

PEASANTS

Peasants were a familiar part of the landscape of Russian literature until as a class, with the end of serfdom and the beginning of communism, they ceased to exist. We see them, in the classics with which we are all familiar, not as individuals with names and stories of their own, but glimpsed as it were from a train window. We meet them in *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, not in their own homes, but in the home of Mme Ranevskaya, as the upwardly mobile Lopakhin and the permanently static Firs. We meet them in Tolstoy as sullen faces staring with suspicion and incomprehension at their masters, inhabitants of parallel worlds.

Russian literature was no different from any other in this respect. Literature, like history, used always to tell the stories of great men, occasionally of women, but never of ordinary people.

Alessandro Manzoni was one of those who began to change that in his classic novel, *I Promessi Sposi*, in which the two principal characters belong to the peasant class, a class which he described as ‘an immense multitude, one generation after the other, passing on the face of the earth, without leaving a trace in history.’ Another Italian, Giuseppe Verga, went further, in novels and stories whose subject is exclusively the lives of poor Sicilians.

D.H. Lawrence was the first to translate them into English. Luchino Visconti’s film, *La Terra Trema*, a classic of Italian realism (the Sicilian dialect meant that, even in Italy, it had to be shown with subtitles), was based on Verga’s *I Malavoglia*. The story of Verga’s that we know best is *Cavalleria Rusticana*, but only in the romanticised version that Mascagni made of it.

Władisław Reymont, a Polish contemporary of Verga, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1924. The citation referred specifically to his novel, *Chłopi*, or *The Peasants*. As far as I know, there has only ever been one English translation, by Michael H. Dziiewicki, published in 1925 and long since out of print. I bought my four volume copy at a second-hand bookshop. The novel is set in a real Polish village, Lipce, and describes a year in the lives of numerous fictional characters, all peasants. The four volumes, in order, are Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer.

The story begins and ends with Agatha, an old woman. We see her leaving Lipce in the autumn to walk the country roads seeking alms so as not to be a burden on her relations. The priest asks her where she will go.

“Out into the wide world, please your Reverence, into the wide world!” she answered, with a wave of her staff from east to west.

The priest mechanically turned his eyes in that direction, but closed them to the blinding sun in the western sky. Then he said, in a lower and somewhat hesitating tone, “Have the Klembas turned you out? Or is it only a little bickering between you?”

She drew herself up a little and, before answering, cast her eyes around her upon the bare autumnal fields and the village roofs surrounded by fruit-gardens.

“No, they have not turned me out: how could they? They are good folk and my close kin. And as for bickering, there was none. I myself saw that I had better leave; that’s all. ‘Better to leap into the deep than cumber another man’s wagon.’ So I had to go; there was no work for me. Winter is coming, but what of that? Are they to give me food and a corner to sleep in while I do nothing to earn it? Besides, they have just weaned their calf, and the goslings must be sheltered under their roof at night, for it is getting cold. I have to make room. Why, beasts are God’s creatures too. But they are kind folk; they keep me in summer-time at least, and do not begrudge me a corner of their house and a morsel of their food. And in winter I go out into the wide world, asking alms. I need but little and that little good people give me. With the help of the Lord Jesus, I shall pull through till spring, and put something by into the

bargain. Surely, the sweet, good Jesus will not forsake His poor.”

Agatha sets off on her winter journey and the priest goes on reading his breviary, looking up from time to time to keep an eye on the men ploughing his field.

“Hey, Valek! That furrow is crooked!” he cried out, sitting up, with his eyes following every step of two sturdy grey plough-horses.

Once more he returned to his breviary, and his lips again moved, but his eyes soon unconsciously wandered to the horses, or to a flock of crows cautiously hopping, with outstretched beak, in the newly made furrow, and taking wing whenever the whip cracked or the horses wheeled round: after which they would alight heavily in the wake of the plough, and sharpen their beaks on the hard, sun-baked clods just turned up.

“Valek, just flick the right-hand mare a bit; she is lagging behind.”

Some of the characteristics of the novel – and some of the challenges for the translator – are evident in these opening paragraphs. Vivid description in plain language; frequent use of direct speech, complete with colloquial expressions and old proverbs; the juxtaposition of sentiment and practicality, sympathy and self-interest, in a way that prevents the reader from making simple moral judgements; a narrative voice which is detached and equivocal.

Reymont and Verga, who is also notoriously difficult to translate, have all these things in common.

Writers bring their own experience to bear on the things they write about. As changes in society make it possible for more people to write, not just because they are literate but because they have time to do it, upwardly mobile peasants start to write their own stories. The poor, who always shared the stage with the rich in the stories they told each other, stories about princes and paupers, farmers and fishermen, orphans and beggars, come out of that oral tradition and lay claim to the written word.

In Russia, Nikolai Leskov, another contemporary of Reymont and Verga, wrote almost exclusively about the lower orders of Russian society in stories which, with the exception of *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, are hardly known in Britain, but which had a powerful influence on later Russian writers. In 21st century Poland, the cast of Reymont’s *Chłopi* reappear with new names in Olga Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times*. American literature began with the poor, the huddled masses, the homeless. Its self-made aristocracy came later. Willa Cather’s novels are imbued with the peasant traditions of European immigrants, Edith Wharton’s with the fragility of the new aristocrats.

In England, where there is a long and proud tradition of putting down peasant revolts, working class novels occupy a small shelf of their own in the literary archives. A kind of snobbery still affects the way we think about D.H.Lawrence and H.G.Wells. Thomas Hardy gave up writing novels after *Jude the Obscure* brought down on his head the disapproval of the establishment. *Love on the Dole* and *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* are literary curiosities.

Peasant is a term of popular abuse in England. It’s not swearing at a police officer that causes a government minister to lose his job, it’s calling him a pleb. English peasants prefer to read and write about the rich and powerful. We don’t like being reminded who we really are.