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Ivan Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* achieves variety in its unvarnished, individual portraits of Russian serfdom, and then unity through the rapturous depiction of the countryside they labor upon and share. In this way, Turgenev forsakes plot, but gives this collection of stories a poetic lyricism as themes and images mount. Varying pictures of feudal life take on a panoramic composition of inward, inhuman imprisonment and liberating natural beauty.

These short stories are political in nature—the stout peasant Kohr, Arina, the unhappy, mistreated former maid, and the hunter Yermolay, are all subjugated to the medieval feudal system of 19th Century Russia. Class rises above the consciousness of the individual. In order to further the political aims of these stories, Turgenev sedates his first-person narrator in his relations to the other characters of the novel. Except for the emotional requiem for his friend and fellow student Avenir in *Death*, the narrator observes rather than judges, and rarely interferes with the action of the story. Even Yermolay, who starves his dog and beats his wife, is not explicitly condemned or impugned morally by the narrator, as a Victorian novelist such as George Eliot might be wont to do. Remarkably, he reserves this judgment despite his status in the higher class.

Moral judgments come quietly, through the implicit honesty of the observations. The narrator gently prods the characters he meets into volunteering stories about their lives, or he simply relaxes into the unspooling of a ghost-story yarn around a fire. The reader glimpses his style in a typical introduction to a story-within-a-story: “Forgive me, Lukeria, I said at last, but what’s happened to you?” (*Living Relic*, 356) Past stories of degradation and cruelty filter down to the reader from the lower class. Stories such as Arina’s callous treatment from the wealthy Zverkov give context to the abject state of the peasants. This neutrality lends the stories a modern ambience, as if they were shot through the lens of a documentary film camera.

But if the narrator often refrains from omniscient and even subjective judgment, the characters still stir the emotions of the reader. The narrator depicts them with an innate sympathy and an unyielding honesty, which often seems crude in its contours. Only the wealthy Pytor Petrovich stands out as a character whose lank, sickly outward appearance defies his true nature. Indeed, in *Living Relic*, the narrator implies that spiritual

well-being has a mirror in outward appearance, as Lukeria was once a beautiful maid, but is now only a “mummy.” (356)

Some characters, like Stepushka, with his translucent bat-like ears, and Kohr, who seems rooted to the earth like a turnip, have a crudity of form reminiscent of Van Gogh’s portraits of Dutch coal miners later in the 19th Century. The narrator describes the roughage Stepushka gulps down, “...and if hadn’t spent the morning to evening worrying about food, my Stepushka’d died of hunger...(he’d) spend his time sitting under the fence eating a radish or sucking a carrot or crumbling in his lap a dirty head of cabbage.” (45) Here one thinks of Van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters*—lumpy, dour peasants painted with the tar-like colors of the earth. Degradation defines their social condition.

Yet the narrator refuses to let these details sully the reader’s sympathetic connection to the characters. For instance, the boys gathered around the fire in *Bezhin Lea* seem lit with an awestruck wonderment, which makes their uneducated innocence nearly romantic. Such characters seem tethered to the mystery of an enfolding nature; at times comforting, and at other times, capricious.

Depictions of Russia’s countryside seem almost religious in their revelry, and again Van Gogh comes to mind. In his diaries, he writes that he wishes to replace the haloes of medieval paintings with the color of his characters and the sun. In *Bezhin Lea*, the narrator slips off his objective restraint for Van Gogh expressionism: “At the point where the sun has just set as calmly as it rose into the sky, a crimson glow lingers for a short time over the darkened earth, and, softly winking, the evening star burns upon the glow like a carefully carried candle.” (99) This enthusiasm for nature is not an exercise in self-indulgent detail. Rather, the narrator animates nature with a hopeful spirit. As the faithful in this cathedral of nature, even the lowliest peasants may find redemption. Meanwhile, the landowners and the educated class—fat Zverkov in Moscow, the casually cruel bailiff in Chinese slippers, the dignitary in the *Hamlet* story—feel only the listless chill of their marmoreal company.