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The Russian Peasant Rediscovered: “Village Prose” of the 1960s

The name of Solzhenitsyn so dominated the Soviet literary scene in the 1960s that the ordinary Western reader might be forgiven for supposing that in the writing of fiction he was the lone star in an otherwise featureless sky. This is far from being the case. Solzhenitsyn himself, in a recent interview with Western correspondents, pointed out that there are a number of other writers of major stature at work in Russia today, though understandably he was inhibited from naming any of them.¹ In fact, in the return to the moral concern, insight, and compassion which are the great heritage of the nineteenth-century realist novel, Solzhenitsyn has been by no means alone. On the contrary, he is merely *primus inter pares* among a whole school of writers who have made it their aim to digest and reassess Russia's apocalyptic recent past, and in the light of it to reflect on man's moral nature.

Solzhenitsyn's main preoccupation has been Tolstoy's question, “By what do men live?” The question has two sides for him. First, one of physical survival: how do men obtain the food, clothing, and shelter they need in order not to die? And second, the spiritual problem: by what ideals do men live in a world which is both threatening and corrupting? The microcosm through which Solzhenitsyn examines these questions is, in his most characteristic works, the Stalinist labor camp, a setting which exposes the dilemmas in an acute form. The mastery of his novels lies in the sinewy integrity with which he approaches them and in the strength of imagination with which he recreates human attempts to answer them.

However, as I have said, he is not alone. Another theme which, since the mid-1950s, has proved no less fruitful to writers concerned about the heritage of the Soviet past has been the Russian peasant village. Indeed, it is my contention in this article that, in the renewed search for moral values of the post-Stalin era, “village prose” has played a vital part.² There are

1. *New York Times*, Apr. 3, 1972.

2. For another interesting approach to this general field see Gleb Žekulin, “The Contemporary Countryside in Soviet Literature: A Search for New Values,” in James R. Millar, ed., *The Soviet Rural Community* (Urbana, 1971), pp. 376–404.

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perhaps two main reasons for this. One is that the Soviet village is a milieu which poses Tolstoy's question in scarcely less acute form than the labor camps. Twentieth-century rural Russia has seen civil war and famine, a brutal and devastating collectivization of agriculture, an exodus of most of the young men to the towns, and a huge war which ravished half of the country while removing all the remaining able-bodied men from the other. At most times during these catastrophic processes, the state has requisitioned agricultural produce for the armed forces and the urban population, leaving the peasants simply whatever remained. The problems of how men survive and by what ideals they live have therefore been posed very directly by the circumstances of rural Russian life.

The second reason for the importance of "village prose" is that it looks past what is immediate and obvious in Soviet urban reality, and returns to older phenomena in Russian society and in Russian culture. The Russian village has been both exploited and reorganized, but in many essentials it has not *changed*. When Vladimir Soloukhin walked through Vladimir Oblast in 1956, he had the sense of throwing off spiritual barriers raised by a generation of hectic activity: the people who caught his imagination were the craftsmen of Mstera and the peasants who grow rowan trees in Nevezhino, men who have pursued their calling in much the same way for centuries.³ It was this survival of old forms which was for many writers both a revelation and an emancipation. They were also returning to older literary forms, for the major Russian writers of the nineteenth century had always taken a close and anxious interest in the peasantry. It was part of the *noblesse oblige* of the writer's station. In some—such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and populist writers like Uspensky and Zlatovratsky—this interest amounted to reverence. They hoped (though they were not always able to believe) that the peasants could teach men brotherhood. One of the most intriguing aspects of the "village prose" of the 1960s has been evidence that Soviet writers are gripped by the same yearning for that sense of community which has been lost in the corrupt and impersonal urban world.

In most Soviet fiction before Stalin's death the peasant ideal was subordinated to the proletarian dream.⁴ Peasants were often featured in fiction,

3. Vladimir Soloukhin's *Vladimirskie proselki* was first published in *Novyi mir*, 1957, no. 9, pp. 82–141, and no. 10, pp. 75–134. It is available in an English translation by Stella Miskin: *A Walk in Rural Russia* (London, 1966; New York, 1967).

4. However, some writers of the 1920s were ambivalent in their attitude, painting the demise of the traditional village in somber colors. This is particularly true of Leonov, in *Barsuki*, and of Pilniak, in *Golyi god*. And throughout the Stalinist period, Prishvin, fascinated by inherited peasant skills and folklore, remained an exception to this as to many other generalizations about Soviet literature. His influence, transmitted through Alexander Iashin, has been considerable on Vasiliï Belov and other writers of the northern region.

but usually as a backward and anonymous mass, perhaps homely by the native hearth, perhaps brutally impressive on the battlefield, but certainly not the bearers of a way of life worth preserving for what it could contribute to the modern world. On the contrary, they were to be modernized themselves—if necessary, dragged kicking and screaming into the socialist society whose rightness they themselves would all one day recognize. It was only after Stalin's death that writers' attitudes toward the peasantry began to change.

One of the main reasons for this change was none other than Nikita Khrushchev, who by his personal style and his program of reform moved the peasant to the forefront of Soviet politics. He made it his task to arouse the awareness of Soviet intellectuals and the party, still lulled by repeated ritual evocations of a flourishing collective agriculture. He used his control of *Pravda* and other party journals, mobilizing journalists and writers to present a frank picture of the atrocious conditions of rural life, and to adumbrate solutions of the kind he was envisaging. Khrushchev did not dissent from the accepted Stalinist view that peasants had to be changed, but he believed it could not be done by continued exhortation from the center. Instead he proposed to solve the agricultural crisis by granting more initiative to the men on the spot, the kolkhoz chairmen and the local party secretaries, who knew the soil and the climate and the peasants with whom they had to work. He wanted to get the most talented administrators out of their armchairs and into the fields, close to the peasants. And he wanted to divert resources from the traditional Stalinist priorities of heavy industrial and military expenditure in order that the countryside should have better facilities and the peasants the material incentive to work on the collective.⁵

Most of Khrushchev's agricultural reforms did not work out as intended. Some of them were impractical, some were blunted by conservative opponents, and some were vitiated by Khrushchev's own view of himself as the nation's No. 1 kolkhoz chairman, competent to solve all problems for all farms in all areas. But once he had set in motion a relatively frank debate about the Soviet countryside, he had unleashed something which both he and his successors found difficult to control. Those who saw the disappointing results of Khrushchev's reforms began to look further than the local party secretary, to the peasant himself, to try to understand him and even perhaps in the end to learn from him. Writers who had given their allegiance to Khrushchev began to turn against him in order to continue to fight for the ideal of a sturdy and prosperous Soviet peasantry, which he seemed to have abandoned. An interesting case in point is Valentin Ovechkin. In a famous series of semi-

5. Sidney Ploss, *Conflict and Decision-Making in Soviet Russia: A Case Study of Agricultural Policy, 1953-1963* (Princeton, 1965); Erich Strauss, *Soviet Agriculture in Perspective* (London, 1969), chap. 8.

documentary sketches written between 1952 and 1956, he painted a horrifying picture of distress on the kolkhozes, and exposed an ignorant and authoritarian administration utterly out of touch with the peasants.⁶ His proposed solutions were completely in line with the reforms for which Khrushchev was struggling at the time, and in particular he recommended the appointment of local party secretaries and of kolkhoz chairmen who could understand and work well with the peasants. Yet in Ovechkin's later sketches there are already signs of a certain duality: even after Martynov, the "good" *raion* secretary, has defeated his authoritarian predecessor, Borzov, things do not go much better on the farms. Rather inconclusively, in a scrapbook of reflections, Martynov speculates that perhaps the answer lies not in administrative decisions at all, but rather in trusting the peasants themselves: "Sometimes in our attitude to the people we are like an oversensitive and anxious Mama, who simply cannot accept the fact that her son has long been a grown man."⁷

This, however, is a thought which Ovechkin never pursued in his published writing. But it may have affected his later life. In 1962 he is said to have submitted a memorandum to the CPSU Central Committee recommending that the kolkhozes be reformed "on the Yugoslav model" (which implies private farming coordinated by a network of state cooperatives). It is even rumored that he was confined to a mental hospital for a time as a result of this proposal and that he tried to commit suicide there. He lived the rest of his life, in unexplained circumstances, in Tashkent (surely not the place a lover of rural Russia would have *chosen* to live) and died apparently in January 1968.⁸

Ovechkin's tentative idea that one should learn to rely more on the peasants themselves became a keynote of later "village prose." In Efim Dorosh's rambling yet passionate *Derevenskii dnevnik* the peasant and his traditional way of life occupy the center of the stage. The villages, the fields and woods and lakes of the Rostov region, the local linguistic usages, the private cows and garden plots, the onion domes of the churches, the lacework friezes of the peasant huts—all these things he sees as a single ecological and

6. These sketches are collected in Valentin Ovechkin, *Trudnaia vesna* (Moscow, 1956). For a commentary on them, see Gleb Žekulin, "Aspects of Peasant Life as Portrayed in Contemporary Soviet Literature," *Canadian Slavic Studies*, 1, no. 4 (1967): 555–58. Excerpts and abstracts from Ovechkin's sketches were presented in English in *Soviet Studies*, 4, no. 4 (1953): 447–68; 5, no. 3 (1954): 289–99; 6, no. 1 (1954): 77–91; 8, no. 3 (1957): 279–98.

7. Ovechkin, *Trudnaia vesna*, p. 319.

8. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Jan. 31, 1968. Dimitry Pospelovskiy, "The 'Link System' in Soviet Agriculture," *Soviet Studies*, 21, no. 4 (1970): 415, cites "Soviet literary and intellectual defectors" as evidence for the facts of Ovechkin's later life. See also *Kasnimye sumasshestviem*, ed. A. Artemov, L. Rar, and M. Slavinsky (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), pp. 184–85.

human organism which bureaucrats and planners disturb at their peril. Kolkhoz chairmen and party secretaries play a positive role only insofar as they understand this. Dorosh was a profound conservative, who would limit change to what can be readily assimilated by the inherited structures of the peasant village. But his vision was a radically innovative one for the late fifties and early sixties, and it played a major role in opening the eyes of the intelligentsia to a world which had always existed around them, half-forgotten and unappreciated, and was now in serious danger of disappearing altogether.⁹

The new emphasis on the peasant also answered many of the needs of Russian fiction at this time. Emancipating itself from a heavy and obsessive bureaucratic guardianship, Russian fiction was beginning in the mid-1950s to seek its own creative sources outside the repertoire of party-approved themes. One of the most promising new subjects, and perhaps ultimately the most important, was the life of the Russian village. The reasons are aptly summed up in two stories which attracted considerable attention in *Literaturnaia Moskva*, no. 2, 1956: *Poezdka na Rodinu* by N. Zhdanov, and *Rychagi* by A. Iashin. Both stories explored in a tentative way the gap that had opened between the town and the country. They saw the peasants as existing in a separate world, isolated from industry, from officials, from intellectuals, not comprehensible in urban terms at all. The implication was that a split had opened up in Russia's social fabric—a split which made it impossible for the inhabitants of town and country to understand one another, and which was reflected in the individual psychology of every Russian who tried to comprehend what had happened to his country in the twentieth century.

In Zhdanov's story, the party official Varygin, returning to his native village for the funeral of his long-neglected mother, rediscovers in the crosses of the cemetery, in the smell of incense, in the rough wooden furniture of his former home a world which "according to his conceptions, had long ago ceased to exist." His mother's fellow villagers begin to mumble to him tales of bureaucratic ignorance, arbitrariness, and corruption, but he cuts them short and rushes back to the town and his comfortable carpeted office. Once there, however, he cannot shake off the images he has seen, and the timid question of an old peasant woman: "Have they done right by us or not?" The village leaves in his mind an enduring deposit of bewilderment and guilt.

9. The numbers of Dorosh's *Derevenskii dnevnik* can be found in *Literaturnaia Moskva*, 1956, no. 2, pp. 549-626, and in *Novyi mir*, 1958, no. 7, pp. 3-27; 1961, no. 7, pp. 3-51; 1962, no. 10, pp. 9-46; 1964, no. 6, pp. 11-83; 1965, no. 1, pp. 81-87; 1969, no. 1, pp. 3-41, and no. 2, pp. 6-59; 1970, no. 9, pp. 39-73. His hopes and fears for the future of the Russian village are most succinctly presented in the last number, *Novyi mir*, 1970, no. 9, esp. pp. 49-56. Dorosh's thought is very rich and many-sided, and it would be impossible to expound it adequately here. I hope to attempt to do so later in a separate article.

Iashin's story presents an analogous split in the personalities of rural officials themselves, reflected largely in their use of language. One moment four humble kolkhoz officials are sitting casually round a table grousing about the arbitrary behavior of the district party secretary, and the way he overrides their traditional and well-trying crop cycle; the next minute they reconstitute themselves as a meeting of the local party cell, deliver speeches in approved official jargon, accept the district party secretary's proposals, and draw up a report which begins: "The whole collective, animated with a spirit of great enthusiasm in its work. . . ."

This theme of the split between town and country—a split much graver than any of the "two cultures" or "two nations" that we have experienced in recent British history—provided a fruitful starting point for the "village prose" of the 1960s. Early examples of the genre, not surprisingly, usually concern a townsman (or at least someone educated in the town) who goes to the village with the desire to understand or help the peasants, and is rebuffed because of the gulf in technical standards and in comprehension. One outstanding example is Sergei Antonov's novella, *Delo bylo v Pen'kove*.¹⁰ Tonia Glechikova, returning to the village with an agronomist's diploma, is brought up short on her first day by her grandfather's stolid assertion that "tractors ruin the soil" (p. 27). Her grandfather, of course, is not the arbiter of technical methods used on the kolkhoz, but the reality she has to get accustomed to over the following days is scarcely more in conformity with the scrupulous lecture notes she has brought with her from agricultural college. The maize seed is dried in the stable attic, where it gets damp; flax is retted by laying it out on the dirt road and driving lorries over it. The *raion* authorities hand down instructions which are piously hung in the kolkhoz office, though everybody knows they cannot be fulfilled. Tonia is very eager to change things, but her notion of how it should be done switches from day to day: one day she writes to a friend, "the key is cattle feed," but in the next letter it is "long-range planning," and in a third, "culture" (pp. 72–80). To cap it all, she falls in love with the most irresponsible (though also the most intelligent) of the young men on the kolkhoz. In an unconvincing last chapter some of Tonia's proposals are accepted, and they help to put the kolkhoz on its feet. But at the same time the author, as though with tongue in cheek, attributes the kolkhoz's success at least as much to the fact that "Ivan Savvich [the chairman] has begun to smile at Tonia" (p. 158).

Another example of this sort is the first published novella of Vladimir Voinovich, *My zdes' zhivem*.¹¹ A young poet, Vadim, comes to the kolkhoz

10. First published in *Oktiabr'*, 1956, no. 6, pp. 3–90, and revised for separate publication in 1961. The latter version is available in a useful text, annotated in English by Alfred Dressler (Oxford, 1967). Quotations are from the English edition.

11. *Novyi mir*, 1961, no. 1, pp. 21–71.

from Moscow, saying: "I would like to work with you a while. I need experience of life. Will you have me?" He works, first as a cultural assistant and then on the harvest, but never feels at home. He succeeds only in turning the head of one of the village girls, Sanka, persuading her that she might make a career as a singer in Moscow. Goshka, Sanka's rustic admirer, is something of a misfit, with aspirations toward an urban education. Like some of Voinovich's later characters,¹² he exhibits a naïve and clumsy honesty at odds with a world of everyday mild corruption. Goshka's more forthright friend, Anatolii, however, tells Vadim to clear out and leave the villagers in peace: "The difference [between you and us], Vadim, . . . is that you came here looking for experience of life, but we live here. You understand?"¹³

In Alexander Iashin's sketch, *Vologodskaia svad'ba*,¹⁴ the narrator returns from Leningrad to his village in the far north to attend a wedding. He describes the ceremony in loving detail, and also observes the effect of change brought from outside: the mother of the bride wants an old-style ritual, with girl friends singing a lament and the bride weeping, but the groom insists on a simpler, more cheerful ceremony. The author returns to Leningrad loaded with gifts, jingle bells, a spinning wheel, a birchbark saltcellar—articles going out of everyday use in the village and already museum pieces in the town. The whole sketch is presented with a certain wonderment, as if the author were taken aback, both at the backwardness of rural life and at the extent to which it had managed to preserve its own culture and its own values.

The writer who took these tentative beginnings and molded them into a new kind of fiction was Solzhenitsyn. He did this in two ways. First, in *Matrenin dvor* he gave an explicit content to the moral values which had been preserved in the village. In the neglected hamlet of Talnovo, demoralized and exploited for the needs of a neighboring industrial settlement, he showed a peasant woman as having maintained a humility and selflessness without which, as he says at the end, society would break down altogether. Indeed, in the final sentences he gives an openly Christian content to this moral outlook, such as we shall not find more than hinted at in the work of other writers. Through her closeness to living things (the grimy goat, the gammy cat, even the cockroaches), through her capacity for work when she is healthy, through her cheerful willingness to help others to the utmost of her ability, she radiates a moral force which is vital in binding communities together.¹⁵

Second, both in *Matrenin dvor* and (even more) in *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*, he introduced a new kind of language and a new narrative

12. See especially Samokhin in *Khochu byt' chestnym*, in *Novyi mir*, 1963, no. 2, pp. 150–86.

13. *Novyi mir*, 1961, no. 1, p. 67.

14. *Novyi mir*, 1962, no. 12, pp. 3–26.

15. *Novyi mir*, 1963, no. 1, pp. 42–63.

technique (or rather, revived old ones which had not been in use for a very long time). This is important, because though writers of prose fiction had explored new themes since 1953, they had by and large continued to use the language and style of classical Stalinist realism. This stylistic conservatism hindered the development of a new vision of the peasant, since the language of the Soviet intelligentsia is too close to the bureaucratic jargon which was for so long employed not to describe the realities of rural life but rather to avoid coming to grips with them, to let them float by in a procession of soothing euphemisms. Solzhenitsyn's solution to this problem was to use the language of the peasant himself, rejecting the smooth and rounded periods of educated narrative prose in favor of the abrupt, laconic, and vivid popular speech which he had heard around him in the army and the labor camps. At the same time, to avoid espousing the limitations of the outlook of the uneducated man, Solzhenitsyn presents the narrative in the third person—though with long sections where it appears to be in the first person. This kind of indirect *skaz* technique was an essential part of the presentation of prison camp life in *Ivan Denisovich*, and was later to enable “village prose” writers to anchor their work more firmly in the peasant world and to explore from the inside the values of that world.¹⁶

The values which they saw as being important are largely those of Matrena. They grow out of the peasant's close experience of the soil, of plants and animals, and of the seasons, and out of the roots which he has in the family and in the village community. He has an instinctive, unreflecting feeling for natural objects, both for their beauty and for the uses to which they can be put. He knows the earth and the weather, he knows where he can pit his strength against them and where he must give way. He knows that the continued wresting of a living from the soil depends on the mutual help which the family and the village community can give to one another in difficult times, and so he sticks by them, especially when the going is rough.

But this world is seen as being under constant threat from the towns and from everything the towns represent: money, the lure of bright lights and fame, and, above all, bureaucracy, the greedy and compartmentalized minds of officials who do not understand living things. “Village prose” is in part a lament for a way of life which the steady urbanization and bureaucratization of the Soviet Union has been destroying. It sees urban man as lost, either shallow or alienated from himself, basing his life on false values or on no values at all. What is implicitly counterposed to this threat is the peasants' solidarity and their closeness to nature. The moral principles set forth in these

16. See especially L. Rzhevsky, “Obraz rasskazchika v povesti Solzhenitsyna ‘Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha,’” in the author's collection of essays, *Prochten'e tvorcheskogo slova* (New York, 1970), pp. 237–52; also Vladimir J. Rus, “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Point of View Analysis,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 13 (1971): 165–78.

works are not anti-Communist, but they are not Communist either. They entail more tolerance and often humility, more warmth and openheartedness, a greater ability to improvise, a less rigid sense of order and discipline. And their perspective is different: they proceed from a solidarity based not on the common effort to build a society of the future, but rather on a brotherhood of deprivation and suffering lived through together in the past.

To illustrate and substantiate these assertions, I now turn to three examples of the "village prose" genre in its maturity, all published in the mid- and late 1960s: (1) Fedor Abramov, *Dve zimy i tri leta*, (2) Boris Mozhaev, *Iz zhizni Fedora Kus'kina*, and (3) Vasilii Belov, *Privychnoe delo*.¹⁷

Abramov's novel is set in the far north of European Russia, and, as the title suggests, the passage of the seasons is a paramount formative influence on its characters. The succession of long winters and short summers is the framework of their lives. In the summer the villagers must take advantage of the long evenings to mow the hay, plow the soil, sow and reap the barley. Then, in the endless winter months, they batten down the shutters and prepare to struggle for survival, while the men go off to the lumber camps, fell the great fir trees, transport them to the river bank, get ready to set them afloat with the thaw, and watch and repair the guide-barriers which keep them sailing downstream and prevent them from piling up in the backwaters. The texture of the novel is woven out of a detailed account of these processes. The peasant characters emerge from this background and are measured against it. This is the novel of a village, Pekashino, and within it of a family, the Priaslins. It is the end of the Second World War, from which the father has not returned, and Mikhail Priaslin is at seventeen prematurely the head of a family of five children. He is also almost the only able-bodied young man on the kolkhoz. Consequently, he has a formidable set of responsibilities both to the family and to the kolkhoz. For the kolkhoz there is scything, plowing, sowing, and reaping, and also the lumber work in the winter; for the family he must find hay to feed Zvezdonia, the cow on which they all depend for milk, then food for them all to eat and firewood to keep their hut warm. Very little of this is provided by the collective, and much of it has to be obtained in semilegal fashion.

17. Fedor Abramov, *Dve zimy i tri leta*, published in *Novyi mir*, 1968, nos. 1-3 (republished as a separate book by "Sovetskii pisatel'," Leningrad, 1969); quotations are from the Leningrad edition. Boris Mozhaev, *Iz zhizni Fedora Kus'kina*, published in *Novyi mir*, 1966, no. 7. Vasilii Belov, *Privychnoe delo*, published in *Sever*, 1966, no. 1 (republished, somewhat revised, in *Za tremia volokami* (Moscow: "Sovetskii pisatel'," 1968), and in *Sel'skie povesti* by the Komsomol publishing house, Molodaia Gvardiia (Moscow, 1971).

For the most part, Mikhail accepts these burdens as necessary to the survival of the collective and of the family which he loves. But of course the acceptance of them closes off avenues of personal development. His adolescent sweetheart, Duniarka, goes off to the town to study at an agricultural institute, and there learns to despise the village. She marries a naval officer. Mikhail's boyhood companion, Egorsha, free of family responsibilities, can also go into town, take a tractor-driver's course, and gain leisure, money, women, even political standing, with an easy smoothness which Mikhail cannot begin to emulate. Throughout the novel the town, with its promise of success and comfort, even of noble deeds performed for the nation, competes with the simpler, more enduring virtues of village life in Mikhail's heart:

Mikhail's heart swelled with envy when he looked into the kolkhoz office of an evening and his eye caught the national newspaper.

Elsewhere a great life was buzzing away, elsewhere lived inspired people—shining knights who, every day, every hour, wrought heroic deeds for the glory of the motherland and then recounted them graphically in their letters and reports.

And what was there in Pekashino? What sort of life? Snowdrifts up to the windows. And a murky dawn toward ten o'clock in the morning.

...

No, this was not the life he had dreamed of. . . . (pp. 206–7)

However, the most immediately obvious face of the town in the countryside is its harsh one, that of the party authorities whose job it is to ensure that each kolkhoz makes its contribution to the national productive effort. Podrezov, the *raion* party secretary, with his black leather jacket, sharp cheekbones and cold blue eyes, is always exhorting, demanding, laying down the line. Yet he is not entirely a simple character. He understands people, knows how to get good work out of them in a crisis, and is not averse to rolling up his sleeves, putting on his boots, and getting out to help with the logging himself when matters are urgent. At the same time he will unhesitatingly override the agricultural sense of the peasants and of the kolkhoz chairman when party and state discipline demands it. If logs need to be sent down river to meet the requirements of the ministerial procurement organs, then that takes priority over the kolkhoz spring sowing. Anfisa Petrovna, the kolkhoz chairman, does not even attempt to argue with him:

Once Podrezov starts to let fly with his heavy artillery (“demobilization,” “anti-state practices,” “sabotage,” “shortsightedness”), then shut up and don't answer back. True, the same terrible words would be hurled at her if she failed with the sowing. But this wasn't the moment to start proving that she was right. (p. 51)

The really important matters in Podrezov's life are the orders he gets from

above and the reports he writes on their fulfillment. His understanding of the village and of the peasants is always limited by these administrative considerations.

Mikhail's acceptance of family and community responsibility means subjection to this kind of man and to this kind of system. Understandably this bondage galls him profoundly, and at one juncture he breaks out and rebels against everything he holds dear. He repudiates his family by engaging in a passionate love affair with an older woman, and when this comes to an explosive end, he retreats to a lumber hut on his own and refuses to do anything for the kolkhoz either. In the end, torn by love for his deprived mother and his brothers and sisters, he returns home and tries to do his best for the collective again. But the bitterness and doubt are not dispersed by the end of the novel, in which the brash, worldly Egorsha wins the hand of Lizka, Mikhail's sister, largely by virtue of the money he is able to put forward to buy a new family cow.

Mikhail's personal conflicts are illuminated by a character who does not appear often, but who stands as a symbol of inherited communal solidarity. That is the Old Believer, Evsei Moshkin, who returns from exile in Siberia at the end of the war to find that his two sons have been killed and that the villagers, thinking he has died somewhere in a labor camp, have dismantled his hut in order to use the wood for their own purposes. Evsei refuses to have his logs returned to him by those who had taken them, maintaining that "there is no such thing as 'someone else's'" (*netu chuzhikh*) and that "we are all members of the same family" (*vse liudi rodnye*) (p. 31). He knows the genealogy of everyone in the village, and loves to reminisce about their fathers and grandfathers. And his sense of the family and the human community extends outward to the earth on which they live, and to the God of his faith. His opposite in this respect is Egorsha, who has no sense of family piety, and whose use of the "mother" oath brings Evsei to tears: "Ah, Egor, that is not right. The mother oath is the most terrible of all. You sin against your own mother, against Mary the Mother of God, and against the damp mother earth" (p. 205).

The end of the novel is indeterminate and foreboding. Evsei is arrested on a trumped-up charge of counterrevolutionary propaganda, and it is Egorsha who apparently prospers in the modern world, while Mikhail's devotion to his family is tinged with doubt and bitterness. Rural solidarity is, it seems, steadily being undermined by the corrupt values of the towns.

Mozhaev's novella, *Iz zhizni Fedora Kuz'kina*, is something of a contrast—a lively, salty piece of writing with an optimistic ending. Its main character, Fedor Kuzkin, also known as Zhivoy, is a perky and resourceful peasant figure who knows how to take on the bureaucracy and score points

off them. His story is recounted in a pithy, racy language, with a slight exaggeration here, a touch of fantasy there, like a tale that has gone the rounds and emerged the better for the telling.

It begins with a family in disunion. In Fedor's family all misfortunes take place on Saint Frol's Day (August 18), and there have recently been many of them: his own father was killed by a brother in a quarrel over a piece of land; another brother died in a drunken orgy. The greater, then, is Fedor's devotion to his wife, Dunia, and their five children. The story turns on his efforts to make a living that will support them in the face of natural difficulties and an indifferent, when not actively malicious, officialdom. The irony of his situation is that he himself, had it not been for his peasant instincts, might have been a member of that officialdom. After the collectivization he had been sent on a law course to train as a kolkhoz chairman. Before the course was half finished, however, he was actually dispatched to take charge of a kolkhoz in a distant forest region. Being used to the black earth and meadow of his home village, Prudki, he felt that the mere fact of a bureaucratic appointment would not teach him how to run a timber collective in an area where "there was not enough earth for a pig to dig up with its snout." Besides, he could see that most of the local peasants felt the creation of this collective to be unpromising and were leaving to find jobs elsewhere. So Kuzkin refused the appointment, and for this he was excluded from the course and sent back to Prudki classified as a "clandestine element and saboteur." Back there his pugnacity and plain speaking led to his arrest and imprisonment for "anti-Soviet propaganda." He was released in time for the Second World War, in which he won three medals and lost three fingers of his right hand.

His two main adversaries are Motiakov, the chairman of the local *raion* executive committee, and Guzenkov, the kolkhoz chairman. Motiakov was a colleague of Kuzkin's in the law course, but had not turned down the first post he was offered, and has done very well for himself ever since. Guzenkov, recently "elected" kolkhoz chairman, has distinguished himself from his more easygoing predecessor by making the members of the kolkhoz stand up in his office when they come to see him, instead of sitting in chairs or squatting along the wall. His keyword, he makes clear, is "discipline." "All because he was at the Academy," grumbles Kuzkin to a group of peasants. "They wouldn't let him into the classroom, but he walked the corridors and picked the dustbins and crammed his head with wisdom that way. That's why he's a strict one" (p. 44).

In the past year (1953) Kuzkin and his wife have notched up no less than 840 labor-days working on deliveries for the kolkhoz: for this they have received 62 kilograms of buckwheat, and no potatoes or wheat at all. Since he cannot feed his children on this kind of income, Kuzkin decides to leave the kolkhoz. He begins to make money on the side by doing some unauthorized

mowing for some of his better-heeled comrades, and improves on the shining hour by fishing and shooting duck. This gives Guzenkov the chance to expel him from the kolkhoz. Kuzkin is summoned to the *raion* executive committee, where he explains: "I'm not refusing to work for the kolkhoz, it's just that I don't want to work for nothing." But Guzenkov and Motiakov keep up a barrage of abuse, and the committee confirms his expulsion and imposes a double tax on him, which of course he cannot meet (pp. 58–63).

This incident sets the tone for the whole work. In his encounters with arbitrary officials, Kuzkin is unfailingly impudent but always honest. What he stands up for is his absolute right to find a living for himself and his family. What is more, his legal training, albeit curtailed, has evidently given him a sound knowledge of the Kolkhoz Charter and of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR: he knows what his rights are, and he also knows how to stand up for them. For example, he successfully appeals against the decision of the *raion* executive committee, posting his appeal from a railway station forty kilometers distant so that no local official has the chance to intercept it. The party regional committee (*obkom*), to which the appeal is addressed, restores Kuzkin's rights, and orders that he be issued a passport so he can find work outside the kolkhoz. He works for a time in a neighboring kolkhoz (he cannot bring himself to leave the familiar village), and then minds a landing stage on the nearby river for a steamship company. Finally, he finds a more permanent job in a kolkhoz just across the river. It is now 1955, and things are improving for Russian agriculture.

In Mozhaev's story, then, there are just and humane officials as well as bad ones. The author looks toward the future to reassert the humane values rooted in the past. In many ways the novella has the optimism of the early Khrushchev era (even though it was published long after that), when it was hoped that a new generation of enlightened, energetic officials would solve the problems of Soviet agriculture. In fact, the overall impression conveyed is of the Russian peasant—industrious, capable, honest, and resilient—coming into his heritage at last after years of hardship and oppression. In this respect it contrasts with the pessimism about the future which is more characteristic of "village prose."

Ivan Afrikanovich, the hero of Vasili Belov's novella, *Privychnoe delo*, is perhaps the most richly developed of all these peasant characters. Yet, curiously enough, Ivan Afrikanovich does not embody the usual peasant strengths as much as Mikhail Priaslin or Fedor Kuzkin do. He is neither a jack-of-all-village-trades nor a fearless and resourceful fighter against bureaucracy. It is his wife, Katerina, as a milkmaid, who really keeps their large family, while Ivan only picks up a bit of money here and there by fishing or doing an occasional piece of carpentry. He is a childlike character, affectionate

and dependent, easily led by others, given to irresponsible pranks, and not very competent at the tasks which a peasant needs to master in order to survive in the far north. In these features he resembles many male members of the Soviet intelligentsia in an era when women often earn as much as men and tight political control leaves restricted scope for personal initiative and responsibility. This may in part explain the popularity which the novella has enjoyed.

Ivan's dependence on Katerina is total. He needs not only her stalwart working qualities, but even more her love. By a previous wife, with whom he shared only a "cold love," he had no children, but his "warm love" with Katerina has produced nine, whom the two of them have to clothe and feed. The efforts needed to do so in the difficult conditions of the far northern kolkhoz occupy all their lives and also require the constant help of Katerina's mother, Evstolia, who is always threatening to leave them but never actually does. The kolkhoz regulations do not allow them enough hay to maintain the cow on whose milk they depend, so Ivan, with his son Grishka, must mow hay secretly on the edge of the wood by night: "Without the hay Ivan Afrikanovich could not keep the cow, and without the cow there would be no milk, and without the milk there would be no money for bread and sugar, not to mention the fact that without milk no kind of cooking would ever nourish such a family" (*Sel'skie povesti*, p. 167).

This is the basic catechism which determines the survival of each peasant family, and its starkness eventually almost drives Ivan from the village and family which he loves in search of a better life elsewhere, in the town.

Ivan's element is the village and the family, and the natural world of animals and plants around them. But beyond them is a broader base. Indeed, there is a religious side to Ivan's personality which is not present in the chief characters of Abramov and Mozhaev, and is to be found elsewhere perhaps only in Solzhenitsyn's *Matrena*. Ivan's religious feeling is pantheistic, a vague religion of life, which grows out of, but extends beyond, family affection and a fellow feeling for animals and birds. He loves to get up early in the morning and go out to inspect his fish traps at the edge of the lake. It is on these occasions that the meaning of his existence becomes apparent to him, in the fragrance of the fir trees, in the blue shadows of the snow crust, and in the immensity of the sky. He finds a sparrow half-frozen in the snow, with a broken leg, and pushes it under his shirt to give it warmth.

"Sit there, envalid [*sic*]. Thaw yourself out in a bit of free warmth, and then we'll see. Well, you want to live too, there's no getting away from that. That's how things are [*delo privychnoe*]. Life. Everywhere life. There's life under feathers and life under shirts. The women over there have lit the stoves, and now they're bustling about the hearths—

that's life too. And that's all good, that's all right. It's right that we were born, right that we had children. Yes, life is life, that's what it is." (p. 133)

He experiences a mystical sense of oneness with nature which proceeds from the light, the colors, the singing of the birds, and the sleep of his baby in the cradle:

Ivan Afrikanovich walked for a long time over the fields covered with frozen snow. His legs bore him of their own accord, and he ceased to be aware of himself, he merged with the snow and the sun, with the blue, hopelessly distant sky, with all the smells and sounds of eternal spring.

Everything was ice-cold, sunlit, stretching broadly away. Smoke was rising peacefully from the distant village chimneys, the cocks were crowing, the grouse were grumbling away, and the snow sparkled white, fast-bound by the frost. Ivan Afrikanovich walked on and on over the crunching snow-crust, and for him time ceased to exist. He was thinking about nothing at all, just like his little child lying smiling in the cradle, for whom there was no difference between sleeping and waking.

And for both of them at that moment there was no end, and no beginning. (pp. 134–35)

These reflections of Ivan's are supported and echoed by a chapter describing the internal world of each of his younger children, from the six-week-old baby, driven mainly by hunger and making his first distinctions between physical sensations, to the other children, yearning for the love of a mother who is out at work most of the day, but also beginning to explore and enjoy the world outside their hut. Their perceptions and emotions are portrayed as similar in kind to those of Ivan himself. As Katerina says: "Nine kids we've got, and the tenth is Ivan Afrikanovich—often just like a little child himself, he is" (pp. 120–24, 136).

The real "plot" does not start until more than halfway through the novella, when the characters and background have been firmly established. It concerns the tragedy which Ivan brings upon himself, when, tempted by the lure of the town, he tries to break away from the village and even, for a time, from his family. The temptation comes in the form of Katerina's brother, Mitka, who works in Murmansk. There, Mitka says, the wages are good, and one can make a good deal on the side without any trouble. He urges Ivan to come to town with him to make a bit of money, and jeers at his unrewarded labor on the kolkhoz. Ivan resists, objecting that Mitka is trying to buy him. But then Mitka throws in the weightiest argument of all: "At least you should think of your children. . . . Do you think they will remember you kindly if you leave them on the kolkhoz?" (p. 196).

That decides it. For several days Ivan goes around with a grim expression on his face, ignoring Katerina's pleas. Then he goes off, after a final painful parting with Katerina by the spring outside the village. She, burdened with a weak heart after the ninth childbirth, faints after his departure. And the next day, doing extra haymaking (which Ivan was supposed to be doing), she has another, and this time fatal, collapse.

The rest of the story is concerned with Ivan's grief and his attempts to come to terms with what has happened. Katerina's death challenges his naïve pantheism and his unreflecting sense of some kind of life existing after death. After pondering suicide, he gropes to the uncertain conclusions that life will go on anyway even after his death, that his children and other people will continue to live, and that in general it was better to have been born than not to have been born. But the ending is deliberately left vague and inconclusive. Ivan, as before, remains preoccupied with his own feelings while others make the important decisions. Evstolia decides what shall be done with Ivan's children and even determines that Ivan shall marry the village old maid, Niushka. Full of the feeling that life must go on somehow, Ivan starts to make a canoe, but abandons it, and is finally seen overcome with grief at his wife's grave.

In some ways, Ivan Afrikanovich is reminiscent of Iurii Zhivago: he shows the same childlike sensitivity, the same preoccupation with ultimate questions, especially that of immortality, and the same irresponsibility toward a loved family. And Belov's themes are similar to those of Pasternak's novel: man is rooted in nature, and individuality is grounded in social relations, especially those of the family. Both Pasternak and Belov would, on the evidence of their novels, regard these truths about human nature to be the basis of the morality of any society, and their work reflects alarm for the fate of a society that ignores or repudiates them.

What cannot be demonstrated here is the exuberance and variety of Belov's presentation of the peasant world—especially the linguistic panache with which it is done. One remembers the long opening drunken monologue addressed by Ivan to his horse, Evstolia's story about the incompetent peasants of Poshekhonye (a pastiche on idyllic folksy prose about goodhearted stupid bumpkins),¹⁸ the pranks of Ivan's drinking companion, Mishka, the careful delineation of the individuality of each of Ivan's children, and the section which is virtually the autobiography of the family cow, Rogulia. It is an integral part of Belov's conception that animals, babies, and grown men all operate on the same level, and their interaction is celebrated in the richly colored colloquial language of the author.

18. Since writing *Privychnoe delo*, Belov has developed further his mastery of the Vologda peasant language through pastiches on folk tales, told in the local dialect. See especially *Bukhtiny vologodskie*, in *Novyi mir*, 1969, no. 8, pp. 158–84, and “Sluchainye etudy,” *Nash sovremennik*, 1971, no. 7, pp. 95–102.

It is not easy to define the position of works such as those of Abramov, Mozhaev, and Belov in Soviet literature. On the one hand, they constitute a vindication of some of the features of socialist realism, in that they depict society realistically and they present positive heroes with their roots in the *narod*. On the other hand, the Soviet reality which they describe is appalling, and is not usually shown as improving, while the positive hero is in no way *partiinyi*. Rather, he is passive and easygoing, or at best (like Kuzkin) a wayward individualist. Worst of all, perhaps, the sense of community which gives these heroes their strength derives not from any vision of the future but from common suffering lived through in the *past*. In other words, the optimism which is perhaps the only common denominator of party-approved socialist realism is usually missing, and in fact is replaced by an aura of foreboding about the future.

These characteristics of "village prose" have aroused considerable misgivings in Soviet literary criticism. And today, as in the tsarist past, literary criticism often seems to be a substitute for free discussion about wider social and cultural issues. In 1967–68 *Literaturnaia gazeta* brought together some conflicting views on "village prose," in a way which suggested a debate about the whole progress of Soviet society and the place of moral values within it. Opening the attack on the genre, V. Kamianov contended that the humble "people of good conscience" (*sovestlivtsy*) who are its heroes are static as personalities and wholly inadequate models for Soviet man in a complex and changing world. He dismissed their outlook and language as "thinking in sighs."¹⁹ V. Kozhinov, his most consistent opponent, asserted that, on the contrary, it was precisely in the complex modern world that men have most need of positive moral guidance. The peasant, he affirmed, has an "integrity of being and consciousness which is lost by people from other walks of life, a unity of practical, reflective, moral, and aesthetic activity." "The peasantry," he added, "is not the 'ideal' or 'highest' part of the people, but it is the indispensable grounding for the perpetual 'renewal of the vital forces of nations.'"²⁰

F. Levin agreed with Kamianov that an urban educated man cannot turn to his semiliterate grandmother as the source of all wisdom, but nevertheless argued that "village prose" had a positive role to play in the evolution of Soviet culture and society: "We all know that at history's harshest junctures our high moral principles have on occasions suffered. These principles

19. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Nov. 22, 1967, p. 4. It is interesting that Kamianov specifically excepts Ivan Afrikanovich from this criticism. Ivan Afrikanovich, perhaps because of Belov's literary skill, seems to have disarmed all the critics, though they may debate what his significance is.

20. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Jan. 31, 1968, p. 5. He specifically quotes Ivan Afrikanovich as an example.

have been violated, and as a result we have been morally debased. Callousness, indifference, selfishness, duplicity, cowardice have all been more or less widespread. . . . And so now we see some writers drawn to their 'roots' [*istoki*], to people who live a simple working life and are not trying to get anywhere."²¹

A. Ianov, more than any other discussant, was excited by the opportunities which modern urban and technical civilization is opening up, but he was also very conscious of the need for moral values appropriate to that era. The whole of world culture, he asserted, was preoccupied with the search for such values. And for Russians, he said: "It is perhaps natural that this should begin in the village, where the complex of moral problems is more readily grasped. Where life's problems are more acute, more exposed, more open to the eye of the investigator. Where a man who has lived through immeasurable suffering, yet incredibly manages not to become hardened or embittered, remains kind and open to kindness, remains human. We are drawn to the village by a powerful classical literary tradition. And we are drawn there, not least, by the sorrow of parting, of dissolution, of the decay of our native roots [*istoki*], and by a vague feeling of guilt about it, of grief not fully expressed."²²

Not the least remarkable feature about this debate is the fact that socialist realism is never mentioned: *partiinost'* and *ideinost'* are not once invoked, even though questions of moral conduct and the construction of a better society are constantly at issue. It is as though the critics on both sides were anxious to declare a moratorium on these terms, which are no longer adequate to catch the complexities of change inside a socialist society, and to let their discussions take on a wider significance. As Max Hayward suggests in a recent article, nobody is really writing socialist realism today. Not even the Stalinist conservatives, like Kochetov and Shevtsov, are convinced of ultimate victory any more, but on the contrary fear that the country is going to the dogs unless the political leadership pulls itself together.²³

All that has survived from the ideals of socialist realism is *narodnost'*.

21. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Jan. 17, 1968, p. 6.

22. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Feb. 28, 1968, p. 6. Another aspect of "village prose" which has delighted some critics and alarmed others is its potential espousal of the cause of old Russia. A whole school of writers in the journal *Molodaia gvardiia*, headed by Viktor Chalmayev, took the opportunity to rehabilitate the "Russian soul" and to glorify a variety of aspects of prerevolutionary Russian society and culture. I. Dedkov and A. Dement'ev, in *Novyi mir*, took up the defense of Soviet orthodoxy, Dedkov maintaining that the ideals of "village prose" were general human ones, and not specifically Russian. See V. Chalmayev, "Neizbezhnost'," *Molodaia gvardiia*, 1968, no. 9, pp. 259-89; I. Dedkov, "Stranitsy derevenskoi zhizni," *Novyi mir*, 1969, no. 3, pp. 231-46; A. Dement'ev, "O traditsiakh i narodnosti," *Novyi mir*, 1969, no. 4, pp. 215-35; V. N. Pavlov, "Spory o slavianofil'stve i russkom patriotizme v sovetskoi nauchnoi literature, 1967-70 gg.," *Grani*, no. 82 (1971), pp. 183-211.

23. Max Hayward, "The Decline of Socialist Realism," *Survey*, 18, no. 1 (Winter 1972): 73-97, esp. pp. 93-94.

But it is an older kind of *narodnost'*. The best work of Abramov, Mozhaev, and Belov marks a renewal of Russian fiction by a return to the traditional.²⁴ Their stories and sketches resemble the production of writers of the 1870s and 1880s, such as Uspensky, Reshetnikov, Zlatovratsky, and Engelgardt, who were then exploring the Russian village, impressed by the inherited moral values of the peasants, and worried that they were being undermined by the modern urban, commercial, and bureaucratic world. This populist fiction of the nineteenth century grew, like the "village prose" of the 1960s, out of a far-ranging discussion of the peasant problem (in the late 1850s and early 1860s) and its frustration in disappointing agrarian reforms. Both the discussion and the frustration raised far-reaching questions of identity, which these writers sought to resolve in their sketches of the life of the *narod*.²⁵

In the search for ideals which followed the death of Stalin and the revelations of the "cult of personality," then, the writers of "village prose" have sought to draw on earlier traditions of Russian literature, descending to the little man whose existence is a struggle, who is threatened by the forces of the modern world, and have written about him sometimes with humor, sometimes with lyricism, sometimes with moral concern, always with compassion. The peasant, principal victim of the huge and ruthless processes by which the Soviet state has pursued modernization and military security, was the natural object for such studies. In portraying him the writers of "village prose" have developed certain characteristics of socialist realism (*narodnost'*, realism, the presentation of a positive hero) while abandoning others (*partiinost'*, *ideinost'*, and optimism about the future).

For a time after the resignation of Tvardovsky from the editorial board of *Novyi mir*, "village prose" almost disappeared from the major literary journals, though throughout 1971 and 1972 it maintained a foothold in some minor

24. It should be emphasized that these are not by any means the only authors working in the genre of "village prose," and animated by the concerns I have expounded in this article. Some other fine examples are: S. P. Zalygin, *Na Irtyshe*, in *Novyi mir*, 1964, no. 2, pp. 3-80 (which concerns the way collectivization broke up the old village commune). V. F. Tendriakov, *Podenka—vek korotkii*, in *Novyi mir*, 1965, no. 5, pp. 95-141, and also *Konchina*, in *Moskva*, 1968, no. 3, pp. 3-138. N. Voronov, *Iunost' v Zheleznodol'ske*, in *Novyi mir*, 1968, no. 11, pp. 3-95, and no. 12, pp. 31-110 (which is concerned with the life of peasants who move into the new industrial towns of the First Five-Year Plan). V. Shukshin, "Iz detstva Ivana Popova," *Novyi mir*, 1968, no. 11, pp. 98-110. V. Voinovich, *Zhizn' i neobychnnye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina*, in *Grani*, no. 72 (1969), pp. 3-83. Even these works are only the tip of an iceberg, not all of which, however, is of such good literary quality. An excellent *samizdat* novel which takes the insights of "village prose" and applies them in a wider field is Vladimir Maximov, *Sem' dnei tvoreniia* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972): here the family, and the redemption of a sick society through the family, is the main theme. For further examples see my "Selected Bibliography of Recent Village Prose in the Soviet Union," *ABSEES*, 4, no. 2 (October 1973), Special Section.

25. See Richard Wortman, *The Crisis of Russian Populism* (Cambridge, 1967).

or provincial ones, notably *Nash sovremennik* and *Sever*. In 1973, however, Abramov and Mozhaev have returned to *Novyi mir*. The genre, in fact, looks extremely tough, even though (or perhaps because) the world of the organic, backward village has finally been broken up by the agricultural reforms on which Brezhnev embarked at the March 1965 plenum.²⁶ Clearly, the role of "village prose" is not yet exhausted: it has played, and continues to play, a vital part in the development of Russian fiction, offering a path by which writers can emancipate themselves from the contrived ideals of Stalinist realism and return to the broad traditions of humanity and compassion which have been the peculiar glory of Russian literature.

26. For an account of the application of the Brezhnev-Kosygin reforms, see Alec Nove, "Soviet Agriculture Under Brezhnev," *Slavic Review*, 29, no. 3 (1970): 379–410. For an interesting Soviet impression of the wealthier but also less cohesive village community of the early 1970s see Leonid Ivanov, "V Rodnom Kraiu," *Neva*, 1972, no. 6, pp. 118–36. I suspect that the writers of "village prose" have tended to depict the village not as it was *at the time of writing*, but as it used to be somewhat earlier, say just after the Second World War. It is possible that because of their cultural concerns they have overemphasized both the backwardness and the communal cohesion of the peasant village. Compare most of the writings mentioned in this article with Andrei Amal'rik's *Nezhelannoe puteshestvie v Sibir'* (New York, 1970), written at the same time: on pp. 163–75 he gives a bleak view of the Soviet peasantry, demoralized and devoid of any communal spirit. The book has been translated into English by Manya Harari and Max Hayward: *Involuntary Journey to Siberia* (New York, 1970).