

Title: Flânerie, Russian Style: Benjamin's "Panoramic Literature" and Nekrasov's *About the Weather*

Author: Matthew McWilliams, Yale University

Abstract:

Walter Benjamin associates the figure of the flâneur with panoramic literature, which (as "the salon attire of a literature which was basically designed to be sold on the street") he considers analogous to the feuilleton, and with the physiological sketch (67-68). However, he characterizes the latter as a "petty-bourgeois" and "socially dubious" genre, insofar as it "helped fashion the phantasmagoria of Parisian life" by giving readers a friendly but false image of one another (69-70). Nikolai Nekrasov and his Russian contemporaries also wrote feuilletons and physiologies—it was Bulgarin's critical response to the *Physiology of Petersburg* (1845), edited by Nekrasov, that gave the "Natural School" movement its name—but with a marked emphasis on urban poverty and suffering: Dostoevsky's sentimental debut novel *Poor Folk*, for example, first appeared in the *Petersburg Collection* (1846), the "sequel" to the *Physiology of Petersburg*. Thus, Nekrasov and his peers combined, or attempted to combine, the flâneur-physiologist's claim to disinterested and "scientific" objectivity with the moral authority of the social critic. Erik McDonald notes that the satirical poems that make up Nekrasov's later "numbered cycle", which include *About the Weather* (written between 1858 and 1865), have traditionally been considered verse feuilletons, and that they feature a "satirist-narrator" who "walks around St. Petersburg, observing and talking to a startling variety of people"—that is, a flâneur (McDonald 605). I contend that Nekrasov's poem bears the traces of the physiological sketch and the feuilleton, as well as eighteenth-century Russian satire, a Sentimentalist ethos predicated on compassion, Romantic irony, and Belinskian social criticism. If, as Martina Lauster argues, Benjamin's flâneur is "a 'threshold' type"—"one who has the potential, but not the illusion-free insight, to recognize his own commodification"—Nekrasov's narratorial personae are also ambiguous and liminal creatures, moving between genres and incorporating aspects of several major literary movements (142-43).

Benjamin's emphases on the crowd and the marketplace helpfully illuminate Nekrasov's treatment of his own urban environment, but my presentation points to the cultural and (especially) political differences between mid-nineteenth-century Paris and St. Petersburg, which call for a rethinking of Benjamin's flâneur in the Russian context. I also challenge Benjamin's dismissal of the value of panoramic literature, demonstrating that Nekrasov's *About the Weather* mobilizes sentiment for aesthetic and political aims—an attempted move from poesis to praxis with important ethical dimensions.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Harvard UP, 2006.

Grøtta, Marit. *Baudelaire's Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and 19th-Century Media*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Lauster, Martina. "Walter Benjamin's Myth of the 'Flâneur.'" *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Jan. 2007), pp. 139-156.

McDonald, Erik. "Russia's Juvenal or Russia's Horace? Nekrasov's Satirical Personae." *The Russian Review*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Oct. 2008), pp. 597-621.

Tseitlin, Aleksandr. *Stanovlenie realizma v russkoi literature*. Nauka, 1965.

Volkov, Solomon. *St Petersburg: A Cultural History*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.