

Environments of the Post-Reform Village An Ecocritical Reading of Nekrasov's *Red-Nose Frost*

J. Alexander Ogden
University of South Carolina, USA

Abstract Nikolaj Nekrasov's *Moroz, Krasnyj nos* (Red-Nose Frost) (1863) focuses on the death and legacy of the peasant Prokl and the suffering and death from exposure of his widow Dar'ja. Some relevant issues from an ecocritical perspective – creatures, natural forces, and the natural world in general – are portrayed as sentient and accorded respect and agency; peasants in the poem are fully enmeshed in the natural world – not insulated or isolated; and Nekrasov displaces onto a peasant Other a connection with the natural world that has been lost by his implied audience of the urban elite.

Keywords Ecocriticism. Nekrasov. Red-Nose Frost. *Moroz, Krasnyj nos*. Peasants. Folklore. Ecological Indian.



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Nikolaj Nekrasov's contemporaries recognised his love of the natural environment. Pavel Zasodimskij described Nekrasov as a writer

who so loved the open space of his native fields, meadows, and shady forests, who so subtly and sensitively felt, understood, and knew how to convey in words the reverie-inducing, dreamy charm of our northern nature. (Zasodimskij 1908, 319-20)

The view of Nekrasov promulgated in the Soviet period, however, emphasized the social content of his poetry – his role as “singer of the revolutionary aspirations of an oppressed peasantry” (Egolin 1939, 504). Nekrasov's *derevnja* was interpreted almost exclusively as symbolic of the iniquities of village social relations, not literally as the countryside environment. When ‘nature’ is mentioned in Soviet Nekrasov criticism, it is often seen in diametrical opposition to the social life of the village:

For his whole life Nekrasov preserved a touching love for the nature of the Volga region. But in sharp contrast with these enchanting pictures stood the subjugated life of the enserfed peasantry and the Volga barge-haulers. (Egolin 1954, 385)

Nekrasov's poetry certainly juxtaposes the freedom, expanse, and beauty of the natural world to the oppression, constriction, and cruel suffering of rural Russia's serfdom and poverty. But these two portrayals are not separate and contradictory: Nekrasov sees his social concerns and his sensitive appreciation for the natural environment as intimately related and, in fact, fully integrated. Natural beauty is even more poignant since it is marred by violence and injustice; human oppression is even more outrageous in a world that contains such freedom and beauty.

Too often, Nekrasov scholarship has talked about the poet's ‘pictures’ of nature, seeing the natural environment as a static backdrop for more important social concerns. Taking an integrated view of the environment as central to Nekrasov's works allows more satisfying readings. Nekrasov's perceptive portrayals of characters' physical worlds let us analyse specifics of the varied ways individuals and communities function in their ecosystems, as can be seen in a foregrounding of the environment's central role in Nekrasov's work *Morož, Krasnyj nos* *Мороз, Красный нос* (Red-Nose Frost, 1863).

Andrey Fedotov and Pavel Uspenskij have shown the value of taking an ecocritical approach to Nekrasov's poetry. In a 2021 *Russian Review* article, they analyse one of Nekrasov's poems for children, “Deduška Mazaj i zajcy” “Дедушка Мазай и зайцы” (Grandpa Mazaj and the Hares, 1871), a canonical work and a staple of the elementary school curriculum. The embedded first-person narrative, told by the

peasant Mazaj, recounts his rescue of hares during spring flooding. As Fedotov and Uspenskij discuss, most readings of the poem have simplified it to “a story about love of nature and animal welfare” (Fedotov, Uspenskij 2021, 473); they argue, instead, that

the environmental pathos of the poem [...] was supposed to impart [...] a humane attitude toward, not nature, but Russian peasants, and at the same time, an economically profitable model of collaboration with them. (473)

We see, then, that the poem’s environmental issues are not separate, but instead enmeshed with central concerns of Nekrasov’s: representing peasant life and laying bare the economic underpinnings of inequality. In contrasting two ways of understanding our place in the natural world, Fedotov and Uspenskij describe both a “proto-environmental ethics”, in which “nature exists for the sake of humanity, [...] is understood in human categories, and [...] requires sporadic and precise human interventions”, (484) and a fully environmental ethics. The latter

does not consider the surrounding world to exist exclusively for humankind. It allows for the specific subjectivity of all living beings, whose desires do not coincide with the desires of humanity, and calls humanity to take this into account. [...] [It] painstakingly continues to seek the proper balance between refraining from any human interference in the natural world and the recognition of our dependence on natural resources. (484)

As they note regarding “Grandpa Mazaj and the Hares”, the poem

offers us an acceptable version of this balance: the environmental ethics of the poem does not exclude the human being from the natural world, but on the contrary, returns the human to nature. The human remains a consumer of natural resources [...] yet, as the most rational being, he becomes the regulator and protector of nature. (484)

In the poem, the peasant Mazaj justifies a rational and sustainable approach to the natural world on economic grounds: he advocates against the slaughter of the hares trapped by the flood because their pelts in spring are not valuable and argues against hunting with nets and snares since this “suggestion would increase the quantity of the peasants’ final product of hare pelts and meat” (480).¹

¹ For an ecocritical consideration of Nekrasov’s *Komu na Rusi žit’ xorošo*, see Ogden (forthcoming).

We find similar concerns and a similar approach in *Moroz, Krasnyj nos*. The *poema*, in two parts and 36 sections of varying length, describes the aftermath of the death of the peasant Prokl and the mourning of his parents, widow, and children. Much of the poem focuses on the suffering and then death from exposure to winter cold of his widow Dar'ja. From an ecocritical perspective, three issues seem particularly relevant: creatures, natural forces, and the natural world in general are portrayed as sentient and accorded respect and agency; peasants in the poem are fully enmeshed in the natural world – not insulated or isolated; and Nekrasov displaces onto a peasant Other a connection to the natural world that has been lost by his implied audience of the urban elite.

Prokl's old roan horse has a privileged place in the life of the peasant's family and in the narrative development of the poem. Introduced at the very beginning of Part One and present throughout much of the poem, the roan works alongside both husband and wife and is last seen, in Dar'ja's dream at the end of the poem, reaching out and taking their little son's ear "in his soft, kind lips" (996-7).²

The roan is the addressee for an extended exhortation in section 11, an address which assumes the horse is a rational and devoted partner, one who was raised by Prokl since his days as a foal, laboring beside him for years. This address takes up eight of the ten stanzas of section 11. It assumes that the horse can understand the concept of serving his master for the last time and has a conscious awareness of the course of his life going well beyond that usually ascribed to animals. He is treated and addressed here more as a valued coworker than as a beast of burden.

In addition to serving Prokl, the roan horse also serves the poet himself. There is a direct parallel between the role of the poet within the poem and the role played by the horse. Nekrasov's first-person speaker is not much present in the poem, but does appear in self-consciously metapoetic passages that address the construction of the poem's narrative. In a famous section on the fortitude of Slavic women, Nekrasov writes

Ты глухо, незримо страдала,
Ты свету кровавой борьбы
И жалоб своих не вверяла, –

Но мне ты их скажешь, мой друг!
(83-6)

² References to Nekrasov's *Moroz, Krasnyj nos* are given parenthetically by line number and refer to the Nekrasov edition (1982).

[You suffered silently, invisibly, | With the world your bloody struggle | And your complaints you did not share. || But to me you will tell them, my friend!]

The Slavic women, the speaker suggests, will reveal their sufferings to him. And, further expanding on the poet's creative control, a stanza later, at the beginning of section 4, Nekrasov writes

Однако же речь о крестьянке
Затеяли мы, чтоб сказать,
Что тип величавой славянки
Возможно и ныне сыскать.
(92-5)

[However, this speech about the peasant woman | We've dreamed up in order to say | That the type of the majestic Slavic woman | May be sought out even today.]

In other words, the poet speaker has constructed the previous scene in order to reveal something to us, his readers. The poet's task is to move the narrative along, and the roan works in tandem with him in this process. As the roan aids Prokl's mother in pulling Prokl's coffin home at the very beginning of the poem, the poet runs ahead of them in his thought: "Привычная дума поэта | Вперед забежать ей спешит" (The accustomed thought of the poet | Hurries to run ahead of her, 8-9). The horse literally moves things forward right from the beginning, as emphasised in the extended address in section 11, which is repeated again in section 13:

Саврасушка, трогай,
Натягивай крепче гужи!
Служил ты хозяину много,
В последний разок послужи!
(423-6)

[Dear little roan, move along, | Pull tighter on the reins! | You served the master a lot, | [Now] serve for the last time!]

At the transition from Part One to Part Two of the poem, the roan once again is there, in the last lines of section 15 and the opening of section 16. As the story moves from the burial and mourning of Prokl to his wife's efforts to gather firewood and consequent death by freezing, the roan again is the conveyance. Having left her children with a neighbour, the widow heads off into the forest on the same horse (490-1). As seen in many of these examples, the horse is often there at the border between sections; we see this again near the end of the

poem (992-7). The roan and sledge convey us, readers, through the story as surely as does the poet himself.

It is not only domestic animals that are an intimate part of the poem's peasant world, dependent on humans but working in symbiosis with them for mutual benefit. This is true even of the earth and plants: the field invites plowing, and grasses ask for the scythe (575-6). In this world, elements of nature are anthropomorphized and made sentient. The crops, for example, are "rož'-matuška" "рожь-матушка" (little mother rye, 597). Even the wilder parts of the natural world are drawn in. Calling to mind the apostrophes to the natural world in folklore or in medieval works such as the *Igor Tale* or the *Zadonščina*, we find here speeches addressed to the winter nights (678) or the forest path (776). Seasons, weather, and times of day are all personified. And not all of these forces are benign. Winter deals a blow to finish off Prokl (386), and - again calling to mind folklore - the heads of rye are seen as the innumerable troops of an enemy host, as in the *byliny* былины (medieval folk epics) (624 ff).

At times nature is an impartial witness, watching with the lifeless yellow eyes of an owl (516-18); at other times, it directly reflects human emotions. As Prokl's father mourns him while digging his grave, it seems "as if all the world is dying: silence, snow, half-gloom" (220-1). Later, as Dar'ja sets out for firewood, the forest and wild birds listen to her grief (513, 526).

This natural world is also suffused with supernatural forces - the motivation behind everything from forest rustling to shooting stars. The poem includes references to God and Mary, but also to the "unclean force" of traditional folklore:

Слышу, нечистая сила
Залотошила, завыла,
Заголосила в лесу.

Что мне до силы нечистой?
Чур меня! Деве пречистой
Я приношенье несусь!
(746-51)

[I hear how an unclean force | Began rustling, crying, | howling in
the forest. // What do I care about the unclean force? | Leave me!
To the holy virgin | I bring an offering!]

К утру звезда золотая
С божьих небес
Вдруг сорвалась - и упала,
Дунул господь на нее,

Дрогнуло сердце мое...
(778-82)

[Toward morning a golden star | From God's heaven | Suddenly
tore itself away - and fell, | The Lord blew on it, And my heart
trembled]

At any point even the most natural, quotidian scene can reflect the supernatural: a crow sits on a gilded cross, and Dar'ja's heart trembles - is it just a crow, or an omen (802)?

Without question the most significant and fully developed sentient personification of the natural world is the figure of "voevoda Moroz" "воевода Мороз" (Chieftain Frost) who appears in the final sections of the poem. As has been extensively investigated in scholarship on Nekrasov, this figure is drawn from folklore but - as so often in Nekrasov's verse - is repurposed in a more naturalistic setting here. Frost ultimately claims Dar'ja for himself, and the poem ends as she freezes to death, a smile of satisfaction and happiness on her face as she yields to her enchanting dream (1036-65).

Even as the natural world in Nekrasov's poem is given heightened significance, sentience, and agency, the people in the poem - Russian peasants - are shown to be fully enmeshed in that world, not insulated or isolated. The opening scene of the poem provides a perfect example of this. Prokl's mother is bringing home a coffin. She and the roan are stuck in the middle of a drift of snow, and she is ice-covered here (56) as is her husband later, while digging their son's grave (188-92). Both Prokl and Dar'ja die from exposure to the cold, ice, and snow. As Dar'ja freezes to death, we see her slowly covered in beautiful but deadly ice: "Пушисты и белы ресницы, | Морозные иглы в бровях" ([His] lashes are fluffy and white, | With needles of frost in [his] eyebrows, 952-3) and "В сверкающий иней одета, | Стоит, холодеет она" (Clothed in sparkling hoarfrost, | She stands freezing, 954-5).

The peasants of the poem are defined by their labour in the natural world, and that labour is repeatedly highlighted throughout the poem. We not only see footwear and garments made of natural products; we also see the processes that produce those objects. Bast shoes and a coffin-cover of bast matting show up in the opening lines of the poem, but later we see a young peasant harvesting bark in the forest (707) and see Prokl's father ineptly plaiting a bark shoe (336). Similarly, Dar'ja sews a linen shroud at the beginning (66-7); later, as she freezes, she dreams of weaving linen into fine cloth: "Много натку я полотен, | Тонких добротных новин" (I will weave much linen, | Fine, good new material, 682-3). Prokl, who labored on, in, and for the earth his whole life, is seen in death laid on a table of white fir and clad in linen and bast:

Уснул, потрудившийся в поте!
Уснул, поработав земле!
Лежит, непричастный заботе,
На белом сосновом столе,

Лежит неподвижный, суровый,
С горящей свечой в головах,
В широкой рубаше холщовой
И в липовых новых лаптях.
(264-71)

[Having labored in sweat, he fell asleep! | Fell asleep, having done his work for the earth! | He lies apart from the bustle, | On a white pine table, || Lying motionless, stern, | With a burning candle at the headboard, | In a broad linen shirt | And in new bast shoes of linden.]

Even the poem's imagery emphasises parallels with the natural world: sobs are like rain long preparing to fall (68-9), tears drop like ripened grain (176-9), and the wailing of Prokl's kinsfolk is like wind playing in the grass (285-8). When Dar'ja dreams of their son Griša, he is "a green bush running", wrapped in peas (981). In the folkloric mourning of his relatives, Prokl is a dove with blue wings that has flown away, while also a person defined by his labour in the field and by his kindness and love:

Голубчик ты наш сизокрылый!
Куда ты от нас улетел?
Пригожеством, ростом и силой
Ты ровни в селе не имел.

Родителям был ты советник,
Работничек в поле ты был,
Гостям хлебосол и приветник,
Жену и детей ты любил...
(288-95)

[You are our gray-winged little dove! | Whither did you fly, leaving us? | In beauty, stature, and strength | You had no equal in the village. || You were an adviser to your parents, | You were a worker in the field, | You welcomed guests with bread and salt, And you loved your wife and children]

An important feature of the poem's dynamics is that the intimate connection to the natural world exhibited by all its peasant characters is available only vicariously to the poem's non-peasant lyric

speaker and to his implied non-peasant addressees. Nekrasov suggests that that direct connection to nature is possible only for peasants and has been lost by his implied audience of the urban elite. The fact that both speaker and addressees are different from the peasants is clear from the way that the speaker confidently and somewhat condescendingly says, in reference to the robust ideal Slavic peasant woman, “И все мы согласны, что тип измельчал” (And we all agree that the type has declined, 80). People like the narrator must feel compassion or pity for such women’s suffering, but are inevitably distanced from it: “Тот сердца в груди не носил, | Кто слез над тобою не лил!” (He carried no heart in his breast, | Who has not shed tears over you, 90-1).

While throughout the poem *Prokl, Dar’ja*, and all the other peasants find purpose and meaning in their lives through labour, the narrator is idle – looking on as an observer. Writing again about the ideal peasant woman, the speaker says, “Я видывал, как она косит” (I often would watch her mow, 114). In this, he joins a long line of other Nekrasov lyric speakers, as well as figures such as the narrator of Turgenev’s *Zapiski oxotnika* (Notes of a Hunter, 1852), in showing himself to be an outsider fascinated by the peasant Other.

This has significant implications for an ecocritical reading of the poem, because Nekrasov is able to attribute to his peasant characters a life immersed in nature and in tune with natural processes – one unavailable to those of his ‘cultured’ background. In this, Nekrasov’s peasants have something in common with what anthropologist Shepard Krech III has termed the “Ecological Indian”:

The dominant image is of the Indian in nature who understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve so that earth’s harmonies are never imbalanced and resources never in doubt. (Krech 1999, 21)

Connection to the natural world is displaced onto an Other who preserves a harmony with nature that educated society has lost – people who are attuned to earth and creatures of the natural world, living in balance with the rest of nature. Furthermore, as part of a traditional culture, they ascribe consciousness and volition to natural forces and all animals thanks to a belief system with elements of animism in it (Garrard 2011, 129-37). The parallel is not perfect, of course, but it helps illuminate the particular kind of environment that Nekrasov creates in the poem, as well as the place of humans within that environment.

Nekrasov is often writing for an implied audience of the urban elite who are distanced from their connection to the natural world, and that is true in *Moroz, Krasnyj nos* as well. Within the poem, as

we have seen, he makes specific reference to his authorial role and authorial control of the narrative – clearly with an eye toward a sophisticated readership attuned to the expectations and conventions of written poetry. His frame of reference has a broad historical and cultural scope – features shared with that implied audience, and not with the peasants who populate the poem. Thus, even though in ways we can argue that Nekrasov’s picture of folk life is unsentimental and relatively unvarnished, it is also a romanticised one. Drawing on Russian folklore, he portrays a sentient natural world that is intimately enmeshed with the human. And the narrative that he creates of peasant life, work, joys, suffering, and death is one showing that that life cycle takes place immersed in the natural world in a way that is no longer available to his speaker or implied audience.

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