

Edward Garnett: Interpreting the Russians

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‘It is time someone should estimate for us what the Russians have done in literature, should show clearly how they have successfully widened the whole scope and aim of the novel.’¹ Thus Edward Garnett, writing anonymously in 1890. Then aged twenty-two, his principal job was as publisher’s reader at the firm of T. Fisher Unwin. Six months previously, Garnett had married Constance Black, and when, in the summer of 1891, pregnancy forced her into a period of unaccustomed inactivity, a Russian émigré to whom Edward introduced her, Felix Volkhovsky, encouraged her to learn the language. Constance’s first translation – *A Common Story*, from Ivan Goncharov’s *Obyknovennaia istoriia*, 1848 – was published in 1894, initiating a distinguished career during which she translated more than seventy volumes of Russian writing, making the works of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov, amongst others, available to British readers.

Until Constance Garnett began translating nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian realist fiction, many English versions were simply adapted from French or German translations. As Rachel May argues, this unsatisfactory situation was one of the reasons Russian literature lacked recognition.² The problem, however, was not purely one of translation; as Edward Garnett would suggest in several of his later articles, contemporary readers often failed to appreciate the distinctive qualities of Russian writing, and were at something of a loss

¹ [Edward Garnett], ‘The Russian Novel’ (review of Charles Edward Turner, *The Modern Novelists of Russia*), *The Speaker*, 1 March 1890, p. 241.

² Rachel May, *The Translator in the Text: On Reading Russian Literature in English* (Evanston, IL, 1994), p. 19.

as to how it should be interpreted. Even when the issue of translation had been addressed, the challenge of interpretation remained. Just as Constance's translations made an array of Russian works available to an anglophone readership, Edward Garnett set himself the equally difficult task of explaining the unfamiliar mental habits and emotional colouring behind them, a task of interpretation he considered essential to an understanding and appreciation of the great Russian writers. 'It is evident from the general tone of writers in the English Press and in our periodical literature that the tone of the Russian mind and the Russian attitude to life are a profound mystery to the educated Englishman', he declared in a 1905 review.³ Garnett believed that this state of affairs could be remedied only through the study of the Russian mind 'as it expresses itself in its own literature'.⁴

'How difficult it is for the people of one nation to enter sympathetically into the national spirit of another people', he wrote, and it was Garnett's view that the critic should aim to facilitate this:

The first object the literary critic should set himself, in dealing with a foreign literature, is to explain this strange people's life, their conception of life, the spirit of each age, the inevitability of the intellectual movements of the various generations, and he will look round in the literature for the chief types, among authors great or obscure, whose work best reflects all that is a national revelation and fundamentally significant of the people's life and their mental characteristics.⁵

His target here is the Polish author Kazimierz Waliszewski, whose *History of Russian Literature* (1900) he is reviewing. Garnett accuses Waliszewski of being 'out of sympathy with the Russian mind' because he consistently 'derive[s] Russian nature from Western ideas, and not the ideas enough from the Russian nature'. A critic such as Waliszewski, whom Garnett castigates for being 'notably deficient in sympathy and in intuition' (both key words in the Garnett vocabulary) and who seeks to impose an understanding of the 'mental habits' of Russian writers through a loud insistence on Dostoevsky's debt to Rousseau, or Schopenhauer's influence on Turgenev, betrays what Garnett believes to be one of the first duties of the critic:

The critic will seek to criticise very sparingly the conceptions and ideas of the great authors in particular, because by doing so he gets himself between the literature he is explaining and the reader he is seeking to

³ Edward Garnett, 'Maxim Gorky', *The Speaker*, 11 March 1905, pp. 570–1 (p. 570).

⁴ Edward Garnett, 'Introduction', in Ostrovsky, *The Storm*, translated by Constance Garnett (London, 1899), pp. v–x (p. v).

⁵ [Edward Garnett], 'Russian Translations', *The Nation*, 25 August 1917, 536–8 (p. 536).

reach. The reader does not want him the critic except as a far-sighted introducer, he wants to understand, to penetrate, to realise fully how this foreign nation feels and thinks and acts, and why it is these people have thoughts and feeling so different from his own. Each literature is valuable because it gives the clue to a new world of interest, beauty or strangeness, and the critic who would guide us there must be a sympathetic interpreter.⁶

For Garnett, critics also have a special duty towards the contemporary. In a programmatic essay of 1901, 'The Contemporary Critic', he divides critics into two classes, 'academic' and 'contemporary', and rebukes the former for their hostility to new writing. Andrew Lang, doyen of the 'academic' camp, whose monthly column in *Longman's Magazine* had assumed something of the status of a national institution, comes in for particular criticism for his attacks on Tolstoy and Ibsen. The word 'critic', Garnett complains, has become synonymous with 'faultfinder', whereas in his opinion the critic should be

the explainer, the demonstrator of what writers introduce or reflect in contemporary life. His aim will be to *account* for authors, to explain them to their age, and their age through them... And thus the critic... will find the weapon that can deal with the present, in his chief aim – *Interpretation*.⁷

Earlier in the essay, Garnett alludes to those critics who 'stand as the spokesmen of foreign or classic culture, the study of which in their judgment would bring to their nation a wider outlook, finer aims, and clearer self-knowledge'.⁸ He argues that his own nation is in dire need of just such a set of values, and that a close engagement with Russian literature would enable contemporary writers at home to open new windows in what had become a rather shabby, dilapidated house of fiction.

Garnett was not the first to note the parlous state of the English novel. Matthew Arnold, in his 1887 essay on Tolstoy, had lamented that 'the famous English novelists have passed away, and have left no successors of like fame'. The 'spirit of observation and the touch of hardness' that now characterize the French novel, Arnold contends, have also been carried to excess and reached a dead end. It is left to 'the novel of a country new to literature', Russia, to become the standard-bearer of European fiction: 'In a nation full of life, but young, and

⁶ [Edward Garnett] 'Russian Literature', *The Academy*, 31 March 1900, 267–8 (p. 267).

⁷ Edward Garnett, 'The Contemporary Critic', *Monthly Review*, 5 (December, 1901), 92–109 (pp. 108–9).

⁸ Garnett, 'The Contemporary Critic', p. 107.

newly in contact with an old and powerful civilisation . . . sensitiveness and self-consciousness are prompt to appear.⁹ These traits are of great value 'for evoking and enriching a literature'. In discussing the youth and warmth (as opposed to French coldness) of Russian writing, which he implicitly relates to questions of national life and literary inheritance, Arnold anticipates Garnett's thinking about the role Russian fiction could play in the rejuvenation and future development of the novel in Britain.

Although Garnett was vehemently opposed to the prevailing political system in Russia, there was much to attract him in its literary culture, especially the high status accorded to literature in general, and the novel in particular. This is partly a historical matter; Robin Milner-Gulland emphasizes that 'few outsiders' understand 'how deeply *literaturnost* ("literariness") has been ingrained in Russian cultural consciousness'.¹⁰ From around 1830, the interests of Russian readers shifted from poetry to prose, and according to John Garrard, 'given the cultural and spiritual traditions of Russia it was unthinkable that the novel would become merely a source of entertainment; Russians have always been much too conscious of the symbolic value of the word'.¹¹ Such a characterization may be compared with Garnett's appraisal of the status of the novel in England in his 1899 preface to his wife's translation of Turgenev's *The Jew and Other Stories*:

Many men of letters to-day look on the novel as a mere story-book, as a series of light-coloured, amusing pictures for their 'idle hours,' and on memoirs, biographies, histories, criticism and poetry as the age's *serious* contribution to literature. Whereas the reverse is the case. The most serious and significant of all literary forms the modern world has evolved is the novel; and brought to its highest development, the novel shares with poetry to-day the honour of being the supreme instrument of the great artist's literary skill.¹²

Russia's history of censorship and political despotism lies behind the Russian seriousness about the novel. But many of England's left-leaning intellectuals also welcomed new works which, as Peter Kropotkin wrote in 1905, brought 'within the domain of Art . . . nearly all those questions, social and political, which in Western Europe and America . . . are discussed chiefly in the political writings of the day, but

⁹ Matthew Arnold, 'Count Leo Tolstoi', *Fortnightly Review*, 42 (1887), 783–9 (p. 783).

¹⁰ Robin Milner-Gulland, *The Russians* (Oxford, 1997), p. 133.

¹¹ *The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak*, edited by John Garrard (New Haven, CT, 1983), pp. 15–16.

¹² Garnett, 'Introduction', in Ivan Turgenev, *The Jew and Other Stories*, translated by Constance Garnett (London, 1900), pp. ix–xix (p. ix).

seldom in literature'.¹³ Garnett's political allegiances were very much to the left, and he enjoyed close friendships with many of the exiled Russian revolutionaries then in London, but nevertheless politics were not at the centre of his presentation of the Russian novel.

Garnett admits that Kropotkin's 'political and social outlook' serves him well when it comes to explaining a writer's relation to the social history of his time (he considers Kropotkin's analysis of Chekhov particularly valuable in this respect), but such an approach is at best limiting, at worst damaging. 'In this respect', writes Garnett, '[Kropotkin's] criticism of Dostoievsky's greatest book, *The Brothers Karamazov*, as being too painful to read, is the criticism of a reformer pure and simple, which will not be echoed by readers who take a pure aesthetic pleasure in the psychological insight in this gloomy human abyss.'¹⁴ It is noticeable that when Garnett took over writing the prefaces to Constance's Turgenev translations from Sergey Stepniak-Kravchinsky, the revolutionary émigré, the portrait of Turgenev was shaded very differently, with Stepniak's picture of the author as the chronicler of social and historical dissent replaced by Garnett's view of Turgenev as the model of aesthetic perfection. While Garnett's individual instincts and preferences explain his emphases in part, he also commented on the discrepancy likely to be found between Russian and British readers' interpretations of a given work. Whereas a Russian would consider the satire in Gogol's *Dead Souls* to be directed specifically at the landowning classes, the British reader was far more likely to see it as a parody of Russian national characteristics more generally. Similarly, Garnett maintains that whilst Kropotkin argues that Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches* is above all a biting criticism of serfdom, it would be difficult for the British to see more than the most shadowy political tendency in it.

None of this should be taken to imply that Garnett was oblivious to or dismissive of the close relationship between political and social conditions and the development of Russian literature. His 1917 book on Turgenev, for example, makes this quite clear. However, his agenda ultimately differed from that of men like Kropotkin and Stepniak, who sought to use literature as a means of drawing attention to the evils of the autocratic regime in Russia and persuading the British to join their opposition to it. Put simply, the Russian émigrés hoped that the promotion of their national literature would marshal British

¹³ Peter Kropotkin, *Russian Literature* (London, 1905), p. v.

¹⁴ [Edward Garnett], 'Causerie of the Week: Russian Literature', *The Speaker*, 4 August 1906, 410–12 (p. 411).

public opinion against the absolutist government; Garnett believed Russian writing offered authors at home a new set of 'ancestors' capable of revivifying the British novel, and that it could force Anglo-Saxon readers to face up to some unpalatable truths about themselves and their own national culture.

The argument that political issues are integral to translation has been put forward by many commentators, and this is certainly evident as far as the transmission of Russian literature in this era is concerned. In effect, there were three competing 'interpreters' of Russian writing: the émigré native speakers whose aim was to change political conditions in their homeland; the British intelligentsia who aspired to recruit Russian literature to the socialist cause in Britain; and critics like Garnett whose emphases were predominately aesthetic. At the same time, there were distinct political undertones in Garnett's desire to expose what he saw as the overweening arrogance and cant in many sections of British public life. As he wrote in a 1905 review of Gorky: 'The spiritual difference between the English public which waxed so enthusiastic over Rudyard Kipling and the Russian which acclaims Gorky, is characteristic of the profound abyss which separates the national life and moral ideals of the Anglo-Saxon and the Slav.' He goes on to condemn the British obsession that literature should trumpet the attainment of moral strength, growth of will, worldly success, and personal force. Garnett sums up what he considers 'odious' in the British mind as follows:

our complacent patronage of our 'inferiors', our lack of charity, our hard superiority to the 'sinner', our open or secret self-complacency, and also – what is perhaps even more insidiously narrowing – our distrust of our own human impulses, our dislike of letting our emotions go, our perpetual self-distrust, our fear of being ourselves freely and boldly – in short, our intellectual hypocrisy and dishonesty.¹⁵

R. B. Cunninghame Graham, in a letter to Garnett of 1922, argued that 'that gift of "intellectual sincerity" which you say is [a] peculiarly Russian trait is really shared by all good writers of whatever nation'.¹⁶ Garnett, however, remained convinced that the Russians in particular had much to teach the British about how to write and how to read.

When, in his review of Kropotkin's *Ideals and Realities of Russian Literature*, Garnett contends that 'the chief gift in literature of Russia to Europe has been undeniably the "higher realism" of the Russian

¹⁵ Garnett, 'Maxim Gorky' (n. 3), p. 570.

¹⁶ Unpublished letter from Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett, 9 December 1922 (Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin).

novel',¹⁷ he refers not so much to literary form as to the Russians' capacity and willingness to write 'life down as it appeared to be passing before their own eyes'.¹⁸ 'Edward was not particularly interested in realism as a *method*', his son David once explained, 'What he cared about was what he called truth, i.e. psychological truth',¹⁹ and as Garnett himself stated, when it came to psychological truth and breadth of vision 'the Russians always beat us hollow'.²⁰ In his review of Maurice Baring's *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910), Garnett approvingly quotes Baring's view that Russian realism is 'the natural expression of the Russian temperament and the Russian character'.²¹ 'Every reader of Russian literature from Gogol to our day', Garnett declares in his book on Turgenev, 'cannot fail to recognize that the Russian mind is superior to the English in its emotional breadth and flexibility, its eager responsiveness to new ideas, its spontaneous warmth of nature'.²² It is these qualities, this 'emotional colouring', that the British find so hard to grasp, and this is why a writer like Gorky requires an 'interpreter' to adjust the vision of the short-sighted British to what Garnett, in a discussion of Turgenev and Tolstoy, describes as the Russians' 'breadth of view'.²³ Left to their own devices, the British public would simply condemn a story like Gorky's 'Malva' (1897) as 'brutal', failing to understand that, as Garnett puts it, 'the artist who makes us feel nature's brutality is really appealing to the instinct within us which makes against brutality'.²⁴

Whereas English realism shirks from 'particular regions of truth as being too dark, too grey, too horrible for exact portrayal',²⁵ and the French lose life's quickening sensations in 'clarifying their impressions and crystallising them in art', the Russians, according to Garnett, 'are *instinctive* realists, and carry the warmth of life into their pages'.²⁶ The characterization suggests a spontaneous, unmediated quality contrasting with the self-conscious refinement of writers like Flaubert

¹⁷ Garnett, 'Causerie of the Week' (n. 14), p. 410.

¹⁸ [Edward Garnett], 'Russian Realism', *The Nation*, 2 April 1910, 25–6 (p. 25).

¹⁹ David Garnett to George Jefferson, 14 February 1973, cited in George Jefferson, 'Edward Garnett and the Literature of the Twentieth Century' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 1973), p. 278.

²⁰ Edward Garnett, 'Introduction' to Nicolai Lyeskov, *The Sentry and Other Stories*, translated by A. E. Chamot (London, 1922), pp. vii–xvi (p. xiii).

²¹ [Garnett], 'Russian Realism', p. 25.

²² Edward Garnett, *Turgenev: A Study* (London, 1917), p. 157.

²³ Edward Garnett, 'Tolstoy and Turgenieff', *Anglo-Saxon Review*, 6 September 1900, 150–65 (p. 151).

²⁴ [Edward Garnett], 'Maxime Gorki', *The Academy*, 8 June 1901, 497–8 (p. 498).

²⁵ Garnett, 'Tolstoy and Turgenieff', p. 165.

²⁶ Edward Garnett, 'Introduction' to Ivan Turgenev, *A Desperate Character*, translated by Constance Garnett (London, 1900), pp. vii–xiii (p. viii).

or Henry James. 'When I read Russian... fiction I sometimes think that the literary pallor & frigidly intellectual appeal of so many English representative modern writers is almost abnormal', Garnett declares in a letter to Allan Monkhouse of 1912.²⁷ These last remarks might create the impression of Garnett as a dyed-in-the-wool advocate of the realist school, implacably opposed to the emergence and development of what we now call literary modernism, whereas in fact nothing could be further from the truth. His essays on Turgenev are perhaps the best illustration of this. Garnett calls Turgenev a realist, but points out that the Russian's 'realism' is not akin to that of Dickens or Balzac, but rather achieves a fusion of the psychological and external which enables him to represent a higher form of reality. Garnett argues that 'at the precise point of psychological analysis... Turgenev throws a ray of light from the outer to the inner world of man and the two worlds are revealed in the natural depths of their connection'.²⁸ It is Turgenev's exploration of the mind, his gift for poetic condensation, and his uncanny ability to distinguish that enduring 'secret essence' in a transitory world that makes him the writer to whom the aspiring artist should turn.²⁹ Garnett was by no means alone in his insistence on such modernist qualities in Turgenev. His comments anticipate Virginia Woolf's in her 1933 essay 'The Novels of Turgenev', in which she observes that the Russian 'did not see his books as a succession of events; he saw them as a succession of emotions radiating from some character at the centre'.³⁰ The language here is very similar to that of her celebrated essay 'Modern Fiction': 'Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.'³¹ T. S. Eliot was another who acknowledged Turgenev's significance to the contemporary writer, concluding his review of Garnett's book on Turgenev with the words: 'I am not sure that the method of Turgenev – this perfect proportion, this vigilant but never theoretic intelligence, this austere art of omission – is not that which in the end proves most satisfying to the civilized mind.'³²

Much as he lauded the Russians, Garnett was by no means universally approbative of their work. 'It is difficult to sum up Gorky as

²⁷ Unpublished letter, 28 June 1912, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

²⁸ Garnett, *Turgenev* (n. 22), p. 136.

²⁹ Garnett, *Turgenev*, p. 160.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of Ivan Turgenev', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Andrew McNeille and Stuart N. Clarke, 6 vols (London, 1986–2011), VI, 8–17 (p. 12).

³¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), pp. 184–95 (p. 188).

³² T. S. Eliot, 'Turgenev', *The Egoist*, 4 (1917), 167.

an artist', he concludes in one introduction. 'It is difficult for the reason that so many of Gorky's tales are merely bits of narrative, slices of life represented much as they happened. Such narratives show insight, vigour, and truth to life; but the artist is not in sufficient evidence in the composition or selection of the material.'³³ But what of Dostoevsky, arguably the Russian author whose work posed the greatest challenge to the baffled British reader? Garnett was already lamenting the lack of English translations of Dostoevsky's work in 1906, six years before the first of Constance's Heinemann editions triggered the onset of 'Dostoevsky fever' in literary circles. It was immediately apparent to Garnett that what he calls 'the Englishman's fear of morbidity' (and here the word is used in its early twentieth-century sense of something morally unhealthy) presented a potentially serious obstacle to the advancement of Dostoevsky's cause in England.³⁴ From the outset, Garnett identified Dostoevsky as the novelist with the greatest 'right' to speak for Russia – 'for though others have given more aesthetic and luminous interpretations of that country, none has been so close to the core of the race as he'.³⁵ According to Garnett, Dostoevsky's work epitomizes the 'broad human tolerance and fraternal feeling' peculiar to the Russian psyche,³⁶ which the British find so hard to understand, let alone sympathize with. Garnett's 'interpretation' of Dostoevsky can be summed up in his remarks about *The Brothers Karamazov* – that 'great treasure-house of psychical pathology' – which he also considers 'exhaustive' and 'distressingly diffuse'.³⁷ The Russian novelist has much to teach the Anglo-Saxon about suffering, charity, and the precarious boundary between 'normality' and 'abnormality', the sane and the insane. It is not what he considers to be Dostoevsky's 'Russian' qualities that Garnett objects to, but his aesthetic aberrations.

It is Dostoevsky who above all is associated with that nebulous but remarkably enduring myth of the 'Russian soul' which was seized upon with such alacrity by many British writers and critics in the early twentieth century. The notion of the 'Russian soul' actually started in Russia, and has its roots in the Slavophile movement of the nineteenth century. It developed as a result of the antagonism between those who believed that Russia should follow the traditions of the patriarchal,

³³ Edward Garnett, 'Maxim Gorky', in Maxim Gorky, *Twenty-Six Men and a Girl*, translated by Emily Jakowleff and Dora Montefiore (London 1902), pp. vii–xvi (p. xv).

³⁴ Edward Garnett, 'A Literary Causerie: Dostoevsky', *The Academy*, 1 September 1906, pp. 202–3 (p. 202).

³⁵ [Garnett], 'Russian Realism' (n. 18), p. 26.

³⁶ Garnett, 'A Literary Causerie: Dostoevsky', p. 203.

³⁷ Garnett, 'Introduction' to Feodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett (London, 1927), pp. vii–xi (p. viii).

Orthodox society of old Muscovy, and those (mostly with St Petersburg affiliations) who advocated the process of westernization begun by Peter the Great. The Slavophiles celebrated the customs and 'simplicity' of peasant village life, venerated the land of Russia, and believed that the Christian ideals of sacrifice and humility were integral to the Russian outlook.³⁸ This concept of the 'Russian soul' and the accompanying ideal of a peculiarly Russian distinctiveness, which evolved in the attempt to counter encroaching Western ideas and values, was seized upon by many Russophiles in England, who saw it as an antidote to their own modern, industrialized, bourgeois society. This obsession with the 'Russian soul' gained currency through the highly influential study *Le Roman russe* (1886) by Eugene-Melchior de Vogüé, a work described by Dmitry Mirsky as 'the main landmark of the penetration of Russian literature into Western Europe'.³⁹ De Vogüé sets out to provide the Western reader with a firmer conception of writer and race (the two being seen as inextricable), explaining that his aim is 'to show [the novelist] as well as his work; and both, as illustrating the Russian national character'.⁴⁰ Unsurprisingly, such an approach results in some sweeping generalizations, but de Vogüé's national typecasting was to prove remarkably enduring. According to de Vogüé, Russian authors 'are the guides of the race, almost the creators of their language; their poets are such according to the ancient and full sense of the word – *vates*, poet, prophet'. In particular, Turgenev 'possessed the dominant qualities of every true Russian: natural kindness of heart, simplicity and resignation. With a remarkably powerful brain, he had the heart of a child.' De Vogüé also discusses 'the proclivity of the Slavic mind towards that negative doctrine which to-day we call Nihilism, and which the Hindu fathers called *Nirvâna*'. This fascination with the Asiatic elements in the 'Slavic' psyche, which comprise an incongruous mixture of fatalism, barbarism, and asceticism, became increasingly prevalent in the West, particularly as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky gained in popularity.

³⁸ For the origins of the notion of the 'Russian soul' in Russia itself and its place in Russian nationalism, see further the preface and first chapter of Robert C. Williams, *Russia Imagined: Art, Culture, and National Identity, 1840–1995* (New York, 1997). Williams concludes that 'whereas the "Russian soul" to the Russians was utopian, identifying a historical potential to be realized in time, to Europeans it was arcadian, preserving a cosmos which was primitive and timeless' (p. 18).

³⁹ Quoted in Dorothy Brewster, *East-West Passage: A Study in Literary Relationships* (London, 1954), pp. 112–13. Garnett was familiar with de Vogüé's work; it is listed in the bibliography of his study of Tolstoy.

⁴⁰ My quotations are from the 1887 translation and abridgement by Jane Loring Edmonds under the title *The Russian Novelists* (Boston, MA, 1887), here p. 6. The four novelists he discusses are Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. The following quotations are from pp. 94, 96, and 20.



As Martin Malia points out, the West's fluctuating perceptions of Russia are to be explained less by that country's actual role in Europe than by 'the fears and frustrations, or the hopes and aspirations generated within European society by its own domestic patterns'.⁴¹ In other words, the Russia that exists in the Western mind arguably reveals more about the mind that conceives than anything else. Garnett was just one of many who expressed feelings of disillusion with the state of Western civilization, and hence it is not hard to see why he was so susceptible to the widespread fixation with the 'Russian soul'. Although Garnett had little time for what he perceived as the mysticism of Dostoevsky, he did share what he believed to be Dostoevsky's belief in the power of literature to change humanity. Above all, the novel was a potent force for revealing the truth, and Garnett was convinced that an accurate depiction of the world was the necessary first step towards changing it: 'The English mind', he declares in a review of Paul Birukoff's edition of Tolstoy's autobiographical writings, 'is particularly fond of trying to dissociate "real facts" from "imaginative fictions" and strives pathetically to believe that the truth which is conveyed in the form of a dry chronicle is more valuable than the truth which is conveyed in the form of art.'⁴² It is in another review of Tolstoy that Garnett enumerates those qualities he considers characteristic of the Russian soul: self-criticism, tenderness, pity, fraternal charity, and what he calls 'unconquerable realism' – by which he means the willingness and ability to face ugly and unpalatable facts – all virtues in which the Anglo-Saxon is sadly lacking.⁴³

When, in 1922, John Middleton Murry reviewed *Friday Nights*, a collection of Garnett's essays, he suggested that 'the book is inspired and knit together by an intense moral fervour'.⁴⁴ It is a perceptive comment; Murry clearly recognized Garnett's belief in the potentially transformative power of the novel, as well as appreciating just how central the relationship between literature and life was to Garnett's critical ethos. Within this ethos Russia played a central role. Garnett believed that the qualities associated with the 'Russian soul' had evolved as a result of the country's harsh, frequently

⁴¹ Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 8.

⁴² Edward Garnett, 'Fact and Fiction', *The Speaker*, 14 July 1906, pp. 339–40 (p. 340).

⁴³ Edward Garnett, 'Tolstoi's New Novel', *The Speaker*, 11 November 1899, 145–6 (p. 146).

⁴⁴ John Middleton Murry, 'Edward Garnett', *Nation and Athenaeum*, 22 July 1922, pp. 567–9 (p. 567).

tragic history. 'Without this consciousness of national suffering', he writes, 'this tenderness of perception and instinctive sympathy, the Russian soul could not exist; it is its way of escape from hardening into the monstrous inhumanity of acquiescence in evil.'⁴⁵ Yet the literature which gives expression to the Russian 'soul', the product of peculiarly national circumstances, also offers a perspective on human values which ultimately must transcend geographical, political, and social boundaries. The *Times*' reviewer of *Friday Nights* concluded that Garnett's book 'sketches for us the possible outlines of a new humanism, a fresh valuation of both life and art'.⁴⁶

The tremendous impact of Russian literature in early twentieth-century Britain owed much to translators like Constance Garnett, Aylmer Maude, and Samuel Kotliansky, all of whom helped to make works by Russian authors available to an English-speaking readership. Yet although this new audience *could* now read novelists such as Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov, many of them were at a loss to know *how* to read them. This is why 'interpreters' like Edward Garnett played such an important role in the promotion and dissemination of Russian writing, despite the fact that they were unable to speak the language. Garnett's early recognition of the distinctiveness of the Russian novel and its potential to change and revivify its English counterpart, ideas that he tirelessly promulgated through articles, reviews, and his impassioned advocacy to his own literary protégés, makes him one of the foremost 'interpreters' of his day. There are numerous examples of Garnett urging the Russian example upon authors who turned to him for guidance. For example, he advised May Sinclair: 'Read Turgenev's *Smoke* if you want to see how deep natural depths are.'⁴⁷ Liam O'Flaherty tells Garnett in a letter of 1924: 'The other day a man paid me a great compliment. He said that the only two people who seemed to be able to get the Russian "picture" knack into their writing were Conrad and myself. Puffed up by such a combination of names, I said proudly: "Ah yes, but Conrad and myself studied under the same master [i.e. Garnett]".'⁴⁸

Garnett's work on Russian literature has proved influential. John Galsworthy argued that the British acceptance of Chekhov's

⁴⁵ Edward and Constance Garnett, 'Tolstoy and *Resurrection*', *North American Review*, 172 (1901), 504–19 (p. 511).

⁴⁶ This quotation is printed on the back of the 1929 Traveller's Library edition of the book and is attributed to an anonymous *Times* reviewer.

⁴⁷ Unpublished letter, 16 March 1902, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

⁴⁸ Cited in *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, edited by A. A. Kelly (Dublin, 1996), p. 91.

short stories was 'due more to Edward Garnett than to any man alive... because he has had the power of distilling year by year into the minds of others his unerring feeling for what is the right shape and clothing of idea and incident'.⁴⁹ Current scholarly thinking has also been shaped by Garnett; his early remarks on Conrad's debt to Dostoevsky, for example, have been built upon by a number of commentators.⁵⁰ Garnett's reviews gave him the opportunity to educate the British as to how to approach this unfamiliar literature, while as a publisher's reader he was able to direct his protégés to it, and to encourage fledgling authors to follow the example it offered.⁵¹ In the *Tolstoy* review, Galsworthy maintains that it is 'the spiritual truthfulness, a sort of natural power of putting forth impressions and experience unstained by self-consciousness' that sets the Russians apart from all other writers of fiction. 'It is this quality', Galsworthy continues, 'which Edward Garnett seems to have been born to nurse and foster.'⁵² Behind all this lay Garnett's impassioned belief in the power of literature and its potential to change the world. His activities as an 'interpreter' of Russian literature were a crucial and integral part of his crusade to transform Britain's literary landscape in the early twentieth century – a crusade which in Middleton Murry's eyes made Edward Garnett 'the most single-minded, the most austere devoted, and the most influential critic of modern English literature'.⁵³

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⁴⁹ John Galsworthy, 'Note on Edward Garnett. 1914', in *Forsytes, Pendycyes and Others* (London, 1935), pp. 261–7 (p. 265).

⁵⁰ Garnett draws parallels between the two writers in his review of *Youth and Other Stories*, 'Mr Conrad's New Book', *The Academy*, 6 December 1902, pp. 606–7. For examples of current scholars' engagement with Garnett's comments, see Paul Kirschner, *The Psychologist as Artist* (Edinburgh, 1988), Zdzisław Najder, *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity* (Cambridge, 1997), Peter Kaye, *Dostoevsky and English Modernism* (Cambridge, 1999), and Carola Kaplan, 'Conrad's Narrative Occupation of/by Russia in *Under Western Eyes*', *Conradiana*, 27 (1995), 97–114.

⁵¹ Garnett started his career with T. Fisher Unwin in 1887 and had a brief spell with Heinemann between 1900 and 1901. For the next fourteen years, he worked for Duckworth. After a temporary arrangement with John Lane came to an end, Garnett joined Jonathan Cape in 1921 and remained there until his death in 1937.

⁵² Galsworthy, 'Note on Edward Garnett', p. 264.

⁵³ Murry, 'Edward Garnett' (n. 44), p. 567.

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