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The Limits of Realism and the Proletariat on the Horizon: Fedor Reshetnikov's *Where Is It Better?* (1868)

Abstract: Nineteenth-century Russian representations of peasants largely reflect "the changing moods and attitudes of the most influential segment of educated society," as Donald Fanger plainly framed it, and inform us about that society, rather than peasants themselves. There were, however, both subjects of literature and writers of it who fell between the polls of peasant and elite. Reshetnikov, the orphaned son of a postman, was such a writer, and his 1868 novel concerning ex-peasants' rural to urban migration, *Where Is It Better?* (*Gde luchshe?*), diverges from and critiques the expectations of its audience of educated readers. Populist-leaning critics and editors, seeking literary access to the landed peasantry, hoped that Reshetnikov would be uniquely able to bridge the distance between these educated readers and the masses. *Where Is It Better?* instead dramatizes the failure of ex-peasant characters to integrate into urban society. Published in the midst of debates over how to prevent the formation of an urban proletariat in Russia, it makes visible a contingent of the population that political and aesthetic discussions treated as something that should not be given form. The article shows how Reshetnikov apprehends the limits of the protagonist-driven realism of his time. It argues for expanding contemporary scholarship of Russian realism to include Reshetnikov, and more thoroughly account for non-noble contributions to nineteenth-century Russian literary culture.

Keywords: Realism, Emancipation, Politics of Aesthetics, Populism, Nekrasov, Reshetnikov

The second half of Fedor Reshetnikov's 1868 novel *Where Is It Better?* (*Gde luchshe?*) opens with a view of St. Petersburg creaking under the weight of incoming humanity:

> The train, the next from Moscow, is late. The whole courtyard is choked with drivers, cabbies, and police carriages; the nobles' carriages stand apart. […]
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> But then the train appears. The pavement shudders along the line of the railroad. The train moves more and more slowly, until it finally stops. All of the people [*narod*], previously inside the station, explode onto the platform, the drivers crowd around and in front of the entrance. The people [*narod*] start to leave the train, – and my god! How many people [*narod*] came out in the span of a quarter of an hour, *common people* [*prostoi narod*]! Where will all these common people make off to – men, women, girls? [*muzhiki, baby, devki*]?[1]

Imagery of the provincial masses arriving in the Russian Imperial capital to stay, but finding nowhere to go, concretizes an anxiety felt at the time across the political spectrum, from the circles of government officials to those of anti-Tsarist revolutionaries: a persistent worry that the peasants of the urban centers would shed their ties to rural, traditional life and become the urban proletariat that appeared as both a moral stain and force of political destabilization in Western Europe. Reginald Zelnik, in his seminal study of post-emancipation urban labor, draws on *Where Is It Better?* as a primary source: it is the earliest literary depiction of Petersburg workers, and one of very few engagements with urban labor of any sort to emerge from the sphere of *belle-*

[1]F.M. Reshetnikov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (*PSS*)*,* red. I.I. Veksler (Sverdlovsk, 1939), 6 vols., 4:150. This and all subsequent uncredited translations are mine.

lettres until the mid-1870s.[2] This gap in representation is related to the shift in left circles in the late 1860s from a radicalized version of 1840s Westernism, to populism, *narodnichestvo*.[3] While the former advocated universal equality and the end of monarchy, but was broadly committed to technological and industrial progress, populists retained the previous generation's socialist objectives, but questioned the means of achieving them. They turned to traditional peasant society for communal social models that could be universalized without passing through capitalist industrialization and the proletarianization it would inevitably bring about.[4] The desire, across the political spectrum, to prevent the formation of an urbanized lower class limited attempts to ameliorate conditions for urban laborers, or incorporate them into political and

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[2]Reginald E. Zelnik, *Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia* (Stanford, CA, 1971), 228.

[3]Nikolai Chernyshevsky, for example, sought in the peasant commune an economic model for modernizing society, but was not opposed to industrialization, and not concerned with national particularity. See Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in 19th Century Russia (1960)* (London, 2001), 148-50. See also Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford, CA, 2005), 183-221.

[4]Walicki argues that this "economic romanticism" prevailed in the movement's late-1860s theoretical stage, before it became an active revolutionary movement in 1873-6, leading to further distinctions among factions, in his *A History of Russian Thought*, 223. Richard Wortman's psychological approach sees populism as shaped by intellectuals' hope of finding a lost wholeness in the peasant commune in *The Crisis of Russian Populism* (Cambridge, UK, 1967), 6.

cultural conceptions of the nation.[5] Reshetnikov's novel about the transformation of Russia's rural factory peasants into the urban poor thus focuses on a portion of the population that few at Reshetnikov's time wanted to see. *Where Is It Better?* is not engaged with the question of whether or not proletarianization should be allowed to take place, but rather grasps it as a process already in progress. The novel presents no traditional world to which its uprooted peasants can return. Neither does Reshetnikov suggest that ex-peasants can potentially develop into bourgeois subjects. This is not because of cultural distinctions or lack of education, but because of the structure of society and its institutions. As I will show, Reshetnikov clears the way for the role the proletariat would play in Marxist discourse, but not through the positive expression of class consciousness, as later Soviet critics would suggest, rather by articulating the boundaries of existing modes of representation.[6] *Where Is It Better?* demonstrates through its resistance to

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[5]Zelnik, *Labor and Society,* 241-6. In conservative discussions it was explicitly argued that ex-peasants should not appear in literature and should not even be considered under the term "*narod,*" which could mean both the "national," the Russian, and the "popular," the mass. See V.G. Avseenko's review of Reshetnikov's collected works, "Real'naia belletristika," *Russkii Vestnik* 116, no. 4 (1874): 671–704, 687 here.

[6]The Marxist revolutionary narrative sees the proletariat emerging as the subject of history when the masses, excluded from bourgeois individuality, gain corporate identity through factory labor, as most schematically outlined in Marx and Engels's "Manifesto of the Communist Party," (1848), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2d ed. (New York, 1978), 469-500. Veksler writes in his commentary to *Where Is It Better?*: "Reshetnikov […] not only distinguishes the proletariat of the factories and mills from the masses of workers, but […]

these modes of representation the degree to which contemporary universalist political ideologies – both liberal and populist – and their literary reflections served the particular interests and worldview of educated, cosmopolitan society.

The literary culture that developed in the first half of the nineteenth century struggled to confront the social reality of the century's second half, a phenomenon that recent researchers have considered from the perspective of the gentry, the class whose subjectivity realism emerged to reflect.[7] The populist notion of progress that would utilize the stratified culture and uneven modernization of the Russian Empire to carve out a non-capitalist path of development was reflected in literary criticism, with calls for depictions of the common people, the *narod,* that would open up their worldview to educated readers.[8] Russia's critical and editorial authorities

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ascribes to them the distinct conscious condition of workers in a society founded on exploitation," in Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 4:425.

[7]See Bella Grigoryan, *Noble Subjects: The Russian Novel and the Gentry, 1762-1861* (DeKalb, IL, 2018) and Ani Kokobobo, *Russian Grotesque Realism: The Great Reforms and the Gentry Decline* (Columbus, OH, 2018), which together cover the rise and fall of the gentry. Jennifer Jean Flaherty's study, "Forms of the Peasant: Aesthetics and Social Thought in Russian Realism, 1847-1877," is another important recent consideration of realist representation in relation to class (Ph.D. Dissertation: Berkeley University, Slavic Languages and Literatures, 2019).

[8]Key essays that will be discussed here are M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, "Naprasnye opaseniia (Po povodu sovremennoi belletristiki)" (1869) *O literature* (Moscow, 1952), 288-300, and N.V. Shelgunov, "Narodnyi realizm v literature. Sochineniia F. Reshetnikova, 2 chasti. SPb., 1869," *Delo*, no. 5 (1871): "Sovremennoe obozrenie," 1-45.

called on Reshetnikov and others of his generation of *raznochintsy* writers to build a bridge between estranged cosmopolitan and traditional social worlds.[9] This discussion, it should be noted, was concerned with representation, not communication – efforts to increase peasant literacy were separate from these critics' aesthetic concerns, though these efforts also emerged in the context of the radical literary tendency of which Reshetnikov was a part. Nikolai Nekrasov, for example, who was the editor of *The Contemporary,* where Reshetnikov published his first major work *Podlipovtsy* (1864), and *Fatherland Notes,* in which *Where Is It Better?* was originally published, produced a series of brochures containing works written specifically for

[9]*Raznochintsy* means simply "people of various ranks," but in this context describes a broad group of writers whose humble origins in priestly and petty bureaucratic milieus gave them a perceived privileged access to popular life. In the early 1860s, these writers, including Reshetnikov as well as Nikolai Uspensky, Nikolai Pomialovsky, Alexander Levitov, and others, emerged as a cohort, writing for progressive journals such as *The Contemporary* (*Sovremennik*), and *Russian Word* (*Russkoe Slovo*), and their post-1866 corollaries *Fatherland Notes* (*Otechestvennye Zapiski*) and *Affairs* (*Delo*). See Rose Glickman, "An Alternative View of the Peasantry: The Raznochintsy Writers of the 1860s," *Slavic Review* 32, no. 4 (December 1974): 693–704. Reshetnikov, the orphaned son of a postman, hailed from even more impoverished origins than many of his *raznochintsy* peers, most of whom were sons of priests. Priests' sons were educated in the *bursa* and then in seminary, while Reshetnikov was mostly self-educated, although he did attend a provincial school (*uchilishche*) for some years. The most complete and reliable account of Reshetnikov's life is Veksler, "Fedor Mikhailovich Reshetnikov: kritiko-biographicheskii ocherk," in Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 6:5-64.

peasant readers. Reshetnikov's fellow *raznochinets* Nikolai Pomialovsky published novellas and sketches in *The Contemporary* but also wrote pedagogical theory, and was involved in the "Sunday school" movement to make education accessible to urban workers in the early 1860s.[10] Distinct from such projects, calls for literary depictions of the *narod* to be published in thick journals were instead concerned with expanding educated readers' imaginaries to incorporate the worlds of the common people. Responding to the populist critical discourse on literary content and form, rather than education, Reshetnikov's novel is written with these educated readers in mind; indeed, at a time when only 8% of the population was literate, no other sort of novel reader existed.[11] Consistent with the history of the representation of peasants throughout the nineteenth-century, his work responds to, as Donald Fanger put it, "the changing moods and attitudes of the most influential segment of educated society."[12]

[10]On Nekrasov's publishing for peasants, see Mikhail Makeev, "Literatura dlia naroda: protektsia protiv spekuliatsii (k istorii Nekrasovskikh 'krasnykh knizhek')," *NLO*, no. 124 (2013). On Pomialovsky's pedagogical efforts, see N.A. Blagoveshchenskii, "Nikolai Gerasimovich Pomialovskii," in N.G. Pomialovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenie* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1935), 2 vols., 1:xxxiii-xxxvi. On the Sunday school movement, see Zelnik, *Labor and Society,* 174-192.

[11]Abram Reitblat, *Ot Bovy k Bal'montu i drugie raboty po istoricheskoi sotsiologii russkoi literatury* (Moscow, 2009), 17.

[12]Donald Fanger, "The Peasant in Literature," in *The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, ed. Wayne Vucinich (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1968), 322.

But Reshetnikov reflects upon and frustrates his audience's expectations, rather than simply fulfilling them. Keeping in view this implied educated reader, I read *Where Is It Better?* as a dramatization of the impossibility of political and social incorporation of ex-peasants into Petersburg life. These historical conditions are also expressed on a formal level, as Reshetnikov shows the inability of individualizing narrative forms to capture the ex-peasant struggle. In the Western European context, George Eliot frames the basic formal limitations of the realist novel as the narrative necessity of narrowing focus on particular characters: "If we had a keen vision for all ordinary human life… we would die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."[13] We might imagine Reshetnikov's novel as an attempt to corral this roar into the trappings of classical realism, while uncompromisingly keeping its whole in the narrative frame. Contemporary critics recognized this remarkable quality, but wanted the roar of humanity present in its pages to produce an essence: a pure overtone above the din. Reshetnikov rejects this demand as well. As I will discuss below, these critical dissatisfactions strike a contrast to the reception of Nekrasov's own magnum opus *Who Lives Well in Rus'?* (*Komu na rusi zhit' khorosho,* 1866-1877), which, not numbering among the author's works directed at a peasant audience, satisfied its cosmopolitan readers' desire for a sense of closeness to popular life. *Who Lives Well…?* and *Where Is It Better?* both narrate the journeys of uprooted rural people, but their relationship goes beyond their shared subject: as editor of *The Contemporary* and *Fatherland Notes,* Nekrasov played a central role in establishing Reshetnikov's career and reputation. In his epic poem, Nekrasov draws from Reshetnikov's legacy to produce a symbolic

[13]From *Middlemarch,* qtd. in Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ, 2003), 34.

realization of the mediator the latter refused to be in life. The present article argues for the importance of turning scholarly attention to Reshetnikov himself, who outlined the negative space where new political and aesthetic forms were needed, but not yet articulable.

The Peasant, the Proletariat, and the Realist Promise

Before approaching *Where Is It Better?* itself, more attention is due to the interrelation of existing political and aesthetic forms of representation at the time of Reshetnikov's writing. In the aesthetic realm in the late 1860s, discussions of the necessity of a literature that could bridge peasant and educated, Westernized worldviews reformulated with some urgency an imperative put forward by Nikolai Dobroliubov in 1858. Dobroliubov proposed accessing nationality (*narodnost'*) in the Emancipation era both by gathering concrete information and by cultivating a spiritual and experiential connection with those outside the social and cultural world of the Europeanized, educated sphere.[14] Such an immersion in the popular national life should not spur a return to folk forms, however, but rather a *narodnyi* development of the literary tradition already in place. In practice, Dobroliubov's call to action was manifested in efforts to cultivate the cohort of raznochintsy writers that included Reshetnikov. Nonetheless, even following the entry of these authors into literary prominence, by the end of the 1860s populist-leaning literary critics such as Nikolai Shelgunov and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin continued to lament literature's disconnect from the experience and worldview of the *narod*: "our very literature,"

[14]N.A. Dobroliubov, "O stepeni uchastiia narodnosti v razvitii russkoi literatury," *Sovremennik* 67, no. 2 (1858): 155.

wrote Saltykov, "can be described as a caste domain (*kasticheskoe dostoianie*)."[15] Saltykov pointed to new work that was breaking apart the gentry domination of literary space – including that of Reshetnikov – but found that this work had no audience: those whose tastes were shaped by the gentry-focused realism of the 1840s "comprise the main contingent of the reading public," and were not sympathetic to the new literature.[16] Both critics articulate a crisis in the constitution of the contemporary literary sphere, which anticipated the later crisis of populism itself.[17] But whereas the crisis in populism would result from the loss of the hope of creating a cultural synthesis between the Europeanized elite and the peasantry, Saltykov and Shelgunov had not yet reached this point of despair. They both celebrated the sheer quantity of raw material from popular life present in Reshetnikov's work, but searched there for the "direction"[18] or "parallels with the realism produced by the intelligentsia"[19] that could be put to use in the same way that populist political thinkers dreamed of putting to use the social forms of the village commune.

Contemporary critical discourse around the exclusivity of literature addressed its constitutive elements, as well as its audience. Saltykov-Shchedrin observed of *Where Is It Better?* that it is entirely structured around its vast number of passing characters, alongside its protagonists, who together constitute a new literary subject, the "collective hero."[20] Saltykov

[15]Saltykov-Shchedrin, "Naprasnye opaseniia," 289.

[16]Ibid., 300.

[17]See Wortman, *The Crisis of Russian Populism.*

[18]Saltykov-Shchedrin, "Naprasnye opaseniia," 320.

[19]Shelgunov, "Narodnyi realizm," 40.

[20]M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, "Gde luchshe? Roman v dvukh chastiakh F. Reshetnikova. SPb

connected this phenomenon to the contemporary level of cultural development among the common people, who were "still not in a condition to distinguish heroic personalities among themselves."[21] Saltykov's review recast Pavel Annenkov's Hegelian argument from 1854, in which the Westernizer critic had proposed that peasants must achieve self-consciousness – through education – before they would be able to serve as literary characters.[22] On the other side of emancipation, Saltykov found that while peasants still could not *individually* be heroes of novels, lacking the particularity that would allow them to emerge as literary types, their collective struggle had taken on the contours of narrative. In another contemporary review, the radical populist Petr Tkachev argued that Reshetnikov captures the humanity of the individual in the mass more fully than any other chronicler of *narodnyi* life. In so doing, he shows them to be incapable of articulating political interests – of being citizens, in addition to humans.[23] These critics equated the individualized literary protagonist with the self-interested political subject, and the constitutive elements of literary realism with the social world of educated society.

This point both resonates and contrasts with what Alex Woloch has influentially described as the paradoxical democratism of Western European realism of that era. Woloch argues that classic realist novels demonstrate their attachment to "the freestanding individual,"

1869," in *O literature* (Moscow, 1952), 440.

[21]Saltykov-Shchedrin, "Gde luchshe?," 441.

[22]Pavel Annenkov, "Romany i rasskazy iz prostonarodnogo byta v 1853 godu," *Sovremennik* 1854, no. 2 (1854): otd. III, 1–22.

[23]P.N. Tkachev, "Razbitye illiuzii. Gornorabochie – Glumovye – Gde Luchshe. Romany Reshetnikova (Stat'ia vtoraia.)," *Delo*, no. 12 (1868): Sovremennoe obozrenie, 53.

which infuses them with a "sense that any character is a potential hero." This democratic inclination is at odds with the fact that "only one character is [a hero]; just as increasing political equality, and a maturing logic of human rights, develop amid acute economic and social stratification."[24] Literature, along with social forms, cannot represent the *mass* as *individuals.* In suggesting that the individual is articulated to the exclusion of the mass, Saltykov appeared to recognize the paradox that Woloch points out. Saltykov and Tkachev both critiqued the inaccessibility of political or literary speech to portions of the population, but did not discuss this problem in terms of the liberal promise that anyone can be a protagonist. This is not because they did not *want* to live in such a polity of universal citizenship, but they recognized that they did not, and did not imagine individual striving as a means of resolving this problem. The peasantry and the educated were perceived to be culturally and materially divided, and this perception was what drove populists to try to conceive of a non-capitalist path of development, which could constitute a new, shared political subjectivity. Beginning from the recognition of peasants' inability to articulate their interests, however, these thinkers could not conceive of a solution that did not begin with the agency of those who did wield political and literary speech – themselves.

These discussions did not attend to the phenomenon of proletarianization, and largely assumed there to be something coherent binding together those excluded from novelistic representation. In fact, this ground was shifting under their feet – a reality dramatized in *Where Is It Better?,* but largely unremarked upon by critics. The novel was written in 1867-8, which proved to be a turning point in the industrialization of St. Petersburg. After the emancipation of 1861, the urban to rural migration that had been ongoing for the previous half-century briefly

[24]Woloch, *The One vs. the Many,* 35.

tapered off, but between 1866 and 1869 this trend reversed, and by 1869 the peasant population of St. Petersburg was fourteen percent higher than it had been at the time of emancipation. At the same time, employment opportunities in the capital were contracting. Peasants migrated, primarily from surrounding provinces, to escape intolerable conditions in the countryside, but the situation was not better in the city.[25] Reshetnikov's novel depicts the roving population of former factory serfs who find no place in society to absorb them, and refers to these migrant workers of various backgrounds as the "working class." This term includes the craftsmen that made up a large portion of the rural and urban male workforce, as well as laundresses and cooks, and was appropriate not for its Marxist specificity, but its generality in contrast to contemporary estate

[25]Zelnik, *Labor and Society*, 225-226. Zelnik's is the central English-language study of post-emancipation industrial labor. Its focus is St. Petersburg, and Reshetnikov's characters differ from the basic profile of the Petersburg laborer offered by Zelnik. They come from the Urals, rather than surrounding regions, and are not seasonal laborers (*otkhodniki*), the contingent that made up a large portion of the urban underclass into the twentieth century (Zelnik 49-50). On labor in the Urals, see V.V. Bervi-Flerovsky's 1869 ethnographic study of Ural workers, *Polozhenie rabochego klassa v Rossii* (1869) (Moscow, 1938) for a view contemporary to Reshetnikov's. D.V. Gavrilov's *Gornozavodskii Ural 1861-1900 gg.: vlasti, predprinimateli, rabochie: ot soglasiia k konfrontatsii* (Moscow-St. Petersburg, 2018) is the most recent and comprehensive study of Ural labor; see 91-143 on the immediate post-reform period. On nineteenth-century urban to rural migration in Russia, see L. N. Mazur, *Rossiiskaia derevnia v usloviiakh urbanizatsii: Regional'noe izmerenie: vtoraia polovina XIX - XX v* (Ekaterinburg, 2012), 38-45.

(*soslovie*) categories of peasant, noble, merchant, and clergy. Legible representatives of these categories can barely be found among the masses of people that appear in the pages of *Where Is It Better?*.[26]

To depict this new social contingent, Reshetnikov establishes a distinct relationship between narrative and character. As contemporary critics noted, *Where Is It Better?* reflects on the possibility that conventional literary figures – for example, the individual protagonist-hero – might emerge from the ex-peasant population that is its subject. The young widow Pelageya Prokhorovna Mokronosova is both the focal point of the narrative and repeatedly anonymized, referred to simply as a "young woman with a bundle under her left arm,"[27] as she enters St. Petersburg along with all the other "*muzhiki, baby, devki*." This moment underlines the fact that the choice of Pelageya as a central character is arbitrary, and in this respect reflects the democratic impulse outlined by Woloch. Rather than developing the individualizing view of a character-driven narrative, however, *Where Is It Better?* reflects on Pelageya's exclusion from novelistic protagonicity, and thus critiques the form itself. At the same time, Reshetnikov shows Pelageya's process of becoming urbanized and detached from her family and origin; she is a fundamentally modern character, and not an idealized peasant type.

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[26]Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 4:46, 271. In the 1860s, the terms "working class" and "proletariat" seldom referred specifically to factory workers, and simply described the non-agricultural poor (Zelnik, *Labor and Society*, 246), or the pauperized urban populations that appeared in contemporary accounts of Western Europe (Ibid., 25-26 on the term's use in government studies, 71-73 among the intelligentsia).

[27]Reshetnikov, *PSS*, 4:151.

The necessity for this negation of both existing models of representation relates to the problematic conception of authenticity that framed Reshetnikov's work. It was not just Reshetnikov's characters, but the writer himself who occupied a social sphere distinct from that of his readers. Indeed, critics and editors commonly understood the author as able to access the lives of the *narod* only due to his personal proximity to them, as a poor, orphaned postman's son from the Urals with limited formal education, and likewise saw him as incapable of articulating his own interests, or determining the meaning of his own work. Reshetnikov was often characterized as a thoughtless vessel translating his experience of popular life directly into prose – as Alexander Skabichevsky vividly put it, "a child of nature, charcoal on the wall, without the slightest knowledge of perspective."[28] Nikolai Mikhailovsky, like Tkachev, wrote that Reshetnikov offers a radically humanizing view, and "finds a man in the animal," but argued that it was necessary to go further and "awaken national consciousness," a task which Reshetnikov "is not capable" (*ne v silakh*) of taking on.[29] Given that limited scholarly attention has allowed such remarks to continue to shape contemporary conceptions of Reshetnikov as an author, it must be stated clearly at the outset that he was not naïve, and was aware that his outsider status

[28]A.M. Skabichevskii, Neskol'ko slov o zhizni i sochineniakh F.M. Reshetnikova," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii F.M. Reshetnikova v dvukh tomakh*, ed. A.M. Skabichevskii, (St. Petersburg, 1904), 2 vols., 1:xviii.

[29]N.K. Mikhailovskii, "O F.M. Reshetnikove" (1880) in *Literaturnaia kritika i vospominaniia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1995), 170–76.

carried cachet in the early 1860s.[30] He framed his work in ways that resonated with Dobroliubov's and Chernyshevsky's demands for truth over form even before moving to St.

[30]Reshetnikov's work in general, and *Where Is It Better?* in particular, have been minimally studied in recent decades, and largely neglected in Anglophone scholarship on Russian literature. Cathy Frierson mentions Reshetnikov's best-known work, *Podlipovtsy* (1864)*,* in *Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth Century Russia* (New York, 1993), but mistakenly refers to the village in Reshetnikov's novella as "Podlinnoe," ("authentic") rather than "Podlipnoe," ("under the lindens"), and incorporates this error importantly into her reading (119). Rose Glickman's "The Literary Raznochintsy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Russia," (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Chicago, Department of History, 1967) includes a chapter on Reshetnikov, 130-187, and is also marred by error, continuing a history of using the fictional *Among People* (*Mezhdu liudmi,* 1865) as a documentary account of the author's life (See I. Dergachev, "Po arkhivnym stranitsam: Novye materialy k biografii F.M. Reshetnikova," *Ural*, no. 3 (1958): 133–37). Boris Gasparov has more recently suggested a welcome new approach to Reshetnikov's work, discussing it within the aesthetic vocabulary of modernism, in comparison to that of Andrei Platonov, "Platonov and Reshetnikov," *Ulbandus Review* 14 (2012/2011): 111–29. Mikhail Makeev has suggested that the work of Reshetnikov, as well as that of Nikolai Uspensky, contains an implicit critique of the radical ideological understanding of social progress, a perspective supported by the reading presented in this article, *Spor o cheloveke v russkoi literature 60-70 gg. XIX veka. Literaturnyi personazh kak poznavatel'naia model' cheloveka* (Moscow, 1999), 68-79. The work of Reshetnikov scholar I. Dergachev has been regularly published posthumously by Ural Federal University. See "Pervyi roman o rabochikh

Petersburg in 1863 to pursue his writing.[31] As his work developed, he did not simply strive to fulfill editors' demands, but intervened in this discourse in his own way. Surviving diary entries, letters, and working notes show Reshetikov responding to the imperative toward verisimilitude in a more sophisticated way than his contemporaries recognized.[32] In rejecting the

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[F.M. Reshetnikova]," in *Dergachevskie chteniia - 2016. Russkaia slovesnost': Dialog kul'turno-natsional'nykh traditsii: materialy XII vserossiiskoi nauchnoi konferentsii (g. Ekaterinburg, 13-14 oktiabria 2016 g.): k 70-letiiu ob"edinennogo muzeiia pisatelei Urala* (Ekaterinburg, 2017), 5–24 and other articles in the same series. Scholars in Ekaterinburg continue to work on Reshetnikov, for example, E.K. Sozina, "Spetsifika zhanrovogo myshleniia F.M. Reshetnikova," in *Dergachevskie chteniia - 2008. Russkaia literatura: Natsional'noe razvitie i regional'nye osobennosti. Problema zhanrovykh nominatsii: materialy IX mezhdunar. nauch. konf.* (Ekaterinburg, 2009), 281–92.

[31]Reshetnikov gained knowledge of contemporary literary culture thanks in part to a well-stocked library at the government chamber where he served in Perm'. The history of the library and lists of its holdings are documented in "Zhurnal zasedaniia vybornykh chlenov biblioteki," RGALI, fond 430, opis 1, № 8. He proudly proclaimed that he had not "read rhetoric," and thus was "developing himself and studying life from nature" in a letter dated March 26, 1862, *PSS,* 6:343, a sentiment that echoes essays by Chernyshevsky that Reshetnikov would have had access to, such as "Ne nachalo li peremeny? Rasskazy N.V. Uspenskogo," *Sovremennik* 90, no. 11 (1861): 79–106.

[32]Reshetnikov spent his short life – he died of pulmonary edema in 1871 at age 29 – documenting the lives going on around him obsessively and continuously. For example, an

characterization of naiveté, however, I do not suggest that Reshetnikov was uniquely capable of speaking on the behalf of the masses, nor that the author was fully excluded from literary speech. Rather, I argue that Reshetnikov confronts the very means with which he had to speak: his work reflects critically on literary form and literary society as they were constituted at his time.

Moving to the city, moving into literary space

The first and second halves of *Where Is It Better?* – "In the Provinces," and "In Petersburg" – are distinguished in a way that aligns the characteristic elements of realist narrative with incorporation into urban life. The first half is episodic, under the motivating pressure of the titular question's entropic force, as the novel's protagonists disperse and spread across the Russian interior in search of something "better." Each chapter stands almost as an individual sketch (*ocherk*), titled according to its setting or to a key event: "The Goldmines at Udoikinsk," or "Prison Life." Reshetnikov takes his reader to various unknown milieus – salt processing, railroad construction, provincial laundressing – and the novel is ethnographic in orientation. The characters are found most often in crowed spaces – markets, inns, taverns, roads, prisons, work

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unpublished page of the surviving manuscript of Reshetnikov's diary describes in detail the activities of all of the author's Petersburg neighbors (IRLI RAN fond 388, opis 1, № 239, list 9). He was an assiduous researcher of labor conditions both in the Urals and in Petersburg, and historical accounts of the period confirm the accuracy of Reshetnikov's descriptions (Zelnik, *Labor and Society,* 288; Veksler, ""Gde luchshe?" Kommentarii," in Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 4:419-423). He wrote three other novels, in addition to *Where Is It Better?,* although they all remained unfinished, as well as a great number of short stories, novellas, and plays.

sites – where their experiences merge with those around them. The second half of the novel, in distinction, focuses on St. Petersburg and the plight of a single character, Pelageya Mokronosova. The story begins to take on the contours of a novelistic love plot, before stopping short of fulfilling this literary transformation.

The nature of the narration is itself crucial to this shift, and to establishing the reader's relationship with the characters in the novel. Although Reshetnikov frequently conveys characters' internal thoughts to the reader, providing the transparency of internal experience that, perhaps more than any other technique, marked the realist novel as a prose genre, *Where Is It Better?* does not offer the total transparency of a Tolstoy novel, instead keeping its narration attached to a particular, but changing, subjective perspective.[33] This technique orients the reader in unfamiliar contexts, and at once maintains distance between the reader's perspective and these contexts – the reader is always a spectator, seeking orientation. The opening of the novel provides a useful example. A forest guard spots a small band of travelers in the distance, and can't establish the relationships between them – a woman and man in their twenties, two teenage boys, and an older man. Are the boys the man's children? Are the younger man and the woman married? Neither the familial composition of the group nor their intentions are legible to the guard. The narrator lists the clothing items worn by each of the traveler-protagonists. To the reader this is unexplained raw data; its significance is not articulated. Within the scene, it appears from the perspective of the guard, who takes in the travelers with interest, but to whom they are

[33]On the history of the process by which framed narrative developed into omniscient third-person narrative in Russian prose, see Victoria Somoff, *The Imperative of Reliability: Russian Prose on the Eve of the Novel, 1820s – 1850s* (Evanston, IL, 2015).

strange, out-of-context apparitions in the night. The reader shares the guard's incomprehension: the characters appear as combinations of objects and features, not synthesized or interpreted.[34] These figures, Reshetnikov's protagonists, have drifted away from their home village and traditional life. Though they are relatives, they aren't a nuclear family: aging bachelor Terenty Ivanovich Goriunov, his teenage nephews, Panfil Prokhorovich and Grigory Prokhorovich Goriunov, their sister, the widowed Pelageya, and their friend, joiner Vlas Vasilievich Korovaev, to whom Pelageya becomes engaged. The guard makes an attempt to clarify what they are up to: how far are they going, to where? In reply, Terenty Goriunov names not a place, but an idea: "There, where it's better" (*tuda, gde luchshe*).[35] These mysterious figures have come from nowhere, and do not know where they are going. The guard's inability to comprehend them underlines their disconnection from any context that would make their dress, intentions, and relationships legible to an observer familiar with factory peasant milieus, as the forest guard is.

Throughout the novel, such occasionally disorienting presentations of information make sense when one considers to whom, in a given scene, perception pertains. Likewise, when contextual information is given, it comes from the characters themselves. At a salt works early on in the novel, the narrator describes Pelageya's observation that, "life here was different from in her [home] factory, where girls would live at home until marrying… here they started to meet men and boys early, at work in the factory."[36] Pelageya and the other protagonists provide situated viewpoints from within the novel, through which Reshetnikov illustrates distinctions in

[34]Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 4:5-6.

[35]Ibid.*,* 4:5.

[36]Ibid., 4:56.

habits across contexts, for the benefit of the reader. Consistent with this method, the novel's protagonists serve as embedded observational perspectives, rather than psychologized individuals. Reshetnikov tracks what happens around them, rather than within them.

This narrative method contributes to the novel's depiction of, as Saltykov-Shchedrin described it, a "collective" protagonist. Saltykov connected this collectivity to the drama of migration as a mass phenomenon, alongside the level of development of the *narod* in relation to the individualizing demands of narrative. The novel, however, does attend to the texture of individual experience without excluding the collective view. In contradistinction to the drama of subject-formation of the classic *bildungsroman*, within the shifting embedded narrative perspective of *Where Is It Better?*, intense emotional experiences do not articulate the self, but break it down. One of the most emotionally charged scenes in the novel describes Panfil Goriunov's agony at being confined in a group prison cell, where he lands for passing what he didn't realize was a counterfeit banknote. Panfil's suffering is amplified and articulated through its repetition and reflection in the other prisoners in his cell. The episode begins with a description of the scene, constructed of partially articulated human and material elements: the reader sees heads, shackles, and stripes of light and shadow, rather than individuals; they hear cries, scratches, moans, and wails, but no voice is matched to any individual, except for, momentarily, Panfil himself.[37] When attention does shift more emphatically to Panfil, he is overcome with misery, which grows as he hears his neighbor crying in the night. Then, hearing his neighbor's prayer, he is himself driven to pray, as though by an external force:

[37]Ibid., 4:93-4.

> Panfil listened and listened, it grieved him, bore heavily on him, it clutched his heart, like someone was grasping him around the throat… Crawling out clumsily from under the bunk, he knelt, burst into tears, and let out a sob… Not feeling anything, not hearing anything, he kneels, head hanging, and tears, burning tears, stream from his eyes.
>
> -Lord! Lord Jesus Christ!! – wails Panfil, and can't pronounce anything else as his tears flow uncontrollably. [38]

While the narrative centers on Panfil, his experience of his own misery is given form by the experience of those around him. His outburst is the accumulated misery of all of those in the prison cell bubbling over; it emerges from the scratches and wails of the night, and is eventually absorbed into the morning clatter. Reshetnikov's use of his characters as embedded perspectives around which to organize the description of spaces and milieus also serves to dramatize individual experience and emotion without centering one character's experience to the exclusion of others, resisting the isolative formal demands of psychologizing realism.

In contrast to the dispersive tendency of the novel's first half, from the moment when the narrative zeroes in on Pelageya Mokronosova on a Petersburg street in the novel's second half, it stays with her. At first Pelageya, like every other character, serves as a vessel for conveying to the reader the stories and experiences of myriad others whom she encounters. This tendency, however, shifts as she gradually situates herself in the capital and her own story is centered. The same method of embedded narrative perspective is employed to demonstrate the process of Pelageya's reciprocal recognition and interpolation into the social and political order of the city. When Pelageya encounters the joiner Ignaty Prokof'ich Petrov for the first time – a man who

[38]Ibid., 4:95.

will eventually become her betrothed – he appears as simply a "head." A lengthy passage persistently refers to him in this way, to comic effect,

> […] on one side of the yard, from the basement, the strike of a hammer could be heard, and from the other, looking out from above, right at [Pelageya], was a male head. The head amused Pelageya Prokhorovna, looking as though it had come straight out from the water pipe; but besides the head, which was wearing something plush on one side, like a skullcap [*ermolka*], she noticed two elbows in the window, the ends of which were sticking out.[39]

This extended reflection on a disarticulated body recalls the most famous tale of a misplaced body part in nineteenth-century Russian literature – Gogol''s "Nose" ("Nos," 1836). In Gogol''s tale, we find Petersburgians' perception so distorted by their absorption in the illusory material world that a policeman can easily be convinced that an orphaned nose is a whole State Councillor.[40] Both Gogol' and Reshetnikov depict perspectives determined by established social categories. In "The Nose," social and political power appear available as a set of floating positions that need only be claimed with vigor to be recognized. Pelageya's process is the reverse: rather than existing in a social and political order that determines her perception, she has no sense of her relationship with the people and institutions around her, and begins to recognize herself as a subject in the city only after being called, personally and by name, to do so.

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[39]Ibid., 4:202.

[40]N.V. Gogol', "Nos," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow; Leningrad, 1938) 14 vols., 3:55, 66. State Councillor is a medium-high station (fifth class) in the Table of Ranks.

This episode shows the meaning-giving function of social incorporation, rather than revealing its underlying absurdity. Pelageya perceives the speaker as a disarticulated set of body parts because of the cognitive dissonance produced by his specific interest in her: she cannot see him because he is looking at her. Pelageya has been one who sees, rather than one who is seen. It thus evokes her great astonishment when the "head" – Petrov – calls her by name. With Petrov's call, she appears for the first time as a known resident of Petersburg: a recognizable individual with a specific identity. She does not immediately reciprocate this recognition, rather it appears to function as noise, causing static in her perception. A week later she encounters "that head" again in the street, where it is "sitting on a bench." When she finally takes in the whole human that attaches the head to the bench it sits on, she see a man whose "whole figure showed him to be a skilled worker (*masterovogo*)," and connects that worker to the man she is most attached to: her absent betrothed, Korovaev.[41] Placing Petrov in terms of her previous social world enables Pelageya to return his interest. This mutual recognition is the beginning of Pelageya's incorporation into Petersburg society. Later, when deciding to marry Petrov, she is happy that "At least my husband will be from Petersburg."[42]

The significance of this episode as the depiction of incorporation into a social-symbolic order is illuminated by Louis Althusser's scene of interpolation. Althusser explains ideology as the representation of an individual's "imaginary relationship" with their "real conditions of

[41]Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 4:204.

[42]Ibid., 4:284.

existence" – the individual's understanding of their own place within a given order.[43] Althusser famously explains the realization of this relation, which he terms interpolation, through the scene of "hailing," in which the individual recognizes themselves as the "you" in another's "hey, you there!" The individual reciprocally apprehends themselves being apprehended as a "concrete subject" of a given ideological order.[44] When Pelageya is literally hailed by Petrov, she is at first unable to grasp the relationship she is being assumed to be a part of, but then comes to recognize herself as recognizable in St. Petersburg. Althusser's hailing scene is structured by the repressive state apparatus, in addition to the ideological, and thus takes place in the context of the encounter with state power – with the police. Pelageya's encounter with Petrov comes just before she is subjected to the order of Petersburg through repressive means: she is arrested, accused of having stolen her own bundle. However traumatic, her confrontation with the repressive state apparatus makes her a documented resident of the city. When it is proven that her bundle is her own, she is released with a residency permit (*bilet na zhitel'stvo*), which will allow her to rent a room, live with official status, and later be accepted at the hospital.[45] Petrov then helps Pelageya move in with a family of workers living near a foundry, the Gorshkovs. Through her connection to Petrov, she comprehends and situates herself in the social world of the city – with other workers. Before

[43]Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London; New York: Verso, 2014), 256.

[44]Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 264.

[45]Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 4:230. The importance of having a document of official residency (*adresnyi bilet*), received after registering with the police with a permit for residency (*bilet na zhitel'stvo*) appears throughout the second half of the novel.

she can legally move in with the workers, however, she must be subjected to the city governance by her encounter with the law and acquisition of official papers. Reshetnikov thus dramatizes the process of social and political incorporation for a provincial immigrant to the capital.

The author attaches this process to a simultaneous shift in narrative perspective and plot structure. As Pelageya becomes a named, recognized, socialized, and documented resident of St. Petersburg, *Where Is It Better?* transforms into a plot-oriented novel, focused on a single protagonist, and told from two consistent narrative perspectives: Pelageya's and Petrov's. The gradual development of the mutual attachment of Pelageya and her future husband is narrated across chapters and episodes. The narrative begins to build towards what looks like a happy ending. Things begin to fall into place for Pelageya and Petrov, and they decide to rent an apartment together. Petrov asks Pelageya to marry him, she accepts, and a long passage describing Petrov's dreams of family life follows.[46] As the object of Petrov's affection, Pelageya's character takes on further representative weight in the narrative. This is consistent with the narrative mode of the novel as a whole: with the arrival of Petrov, the reader observes Pelageya from his perspective, rather than every passing stranger that Pelageya encounters. As the novel's dispersed narrative perspective narrows to one man and one woman seeing and choosing each other, the answer to the titular question, "where is it better?," begins to appear as typically bourgeois: love leads to marriage, family, and economic independence. Pelageya and Petrov appear capable of escaping proletarianization together by starting their own small enterprises as washerwoman and carpenter, respectively. The possibility emerges that these characters' lives will be resolved with the world of St. Petersburg through conventional plot

[46]Ibid., 4:283-4.

mechanisms and the establishment of a stable family life. The significant shift comes, however, not in the development of the characters themselves, but in the narrative perspective of the novel, which is now specifically interested in two individuals and their fate. This shift hints that the author-narrator, whose perspective has been studiously attached to those of the characters, will emerge in full omniscience to synthesize the traditional family as the order-giving institution for Petersburg workers, completing an arc of development that funnels socially anomalous, unrepresentable characters into social positions and forms of representation familiar to the novel's implied and actual readership of Russia's gentry and educated bourgeoisie. But confounding such expectations, Reshetnikov stops short of executing this transformation.

Together at the theater

Understood in terms of interpolation, the second half of the novel is a drama of recognizing and occupying available urban social positions. The novel's conclusion relates the social milieu it has settled into – that of urban workers – back to literary space. In a climactic episode that introduces a meta-literary level and reflects on the implied reader's relationship with the novel's characters, Petrov and Pelageya go to see Alexander Ostrovsky's play *The Storm* (*Groza,* 1859). It is one of the few moments when Reshetnikov's narrator intervenes in the first person:

> I will not describe how our acquaintances got on at the theater. It is enough to say that they liked the production of *The Storm* so much that they each wanted to go to the theater more often. For Pelageya Prokhorovna it was indeed all so new that it seemed to her she had found her way into some God only knows how lovely a place. She only paid

attention to the public during the intermission, and during the performance her full attention was on the characters on the stage.[47]

Where it is truly better is, in fact, at the theater. Here, Pelageya becomes a consumer of art herself, and momentarily, the social cohesion anticipated by the reader appears. *The Storm* was an extraordinarily popular play that every reader would know, leaving nothing for Pelageya to recount. As Pelageya takes her place in *The Storm*'s audience, the reader's relation to her shifts. They are for the first time excluded from Pelageya's experience, and reader and protagonist sit momentarily side-by-side as spectators at the theater.

Distinctions in responses to art – in particular those determined by class and gender – are used as a means of articulating relationships with the cosmopolitan culture represented by the theater in other important literary works of the time. The description of Pelageya's focused attention might be compared to that of Natasha Rostova, for example, whose perspective, rendered naïve by romantic passion, serves to demonstrate the seductive artifice of the theatrical spectacle.[48] Pelageya, also a naïve viewer, instead accepts the artwork as truth (*neuzheli eto pravda?*), and identifies yet another sphere of Russian life where things are not "better": "Even the merchants don't live well," she comments (*Ne veselo zhe i kuptsam zhivetsia*).[49] Pelageya is not seduced by the spectacle, nor does she offer the incisive outsider vision that would dismiss it

[47]Ibid., 4:287.

[48]On this scene in *War and Peace*, see Laura J. Olson, "Russianness, Femininity, and Romantic Aesthetics in War and Peace," *The Russian Review* 56, no. 4 (1997): 524-5.

[49]Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 4:287. Pelageya's comment echoes verbatim the refrain of Nekrasov's peasants in his epic poem *Who Lives Well in Rus',* on which more below.

as the meaningless playacting of the leisure class. She accepts it as a piece of reality, an encounter with an unfamiliar sphere of life. This does not lead her to imagine herself as a romantic heroine, like *The Storm*'s Katerina, but rather fills in another place where life is not better. While the implied reader of Reshetnikov's novel is educated, this episode implies that the viewer of Ostrovsky's play is equally Pelageya and that same educated reader. The social bifurcation that Reshetnikov's contemporaries such as Saltykov-Shchedrin and Shelgunov found so pronounced in contemporary novelistic prose briefly disappears in the theater, "where it is better." There, Pelageya joins her reader in expanding her knowledge of Russia's suffering *narod*, just as the reader has been doing in reading *Where Is It Better?*. As a member of the audience of Ostrovsky's play, Pelageya is no longer a guide to the reader, nor herself an entity to be observed and understood. She is a part of the expansive *narod* that includes the reader, as well as the actors on stage and the characters they portray, all engaged in the project of sharing and learning about each other's suffering.

One must note, however, that in this case, the illusion of the theater is not on stage in the form of worldly culture, as Tolstoy had it, but in the sensation of collectivity experienced by its socially heterogeneous audience. In fact, it was not easy for workers and peasants to buy tickets to the theater, and not simply because of the cost. They were often turned away because of their class. The theater was close to Reshetnikov's heart; he himself wrote numerous plays. He complained in his diary about the exclusion of lower class people – including himself – from existing theaters. Discussing problems he saw in proposals to build "people's" (*narodnye*) theaters in poorer neighborhoods in his diary, he describes his own experience of being refused a ticket to the Mariinsky in St. Petersburg, and turning the corner to see a crowd of *muzhiki* around the entrance who were also not allowed in. "There's no point in saying that our people – the

peasants (*muzhich'e*) – don't go to the theater," he writes. Reshetnikov suggests that peasants don't need their own theaters, they need to be allowed into the theaters that exist.[50] Thus Petrov's uneventful trip to the ticket booth, his joyful selection of the second-least expensive, rather than the least expensive tickets, and his and Pelageya's peaceful trip to the theater appear just as fantastical as his dreams of the familial idyll they will build together.[51] In this scene, *Where Is It Better?* as a work of art comes in contact with art as a phenomenon in the world. This is a particular, historical instantiation of art, rather than art as an abstract concept: the theater is an existing social space of the time of the novel's writing, where only certain people are able to go. Likewise, literary realism has a particular, existing shape which can only be occupied by certain kinds of lives, and encountered by certain kinds of readers. A young woman of Pelageya's class would certainly have had far more difficulty acquiring the education and leisure time necessary to read a novel than tickets to a play. The theater-viewing episode is a moment in which reader and characters are briefly aligned as both equally able to become protagonists and audience of realist narrative. The conclusion of the novel finally breaks this illusion.

The Storm, of course, does not have a happy ending, but a tragic one. Similarly, Pelageya's death follows immediately after she witnesses the death of Ostrovsky's heroine on stage. In *The Storm,* an unhappily married young woman, Katerina, falls in love with a man who is not her husband, and is driven to suicide. Katerina's final speech echoes the question that appears throughout Reshetnikov's novel, and the persistent suggestion that perhaps it is not

[50]Ibid., 6:318. The entry is from November 1868; *Where Is It Better?* was published earlier that year.

[51]Ibid., 4:287.

"better" anywhere on earth: "Where will I go now? Home? No, going home would be going to the grave – it's all the same. […] In the grave it's better…"[52] Petrov sees himself and Pelageya reflected in the play and is filled with foreboding, which is borne out the following day.[53] Pelageya gets back to work, drinks cold water, becomes feverish, and dies. Petrov's words upon her death echo those of Katerina's husband, Kabanov, who cries over her grave, "It's good for you, Katia! But why am I left in the world to suffer?"[54] In Petrov's version: "Now there's no life in my life: it had seemed brightly clear, and it disappeared."[55]

But for all its echoes of Ostrovsky's play, *Where Is It Better?* is a different kind of tragedy from that of *The Storm.* Where *The Storm* presents an intractable conflict between emotion, desire, and the strictures of a particular social world, in *Where Is It Better?* material conditions prevent the narrative consummation of the developing love plot. Pelageya's death is the most likely end for all those "*muzhiki, baby, devki*…" among whom she arrived in Petersburg and from whom she appeared indistinguishable, who pile into the city with no place to go, day after day. Because of the many unceremonious deaths that have occurred throughout the novel, all echoed in Pelageya's swift demise, this conclusion is not presented as the distinct tragedy of Pelageya's and Petrov's dashed dreams, in the key of Katerina's assertion of individual will in the face of an intolerable life. Rather, it redirects their story back into the collective narrative

[52]A.N. Ostrovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Gos. iz. khud. lit., 1950), 16 vols., 2:264.

[53]Ibid., 2:287.

[54]Ibid., 2:264.

[55]Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 4:288.

with which the novel began. In recognizing this connection, one may realize that a happy ending for Pelageya and Petrov would not have resolved the collective drama of *Where Is It Better?,* but rather would have crudely erased the masses from the scene. In sum, Reshetnikov's novel suggests that the collective experience of Russia's common people cannot be resolved into the social reality and literary conventions of educated readers and critics by any extant narrative mechanism: as the novel comes to a close, the narrator indicates that the story will trundle on without Pelageya, promising to "continue [the narrative] under a different title."[56] The paradoxical democratism of Western European realism's liberal promise that Woloch describes – the idea that any person can be a protagonist simultaneously demands that only one is – appears here in stark relief: literary heroism is only available at the mortal cost of those who are not. In the Russian context, where the question of who could be a literary protagonist was actively recognized as a political and aesthetic problem, the exclusion is even more complete. The absence of non-noble novelistic heroes was entangled with the fact of literature's limited audience. *Where Is It Better?* addresses the unidirectional representational relationship between the worlds of its readers and its characters: Pelageya can neither fully occupy the position of the literary protagonist, nor encounter the novelistic rendering of a story like hers in the way she encounters *The Storm* at the theater. Full protagonicity is not available to anyone in *Where Is It Better?* Withholding any kind of narrative satisfaction asserts the poverty of available narratives and existing representative forms, and the reader's very ability to encounter this story is implicated in its tragic lack of a conclusion.

[56]Ibid., 4:290.

Grisha Dobrosklonov and the memory of the *raznochintsy*

Reshetnikov's novel is, among other things, an indictment of a contemporary literary culture from which the author himself was profoundly alienated – as he writes in an exemplary misanthropic diary entry from 1866, "I still haven't gotten to know anyone, I sit silent and listen to other writers' blathering (*vzdor*). No one pays attention to me, and I couldn't care less about them (*mne naplevat' na nikh*)."[57] To conclude, I turn to a figure likely to have been in that room of writers: Reshetnikov's editor, Nikolai Nekrasov. Nekrasov's epic poem *Who Lives Well in Rus'?* also takes up the theme of peasants' post-emancipation mobility and the new possibility of finding something better elsewhere. It is a text closely connected to Reshetnikov's novel in a number of ways. The two works present distinct responses to the demand for a *narodnyi* perspective in literature. The works' titles – *Who Lives Well in Rus'?* and *Where Is It Better?* – ask almost identical questions. Both clearly place the texts in the radical lineage of Alexander Herzen and Chernyshevsky, whose *Who Is to Blame?* (*Kto vinovat?,* 1846), and *What Is to Be Done?* (*Chto delat'?,* 1863) respectively are framed by titular interrogatives that function as statements of protest. Dobroliubov had called for a synthesis of the voice and consciousness of the educated elites and the people – of Nekrasov's and Reshetnikov's worlds. Yet a comparison of Nekrasov's celebrated production of a *narodnyi* poetic voice with Reshetnikov's verisimilar depiction of *narodnyi* life reveal them to work at cross purposes – the former seems to build the illusion of collectivity across classes, while the latter deconstructs it. This relationship becomes more complex when we consider the echoes of Reshetnikov in Nekrasov's epic.

[57]Ibid., 6:291.

Nekrasov published the prologue to *Who Lives Well…?* in *The Contemporary* in 1866, where Reshetnikov would certainly have seen and read it, and it is not unlikely that the latter was inspired by Nekrasov's work in his own choice of title and conceptual frame. Caught up in discussing the titular question – who lives well in Russia – the band of peasants at the center of the narrative drift so far from home that they no longer know the way back.[58] They are transformed into pilgrims (*stranniki*), seeking something of spiritual necessity, without which they cannot return to village and family life. Unlike Reshetnikov's wanderers, Nekrasov's peasants *want* to go home. In addition to this desire to return to their origins, as Alexander Ogden has argued, in *Who Lives Well…?* the poetic voice that derives from folk poetry but, with the help of the master poet, transcends it, appears capable of bridging the social chasms that plague the nation.[59] The epic elides the distance between educated readers and peasant characters by surrounding the reader with folk speech that is presented as belonging as much to them as to the peasantry. Reshetnikov's novel, in contrast, rejects both the possibility of preserving traditional life and the proposition of facilitating proximity across classes through literature.

Nekrasov published Reshetnikov's work and knew it well. He worked on *Who Lives Well…?* over the course of many years, publishing segments of it periodically until his death in 1878. The last section to be written, "A Feast for All the World," ("Pir na ves' mir") introduces Grisha Dobrosklonov, a character with an 1860s *raznochinets* biography (a poor, priestly family

[58]N.A. Nekrasov, "Komu na Rusi zhit' khorosho," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem (PSS)* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1982), 15 vols., 5:10 ("Prolog," line 193).

[59]Alexander J. Ogden, "Listening to Peasants: Miscommunication and Ventriloquism in Nekrasov's 'Komu na Rusi zhit' khorosho'," *Russian Review*, no. 72 (October 2013): 509-606.

and a seminary education) and the populist sentiments of the 1870s student activists (readiness to die for the people). The chapter depicting Grisha was written in 1876-77, and its immediate historical context is the retreat of the populists from their agitation efforts in the countryside.[60] In this crisis moment, Grisha is depicted as the symbolic mediator between gentry and *narod* that his historical *raznochintsy* counterparts largely refused to be in practice. He is uniquely capable of articulating the interests of the peasantry in the way that Tkachev, Mikhailovsky, and Shelgunov argued that the peasants themselves could not – he succeeds where Reshetnikov was seen to have failed.[61] Within Grisha's composite portrait, there are references to specific figures. It has been widely recognized that the name "Dobrosklonov" intentionally recalls that of Dobroliubov.[62] In an earlier draft, Nekrasov also explicitly references Pomialovsky, the most celebrated narrator of the miseries of religious education for preachers' sons, in his discussion of Grisha's life at seminary.[63] Although there is no named reference to Reshetnikov in Nekrasov's drafts, elements of Grisha's story draw from Reshetnikov's biography as well. As much as Pomialovsky's legacy was attached to the seminary, Reshetnikov's was to the barge hauler (*burlak*), depicted in *Podlipovtsy.* These identifiable sources for the Grisha character indicate that

[60]Nekrasov, *PSS,* 5:610; on the work's relationship with populism, B.Ia. Bukhshtab, "Zamysel poemy 'Komu na Rusi zhit'' khorosho?,'" in *N.A. Nekrasov. Problemy tvorchestva* (Leningrad: Sov. pisatel' Leningradskoe otdelenie, 1989), 131.

[61]Ogden points to Dobrosklonov as the figure who articulates positive ideology in "Listening to Peasants," 603-4.

[62]Nekrasov's sister is credited with confirming this connection, *PSS,* 5:682.

[63]Ibid., 5:515. I thank Mikhail Makeev for pointing me to this reference.

he should be approached as the synthetic ideal of a *raznochinets,* non-noble writer. His referents are specific, but he himself exists on the level of cultural mythology. We may analyze his character and role in Nekrasov's epic in terms of the author intentionally crafting the legacy of those writers whose work he brought into the world – including Reshetnikov.

Grisha's sympathy for the people stirs him to write poetry, and the barge hauler plays a crucial role in the emergence of his final song, which celebrates the Russian nation and its awesome spiritual power. Along the Volga river, "Grigory walked, looking over/At the satisfied barge hauler/And from his lips words burst worth."[64] This song ("Burlak") brings Grisha to the moment of inspiration that leads to his final, glorious song ("Rus'"), which is described as the answer to the wanderers' quest ("Our pilgrims would be under their home roofs/If they could only know what stirred in Grisha"): "From the barge hauler, Grisha's thoughts/moved to all of great mysterious Rus',/to the people."[65] This climactic episode might as well have been lifted directly from Reshetnikov's diaries. In Perm' in 1862, Reshetnikov wrote of being inspired by the barge haulers on the Kama river.[66] In St. Petersburg in 1864, writing to Nekrasov about *Podlipovtsy,* which he was anxious to see published, Reshetnikov writes:

> I know the lives of these poor people [like those in *Podlipovtsy*] well, because I lived in Cherdyn district and spent 20 years on the banks of the Kama, along which in Spring

[64]Ibid., 5:232 (1685-8).

[65]Ibid., 5:235 (1781-2); 5:233 (1714-16).

[66]Reshetnikov, *PSS,* 6:268. The same barge haulers would have passed by Grisha on their way to the capitals: the Kama merges with the Volga just south of Kazan'.

thousands of barges and tens of thousands of barge haulers would float by, and I thought to write about their lives with the hopes of somehow helping these poor laborers.[67]

Reshetnikov's description of the inspiration for *Podlipovtsy* in his letter to Nekrasov and Nekrasov's description of Grisha Dobrosklonov's inspiration for "Rus'" are similar enough to propose that Nekrasov could have intended for Reshetnikov's legacy to be recognizable within his composite portrait. By 1876, the works of both Reshetnikov and Pomialovsky were considered obligatory reading for populist activists seeking to learn about the people.[68]

Although Grisha's final song, "Rus'," concludes with a refrain that captures the populist sentiment he embodies as a call to action and a promise for a brighter future – "You are all-powerful/Mother-Rus'!"[69] – this conclusion cannot be taken as decisively triumphant. Nekrasov himself never finished the work, and even if we accept Grisha's song as the closest the epic gets to a conclusion – it was the last part that Nekrasov wrote – it contains a fundamental ambivalence: the pilgrims never hear it, and thus cannot go home.[70] Georgy Plekhanov wrote of this episode that it demonstrated how "the strivings of our radical intelligentsia remain unknown and not understood by the people (*narod*)."[71] But *Who Lives Well…?* does not number among

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[67]Ibid., 6:350.

[68]Benjamin Ekloff and Tatiana Saburova, *A Generation of Revolutionaries: Nikolai Charushin and Russian Populism from the Great Reforms to Perestroika* (Bloomington, IN, 2017), 32.

[69]Nekrasov, *PSS,* 5:234 (1766-1770).

[70]The order in which the epic's existing parts should be published is a point of contestation. On the order of writing and publishing various parts see Nekrasov, *PSS,* 5:609-613.

[71]Qtd. in Bukhshtab, "Zamysl poemy," 133-4.

Nekrasov's compositions for the peasantry; its audience, like that of Reshetnikov's novel, is the educated.[72] Reflections on the epic like that of S. An – sky, who wrote several decades after Nekrasov's death that "he taught [the intelligentsia] how to understand, love, and revere the *narod*," as well as the subsequent status of *Who Lives Well..?* in the canon, suggest that it did allow the intelligentsia to imagine themselves in closer proximity to the peasantry.[73] Dobrosklonov thus seems to accomplish what the writers whose biographies Nekrasov used to create him could – or would – not. He offers a poetic voice that at once transcends and portends the end of social, cultural, and economic stratification – if only the *stranniki* could hear it!

Conclusion

On the other side of the Russian Revolution, foremost Marxist theorist of literary realism Georg Lukács argued that the apprehension of national life and the production of literature with mass appeal were objectives to be achieved with a single instrument: the realist novel. He saw the great realists of his time – his examples are Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland, and Thomas Mann – as "sons" of their nations whose "organic" relationship with their culture allowed them to strike a chord with the masses, and achieve the prophetic quality of truly "significant" realism: its capacity to cognize the social forms of the future.[74] A novel that could achieve broad cross-class appeal was not possible in Russia in 1868, and populist critics sought literature that could

[72]See n. 11 above.

[73]Qtd. in Ogden, "Listening to Peasants." See Ogden for further notes on this reception, 605.

[74]Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Georg Lukács et al. (New York: Verso, 1980), 54.

approximate this missing common culture by opening up to educated readers the social forms of the *narod*. Reshetnikov's best quality, in the eyes of his critics, was his organic connection to the people – but this was meant to serve his communication with an audience of educated readers, not the people themselves. Saltykov-Shchedrin and others searched for and did not find the "direction" in Reshetnikov's novel that would make his portrait of the people ideologically useful, echoing Lukács's imperative towards a recognizable tendency. Similar criticism would later appear in response to the stories of Anton Chekhov, a non-noble writer at a time when this role was no longer so tied to a specific cultural position.[75] Part of why Reshetnikov, unlike Chekhov, has rarely been studied, is that his work has disappeared behind the cultural image of the *raznochintsy* writer exemplified by Nekrasov's Grisha Dobrosklonov, who appears to provide the direction Saltykov sought when he articulates and orients the collective power of the people.

Indeed, although Reshetnikov is in many ways an exceptional figure in Russian literary history and merits attention for this reason, his work might be productively compared not only to that of Chekhov, but also Maxim Gorky. As a novel that pushes the boundaries of realist form and a pre-Marxist representation of an emergent proletariat, *Where Is It Better?* offers a rich precedent for both of these authors who bridge realism and modernism, the former resisting apparent ideological commitment, and the latter embracing it.[76] In the context of his own time,

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[75] See, for instance, K.P. Medvedskii, *Nabliudatel'*, no. 9 (1892), 193, qtd. in A.P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-1982), 8:146, who wrote that Chekhov could not "connect his scattered observations into one whole."

[76]On Soviet discussions of Reshetnikov in relation to Gorky, see I.A. Dergachev, "A.M. Gor'kii i F.M. Reshetnikov," in *Dergachevskie chteniia - 2006. Russkaia literatura: national'noe razvitie*

studying Reshetnikov presents an opportunity to consider a non-noble writer's approach to the problems of how forms refined to portray noble life to noble readers could be reworked to represent the broader population, and what it meant to represent a population of people who themselves had no access to literature. As these questions arise in response to the limited sociological makeup of the literary audience and literary sphere, it is crucial to consider how they appeared to those authors like Reshetnikov who, for social and economic reasons, spent their lives on the margins of literary culture. These issues are not exhausted in the scope of this article. Fedor Dostoevsky, for example, recognized that he shared with Reshetnikov and his peers – as he termed them, "the Reshetnikovs" – the desire to push beyond the "landlord literature" that did not represent the reality of life in the Russian empire.[77] *The Adolescent* (*Podrostok,* 1875) might be Dostoevsky's most direct attempt to achieve this objective.[78] Of course, Dostoevsky's experiment in non-noble protagonicity takes the opposite approach to that of Reshetnikov. While the teeming urban poor crowd the edges of works like *Notes from the Underground* (*Zapiski iz podpol'ia,* 1864) and *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie,* 1866), *The Adolescent* takes the family unit as microcosm for the divided nation and finds resolution in spiritual

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i regional'nye osobennosti: materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchonoi konferentsii, Ekaterinburg, 5-7 oktiabria 2006 g. (Ekaterinburg, 2007), 5–8.

[77]F.M. Dostoevskii, "Pis'ma: 157, N.N. Strakhovu, 18 (30) maia 1871," in *Sobraniie sochinenii*, (St. Petersburg, 1996) 15 vols., 15: 490.

[78]On Dostoevsky's ambitions for this novel, see Kate Holland, "*The Adolescent*: Remaking the Noble Family Novel," in *The Novel in the Age of Disintegration: Dostoevsky and the Problem of Genre in the 1870s* (Evanston, Ill, 2013), 101-131.

community transcendent of class. Nonetheless, these works share core concerns. Reshetnikov's approach suggests previously unrecognized commonalities between Russian and French and English realist novels, in which the urban crowd was a more central subject of novelistic representation.[79] Expanding the view of what works constitute Russian realism would allow scholars to consider Dostoevsky's concerns with national culture and literary form in relation to the questions of aesthetic and political representation that appear in *Where Is It Better?.* More broadly, greater consideration of the work produced by the wave of non-noble writers of which Reshetnikov was a part can contribute to building a view of Russian realism less bound to "the changing moods and attitudes of the most influential segment of educated society" that dominate its history.

Reshetnikov himself produced nothing like the hopeful poetic song that flows from Nekrasov's Dobrosklonov, yet his legacy, appropriated by his editor years after his death and subsumed into Dobrosklonov's allegorical figure, did finally produce the synthesis his critics searched for. This might reveal what Reshetnikov's role, as conceived by critics, really was all along: to provide the raw material to other, more authoritative writers, to be crafted into something that could provide educated readers with the illusion of proximity to popular life. As I have argued, the author himself did something different. He showed the tragic exclusivity of the old forms, rather than supplying them with new material, or opening up to his readers something outside of these forms – two narrative solutions that would illusorily resolve together estranged

[79]In addition to Woloch, see Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018) on this subject.

social spheres for elite readers.[80] Reshetnikov produced the collective narrative of a mass, landless ex-peasant population – but he was not a Marxist. Instead, his work clears the way for and asserts the necessity of new forms for the future.

[80]This interest in the failures of representation is related to what Gasparov finds in Reshetnikov's work that connects it to modernism's general interest in the failures of form, and Platonov's in particular, in his article "Platonov and Reshetnikov." This relationship could be further explored regarding these two writers' idiosyncratic relationships to ideology.