

In the Peasant's Place: Social Problems and Narrative Practice in Turgenev's *Notes from a Hunter*

JENNIFER FLAHERTY

In January 1847 readers of *The Contemporary* saw the last poetry Ivan Turgenev published in his lifetime and the first story of the cycle *Notes from a Hunter* that launched his prose career. In the poem “The Village” and in the story “Khor and Kalinych,” Turgenev is occupied with the single theme of the Russian countryside. With Turgenev’s path-breaking cycle, tensions inherent in the image of the Russian countryside as a place of concrete particularity as well as contemplative abstraction enter into the structure of Turgenev’s prose and, more broadly, the Realist poetics he helped create. By confronting the cultural distance that separates peasantry and gentry, Turgenev seeks a place for his own prose—one that would ground the identity of Russia’s cultural elite while also finding accord with peasant culture and, at the same time, overcome the charges levied against Romanticism (and literature in particular) that it was way of detaching from one’s immediate surroundings.

In “The Village,” Turgenev rehearses Romantic visions of the southern countryside’s endless steppe and uses for his speaker a voyeuristic outsider who turns village reality into an idyllic painting, but he also explores the limits of these familiar tropes. In one instance, the boundary between peasant life and the lush serenity which the speaker is in the midst of creating is momentarily erased when his canvas gazes back at him, though we do not enter that perspective: “Contemplatively you look into the faces of peasants / And you understand them, ready to give yourself over / To their poor, simple existence.”¹ The speaker is ready to succumb to the temptations of countryside languor—a leitmotif throughout the poem, despite obvious traces of labor—but the impulse is fleeting. Later, when he finally gives

I would like to thank Irina Paperno, Luba Golburt, Victoria Frede, and Boris Maslov for their feedback on early versions of this work.

¹I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh (PSS)*, ed. A. I. Grishunin et al. (Moscow, 1978), 1:57.

himself over to his surroundings, he loses consciousness in a shift from contemplation to immersion, falling asleep in the forest's mossy undergrowth. Such transitions bring scenes to a close, resituating the speaker in a distant perspective once a new stanza begins.

The shifts between immersion and contemplation in "The Village" pave the way for a fundamental tension in *Notes from a Hunter*. In "Kasyan from The Beautiful Lands," a peasant character explains the values to which two different realms correlate: "The land's free and open *there*, with plenty of rivers, a real home for us; but *here* it's all enclosed and dried up."² "Here" is the steppe to which the serf Kasyan has been relocated, and "there" is the region east of Orel from which he has been displaced. Each locale has spiritual meaning: one is the earthly existence evaded by Kasyan, who belongs to a religious sect of wanderers, while the other represents the heavenly beyond. In "The Village," the countryside straddles the divide between "here" as an immersive experience, lightly threatening for its soporific charms, and "there" as a wistful hinterland. In *Notes from a Hunter*, the speaker who stands apart from the countryside has no shortage of words to describe it, but a sense of entrapment surrounds him once he enters the landscape. Yet although the countryside is a restrictive place in *Notes from a Hunter*, it is also a "real home," in Kasyan's words, and the hunter, too, seeks freedom here. Kasyan awaits the next world but embraces even the most barren parts of the countryside for their natural beauty, reflecting the cycle's own secular values in which Kasyan's religious longing is traded for transcendent experiences of nature and a nostalgic dream of a home that is lost.

A window onto nature and the actual home of gentry writers like Turgenev, the countryside would seem to offer a unique temporality conducive to the "free and open" experience Kasyan describes. According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia stems from a conception of time as historical progress that threatens to render irrelevant one's own past experience. As a result, the past is idealized by the nostalgic and acquires eternal meaning: "The object of Romantic nostalgia must be beyond the present space of experience, somehow in the twilight of the past or on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped, as on an antique clock."³ From this perspective, Kasyan's relationship to the Beautiful Lands is nostalgic because it correlates the past with a sense of freedom and transforms it into an eternal present: "I mean, you'd go up a hill, you'd go up—and Good Lord, what wouldn't you see from there? Eh? There'd be a river there, a meadow."⁴ Kasyan's memory unfolds into the present, inviting readers to close their eyes and envision the countryside wherever they are. As a memory, the countryside acquires its unique temporality in the shift from narrative past to scenic present.

Kasyan's description of the Beautiful Lands models the use of a second-person subject that appears throughout the cycle, but he also models the way such descriptive devices are

²Ivan Turgenev, *Zapiski okhotnika: Literaturnye pamiatniki*, ed. A. I. Grishunin et al. (Moscow, 1991), 86 (emphasis added); and Turgenev, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, trans. Richard Freeborn (London, 1990), 135. Subsequent references to *Zapiski/Notes* will, when appropriate, be given in in-text parenthetical citations, with page numbers from *Zapiski* and then *Notes*.

³Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), 13.

⁴Turgenev, *Zapiski/Notes*, 86; 135. Fredric Jameson describes the eternal present in relation to a tendency in Realism to evoke the presence of a scene rather than its finality in the past (that is, showing versus telling). See Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* (London, 2013), 20–24.

undermined when he calls the narrator “master” and interrupts the narrator’s contemplative reverie. Like Kasyan’s experience of the countryside, Turgenev’s depiction is two-sided. In one version of the countryside, a scenic present is open to readers. In the other, characters like Kasyan and the narrator exist in a narrative past and address one another.

This article traces the shifts between these versions of the countryside. In the first section, I elaborate how the countryside is constituted by literary acts like Kasyan’s imaginative ascent over the Beautiful Lands and discuss demands put upon literature to ground a national consciousness in accord with peasant life. Refracting debates on national identity in the 1840s, the cycle’s narrative experiments are also a bid for national originality. In the second section, I show how changes in descriptive style produce for Turgenev a narrator immersed in the social landscape he documents. In the third, I show how these conflicts generate narrative transformations in the gradual disentangling of first-person eyewitness narration from a third-person narrative voice. I conclude with a reading of “The Singers,” in which the literary qualities that emanate from the countryside are separated from the place itself, arguing that Turgenev’s Realist poetics are developed within this separation.

A POETICS OF PLACE

“Forest and Steppe” exemplifies what S. E. Shatalov has called the lyric principles of Turgenev’s cycle.⁵ Though it comes at the end of the 1852 collection, this story was written in 1848 soon after Turgenev conceived the idea of a cycle with the help of editors at *The Contemporary*. Positioned at the cycle’s end and, in another sense, at its beginning, “Forest and Steppe” offers a statement of its intended purpose; namely, to share the pleasures of hunting—“a delight in itself, *für sich*, as they used to say in the past” (258; 383). “Forest and Steppe” uses a second-person subject, anticipates Kasyan’s tone when he describes a hill-top view of the Beautiful Lands, and is introduced by a poem “consigned to the flames” that indulges a bucolic idyll. Like the use of *für sich*, a term popular among Russian Hegelians in the 1840s, the spurned poem is among several ironic rebuffs the cycle makes against itself. “Forest and Steppe” epitomizes aspects of the cycle’s general style, but readers may wonder that it too should be cast into the flames.

Critics since Belinsky have located the cycle’s Realist style in Turgenev’s ability to describe rather than concoct plots, and several also draw attention to the cycle’s irony as a signal of Realism’s project to demystify and enlighten.⁶ With gestures of negation like the note to the poem that introduces “Forest and Steppe,” Turgenev’s cycle suggests that reality exists behind romanticized distortions even as it includes them. The burnt poem reminds

⁵S. E. Shatalov, *Khudozhestvennyi mir I. S. Turgeneva* (Moscow, 1979), 247.

⁶For Belinsky’s comments see V. G. Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1953–59), 10:344–46. For a treatment of Turgenev’s irony see Dale Peterson, “The Origin and End of Turgenev’s *Sportsman’s Notebook*: The Poetics and Politics of a Precarious Balance,” *Russian Literature* 16 (1984): 347–58. In *Beyond Realism: Turgenev’s Poetics of Secular Salvation* (Stanford, 1992), Elizabeth Cheres Allen has argued against reading Turgenev’s works as Realist, defining Realism in terms of a community-centered ethics. At the end of this section I suggest the writer’s evident interest in national identity betrays a drive toward community.

us that literature is mere paper, often filled with heady promises that do not add up to much, like the poem's final line about the countryside: "There it is good ..." (*Tam – khorosho ...*).⁷ We have seen the limits of immediate context, full of trivialities that interrupt poetic reverie, but in this line the limits of a distant vantage point are also apparent. Ultimately, there is not much to say about this distant place beyond one's desire for it, and we therefore return from a vision of infinite scope to the perspective of the viewer.

Despite the poem's ironic treatment in "Forest and Steppe," its lines evoke the same temporality of scenic presence that characterize the cycle's most successful descriptive passages. Describing the painterly effects of Turgenev's prose in *Notes from a Hunter*, Kirill Pigarev draws attention to the writer's preference for evoking change over time.⁸ Turgenev's descriptions have a narrative quality, but they are also ahistorical. Verbs like "to redden" capture this duality; it does not matter *when* the sky turns red, but it does happen. Nevertheless, events like the sunset in Turgenev's cycle exceed history in accordance with Romantic tropes: the whole of nature merges with an inner self, and both escape the superficial interventions of historical change.

Although the cycle draws on devices exemplified by the poem consigned to the flames, the poem fades away while the cycle itself boasts a sturdier existence, if only by way of contrast. Two kinds of literature emerge: one that dissolves in the confrontation with historical reality, and one that does not. Canonized by Romanticism as a higher calling and professionalized as an institution during the nineteenth century, literature acquires special meaning during Turgenev's time as a quality to which writers aspire. Realist theories like Belinsky's build upon this definition, claiming that literature accesses new depths within everyday existence. Between a barren here (mere existence) and an ineffable there (mere idea) lies a third way: literature that transports readers to an otherwise inaccessible reality. For Turgenev, a reality deeper than mere existence amounted to an exhaustively rendered setting from an objective perspective. In a review of Sergei Aksakov's *Notes of a Hunter of Orenburg Province*, Turgenev lauds Aksakov for representing nature's independent existence in ample detail and correlates this representation to hunting. Turgenev quotes a passage from Aksakov's writing that suggests the rarefied place of hunters among nature and their unique ability to represent it:

[The river's] shores are not disfigured by anyone's touch. From time to time, a hunter may shuffle through them, but his tracks do not remain for long. Thick vegetation, sprouting from an abundance of moisture, instantly resurrects the crumpled grass and flowers.⁹

In this passage, the hunter begins the work of representing the natural world, which the writer will complete. Words describing the return of vegetation symbolically perform the erasure of the hunter's tracks. And while a real-world observer cannot avoid forging a path through grassy banks, literature gives us what the observer cannot: nature in itself.

⁷Turgenev, *Zapiski/Notes*, 258; 383. This line ends the published fragment that begins "Forest and Steppe," but the poem continues and expounds on the idea of *rodina* (homeland) for another several lines. The complete version was first published in a 1922 edition of Turgenev's collected works (Turgenev, *PSS* 3:517).

⁸Kirill Vasil'evich Pigarev, *Russkaia literatura i izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo* (Moscow, 1972), 83–109.

⁹Turgenev, *PSS* 4:500.

The narrator of Turgenev's cycle is similarly positioned to model the kind of objective, exhaustive literature celebrated in Aksakov's writing. A sportsman with no particular object, he is, at least potentially, a subject with no particular identity, investing himself completely in his observations. Though he lacks a definitive purpose, a hunter is associated with desire in general, as the root of the Russian word, *okhotnik*, implies.¹⁰ With no specific motive but generally driven, the hunter outlines a character without encumbering the text with specific preoccupations, at least not overtly. Moreover, he is at home in nature, where he is sometimes able to shed his social identity. Not only do hunters grant access to such places as a hidden riverbank, but they may also be the perfect conduit to a reality beyond themselves.

Though often faulted for a lack of plot, Turgenev's cycle seems at times to intentionally avoid it. In a typical shift away from plot, "Yermolay and the Miller's Wife" begins with the makings of a story: "In the evening the hunter Yermolay and I set off for 'cover.'" But it proceeds to explain the hunting term instead of unfolding the action. The explanation acquires its own narrative momentum in the present tense and uses a second-person subject: "You seek out a place for yourself somewhere close by a thicket" (14; 29). Concealing his "I" behind the second-person "you," the hunter departs the narrative past and enters a scenic present, but he imbues his descriptive lyricism with objectivity by avoiding his own emotions, a tendency Turgenev criticized in nature descriptions by Romantic writers.¹¹

As long as Turgenev's hunter is hunting, he sustains an interim existence, with no major decisions to be made as long as the hunted object remains to be found. He simply wanders, unencumbered. In this interim realm, where the hunter symbolizes a writer for the objectivity and exhaustiveness that literature may add to life, he meets his counterpart, the reader. Occupying with the hunter a middle ground between here and there, the cycle's readers may be offered innumerable details or none at all ("there it is good") but are, in any event, given to feel that the scenes belong to them. Some scenes are marked as familiar among communities like inhabitants of Orel province or nature lovers, so that details evoke a shared memory. Recalling their own memories, readers escape their present social reality to experience scenes directly, leaving behind the worst of "here" while avoiding the extreme abstraction that comes with longing for "there."

An intimate understanding between writer and readers defines a place within literature and serves as a contrast to the failed connections it describes. According to the narrator in "Forest and Steppe," readers are moved to read the cycle's stories by envy for the hunter's access to nature, indulging a form of desire that is sharpened by comparison. If the writer hunts for an eternal present in nature, readers do so with even more intensity since they are likely absent from the countryside to begin with. Vectors of desire converge on the countryside and create there a chasm. For readers and writers alike, literature helps create a sense of lack by removing us from what we have, but it also responds to lack by giving us what we do not.

¹⁰Thomas Hodge explores the meaning of this root and the motif of hunting in "The 'Hunter in Terror of Hunters': A Cynegetic Reading of Turgenev's 'Fathers and Children,'" *Slavic and East European Journal* 51:3 (2007): 453–73.

¹¹See Turgenev's second review of Aksakov in *PSS* 4:515.

However, although hunting helps create the middle ground occupied by readers and writer, it often brings their shared reverie to an end. In the case of “Yermolay and the Miller’s Wife,” the hunter’s position grants unique access to the countryside’s natural landscape, but when the awaited prey finally appears, flying “out from behind a dark birch into your line of fire,” the spell is broken and the eternal present is dissolved (15; 30). Commentators often discuss another moment of rupture in “Kasyan from The Beautiful Lands,” when Kasyan berates the hunter for killing birds.¹² In this instance, a hunter is asked to account for his actions rather than losing himself in passive observation. Leisure hunters are socially marked as members of the gentry, and Kasyan’s comment draws attention to the violence wrought in spite of—even owing to—the hunter’s efforts to tread lightly across the countryside in concealment. Undetected movement with absolute freedom is the conceit of a self-determined subject, although social privilege makes that freedom possible. Throughout Turgenev’s cycle, what acts as a cover for social identity is also the cause of its unveiling. Literature symbolized by hunting contains the seed of its own critique.

THROUGHOUT *NOTES FROM A HUNTER*, we encounter texts like the poem in “Forest and Steppe” that distort the countryside with Romantic visions. To redress these distortions, the cycle suggests a new literary mode associated with a peasant way of life. In “Death,” the line between new and outmoded literature is drawn along national lines and reflects a broader distinction throughout the cycle between national originality and foreign imitation. While a German steward passes time in a forest clearing by retreating to the shade with a sentimental novel, a peasant named Arkhip “remained out in the sun for a solid hour and without budging an inch” (142; 218). Remarking on the difference, the hunter is neither detached from his surroundings like the steward nor fully merged with them like Arkhip. Unlike the union between writer and readers generated in description, a new commonality emerges in the narrative past between Russian gentry and Russian peasant. Readers, too, are welcomed into this union as we watch the German retreat into another world but do not follow him there, imagining that we are not, like him, reading a book.

The charge against foreign-influenced literature was typical in the 1840s, when debates raged over national identity and literary originality. Free from foreign influence, peasants seemed to many more uniquely Russian, but establishing a national literature in reference to the peasantry proved difficult for a gentry distinguished by education and literacy. Literature seemed a world away from peasants, though it too lay claim to national identity. The very concept of a nation has been traced to a time when cultural elites gained a sense of political autonomy and began forging connections by writing, referencing in their texts a people for whom they claimed to speak.¹³ Popularized by Ernest Gellner, the association between national identity and cultural elites resonates with the Russian gentry’s efforts to

¹²Commenting on this scene, Irene Masing-Delic also discusses the problems of abstraction across mystic peasants like Kasyan and philosophizing gentry in her “Philosophy, Myth, and Art in Turgenev’s *Notes of a Hunter*,” *Russian Review* 50 (October 1991): 444–45.

¹³Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1983).

consolidate a national identity by establishing a Russian literature.¹⁴ Constructed in this way, however, national identity depends on a collaboration between the classes that comprise it; namely, a literary elite to represent the people, and a people who need representation.

Against the background of these concerns, Turgenev's narrator distances himself from a sentimental German novel for obvious reasons. Whereas the steward escapes into literature that is out of touch with its surroundings, the hunter recall lines from a 1837 poem by Aleksei Kol'tsov, "Forest," that invoke a national tradition and, at the same time, merge with the current context. Jane Costlow writes that forests in Turgenev's work rustle with literary allusions, and as similar interplay between forest sound and poetic reference in "Death" contributes to a sense of merger between literature and place.¹⁵ With this union, the countryside may be ravaged by time just as the forest that echoes lines from Kol'tsov has been damaged by frost, but it cannot be erased.

More than invoking a literary tradition, the forest in "Death" is enshrined in the hunter's memory, which brings us into a scenic present no sooner than it is called forth. While the steward laments the forest's loss, the hunter recalls it as it was, describing details that break through into the present tense, like a blackbird's song that "suddenly rang out" (143; 218). For the hunter, the forest exists as a text and a memory, but compared to the steward, his perspective only deepens the countryside with layers of meaning rather than escaping it entirely. But while the hunter retrieves a memory and the steward bemoans the forest's loss, the peasant Arkhip "lashed [the fallen logs] with his riding crop" (144; 220). Compared to Arkhip, the hunter is as sentimental as the steward—less aligned with those who accept the countryside in its current state, and more inclined to impose visions upon it.

Despite introducing cultural differences between peasant and gentry, Arkhip's lack of sentiment models a resignation to death that the story celebrates as part of Russian national character. Arkhip shows no pity to the forest, just as dying peasants ask for none. When the hunter marvels, "Russians surprise one when it comes to dying," and recalls a number of peasants who accept death without resistance, he is also suggesting that Russian national identity is grounded in time's passage—the very thing that sweeps away other forms of existence (147; 225). In this story, the Russian peasant appears to have made his peace with his own inevitable erasure, finding a sense of stability within the reality of change. The deadlock between a barren "here" and an abstract "there" may finally be overcome by drawing on the values of peasant characters who model resignation, giving themselves up to whatever might befall them.

In "Death," Russian national identity acquires a vague, philosophical definition which is nevertheless perfectly fitting for a literature building itself in the framework of an immediate present yet tasked to legitimize a cultural past. For literature, the equation of Russian national identity with death's embrace means that Russian literature can, in a sense,

¹⁴Vera Tolz, for example, attributes the formulation of Russian national ideals to eighteenth-century intellectuals who elevated education as "a source of pride beyond social origin." See Tolz, *Inventing the Nation: Russia* (London, 2001), 47.

¹⁵Jane Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest* (Ithaca, 2013), 27. On the connection between social tensions and environmental concerns see idem, "Who Holds the Axe? Violence and Peasants in Nineteenth-Century Russian Depictions of the Forest," *Slavic Review* 68:1 (2009): 10–30.

never become outmoded. Fashionable forms come and go, but literature with an ironic attitude toward itself is already attuned to its own demise. Willing to acknowledge its own fragility with poems that burn like so much wasted paper, literature like Turgenev's *Notes from a Hunter* acquires a unique staying power, transforming the merely ironic into the deeply real.

As generations of critics have remarked, Turgenev's hunter fails to unify the cycle's stories into a cohesive plot, much less overcome Romantic tropes. Yet these failures are also part of what critics celebrate as the cycle's uniquely realistic depiction of countryside as a place that is socially disjointed, incomprehensible, and inextricable from subjective experience. More than ironic inversion, the movement between negative gestures and positive concepts constitutes a principle of Realism as defined in recent years by Fredric Jameson, who suggested that "Realism" is

a historical and even evolutionary process in which the negative and the positive are inextricably combined, and whose emergence and development at one and the same time constitute its own inevitable undoing, its own decay and dissolution.¹⁶

Realism in this sense is a dialectic, constantly overcoming itself. We ascend to a wistful hinterland only to fall down to earth and begin the ascent all over again. In *Notes from a Hunter*, this process is rooted in a vision of the countryside and the search for a national identity across the social divisions that comprise it.

DESCRIPTION

In his review of Aksakov's 1854 sketches, Turgenev lays out his view of nature as a network of particulars from insects to human beings.¹⁷ Each particular acts as if unaware of the "great, harmonious whole" to which it belongs, caught up in itself and denying others independent existence.¹⁸ In Turgenev's writing, when a hunter lies down in the grass to observe how ants carry out their lives ("The Village") or notices hawks above the fields (*Notes from a Hunter*), his speakers attempt to capture nature's harmonious whole in the only way possible: by looking beyond their own particularity to notice the existence of others. In his cycle, Turgenev uses concrete, ephemeral details in order to behold nature as a whole: the particular is the gateway to the universal; "here" evokes and encompasses "there."

Scholars studying description in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries emphasize the novelty of what Cynthia Wall calls the inherent ontology of particulars. Previously considered accidental and superfluous in contrast to unchanging and essential universals, particulars began to "absorb the energy of the universal" with the subjective focus of

¹⁶Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, 6.

¹⁷For a discussion of Turgenev's views of nature as it relates to broader conceptual trends see Thomas Newlin, "At the Bottom of the River: Forms of Ecological Consciousness in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature," *Russian Studies in Literature* 39:2 (2003): 71–90.

¹⁸Turgenev, *PSS* 4:515.

Romanticism.¹⁹ Before the eighteenth century, the best literature was thought to avoid description in favor of plot, but during the Romantic period these values are flipped: to do literature was to do description.²⁰ Rather than serving as allegories, details became meaningful in themselves, a trend that continued into the mid-nineteenth century when details were used not only to set the stage for a story but also to make stories come alive from the inside when filtered through a character's perspective.

Lidiia Ginzburg credits Turgenev with affecting this shift in the Russian context by emphasizing how details are seen from specific vantage points.²¹ What Wall describes as the nineteenth century's "celebration of the particular" begins in Romanticism as a celebration of universal connection, but description that uses embedded perspectives soon develops into an exploration of the many divisions that characterize Realism, from divergent perspectives to distinctions between inner and outer realities. In Ginzburg's analysis, the Romantic "cult of nature" makes possible a new focus on description, but eventually, description helps undermine beliefs in inherent connections between particulars. The shift is apparent in "Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands" when the hunter feels at one with the sky's "calm, shining infinity," only to be called back by Kasyan's interruption to a reality divided by social difference (84; 131). The first-person perspective that grounds concrete experience belongs to a character who is barred from the universal whole by social position and limited in his knowledge.

For Realists like Turgenev, a universal whole cherished by Romantic writers continues to exist but morphs into a reality inaccessible from any single perspective. This whole is comprised of concrete, singular events that are independent of the abstractions that may be applied to them. As Roland Barthes has remarked of nineteenth-century uses of description, the idea of concrete reality acquires a sense of ineffability as "the pure and naked relation of 'what is' (or has been) ... [that is] brandished like a weapon against meaning."²² In Barthes's account, in contrast to allegorical descriptions, details in the nineteenth century proclaim only that "we are the real." What Barthes highlights as a contrast between language and reality has specific meaning in Turgenev's writing, where silent peasants like Arkhip offer positive contrasts to verbose gentry characters like the eponymous hero of Turgenev's first novel, *Rudin*. The problem of social difference is layered into the problem of representation.

Paralleling the shift from a Romantic belief in nature's universality to a Realist anxiety over social fracture, Turgenev's cycle moves between lyric descriptions and descriptions typical of the physiological sketch, a genre central to the development of early Russian Realism and focused on social environments and social types. Turgenev makes use of this genre to introduce characters and offer information about local habits. Not unlike the cult of nature, however, the physiological sketch involved a new cult of classification drawn

¹⁹Cynthia Sundberg Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2006), 34.

²⁰I paraphrase Phillippe Hamon and Patricia Baudoin, "Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive," *Yale French Studies* 61, *Towards a Theory of Description* (1981): 6.

²¹Lidiia Ginzburg, *Literatura v poiskakh real'nosti* (Leningrad, 1987), 22.

²²Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect" (1968), reprinted in his *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, 1989), 146.

from the natural sciences that elevated the significance of details as a means to access the whole. By the end of the 1840s, writers who addressed social issues were lauded not only for their contrast to Romanticism but for the clarity they brought to a social structure that was anything but clear. Like other locales, the countryside held a vast spectrum of identities, from smallholders (*odnodvortsy*), who bridged the gap between nobility and peasantry, to vagabond peasants, who belonged to no definite group. Turgenev's hunter describes one such character as hardly human, laying bare assumptions that social identity is comprehensible to outside observation (23; 44).

Unlike Romantic nature descriptions, however, descriptions in a physiological sketch evoke history rather than evading it by situating characters within the environments that produce them. In "Raspberry Water," for example, the hunter meets two peasants fishing by a spring and does not proceed with his story until he clarifies where they come from and what type of peasant they are. To do so, he pulls away from the scenic present and traces their various histories, like that of serfdom under Catherine I (25; 46).

While it is clear that the hunter seeks communion with nature and avoids social entanglements, he often welcomes interruptions when they are opportunities to learn about peasant types. When Kasyan interrupts the hunter's reverie in "Kasyan from The Beautiful Lands," he has disturbed a sense of peace in which the hunter may forget his social position, but the hunter is surprisingly unperturbed. A reticent Kasyan has finally opened up, offering knowledge the hunter desires as much as his peace. Throughout the cycle, the hunter's desire is two-fold: he seeks historical knowledge of characters' origins and the ahistorical experience of being in nature. What unites these desires is a merger of person and place. By clarifying the social backgrounds of the peasants he meets at the spring in "Raspberry Water," the hunter rests assured that everything to be known about this place is contained within it. Characters are brought out into the open with nothing to demarcate them from their surroundings, coexisting with perceptible details of the natural world.

In addition to defying easy categorization, peasant characters can also disrupt the illusion of a fluent merger between self and environment by resisting their environments. They can be ambitious in their emulation of gentry fashions and subject to competing cultural influences. In such cases, a character is shaped by what he is not, be it a group he strives toward, or one he rejects when he identifies with one part of his heritage over the other. Such dislocated identities have no place in the hunter's ideal world, where everyone is reconciled to their environments so that they may, like Arkhip from the story "Death," avoid drifting away from the present with thoughts of somewhere else.

In *Notes from a Hunter*, description fails to sustain the universal connectedness it seems to promise, from a self reconciled to its environment to a reality that fully accords with language. In "Raspberry Water," after the hunter fails to engage peasant characters in conversation, he returns to scenic description but cannot escape a sense of his own displacement:

We were sitting in the shade. ... Grasshoppers sawed away in the sun-browned grass. Quail cried out as if despite themselves. Hawks floated smoothly above the fields and frequently stopped in one spot, rapidly beating their wings and fanning out their tails. We sat motionless, oppressed by the heat. (27; 49)

Contemplating such details as the airborne hawks, we are reminded of Aksakov's riverside, lauded by Turgenev for avoiding comparisons to inner life and illustrating his view of nature. But something has changed. This passage returns to the action with which it began, unable to stray from plot, and an impersonal "we" asserts itself in place of the second-person "you." Three characters sit motionless, with unspoken thoughts: the vagabond Styopa is unable to articulate himself, his companion, Tuman, seems to suppress a full response to the hunter's inquiries, and the hunter has recalled his connections to these serfs' owners. Situated now in the narrative past, the hawks in this passage become symbols for the characters, frozen in the tension created by social difference. Narrative is overtaking description.

Awake and exposed, the hunter has entered the countryside as a participant, casting his shadow and confronting himself. In Turgenev's poem "The Village," just after a hunter notices ants carrying out their lives in parallel to his own, he falls asleep, observing nature's network and escaping his own particularity by losing consciousness entirely. In *Notes from a Hunter*, as if to underscore the merger of self and environment achieved by hunting, we are told that the "sleep familiar only to hunters" is dreamless (175; 266). Only in the shade is the hunter liable to sleep, as in one early moment from "Khor and Kalinych," when he becomes momentarily free from consciousness and concealed in shadow. But in later stories the hunter of *Notes* is keen to stay awake in order to eavesdrop on peasants' conversations, despite the encumbrance of his waking consciousness, while it is the unrelenting heat rather than shaded forests that becomes a leitmotif of the cycle.

The hunter's self-confrontation is complete in such stories as "The Meeting," when, eavesdropping on an encounter between a house serf pretending to be something he is not, and a peasant girl content with who she is, the hunter lunges from his hiding place to comfort the girl. Crossing over into action, the hunter frightens the girl, who drops the flowers she was holding. The hunter takes them as a keepsake so that the once-living object is now dead, becoming a symbol for the hunter's experience rather than a life in itself. In other stories, description is markedly self-conscious, as when the titular character of "Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District" pauses mid-description to comment ironically, "Note in what detail I describe it all" (196; 294). In these moments, perspective is clouded with desire, details placed in the service of self-image. A world of relativity has opened, and there are no concrete universals within it—only distinct perspectives that bring us into the narrow realm of the perceiver.

NARRATION

Across *Notes from a Hunter*, the narrator struggles to maintain the illusion of unity from within the countryside. Often, the narrated world is like the barren "here" that symbolizes dislocation in the passage described above from "Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands." In stories like "Raspberry Water," however, the problems of the present are not redeemed by attitudes of resignation. Unlike distant vantage points, views from within the countryside stifle rather than inspire language, as though speakers lose their sense of self in the realization

that they, too, are defined by this place. Such silence brings many stories in the cycle to an end, suggesting not only the limitations of the hunter but the literature he symbolizes. And unlike the characteristic silence of peasants like Arkhip in “Death,” who is celebrated for his connection to the countryside, the silence that often ends stories in the cycle suggests that person and place are mutually exclusive. Once the hunter realizes that the network to which he longs to be a part already speaks through him, he falls silent—unable to reconcile the self he feels to be free, and the reality that confines it.

So much for the immediate experience of the countryside that offers belonging for the price of expression, along with concrete details for observational distance and the destruction of their independent meaning. But what happens to the countryside as a timeless memory and cherished homeland of gentry and peasantry alike? In the preceding sections I have established that attitudes of resignation attributed to Russian peasant culture in Turgenev's cycle are meant to rehabilitate the idea of a national whole in face of historical change, and that social categorization in the physiological sketch contributes to the cycle's effort to establish transparent connections between people and places. I will now show how the cycle's failure to narratively embody the illusion of unity associated with the peasant countryside results in the emergence of character from type, where character is correlated with the idea of dislocation and type is correlated with the idea of accepting your lot. The vision of the countryside laid out in stories like “Forest and Steppe” is not cast aside by Turgenev's burgeoning Realist poetics, but concealed in later work in a third-person omniscient narrative perspective. By depending on characters for access to concrete details, yet refusing character for the dislocation it entails, third-person narration offers a narrative solution to the “here” and “there” dialectic posed in *Notes from a Hunter*.

Across the cycle, sounds of the countryside reach the hunter from afar, and his limitations as a narrator are laid bare. He hears echoes of duck calls and distant shouting but cannot see their source, a scenario that ends several stories and suggests how the countryside stretches beyond the hunter's understanding. What remains beyond the ken of *Notes from a Hunter* does not imply mystery, however, despite references to the endless steppe that recall Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Rather, Turgenev's narrator's epistemological limits emerge at the same time the countryside is demystified, offering no sense of transcendence or escape, as when Khor asks at the conclusion of “Khor and Kalinych” about the hunter's estate, warning him to hunt as he pleases so long as he frequently checks on his bailiff (14; 27). In such moments, a narrator who often breaks the narrative's frame to address readers becomes what Mieke Bal calls “character-bound,” that is, subject to the limitations of time and space that define the narrated world.²³

Broadly speaking, characters have limitations that narrators do not, and a further distinction in Turgenev's cycle between type and individual exacerbates a sense of entrapment in the narrated world. Since its first appearance in 1847, “Khor and Kalinych” has been celebrated for offering uniquely individualized peasant portraits, but more recently, Alexei Vdovin has argued that the two peasants who are the focus of the cycle's first story become interesting to the hunter because he is able to slot them into typological categories, not

²³Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd ed. (Toronto, 2009), 43.

because they resist categorization.²⁴ As Vdovin points out, types depend on contrasts like those drawn between Khor and Kalinych, and they also help assimilate new information. Khor's resemblance to Socrates renders him comprehensible to a gentry to whom Socrates is familiar. Whereas types are comprehensible in general terms and through their relation to others, characters are defined by their relationship to plot. Characters may be socially typical, but they nevertheless act as individuals who fulfill typological determinations to varying degrees.

As an exemplary type, Khor epitomizes a sense of resignation attached to types throughout the cycle in his acceptance of the social order. He skirts the line of character with attempts to improve his position by negotiating his landowner dues and selling goods on the side, but ultimately, Khor "took a realistic view of his position" as a serf (13; 25). Unlike the hunter who roams from his manor seeking something other than what he has, Khor stays where he is, even as he establishes a personal fiefdom with a coterie of strapping sons on the edges of his landowner's estate. Khor does not so much passively submit to his place as actively lay claim to it. Bound to the limits of time and space in the same way as any character, he is also true to his type and fully expressed by his surroundings.

Considering a change in status, Khor explores the edges of character as defined in part by interiority, only once muttering to himself in the third-person that "if Khor was among free people ... then everyone without a beard would be a bigger fish than Khor" (9; 21). Whereas Styopa in "Raspberry Water" can hardly speak for his lack of social belonging, and the hunter falls silent whenever his own displacement is invoked, Khor is strikingly articulate, his thoughts readily externalized. Interiority, by contrast, is a distinguishing feature of characters who struggle within their positions. Whenever Khor is silent, he does not betray anguish, a trait shared by Arkhip from "Death" but not by major characters in Turgenev's later works like the heroine of his 1858 novella *Asya* who "wanted the whole world to forget her origin" and, for the same reason, betrays an inner life that the narrator finds hard to penetrate.²⁵ Like the tensions that suggest themselves at the end of "Raspberry Water," suppressed speech in Turgenev's world often stems from dislocation.²⁶

Although depictions of unspoken thoughts are a major feature of Realist narrative technique and especially the novel, they would come as a disappointment for a narrator like Turgenev's hunter, who prefers that scenes are channeled through an eyewitness so that they are concrete but free of inward preoccupations. From the Romantic point of view, an eyewitness can channel connections between universally linked individuals, and for the Realist, the witness ensures verisimilitude and catalogs types within a system. But these universalist values are only maintained in description which, as Georg Lukács has argued, demands a standpoint of observation rather than participation and treats events as things

²⁴Aleksei Vdovin, "Nevedomyi mir: Russkaia i evropeiskaia estetika i problema reprezentatsii krest'ian v literature serediny XIX veka," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 141 (2016): 303–8.

²⁵Turgenev, *PSS* 5:169.

²⁶For a discussion of the emergence of interiority in Turgenev's writing and the valences of suppressed speech versus silence see Victoria Somoff, "No Need for Dogs or Women: Muteness in Turgenev's 'Mumu,'" *Russian Literature* 68:3–4 (2010), 501–20.

rather than “the vicissitudes of human beings.”²⁷ In narrative, eyewitnesses becomes participants. Whatever they see is subject to their internal dramas. Cast in this way, first-person narration is far from being concrete, each detail catalyzing a chain of associations that runs deep into the self but far from the whole.

For critics like Lukács, at the foundation of any whole is man himself, meaning that naturalized values are in fact fungible, and that the whole of nature with which Turgenev attempts to associate the Russian peasantry is itself an illusion. More than being inaccessible, the peasant countryside simply does not exist as a projection of natural unity that Turgenev tries to generate by writing about it. In fact, the countryside is not a stable background at all, neither for description nor national identity, but is rather the stuff of story—invented, even mythic, and bound up with character.

Plunging into a world of relativity and forgoing the promise of unity was not Turgenev's course, however, even as he strove to depict social processes. While the genre of the physiological sketch implies the assumption that society is as describable as a collection of physical objects, Turgenev suggests in stories like “Raspberry Water” that social identity exists within relationships that can only be narrated. Nevertheless, it was an age when literature was tasked not only to depict contemporary social problems but to generate a reality wider than the limits of an individual, and for Turgenev, at stake was a national identity inclusive of gentry and peasantry alike. A new narrative perspective was needed.

Third-person omniscient narration is often discussed as a distinctive element of nineteenth-century Realist genres that carries certain values, from panopticon-like illusions of control to God-like beholding. But in Turgenev's writing the discussion of omniscience as a negative quality defined by contrast is perhaps most appropriate. As Audrey Jaffe describes it, omniscience is an effect created by shifting between different points of view without ascribing the voice that fills those shifts to a “circumscribed consciousness.” Not unlike Turgenev's search in *Notes from a Hunter* for a middle ground between here and there, the search for omniscience is, according to Jaffe, the search for a place “between a voice that implies presence and the lack of any character to attach to it; between a narratorial configuration that refuses character and the characters it requires to define itself.” Jaffe goes on to argue that omniscience is “a fantasy of transcending the bounds of a unitary identity,” but for Turgenev the refusal of character that lies at the heart of this narrative perspective implies a slightly different fantasy; namely, an identity rooted in concrete experience yet expressive of a national whole.²⁸

By relying on character perspective to depict social experience but itself refusing the entanglements entailed by that perspective, third-person narration maps a world of dislocation while maintaining a realm apart into which writer and reader may escape, witnessing without participating. In this place—a distant “there” cultivated in literary solitude and associated with the peasant countryside as a timeless memory—the silenced narrator of *Notes from a Hunter* may speak again.

²⁷Georg Lukács, “To Narrate or Describe?” (1936), in his *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur Kahn (New York, 1970), 111.

²⁸Audrey Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (Berkeley, 1991), 6, 7.

CONCLUSION

In *Notes from a Hunter*, literature enters the peasant countryside in the form of a hunter—lover of nature, conduit for concrete experience, and effaced subjectivity. But from “Forest and Steppe” to “Singers” (1850) and to the publication of the complete cycle in 1852, much had changed. Throughout the stories, genres of Romantic lyric poetry and the physiological sketch treated the countryside as a canvas for description. But these treatments also generated elements of narrative, from non-typical characters to shifts in temporality. Instead of resolving the dialectic of “here” and “there” that was posed by the countryside as a realm of both social fracture and timeless unity, “The Singers” suggests a split that manifests in Turgenev’s later works as one between narrator and narrated world. In “The Singers” this narrative difference is introduced between, on the one hand, a folk song embodying the literary value and national sentiment associated with the countryside, and, on the other, the singers who produce it.

In this story, a desolate landscape surrounds the hunter, who is suffering from thirst in the unrelenting heat, recalling the sense of entrapment Kasyan associates with the southern steppe and the implications of exposure in the final passage of “Raspberry Water.” Moreover, the land on which the hunter treads belongs to “a Petersburg German,” abandoned in favor of a cosmopolitan city life. While civilization bustles elsewhere, here in the countryside, “emaciated willows straggle timidly” down riverbanks along a ravine that “gapes like an abyss” (150; 231). But like the ravaged forest in “Death,” the barren countryside retains national values enshrined in memory and bolstered by a culture of resignation that transforms evanescence into timeless truth. Indeed, a tavern on the ravine offers the comforts of home as a watering hole for myriad characters that populate the cycle and challenge the neat social categories assumed in the physiological sketch, from domestic servants influenced by gentry culture to Turkish-born crown serfs. In this tavern, a spectrum of identities will be united in a national sentiment evoked by song.

A literary event in oral form, the tavern’s singing competition is presided over by two characters who model narrative positions alongside the hunter’s. The tavernkeeper Nikolai Ivanych “remains on the sidelines” like an eyewitness, while a character nicknamed Gentleman Wildman participates in the action at some remove, judging the competition but remaining mostly silent (151; 232). With an undisclosed social identity, Gentleman Wildman has suffered the torments of character but has since focused his identity in one unifying and outwardly directed theme: a love of music.²⁹ Modeling narrative positions with observation and literary sensibility, these characters facilitate a performance that moves the audience into the shared space of national identity.

When the singer of the winning song begins, he empties himself of particularity so that he becomes a conduit for the melody that unites the fractious crowd, placing his hands over his face and then removing them to reveal a death-like demeanor (161; 245). As he sings, the narrative flows between descriptions of the scene and associations provoked by the song, but these distinct temporalities are woven together as each association returns to

²⁹“It seemed as if certain mighty powers sullenly lurked within him ... and if I’m not terribly mistaken, precisely such an outburst had occurred in the life of this man” (Turgenev, *Zapiski/Notes*, 158; 242).

the tavern with the chorus-like refrain, "he sang." Alternations between scenic present and narrative past create a rhythm that mimics oral poetry while simultaneously layering different contexts into experience. Unlike histories of displacement that pull narrative away from scene, every sentence in this passage converges back onto the tavern, where a national whole appears to be contained.

In the midst of this song, the hunter has a memory of a seagull standing on the shore with open wings (161; 246). Though this memory briefly departs from the scene in the tavern, it does not use a second-person pronoun to address readers. Instead, the memory adds depth to the narrative past. Though readers are absent from this place, the song is about longing, and the audience present to its performance feels just as readers do; that is, drawn away from a fractious reality and into a unified aesthetic trance. In this moment there is no divide between the experience of literature and extratextual reality, just as there is none between Russian gentry and Russian peasant. And although the narrative is situated in the first person, the hunter's perspective encompasses the surroundings with which he has merged. Even the singer forgets his audience, externalizing his inner life so that it is shared with others rather than marking his distance from them.

Like other moments of reverie depicted throughout the cycle, the song eventually must end, and when Gentleman Wildman breaks the silence by uttering the singer's name and Nikolai Ivanych issues the reward, they pronounce a victor and disrupt the non-hierarchical totality he had created. Unity is beginning to fracture, each narrator-figure intruding on the scene. But the hunter departs the scene entirely, needing to escape the tavern before the song's spell is broken and therefore desiring not the concrete experience of a place but rather the ephemera produced within its bounds. In a departure from the descriptive style emblemized in "Forest and Steppe," however, he finds no relief in "the profound silence of exhausted nature" (162; 247). Noise from the tavern calls him back to peer into its window, a symbol of the new distance between the hunter and his narrative. What he sees through the frame calls to mind a painting and invites comparison with Svetlana Alpers's study of Pieter Bruegel's peasant scenes: "We can enter, and learn, but we cannot stay."³⁰

At the conclusion of "The Singers" the hunter wanders from the tavern into the arid night and hears an echo from afar. The name "Antropka," with its final elongated syllable and alternating tonal resonance, is described like music, and when Antropka responds to learn that he is being called home for a flogging, the singing competition's reward is replaced by punishment. Traveling the countryside in search of a lasting literary embodiment of the national sentiment he is just witnessed, the hunter has been to the source of echoes like these. He knows that the more you try to pin down details to the experience from which they emanate, the more entrapped you become, and the less concrete that experience appears. In a sense, we have returned to where we began, the bucolic idyll invoked in the poem that introduces "Forest and Steppe," because the peasant countryside must remain a distant place. If there is any sense of unity at the end of "The Singers," it is contained in longing or irony, but no longer does it seem bound to the countryside. Instead, *Notes from a Hunter*

³⁰Svetlana Alpers, "Bruegel's Festive Peasants," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 6:3–4 (1972–73): 176.

suggests the impossibility of being entirely at one with a place, but the energy generated between poles that will never meet—gentry and peasant, freedom and belonging, “here” and “there”—informs Turgenev’s Realist poetics in the years to come.