



How Russian and English Lines Can Get Crossed

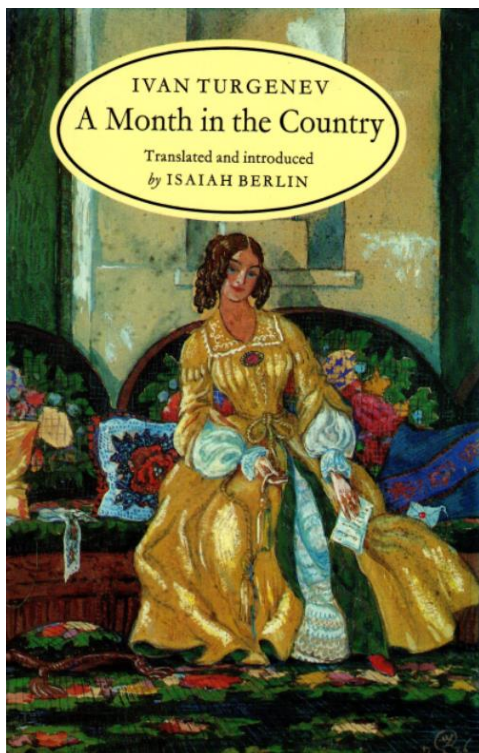
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How Russian and English Lines Can Get Crossed

Letter, *The Guardian*, 19 February 1981, 12g–h



The jacket of IB's translation of A Month in the Country
showing a scene from the play painted by Mstislav Dobouzhinsky

TO THE EDITOR OF *THE GUARDIAN*

Sir,

In the course of his very sympathetic account (*The Guardian*, 17 February, 9), for the most part remarkably accurate, of our conversation, Mr Alex Hamilton attributes to me several statements which I should like to correct. Our three-hour long interview probably made such mishearings – they are no more than that – inevitable.

Thus I did say that Turgenev failed to restore the cuts made by the Russian censor when the manuscript of *A Month in the Country*

was first submitted to him; but not that these have been restored in Soviet editions – they have been listed, but not restored.

Nor do I remember saying that Turgenev was, as a lover, ‘a feeble old thing’ – there is, so far as I know, no evidence that anyone actually thought this – only that in the character of Rakitin in the play, he consciously parodies his own character.

Nor is what I said about the letter which Turgenev’s mother sent him apropos *The Fire at Sea*¹ – not *The Storm [12h] at Sea* – or about Dostoevsky’s references to this episode in *The Possessed*,² altogether accurately reproduced – but this may very well be my fault and not Mr Hamilton’s.

I did not say that Turgenev was the first to introduce the rhythms and idiom of spoken speech into Russian writing – only that he in fact did so – as Pushkin and Gogol had also done. Nor, of course, that Solzhenitsyn is almost unintelligible to people brought up on Tolstoy – which is patently false: I said this, I feel sure, only about ‘the language of concentration camps’, as Mr Hamilton correctly reports.

I might as well add that the parallel between our conversation and the interview given to a French journalist by Tolstoy was not mentioned (I have no wish to be accused of ridiculous megalomania); that I did not say that ‘purity of character and spontaneity’ were not to be met with in the West – quoted also on your front page – only that they were somewhat more frequently found among victims of tyranny in Russia than in the freer conditions of the sophisticated West; and finally, that I was born in 1909 (not 1907) and left Russia in 1919³ (not 1917).

I hope that Mr Hamilton will not mind my wish to keep the record straight. I should like to repeat that I read his piece with pleasure and the most genuine personal gratitude.

Yours faithfully,
Isaiah Berlin

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Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 30 April 2023

¹ [Or *A Fire at Sea*, the title under which IB’s translation was published.]

² [Or *The Devils*.]

³ [In fact in 1920.]