

Literary Reminiscences

I. Turgenev

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Turgenev is probably the only individual in the universe who has attended readings both by Gogol and Dickens. The one by Gogol was a semi-public one for a limited audience of actors taking place in Gogol's own house. It was a rare, maybe even a unique event, Gogol having the intention of teaching the actors how to play the Government Inspector, but to his chagrin few of the actual actors bothered to turn up. His reading was interrupted by a late arrival and then he lost his inspiration. The readings of Dickens on the other hand were really public affairs, with Dickens performing dramatically not to say theatrically, while Gogol was far more restrained, reading with a sincerity bordering to the naive. Next year Gogol died, and Turgenev was shocked, wrote an article on Gogol, which was subsequently rejected by the censor, showed it around, was encouraged by friends to have another go. It appeared, and Turgenev was sentenced to banishment at his estate. In retrospect it seems so idyllic, but at the time it was serious. The liberalization of the serfs in the middle of the century was probably the most pivotal political event during the 19th century, at least from the perspective of the liberal intelligentsia, acting as a watershed and hence there appeared a gulf between the younger generation coming of age after the event, and the generation of Turgenev, who had suffered the oppression of previous regimes. And this need to explain himself to late-comers appears to have been a major component of the motivation to write down his reminiscences, to set the record straight.

Turgenev comes across as a very wise and gentle man, soft-spoken and moderate. The downside of this is a certain blandness to his recollections, with few memorable passages to stick in your mind. Maybe part of it is the English translation, Turgenev is supposed to be maybe the most accomplished stylist of the great Russian writers, but little of this is supposed to survive the transition into another language. Anyway we are treated to a few glimpses of the great. Pushkin died while Turgenev was still a teenager, he brushed with him once, when the former left a party that Turgenev had had the honor to be invited to, without at the time realizing who it was. And then later caught sight of him from afar at an opera. Similarly Lermontov was only seen at a distance performing at some party being surrounded by women. With Gogol he met and talked, Gogol doing most of the talking. But with Belinsky he struck up a real friendship, and his portrait of him is the most extensive of the lot. Belinsky is portrayed as a man doomed by his tubercular disease, a fate rather common at the time as we all know from the Russian novels, whose great genius was that of a critic. A critic like Belinsky, with an unerring instinct for the good, is absolutely essential for the development of a literary culture, Turgenev tells the reader, especially one which like the Russian had no tradition. Belinsky was badly educated, and like so many intellectuals at the time, affected for a period by Hegel. But that did not really matter as long as his critical instincts were sound. Turgenev met him in Paris, but the sights of Paris made no impression on the critic, anything that did not relate to Russia and its literature was of no interest to him. Why should he be excited by Place de

Concord and the fact that the French King had been beheaded there? In addition to those names still remembered by posterity, Turgenev also remembered others long forgotten by the former.

The reminiscences only come to life when he recounts episodes from his travels abroad. There is the encounter with the stranger at the Tuilleries. The ill-clad tramp who showed such perceptive insights into the political situation in France prior to 1848 and who predicted the downfall of the monarchy and the resurgence of a Napoleon. Predictions which actually came to pass (but when written after the event, fails to carry conviction as such.) The eye-witness account of the actual revolution in 1848 and the subsequent insurgency is one of the more gripping. Turgenev was still a young man and his account of the strange mixture of the normal and the sensational that no doubt characterizes such events, makes it almost appear modern, as if occurring on the evening news. The peaceful street which is suddenly erupting in violence, Turgenev seeking shelter in the back alleys along with other by-standers some of them seriously wounded from gun shots.

But probably the most moving piece concerns the execution of a certain Jean-Baptise Tropmann. This was a young man, not yet twenty, who had killed a whole family, father, mother and innocent daughters. The crime was heinous, the culprit soon apprehended and sentenced to death. Turgenev is invited to be present at the actual execution, an invitation which he reluctantly accepts. To be able to do so they have to arrive early to the prison, because it is being surrounded by a growing mass of people starting to assemble already in the evening. Consequently Turgenev is forced to wait an entire night along with other invited guests. Conversation is impossible, because there can only be one topic of it, and it is a most awkward one at that. The night drags on, and Turgenev remarks that contrary to belief, the last hours do not pass even more slowly than the first. At one time he escapes the claustrophobic atmosphere and escapes out in the prison yard where the guillotine is being assembled. The prison is surrounded by a sea of people ejecting a din not unlike that of waves, there is also a pungent reeking of alcohol, and no doubt huge quantities of wine must have been consumed. Turgenev has the writers sensitivity to the significant detail and he is struck by the wicker basket, intended to catch the still warm severed head, which along with the rest of the body would then be speedily removed and interred. Turgenev feels sick.

Dawn gradually disperses with the darkness, the young convict has slept soundly through the night, in spite of the constant roar outside, and is now to be waken up then taken to do his toilet and receiving the last rites. Turgenev is struck by how young he is, not yet twenty, still so much of a child. His hair is cut by a fumbling old man in the neck, as is part of the collar, in order to make a path free for the falling blade, as if this would be necessary. Turgenev sees the imaginary line being traced across his neck and shoulders, along which severance will be effected. The young man himself seems almost unaffected, walking nay almost running up and down the corridors hurrying to his end after the preparatory business is completed. The party with Turgenev is hardly able to keep up. And so he arrives at the scaffold, his legs and arms are tied with leather straps. The crowd which up to now had become louder and more restive, not became completely quiet as the great event is finally to happen. At the very end Turgenev cannot bear to watch, he only hears the sound of the wooden blocks coming together keeping the head in place,

and then the fall of the heavy guillotine, landing with a big thud. It is over, and Turgenev almost throws up. He feels that he has been an accomplice of a crime. The crime of deliberately taking a life. As he leaves he sees people running to the scaffold to lick up still dripping blood from the interstices of the planks.

What is the point really of capital punishment he asks the reader, because the whole point of the story is to make a point against the barbarous tradition of capital punishment, at least the public one. And all those people, what could they possibly see of the execution, except those standing at the very front? In what way did it teach them to live more virtuous lives? Was it not just an opportunity for a spectacle, standing there the whole night, drunk and raving, in excited anticipation. Turgenev was later criticized by Dostoevski for his story, as if it was written solely to hold up what fine a fellow he was, how refined and delicate, how much above vulgar feelings, and in the process letting his own emotions take center stage. Accusations, rather unfair I would say

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