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Chapter 5

Evaluating negative representations of reading: Ivan Turgenev's *Faust* (1855)

Shafquat Towheed

We all love to talk about a good book, but what about the books we hate, or refuse to read? How do we register and interpret negative responses to books? How do we avoid confirmation bias in research gathering readers' responses to their reading? The same questions arise when we consider the representation of negative responses to reading, or indeed to non-reading. As several of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, writers have often included representations of negative responses to reading and to the refusal to read within their works of fiction; often these serve a clearly didactic or moralistic purpose. From W. M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890–1), there are many representations of books, poems and plays in works of literary fiction, which either should not have been read by their fictional protagonists or are read with hugely damaging outcomes, or where the refusal to read certain types of fiction is endorsed by the narrative. Although the perceived moral danger of taking fiction as literally true has been with us for centuries, negative representations of reading fiction within fictional narratives have often been seen simply as a truism: is there such a thing as a bad book, or only a bad (insufficiently skilled) reader? From books which are perceived as being morally harmful and should not be read (such as Dorian Gray's 'Yellow Book') to books whose reading within the narrative precipitate an existential crisis (such as Goethe's *Faust* in Turgenev's *Faust*), many novelists have played with the idea of an act of reading a fictional work that has serious negative consequences. In a similar vein, some novelists have examined through their fiction whether refusing to

read a literary work, the very act of non-reading, can also be consequentially damaging. Ideological arguments about the value of 'correct' reading as opposed to the moral dangers of incorrect, incomplete or incoherent reading have been played out through the pages of fiction, with writers, editors, reviewers, translators and readers all complicit in the fashioning of value judgements about how a literary work should be interpreted, and what a negative representation of reading actually means.

In this chapter, I look at some of these negative representations of reading in Turgenev's novella *Faust*, and interrogate a central paradox: can a work of literature in all honesty represent the act of reading (or refusal to read) a 'bad' book in a positive light? Can literary fiction ever endorse an individual's refusal to read another work of imaginative literature on moral, ethical or philosophical grounds? I do this through three complementary approaches. First, by outlining the extent to which Goethe's *Faust, Part I* (1828) serves as intertext and metanarrative in Turgenev's *Faust*, a novella which reinterprets several of the key themes of the earlier work. Second, I offer a detailed close reading of the representations of negative responses to reading – and resistances to reading – in Turgenev's *Faust*, teasing out the complex ways in which different types of readerly interpretation are modelled and critiqued in the novella. Finally, I place Turgenev's discussion of the potentially disastrous impact of inadequate critical reading in the context of the wider discussions and moral panics about the rise of literacy and popular reading in the 1850s. Turgenev's *Faust* offers us a compelling insight into the representations of negative responses to reading and serves as a warning about the limitations of reading as always being a beneficial activity. At the same time, I would argue that it is a focalising literary work during a period of intense debate about the purpose and function of literary fiction. Despite considerable contemporary ideological and moral pressure to demonstrate the benefits of good reading and condemn the reading of bad and allegedly morally corrupting books, Turgenev refuses to endorse any kind of totalising position about how negative responses might be interpreted. Instead, as I will demonstrate, Turgenev explores through the complex readerly engagements represented in *Faust* how we might interpret and negotiate the seemingly contradictory position of a text that is pleasurable to read, but where the act of reading itself leads to a disastrous outcome.

Goethe's *Faust, Part I* (1828) and Turgenev's *Faust* (1855)

As documented in his correspondence and corroborated by his biographers, Turgenev had an intimate and lifelong relationship with the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), and in particular with *Faust, Part I*. It is likely that Turgenev first read Goethe's *Faust, Part I* as a student in Berlin in the late 1830s, at a time when he was romantically attracted to Bettina von Arnim (1785–1859), the German aristocrat, Romantic writer and close friend of Goethe; von Arnim had just published a fictionalised correspondence between herself and Goethe in *Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde* ('Goethe's Correspondence with a Child', 1835). One of Turgenev's friends and fellow students in Berlin at this time was G. H. Lewes (1817–78), who would later become a famous literary critic, essayist and the first English biographer of Goethe; Lewes's biography of Goethe was published in 1855, the same year as Turgenev's *Faust*. Indeed, reading *Faust* would lead directly to Turgenev's first serious literary publication, which, as Turgenev's biographer Leonard Schapiro points out, was 'a critical essay inspired by a Russian translation of *Faust*' which appeared as a review in the journal *Annals of the Fatherland* (No. 2, February 1845).¹

Turgenev's correspondence is peppered with allusions to Goethe's *Faust, Part I*, and interestingly, he often draws direct comparisons (both positive and negative) between his own tastes and preferences and those of the fictional characters in *Faust*. Writing to the music and art critic V. V. Stasov (1824–1906) about the relative paucity of Russian artistic production, Turgenev compared himself to Faust's student Wagner: 'I'll be the first to rejoice over Russian art; but I don't want to be like Wagner, of whom Goethe says that: "with greedy hands he digs for treasures – And is happy if he finds worms".'² Turgenev's overwhelming preference for *Faust, Part I* over *Part II* is also extensively glossed in his correspondence, with any preference by other readers for *Part II* seen as a defect on their part. Writing to his friend the famous Russian literary critic P. V. Annenkov (1813–87) in 1853, at the time when he was working on his own version of *Faust*, Turgenev criticises a recent acquaintance for being 'a systematist, and not very bright – that is why he holds the second part of Goethe's *Faust* in such reverence'.³ As Leonard Schapiro notes, the works of Goethe were well represented in Turgenev's library at Spasskoe, which is now rehoused in the museum in Orel, and his library 'reflects the various stages in the development of his intellectual interests'.⁴

Turgenev was actively engaged in rereading Goethe's writing, especially his correspondence, at the time of writing his own *Faust*; as Leonard

Schapiro observes, Turgenev 're-read the classics such as Homer, Molière, and above all, *Don Quixote*, which in the summer he intended to translate into Russian, if he should eventually decide not to go on writing his novel . . . in the spring of 1853 he was much absorbed with the correspondence of Goethe's friend H. J. Merck'.⁵ The fact that Goethe's letters were reread at the same time as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* strongly indicates Turgenev's interest in the potentially negative impact of reading as represented in some literary classics he already knew well. As Schapiro observes about Turgenev's novella, 'the story, which is told in a series of letters, is remarkable . . . for the evidence which it provides of Turgenev's continuing preoccupation with Goethe, and particularly with Part I of *Faust*'.⁶ Turgenev read out the manuscript version of his *Faust* in preparation for publication just before another trip to England in 1855, but, as Patrick Waddington notes, he was particularly selective about which version of the Faust legend he drew upon. While he had read and knew Marlowe's version of the Faust story, 'Turgenev did not borrow anything from Marlowe, even though . . . he was already well acquainted with *Doctor Faustus*'.⁷ Indeed, as far as Turgenev was concerned in terms of his own retelling of the Faust myth, it was Goethe's *Faust, Part I* alone that stood as the central intertextual reference. The plot of Turgenev's novella draws heavily on the premise of Goethe's play, but even more impressive are the very specific references to editions of the work in the story, editions of the text which Turgenev himself had read and owned.

Turgenev's 1855 novella *Faust* has at its centre multiple readings and critical interpretations of Goethe's *Faust, Part I*. Turgenev's *Faust*, subtitled 'A Story in Nine Letters', is an epistolary novella which takes place between June 1850 and March 1853. The letters are written by Pavel Alexandrovich B (PB) to his university friend in St Petersburg, Semyon Nikolayevich V (SV). Pavel spends three months of the summer (June–September 1850) in his ancestral village; his family is a member of the landowning elite. Here he meets again his neighbour and childhood sweetheart, Vera Nikolayevna, who is now a married woman and a mother. Nearly a decade earlier, Pavel had proposed marriage to Vera, a proposal that was rejected by Vera's formidable (and now deceased) mother, Mrs Yeltsova. Vera is the product of a peculiar and experimental educational upbringing, for Mrs Yeltsova, had banned her daughter from reading imaginative literature of any kind. Vera's reading is entirely of factual material and she reaches adulthood without ever having read a single work of fiction, poetry or drama. This makes her uniquely vulnerable as a potentially over-affective and over-identifying reader, one who will struggle to disentangle fact from fiction, real human emotions from their literary representations. Over the course of the summer, and

mediated through repeated shared reading experiences, an illicit love affair develops between Pavel and Vera, and this ends disastrously, with Vera's death. In Turgenev's *Faust*, both love and death are staged and structured through multiple acts of reading.

Goethe's *Faust Part I* serves as both a metanarrative and an essential intertext throughout the novella. There is a complex interplay between the Faust legend, Goethe's *Faust Part I*, and Turgenev's novella, and the influence of Goethe's text plays itself out in Turgenev's novella with anatomical precision. Turgenev's frame of reference is precise, his bibliographic credibility formidable. As Pavel tells us when he unpacks his portable library for his summer in his family dacha, he is carrying with him his German student edition of *Faust Part I*; we know it is only Part I because of the date. His description of it as a 'poor edition' disguises the fact that the 1828–9 revised edition was the final publication of *Faust Part I* edited and approved by Goethe in his lifetime. *Faust Part II* appeared posthumously in 1832, and in keeping with Turgenev's disdain for it, is not in the frame of reference anywhere in the novella. Pavel describes his student edition with a combination of affection and bibliographical precision: 'with what an inexpressible feeling did I catch sight of the little book I knew all too well (a poor edition from 1828!) I carried it off with me, lay down on the bed, and began to read'.⁸ Pavel's comment about his 'poor edition' of 1828 shows his awareness of the specific translations and editions of the work. The 1828 French translation of *Faust* had seventeen beautiful lithographic illustrations by Eugene Delacroix; Pavel's comment about his own 'poor edition' in German stands in contrast to the lavishly illustrated Charles Motte 1828 Paris edition. It is in fact this student edition – just like the one Turgenev himself read as a student in Berlin in the 1830s – that becomes central to the unfolding disaster told in the narrative.

Negative representations of reading in Turgenev's *Faust*

Turgenev explores different models of (and competences for) reading in this novella, one where the act of reading Goethe's *Faust* has a disastrous outcome only for the heroine, Vera Nikolayevna. Through the novella, Turgenev challenges us to consider the moral responsibilities of both readers and recommenders, without making any direct judgement; the seemingly innocent activity of recommending a favourite literary work is charged with ethical implications.

It is not just the bibliographical references in Turgenev's novella, mentioned earlier, that are precise: so are the details about reading. It is clear

from early on in the novella that Vera has been the subject of a particular pedagogical experiment, inflicted upon her by her mother, Mrs Yeltsova. This is Pavel's account of Mrs Yeltsova's reading regime:

Mrs Yeltsova was a very strange woman with a strong character, insistent and intense. She had a powerful influence on me: I was both respectful and a little afraid of her. She had everything done according to a system, and she had brought her daughter up according to a system too, but had not restricted her freedom. Her daughter loved her and had blind faith in her. Mrs Yeltsova only had to give her a book and say: 'don't read this page', and she would miss out the preceding page rather than catch a glimpse of the forbidden one. Yet Mrs Yeltsova had her *idées fixes* as well, her hobby horses. For example, she feared like fire anything that might affect the imagination; and so her daughter, right up the age of seventeen, had not read a single story, nor a single poem, whereas in geography, history and even natural history she would quite often have me stumped – me, a graduate, and not a bad one either, as you perhaps recall. I once tried to have a talk with Mrs Yeltsova about her hobby horse, although it was difficult to draw her into conversation: she was very taciturn. She only shook her head.

'You say,' she said finally, 'reading works of poetry is *both* beneficial *and* pleasant . . . I think in life one has to choose in advance: *either* the beneficial *or* the pleasant, and so come to a decision once and for all. I too once wanted to combine both the one and the other . . . It is not possible, and it leads either to ruin or vulgarity.' (p. 19)

Vera's calm and passive demeanour is attributed to the influence of her late mother's utilitarian education system, one that has banished imaginative literature – poetry, drama and fiction – from her mental and emotional development. Turgenev's depiction of Mrs Yeltsova's reading regime bears more than a passing resemblance to Dickens's satire on utilitarianism in the figure of Gradgrind in the contemporaneously published *Hard Times* (1854). Indeed, Turgenev and Dickens shared cultural space for English readers, for Turgenev's first stories in English translation, from the collection *A Sportsman's Sketches* rather than *Faust*, would appear in the pages of *Household Words* not long after the serialisation of *Hard Times*. Vera's name glosses both the Russian word for faith (*Bepa*), and the Latin word for truth (*Verus*), and she remains entirely faithful to Mrs Yeltsova's regime, even after the latter's death. Pavel decides to take it upon himself to rectify this, as he writes to Semyon in his third letter:

I kept on involuntarily glancing at the gloomy portrait of Yeltsova. Vera Nikolayevna sat directly beneath it: that's her favourite place. Imagine

my surprise: Vera Nikolayevna has still not read a single novel, or a single poem, in short, not a single – as she expresses it – invented work! This incomprehensible indifference to the most elevated pleasures of the mind made me angry. In a woman who is intelligent and, so far as I can judge, highly sensitive, it is simply unforgivable.

‘Why is it,’ I asked, ‘that you’ve made a point of never reading such books?’

‘I’ve not had occasion,’ she replied, ‘there’s been no time.’ (p. 23)

Pavel engages Vera in a discussion about her lack of reading fiction, poetry or drama; she responds by confirming her allegiance to her mother’s system: ‘I’ve been accustomed from childhood not to read these invented works; that was the way Mother wanted it, and the longer I live, the more convinced I become that everything that Mother did, everything she said, was the truth, the holy truth’ (p.23). Pavel’s actions in recommending Goethe’s *Faust, Part I* is in direct opposition to an established reading regime and a household ideology built upon uncritical obedience, a system that values facts as ‘truth’ and derides imaginative literature as lies.

Vera insists that while her mother’s prohibition on reading imaginative literature was withdrawn as soon as she married, she herself has never felt any inclination to read for pleasure: ‘as soon as I was married, my mother withdrew any sort of prohibition from me’, she tells Pavel, stressing that this was a matter of habit, rather than compulsion: ‘it didn’t occur to me myself to read . . . how do you put it? . . . well, in short, to read novels’ (p.24). Pavel’s response is immediate: Vera must be introduced to imaginative literature at the first opportunity:

‘I’ll bring you a book!’ I exclaimed. (The *Faust* that I had recently read came suddenly to mind.)

Vera Nikolayevna sighed quietly.

‘It . . . it won’t be George Sand?’ she asked, not without timidity.

‘Ah, so you’ve heard of her? Well, perhaps even her, what’s the harm? . . . No, I’ll bring you another author. You haven’t forgotten your German, have you?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘She speaks it like a German,’ Priyimkov joined in.

‘That’s fine then! I’ll bring you . . . well, you’ll see what an amazing thing I’ll bring you.’ (p.24)

Pavel wastes no time and springs into action by proposing a shared reading of Goethe's *Faust, Part I* in the Chinese pavilion the following evening. Writing to Semyon, he confesses immediately that he has misgivings about his choice of first literary work for Vera, a virgin reader of imaginative literature:

When I got home from the Priyimkovs' I repented of having specified *Faust*; Schiller would have suited much better for the first occasion, if we were to be dealing with the Germans. I was particularly worried about the first scenes before the meeting with Gretchen; I wasn't happy as regards Mephistopheles either. But I was under the influence of *Faust* and could not willingly have read anything else. When it was already grown completely dark, we set off for the Chinese summer house; it had been put in order the day before. (p.28)

'Under the influence of Faust', Pavel offers to read out aloud from Goethe's play, but this ostensibly public performance soon becomes a private reading, with Pavel focussed entirely on Vera's response:

Vera Nikolayevna did not stir; I stole a couple of glances at her: her eyes were fixed directly and attentively upon me; her face seemed to me pale. After Faust's first meeting with Gretchen she moved forward from the back of her armchair, folded her arms and remained motionless in that position until the end. I sensed that Priyimkov was having a wretched time of it, and this at first turned me cold, but little by little I forgot about him, became excited and read with fervour, with passion . . . I was reading for Vera Nikolayevna alone: an inner voice told me that *Faust* was having an effect on her. (p.29)

Possessed by the voice of Faust, Pavel continues to read, only too aware of the effect he is having on his first-time listener. Vera Nikolayevna's first response to hearing *Faust* read aloud is physical and results in action, rather than a verbalised opinion, whether favourable or not:

I wanted to hear what she would say. She got up, took some indecisive steps towards the door, stood for a while on the threshold and went quietly out into the garden. I rushed after her. She had already managed to move several steps away; the whiteness of her dress could just be seen in the dense shadow.

'Well, then,' I cried, 'didn't you enjoy it?'

She stopped.

'Can you leave that book with me?' her voice rang out.

'I'll give it to you as a gift, Vera Nikolayevna, if you wish to have it.'
(pp. 29–30)

Public shared reading leads to private reading: Vera takes Pavel's copy of *Faust* and immediately continues to read it alone, in her bedroom. What is particularly apposite here, given the way the plot develops, is Vera's total lack of any evaluative commentary on her first ever encounter with imaginative literature in general and Goethe's *Faust* in particular. Whether this is or is not a negative response to reading is at this point in the narrative impossible to surmise, except perhaps through some of Vera's gestures and bodily reactions. Pavel is reading the signs of Vera's body language meticulously, and even that is simply his subjective interpretation from an external point of view. Should we as readers even trust Pavel's reading of Vera's responses, given his own emotional investment in her? Vera herself says nothing, but her physical response suggests intense emotional affect, and is confirmed by her husband, Priyimkov, in the conversation over dinner that follows:

'Just imagine, I've gone upstairs to her room, and I find her crying. It's a long time since she's been like this. I can tell you when the last time she cried was: when our Sasha passed away. There's what you've done with your *Faust!*', he added, with a smile.

'So now, Vera Nikolayevna,' I began, 'you can see that I was right when . . .'

'I didn't expect this,' she interrupted me, 'but still, God knows whether you're right. Perhaps Mother forbade me to read such books for the very reason that she knew . . .' (p. 31)

Emotional affect leads to compulsive, monomaniacal behaviour, and Vera's relentlessly immersive intensive reading of Goethe's play means she cannot sleep, as Pavel learns the next morning:

'I've been awake all night,' she told me, 'I've got a headache; I came out into the air – perhaps it will pass.'

'Surely it's not because of yesterday's reading?' I asked.

'Of course: I'm not used to it. In that book of yours there are things I simply can't escape from; I think they're what is burning my head so,' she added, putting her hand to her forehead.

'That's splendid,' I said, 'but this is the bad part: I'm afraid this insomnia and headache might dispel your desire to read such things.' (p. 32)

Vera is trapped by her reading, her brain seared by what she has encountered. Far from the headache-ridden sleepless night discouraging her, over the coming weeks she becomes a compulsive reader, one increasingly obsessed with *Faust*, seeing her own emotional life through the filter of Goethe's play, making life mirror art. Inevitably, she realises that she has fallen in love with Pavel, with disastrous consequences:

When I went in to Vera she looked at me intently and did not reply to my bow. She was sitting by the window; on her lap lay a book which I recognised at once: it was my *Faust*. Her face expressed fatigue. I sat down opposite her. She asked me to read out loud the scene between Faust and Gretchen where she asks him whether he believes in God. I took the book and began reading. When I had finished, I glanced at her. With her head leaning against the back of the arm-chair and her arms crossed on her breast, she was still looking at me just as intently.

I don't know why, but my heart suddenly began pounding.

'What have you done to me!' she said in a slow voice.

'What?' I asked in confusion.

'Yes, what have you done to me!' she repeated.

'Do you mean,' I began, 'why did I persuade you to read such books?'

She stood up in silence and went to leave the room. I gazed after her.

On the threshold she stopped and turned back to me.

'I love you,' she said, 'that's what you've done to me.'

The blood rushed to my head . . .

'I love you, I'm in love with you,' repeated Vera. (pp. 49–50)

Far from generating empathy, understanding or wellbeing, the reading of *Faust* provokes a disastrous explosion of uncontrollable passion. After finally declaring their love for one another over that shared, gifted student copy of *Faust, Part I*, Pavel and Vera agree a secret tryst by the Chinese summer house the following day. They share a first and only kiss, but their secret moment of bliss is shattered when Vera sees the ghost of her dead mother, Mrs Yeltsova, staring at them. Vera flees in terror, immediately falls ill, and never recovers. Pavel's account of Vera's sudden illness and rapid demise links her fate directly to the emotional arousal caused by Goethe's text:

The illness, to use the words of the doctor, took shape, and Vera died of that illness. She did not live even two weeks after the fateful day of our fleeting tryst. I saw her once more before her death. I have no memory more cruel . . . almost throughout her illness she raved about *Faust* and her mother, whom she sometimes called Martha, sometimes Gretchen's mother. (p. 56)

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested three categories of representations of negative responses to reading in fiction, which I summarised in the following way: (1) where a character in a novel has reacted negatively to a work that they have read, evidenced either through their own words, comments from others, or via omniscient narration; (2) where an act of reading influences a character negatively and results directly in a disastrous outcome; (3) where a conspicuous act of non-reading (or refusing to read) is articulated (either endorsed or criticised) in the text. Turgenev's novella demonstrates both the latter two, but not as far as I can tell, the first: none of the readers of Goethe's *Faust* express a negative opinion of it as a literary work, not even in passing – and pointedly, Vera never offers a negative response to it, even while her obsession with *Faust* drives her to mental instability and eventually to death. A negative outcome as a result of a naïve, insufficient or inept reading of a fictional work has been an absolute staple of literary fiction from Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605–15) to the present day. In this category definition, it is the lack of critical distance and over-identification with a character in a fictional work that is sometimes humorous and often fatal, and this serves again as a reminder for us to be sufficiently sceptical, not to over-identify too much, to keep our affective response in check. But who is the 'bad' reader in this novella? Is it Vera, whose total lack of expertise as a critical reader, caused by her peculiarly constrained and impoverished education, means that she literally expects her own life to mirror that of Gretchen in *Faust*? Or is it Pavel, who should know better, as a repeated reader of *Faust* and someone who himself claims to be 'under the influence of *Faust*', and therefore, should not be recommending it to a naïve, emotionally susceptible reader?

The phrase 'I wish I had never read . . .' is a common expression of regret in a negative response to reading, either actual or fictionally represented. And yet such an expression of regret is not found anywhere in Turgenev's novella, even after Vera's death. Turgenev's reluctance to explicitly voice negative responses to reading imaginative literature can partly be explained by the much wider cultural anxieties over mass reading taking place at the time, which often placed novelists in a precarious position: at once celebrated for providing quality literature for a fast

expanding reading public, while at the same time heavily scrutinised and sometimes policed for the possibility that literature might corrupt a new generation of inexperienced, first-time readers of fiction.

Anxieties over fiction and the (mass) reading public

The 1850s were marked by widespread cultural anxieties over the reading of fiction by newly literate and variedly skilled mass reading publics.⁹ This was the case in both Britain and Russia, despite the specific and substantial differences in terms of literacy rates and access to printed books and serials in the two empires, as well as wider issues around censorship and freedom or artistic expression specific to the Russian Empire. Debates about how, where and why writers of quality fiction could serve an expanding reading public, many of them hungry for entertainment but potentially inexpert in their reading skills, raged across the popular press, in literary journals and in the corridors of power. In Britain, the possibilities and challenges of the ever-expanding reading public were succinctly summarised by the novelist Wilkie Collins (1824–89) in his essay ‘The Unknown Public’ (1858), which appeared in the Dickens orchestrated pages of *Household Words*; for Collins, the challenge was one of literary taste, to turn a newly functionally literate population into avid readers of good quality fiction: ‘An immense public has been discovered: the next thing to be done is, in a literary sense, to teach that public how to read.’¹⁰ While anxieties in Britain about the mass reading public were primarily focussed on elevating the quality of what was read, in Russia there was a wider concern about harnessing literacy for self-improvement, in the face of both widespread scepticism about the value of reading for ordinary people, and state-sanctioned censorship of political or morally subversive content. Jeffrey Brooks notes that the greatest expansion of the mass reading public in Russia took place in the decades immediately after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, and that top-down attempts to encourage literacy were sometimes met with bewilderment and resistance from the peasantry. ‘Educated Russians’, Brooks observed, ‘thought of literacy as a gift the peasants would be eager to receive’ but often in reality, ‘most peasants were indifferent to literacy at the time of the emancipation’; the greatest diffusion in literacy happened only once the peasantry discovered the day-to-day utility of literacy skills.¹¹ The expansion of literacy and the rise of a new class of readers of literary fiction took place in a policed cultural space, one where all publications had to be registered for approval via the state censorship committee in Saint Petersburg. The committee was staffed primarily by professors of literature and published

writers, such as Ivan Goncharov (1812–91), who wrote his masterpiece *Oblomov* (1859) while serving as a censor in the 1850s; Turgenev's *Faust* was approved for publication by this very committee. Censorship visibly demonstrated the Tsarist state's anxieties of the potential negative impact of literary works which might be politically or morally subversive, but it also indicates the primacy of paternalistic ideas about what people should read to what end.

More than a decade earlier, Nikolai Gogol (1809–52) had wrestled with many of the same issues in relation to the reception and potential misreading of his masterpiece, *Dead Souls* (1842), a text which, like *Faust*, is centrally invested in the ways in which inexperienced readers of fiction might misread or misunderstand his intentions. These anxieties about the potential ineptitude of readers are ever-present in Gogol's novel. As Anne Lounsbery observes, '*Dead Souls* incorporates commentary on its own readers' incompetence into its narrative tactics . . . by making the denizens of N stand in for the novel's readers'. Gogol, Lounsbery argues, explicitly 'calls our attention to *Dead Souls*' parody of its own readership'.¹² Gogol's critique, as Lounsbery notes, focuses on the perceived lack of intellectual and aesthetic development of the newly literate mass readerships emerging in Russia: 'all of the text's direct representations of reading and readers serve to reinforce our sense of an audience so lacking in aesthetic sophistication that virtually any work of art is beyond its comprehension'.¹³ Gogol's text decries the provincialism, lack of aesthetic awareness and deficiency of critical thinking of mass Russian readers, and in doing so, ironically echoes some of the same paternalistic concerns of the Tsarist authorities: readers who are incapable of thinking for themselves should be told what to think.

Unlike Gogol, Turgenev in *Faust* does not offer an implicit or explicit critique of how people should read or how they should derive meaning and satisfaction from their reading. While Gogol is conscious of the limited capacity for literary interpretation of a relatively unsophisticated readership in the 1840s, Turgenev does not criticise the perceived critical limitations of his fictional readers in *Faust*. In modelling the disastrous shortcomings of Vera's utilitarian, fact-based education – an education that has provided her with no real emotional intelligence or psychological resilience – Turgenev is certainly making a broader claim about the value of imaginative literature in human development, as well as encoding a wider critique about the disastrous repercussions of censorship from the Tsarist state and prohibitions on certain types of literature emanating from the Russian Orthodox Church. Mrs Yeltsova's prescriptive education is a metaphor for nineteenth-century Russia as a whole, a society which through restrictions on creative expression has created a

population bereft of critical thinking and dangerously liable to confuse fact with fiction and truth with lies.

Conclusion

Negative evaluations of reading, negative feelings associated with reading, and indeed, the refusal to engage in reading as a worthwhile activity, are common enough in the historical record, despite readers' own expectations that they ought to gain something positive and productive from the act of reading. The *UK Reading Experience Database, 1450–1945* (UK-RED), for example, has dozens of examples of negative responses to reading, such as Jane Austen's famously withering comment in a letter to her sister Cassandra about the English translation of Madame de Genlis's *Alphonsine: or Maternal Affection* (1806): "Alphonsine" did not do. We were disgusted in twenty pages, as, independent of a bad translation, it has indelicacies which disgrace a pen hitherto so pure.¹⁴ The sense that time wasted on an unproductive, unfulfilling, unengaging or unsatisfactory book is something to mark down, so that the mistake is not made again, is just as prevalent today as it was two centuries ago for Jane Austen, as the many Goodreads lists of 'Books I wish I had never read' demonstrate.¹⁵ There are many such lists to be found on social media platforms and the blogosphere, but the chief motivating factor behind the sense of disgust is time wasted: that the investment in reading did not provide a commensurate return. Not everyone is as judicious a reader as Austen, who dispensed with reading *Alphonsine* after just twenty pages. However, while the book that is discarded with a sense of disgust, or boredom, or wasted time clearly fits the category of a negative evaluation of reading, Turgenev in *Faust* through the figure of Vera's reading of Goethe's *Faust* offers us something altogether more complex: a first-time reading that results in compulsive intensive reading; an initial shared experience of reading aloud that results in private, silent reading; a reading experience that moves from being emotionally neutral to being overwrought; a reading encounter that becomes increasingly aesthetically pleasurable, just as at the same time it results in increasing emotional turmoil and eventually to Vera's death. Turgenev offers a compelling critique of utilitarianism and demonstrates the total inadequacy of Vera's factual education, and in doing so he makes an urgent case for the need for imaginative literature in education. At the same time, the means by which the importance of literature is demonstrated in the novel is through two negatives: Vera's lack of literary reading, and the disastrous impact that reading literature for the first time has on her. Despite

the clearly negative impact that reading *Faust* has on Vera, at no point does anyone in the novella offer a negative evaluation of Goethe's play, and at no point is the book wrestled away from Vera's hands. Vera expresses no remorse at having read it; indeed, only Pavel expresses regret at having chosen Goethe's play as Vera's first work of imaginative literature to read. Turgenev presents us with a paradox, and a challenge for historians of reading to interpret: can a reader's encounter with an imaginative work of literature be aesthetically pleasurable but emotionally damaging?

Notes

1. Leonard Schapiro, *Turgenev His Life and Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 21.
2. Turgenev to V. V. Stasov, 26 June 1872, in *Turgenev Letters*, trans. by David Lowe, 2 vols (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1983), vol. 2, p. 107.
3. Turgenev to P. V. Annenkov, 11 June 1853, in *Turgenev Letters*, vol. 1, p. 75.
4. Schapiro, *Turgenev*, p. 99.
5. Schapiro, *Turgenev*, p. 98.
6. Schapiro, *Turgenev*, p. 111.
7. Patrick Waddington, *Turgenev and England* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 14.
8. Ivan Turgenev, *Faust*, trans. by Hugh Aplin (London: Alma Classics, 2012), p. 13. All further references are in the text. Translation © Hugh Aplin 2003, 2012, reproduced with permission by Alma Books Ltd.
9. See, for example, Margaret Beetham, 'Domestic Servants as Poachers of Print: Reading, Authority and Resistance in Late Victorian Britain', in *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800*, ed. by Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin and Abigail Wills (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 185–203; Patrick M. Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1908); Deborah Wynne, 'Readers and Reading Practices', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Vol. 3: The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820–1880*, ed. by John Kuchich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 22–36.
10. Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words*, 18 (21 Aug. 1858), p. 222.
11. Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture, 1861–1917* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p. 3.
12. Anne Lounsbury, "'Russia! What Do You Want of Me?'" The Russian Reading public in *Dead Souls*', *Slavic Review* 60(2) (Summer 2001), 367–89 (p. 371).
13. Lounsbury, 'Russia! . . .', p. 372.
14. Letter from Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 7–8 January 1807, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 115–16, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=10371, accessed 7 October 2023
15. Goodreads, 'Books I wish I had never read', https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/2850.Books_I_wish_I_had_never_read, accessed 7 October 2023.

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