

IVAN TURGENEV:

Romantic Humanist

By WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

OF RUSSIA's three great nineteenth-century novelists, Ivan Turgenev, although the most universally readable, has enjoyed less appreciation than Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. He brought off no single work with the epic power and sweep of *War and Peace*. He did not search the darkest abysses of the human soul and pose eternal questions of morality and philosophy with the passionate urgency of Dostoevsky, especially in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Much of the rare beauty of Turgenev's prose style is almost inevitably lost in translation. This even applies to his titles: *Dvoryanskoe Gnyezdo* sounds rather stiff and unnatural in such renderings as *Noblemen's Nest* and *House of Gentlefolk*.

Yet Turgenev is unmistakably a great novelist, a worthy compeer of his intimate French friend and contemporary, Gustave Flaubert, to whose memory he dedicated one of his numerous short stories with an inscription from Schiller, "Wage du zu irren und zu träumen." ("Dare to go wrong and to dream.") If he never reached the towering peaks of fiction, he remains on a high plateau of uniform excellence. Unlike Tolstoy, he never forsook his art in pursuit of ethical and social ideals. Unlike Dostoevsky, he kept a steady sense of balance and proportion.

He stands out in the rich cultural history of the nineteenth century as a romantic humanist, a great Russian and a great European. Unlike the intensely Russian Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, he lived much of his life abroad and was at home in the cosmopolitan literary society of Paris, where his luncheons with Flaubert, Zola (whom he admired less), the Goncourt brothers, and other prominent literary figures were equally famous for wit, wide-ranging conversation, and gourmet delicacies. Turgenev was fluent in German, French, and English, was admired by Henry James as "the beautiful genius," and conceived an admiration for the United States, although he never carried out his expressed desire to cross

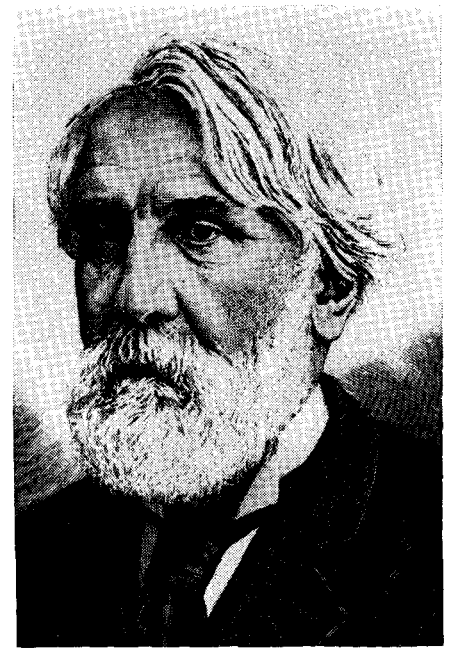
the Atlantic. But he prided himself on writing only in Russian, and one of the finest of the random sketches that have gone under the name *Poems in Prose* is a stately tribute to the Russian language:

In days of doubt, in days of painful meditation about the fate of my fatherland, thou alone are my prop and my support, O great, mighty, just and free Russian language. If it were not for thee, how could one escape falling into despair at the sight of all that goes on at home? But it is impossible to believe that such a language is not bestowed on a great people.

There is significance in the date of this tribute, June 1882. The comparatively liberal Czar Alexander II had been assassinated in the preceding year, and a regime of stern reaction gripped the country. Turgenev, who was himself to die at the age of sixty-five in 1883, after long agony from cancer of the spinal cord, had seen his hope for evolutionary progress in his native land frustrated.

ROMANTIC but not a sentimentalist in his writing, a humanist in the breadth of his international contacts, Turgenev was that rarest of Russian intellectual types, a liberal. Tolstoy paid little attention to the social ferment of his time, and Dostoevsky, after being sent to Siberia for belonging to a study group concerned with new ideas, vehemently rejected Western liberalism and turned into a passionate champion of Orthodoxy and old Russian beliefs. But Turgenev followed trends among the younger generation with a mixture of sympathy and skepticism.

His masterpiece, *Fathers and Children* (a more accurate translation than the more familiar *Fathers and Sons*), reflects the nihilist mood of some of the Russian students of the Sixties, a mood of questioning all accepted values and substituting a rather crude materialism for the somewhat affected niceties of upper-class social life. He received much unmerited abuse from the young rebels



—Bettmann Archive.

Ivan Turgenev—"a worthy compeer of . . . Gustave Flaubert."

who professed to regard Bazarov, the hero, as a caricature; but tolerance has seldom been a Russian virtue.

Turgenev returned to a social theme in a later novel, *Virgin Soil*. At this time—in the Seventies—there was a movement among the educated youth to "go to the people," to go into peasant villages for the double purpose of spreading literary and elementary health measures, and distributing revolutionary propaganda. The peasants viewed these strange city folk with suspicion, and handed over a good many of them to the police.

The two principal characters in *Virgin Soil* are Nezhdanov, a nobleman's illegitimate son and a radical young intellectual, and Marianne, a girl whom he meets in the country mansion where he is employed as a tutor. They are drawn together by similarity of ideas, by a common impulse to work for the overthrow of a corrupt social order. Finally they run away, with childlike naïveté, dreaming of going to the people with the gospel of social revolution. Poor Nezhdanov experiences a pitiful fiasco. The peasants cannot understand his high-flown phrases and he cannot stomach the strong vodka which he gulps down in an effort to fraternize with them. His love for Marianne is paralyzed by a sense of frustration. He commits suicide, leaving Marianne to the care of a mutual friend, Solomin.

The latter, a common-sense, self-educated peasant who has become a factory manager, is one of the practical figures whom Turgenev sometimes presents along with his Hamlet-like intellectuals, his Rudins and Nezhdanovs, who don't know what they want and won't be

happy until they get it. He urges Mari-
anne to find satisfaction in practical so-
cial tasks, to teach peasant children and
mothers the elements of health and sani-
tation and literacy.

In this advice one can sense the
prompting of Turgenev's clear head. But
his warm heart is reflected in this out-
burst of the enthusiastic Marianne:

If I am unhappy, it is not with my
own unhappiness. It sometimes seems
to me that I suffer on behalf of all the
oppressed, the poor, the wretched in
Russia. No, I do not suffer, but I am
indignant for their sake, so indignant
that I am ready to lay down my life
for them. I am unhappy because I am
a young lady, a parasite, because I do
not know how to do anything whatever.

And in one of the "Poems in Prose"
there is a vision of an idealistic young
woman, setting out on the dark, forbid-
ding career of an underground revolu-
tionary as one voice hisses, "A Fool,"
and another voice answers: "A Saint."

Although Turgenev's contact with
England was slight, British rational lib-
eralism was congenial to his temper. On
a visit to Oxford, where he received an
honorary degree, the Russian novelist
was fascinated by a debate among the
students on the subject: "Resolved, that
the Communards of Paris deserve the
sympathy of the English people." He
was fascinated by the spectacle of cool
argument on a subject that in Russia
would have probably caused the mobil-
ization of the whole police force; also by
the fact that the students, after hearing
all the arguments on both sides, over-
whelmingly voted down the proposition.
"There will be no revolution in Eng-
land," was Turgenev's prophetic con-
clusion.

TURGENEV is an author for all seasons.
But he is best read in youth. It is doubt-
ful whether any novelist excels him in
the gift of creating an atmosphere of
romanticism that does not degenerate
into sentimentality. Many factors enter
into this gift: his sense of nature and
landscape, his love of music, his rare
ability to understand and communicate
the moods of youth.

He is especially happy in his feminine
characters. Liza in *Noblemen's Nest*,
Natalya in *Rudin*, Elena in *On the Eve*,
Gemma in *Torrents of Spring* are a rare
galaxy, a true dream of fair women.
Stronger, often, and more constant than
his male characters, these Turgenev her-
oines are singularly free of worldly so-
phistication and are capable of the most
intense, single-minded devotion to an
individual or to an ideal. Yet they are
far removed from the wooden heroines
of Walter Scott or from such creations of
Thackeray as Amelia Sedley in *Vanity
Fair* or Laura in *Pendennis*. They are

warm, flesh-and-blood human beings
without a trace of priggishness or pru-
dishness.

Perhaps it was the absence of social
and commercial pressures, the leisurely
pace of life in a Russia that had scarcely
entered the Industrial Age, that made
for the existence of such characters. The
"Turgenev girl," one suspects, was a
casualty of the Russian Revolution.

The only way adequately to appreciate
Turgenev's romantic spell is to read and
reread his novels. But one may recall two
episodes of rare beauty. There is the
night garden scene in *Noblemen's Nest*
in which Lavretsky wins a confession of
love from Liza, perhaps the most appeal-
ing of his heroines. Unable to sleep from
happiness and excitement, Lavretsky
wakes up Liza's old German music
teacher, Lemm, who realizes what has
happened and sits down to play like a
man inspired. The beauty is more poign-
ant because tragedy is in the wings.
Lavretsky's faithless wife, whom he be-
lieved to be dead, returns. Divorce, un-
der the canons of the Orthodox Church,
is impossible. Liza buries her broken love
in a convent; Lavretsky learns to live
with renunciation.

There is another glowing scene in *On
the Eve*. Here the strong, almost dour
personality of the dedicated Bulgarian
nationalist, Insarov, is set against that of
some amiable Russian triflers. When
Elena, the heroine of the novel, learns
that Insarov is about to leave Russia, she
goes to him and tells him that she loves
him—a far greater breach of convention
at that time than it would be now.

Insarov, deeply in love with Elena,
but earnest and serious, feels obliged to

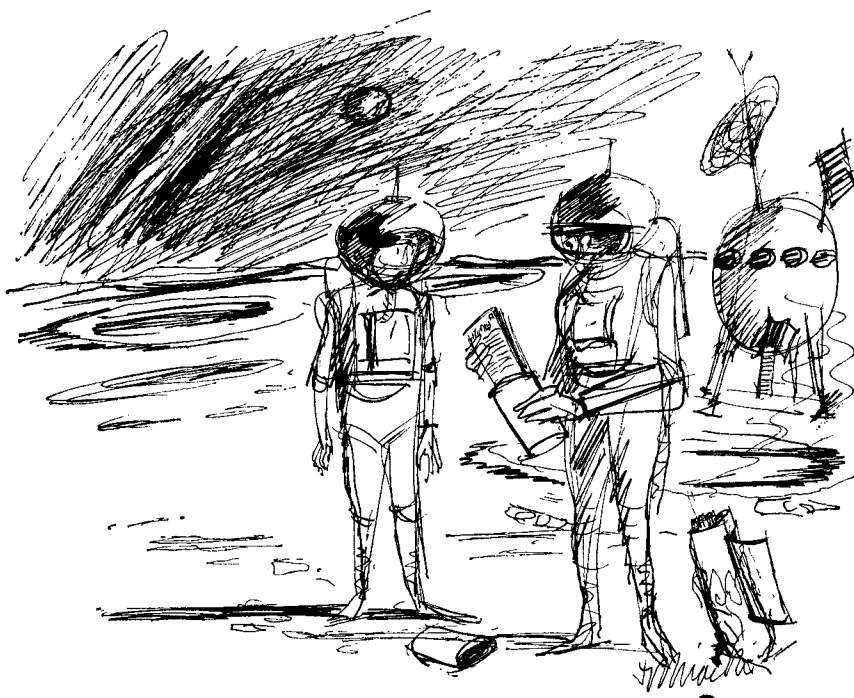
warn her of one obstacle after another
to their marriage: the disapproval of her
parents, the necessity to leave Russia,
commitment to the hard and dangerous
life of a rebel against Turkish rule in his
native Bulgaria. But to every testing
question Elena quietly responds "I
know"—until the climax is reached as
Insarov cries: "Long live my wife, be-
fore men and before God."

THERE IS an episode in Mary Mc-
Carthy's *The Group* in which the woman
makes the advance but which is other-
wise as complete a contrast to the spirit
of the relation between Insarov and
Elena as could well be imagined. There,
Dick's parting message to Dottie is, "Get
yourself a pessary—a female contracep-
tive, a plug." And he follows this with
assurances of prospective infidelity.
Other times, other values, other morals.
Love is indeed a many-sided thing.

In this novel also there is no happy
ending. Insarov dies of tuberculosis in
Venice "on the eve" of his return to Bul-
garia; Elena disappears. The death oc-
curs against this vivid and characteristic
descriptive passage:

The mildness and softness of spring
become Venice, as the brilliant sum-
mer sun becomes magnificent Genoa,
as the gold and purple of autumn be-
come the grand old city—Rome. . . .
The huge masses of the palaces and
churches stand light and splendid, like
the beautiful dream of a young god;
there is something fabulous, something
enchantingly strange in the green-grey
gleam and the silken play of hues of
the dumb water in the canals, in the

(Continued on page 52)



"I don't know. Getting the 'Times' every
morning makes me even more homesick."

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the heating furnaces of thousands of apartment houses and office buildings, and by manufacturing establishments.

New York City has begun to mount a counter-attack. The Mayor's Task Force on Air Pollution has completed an agreement with Consolidated Edison, the city's supplier of electrical power, to start shutting down its antiquated stations, now located within the city, and build power-generating stations at remote areas outside the city, then to carry the power into New York over transmission lines. These new plants would be equipped with air-pollution control devices and would be located in sparsely populated areas. Moreover, with the urging and backing of the city, Consolidated Edison has received from the Federal Power Commission an additional allocation of 20 billion cubic feet of natural gas to be used instead of soft coal and fuel oil at some of its power plants inside the city. The power-generating station just south of the United Nations already has been converted to smoke-free natural gas, and U.N. delegates may use their terrace this summer without having to cope with heavy soot fallout.

New York City has also just enacted legislation aimed at reducing the amount of the highly noxious sulfur oxides, produced by the burning of coal and fuel oil. And the city intends to install pollution-control devices on the city-operated incinerators, which account for a considerable portion of the dirt and poisons in the air.

Perhaps the most important single recommendation of the Mayor's Task Force on Air Pollution in New York is directed to the creation of an Environmental Control Board, with authority to combat air pollution, water pollution, noise, and congestion. Mayor John V. Lindsay has accepted the Task Force report as the basis for the anti-pollution program of his administration.

Basically, however, the fight to control environmental dangers is a national and even a world one. The human race may not be tied together politically or philosophically or culturally, but the one thing that all the world's people have in common is a finite amount of land, an air envelope that is rapidly filling up with filth and poisons, and an uneven water supply that is largely unprotected against infection by sewage and noxious wastes.

The human intelligence that created industrial civilization now has the assignment of making that civilization compatible with man's basic needs. If this is not done, the verdict on man is likely to be that he is first of all an anti-environmental predator and a producer of garbage and poisons, and only secondarily a creator of fine works, great deeds, and beauty.

—N.C.

The Other War

EDITOR'S NOTE: *For the past five months, SR's editor has served as chairman of a Task Force on Air Pollution appointed by Mayor John V. Lindsay of New York City. The following editorial is drawn from that experience:*

THE American people are involved in a war far more deadly than the war in Vietnam, but very few of them seem aware of it; even fewer of them are doing anything about it. The war is being waged against the environment. Land, air, and water are the basics of that environment. All these basics are now under unrelenting attack.

Consider the assault on the land. Americans are possessed of an incredible delusion. They believe they have a limitless supply of food. They have seen so many pictures of storage bins overflowing with grain that it hasn't occurred to them that their abundance may now be shrinking and that they may be headed for a food shortage. Each year for the past two decades more than a million acres have been taken out of cultivation in order to find space for spreading cities. Another million acres each year have been covered by broad cement ribbons of new superhighways. Meanwhile, millions more Americans have to be fed each year and our foreign commitments are growing.

Even without respect to food supplies, the gouging-out of forests and farmlands has already inflicted grave damage. Whether on broad new highways carved out of the countryside or on speedways cutting through the hearts of the cities, automotive vehicles are spew-

ing into the atmosphere each year hundreds of thousands of tons of gases and chemical wastes that are hostile to the delicate lung tissue of human beings and other animals, and that devitalize or destroy the crops on which life depends. Under the Federal Clean Air Act, all new automobiles in the U.S. will have to be equipped with special pollution-control devices by 1968. This is all to the good. Unfortunately, the bulk of the car population will be unaffected unless the states pass effective legislation to bring all cars, trucks, and buses under control. Another serious difficulty is that the new federal legislation calls for a device that is directed against hydrocarbons but that actually will have the effect of increasing the highly dangerous oxides of nitrogen in automobile exhausts.

It makes little difference how much progress may be made in other areas of attack on pollution; unless there is effective control over gasoline and diesel engines, the larger fight against pollution will fail. No American city has been more vigorous and effective than Los Angeles in reducing poisons and filth caused by incineration, open burning, and heating furnaces. But the growth of the freeways and of automotive traffic has been cancelling out the gains produced by the tamed chimneys.

New York has 1,500,000 gasoline and diesel engines pumping lead, polynuclear hydrocarbons, benzopyrene, nitric oxides, and carbon monoxide into its air each day. This incredible noxious spew is added to all the other poisons produced by incinerators, public and private; by power-generating stations; by