

## A Window on Russia

*E. Wilson*

July 21–23, 2009

This is another old book in my library. Have I ever read it before? Most of its contents are new to me, still once in a while there are passages that ring a strong bell. Have I really read it and most of the contents have simply been obliterated in memory, even those that on a second reading appear so vivid, such as the story of Turgenev and his mother? If so what is the point of reading when most of what you read is indefinitely sunk into oblivion, and what you actually recall is but random fragments. Or did I just skim through the book, or did I read parts of this collection elsewhere? What I recall is the initial praise of Russian. No need to learn Spanish in order to talk to God, nor French to consort with your friends nor German to engage with your enemies and finally no reason to learn Italian to speak to the ladies, when Russian will do for all. Or that in Tolstoy there is a marked difference when the characters use French instead of their Native Russian, in the former case there is but artifice and superficiality, French being the language par excellence when it comes to rationalize the false and pretentious. Or that Wilson himself was once trapped in a small cottage in Connecticut insulated from the outside world by snow, caught up in reading *War and Peace*, no doubt putting the wrong stress on many words, but so blissfully absorbed in the book that it surely did not matter<sup>1</sup>. What I definitely recall is his long critical review of his friend Nabokov's translation of *Eugen Onegin*, in which he hashes it to pieces with such abandon and persistence, that even when he finally turns to praise parts of Nabokov's erudition, he cannot refrain from further sniping. I guess this review, which caused a longer public interchange between the two<sup>2</sup> effected a breach of their friendship that would never heal. Finally I recall snatches of Wilson's ruminations on the Russian language, the great variety of specific verbs, the rich vocabulary on things having to do with snow and ice<sup>3</sup>

So what is Wilson doing writing about Russian literature a subject of which he is but a well-meaning aficionado, a bumbling amateur? He is a bit defensive on the subject, claiming that as an outsider he is more likely to point out what the insiders take for granted. Thus his mission is to provide a link, and open, so to speak, a window on Russian literature, which although known and much admired by Western readers, still is foreign and improperly understood, and only imperfectly transmitted through translations, giving but a faint and fuzzy image of the real thing.

What is so fascinating about Russia? Those pieces were written during the Cold War,

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<sup>1</sup> A book he incidentally recommends to the learner of Russian. The long French passages giving relief, and the length of the book actually ensures that at the end you will have learned a lot.

<sup>2</sup> When no longer accommodated by the *New York Review of Books*, it was moved by Nabokov to other magazines, no doubt much to the perplexity of their readers.

<sup>3</sup> Russian, like Swedish, has a specific word (наст/skare) for the notion of frozen snow crust, which is conspicuously absent in English.

when the attention of the general public to things Russian were particularly aroused, and Russia perhaps more than ever before and after was a source of fascination, a mixture of fear and disdain. A mixture that has of course been present for a very long time, Russia being seen as vast barbaric country, exhibiting vast differences of wealth, abject poverty mixing with oriental splendor, exquisite intellectual refinement emerging out of bottomless ignorance. I myself was educated in fear and hatred of things Russian, a vast Slavic sea, on whose fringes one was in constant risk of being inundated. Concomitant with this I was in younger years alerted by my mother of a rich and fascinating literature, whose fruits I was not to taste until my later teens. I do not recall which was the first Russian book I read. An early inconsequential play by Chekov shown on TV sent both me and my brother into paroxysms of laughter, so it is possible that some short story of his might have been my introduction<sup>4</sup>. I do definitely recall reading far into the night 'Fathers and Sons' in the fall of 1968, a book which made a deep impression on me. In the year before my move to the States I read some of Dostoevskis shorter novels, although I did not have at the time the tenacity to tackle any of his longer novels, nor those of his even more famous contemporary. This would have to wait until my years in the States, when I did during the initial years 1971-76 read most of the classical Russian novels in English translations, provoking in me a fantasy of learning Russia and read them in the original, a daydream that a Wilson had taken far more seriously, even if entertained at a more mature age. Those were the years of my major infatuation with Russian literature, and no doubt the present book must have been bought at the time (or soon thereafter).

The longest and most ambitious essay in the book deals with Turgenev. This is fitting, because he was also the first Russian writer that gained an international reputation, being lionized by the French. Wilson claims that Turgenev was, perhaps with the exception of Pushkin, the most accomplished stylist of the Russians, his prose being far more conscientiously shaped than that of the more slapdash Tolstoy. Not that Wilson ever doubts the essential superiority of the latter, whose uncanny ability to enter the minds of others in his fictions, turns him into a genius. Turgenev had a tortured childhood and early adulthood, being under the thumb of a sadistic mother who ruled her estate and her serfs with the reckless despotism and irresponsible caprice of a tyrant. His Sportsmans sketches made his reputation, and it is even speculated that it was instrumental in bringing down the institution of serfdom in Russia having so effected the Russian czar Nicholas. This surprises me greatly, pleasant as his stories are, they nevertheless did not made any deeper impression on me when I read them a few years ago, only the best of them being on the general level of Chekovs more mature work. According to Wilson, Turgenev had two faces, one which he turned towards his Western admirers, who found him intelligent, highly educated and charming, if somewhat elusive; the other which he presented to his fellow countrymen, which was far more passionate and sincere. Turgenev was dismissed by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as being too Westernized, betraying the Russian soul and its mission; while Wilson emphasizes the basic decency of the man, his rational intelligence and his often unappreciated prophetic powers. (If you want to understand Bolshevism, Wilson claims, you can hardly do better than reading Turgenev.)

On Chekhov Wilson is far briefer. He points out that his oeuvres follows a trajectory

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<sup>4</sup> I recall seeing a Russian film-version of the Lady with the Lapdog in the late 60's.

of development, starting from his mostly farcical early works<sup>5</sup> through a more developed sarcastic period to the mature works of his later works. It is important to read him chronologically he admonishes, and thus welcomes the appearance of this collected works. Like most Russian writers he has been ill-served by his translators being presented out of focus. Wilson notes sarcastically that while Soviet criticism blames the old regime on the sly, enterprising characters, that play the villains in Checkovs stories, it is exactly this kind of man who rose to prominence after the Revolution.

Pushkin, the father of Russian literature, plays a central role in Wilson's essays, in which primarily his verbal dexterity is praised. Wilson regrets that modern literary criticism loses itself in airy abstractions, rather than concentrating on the craft of writing as the old rhetoricians did. In former times the writing of poetry presented a technical challenge, and a poet would be appreciated for his virtuosity. Different languages require different meters. Eugene Onegin is written in a tetrameter, while English is better suited to the pentameter, while the French excels in the hexameter. Translations of poetry is notoriously intractable, based as it is on the play of words, forcing reinterperation rather than literal transformations. Nabokov seems more intent upon the literal aspect, thus he dredges from the dictionary the most archaic specimen, making his rendering not only awkward but also intermittently incomprehensible.

Most of the pieces are written in the late forties and early fifties, but there are also some more contemporary ones, meaning the late sixties and early seventies (Wilson died in 1972), which means that he can also touch upon Svetlana, the daughter of Stalin, and her memoirs. He regrets her exploitation by the Western media. As to the literature of the camp, he can only shake his head. Such suffering, such relentless, meaningless suffering, brought about by pure sadism. How come people can spend all their time and effort just to make the lives of other totally miserable. This clearly is not his cup of tea. He reads Solshenitsyn, whose Western fame had just become manifest, to some degree, in connection of having been awarded the Nobel Prize. He is appreciative but without warmth, he approves of the choice, bit without enthusiasm, as the dreariness of his topic is just too unrelenting.

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<sup>5</sup> A sample of which entertained me and my brother so much once.