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TIME, BACKWARD! MEMORY AND THE PAST  
IN SOVIET RUSSIAN VILLAGE PROSE

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"Time, Backward!" is the mirror image of Valentin Kataev's *Vremia, vpered!* (Time, forward) (1932), one of the best known and best written Soviet industrial novels. Superficially, Kataev's book is about a metallurgical plant brigade that breaks the world record for pouring concrete, but on another level it is about the industrialization effort seen in terms of the speeding up of time. "Time was concentrated. It flew. It interfered. He must tear himself out of it, free himself. He must outdistance it. Smetana was almost running."<sup>1</sup> This is the treatment of time that socialist realist theory was to promote officially in 1934; for example, the "depiction of reality in its revolutionary development," and revolution meant speed.

There could not be a greater literary contrast than the one between fast-paced, impatient, future-oriented works of socialist realism, whether about factories or collective farms, and the slow, patient, seemingly passive, past-oriented village prose that first appeared in the 1950s. To understand canonical socialist realist works one has to see their orientation towards the future, to speed, and to a rejection of the traditional in favor of creating a new world. An appreciation of village prose involves looking at the writers' interest in time, memory, and the past, as well as in qualities such as *svetlyi* (radiant, luminous), *rodnoi* (native, one's own), and in the image of *doroga dlinnaia* (the long road), which refers not only to the endless, slow roads of the Russian countryside but also the "long road" back to one's own past and to the past of rural Russia. In approaching village prose from this angle, examples have been drawn from not only some of the better known *derevenshchiki* (village prose writers)--Fedor Abramov, Vladimir Soloukhin, Valentin Rasputin, Viktor Astafiev, and Vladimir Krupin--but also several lesser known but very gifted writers, for example, Aleksey Leonov, Viktor

Perepelka, and Vasily Lebedev.

What is called village prose--and the term itself is controversial--was written between the mid-1950s and the present. The events it describes took place between the mid-1920s and the present. Time, though, is a very complex process in village prose and the writers generally pay much more attention to a rich, multi-layered sense of time than to innovative plots or original characters. In this paper, some of the most important kinds of time that operate in village prose have been identified. They are, of course, intermingled in a given work, but each has its own specific power: historical, cyclical, literary, generational, childhood, and apocalyptic time.

#### Historical Time

Village prose has been described as a chronicle of the Russian countryside in the Soviet period. In this chronicle, there are two major historical events: collectivization and World War II. Collectivization is all-important because it was the most dramatic and sudden change. The immediate origin of village prose, it must be remembered, is in the criticism of the collectivized countryside--both its management and the literature about collective farms--in the postwar period. As the literary movement evolved, writers began to move further back to the 1920s. They began to question the way collectivization was carried out and even the ultimate wisdom of this complete reorganization of rural life. The excesses of the early period, especially de-kulakization, gave these works their dramatic scenes. Vasily Belov's *The Eves* is especially eloquent on this subject, but there are a number of other works, including Sergey Zalygin's *On the Irtysh*, Boris Mozhaev's *Peasant Men and Women*, and Ivan Akulov's *Kasyan the Tiresome*. The final installments of the Belov and Mozhaev works were published in 1987 in

*Novyi mir* (no. 8) and *Don* (nos. 1-3) respectively, 10 years after the first sections of each work appeared. Valentin Rasputin's spirited review of *The Eves* in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (October 21, 1987) asserted that the novel contains a bitter truth that can no longer be withheld about the destruction of strong, hardworking Russian farm families. The move against *kulaks*, so confidently presented in *kolkhoz* literature--that is, socialist realist literature about collective farms--is treated as an avoidable tragedy by Belov. Village prose has given Russian literature a fuller picture of what happened in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a picture that is based sometimes on research, but more often on stories from the writers' own villages and families. The treatment of collectivization in village prose stimulated a lot of discussion by literary critics and other commentators even before the current policy of "openness."

The other event of village prose is war. Village prose does not so much contradict socialist realism about the war as a whole, as much as it supplements it by telling more about the war years on the rural home front and the heroic efforts by villages deprived of almost all adult men but given impossibly high quotas of food and other supplies to hand over to the government. *Kolkhoz* literature showed a wartime countryside that felt few ill effects and where living conditions were actually improving; in fact, as the *derevenshchiki* knew from firsthand experience, rural people suffered terribly. It was not only the privations and hard work, but the more harrowing, frequent arrival of a *pokhoronnaia*, the official telegram announcing the wartime death of a villager. In his memoir of a wartime boyhood, *Whose Advice is Best?*, Aleksey Leonov describes what he and his friend encountered when they returned home one day.

Suddenly my ears and heart were pierced by the familiar sound of hopeless wailing. We stopped, listening closely to the voice of the lamenting woman.

A pain gripped my heart. ... It was my people who were crying .... I still didn't know for whom my mother was mourning so I held back my tears .... The first to meet me was my Aunt Aniuta.

...

-Lenka, such grief, such grief! ...

My brother Mishka was dead. ...

No one could comfort us. They had their own sorrow, and lived in expectation of more.<sup>2</sup>

Village prose stressed the role of the unsung, unrewarded peasant heroes, such as Mikhail Pryaslin and Anfisa Minina in Abramov's tetralogy *The Pryaslins*. In the prologue to the first volume, *Brothers and Sisters*, the author sees the true chronicle of Pekashino as a wooden table in a haymaking hut, on which the men of the village had carved their names and marks over the years. He adds that he will also tell the story of the Pekashino women, who left no marks in wood, but whose efforts were no less heroic. In a nation of hero-cities, there is no "hero village," except in these works. Village prose writers brought simple peasants into official history, not letting their contributions go unnoticed, even if they themselves left few written records or photographs. One motif of village prose is the characters' fear of being forgotten because of having to sacrifice their few possessions just to survive. In Aleksey Leonov's "Along Summer and Winter Roads," Tatyana Averkhina must sell her only valuable possession, a centuries-old cashmere shawl, in order to feed her family during the war:

She folded the cashmere shawl in half and put it on. From the shawl there came the trunk's smell of olden times - and in her mind there appeared in rapid succession great-grandmothers and grandmothers, handing this precious object from one person to the next. And here she was knocking down the price for this wretched profiteer. ... Neither her grandchildren nor her great-grandchildren would get to see this shawl and they would not remember their grandmother, because there wouldn't be anything to remember her by.<sup>3</sup>



With the exception of collectivization, the *derevenshchiki* tend to portray historical events and Nature in elemental, impersonal terms. Characters are not so much passive as driven creatures, surviving at the pleasure of forces stronger than any human being. Here the continuing influence of folk beliefs and rural speech is revealed not only in references to superstitions and traditions but has penetrated the very language and structure of the text. Some of the most powerful passages in village prose, Aleksey Leonov's and Abramov's comments about the war years, and Rasputin's account of the flooding of villages for a hydroelectric project, express this feeling of acceptance of the inevitable. Darya, in Rasputin's *Farewell to Matyora*, repeatedly remarks on how everyone is pulled and swept along through life and it is a rare person who sets his own pace. This is quite a different picture from the all-powerful masters of history that socialist realism envisioned.

In addition to the two above-mentioned major historical moments, village prose also chronicles life in the countryside during the postwar period. It portrays the multiple attempts at agricultural reform and gradual transformation of rural areas that sought to make rural life more efficient and more appealing to young people with increasingly urban tastes. Village prose writers for the most part treat the process of transformation with skepticism and with sorrow at the gradual loss of the distinctive, ancient rural ways of life. They tend to stay away from the present because writing about the present moment in the countryside would involve them almost inevitably in the rhetoric of the publicistic essay (*ocherk*) and would force them to pay attention to the latest party policy on rural areas. Village prose writers prefer to remain somewhere in the past, depicting the village, as Geoffrey Hosking has said, "Not as it was *at the time of writing*, but as it used to be somewhat earlier."<sup>4</sup> Their favorite

characters have always been the bearers of tradition, the old people, rather than *kolkhoz* literature's youthful carriers of change.<sup>5</sup> It has not escaped the attention of Soviet critics that the *derevenshchiki* have the ability to make loss a more compelling theme than gain. In 1979, the critic Prokhanov complained in *Literaturnaia gazeta* that while there were wonderful metaphors for loss in contemporary literature, there were no effective *metaphory sovremennosti* (metaphors for the present).<sup>6</sup>

### Cyclical Time

A second kind of time that village prose describes is cyclical time, primarily the natural cycle of seasons, but also the way that cycle is intertwined with work, folk customs, and with the church calendar. The remarkable calming effect of much village prose, even amidst scenes of historical upheaval and personal tragedy for peasants, is largely due to the sense of a predictable cycle of spring thunder and flooding, ploughing, planting, fishing, early summer haymaking, long summer days, the last swim and the first apples, gathering and preparing mushrooms, the main harvest period, followed by the spinning of flax and repair of fishing nets indoors during the dark winter, and the wait for the cow to calve and once again give milk. Then the cycle is repeated, always with the same contours but with no day or year exactly like the previous one. Each season has its designated activities, holidays, songs, sayings, and superstitions, and its own rhythm.

In Leonov's "Along Summer and Winter Roads," Tatyana, in labor in a root-cellar, a few months into the war with the enemy nearby, remembers when her other children were born, not as numbers on a calendar, but according to where these births fit into the natural cycle.

When Ivan was born the fruit trees were in bloom and bees

and flies were buzzing ... And Fedor was born when the apples were ripe. That year the apples came really well. ... Masha appeared on Christmas Eve. It was very snowy ... and there was a whistling in the stove-pipe. ... When Verka arrived they were gathering mushrooms in the woods. ... Mishka was born with the first snow on a pale-blue evening. The cow had a calf the very same day. ... In March crying Alyoshka appeared. The starlings were flying above the tree-tops, fighting over the starling houses. ... And just before haymaking, when the meadow was dandelion-yellow and the hazy heat poured over the growing grain and furrows were hidden by the tops of the potato plants, Petya entered the world.<sup>7</sup>

The cyclical structuring of life in village prose seems to lift the village out of history and place it in a protected place in a primordial forest, and yet a troubled social history is never far away. Vasily Belov calls these two poles of village prose: *lad* (harmony) and *razlad* (disharmony, discord).<sup>8</sup> The distilled vision of *byt* (daily routine) is presented most fully in Belov's book of sketches on folk aesthetics called *Harmony*, which provides a description of life in the northern villages near Vologda. Time was experienced differently in the countryside than in urban areas, Belov tells us, without clocks and without speed, but rather with an eye to the sun's position and a steady, stubborn effort. The emphases on cycles and the detailing of *byt* allow the *derevenshchiki* not only to move time backward but also to slow it down. This slowing down extends even to the narrative pace and style of these works and the way they are read. Kataev's *Time, Forward!* intentionally matches the tempo of a speeding train and pulls the reader along; other socialist realist works are simply transparent in style, and there is nothing over which a reader could linger. Village prose takes great pleasure in language with a complex style full of dialect, archaisms, local names and terms, bits of folklore, and impersonal constructions all of which force the reader to spend more time with a given work. Critics often comment favorably on this quality. One critic, Yevgeny Kutuzov, even suggested that good village prose ought not to be read on a commuter train

or during breaks in a hockey match because such a rich style required and deserved a slower, more attentive reading.<sup>9</sup>

In the realm of folklore, village prose has not added that much new material to an already rich scholarly tradition, but it has overcome the sterility of *kolkhoz* literature by reincorporating folk material into fiction and promoting a new interest in folk culture among urban readers, many of them only a few generations removed from the village. Village prose writers are interested in what academician Dmitri Likhachev calls the "ecology of culture" as well as in the ecology of nature. The more that village prose concentrates on traditional ways, the less interest it shows in the present, except as a time of loss of customs and the values behind them. The interest in man's place in nature by *derevenshchiki* has become a serious concern for the environment, which has emerged as their primary extra-literary public activity.

#### Literary Time

In the early 1950s, when Vladimir Pomerantsev, Fedor Abramov, and Valentin Ovechkin wrote essays on the sad state of *kolkhoz* literature, they suggested that one way out of the morass was for young writers to look back for inspiration to Aksakov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Leskov, Dostoevsky, Gleb Uspensky, Chekhov, Bunin, and Prishvin--all writers with their roots in prerevolutionary Russia.<sup>10</sup> This advice was taken with enthusiasm, and Soviet Russian literary models were mostly ignored. The "literary time" of village prose is thus distinctly, recognizably prerevolutionary, bypassing *kolkhoz* literature; even critics of village prose make no mention of any socialist realist influence other than Sholokhov. The nostalgia in the literature of the past for the decline of the gentry, their estates, and their whole way of life, became in the hands of the *derevenshchiki* nostalgia for the vanishing traditional peasants, their houses, and for the whole

of village *byt*. The breaking string that signals painful impending loss in Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard* resounds just as mysteriously in Rasputin's stories "Downstream" and *Farewell to Matyora*. The fact that the émigré writer Bunin's works were republished in the USSR in the mid-1950s is of great consequence in understanding the literary time of village prose. The qualitative superiority of village prose to *kolkhoz* literature has a lot to do with the models to which *derevenshchiki* turned.

### Generational Time

A sense of time in village prose also involves the *rodina* (native land, homeland) and its people. This homeland can be as large as Russia or the Slavic world, but it also extends down to a region--central Russia, northern Russia, Siberia--to a village, and to people related in some way from the past and in the present. There is at times a fierce "tribal" loyalty in these works. Valentin Rasputin insisted at one point that there was no single Siberian character for writers to describe, but rather differing characteristics of people from the Angara, the Far East, the Enisei, Magadan, and other regions that had evolved over the centuries.<sup>11</sup> Having seen Soviet Russian literature already split into rural and urban streams, critics were quick to protest further fragmentation. Nationalist feeling was commendable in literature but not when the homeland became smaller than the Russian republic. It is interesting to note that most of the writers involved reject the term *derevenshchiki* but not, for example, "Siberian writer," "central Russian writer," or "Vologda writer."

Village prose writers were much more effective, especially in terms of style, when they were describing local color and regional differences than when they took up the theme of *Rus'* or the Slavs and a mythical past unity. The end of Vladimir Soloukhin's *A Walk in Rural Russia* serves as an example of how the

focus on a larger affinity group causes the writer almost automatically to shift into a false-sounding apostrophe, even in an otherwise interesting and sincere work.

In olden days the Slavs, when departing from their homeland, plucked up an herb from the river bank and kept a fragment of its root with them throughout their travels.

I believe that they did not so much invest this with magic properties as see in it a fragment of their native earth, personifying their homeland and their invincible love for it.

...

If this is so and if it is not simply an herb, but love of our homeland, then shall we not repeat after our ancient forefather, preparing himself for the difficulty of unknown ways:

'Herb of power! Overpower the wicked people: may they not think evil against us, may they not plan wickedness. ...

'Herb of power! Overcome for me the high mountains, low valleys, blue lakes, steep banks, dark forests ... I will hide you, herb of power, close to my eager heart throughout my journey and all my ways.'<sup>12</sup>

The titles of later collections of essays by Soloukhin--*Letters from the Russian Museum* and *The Slavic Notebook*--show his continuing interest in this larger focus.

The theme of a common national and ethnic past found in some village prose led to writing that was not always as artistically refined as it was ideologically stimulating. The feeling for local roots and generational unity has been much more effectively expressed. A constellation of words related to *rodnoi* links land; language; home; renewal; and a bond between the dead, the living, and those not yet born. Sometimes the bond is an emotional expression of remembrance, as when Nastasya in Viktor Perepelka's "The Last Day in the Old House" talks to her deceased husband in the village cemetery before moving to her daughter's home.<sup>13</sup> At other times there is a sense of real communication with those who have gone ahead into the other world, for example, in Aleksey Leonov's "Kondyr," Boris Ekimov's "The Last Peasant House," and, most importantly, in

Rasputin's *Farewell to Matyora*.<sup>14</sup> In the latter work, Darya, after holding a vigil in the devastated graveyard, finally receives the message she has been seeking as to how best to say farewell to the family home before it is burned down to make way for the flood waters. Darya thinks a lot about the living and the dead as well as about the different generations alive at one time. Sitting with her son Pavel and grandson Andrey, she contemplates her own death:

There it is, one thread with knots. It seemed that there were so many years between knots ... where are they? My knot is going to be stretched out and smoothed over, they'll let the smooth end go so that it'll be invisible ... so that they can tie a new one on the other end. Where will the string be pulled now? What will happen?<sup>15</sup>

The mysterious cat-like Master of the island, like any good *domovoi* (house-spirit) watches over his domain at night. "Only at night, casting off from the solid land, the living and dead meet--the dead came to them in body and word and ask for the truth, in order to pass it on even further, to those who they remembered."<sup>16</sup> The *predki*, or ancestors, were always important in Russian folklore and Russian Orthodoxy, and village prose reflects these still active beliefs. In general, death in traditional rural life was faced more calmly and with a greater acceptance of the natural cycle, making a striking contrast to the world of the educated and the city-dweller, a contrast noted by Tolstoy in the 19th century.

### Childhood Time

A number of critics both in the Soviet Union and abroad have called village prose "pastoral" and have in other ways characterized it as an idealized, even patriarchal vision. Soviet critics admit that the term "patriarchal" addressed politics more than art. The label "pastoral" or "idyll" is consciously used to imply that village prose presents an inaccurate picture, one made up in order to

appeal to nostalgic urban readers. Because village prose began as a reaction to the unbelievably positive *kolkhoz* novels, the question arises as to whether one false pastoral has been replaced by another.<sup>17</sup>

There are indeed works of village prose that go to an extreme in idealizing nearly every aspect of the traditional peasantry and their way of life, but most works are idyllic in a more balanced way. Mikhail Bakhtin described the idyll in his essay "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel." Most important for Bakhtin is the relationship of time and space; in the idyll, he sees:

... an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home. Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where ones children and their children will live.<sup>18</sup>

To dismiss village prose as idyll and pastoral and, in that way, to question its approach to time, to the past, and to memory, is to misread it, to miss the fact that much of village prose is not a false vision, but a sincerely written pastoral of childhood.<sup>19</sup> Virtually all *derevenshchiki* spent their first 18 years in the village until the army or further education took them away. Their writing, rather than being divorced from reality, is highly autobiographical, using their detailed memories of childhood. The memories are deep, and yet the writers freely admit that they do not constitute a documentary account.

Vladimir Tendryakov in "A Day in the Old Home Town" recalls a month-long visit he made as a five-year-old with his father to the village in which Tendryakov was born.

I will always remember the grey, summer morning, with tattered clouds over the dark, low roofs, and a damp freshness in the air from the recent rain. My father walked by the side of the cart and greedily looked at the roofs. ...  
"Look!" - He touched my shoulder. "Look - it's your home town!"



I was forever hearing that there was a place on earth called My Home Town. I couldn't remember it - I was taken away from there in swaddling clothes. They told me about it at bedtime along with fairy-tales, and in the end the village of Makarovskaya itself became like something in a fairy-tale - indistinct and wonderful.<sup>20</sup>

He goes on to recall the first big fish he caught on that visit and how events of the summer were engraved in his memory for a lifetime to be summoned up from memory in his years away from the village. Several times he uses the prose refrain "Then I was five years old, now I'm forty." The "day" in the title is the one-day visit he makes as a 40-year-old man. One of the most important narrative patterns in village prose is that of return, generally the return to the village of an uprooted native son or daughter who recalls the past in lyric tones, is distressed by present conditions, and then leaves. The lyric feeling, the *svetlaia atmosfera* (radiant atmosphere) is strongest when the work is told in the first person.

In *The Final Bow*, Viktor Astafiev "lays bare" the transformation that childhood memories naturally undergo. The narrator analyses his grandmother's retelling of a story about his mother, who bowed and cried every time she passed the former house of her inlaws, who had been sent away as *kulaks* during collectivization.

After my mother's death, grandmother Katerina Petrovna often told me this story, and every time she told it she added something, not just tears, but details about my mother's personality, her habits, and her actions. As the years passed, my mother's image became more and more radiant in grandmother's memory. For that reason it is sacred to me, although I understand that this image of my mother, one that was reborn and recreated by my grandmother's guilt over a daughter who died young and by my longing for my mother - this image can hardly be reconciled with the reality of the simple, hard-working peasant woman that she was. Mama was and will now forever remain the finest, purest person, not even a person, but a deified figure.<sup>21</sup>

Enhanced memories of childhood are a universal, but Russian village prose writers

have a long road to travel back to their roots. There is the distance between the cities where they live as adults and the countryside, as well as the distance between the village they grew up in and the same village now either modernized, abandoned, or slowly dying out. It is not surprising that they are drawn to the oldest rural inhabitants who can tell how things used to be and reinforce the writers' own memories of the *svetloe proshloe* (radiant past).

While other qualities of village prose such as *dukhovnost'* (spirituality), *narodnost'* (national feeling), and *iskrennost'* (sincerity, truthfulness), may be the result of reflection and planning, the *svetlyi*, or radiant, character is more spontaneous, the positive side of the rush of memories that comes when we turn back to childhood. The extent to which critics from the East and West have found this "radiance" hard to believe has to do with an urban, political sense that the countryside was so miserable a place that no one could really have been happy there or, for Soviet critics, that this happiness had too little to do with the Soviet age. Such responses ignore the special quality of the child's perception of the world, and the adult's memories of his childhood that are the basis of much of village prose.

#### **Borrowed Time: The Apocalypse**

Village prose is simultaneously a literature of first and last things. The first things are the primordial setting and the memories of childhood, and the last things are all the ways in which the rural life and even the existence of the small village are coming to an end. The emphasis on endings, the past, and progressive loss is reflected in titles, for example, *Poslednii srok* (Borrowed time) by Rasputin, *Poslednii poklon* (The final bow) by Astafiev, *Poslednii koldun* (The last wizard) by Lichutin, "Posledniaia okhota" (The final hunt) and "Poslednii starik derevni" (The last old man in the village) by Abramov,

"Posledniaia khata" (The last peasant house) by Ekimov, and Viktor Perepelka's "Poslednii den' v svoem dome" (The last day in the old house).<sup>22</sup> It is also reflected in the mainly older characters, and in the houses, artifacts, and customs of traditional rural *byt* that function as important images and symbols in these works. The changes that have taken place in the countryside are perceived by the *derevenshchiki* as a process of loss, both personal and national. For them, the old rural life, the very roots of the Russian character, is slipping away quickly and forever. When old people die and young people leave, there is no hope for the village.

The village, like the gentry estate before it, is shown in literature as being isolated and living largely outside of history in cyclical and generational time, but with change invading that timeless state. In village prose, the changes alluded to are: collectivization, the war, urbanization, government neglect and mismanagement, and environmental damage. The result is great turbulence in rural life with many young people leaving. The peasant home and the village were so self-contained and central to rural culture, that the emptying of these places is a poignant event. Village prose shows how home by home, village by village, rural Russia is losing its distinct way of life; writers worry about the long-term consequences of this exodus.

If the most important narrative pattern in village prose is that of the temporary return of an uprooted person, then the next most frequent plot is a variation of the idea of uprooting: an old villager is pressured into moving from the ancestral home and dies in the process, taking something of the folk tradition to the grave. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's work *Matryona's Home* is one of the first examples of this basic story line: Matryona's house is literally broken in two by greedy in-laws, who could not wait for her to die; in the process of

hauling half of it away to a new site, Matryona is crushed by a train, itself a standard symbol of progress and an object of fear to peasants.

Grandmother Polya in Boris Ekimov's "The Last Peasant House" dies in the simple wattle-and-daub structure she had built by herself on the eve of its being torn down by her son-in-law in order to make way for a large, modern home. In Leonov's "Kondyr" an old man dies when he leaves a housewarming party in a new consolidated village to go back to his old, abandoned house. He feels an intense pain at the thought of his family's roots being torn from Mother Earth. In Perepelka's "The Last Day in the Old House" Nastasya is sad at cutting all family ties to her old village and does not survive the journey to her daughter's home.

The Soviet critic Shaitanov observed that village prose had developed its own clichés, the most frequently used one being the situation of *pereezd* (moving) from one's family home to a larger settlement or to the city. The emphasis in the treatment of the motif of moving is the spiritual value of traditional Russian culture. "In his dreams of spirituality, the village itself often appears to the writer in its former hut-like appearance. ... The peasant home is seen as a symbol of the life that flowed by in it and simultaneously as a symbol of the culture and the spirit ... that were connected to that life."<sup>23</sup>

It is quite true that in village prose the traditional home stands for all rural Russia--its everyday life and culture--and for the peasant view of the world, of time, fate, the family, work, and beauty. The house is a frequent and important symbol, and abandoning it is a painful event. The emptied houses are seen as mausoleums, that is, directly connected to death. This ties in with Russian folk belief in which changes in the dwelling-place--building, moving, a bride or a soldier leaving home--are closely linked to the activities of *nechistaia sila* (impure forces), specifically place-spirits like the *domovoi*.

An underlying assumption of much of village prose is that the 1,000-year-old rural chain of being has been or is in the process of being broken. The sight of abandoned houses in Rasputin's "You Live and Love" causes the narrator to say that the former life has been "ruptured."<sup>24</sup> In Astafiev's "The Sad Detective," the sight of a family heirloom, an old trunk, elicits from the hero, Soshnin, a similar comment: "How can one talk about links in time! They have been broken, truly broken, and this expression is no longer a metaphor, but has taken on an ominous meaning."<sup>25</sup>

Astafiev's trunk is a very powerful image of loss, of the break in the chain of tradition and memory. The story in which it appears is about people with rural roots who are now residents of a provincial city. It ends with Soshnin, an ex-detective turned writer, reunited with his family. Waking up in the middle of the night, he goes to check on his sleeping daughter.

Having kicked off the blanket and let the pillow fall, with arms and legs dangling, the girl trustingly embraced Granny Lina's old trunk, created by skilled craftsmen from Viatsk and warmed by her little body since her earliest childhood. Before that this trunk had been warmed by distant relatives of Svetka and used to store their wedding dresses and simple country dowry, yarn, scarves, coins and hard candy tied up in small bundles, floor coverings, tablecloths, and lace. She had never seen and would never see or know these relatives and would never find out anything about them.<sup>26</sup>

The ties of memory are broken; Svetka will inherit the object, but lose the context in which the object "lived" and was valued. Like the shawl in Leonov's story that passed out of the family, Astafiev's trunk is an object torn out of its context and out of its time.

The *derevenshchiki*, except for Soloukhin, are negative about the collection of rural objects and folklore as a way to heal this break in time. Vasily Belov in *Harmony* speaks disparagingly of published lists of proverbs with no sense of the situations in which they are appropriate. In "The Sad Detective," Astafiev

wickedly satirizes the provincial intelligentsia's habit of juxtaposing genuine folk objects, folksy souvenirs, and reproductions of European art in their apartments. In a recent cycle of stories in the journal *Nash sovremennik* (1986, no. 5), he is even more caustic on the subject of souvenir-hungry Muscovites pillaging the countryside. The narrator of Abramov's story "Wooden Horses" goes to a village in order to steep himself in folk traditions and collect peasant tools, but he leaves prematurely when he comes to value the hands that made and wore smooth the spindle and plow handle over the objects themselves--that is, the values over the things. In Vladimir Krupin's *The Water of Life*, this fear of the collecting of relics replacing living custom and memory is stated directly:

And who remembers anymore the sickle, the scythe, a horse with a plow and a woodsman's axe? Soon you'll be able to see people plowing and cutting wood the way they've done it for a thousand years only in the movies, and it's easy to imagine how Masha [the hero's granddaughter] will look at them - like she would at abnormal people. And in another hundred years-who will even explain it?<sup>27</sup>

The image of an entire village being lost is especially powerful. In Aleksey Leonov's "The Widowed Well," he says of such a place: "... all that's left is one well. In dead villages, the wells die last."<sup>28</sup> In Rasputin's story "Downstream," the writer-hero's village is to be flooded by a hydroelectric project and must be moved to a consolidated settlement inland. Villagers refer to the impending move as "the end of the world" and the dismantled family home is said to look like a grave.<sup>29</sup>

The most striking vision of a rural apocalypse, involving both nature and culture, is Rasputin's novella *Farewell to Matyora*. A centuries-old village is shown on the eve of its destruction, first by fire in order to clear the land and then by flood from the same project that Rasputin refers to in "Downstream." Scene after scene strengthens the sense of an end: the desecration of the

cemetery, a wake for a house about to be burned down, the mysterious Master watching the island's last days, and the invincible larch. The end of *Matyora* is deliberately ambiguous. A boat sent out to take the last inhabitants off the island becomes hopelessly lost in the fog. The final sounds of the novel are the lost boat moving further away from its destination and the Master howling for the last time.

Rasputin announced after this story that he was "following" his island characters to new settlements to see how they would live in a different setting; other village prose writers have made a similar decision. But in leaving the village, the apocalyptic theme is even stronger and the "radiant" spirit of village prose noticeably weaker. This can be seen, for example, in Rasputin's recent story "The Fire," Astafiev's "The Sad Detective" and "The Place of Action," and Vasily Belov's ironically titled *Everything Lies Ahead*.<sup>30</sup>

Because time is running out, characters in village prose must act quickly to pass on their special knowledge. In Rasputin's *Borrowed Time*, the dying Anna must teach her daughter Varvara the laments so that the funeral will be properly conducted. In his story "Oh, You Old Woman!" the last shaman dies before she can tell her secrets to her granddaughter, thus breaking the chain of 1,000 years.

Despite the emphasis on the end of rural life, most works that focus on loss end not on a note of gloom or self-indulgent mourning, but on a lighter note of *toska*, a mixture of sadness at loss and the pleasure of remembering something beautiful and *rodnoi*. Even after the many bitter passages of "The Sad Detective," at the end Soshnin begins to write with new confidence; the act of remembering is creative and life-affirming and mitigates to a certain extent the loss.

Darya, in *Farewell to Matyora* equates truth with memory: "The person without

memory is without life. But she understood: that wasn't the whole truth."<sup>31</sup> Astafiev directly and ecstatically addresses memory in his "Ode to a Russian Garden:" "Oh my memory, work another miracle; take the anxiety from my soul ... resurrect the little boy in me, let me calm and purify myself by his side."<sup>32</sup>

For the most part, the memories of the past that are found in village prose are purifying and calming, but several recent exceptions to this general pattern are striking. Instead of purity and calm, instead of *svetlost'* (radiance), there is anger over the past and present. Belov, in *Everything Lies Ahead*, Mozhaev, in the final part of *Peasant Men and Women*, and Astafiev in several recent stories and in his much-publicized letter to the critic Eidelman, have displayed a marked illwill towards a number of different groups, but especially towards Russian Jews.<sup>33</sup> Astafiev's "memory" of the past now makes Jews responsible for Russia's unprecedented suffering. Like members of the nationalist group Pamyat (memory), with which he has not been directly linked, Astafiev mixes true memories of suffering and the loss of the village world with made-up memories of a past that never happened. These angry anti-memories are, so far, a minor but discordant note in the three-decade history of village prose and have appeared as the movement naturally reaches its end.

Looking at the evolution of village prose it can be said that as a literary movement it differentiated itself from *kolkhoz* literature by its sense of time and by the value it placed on memory and the past. The *derevenshchiki* juxtaposed a somewhat idealized "radiant past" to a wholly compromised "radiant future" of *kolkhoz* novels, and the superior artistic quality of their works revived the rural theme in Russian literature. They pushed time backward, stopping at different points in the past, and slowed time down, not because they had any illusions about the continuing existence of the traditional village, but rather



because they saw themselves as witnesses to a way of life that was disappearing as they wrote.



## Notes

1. Valentin Kataev, *Time, Forward!*, trans. C. Malamuth (New York: Holt, 1933, 1961; Rpt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 69.
2. Aleksei D. Leonov, *Chei sovets dorozhe?* (Leningrad: Detskaia literatura, 1985), p. 27.
3. Aleksei Leonov, "Po letnim i zimnim dorogam," in *Khodiat devki* (Moscow: Sovetskaia rossiia, 1971), p. 68; the same story published with some revisions appears in later collections as "Po vetru pepel."
4. Geoffrey Hosking, "The Russian Peasant Rediscovered: "Village Prose of the 1960s," *Slavic Review* 32, no. 4 (December 1973), p. 724, footnote no. 26.
5. This contrast is discussed at greater length in K. Parthé, "Images of Rural Transformation in Russian Village Prose," in *Studies in Comparative Communism* (forthcoming).
6. A. Prokhanov, "Metafori sovremennosti," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September 12, 1979, p. 4.
7. Leonov, "Po letnim i zimnim dorogam," pp. 8-9.
8. Vasilii Belov, *Lad. Ocherki o narodnoi estetike* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1982), p. 7.
9. Evgenii Kutuzov, "Potrebnost' souchastiia," *Avrora*, 1976, no. 5, p. 68.
10. Vladimir Pomerantsev, "Ob iskrennosti v literature," *Novyi mir* 29, no. 12 (December 1953); Fedor Abramov, "Liudi kolkhoznoi derevni v poslevoennoi proze," *Novyi mir* 30, no. 4 (April 1954); Valentin Ovechkin, "Kolkhoznaia zhizn' v literature," *Novyi mir* 31, no. 12 (December 1955).
11. Valentin Rasputin, afterword to Vladimir Krupin, *Zhivaia voda*, *Roman-gazeta*, 1985, no. 15, p. 48.
12. Vladimir Soloukhin, *A Walk in Rural Russia* (Vladimirskie proselki), trans. Stella Miskin (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1967), pp. 253-4.
13. Viktor Perepelka, "Poslednii den' v svoem dome," *Lastochka nad gorodom* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1973).
14. Aleksei Leonov, "Kondyr'," in *Khodiat devki*; Boris Ekimov, "Posledniaia khata," in *Za teplym khlebom* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1986); Valentin Rasputin, *Farewell to Matyora* (Proshchanie s Materoi), trans. Antonina Bouis (New York: Macmillan, 1979).
15. Rasputin, *Farewell to Matyora*, p. 105.
16. Rasputin, *Farewell to Matyora*, p. 55.

17. Of course one can go further back and compare village prose to Karamzin's *Poor Liza*, Tolstoy's Platon Karataev in *War and Peace*, and the idealized peasant commune of the populists.

18. M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 225.

19. See Peter Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971), ch. 5, quoted by Katerina Clark in "Zhdanovist Fiction and Village Prose," in Evelyn Bristol (ed.), *Russian Literature and Criticism* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1982), p. 44. For more on the child in village prose see David Gillepsie, *Valentin Rasputin and Russian Village Prose* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1986).

20. Vladimir Tendriakov, "Den' na rodine," *Nauka i religia*, 1964, no. 11, p. 43.

21. Viktor Astafiev, *Poslednii poklon* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1982), p. 274, especially the beginning of Book II.

22. See also "Poslednie koni" (The last horses) by V. Potanin, *Posledniaia okhota* (The last hunt) by A. Petukhov, and "Posledniaia strada" (The final harvest) by V. Goncharov. There are titles in a similar vein using the words for "old" and "farewell." Vladimir Soloukhin has also noticed this pattern in titles and added to this author's list Belov's *Kanuny* (The Eves) and Vladimir Krupin's "Sorokovoi den'" (The fortieth day), which in Russian Orthodoxy is the day after death that the soul of the deceased person leaves the earth. On Rasputin, see Vladimir Soloukhin, "Bol' ego i nadezhda," *Ogonek*, 1987, no. 13, pp. 2-3.

23. Igor' Shaitanov, "Reaktsiia na peremeny (Tochka zreniia avtora i geroiia v literature o derevne)," *Voprosy literatury*, 1981, no. 5, pp. 36-7, 40.

24. Valentin Rasputin, "Vek zhivi - vek liubi," in *Izbrannye proisvedeniia* (v 2-kh tomakh), vol. 1 (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1984), p. 346; cited by A Hiersche, "Novye rasskazy V. Rasputina," *Zeit. fur Slav.* 31, no. 3 (March 1968), p. 411.

25. Viktor Astafiev, "Pechal'nyi detektiv," *Oktiabr'*, 1986, no. 1, p. 73.

26. Astafiev, "Pechal'nyi detektiv," p. 73.

27. Vladimir Krupin, *Zhivaia voda*, p. 21.

28. Aleksei Leonov, "Vdovii kolodets," in *Khodiat devki*, p. 184.

29. Valentin Rasputin, "Downstream" (Vniz i vverkh po techeniiu), trans. Valentina Brougher and Helen Poot, in Carl and Ellendea Proffer (eds.), *Contemporary Russian Prose* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982), p. 394.

30. Valentin Rasputin, "Pozhar," *Nash sovremennik*, 1985, no. 7; Viktor Astafiev, "Mesto deistviia," *Novyi mir* 62, no. 5 (May 1986); Vasilii Belov, "Vse

vperedu," *Nash sovremennik*, 1986, nos. 7-8.

31. Rasputin, *Farewell to Matyora*, ch. 18, p. 181.

32. Viktor Astafiev, "Oda ruskomu ogorodu," in *Povesti* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1984), pp. 85-6.

33. Natan Eidelman wrote to Astafiev in August 1986, praising his previous works but questioning the prejudice displayed towards Georgians, Jews, and others in the recent stories. Astafiev sent a bitter reply on September 14; Eidelman's short answer is dated September 28.