

Title: Class Interest and the End of Realism in Nekrasov's "Komu na Rusi zhit' khorosho"
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Abstract:

In Nikolai Nekrasov's "Komu na Rusi zhit' khorosho" a character named Veretennikov records songs from peasants, who welcome him as a sympathetic outsider. Like the poem itself, Veretennikov transcribes and only occasionally judges peasant life, which he treats as a source of aesthetic vitality and ethnographic knowledge. This paper argues that Nekrasov's poetry exploits a tension within literature between class-based conceptions of language, which are epitomized in the confrontation between Veretennikov and a peasant named Yakim, who responds to Veretennikov's judgments with a speech that makes the case for nihilistic resignation. I contend that "Komu na Rusi zhit' khorosho" expresses an impasse in these conceptions, which marks the culmination of Russian realism.

Despite themes of miscommunication, realist texts often suggest that social togetherness supersedes communication: although language cannot bridge between individuals, it can create the world of a novel, which stands in for connections unnoticed or unmade. Nekrasov's final work continues the effort to build such conciliatory worlds, but it also unmakes them, exposing the act of creation as colored by interest and limited in perspective.

I offer a reading of Yakim and Veretennikov's encounter as class-based distinctions in language. Shifting values in the 1860s produced conflicts in familiar associations, which are tenuously resolved in an alliance between peasantry and intelligentsia. The key function of this alliance was to address the issue of interestedness. Peasant interest could serve as the basis for universal expression, which was to be provided by the intelligentsia. Drawing peasants into poetry affords emotional authenticity, but it also reveals the poet's class-based desires. To be ruled by desires appears as a fact of language: this is how Nekrasov's poetry is realist as well as transformative, whereby the gaps within words and ways of knowing are left open instead of bridged, as they arguably are in the realist novel.