

Title: Он всегда попевал вполголоса: Capturing Peasant Voice in Turgenev's *Zapiski Okhotnika*

Author: Jennifer Flaherty, U.C. Berkeley

Abstract:

In Turgenev's *Zapiski okhotnika*, peasants serve as a point at which issues of genre and social politics meet. How can the narrator—a Europeanized barin and a sensitive observer of the world—give aesthetic form to his own backyard? How can he access the thoughts and feelings of its inhabitants? In confronting the Russian landscape and its social tensions, Turgenev uses not only elements of ethnography; he also draws on lyric poetry and landscape art. Marshalling the techniques of those genres commonly indicted in the years to come for political quietism and complacent subjectivism, Turgenev introduces the peasant theme into literature with new force, aiding the foundation of an aesthetics that centered on social responsibility.

Peasant figures evoke elements of both lyric and landscape and are associated with bird-song and the image of the vast Russian steppe; they seem, I argue, to occupy a non-narrative center around which narrative conflict is woven. Expressing shock at the clear and intelligent speech of some peasants, Turgenev's narrator underscores his key preoccupation: finding his narrative voice amid his presumably voiceless subjects. Peasants, like the narrator, are sometimes able to participate in a poetic sublimity that exceeds the trivialities and clumsy use of words typical of the cycle's landowners. But while this store of verbal "truth" potentiates both within the narrator and his peasant subjects, it cannot be manifested in dialogue between them.

It is in the conflict of dialogue generated by the narrator's cumbersome presence amid peasants that narrative is born. Turgenev's narrator is unable to absent himself from the scene which he would hope to describe objectively, as per the dictates of the physiological sketch and as against the subjective-focus of the lyric. Yet this subjective-focus is crucial to engaging the social theme and developing narrative form. In Turgenev's cycle, the naturalized scenery is made inescapably social as the cycle's focus—as in despite of itself—turns back on the narrator; what emerges as its subject is the narrator's discourse with that which he hopes to represent.

In asking these questions, this paper will focus on the stories "Pevtsy" and "Kas'yan s Krasivoi Mechi," while also engaging Turgenev's early lyric poetry and a selection of paintings, including Vasilii Perov's "Ptitselov" (1870) for generic comparison.