CHAPTER FIVE

Turgenev: “A passion for art”

Approaching Turgenev

In the “The Russian Point of View” (1925), Virginia Woolf does not mention the writer to whom she refers elsewhere, in implicit comparison to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, as “the least great of the Russian trinity” (“English Prose,” E 3: 174). However, she read and admired the fiction of Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev during the decade between 1910 and 1920 when she first read the major Russian writers. Her sole review of his fiction, “A Glance at Turgenev,” appeared in 1921; she reviewed a new biography of the writer in 1927. Six years later, she gave Turgenev considerably more than a “glance”: she read or reread eleven volumes of his fiction in English as well as a biography, a memoir, and a volume of his collected letters in French. During the late summer and early fall of that year, she recorded passages from her reading along with her observations about the novels and their author in preparation for a projected essay focusing exclusively on Turgenev. Her reading notes on his fiction comprise her most extensive series of notes on any single writer; the resulting essay, “The Novels of Turgenev,” is Woolf’s only essay to focus on a Russian writer by herself. The essay was published in December 1933 in the Times Literary Supplement and the Yale Review. During the same year, Woolf began to compose a novel first titled The Pargiters. Ultimately published as The Years in 1937, the novel reflects the influence of Turgenev on Woolf’s ideas about the relationship between scene and feeling and between vision and form.
Turgenev was one of the first Russian writers to be translated into English, with *A Sportsman’s Sketches* appearing as early as 1854 (Gettman, *Turgenev in England and America* 17). For that reason, British readers were aware of his work considerably before the peak years of Russophilia in England. Ironically, when the major Russian writers of the next generation began to appear in English editions, Turgenev suffered a diminution of critical reputation. Woolf’s balanced analysis of his fiction after the waning of British—including her own—intoxication with Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and Tolstoy constitutes a discerning reappraisal of critical opinion that had dealt both extravagantly and harshly with Turgenev during the early years of the twentieth century. For example, in a statement that is laughable a century later, the writer Ford Maddox Ford ranked Turgenev above Shakespeare because “his characters are more human than Shakespeare’s were” (*The Critical Attitude* 156). By contrast, the critic Arthur Clutton-Brock objected to Turgenev’s authorial detachment, likening him to “a very big man playing a very small instrument” (“Turgenev,” *Essays on Books* 160).

Early contentions that Turgenev was Westernized as a result of the many years he lived in France—and, therefore, that his representations of Russian life were less authentic than those of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov—yielded to recognition of his psychological insight and technical mastery. Critical commentary throughout the twentieth century tended to laud either the political/social Turgenev—the group that has “dominated the discussion of Turgenev’s works both in Russia and in the West”—or the aesthetic/formal Turgenev, but rarely both (Allen, *Beyond Realism* 3). The latter group is typified by “imaginative writers, including Henry James, Thomas Mann, Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway, William Dean Howells, Virginia Woolf, and Somerset Maugham, to name but a few. Distinctive and superb stylists themselves, they cared more for Turgenev’s mastery of form than for his historical subject matter” (Allen, *Beyond Realism* 3). Henry James, who considered the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky formally and stylistically slack,1 regarded Turgenev as a model and inspiration. The label he gave the writer stuck: he called him “the novelist’s novelist—an artistic influence extraordinarily valuable and ineradicably established” (“Turgenev and Tolstoy” 170).2

Woolf is clearly among those who appreciated Turgenev more for his formal artistry than for his political or social commentary. In an essay on the novels of E. M. Forster, published several years before “The Novels of Turgenev,” Woolf divided novelists “roughly” into “the two great camps to which most novelists belong... the preachers and the teachers,