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A Visitor and a Letter: Ivan Turgenev's Finnish Contacts

Ivan Turgenev was the first Russian writer to gain popularity in Finland, with many translations into Swedish and Finnish being published during his last years. On the other hand, Turgenev's personal contacts with Finland were next to nonexistent. He never visited Finland, and neither did he reveal any interest in Finnish culture. Among his friends and acquaintances nobody with a Finnish background is to be found. The sole contacts with Finland to be registered are Jac. Ahrenberg's visit to Turgenev in Paris in 1878 and – four years later – a letter from a publisher concerning Finnish translations. Ahrenberg's visit has passed unnoticed by researchers, while Turgenev's letter in reply to the Finnish publisher has been included in the writer's collected works, it is true, though accompanied by totally erroneous comments.

The visitor

In 1878 Jac. Ahrenberg (1847–1914) was chosen to be a member of the Finnish commission for the Paris World Fair. He had studied architecture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, and after having received a diploma in 1874, he worked as a teacher of drawing and art history in Finland. Simultaneously he had established himself as a journalist and writer. Ahrenberg arrived in Paris on 6 April, in good time for the opening of the Fair, which was to take place on 1 May (A-n E. 1878; Smeds 1996, 148).

At the Fair Finland did not have its own section, but the Finnish exhibits were included in the Russian section. The arrangement of the exposition did not occupy all of Ahrenberg's time, but during the almost two months which he spent in Paris (HD 1878) he had many opportunities to acquaint himself with the local cultural life. Through a common friend, he was presented to the Russian painter Vasily Vereshchagin, who had returned to Paris after ten months in the Russo-Turkish war. Vereshchagin invited Ahrenberg to his

atelier outside Paris, promising that Ivan Turgenev would be among the guests. Much to Ahrenberg's disappointment, Turgenev, whom he knew and admired as a writer, did not show up, and he had to content himself with viewing Vereshchagin's collection of paintings. (Ahrenberg 1919, 119.)

It did not take long, however, before Ahrenberg was given a new chance to meet the legendary Russian writer. At the receptions of Countess Juno Bobrinskaya, a relative of his wife, he got to know Marquis Wielopolski, a seventy-year-old Polish gentleman¹. Wielopolski led an active social life and took a pride in his many contacts in the Parisian foreign community. A person that he often mentioned was Ivan Turgenev. Wielopolski claimed to own a *chateau* in Bougival, close to Paris, and thus was a neighbour of Turgenev. When Ahrenberg expressed a wish to meet Turgenev, Wielopolski, however, came up with many excuses explaining why such a visit could not be easily arranged. His own Bougival residence was undergoing reparation, and as for Turgenev, he did not live at his own villa at the moment but was staying with Monsieur and Madame Viardot. This last piece of information was clearly made up, as Turgenev had jointly acquired a summer residence in Bougival with the Viardots four years earlier. Ahrenberg was already prepared to give up the thought of meeting Turgenev when Countess Bobrinskaya intervened, insisting that Wielopolski had to introduce Ahrenberg to the Russian writer. (Ahrenberg 1919, 72.)

On a day in May 1878² Ahrenberg and Wielopolski finally set out to Bougival in Bobrinskaya's cab. Feelings were not very high, as Wielopolski clearly showed that he had no interest in the coming meeting. To Ahrenberg he confessed that he did not know Russian and, furthermore, was not very fond of Russians (SLSA [1878]). Ahrenberg on his side felt unsure on what ground he had the right to disturb Turgenev. Much to his relief, at this point he caught the sight of another acquaintance, also heading for Turgenev's villa. This was Knut Nilsson, the Swedish owner of the bookshop "Librairie Nilsson" at rue de Rivoli (Ahrenberg 1919, 73). Nilsson had been invited to visit Turgenev, and as he did not know the writer personally, he had asked a

¹ This is not the famous Polish statesman, Marquis Aleksander Ignacy Wielopolski (1803–1877), who had died the previous year in Dresden.

² Ahrenberg's biographer Erik Ekelund (1943, 123) states that Ahrenberg visited Turgenev in 1875. However, the letter from Ahrenberg to his father, upon which this claim is based, gives only "Paris, May" as the place and date. Ahrenberg was also in Paris in May 1875, but 1878 seems more likely for manifold reasons. Ahrenberg claims, for example, that he had not met Turgenev before he was introduced to Vereshchagin, that is in 1878. *Vårböljor* (Veshnie vody), which is mentioned as one of the translations that caught Turgenev's attention, was only published in 1876. Also Ahrenberg's observation of Turgenev's acute physical pains at the meeting indicates that the meeting occurred in 1878. Ahrenberg's visit to Turgenev in Bougival is not registered in the chronicle *Letopis zhizni i tvorchestva I.S. Turgeneva* (Moshkovskaya 2003).

pupil of Paulina Garcia-Viardot, Mlle D.³, to accompany him. While Ahrenberg joined the couple, Wielopolski hastily returned to Paris.

Before entering the villa, Nilsson explained the situation to Ahrenberg. A few days earlier Turgenev had dropped into the bookstore while Nilsson was out, and there he had caught the sight of some unauthorized translations of his works. Angrily he had left word that he wanted to have a talk with the owner of the shop. Nervous and pale, Nilsson felt like “entering the lion’s den”, and he decided to use Ahrenberg as his lightning-conductor. Ahrenberg was to ask Turgenev for permission to translate some of his works for a Swedish publisher in Örebro (SLSA 1878).⁴ The plan suited Ahrenberg, as it gave him a good excuse for the visit.

The visitors were shown into Viardot’s drawing room, where portraits of composers and musicians hung on the walls and instruments and sheets of music were spread out on tables and shelves. When Turgenev appeared, Mlle D. introduced the two guests. Ahrenberg recalls his outer appearance: “Turgenev looked like a typical Russian of the main Russian race, mixed with Finns. The broad nose, the hair which was divided in the middle of his forehead, the bluish-grey eyes, the bushy beard, everything was as Russian as possible” (Ahrenberg 1919, 75). To his father back in Viborg (Viipuri), Ahrenberg wrote that Turgenev looked exactly like the Russian gardener whom they usually bought vegetables from. His appearance showed that he was in poor health, suffering from gout. “He looked terrible, could hardly walk”, Ahrenberg reported to his father (SLSA [1878]). But all worries and unflattering thoughts concerning Turgenev’s looks were forgotten when the writer broke his silence with a friendly “bienvenu” and gave the guests a warm glance. “Typical for him were, in addition to the enormous head, the kindness and the geniality that you immediately sensed, heard and saw, when he started to talk”, Ahrenberg recalled (1919, 75).

Without delay Turgenev started to discuss artistic and literary copyright, an issue which was apparently of immediate concern to him at this time.⁵ He felt that he had been exploited in a shameful way by Swedish publishers,

³ In his memoirs from 1904 (1919, 73) Ahrenberg is unsure whether Mlle D. was Dons, a pupil of Viardot, or an Italian singer, a pupil of Désirée Artôt (1835–1907), Tchaikovsky’s former fiancée. In his letter to his father, Ahrenberg only says that she was a pupil of Viardot (SLSA [1878]).

⁴ It is unclear why Nilsson mentions Örebro. Only one Swedish translation of Turgenev’s works was published in Örebro, that is “Ett slut” (1886, “Konets”) with J:n S:n as the translator. *Vårböljor* (1876) had been published in Köping, but the translator Victor Emanuel Öman had five years earlier translated Pushkin for Beijer in Örebro.

⁵ When writing his memoirs about the meeting with Turgenev in the beginning of the 20th century, Ahrenberg noted that the situation had not changed as far as Russian literature was concerned. Foreign publishers still had full right to translate and publish Russian literature without the author’s permission and with no compensation.

among others. Without his permission most of the translations were made either from German or French, and not from Russian.⁶ In Nilsson's shop-window he had spotted his *Torrents of Spring* (*Veshnie vody*) in a Swedish translation (*Vårböljor*), published without any mention of the translator and without permission.⁷ He remembered having received a letter from a Swedish publisher, but he had been so offended by the tone of the letter that he had refrained from answering. The Swede had stated that even though he had a free hand with the translation, he nevertheless wanted to compensate the author, offering him, according to the offended Turgenev, "un pour-boire" (a mere tip) (Ahrenberg 1919, 76).

Nilsson justly commented that he was not responsible for the prevailing translation and publication policy, as he was only selling the books. As he saw it, the problem was that it would not be profitable to publish translations for the small Swedish book market in case one had to pay not only the translator but also the author. He also reminded Turgenev that Russian publishers were using their right to publish translations without permission and compensation. Turgenev confessed to his visitors that the issue had been raised by his Russian publisher, who claimed that in Sweden Turgenev was more read and sold than any other writer, including Swedish writers (an untrue statement, as Ahrenberg rightly comments), and who had urged Turgenev to try to get some compensation for these numerous translations. Turgenev seems to need the money, Ahrenberg thought, while fully agreeing in principle with the Russian writer (Ahrenberg 1919, 77). Half jokingly Turgenev spoke about "the ravages and plundering expeditions of the modern Varangians" (*ibid.*). If there were no restrictions preventing free translations, the result would in the long run be disastrous, especially for small nations. For publishers it was more profitable to publish free translations of foreign literary masterpieces than to support their own minor writers financially. This could already be seen in Italy and Spain, where the national literature faced a crisis, as their publishers preferred translations of French literature.

⁶ Turgenev was right about the Swedish translations, as most of them during his lifetime were made from French or German and not from Russian. For example, all of Carl J. Backman's many translations of Turgenev's shorter works in the years of 1867 to 1870 were made from French. The first translation that claims to be authorized by Turgenev is *Obruten mark* (*Nov'*) in 1878. The translator is not mentioned, but he could have been Josef Natanael Nyman, who in the same year translated *Fäder och söner* (*Ottsy i dety*) for the same Stockholm publisher. These translations, too, were made from French. Turgenev knew about the Swedish translation of *Nov'*, as he mentions it in a letter to his brother from 7 November 1877 (Moshkovskaya 2003, 154).

⁷ In the Swedish translation *Vårböljor* (1876), the name of the translator, Victor Emanuel Öman (1833–1904) is in fact openly mentioned. It might be that Ahrenberg here is mistaken, as in the letter to his father written right after the visit, he says that it was either a Swedish or a German translation and that it could have been *Torrents of Spring* or some other work by Turgenev.

At this point Ahrenberg shrewdly asked for permission to translate Turgenev's essay "Hamlet and Don Quijote" ("Gamlet i Don-Kikhot"), which Nilsson had stuck in his hand on their way in. Turgenev lightened up: "Being a Finn, you can surely translate straight from Russian, can't you?" Ahrenberg had studied Russian at school back in his home town of Viborg, but nevertheless gave a negative answer. Turgenev was disappointed, as "the Russian language was so plastic, so expressive and flexible, that all the merits that his style had could be found only in this language" (Ahrenberg 1919, 78). Even the French translations that had been done under his supervision were "like a piano version of a big orchestral composition; it could sound quite similar, but it was not the same" (ibid.). Nevertheless, he reluctantly gave the Finn permission to translate his essay into Swedish. Fifteen years later, in 1893,⁸ Ahrenberg fulfilled his promise, as his translation "Hamlet och Don Quichotte", was published in *Hufvudstadsbladet* without any mention, however, that the translation was authorized.

On their way out, Ahrenberg and Nilsson found Mme D. involved in a lively discussion with the singer Paulina Garcia-Viardot and a beautiful, young Frenchwoman. The topic was the music of Wagner. Being a great lover of music, Turgenev immediately threw himself into the conversation, and Ahrenberg noticed how his "not very handsomely formed face acquired an air of life and warmth, which gave it a beauty, greater than that of the form" (Ahrenberg 1919, 79). The topic also interested Ahrenberg, as he had recently been at a concert where Édouard Colonne (1838–1910) had conducted Wagner's music. Just like at the disreputable premiere concert of the *Tannhäuser* overture in Paris 1861, the French audience had met Wagner's music with whistles and catcalls. Turgenev found such a reaction revolting: "War against art is barbarity and a sacrilege [...]" (Ahrenberg 1919, 79). It reminded him of the Roman praetorians, who beheaded the statues of hated emperors and replaced their heads with that of Caesar's. Turgenev also pointed out that the French composer Hector Berlioz had met with appreciation in Germany long before his greatness and uniqueness had been understood in his own country.

On their way out from Viardot's villa, Turgenev asked Nilsson to search for a Swede who knew Russian and could translate all of Turgenev's novels.⁹ Such an undertaking Turgenev would wholeheartedly support. Nilsson promised to give the idea a thought, but, as Ahrenberg noted, his health was already so weak at that time that there was no possibility for him to meet Turgenev's wish. Nilsson died in 1887 (NF 1910, 125).

⁸ *Hufvudstadsbladet* 10 (№ 237), 18 (№ 244) and 22 October (№ 248) 1893.

⁹ Professor Herman Almkvist (1839–1904) translated eleven works by Turgenev from Russian, starting in 1872 and culminating in the eighties, after Turgenev's death. Turgenev does not appear to have been conscious of Almkvist's work.

Jac. Ahrenberg was to meet Turgenev again, in 1881 in Russia. In his memoirs, he connects the meeting with the preparations for the 15th All-Russian Industrial and Art Exhibition in Moscow, where he functioned as the architect and decorator of the Finnish section (Ahrenberg 1919, 80). The opening of the exhibition took place only in June 1882, a year later than scheduled because of the murder of the Tsar, but the Finns had been actively preparing their own section since 1880. This time the meeting with Turgenev must have taken place in the summer of 1881, when the Russian writer made his last visit to Russia, taking in both Moscow and St Petersburg.¹⁰ Ahrenberg recalls that he saw many of the leading names in Russian literature and art, mostly in the company of the critic Dmitry Grigorovich (1822–99). Vereshchagin also met Turgenev that year, coming to St Petersburg especially to meet his old friend, and he later told Ahrenberg about the meeting. At Turgenev's place he had met a doctor who had treated him as a young cadet, and Vereshchagin had been so overwhelmed by the meeting that he had embraced the doctor, kissing him and showering him with gratitude. At the sight of this scene, "even the sceptic Ivan Sergeevich was deeply moved", Vereshchagin told Ahrenberg (1919, 81).

Ahrenberg's final words about Turgenev were "a soul full of warmth and an artist, whose equal Russia shall not soon find, full of sentiment but never sentimental, with a feeling for form as fine as any skilled French writer but still never a word chaser, never mannered, in short, a good model for the writers of our time" (1919, 81). As a writer himself Ahrenberg was to show Turgenev's influence.

The letter

Turgenev was translated into Finnish for the first time in 1872, when "Laulajat" ("Pevtsy"), a short story from *Notes of a Hunter*, was published in *Kirjallinen kuukausilehti*. Four years later "Ravintola tien syrjässä" ("Postoyaly dvor") appeared in the newspaper *Keski-Suomi*. The first book publications were *Luutnantti Jegrunovin juttu* (1879, *Istoriya lejtenanta Egrunova*), *Metsämiehen muistelmia* (1881, *Zapiski okhotnika*) and *Asja* (1882, *Asya*).

The Finnish translations were made from the Russian original, but without the author's permission and without any fee being paid. When in 1882, Edward Wilhelm Palander (1845–1914), translator at a county government office and a teacher of Russian at the Lyceum in Hämeenlinna, decided to promote new Finnish translations of Turgenev's works, he could have done it without contacting the author. Palander, nevertheless, wrote to Turgenev,

¹⁰ In 1881, Turgenev stayed in Moscow on three occasions – 6–11 June, 19–26 June and 3–6 September, while he visited Saint Petersburg on 13 May to 5 June and 7–9 September (all New Style).

asking for permission for his young friend, the student Severin Ahonius (1860–1937), to translate his works. As Turgenev answered in German, Palander had probably written to Turgenev in German and not in Russian. Palander was in fact fluent in both languages, being the author of not only a Russian reader (1873) and but also a German reader (1882).¹¹ Likewise Turgenev, an educated European Russian who had lived for decades in Germany and France, knew both German and French very well.

Ivan Turgenev answered Palander in March 1882 from his Paris flat:

50, RUE DE DOUAI
PARIS
d. 20 März 82.

Verehrter Herr,

Entschuldigen Sie mein langes Stillschweigen. Ich hatte diese ganze Zeit viel Sorgen¹² und was selbst unwohl. – Natürlich gebe ich H-n Ahonius meine vollständigste Autorisation und fühle mich sehr geschmeichelt, dass man es werth hälte, meine Sachen der finnischen Litteratur einzureihen, der ich vom ganzen Herzen das schönste Gedeihen wünsche.

Empfangen Sie die Versicherung meiner Hochachtung.

Ergebenst
Iw. Turgènew

Herrn E. W. Palander.¹³

¹¹ Palander has also written a substantial article on the history of Russian literature, *Uebersicht der neuren russischen Literatur von der Zeit Peters des Grossen bis auf unsere Tage* (Tavastehus, 1880), in which he talks enthusiastically about the writings of Ivan Turgenev.

¹² Turgenev is probably alluding to the situation of his daughter Paulinette (Pelagaya) Bruère, who together with her children was hiding from her husband in Switzerland.

¹³ “Dear Sir, Please excuse my long silence. I have had many sorrows during this time, and I have myself been ill. – Naturally I give Mr Ahonius my complete authorization and feel very flattered at the thought that you find it worth including my works in Finnish literature, to which I from the bottom of my heart wish the fullest blooming. Please accept my deepest respect. Yours truly, Iw. Turgènew.”

The letter has been published in Ivan Turgenev’s Complete Collected Works (1968, 215). The comments on the letter are, however, erroneous. Palander is not identified, and the translator Ahonius is proposed to be the writer Juhani Aho. The work by Turgenev that Palander asks permission to translate is assumed to be *Asya*, which is claimed to have been published in the magazine *Valvoja* in November 1882. What actually was published in *Valvoja* was only a review of S. Ahonius’s translation of *Asya* from the same year. All these groundless guesses are repeated in Mostovskaya 2003 (441), where, furthermore, Palander is now claimed to be a Swedish journalist and Ahonius without any hesitation is identified as Juhani Aho’s pseudonym.

The tone of the letter is heartfelt and sincere, and Turgenev refrains from touching upon the financial side of the project. Perhaps he had unwillingly accepted that there were no legal rights for claiming fees for translations, or maybe he was aware that his days were numbered and thus no longer paid attention to monetary trifles. Turgenev died one and a half year later.

Turgenev's letter was given broad publicity in Finnish newspapers.¹⁴ Within two years, four Finnish translations by Severin Ahonius appeared – *Asja* (1882), *Kolme kohtausta* (1882, *Tri vstrechi*), *Aattona* (1883, *Nakanune*) and *Ensi lempi* (1883, *Pervaya lyubov*).¹⁵ Ahonius used the pseudonym *Auramo* for the last three publications. In the books it was stressed that the works had been translated from Russian and with the author's permission. A facsimile copy of Turgenev's letter was added to *Aattona*,¹⁶ as proof that the problems Turgenev had raised in the discussion with Ahrenberg five years earlier had now been partly taken into account in Finland.

In both the discussion with Ahrenberg in 1878 and in the letter to Palander in 1882, it was the rights of the writer that Turgenev felt most concerned about. Changes were to come. The Berne Convention for Protection of Literary and Artistic Works was established in 1886. Sweden joined the convention in 1904, while Finland remained outside the treaty until 1928, precisely on the grounds that had been mentioned in the discussion in Bougival. Tsarist Russia made only bilateral treaties with some countries concerning copyright, and it was only after the Soviet era that the Berne Convention was signed, namely in 1995.

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¹⁴ The content of Turgenev's letter was first given in *Hämeen Sanomat* (Hämeenlinna) 28 March 1882 (№ 25) and then in *Uusi Suometar* (29 March 1882 № 73), *Satakunta* (1 April 1882 № 25) and *Kansan Sanomat* (6 April 1882 № 28).

¹⁵ *Asja* (E. Hagelberg: Tampere, 1882), *Ensi lempi* (O. Palander: Pori, 1882), *Aattona* (K.E. Holm: Helsinki, 1883) and *Ensi lempi* (O. Grönholm: Hämeenlinna, 1883). It can be mentioned that *First Love* (*Pervaya lyubov*) was published in Finnish without the epilogue that Turgenev wrote on the request of his French publishers.

¹⁶ See appendix. The original has not been found.

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Appendix

50 RUE DE DOUAI

PARIS

20 März 82.



Verehrter Herr,

Entschuldigen Sie mein langes Miloschweigen.
Ich hatte diese ganze Zeit viel Sorgen und
war selbst unwohl. – Natürlich gebe ich H^{er}
Honius meine vollständigste Autorisation –
und fühle mich sehr genötigt, dass man
es werth hält, meine Sachen der finnischen
Literatur einzureihen, der ich von jungen
Leuten das Schöne gedreht wünsche.

Empfangen Sie die Versicherung meiner
Hochachtung.

Respekt

Iv. Turgenev

Herrn E. W. Palander.