

NIKOLAJ NEKRASOV: HIS LIFE AND POETIC ART

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NIKOLAJ NEKRASOV

HIS LIFE AND POETIC ART

by

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TO MY WIFE

INTRODUCTION

Nikolaj Alekseevič Nekrasov (1821-1878), one of the great poets of nineteenth-century Russia, is virtually unknown in this country, chiefly perhaps because of the paucity of English translations of his poetry. Moreover, the strictly contemporary flavor of his poems requires some familiarity with the Russia of his time.

Coming, as he did, just after the Golden Age of Russian poetry, Nekrasov wrote under conditions that were totally different from those prevailing when Puškin and Lermontov were alive. In the early 1840's the dominant literary critic, Belinskij, admonished all writers, including the poets, to be socially conscious in everything they wrote; in the 1850's, the critic Černyševskij's negation of all spiritual values sounded a death knell for the poetry of the eclectics, like Fet; in the 1860's the radical critics, Dobroljubov and Pisarev, refused to recognize poetry except as a means of revolutionary propaganda. Nekrasov, although he did not subscribe to all the views of the Populists,¹ felt a moral obligation (indeed, a compulsion) to speak for the suffering Russian peasant, whose misery he knew at first hand and for whom his sympathy was genuine, having been derived from his childhood experiences and his mother's humane attitudes; nor did Nekrasov's interest in peasant life and problems cease with the year 1861, when serfdom was officially abolished in Russia. Some knowledge of the poet's life and of the social background of the time is indeed relevant to an understanding of his poetry.

Nekrasov's life was in a sense a drama in which he was the chief actor, and the stage for that drama was Russia itself. His family heritage and his emotional and intellectual development shaped his poetic temper and determined his choice of topics to write on. The best of his poems actually dealt with but two recurrent themes: 1. his recollections of his mother, 2. the life of the Russian peasant. It is in such poems that his empathy and his proneness to grieve over human suffering strike us as genuine and artistically convincing. On the other hand, one cannot deny that in many of his contemporary satires (and even in his long narrative poem, "Russian Women")² Nekrasov seems to assume an altogether hypocritical attitude, paying lip service to artistic perfection and being concerned primarily about the salability of his literary production. The poet himself admitted (in his poem, "To an Unknown Friend")

¹ See Glossary.

² All translations from Russian are original unless otherwise noted.

that at times his lyre “was clearly out of tune”.³ His poetry could not — and never did — appeal to all strata of contemporary Russian society; and those to whom it did appeal, often interpreted it in terms of ideas rather than art. It was Černyševskij, after all, who cast Nekrasov in the role of a radical saint. Yet the poet was no social reformer any more than Puškin and Gogol had been; it was his essential humaneness that prompted him to devote his talent to the cause of social betterment. Nekrasov’s lifetime dream was to be remembered after his death by the Russian peasantry, whom he had portrayed so lovingly in his long narrative poem, *Who is Happy in Russia*. Since he identified himself with his people and his country, Russia looms large in his poetry as in his life.

Nekrasov has been called by some “a poet of vengeance and grief”, and his own words could be cited as proof that such an appellation was at least partly justified:

Be at one with my Muse of distress:
I have no other lilt in my possession.
He who lives without wrath or depression
Love of Motherland does not possess.⁴

Nekrasov’s “Muse”, however, seems to have been at her best in purely lyrical poems. He was primarily a lyrical poet and only secondarily a social satirist. The figure of Nekrasov-the-artist overshadows the social prophet. The gap between his world and ours can be bridged only through appreciation of his poetic art, of which his own personal life and the life of his Russian homeland were the matrix. Nekrasov, “a poet of vengeance and sorrow”, and a first-rate lyricist, cannot be seen in his true perspective if considered apart from the times and the society in which he lived. His poetry, taken in its entirety, not only provides the key to the understanding of his complex personality but also reflects all the important political and social changes that occurred in Russia between 1845 and 1875. But it is the lyricist, not the satirist, that appeals to us as we read Nekrasov’s poems. The “anger and grief” in Nekrasov’s poetry have long since ebbed away, but his art remains.

³ Nekrasov, “Umru ja skoro ... (Posvjaščajetsja neizvestnomu drugu ...)”, *Sobranie sočinenij v vos'mi tomax* (Moscow, 1965-1966), Vol. II, p. 189.

⁴ Nekrasov, “Gazetnaja”, *Ibid.*, p. 143. Tr. by Nadine Jarintzov in *Russian Poets and Poems* (Oxford, 1917), Vol. I, p. 260.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
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NEKRASOV'S LIFE AND LITERARY ACTIVITY

I. Mother and Son	13
II. School and University Years	16
III. "Dreams and Sounds"	22
IV. Nekrasov's Journalistic Apprenticeship.	25
V. Friendship with Belinskij	28
VI. Editorship of <i>The Contemporary</i> ; Nekrasov as a Businessman and as a Poet.	42
VII. Editorship of the <i>Fatherland Notes</i> ; The Waning Years.	54

NEKRASOV'S ART

VIII. The Evolution of Nekrasov's Art as seen in the Mirror of Russian Criticism.	61
IX. Pre-Emancipation Rural Russia in Nekrasov's Poems	82
X. Two Post-Emancipation Poems: "Peasant Children" and "The Peddlers"	106
XI. "Red-Nose Frost"	118
XII. "Who is Happy in Russia"	138
XIII. Nekrasov's Mother in his Poetry	190
Conclusion.	200
Bibliography	203
Glossary.	205

PART I

NEKRASOV'S LIFE AND LITERARY ACTIVITY

I

MOTHER AND SON

Nikolaj Alekseevič Nekrasov was born on November 28, 1821, in the town of Nemirov in southwestern Russia. His father was a Russian regimental officer; his mother (as most biographers now admit) was a Polish gentlewoman. It was she, and not her husband, who was destined to play a major role in the formation of the future poet's character.

The Russian critic Lebedev-Poljanskij, in his biographical sketch of Nekrasov, gives this interesting account of the romance between the future mother of the poet and her Russian suitor:

Aleksej Sergeevič often went on official business to Kiev, Odessa, Warsaw, and other cities. During one of his official missions he became acquainted with the family of the Polish magnate Zakrzewski and fell in love with his daughter Elena Andreevna. It is difficult to comprehend how an intelligent, educated, rich, beautiful and refined Polish aristocratic young lady could have been captivated by a semi-literate, coarse Russian officer. But she returned his love, and, not heeding her parents' entreaties and active opposition, she eloped with Aleksej Sergeevič. Thus, she broke forever all the ties that bound her to her former home, and gave up her former high position in society.¹

The veracity of the above is borne out by what Nekrasov himself wrote in his reminiscences, which in turn were based on what his mother had told him:

... Staying rather frequently in Warsaw, ... he fell in love with Zakrzewski's daughter; it was useless to try to obtain the parents' consent to the marriage: a semi-literate army officer, and a rich man's daughter — beautiful, well-educated ...

My father carried her away straight from a ball — he married her on the way to his regiment — and her fate was sealed.²

The marriage ceremony of Aleksej Sergeevič Nekrasov and Elena Andreevna Zakrevskaja (Helen Zakrzewska, daughter of Andrew) took place on November 11, 1817, in the little town of Juzvin in the Ukraine (in southwestern Russia). In time three sons were born, of whom Nikolaj was the eldest. In 1823, when the future poet was not quite three years old, his father retired from the army and settled on his

¹ Lebedev-Poljanskij, *N. A. Nekrasov: Kritiko-biografičeskij očerk* (Moscow, 1921), p. 7.

² Nekrasov, "Avtobiografičeskije nabroski, vospominanija i zametki", *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 49-50 (Moscow, 1946), p. 139.

family estate of Grešnevo, near the city of Jaroslavl' (northeast of Moscow). There, Nikolaj spent his childhood years.

The boy was reared in what could hardly be called a happy home environment. The father turned out to be a bully and a drunkard who mistreated his family and his serfs alike and indulged in wanton orgies in the presence of his wife and children. The mother, on the other hand, was a refined and cultured woman. She knew several foreign languages, was a connoisseur of music and an avid reader. Full of compassion for the suffering Grešnevo peasants, she often interceded with her husband to save them from his brutalization — usually without success.³ The incompatibility of Nekrasov's parents, and the scenes of violence he witnessed, could not but leave an imprint on his young mind. In the words of Lebedev-Poljanskij, "... the first childhood impressions determined the poet's character and gave direction to his poetic creativity."⁴

It was in those years that Nekrasov's empathy, his ability to suffer with his fellow men, became manifest. At home he had many occasions to witness human misery. Also, since his father's estate was located between the Volga River and the main road to Siberia, he actually saw Volga barge-haulers (*burlaki*) at work as they strained at hawsers while hauling heavy barges upstream and, at times, he would see Siberia-bound convicts passing on the highroad, with their shaven heads and heavy leg-irons. Nekrasov never forgot those sights and many years later he recreated them with remarkable vividness and poignancy in his poems, "On the Volga" and "The Unfortunates".

In those early years, however, it was his mother's silent suffering at the hands of her despotic husband that became Nikolaj's personal tragedy. As told by one of the poet's biographers, Aleksej Sergeevič tormented his wife not only physically but spiritually and morally as well:

... In his rage, he would tie her to a linden tree and then issue stern orders that she should not be given anything to eat or drink, and then he himself would leave on a hunt. Evidently, he also beat her....

Being a sensualist, the poet's father was addicted to gross debauchery. Any peasant girl that caught his eye was led to him like a dog on a chain, and, if she knew how to please the master, she became his favorite mistress. Even during the lifetime of the poet's mother, they brought to the house a certain Agrafena, who treated Elena Andreevna with insolence and deliberate rudeness.

As undisciplined natures do, Aleksej Sergeevič spent his time mostly hunting, drinking, and playing cards....⁵

Nikolaj never grew accustomed to his mother's uncomplaining martyrdom. He began to hate his father for it, bestowing all his affection on his mother. With her

³ Biographical details of Nekrasov's childhood are taken from the following sources: *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 49-50; Lebedev-Poljanskij, *op. cit.*, Chapter II.

⁴ Lebedev-Poljanskij, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9.

he spent long hours reading or conversing, and it was she that awakened in him a love for beauty and an interest in poetry. By reading good literature to him she gave him his first lessons in literary taste. According to one of the poet's biographers,⁶ his early readings probably included French novels popular at the time as well as works of contemporary Russian and Polish poets: Puškin, Lermontov, and Mickiewicz.

The strong influence of Nekrasov's mother on her son's spiritual, intellectual and moral development has been recognized by most critics. Lebedev-Poljanskij has this to say:

A number of poems: *A Dog Hunt*, *Homeland*, *The Unfortunates*, *Mother*, and others, depict the poet's unhappy childhood. And what would his life have been like, had he not had a tender, loving mother? Lonely and abused, she was withering away in an atmosphere of ugly orgies and serfdom. "For twenty years she uncomplainingly bore her cross in the silence of a slave", and, proud and duty-conscious, she never even thought of breaking the marriage bond and fleeing from the sordid life that was her lot; and while slowly dying away, she concentrated all her love on her children. Through her sufferings and her love she saved her son. ...⁷

What she was trying to save her son from was, above all, selfishness and gross materialism that were so evident in her husband. She must have taught Nikolaj something about the equality of all human beings and encouraged his friendliness toward the peasant children of Grešnevo. From his mother, Nekrasov could not help but acquire compassion for the Russian peasant.

Elena Andreevna died in 1841 when the poet was twenty years old. A few of Nekrasov's biographers (Corbet, for one)⁸ seem to think that her direct imprint on her son's personality was not great, that a sentimental remorse outweighed filial trust and love in the lifelong and quite remarkable enshrinement of the poet's mother to be found in his works. Be that as it may, the facts⁹ establish only that this Polish-born and deeply religious mother fostered Nekrasov's idealism, introduced him at an early age to the spell of the written word, and, through her own example, taught him compassion and on whom to bestow it.

⁶ Corbet, *Nekrasov, l'homme et le poète* (Paris, 1948), p. 12.

⁷ Lebedev-Poljanskij, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁸ Corbet, *op. cit.*, pp. 12 ff.

⁹ See note 3.

II

SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY YEARS

In 1832 Nekrasov, then eleven years old, entered a government-run secondary school (*gimnazija*) in the city of Jaroslavl'. He did not turn out to be a very bright student despite all the work he had done at home under private tutors. But he did read all the literary material he could lay his hands on, including certain proscribed poems by Puškin and articles by the contemporary critics, Polevoj and Nadeždin. His writings of that time were mostly juvenile satires with numerous personal references to his classmates and school authorities.

In the secondary school I became addicted to bombastic phrase, and I began to read literary journals from time to time, while also writing satires on my friends.¹

It was evidently such satire of a personal kind that caused most of young Nekrasov's trouble with the school's administration. Both the professors and the director failed to appreciate the wit and humor of his poems, and hinted to the young author that perhaps he might continue his education at some other institution of learning. When, to make matters worse, Nekrasov's father refused in 1837 to pay for any further instruction given his son, Nikolaj had no choice but to leave school and return to his home in Grešnevo.

The five years spent by Nekrasov in the Jaroslavl' secondary school may be recorded as another milestone in his intellectual development: he had become acquainted with contemporary poetry and literary criticism; he had also asserted himself by writing poems both imitative and original. Nekrasov's favorite pastime in these formative years was imitating and occasionally parodying poems by Puškin, Lermontov, Byron, and others.

The main point is, I would imitate whatever I had read. And so, at the age of fifteen, I already had a whole notebook full of poems, which gave me a strong urge to go to Petersburg. ...

Puškin was hardly to be found in literary magazines any more, and Benediktov had been succeeded by others. Indebted to these poets for the rhetoric of my youthful style, I later remembered them gratefully.²

¹ Nekrasov, "Avtobiografičeskie nabroski", *op. cit.*, p. 147.

² *Ibid.*, p. 148.

The poems referred to by Nekrasov in his memoirs are the same that appeared in book form in 1840 under the title *Dreams and Sounds* (*Mečty i zvuki*). In these, as one critic puts it, he “fell into the rut of epigone romanticism”.³ A fairer statement would be that in his apprenticeship as a poet Nekrasov learned by trial and error as did many other poets. In 1837, while dreaming of going to Petersburg and winning literary fame, young Nikolaj certainly did not know that a new age was dawning on Russia — an age of prose.

Nekrasov's biographers differ somewhat with regard to his life and activities during the years prior to his university studies. M. M. Stasjulevič, in a biographical sketch preceding the 1877 edition of the poet's complete works, states:

Nekrasov's father had always wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and choose a military career. As a result, young Nekrasov had to leave his secondary school early, and in 1839 he departed for Petersburg to enter the cadet corps. A friend of his father's, the Jaroslavl' district attorney Polozov, gave him a letter to a brother of his, who was then a district commander of the military police. The latter, in turn, recommended the young man to Ja. I. Rostovcev — and the matter was almost settled. But in Petersburg Nekrasov met his former Jaroslavl' friend, Glušickij, then a university student, and by chance he became acquainted with D. I. Uspenskij; his conversations with them strengthened his determination to become better educated, and he frankly confessed to general Polozov's wife his wish to enroll at the university. The Polozovs approved of his plans but, at the same time, they notified their kinsman in Jaroslavl'. Through him, Nekrasov's father learned of everything. The father's anger did not daunt the young man, who, as a result, was left to his own devices.⁴

A. S. Suvorin, in his “Sunday Sketches and Vignettes”, gives a shorter but almost identical account, without mentioning in what year Nekrasov came to Petersburg.⁵

S. N. Krivenko, one of the poet's biographers, quotes Nekrasov himself as saying: “I arrived in Petersburg in 1837 (the year of Puškin's death). Since I had refused to bow to my father's wish and enter the cadet corps, my money was cut off by him.”⁶ The only way to end this apparent confusion is to accept the testimony of one of the poet's sisters, according to which Nekrasov left for Petersburg on July 20, 1838.⁷

Several different explanations are likewise given for Nekrasov's decision to enroll at the university. N. I. Glušickij, whose brother Andrej was a schoolmate of the poet in Jaroslavl', gives this interesting account:

Upon meeting N. A. in Petersburg, my brother indeed made every effort to dissuade him from joining the cadet corps and ... entering military service; he succeeded. In that laudable task my brother was aided also by his university colleagues, Il'enkov and Kossov ... Their joint endeavor prevented Nekrasov from sinking into the slough of despond of ... army life and made it possible for him to register at the local university ... as an auditor.⁸

³ Druzin, “N. A. Nekrasov”, *Stixotvorenija N. A. Nekrasova* (Leningrad, 1956), Vol. I, p. 8.

⁴ Stasjulevič, “N. A. Nekrasov”, *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 49-50, pp. 188-189 (See also footnote, *Ibid.*, p. 190).

⁵ Suvorin, “Nedel'nye očerki i kartinki”, *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁶ Krivenko, “Iz rasskazov Nekrasova”, *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁷ Butkevič, “Nabroski biografii Nekrasova”, *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁸ Glušickij, “Po povodu biografii N. A. Nekrasova, pomeščennoj v *Otečestvennyx zapiskax*”, *Peterburgskij listok*, No. 107 (1878).

In the 1877 biography of Nekrasov by Stasjulevič, mention is also made of the theology professor D. I. Uspenskij. This man, as the biographers generally agree, should be given the credit for improving Nekrasov's knowledge of Greek and Latin, in which two languages the latter had not made much progress in Jaroslavl'.⁹ Il'enkov and Kossov, themselves students, demonstrated their friendship for the poet by assuming the task of preparing him in mathematics and natural sciences, separate examinations in which were required for admission to the university. However, all these facts still do not provide a satisfactory explanation for Nekrasov's change of mind regarding his future career. The answer may perhaps be found in the following passage, quoted from the writings of the famous radical critic Nikolaj Černyševskij:

Who was it that suggested to Nekrasov that he enroll at the university? According to what he has told me, it was his mother. It happened, as told to me by him, in the following way:

His mother wanted him to be an educated man, and often said to him that he should go to a university, since good education is obtained at a university and not in special schools. But his father would not even hear of it; he would agree to let Nekrasov go only for the purpose of entering the cadet corps. It was useless to argue, and the mother kept silent. The father sent Nekrasov to Petersburg to join the cadet corps. ... But the latter was going there with the intention of enrolling not in the cadets' school but at the university. ...¹⁰

This revelation is too important to be treated lightly, the more so that it comes from a man who indeed knew Nekrasov very well and was interested in all that the poet told him about his early years. Černyševskij, it may be pointed out, had conversed with Nekrasov many years before the poet's illness impaired his memory. It is therefore possible to arrive at the conclusion that the idea of enrolling at the university was inspired in Nekrasov by his mother, and that he went to Petersburg with that intention.

Little is known about the first few months of Nekrasov's stay in Russia's capital. The poet himself, in his autobiographical sketch, states simply: "I was getting ready for the university, starving, and preparing nine boys, in all subjects, for admission to military schools."¹¹ This statement is repeated with minor variations by contemporary biographers of Nekrasov, such as M. M. Stasjulevič, S. N. Krivenko, A. A. Butkevič, and others. N. V. Gerbel' adds still another detail: "Nekrasov feverishly began to read textbooks and prepare ... for the stiff examination that was to take place exactly within a year."¹² Did Nekrasov actually enroll at the university during the initial period of his stay in Petersburg?

⁹ Stasjulevič, "Biografičeskij očerk", *Stixotvorenija N. A. Nekrasova: Polnoe sobranie v odnom tome* (St. Petersburg, 1882), viii. This is a reprint of his article, the latter having been published separately in 1877.

¹⁰ Černyševskij, "Zametki pri čtenii 'biografičeskix svedenij' o Nekrasove, pomeščennyx v I tome posmertnogo izdanija ego *Stixotvorenij*", *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij i pisem* (Moscow, 1939-1953), Vol. I, pp. 742-743.

¹¹ Nekrasov, "Avtobiogr. nabroski", *op. cit.*, p. 148.

¹² Gerbel', "N. A. Nekrasov", *Ibid.*, p. 184.

The previously mentioned N. I. Glušickij, whose brother (A. I. Glušickij) had been a classmate of the poet's in Jaroslavl', sent an explanatory letter to the editor of *The Petersburg Leaflet* (*Peterburgskij listok*) in 1878. This letter, whose main purpose was to supply pertinent biographical information about the deceased Nekrasov's university years, is quoted here in part:

A. I. Glušickij earnestly wanted Nekrasov to be included in the number of Government-paid students; this was indispensable in view of the late poet's precarious financial situation. ... But Nekrasov himself presented an insurmountable obstacle to his being a regular student. "Nekrasov", my late brother told me, "was extremely weak in mathematics and, moreover, was somewhat repelled by that particular science. Despite my fervent wish to help him and my wearisome work with him in that subject, I lost all hope of his ever passing an examination even in the Department of Philology, where no great knowledge of mathematics is said to be required." In the other subjects required for the entrance examination, according to the words of A. I., the late poet was well prepared.¹³

Nekrasov's other tutor was D. I. Uspenskij, who undertook to prepare him in Greek and Latin, and also in the natural sciences. Thanks to Uspenskij's efforts, the future poet passed the entrance examination in Latin with a grade of "excellent"; but, as regards physics and geography, he received grades of "poor" in both, owing perhaps as much to his tutor's inadequate knowledge of these subjects as to his own distaste for them. His entrance grade in Russian language and literature was but "satisfactory", which could have been the result of his irregular study habits in the Jaroslavl' secondary school. It is obvious that Nekrasov's first attempt to gain admission to the university (in July 1838) must have ended in a failure.

The failure was quite a blow to the young man's ego, for he suddenly saw all his dreams shattered. He did the only thing he could do, namely, appealed to the university rector, P. A. Pletnev, to give him another chance in view of his special situation (he was registering at the university against his father's wishes). Pletnev promised to plead Nekrasov's case before the admissions committee if the young man took his physics examination again. Nekrasov, however, never appeared for the examination. Consequently, he was advised by Pletnev to register only as an auditor, which he did.

Thus, in September 1839, Nekrasov became an auditor at the university, having all but given up the idea of enrolling as a regular student. Nevertheless, he took another entrance examination in July 1840, which he also failed.¹⁴ It is true, he received a grade of "excellent" in Russian language and literature, but his remaining grades were either "fair" or "poor" or even "unsatisfactory" (especially in modern foreign languages and in natural sciences). Yet it would be wrong to assume that Nekrasov's insufficient preparation for university studies was entirely his own fault.

¹³ See note 8.

¹⁴ Evgen'ev-Maksimov, *Žizn' i dejatel'nost' N. A. Nekrasova* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1947), Vol. I, p. 162.

A large share of the blame had to be borne by the Jaroslavl' secondary school, whose low educational standards were by no means exceptional among the provincial schools in the Russia of the time.

Still another factor, a very important one, contributed to Nekrasov's failure at the university. It was the dire poverty in which he was forced to live during his first years in Petersburg. Owing to his father's refusal to help him financially, Nekrasov, from the very moment of his arrival in Petersburg (i.e., from July 1838) to the year 1840 inclusive, experienced all the miseries of a life of starvation and want. All of Nekrasov's biographers agree that under such circumstances, most of his energy would be spent in a desperate struggle to survive, to earn his daily bread — as it indeed was.

Here is what Nekrasov himself told a friend of his, S. N. Krivenko:

For three years, I was hungry all day, every day. It was not only that I ate bad food and not enough of that, but some days I did not eat at all. I often went to a certain restaurant on Morskaja (Street), where one was allowed to read without ordering food. I would take a newspaper just to pretend, and then push a plateful of bread underneath and eat. ...¹⁵

It was this constant starvation that finally brought on a serious illness, diagnosed by doctors as complete exhaustion of the organism due to malnutrition. Nekrasov, thought by many to be near death, eventually recovered, but the traces of the disease remained in his system for the rest of his life.

In the years 1838-1841, Nekrasov vainly sought a way out of his dilemma. He clearly saw the impossibility of getting on without a steady source of income, but at the same time he still did not want to give up his dream of obtaining a university education. Against his better judgment, he struggled on, earning his livelihood by tutoring and other work while trying to attend university lectures as an auditor. Often he had to depend on the kindness of his various landlords not to throw him out into the street for not paying his rent. The following excerpt from his reminiscences contains his own account of the terrible conditions under which he lived in Petersburg in those years:

I owed forty-five roubles to a soldier in the Raz' 'ezžaja (Street). I had been living in a wooden wing of his house. I was hungry and cold, and had a fever besides. The other tenants were telling me to go to the devil. Nevertheless, I recovered, but had nothing to live on, and the soldier was pressing me for money ... One day he comes to me and says first in a friendly manner: "Please write that you owe me forty-five roubles, and leave me your things as security." I gladly complied with his request ... Well, I think to myself, it's like having been relieved of a heavy burden. I go to a friend on the other side of town and stay there until late at night, I come back home, ... quite confident that the soldier will not bother me now for a long time. ... I come up to the house wing, and knock. "Who are you?" the soldier asks. "Your tenant, Nekrasov", I answer. "All our tenants are home", he says. "How can they all be home", I say, "if I just came!?" Then he says, "You shouldn't have bothered; you gave up your room, and left your things as security ..."¹⁶

¹⁵ Krivenko, "Iz rasskazov Nekrasova", *op. cit.*, p. 208.

¹⁶ Suvorin, *Ibid.*, p. 201 (See also *Novoe vremja*, 1877, Nos. 380, 662, 745).

Nekrasov's account is then continued by A. S. Suvorin, to whom the poet told the story in person:

What could one do? The poor devil tried to argue, to shout — but it didn't help. The soldier was unmoved. Outside, the fall weather was dreadful, cold and bone-chilling. Nekrasov went along the streets, walked this way and that, until he became so fatigued that he sat down on the doorstep of a store. He was wearing only a tattered overcoat and a pair of serge trousers. He felt so wretched that he hid his face in his hands and wept bitterly. Suddenly he heard footsteps; he looked up and saw a beggar accompanied by a small boy. "Please give, for the love of Christ", wailed the boy, stretching out his hand toward Nekrasov. The latter still had not thought of an answer when the old man nudged the boy:

"What's the matter with you? Can't you see, he himself will freeze to death by morning! Eh, you blockhead!" "And what are you doing here?" he continued, addressing the stranger.

"Nothing", answered Nekrasov.

"Nothing, there's a proud one! You've got no place to live, one can see that. Come along!"

"I won't come. Leave me alone."

"Well, don't act so important. You'll freeze to death, I say. Let's go, don't be afraid, we won't harm you."

There was no other solution. Nekrasov went ...

"I went to live with them", said Nekrasov.¹⁷

In this way, the poet came to know the "lower depths" of the Russian capital. Those terrible years, 1838-1841, gave him an insight into life and its problems which, in the long run, proved more valuable to him than his unfinished education.

The adverse circumstances of Nekrasov's early Petersburg life could not but affect the normal development of his poetic talent. Unknown as he was at that time to the reading public and to literary critics, he had to take whatever short-term assignments he could get on the staffs of various literary journals, the chief among them being *The Son of the Fatherland* (*Syn otečestva*), *The Literary Gazette* (*Literaturnaja gazeta*), *The Pantheon* (*Panteon*), and *Fatherland Notes* (*Otečestvennye zapiski*). Besides writing book reviews and short articles, he did bibliographic research, composed fables and children's primers, and even wrote short plays for vaudeville theaters. Many years later he would tell his friends about that literary drudgery with a certain rueful relish:

It is almost beyond belief that I could have worked so hard. I don't think I exaggerate if I say that in a few years I produced up to two hundred folio sheets of printed material for journals, beginning just a few days after my arrival in Petersburg. ...¹⁸

According to N. V. Gerbel', Nekrasov's first attempt at writing poetry for publication was the poem "Thought" ("Mysl'"), which appeared in 1838 in *The Son of the Fatherland*. His second published poem was "Life" ("Žizn'"), printed in 1839 in *Library for Reading* (*Biblioteka dlja čtenija*). This success, modest as it was, appears to have been the factor that made him choose poetry for his career.¹⁹ The next step was to find a publisher for a collection of his already written poems.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

¹⁸ Nekrasov, "Avtobiogr. nabroski", *op. cit.*, p. 149.

¹⁹ Gerbel', *Ibid.*, p. 185.