

Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

NCLC

181

Volume 181

Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

*Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other
Creative Writers Who Died between 1800
and 1899, from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations*

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Kathy D. Darrow
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Kathy Darrow and Russel Whitaker

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Preface

Since its inception in 1981, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC) has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on writers of this transitional period in world history. Designated an “Outstanding Reference Source” by the American Library Association with the publication of its first volume, NCLC has since been purchased by over 6,000 school, public, and university libraries. The series has covered more than 500 authors representing 38 nationalities and over 28,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to nineteenth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as NCLC.

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Every fourth volume of NCLC is devoted to literary topics that cannot be covered under the author approach used in the rest of the series. Such topics include literary movements, prominent themes in nineteenth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

NCLC continues the survey of criticism of world literature begun by Thomson Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC) and *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC).

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An NCLC entry consists of the following elements:

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

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Sergei Timofeevich Aksakov

1791-1859

Russian novelist, essayist, memoirist, short story writer, and poet.

The following entry presents an overview of Aksakov's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *NCLC*, Volume 2.

INTRODUCTION

At the height of his career, Sergei Timofeevich Aksakov was among the most popular writers in mid-nineteenth-century Russia. A key figure in the development of Russian literary realism, Aksakov wrote fiction that was firmly rooted in his own life, drawing from family history and personal experience to craft narratives that are distinguished by both their fidelity to verisimilitude and their plain, unadorned prose. In such works as *Semeinaia khronika* (1856; *The Family Chronicle*) and *Detskie gody Bagrova-vnuka* (1858; *Years of Childhood*), he creates a vivid portrait of country life in Tsarist Russia. These sagas blend historical detail with fictionalized characterizations to tell the story of Aksakov's family heritage, from his grandfather's settlement of a vast estate in the Southern Urals to the author's own coming of age. Aksakov's writing embodies a stark repudiation of the more worldly Romanticism of such writers as Nikolai Karamzin, espousing instead a classical, Slavophilic approach to storytelling. In spite of its reactionary aspects, Aksakov's work contributed vitally to the development of the modern novel form, notably in its straightforward prose style and its liberal intermingling of fact and fiction. While Aksakov's works are still widely read in Russia, they remain relatively unknown in the West, and only a handful of critical studies devoted to Aksakov's career have appeared in English. Still, his role as a central figure in nineteenth-century Russian literary culture remains indisputable; his works influenced such pioneers of Russian literature as Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy, among numerous others.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Sergei Timofeevich Aksakov was born in Ufa, Russia, on September 20, 1791, the son of Timofei Stepanovich Aksakov, a court official, and Maria Nikolaevna Zubova, a descendant of landed nobility. Aksakov's pa-

ternal grandfather, Stepan Aksakov, owned a vast estate, which he named Novo-Aksakovo, on the banks of the Buguruslan River. As a boy Aksakov spent much of his time exploring the forests and rivers of Novo-Aksakovo, where through his father's guidance he mastered the arts of hunting and fishing. These experiences would foster a deep-seated love of the natural world in Aksakov and would later form the basis for his best-known nonfiction works.

While Aksakov inherited his appreciation for nature from his father, his mother cultivated his passion for literature. Maria Nikolaevna was a cultured, intelligent woman, well-read in both Russian and Western European literature, and she taught her son to read and write when he was only four. In 1801 Aksakov enrolled in the Kazan gymnasium, a boarding school, although he soon became seriously ill with a nervous disorder and was forced to return home. He reentered the gymnasium a year later, where he embarked on a course of study that included literature, science, mathematics, and history; he also published poems and short stories in the student literary journal. His early writings were inspired by the sentimental school of Nikolai Karamzin, one of Russia's leading literary figures of the era. Aksakov played an active role in student theater and gained prestige among his classmates for his ability to memorize and act out entire plays by himself.

In 1804 Kazan gymnasium expanded to become Kazan University, and for the next three years Aksakov attended both high school and university classes, receiving a certificate of attendance in 1807. Although Aksakov later regarded his formal education as inadequate, his school experiences exerted a powerful influence on his mature writings. Shortly after leaving school, Aksakov's literary philosophy underwent a dramatic transformation. He repudiated Karamzin's cosmopolitan, Eurocentric attitude toward literature, espousing instead the conservative literary ideals of Admiral Aleksandr Shishkov, who advocated the nurturing of a nationalistic, Slavophile form of literature.

In 1807 Aksakov moved with his family to Moscow. A year later the family relocated to St. Petersburg, where Aksakov went to work for the civil service while continuing to write poetry. In St. Petersburg Aksakov became personally acquainted with Admiral Shishkov, who introduced him to the various writers, artists, and actors who frequented his salon. Although Aksakov's

noble birth prohibited him from becoming an actor, at Shishkov's urging he staged a number of amateur plays for his friends and colleagues. Aksakov quit his civil service job in 1811 and moved to Moscow; following Napoleon's invasion a year later he returned to the family estate. For the next several years he traveled throughout the country, stopping regularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg to visit friends and see plays. Aksakov also produced translations of plays by Sophocles and Molière during these years, although these works were never published.

In 1816 Aksakov married Olga Semenovna Zaplatina, the daughter of a retired army officer. Little is known about Aksakov's married life, apart from the depictions that appear in his autobiographical novels and some brief descriptions in the writings of his son, Ivan Aksakov. By both accounts, Aksakov enjoyed a healthy relationship with Olga, as well as a happy and stable family life. Over the course of their marriage, Aksakov and his wife had fourteen children, although four died in infancy. Shortly after their marriage they settled in the countryside near Aksakov's paternal estate, where they remained for the next decade. During these years Aksakov dedicated himself to his duties as a landowner and father, while devoting his free time to hunting and fishing.

Aksakov's life underwent a dramatic change following the Decembrist Revolt of 1825. In addition to provoking harsh reprisals from Tsar Nicholas I, the uprising inspired a conservative backlash among Russia's leading intelligentsia, providing fertile ground for Admiral Shishkov's Slavophilic ideology. Shishkov himself was named minister of education in 1826. A year later, after accepting Shishkov's invitation to serve as government censor, Aksakov moved with his family to Moscow. He held the government position sporadically for the next several years. Throughout this period he published numerous articles and reviews in literary journals and befriended a number of influential writers, among them the historian and journalist Mikhail Pogodin, as well as the literary critic Nikolai Nadezhdin, with whom he collaborated in publishing the short-lived journal *Teleskop*. Aksakov also met the author Nikolai Gogol during these years, forming a friendship that would endure until Gogol's death in 1852.

In 1833 Aksakov published his first short story, "Buran" ("The Blizzard"), in the *Dennitsa* almanac. That same year he was named inspector of the Konstantin Geodetic School, a training academy for land surveyors. He eventually became director of the school, retiring from his post in 1839 after receiving substantial inheritances following the deaths of his parents. Free to pursue his literary interests full-time, and with Gogol's encouragement, Aksakov began to write prose in earnest. His home became a salon for the next generation of writers

and critics, among them Gogol, Pogodin, and Vissarion Belinsky. His first volume of essays, a collection of sketches on fishing entitled *Zapiski ob uzhen'e* (*Notes on Fishing*), appeared in 1847. In 1852 he published a book of hunting essays, *Zapiski ruzheinogo okhotnika Orenburgskoi gubernii* (*Notes of a Provincial Wildfowler*). During these years Aksakov also worked diligently on his chronicles of Russian pastoral life, publishing both *The Family Chronicle* and *Vospominaniia prezhnei zhizni* (*A Russian Schoolboy*) in 1856, followed in 1858 by *Years of Childhood*. In 1857 he had begun working on a novel, *Kopyt'ev*, although by this time he had become gravely ill, and the work remained unfinished at his death. In spite of his worsening health, Aksakov managed to maintain contact with Russia's literati in his last years, befriending younger authors like Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev. Aksakov died of kidney failure on April 30, 1859.

MAJOR WORKS

Aksakov's reputation rests primarily on his trilogy of autobiographical novels: *The Family Chronicle*, *A Russian Schoolboy*, and *Years of Childhood*. The first of these sagas, *The Family Chronicle*, focuses on Stepan Mikhailovich Bagrov, the fictional alter-ego of Aksakov's grandfather. In many respects, Bagrov is the quintessential patriarch, a strong-willed, larger-than-life figure whose determination and ambition enable him to carve a family empire out of the unsettled regions of central Russia. Into Bagrov's world Aksakov introduces the acutely different character Mikhailo Maksimovich Kurolesov, an opportunistic and unscrupulous young man who contrives to marry Bagrov's cousin. Eventually, Kurolesov's philandering and cruelty provoke Bagrov's wrath, and the patriarch has one of his serfs poison Kurolesov. The work concludes with an extended chronicle devoted to Bagrov's son, Alexei Stepanich, depicting the early days of his marriage and culminating with the birth of his son, Sergei. In *A Russian Schoolboy*, considered by the majority of scholars to be the most autobiographical of the three works, Aksakov recounts his personal experience of leaving home to attend Kazan gymnasium. The novel provides one of the few existing accounts of Aksakov's formative years, while serving as a valuable chronicle of Russian life during the Napoleonic years. *Years of Childhood* moves backward in time, recounting Aksakov's earliest years from the point of view of his childhood self. In each of the three narratives, Aksakov delivers a profound statement on the importance of family, suggesting that the individual is always subservient to the broader forces of history, society, and custom. The novels remain important examples of nineteenth-century fictional realism.

Aksakov was also an accomplished essayist. In such works as *Notes on Fishing* and *Notes of a Provincial Wildfowler*, he describes his life-long passion for fishing

and hunting. The books offer practical advice for anglers and hunters and include painstaking descriptions of technique, gear, and habitats. On a deeper level, however, the works reveal Aksakov's ideas concerning the powerful relationship between human beings and the natural world. The essays are also noteworthy for their unpretentious, conversational style and are in themselves important examples of the realistic mode. A collection of essays and memoirs, *Rasskazy i vospominaniia okhotnika o raznykh okhotakh*, appeared in 1855, and the memoir *Literaturnye i teatral'nye vospominaniia* (1856) followed a year later. Published posthumously, *Istoriia moego znakovstva s Gogolem* (1890) chronicles Aksakov's friendship with Nikolai Gogol and offers valuable insights into Gogol's personality, his writing methods, and his impact on his contemporaries.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Sergei Aksakov enjoyed widespread acclaim in Russia during his lifetime. His earliest champions included Leo Tolstoy, who praised the naturalness and realism of Aksakov's prose, and the radical critic N. A. Dobroliubov, who was among the first to argue for the inherent political value of Aksakov's approach to fiction. Opponents of Dobroliubov, notably Pavel Annenkov, focused on the objective aspects of Aksakov's work, insisting that the contemplative qualities of his narratives divorced them from any particular social context. By the 1890s, historian Pavel Milukov had singled out Aksakov's autobiographical novels as among the most enduring and influential works of the nineteenth century; indeed, Milukov argued that the average Russian's idea of childhood had been shaped to a large degree by Aksakov's chronicles. Although Aksakov's works were banned during much of the Soviet era, they remained of interest to scholars in the West. Important twentieth-century commentators included J. D. Duff, who was the first to translate the trilogy into English, and D. S. Mirsky, who offered a valuable critique of Aksakov's works in his *A History of Russian Literature from Its Beginnings to 1900* (1927). Writing in the 1960s, Ralph Matlaw examined the relationship between Aksakov's attitude toward nature and his realistic prose style. In the late twentieth century, Aksakov's work began to attract the attention of a new generation of scholars, among them Andrew Durkin, whose 1983 publication *Sergei Aksakov and Russian Pastoral* remains one of the only book-length studies of the author's work in English; and Richard Gregg, who has investigated questions of genre as they relate to Aksakov's innovative fiction-writing practices. In the late 1990s the Northwestern University Press produced the first English translations of Aksakov's essays: *Notes on Fishing* came out in 1997 and *Notes of a Provincial Wildfowler* in 1998.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- "Buran" ["The Blizzard"] (short story) 1833; published in almanac *Dennitsa*
 **Zapiski ob uzhen'e* [*Notes on Fishing*] (essays) 1847; also published as *Zapiski ob uzhen'e ryby*, 1854
Zapiski ruzheĭnogo okhotnika Orenburgskoi gubernii [*Notes of a Provincial Wildfowler*] (essays) 1852
Rasskazy i vospominaniia okhotnika o raznykh okhotakh (essays and memoirs) 1855
Literaturnye i teatral'nye vospominaniia (memoirs) 1856
Semeinaia khronika [*Memoirs of the Aksakov Family (A Family Chronicle, Part I); A Russian Gentleman; The Family Chronicle*] (novel) 1856
Vospominaniia prezheĭ zhizni [*A Russian Schoolboy*] (novel) 1856
Detskie gody Bagrova-vnuka [*Years of Childhood*] (novel) 1858
Polnoe sobranie sochinenii S. T. Aksakova. 6 vols. (prose) 1886
Istoriia moego znakovstva s Gogolem (memoirs) 1890
Sobranie sochinenii. 4 vols. (prose) 1955-56
Sobranie sochinenii. 5 vols. (prose) 1966

*Includes additional translations of selected essays and poems.

CRITICISM

Xenia Glowacki-Prus (essay date 1974)

SOURCE: Glowacki-Prus, Xenia. "Sergey Aksakov as a Biographer of Childhood." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, n.s. no. 2 (1974): 19-37.

[In the following essay, Glowacki-Prus examines the narrative strategies Aksakov uses in his 1858 autobiography *Years of Childhood*.]

*Mon âme est ce lac même où le soleil qui penche
 Par un beau soir d'automne envoie un feu mourant.*

Sainte-Beuve

I

Aksakov wrote *Detskiye gody Bagrova vnuka*¹ in 1857 (at the age of sixty-five), and published it in the following year. It was the last of his important works and, as far as the author was concerned, the most demanding one. Aksakov told Pogodin: "I finished my book on 19 June. For a night and a day I was sad like a child. I do not know if my work is good, but I have put a great deal of my soul into it and feel a kind of emptiness."²

Detskiye gody [*Detskie gody Bagrova-vnuka*] has achieved considerable fame both in Russia and abroad.³ It was the only book by Aksakov to be allowed publication after the Revolution, when most of his work was banned,⁴ and it seems to have enjoyed the same popularity in post-revolutionary Russia as in Aksakov's own days. Very few critics were hostile to the book,⁵ most saw it in a favourable light,⁶ and a few considered it an idealisation.⁷ Although many articles and reviews have been published about it there is no comprehensive critical analysis and appraisal of the work, for critics, when writing about *Detskiye gody*, have usually quoted from the book only to illustrate its chief protagonists and its treatment of nature and the peasants, and have drawn rather superficial conclusions. Some neglected problems are the influence of his surroundings on the little narrator, the role of the narrator himself, and finally the question as to why Aksakov found it necessary to disguise himself under a pseudonym in *Detskiye gody* and *Semeynaya khronika* whereas in *Vospominaniya* he did not use this device. Aksakov was annoyed when critics of the day linked *Vospominaniya* and *Semeynaya khronika* together, as can be seen in both his introductions to the latter work.⁸

Although Aksakov gave little Seryozha the name Bagrov, and otherwise tried to dissociate himself from the work, his book is nonetheless completely autobiographical. Unlike Tolstoy's *Detstvo*, where there is an intentional fictional element, Aksakov's work does recount the story of Sergey Timofeyevich's own childhood. It is enough to read Arkhangel'sky's article on this subject to be completely reassured about the authenticity of most of the happenings in *Detskiye gody*,⁹ and Aksakov's own introduction to the book is most revealing. No one could have written this kind of introduction if he were recounting somebody else's childhood.¹⁰ It would have been dishonest and unnecessary to write such an introduction had Aksakov been describing somebody else's childhood. Aksakov must have had his reasons for this masquerade and one may only attempt to guess at them.

In order to appreciate fully the role of the little narrator it is important to study first the environment in which he grew up and the various forces that converged on him. In particular we must assess these from Seryozha's point of view, and only later will it be possible to evaluate which elements played a part in the author's development and remained with him for over sixty years. Aksakov wrote a book about his childhood; the reading audience he had in mind was children. This in itself is a unique phenomenon in his day; another feature of this book is that there is a constant dialogue between Seryozha the little boy and the wise old man rediscovering and unveiling the past with all the sensitivity and dawning awareness of the child.¹¹ Yet the illusion that the child is telling the story is complete.

II

Sof'ya Nikolavna, Seryozha's mother (Aksakov spells several names phonetically in *Detskiye gody*), is considered an outstandingly brilliant and progressive woman, *krasavitsa ufimskogo bomonda*¹² and a 'Russian Cinderella'.¹³ She is the character who, after Seryozha himself, has attracted most attention, yet she has always been appraised from what is known about Aksakov's own mother and from the descriptions of Sof'ya Nikolavna, before and after her marriage to Aleksey Stepanych Bagrov in *Semeynaya khronika*. There is no reason why Seryozha's mother should not be assessed simply in the light of how she appears and behaves throughout *Detskiye gody*, where she is one of the more interesting, if less charming protagonists.

We learn very little from Seryozha about his mother's looks. He notices that sometimes she looks very beautiful, that in fact she is the most beautiful lady he knows,¹⁴ but he also frequently points out how drawn and tired she seems, how jaundiced she looks when she is ill. He seems to notice his mother's ill health far more than her outward appearance. He hardly ever comments on her dresses, except that we can deduce that they were different from those of his grandmother and aunt in Bagrovo, for they seemed to dress like the servants.¹⁵ He only once points out that his mother took great care in getting dressed, and that was when they were invited to see the rich landowner Durasov.¹⁶ The same applies to his father. Aksakov, who always liked to describe in detail the physiognomy and clothing of his characters, gives us no clues as to the appearance of all those around him, whom he loved. What Sof'ya Nikolavna or her husband, his little sister Nadezha or his brother, Yevseich, his *dyad'ka*, or Parasha, looked like is completely irrelevant to the little boy; all that matters is that they love him, he feels at home with them and therefore he notices their spiritual qualities and none of their physical ones. It is only when the family travels to Churasovo that we find out that Seryozha's little sister is described as *zamukhryshka*, and his brother *chernushka*, by their grand-aunt, Praskov'ya Ivanovna.¹⁷ On the other hand Seryozha notes in great detail all the ordinary and extraordinary people he meets and all the strange new sights.

Seryozha's portrayal of his family and Yevseich is chiefly a psychological one; even then a great deal remains unsaid and the reader must draw his own conclusions. It seems that in all autobiographies there is a 'cone of darkness at the centre, even in those outstanding psychological documents',¹⁸ and *Detskiye gody* undoubtedly is a 'psychological document'.

The reader sees from the very beginning of the tale how different Seryozha's parents are from most of their relatives, who are on the whole ignorant, petty and jealous.

ous. Seryozha's grandfather, the formidable Stepan Mikhaylych, and his eldest daughter Aksin'ya Stepanovna are the only relatives of Aleksey Stepanych who have the same regard for truth and honesty as he and his wife; another characteristic Aleksey Stepanych shares with his father is his faith in tradition and the awareness of the responsibility which he carries towards his peasants as their landowner. Stepan Mikhaylych is an autocrat and rules his household in the old patriarchal way; he is occasionally violent¹⁹ and has little time to waste on Seryozha who is afraid of him and cannot speak up for himself. His son, Aleksey Stepanych, is meek on the surface and never fights unnecessary battles with his wife. Most critics²⁰ are content to stop at this meekness, but in fact it conceals a great deal of determination. It is not the strong-willed Sof'ya Nikolavna who gets her own way with Praskov'ya Ivanovna,²¹ another autocratic personality, but the meek Aleksey Stepanych. He also gets his own way with the peasants, not by using violence or force but by means of gentleness. Mironych does as he is told,²² and even the spoilt and badly-trained Churasov servants behave with more courtesy towards the Bagrovs than towards anyone else,²³ while the peasants are genuinely devoted to him. Sof'ya Nikolavna, on the other hand, cannot stand any contact with servants or peasants. This is one of her most unpleasant characteristics. Seryozha reiterates many times how intelligent his mother is, and the aforementioned critics also stress her intellectual superiority over her husband.²⁴ Yet there is very little trace of any outstanding intelligence about her, especially in her behaviour towards the peasants, whom she always refuses to see (thereby making herself extremely unpopular with them),²⁵ and in her behaviour towards her relatives. She mocks her husband's favourite hobbies, such as fishing, hunting and collecting mushrooms,²⁶ and is inordinately possessive of Seryozha, although, by the end of the book, she has four children. Seryozha recounts her behaviour faithfully, together with his own astonishment at it, and, although she is by no means a stupid woman, she behaves in a most shortsighted and spoilt fashion towards many people, displaying trivial and vulgar class-conscious traits which her allegedly less intelligent husband does not possess.

Unlike his wife, Aleksey Stepanych and the little Seryozha remain unaware of class distinctions. They remain what they are, and are valued for what they are by the peasants; and they in turn treat both the peasants and their work with the deference due to any human being.²⁷ Sof'ya Nikolavna is incapable of this, just as she is incapable of forgiving and trying to understand her relatives, whom she simply despises, as she tells her sister-in-law Tat'yana Stepanovna.²⁸ She chooses the way of least resistance in certain situations. Instead of assuming her role as mistress of the house when her mother-in-law dies (she may be forgiven for not assuming this

role earlier) she simply asks Tat'yana Stepanovna, her husband's unmarried youngest sister, to carry on looking after the house. If she really had this fine intelligence which is attributed to her, if she were not such an intransigent egoist towards anyone except her own children (and at times her husband and particular friends), if she were more aware of other people's feelings, she would have been a far more endearing character. Her one great redeeming feature is her love for her children—and particularly for Seryozha whom she virtually saved from an untimely death when he was a very young child. Yet even her love for the child seems excessive, as her husband points out to her.²⁹ Time and again she limits little Seryozha's enjoyment of life by her cold and dispassionate attitude to his dearly beloved sports, but he faithfully recounts everything to her, and in the end she makes him feel so guilty that he does not love her enough³⁰ that the child stays with his mother almost all the time. It is fortunate for Seryozha that his love for nature proves a very serious rival for his mother's affection; had it not been for that and the extreme level-headedness of his father, Sof'ya Nikolavna might have caused a great deal of damage to Seryozha by her excessive, demanding love, which verges on hysteria.

Sof'ya Nikolavna is neither an outstandingly brilliant and intelligent woman nor a Russian Cinderella, even if it is in old Bagrov that (according to Pritchett) she finds her Prince Charming.³¹ She is simply an honest, moderately intelligent woman, a town-dweller despising country-folk and life, who is bored with the country and, finding little companionship in her immediate circle, promotes her eldest son to the role of friend and confidant. She loves her husband, which is evident in the closing chapters when her mother-in-law dies and Aleksey Stepanych is overcome by grief,³² but she does not have the loving heart which her husband, son and daughter possess. She has none of the qualities that Baring sees in Seryozha, when he writes that:

One is spellbound by the charm, the dignity, the good-nature, the gentle easy accent of the speaker, in whom one feels convinced not only that there was nothing common or mean, but who was a gentleman by character as well as by lineage, one of God's as well as one of Russia's nobility.³³

Moore maintained that it was not Seryozha but his father who was the chief character of *Detskiye gody*.³⁴ As mentioned earlier, Aleksey Stepanych is usually considered as not particularly intelligent, and too weak compared to his wife. It is true that one may miss the resolution hidden underneath Aleksey Stepanych's meekness, but it is impossible not to appreciate his great spiritual qualities, and admire him for preserving them intact regardless of a milieu not very conducive to gentleness, sweetness of disposition or fairness. Seryozha's father is no more the 'principal character'³⁵ than Seryozha himself. Moore is wrong; *Detskiye gody* does

not possess a principal character, and the little narrator, his father and mother are simply to be considered *primi inter pares*.

Yevseich, Seryozha's *dyad'ka* and constant companion, is another purely Russian type, cast in the same mould as old Bagrov. Parasha, Seryozha's sister Nadezha's nanny, likes her charge, but we get the feeling she is merely doing her work whereas Yevseich has a strong attachment to his work and to Seryozha. In many ways childlike, he enjoys fishing and collecting mushrooms as much as the little boy. He is a man with apparently no family ties (or at least they are never mentioned), who loves and protects little Seryozha, guarding him from such pitfalls as falling into a river or seeing the uncomely behaviour of the Churasov servants. He is in many ways a simpler version of Aleksey Stepanych, and it seems throughout *Detskiye gody* that Seryozha is happiest when in the company of his father or Yevseich. Yevseich as he is portrayed in *Detskiye gody* does not display any negative characteristics.

Seryozha frequently mentions his love for his little sister and his mother, less frequently does he analyse his feelings towards his father; he certainly never discusses his emotions with Aleksey Stepanych. But he never mentions his affection for Yevseich. It seems that the idea of loving or not loving his most faithful companion has never occurred to him. Unlike his mother, father and sister, Yevseich is always there to look after Seryozha, care for him, make his fishing rods and share the joys of catching fish, picking mushrooms and berries with him. The little boy tells Yevseich everything, just as he does with his little sister. It seems therefore that both for Seryozha, and for Aksakov writing the book sixty years later, it was unnecessary to uncover what Pascal calls the 'cone of darkness': Yevseich was Seryozha's friend, and Seryozha did not need to reassure himself that he loved him, he took it for granted that it was so.

Seryozha's little sister is portrayed only in glimpses. From what her brother recounts she must have been an extraordinarily patient child, for she always listens to the fairy tales and accounts of books that Seryozha has read, and all the new sights he has seen, shares wholeheartedly in his joys and grief and above all is not jealous of her mother's attention to her eldest son. Seryozha is aware of this, and points out that his sister did not like to stay in his mother's room, that she would leave at the earliest opportunity; and although at the time he thought she did not love her mother enough, she did in fact love her far more deeply than he himself.³⁶ Hardly anything is mentioned about the youngest brother, who is born during the tale, except that both children were delighted about this new arrival and were fully prepared to accept him and love him as much as they did one another. The children never quarrel; this

may be accounted for by the literary interests of the brother and the compliant character of his sister who listened to Seryozha for hours, and even put up with Seryozha's attempts to teach her how to read. The first attempts led to little success but, when the teacher reached the mature age of seven and his sister five, some results were achieved.

This is the small circle of people that counted for Seryozha. He learnt to like his grandfather and grandmother, after their death, and later his aunt Tat'yana Stepanovna. The grandmother, not a very likeable character, with a predilection for bad eggs and wormy mushrooms, scares little Seryozha by shouting and beating one of the servant girls.³⁷ After the death of her husband, Arina Vasil'yevna seems to age greatly and hardly takes any part in the life of Bagrovo, so that we learn little about her. Seryozha avoided her after the episode with the servant girl and possibly because he felt a hidden hostility towards himself and his mother. Arina Vasil'yevna's dislike of Sof'ya Nikolavna, whose position was made very difficult on this account, is clear from her dying words as reported by Aksin'ya Stepanovna asking for Sof'ya Nikolavna's forgiveness.³⁸ Tat'yana Stepanovna is faintly sketched by Seryozha except for her hoarding habits. She has a *zavetnyy ambar* where she has collected a rather overwhelming dowry which is guarded by Matryosha when all the things in it are taken out for an airing in spring. She does not seem to be a particularly intelligent woman, and is fully aware that she is a country bumpkin (*derevenshchina*).³⁹ For this reason she refuses to visit Praskov'ya Ivanovna in the more fashionable Churasovo and causes a great deal of amusement to Parasha and Yevseich by asking her brother to transport the contents of the *zavetnyy ambar* to her sister's estate, as she did not consider it safe to leave it unattended in Bagrovo.⁴⁰ She is basically kind—unlike her other sisters, particularly the *General'sha*, Yelizaveta Stepanovna.

Praskov'ya Ivanovna is portrayed in the book more as the older Bagrov, that is Sergey Timofeyevich, knew her, rather than through Seryozha. Her tale is told in *Semeynaya khronika*. As far as the little Seryozha is concerned he likes her and values her, for she too is straightforward, honest, and cannot stand any artificiality; but the child cannot appreciate or understand this extraordinary woman and therefore she remains a driving force in the background, somebody whose wish is everybody's command, whom nobody dares disobey.

III

Pearsall-Smith wrote in his review of Duff's translation of *Years of Childhood*:

The fact that the boy is a Russian boy largely explains our interest, and this for several reasons. There is in the first place the charm of geography and local colour; for

if Aksakoff's experiences themselves are not unusual, their setting is quite strange and unfamiliar to us; we are transported to one of the remotest corners of Europe . . . into a half barbaric country full of Tartars and nomad tribes; and the life of this region is presented to us with extraordinary richness.⁴¹

However, Pearsall-Smith is wrong in thinking that only the English reading public would find these traits interesting. The Russian reading public in 1858 had found Seryozha's descriptions of nature, people and traditions just as fascinating, and so have many readers since. When describing 'geography and local colour' Aksakov reverts to his usual descriptive style, using every minute detail that he can recollect, in order to give the reader as clear a picture as possible. Some critics found the detail excessive and unnecessary; if Stankevich had had his way *Detskiye gody* would have been reduced by at least two thirds,⁴² and Vengerov says that the descriptions of nature are very tedious.⁴³

Detskiye gody is a treasure house of information, conveyed quite unconsciously by the author, about a way of life that survived until the Revolution. In Seryozha's tale, customs, traditions and people deserve some of our attention.

It is impossible to enumerate all the customs portrayed in the book, for one cannot dissociate them from the life of those days. Seryozha mentions many little points: his father blessing the children before they retire to bed,⁴⁴ the description of the peasants meeting the Bagrovs and being genuinely delighted at seeing them, although they did not personally know them;⁴⁵ the icon of Saint Nicholas that Seryozha spots in the stable;⁴⁶ the jam-making, when the children are given the sugary coating that forms on top of the jam boiling in huge brass cauldrons;⁴⁷ the wet-nurse, dressed in her 'finery' and full of her own importance;⁴⁸ and Yevseich telling the little boy that he was too late to see how *solnyshko igrayet* on Easter Day.⁴⁹

These are just a few small details of traditional life with which the little narrator acquaints us. Two more important aspects are the relationship between landowner and peasant, and the attitude to death; for in *Detskiye gody* we witness three deaths, those of Seryozha's grandfather and grandmother, and the old miller Boltunyonok, who dies by misadventure on Easter Day.⁵⁰

Seryozha's father takes the little boy with him when he is overseeing the work at Bagrovo or in some of the villages belonging to Praskov'ya Ivanovna. The child is struck by the rhythmic beauty of the work in the fields and notes that, although the work is hard, the peasants remain cheerful⁵¹ except when either the weather, shortage of labour or illness amongst the cattle depress them; even as a very young child, during his first encounter with the peasants, Seryozha feels as sorry as his father

and the peasants that they will not have time to store the corn.⁵² The usual greeting uttered by Seryozha's father was: *Bog na pomoshch'*; to which the peasants would answer: *Blagodarstvuyte, Aleksey Stepanych*; after which they would either carry on with their work, or the *starshina* would have a conversation with Bagrov. Once when there has been a particularly bad drought in Parashino one of the peasants points out the weeds growing in the fields. Aleksey Stepanych answers: *Kak byt', volya Bozh'ya* . . . to which the peasant replies gently: *Vestimo tak, batyushka*.⁵³ These words remained with Aksakov all his life; it was only later on, he notes, that he understood their true meaning.⁵⁴ Golovin's comment is particularly appropriate when he writes that the relationship between the people in Aksakov's book is based not on the letter of the law but on a tradition which has become part of the people,⁵⁵ and which they accept and honour.

Death is accepted in a matter of fact way. The household wail, as apparently was the custom in those days,⁵⁶ but no-one seems to lose his appetite after a death, be it of a father or mother, except for Sof'ya Nikolavna. The womenfolk in the family, although they wail, do not seem to be excessively cast down in spirits and even manage to get slightly tipsy during Stepan Mikhaylych's wake.⁵⁷ This does not necessarily show lack of affection or grief for the departed: after all, Tat'yana Stepanovna, who takes part in the wake, gives as one of her reasons for not going to Churasovo the fact that she has to go and visit her mother's grave and order *panikhidy* to be sung.⁵⁸

All the traditional customs surrounding a death are strictly observed. Two *psalomshchiki* read in the room of the departed for nine days, day and night, and the little Seryozha goes and reads from the Book of Psalms on the ninth day,⁵⁹ when a Requiem is always sung in the Russian Orthodox Church. The relatives all congregate on the ninth day of Stepan Mikhaylych's death and on the fortieth day of Arina Vasil'yevna's for this again is traditional. The guests wail, cry and grieve, dutifully go to church although the road to the church is virtually impassable (Arina Vasil'yevna died in November) and, as Aksakov recalls for the fourth time, the guests ate, drank, cried, reminisced and then left.⁶⁰

In *Detskiye gody*, as in all his other works, Aksakov remains a master portrait-painter. There is the pathetic figure of the *zasyпка*, Vasilii Terent'yev,⁶¹ the shrewd Mironych with his extraordinary eyes,⁶² descriptions of the Mordva,⁶³ the Bashkirs.⁶⁴ Aksakov shows people working, having a day off, or simply gazing at the river Belaya when the ice started breaking up, feeling sorry about a black cow that got stranded on a little island of ice, but laughing at the antics of a dog in a similar plight, since they thought, according to Seryozha, that the dog would save itself, whereas the cow would cer-