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An Alternative View of the Peasantry: The *Raznochintsy* Writers of the 1860s

The 1860s witnessed an important but somewhat neglected stage in the evolution of intelligentsia attitudes toward the peasantry and other lower strata of society. It is best represented by writers who devoted themselves to portrayals of the *narod*, urban and rural, and who were known collectively (although they were by no means a cohesive group) as the *raznochintsy* writers of the sixties. They included F. M. Reshetnikov, N. V. Uspensky, N. G. Pomialovsky, A. I. Levitov, N. A. Kushchevsky, and M. A. Voronov. The biographies of these men are remarkably similar. They were all from uneducated families of the lower classes. Caught up in the ferment of the sixties which penetrated even to the most backward and obscure areas of Russia (from which most of them came), they made their way to St. Petersburg, seeking to free themselves from the age-old restrictions which Russian society had imposed on people of their social origins. These *raznochintsy*—men with little education and without pedigree, useful connections, or material security—were really the first generation of Russian writers to depend on literature for their livelihood. The intelligentsia of the sixties, especially its radical wing, received their works eagerly, and for about a decade they were published regularly in journals like *Sovremennik* and *Russkoe slovo*.

The common and distinctive attribute of these writers was their unwillingness to idealize or romanticize the peasant in any way. In fact, they often deliberately chose to perceive and portray only the most dismal features of peasant life and character. The literary image of the peasant thereby produced was a substantial departure from that of the forties and fifties, when the peasant in literature was more often than not idealized in order to support the case against serfdom. In the seventies and eighties the peasant again was to be portrayed in an idealized form—this time as the harbinger of a new social order.

Students of literature have devoted little attention to the *raznochintsy* writers, possibly because these writers are not generally considered to have created a first-rate literature.¹ Most students of intellectual history have also

1. Since literary scholars are legitimately concerned with the study and evaluation of first-rate literature, they should not be criticized for ignoring literature which is

neglected the *raznochintsy* writers, preferring—in their studies of attitudes toward the peasantry—to stress the forties and fifties and the seventies: the periods of pre-emancipation idealization and of populist adulation.² To be sure, the *raznochintsy* of the sixties have by no means been ignored by historians, but the emphasis has generally fallen on their reaction to the “fathers” of the previous decades, or on their preparatory role for the populism of the seventies. The sixties, however, was a creative decade in its own right. It witnessed the efflorescence of many ideas and attitudes which, owing to the overwhelming impact of populism, did not always persist into the decades that followed, but which need to be recognized and evaluated if we are to have a complete picture of the evolution of intelligentsia attitudes over the entire century.

In 1861 a critic in *Syn otechestva* remarked, “In the last five years there have been as many *narodnye* writers, as many *narodnye* books published . . . as in the entire past century. . . . What does this all mean?”³ What it meant was that in the atmosphere surrounding the Emancipation, the young intelligentsia had grown reluctant to accept the milieu depicted by the writers of the 1840s and 1850s as the only one worth writing about. The literature of earlier decades had mirrored the lives, dilemmas, and aspirations of the gentry. The new intelligentsia deeply resented the narrow focus which excluded from literature the problems of a broader cross section of the Russian population. This was, then, a call to write about the masses—the *narod*—not as idealized though ancillary figures embellishing the preoccupations of the upper classes, but as people in their own right. Even the few earlier writers who had made forays into the world outside the noble drawing room, who had attempted to depict the lower strata of society, were considered entirely inadequate by the new critics. The gentry writer, however good his intentions, had been too removed from the masses to understand them except as a romantic abstraction, and often his approach, according to the *Syn otechestva* critic, had been condescending and frivolous: “To be a *narodnyi* writer it was usually con-

mainly second-rate. In some cases, however, literary historians have made sweeping and unsubstantiated nonliterary judgments regarding the intelligentsia's view of the peasantry based solely on their study of the major writers of the nineteenth century. See, for example, Donald Fanger, “The Peasant in Literature,” in Wayne Vucinich, ed., *The Peasant in Nineteenth Century Russia* (Stanford, 1968), and I. Z. Serman, “Problema krest'ianskogo romana v russkoi kritike srediny XIX veka,” in I. Z. Serman and B. I. Bursov, eds., *Problemy realizma russkoi literatury XIX veka* (Leningrad, 1961).

2. Although Soviet intellectual and literary historians have not entirely neglected the *raznochintsy* writers (especially in the early decades of the Soviet period), they tend to lump them together indiscriminately into the category of “revolutionary democrats.” This categorization seems to have hindered serious investigation of these writers and the attitudes their works reflected. See my doctoral dissertation, “The Literary Raznochintsy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Russia” (University of Chicago, 1967).

3. A. V., “Rasskazy N. V. Uspenskogo,” *Syn otechestva*, 1861, no. 52, p. 1582.

sidered enough simply to spend some time among the people, take note of several scenes . . . , mix into the conversation some proverbs and funny sayings." Or worse: "Others thought the Russian peasant so simple that it was not even necessary to leave one's study—it was enough to converse once in a while with one's lackey or watch the peasant through the window."

The result had been what was now deemed to be the ridiculous idealization of the *narod* by writers such as Turgenev, Pisemsky, and Grigorovich. In the contemptuous words of Chernyshevsky: "They idealized peasant life, portrayed for us such noble, exalted, virtuous, patient, and energetic beings, that we could not but be touched at the description. And we shed tender tears over the unpleasantness to which such nice creatures were subjected."⁴

Obviously, such assessments of the peasant literary persona of the past, mixing all sorts of writers together without discrimination, need not be accepted at face value. One cannot, for example, accuse a writer such as Pisemsky of romanticizing the *narod*. The point is, however, that most critics of the sixties chose to ignore the exceptions and to reproach all past literary treatments of the peasant for being fanciful and biased. In general, of course, they were correct.

The new critics were well aware of the important political reason for the earlier idealized portraits of the *narod*. In the forties and fifties the literary opponents of serfdom, continuing an eighteenth-century tradition, had created a positive image of the peasant to support their belief in emancipation. But the romanticized peasant, the literary creation of a guiltless and exalted being, had served only to assuage the conscience of an aristocratic intelligentsia which, hating serfdom, had been incapable of acting to abolish it. Compassion had been a substitute for action, and the literature of the past left no legacy on which to base the kind of action made possible by the promise of Emancipation. How, the intelligentsia of the sixties asked, was it possible to help the *narod* if it remained a sentimental abstraction? It was essential to know the truth about the people, to discard the "mystical essence with which previous writers had invested the peasantry."⁵ The time had come for literature to deal with unadorned facts: authenticity and ethnography, as it were, became more important than artistry, and the young intelligentsia were prepared to accept the results of this approach even if the truth was dismal and unpleasant. Indeed, the assumption was that an honest look at the *narod* would inevitably produce a dolorous picture.

It was also assumed that even with more diligent and conscientious observation, gentry writers could never hope to portray the peasant accurately,

4. N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 16 vols. (Moscow, 1939–53), 7:883.

5. P. V. Annenkov, "Sovremennaia belletristika: N. Uspenskii," *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti*, 1863, no. 11, p. 46.

separated as they were from the people by social origin, life style, and psychology. Only a person whose knowledge of the people had been assimilated by the very conditions of his own life could approach the *narod* without a priori assumptions. The door was thus opened to the *raznochintsy* writers, who, it was felt, would be able to pierce through all previous literary distortions to the real nature of the lower strata of society. The *raznochintsy* writers, responding to the call, wrote about the milieu of their own social origins, providing the reading public with grim, often unflattering portrayals of the peasantry, the clergy, the poor student, the *chinovnik*, and the worker. As Peter Tkachev noted in retrospect: "The literary *raznochintsy* made their appearance in torn frock coats, uncombed hair, and blackened boots. . . . They were poorly educated and not particularly well developed. In vain you search their works for profound analysis, bold reproduction of character, intricate concepts, rich artistic imagination. . . . No, you will meet with none of that in their works. Then what do they have? They hasten to share with the reader those sad impressions of their poor youth; therefore they invent nothing."⁶

Two of the most popular and widely acclaimed representatives of the *raznochintsy* writers were Nikolai Vasilievich Uspensky and Fedor Mikhailovich Reshetnikov, whose works span the years 1858 to 1872. The evolution of critical responses to their works reflects the shifts that took place in intelligentsia attitudes toward the peasantry in the course of those years.

Nikolai Uspensky was the first of the *raznochintsy* writers to attract notice in the 1860s. His father was a poor village priest in the village of Stupin (Tula Guberniia), where Nikolai was born in 1837. His early education was the traditional one for a priest's son—eight years in a local ecclesiastical school (*bursa*). Then, in 1856, he made his way on foot to St. Petersburg, where he attended lectures first at the St. Petersburg Medical–Surgical Academy and then at the University. After a year he abandoned his studies to write, and became a permanent contributor to *Sovremennik*. In 1861 Nekrasov lent Uspensky money to spend a year in Europe, hoping that the experience would encourage him to develop further as a writer. When Uspensky returned, a number of disputes with Nekrasov and other members of *Sovremennik's* editorial staff led him to break with them. From 1864 to 1874 he worked sporadically as a teacher, first at Iasnaia Poliana, then at various district elementary schools. From 1874 Uspensky lived an entirely nomadic life, earning his bread as a street buffoon, wandering about the

6. P. N. Tkachev, "Nedodumannye dumy," in *Izbrannye sochineniia na sotsial'no-politicheskie temy*, 6 vols. (Moscow, 1932–37), 2:228 (first published in *Delo*, 1878, no. 1).

countryside playing an accordion, telling stories, and becoming progressively more alcoholic. He committed suicide in 1889.⁷

In 1861 Chernyshevsky decided that Uspensky was the writer for whom the literary world had long been waiting. What drew him to Uspensky's stories was a view of peasant life which had never before appeared in Russian literature. Uspensky's peasants are brutish, base, alcoholic, ignorant, and dull-witted. The peasant commune emerges as an authoritarian institution which serves the peasants' greed and brutality. The stories are often mere vignettes, from which Uspensky completely eliminates himself as well as all narrative description of the environment, allowing his characters to reveal themselves through their own conversations. A humorous vein runs through most of the stories, but the humor is tempered by the absence of any sympathetic characters. Not only are the main protagonists—the peasants—mean, ignorant, and coarse, but the merchants, kulaks, and petty bureaucrats who inhabit Uspensky's world are exploitative, brutal, or, at the very least, insensitive. For example, in a story called *Khoroshoe zhit'e* a village tavern keeper, Andrei Fadeich, describes village life to a friend: "The main thing, I tell you, is that the tavern . . . was not only a place for drinking but was also like an official establishment. It was the court and everything else. If some matter had to be decided, everyone came trooping into the tavern. There was no better place."⁸

The tavern keeper has no qualms about exploiting the muzhik's penchant for drink, for in his view the muzhik deserves to be exploited. To illustrate, he relates the following incident. All the muzhiks, including the village priest, had gathered in an abandoned barn near the tavern. It was discovered that one of the peasants, Eremka, had stolen the lock to the barn. As a punishment for the theft, the peasants took his new cart and traded it to the tavern keeper for vodka. The entire group, including Eremka, got drunk. "When they had drunk all the vodka," relates the tavern keeper, "they began to ponder . . . what else of the thief's they could drink up. Those little people—the more they drink, the more cruel they become. Then they show their true colors. . . . They shouted, 'Lads, let's go to Eremka's again. Take whatever you see in the yard'" (p. 62). By this time Eremka was so drunk himself that he gave them a list of what he owned, and they proceeded to drink away all his earthly possessions. The tavern keeper comments: "Well, that is how they are—always getting drunk. Every single day, the whole bunch

7. For full biographies of Uspensky and Reshetnikov see my dissertation, "The Literary Raznochintsy," pp. 16–77 and 130–88.

8. N. Uspensky, *Povesti, rasskazy, ocherki* (Moscow, 1957), p. 61 (first published in *Sovremennik*, 1858, no. 2).

of them. If there is a scuffle—a drinking bout! If someone's dog goes mad—a drinking bout!" (p. 71).

In all of Uspensky's stories the reader is presented with an image of a peasant demoralized, ignorant, and greedy. The commune emerges as a burlesque of these characteristics, an institution in which the ignorant and weak are exploited by the no-less-ignorant but craftier and possibly wealthier members. Thus, from the cumulative impression of Uspensky's works Chernyshevsky concluded that "only a few clear-sighted persons like Uspensky who love the people fiercely could muster the resolution to lay before us these [negative] traits without mitigation."⁹

Chernyshevsky perceived in Uspensky's cheerless portrayal of peasant character a much greater love for the people than the kind of love the nobility had formerly been so proud of, for it was completely without condescension. Uspensky, as a *raznochinets*, felt no need to assuage his conscience by reducing the peasants to an undifferentiated, romanticized mass. It was important for anyone who truly wished to better the peasants' lot to understand that collectively and individually they were capable of the same range of emotions and behavior as anyone else in society. Uspensky's great virtue, Chernyshevsky said, lay in his capacity to "renounce all deception in order to depict the routine thoughts, acts, feelings, and habits of the simple people. The picture is not attractive. At every step one finds nonsense, filth, trivia, and blindness" (p. 876). But however painful it might be for the educated classes to shed their illusions about the peasantry, it was necessary to "know their essence in order to know what incentive [could] awaken their initiative" (p. 863).

Anticipating the accusation that Uspensky unduly emphasized the bleak side of the *narod*, Chernyshevsky agreed that in every class, including the peasantry, there were capable and energetic people, but Uspensky's goal was "to acquaint us with the ruling tone of the people's lives; at the present time the ordinary routine prevails and in no way shows the strength and initiative which undoubtedly exist somewhere" (p. 887). Chernyshevsky saw in Uspensky's appearance on the literary scene a long-awaited link between the radical intelligentsia and the people, for Uspensky—the first writer with the courage to write the truth about the peasantry—was himself a man of the people: "When he sits at an inn or in a muzhik's home or just wanders among the people, his crude fellows will not say of him 'what a good and tender *barin* he is,' but will speak to him without formality as to their own brothers. This is proof that educated people . . . can be understood by the people, can be close to them. . . . Ten years ago there would not have been

9. Chernyshevsky, "Ne nachalo li peremeny?" in *Polnoe sobranie sochineniia*, 7:876 (first published in *Sovremennik*, 1861, no. 11).

a single person from among the educated who could have produced such an impression on the peasants" (p. 889).

That Chernyshevsky should respond to Uspensky's works so positively is not surprising. It is entirely consistent with his general outlook. What is more significant is that until 1864 Chernyshevsky's attitude toward Uspensky was echoed from almost every quarter. Critics writing for journals that were unsympathetic to Chernyshevsky on most issues agreed: "We do not know a writer who could deal with the people more skillfully than Uspensky—who would be less restrained by the preconceived notion that one must look condescendingly on the people, that one must emphasize their good side and leave their bad side in the shadows."¹⁰

Even the *pochvenniki*, who were for the most part offended by Uspensky's portrayals, appreciated him, as Dostoevsky put it, for "loving the people, not for this or that reason, but for themselves, just as they are. . . . He neither praises nor blames."¹¹ Yet this very attribute of Uspensky's approach was, by 1864, beginning to trouble even his admirers. Here was a curious contradiction. On one hand, the demand was for "unadorned truth," which by its very nature implied detachment and objectivity; on the other hand, this detachment was producing discomfort among the critics, and some were beginning to request that Uspensky take a position. No one was prepared to state with any clarity just what the "correct" position was, and certainly no one was prepared to question Uspensky's knowledge and understanding of peasant character and life. But some critics were beginning to suggest uneasily that it was not quite enough to describe the peasant without comment. As one critic wrote: "In fact, . . . the ugliness which spills onto everything touched by Uspensky's pen does not give evidence of a well-thought-out and definite view of life. . . . More likely, it indicates an indifference of thought, an intellectual indolence."¹²

By 1868 the ambivalence had disappeared and was replaced by outright rejection. At best it was said—by Saltykov-Shchedrin, for example—that Uspensky's works were a natural reaction to the romanticized *paysan* of a Grigorovich.¹³ At worst, it was now claimed that "*barskii* mockery of the Russian peasant is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the stories of N. Uspensky."¹⁴ A. Skabichevsky voiced a middle and more representative

10. A. S., "Narodnye prosvetiteli," *Russkaia rech'*, 1861, no. 100, p. 757.

11. F. Dostoevsky, "Rasskazy N. V. Uspenskogo," *Vremia*, 1861, no. 6, p. 177.

12. E. Edel'son, "Sovremennaia natural'naia shkola," *Biblioteka dlia chteniia*, 1864, no. 3, p. 20.

13. N. Shchedrin [M. E. Saltykov], "Naprasnye opaseni," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 20 vols. (Moscow, 1933–41), 8:66.

14. M., "Osenie listy russkoi zhurnalistiki," *Nedel'ia*, 1868, no. 44, p. 1519.

position. Still espousing the need for realism, he specifically denounced Uspensky's selection of the facts which portrayed "people who are ruled in life by the crudest, most bestial feelings, who strive for nothing more than earning a kopek or spending it in the tavern."¹⁵ Skabichevsky accused Uspensky of not understanding that his descriptions of the peasantry were a double-edged weapon. In emphasizing the peasant's ignorance and bestiality to show the terrible effects of serfdom, Uspensky forgot that the same emphasis might be used to prove the logic of serfdom.

Uspensky's name rarely appeared in the critical literature of the 1870s, although he continued to write until the late eighties and, indeed, to improve as a craftsman. But the audience for his pessimistic evaluation of the peasant and the commune was disappearing, and other *raznochintsy* writers who used peasant themes in a more palatable way usurped his place.

Among them was Fedor Reshetnikov. Reshetnikov was born in Ekaterinburg in 1841. The son of a village deacon, he was brought up by an uncle who worked for the postal service. His entire education consisted of one year at the *bursa* and five at a local school, after which he worked as a petty *chinovnik* in Ekaterinburg and Perm until his departure for St. Petersburg in 1863. It was not until the last year of his life that his income from his literary success permitted him to live above the level of poverty. He died in 1871 of a lung disease aggravated by alcoholism.¹⁶

Reshetnikov's six novels, written between 1864 and 1868, dealt with the lives of the poorest, most deprived stratum of the peasantry—that element which was forced to abandon the land and seek its livelihood on the fringes of agriculture and industry.¹⁷ He wrote of barge haulers and of peasants in the saltworks beyond the Urals, of workers in the gold fields, of peasants driven to St. Petersburg seeking survival in the large factories. His first novel, *Podlipovtsy*, provided a format which his subsequent novels followed. It told the story of a family of state peasants from Podlipnoe, an isolated and poverty-stricken village in the Urals: "One sees little life in this village. In the summer one can see a man or woman or child in the fields, but one hears no gay conversation, no songs. . . . Even the horses, cows, and pigs are apathetic. . . . Nor is it better indoors. Everywhere one sees poverty and filth. Half of the inhabitants are lying down, the others sit silently or tend

15. A. Skabichevsky, "Zhivaia struia," *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1868, no. 4, p. 146.

16. Glickman, "The Literary Raznochintsy," p. 185.

17. *Podlipovtsy* in *Sovremennik*, 1864, nos. 3, 4, 5. *Stavlennik* in *Sovremennik*, 1864, nos. 6, 7, 8. *Mezhdú liú'd'mi* in *Russkoe slovo*, 1865, nos. 1–3. *Gornorabochie* in *Sovremennik*, 1866, nos. 1 and 2. *Glumovy* in *Delo*, no. 2 (1866) and nos. 3, 4, 7, and 10 (1867). *Gde luchshe* in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1868, nos. 6–10.

to some small tasks—cursing the work, themselves, and everyone around them.”¹⁸

Since the Emancipation has done nothing to ameliorate the peasants' misery and destitution, the family leaves Podlipnoe in search of a better life. But the journey to the Kama River, which they make on foot, merely repeats the poverty and exploitation they had known in their village. Their ignorance leaves them easy prey to the exploitative people they meet in all their attempts to escape their former life. Poorly dressed and hungry, they walk in the snow and frost through the countryside and towns. In the towns, overwhelmed by a level of opulence they had never imagined, they instinctively bow before the carriages that pass through the streets: “The occupants of the carriages . . . did not even glance at them. If they did, it was with scorn. These gentlemen scarcely bothered to think of the poor. They did not know how much grief Pila and Sysoiko [the main protagonists] had borne, that their entire lives had been only deprivation, unhappiness, and bitter tears . . . , that they were trying to escape want, that they walked through the bitter frost in search of a good place, where there would be enough bread and where they would be free.”¹⁹

The women in the family find employment in the saltworks, the men as barge haulers on the Kama. In short order they are all dead from malnutrition and overwork—victims of total exploitation.

Reshetnikov was not making a romantic plea for the oppressed but noble peasant. His peasants, like Uspensky's, were filthy and ignorant. They stole, drank, and blasphemed; and they were insensitive to anything beyond their physical needs. What was it then that made his works acceptable at precisely the moment Uspensky's were rejected? After all, as Tkachev pointed out, “His heroes and heroines are as stupid and coarse as those of the buffoon-story tellers [such as Uspensky].” But, he continued, “You will neither laugh at them nor turn away. You will understand that they could not be different or better living under the circumstances that surrounded them.”²⁰

And that was the point. Uspensky had presented a picture of the peasant without reference to the surrounding conditions of the peasant's life. He took the muzhik's environment for granted. The reasons for the peasant's drunkenness, pettiness, ignorance, and wickedness were self-evident to him and, he assumed, to his reader. Reshetnikov, however, applied himself specifically to the environmental causes for the peasant's behavior, foremost among them poverty and oppression. And he did so in an excessively detailed fashion,

18. F. M. Reshetnikov, *Povesti, rasskazy, ocherki*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1956), 1:4.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

20. Tkachev, “Razbitye illiuzii,” in *Izbrannye sochineniia*, 2:339.

which sometimes obscured his message. He described the physical environment, from the land and weather to the clothing worn by his characters, the food they ate, and how they ate it. He exposed the social environment, from the minute-by-minute operations of their labor to their relations with each other and with those of the different strata who oppressed them. In contrast to Uspensky, who presented a static situation from which his characters made no attempt to escape, Reshetnikov told a tale in which the fundamental impulse of the protagonists was to seek something better. In every novel there was a peasant character, or several, who no matter how gray and colorless, no matter how ignorant and dull-witted, never lost the energy to search for a better life. Indeed, the leitmotiv of all his novels is expressed in the title of his last one, *Gde luchshe*. However naïvely Reshetnikov's characters undertook their quest for a better life, however unsuccessful they were—and they all failed—the fact that they tried to improve their own lot was more acceptable to a reading public that was just beginning to search for allies among the peasantry. For some, like Skabichevsky, the lesson to be learned from Reshetnikov was that the enormous energy latent in the peasantry was dissipated because the peasants sought salvation individually. Let them once realize that they could better themselves only by working together, and the problem would be solved.²¹ For others, like Tkachev, Reshetnikov proved that despite their indisputable energy, the masses were incapable of intelligent collective protest, and therefore needed the active leadership of the intelligentsia.²² Still others, like E. Utin, writing in the moderate, Western-oriented *Vestnik Evropy*, declared that Reshetnikov had revealed Russia's overwhelming material and spiritual poverty, which could be remedied only by exposure to Western models.²³ But whatever the critics read into his works, they all seized on the evidence of peasant initiative which Reshetnikov provided them.

Reshetnikov occupies a transitional point between the realism of the early sixties and the *narodnik* romanticism of the seventies. It was appropriate on the eve of the Reforms and for a few years afterward to call for an "exposé" of the peasant, for it seemed that the oppressive environment which had molded him was about to be altered. But before long two things had become clear: first, altering the juridical relations of serfdom had not improved the peasant's lot; second, the efforts of the radical intelligentsia to change society, even with a realistic grasp of peasant life and character, were also of dubious value. Chernyshevsky's raptures over Uspensky in 1861 were no longer relevant. The intelligentsia were not yet consciously seeking the peasant hero nor as yet prepared to reject "truthful" (that is, grim) portrayals. It had

21. A. Skabichevsky, "Chego nuzhno dobivat'sia real'nomy poetu," *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1877, no. 6, p. 164.

22. Tkachev, "Razbitye illiuzii," p. 336.

23. E. Utin, "Zadacha noveishei literatury," *Vestnik Evropy*, 1869, no. 12, p. 845.

nonetheless become necessary to explain the reasons for peasant behavior and—as was to become increasingly important—to offer evidence of peasant initiative. Reshetnikov did both.

Many of those who admired the content of Uspensky's and Reshetnikov's works, as well as those of other *raznochintsy* writers, complained about their artistic shortcomings. Repeatedly in the critical literature one finds the highest praise for their knowledge of the peasantry, for their acute perceptions and honesty, and for those talents which they did have, side by side with criticism of their artistic defects and exhortations to improve. Yet, in the end, it was the substance rather than the purely literary merits of their works which made them not only acceptable but widely read and highly acclaimed.

Although the *raznochintsy* writers were associated with the radical intelligentsia and in general shared their attitudes, they did not have a coherent and articulate radical point of view. They saw themselves as muckrakers whose task it was to expose the flaws and evils in Russian society with the pen, but here their active participation in changing the status quo ended. Despite their literary successes, their lives were generally unhappy, sometimes tragic. They understood that, acceptable as their literature might be, as individuals they lacked the qualifications for comfortable assimilation even into the intelligentsia, the most fluid and tolerant group in Russian society. Most of them ended their lives as alcoholics.

In 1877 Skabichevsky was already writing of this period in Russian literature—when the sine qua non of literature was not only that it treat the *narod* in all of its various manifestations but that those who did the writing be of the same social strata as their subjects—as a bygone era. Writing on the death of Alexander Ivanovich Levitov, another *raznochintets* writer who had written pessimistically of the peasantry, Skabichevsky lamented the thinning ranks of the *raznochintsy* writers: “Coming from the people, carrying on their shoulders the suffering of the people, and living as the people to the end of their days, they [the *raznochintsy* writers] did not idealize the people, did not put them on a pedestal. They did not seek in the people some kind of preconceived world, and they considered the foggy fantasy of . . . an A. Grigorovich or an L. Mei as profound nonsense.”²⁴ He attributed their passing partly to early death, but indicated his awareness of a more significant reason for their disappearance from the literary scene, namely the change in mood among the intelligentsia. And he advised the radical intelligentsia of the seventies to go back and read the *raznochintsy* writers as an antidote to their own form of “profound nonsense.”

This generation of *raznochintsy* writers was indeed, with one or two exceptions, short-lived. Most of them died young, as often as not from ill-

24. Skabichevsky, “Aleksandr Levitov,” *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1877, no. 6, p. 164.

nesses caused or exacerbated by poverty and alcoholism. But the mood among the intelligentsia and reading public who found their depictions of the peasantry appropriate and illuminating was equally short-lived. The radical intelligentsia of the seventies were no longer interested in melancholy descriptions of the peasantry which contradicted what they preferred to believe about the *narod*. The moment had passed when a writer's social origins would insure a favorable reception of uncomplimentary portrayals of the *narod*, for by the early seventies, as Kotliarevsky writes: "The progressive and radical person wanted to find a true ally in the people: he wanted to acquaint himself with the world view of the people in order to use it as a model for his own aims; he wanted to see the firm strength and will of a man on whom he could lean. Such a person did not come his way. Even at the height of the populist movement, the radical was not able to ferret him out—so he created him!"²⁵

This episode in the history of the intelligentsia's relation to the peasantry indicates that the intelligentsia did not need to romanticize the *narod*. The fact is that for a short time the intelligentsia was both willing and able to put aside its fantasies, to demystify the peasant, and to seek some realistic assessment of that class which dominated its concerns and activities to the twentieth century.

This period of realism was not the result of experience, as was to be the case when the realities of peasant life once again emerged in the works of writers such as Chekhov and Bunin, and which were acceptable then in the wake of the failures and disappointments of the populist movement. On the contrary, the people of the sixties welcomed bleak depictions of peasant reality because of their confidence in the capacity of the Reforms to alter prevailing conditions and, more important, in the intelligentsia's own ability, through personal emancipation and scientific study, to rectify the injustices of Russian society. Their subsequent adherence to populism mirrored a kind of pessimism, a breakdown in their confidence, which required the aid of a force outside both the establishment and themselves. Their reasons for choosing the peasantry need no particular elaboration. All brands of populism, however much they differed tactically, had in common the need for certain positive expectations of the peasantry. This need diverted the intelligentsia from the attitudes reflected in works of the *raznochintsy* writers.

25. N. Kotliarevsky, *Kanun osvobozhdeniia* (Petrograd, 1916), p. 492.