

THE WAR PROSE OF

VIKTOR PLATONOVICH NEKRASOV

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PREFACE

Any student of Russian literature will be aware of the close link traditionally obtaining between literature and politics in Russia. In the absence of any relevant political mechanism, literature has long constituted the only viable forum for socio-political, and ultimately philosophical, debate. In the Soviet period, after the first decade of relative freedom, the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. has sought to eliminate the antagonism between literature and politics by subjecting belles-lettres to the same totalitarian concepts which set industrialization and collectivization in motion. Since the 1930's a permanent feature of the Soviet literary scene has been the vicissitudes in the struggle -- varying in intensity according to the political barometer -- between the dogmatists in favour of a Party-controlled and directed literature and the advocates of a literature unhampered by party-political considerations. Consequently, any study of a Soviet author must of necessity take extra-literary factors into account. The present study is no exception, insofar as it undertakes an evaluation of V.P. Nekrasov's war prose against the background of the politico-literary perspective.

In the absence of any detailed biography or full length work devoted to the writer's literary production, Chapter I provides an introduction to the man and his works and seeks to place him in the general

context of Soviet literature. Subsequent chapters are devoted to an examination of his war prose, on which his reputation primarily rests. Chapter II deals with his first novel In the Trenches of Stalingrad, placing special emphasis on a number of its salient linguistic features; in Chapter III his second major novel In the Home Town is discussed as a novel of the return from the war and as a 'thaw' novel. Chapter IV analyses the short stories on the war theme. In the Conclusion an attempt is made to assess Nekrasov both as a literary artist and as a representative of the liberal-progressive faction of Soviet letters.

* * *

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Victor Nekrasov is comparatively unknown in the West, where translations of his major works have been available only since the early 1960's. In the Soviet Union, however, Nekrasov is one of the most popular and highly respected figures of contemporary Russian literature. His popularity derives not only from his merits as a literary artist, but is due in large measure to his moral integrity as a writer: from his literary debut in 1946 with the publication of In the Trenches of Stalingrad¹ the keystone of his work has been an attitude of honesty and sincerity. Stalingrad marked the first phase of Nekrasov's discreet yet sustained polemic against the canons of Socialist Realism -- the dominant Soviet literary creed -- and represented, in literature, the breath of fresh air that Pasternak attributed to the role of World War II in Soviet life generally:

...война явилась очистительной бурей,
струи свежего воздуха, веянием избавления.²

¹First published as Stalingrad, Znamya, Nos. 9, 10, 1946.

²Doktor Zhivago, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1958, p. 519.

In the post-Stalin period Nekrasov has been one of the staunchest supporters of the cultural thaw, as can be seen from the views expressed in his numerous pronouncements on modern art, architecture, films, the theatre and literature. Since 1958 his travelogues have furnished Soviet readers with an unbiased knowledge of the West long denied them. In 1961, with the publication of his third novel Kira Georgievna³, Nekrasov broached the theme of the returnee from a Stalinist concentration camp, thus prefiguring later developments on this theme in the works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Yuri Bondariev.

Nekrasov belongs to the middle generation of Soviet writers -- he is neither one of the 'angry young men' like Evgeny Evtushenko and Andrei Vosnesensky, whose most crippling experience of life was loss of faith in Stalin; nor is he one of the liberal elder statesmen of Soviet letters like Ilya Ehrenburg and Constantine Paustovsky, whose careers began before the Revolution and Stalin. However, by temperament and in his intransigent attitude to official literary policies, Nekrasov gravitates towards the younger generation. Barely six at the time of the Revolution, Nekrasov's youth and adolescence were passed under the Soviet regime: he has been a loyal Party member since 1944 and sincerely believes in the superiority of Communism over Capitalism. Yet he has played a significant role in the cultural thaw and come out strongly in

³Kira Georgievna, Novy Mir, No. 6, 1961.

favour of the separation of literature from politics. Anti-dogmatism and complete artistic freedom, he claims, are entirely consistent with the ideals of Communism and correspond to the search for truth and the lofty dream of freedom and justice inherent in the great tradition of Russian literature.

* * *

Victor Platonovich Nekrasov was born on the 17th June, 1911, in the family of a liberal physician in Kiev. In 1936 he graduated in architecture from the Kiev Construction Institute, but practised as an architect less than a year: work in a Kiev drawing office apparently proved uncongenial, so Nekrasov turned to another profession. While attending the Institute, Nekrasov had simultaneously taken evening courses at the theatrical studio attached to the Kiev Theatre of Russian Drama. From 1937-1941 he worked as an actor and stage-designer in various parts of the Soviet Union. A highlight of these years, as he tells us in Three Encounters,⁴ was an audition with Constantine Stanislavsky at the Moscow Arts Theatre. But the great director was unimpressed with Nekrasov's Khlestakov monologue from Gogol's Revizor.

His career in the theatre was interrupted by the outbreak of war on 22 June, 1941. From 1941-1944 Nekrasov served as a combat officer and engineer: early in 1942 he went to the front, where he participated in the Red Army retreat from Kharkov to Stalingrad. But the most crucial

⁴Tri vstrechy, Novy Mir, No. 12, 1958.

time was from August, 1942, when he rejoined the army of General Chuikov in the defence of Stalingrad. His direct experience of war was to launch him on a new career -- that of professional writer, and it was only this later calling that was destined to bring him fame.

Nekrasov made a relatively late debut in literature, in 1946, with the publication of In the Trenches of Stalingrad. This semi-autobiographical novel, based on his own immediate experience of the Battle of Stalingrad, deviated radically from the norms of Soviet war literature and won him immediate fame. In order to evaluate Nekrasov's novel as a specifically Soviet work, it is necessary to place it in the general perspective of Soviet literary development. By 1941 Soviet literature had undergone two distinct phases: roughly speaking, the 1920's produced the literature of the Revolution, Civil War and the struggle to establish Soviet power. Literature in the 30's was marked by a growing interest in matters social and economic: Soviet power was established, the interventionists and the Whites had been routed, the electrification of Russia and the first Five Year Plan initiated. Soviet writers turned to industrialization and collectivization for their themes and sought a new ethic in work and production, best typified by the cult of Stakhanovism.

But the Gleichschaltung of the arts in 1932-4 -- the imposition of the doctrine of Socialist Realism -- led to an inevitable impoverishment of literature: authors were turning more and more to historical themes to escape the impasse of prescribed subject-matter. World War II

represented an interval of relative freedom: for the brief duration of the war the writers' aims coincided with those of the Party. National defence, the need to encourage the war effort and bolster the morale of an embattled people became paramount.

From a literary standpoint, however, the beginnings were inauspicious: the hate literature of the early years was unashamedly publicistic and tendentious. This stage was followed by a revival of lyric poetry, much excellent battlefield rapportage and a spate of effective war novels. But the spontaneity of these years was not destined to survive the war very long. As early as 1943, when the Party felt more confident about the outcome of the war after the turning point symbolised by the successful defence of Stalingrad, there were demands for a deeper Party-dictated interpretation of the war and the Party's role in it.

By the time of the Central Committee decrees of August 14, 1946, the brief relaxation of controls was at an end. Faced with the appalling problems of reconstruction, an exhausted economy and a war-weary populace, and therefore anxious to restore its authority over all facets of life, the Party initiated a campaign against the more independent writers. Following the pattern laid down in the vilification campaigns of the late 20's and early 30's, the Party selected as its chief victims the satirist Zoshchenko and the lyrical poetess Anna Akhmatova 'pour encourager les autres'. The two authors were attacked for

lack of ideological content in their works. Editors, too, were criticized for forgetting the Leninist tenet that Soviet literature cannot, by definition, be apolitical:

«Сила советской литературы, самой передовой литературы в мире, состоит в том, что она является литературой, у которой нет и не может быть других интересов, кроме интересов народа, интересов государства. Задача советской литературы состоит в том, чтобы помочь государству правильно воспитать молодежь, ответить на ее вопросы, воспитать новое поколение бодрым, верящим в свое дело, не боящимся препятствий, готовым преодолеть всякие препятствия.

Поэтому всякая проповедь бездейности, аполитичности, «искусства для искусства» чужда советской литературе, вредна для интересов советского народа и государства и не должна иметь места в наших журналах».⁵

The period 1946-1953, generally referred to as the Zhdanov period after A. A. Zhdanov, cultural custodian and Stalin's heir apparent, was one of the most sterile periods of Soviet literature and was usually characterized by the term Babayevschchina, a synonym for the naively rose-coloured portrayal of Soviet life to which Zhdanovism gave rise. There was a tendency to idealize Soviet life and people, to gloss over the unpleasant facts of life, to reduce conflict to a minimum.

⁵ Kultura i Zhizn, August 20, 1946.

The classic example of the writers' predicament at this time is the case of Alexander Fadeyev, the then Secretary-General of the Writers' Union, who was compelled to re-write his prize winning novel Young Guard (1946) in order to show the leading, educative role of the Communist Party in the heroic underground struggle of the young komsomols of Krasnodon against the Germans.

Of the works which appeared in 1945-50 a handful were outstanding in their refusal to conform to any prescribed ideas: in them the centre of gravity moves away from the publicistic, adulatory or quasi-philosophical towards an uncompromisingly realistic, psychological portrayal. War is seen, not as an epoch-making event, but as the backcloth to people's thoughts, hopes and fears. The brief relaxation of control during the war years had, in effect, brought about a polarisation in Soviet literature. Plotkin⁶ discerns two basic, opposed tendencies: on the one hand, romantic realism, best exemplified by Fadeyev's Young Guard; and on the other, the poeticization of the quotidian, best exemplified by Nekrasov.

In his novel Nekrasov avoids broad dimensions and generalizations; he focuses on a narrow sector of the front, giving us, in effect, the chronicle of a small military unit, of the officers and men engaged in the day-to-day duties of the front-line. The author is above all concerned

⁶Nachalo raboty, Zvezda, No. 6, 1947, pp. 194-195.

with people, their inner lives, their heroic endurance manifested in the daily routine. The externals of war, large-scale battles and individual acts of extraordinary heroism, are reduced to the absolute minimum. All false pathos is absent, war is depicted through the consciousness of its main protagonists.

It is indicative of the novel's impact that it received a Stalin prize for literature in 1946, despite its flagrant violation of the canons of Socialist Realism.

Encouraged by the success of his first venture into literature, Nekrasov entered a national drama competition: his one play, Perilous Journey (1947) is thematically a continuation of In the Trenches of Stalingrad:

может быть, даже герои моей пьесы
будут герои повести «В окопах Сталинграда»,
люди, снявшие военные шинели.⁷

The play had about a dozen performances in MAT in 1949, but was taken off as it was construed to be a slander on Soviet officers. On the author's own admission the play, which has not been published, is 'weak', progressively deteriorating through its three acts. Nekrasov's experience

⁷Nekrasov interviewed by V. Shevtsov, Vechernyaya Moskva, June 15, 1947.

with trying to get the play staged -- too many instances -- deterred him from further experimentation in this genre.

Apart from his journalistic activity, which embraced art, architecture and the theatre, Nekrasov remained silent until 1954 when he published his 'thaw' novel In the Home Town⁸ -- a re-working, in prose form, of his ill-fated play Perilous Journey. In the period of the first 'thaw' -- from Stalin's death to the aftermath of the Hungarian uprising, Soviet authors were able to speak their minds with an unusual degree of freedom. In this freer atmosphere Nekrasov felt at liberty to touch on one of the tabu subjects of Soviet literature: in direct refutation of the official hypocrisy that no problem of readjustment existed in the Soviet Union after the war, Nekrasov's novel deals with the problems encountered by front-line veterans returning home, the ethical problems raised by their experience of war, the shattering impact of war on the fabric of social and especially family life, the struggle to accept new responsibilities on the part of those whose formative years have been passed under the stress of war. Against the background of shattered life in Kiev, Nekrasov delves into the subjective feelings of individuals, concentrating on love and eschewing considerations of Party and group interference.

⁸V rodnom gorode, Novy Mir, Nos. 9, 10, 1954.

With his re-assertion of the pre-eminence of human sentiments Nekrasov struck a dramatic note in the post-Stalin cultural thaw. In the Home Town constitutes a weighty contribution to the revival of realism untrammelled by party-political considerations. In his rediscovery of the psychological side of man, Nekrasov adds a new dimension to the portrayal of Soviet man, relegating socio-economic problems to the background.

This widely-read work established Nekrasov as one of the most popular and respected post-war writers. His reputation was further enhanced by his tales and short stories, most of which are devoted to various aspects of the war theme, the best being his deeply humanistic Second Night.⁹

An event of major importance for Nekrasov was his first mature encounter, in 1957, with the West since his childhood sojourn in Paris, where his mother had worked in a military hospital until 1915. As the writer tells us in the foreword to Puteshestviya v raznykh izmereniyakh,¹⁰ travel has been one of his most cherished dreams since early childhood:

⁹Vtoraya noch, Novy Mir, No. 3, 1960.

¹⁰Soviet'sky pisatel', Moscow, 1967.

Есть люди, которые с детства любят
ковыряться в будильниках, разбирать
замки, возиться с разными колесиками,
винтиками, не расстаются с отвертками,
стамесками, гаечными ключами. Мне
все это было чуждо. Я любил путешествия.
И до сих пор мне кажется это самым
интересным.¹¹

As a youth he had wandered on foot through Southern Russia, the
Caucasus and the Crimea.

In April, 1957, during the period of political relaxation
following the policy of de-Stalinisation initiated by N. S. Khrushchev
at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in 1956, Nekrasov
was allowed to make a goodwill visit to Italy at the invitation of the
Italy - USSR Society, with a brief stopover in Paris. The first fruit
of this trip was First Acquaintance¹² -- a milestone in his literary
career. In the following six years, during which he was permitted to
travel widely in the West, visiting France, Italy and the United States,
Nekrasov embarked on a new literary genre -- the travelogue, which he
was to develop in his own unorthodox way.

The significance of Nekrasov's travelogues goes far beyond their
intrinsic literary merit. Nekrasov has always been interested in wider
aspects of art than just literature. By training an architect, he has

¹¹Ibid., p. 4.

¹²Pervoye Znakomstvo, Novy Mir, Nos. 9, 10, 1958.

always been interested in the graphic arts. As Serpilin¹³ tells us, Nekrasov early developed an interest in photography and drawing -- his apt caricatures and cartoons, above all his political placards, embellished the stengazeta of the Construction Institute at all levels -- group, course and faculty. Among his more serious interests architecture occupied a predominant position. His enthusiasm for this subject, says Serpilin, was almost fanatical:

Однако главным его увлечением была в те годы избранная им специальность -- архитектура. Он мог говорить и спорить о ней буквально часами. Порою казалось, что всех людей Некрасов делит на две категории -- архитекторов и не-архитекторов.¹⁴

Nekrasov has also been active in the Soviet film industry -- he wrote both the scenarios for the film version of his novels In the Trenches of Stalingrad and In the Home Town, and has worked on a number of documentary films. He thus brings to his observations on life in the West a breadth of interest in the visual arts unrivalled by any contemporary Soviet author. His objective views on trends in Western art and life combine to give his travelogues a unique quality.

¹³Leonid Serpilin: Serdechny i muzhestvenny talant; Sovietskaya Ukraina, No. 6, 1961, pp. 156-158.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 156.

In First Acquaintance Nekrasov described his travels and the beauties of nature in lyrical language, sharing with his readers his impressions of Italian life and his reactions to Italian art and architecture. He also voiced a plea for greater contact with Western countries. His honest, authentic travel account was received with unusual interest and deep appreciation by millions of Soviet readers long denied unbiased information about the non-communist world. In subsequent years Nekrasov was to create a highly individualistic travelogue: descriptions of people and places which discreetly raised, by contrast and comparison, some of the fundamental issues of the 'thaw'.

In November, 1960, Nekrasov spent two weeks in the United States as a member of an official delegation of Soviet tourists, and in March, 1962, he re-visited Italy, this time to attend the Second Congress of the Society of European Writers in Florence. These two trips provided material for Both Sides of the Ocean.¹⁵ In America Nekrasov found much to admire and much to criticize. Adopting an attitude of fifty-fifty, he observed life with keen intelligence and renewed his plea for a humane view of the world, for greater understanding between people and nations, for a widening of horizons.

¹⁵Po obe storony okeana, Novy Mir, Nos. 11, 12, 1962.

Both these travelogues are remarkable for the rambling freedom of the narrative, the sharpness of observation, the picturesque digressions and the wealth of detail and anecdote; all these typical features of Nekrasov's literary manner bring Soviet readers a closer view of the West. But observations on the West are sometimes only a pretext to facilitate criticism of Soviet life. Anticipating Alexander Tvardovsky's call for avoiding the stereotyped clichés of reporting travel abroad,¹⁶ Nekrasov considerably widens the scope of the conventional travel account and touches on some of the most sensitive areas of Soviet life.

For example:

On the limited extent of de-Stalinisation in literature:

If our literature has not yet taken up the complex, bitter and contradictory aspects of what we call the period of the cult of the individual, this is only a matter of time.¹⁷

On Security Police surveillance of Soviet citizens abroad:

Poor, poor Ivan Ivanovich after all,
he had to keep track of all 20 of us ...

¹⁶ Po sluchayu yubileya, Novy Mir, No. 1, 1965.

¹⁷ Both Sides of the Ocean, trans. Elias Kulukundis, Pantheon Books, New York, 1964, p. 83.

Still and all, our kind Ivan Ivanich forgot one thing.... Excessive caution -- let us call it that, does not bring people together, it drives them apart.¹⁸

Nekrasov also reports what an Italian Communist had told him concerning the Soviet standard of living:

....the average Italian....unfailingly asks: 'Why is it that these people who have sent a satellite around the moon, still can't get rid of queues?'¹⁹

The striking feature of Both Sides was the remarkable degree of independence Nekrasov showed in his observations of life in Italy and America: his contribution towards mitigating traditional Soviet xenophobia has been considerable. Nekrasov's boldness, however, was not destined to go unchided. The first part of Both Sides appeared in the same issue of the liberal journal Novy Mir (November, 1962) as Alexander Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. Critical attention was at that time divided between Solzhenitsyn's revelation about prison life under Stalin's regime -- the most powerful denunciation

¹⁸Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 141.

of Stalinism published inside Soviet Russia to date -- and Khrushchev's splenetic outburst against 'modernist' (abstract) art at the Manezh Exhibition Hall in Moscow (December 1, 1962). It is perhaps for this reason -- the uncertainties of the official cultural direction (Khrushchev had, after all, authorised publication of One Day) that Both Sides went unobserved in the Soviet press for almost two months. But official criticism was only dormant.

On January 20, 1963, Izvestia published an unsigned article entitled Tourist with a Walking Stick. Nekrasov, whose only offence was that he had striven to report only what he saw, was accused of superficiality, of erroneous generalisation, of adopting an attitude of compromise, of 'promoting peaceful coexistence in the field of ideology', of 'bourgeois objectivism.' 'It is altogether unclear', continued the newspaper, 'how a Soviet writer contrives not to see the striking social contrasts and class contradictions of American life and the military psychosis fanned by imperialist circles'.²⁰ The implications of trying to apply the principle of fifty-fifty were horrendous: Nekrasov 'applied his rule of fifty-fifty to matters far more serious -- a comparison of two worlds, two ideologies. And when we get a slogan justifying coexistence on the subject of ideology, fifty-fifty is a dangerous thing.'²¹

²⁰ Dangerous Thing, Time, 81:27, February 1, 1963, pp. 27-28.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

This virulent attack was, however, only the prelude to a vigorous campaign to force Nekrasov to recant his 'errors'. In a speech before writers, artists and intellectuals on March 8, 1963, Khrushchev singled out Nekrasov as his principal target in an attack that also involved Ehrenburg and Evtushenko. Nekrasov remained silent until he was compelled to speak out at a similar meeting of Party members and intellectuals in Kiev on April 3. Apparently, Nekrasov refused to recant, declaring that such an admission would mean a loss of self-respect as a writer and a Communist. He would write only 'the truth, the great truth, the genuine truth.'²²

The danger that Nekrasov was courting by his intransigent attitude -- expulsion from the Party or worse -- was now intimated for the first time: N. Podgorny, a rising protege of Khrushchev, charged that Nekrasov "... had learned nothing and indeed had no desire to do so. As all of you heard, he considers an admission of errors to be a loss of self-respect as a Communist. For what truth do you, Comrade Nekrasov, stand? Your speech and the ideas you continue to maintain carry a strong flavour of petty-bourgeois anarchy. The Party, the people cannot and will not tolerate this. Comrade Nekrasov, you should ponder this seriously."²³

²²Speech by Nicolai Podgorny, Pravda Ukrainy, April 10, 1963.

²³Ibid. p. 55.

The attack on Nekrasov was continued by Khrushchev in a speech before the Central Committee on June 21. Incensed by the writer's refusal to change his views,²⁴ Khrushchev warned that "the weakening of the class war in the international area" could drive him to more extreme measures. Khrushchev recalled that Taras Bulba, Gogol's hero, had killed his son, Andrei, for going over to the side of the enemy. 'Such is the logic of the struggle.'²⁵ The campaign to exclude Nekrasov, a Party-member since 1944, aborted: within a year Khrushchev himself had been deposed. Since 1963, however, Nekrasov has been refused permission to travel in the West.

Though Nekrasov came under fire in 1963 specifically in connection with Both Sides, there can be little doubt that the underlying motive for the campaign can be traced back to the publication of his third major novel Kira Georgievna in 1961, -- the first of his novels to be translated into English, and 'one of the most controversial books

²⁴A. D. Akaba revealed (Pravda, June 20, 1963) that Nekrasov had written to the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party, but the letter was found unsatisfactory: 'Recognising the criticism of his well-known sketches to be on the whole correct, Nekrasov tries to belittle the political significance of his errors.' Quoted in P. Johnson: Khrushchev and the Arts, Boston, MIT Press, 1965, p. 54.

²⁵P. Johnson: Khrushchev and the Arts, Boston, MIT Press, 1965. p. 55.

of the 60's.⁴ This short novel represents a new departure for Nekrasov in that he deals with the diverse problems of the Soviet intelligentsia. The life-style and morals of artists and intellectuals in Moscow and Kiev come in for sharp criticism.

The novel's heroine, Kira, a successful Establishment sculptress, is a far cry from the stereotype of Soviet womanhood: her egocentricity and cynicism are, however, depicted against the background of her personal and social tragedy. Nekrasov leaves us in no doubt as to who is to blame for Kira's depravity: in skilfull flashbacks he shows us the young idealistic Kira of the 30's and her gradual degeneration into the depraved Kira of today: having lost her young poet-husband in the Yezhov²⁶ purges of 1938, Kira embarked on a course of self-preservation. Her professional success proves to be sterile: she finds herself in an emotional vacuum, unable to find common ground with her first husband Vadim when he returns from twenty years in a Stalinist camp. The gulf separating the erstwhile lovers is too great -- far greater than the mere fact of twenty years.

Vadim, the ideological hero of the novel, has endured his unjust sentence, has survived the horrors of camp-life unbroken in body and spirit; in fact his spiritual life has been enriched by his experience. He is without bitterness, and strongly declares that such things must never happen again.

²⁶Chief of Soviet Secret Police, 1936-38.

Though the novel can be interpreted as an expose of Soviet life, the overtly polemical aspect is secondary to the novel's real centre of gravity: Nekrasov focuses on human relationships and attitudes. Kira is, he says, a story:

О честном и нечестном, половинчатом
отношении людей к жизни, к творчеству,
и к самим себе.²⁷

The novel represents a superb essay in human nature; in style and content it is the most Chekhovian of his works, concentrating on man and his inner impulses. Kira has her predecessor in The Scammer (Попрыгунья) and her husband Obolensky is a poignant echo of the lonely, alienated professor Serebryakov in Uncle Vanya.

While the storm over Both Sides was brewing at the end of 1962, Nekrasov, along with Andrei Vosnesenky and Constantine Paustovsky, was in Paris as a guest of the French Association of Writers. His account of his experiences is found in A Month in France.²⁸ Unlike Both Sides, this travelogue is focused on the foreign country without reference to the Soviet Union. With great feeling, Nekrasov gives us his first-hand impressions of the city's architectural and art treasures. Besides Paris,

²⁷ Author's preface to Kira Georgievna, op. cit.

²⁸ Mesiats vo Frantsii, Novy Mir, No. 4, 1965, pp. 102-103.

he also visits Marseilles and Provence, painting delightful pictures of nature. But Nekrasov, as always, is primarily concerned with people. This comes out particularly forcefully in his Kamchatka Tales²⁹ -- the result of a government sponsored trip to the remote regions of Eastern Siberia and the Kamchatka peninsula.

The fourteen travel sketches which make up the first series of Kamchatka Tales all show the same literary integrity and freedom of expression which are the hallmarks of Nekrasov's writings. Once again, he is at his best describing simple people in their everyday joys and sorrows. He shows himself to be animated by a concern for honesty and truth: he does not conceal his predilection for natural, authentic people who are oblivious to the "impression" they make. Under his pen a host of miscellaneous characters emerge as warm human beings: the young worker who studies to become a scientist, the old seal-breeder who has forfeited her vacation for years because she is afraid to entrust her 'children' to strangers; the old 'philosopher', a former wealthy Siberian merchant, who for over half a century has led a hermit's life on an island off Kamchatka.

True to his maxim of objectivity, Nekrasov is not loath to criticize where criticism is called for: he expresses intolerance of the spirit of bureaucracy which often spoils human relationships; but at

²⁹Kamchatka, Novy Mir, No. 12, 1965.

the same time, can find warm words for the Party Secretary of the Petrapavlosk region who can speak intelligently with people and is interested to find out their views.

* * *

But for the decorated, twice-wounded hero of Stalingrad the war remains the deepest and most meaningful experience of his life. War, in its various manifestations and associations, is a recurrent theme in Nekrasov's work:

Он, этот ответ (войны, Сталинграда),
лежит на всем, что создано В. Некрасовым
после его первой повести. Он явственно
ощутим и на лирически-взволнованных
путевых заметках писателя -- книге
Первое знакомство, и на многих его
публицистических выступлениях, и,
конечно же, на его замечательных
сталинградских очерках.³⁰

In the following chapters the theme of war is examined in depth.

³⁰L. Serpilin, op. cit., p. 158.

CHAPTER II

IN THE TRENCHES

Герой же моей повести, которого я люблю всеми силами души, которого старался воспроизвести во всей красоте его и который всегда был,³¹ есть и будет прекрасен -- правда.

Perhaps the best point of departure for an analysis of Nekrasov's maiden novel In the Trenches of Stalingrad would be a brief review of the criticism it provoked on publication in 1946 (Znamya, Nos. 9, 10). An indication of the significance attached to the novel is the fact that it was twice subjected to official discussion, once at a special meeting of the Presidium of the Union of Writers,³² and once by the War Commission.³³ Evaluations of the novel's merits were mutually exclusive: a number of critics considered the work a significant event of Soviet literature, and saw in it a realistic work about the courage and heroism of Soviet people and the defenders of Stalingrad. Others, principally

³¹L. N. Tolstoi, Sobranie sochinenii v 14-i tomakh, vol. II, Moscow, 1957, p. 167.

³²Stenogramma zasedaniya Presidiuma sovmestno s chlenami Pravleniya. Obsyzhdeniye romana V. P. Nekrasova Stalingrad, December 26, 1946. From the author's archive.

³³Stenogramma soveschchaniya Voennoi Komissii Soyuza Sovetskikh Pisatelei, U.S.S.R. po voprosu obsuzhdeniya romana Nekrasova Stalingrad, January 1, 1947. From the author's archive.

B. Soloviev, hewed to the Party tenet of a tendentious literature and concentrated on finding fault and pointing out the novel's shortcomings. Nekrasov was accused of naturalism, objectivism and anti-historicism. The book's detractors labelled it Remarquist, a book which did not rise above 'trench truth', not a story, but fragments, notes. In his damning article Pooschchrenie naturalizma Soloviev equated Nekrasov's aesthetic position with that of Flaubert, claiming that the novel's ideological content «не находит полного и глубокого выражения ни в авторском тексте, ни в высказываниях героев романа.»³⁴

Analysis will show, however, that In the Trenches of Stalingrad is not a simple, naturalistic story of men's experience of war, conveyed in a chaotic flow of details which seem to carry all before them, but rather a well thought-through composition which takes into itself the experience of some books and polemicalizes with others. Analysis will further give an idea of the conscious choice by the author of a definite aesthetic position, his literary sympathies and antipathies, and in doing so point to the new humanism which, since Stalin's death, has been trying to re-assert itself.

Nekrasov formulates his artistic position many times in the course of his narrative: in this connection it is perhaps worth quoting in full a passage which has been consistently omitted from later editions of the novel, but which sums up Nekrasov's literary attitude. The artist Igor predicts the literary treatment of the war theme:

³⁴ Novy Mir, No. 3, 1948, p. 181.

Я ведь заранее знаю-война кончится -- все за нее ухватаются, и художники, и писатели, и скульпторы, и драматурги. Половина -- да куда там половина девяносто процентов из них о войне только из газет знать будут, а все-таки оседлают ее. И все у них будет чин-чистенькие, выбритые... Вот будешь на послевоенной выставке какой-нибудь, вспомнишь меня. Половина картин будет встреча Красной Армии с освобожденным населением, четверть портреты, а четверть подбитые немецкие танки или разрушенные города... Хочется, чтобы о войне заговорили так же просто и искренне, как Левитан о природе... Я не против Гойя. Гойя непревзойден. Но это крик, вопль, плакат, если хочешь. В хорошем, конечно, смысле этого слова. Но это все-таки обобщение. А вот простым языком рассказать о войне... И о землянке с коптилкой... и о том, как часами лежали мы в щелях, зажав глаза: попадет или не попадет, и о товарище с пробитой головой... о ночных походах по колено в грязи...³⁵

This central motif of Nekrasov's novel -- the unadorned truth about war -- is further developed by his principal protagonist -- the architect turned combat engineer Yuri Kerzhentsev, whose first person narrative gives unity to the disparate elements of plot and idee. In his youth Kerzhentsev loved to look at pictures in an old English journal showing Louvain in flames: his present experience as a grown man at the front in Stalingrad destroys his old concepts:

³⁵Quoted in an unpublished article by V. Alexandrov: Na Kraiyu zemli: 1946, p. 1.

и мне вдруг становится совершенно ясно,
как бессильно, беспомощно искусство.
Никакими клубами дыма, никакими
лижущими небо языками пламени и
зловещими отсветами не передать того
ощущения, которое испытываю я сейчас,
сидя на берегу перед горящим Сталинградом. ³⁶

This contrast between pre-war conceptions of the nature of war and its real aspect as experienced first hand permeates the whole book.

The motive for this constant emphasis amounts to a demand for merciless battle against literary cliches and canons, in favour of the establishment of the criteria of real life as the main ones in art. For Nekrasov the truth about war consists in the depiction of its essential toil: war is heavy, day-to-day labour, demanding all the nervous and physical energy of those who participate. In the unending, exhausting daily routine of life at the front, Nekrasov sees the source of eventual victory: battles, attacks, mine-laying and digging trenches -- all form an essential part of front life and become a matter of course.

Within the ethos of work the heroic deed or great battle is not seen as a culmination or a special stage in the course of the war: the dividing line between battle and rest periods becomes blurred. In his direct descriptions of battle episodes, Nekrasov avoids any elevated tone; he never shows a battle in the round, but directs attention, not

³⁶ V okraikh Stalingrada: Voennoe Izdatelstvo, Moscow 1955,
p. 89.

to the results of an engagement with the enemy, but to its course. Mass battle scenes are reduced to component details and conveyed through the perception of one hero directly participating in events, and therefore unable to grasp the whole panorama:

На войне никогда ничего не знаешь,
кроме того, что у тебя под самым
носом творится. Не стреляет в тебя
немец, --- и тебе кажется, что во
всем мире тишь и гладь начнем бомбить,
--- и ты уже уверен, что весь фронт от
Балтийского до Черного задвигался.³⁷

Against the background of the prosaic, day-to-day routine of front-line life, Nekrasov focuses on the psychological make-up of his heroes. Just as Kerzhentsev's direct experience of war had corrected his childish misconceptions, so it also puts broader questions of life into perspective, and leads to a fundamental transvaluation of values. Before the war Kerzhentsev's horizons had been extremely limited, revolving round art and architecture; his experience of war was to create new attitudes towards people and life:

На войне узнаешь людей по-настоящему.
Мне теперь это ясно. Она --- как
лакусовая бумажка, как проявитель
какой-то особенный.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 50.

The question of pre-war myopia is raised by the Jewish combat officer Faber, former mathematics graduate, in one of his rare moments of candour: he expresses a deep sense of guilt for having relied on others in military matters, for having been engrossed in higher mathematics to the exclusion of all else. Faced with the prospect of having to train men in the practical business of war, he had realised his own incompetence and the hypocrisy of leading others when not qualified to do so. He does, however, fully acknowledge his guilt, and try to make amends by devoting himself to the task in hand without shirking the arduous or dangerous assignments: he refused a safe job which his knowledge of languages would have assured him, and operates as a combat officer while qualified as an engineer.

The change in values wrought by war is reflected, on a different level, in the case history of the army scout Chumak, formerly a chauffeur and sailor, whose interests before the war did not rise above the most banal level -- vodka, hooliganism and, of course, women:

Понимаешь, до войны я себе царь и бог
был. Была у меня шлана. Вместе выпивали,
вместе морды били таким вот... таким вот
субчикам.³⁹

³⁹ Ibid., p. 169.

One of Chumak's chief rivals in Sebastopol had been Terentiev: before the war they had lived in constant enmity -- Chumak had knocked out two of Terentiev's front teeth, receiving in return a couple of broken ribs. But Terentiev had later risked his life to pull the badly injured Chumak away from the German lines. Chumak's whole concept of comradeship had radically altered after this experience; he had developed a true sense of responsibility for others. The difficulties encountered by this physically oriented man, who has gained a new sense of duty and comradeship, are reflected in the fate of the veteran Gromoboi in Nekrasov's second novel In the Home Town: this heavily decorated hero of Stalingrad finds himself unable to adjust to the routine of an Engineering Institute in peace-time; the problems of mathematics and engineering, the new modes of behaviour confuse and distress him.

This aspect of the novel -- the juxtaposition of pre-war and war-time habits and modes of thinking, amounts to a critique of the first generation of wholly Soviet youth, and points up the hollowness of Stalinist slogans proclaiming socialist fraternity and the pre-eminence of the collective ethic. Nekrasov's three principal fictional heroes, Kerzhentsev, Nicolai Mityasov and Kira Georgievina, all lived essentially personal, circumscribed lives before the war. Kerzhentsev and Kira were both pre-occupied with architecture and art respectively and lived care-free, bohemian lives in Kiev; Mityasov's circle of friends and interests

was also narrow. For the two men, Kerzhentsev and Mityasov, new responsibilities at war open their eyes to social and civil responsibilities in general.

For Kira the lesson does not come until twenty years after her poet-husband's arrest in 1938. On his return she becomes aware of her sense of guilt -- she, too, had led the life of an ostrich, hiding her head under her wing, unwilling to look reality in the face.

In the Trenches of Stalingrad thus expands beyond the confines of its immediate narrative locale, and embraces art and its ethos, as well as examining the true nature of personal relationships: «ЧЕМ ЖИВУТ ЛЮДИ».

In some details In the Trenches of Stalingrad is similar to the works of Remarque, Hemingway and Dos Passos. In contradistinction to Nekrasov's heroes, the experience of war inspires fear of death in Remarque's and Hemingway's heroes, bestializing them and driving out all healthy human emotions: the sole survivor is the instinct of self-preservation. Under the stress of war the representatives of this 'lost generation' lose all moral criteria, of which the most widespread symptom is a tortured self-analysis: this led, however, not to a solution of the problem, which centres round purpose in life, but to an escape from reality into the closed world of esoteric experience.

Nekrasov polemicizes with Remarque and the 'lost generation': he comes to a diametrically opposite view of the effect of war on his heroes.

War, for Nekrasov's characters, is not merely a curse -- he is uncompromising in his objective descriptions of the chaos of the Red Army retreat in 1941, the poor leadership and even worse provisions and ammunition situation, the undoubted superiority of the German invaders in the air and their overwhelming Blitzkrieg mobility on the ground. For Nekrasov war is, above all, the crucible which tempers both martial and civic virtue.

The scope of the novel is thus broadened by Nekrasov's concentration on the martial and moral development of Soviet officers and men which is reflected in the conscious choice by the author of the structural division of the narrative into two parts -- the retreat and the defence. The emphasis on the retreat is vital for an understanding of the psychological process undergone principally by Kerzhentsev. As the small military unit, which has been left behind to cover the battalion's retreat, itself joins in the general chaotic stream of refugee civilians and soldiers, moving closer to Stalingrad, so Kerzhentsev's sense of guilt and shame grow correspondingly:

Бабы спрашивают, где же немцы и куда мы идем. Мы молча пьем холодное, из погреба, молоко и машем рукой на восток.

Туда... За Дон...

Я не могу смотреть на эти лица, на эти вопросительные, недоумевающие глаза. Что я им отвечу? На воротнике у меня два кубика, на боку пистолет.

Почему же я не там, почему я здесь,
 почему трясусь на этой скрипучей
 подводе и на все вопросы только машу
 рукой? Где мой взвод, мой полк, 40
 дивизия? Ведь я же командир...

The direct result of Kerzhentsev's incipient feeling of personal responsibility is the disintegration of his former ideals: at the front he had often dreamt of his beloved Kiev, his mother and home, the divan and the cat Fracas. But once in Stalingrad, during the first, almost idyllic days, when he is surrounded by domestic bliss, he feels an insidious malaise:

Сколько раз на фронте я мечтал о
 таких минутах: вокруг тебя ничего
 не стреляет, не рвется, и сидишь ты
 на диване, и слушаешь музыку, и
 рядом с тобой хорошенькая девушка.
 И вот я сижу сейчас на диване и
 слушаю музыку... И почему-то мне
 неприятно. Почему? Не знаю. Я знаю
 только, что с того момента, как мы
 ушли с Оскола, -- нет, позже, после
 сарая, -- у меня все время на душе
 какой-то противный осадок. Ведь я не
 дезертир, не трус, не ханжа, а вот
 ощущение у меня такое, как будто я и
 то, и другое, и третье. 41

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 40.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 47.

The absence of direct, purposeful activity greatly oppresses Kerzhentsev: activity becomes the only palliative to his deep sense of inadequacy:

..самое страшное на войне -- это не снаряды, не бомбы, ко всему этому можно привыкнуть; самое страшное -- это бездеятельность, неопределенность, отсутствие непосредственной цели. Куда страшнее сидеть в щели в открытом поле под бомбежкой, чем идти в атаку. А в щели ведь шансов на смерть куда меньше, чем в атаке. Но в атаке -- цель, задача, а в щели только бомбы считаешь, попадет или не попадет.⁴²

Kerzhentsev's unsettled state of mind is conveyed by his attitude to art and nature: in conversation with Lucy on Mamaev Hill, he claims that Blok and Esenin no longer interest him; he is totally pre-occupied with the war. He fails to appreciate the fine view of the Volga, expressing a purely functional view of the terrain: the Hill offers good fields of fire for machine-gun emplacements.

Я теперь и на луну смотрю с точки зрения ее выгоды и полезности.⁴³

⁴²Ibid., p. 48.

⁴³Ibid., p. 54.

Another aspect of Nekrasov's polemic with the norms of Soviet war literature, which had hitherto concentrated on the exceptional rather than the prosaic, is in his depiction of the nature of heroism. Contrary to the official myth that heroism is an innate quality of Soviet man, Nekrasov shows that the truth lies closer to the Russian proverb <Война рождает героев>. Kerzhentsev recollects captain Maximov's words on the subject:

Людей, ничего не боящихся, нет. Все боится. Только одни теряют голову от страха, а у других, наоборот, все мобилизуется в такую минуту и мозг работает особенно остро и точно. Это и есть храбрые люди.⁴⁴

The prime example of cowardice in the novel is captain Abrosimov: in this figure Nekrasov attacks the formalist approach to life, in which he sees the source of cowardice. Abrosimov's insistence on the observation of the petty details of dress and behaviour is a symptom of the attitude which leads to the tragic frontal assault on the German-held oil-tanks. Following the letter of the order to attack, rather than its spirit, Abrosimov drives his men, who have devised a plan more likely to succeed, into the hopeless frontal attack.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 141-2.

It is in fact the court of enquiry, held to investigate Abrosimov's action, and not the much vaunted order of general advance along the whole front of November 19, 1942, that is the culminating point of the whole novel. Nekrasov shows us quite clearly where his interests lie: not in the order to advance which falls on Kerzhentsev's birthday and so spoils the planned celebration. Kerzhentsev's reaction is the natural one -- he does not wax lyrical and propagandistic about the 'great turning point in the war and world history.' His reaction is rooted in his concern for his men:

Пока что мне понятно только одно:
до начала наступления осталось десять
часов, и обещанный мною на сегодняшнюю
ночь отдых бойцам, первый за последние
две недели, безнадежно срывается.⁴⁵

Since the highest criterion for evaluation of a man is his attitude to toil and the execution of his duty, it follows that Kerzhentsev's reactions to people should be on this level. In this connection one must mention Lisagor -- one of the most debatable figures in the book. Nekrasov, true to his principle of objectivity, leaves us in no doubt that Lisagor is on the one hand a grasping philistine, who is none too forgetful of his own immediate needs; on the other hand he is a master of his trade, a worker and no coward.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 204.

Attached to the figure of Georgy Akimovich is one of the central symbols of the book : his whole life has been devoted to the construction of the famed Tractor Factory, whose fate hangs in the balance as the Germans draw closer and Russian engineers prepare to blow it up. For much of the duration of the battle, the front line runs right through the factory. This symbol of Soviet industrial achievement miraculously survives the heavy bombing: inexplicably defying the laws of probability, one chimney stack remains intact as the Soviet forces move onto the counter-offensive.

Georgy Akimovich also represents the main ideological foil to Kerzhentsev and Igor: he is sceptical about the Soviets' ability to fight -- the Germans have a superior technology. Igor counters, saying France collapsed in two weeks, whereas the Russians, having lost the Ukraine and White Russia, are still fighting. But Igor can find no more convincing argument than a stubborn:

-- Нет, не может этого быть. Не пойдут они дальше, Я знаю, что не пойдут.⁴⁶

Georgy Akimovich also holds an ambiguous position:

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 79.

-- Мы будем воевать до последнего солдата. Русские всегда так воюют. Но шансов у нас все-таки мало. нас может спасти только чудо. Иначе нас задавят. ⁴⁷Задавят организованностью и танками.

What, then, is the miracle which will save Russia? Avoiding the cliches about the inherent superiority of the socialist system, Nekrasov sees the miracle in what Tolstoi called «скрытая теплота патриотизма». A simple conversation overheard in the dark fills Kerzhentsev with faith:

-- Нет, вась... Ты уж не говори... Лучше нашей нитке не сыщешь. Ей-богу... Как масло земля -- жирная, настоящая. -- Он даже причмокнул как-то по-особенному. -- А хлеб ⁴⁸взойдет -- с головой закроет...

The quintessence of this latent warmth of patriotism is to be found in Kerzhentsev's batman Valega. His close friendship with Valega had occasioned a revision of his concept of friendship:

Ведь у меня и раньше были друзья. Много друзей было. Вместе учились. работали, водку пили, спорили об искусстве и прочих высоких материях...

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 79.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 80.

Но достаточно ли всего этого? Выпивок, споров, так называемых общих интересов, общей культуры?⁴⁹

Kerzhentsev's characterisation of Valega constitutes both a powerful condemnation of Soviet education and propaganda, and a strong affirmation of Russian character:

Валега вот читает по складам, в делении путается, не знает, сколько-семью восемь, и спроси его, что такое социализм или родина, он, ей-богу ж, толком не объяснит: слишком для него трудно определяемые словами понятия. Но за эту родину --- за меня, Игоря, за товарищей своих по полку, за свою покосившуюся хибарку где-то на Алтае, за Сталина, которого он никогда не видел, но который является для него символом всего хорошего и правильного, --- он будет драться до последнего патрона. А кончатся патроны -- кулаками, зубами... Вот это и есть русский человек. Сидя в окопах, он будет больше старшину ругать, чем немцев, а дойдет до дела -- покажет себя.⁵⁰

One of the distinctive features of the novel is the absence of propagandistic bias: the Germans are not referred to as 'fascist beasts', but usually by the colloquial term 'Fritz'. The only word regularly associated with them is «противный крестик» Oaths are reserved for the Russian's own superiors. Similarly, the word 'communist' does not

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

appear at all, and the only overtly political figure, the political agitator Senichka is treated briefly but with great sympathy: he is seen in action rather than rhetoric. His ploy in erecting a scare-crow figure of Hitler in no-man's-land wins popular approval amongst the troops: not only is it ironic to see the Germans trying to shoot it down, but on trying to retrieve it after dark, they lose three men.

One of the most striking features of In the Trenches of Stalingrad is Nekrasov's style of writing. The complexity of 'linguistic style' is such, however, that any comprehensive analysis of the linguistic and stylistic aspects of the novel is beyond the scope of the present thesis. We will limit ourselves, therefore, to a discussion of a number of related aspects of style which derive from the patterns and intonations of the spoken language: the use of what the Russians call «несобственно-прямая речь» syntactical association (присоединение), and the use of dialogue.

A widespread feature of the Russian literary language in the Soviet period is the use of so-called «несобственно-прямая речь»: this involves interpenetration of the subjective planes of both the author and his protagonist: there is a switch from the direct speech of the hero either to the hero's interior monologue or to the author's 'statement.' In both cases these 'statements', based on the norms of direct speech, necessitate a corresponding shaping of the grammatical and syntactical structure: the general content of the statement, its modality, the choice

of vocabulary and sometimes even the temporal plane are transferred to the subjective level of the speech and thoughts of the protagonist.

<Несобственно-прямая речь> is an intermediate phenomenon between linguistic categories proper and stylistic method; in the general plane of the narrative the introduction of this device is necessarily linked with a change of linguistic method: by intruding into the subjective plane of his hero, the author adapts the totality of syntactical, lexical and even morphological forms to the speech style of his hero. By moving away from the traditional analytical methods, the author thus opens up the way for very concise 'self-characterisation' and evaluation of events described.

In Stalingrad this phenomenon is presented in its simplest, most typical and direct forms: the author retires from the subjective/evaluatory plane of the narrative, leaving this to his hero. In the following passage we have an example of what might be called an interior dialogue: Nekrasov here eliminates the potentially lengthy dialogue: the whole scene when the young woman Lucy offers the soldiers shoe polish and chats with them, is conveyed in a concise paragraph:

Мы благодарим, берем крем. Да, он действительно лучше, чем слюна. Как новые, заблестят сапоги. Теперь не стыдно и в театре показаться. А мы что, в театр собираемся? Да, в театр, на «Подвязку Борджиа». Может, она

нам компанию составит? Нет, она не
 может. А она любит оперу? Да, особенно
 «Евгения Онегина», «Травиату» и
 «Пиковую даму». ⁵¹

Another feature of the novel is the widespread use of so-called associative (присоединительные) constructions: this is a complex sentence in narrative passages, which reflects the intonations and articulations of the living spoken language. It consists of several 'incomplete' sentences immediately adjoining the first, pivotal one and grammatically dependent on it. The normal use of subordination is not applicable here: the secondary sentences form isolated syntagmata related to the pivotal sentence by grammar rather than subordination. This usage is one of the most interesting and instructive aspects of Nekrasov's style: the syntactical organisation of his narrative reflects the norms of spoken language: it is comparatively rare to find a grammatically complex, complete period in Nekrasov. A number of examples will illustrate the point:

Где-то высоко-высоко в небе тарахтит
 «кукурузники» -- ночной дозор. Над
 «Баррикадами» зажигаются «фонари».
 Наши «фонари», не немецкие.

Некому уже у немцев зажигать их. Да
 и незачем. ⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵² Ibid., p. 247.

Приходят раненные. Поодиночке. по-двое
серые, запыленные, с безразличными,
усталыми лицами.⁵³

The direct relationship of such constructions with the norms of colloquial language is best shown by a direct comparison of the sections quoted with a typical Nekrasovian dialogue:

-- Мины есть?
-- В одном только месте. Против пушки,
с развороченным стволом. Чуть по-
выше.
-- Много?
-- Не считал. Штук пять мы выкинули.
С усиками. Противотанковые, что-ли,
щрапнельные.
-- А фрицев много?
-- Черт их знает... как будто не очень.
В блиндажах сидят. Патефон крутят.
Катюшу.⁵⁴

Nekrasov's highly individualistic syntax is the prism through which his artistic view passes: the episodic nature of his narrative (chapters are loosely linked) is reflected in the break-down of his sentences which admirably suits, by isolation and repetition, his predilection for characteristic detail.

Dialogue in Nekrasov is always in direct imitation of actual speech, and the immediacy of the impression is enhanced by the absence

⁵³Ibid., p. 91.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 159.

of 'stage directions'. Another characteristic is the repetition of the last words of a statement/question in the reply. For example, Kerzhentsev and Lucy, sitting on Mamaev Hill overlooking Stalingrad and the Volga, have a very significant conversation. Kerzhentsev is pre-occupied with his own thoughts; he has just completed the retreat to Stalingrad and is suffering a deep sense of shame: this is conveyed by his laconic, mechanical answers: the ill-defined feeling of guilt and the knowledge that the war has to go on has made him indifferent to the beauties of nature:

- Красиво, правда? -- говорит Люся.
- Красиво, -- говорю я.
- Вы любите так сидеть и смотреть?
- Люблю.
- Вы в Киеве тоже, вероятно, сидели с кем-нибудь на берегу Днепра вечером и смотрели?
- Сидели и смотрели.
- У вас там жена, в Киеве?
- Нет. Я не женат.
- А с кем же вы сидели?
- С Люсей сидел.
- С Люсей? Смотрите, как смешно, -- тоже Люся.
- Тоже Люся. И она так же, как и вы, коротко подстригала волосы. На рояле, правда, не играла.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

Another example of dialogue in Nekrasov shows the changing relationships between people. Chumak, the experienced fighter, reacts to the newly assigned, inexperienced Kerzhentsev, in a cold, half-mocking way: the following exchange takes place when Kerzhentsev is sending Chumak off on a reconnaissance mission:

- Маскхалаты возьмете?
- Нет.
- Почему? У меня как раз четыре.
- Не надо.
- Водки дать?
- Свою пьем. Чужую не любим.
- Ну, как знаете.
- Можете за наше здоровье выпить.
- Спасибо. 56
- Не стоит.

The overwhelmingly negative reaction on the part of Chumak is conveyed without analysis: intonation is paramount. A complete reversal in the relationship is expressed just as succinctly after a successful attack in which Kerzhentsev has 'proved himself' Chumak himself addresses Kerzhentsev:

- Слушайте, комбат...
- Ну, ладно, води. 57

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 195.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 210.

Nekrasov's artistic manner is further characterised by restraint and understatement, best exemplified by his constant attention to detail, the importance of which he expressly emphasises:

Есть детали, которые запоминаются на всю жизнь. И не только запоминаются. Маленькие, как будто незначительные, они въедаются, впитываются как-то в тебя, начинают прорастать, вырастают во что-то большое, значительное, вбирают в себя всю сущность происходящего, становятся как бы символом.⁵⁸

This detail-symbol is always material and visible. The essence of an object or phenomenon is brought out in sharp relief. Nekrasov never exaggerates or allows individual details to develop into allegories:

Я помню одного убитого бойца. Он лежал на спине, раскинув руки, и к губе его прилип окурок. Маленький, еще дымившийся окурок. И это было страшней всего, что я видел до и после на войне. Страшнее разрушенных городов, распоротых животов, оторванных рук и ног. Раскинутые руки и окурок на губе. Минуту назад была еще жизнь, мысли, желания. Сейчас -- смерть.⁵⁹

* * *

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 80.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 80.

In the Trenches of Stalingrad superseded Simonov's Days and Nights (1944) as the best novel devoted to the epic Battle of Stalingrad. Simonov had stressed the prosaic, day-to-day routine of war, in refutation of the emotional and romantic elements predominant in works such as B. Gorbатов's The Invincibles and V. Grossman's The People are Immortal. Though Nekrasov has the prosaic as his basic motif, it is to his credit to have expanded the war novel beyond its immediate confines: war is seen, not as an end in itself, but as a catalyst compelling people to re-evaluate their lives and the code of values by which they live. At the same time, the novel does not develop along the lines of Ehrenburg's cataclysmic Storm (1947), nor does it gravitate towards Bubenov's arch-symbolical White Birch (1947).

Nekrasov's novel inaugurates a new trend in Soviet literature: it is a plea for independence -- both in the artistic and personal sphere; man is central and not overshadowed by the magnitude of events. By moving away from the exclusively political plane which invariably involves affirmation of the political status quo, the novel marks the beginning of Nekrasov's analysis of Soviet man and the true nature of Communism.

CHAPTER III

ON THE HOME FRONT

Самое главное -- уметь жить не
для одного себя.⁶⁰

Nekrasov's second novel, In the Home Town, published in Novy Mir, Nos. 9, 10, 1954, is devoted to a theme that has occupied a number of twentieth century writers -- that of the complex psychological and ethical problems encountered by men seeking to adjust to the conditions of normal life after a war. In the West this theme has found its best expression in the works of E. M. Remarque, R. Graves and E. Hemingway, to mention but a few. These writers posit the concept of a so-called 'lost generation' -- a generation of young men whose experience of World War I destroyed their idealism.

In contradistinction to Western cynicism about king and country, Nekrasov endeavours to portray the positive moral values that war, especially a just war, can engender. The post-war predicament of Remarque's hero just returned from the front: absence of employment, no special skills, moral bankruptcy and lack of sustaining Weltanschauung --

⁶⁰ Izbrannye proizvedeniya, Moscow, 1962, p. 352.

inevitably led to nostalgia for, and idealisation of, trench life. In his novel Nekrasov polemicizes with this idealisation: to his principal hero, Nikolai Mityasov, civilian life also appears strange, even hateful. But in the course of Nikolai's development we see how he transcends his deep sense of alienation and nostalgia for the front and strives to transpose the positive values of Kampfkameradschaft into tenets viable in the radically different conditions of peace-time.

Thematically, In the Home Town, is a continuation of In the Trenches of Stalingrad, but the characters are different. Nekrasov consciously selects as his principal protagonists men with a low level of sophistication and little experience of life prior to the war. The architect Kerzhentsev, the mathematician Faber or the artist Igor -- all representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia in Stalingrad, would have been too articulate in this context and Nekrasov's idee would have degenerated into a socio-political diatribe:

Я не собираюсь рисовать смелого
мыслителя.⁶¹

Nekrasov's explicit objective is to avoid the hackneyed socio-political orientation of Soviet letters: he prefers to convey the emotional and psychological reactions of his heroes rather than to

⁶¹Vystuplenie Viktora Nekrasova na tvorcheskoi konferentsii v Tsentralnom dome literatorov, Moskva, April 18/19, 1955, p. 1. Stenogram from the author's archive.

theorize about their dilemma. By his choice of Mityasov and Yeroshik as his main heroes Nekrasov also underlines his view that literature should concern itself with dialectical processes rather than static, pre-conceived conditions. While not denying the didactic function implicit in the nature of Socialist Realism, he eschews the exclusive socio-politico-economic orientation and in favour of the moral plane:

Литература обязана заниматься...самим процессом перевоспитания человека.⁶²

Nekrasov's emphasis on the cardinal importance of development in character is closely allied to his view of that most debatable question of Soviet literature -- the positive-negative hero syndrome. He is strongly against the rigid division into 'good' and 'bad' types which has plagued Soviet writing for so long:

У нас много говорят о положительном и отрицательном герое. Но часто очень уже отвлечено и прямолинейно представляют его себе. Кто же он такой, положительный герой? По-моему, это человек, пусть не лишенный больших недостатков, но умеющий с ними бороться, человек, в котором в конце концов побеждает основная, ⁶³ положительная тенденция советского общества.

⁶² Ibid., p. 4.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 5.

One of the characters in Stalingrad maintained that before the war many people lived like ostriches, hiding their heads under their wings, but after the war this would be impossible. This is the crucial point of departure for an understanding of In the Home Town. Nekrasov places his hero in an extreme, dramatic situation: the wounded army captain Nikolai Mityasov returns from the front towards the end of the war. He finds his native town, unmistakably Kiev, in ruins and suffering from the aftermath of the recent German occupation, his wife Shura, who has endured the two and a half year occupation, with another man. Nikolai's formative years have been spent in the struggle against Fascism -- the advent of war prevented his completing his education. Bereft of wife and relatives, lacking a profession and an aim in life, Nikolai finds himself in a sort of spiritual limbo.

Life around has not yet returned to normal, it is disordered and harsh. Alongside human misery and the victorious achievements of the advancing Red Army, there develop among the civilian population sharp practices and general inhumanity. Nikolai's personal drama plays against the background of this disorder: interminable queues for the bare necessities of existence, streets thronged with the war-wounded, second-hand stores, crowded trams and destroyed houses. Happiness exists side by side with grief, the bitterness of living conditions contrasts sharply with the sweet presentiment of victory and peace.

In such circumstances a man's fate can be adjusted quite quickly and satisfactorily, as in the case of Voropaev (in Potapenko's Happiness), whose world-view had already been formed before the war; but, Nekrasov insists, many were fated to undergo the same experiences as his hero. For the latter the war, the front, reconnaissance patrols and dug-outs had been a time of great spiritual exultation. Life 'на краю земли' had been full, self-sacrificing and somehow 'right'. But war had not equipped Mityasov for normal life: in the rear, the dichotomy between the spiritual exultation and candour of human relationships won in the trenches of Stalingrad, and the frightening spectre of the banality of daily life in the rear, in which the values of front life disappear, becomes only too apparent.

Nikolai's problems are compounded by the complexity of his personal life: at the front he had dreamt of his wife Shura, but on his return he had been dealt a heavy blow. The exigencies of the occupation and the resultant loneliness had been too much for Shura: deprived of all contact with Nikolai, subjected to constant German propaganda about the imminent demise of the Red Army, and burdened with the drawn-out death-throes of her cancer-ridden mother, she had quickly succumbed to a young officer, Fedya, on the liberation of Kiev.

One of the most striking features of Nekrasov's portrayal of Shura's marital relationships -- in the course of the novel she cohabits

with three men, Nikolai, Fedya and finally Sergei, -- is the degree of objectivity and absence of all moralising. There is an uncritical fatalism about the Shura-Fedya entanglement:

И случилось то, что не могло не случиться,
когда двое молодых людей живут под одной
крышей.⁶⁴

The fact of Shura's adultery is, however, not paramount in determining the future relationship between her and Nikolai. After the initial shock, Nikolai is reunited with his wife. Their reconciliation and subsequent separation symbolises the fundamental change in Nikolai: their marriage before the war had lacked a spiritual dimension, they had both been on an elementary level of maturity. War had been a school of life for Nikolai and on his return he finds no real communication between himself and Shura. He finds that his deep affection for Shura is no substitute for love: their brief life together revolves round trivialities.

The complex relations between Nikolai and Shura end in a sad separation: neither is to blame. Just as there is a spiritual gulf between Vadim who spend twenty years in a Stalinist camp in Siberia, and

⁶⁴ Izbrannye proizvedeniya, p. 288.

Kira Georgievna, so, too, Nikolai's experience has changed him: he has new values of selflessness which draw him towards Valya -- a fellow front-liner and veteran, and separate him from Shura who symbolises the past. For Nikolai there can be no return to the past: the couple's carefree existence of before the war cannot be resumed.

Another kind of relationship obtains between Nikolai and Valya, the daughter of the hospital librarian, whom Nikolai eventually marries. She, too, has been in the army and can talk to Nikolai in army slang: her mother, Anna Panteleimonovna, is horrified by her coarse expressions, but Valya is the only person Nikolai can communicate with at first. Their reliance on shared memories of military service initially prevents them from finding a deeper understanding: she is regarded more as a friend than as a surrogate for Shura.

In his successful relationship with Valya, one aspect of Nikolai's problematic readjustment to civilian life is solved -- that of personal happiness. For many characters in the novel, simply to achieve a measure of personal happiness would be sufficient; but Nekrasov is concerned to show the complete man. Nikolai has a new dimension to his character -- social responsibility.

Самое необходимое в жизни человека, без чего ее никак нельзя назвать счастливой, -- это мир и благополучие в семье и удовлетворение работой.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 343.

At first Nikolai is dogged by his inexperience of actual life: his story is that of his search for his place in life and is emphasised by his chance acquaintance with the former airman Sergei Veroshik, who articulates, at an elementary level, Nikolai's dilemma. Sergei introduces himself as a man without a biography -- since nobody needs legless fliers his biography is 'generally finished.' Sergei's case is particularly acute: his experience of war has all but totally brutalised him: having lost his parents and both brothers and all opportunity of flying, he escapes into a reckless life of egoism and hedonism, submerging in vodka and spleen. In his cynical attitude to life around him and to women, Sergei epitomises the philosophy of non-involvement.

Не обращай внимания. Это главное
-- не обращать внимания.⁶⁶

Nevertheless Sergei's material situation is quite good ; he has succumbed to the temptation of easy money: he makes a handsome profit peddling slippers made by a Rostov cooperative of war invalids.

In the figure of Sergei Nekrasov portrays, in an acute form, the dangers facing men suddenly deprived of a purpose in life: the temptation to escape the void in one's life by indulging in egocentric misanthropy and cynicism. Sergei is quick to detect his spiritual affinities with Nikolai

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 260.

in this respect:

Да ты, я вижу, вроде меня... я ведь
тоже не знаю... раньше знал, а теперь
не знаю.⁶⁷

Nikolai in his turn, senses a kindred spirit in Sergei, in spite of the latter's exaggeratedly easy manner. In Sergei's question:

Ну, а мне куда прикажешь деться, товарищ?⁶⁸

we can detect the germ of that consciousness of despair which, under the influence of a woman's love, will bring him back onto an even keel and furnish him with a renewed sense of purpose and direction.

Before the war Nikolai was simply an ordinary chap, the circle of his interests and knowledge was extremely circumscribed. His aims in life, so far as they were consciously formulated, were strictly limited: he loved physical education and knew he could work well in this field, he never pondered the complex questions of life. He remained in this state until life itself put its questions before him.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 268.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 263.

The war -- the most important event in the life of a whole generation -- provided the impetus under whose influence Nikolai's future moral character was to develop. War was destined to turn him from a 'good chap' into a man of social temperament: at war he had come to know the true nature and value of human relations:

До войны у него были товарищи -- и на пароходе, и в технике, и в институте, -- со многими из них он по-настоящему дружил. Но это было только товариществом, не больше. Дружба людей, рожденная общностью работы, учения, а может быть, и просто молодостью.

На фронте все это стало другим. Именно на фронте Николай понял, что товарищи -- это не просто твои товарищи, к которым ты привязан потому, что они тебе нравятся, а что это и есть народ, то самое, что для Николая было до войны большим, но все-таки до какой-то степени отвлеченным понятием. На фронте Николай узнал народ. Узнал и оценил.⁶⁹

The chief moral to be drawn from Nikolai's deeper understanding of the people (narod) is concentrated in his new sense of responsibility:

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 334.

Узнал он там и другое -- чувство ответственности. Ответственности перед людьми, перед самим собой, ответственности за их жизнь, за правильно принятое решение, за выполненную задачу.⁷⁰

At war Nikolai had learnt that the best men are always in the vanguard and prepared to sacrifice everything for others -- parents, wife, family and home: the welfare of the whole depended on the strength -- both physical and moral -- of the individual parts.

In the changed circumstances of the rear however, when Nikolai tries to apply his new concepts of personal responsibility to peace-time conditions, he initially finds only confusion. The main qualities required are no longer physical strength and endurance: new, civic, qualities are paramount.

In Nikolai's development -- from the time of his return to Kiev to convalesce until the closing chapters of the novel, we see the complex process of adjustment. The heavy blow of Shura's infidelity provokes in Nikolai nostalgia for the front:

Он хочет сейчас только одного --- назад, туда, где самые близкие для него люди: Тимошка, Надочкин, веселые его разведчики.⁷¹

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 334.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 281.

It is only in his intercourse with the inhabitants of apartment sixteen, principally with Valya and her mother Anna Panteleimonovna, that Nikolai begins to recognise his longing for the front for what it is -- a disguised form of 'hugging the ground', the philosophy of the ostrich. Anna Panteleimonovna embodies that principle of civic courage which Nikolai is seeking: irritated by Nikolai's yearning for the front, she launches a violent attack on him. She herself had endured the occupation in complete solitude, her husband being dead and Valya serving in the army. And she had risen above all the material difficulties: the great thing for her was not the intolerable conditions of life, but the ability to hold her head up high and walk about her native town freely. Nikolai's preference for the front is given short shrift:

-- Замолчите! Слышать не хочу! Как можно такое говорить? Дурно или хорошо у нас здесь, но люди все-таки ходят по улицам во весь рост и не боятся, что их убьют. Очереди надоели? Без работы скучно? Так ищите работу, а не расхваливайте мне войну.⁷²

When life with Shura is resumed, Nikolai finds a post as a physical education instructor in a school: for a while life is idyllic: in his personal and professional life Nikolai is apparently content.

⁷²Ibid., p. 326.

He soon realises, however, that despite enjoying the work, he is only working at half strength. His first job as a housing inspector with the Regional Housing Board had been an attempt to be of use to people, but lack of specialised knowledge had hampered his efforts. His struggle against the rogues on the Board, who were speculating on the housing shortages, had been unequal. He had been forced to beat a tactical retreat.

With Nikolai's resignation from his school post in order to pursue advanced studies at the Building Institute, Nekrasov strikes his central theme: the morality of Communism, which in this case revolves round the courage of those who survived the war to continue the battle in life. It needed a great deal of courage to attack the enemy at war: but, Nekrasov points out, it is no less difficult to fight against what seems to be a friend. It is hard to see your enemy in a Party member, especially one like Aleksei Chekmen, the ex-army captain who has helped you enter his Institute.

Nikolai's search for his place in life crystallizes in his clash with Chekmen, the Dean of the Faculty of Nikolai's Institute. From the personal plane -- Nikolai's attempt to solve personal and career problems, the novel rises to the ideological plane: the conflict between front line precepts of friendship and selflessness, to live not for oneself but for others, and the calculating egoism, life for oneself exclusively, which

is embodied in the various forms of bureaucracy and radical demagogy. This antagonism comes out most clearly in the contrast between Chekmen and Sergei. Our first meeting with Aleksei Chekmen forebodes no ill: he creates a pleasant enough impression:

Невысокий, плотный, слегка лысеющий капитан
с насмешливыми глазами и двумя рядами
орденских планок на груди.⁷³

But in his official capacity as dean of the Faculty, Chekmen undergoes a radical metamorphosis. This pleasant, educated man is revealed as a scoundrel and demagogue, subverting the ideas of patriotism and state welfare to his own uses: his real voice is heard when he is under pressure at the meeting to discuss the Mityasov case: he loses self-control and resorts to invective and threats:

чтоб прекратить этот затянувшийся,
бессмысленный спор, должен вам сказать...⁷⁴

The point at issue here is Chekmen's attack, for purely personal reasons, on the aging professor Nikoltsev whom Chekmen wants to replace with a friend of his army days. When Chekmen's vague statements

⁷³Ibid., p. 352.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 438.

about the need for 'new perspectives' are seriously challenged, he resorts to the cliches of Party propaganda, evoking the external pathos of battle and exalting the narod (people). Accusing all those who remained under German occupation, including professor Nikoltsev, he claims to speak in the name of the narod, 'Мы -- советские люди', 'наш -- не наш'. But this pathos only serves to conceal his merciless contempt for, and distrust of, the people.

In the figure of Sergei Nekrasov polemicizes with the traditional image of the 'positive hero' in Soviet literature: a drunkard and desperate debauchee, Sergei cuts a poor figure; his coarseness of look and manner is offensive to men and women alike. Nikolai finds his attitude to women particularly offensive:

-- И чего ты со всей этой дрянью
возишься? Не противно разве?⁷⁵

Sergei's self-characterisation is in sharp contrast to Chekman's false pathos and fine-sounding words:

-- Распутный малый, приземлившийся
летчик, работать не хочет, спекулирует
своим протезом...⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 265.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 267.

Ну, я, дрянь, пьяница, бузотер,⁷⁷
безногий инвалид, кому я нужен?

But Sergei possesses the one saving grace: he is genuinely interested in the welfare of others. This concern comes out in his actions: he is always willing to help. The same applies to Shura, Valya and all the residents of apartment sixteen. They are all ordinary, honest people, the sort of people Nikolai had come to know and value at the front. Nekrasov makes the contrast between the two men explicit:

Вот Алексей говорит: мы настоящие,
крепкие, хорошие, мы -- советские...
Сергей такого никогда не скажет.
Ни настоящим, ни хорошим он себя
не называл. Наоборот -- дрянью,
пьяницей, бузотером. Но это ж не
так! Неправда это! Все это
наносное, прилипшее, чужое.⁷⁸

This trait of Sergei's psychological and emotional make-up is his salvation: in Shura, whom he has done his best to re-unite with Nikolai, he finds a kindred spirit: a woman of simple tastes and simple demands.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 341.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 455.

In the unmasking of Chekmen Nekrasov is revealing the heartlessness of the bureaucracy - the new Soviet elite class, and pointing out the difficulties of fighting people so closely identified with the Party and its Communist principles. Corruption in the Soviet system is shown to exist at all levels: Sergei, when he was peddling slippers, and the rogues on the Housing Board, were all motivated by self-interest. Chekmen is shown to be governed, at a higher level, by similar motives: his crime is alien to the spirit, if not the practice, of the Party in whose name he acts. Chekmen's hypocrisy is, however, difficult to discern: for a long time Nikolai does not question the former's Communist principles: after all, Chekmen is a Party member, a decorated war-veteran. It was only under his influence that Nikolai began to see the need for further education if he is to take his rightful place in life. Nikolai is further influenced by Khokhriyakov, the Party Secretary, whose life has been devoted to the struggle to establish the Soviet Union. He has hardly known peace: he occupies a median position between the thoroughgoing bureaucrats like Mizin and Gnedash, and Nikolai: Khokhriyakov, while sympathising with Nikolai in his beliefs, is more politically mature: he is concerned to consolidate his position before speaking out:

Силонок не хватает, вот и бережем.⁷⁹

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 453.

It is a mark of Nekrasov's objectivity that these two men, Khrokhriyakov and Chekmen, both of whose views are anathema to Nikolai, are vitally linked with Nikolai's growing awareness of social, rather than personal duty:

-- Замкнулись вы, товарищи, в себе -- говорил он тогда, -- замкнулись, каждый в своей группе, на своем курсе. Не живете жизнью всего института. Загрузкой оправдываетесь. Но загрузка загрузкой, а жизнь жизнью. Если уж очень нахмешь на вас, выпустите раз в год стенгазету, да и то ее только мухи читают, вызовете кого-то там на соревнование, и точка -- никто этого соревнования не проверяет. Нельзя так, товарищи, надо шире жить. Большой институтской жизнью жить.⁸⁰

Another aspect of the Soviet bureaucracy is represented in the two 'paper souls' -- members of the Institute's politbureau, Mizin and Gnedash. Both are formalists:

Не те вы люди, товарищи Гнедаш и Мизин. Посмотришь на вас: все у вас чистенько, гладенько, ни к чему не придерешься. План работы есть -- всегда под рукой, в шкафу, в папочке, говорить вы умеете, очень даже убедительно умеете, заседания

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 427.

проводите, протоколы пишете, в райком относите их без опоздания, стенгазету выпускаете регулярно, отчеты парторгов заслушиваете.⁸¹

Nekrasov's unmasking of Chekmenism points to the democratic tenor of his work: he seeks to examine the motives behind the fine phrases. Chekmen's complete power is only possible in conditions when all the questions of life are resolved 'наверху' (on top), behind closed doors, while 'внизу' (below) ordinary people, busy with the immediate interests of everyday life, 'hug the ground'. Nekrasov does not pontificate:

Дурно это или хорошо -- это уже другой вопрос, но так и было.⁸²

* * *

In the Home Town ranks with Ehrenburg's Thaw and Dudintsev's Not by Bread Alone as one of the finest novels of the first 'thaw': it marks the end of the doctrinaire epoch of Soviet letters and inaugurates the birth of a new intellectual and artistic non-conformity. Nekrasov

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 454.

⁸² Ibid., p. 457.

deliberately places his narrative outside the exciting, intoxicating atmosphere of so many Soviet works, the Revolution of 1905 and 1917, the Civil War, Five Year Plans and World War II, which had hitherto provided the principal themes of Soviet literature. Nekrasov is turned towards the future -- the problems posed by the peaceful development of Communism.

As Dominique Fernandez rightly indicates, true analysis of Communist life and morality has been neglected, due to the gravitational pull of the cataclysmic events surrounding the birth of the Soviet Union:

L 'epopee des kolkhozes et des terres
defrichées, des barages et des usines,
n 'était encore qu 'une transposition
de l 'epopee guerriere, et l'artiste
communiste pouvait negliger l'etude
veritable d'une societe devenue
modestement, humblement, quotidiennement
communiste, en se refugiant dans la
celebration des Journees Glorieuses
celebration qui devenait de plus en plus
artificielle, rhetorique et conformiste. ⁸³

Nekrasov has placed man -- a complex, sentient being, back in the centre of Soviet literature. By taking as his principal protagonist a demobilised officer and as the subject of his novel the return to

⁸³ La Nouvelle Revue Francaise, No. 52, April 1, 1957, p. 730.

ordinary life and its disenchantment, Nekrasov has taken a symbolic decision to examine the real problems which confront Communist man and to subject him to the human condition.

By Western standards In the Home Town by no means represents an act of innovation, but within the context of Soviet literature it is a characteristic manifestation of a new trend: the presentation of the purely personal, individual side of human experience. This belated rediscovery of the psychological nature of man confounds the simplistic view of man and the world propagated by the dogmatic supporters of the precepts of Socialist Realism. In spite of the accent on the convolutions of the individual psyche, the novel does rise to ideological heights: not via the media of socio-political jargon, but through the consciousness of its heroes. Nikolai's reaction to the bureaucrats is on an emotional plane:

Со стороны посмотреть -- полный порядок.
А копнень поглубже -- и страшно становится. ⁸⁴

Through understatement the novel encompasses issues beyond its immediate confines. It constitutes, in essence, a manifesto for intangible, spiritual and humanistic values, counterpoised to materialistic, pedestrian careerism.

⁸⁴ Izbrannye proizvedeniya, p. 454.

CHAPTER IV

MEN AT WAR

Война ро́дит героев
(proverbial saying)

During the decade 1950-1960 Nekrasov published a number of short stories, the majority of which are devoted to the war theme. Taken together, they constitute an epilogue to the major war fiction and examine isolated aspects of heroism -- its source and psychology. All of the stories derive from Nekrasov's personal experience and reflect the aesthetic and ethical position he adopted in In the Trenches of Stalingrad and In the Home Town: he eschews the traditional format of great battle-scenes and acts of exceptional heroism, concentrating rather on the psychology of the individual and seeking to penetrate to the roots of heroism.

Though there is a different focus in each of the stories, there are thematic affinities with the earlier novels. In Stalingrad Nekrasov endeavoured to portray the process of moral development under the extreme conditions of a humiliating retreat and the defence of Stalingrad, expanding the novel's idee beyond the confines of the immediate battle-field

and showing how the new ethical criteria acquired at war put pre-war life into a new perspective. In the Home Town subsequently explored the problem of adjustment to civilian life in the light of this new outlook on life, and also raised some fundamental questions of Communist morality. Thematically, the stories can be placed in two categories -- those that deal with the process of the growth of consciousness of individual responsibility on the one hand, and those which treat the question of adjustment, this time from civilian to army life. The two categories are not, however, mutually exclusive but tend to interpenetrate.

Nekrasov's moral-aesthetic position, already defined in Stalingrad as a pre-occupation with the inner world of his heroes and avoidance of all ostentatious pathos in the depiction of war, is reiterated in his essay Dedicated to Hemingway, the simple story of a young signaller in Stalingrad:

Фамилии его я уже не помню, или, вернее, просто не знал, звали же Ленкой -- это помню твердо. Маленький, худенький, с тоненькой детской шейкой, вылезавшей из непомерно широкого воротника шинели, он казался совсем ребенком, хотя было ему лет восемнадцать-девятнадцать, не меньше. Особую детскость ему придавали нежно-розовый, девичий цвет лица, совершенно непонятно как сохранившийся после многодневного сидения под землей, и глаза -- живые, выразительные, совсем не взрослые. Знаменит же он был тем, что много читал. Когда бы вы ни пришли на III батальона, вы всегда могли застать его в своем углу, у

аппарата, с трубкой и с глазами, устремленными в книжку. Наверху гудело, стреляло, рвалось (ИП батальона находился в подвале мясокомбината), а он, поджав под себя ногу, листал книгу, время от времени отрываясь от нее, чтоб крикнуть: Товарищ шестнадцатый, четвертый вызывает.⁸⁵

Many years later the narrator recollects this little episode.

In it he sees that spark of courage and humanity which Nekrasov especially values in his heroes. It was only at war that Lyoshka, who had only completed grade six, developed an interest in reading, and also in the world around him. Psychological interest attaches to this fact alone: war, which demands all the physical and moral forces for exclusively practical tasks, should relegate all effort not directed to the pursuit of war to the background. It is no accident that the bibliophile major with his banal comments about the muse falling silent while the guns boom, appears in a poor light. Lyoshka closes his ears to the thunder around him and learns for the first time of the fate of Petya Rostov.

Lyoshka is a rare phenomenon -- a soldier who reads at the front. Though he reads without a system, accepting whatever comes to hand, his reading is not just to kill time: what he reads provokes questions. The narrator is further struck by Lyoshka's independence and desire to have a personal view of life: in his question: why was such and such

⁸⁵ Vasya Konakov, *rasskazy*, Dnipro, Kiev, 1965, p. 137.

written? we can detect a moralist. Lyoshka's single, direct questioning comes into sharp contrast to the banal opinions expressed by the major on art, literature and the theatre. The latter has no pangs of conscience about using other people's words, whereas Lyoshka echoes Igor's words about «простой язык».

In Lyoshka's ability to abstract himself from his surroundings -- only fifty or sixty metres from the German trenches, the narrator sees a symbol of hope -- hope that even in the harshest of circumstances man will not lose his essential humanity. This motif is expressed in connection with Hemingway's collected stories The Fifth Column and Thirty-Eight Stories. In Lyoshka's laconic statement «Чаль Пеко, хороший был парень»⁸⁶ half an hour after being wounded by German shrapnel, Nekrasov sees true courage. This same quality had endeared the Spanish chauffeur to Hemingway:

«Пусть кто хочет ставит на Франко,
или Муссолини, или Гитлера. Я ставлю
на Иполито».

«И на Ленку»:⁸⁷

By his emphatically polemical position -- raising the ordinary mortal to the heights of heroism and neglecting to stress the role of the

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 144.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 145.

Communist Party in his heroes' moral and political development, Nekrasov frequently runs foul of orthodox criticism which is accustomed to dogmatic stereotypes and the rigid canons of Socialist Realism. This fact is well exemplified by reference to an article by Ivan Shevtsov devoted to Nekrasov's story Sen'ka (1950):

В недавно опубликованном рассказе 'Сенька' В. Некрасов пытается оправдать умышленно пострелившего себе в руку труса и паникера. А затем, чтобы реабилитировать своего героя, автор заставляет его совершить подвиг. Но в такой подвиг читатель не верит, потому что это противоречит жизни, всей логике характера персонажа и природе воинского подвига.⁸⁸

But this accusation that Nekrasov sets out to justify desertion is patently unfounded and only serves to point up the limited view of human nature held by the author of the article. The situation in Sen'ka is clearly and consistently developed and leaves no room for misapprehension of the hero's motives. The young, unshelled, eighteen year old Sen'ka commits a serious breach of military discipline. After many hours of sustained bombardment, paralysed with fear and hardly conscious of the significance and consequences of his action, Sen'ka shoots himself in the hand. In this opening episode Nekrasov clearly describes the

⁸⁸ Literaturnaya gazeta, February 20, 1958.

psychological condition of his hero:

Он не принимал никакого решения, он
просто снял винтовку с бруствера,
зажал ее меж колен, взвел курок,
положил руку на дулю, зажмурил глаза
и нажал крючок.⁸⁹

Nekrasov makes no attempt to justify Sen'ka's action: he simply shows how the instinct of self-preservation overwhelmed the immature Sen'ka in his first experience of aerial bombardment. In fact the action receives harsh condemnation in the story.

According to the strict military code Sen'ka should face a court of inquiry and receive punishment. But before the inquiry Sen'ka is destined to receive a whole series of lessons on front-line ethics. He slowly comes to a consciousness of the seriousness of his action: he is not well developed intellectually and the measure of his mistake comes out only under the influence of various events and impressions. Sen'ka senses his alienation from those around him: the young sergeant who escorts him to the medical centre, the doctor who treats his wound, the senior sergeant who only the day before had been concerned with Sen'ka's welfare, the lieutenant who comes to write out the report; in their silence Sen'ka perceives an attitude of contempt.

⁸⁹Vasya Konakov, p. 10.

«За человека не считает?»⁹⁰ is Sen'ka's reaction when the lieutenant leaves in silence -- a silence far removed from his usual greeting:

Ну как, орел, покурим, что ли,
твоей сибирской, крепенькой? ⁹¹

This unanimous open condemnation by people who endured the same danger as he is the first lesson and act of moral retribution, the justice of which Sen'ka silently recognises.

In his effort to give a comprehensive analysis of the psychological situation, Nekrasov sharpens the situation by contrasting Sen'ka with another soldier who shot himself in order to escape front-line duty: Akhrameev. In contrast to the purely instinctive behaviour of Sen'ka, Akhrameev was fully conscious, even calculating, in his action: he is thoroughly conversant with all the ramifications of his situation. He knows the extent of the punishment, the date the court convenes, the various methods of effecting a wound without leaving a tell-tale burn mark, and hopes to lie his way out of punishment. Akhrameev is a cynic who displays a complete lack of shame. In Sen'ka he hopes to find a man who

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

sympathizes with his motives. But Nekrasov shows how men having committed the same crime can have opposite motives and attitudes to that crime. Akhrameev tries to find justification for his action in the nature of the war: «Не война, а убийство»⁹². For him survival of self is paramount:

-- Вот я на тебя смотрю. Парень
здоровый -- кровь с молоком. Тебе
жить надо. Жить. А тебя под бомбы,
как скотину, гонят. Я вот старик, а
и то жить хочу. Кому умирать охота?
Да по-бестолковому еще... Мясорубка
-- вот что это, а не война.

-- Нельзя так говорить, -- сказал
Сенька.⁹³

By this laconic rebuttal of Akhraveev's view, Sen'ka reveals the repulsive nature of his deed to himself. Subjectively, desertion is alien to him.

Nekrasov thus leaves no doubt about his condemnation of desertion: the main question is then: was Sen'ka's action fortuitous or did it derive from his moral make-up? In the case of Akhrameev all is clear: the crime is part of his philosophy of life, whereas Sen'ka only cogitated the matter after the event: in his dazed state the lieutenant's opinion does not sink in immediately:

⁹²Ibid., p. 18,

⁹³Ibid., p. 18.

-- Пристрелил бы на месте, да патрона
жалко...⁹⁴

Nekrasov makes no attempt to minimize Sen'ka's guilt, but the fact of the latter's sense of shame and alienation from his former friends, his rejection of Akhrameev's attempts at self-justification, prove that Sen'ka is not intrinsically criminal.

Having analysed Sen'ka's passively good quality -- his sense of shame -- Nekrasov proceeds to depict him in action. The decisive turning point in Sen'ka's development comes with his encounter with sergeant Nikolai: this acquaintance forms the logical antithesis to the episode with Akhrameev and gives Sen'ka a positive view of courage. This small, fragile sergeant is wounded for the third time, has been fighting since the Finnish campaign and has already won the Red Star. The healthy, strongly-built Sen'ka cannot but compare himself to Nikolai: he realises that heroism is not the preserve of a special category of people but attainable by all. Nikolai becomes the model of behaviour for Sen'ka.

Больше всего в жизни ему хотелось
сейчас быть у Николая помкомвзводом.
Ох, как бы он у него работал... И
обязательно бы сделал что-нибудь
очень геройское. Так, чтоб все о нем
заговорили. И орден бы ему дали. И
чтоб Николай... Нет, этого никогда
уже с тобой не будет. И воевать
ты больше не будешь. Отвернулся.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

Пострелял бы их всех к чертовой матери,
 -- сказал Николай. -- Чего с ними
 цапкаться. И с тобой не будут
 цапкаться. Ты солдат, ты давал присягу,
 обещал драться до последней капли
 крови, и ты нарушил эту присягу, струсил
 -- теперь становись.... Все! Нет тебе
 жизни на земле....

Сенька почувствовал, как что-то
 подступило к горлу, встал и вышел из
 палатки. Боже, чего б он только не
 дал, чтоб стать помкомвзводом у Николая... 95

Sen'ka, who devotes himself to Nikolai's welfare, is so simple and sincere in his intercourse with the other wounded men in the tent that no-one suspects this good-hearted, open boy of his crime. The contradiction between the general impression Sen'ka creates and his one mistake produces great dramatic tension in the relations between Sen'ka and Nikolai, especially in the scene where Nikolai shares with Sen'ka his doubts about Akhrameev and condemns such deserters:

А я вот с ними бы не цапкался. Лечат
 чего-то их, возятся. Кому это надо?
 Люди там, -- он кивнул головой в ту
 сторону, где день и ночь гроыхало,
 -- из кожи вон лезут, держат, эти
 сволочи о шкуре своей только думают.
 Пострелял бы их всех к чертовой матери. 96

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 29-30.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

On learning that Sen'ka is a deserter, Nikolai undergoes a trauma -- loss of faith in a friend. Sen'ka's shame is such that he does not return to the tent all day:

Когда совсем стемнело, Сенька вернулся в палатку. Он долго стоял у входа, прислушиваясь, что делается внутри. Потом вошел. Николай уже спал, закрывшись шинелью. Сенька принес свежей воды из кухни, лег на свою солому и всю ночь пролежал с открытыми глазами. Под утро он все-таки заснул.

Проснулся поздно, когда все уже позавтракали. У изголовья стоял котелок каши. Николай лежал и смотрел куда-то вверх. Сенька встал. Николай даже не пошевелинулся. Сенька вышел и принес чай. Потом тихо спросил Николая:

--- Кушать будешь?

Николай ничего не ответил. Лежал и смотрел вверх.

Целый день Сенька пролежал под дубом. Когда вернулся, Николая уже не было. На его месте лежал другой. Котелок с остывшей кашей, нетронутый, стоял на прежнем месте.⁹⁷

Nikolai's silence and the untouched bowl of kasha could not be a more eloquent condemnation. Inextricably bound up with the theme of condemnation is, however, that of moral education. Sen'ka is shown to be

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

totally unprepared for modern warfare: he had only trained to throw grenades and to use the bayonet: blind fear induced by aerial bombardment had stifled his sense of duty to his fellow men and his country. His acquaintance with Nikolai had added the moral dimension Sen'ka lacked: in the final scene, when he courageously destroys a German tank, he acts spontaneously and actively, volunteering for a dangerous mission.

In Sudak (1958) Nekrasov once again probes beneath surface appearances and examines the complex of moral and psychological potentialities latent in any single action. In Sen'ka the principal protagonist had been an immature youth coming to grips with the unpleasant facts of modern warfare. In Sudak Nekrasov examines and expands upon a motif touched upon in Stalingrad: that there is no single, all-embracing criterion for the evaluation of a man, that a man is too complex and contradictory to come under a simple descriptive heading like coward, deserter, malingerer or even hero. Most of the characters discussed in this chapter begin military life unimpressingly: Lenka, hero of Second Night, is immediately successful in his military exploits, but nonetheless his achievement -- the strangling of a German -- has such profound moral implications that it is inadequate simply to regard him as a hero -- in the story this youth emerges as a deeply motivated humanist.

The relativity of all things had been one of the lessons learned by Kerzhentsev in Stalingrad:

И я лежу, уставившись в потолок, и
 размышляю о высоких материях, о том,
 что все в мире относительно, что сейчас
 для меня идеал -- эта вот землянка и
 котелок с лапшой, лишь бы горячая
 только была, а до войны мне какие-то
 костюмы были нужны и галстуки в полоску.⁹⁸

The principal figure of Sudak is Lieutenant Ilin who in his psychological make-up is reminiscent of Faber in Stalingrad: both of them experience great difficulty in adapting to conditions of war and finding a common language with their fellow soldiers:

В полку -- Ильин сразу это понял -- он никому не пришелся по душе. Он не умел, да и не хотел скрывать свои недостатки, и это определило отношение к нему окружающих.⁹⁹

Ilin is seen through the eyes of the regimental favourite Vergasov. The latter would appear to be the epitome of the fighting man: young, strong, steeled in the inferno of Stalingrad, Vergasov rides around his battalion -- everywhere his authority is respected and admired. By contrast Ilin cuts a tragi-comic figure -- he is weak, civilian and preserves the intonations, manners and customs of a quiet, shy intellectual unable to adapt to his new environment:

⁹⁸ Vokopakh Stalingrada: p. 180.

⁹⁹ Vasya Konakov: p. 105.

С солдатами он не мог найти общего языка --- так ему, во всяком случае, казалось. Приказывать и требовать он не умел, никак не мог отделаться от «пожалуйста» и «попрошу вас», а в отношениях со старшиной --- хитрым и оборотистым малым -- просто становился в тупик.¹⁰⁰

Ilin's lack of the accepted military virtues -- he cannot drink vodka without erupting into fits of coughing and can throw grenades no distance at all -- prejudices him in the eyes of Vergasov who wants to be rid of him:

Куда б его сплавить, черт возьми? -- думал он дорогой. -- Поговорить, что ли, с Петручанским? Наверно, им в штабе такой тип нужен. Геморройной работы у них хватает.¹⁰¹

But Nekrasov does not concern himself with mere externals, for him man is more complex, more unexpected. Ilin is first seen objectively by Vergasov: the final verdict on Ilin would seem to have been passed, but then, by a switch of focus, we get to know Ilin through his own consciousness.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 91.

Ilin's virtue is to have preserved his sense of justice and remained an integral personality when all the pressures were for him to conform to some sort of front-line norm. The defining quality for Ilin is responsible action in an extreme situation -- the moment before the attack on his first mission. The problem of conducting an attack at night is compounded by an unforeseen contingency at the last moment. Ilin realises that the elevation he has been assigned to capture is of secondary importance -- the next elevation, as yet unoccupied by German troops, forms part of the main German lines: its capture could completely disrupt German activity over a wide area.

Ilin's initial reaction to the mission was subjective: he hoped at last to prove himself and in some degree expiate his sense of guilt at his military incompetence. Lying in the dark a short distance from enemy lines and debating in his mind the pros and cons of changing the mission's objective, he realises with unexpected force the terrible burden of personal responsibility for his men:

Самое трудное на фронте -- принять решение, иными словами, взять на себя ответственность за все последующие события, за то, что люди, судьба которых в твоих руках, если даже и погибнут, то погибнут, выполняя задачу, в правильности которой ты, во всяком случае ты, абсолютно уверен.

Да, это и есть самое трудное на войне -- принять решение, а приняв, твердо выполнять. ¹⁰²

¹⁰² Ibid., p.121.

This, for Nekrasov, is the highest criterion for evaluation of a man: to act, to take decisions, in full knowledge that subjective considerations are not influencing one's assessment of a situation. Ilin is well aware that Vergasov will be furious, but nevertheless he takes the necessary steps to achieve the new objective.

No less important than Ilin's proved capacity for personal initiative is the insight which this episode affords Vergasov into his own prejudices. Enraged by the thought that Ilin has gone against explicit orders, he is momentarily blinded to the reasonableness, in military terms, of Ilin's initiative. In the light of the success of Ilin's operation, however, Vergasov is compelled to revise his opinion about the man and his abilities. In the final scene the two men are drawing closer to a reconciliation.

The essentially humanist trend in Nekrasov's thought reached its apotheosis in 1960 with the publication of Second Night (Novy Mir, No. 5). Once again Nekrasov takes as his central hero a simple, unsophisticated young man: Lenka Bogorad from the remote forests of Siberia. Lenka's experience of war provides the central motif of the story: on the first night he encounters the impersonal nature of modern warfare which had shocked Sen'ka into desertion. Laying mines on a section of the front Lenka had encountered the enemy, but had not seen him. Though politically immature, Lenka does have his own way of philosophising.

After his experience of the first night he attacks the impersonality of war in a conversation with captain Orlik:

Воюешь вот, воюешь, а с кем и не знаешь....

-- То есть как это -- не знаешь?
-- Орлик даже удивился. -- Два года воюем, а ты и не знаешь?

-- Ну, не то что не знаю... Знаю, конечно. Знаю, что есть Гитлер, фашисты, что они хотят всю Россию завоевать и весь мир.... Но раньше, лет сто или двести назад, не так было, правда? Сойдутся два войска и дерутся. Он тебя, а ты его --- кто кого. А теперь... -- Ленка скинул муравья с ладони и посмотрел, куда он упал. -- Убило вот недавно у нас Сучкова. Когда минное поле ставили. Вы его знаете, высокий такой, с нашего взвода. Прилетела мина и убила. А он живого фрица ближе как за триста метров никогда и не видел. Да и я тоже...¹⁰³

Lenka's wish to meet the enemy at close quarters is realised the following night: returning from a reconnaissance patrol, captain Orlik and Lenka engage in hand to hand combat. Lenka strangles a young German. The author underlines the difference between the two nights:

-- В первую ты познакомился с минами. И с нами. А во вторую --- с этим самым, с Гетике...¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 185.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 193.

Back in the dug-out Lenka gets to know his opponent even more closely: he sees the photographs taken from the dead Getzke:

На маленькой карточке с неровными, точно оборванными, краями улыбался курносый, с вихорком на лбу, светлоглазый парень в расстегнутой белой рубашке. Орлик бросил на стол еще две карточки. На одной тот же парень, в одних трусах, на плече, сидит, обхватив руками колени, рядом -- девушка в купальном костюме и резиновой шарочке. На второй -- старик в высоком воротничке, старушка, и тот же парень, и та же девушка: он -- в пиджаке и галстуке, тщательно причесанный, без вихорка, она -- в светлом платье, с цветком в волосах.¹⁰⁵

The lexical usage in the passage indicates Nekrasov's position: the diminutives <вихорок> instead of <вихор,> <платьице> instead of <платье>, <воротничок> for <воротник> : all these words, in conjunction with the smiles, flowers in the hair and the light clothes create a touching atmosphere around the dead German. Nor is it fortuitous that both Lenka and the German share the same year of birth -- 1925. They also have a physical resemblance: Lenka is described as having <славная морда -- курносая, веселая> Getzke: <веселое, курносое лицо>.

After this second night Lenka undergoes a severe spiritual depression: his notion that war on a man-to-man basis would be easier than one where men fight each other with long-distance weapons is destroyed.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 191.

The closing lines of the story underline the bitter irony of war:

Итак, русский мальчик Ленка Богорад,
тысяча девятьсот двадцать пятого года
рождения, веселый, курносый, убил
немецкого мальчика Иоганна Геттке, тысяча
девятьсот двадцать пятого года рождения,
курносого, веселого. Человек убил человека.
И это тяжело, это ужасно. И будь проклятая
война!¹⁰⁶

* * *

The three stories, Sen'ka, Sudak, and Second Night all provide excellent material for the study of modern forms of artistic analysis. In them Nekrasov attains a maximally 'objective' prose: the author seems to be completely abstracted and diffused in the substance of life: his presence is not fixed or revealed in the narrative, but is intuited in the intonations of the subtext. Nekrasov's language is simple in the extreme -- he uses a so-called working word (рабочее слово) whose sole aim is to capture, express and define all the facets, nuances and overtones of the person or event being analysed -- the eloquence of the untouched bowl of kasha in Sen'ka has already been alluded to.

¹⁰⁶Quoted in G. Almashin's article: Neskol'ko myslei povedu rasskaza Viktora Nekrasova 'Vtoraya Noch', Molodaya Gvardiya, No. 2, 1961. It is an interesting comment on the development of Nekrasov's artistic manner that this strongly ironic ending to the story is abandoned in versions subsequent to the first one (Novy Mir, No. 3 1960), in favour of a Chekhovian 'zero-ending': captain Orlik watches Lenka sleeping peacefully, while the birds chirp...

Though Nekrasov betrays a basically psychological orientation in his treatment of the war theme, he is not restricted to the sphere of individual psychology: in each story the psychological aspect constitutes a many-sided analysis of one particular feature of war and man. In Sen'ka Nekrasov examines, and seeks to understand, the motives behind desertion and cowardice; Sudak, like so many of Nekrasov's works, raises the question of responsibility for others -- a question which goes beyond the context of the battle-field and lies at the root of all social morality. In Second Night (on the basis of a single incident) the tragic paradox of war and killing is examined.

In each case Nekrasov's starting point is a concrete episode from his hero's experience. Other characters only interest Nekrasov insofar as they participate in this episode and contribute to the unfolding of its complex, diverse inner relations. His analysis gains in dynamism by the fact that each circumstance, mood, feeling or thought, is conveyed not descriptively, but actively. In this connection we have only to mention the acute discomfort experienced by Sen'ka whenever the topic of desertion arises: he covers up his embarrassment by busying himself with some trivial task. The dynamic nature of Nekrasov's narrative is further supported by his choice and treatment of heroes. Their inner lives are suddenly rendered complex by war: to gain a comprehensive understanding of this complexity, Nekrasov focuses on two main characters (Sen'ka and Nikolai; Ilin and Vergasov; Lenka and Orlik), whose highly peculiar

relationships throw the author's idee into sharp relief. He avoids, however, a comparative or contrasting depiction of his heroes: he studies the dynamic ties between them.

In his vignettes of war Nekrasov confronts with great artistic skill and force the simplistic view of man prevalent in Soviet letters: in his exploration of the vagaries of human nature under extreme conditions of war, Nekrasov exemplifies that broad sympathy for, and understanding of, man, which is symptomatic of the humanist trend in post-Stalin Soviet literature.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Неправда убивает искусство. Она бывает разная -- в желании увидеть то, чего нет, или не видеть то, что есть. Я не знаю, что хуже.¹⁰⁷

Nekrasov's first novel was published during the period when the Party was re-asserting its temporarily relaxed controls on literature: until Stalin's death in 1953 the post-war period was marked by that sterility which had characterized Soviet literature in the late 1930's. It is to Nekrasov's credit to have struck a note of sincerity in Soviet literature from the very beginning, thus prefiguring by almost a decade the incipient renaissance of Russian literature which the young critic V. Pomerantsev pleaded for in his article, On Sincerity in Literature,¹⁰⁸ and which started with Ehrenburg's Thaw proper.

The impact of Stalingrad was first of all felt in the sphere of war literature: as part of its efforts to restore Party authority, emphasis was being laid on the Party's role in the war (the case of Fadeyev has already been mentioned) and also on the very nature of the war.

¹⁰⁷ V. P. Nekrasov: Puteshestviya v raznykh izmereniyakh, Sovietskyy pisatel', Moscow, 1967, p. 379.

¹⁰⁸ Novy Mir, No. 12, 1953.

In direct opposition to the prescriptive demands of the Party, Nekrasov occupies a polemical position: though his narrative is centred around the great turning-point in World War II, he deliberately avoids making the Party-dictated deductions from Soviet victory in Stalingrad. For him, as we have seen, the centre of interest is the psychological plane. The theme of ordinary mortals, abstracted from the socio-political and economic milieu which we have come to associate automatically with Soviet literary figures, but seen rather in their personal lives, was a great innovation for Soviet readers. The war, as such, is only important for Nekrasov insofar as it provides the impetus for psychological development and analysis.

As far as subsequent war literature is concerned, the two principal followers of Nekrasov's precepts are G. Baklanov and B. Okudzhava. The latter's autobiographical story Good Luck, Schoolboy! is particularly close to Nekrasov's manner:

Okudzhava's novella is one of the rare works of Soviet literature which deals sympathetically with the non-heroics of war -- such hitherto unheard-of sentiments as the fear, bewilderment, and bravado of a teenage boy making his way across a German mine-field.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Half-way to the Moon; Edited by P. Blake and M. Hayward, Doubleday and Co. Inc., New York, 1963, p. XXIV.

A further innovation on the part of Nekrasov was his depiction of war not in its descriptive aspect, but as what one might call a perspective-finder: his articulate heroes -- Kezhentsev, Faber and Igor, begin to attain a degree of consciousness of their predicament: pre-war life is suddenly thrust into a new perspective, it is no longer seen as idyllic, but rather as a mirage behind which real life and real values were hidden.

In the figures of his inarticulate or uneducated heroes, Nekrasov is primarily showing the springs of action: in opposition to Party propaganda, he demonstrates how people's motives are not derived from the abstract notions of Party, rodina (fatherland) or Socialism, but evolve from the exigencies of actual life and its multitude of experiences. Valega and Sedykh are truly heroic in their devotion to duty, though on an intellectual plane they can scarcely formulate their ideas (сколько чего-чего).

In the interaction between the educated and the uneducated, Nekrasov develops his principal theme -- that of responsibility. In the Home Town develops this theme into a penetrating analysis of the essence of true Communism. For Nekrasov, a Party member since 1944 and a convinced Communist, man is central: the anthropocentric humanism he advocates constitutes the main foil to the entrenched Establishment view of man as pre-eminently an economic animal. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that In the Home Town represents a first, tentative step, in Soviet literature,

towards a fair-minded analysis of the Soviet Union as a Communist society.

In his short stories Nekrasov has further explored, by focusing on individual cases, some of the sources of human action and shown how fundamental personal motives are: Sen'ka's moral regeneration is engendered by a sense of shame, the same redeeming character trait which brings the cynical Kira Georgievna to a more sober, responsible view of life. Ilin, in Sudak, transcends considerations of personal vanity in his feeling of responsibility towards his men; and Lenka's reaction to his murdering a German in unarmed combat is perhaps the deepest expression of the humanist trend in Nekrasov's thought.

Да, прежде всего будь самим собой, а
потом уж проповедником. Впрочем, быть
самим собой -- не есть ли это лучшая
проповедь?¹¹⁰

The simple truth expressed in the above words is one that has long been denied Soviet writers: Nekrasov's plea for independence, for the paramount importance of the individual, is matched by the independence of his literary style which is free of the cliches of the publicistic jargon which has debased the literary language. In his manner and in his objectivity he gravitates towards Chekhov.

¹¹⁰ Puteshestviya, p. 107.

In spite of his criticisms of the Soviet system, especially the bureaucracy, Nekrasov is not a disaffected citizen: his aim is not to subvert the regime, but to humanize it. Carmel is right in hailing Nekrasov as one of the leading prose writers in present-day Russia:

Nekrasov is neither a rebel nor a clandestine dissenter from the principles of Communism. Yet, like the other liberals in the Party, he strives for a revival of 'Marxist humanism' within the Party. Since 1953 he has fought with unflinching moral courage to re-establish in Russian literature the sovereignty of language over the tyranny of cant, to restore to the Soviet man of letters his dignity and freedom to choose for his writing his own style and literary form. Cutting through all political clichés and the stereotypes of socialist realism, he exemplifies the rejuvenation in Russian prose since Stalin's death, giving hope that this process of change from within is irreversible despite the chronic zigzagging and setbacks and the one-step-forward, two-steps-back of official policy.¹¹¹

The preceding chapters serve to confirm this apt evaluation of Nekrasov: his moral integrity in resisting all pressures to conform and the challenge, implicit in all his literary works and articles, to the way Soviet writers are expected to write, combine to give him a prestige almost unrivalled by the elder generation of Soviet writers. The views and hopes expressed

¹¹¹Viktor Nekrasov: Pioneer of the Renaissance in Post-Stalin Russian Prose, Books Abroad, No. 40, 1966, p. 385.

by Nekrasov in his war prose can be said to represent an integral part of the credo of the liberal, progressive faction of Russia's new intelligentsia.

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