



On Translating Turgenev

Mrs Pegaway's Virtues

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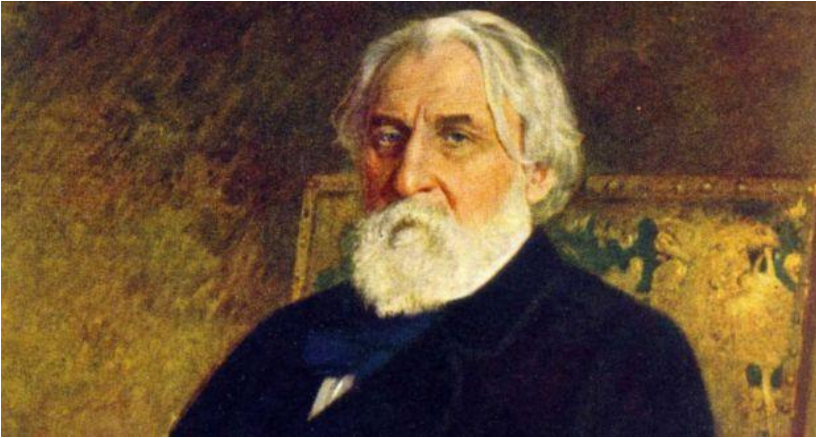
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Review of I. S. Turgenev, *Smoke, On the Eve, Virgin Soil, Fathers and Children* and *A House of Gentlefolk*, trans. Constance Garnett (London, 1920–51: Heinemann), *Observer*, 11 November 1951, 7



Turgenev by Aleksey Kharlamov, 1871

THE INFLUENCE of translators upon thought and literature is a topic which still awaits proper treatment, and among them the prodigious labours of Mrs Garnett occupy a central position. In the course of her busy and devoted life, this admirable lady translated the greater part of classical Russian prose into English, and virtually opened that vast continent to English-speaking readers and writers, thereby transforming their world.

There have been better translators from the Russian than Mrs Garnett: Aylmer Maude's translation of *War and Peace*, for example, is more faithful and, in addition, a work of art; Duff's translation of Aksakov's celebrated trilogy is much the best translation from the Russian into English in existence, and a great masterpiece in

itself; both these versions leave far behind Mrs Garnett's plodding prose.

Yet her merits are great and enduring. Her prose, for all its old-fashioned clumsiness, is sober, honest, direct, seldom inaccurate, and occasionally achieves felicities of its own. Above all, it is free from the intolerable vulgarities of those translators who try to render idioms unique to the language or the style of their originals into breezy modern colloquialisms, or quaint phrases specially manufactured to fit the mysterious movements of the Slav soul, and usually mingle this with sudden archaisms and so disfigure the originals out of all recognition.

Mrs Garnett is always serious, always careful, and anxious only to translate; throughout the entire compass of the vast territory which, single-handed, she took into her charge, her mistakes are seldom other than trivial. She is never precious or slipshod or skittish, she never obtrudes her personality, she never lapses into pidgin English. Where the Russian is imaginative, poetical and, as a young literary language is apt to do without self-consciousness, adopts spontaneous new forms which in an older language might feel too artificial and *voulu*, Mrs Garnett tends to miss the point and remains remorselessly flat and monotonous.

Nevertheless, she called a new world into being, and the fact that she steadily produced a uniform series of perfectly adequate English versions of virtually the whole of Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostyevsky, Chekhov (as well as Herzen's autobiography, a wonderful work of genius which but for her might have remained unnoticed until the present century) had the incidental result of imposing a unity of style and feeling upon Russian literature in its English form (the unity, as a rule, of Mrs Garnett's rather than her authors' personality), thereby providing a vision of a single coherent and astonishingly rich new universe to the English-speaking world – that nineteenth-century Russia which has had so profound an effect upon Western modes of feeling.

It is notoriously the case that some writers can be transposed into new media more easily than others, and triumph over all the

atrocities committed by their translators; while others defy even the most sensitive, imaginative and accurate. Thus, while Shakespeare and Dostoevsky cannot be entirely killed even by the most abominable renderings, Racine and Pushkin remain untranslatable.

Turgenev occupies a position somewhere between these extremes. His prose is melodious, lucid and of a classical purity and simplicity: above all, it is absolutely simple and direct despite the extreme delicacy and subtlety of the emotional shading both of his dialogue and his descriptive writing. Both the words and the structure of the sentences are almost wholly free from ornament and elaboration, and in this respect stem directly from Turgenev's master, Pushkin. Those who are familiar with Merimée's translation of Pushkin's prose tales may be surprised to hear that even that master of dry and direct expression felt it necessary to add romantic colour to Pushkin's exquisite transparency and purity of style, and this seems no less true of all the Western translations of Turgenev.

The demands which Turgenev makes are exceptionally tormenting to translators: even at his most sentimental or trivial his prose remains luminous, graceful and direct; the dialogue in particular is written in a language so natural, spontaneous and fresh, the style is so free from that 'literariness' which infects conversations even in the most naturalistic French or English novels of the nineteenth century that after a hundred years it has not dated. The opening of *On The Eve* where two young men discuss the ends of life, or the talk of the peasants in *A Sportsman's Sketches*, possesses a timeless quality to which Tolstoy himself (and well he knew it) scarcely ever attained. In Mrs Garnett's translations, now being reissued by Messrs Heinemann, all this has almost vanished. We find ourselves once again in a familiar Victorian framework, with its clear distinction between the spoken word and literary diction, to have transcended which is one of the major achievements of Turgenev's genius.

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If his feelings and opinions are those of his time, his mode of expression is not; it is perhaps this attribute, scarcely noted by the admirers among his contemporaries that attracted the late M André Gide – who has so little in common with him – to the task of collaborating in what is still the best rendering of any of Turgenev's works in a foreign language. In the meanwhile, unaware of these fine problems, Mrs Garnett translated and translated, apparently untroubled by literary qualms about the poetical quality of Turgenev's prose. In her simple way, she invented and imported the 'Little Fathers' and the 'Ah, my God, my dear sirs', the queer paraphernalia which now seems so intrinsic to it and has given a slightly ridiculous quality to all Russian writing as such in the eyes of English readers. And so Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, writers many miles distant from each other not merely in content but in style, were firmly fitted out in sound, uniform English cloth by the indefatigable Dr and Mrs Pegaway (as Sir Max Beerbohm once called the Garnetts), but still contrived to look somewhat exotic in the literary world of half a century ago, although exotic is exactly what they were not.

Nevertheless, if Mrs Garnett had been exposed to the fears and indecisions which a more sensitive insight would inevitably have brought with it, she might never have performed the Herculean labour upon which she was engaged throughout her long, blameless, competent, admirable working life. She built one of the most enduring bridges that ever connected one culture with another; long may she be remembered for it.

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