



The Edinburgh Student Literary Journal

The Difficult Foxtrot: A Study on the Writing Mechanism of Maurice Baring's Literary History of Russia

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S/S 2026

*“In 1905 a new era began, and what that era will ultimately produce, it is too soon
even to hazard a guess” (Baring, *An Outline of Russian Literature* 249)*

1. Introduction

Maurice Baring (1874–1945), born into an aristocratic British family, was deeply steeped in classical humanism from his time at Eton College to Trinity College, Cambridge, mastering languages including French, German, Italian, Greek, Latin, Danish, and Russian. His six-year stint as a diplomat (1898–1904) ended in frustration, but unexpectedly ignited his passion for literary creation. In 1904, while serving as a secretary at the Copenhagen Embassy, Baring began his cultural initiation into Russia through close association with the Russian diplomat Count Alexander Konstantinovich Benckendorff. The following year, he travelled to the Russian Far East as a correspondent for *The Morning Post* to report on the Russo-Japanese War. He did not bid farewell to the Russian land until the eve of World War I in 1914. His more than ten visits to Russia between 1905 and 1914 eventually culminated in political works such as *With the Russians in Manchuria* (1905), *A Year in Russia* (1907), *The Russian People* (1911), and *The Mainsprings of Russia* (1914), as well as literary works including *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910) and *An Outline of Russian Literature* (1914).

At this historical juncture in the turn of the century, Baring's writing shouldered a dual mission. First, since the English merchant Richard Chancellor first explored the Grand Duchy of Moscow in the 16th century, "Russia" in Western narratives had oscillated between the poles of the mysterious holy fool and barbaric tyranny, shrouded in Orientalist fantasies and geopolitical prejudices; thus, Baring's writing needed to contest three centuries of solidified imagery. Second, amid the turbulent reality of the 1905 Russian Revolution to the eve of World War I, Baring needed to capture the transience and ambiguity of Russian culture.

As a pro-Russian intellectual situated at the core of a centre-literary polysystem

(Even-Zohar 45-51) and the first to systematically introduce Russian literature to the British, Baring mastered the “art of distance” (Casanova 89). On one hand, he strategically narrowed the perspective, incorporating unfamiliar cultural elements into the reception horizon of Victorian readers to shape the image of “familiar strangers”. On the other, rather than completely closing the distance—which might stifle the zest for mutual understanding—he chose to appropriately withdraw, maintaining the necessary tension of cultural difference. This pacing of alternating proximity and detachment resembles the foxtrot, manifested at every level of selection and creating a hybrid form that is both intimate and idiosyncratic.

2. Intelligibility: The Strategy of “Unjust Justice”

2.1 The Frustration of Political Writing

Historically, Russian studies in British society have long been dominated by political discourse. Books, reports, and travelogues were authored not only by the British but also by Russian political exiles living in England. The British media at the time continued the tradition of confrontation that had persisted since the struggle for influence in Central Asia in the 18th century, constructing an Orientalised image of Russia around its “non-European” nature. These political pamphlets by Russian exiles often selectively focused on social pathologies under the tsarist autocratic system. By repeating keywords such as “autocratic rule,” “violent turmoil,” and “political persecution,” such texts successfully shaped a romanticised image of revolutionaries among British left-wing intellectuals, providing an ideological basis for subsequent interactions in Anglo-Russian relations.

Facing a political fog that was becoming increasingly uncontrollable, Baring expressed his vigilance regarding public opinion in his first Russian publication (*With the Russians in Manchuria* xiii). He realised the necessity of “objective” political

publishing—to avoid having literary history misread as an endorsement of revolution, he first needed to correct the prejudices of the British masses. The specific nature of “objectivity” can be glimpsed in the preface to *A Year in Russia*: Baring candidly stated that “unjust justice” was his overarching strategy for writing about Russia. This constituted the vitality of his work. Setting aside political interests, he sought to understand and interpret with the greatest possible realism. Virtually, true “understanding” does not eliminate “prejudice,” but it allows “prejudice” to become visible, clash, and transform during dialogue.

Political factors, as highly pragmatic elements, influenced the overall stance Baring manifested in his book—one that was not Russophilic, but British-centric. Although the need to foster an Anglo-Russian alliance against Germany became increasingly urgent, Baring, mindful of the deeply ingrained impression of Russia resulting from Britain’s long-standing tradition of confrontation, felt compelled to adopt a dispassionate, documentary approach to present the turbulence during the Russian Revolution – providing British readers with a “safe distance” to perceive Russia. However, this record of what he has “seen and heard” himself (*A Year in Russia* xiii) was met with simultaneous criticism from both British conservatives and liberals, and was banned by the Russian censorship authorities. In *Russian Essays and Stories*, published the following year, Baring reflected that “impartiality is unpopular,” noting that “people prefer to see dogmatic opinions nailed like a flag to one side or the other,” (*Russian Essays and Stories* viii-ix.) and that the British, while keen to intervene in the affairs of other nations, generally lacked empirical research into the matters themselves, causing so-called concerns to be built upon cognitive dissonance. Under the pressure of realpolitik, this initial practice of “unjust justice” fell into a predicament of multifaceted rejection due to its ambiguous positioning.

2.2 Literary History as an Alternative Medium

In the freer field of literary history, which offers greater room for manoeuvre, Baring had the leisure to further his pro-Russian “bias”. By integrating author biographies, textual analysis, and a combination of narrative and argumentation, he constructed a more dimensionally complex sense of nationality, carving out an alternative path to resist a flattened political narrative that appeared logically closed but in fact simplified causality. He wove the “thread” he required into the entire fabric of literary history; when returning to the historical scene to deconstruct this maneuver and its design, the ideology carried by this “thread” actually facilitated the invention of a historical version in which “Russia was deeply influenced by Europe, and in turn, had fed back into Europe”.

2.2.1 Reconstructing Russia’s European Origins through Historical Narratives

Baring took the 19th century as the starting point for his writing on Russian literary history acknowledging the importance of understanding Russian history for grasping Russian literature – however, limited by space, he selected several key historical facts as cross-sections for his narrative.

According to the 12th-century Old Russian chronicle *The Primary Chronicle*, in the mid-9th century the East Slavic tribes fell into long-term turmoil due to internal divisions and ultimately decided to invite the foreign Viking leader Rurik and his brothers, Sineus and Truvor, to take charge (*The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 59-60). In *An Outline of Russian Literature* (hereafter referred to as *Outline*), Baring treated this legend as a historical fact, even replacing the original “invitation” narrative with a version where the Northmen “took Novgorod and Kiev” (*Outline* 11). This rewriting aligns with the stance of the “Normanist School” prevalent from the late 19th to the early 20th century – arguing that the formation of the Old Russian state organisation depended entirely on the military and political

capabilities of the Vikings, while the Slavs remained in the position of passive subjects.¹

It is worth noting that Baring presented mutually contradictory accounts of the same event in different works: in *The Russian People*, he followed the original version of the chronicle, emphasising that the Varangians came to govern at the invitation of the tribal alliance; yet, in his literary history, he turned to a Normanist narrative. Baring was well aware of the distinction between legend and historical fact, noting that “the history of the first rulers of Kiev is a blend of half-historical tradition and saga, in which certain broad facts stand out clearly” (*The Russian People* 77), yet he selectively employed discursive systems according to different contexts. When constructing the European nature of Russian civilisation, the “external dominance theory” of Normanism became a vital tool for his “Western influence” narrative; whereas when discussing national subjectivity, he returned to the “voluntary invitation” narrative of the indigenous chronicles.

2.2.2 Rediscovering Classical Continuities through Cultural Anthropology

Through the perspective of art anthropology, Baring attempted to reveal the deep-seated homology between Russian civilisation and the European classical tradition. This tendency can be traced back to Baring’s auditory associations with Russian folk songs; based on an archaeological investigation of music theory, he pointed out that they preserved ancient Greek musical scales such as the Dorian, Phrygian, and Lydian modes, and thus, a pure factor derived from ancient Greek influence existed in both Russian secular and religious music (*The Russian People* 307).

¹ Anti-Normanists argue that the Slavs themselves possessed the inherent capacity to establish a state, contending that the role of the Normans (Vikings) has been exaggerated. Based on linguistic and archaeological evidence, they point out that Slavic culture was already mature during the formative period of Kievan Rus’, and that the Normans were merely auxiliary foreign forces rather than the creators of the state. Current consensus in the historical community leans toward a moderate position, acknowledging that there was interaction between the Normans and the Slavs, and that the Normans made a certain contribution to the establishment of Kievan Rus’, while the Slavs remained its primary constituent force.

2.2.3 Constructing a Russo-Classical Aesthetic Community through Literary Criticism

In his literary history, Baring continued this narrative path, frequently implying an aesthetic connection between the cultural genetics of Russia and Europe. As a pioneer in the field of Russian poetry, Baring believed that Pushkin's poetry possessed a "Greek quality," which stemmed from his exquisite mastery of Russian linguistic conciseness, manifested particularly in the use of past passive participles, gerunds, gerundives, and the instrumental case. The writing attained perfection, with words becoming like "the transparent skin of the thought"; Baring regarded "the complete absence of obvious, deliberate style" as the "highest level of style," and Pushkin possessed "the absence of style which is the highest style" (*The Russian People* 210-211). Baring praised certain scenes in *Boris Godunov* for achieving sublimity, noting that the unadorned, naturally concise language therein "belong[ing] only to the greatest artists, to the Greeks" (*An Outline of Russian Literature* 70). Regarding *Eugene Onegin*, often compared at the time to Byron's *Don Juan*, Baring asserted that *Onegin* was an organic whole with intricate structure, superior to *Don Juan* in technique because, despite his natural spontaneity, Pushkin "cannot drop a stitch, strike a false note, or blur an outline." As for the artistic form of his creation, it could be summarised in one word: "classic in the same way that the Greeks are classic" (*The Oxford Books of Russian Verse* xxv-xxix).

When introducing the chapter on the "Age of Poetry," Baring temporarily set aside his favored path of individual writer criticism and yielded to orthodox literary history, attempting to categorise Russian poets into schools. He grouped stylistically disparate Russian poets into the Parnassians; however, when examining literary historical facts, the actual influence of the French Parnassians on the Russian literary scene was minimal, and their definition remained subject to academic controversy even in France. Amidst the coexistence of numerous poetic schools in the 19th century, why did Baring choose the

Parnassians as his coordinate for classification? The school was named after the poetry anthology *Le Parnasse contemporain* published in 1866, with its name derived from Mount Parnassus, the sacred mountain inhabited by the sun god Apollo and the Muses in Greek mythology, symbolizing the pinnacle of poetic art. The school upheld the aesthetic credo of “l’art pour l’art,” striving to construct the pure formal beauty of poetic language and focusing particularly on neoclassical experiments with ancient Greek themes. Here, Baring clearly transcended the empirical logic of traditional influence studies, turning instead to discover intertextual connections between Russian and French poetry in their formal experiments and classical aesthetic orientations, thereby linking ancient Greek poets, the French Parnassians, and 19th-century Russian poets through a “participatory sense of belonging”², and creating an imaginative, trans-temporal poetic community (Perkins 118).

In the realm of fiction, Baring not only compared the grandeur of the spiritual adventures in Dostoevsky’s works to ancient Greek tragedy but also argued that the phenomenon of polyphony among his characters was analogous to the chorus in ancient Greek tragedy (*Landmarks in Russian Literature* 215).

Although Baring never explicitly asserted it, his writing revealed that Russia’s cultural heterogeneity partially stemmed from its preservation of the origins of European civilization. When Western Enlightenment rationality obscured the legacies of ancient Greece and Rome, Russia, through its literary practice and folk art, guarded the lost cultural genes of Europe. By constructing an “Russo-Classical” aesthetic alliance, Baring completed a series of value inversions, embedding marginalized national characteristics into the cosmopolitan ideals of liberalism.

² “Participatory sense of belonging” serves as the foundational basis for the legitimacy of literary classifications (including groups, schools, movements, etc.). Its specific connotation is that a particular group can self-identify as a collective, effectively exert the group’s influence throughout the historical process, and produce a body of work that is perceived by the public as authentic. However, classification remains subjective and ultimately boils down to perception; therefore, any classification can be deconstructed.

Baring's construction of the European origins of Russian civilization relied not only on his subjective selection of historical events but was also deeply rooted in the system of subject-oriented discourse long maintained by the Russian intellectual elite. He emphasised that the Russian language, as a national language, encompassed various traits of European languages and served as an epitome of the limitless potential of Russian literature.

(*Landmarks in Russian Literature* 258) This was not his own innovative creation; the discursive construction of “inclusive Europeanization” in the history of Russian language and culture can be traced back to the 18th-century scholar Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov's high praise for the Russian language (Ломоносов 862). In his work *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky*, the Russian critic Dmitry Sergeyevich Merezhkovsky highly lauded the localisation of the “all-humanity” (всечеловечность) in Dostoevsky's works, thereby elevating this linguistic trait to an ontological dimension in Dostoevsky's creative output (87). The “Dostoevsky interpretation craze” emerging in Russian academia at the turn of the century essentially reflected the attempts of the marginalised Orthodox civilisation to introduce universality and inclusiveness into the core narrative of the national spirit by emphasising linguistic vitality.

In this context, Baring's writing not only keenly captured the performative demands of the Russian intellectual elite in constructing their subjectivity, but also provided an interlingual restatement of their performance – narrowing the distance between each side and opening a channel for dialogue within the unequal structure of Anglo-Russian cultural power.

3. The Self-Consciousness of Cross-Cultural Writing

Literary history is not a self-sufficient utopia; its knowledge production cannot be detached from continuous dialogue and contestation with external realities. Faced with each independent context, Baring had to coordinate knowledge, aesthetics, and politics with the

flexible pacing of the foxtrot, taking into consideration the potential effects of each adjustment. Even as a non-typical academic scholar possessing both political practice and on-the-ground experience, Baring felt increasingly powerless in maintaining this dynamic balance, realising that his political acumen and experiential advantages did not translate to precise judgments about Russia.

This dilemma in cross-cultural writing became increasingly acute as Russia's modernisation accelerated. Baring's political career and wartime experiences endowed him with a unique sensitivity to reality—on the eve of the 1905 Russian Revolution, he chose to terminate his literary history narrative, even though he may not have been consciously aware of the allegorical nature of this rupture. “In 1905 a new era began, and what that era will ultimately produce, it is too soon even to hazard a guess” (*An Outline of Russian Literature* 249). He realised earlier than his contemporary armchair scholars that Turgenevian poetic contemplation could no longer explain the revolutionary kinetic energy rising from the barricades of St. Petersburg. This cognitive anxiety reached its peak in his work *The Mainsprings of Russia*; although he still firmly believed in the possibility of resonance and complementarity between the British and the Russians, he decided to permanently set aside the Russian theme in one more “very short book on Russian literature” he was working on: “I have said my say. I leave it to the newer and better writers to say theirs” (*The Mainsprings of Russia* vi). When the shock of the October Revolution overturned the existing cognitive framework of the European intellectual circle, Baring had already chosen, three years earlier, to use “incompleteness” as the final response to his Russian writing.

If measured by the standard of completeness in traditional literary history compilation, Baring's writings clearly have deficiencies—he neither established a linear evolutionary literary genealogy nor exhausted all important writers of the Golden and Silver

Ages. However, as an introducer at the moment of cultural initial encounter, Baring's historical value lies precisely in his declaration of cognitive limitation. When Venuti criticised "transparent translation" for its erasure of the other, Baring had already practised a similar resistance; he positioned himself as "one who opens a window for British readers," yet chose to respect differences after realising that the Russian landscape he presented had, without exception, undergone refractive processing through his native cognitive framework. After the historical cataclysm of 1917, a host of "Russian experts" fell into a predicament of explanatory failure; contrastingly, Baring's deliberate blank spaces in his early works, the points marked with doubt, and his humble practice of actively recommending readers to consult other works revealed an astonishing foresight.

As the historian of culture who received classical humanistic training and understood the Socratic philosophy of "knowing one's own ignorance". Baring ultimately found that he could not provide his readers with a firm answer or exhaust all facets of Russia. Looking back from the present, more than a century after Baring's Russian writings were first published, his series of writing practices accomplished a more profound enlightenment: teaching British readers how to coexist with the inexhaustibility of the "other".

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