

The Gentle Barbarian

The Life and Work of Turgenev

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Turgenev was born in Oryol (Orel) on November 9 (N.S.) 1818 and died in Paris from cancer of the spinal chord on September 3 1883. Incidentally he was a very close contemporary of Marx (May 5 1818 - March 14 1883, who lived for 15 days longer) but the two men probably never crossed paths.

He was of the nobility, and the younger son of an unhappy marriage. The father was a few years younger than his wife, a strapping officer who had married for money and amused himself with adulterous affairs and died young at forty-one when Turgenev was still a teenager. The mother, by name of Varvara Petrovna born Lutvinova, was a strong-willed woman and mistress of an estate - Spasskoe - where she cruelly ruled over thousands of serfs. His semi-autobiographical novel 'First Love' (Первая Любовь) depicts his early family life. Ivan Turgenev was her favorite son and at home he got a thorough language education through foreign governesses, ending up being fluent in French, German and English at an early age. In fact at home French was spoken. He continued his education in Moscow, where the family retired for that purpose, and then continued at the universities of Moscow and St-Petersburg focusing on the Classics, Russian literature and philology, and capping it off in 1838 by going to Berlin studying philosophy, predominantly Hegel, as expected. His first sojourn in the West lasted for three years. Returning home he first opted for an academic career, but dismissed it as too easy, then accepted a post in the Civil Service but soon tired of it and from then on he devoted himself to literature being a man of independent means. His first attempts were in poetry, but rather indistinguishable. A keen sportsman loving to hunt, as fitted a country gentleman, he published a collection of short stories under the title of 'A Sportsman's sketches' (Записки охотника) which made a splash and established him. Subsequent books, at least in Russia, got a cooler reception, probably because of crossed expectations. He was the foremost representative of the liberal Westerners, who counted on him to further their cause, while the Slavophiles detested him no matter what. Trying to steer some middle course would of course satisfy no one. In the West however, he was lionized, seen as the gentle and sage Russian, fascinating because he seemed to combine Western civilization with Oriental Russian exoticism, providing a window to the unfamiliar. He moved in the most exclusive of literary circles and was a personal friend of among others Flaubert. Many of his admirers, such as Henry James, preferred him to the more unwieldy authors such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Turgenev presented a tall imposing figure, yet gentle and exquisitely civilized and erudite. A Gentle Barbarian indeed, as the title of the biography indicates. Of a light disposition, prone to childish play, would the occasion arise; yet of a hypochondriacal temperament and a fear of death and concerned with a premature aging. He never married but did have off-springs with serf-women in his youth, the issue of which did not concern

him overly. However, one daughter named Paulinette he farmed out and paid a substantial dowry for while the marriage did not work out and ended in divorce. His great consuming love-affair was with the celebrated opera singer, and more than capable, not to say outstanding, pianist¹ Pauline Viardot (Garcia) (1821-1910). She was Spanish of gypsy extraction and married to the much older Louis Viardot (1800-1883) who was quite rich and acted as her impresario². Turgenev met her in 1843 when he was twenty-five and she twenty-two and she was performing the role of Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Seviglia* in St-Petersburg at the newly erected opera house capable of accommodating three thousand people. In fact her sojourn in St-Petersburg was a resounding success, and Italian operas, which had not been staged there for a long time, met with a receptive revival. Turgenev was quite taken by her. She was not strikingly beautiful (although portraits belie that assessment, but those can of course have been painted to flatter³), but her eyes were very expressive, and she had character. Then apart from her obvious talents as a performer, she was cultured and skilled, having spoken fluent Spanish, French, English and Italian since early childhood⁴. At that time the celebrity culture was taken up by musical, and to a lesser extent, theatrical performers, earning substantial sums on exhausting tours⁵. Turgenev must have found that quite alluring. He started out strategically by striking up a friendship with her husband and quickly imposed himself as a partner in the family. Gossip painted it as a *ménage à trois* suggesting that some of the breed issued from her were due to Turgenev. He certainly took a more active interest in her children than he did in his own, although it was to the Viardots he had farmed out his illegitimate daughter. He was a frequent visitor to their castle-like manor Courtavenel in Vaudoy-en-Brie (where the husband Louis had been born), and lived close to each other in Baden-Baden, where she settled after her retirement from the stage. With Louis he shared an aristocratic interest in shooting and kept on amiable relations. When not living in close contact he kept up an intimate correspondence with Pauline, a correspondence which naturally waned and waxed over the years.

At the very end of his life he submitted to the removal of a malignant tumor without anesthesia, but too late, the rumor had spread to his spinal chord and the last month of his life was exceedingly painful. He died in Paris and after a funeral oratory he was taken by two of Pauline's sons-in-law to St-Petersburg and was given a big public funeral (nervously supervised by the Tsarist authorities) and interred at the Volkov cemetery close to Gogol.

The biography by the illustrious British author of short stories is competent and

¹ A student of Liszt, she started her performing career as a concert pianist at the age of 16. She was a close friend of many of the leading musicians at the time, in particular with Chopin. She also composed, but mostly for a private circle, and was claimed by her teacher Liszt as the first serious woman composers.

² She was courted already at the age of 17 by Alfred de Musset, but declined his proposal, instead she was directed by her friend George Sand to Viardot

³ One portraitist of hers, a certain Scheffer, pronounced her dreadfully ugly, and in fact his polite portrait of her, indicates that his verdict might not have been that off

⁴ As a singer of Russian songs she was easily taken for a Native.

⁵ There being no mass communication, the audiences for them were probably restricted to the wealthy and cultured, on the other hand cheap admissions (standing only?) was available, especially, I surmise in Italy

economical in execution. In the intervening forty odd years longer and more substantially researched biographies would emerge. Pritchett knew no Russian, which one would think of as a handicap, on the other hand the ambition has hardly been professional. He also contributes nut-shell summaries of plots and reviews of receptions. Turgenev, being rich and used to a comfortable life appears as rather lazy and congenial to the life of leisure and approval open to him. Yet he was a professional writer taking pains to perfect his art; thus the approval meted out by someone like Henry James whose artistic attitudes he shared. On the Scandinavian scene, the resigned pessimism and concomitant detachment of a Hjalmar Sderberg comes to ones mind.

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