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A Brackish Hippocrene: Nekrasov, Panaeva, and the "Prose in Love"

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if I had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*

ROBERT FROST

"All my life," wrote Nekrasov shortly before his death, "I have suffered for [the sake of] women."¹ A case of sorts can be made for the boast. For over thirty years he had been writing poems—among them some of his most famous—about a female martyr who—whether in the form of the Muse, a Russian "lady," a peasant woman, or the poet's own mother—leads, in the face of soul-crushing adversity, a life of exemplary virtue and self-sacrifice.² And if, as some might argue, the labor pains of poetic creation are in themselves a category of suffering, one cannot logically deny Nekrasov a small crown of thorns.

When, however, we turn from these encomia of womankind to the women whom Nekrasov actually knew and loved, we are reminded that the data of literature refract as well as reflect the facts of life. For the testimony of fact resembles the moral stance implicit in Nekrasov's poems as, if a well-worn simile will be allowed, the oyster resembles the pearl which it secretes.

In view of Nekrasov's celebrated cult for his mother it is remarkable that a small model for the grown man's attitude toward women is discernible in his boyhood treatment of Elena Andreevna herself. It is not to doubt the unanimous accounts of Nekrasov's mother as a sensitive and loving creature who was mistreated by a sensual and brutish husband,³ to suggest that her

1. N. A. Nekrasov, "Iz poemy 'Mat'," *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ v trekh tomakh*, ed. K. I. Chukovskii (Leningrad, 1967), 3:319.

2. Outstanding works exemplifying this theme are "Rodina," "Muza," "Moroz krasnyi nos," "Rytsar' na chas," "Orina Mat' soldatskaia," and "Sasha." Large parts of *Komu na Rusi zhit' khorosho?* are also devoted to this theme.

3. For a circumstantial account of this relationship see V. Evgen'ev-Maksimov, *Zhizn' i deiatel'nost' N. A. Nekrasova*, vol. 1 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1947), pp. 26–86.

son's compassion for her lot was largely a posthumous affair. A kind of Russian Huckleberry Finn, who was shooting game and riding to the hounds at ten, who fought and played with the serf boys, dallied, it would seem, with their sisters,⁴ frequented the taverns, studied badly, quit school at fourteen and home (for St. Petersburg) at sixteen, young Nekrasov was in certain important respects his father's son.⁵ To assume (with many Soviet critics) that this hard-bitten boy must have sided with the timid and ineffectual Elena Andreevna against her bullying husband is not merely to spin a pleasant theory out of nothing, but to ignore Nekrasov's own testimony to the contrary:

О мать моя! О чем же ты грустила!
 Не понимал, не думал я о том.
 Я помню, ты порою подходила
 Ко мне и за руку меня брала.
 Но ты напрасно грустными глазами
 В мои смотрела детские глаза.
 Нет! . . . не было сочувствия меж нами,
 Моей руки не жгла твоя слеза.⁶

After leaving Greshnevo as an adolescent, he never saw his mother again,⁷ and

4. When we recall that before 1861 the sons of Russian landowners often received their sexual initiation from the serf women on the estate; that already as an adolescent Nekrasov had begun to show a penchant for dissipated diversions; and, finally, that as an adult his voluptuary tendencies were marked, the possibility that at the age of fifteen or sixteen he had affairs with some of the local peasant women must be reckoned good. Internal evidence moreover seems to support this assumption. Recollecting, presumably, the sordid atmosphere of his childhood and youth in "Podrazhanie Lermontovu" Nekrasov wrote: "Round and about me seethed filthy waves of depravity/. . . And of that ugly life upon my soul/ The coarse marks were stamped/. . . Suddenly, vehemently, boisterously overtaken [by this way of life],/ I plunged into the turbid stream/ And madly my youth/ Was burned in ugly debauchery" (*Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:116-17). The patently autobiographical "Rodina" expresses a similar opinion about the poet's "native home": "From my prematurely corrupted soul/ Blessed peace of mind so early disappeared,/ And of the cares and desires alien to most children [*nerebiacheskikh shelanii i trevog*]/ The exhausting fires burned my heart" (*ibid.*, p. 107). Even when allowances are made for hyperbole, it is hard, under the circumstances, to believe that the debauchery and unchildlike desires referred to mean merely playing cards and visiting the local taverns. For a detailed description of Nekrasov's youth see Evgen'ev-Maksimov, *Zhizn'*, pp. 86-129; also Charles Corbet, *Nekrasov, l'homme et le poète* (Paris, 1948), pp. 3-67.

5. Chukovskii even went so far as to assert that Nekrasov was "terribly similar" to his father (quoted by Evgen'ev-Maksimov, *Zhizn'*, p. 412). The latter's attempt to whitewash Nekrasov is unconvincing.

6. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 3:434.

7. Nekrasov's failure to enter military service on his arrival at St. Petersburg, as he had apparently promised his father, had led to a rupture between the two, and it was not until the summer of 1841 that Nekrasov, having been informed that his mother was

it seems overwhelmingly likely that his cult for her arose *in absentia* and was in part at least an atonement for the remembered indifference of his boyhood.⁸

Mutatis mutandis this tough-minded attitude toward “real” women marked Nekrasov’s behavior throughout his life. True, the putative affairs with the serf women at Greshnevo prove little more than that moral standards in a serf-owning society are apt to be low. But it is harder to condone the opportunistic young man who, according to contemporary accounts, found it expedient during the early St. Petersburg period (1838–42) to live with—and off of—the prostitutes and working girls of the city.⁹ Nor, after the early years of extreme penury were over, was his prolonged liaison (1848–63) with Avdotia Panaeva noted for its altruism—it began with a *ménage à trois* that helped secure him prestige and affluence, and ended when, freed by Panaev’s death in 1862 to marry Avdotia, he threw her over for younger companions. The basis of his subsequent known attachments to the French “actress” Céline Lefresne (1863–69) and to the *meshchanka* Praskovia Meishin (1869–70) was candidly practical: “to sleep with me,” as he succinctly put it to the latter, “whenever I please.”¹⁰ And though his final liaison with the semiliterate

sick, returned to Greshnevo only to find that Elena Andreevna had died several days before.

8. Corbet expressed a similar view when he hypothesized: “Si elle [Elena Andreevna] aimait démesurément ses enfants, qui par la suite, lui vouèrent un véritable culte, il ne semble pas qu’elle ait trouvé chez eux sur-le-champ cette affection . . . qui peut-être l’eût payée de ses peines. Nicolas Alekséevič lui consacra une immense piété posthume, qui joue d’ailleurs le rôle d’une soupape de sûreté dans son mécanisme psychologique: mais de son vivant, il fit bien peu pour récompenser toutes les preuves de dévouement qu’elle lui prodiguait” (*Nekrasov*, p. 12).

9. E. Kolbasin tells of young Nekrasov living off the earnings of a governess until her money ran out, and then leaving her (“Teni starogo *Sovremennika*,” *Sovremennik*, 8 [1911]: 228–30). Chukovskii quotes N. N. Vil’de (“Literatura i sovest’,” *Golos Moskvy*, 1912, no. 221) to the effect that Nekrasov had once told Turgenev how during his early St. Petersburg years he tormented his young mistress, who was then working to support him, by prolonged periods of total silence (“Podrugi poet,” *Minuvshie dni*, January 1928, p. 12). Nekrasov himself would seem to have provided oblique confirmation for these allegations. In his uncompleted and posthumously published prose narrative *Zhizn’ i pokhozheniia Tikhona Trostnikova*, which reflects his experiences during the early penurious St. Petersburg years so obviously that Chukovskii does not hesitate to call it Nekrasov’s “biography in the form of a belletristic tale” (*Zhizn’ i pokhozheniia Tikhona Trostnikova*, ed. V. Evgen’ev-Maksimov and K. Chukovskii [Moscow and Leningrad, 1930], p. 29), the young hero soon after arriving in St. Petersburg contracts a liaison with a young prostitute named Matilda (though at the time he is not aware of her profession). Later he consents to live for several months as a “kept man” with Maria Samoiloovna, a corpulent and unattractive tavern keeper (*kukhmeistersha*) of forty years in exchange for room and board.

10. Quoted by E. I. Zhukovskaia, *Zapiski* (Leningrad, 1930), p. 236. The fact that Nekrasov helped Meishin financially after the end of the liaison mitigates considerably the caddishness of his conduct.

young prostitute Fekla Viktorovaia (1870–77) seems to have been marked by genuine affection—on Nekrasov’s side at least—it was only the last stages of an incurable cancer that prompted him to marry the buxom “Zinaida” (as he had dubbed her) quite literally on his deathbed. The marriage took place in April 1877; he died in December of the same year.

Womanizing as such is not, of course, an unusual activity for unmarried gentlemen of means. And Nekrasov’s promiscuity—for it amounted to no less than that—would be of relatively minor interest if it did not underline a raw, intractable *Wahrheit* for which his *Dichtung* was the complement and compensation. As the poet prostrated himself with quasi-religious fervor before the heroines of his poetic imagination (the verse portraits of his mother were in certain respects as fictional as his martyred muses and flogged peasants),¹¹ the avowed enemy of marriage¹² was surrounding himself with women whose socially inferior or “fallen” status made matrimony unthinkable, and whom he could therefore treat with the indulgence or condescension of a “male chauvinist.”¹³ Considering the essentially practical nature of these relationships it is not surprising that they inspired almost no love poetry.¹⁴

However puzzling this dualistic attitude toward women may seem, it is by no means a psychological anomaly. Early in the century Freud described a category of male for whom the feminine world is divided into the “sacred”

11. The origin of the family legend according to which Elena Andreevna was a patrician Polish *pani* abducted from her native Warsaw by Nekrasov’s father is unknown. Considering the myth-making faculty which often helps persecuted and lonely people bear their misery, it is possible that she made up the story herself. At all events it was repeated, though not believed, by her son, who, we may assume, did not dislike the idea of having an aristocratic Polish lady as a mother, and who may well have thought that to reject his mother’s myth would be to impugn her memory. Elena Andreevna was in fact Ukrainian by birth and education and Greek Orthodox with respect to religion.

12. F. Smirnov quotes Nekrasov’s reply when late in his life he was asked why he never got married: “A wife would get in your way in anything you tried. If you wanted to go hunting she wouldn’t want it.” Quoted in *N. A. Nekrasov: V vospominaniakh i dokumentakh*, ed. E. M. Isserlin and T. Iu. Khmel’nitskaia (Leningrad, 1930), p. 156.

13. Characteristic of this attitude is a small detail mentioned by Chukovskii (“Podrugi poet,” p. 18), namely, that “Zina” customarily kissed her “master’s” hand as a form of greeting.

14. The only important exceptions to this “rule” are “Esli, muchimyi strast’iu miatezhnoi,” and “Ty vseгда khorosho nesravnenno,” both of which are apparently addressed to a woman Nekrasov knew immediately prior to his liaison with Panaeva. The three poems which Nekrasov addressed to “Zina” during the last year of his life tend actually to confirm the “rule” for it was not until he was an emaciated, bedridden, and dying man—not until the physical aspect of his love for “Zina” was in eclipse—that she became the subject of his poems. It was not until “Zina” ceased to be his mistress that she became his Muse, and—not coincidentally—his wife. In this respect it is significant that the three poems in question are written in the distinctively hagiographical vein in which the verses to his mother were also written.

and the “profane” realms: the former peopled by morally superior women who inspire adoration but no physical desire, the latter by inferior creatures (courtesans, prostitutes) whose physical attraction lies precisely in their degraded status.¹⁵ And Wilhelm Stekel’s detailed study of a patient whose “whore-angel” ambivalence toward women is traced back to a childhood in which, like Nekrasov, he repeatedly witnessed the beating and humiliation of his mother by his father, suggests a possible aetiology for the poet’s condition.¹⁶

If it is reasonable to assume that Nekrasov had close affinities to this type of male, we should not forget that even representatives of well-established psychological types sometimes deviate from the norms which mark their behavior as a whole. Thus the introvert may under certain circumstances become expansive; the chronic rebel, submissive; the invert, drawn to the opposite sex; and so on. When the full particulars of these divergences are examined, however, it is usually found that they can be understood in terms of—even in a sense conform to—the pattern which they seem to violate.

The circumstances of Nekrasov’s love affair with Avdotia Panaeva illustrate such a deviation and imply such an accommodation. Around 1843, while still a struggling young hackwriter, he fell in love with the wife of a vacuous *bon vivant* and part-time man of letters, I. I. Panaev. Pretty, vivacious, the feminine “soul” of a distinguished circle of writers which included Belinsky, Turgenev, and—more peripherally—Dostoevsky, Avdotia was for all her plebeian origins¹⁷ “above” Nekrasov in the eyes of the world. Her cold reception of his suit precluded, at the outset at least, anything like condescension or caddishness on his part. And the cycle of poems which she was eventually to inspire further testifies to the unusual nature of his attachment.

15. “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. 11 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 180–83. In an article about a closely related psychological category, entitled “A Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men” (pp. 163–76), Freud describes a type of male who is drawn to women providing the following conditions are met: (1) She must, because of a relationship which she is maintaining with some other man, not be completely free. (2) She must be sexually promiscuous or a prostitute. (3) She must be one of a long series of women in the man’s life. (4) He must, somewhat paradoxically, feel an urge to save the women from even deeper degradation. Although all these conditions plainly do not obtain in each of Nekrasov’s many liaisons, their relevance to his overall attitude toward women is self-evident.

16. Wilhelm Stekel, “A Case of Sodomy and Sadism,” *Sadism and Masochism*, trans. Louise Brink (New York, 1929), pp. 243–301. Despite the title, the patient in question was not in practice a homosexual.

17. Panaeva was the daughter of the professional actor Ia. G. Brianskii. Since it was extremely rare for a bona fide member of the *dvorianstvo* to take up acting as a career in early nineteenth-century Russia, it may be assumed that she was of nongentry origins.

These facts notwithstanding, viewed as a whole their liaison (Avdotia became his mistress in 1847 or 1848) enacts the restoration of the pattern at the expense of the divergences, the bending of the "exception" to fit the "rule." For with the lapse of years, Avdotia's tenure in her own household grew less secure; her self-respect harder to maintain. Having assumed the role of the "emancipated woman" who chooses to live openly with her lover, she found her dignity diminished by Nekrasov's dissipated ways and affairs with other women. Her own character was impugned by the damaging disclosures of the "Ogareva Affair."¹⁸ Her ultimate role in the ménage approximated that of her "sisters": the querulous and tearful companion of an increasingly rude and promiscuous man.¹⁹ As for the "Panaeva Cycle," extraordinary it certainly is—the only body of verse which a mistress of Nekrasov was to inspire. But the impulse for its creation was, as we are about to see, less the poet's passion than its erosion. And whether, as a whole, it may be considered "love poetry" depends on how much that expression may borrow from its antonym.

When in the middle 1840s Nekrasov was wooing Avdotia, he knew, as already noted, temporary setbacks as well as eventual success. It is characteristic of the peculiar sources of his creativity, however, that neither the longings of an unanswered passion nor the joys of its requital (the traditional subjects of the poet in love) elicited from him a line of verse. In fact the liaison was in its fourth year before the poet alluded to it for the first time. His bittersweet tone suggests it might well be the last:

18. Sometime in the late 1840s when Maria L'vovna Ogareva, the divorced wife of the poet N. P. Ogarev, was living abroad, she drew up a letter of procuracy authorizing Panaeva, an old friend, to act as her agent in an eventually successful effort to collect 200,000 rubles in alimony from her ex-husband. But although Panaeva and a legal agent named N. S. Shanshiev received the full amount, nothing at all was sent on to Ogareva in France. After the latter's death in 1853, her former husband instigated an inquiry, the embezzlement was uncovered, and Panaeva was condemned in 1859 to return the full amount to Ogarev. By then she and Shanshiev had spent the entire sum, and Nekrasov was obliged to make reimbursement. It is plain from a fragment of a letter which he wrote Avdotia that he had been privy to his mistress's theft. But there is no evidence that he instigated, approved, or, directly at least, profited by it. For a detailed account of the affair see Ia. Z. Cherniak's *Ogarev, Nekrasov, Chernyshevskii v spore ob Ogarevskom nasledstve* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1933).

19. Nekrasov's rude and boorish treatment of Panaeva during their final years together was attested by Chernyshevsky. See Chukovskii's article "Panaev i Nekrasov," which serves as a preface to the Soviet edition of Panaev's novella *Semeistvo Tal'nikovikh* (Leningrad, 1928), pp. 7–8, 19. Another eyewitness, E. I. Zhukovskaia (*Zapiski*, p. 235), claimed that during the final years of their liaison Nekrasov was receiving other women into their home and expecting Panaeva to act as housekeeper for his concubines.

Я не люблю иронии твоей.
 Оставь ее отжившим и не жившим,
 А нам с тобой, так горячо любившим,
 Еще остаток чувства сохранившим,—
 Нам рано предаваться ей!

Пока еще застенчиво и нежно
 Свидание продлить желаешь ты,
 Пока еще кипят во мне мятежно
 Ревнивые тревоги и мечты—
 Не торопи развязки неизбежной!

И без того она не далека:
 Кипим сильней, последней жаждой полны,
 Но в сердце тайный холод и тоска . . .
 Так осенью бурливее река,
 Но холодней бушующие волны . . .²⁰

The most striking formal feature here, the triplet in lines 2–4 augmented by the internal rhyme (*otzhivshim*) in line 3 and capped by the metrically truncated fifth line, strikes overtones that echo throughout. The incantatory effect worked by this quartet of *past* participles reminds us with a kind of sibilating insistency that the lovers' passion is indeed behind them. Moreover, the use of a verbal form associated with prose²¹ hints through a kind of grammatical metaphor at the inroads which "prosaic" feelings (boredom, depression, and so forth) were in fact making on the "poetry" of their love. In the lines that follow this compound of ardor and chill, "poetry" and "prose" are removed from the temporal to the psychological plane. If Avdotia can be cruelly ironical, she is nonetheless shy and clinging. Although Nekrasov is cold and depressed, he still "seethes" with passion. Pitted against each other the lovers are divided inside themselves. What imposes eventual order on this moil of emotions is the fine controlling image of the cold, boiling autumnal stream, and with it our realization that these lines are not merely a description of a decaying love but its rehearsal. For the "vestige of feeling," which Nekrasov begins by trying to protect, grows more cold even as the poem

20. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:128. Like "Tak eto shutka? Milaia moia" and "Da, nasha zhizn' tekla miatezhno," both of which were sent to Panaeva when she was traveling in western Europe, this poem was written in 1850. On the basis of internal evidence I am assuming that it was written before Panaeva's trip, since it seems unlikely that Nekrasov would refer to an imminent separation from her if she had just returned to him.

21. There was of course no rule which prohibited Russian poets from using active adjectival participles in their verse. However, insofar as nineteenth-century Russian literature is concerned, this form is found far more often in prose—and in particular in expository prose—than in poetry.

proceeds—compare the emotional “temperature” of stanzas one and three. Hence the ultimate irony: the “irony” which the poem is designed to exorcise seems by its end to be largely justified.

When in April 1850 the lovers, *de guerre las*, agreed to part and Avdotia left for western Europe, the “inevitable dénouement” predicted by Nekrasov may have seemed at hand. But a pair of epistolary poems written to Panaeva while she was abroad suggest that the separation was intended to heal not to ratify their differences. In the longer of these, “Da, nasha zhizn' tekla miatezhno,” Nekrasov admits that their frequent quarrels have made a break necessary; goes on to declare, however, that Avdotia’s rejection of his suit years before is nothing compared to the misery he now feels without her; inquires if she has forgotten the “sweetness” and “torture” of their past union; and concludes by commenting on the peculiar quality of his love:

Скажи! я должен знать . . . Как странно я люблю!
Я счастья тебе желаю и молю,
Но мысль, что и тебя гнетет тоска разлуки,
Души моей смягчает муки . . .²²

Like its companion piece—which it resembles formally as well as thematically²³—“Tak eto shutka? Milaia moia” is too long to quote in full, but artistically it reaches heights not attained by the former and is psychologically more revealing. Elicited by a deliberately cold note which Avdotia had written the poet, it tells of the pain which her little “joke” has caused him, describes the happiness which a second, redemptive letter has brought, and closes with a simile as remarkable for its matter as for its quasi-Homeric manner:

Так няня в лес ребенка заведет
И спрячется сама за куст высокой;
Встревоженный, он ищет и зовет,
И мечется в тоске жестокой,
И падает, бессильный, на траву . . .
И няня вдруг: ау! ау!
В нем радостью внезапной сердце бьется,
Он всё забыл: он плачет и смеется,
И прыгает, и весело бежит,
И падает—и няню не бранит,
Но к сердцу жмет виновницу испуга,
Как от беды избавившего друга . . .²⁴

22. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:128.

23. The two poems are roughly equal in length, with an irregular rhyme scheme, an irregular stanzaic pattern, and a shifting four-, five-, or six-foot iambic line.

24. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:126.

In both “epistles” Avdotia’s absence seems to have rekindled Nekrasov’s passion. Both seem to assume that she will soon rejoin her lover. But the overall emphasis placed on the pain-giving aspects of love does not, in truth, augur well for their future. And underlying the image of Nekrasov as a helpless, stumbling child running joyfully to embrace his teasing nanny is a cat-and-mouse concept of love for which Thomas Mann’s remark, “He who loves the more is the inferior,” is an apt commentary.

Viewed as therapy, Avdotia’s trip was in a sense successful, for in September 1850 she rejoined Nekrasov in St. Petersburg. Once reunited, however, the lovers appear to have taken up where they left off. In a poem similar in attitude to “*Ia ne ljubliu ironii tvoei*” Nekrasov complained:

Мы с тобой бестолковые люди:
 Что минута, то вспышка готова!
 Облегченье взволнованной груди,
 Неразумное, резкое слово.

Говори же, когда ты сердита,
 Всё, что душу волнует и мучит!
 Будем, друг мой, сердиться открыто:
 Легче мир—и скорее наскучит.

Если проза в любви неизбежна,
 Так возьмем и с нее долю счастья:
 После ссоры так полно, так нежно
 Возвращенье любви и участия . . .²⁵

The emotional catharsis which domestic quarrels—metaphorically “the prose in love”—can bring about is the theme here. But a certain opacity caused by the parataxis in the first stanza²⁶ is symptomatic of a blurring of motives which recurs later. To the extent that Nekrasov makes us feel that their flareups are an all too common occurrence—and this extent is considerable—the point of his plea, that Avdotia get angry “openly,” does not seem to be rooted in any real need. Nor are the joys of reconciliation as pure as the final lines declare. For however we understand the boredom predicted in the second stanza (disarming candor? calculated cynicism?), it is plain that, for Nekrasov, domestic peace had its penalties as well as its rewards. The fact may explain why he seems to have seen so little of it.

25. Ibid., p. 130.

26. The clarifying vincula between the two apparently conflicting statements are missing. Emended and expanded a paraphrase would read: “*Although* we are absurd people and our flareups are frequent, *nonetheless* these scenes give us an emotional relief which is necessary to us.”

The next pair of poems indicate further slippage in the relationship. In 1852 Nekrasov's perusal of some old love letters inspired these lines:

О письма женщины, нам милой!
 От вас восторгам нет числа,
 Но в будущем душе унылой
 Готовите вы больше зла.
 Когда погаснет пламя страсти
 Или послушаетесь вы
 Благоразумья строгой власти
 И чувству скажете: увы!—
 Отдайте ей ее посланья
 Иль не читайте их потом,
 А то нет хуже наказанья,
 Как задним горевать числом.
 Начнешь с усмешкою ленивой,
 Как бред невинный и пустой,
 А кончишь злобою ревнивой
 Или мучительной тоской . . .
 О ты, чьих писем много, много
 В моем портфеле берегу!
 Подчас на них гляжу я строго,
 Но бросить в печку не могу.
 Пускай мне время доказало,
 Что правды в них и проку мало,
 Как в праздном лепете детей,
 Но и теперь они мне милы—
 Поблекшие цветы с могилы
 Погибшей юности моей!²⁷

One wonders if the very intensity of the emotions expressed here has not affected the artist's control of his materials. For if Nekrasov's aversion to Avdotia's epistolary "babble" is effectively (if somewhat rawly) conveyed in the first sixteen lines, the same cannot be said for the rehabilitation at the end. In what meaningful sense can these letters—after the cynical abuse that has been heaped on them—still be "dear" to him? The worn simile of the "faded flowers" seems like an evasion rather than an answer. It is as if the spontaneous overflow of the poet's negative feelings—recollected, perhaps, in insufficient tranquillity—has undermined his ability to convey the more positive ones.

Three or four years later the act which Nekrasov had contemplated and rejected was, after a particularly violent quarrel with his mistress, performed

27. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:156–57.

by her. His outraged response was recorded in "Pis'ma":

Плачь, горько плачь! Их не напишешь вновь,
 Хоть написать, смеясь, ты обещала . . .
 Они навек погибли, как любовь,
 Которая их сердцу диктовала!
 Хранились в них души твоей черты,
 Корыстному волнению непричастной,
 Поэзии роскошные цветы,—
 Благоуханье молодости ясной!
 И пусть бы жизнь их ложью назвала—
 Она давно в них веру колебала,—
 Нет, та рука со злобой их сожгла,
 Которая с любовью их писала!
 Грядущее опоры лишено,
 Прошедшее поругано жестоко,

²⁸

That this misogynistic blast should have been cast in a verse form once invented by poets to express the tenderest of romantic sentiments (it is, interestingly, the only sonnet in Nekrasov's mature *oeuvre*)²⁹ is an irony which probably escaped Nekrasov—he seems beyond irony here. By taking the law into her hands and burning her own "babble," Avdotia has placed herself beyond forgiveness and aroused emotions so intense that the strict logical coherence of the poem appears (again) to have been affected. However, the small illogical touches help validate the voice speaking them. If, from a rational standpoint, the "No" of line 11 is out of place, affectively speaking, the "mistake" rings true: the bitterly disillusioned lover's blind denial of *all* values. Similarly, although his suggestion that "life" may have proved Avdotia's early letters false is belied by what he says elsewhere, and makes little sense in any case,³⁰ the contradiction illustrates the truth of Tolstoy's remark

28. *Ibid.*, 3:439.

29. Several poems in Nekrasov's adolescent collection, *Mechty i zvuki*, were called "sonnets"; but it is characteristic of his shaky knowledge of the formal aspects of poetry that none conform strictly to the sonnet form.

30. The logical incoherences of these lines may be specified as follows. First, to suspect, as the poet does in line 9, that "life" (that is, subsequent events) has *proved* that Avdotia's early love letters were false is as illogical as to suppose that a wife's request for divorce proves that her original marriage vows were made in bad faith. It is an *ex post facto* judgment. Second, plainly the "No" in line 11 applies to this momentarily held suspicion, namely, that the letters were insincere. In other words, having momentarily hesitated about their sincerity the poet decides in favor of their *honesty*. But what then are we to make of the statement in line 10 that "life has shaken [my] faith in them"? If the "No" repudiates line 9 it must repudiate this statement too.

that in emotional matters inconsistency is one of the surest signs of sincerity. A breakdown in the power to communicate is, the novelist might have added, another sign. Hence the force of the misleading final comma, which like a stair over a void leads to nothing save a double row of dots—an avowal of verbal impotence as well as a metaphor for that baseless (*bez opory*) future predicted in the penultimate line.

Occasional stylistic clashes reinforce these semantic tensions. Taken as a whole, the language of the "Panaeva Cycle" is more conventionally "poetic" than that of Nekrasov's satirical pieces or his folk influenced verse, where subliterate words and expressions abound. And it is precisely against this relatively conservative linguistic background that the use of colloquial speech or banal details acquires an ironic flavor. Thus, in the earlier poem the two receptacles, problematical and real, of Avdotia's "epistles" turn out to be a prosaic *pechka* and an even more prosaic *portfel'*. The conventionally poetic "flame of passion" and "faded flowers" jostle with colloquialisms like *zadnim chislom* and *net proka*. The tone of anathema in "Pis'ma" is leavened slightly by an image from office life: love which *dictates letters* to the heart.³¹ All of which is to say that the "prose in love" once used to denote the lovers' unpoetic bickering has here become a "realized metaphor"—the ironic weaving of elements of prose speech or a prosaic way of life into the stuff of poetry.

From 1855 to 1857 the ravages of an undiagnosed case of syphilis made Nekrasov—never the most complaisant of companions—an exceedingly hard person to live with.³² Convinced that a painfully inflamed throat was killing him (it nearly robbed him of his voice and left him hoarse for life), he suffered from fits of melancholia during which Avdotia sometimes became the scapegoat for his misery. The creative by-products of these moments were—to borrow from Eliot—two "fragments from an agon" in which the lovers confront each other in person for the first time. (Avdotia had heretofore been apostrophized.) The first, written in 1855, reads:

Yet the latter is not couched as a conjecture (like line 11) but as a fact. Third, immediately following the poet's denial that the letters were insincere comes the assertion that they were burned in hate, a confusing *non sequitur*, since the hate which accompanied their destruction cannot obviously confirm the sincerity of their original creation. To make completely logical sense the sentence would have to read: "No! That hand which burned them in hate wrote them in love."

31. The use of the verb *diktovat'* alone would not necessarily evoke office life. But taken in conjunction with the word *pis'ma* the secretarial overtones are unavoidable. The fact that Avdotia did in fact work in the offices of the *Sovremennik* for a while may unconsciously have suggested the image.

32. Symptoms of the disease appeared in 1853, but it did not take full effect until two or three years later.

Тяжелый крест достался ей на долю:
 Страдай, молчи, притворствуй и не плачь;
 Кому и страсть, и молодость, и волю—
 Всё отдала—тот стал ее палач!

Давно ни с кем она не знает встречи;
 Угнетена, пуглива и грустна,
 Безумные, язвительные речи
 Безропотно выслушивать должна:

“Не говори, что молодость сгубила
 Ты, ревностью истерзана моей;
 Не говори! . . . близка моя могила,
 А ты цветка весеннего свежей!

“Тот день, когда меня ты полюбила
 И от меня услышала: люблю—
 Не проклинай! близка моя могила:
 Поправлю всё, всё смертью искуплю!

“Не говори, что дни твои унылы,
 Тюремщиком больного не зови:
 Передо мной—холодный мрак могилы,
 Перед тобой—объятия любви!

“Я знаю: ты другого полюбила,
 Щадить и ждать наскучило тебе . . .
 О, погоди! близка моя могила—
 Начатое и кончить дай судьбе! . . .”

Ужасные, убийственные звуки! . . .
 Как статуя прекрасна и бледна,
 Она молчит, свои ломая руки . . .
 И что сказать могла б ему она? . . .³³

Although there is something of Tiutchev's "fatal duel" between lovers here,³⁴ the mixture of paranoia, cruelty, and self-hate brings Nekrasov's emotional world—not for the first time—close to Dostoevsky's. Like mentally disturbed persons who, we are told, sometimes invent a second self who stands outside the "real" one observing and criticizing,³⁵ so the mentally distraught poet here is literally *beside himself*. In stanzas one, two, and seven it is the

33. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:191–92.

34. For an interesting comparison of the two love cycles see G. A. Gukovskii's "Nekrasov i Tiutchev," *Nauchnyi biulleten' Leningradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 16–17 (1947): 51–54.

35. See Freud, *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1933), p. 85.

ideal Nekrasov—a man of justice and magnanimity—who speaks. Before him stands the actual Nekrasov—sick, hysterical, and self-pitying—with a mind so twisted with thoughts of death that he can neither hear nor speak the truth, and who manages to make even his plea for mercy a means of hurting a friend. In this tragic triangle of Soul, Self, and the Other, our pity arises from the victimization of the Other by the Self; our terror—if the Aristotelian term is not too strong—from the perception that their situation is not only painful but hopeless: the Soul seems to be speaking through a wall of glass so thick that he can be heard by neither the unhappy Avdotia nor by the apparently oblivious Self.

A second poem written at about the same time (1855–56) reflects similar strains but evolves quite differently:

Тяжелый год—сломил меня недуг,
 Беда застигла, счастье изменило,
 И не щадит меня ни враг, ни друг,
 И даже ты не пощадила!
 Истерзана, озлоблена борьбой
 С своими кровными врагами,
 Страдалица! стоишь ты предо мной
 Прекрасным призраком с безумными глазами!
 Упали волосы до плеч,
 Уста горят, румянцем рдеют щеки,
 И необузданная речь
 Сливается в ужасные упреки,
 Жестокие, неправые . . . Постой!
 Не я обрек твои молодые годы
 На жизнь без счастья и свободы,
 Я друг, я не губитель твой!
 Но ты не слушаешь . . .
³⁶

If obvious verbal and thematic echoes make this poem a sequel to its predecessor,³⁷ it is also in a sense its rebuttal. To the rhetorical question which closed the former—what could Avdotia possibly say to her lover's unfair accusations?—the latter answers with an irony no less deadly for being (one supposes) unintentional: more than he thinks; more than he will be able to endure.

In contrast to the dialectics of the earlier poems, these lines develop with the rectilinear simplicity of—if the anachronism will be allowed—a radio

36. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:226–27.

37. In addition to the obvious similarity in situation one notes that the poems share a common lexical stock: *shchadit'*, *uzhasnyi*, *prekrasnyi*, *bezumnyi*, and the initial *tiazhelyi*.

being turned on steadily louder until the din becomes unbearable. Opening at a relatively low pitch with Nekrasov's Job-like recital of his miseries (1–3), the poem breaks its decasyllabic flow at the first mention of Avdotia (4), who thereupon seems to materialize before his eyes (5). Part martyr (her "enemies" are unnamed, but can, perhaps, be guessed)³⁸ part Avenging Angel (like the Self in "Tiazhelyi krest dostalsia ei na doliu," the tortured is also a torturer), she becomes, as the poem proceeds, entirely the latter. As the images of heat, liquefaction, and disorder multiply (8–12), the metrical structure, as if shaken by the violence of the attack, sways irregularly from hexameter to tetrameter to pentameter. The effect of the final phase (13–17) is that of a pseudo-duet in which one voice (his) is audible but weak—he neither counterattacks nor rebuts, he merely *denies*; while the other (Avdotia's), although unheard, is overwhelming. Ranged at the end is (again) a row of dots suggesting his inability to defend himself further, as well as, perhaps, the incoherence of his mistress's tirade.

If at this point we stop for a moment, "step back" from the eight poems which we have examined on an individual basis, and consider them as a group, an overall pattern, already hinted at in passing, comes into sharper focus. One aspect of this pattern is defined by the way these poems fall into a series of *doublets*, that is, pairs of poems sharing marked thematic—and sometimes formal—similarities. A second aspect is the way this sequence of doublets (four in all) describe a stair- or ladder-like progression to which the term "escalation"—with all its belligerent overtones—may fairly be applied. Thus, the first stage ("Ia ne liubliu ironii tvoei" and "My s toboi bestolkovye liudi") reveals the tensions which were beginning to beset the couple; the second ("Da, nasha zhizn' tekla miatezhno" and "Tak eto shutka? Milaia moia") shows the effects of a mutually agreed upon "cooling off period"—Panaeva's trip abroad.³⁹ The third stage ("O pis'ma zhenshchiny, nam miloi" and "Pis'ma") tells of new and more violent frictions which center on the same subject and culminate in an "overt act": the burning of Avdotia's letters. In the fourth phase ("Tiazhelyi krest dostalsia ei na doliu" and "Tiazhelyi god—sломil menia nedug") hostility gives way to hostilities, as Nekrasov's attack in the former elicits (or so it almost seems) Avdotia's counterattack in the latter.

38. They may well have been Avdotia's accusers in the "Ogareva Affair" (see note 18).

39. The pattern of escalation is of course not absolutely consistent if one assumes, as I have (see note 20), that "Ia ne liubliu ironii tvoei" was written before Panaeva's trip abroad.

It is hard to imagine a domestic partnership long surviving the emotional attrition caused by such confrontations. Either the lovers must separate or one of them must “surrender unconditionally” to the other. A lyric entitled “Prosti” written in 1856 shows that permanent separation was in fact envisaged.⁴⁰ But a more substantial piece written in the same year indicates the road which was actually taken:

Как ты кротка, как ты послушна,
Ты рада быть его рабой,
Но он внимает равнодушно,
Уныл и холоден душой.

А прежде . . . помнишь? Молода,
Горда, надменна и прекрасна,
Ты им играла самовластно,
Но он любил, любил тогда!

Так солнце осени—без туч
Стоит, не грея, на лазури,
А летом и сквозь сумрак бури
Бросает животворный луч . . .⁴¹

Clearly in this war (as in many another) both sides were losers. For if Avdotia’s surrender seems unconditional, Nekrasov’s victory is largely Pyrrhic. Largely, but not entirely. For even as the poet, whose use of the third person for himself may well have psychological overtones,⁴² laments the empty calm which has replaced the stormy passions of the past, he is pleased to underline the slave-like role which his once proud mistress must now accept. Nor should this emphasis surprise us. The taming of Avdotia was, as we have already noted, essentially a return to the *status quo ante*: the restitution of those prerogatives of male superiority which Nekrasov had enjoyed with others and which he would never again relinquish.

40. Since the chief interest of this pale little lyric is that it is one of the two poems (the other is “Davno otvergnutyi toboi,” 1855) which Nekrasov wrote to Panaeva in a more or less “Pushkinian” vein, I have omitted discussing it and its congener. It may be worth pointing out, however, that both of these conventionally “poetic” pieces—in the former he asks Panaeva to remember the happy not the melancholy moments of their love, in the latter he compares his present rejection by her with a similar moment in the long distant past—are poems of *separation*. It is when the lovers are *together* that as a rule the bitterness arises.

41. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:241.

42. It is interesting to note that as the poems become more bitter Nekrasov uses the third person for himself or for Avdotia with increasing frequency (for example, “O pis'ma zhenshchiny, nam miloi,” “Tiazhelyi krest dostalsia ei na doliu,” “Kak ty krotka, kak ty poslushna”). It is almost as if, unconsciously shrinking from the painful intimacy of the first and second persons, he took refuge in the more impersonal third person form.

The point is worth making. It helps us understand why, despite the poet's unequivocal declaration that he no longer loved Avdotia, she remained a part of the ménage for another seven years. Clearly some aspects of this altered relationship were to his liking. It also suggests why the last years of their cohabitation were, poetically speaking, barren. For, as we have seen, what had brought these brackish poems into existence was neither love nor hate, neither compassion nor anger, but a *mixture* of these opposites.⁴³ Where no positive component was present—and the declared indifference to his mistress seems to rule out such an element—no poetry was forthcoming.

This generalization knows only one exception, the satirical “Slezy i nervy” written in 1862. In slightly abridged form it reads:

О слезы женские, с придачей
 Нервических, тяжелых драм!
 Вы долго были мне задачей,
 Я долго слепо верил вам
 И много вынес мук мятежных.
 Теперь я знаю наконец:
 Не слабости созданий нежных,—
 Вы их могущества венец.
 Вернее закаленной стали
 Вы поражаете сердца.
 Не знаю, сколько в вас печали,
 Но деспотизму нет конца!

* * * * *

Кто ей теперь флакон подносит,
 Застигнут сценой роковой?
 Кто у нее прощенья просит,
 Вины не зная за собой?
 Кто сам трясется в лихорадке,
 Когда она к окну бежит
 В преувеличенном припадке
 И “ты свободен!” говорит?
 Кто боязливо наблюдает,
 Сосредоточен и сердит,
 Как буйство нервное стихает
 И переходит в аппетит?
 Кто ночи трудные проводит,
 Один, ревнивый и больной,

43. The converse was, as already noted, also true. During the years when Nekrasov's love for Panaeva was at its height he spoke of it to no one: “But I did not want to share them [my dreams of love]/ With my idle friends. . . / I admitted no one/ Into the sanctuary of my modest soul!” (“Vliublennomu,” *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 1:227).

А утром с ней по лавкам бродит,
 Наряд торгую дорогой?
 Кто говорит: “Прекрасны оба”—
 На нежный спрос: “Который взять?”—
 Меж тем как закипает злоба
 И к черту хочется послать
 Француженку с нахальным носом,
 С ее коварным: “C'est joli!”
 И даже милую с вопросом . . .
 Кто молча достает рубли,
 Спеша скорей покончить муку,
 И, увидав себя в трюмо,
 В лице своем читает скуку
 И рабства темное клеймо? . . .⁴⁴

It is hard to think of another poet of the century capable of verse of this kind. Devoid of pity, or regret, or even indignation, it expresses a contempt so pure, so lacking in “higher feelings” that it approaches somewhat paradoxically the condition of light verse. Miserable but not tragic, ridiculous but not comic, the two lovers turned antilovers inhabit a poetic world which seems at once more modern and more ancient than their own. Anticipating a later age when the merely trivial or mean could engage the attention of serious poets (the scene of the squabbling couple in the fashionable woman’s clothing store is unmistakably “modern” in temper), these lines simultaneously recall earlier ages when the satyr-satirist (a Juvenal, a Rochester) could momentarily forget the poet’s sacred obligation to delight or instruct and simply *rail*—but with this important moral difference: the target of those satirists was always the Other; the object of Nekrasov’s scorn here is, primarily, himself.

A year later the liaison was mercifully dissolved. After seventeen years with the poet, Avdotia, sensing perhaps that her husband’s recent death would not change her status and unwilling to suffer further indignities, left Nekrasov for good, remarried, and lived to write—more than a decade after the poet’s death—her singularly unacrimonious memoirs. She died in 1893. As for Nekrasov, he continued to live in their St. Petersburg dwelling, his way of life essentially unchanged by her absence. The two appear never to have met again.

The poet’s capacity for making restitution in verse to those he had treated imperfectly in life has already been noted. Thus it should not surprise us that, a decade later, he would in a piece entitled “Tri elegii” (1873) recall Avdotia with great tenderness, declare that their love was still alive, and even predict

44. *Ibid.*, 2:101–2. Lines 11–33 have been omitted.

her eventual return:

Придет . . . и, как всегда, стыдлива,
 Нетерпелива и горда,
 Потупит очи молчаливо.
 Тогда . . . Что я скажу тогда? . .

Безумец! для чего тревожишь
 Ты сердце бедное свое?
 Простить не можешь ты ее—
 И не любить ее не можешь! . .⁴⁵

That the “historical” Nekrasov actually entertained such an expectation must be doubted. Avdotia was by then over fifty and married to another; Nekrasov, too, had formed other attachments. More revealing, perhaps, than this commemoration of an old passion is the bitterness which accompanies it. What acts Avdotia had committed which he could not forgive we can only guess.⁴⁶ That animosity was a necessary part of his remembrance of her, however, is as plain as the title which the poem had borne in an earlier version—“*Liubov' i zlost'*.”⁴⁷

These lines were not Nekrasov’s final valediction to Panaeva. In 1877, the year of his death, he undertook a revision of “*Pis'ma*,” written some twenty years before. The second version, retitled “*Goriashchie pis'ma*” reads:

Они горят! . . Их не напишешь вновь,
 Хоть написать, смеясь, ты обещала . . .
 Уж не горит ли с ними и любовь,
 Которая их сердцу диктовала?

Их ложью жизнь еще не назвала,
 Ни правды их еще не доказала . . .
 Но та рука со злобой их сожгла,
 Которая с любовью их писала!

Свободно ты решала выбор свой,
 И не как раб упал я на колени;
 Но ты идешь по лестнице крутой
 И дерзко жжешь пройденные ступени! . .

Безумный шаг! . . быть может, роковой . . .
⁴⁸

45. *Ibid.*, p. 399.

46. Nekrasov may, again, have had in mind the “Ogareva Affair” (see note 18).

47. For the details of its genesis and publication see *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 2:674–75.

48. *Ibid.*, 3:327.

As Turgenev had once emended—and weakened—Tiutchev's poems in the interests of increased metrical smoothness, so Nekrasov, his sureness of touch impaired, conceivably, by age, disease, and heavy sedation, purged "Pis'ma" of those irregularities to which we earlier called attention. Accordingly, a metrically "correct" iamb has supplanted the opening spondee ("Plach', gor'ko . . ."); the confusing "No" of line 11 of the first version has been eliminated; and the questionable logic in the charge that Avdotia's conduct may have proved the falseness of her earlier letters has been softened. Moreover, by dividing the lines into regular quatrains and a pseudo-couplet he has given his sonnet a less "accidental" appearance. But does the poem gain artistically thereby? To one reader at least the very "raggedness" of the earlier version imparted an improvised, spontaneous quality which its smoother successor fails to achieve.

Viewed as a psychological document the revision points in another direction. To the extent that the poet's choice of subject matter reflected his mental preoccupations, his decision to rework, on his deathbed, one of his angriest denunciations of Avdotia is of obvious interest. Fourteen years after their final separation, the memory of injuries he had once sustained from her apparently continued to rankle.

A necessary caveat brings us to our conclusion. Whoever reads the cycle *in toto* from beginning to end (it comprises a score of pieces written over a twenty-seven-year span)⁴⁹ will be tempted to see in these intimate, sometimes anguished, revelations a kind of logbook of the entire liaison. It is a temptation which must be resisted. Like the images reflected in a splintered mirror, these poems reveal many truths, but not the Truth. Unable, by his own admission, to evoke the joyful aspects of his love,⁵⁰ Nekrasov has, perforce, given us a fragmentary, hence distorted, picture of it.

The significance of the cycle in terms of literary history is related to this very "limitation." When, in the eighteenth century, Russian poets, in imitation of their Western compeers, began to write about love, it was axiomatic that their attitudes and language would in some undefined but meaningful sense be *decorous*. This convention did not prevent them and their successors from expressing such "earthy" emotions as desire, jealousy, and anger—as the love poetry of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tiutchev (to name only three) makes clear. It meant rather that an unvarnished description of certain emotions or situations which sometimes attend life with one's mistress—exasperation, petulance, boredom, the intemperate outburst, the petty squabble

49. This figure includes rough drafts, fragments, and poems which Nekrasov declined to publish (or republish) during his lifetime.

50. See note 43.

—were not considered subjects worthy of the serious poet. Verse written about a lady was, after all, verse composed by a gentleman.

But Nekrasov was not a gentleman, his attitude toward women was not, as we have seen, notably gentlemanly, and the originality of these poems lies precisely in the fact that, for all the passion and compassion which they sometimes express, they are in no way bound to the gentleman's code. By describing, without mercy for himself or his mistress, the painful, even sordid, aspects of their life together, Nekrasov became the first poet of his age to depict what Tolstoy, a generation later, was to call the most terrible of all human tragedies—the tragedy of the bedroom.⁵¹

51. Tiutchev's "Deniseva Cycle" of poems, which also reflects a deteriorating love affair and was written over almost exactly the same span of years (1850–64) presents a striking parallel with the "Panaeva Cycle" (see note 34). But the petty, sordid aspects of domesticity are never emphasized by Tiutchev, who in his verse always remained the gentleman. In the English language, George Meredith's sonnet sequence "Modern Love" (1862), a powerful psychological description of a deteriorating marriage, presents certain general points of comparison with Nekrasov's poems. But it will be noted that Nekrasov's poems were for the most part written well before Meredith's.