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Ideology in Turgenev's *Notes of a Hunter*: The First Three Sketches

Turgenev's *Notes of a Hunter* (1852) is considered by most critics—even by those who condemn his subsequent politics, judging them a mixture of vacuous pronouncements and ineffectual gestures—a genuine liberal statement. Literary critics who do not go so far as to claim that the work contributed directly to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1861—a view Turgenev himself occasionally espoused—at least assert that *Notes of a Hunter* is as biting and affecting a criticism of serfdom as literature could level at the time.¹ There is, I believe, a serious objection to this position. I am not referring to the argument that a cycle of twenty-two sketches mainly about a man out hunting with his dog can hardly have much to do with politics; there are so many references to social injustice that even the narrator's most seemingly mundane observations, such as his disquisitions on various hunting techniques, must be read as willful efforts to distract himself from the corruption of Russian life.² Moreover, contemporary readers' reactions would in themselves guarantee *Notes of a Hunter* a place in Russia's political history. My objection is not that there is no political element in *Notes of a Hunter*, but that it is wrong to see this element as unambiguously present. The work is not simply an expression of a liberal credo; rather, it projects the wish to be such an expression, and for all the ideological points Turgenev makes, he is ultimately most concerned with the difficulty of commanding any ideology at all in mid-nineteenth-century Russia.

Indeed, it makes sense to see *Notes of a Hunter* as something of a self-critical device, one that continually proposes ideological positions and moves to reveal their inadequacies.³ This process is neatly illustrated in the movement

1. Turgenev's belief in the crucial role that *Notes of a Hunter* played in the emancipation of the serfs was recorded by his good friends Edmond and Jules de Goncourt in their *Journal, mémoires de la vie littéraire*, vol. 10 (Monaco, 1956): 75. The single most exhaustive treatment of *Notes of a Hunter*, focusing on both the text and the historical circumstances surrounding it, is S. E. Shatalov, *Zapiski okhotnika I. S. Turgeneva* (Stalinabad, 1960).

2. Leonid Grossman's claim that serfdom serves only a stylistic, "compositional" function in *Notes of a Hunter* has had great influence (see his "Rannii zhanr Turgeneva," in Leonid P. Grossman, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4 vols. [Moscow, 1928], 3: 38–68). Grossman's essay is part of a widespread critical tendency to dismiss Turgenev's political concerns altogether, and, in fact, there is much in Turgenev's works and in Turgenev's own statements that supports such an interpretation; but there is at least an equal amount of evidence to support a contrary view as well. My own position, developed in this paper, is that, to the extent that Turgenev discounted politics, it was as a consequence of what he learned in practicing his very politically aware literary method. The internal dynamic of his work taught him the limits of political possibilities in the Russia of his time: literature is a powerfully efficacious mode of knowledge, and what one learns through literature cannot be ignored by shifting over to a purportedly more real or commonsensical view of things.

3. The argument that a literary work progressively reveals and also adjusts its meaning has been made most persuasively by Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley and

from "Khor' and Kalinych" to "Ermolai and the Miller's Wife" to "Raspberry Spring." These three sketches were, respectively, the first, third, and ninth to appear when the sketches were being published separately in *The Contemporary*. But when Turgenev put together the first collected edition of *Notes of a Hunter* in 1852, he made them the first three in the cycle.⁴ The work was thus made to begin, as we shall see, with a sense of a systematically intensifying deadlock, a sequence that brings illumination not of possibilities but of limits. It is worth noting in this connection that though the publication of the collected edition should have been an altogether happy occasion for Turgenev, capping his reputation as Russia's leading writer, it actually coincided with a period of great self-doubt. Turgenev's habitual pose of incapacity before life's tasks accounts for this attitude in part, but if the aim of *Notes of a Hunter* was indeed to depict deadlock, Turgenev's ambiguous reaction to his creation is even more understandable. Success on one level would necessarily have entailed failure on another.

The opening lines of "Khor' and Kalinych" are as follows:

Whoever may have chanced to make his way from the district of Bolkhov to that of Zhizdra has, most probably, been struck by the sharp contrast between the breed of men in Orel' province and that in Kaluga province. The Orel' muzhik is of small stature, he is squat and glum; he eyes you from under his brows, lives in wretched little huts made of aspen, does *barshchina*, does not go in for trading, eats poorly, and wears bast sandals. The Kaluga muzhik pays *obrok*, lives in roomy huts made of pine, is tall of stature, eyes you boldly and cheerfully, is clean-shaven and white of face, trades in butter and birch tar, and, on Sundays, goes about in boots.⁵

This passage invites the reader to consider contrasts. The rhetorical scheme is based wholly on oppositions, so that the designation of a feature qualifying one group of men calls forth, almost ineluctably it seems, the assertion of an absolutely contrary feature in the other group. Turgenev makes it clear that the peasantry is emphatically not homogeneous and constant, but consists of individuals moved by different needs and constrained by particular limitations. The reference to *barshchina* and *obrok* obligations is relevant to this effort, because, while reminding us of a political system that burdens all peasants, it simultaneously holds

London, 1972), to whom I am indebted. My own procedure, however, follows Fish only in the very broadest terms of his argument.

4. The publishing history of *Notes of a Hunter* is complicated. Turgenev began writing the sketches almost offhand, when he was considering giving up literature altogether, and largely as a favor to several friends who had recently taken over the editorship of *Sovremennik*. At the outset, Turgenev had no intention of writing a cycle. The 1852 collection was therefore the first opportunity for him to impose some sense of what the sketches taken as a whole meant to him. He made several changes in the ordering of the sketches. He also had to make alterations in the text to placate the censors, who scrutinized books more carefully than journals. The whole story is set forth in an appendix to Turgenev's collected works (I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, 28 vols. [Moscow-Leningrad, 1961-68], 4: 494-521. Volumes 1-15 contain Turgenev's literary works [*sochineniia*], the last thirteen volumes, numbered 1-13, contain his letters [*pis'ma*]; all subsequent references to Turgenev are to this edition, hereafter cited as *Sochineniia* or *Pis'ma*).

5. Turgenev, *Sochineniia*, 4: 7.

forth the hope that there may be significant gradations in the degree of oppression.⁶ This sounds a note that is echoed throughout the cycle. In *Notes of a Hunter*, Turgenev continually works to calibrate the different social and economic conditions that make up the peasant experience. We are shown not only the common field muzhik but also house serfs, serfs who have managed to set up businesses of their own, serfs who act as willing agents for their tyrannical masters, and finally serfs who resist and consequently lose all hope of subsistence.

The world he depicts, though unrelievedly harsh, is nevertheless variegated and particularized, and this in itself lends Turgenev's effort an air of progressivism that attends any move to critical inquiry. More specifically, the opening lines of "Khor' and Kalinych" announce Turgenev's membership in the Westernizer movement, that group of men who were influenced by the European liberal tradition of insisting on the priority of the individual in all matters.⁷ The sketch appeared, in fact, in the same issue of *The Contemporary* that contained the essay by Konstantin Kavelin, entitled "A Glance at the Juridical Life of Ancient Russia," a programmatic statement of the Westernizer position. If differences between the literary and political imaginations are kept in mind, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the opening lines of "Khor' and Kalinych" represent the start of an extended gloss on Kavelin's claim that "a personality which is conscious of its own uncontingent worth is the necessary precondition for the spiritual development of a people."⁸

But—and this is the fascination of *Notes of a Hunter*—the ringing allegiance to the principle of individualism soon leads to difficulties, and Turgenev's very enthusiasm reveals the problematical nature of such a stance. Although evident in the overly formalistic prose of the opening paragraph, the difficulties become especially visible when the narrator proceeds to describe the title characters. "The two friends," he remarks, "did not resemble each other in the least. Khor' was a sedate person, practical, with a head for administration, a rationalist. Kalinych, on the contrary, belonged to the category of idealists, romantics and people who are exalted and enraptured."⁹ The description goes on for another full page, the characteristics of one man set against those of the other: Khor' is well-off and ambitious, Kalinych leads a hand-to-mouth existence; Khor' has a large family, Kalinych is alone in the world; Khor' feels most at ease in society, Kalinych in nature. By the time Turgenev has finished, we see two distinct and self-contained creatures; it is an admirable achievement, carried out in supple prose, and yet it is also ambiguous. In describing Turgenev's achievement, I have used the word "creature" deliberately, because the degree of life (or lifelikeness) that Khor' and Kalinych attain seems questionable.

6. Serfdom obligated peasants either to perform labor on demesne land (*barshchina*) or to pay rent to the landlord for their own land allotment (*obrok*). Of the two alternatives, the second was generally preferred since landlords usually required so much labor that the peasants had no time to tend to their own crops.

7. The most comprehensive study of Turgenev's relationship to the Westernizer movement remains Henri Granjard, *Ivan Tourguénev et les courants politiques et sociaux de son temps* (Paris, 1954).

8. Konstantin Kavelin, "Vzgliad na iuridicheskii byt drevnei Rossii," *Sovremennik*, 1847, no. 1, section 2, p. 49.

9. Turgenev, *Sochineniia*, 4: 14–15.

For all the narrator's apparent sympathy, there is something in the passage that works against his acknowledging these peasants as men, or, according to Kavelin's definition, as "personalities." This is evident, in part, in the length of the description cited, which begins to resemble an extended observation under a microscope, and, in part, in Turgenev's repetition of essentially the same contrastive rhetorical scheme as the one used in the opening passage, thus suggesting that he commands only a rhetorical facility instead of a felt vision. The problematic nature of the procedure becomes even clearer when shortly thereafter, remarking on Kalinych's affection for Khor', the narrator says, "I confess I had not expected such 'tendernesses' from a peasant." By this sentence, Turgenev has added one more distinguishing trait to the peasant, and it is a particularly humanizing feature. The same sentence, however, reduces Kalinych to the level of the exotic and raises doubts about the narrator's ability to ever see peasants as more than a mere compendium of human traits.

The issue here is not hypocrisy, in the sense that an author might parade emotions or intellectual positions that turn out to be not truly felt. There is no reason to doubt the narrator's—and beyond that, Turgenev's—genuine sympathy for the peasants. It is with the representation of this feeling that difficulties arise; the mode of expression is seriously inadequate to its task. Nor is it enough to say that Turgenev was only following the processes required by the particular genre he was writing in, even though, in many respects, "Khor' and Kalinych" is a perfect example of the physiological sketch: for, in effect, Turgenev has managed to cast doubt on the rationale of this genre even as he seems to conform to it.¹⁰ Simply by following a consistency of literary procedures, Turgenev shows that what starts as an announced generosity of spirit can veer easily toward condescension; and he thus raises the question of why anyone would choose to write in this manner.

Indeed, Turgenev himself was occasionally aghast at what he had committed himself to. His dissatisfaction at the time of the publication of the collected sketches seems to have been connected precisely with this issue of literary style. In a famous letter to his friend Pavel Annenkov in October 1852, in which he indicated his intention to leave behind his "old manner" and move on to a new style of writing, Turgenev says:

I've long enough tried to extract from human characters their compressed essences—*triple extracts*—in order to pour them into little glass jars—smell if you please, respected reader—uncork and smell—doesn't it really smell like a Russian type? Enough—enough!¹¹

Turgenev's dismay proceeds not from his sense of having failed but of having succeeded all too well. Even though he has managed to catch the very "essence"

10. For an account of the physiological sketch in Russia, its historical development, and the philosophical assumptions underlying it, see A. G. Tseitlin, *Stanovlenie realizma v russkoi literatüre* (Moscow, 1965). Peter Demetz, "Balzac and the Zoologists: A Concept of the Type," in *The Disciplines of Criticism*, ed. Peter Demetz (New Haven, 1968), pp. 398–418, provides an excellent discussion of some of the conceptual difficulties surrounding this literary genre. Demetz's focus is on French literature, but his comments are relevant to the situation in Russia.

11. Turgenev, *Pis'ma*, 2: 77.

of character, Turgenev finds his enterprise unsatisfying. The governing image of this letter suggests why: comparison of writing to a commercial process—an operation that produces sensory stimulants for customers of dubious taste—shows that Turgenev feels he has committed himself to a style that is basically mechanical, one that precludes any truly emotional involvement on his part. He notes that he has created only Russian types, and his tone underscores his awareness that this is something less than individualized Russian men. The accumulation of concrete and persuasively rendered detail, for which *Notes of a Hunter* is justifiably famous, has evidently been made possible by sacrificing other aspects of artistic endeavor.

In fact, despite the widespread enthusiasm for literary works that purported to offer a dispassionate analysis of reality, many contemporaries were also somewhat uneasy about such an approach; and the more accomplished the approach became—and *Notes of a Hunter* in some of its aspects represents a high point of the tendency—the more a reaction set in, even among those who rejected any extravagantly romanticizing alternative. As one critic complained, many writers, “while asserting the absurdity of romanticism, go to the opposite extreme and see in Gogol and all contemporary literature the ‘daguerrotypization’ of reality, in which they place the whole secret of art.”¹² Instances in other art forms that seemed to contemporaries to show an excessive indulgence of the empirical impulse—such as the Flemish school of painting (particularly Teniers)—were increasingly invoked as cautionary examples.¹³

Turgenev's own suspicion of anything that might be called empiricism in literature existed even before the trend was seriously questioned. In a letter written in January 1848, he criticized a story by Georges Sand, whom he generally admired, by declaring, “art is not daguerrotype.”¹⁴ And in a review of an Ostrovsky play that Turgenev wrote the same year, he was even more emphatic. Speaking of Ostrovsky's use of naturalistic dialogue, Turgenev pointed out: “We do not wish to say these words are not characteristic [of existing types], but art must not merely repeat life; and all these endless details smother the form and sharpness of depiction.”¹⁵

Even more to the point, it is clear that, even as Turgenev occasionally employs an empirical approach in *Notes of a Hunter*, he also manages simultaneously to question it, like a workman who continually examines and measures his tools. Thus the most prominent sign of Turgenev's attraction to an empirical perspective, aside from his dispassionate prose, is the position of the narrator; but it is also the position of the narrator that reveals Turgenev's profound uneasiness with this perspective. Time and again the narrator places himself at the periphery of the action, allowing the peasant life he records to flow naturally, without intrusion from an alien element. But the narrator's efforts at self-effacement are so extreme that they end up calling attention to themselves: the narrator's intricate devices for locating himself offstage constitute a thundering announcement of his hovering presence. In “Bezhin Meadow” and “Ermolai

12. Valerian Maikov, *Kriticheskie opyty* (St. Petersburg, 1891), p. 5.

13. On Teniers's influence, see Grossman, “Rannii zhanr Turgeneva,” p. 49.

14. Turgenev, *Pis'ma*, 1: 292.

15. Turgenev, *Sochineniia*, 5: 390.

and the Miller's Wife," the narrator must feign sleep beside a campfire while tumultuous events occur nearby. In "The Office," he allows himself to be quickly shunted off to an out-of-the-way room so that the peasants can enact their drama of oppression without his interference. And in "The Tryst," his stance as a detached observer approaches farce, as he hides in the bushes near a forest clearing in order to spy on the emotional rendezvous of a dandified valet and his peasant girl friend.

Such machinations call into question the ideal of objective reporting even as they purport to carry it out. Clearly, a view of Russian reality construed so delicately that any alien element can throw it out of balance does justice neither to life nor to the observer of that life. The narrator is constrained to fatuous silence, his presence embarrassingly superfluous, while existential meaning is reduced to what can easily be perceived from a distance. In the sketch "Prince Hamlet of Shchigrovsky Province," Turgenev's title character remarks, "I would rejoice to take lessons from it—from Russian life, that is—but then it keeps silent, the darling."¹⁶ That Turgenev could put these words into the mouth of one of his characters suggests how clearly he saw his predicament. He knew full well that "the darling" would not disclose its secrets easily, that the true meanings of Russian life did not lie on the surface waiting to be picked up.

An obvious question arises: Since Turgenev knew the limitations of an empirical perspective, why did he employ it even tentatively? In fact, it is most curious that the Westernizers in general were attracted to procedures that managed to project the ideal of individualism only problematically at best. Complicated matters of ideological provenance and personal belief are involved here, as well as the simple fact that men are sometimes willing to suffer an unfortunate implication or two in the hope of conveying their main idea. But there was also a more specific reason for the attraction of the empirical perspective. The Westernizer ideology was never a confidently sovereign program; it was conceived as a polemic, part of the atmosphere of intellectual controversy (primarily with the Slavophiles) that engaged Turgenev and his friends so fully at this time.

Empiricism was by no means the basic element in the Westernizers' ideology—their main debt was always to German Romantic philosophy—but it did fit especially neatly into their polemical arsenal. Empiricism is a position with a cutting edge; it projects the presumption of adhering closer to hard fact, so that, from the first thrust, a polemical opponent is forced into the defensive position of arguing his own relevance. This worked particularly well against the Slavophiles, who were always concerned with propositions and concepts that entailed a departure from the common order of things. Thus the Westernizers attacked on political grounds the Slavophiles' central claim of the existence of a national entity that was logically prior and ethically superior to the individuals composing it; but their attack was frequently on philosophical grounds as well, stressing the mystifying results of thinking in such abstractions. One of Turgenev's statements neatly sums up this tendency to fuse philosophy and politics: "I prefer Prometheus, Satan, the embodiment of revolt and individuality. Let me be

16. *Ibid.*, 4: 282.

an atom but my own master; I do not want salvation but truth and I expect it from reason not Grace."¹⁷

Nevertheless, there is something dubious in the Westernizers' insistence on absolute differences with the Slavophiles. Slavophiles and Westernizers all belonged to the same small group of Russian intellectuals, they possessed a common education (one heavily dosed with German intellectual influences), and, almost without exception, they were members of the nobility. They must have shared certain assumptions. And, in fact, a key point of dissimilarity—emphasis on the individual as opposed to the community—was construed in a way that suggests a different focus rather than total disagreement. The Westernizers fully acknowledged what the Slavophiles valued—the power of immediate and undifferentiated harmony. But the Westernizers insisted that such harmony was a thing of the past. The individual ego had come loose from the whole and now existed apart from any larger entity in a condition of alienated reflection. Any possible harmony would have to be a new unity, a harmony of the future when the ego would be reintegrated into the whole in a way (typical for the Hegelian model favored by the Westernizers) that would both transcend and subsume previous stages. Finally, the particular ferocity of the Westernizer-Slavophile debate may have been less the result of clear oppositions than of a curiously intramural quality—the sense that one's best insights had been stolen by acquaintances, who subsequently corrupted them.

From several points of view, Turgenev proved to be uniquely well placed to explore—and, more often, to exemplify most strikingly—this ambiguous situation. Of all the Westernizers, he was probably on closest personal terms with the Slavophiles, meeting with several regularly and keeping up a lively correspondence with others. Even more telling, perhaps, was Turgenev's deep and intuitive attraction to that idea of transcendental harmony that was central to the Slavophile ideology. The ego alienated from wholeness and harmony may have been a necessary situation, philosophically and historically logical, but Turgenev felt its despair acutely. He thirsted for relief, regardless of ideological strictures, dreaming of the possibility that this ego could overstep its limits and find solace in some sort of spiritual or political community. This attraction to harmony had existed during Turgenev's student days in Berlin, and it remained with him throughout his life. Thus, always given to doubt and reappraisal, Turgenev was even more willing to reexamine his thinking where the issue of harmony was involved. Such a generosity of vision (or is it only irresolution raised to the level of an intellectual position?) gives to many of Turgenev's statements a strikingly undoctinaire flavor, especially remarkable for a time when strict adherence to a program was the norm. It is not surprising, therefore (though it is still noteworthy), that the Slavophile Konstantin Aksakov greeted the appearance of *Notes of a Hunter*—which is in many ways the expression of the Westernizer position *par excellence*—as a wonderful embodiment of the Slavophile ideal.

Turgenev's capacity to accommodate seemingly contradictory perspectives is perhaps most explicitly revealed in his 1852 review of the Slavophile S. K.

17. Quoted in Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*, trans. Hilda Andrews Rusiecka (Oxford, 1975), p. 362. This book offers an excellent discussion of the debate between the Slavophiles and Westernizers, and I am indebted to its author.

Aksakov's *Notes of a Hunter with a Rifle* (*Zapiski ruzheinogo okhotnika*, a title, incidentally, that, by its similarity to Turgenev's great work, suggests the complex cultural linkages of this period). Commenting on Aksakov's understanding of nature as a realm of harmony and instinctual cooperation, Turgenev felt compelled to make a qualification, for it had to be clear to him that the issue was not simply the condition of the natural world but an encompassing ontology:

Doubtless [nature] is one vast sturdy whole—each point in it connected with every other—but its striving is simultaneously in the direction where each individual point, each separate unit in it would exist only for itself, would consider itself the focus of the universe, subsume all that surrounded it to its own aims, would reject the independence of [all that surrounded it], and would master this for its own purposes.¹⁸

Turgenev directly admits the plausibility of Aksakov's world view; his own is only an elaboration, an addition. On one level, to be sure, Turgenev uses Aksakov's picture of undifferentiated wholeness and coherence to highlight his own vision of the world as an aggregate of differences, but he does not thereby reject Aksakov's description. Rather, by some unexplained intellectual maneuver, Turgenev manages to assert that the two visions, although absolutely contradictory, can nevertheless coexist.

Although this leaves something to be desired in the way of discursive argument, there is no reason to judge Turgenev too harshly. Turgenev considered himself a writer not a philosopher; and, in *Notes of a Hunter*, he did effectively scrutinize the vexing question of overlapping world views, as shown in the second sketch, "Ermolai and the Miller's Wife." While out hunting with his peasant companion, Ermolai, the narrator encounters Arina, the miller's wife, and the meeting reminds him of her past. When she was a twenty-year-old serf girl, Arina had been denied her master's permission to marry, for fear that her work as the lady's maid would suffer. When Arina persisted in her pleas, her master only became angrier; and when in desperation she became pregnant out of wedlock, Arina was treated not only as a criminal but as an ingrate for rejecting her master's greater wisdom. Her hair was cropped and she was packed off to an isolated village, while her lover was sent to the army for the usual twenty-five-year term.

These shocking facts are presented as a self-evident condemnation of Russian life. The manner of narration is restrained, almost detached; the narrator feels no compulsion to add judgments of his own. This empirical stance—a projected claim that to discern social evil is itself a sufficient political position, that a fierce scrutiny of injustice is a form of overcoming it—is cultivated in other sketches as well. Although this is not an untenable view of literature's political meaning, neither is it the most efficacious; and, in fact, "Ermolai and the Miller's Wife" ultimately calls such a view into question, and with it the Westernizers' position in general.

Turgenev has built a new element into the second sketch. He depicts a world that offers choices, choices of focus and ultimately choices of attitude. Though the brutal episode concerning Arina is the most dramatic element in the sketch,

18. Turgenev, *Sochineniia*, 5: 415.

it is bracketed by an opening and closing that are vastly different in tone and substance. The sketch begins with a description of a "night watch," a type of hunting technique:

A quarter of an hour before the setting of the sun, in the spring, you enter a grove with a gun but without a dog. You search out a spot for yourself at the edge of the woods, examine the percussion cap of your gun and exchange winks with your companion. The quarter of an hour passes. The sun has set, but it is still light in the forest; the air is clean and transparent; the birds chatter away; the young grass gleams like an emerald. You wait.¹⁹

The passage is a good example of Turgenev's famous capacity to make his prose occasionally achieve a condition of almost perfect transparency, and in this instance the reason is clear enough: Turgenev makes the reader feel that all the necessary meaning lies within the subject matter itself; he presents a natural world that is fully self-sufficient and harmonious, where any additional element, such as signs of the narrator's self-consciousness, would constitute a gross irrelevancy. And as the sketch progresses, as the reader learns more of the fractious and cruel behavior of men, the opening acquires a specific narrative meaning as well. The moment before the world turns dark signifies a set of values usually absent from human affairs. Thus, the world that the narrator confronts is sharply bifurcated, with the social realm marked by injustice and the natural realm by harmony; and the selection of the aspect that he attends to becomes significant. Focusing on nature seems correct, because it reminds him of his best potentialities—a sense of wholeness, a participation in the transpersonal rhythm of the universe. But will this not entail a disturbing lack of interest in Arina's fate?

The last paragraph of the sketch is crucial in fixing his stance:

A flock of ducks swept by over our heads, whistling, and we heard them settling down on the river, not far from us. By now it had grown altogether dark, and it was beginning to get cold; a nightingale was shrilling sonorously in a grove. We burrowed down into the hay and fell asleep.²⁰

The shift away from attention to Arina's plight is abrupt. Instead of the outrage that such injustice should reasonably provoke, the narrator seems only concerned with noting the beautiful intricacies of nature; and instead of some sort of meaningful culmination to Arina's unfolding tragedy, the ending signals a sense of permanence and recurrence. Indeed, the final passage, in its tone and substance, explicitly links up with the opening one. Nothing has changed except that the earth has rotated a bit on its axis and some animals have shifted about.

Turning to nature at the end of the sketch is not an unusual procedure in *Notes of a Hunter*, but what at other times appears as only a formal coda is given precise meaning in "Ermolai and the Miller's Wife." From a set of possibilities, the narrator has expressed a preference. The final stance of the narrator may elicit various reactions—it is possible to despise him for failing to explore Arina's story

19. *Ibid.*, 4: 21.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

more fully, or to feel grateful for being reminded of values that transcend the cruel world of human affairs—but in any case it is obvious that he has made a clear choice. And the idea of choice has a therapeutic value: even if the path taken is the wrong one, there seems to be a visible logic. Because choice appears to be reversible, corrigible, and susceptible to counterarguments, it imparts a sense of control and confidence.

Beneath this surface of clear oppositions, however, Turgenev has in fact built in a more pessimistic design. "Ermolai and the Miller's Wife" does not finally present a world of choices but a world where the concept of choice is put into serious question, where patterns of meaning dissolve or become obliterated. The apparently discontinuous and different sorts of subject matter that inform the structure of the sketch, the alternating focus on the social and natural world, do not hide an overriding fact: that the narrator's attitudes as he attends to each of these spheres—moral outrage and an urge for transcendental harmony—arise equally from an essentially contemplative stance. The last paragraph, with its rich awareness of the perdurable aspects of life, does not so much introduce a new element as confirm one present throughout in muted form: a fascination with ambient circumstances so thorough that it continually acquiesces in the status quo. It is worth noting that, despite references to the passage of time throughout *Notes of a Hunter*, there is no feeling of history, no awareness of forms of existence other than those that prevail.

A basic dilemma in the Westernizers' position is thereby revealed, and it is one that brought them remarkably close to the Slavophiles whom they scorned as backward looking and politically ineffectual. Although the Slavophiles asserted the utopian belief that one had only to look knowingly at the contemporary world in order to discern an underlying harmony, and the Westernizers insisted that to look at this world was to be repelled by the manifest injustice of social arrangements, the two camps nevertheless converged in their inability to imagine a process of meaningful and concrete political change in Russia. The stance of Turgenev's narrator reflects the Westernizers' dilemma: he is obviously dismayed with what he observes, but incapable of shaping dismay into words and of defining an alternative to what exists. By showing the treacherously easy oscillation between an attitude that strives after the transcendental and one that is only passively angry with existing social reality, Turgenev reveals how submissive the Westernizers actually were to the presiding forms of Russian life; and he suggests that their insistence on being distinct from the Slavophiles may only have been an effort to hide a common political impotence.

The brute facts of Russian political life at this historical moment might be brought to bear as an explanation for this limited perspective. Government repression was severe, and, although the essentially intramural polemics between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles were tolerated, the advocacy of a specific political program would not have been. But the facts of Russian political life do *not* fully explain the psychology of the Westernizers: the issue was not only of physical constraint but of constraints on the imagination, as exemplified in the third sketch of *Notes of a Hunter*, "Raspberry Spring."

In the sketch, the narrator encounters three peasants by a cool stream where he has gone to escape the stifling heat which has overtaken him while out hunting. They represent three responses to the institution of serfdom. Vlas has come to

Raspberry Spring on his way home after walking to Moscow (some three hundred miles) to apply for relief from an exorbitant *obrok* obligation. He had gotten no relief, no sympathy. And though the consequence is probably starvation, Vlas shows no surprise that his master has not taken the slightest interest in his fate, but, on the contrary, had him chased from his presence immediately; this is the way masters are supposed to behave. The second peasant, Stepushka, at first seems to be in a better position than Vlas. By some oversight, he has been allowed to fall outside the system of serfdom altogether, he has slipped through the bureaucratic grid, so that it is even doubtful, as the narrator notes with amazement, "if he was actually listed in the government census of serfs." But even Stepushka's situation is not enviable, because, as the narrator remarks, "every human being has some sort of status in the social structure, has some sort of connection; every domestic is issued, if he gets no wages, at least a so-called 'flour allotment.' Stepushka received absolutely no subsistence aid whatsoever, he was not related to anybody; nobody was aware of his existence."²¹ In the summers he sleeps in a cubbyhole in the back of the henhouse, in the winters in the entry to the bathhouse, and his days are wholly taken up with scavenging for food. In removing himself from the prevailing system of total accountability, Stepushka has also removed himself from the only means in Russia by which men are guaranteed social significance. In fact, in escaping direct oppression, Stepushka has lost almost all traces of humanity. The last peasant, nicknamed Fog, is a liberated serf about seventy years old, and his response to serfdom is perhaps the most striking of the three. Fog had served as a sort of major-domo to a rich count, organizing a vast manorial estate in order to provide the maximum of luxury and pleasure for his master. In fact, he performed the duties so wholeheartedly that even now, years after, Fog still rhapsodically recounts the manner of life the count enjoyed. He still itemizes, with a feeling approaching love, the various appurtenances of his master's pleasure: the numerous hunting dogs kept on silk leashes, the servants decked out in red caftans with gold braid, the marvelous snuffboxes, canes, wigs, and colognes. To sum up his memories of his master, Fog remarks: "When he set out to give a banquet—O Lord, Sovereign of life!—the fireworks would begin and so would the pleasure jaunts."²² The parenthetic exclamation is revealing; in such an expression of spontaneous enjoyment and undistanced enthusiasm, Fog reveals how fully the pleasures of the count have become his pleasures as well. He has so thoroughly incorporated the values of the prevailing system that not only can he not bring himself to judge his situation, he cannot even see it.

The dramatic climax of the sketch comes when Vlas recounts how his master drove him away when he applied for help. The peasants are confronted with the incontrovertible cruelty of serfdom, and the sultry, stifling weather, which previously gave a rationale to the random and lackadaisical behavior of the characters, now seems to portend the necessity of purposeful change. However, Fog responds only with token sympathy, then abruptly returns to his fishing; Stepushka at first seems ready to remonstrate, but after a few disconnected words he sinks into confusion and silence, a sequence of gestures that befits a man seemingly free but actually powerless; and even Vlas himself appears curiously

21. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

unaffected, telling his story “with a mocking smile, as though it were someone else he was talking about.” Thus the climactic passage, instead of showing some change in the situation the sketch has revealed, only recapitulates it in a more striking fashion: these peasants are part of a society that is not merely oppressive but also manages to insinuate its own rationality, a political system simultaneously so encompassing and persuasive that it is impossible to conceive of an alternative.

There is even more striking evidence of the constraint on the Russian political imagination than the inadequate reactions of the three peasants: the behavior of the narrator. Though possessed of much greater intellect and sensitivity, he too can summon no meaningful response to the prevailing iniquities. When Vlas finishes speaking, the narrator simply joins in the expression of befuddled and half-hearted sympathy, and then brings the encounter, and the sketch, to an abrupt conclusion with a cool and detached comment: “Half an hour later we went our different ways.” Although “Raspberry Spring” confronts the political realities of Russia more fully than the previous sketches, the result is only a greater sense of powerlessness. The narrator’s political views are disclosed as not so much flawed or problematic as irrelevant. Ideology presupposes the ability to command an alternative vision of reality, but in “Raspberry Spring” it becomes clear that for the narrator there is no way to get outside the prevailing social reality, not even in the imagination. The values of the status quo seem as pervasive as the heat, as correct as the sun.

Notes of a Hunter thus works to expose the condition of political life in mid-nineteenth-century Russia—politics not in terms of a program for action but as a capacity to conceive of alternative realities. In this it provides a valuable corrective to certain widely held views about that historical moment, views held by Turgenev’s contemporaries and still prevalent today. It is generally known that any opposition to the government in the pre-Crimean War period was weak and unfocused; but it makes little sense to insist, as is often done, that this was the result of an affinity among the intelligentsia for German Idealistic philosophy. This philosophy could easily yield radical implications, given the will and the energy of men to insist on such an interpretation. *Notes of a Hunter* argues a more telling explanation of the political situation by focusing on the peculiar sort of dominance the government enjoyed: it was not only powerful but pervasive.²³ It was like an army that relies not merely on superior weaponry but on sheer numbers to achieve its objective; and Russia did indeed have a vast standing army, a fact which helped remind the citizenry of the ubiquitousness of authority.

In a word, the political landscape was not only hostile to new ideas, as is usually the case in any established society, but barren of any entity from which new ideas might begin to grow. The most obvious source of opposition to the central government was the nobility, which, by virtue of its education, relative wealth, and incorporated status, appeared to constitute a coherent political force;

23. Some recent historians have argued that contemporaries regularly overestimated the government’s power, which was actually diluted by inefficiency and corruption. The point is debatable; and even if it were granted it would not change the cultural fact that Russians at mid-century lived their lives *as if* the government was all-powerful (see, for example, S. Frederick Starr, *Decentralization and Self-Government in Russia, 1830–70* [Princeton, 1972]).

in actuality, however, the nobility had no power. It was like a well-designed vehicle that curiously refused to move, and the sections in *Notes of a Hunter* that deal with the nobility are scathing in their criticism of its lack of political energy. The issue was not only one of intent or purposefulness, and Turgenev made this explicit in an article he wrote during this period. The nobility's weakness stemmed from the existing social structure, from the difficulty of finding any escape from the government's all-encompassing influence. Turgenev explained the situation in historical terms, noting that the nobility arose in Russia as a service class, it was obliged to perform duties for the state and received lands (since all of Russia technically belonged to the tsar) at the state's pleasure.²⁴ Indeed, even in the nineteenth century, a petitioner's mentality was prevalent among the nobility; reduced to acquiescence or extreme gestures of rejection, noblemen rarely managed to summon up a vision of sustained change.

Although *Notes of a Hunter* does not escape this stalemate, its precise mapping of the logic of failure has its own therapeutic value. The cycle, full of ineffectual gestures and dubious attitudes, manages to scrutinize despair as well as yield to it. Even though the effort to find a rational vantage point outside the prevailing system of social values is never carried through, never enunciated, this is so obviously the only remedy left that it appears palpably present in the work. It is this implied goal that gives *Notes of a Hunter* its particular political significance; and in fact it is this same feature that fixes the rationale of Turgenev's subsequent career. His loudly proclaimed shift from his "old manner" to writing novels is, in large measure, an attempt to gain a new perspective, to imagine a place somehow distanced from the insidiously corrupt Russian reality that proves so unmanageable and so inescapable in *Notes of a Hunter*.

It is a commonplace of Turgenev scholarship that his novels inaugurated a period of increased social awareness on his part. This point must be qualified, however. One glance at his novels shows that they contain less explicit social commentary than does *Notes of a Hunter*. The innovative feature in the novels is not greater social awareness as such, but rather a new ideological strategy, dictated by the circumstances that *Notes of a Hunter* had illuminated. The earlier work had suggested that there could be no satisfactory confrontation with Russian social reality, because its very nature was to absorb and muffle all such efforts. What already existed may have appeared patently evil, but since no alternative could be imagined, what already existed also seemed perfectly reasonable.

There is a neat symbol in *Notes of a Hunter* for this inability to establish any independent perspective. Though almost every sketch opens with the narrator setting off from his house, the reader never learns what his house is like; its dimensions are not mentioned, no furniture is itemized, the surrounding area is not described. In effect, the narrator has no home; there is no place for him to exist except in the corrupt and corrupting world. Beginning with the first scene in *Rudin*, Turgenev alters his fictitious landscape. In this scene we see how Lipina, a widowed noblewoman, makes a charitable visit to the hut of a dying peasant woman. The encounter is marked by ambiguous gestures and actions.

24. "Neskol'ko myslei o sovremennom znachenii russkogo dvorianstva," Turgenev, *Sochineniia*, 14: 299-304. An interesting account of how this attitude came into being is given by Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia* (New York, 1966).

Lipina's offer of sugar provokes the response that the peasants do not own a samovar; her suggestion that the woman be moved to a hospital is met with the statement that it is better to die in one's own bed. As he did so effectively in *Notes of a Hunter*, Turgenev here seems intent on rendering the pathos and injustice of peasant life, and the inability of the self-conscious nobility to relate to it. Surprisingly, however, these themes are raised only to be dropped. The drama of the dying peasant woman is abruptly truncated, the outcome left completely unmentioned; Lipina is allowed to retreat to the nobility enclave, to the manor houses, to live out her life in the book as a character graced with the virtues of wit, warmth, and moral responsibility. Her behavior with the peasant woman has left no ill effects at all. Hence, the opening scene is not another instance of an inadequate confrontation with the injustices of Russian life, entailing all sorts of crippling moral consequences; instead, the scene urges a new comprehension of the terrain where these confrontations occur. In *Rudin*, Turgenev has projected the possibility of a distinct realm—symbolized by the provincial estate—that is set safely apart from the world at large. And if the inhabitants of this realm are less than perfect (and some are despicable), their shortcomings flow from their own choices: they control their own destinies in a way that would have been inconceivable in the world of *Notes of a Hunter*.

The writing of *Notes of a Hunter* seems to have taught Turgenev that an effective social vision demands adherence to strict limits. To achieve any sustaining strength in the circumstances of Russian reality in the middle of the nineteenth century, it is necessary to start with a sense of oneself, even if this means acknowledging such seemingly parochial features as membership in the nobility. In a letter written in May 1853, Turgenev remarked on the prevalence of peasant themes in contemporary literature, saying that "it is time to send the muzhik into retirement."²⁵ As always with Turgenev, his literary opinion is mixed with ideological implications. The dismissive attitude toward the peasantry reveals not merely boredom with a continually repeated subject but also Turgenev's realization that this particular focus utterly fails to resolve the tasks it has set for itself. Confronting contemporary life directly, in its most egregious forms, might have allowed a mid-nineteenth-century Russian author to indulge his feelings of outrage, but it was not the most effective way of developing a truly critical attitude. The problems introduced in the first three sketches of *Notes of a Hunter* recur, with elaborations and revisions, throughout the cycle, and they showed Turgenev that a proper social vision necessarily had to begin from a comprehension of one's own personal and social capacities. It was to this issue that Turgenev ultimately turned.

25. Turgenev, *Pis'ma*, 2: 160.