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Images of Women in the Works of Ivan Turgenev

The author Ivan Turgenev has been celebrated for imagining female characters who are beautiful, strong-willed, and independent. This tendency is perhaps most pronounced in Turgenev’s novellas Asya (“Asia,” 1858) and First Love (“Pervaia liubov’,” 1860) and his novel Spring Torrents (“Veshnie vody,” 1872), in which a male narrator recounts a “powerful, transcendent, erotic experience from his youth.” At the heart of each man’s tale is a young woman who is to never to reappear in their lives again. And in each story, the male narrator invokes well-known paintings to express his desire for his lost beloved and to conjure her alluring physical beauty. The paintings play a key role in the stories’ narrative structure; their appearance frames the romance at the center of the story in both a visual and narrative sense.

These paintings have received minimal scholarly attention to date. While scholars are certainly aware of the visual references, they offer virtually no interpretation of the paintings’ role within the narrative. Joe Andrew, for one, mentions the paintings in a passing comment as part of his broader analysis of the tragic female types associated with Turgenev’s heroines. Even a recent dissertation titled “The Female Portrait in the Prose of I. S. Turgenev” surprisingly provides only a very brief discussion of the role the paintings play in Turgenev’s fiction and does not address

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1 This article is a revised segment of my undergraduate honors thesis at Bowdoin College titled “Images of Women in the Works of Ivan Turgenev and Aleksei Kharlamov.” The thesis was supervised by Professor Alyssa Dinega Gillespie, chair of the Russian Department.

2 While not an exhaustive list, gender criticism on Turgenev’s heroines includes the following: Andrew, “The Lady Vanishes,” 87–97; Costlow, “On the Eve and the Sirens of Stasis,” 82–105; Gheith, 226–244; and Heldt, 12–24.

3 Joe Andrew uses this phrase to describe the narrative mode of “Asya” and “First Love.” I am extending it to include Spring Torrents. See Andrew, Women in Russian Literature, 113.

4 See, for instance, his “Death and the Maiden,” 40. See also O’Toole, 147–160 for a discussion of the tragic female types associated with Asya.
how the paintings enhance the image of the heroine or how their invocation plays out in the plot’s unfolding.\(^5\)

Before looking more closely at the paintings referenced in “Asya,” “First Love,” and *Spring Torrents*, it is important first to recognize the centrality of the visual arts, especially painting, to Turgenev’s narratives. The author Henry James documented Turgenev’s creative method in his 1894 book of literary criticism *Partial Portraits*, noting Turgenev’s articulation of extended character biographies or dossiers prior to beginning a new work:

> The first thing was to make clear to himself what he did know [about the character], to begin with; and to this end, he wrote out a sort of biography of each of his characters, and everything that they had done and that had happened to them up to the opening of the story [...] With this material in hand, he was able to proceed; the story all lay in the question, What shall I make them do?\(^6\)

The dossiers of these fictional characters presuppose plot, which arises purely as a result of the characters’ actions and interactions. James writes further that “the great strength of such a portrait consisted in its being at once an individual, of the most concrete sort, and a type. This is the great strength of [Turgenev’s] representations of character; they are so strangely, fascinatedly particular, and yet they are so remarkably general.”\(^7\) James’ comments posit the centrality of these illustrated “types” or character portraits for Turgenev’s creative process and point to a fundamental intertwining of the visual in Turgenev’s literary art.\(^8\)

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5 Iusef, 83. Iusef’s study sheds light on the literary formulation of portraits in a number of Turgenev’s works, including “Asya,” “First Love,” “Three Portraits” («Tri portreta», 1846), and *Spring Torrents*. Iusef contends that the paintings mentioned in Turgenev’s *Spring Torrents* and “Asya” are “psychological portraits” that the narrator can hide behind, thereby avoiding the need to realize and outwardly express his inner emotions.

6 James, 315.

7 Ibid., 317–318.

8 Turgenev’s artistic capabilities went beyond simple sketches, as he also engaged in the “Portrait Game,” which he invented and first played in 1856 at the Viardots’ summer home outside Paris, the Château de Courtavenel. The game consisted of Turgenev’s sketching a portrait of an imaginary person whose character he and the other participants would describe in a paragraph
It is not surprising that Turgenev, an intellectual who spent the majority of his life in progressive social circles in France and Germany, was keenly attentive to the artistic currents of the day, both in Western Europe and at home in Russia. Turgenev often praised the works of Raphael among other old masters and believed that Russia’s artists must look to the European Renaissance as an aesthetic model. In his correspondence and cultural criticism, and through his fictional characters, Turgenev affirms the value of artistic influence from outside of Russia. For example, Turgenev’s polemical duo in the novel *Fathers and Sons*—the superfluous aristocrat Pavel Petrovich Kirsanov and the nihilist prototype Bazarov—demonstrate the author’s debate on the relative value of the arts and sciences. Bazarov, positivist and utilitarian in outlook, finds no use in looking back to Raphael and the High Renaissance. Kirsanov, on the other hand, represents those who value the aesthetic power of this artistic movement. As Irene Pearson notes, Turgenev’s aesthetic views fall on Kirsanov’s side: “Turgenev shared Kirsanov’s belief in the dangers of negating the great figures of European civilization: Russia could not skip the difficult but fundamental step of learning from the geniuses of the past if she wished to develop her own national culture.”

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9 Turgenev chronicles his visit to Raphael’s Villa Madonna in his 1861 autobiographical story “A Trip to Albano and Frascati” (“Poezdka v Al’bano i Fraskati”) and records his reactions to the visually and emotionally evocative Italian villa. Turgenev finds an innate visual and emotional aesthetic in the dilapidated yet monumental villa. Turgenev moreover locates this rhetoric in the works of Alexander Pushkin, notably the poem “On the hills of Georgia...” ("Na kholmakh Gruzii...").

10 Leonard Schapiro confirms that Turgenev’s artistic preferences appeared throughout his fiction: “Turgenev’s love of Italian painting is a constant theme in his letters, and is also evident in some of his fiction [...] His taste seems to have been mainly for the painters of the High Renaissance—Raphael above all” (136).

11 Pearson, 366.
Written over a fifteen-year period, “First Love,” “Asya,” and *Spring Torrents* share autobiographical elements from Turgenev’s life. For example, the journey of the main character in *Spring Torrents*, Dmitrii Sanin, is loosely based on Turgenev’s travels to Italy in the summer of 1840, when he saw the paintings of the Italian Renaissance for the first time.\(^\text{12}\) Likewise, as Leonard Schapiro remarks, Turgenev “on a number of occasions […] referred to [“First Love”] as completely autobiographical.”\(^\text{13}\) “Asya” similarly draws on the author’s biography; Turgenev wrote the short story, which takes place in the hills above the Rhine river, as he was recovering from an illness in Germany in 1857.\(^\text{14}\)

In each of these tales the protagonist (Vladimir, N. N., and Sanin respectively) relates a moment in his life that is never to be repeated again: the experience of falling in love (with Zinaida, Asya, and Gemma, respectively). In relating these experiences each narrator invokes paintings, which serve three distinct purposes. The first is rather straightforward: to augment the literal description of the female character’s appearance with a visual aid. Secondly, these paintings appear at key points in the narrative (such as the moment when the male narrator has fallen in love with the heroine) to convey the protagonists’ emotional and psychological transformation. Lastly, the paintings frame the narrator’s failed relationship by marking its beginning and end.

*Spring Torrents*

Written in 1872, *Spring Torrents* takes place in the summer of 1840. It is the story of twenty-three-year-old Dmitrii Sanin, who, after touring Italy, stops in Frankfurt for a night while travelling home to Russia. As Sanin is walking around the city, he meets the beautiful Italian

\(^\text{12}\) Schapiro, 249.
\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 2–3.
\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 128. Schapiro also notes that Turgenev met a young, attractive Russian girl near the “little watering place on the Rhine” that “gave him inspiration to start writing […] ‘Asya’” (130).
Gemma Roselli, the daughter of a Frankfurt confectioner. Immediately infatuated with Gemma, Sanin goes to great lengths to win her hand in marriage, even fighting a duel to uphold her honor. After becoming engaged to her, Sanin impetuously decides to sell his entire estate in Russia to finance their marriage. He is forced to deal financially with Madame Polozov, a beautiful and wealthy Russian woman of peasant origins, in order to complete the sale. Despite his best efforts to resist her temptations, Sanin eventually succumbs to Madame Polozov’s advances (Schapiro writes that Sanin is “drawn [….] into the magnetic field of her physical attraction”15) and returns too late to Gemma: she has left for America and married another man.

At the beginning of their thrilling and intense courtship, Sanin invokes a painting that captures Gemma’s stunning beauty more accurately than words. After secretly stealing a glance at Gemma as she talks to her mother, Sanin describes her face in great detail:

   Her nose was slightly large, but of a beautiful aquiline shape. There was a faint trace of down on her upper lip. Her skin was smooth and without luster, for all the world as if she were made of ivory or of meerschaum, and her hair fell in a wave like that of Allori’s Judith in the Palazzo Pitti. 16

The subject matter of Cristofano Allori’s painting Judith with the Head of Holofernes (fig. 1) derives from the deuterocanonical Book of Judith, in which the Assyrian King Holofernes is

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15 Turgenev, Spring Torrents, 250.
16 Ibid., 19: Нос у нее был несколько велик, но красивого, орлиного ладу, верхнюю губу чуть-чуть оттенял пушок; зато цвет лица, ровный и матовый, ни дать ни взять слоновая кость или молочный янтарь, волнистый лоск волос, как у Аллориевой Юдифи в Палаццо-Питти. Turgenev, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 11:13. This edition is hereafter abbreviated as PSS.
dispatched by King Nebuchadnezzar to take vengeance on the town of Bethulia. Judith, a beautiful widow, seduces Holofernes and decapitates him to save her city from imminent destruction. In this tale, Judith symbolizes virtue and liberty in her ability to help the weak defeat the strong. Sanin’s invocation of Allori’s painting adds to Sanin’s brief description of Gemma by connecting the reader to a visual association that enhances her beauty and implies that she has the same strength and virtue that Judith embodies.

Soon after catching sight of Gemma, in the course of their first interactions Sanin mentions a second painting that functions in much the same way as Allori’s: to enhance the description of his beloved. Upon returning the next morning to the Rosellis’ patisserie shop, Sanin is this time struck by her hands:

That day Sanin was particularly impressed by the elegant beauty of her hands. Every time she raised them to smooth or rearrange the dark, gleaming waves of her hair he could not take his eyes off these long, pliant, well-separated fingers, like those of Raphael’s Fornarina.\footnote{Turgenev, \textit{Spring Torrents}, 36: Санина в тот день особенно поразила изящная красота ее рук: когда она поправляла и поддерживала ими свои темные, лоснящиеся кудри—взор его не мог оторваться от ее пальцев, гибких и длинных и отделенных дружка от дружка, как у Рафаэлевой Форнарины. Turgenev, PSS, 11:29.} Raphael’s \textit{La Fornarina} (fig. 2) is a portrait of the artist’s “last and most desired lover,” who is depicted semi-naked against a background of a myrtle bush.\footnote{Forcellino, 186–187. Irene Pearson discusses other depictions of La Fornarina in addition to Raphael’s. See Pearson, 367.} The art historian Antonio Forcellino notes that La Fornarina wears “a Roman-style turban around her head” and a golden arm band on her wrist inscribed with the words \textit{Raphael Urbinas} (the artist’s name in Latin).\footnote{Ibid. Forcellino argues that this element is “a token of the woman’s ownership rather than of the painting’s authorship.”} In

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the same manner that Allori’s *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* enhances Sanin’s description of Gemma’s facial features, Raphael’s painting is invoked in connection with Gemma’s “long, pliant, well-separated fingers” on her elegant hands. Here, Raphael’s painting augments the erotic suggestivity of Turgenev’s description, because the viewer of La Fornarina’s hands is led directly to her exposed breast and to her lightly covered mid-section and groin. The exquisite turban that Raphael paints on *La Fornarina*, ornamented with a precious gem, might relate to Gemma’s name. Moreover, *La Fornarina* in Italian means “the female baker,” which again calls to mind that Gemma is the daughter of a confectioner. These two parallels, which supplement both visual description and narrative, suggest that La Fornarina is a prototype for Gemma in Sanin’s (and Turgenev’s) mind.

In addition to the enhancement of the heroine’s image, Sanin’s invocation of these two paintings serves the psychological purpose of expressing his immediate and overwhelming infatuation with Gemma. At the very moment when Sanin first sees Gemma, he is unable to move out of awe at her elegance: “He was almost rooted to the spot: he had never seen so beautiful a girl in his life.” Moments later, Sanin returns to his hotel in a state of confusion, not knowing how he had been persuaded to stay a few more days. It seems to him that his decision to stay in Frankfurt was not his own, as if he were helpless in Gemma’s presence: “And what a beauty! But for what have I stayed here?” Forcellino notes that the “ambiguous use of light within [Raphael’s]

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20 “La Fornarina” is most commonly translated into English as “baker’s daughter,” and Raphael’s model was thought to be his mistress Margarita Luti, herself the daughter of a baker. “Fornarina” is the diminutive of “fornaia,” a female baker.

21 Maria Kondor-Szilagyi insightfully investigates the Pygmalion myth in regard to *Spring Torrents* and Raphael’s *La Fornarina*. See Kondor-Szilagyi, 292–300.


23 Translation mine: Да, и красавица же! Но к чему я остался? Turgenev, PSS, 11:25.
painting” allows “nothing to distract the viewer’s eye from the flesh, the breast, and the soft complexion” of La Fornarina’s figure.\(^{24}\) In other words, the manner in which Raphael paints his maiden is to exclusively focus the viewer’s attention on her naked body, which endows the painting with a heightened sexual energy. Sanin invokes Allori’s and Raphael’s paintings when he is dumbfounded, visually conveying the erotic desire that momentarily overpowers him.

Shortly after their first meeting, Sanin cannot resist the urge to return to Gemma, despite his quest to return to Russia. After protesting numerous times that he must leave that night, he finds himself defeated in the face of Gemma’s insistent dinner invitation. He is rendered helpless by her pleas: “What was Sanin to do?”\(^{25}\) Gemma’s firm pressure completely derails his plans, though much to his pleasure. Moments later, when Gemma’s mother has fallen asleep, Gemma sits down on a stool next to him, frequently “look[ing] askance at Sanin, whenever he permitted himself even the slightest of movements.”\(^{26}\) He finds himself in a pleasurable, dream-like state in which Gemma dictates his every move: “It ended with Sanin as if he were frozen and standing motionless, spellbound, admiring the picture with all the strength of his soul.”\(^{27}\) Sanin’s state of suspension or near-paralysis as he observes Gemma (who is at the center of the “picture” Sanin observes) is akin to the trancelike state one enters when contemplating a beautiful painting.

Sanin’s complacent yielding to Gemma acquires further meaning in the context of Allori’s painting. While the painting is certainly violent, it also depicts Judith’s capability, strength, and honor. Allori painted his lover Mazzafirra as Judith and himself as Holofernes, a fact that Turgenev

\(^{24}\) Forcellino, 188–189.


\(^{27}\) Ibid.: Кончилось тем, что и он словно замер и сидел неподвижно, как очарованный, и всеми силами души своей любовался картиной. Turgenev, PSS, 11:31.
himself would likely have known by virtue of his travels to the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, where Allori’s painting hangs (in the Uffizi Gallery). That Allori painted himself into such a scene indicates an (erotic) desire to be controlled by such a strong and powerful woman, a desire echoed in Sanin’s pleasurable state under Gemma’s command. By associating Gemma with the biblical Judith, Sanin transforms his heady experience of erotic desire into something transcendental and profoundly spiritual. In colloquial terms, Turgenev conveys the “out of this world” ecstasy of new love by linking Sanin’s emotions with Allori’s painting.

Allori’s portrait depicts Judith as an attractive but dangerous woman. This portrait, mentioned at the moment in which Sanin becomes romantically infatuated with Gemma, at the same time ironically foretells his submission to the will of another woman, the financier Madame Polozov. As is evident in her control over her husband (whom she sends shopping for her dresses and forces to do her hair, all while excluding him entirely from any business affairs), Madam Polozov is a strong woman whose beauty “would have made any man who met her stand and stare.”

Madame Polozov, who knows of Sanin’s engagement to Gemma, persuades him to stay with her for a few more days instead of returning to Gemma in Frankfurt. Once again, Sanin’s initial hesitation is overpowered by a woman’s insistence, this time Madame Polozov’s. After hearing his business pitch, Madame Polozov admits to Sanin that he is a “man with a heart of gold” and flirtatiously promises “not to torment [him] too much” so long as he stays another two days with her. Madame Polozov subsequently coerces Sanin to take an intimate walk in the park, attend the theater with her that night, and stay another day in Wiesbaden—a chain of events that culminates in the realization that Sanin will never return to Gemma but betray her and remain with

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the “good fellow” Madame Polozov. At the moment Sanin realizes this, the strength and beauty elevated in Allori’s and Raphael’s paintings return to him in the form of a new, striking image:

And at the same time this “good fellow” strolled alongside him with a feline swagger, lightly brushing against him, and gazing into his face now and then; the creature existed in the image of a young feminine being, who emanated that devastating, languorous, soft and fiery seductiveness, of which only Slavic natures are possessed—and few of them at that, and none of them pure-blooded—for the undoing of us weak, sinful men.

Just as Gemma’s beauty and strength are captured in the canvases of Allori and Raphael, so too is Madame Polozov’s “devastating” and “fiery” seductiveness that wins over Sanin’s devotion captured in this (unspecified) verbal portrait that arguably refers back to Allori’s Judith. The images of these two women, Gemma and Madame Polozov, occur at key points in the novel: when Sanin falls in love with Gemma and when Sanin abandons Gemma in favor of Madame Polozov. The paintings by Allori and Raphael and the verbal portrait of Madame Polozov frame Sanin’s romantic tragedy because they mark the start and end of Sanin’s relationship with Gemma. Moreover, both women are associated with Judith’s duality of attraction and danger. The strength and beauty that first drew Sanin to Gemma are the same qualities, this time in Madame Polozov, that pull Sanin away from Gemma in the end.

Asya

The paintings in Spring Torrents serve three important functions: they supplement the narrative description with visual imagery; express the protagonist’s desires in a moment of

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30 Madame Polozov even makes a bet with her husband that she can derail Sanin from returning home to marry Gemma. See Turgenev, 167; Turgenev, 148.
31 Translation mine with the assistance of Professor Alyssa Gillespie: "И в то же время этот «добрый малый» шел […] в образе молодого женского существа, от которого так и веяло тем разбирающим и томящим, тихим и жгучим соблазном, каким способны донимать нашего брата—грешного, слабого мужчину, одни—и то некоторые и то не чистые, а с надлежащей помесью—славянские натуры! Turgenev, PSS, 11:120.
profound psychological change; and foreshadow the downfall of the relationship. All three functions demonstrated in Spring Torrents are also at play in the earlier novella “Asya.” Written while Turgenev was abroad in Germany, in “Asya” the anonymous narrator N. N. remorsefully recalls his ill-fated and tragic love for the enigmatic heroine Asya. The story unfolds around the narrator’s quest to unlock the riddle that is Asya, whom his friend Gagin introduces as his sister (in fact, she turns out to be his illegitimate half-sister). N. N. soon realizes they could not be any more different; not only do they not look alike, but Gagin’s calming persona differs wildly from the dynamic Asya, whose behavior rapidly oscillates between childish inclinations and more mature presentations of “proper” ladylike behavior. Toward the end of the story, the uncontrollable and elusive Asya falls in love with N. N., presenting herself on her knees in front of him in an act of subjugation. Yet N. N. fails to reciprocate and waits to declare his similar feelings of affection for Asya until it is too late; Gagin and Asya have set off for London, never to be seen again.

Toward the middle of the story, N. N. mentions Raphael’s Triumph of Galatea (fig. 3), which depicts the apotheosis of the water-nymph Galatea from Ovid’s Metamorphoses.32 Raphael’s painting here appears to function much in the same way as Sanin’s invocation of Allori and Raphael’s canvases do in Spring Torrents: to supplement the narrative description of the heroine, Asya. One night, while ruminating on Asya’s unpredictable yet attractive nature, N. N. suddenly thinks of this painting:

I undressed, lay down and tried to fall asleep; but an hour later I was again sitting up in bed, leaning on an elbow and again thinking about that “capricious little girl

32 There are two separate myths of two separate Galateas in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Raphael’s painting depicts the water-nymph Galatea, who falls in love with Acis, the son of Faunus and a nymph. The cyclops Polyphemus, who is also in love with Galatea, throws a mountain at Acis and Galatea, killing Acis. The other Galatea is part of the tale of King Pygmalion, who sculpts his ideal lover out of ivory and subsequently falls in love with her. As a gift, the goddess Aphrodite turns the statue into a human for Pygmalion.
with the affected laugh…” “Her figure is like the little Galatea by Raphael in the Farnese,” I whispered, “Yes—and she is not his sister…”

N. N. is referring to the central figure of Raphael’s fresco in the Villa Farnese in Rome. Galatea, the dominant figure, is surrounded by a horde of sea-nymphs and titans who are blowing on trumpets, shooting love arrows and engaging in lustful pursuits. By comparing her to Raphael’s painting, N. N. connects Asya to Galatea’s elegance, reflected in the water-nymph’s flowing hair, light complexion, and smooth skin. Moreover, Galatea's physical posture in the fresco, as Pearson argues, augments the reader’s understanding of Asya’s fluctuating moods: “Galatea’s contrapposto seems to agitate all the figures surrounding her into violent motion […in] the same way [that] Asya’s mysterious changes of mood throw everyone around her into turmoil.”

Asya’s dynamic changes in mood and character, like the movement catalyzed by Galatea’s irregular stance, cause those around her to descend into confusion and frustration. As Sanin’s invocation of Allori and Raphael’s paintings highlights Gemma’s virtues of strength and beauty, N. N.’s reference to Raphael’s *Triumph of Galatea* enhances the reader’s understanding not only of Asya’s beauty but also of her enigmatic character.

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33 Turgenev, *First Love and Other Tales*, 101: Я разделись, лег и стался заснуть; но час спустя я опять сидел в постели, облокотившись локтем на подушку, и снова думал об этой «капризной девочке с натянутым смехом…» «Она сложена, как маленькая рафаэлевская Галатея в Фарнезине,—шептал я—да: и она ему не сестра…». Turgenev, PSS, 7:85.

34 Pearson, 365. Contrapposto refers to a human figure standing with most of its weight on one foot so that the shoulders and arms twist off-axis from the hips and legs.
N. N. makes two further visual associations with Asya later in the narrative that augment her beauty. The first is the legend of the Lorelei, a siren who sat upon a cliff in the Rhine and lured male sailors with her beauty and song, causing them to crash their boats on the rocks. Asya exclaims to N. N.: “Oh, by the way, what about that story of the Lorelei? Is it her rock we can see from here? It is said, that she first drowned everyone, but as she fell in love, she threw herself into the water. I like that story.”  

The Lorelei, a water creature like Galatea, uses her beauty and song to tempt men. Directly following Asya’s pronouncement of admiration for the Lorelei, a religious procession in boats winds its way down the river, filling the air with song: “At that instant came to us fragmentary, monotonous sounds. Hundreds of voices at once and at regular intervals repeated the prayerful tune.”

N. N. directly associates the boatmen's hymn, Asya, and the tale of the Lorelei. As a result, the moment in which Asya falls in love with N. N. becomes interwoven with the Lorelei’s falling in love and her own resultant suicide. Much like the duality of Allori’s Judith, who is associated both with the tender Gemma and the predatory Madame Polozov, Asya possess both the allure and the tragic nature of the Lorelei.

A similar duality is again evident in N. N.’s comparison of Asya to a statue of the Madonna. This comparison first occurs at the very beginning of the novella, shortly after N. N.

35 Turgenev, *First Love and Other Tales*, 116: Ах, кстати, что это за сказка о Лорелее? Ведь это ей скала виднеется? Говорят, она прежде всех топила, а как полюбила, сама бросилась в воду. Мне нравится эта сказка. Turgenev, PSS, 7:99. The Lorelei is a popular theme for nineteenth-century European painters, such as the German artist Wilhelm Kray, who executed a number of canvases based on this legend.


37 Scholars such as Joe Andrew and L. Michael O’Ttoole have discussed extensively the notion of the Lorelei and the Madonna statue, among others, as “tragic female types” associated with Asya. See Andrew, “Death and the Maiden: Narrative, Space, Gender and Identity in Asia,” 40. See also O’Ttoole, 147–160.
and Asya meet. N. N. recollects in his narrative how, during this time period, he would sit for hours admiring the view of the Rhine under a “huge, solitary ash tree” next to “[a] little statue of a Madonna with an almost childlike face and a red heart on the breast, pierced by swords, [who] gazed mournfully out of its branches.” Like Pushkin describing his lover in the poem "Madonna," Turgenev’s N. N. compares Asya to the Madonna to describe her potent purity and beauty. But, given the fact that her heart is gruesomely pierced by swords, this emblem of divinity foretells some sort of ill-fate to come.

Returning now to the significance of Raphael’s painting in “Asya”, we can observe that, like Allori’s Judith in *Spring Torrents*, Raphael’s Galatea not only enhances the description of Asya’s alluring beauty and impetuous character, but also serves both psychological and narrative functions. The fact that N. N. invokes Raphael’s painting at the moment when he falls in love with Asya demonstrates the painting’s psychological purpose. After returning from his first encounter with Gagin and Asya, N. N. lies in his bed in a state of despair and falls to thinking about his “faithless widow,” his former lover whose infidelity spurred him to leave Russia for Germany. As N. N. begins to look at letters she wrote him, his thoughts drift elsewhere: “But I did not even open [the letter]: my thoughts at once took a different turn. I began thinking—thinking of Asya.” N. N.’s hesitation to acknowledge that his thoughts have turned to Asya (indicated by the ellipsis)

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38 Turgenev, *First Love and Other Tales*, 87: Маленькая статуя мадонны с почти детским лицом и красным сердцем на груди, пронзенным мечами, печально выглядывала из его ветвей. Turgenev, PSS, 7:73. In his commentary to Turgenev’s collected works, Iurii M. Lotman notes that the Madonna with a breast pierced by arrows or daggers was a common trope in western European art and literature, including in Goethe’s *Faust*.

39 N. N. writes that she “[threw him] over in favor of a red-cheeked Bavarian lieutenant” (пожертвовав [им] одному краснощекому баварскому лейтенанту). Turgenev, *First Love and Other Tales*, 85; Turgenev, PSS, 7:72. N. N. does not elaborate further on his former lover outside of this detail.

40 Turgenev, *First Love and Other Tales*, 101: Но я даже не раскрыл его; мысли мои тотчас приняли иное направление. Я начал думать… думать об Асе. Turgenev, PSS, 7:85.
hints that the object of his romantic affection has changed: N. N. is no longer caught up in his old love affair because Asya now stands at the center of his attention. But N. N. does not explore this shift any further in his reminiscences of this moment and instead notes that Asya’s figure is like Raphael’s Galatea, thereby replacing an overt declaration of love with his recollection of this painting. The very next morning, N. N. seems to affirm that a shift in his feelings has occurred: “I told myself that I wanted to see Gagin, but secretly I longed to see what Asya would be doing.”

Whereas N. N. initially was interested in both Gagin and Asya, he is now mainly concerned with the latter. N. N. thinks of Raphael’s painting at this moment because it conveys a compelling sense of dynamism that echoes his change of heart, much in the same way that Sanin uses Raphael’s *La Fornarina* to express his sudden, intoxicating infatuation with Gemma.

At the same time, the invocation of Raphael’s painting also elevates N. N.’s love for Asya to the spiritual realm. After hearing about Asya’s childhood, N. N. realizes that he now understands why he was so attracted to her: “it was not only her half-wild charm, which pervaded all her slender body […]; it was her soul that appealed so strongly to me.” In addition to her body, N. N. is attracted to Asya’s soul, a kind of spiritual ecstasy that, as Forcellino notes in regard to Raphael’s

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42 *Ibid.*, 115: Не одной только полудикой прелестью, разлитой по всему ее тонкому телу […] ее душа мне нравилась. Тургенев, PSS, 7:99. The noun *prelest’,* used here to express Asya’s “half-wild” charm, is the same word that Pushkin uses to describe his lover in the poem “Madonna.” This word’s etymology is intriguing, as it means “charm” or “loveliness,” but also charm in the sense of “bewitchment,” as well as the Church Slavic connotation of spiritual self-deception or seductive illusion (conversation with Professor Alyssa Gillespie). N. N.’s description of Asya therefore suggests her beauty but also her enigmatic and potentially beguiling character, just as the Lorelei embodies both allure and mourning.
Galatea, “transport[s] men and women to the higher realms of emotion.” The face of Raphael’s Galatea expresses this ecstasy, much as does the face of Raphael’s painting of Saint Catherine of Alexandria (fig. 4), who was martyred at the age of fourteen by the emperor Maxentius. Both Galatea and Saint Catherine tilt their heads up toward the heavens, exposing their contoured, clothed bodies frontally toward the viewer. Moreover, both of these women undergo suffering that leads to their respective moments of apotheosis. The fact that Galatea shares Catherine’s facial expression is critical because it elevates N. N.’s attraction to Asya from erotic to sublime. In invoking Raphael’s painting at the moment when he falls in love with Asya, N. N. utilizes Galatea’s expression of spiritual ecstasy to capture his transcendent, romantic experience.

Just as a striking verbal portrait of Madame Polozov marks the end of Sanin’s relationship with Gemma in Spring Torrents, so too in “Asya” does a haunting verbal portrait of the heroine enter the narrative at the very moment when N. N. realizes he has lost Asya forever. After a lengthy and complicated pursuit, N. N. has actually succeeded in spurring Asya to declare his love for him. But N. N. is a Turgenevian “superfluous man,” and for a variety of reasons (including his inexperience with women) he fails to reciprocate and openly declare his affection for Asya. When he realizes that he only has himself to blame for the failed relationship, the image of Asya appears: “And now her image pursued me; I begged her forgiveness; the recollection of that pale face, those moist and timid eyes, the tumbled hair on her bent neck, the light touch of her head on my breast.

Figure 4. Raphael, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1507

43 Forcellino, 186.
seared me like red-hot iron.” While the image that “pursues” N. N. is not explicitly Galatea, the “pale face,” “timid eyes,” and “tumbled hair on her bent neck” all bring to mind Raphael’s depiction of the nymph. This image of Asya marks the end of their relationship, coinciding with N. N.’s realization of his error just as it marked the beginning. The sword-pierced Madonna statue, too, returns to the narrative as N. N. sets off in pursuit of Gagin and Asya: as he looks to the other side of the Rhine, N. N. sees his “little Madonna […] peering as sadly as ever from behind the dark foliage of the old ash tree.” It now becomes clear that the Madonna statuette’s foreshadowing of suffering in this tale of ill-fated love has come to pass.

“First Love”

A brief discussion of yet another work, the novella “First Love”, serves to demonstrate that the three functions of portraits in Spring Torrents and “Asya” explored above comprise a consistent pattern in Turgenev’s creative method that carries through to other works as well. In “First Love,” composed two years after “Asya”, the middle-aged narrator Vladimir Petrovich recalls how, as a sixteen-year-old, he instantly fell in love with his new neighbor Zinaida and spent the summer vying for her affection. In the novella, Zinaida has a number of other suitors whom she plays off each other, and Vladimir’s youthful passion turns to torment and despair when he realizes she is only manipulating him and will not return his affection. Toward the end of the story, Vladimir learns that the man who had succeeded in winning over Zinaida is his father, who physically abuses the girl and then abandons her to die.

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44 Turgenev, First Love and Other Tales, 133: А теперь ее образ меня преследовал, я просил у неё прощения; воспоминания об этом бледном лице, об этих влажных и робких глазах, о развитых волосах на наклоненной шее, о легком прикосновении ее головы к моей груди— жгли меня. Turgenev, PSS, 7:114.
45 Turgenev, First Love and Other Tales, 139: На другой стороне Рейна маленькая мадонна всё так же печально выглядывала из темной зелени старого ясения. Turgenev, PSS, 7:120.
At the beginning of his recollection, Vladimir describes Zinaida's beauty and flirtatious personality. Vladimir describes the moment when he first sees Zinaida:

A few paces from me, in a clearing among the green raspberry bushes, stood a tall, slender girl in a striped pink dress with a white kerchief on her head; she was surrounded by four young men and she was tapping them on the forehead with those small grey flowers […] (I saw her in profile).

Vladimir describes Zinaida as if he were literally viewing her portrait. Describing how she entertains her suitors, Vladimir is rooted to the spot in front of the heroine’s portrait, enthralled with her appearance:

In the girl’s movements . . . there was something so engaging, so commanding, so caressing, something so amusing and delightful that I . . . forgot everything. My eyes devoured the slender waist and small neck, the lovely arms and the slightly disheveled fair hair under the white scarf, the intelligent half-closed eyes and the eyelashes and the soft skin of the cheek beneath them . . .

Vladimir, like Sanin paralyzed in the face of Gemma’s commanding beauty, “forgets everything” when Zinaida appears before him. Vladimir is literally disarmed as he stares at Zinaida: “My gun slipped to the grass.” This moment of overwhelming yet impotent passion (with Freudian implications) is precisely when Vladimir falls in love with Zinaida, whose “image floats before [him]” as he returns home filled an exhilarating sense of joy:

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46 Jane Costlow addresses the visual aspect of “First Love” in her article “Abusing the Erotic: Women in Turgenev’s ‘First Love.’” See also Gillespie and Pastoriza, 214.
47 Turgenev, First Love and Other Tales, 146–147: В нескольких шагах от меня — на поляне, между кустами зеленой малины, стояла высокая стройная девушка в полосатом розовом платье и с белым платочком на голове; вокруг нее теснились четыре молодые человека, и она поочередно хлопала их по лбу теми небольшими серыми цветками […] (я ее видел сбоку). Turgenev, PSS, 9:11.
48 Turgenev, First Love and Other Tales, 147: А в движениях девушки […] было что-то такое очаровательное, повелительное, ласкающее, насмешливое и милое, что я […] всё забыл, я пожирал взором этот стройный стан, и шейку, и красивые руки, и слегка растрепанные белокурые волосы под белым платочком, и этот полузакрытый умный глаз, и эти ресницы, и нежную щеку под ними…. Turgenev, PSS, 9:11.
49 Turgenev, First Love and Other Tales, 147: Ружье мое соскользнуло на траву. Turgenev, PSS, 9:11.
“As I was going to bed, without myself knowing why, I spun around three times on one foot, put pomade on my hair, got into bed, and […] looked round me in ecstasy.”

The older Vladimir, narrating these long-ago events, does not explicitly link this outburst of energy to his newfound affection for Zinaida, choosing instead to construct a verbal portrait of her that serves a psychological purpose: to convey the young man’s immediate and overwhelming infatuation.

Likewise, at the end of the novella when he realizes his father has won Zinaida’s heart, Vladimir recalls a painting, *Malek-Adel Carrying Off Matilda* (fig. 5). The painting illustrates an episode in the novel *Mathilde* by Sophie Cottin (1773–1807), when Malek-Adel kidnaps Matilda only to “instantly succumb to the conjoined charms of Matilda’s beauty and virtue.” Vladimir’s sudden memory of this painting functions similarly to the recurrence of striking visual images toward the end of *Spring Torrents* and “Asya.” Like Sanin and N. N., Vladimir has proven unable to take the necessary steps to win over Zinaida’s affection; instead, he ends up succumbing to her erotic power. Yet shortly after he recalls the painting of Matilda, he is visited by a “new image” that “was forever imprinted in [his] memory;” the disturbing image of Zinaida after his


51 Vladimir does not specify a particular painting, but the story is well-represented in painting. Figure 5 is a painting of the subject (with no easily identifiable artist) dating from roughly the same time period as Turgenev’s story.

52 Morris.
father has beaten her with his riding crop.\textsuperscript{53} Whereas the portrait that Vladimir paints of Zinaida in the beginning of the novella is one of beauty and powerful allure, the image of her that he is left with now is one of abject suffering. Once again, as we saw with Asya and Gemma too, the images of the heroine that appear at the beginning and end of these ill-fated relationships are characterized by a compelling duality.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In all three works discussed here, the narrator’s pursuit of his beloved ends with a recognition of his failure to fully reciprocate her affection. This is most evident in the case of N. N., who immediately admits his shortcoming as Asya departs, while Sanin only acknowledges his fault years after the fact. Incidentally, Sanin’s admission coincides with his receipt from Gemma of a photograph of her daughter, who strongly resembles Gemma herself—yet another instance of a portrait serving as narrative closure. In “Asya,” “First Love,” and \textit{Spring Torrents}, the image (whether imagined, pictorial, or photographic) of the heroine (or her likeness) spurs the narrator’s recognition of his shortcomings. This illuminating role of the visual in Turgenev’s fiction can be seen as an extension of Barbara Heldt’s argument in her chapter “The Russian Heroine: Where to Find Her and Where Not To”; Heldt argues that Turgenev’s heroines highlight the shortcomings of the male protagonist who dominates the narrative. According to Heldt, the potency of Turgenev’s heroines lies not in their actions but in their embodiment of qualities the male protagonist is unable to access: “Women are capable of heroism when impelled by love; men, incapable of loving themselves, cannot love women […] [Turgenev’s heroines] are earthly representatives of something which men can attain only in their dreams.”\textsuperscript{54} As we have seen, these

\textsuperscript{53} Turgenev, \textit{First Love and Other Tales}, 212. \[Э]тот новый, внезапно представший передо мною образ, навсегда запечатлелся в моей памяти. Turgenev, PSS, 9:71.

\textsuperscript{54} Heldt, 20.
narrators’ inability to commit to their beloved Asya, Gemma, and Zinaida is vividly revealed by their awed contemplation of these women’s visual representations. Thus, one of Heldt’s comments about the nature of Turgenev’s male characters—“the male has his ideas tested by falling in love, and he crumples”—can be aptly applied to the role of paintings in Turgenev’s creative imagination: N. N., Sanin, and Vladimir are no exception: they fall in love and crumple before the image of their beloveds.  

As this analysis has shown, paintings and verbal portraits play a much more integral role in Turgenev’s narratives than scholars have noted previously. In particular, looking closely at these paintings’ narrative function opens up avenues of inquiry into an underserved aspect of gender criticism on Turgenev: the role of the visual in constituting the heroine. Here one might turn to Laura Mulvey’s notion of the “male gaze” to theorize the power dynamics inherent in how Turgenev’s male protagonists view—and narrate—their female counterparts through various modes of visual representation. Broadly speaking, Mulvey posits that the active male gaze objectifies the female for erotic purposes by projecting a fantasy onto the female figure, which is “to be simultaneously looked at and displayed” for the male character and the male viewership (or here, by extension, the male readership). Arguably, Mulvey’s idea of the male gaze is employed in each of Turgenev’s works analyzed above, as the male narrator is the active voyeur and the female is the “object.” In each case, the male’s act of seeing—which is inseparable from his desire to possess his beloved both erotically and narratively—is predicated upon his narrative framing of

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55 Ibid., 19.
56 Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey was the first to coin the term “male gaze” in 1973 and associate it with the role of the implied male spectator in cinema. See Mulvey, 833–844.
57 Ibid., 837. Other feminist theorists have built on Mulvey’s work in important ways, including Ann Kaplan, Beth Newman, Jane Costlow, Elizabeth Cheresh Allen, and Elizabeth Bronfen. See: Kaplan; Costlow, “Abusing the Erotic: Women in Turgenev’s ‘First Love’;” Allen, and Bronfen.
her, literalized in the trope of the heroine as painting. Yet Turgenev’s works do not always enact for the reader the power of a momentary encounter with sexually charged feminine beauty in a simplistic, uncomplicated way. In certain instances, Turgenev also disrupts the convention of the actively gazing voyeuristic male and passively observed female when the object of the gaze steadfastly gazes back, such as Zinaida’s confrontation and subsequent “disarming” of Vladimir. \(^{58}\) Such examples, including other instances of duality noted in the above analysis, are worth appreciating, as they illustrate the psychological (and political) complexity of Turgenev’s portrayal of sexual attraction and thus raise questions about the limits of feminist critique.

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\(^{58}\) For further discussion of the male gaze in “First Love” see Gillespie and Pastoriza, 214.
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