregnum’, he wrote to Sergey Aksakov (the author of *A Family Chronicle*, and Gogol’s friend), ‘between Gogol and some future master. We all produce bits and pieces [...] which a greater talent would have compressed into one powerful whole, issuing from the depths.’⁷ And again, ‘I know that there is in my work a great deal that is weak and unfinished, unfinished partly because of indolence, partly – why conceal the guilty secret? – because of sheer lack of power.’⁸

Four years later he tells his admired friend the pious Countess Lambert, ‘The other day my heart died. I wish to report this fact.’⁹ His life is over; all feeling is dead; he says that he has turned to stone. This haunting sense of lack of true creative power oppressed Turgenev all his life. It was more than moments of discouragement – the feeling of inadequacy is never wholly absent, even during the happy evenings with his intimate friends in Russia or in Paris. Late in his life he said that the unsuccessful lovers in his stories, like Rakitin in his play *A Month in the Country*, are himself. The constant criticism to which he was exposed in Russia (even while he was one

⁶ Neither letter identified.

⁷ Letter of 1/13 November 1856.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ 28 November/10 December 1860.

of its most widely read authors) wounded him continuously. He was admired by the best writers in France, but it was for Russia he was writing. It was highly characteristic of him to complain that he was old at thirty-four. He had a great capacity for enjoyment: the shooting parties in Russia, the lively literary dinners in Moscow and in Paris, the sense of bliss in the company of Mme Viardot, whose adoring slave he remained to the end – these were sources of lasting, if intermittent, happiness.

Characteristically, he tended to seek advice from others about his writings before publication. He nervously tried out more than one of his novels on friends, such as Annenkov and Botkin, and usually adopted their suggestions. One cannot imagine this degree of hesitation on the part of, say, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. When Gogol read his *Dead Souls* to the Aksakovs and their circle, he did this out of friendship, at their pressing request, in order to give them pleasure. Turgenev needed reassurance, and accepted criticism even from people he did not like or respect, like Katkov. He kept modifying the character of Rudin – modelled on Bakunin – under pressure from his friends, who complained that he was now too kind, now too unfair, to his old friend, at the time a prisoner in the Peter and Paul fortress.

So too with *Fathers and Children*, read to his companions during a holiday on the Isle of Wight. Unsure of himself, he wished to gain approval not of reactionaries, not of left-wing fanatics, but of all those right and left of centre, above all the young in Russia. His immense success with the Russian public did not buoy him up; he declared that he had no more strength left. He was perpetually bowing out, saying farewell to literature, putting an end to it all: it was this that Dostoevsky mocked so cruelly in the character of Karmazinov in *The Possessed*.

Yet this was not a pose. He worked best only if propped up by figures stronger than himself – Belinsky, Annenkov, Flaubert, Mme Viardot. The great contralto, who after all knew him better than anyone (save perhaps Annenkov), once described him as ‘le plus [24a] triste des hommes’:¹⁰ it was all she could do to make him continue to write.

This state of feeling is reflected in virtually all his writings. In an excellent article published some years ago in, I think, the *New*

¹⁰ Turgenev to E. E. Lambert, 2/14 March 1862.

Statesman, V. S. Pritchett pointed out that, whereas with Tolstoy the reader is always contemporary with the events described, carried forward, as it were, by the flow of the narrative, Turgenev's stories look back on something that happened long ago, and is now over and done with. Indeed Turgenev said as much in a letter to Tolstoy in 1856: 'Your life is directed to the future; mine is built on the past.'¹¹ A thin veil of sadness is usually drawn over his narrative. The web of relationships, the emotional entanglements, the tragic and the ludicrous, the moments of exaltation, and the inevitable defeat and humiliation, all are by now in some middle distance, viewed with an all-forgiving understanding of what can have been only as it was. The notion that it might all have turned out otherwise if only one had chosen to behave differently is an illusion.

This resigned determinism is equally true of his letters: there is often regret, but scarcely ever self-reproach. It was what seemed to them Turgenev's preoccupation with trivial emotions of trivial people, crises in the tedious lives of minor Russian gentry in decaying country houses, his evasion of the central questions of human existence, of good and evil, of the meaning and purpose of the life of the human anthill, his total failure to touch upon what alone mattered – the life of the spirit – it was this that irritated both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in their very different fashions (not wholly unlike the disparagement, from a different point of view, of Proust by Lukács).

Dostoevsky's hysterical attack on Turgenev as a renegade to his country, recorded in these letters, left Turgenev relatively unaffected. The notoriously troubled relationship with Tolstoy is a far more complicated affair, and was not entirely due to personal factors. There was a strong element of nineteenth-century positivism in Turgenev. **[25b]** He freely admitted that he found any form of mysticism, transcendentalism, visionary religious experience deeply alien to him; so were all forms of irrationalism, subjectivism, and especially the nostalgic neo-medievalism of the Slavophiles, with their craving for an imaginary, organic, pre-Petrine Russian society. This inevitably made him deeply sceptical about Herzen's search for salvation, after the failure of the revolutions of 1848, in the 'natural socialism' of the Russian village commune.¹² He

¹¹ 13/25 September 1856 (Lowe 75).

¹² See RT2 255, POI2 119.

regarded this as pure fantasy; moreover, such worship of the peasant's 'tanned sheepskin coat'¹³ boded no good for the cause of the progress of reason and individual liberty, which he saw menaced from all sides.

Turgenev's views had been deeply and permanently influenced by the 'Westernism' of the friends of his youth. He believed in the light of reason, social and intellectual progress, political and individual liberty and democracy ('a man with a heart has only one country – democracy,' he wrote to Mme Viardot in 1849,¹⁴ deeply upset by the invasion of Hungary by Russian troops to crush the revolution). Most of all he believed in the supreme value of beauty and of art. This remained his credo to the end of his life. It was scarcely likely to endear him to Tolstoy, even before his 'conversion'. Progressivism, aestheticism, liberalism, the literary life, the visits to the opera were precisely what Tolstoy came to dislike more and more.

True, there was a moment in the late 1850s when Tolstoy wrote to Botkin about the need for a new periodical to be devoted solely to aesthetic questions and to exclude, above all, the kind of political and social issues with which, for instance, Chernyshevsky was concerned. In letters of 1858 (not, alas, provided here), Turgenev, often represented as the archpriest of an aesthetic approach to life, told Tolstoy that he was wrong to avert his gaze from social questions – 'it was not lyrical twittering that the times are calling for, nor birds singing on boughs'.¹⁵ And two months later: 'You loathe politics, and it is, indeed, a dirty, dusty, low business, but then there is dirt and dust [26a] in the streets, yet we cannot, after all, do without towns.'¹⁶ But this moment passed; the moralist in Tolstoy never allowed it to recur. Tolstoy began by liking and disliking Turgenev by turns, but was progressively more and more irritated by him. They took a natural interest in each other's writings, but after the 1850s their relations never grew genuinely warm again.

Turgenev felt uneasy with Tolstoy from the very beginning. In the letter to him of 1856 already quoted (Professor Lowe has included it in his edition), he tried to attribute the 'gulf' between

¹³ To Herzen, 26 September/8 October 1862 (Lehrman 158).

¹⁴ 29 May/10 June 1849 (Lowe 14).

¹⁵ 17/29 January 1858 (Lehrman 99).

¹⁶ 27 March/8 April 1858 (Lehrman 100).

them to his own clumsy attempts to deepen their friendship: ‘I went too far, and when I saw that this embarrassed, irritated you, I retreated too quickly.’ A year later he tells Tolstoy that his perpetual feeling of repulse of his relationships with others, as well as of his own emotions, must make his life difficult for him (and, presumably, for others also; this letter is not given here). Turgenev is clear that their paths diverge, but their friendship need not suffer, although their differences will remain. He recognised Tolstoy’s genius from the beginning, and urged him not to stay in the army, to write. ‘Be warned by my example,’ he wrote to him in 1858 in a letter quoted above: ‘do not let life slip between your fingers [...]. These are the words of a deeply and deservedly unhappy man.’¹⁷ As time went on, relations between them deteriorated; but that did nothing to alter his lifelong conviction that Tolstoy was a writer of towering genius, greater than any other living writer. Even after the celebrated break in their relations, Turgenev urged his Paris friends to read *War and Peace*, [26b] and single-handedly arranged the publication of the French translation.

At the same time, it is difficult not to suppose that the harsh things he says about Tolstoy’s novels are unconnected with Tolstoy’s wounding attitude toward him. He seems to look for faults in Tolstoy’s writings as he does not dream of doing in those of, say, Gogol or Flaubert; there is no touch of envy, only a somewhat worked-up indignation with what he regards as Tolstoy’s occasional sleight of hand as a writer.

In letters to Annenkov and Borisov, after saying that he finds the descriptions of hunts, sleigh-rides at night, and similar scenes ‘marvellous, first-rate’, the work of a master beyond compare, he complains that the historical passages, ‘which the readers adore, are ab[26c]solutely farcical, a charlatan’s tricks’. Tolstoy amazes the reader with ‘the pointed tip of Alexander’s boot’, or ‘Speransky’s laugh, [...] in order to make him think that he knows *everything* about the matter since he goes into such detail, whereas all he knows are only these small trifles – a trick and no more, but the public falls for it’.¹⁸ And again: ‘There are things here which will not perish so long as the Russian language exists. But [...] there is no trace of any real reconstruction of the period.’ Moreover, ‘There is no development

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ To Annenkov, 14/26 February 1868 (Knowles 95, Lowe 208).

THE GENTLE GENIUS: TURGENEV IN HIS LETTERS

of character', just 'an immense amount of the old psychological business ("What do I think? What is thought about me? Do I love or detest?" etc.), which is a kind of monomania on Tolstoy's part.'¹⁹ He speaks of his continual resort to 'vibra[26d]tion and oscillation of feeling' as simply a trick, like the tedious, repeated mention of the selfsame small traits, 'the down on Princess Volkonsky's upper lip', and the like.²⁰



Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev (1818–83)

All this irritates him. 'Of course, there are marvellous things which no one else in the whole of Europe could write, and which puts me in a chill and fever of ecstasy.'²¹ He cannot bear Tolstoy's quirkiness, his ridiculous ideological obsessions, his hobby-horses,

¹⁹ To I. P. Borisov, 27 February/10 March 1868 (Lehrman 208).

²⁰ loc. cit. (note 16 above).

²¹ *ibid.*

his amateur philosophising (which also annoyed Flaubert),²² his habit of going off on irrelevant tangents; yet he remains an unapproachable genius.

When *Anna Karenina* appeared, Turgenev could restrain himself no longer. He told one of his correspondents that it was now clear that poor Tolstoy had completely lost his way; of course, the set pieces – the hunt, the horse race, the reapers, were marvellous; but much of the rest was tedious, trivial stuff. ‘It is all due to Moscow, the Slavophile gentry, old maids of the Orthodox faith, his solitary life, his lack of real artistic freedom.’²³ ‘True, ‘even his grimaces are grimaces of genius’,²⁴ but all this preoccupation with upper-class life is a great pity. One year later, in 1876, he repeats it all to his friend, Baroness Vrevskaya:

However great Tolstoy’s gifts, he cannot get out of the Moscow bog into which he has walked. Orthodoxy, the gentry, the Slavophiles, gossip, [...] ignorance, self-importance, the lord of the manor, the officer in him, hostility to everything foreign, sour cabbage soup, the absence of soap, in a word [28a] chaos! And this is the chaos in which so gifted a man must perish! But it is what is always happening in Russia!²⁵

He had recommended *Childhood* to Mme Viardot as a classic: this, he tells Annenkov in 1866, was a mistake – it is very poor, very poor indeed.²⁶

As for Tolstoy, after 1861 he took relatively little notice of Turgenev or his novels; he thought them well written, sincere enough, but lacking in serious content. After a none too successful effort at reconciliation, he did, after Turgenev’s death, say a few obituary words of mild praise of his gifts and character.

Differences of view and of styles of life can scarcely alone account for this degree of mutual antipathy. After all, Turgenev did not mind being scolded by his other country neighbour, the poet and landowner Afanasy Fet, for his liberal opinions and unfortunate addiction to rational opinions and the enlightened West. He knew

²² See HF2 6.

²³ To A. S. Suvorin, [14/26 March 1875,] 1/13 April 1875 (Knowles 153, Lehrman 314).

²⁴ Untraced.

²⁵ 10/22 March 1876 (Knowles 161, Lehrman 332).

²⁶ Letter of 24 February/8 March 1866 (Lowe 185).

perfectly well, he told Sergey Aksakov, that the Slavophiles thought him a mere rag; but the broadsides of the traditionalists did not upset him: 'a rag can be torn,' he told Aksakov, 'but heavy blows do it no damage'.²⁷ He did quarrel with the arch-reactionary Fet, but he loved him, and the friendship was restored. We owe to Fet the knowledge that Tolstoy's dislike for Turgenev was founded on contempt for a man who wasted his gifts on trivialities, and Annenkov and Panaev corroborate this. The continuation of a real relationship was evidently unthinkable.

Yet Tolstoy's view is arrogant and false. Even on the evidence of this small portion of Turgenev's published letters, it is clear that, despite his endless vacillations, Turgenev held firm and coherent social and political views until the end of his life. His moderation, hatred of fanaticism, passionate belief in human rights, belief that only liberal compromises, only gradualism, and not revolution, would protect men from brutal oppression and violence, were not rationalisations of timidity and scepticism, but part of a firmly held outlook of an exceptionally intelligent and consistent critical thinker. He knew that these opinions would not be popular with either conservatives or radicals, but he did not retreat, and defended them patiently and tenaciously in the face of continued attacks in his own country. In the West, he was principally (and mistakenly) regarded as a greatly gifted, unpolitical, literary artist. His letters testify to the opposite, to his conscious, intellectually thought out, rejection of historical schemas and of all the varieties of teleology dominant in his youth, historical, theological, metaphysical, to which he had listened as a student in the university of Berlin.

[28b] Nature is not for him the benevolent guide and protectress of eighteenth-century thinkers – Mistress Nature, Dame Nature, and the like. Nor has the life of society an inbuilt pattern without the understanding of which there can be no salvation. Men have only themselves to look to. Nature (he had read Schopenhauer, who had also influenced Tolstoy) is indifferent to human endeavour: omnipotent, irresistible, all-devouring, it offers the spectacle of mingled beauty and cruelty. The same force that creates genius and visions of the ideal destroys the good and the innocent at the same time.

²⁷ 25 May/6 June 1856 (Lowe 70).

THE GENTLE GENIUS: TURGENEV IN HIS LETTERS

In a letter to Mme Viardot, he gives a harrowing description of meeting ruined French peasants sitting in helpless misery after their harvest had been destroyed by a hailstorm: the implied protest against the social order which leads to such despair is not far distant from that of Proudhon and Courbet. Nature is nothing but a biological process; to demand a theodicy to justify it is meaningless; at the same time it is a source of infinite delight to him. In an early letter to Mme Viardot, he says:

I cannot bear the sky – but life, reality, its capriciousness, randomness, its habits, its fleeting beauty, all that I adore. I am bound to the earth. I should prefer to watch the hurried movements of a duck at the edge of a lake as it scratches the back of its head with its moist foot, or the long gleaming drops of water slowly falling from the mouth of a cow after it has drawn its fill from the pond, standing motionless up to its knees in water, than anything the cherubim [...] can see in their heaven.²⁸

He worships the beauty of nature, but not its ‘greedy, egoistic’ power, the ‘careless’ force that creates the stars above ‘like warts on the skin’,²⁹ and the nightingale that pours forth its marvellous song ‘while some wretched half-crushed insect is dying in agony in its craw’.³⁰

He has no religion, but having learned Spanish, doubtless for the sake of Mme Viardot, he tells her in an early letter how profoundly moved he is by Calderón’s overwhelming Catholic vision. But it is not for him: he is with those who protest – ‘Prometheus, Satan, revolt, individuality’. ‘I may be an atom,’ the letter continues, ‘but I am my own master – I love truth, not salvation, and expect to find it in reason, not grace.’³¹

He abhorred the violence, and recoiled from the extremism of the revolutionary groups, but this did not drive him into the arms of either the government or the Slavophile opposition. In the famous controversy about the character of Bazarov in *Fathers and Children*, he declared that he did not know whether he loved or hated him, or by what mysterious process Bazarov turned out as he did; but he insisted to all his critics – Fet, Herzen, Sluचेvsky,

²⁸ 19 April/1 May 1848 (Knowles 9).

²⁹ 16/28 July 1849 (Lehrman 22, without the warts).

³⁰ 30 May/11 June 1849.

³¹ 7/19 December 1847 (Lehrman 12).

Saltykov-Shchedrin – that Bazarov, in spite of his unattractive qualities, was, nevertheless, a positive figure for him, because what he believes in is fundamentally right: because the rebellion of the sons against the ruling class is not simply a reaction to the cruelty or corruption of the fathers, or to a bad upbringing – that would prove nothing – but because, coming as they often do from loving homes, they are simply more sensitive to the needs of the people.

Yet ‘the people’ can never itself transform society, since it is, he is convinced, far too ignorant and reactionary for that; only an educated minority, the kind of public that he knew that he was writing for, can do that. Hence his refusal to sign Herzen’s manifesto on the emancipation of the serfs, which seems to him populist patter. The Slavophile–populist antithesis of the West as being beautiful without but ugly within, while Russia is the opposite, is nonsense.

Russia (he tells Herzen in a letter included by Professor Lowe) is not ‘a Venus of Milo in rags and bonds, she is like her Western sisters’,³² and will suffer the same fate. A decade later, on one of his visits to Russia, he thought that he saw this happening: ‘it may be that Bazarovs *are not needed* now’, he wrote to the feminist Filosofova in 1874;³³ there is a new generation of men of progressive mind, quiet resolution, and practical ability – useful men, patient workers without outstanding gifts and brilliance of personality who will radically change things in Russia. Today ‘there is no need to move mountains’.³⁴ Still, Bazarov in his day had been greatly needed; he was a forerunner of things to come.

In his next novel (Turgenev wrote in a letter to his brother three years later), his portraits of the young revolutionaries would show them neither as a gang of rogues and crooks nor as ideal heroes. The novel (his last), *Virgin Soil*, was badly received by the reviewers. Turgenev, as his letters show, did not dispute their verdict. As always, when the criticism was adverse, he tended to think it basically just. The novel was, he wrote, a fiasco.³⁵ His obvious sympathy with the revolutionaries did not, however, pass unnoticed either by the authorities or the student radicals; nor did his financial

³² 23 October/4 November 1862 (Lowe 161).

³³ 11/23 September 1874 (Lehrman 303).

³⁴ Untraced.

³⁵ To N. S. Turgenev, 25 February/9 March 1877.

support for the revolutionary Russian journal in Paris edited by the socialist Lavrov. After Turgenev's death, the young revolutionaries, for all his lifelong disbelief in revolution, claimed him for their own.

His position remained what it had always been. Like Herzen, he was repelled by the new hard men of the 1860s, by their brutality, their contempt for the liberal values of Western civilisation, their fanatical belief in terrorist methods. Herzen still clung to his Rousseauian faith in the 'natural socialism' of the Russian peasant; he found the young fanatics who followed Chernyshevsky unbearable – the antipathy was mutual – but he was ready to support any attempt to bring down the Russian autocracy. Turgenev, always milder and more realistic, felt an almost eighteenth-century horror of the unbridled mob, liberated slaves likely to sweep away all that he and his friends lived by. He did **[30b]** not share Herzen's apocalyptic vision of a barbarian invasion of the West as being, nevertheless, a cleansing storm.

In one of his curious fantasies – in a story called *Ghosts* – the author is carried aloft by a supernatural female figure, curiously called Ellis, on a journey through past centuries, and one of the scenes he witnesses is that of a savage raid by sixteenth-century Volga pirate rebels who, according to legend, murdered one of Turgenev's ancestors: it is a nightmare vision of pillage and slaughter conveyed with terrifying power. The precarious framework of humane culture, the preservation of a minimum of decency, was everything to him. He was not too optimistic about the consequences of the social upheavals of his time, even when he favoured them. A vein of mingled hope and subdued pessimism runs through virtually all political comments in the letters to his Russian correspondents.

The letters to his familiar friends at home, Annenkov, Borisov, Toporov, Fet and Polonsky, Sergey Aksakov, the three favoured ladies, Anna Filosofova, Countess Lambert, Baroness Vrevskaya, even to the satirist Saltykov (who did not greatly like him) – all the letters provided in these collections – are much more free, and spontaneous, and say a great deal more than the letters to his French and German correspondents, even intimate friends like Flaubert or the German painter Pietsch.

These Russian letters in the 1850s and 1860s are filled with an obsessive contempt for Parisian culture – it is cold, narrow, artificial, banal. He says that he likes only music, poetry, nature, dogs; poetry

in France is trivial, music tends to cheap vaudeville, nature is hideous, hunting is quite disgusting. In Rome, greatness is all around one; there is immortal beauty everywhere. England is a superior country – the English are genuine, sincere, only unable to express themselves – but Paris! He tells Tolstoy that he simply cannot like the French. ‘Everything that is not theirs seems to them wild and stupid.’³⁶ Their heads are filled with clichés, set opinions which nothing can alter. He speaks of the ‘jangling clatter of Victor Hugo, the feeble whimperings of Lamartine, the chatter of George Sand’ who has ‘written herself out’ (he is writing in 1857);³⁷ Dumas *filis* and Mérimée, for all his interest in Russian literature, fare little better. Only Michelet escapes the onslaught. Among composers, now that Rossini has ceased writing and Bellini is dead, only Meyerbeer and Mme Viardot’s protégé Gounod are approved of.

He detests the militarism, arrogance, tyranny of the Second Empire: ‘I cannot tell you how deeply I hate everything French, and especially Parisian,’ he writes to his friend Fet in 1860; he is seized by an unbearable longing for the smells and sights of the Russian autumn, ‘the ploughed, by now cool, earth, [...] wisps of smoke, bread, the sound of the head peasant’s boots in the hall’, and the sight of dear Fet himself bustling about his estate with his short [32] cavalryman’s steps.³⁸ Why does he write that he cannot leave Paris? Why indeed? The answer is not in doubt: he moved easily enough to Baden-Baden, but only when the Viardots decided to do so.

This attitude alters once the Franco-Prussian war is over. The Viardot household returns to France, and he makes friends with the leading writers, Edmond de Goncourt, Zola, Daudet, Renan, the young Maupassant; above all he renews his warm relations with Flaubert; they all admired and adored him far more deeply than did any writers in Russia. After 1871 the diatribes against Paris cease, but his letters show that he is still thinking only about Russia and Russians.

His letters to Mme Viardot, who entirely dominated the last thirty years of his life, and whom he idolised to his dying day, are at times oddly conventional. He writes about musical, literary and social events and personalities; there is much amusing talk about

³⁶ 3/15 January 1857 (Knowles 32, Lehrman 86. Lowe 81).

³⁷ To S. T. Aksakov, 8 January 1857.

³⁸ 5/17 November 1860.

mutual friends, there are touching expressions of total love and devotion (often in German); but apart from wonderful descriptive pages about the shooting country in his corner of the woods, there is relatively little that is either arresting or genuinely intimate, even when he is writing about his own physical or mental states.

Perhaps it is a matter of language: he seems to feel and perceive more vividly and authentically when he is in Russia, or thinks in Russian, than through the spectacles of French or German, almost perfectly as he knew these languages. It is only too obvious from the tone of his correspondence, and the lack of any deliberate order as he moves from topic to topic, that his letters were not written with an eye on posterity; they sprang from the need to be in constant contact with others, to be among friends, to talk to them and be answered. It was for Russians (as he admitted) that he was writing; it was by them that he wished to be judged.

The letters to his daughter Paulinette (an odd way of symbolising his love of Pauline Viardot) are the most painful reading in these volumes. Turgenev loved her after his fashion; he took great care to educate and set her up in France; but, as he kept repeating to his friends, he had too little in common with her: she liked neither music nor literature, not even the hunting dogs he loved so well; nor was she grateful enough to Mme Viardot, who had (he kept repeating to her) so generously undertaken to look after her, and was so good to her. Paulinette seemed to him headstrong and perverse and unresponsive, and not to realise how great a proportion of his money he had had to spend on her needs. He was constantly trying to marry her off, and when finally she did marry a Frenchman, it ended badly, both financially and personally.

It is strange that of all people the author of *A Month in the Country* should not have shown a deeper understanding of the humiliating situation of an illegitimate child, taken from her serf mother and handed over as a quasi-ward to a foreign, dominating, inevitably worldly prima donna. The censorious tone of Turgenev's letters, the dutiful but unconvincing affirmations of his love for her, can only have made matters worse. Evidently, the artist and the man are not always one and the same.

The least interesting, as may well be imagined, are the letters about the management [33a] of his Russian estates included in Mr Knowles's volume. As for the love letters to the actress Savina, they are a touching but deeply pathetic record of an old man's last

infatuation. One can naturally respect Mr Knowles's wish to illustrate the full breadth of Turgenev's interest. Still, it is a pity that, even within the severely narrow confines to which he must have been re[33b]stricted, he could not have substituted for the largely business letters to such professional acquaintances as Hetzel, Bodenstedt, Durand and Ralston a few of the more real letters to Annenkov or Borisov (in which he really lets himself go); or the letter to Herzen of 1867 in which he gives a particularly vivid account of his views on the 'social question' in Russia,³⁹ or even the six lines [33c] from the letter to Maria Milyutina (of February 1875) in which he states his basic beliefs,⁴⁰ or (but this may be getting unfair) the remarkable short letter he wrote to the editor Stasyulevich in January 1877 about *Virgin Soil*;⁴¹ or the strange dream reported to Mme Viardot in 1849 which casts a fascinating light on the element of fantasy in his writings.⁴²

[33d] But one cannot have everything, and Mr Knowles's selection is, in general, very well made. His comment on Turgenev's political naivety (as opposed to whose wiser views? Tolstoy's? Herzen's? Chernyshevsky's?) itself seems a trifle naive. But his vignettes of Turgenev's correspondents, his notes and his editorial skill are wholly admirable – models of their kind.

© Isaiah Berlin 1983

Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 9 May 2023
Revised 29 May 2023

³⁹ 13/25 December 1876.

⁴⁰ 22 February/6 March 1875 (Lowe 275).

⁴¹ 22 December 1876/3 January 1877 (Lehrman 350).

⁴² 1/13 August 1849.