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## Nikolai Nekrasov's Representation of the Decembrist Wives

In *On Poetics*, Aristotle formulated the fundamental difference between the historian and the poet, which rested on their varying perception and representation of historical truth:

The difference between an historian and a poet is not in that one writes in prose and the other in verse... The real difference is this that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle's conceptualization of the poet, as opposed to the historian, and of his creative process of capturing historical reality illuminates Nikolai Nekrasov's painstaking work on the poem *Russian Women* (1872–73), which combines historical accuracy with poetic imagination.

By applying, consciously or intuitively, the Aristotelian vision of poetry as the general truth which eclipses historical specifics, Nekrasov creates a poem that is filled with inherent ambiguities of style, subject matter, and genre. The poem is awash with historical inaccuracies, which inevitably point to the poet's mythologization of the Decembrist wives and their feat. Nekrasov's Decembrist wives emerge as both revolutionaries and guardian angels; the poem's lofty theme of the noblewomen's voluntary self-sacrifice is glaringly incongruous with its low style of expression. And yet, despite its many contradictions, Nekrasov's poem has become the standard point of reference in Russian scholarship on the Decembrist wives and remains one of the most popular and most influential literary works that have shaped the perception of them among Russians.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *On Poetics* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1991), 35.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, M. M. Khin, 'Zheny dekabristov', *Istoricheskii vestnik* 18 (1884), 650; V. I. Shenrok, 'Odna iz zhen dekabristov', *Russkoe bogatstvo*, no. 11 (November 1894), 99; P. E. Shchegolev, 'Podvig russkoi zhenshchiny', *Istoricheskii vestnik*, no. 5 (May 1904), 530; P. E. Shchegolev, 'Zheny dekabristov', *Istoricheskie etudy* (Saint Petersburg: Knigoizdatel'stvo Shipovnik, 1913), 397; S. Postnikov, 'Zhena dekabrista', *Zavety* (9 September, 1913), 208; Vera Figner, 'Zheny dekabristov', *Katorga i ssylka* 21 (1925), 228. Nekrasov's poems have been re-published 40 times with editions of 10,000–15,000 copies. In Soviet Russia, the Decembrist wives remained a model of marital loyalty and duty for the wives of persecuted intellectuals and dissidents. See

By 1871, when Nekrasov began working on the poem devoted to the Decembrist wives, Princess Ekaterina Trubetskaia and Princess Maria Volkonskaia, he had already established a reputation of himself as ‘the poet of human suffering’ (‘печальник горя народного’) cultivating in his poems the theme of compassion for the plight of the Russian peasant.<sup>3</sup> The poet’s turn to the story of two Decembrist wives who represented the cream of the Russian nobility does not, however, mark a radical break with his earlier works. The suffering that suddenly befalls these noblewomen – the overarching theme of *Russian Women* – becomes, in Nekrasov’s representation, a unifying force that brings them closer together with the common people. One expected or unintended outcome of this poetic social convergence is the poet’s marked vulgarization of the Decembrist wives that, paradoxically, contributed to their heroization.

Nekrasov’s poem consists of two parts: ‘Russian Women. Princess T \*\*\*’ and ‘Maria Volkonskaia (A Grandmother’s Notes)’.<sup>4</sup> Both parts were published in the journal *Notes of the Fatherland*, on April 13, 1872, and January 22, 1873, respectively. From 1873 onward, they were published together as one poem under

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references to these women in Lidia Libedinskaia, *Zelenaia lampa* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1966), 11; E. V. Markova, *Zhili-byli v XX veke. Prilozhenie k martirologu “Pokaianie”*. Vypusk 8 (Syktyvkar: Fond “Pokaianie”, Soiuz zhenshchin Respubliki Komi, Natsional’nyi muzei Respubliki Komi, 2006); Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Vospominaniia (Kniga pervaiia)* (Moscow: Soglasie, 1999), 443; Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Kniga vtoraiia* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1990), 215; N. E. Emel’ianov, ‘Ob odnoi nenapisannoi stranitse russkoi istorii XX veka’, *Ezhegodnaia bogoslovskaiia konferentsiia Pravoslavnogo Sviato-Tikhonovskogo Bogoslovskogo Instituta: Materialy. 1997* (Moscow: Pravoslunnyi Sviato-Tikhonovskii Bogoslovskii Institut, 1997), 171; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *V krughe pervom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 215; Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 292–3. Among Soviet publications devoted to the Decembrist wives are N. Eidel’man, ‘Sankt-Peterburg – Nerchinsk’, *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 24 (December 1975), 2; N. Eidel’man, ‘Chuvstvo istorii’, *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 24 (December 1975), 5; Z. Lebtse’tern, ‘Ekaterina Trubetskaia’, *Zvezda*, no. 12 (December 1975), 179–194; Iu. Lotman, ‘Dekabrist v povsednevnoi zhizni’, in V. G. Bazanov, V. E. Vatsuro, eds., *Literaturnoe nasledie dekabristov* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1975), 25–74; Ivan Malafeev, ‘Dekabristki’, *Ural*, no. 12 (December 1975), 117–127; Mark Sergeev, *Neschast’iu vernaia sestra. Povest’* (Irkutsk: Vostochno-Sibirskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1975); S. V. Somonova, ‘Dekabristy o prebyvanii zhen dekabristov v Sibiri’, *Sovetskie arkhivy*, no. 6 (June 1975), 27–33; A. Z. Tikhantovskaia, ‘Vas dolzhna udivit’ ta reshimost’’, *Znanie-sila*, no. 10 (October 1975), 53–56. Vladimir Motyl’s film *Zvezda plenitel’nogo schast’a* (The Star of Enchanted Happiness) (Lenfilm, 1975), which offers an unconventional – for the Soviet era – portrayal of the inner world of the Decembrists and their wives, remains the only film produced about these women in Russia.

<sup>3</sup> Fedor Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh* (PSS), vol. 21 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1985), 73; vol. 26, 118. Among the most famous poems devoted to the suffering of the Russian peasant are ‘The Unreaped Row’ (1854), ‘Vlas’ (1854), ‘A Forgotten Village’ (1855), ‘On the Volga’ (1860), *Who Is Happy in Russia?* (1863–1878).

<sup>4</sup> N. A. Nekrasov, ‘Russkiiia zhenshchiny’, *Otechestvennye zapiski* 4 (1872), 577–600.

the title *Russian Women*. Incidentally, the title was one of numerous changes to the poem made by the author for censorship considerations. The original title – *Decembrist Wives* (Dekabristki) – was restored in parentheses alongside the existing one only in 1931, in the sixth edition of Nekrasov's poems, edited by Kornei Chukovskii.<sup>5</sup> The changes in the title by Nekrasov and then by Soviet editors were ideologically motivated, reflecting the shifting perceptions and representations of the Decembrist wives from late Imperial to Soviet Russia.

*Russian Women* tells the story of two Decembrist wives – Princess Ekaterina Trubetskaia and Princess Maria Volkonskaia – who courageously follow their convicted husbands, the participants of the ill-fated revolt of December 14, 1825, into permanent Siberian exile.<sup>6</sup> By the order of Nicholas I, the wives who wished to be reunited with their husbands in Siberia stood to lose their noble rank, status, privileges, and were not allowed to bring their children with them.<sup>7</sup> In the first part of the poem, Nekrasov details the Siberian journey of Trubetskaia. Her bitter-sweet memories of her marriage to Prince Sergei Trubetskoi, their honeymoon in Europe, and her happy years spent in the dazzling Saint Petersburg palace of her parents where she danced with the Emperor himself are brought to a close by the sobering reality of the harsh and miserable existence of the toiling people whom she encounters along the way. Trubetskaia's journey becomes the journey of her political and civic awakening that leads her to condemn high society, denounce the 'kingdom of paupers and slaves' ('царство нищих и рабов'), and sympathize with the common people.<sup>8</sup> In Nekrasov's representation, her transformation from a carefree noblewoman into a politically conscious revolutionary woman, starkly reminiscent of the revolutionary women of the 1870s, reaches its apogee during her five-month long confrontation with the Governor of Siberia Ivan Tseidler

<sup>5</sup> S. A. Reiser, 'Nekrasov v rabote nad 'Russkimi zhenshchinami' ('Dekabristkami')', *Zvenia* 6 (1936), 730.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about the Decembrist revolt, see A. G. Mazour, *The First Russian Revolution 1825: The Decembrist Movement: Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1937).

<sup>7</sup> Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 109 (The Third Section of H. I. M. Chancellory), 1 eksp., 1826, d. 61 (About state criminals), ch. 4 (About prohibiting their children of noble origin, relatives and other persons to follow them to Siberia). 'Vnutrennie izvestiia', *Severnaia pchela*, 85 (17 July 1826). A part of the Emperor's July 13 1826 Manifesto was also published in the Saint Petersburg newspaper *Russkii invalid, ili Voennye vedomosti*, no. 170, 171 (17 July, 1826).

<sup>8</sup> N. A. Nekrasov, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*. Volume 3 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), 27.

who, on the orders of Nicholas I, unsuccessfully tries to convince Trubetskaia to return to Saint Petersburg. In her final conversation with Tseidler, Trubetskaia rationalizes her decision to go to Siberia in terms of the need to revive the revolutionary spirit of her exiled husband: 'Я гордость, гордость в нем спасу, / Я силы дам ему!' (His pride, his pride, I mean to save, And strength on him bestow').<sup>9</sup> In the Russian, uncensored, version of the poem, this quatrain continues to include three more lines, in which Trubetskaia's militancy and revolutionary spirit are manifested more strongly: 'Презренье к нашим палачам, / Сознание правоты / Опорой верной будет нам' ('Contempt for our hangmen, the realization of our rightness will support us').<sup>10</sup> Trubetskaia's complete acceptance of her husband's worldview leads to a gender role reversal, whereby the wife represents a morally and physically stronger figure capable of carrying on the ideas and aspirations of her husband, who is, by contrast, presented as morally crushed.<sup>11</sup> It is in this spiritual and ideological preeminence and unswerving support that the wife sees her highest obligation and sacred duty. Inspired by the people's suffering, accepting her husband's fate and embracing his political views, Nekrasov's Trubetskaia becomes the *Decembrist wife*, the *Dekabristka*.

The story of Maria Volkonskaia, which comprises the second part of *Russian Women*, is similarly the story of the young noblewoman's struggle and complex individual metamorphosis triggered by scenes of human suffering. Unlike Trubetskaia, however, Volkonskaia neither shares, nor fully accepts her husband's political views, despite her attempts to rationalize and justify his actions. Rather than identify with her husband, she assigns him to the category of martyrs, which dictates her subsequent mode of behaviour: she forgives her husband and calmly agrees to share his punishment in Siberia in the hope of alleviating his suffering in exile. In the poem, Volkonskaia's self-realization and self-representation un-

<sup>9</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3, 40. N. A. Nekrasov, 'Russian Women' in *Poems by Nicholas Nekrasov*, transl. Juliet M. Soskice (London, Oxford University Press, 1938), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3, 40.

<sup>11</sup> It is possible to assume that Nekrasov exploits the theme of a politically impotent and weak man attracting a spiritually strong, courageous, and strong-willed woman, capable of a heroic act. The theme of female superiority is recurrent in the novels of Nekrasov's contemporary Ivan Turgenev. For more information on female superiority in Russian prose, see, for example, Barbara Heldt, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987); Rosalind Marsh, *Gender in Russian Literature: New Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Nina Pelikan Straus, *Dostoevsky and the Woman Question: Re-readings at the End of the Century* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).

dergoes a long and painful inner struggle, in which the wife ultimately prevails over the daughter and the mother. A difficult choice of leaving behind her aging parents and her newborn son for the sake of alleviating the suffering of the husband becomes vindicated by the sanctity of marriage itself. The last scene of the poem, which portrays Volkonskaia's angel-like descent into the pitch-dark hell of a Siberian coal mine where she kneels in front of her husband and kisses his chains, is the culmination of Nekrasov's idealization and sanctification of this Decembrist wife:

И я подбежала... И душу мою  
 Наполнило чувство святое.  
 Я только теперь, в руднике роковом,  
 Услышав ужасные звуки,  
 Увидев оковы на муже моем,  
 Вполне поняла его муки.  
 Он много страдал, и умел он страдать!...  
 Невольно пред ним я склонила  
 Колени – и, прежде чем мужа обнять,  
 Оковы к губам приложила!...  
 И тихого ангела бог ниспослал  
 В подземные копи – в мгновенье  
 И говор, и грохот работ замолчал,  
 И замерло словно движенье.<sup>12</sup>

(I hastened towards him, my soul as I went / Was stirred by the holiest feeling. / And now, only now in this underground Hell / Where deafening clamor persisted, / And seeing his chains did I visage full well / The torments in which he existed, / His strength and his patience, enduring these pains / In which his destroyers had placed him, / I fell on my knees to him. Lifting his chains / I kissed them before I embraced him. / Then God sent the angel of peace underground, / And, as in our midst he came flying, / The voices he silenced, the work's mighty sound, / All action, as though it were dying.<sup>13</sup>)

<sup>12</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3, 84–5.

<sup>13</sup> Soskice, *Poems of Nekrasov*, 82. A scholarly analysis of Nekrasov's poems can be found in Kornei Chukovskii, *Masterstvo Nekrasova* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'svto khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1952), V. Evgen'ev-Maksimov, *Nekrasov kak chelovek, zhurnal'ist i poet* (Moscow, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1928).

Nekrasov's Volkonskaia emerges as a guardian angel who descends into the Siberian mines to alleviate the suffering of her husband and rises above the Decembrists' misery as an unmistakably saintly figure.<sup>14</sup>

The duality of Nekrasov's representation of the Decembrist wives as angels and revolutionaries reflects the ambiguity of Nekrasov's essence (or, perhaps, self-identification) as a poet. He vacillates between being the Aristotelian poet on the one hand, i.e. a poet who understands his readers' aspirations and expectations and appeals to their emotions through his skillfully constructed characters, and the Aristotelian historian on the other hand, i.e. a writer who bows to historical accuracy and the historical detail. Nekrasov's Trubetskaia is largely the product of his imagination and a reflection of his own, revolutionary, worldview. Following the most significant and well-known facts of Trubetskaia's biography – the magnificence and popularity of her parents' salon, her trip to Europe, and her long and stubborn confrontation with Tseidler – Nekrasov creates his own image of the Decembrist wife, which bears very little resemblance to the real historical persona.<sup>15</sup> Indifferent to the lack of historical accuracy in his representation of Trubetskaia, the poet boldly endows her with civic aspirations reminiscent of the aspirations of revolutionary women of the 1870s.<sup>16</sup>

Nekrasov's portrayal of Trubetskaia's political awakening was consistent with his general preoccupation with social ills, particularly the plight of the Russian peasant, in his poetry. With the blessing of Belinskii, Nekrasov had since the 1840s exploited civic themes in his poems. His poems of 'vengeance and suffering', written in a simple, colloquial style with easy-to-remember rhymes, made him one of the most prominent national poets of the second half of the nineteenth century. As Konstantine Klioutchkine accurately observed in his study of Nekrasov's controversial legacy, from the late nineteenth century onwards

<sup>14</sup> Soskice, *Poems of Nekrasov*, 82. Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3, 85.

<sup>15</sup> The story of Trubetskaia's life can be gleaned from primary and secondary sources. See, for instance, GARF, f. 1143, op. 1, d. 99. From 'The notes for correcting a few inaccuracies in the recollections of Nikolai Andreevich Belogolovyi' written by E. S. Rakhmanova in 1896; f. 1143, op. 2, d. 1 (Trubetskoi's letters to his wife Ekaterina Trubetskaia); f. 1143, op. 2, d. 5 (E. Trubetskaia's letters); f. 1143, op. 2, d. 103 (Sergei Trubetskoi's letters to his wife Ekaterina); V. I. Pokrovskii, *Zheny dekabristov: sbornik bytovykh statei* (Moscow: Tipografia G. Lissnera i D. Sobko, 1906); K. Bestuzhev, *Zheny dekabristov* (Moscow: Tipografia t-go doma M. V. Baldin i Ko, 1913); A. Ia. Iatsevich, *Pushkinskii Peterburg* (Leningrad: Pushkinskoe obshchestvo, 1935).

<sup>16</sup> See the memoirs of Russian women-revolutionaries in Barbara Engel, Clifford N. Rosenthal, eds. and transl., *Five Sisters: Women against the Tsar* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

Nekrasov remained a poet whose works were memorized, recited, and cited by generations of the intelligentsia.<sup>17</sup> Hailed as a civic hero for his concern for the Russian peasant by non-gentry (*raznochinets*) radical Russian writers and revolutionary democrats such as Dobroliubov and Pisarev, Nekrasov was ultimately avoided and rejected for his apparent democratic and revolutionary sentiments by the nobleman Turgenev.<sup>18</sup> That Nekrasov turned his attention to the Decembrist wives and cast Princess Trubetskaia in a political light as a model for women-populists appeared logical, given the 'civic' bent of his previous poems. Seemingly illogical and surprising was the almost complete lack of revolutionary rhetoric in his depiction of Maria Volkonskaia in the second part of *Russian Women*.

In contrast to Nekrasov's ostensibly politicized image of Trubetskaia, his depiction of Volkonskaia strikingly resembled her representation of herself in her memoir, published in 1904.<sup>19</sup> While working on the second part of *Russian Women*, 'Princess M. N. Volkonskaia', Nekrasov learned of the existence of Volkonskaia's memoir and succeeded in convincing her son Mikhail to read him the manuscript, written in French.<sup>20</sup>

The existence of Volkonskaia's memoir both facilitated and hindered Nekrasov's creative work on the poem. On the one hand, the memoir provided the poet with an authentic plot, embellished with details of Volkonskaia's personal life he had no need to invent. On the other hand, the existence of the memoir presented a serious challenge to the yet-to-be-written poem: once published, Volkonskaia's memoir could undoubtedly reveal the poem's possible historical inaccuracies, undermine its potential success, and earn the condemnation of future readers rather than their praise.<sup>21</sup> In order to ensure the poem's success, Nekrasov chose to adhere meticulously to the factual truth in his depiction of Volkonskaia. In other

<sup>17</sup> Konstantine Klioutchkine, 'Between Sacrifice and Indulgence: Nikolai Nekrasov as a Model for Intelligentsia', *Slavic Review* 66, no. 1 (Spring, 2007), 45.

<sup>18</sup> Leonard Schapiro, *Turgenev: His Life and Times* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 157; S. A. Andreevskii, *Literaturnye ocherki* (St. Petersburg: Tip. T-va A. S. Suvorina, 1913), 138–9.

<sup>19</sup> M. S. Volkonskii, ed., *Zapiski kniagini Marii Nikolaevny Volkonskoi* (Saint Petersburg: Ekspeditsiia zagotovleniia gos. bumag, 1904).

<sup>20</sup> *Zapiski kniagini Marii Nikolaevny Volkonskoi* (Saint Petersburg: Tipografiia A. Benke, 1906), xv, xvii.

<sup>21</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 8, 354–5.

words, in the second part of *Russian Women*, the historian in Nekrasov arguably prevailed over the poet.

Motivated by his strong desire to escape the likely reproach of future generations and to secure the poem's lasting success, Nekrasov made artistic choices – his intentional politicization of Trubetskaia and his no less intentional sacralization of Volkonskaia – that resulted in his unique creation of the image of the Decembrist wives, which embraced two seemingly incongruous concepts: revolution and religion. Ironically, this dual representation of the Decembrist wives turned out to be the key to the poem's immediate and lasting success. At the same time, however, his desire to publish the poem as soon as it was completed led Nekrasov, in an attempt to anticipate the objections of the censor, to edit the text several times, re-phrasing and leaving out certain parts of his composition.<sup>22</sup> In his final version, Nekrasov significantly toned down the overtly anti-monarchical theme of 'Princess T[rubetskaia]' and excluded several intimate details from 'Princess M. N. Volkonskaia' at the insistent request of her grandson Mikhail.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Nekrasov's editing, his representation of Trubetskaia remained starkly politicized. It is not surprising, therefore, that such a depiction of the Decembrist wife struck a responsive chord among the representatives of the revolutionary movement of the 1870s–1880s, many of whom could relate to the Decembrist wives' sacrifice and resolve to share the fate of political exiles. The revolutionaries of the 1870s and 1880s perceived Nekrasov's poem as an inspirational call for action, a hymn of revolutionary and populist movements, which allegedly granted women of different social background equal status with men in all walks of life: political, social, economic, and intellectual. In this rationalization, the political and social transformation of Nekrasov's heroines from carefree noblewomen, oblivious to the suffering of the people, social inequality, and injustice, and unaccustomed to think for themselves, into politically-conscious and independent women, cognizant of their indebtedness to the toiling masses, capable of standing up for themselves and their husbands and eager to change the old patriarchal social order and take control over their own lives, presented a brilliant and compelling model for the revolutionary youth of

<sup>22</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 8, 351; 364.

<sup>23</sup> V. E. Vatsuro et al., eds., *Perepiska N. A. Nekrasova v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1987), vol. 2, 188–191.



Nekrasov's generation.<sup>24</sup> Lev Deich, for instance, an active participant in the revolutionary movement in the 1870s and 1880s and a member of the populist organization the Black Repartition, gave Nekrasov credit for addressing the topic of the day, the woman's question, in his poetry. In Deich's view, Nekrasov's Decembrist wives came to exemplify a new type of Russian woman – politically conscious, socially active, capable of creating her own life, and sacrificing her private life and family for a higher cause – in other words, a woman who was in no respect inferior to any man:

The present generation is, in particular, greatly obliged to Nekrasov; his muse contributed greatly to the development of the movement, because of which our women almost measured up to men intellectually and politically.<sup>25</sup>

To Deich, as to other revolutionaries, the significance and worth of the poem lay not only in its marvellous representation of the woman's suffering, but also in the solution it offered to woman's miserable situation: taking charge of her own life and devoting it to a revolutionary cause.

To revolutionaries, the poetic and artistic quality of Nekrasov's work, the poet's occasional awkward and inappropriate choice of vocabulary, coarse rhymes, and historical inaccuracies, were secondary to what they understood as an inspiring revolutionary message. When questioned by Vsevolod Garshin, Lev Deich, defending the artistic qualities of Nekrasov's poem, insisted that a literary work which made such a strong impact on the audience, moved it, and evoked the purest and the noblest of feelings and aspirations, had to be a true work of art.<sup>26</sup> Nekrasov's contemporary, Anna Stepanova-Borodina, also deemed Nekrasov 'a true poet', whose poetic message resonated in her heart.<sup>27</sup> In her memoirs, Borodina recalled a conversation with Nekrasov, who, in response to harsh criticism of *Russian Women* in the press, admitted that he might have been unsuccessful in his treatment of such a wonderful plot or failed to express

<sup>24</sup> 'Vospominaniia A. G. Stepanovoi-Borodinoi', *Literaturnoe nasledstvo: N. A. Nekrasov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1949), book I, vol. 49–50, 579–588; L. Deich, 'N. A. Nekrasov i semidesiatniki', *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 3 (1921); Vera Figner, 'Zheny dekabristov', *Katorga i ssylka*, 8, no. 21 (1925), 227–237.

<sup>25</sup> Lev Deich, 'Nekrasov i zhenskii vopros' *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, no. 3 (March 1921), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Deich, 15. See also E. Bazilevskii, 'Stikhotvorenie Garshina na smert' Nekrasova. Iz zapisnoi knizhki V. M. Garshina' in P. I. Lebedev-Polianskii, ed., *Literaturnoe nasledstvo: N. A. Nekrasov*, book I, vol. 49–50, 635.

<sup>27</sup> Lebedev-Polianskii, *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 588.

everything that he had wanted to convey. Borodina objected to what she thought was an unfair and false statement and recited the scene describing Volkonskaia's meeting with her husband in the mines, concluding, with tears in her eyes, that only a true poet could produce such remarkable lines. Such an emotional reaction to his poem reassured Nekrasov that, as long as his poems 'evoked such feelings, they would be true poetry'.<sup>28</sup> Russian populists and revolutionaries of the 1870s and 1880s, while hailing Nekrasov as their inspirational leader, an advocate of social causes, and as a proponent of the emancipation of women, were also mesmerized by the beauty of the spiritual imagery in the poem and were not ashamed to admit the emotional impact of Nekrasov's poetic representation of the Decembrist wives generally downplayed by his readers among the aristocracy.

Not all Nekrasov's contemporaries applauded his politicization of the Decembrist wives. A number of prominent contemporary literary critics and writers, such as Viktor Burenin, Vasilii Avseenko, and Fedor Dostoevskii resisted his recasting of the image of the Decembrist wives in political terms, the extension of the motives for their journey to Siberia beyond the private realm, and the view of their exploits as civic rather than self-sacrificial in nature. Challenging the social identity imposed on the Decembrist women by the poet, but having no valid source to prove Nekrasov wrong, Burenin resorted to questioning the author's artistic skill in creating a coherent narrative, a psychologically consistent plot, and well-developed characters.<sup>29</sup> Men of letters rationalized Nekrasov's explicit ascription of civic sentiments to Trubetskaia and Volkonskaia in terms of the outdated mode of Nekrasov's poetry, with its awkward attempts to imitate the 'civic' (*grazhdanskii*) genre of Russian poetry, which addressed relevant socio-political issues and injustices of the era. Avseenko argued that civic writing, characteristic of Ryleev's poetry of the early nineteenth century, had lost its resonance with the audience in the 1870s: 'Civic motifs, which have inspired the hearts of the fans of this most Petersburgian of all Petersburg poets, have faded and do not impress any

<sup>28</sup> Lebedev-Polianskii, *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 588.

<sup>29</sup> See the review of Nekrasov's *Russian Women* by Z. (Viktor Burenin), *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* 73 (1873), 132–141.

longer'.<sup>30</sup> From this point of view, Nekrasov's civic sentiment appeared nothing more than what Burenin called 'insincere, hackneyed "bad buffoonery"'.<sup>31</sup>

The poet's lack of literary inspiration, his conformity to the accepted artistic and social norms, and his lack of sincerity in the depiction of the Decembrist women have been perceived by critics as the inevitable outcome of Nekrasov's opportunistic pursuit of easy fame: the poet had taken advantage of a popular contemporary topic, which guaranteed him instant recognition. Again the chorus of negatively-disposed critics was joined by Dostoevskii, who had been personally acquainted with two of the Decembrist women (Natalia Fonvizina and Praskov'ia Annenkova) and had maintained correspondence with them long after his return from his own political exile in Siberia.<sup>32</sup> Dostoevskii, who admired Nekrasov's poetic talent and even referred to Nekrasov as 'the poet of the people's suffering', was also deeply disappointed by *Russian Women*, which, to him, seemed to have been written in too much of a rush to be of high literary value and manifested Nekrasov's decline towards 'literary consumption and death'.<sup>33</sup> Siding with other critics, Dostoevskii accused the poet of uniformity and banality of ideas and style, which were held to be cliché-ridden.<sup>34</sup> For Dostoevskii, this triteness stemmed from the poet's exploitation of a convenient contemporary theme certain to bring Nekrasov success.

Nekrasov's interest in the Decembrist theme reflected a general contemporary journalistic trend of re-creating, within permissible censorship constraints, events and characters of the Nicholaevan past, in particular, the Decembrist uprising and the Decembrists' life in exile.<sup>35</sup> In the atmosphere of Alexander II's Great

<sup>30</sup> See a review of Nekrasov's *Russian Women* by A. O. (Viktor Avseenko), *Russkii mir* 46 (1873), reprinted in Vasilii Zelinskii, *Sbornik kriticheskikh statei o N. A. Nekrasove* (Moscow: T-vo Tipolitografii I. M. Mashistova, 1902), vol. 2, 148.

<sup>31</sup> See a review of Nekrasov's *Russian Women* by Z. (Viktor Burenin), *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* 73 (1873), re-printed in Zelinskii, *Sbornik statei*, vol. 2, 133–4.

<sup>32</sup> Having spent several years in Siberian exile in connection with the Petrashevskii circle, Fedor Dostoevskii warmly remembered his meeting with the Decembrist wife Natalia Fonvizina, who presented him with a copy of the Bible he kept for the rest of his life. See Dostoevskii's letter to Natalia Fonvizina of January–February, 1854. F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh* (PSS), vol. 28, book 1 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1985), 175–7.

<sup>33</sup> Dostoevskii, PSS, vol. 21, 73; vol. 26, 118.

<sup>34</sup> Dostoevskii, PSS, vol. 21, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Gornfeld, Evgen'ev-Maksimov, Chukovskii, and Gruzdev unanimously noted the poet's turn to historical themes, in particular, to the Decembrist theme in the late 1860s–early 1870s. In the view of Soviet scholars, the poems *Grandfather* and *Russian Women* constituted the so-called Decembrist cycle of Nekrasov's oeuvre and reflected the poet's intent to represent 'contemporary revolutionary

Reforms (starting with liberation of the serfs in 1861), which endowed with a radically new meaning the liberal ideas propagated by the Decembrists in the early 1820s, the lives and political aspirations of the Decembrists, and, by extension, the self-sacrificial heroism of the wives who voluntarily shared their fate, became an attractive historical and popular topic. Nekrasov's poem *Russian Women* was, and remains, the only poetic monument to the Decembrist wives written after the Decembrists' return from Siberia. Besides Nekrasov's *Russian Women*, there are only three nineteenth-century poems dedicated to the Decembrist wives: Evgenii Obolenskii's poems 'M. N. Volkonskoi' (1829) and 'Po doroge stolbovoi' (1831), devoted to the Decembrist wives Maria Volkonskaia and Pauline Annenkova respectively, and Aleksandr Naidenov, 'Primit v znak vospominaniiia' (1828), devoted to Natal'ia Fonvizina, which remains unpublished.<sup>36</sup> Nekrasov's successful career as a journalist and editor, his pragmatism and often unprincipled behaviour when it came to publishing new material, his connections in the world of letters, his familiarity with the most heated contemporary literary discussions and popular topics of interest, allow us to suggest that there was a grain of truth in the critics' claims. Nekrasov was notorious for his unscrupulous editorial choice of potentially profitable topics and did not shy away from intentional 'bribery' of the censorship in the form of reviews favourable to the government.<sup>37</sup> From this point of view, the poet's exploitation of the popular Decembrist theme is hardly surprising, and the emphasis of contemporary critics on Nekrasov's pursuit of fame rings true. Moreover, Nekrasov's final version of *Russian Women* differed drastically from its original draft, reflecting the author's anticipatory implementation of strict self-censorship prior to submitting the poem for editorial review. Nekrasov consciously and deliberately edited and even completely eliminated passages and verses, which, in his own opinion, appeared too radical, too extreme, and too revolutionary to be accepted by the Imperial censorship. When

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fighters' and 'contemporary revolutionary reality' through the prism of the historical past in the conditions of strict censorship. See, for instance, V. E. Evgen'ev-Maksimov, *Tvorcheskii put' N. A. Nekrasova* (Moscow, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1953), 199–200; N. V. Os'makov, 'Poema Nekrasova o dekabriste', *Nekrasovskii sbornik*, book II (Moscow, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk, 1956), 210; A. I. Gruzdev, *Dekabristskii tsikl poem N. A. Nekrasova: kurs lektsii* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo instituta, 1976), 7; 12.

<sup>36</sup> OR RGB, f. 319, k. 5, d. 19 (Aleksandr Naidenov, 'Primit v znak vospominaniiia', February 9, 1828, Tobolsk).

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of Nekrasov's career in journalism, see B. V. Mel'gunov, *Nekrasov-zhurnalists: maloizuchennnye aspekty problem* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1989).

he finally sent the poem to the co-editor of *Notes of the Fatherland*, Aleksandr Kraevskii, Nekrasov admitted that he had brutally butchered his poem to ensure its publication.<sup>38</sup>

The lack of historical veracity in the poet's representation of the Decembrist wives was one of the most frequent criticisms leveled against *Russian Women* in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Decembrist wives and their sacrifice returned to the forefront of public debate. In his 1873 letter to Nekrasov from Wiesbaden, Pavel Annenkov pointed out the poet's misrepresentation of the Decembrist wives, and in particular, of the motive that inspired these women to go to Siberia.<sup>39</sup> In Annenkov's view, the women's aristocratic origins were the driving force that compelled Trubetskaia and Volkonskaia to perform this heroic deed. Like any member of the nobility, Annenkov's argument suggests, both Decembrist women took pride in their names and their long and illustrious lineage. They perceived themselves as representing the cream of society, as being part of 'a higher human breed'.<sup>40</sup> Belonging to the nobility implied, first and foremost, a higher sense of duty and an aspiration to set an example for others. *Noblesse oblige*, an unwritten code of noble conduct, constituted a central part of the aristocratic character and called for moral excellence, benevolence, and a kind of ethical and intellectual superiority. Catherine the Great summarized the essence of nobility in her 1785 Charter to the Nobility: 'Дворянское название есть следствие, исключающее от качества и добродетели начальствовавших в древности мужей, отличивших себя заслугами, чем обращая самую службу в достоинство, прибрели потомству своему нарицание благородное.' (Noble rank has its origins in the quality and virtue of those who ruled in ancient times, and who had distinguished themselves by their merits and, turning the service itself into virtue, acquired noble rank for their descendants).<sup>41</sup> For noblewomen like Trubetskaia and Volkonskaia, following their husbands to Siberia implied more than escaping the pain of separation from the men they loved and more than

<sup>38</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 8, 351; 364.

<sup>39</sup> *Ogonek*, no. 51 (1927), 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ogonek*, no. 51 (1927), 9.

<sup>41</sup> 'Zhalovannaia gramota dvorianstvu', *Polnoe sobranie Rossiiskikh zakonov: 1649–1825* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia II Otdeleniia Sobstvennoi E. I. V. Kantseliarii, 1830), vol. XXII, no. 16187, 214–7.

responding to the call of blind passion, as Nekrasov's depiction of Volkonskaia might have suggested:

Здесь ждёт меня страшная мука.  
 Да, если останусь, послушная вам,  
 Меня истерзает разлука.  
 Не зная покоя ни ночью, ни днём,  
 Рыдая над бедным сироткой,  
 Всё буду я думать о муже моём  
 Да слышать упрёк его кроткий.

(Terrible torture awaits me here. Yes, if I stay, obeying you, separation will torment me. Knowing no rest night and day, weeping over the poor orphan, I will be thinking about my husband and will keep hearing his meek reproach.<sup>42</sup>)

Sharing their husbands' fate, alleviating their suffering, and standing by their side when the entire world turned its back on them was, for the Decembrist wives, a matter of preserving their own noble dignity and carrying out a wife's sacred duty. 'For our great women of 1825, exile was an apotheosis', insisted Annenkov.<sup>43</sup> In this interpretation, class, as much as religion, came to the foreground of the image and mentality of the Decembrist wives: exile was a symbol of their sacrifice, a means of glorifying their unfortunate menfolk, elevating them to the rank of saints, if not of God himself. By kneeling before their husbands both metaphorically and literally, by acknowledging the men's spiritual superiority despite their fall from their position of privilege and prominence, by giving up all material worldly possessions and cutting ties with everything that constituted their former life, the Decembrist women earned for themselves a martyr's crown.

A harsher criticism of Nekrasov's embellishment of historical truth in his representation of the Decembrist wives came from the French diplomat and traveler Melchior de Vogüé, who questioned the plausibility of the scene in which Volkonskaia descended into the Nerchinsk mine to see her husband. In de Vogüé's opinion, the impossibility of this occurrence derived not from the harsh security regulations in the mines, but from the Decembrist women's unwillingness to pay such a visit:

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<sup>42</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3, 59.

<sup>43</sup> *Ogonek*, no. 51 (1927), 9.

Their wives could not have met them [the Decembrists] in the underground mine for a very simple reason: they [the wives] themselves never descended there. On the banks of the Lena-river, these ladies found again the splendour of elegant life and social pleasures, to which they were accustomed.<sup>44</sup>

From the perspective of the French aristocrat, a noblewoman who had been raised in high society would never compromise her dignity and honour by descending into a mine and coming into direct contact with the criminal elements from the lower classes, even if her husband was now regarded as one of them. De Vogüé correctly suggested that the noble code of behaviour encompassed not only virtue, but also display. Not all the Decembrist wives lived in deprivation, let alone squalour, in Siberia. As the memoir of Maria Volkonskaia demonstrated, the Decembrist wives made efforts to preserve their aristocratic lifestyle and behaviour in exile. In fact, as de Vogüé noted, the poet here departed from the factual truth for the sake of a stronger dramatic effect: Princess Volkonskaia met her husband in prison, not in the mine, as Nekrasov's poem states.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, such an interpretation creates a different image of the Decembrist wives that shifts the stress from their self-sacrificing love and devotion to the centrality of their aristocratic origin and upbringing that underscores and feeds their egocentric desire to reconstruct the atmosphere and setting of Petersburg salons in their Siberian exile. What Nekrasov and the Decembrists see as a feat of moral courage, spiritual beauty, and an almost unwomanly resolve becomes, in de Vogüé's depiction, a melodramatic, romantic-novel-style adventure in an exotic Siberian setting.

Unsurprisingly, de Vogüé's deliberate or unintentional attempt to demythologize the Decembrist women did not pass unnoticed. Maria Volkonskaia's son Mikhail considered it a matter of honour to point out the extent of de Vogüé's historical fallacies and misconceptions: 'First and foremost, there is no fiction in Nekrasov's poem, which can be proved by the very *Notes* of Maria Volkonskaia. It is also proved by numerous memoirs by the Decembrists (Rozen, Trubetskoi, Iakushkin, Basargin, Obolenskii, Gorbachevskii, and others).'<sup>46</sup> That Volkonskaia's son found it necessary to cite and refute de Vogüé's assertion suggests that at least some of their relations colluded in fostering the myth of the Decembrist

<sup>44</sup> Melchior de Vogüé, 'La poésie socialiste en Russie. N. A. Nékrassof'. In Vte E. Melchior de Vogüé, *Regards historiques et littéraires* (Paris: Armand Colin et Cie, Editeurs, 1892), 282–3.

<sup>45</sup> Vatsuro, *Perepiska Nekrasova*, vol. 2, 193.

<sup>46</sup> Volkonskaia, *Zapiski*, xix–xxi.

women. Volkonskii's pronounced emphasis on his mother's dedication of her memoir to him and his sister can also be viewed as an affirmation of emotional ownership of her work, which seems to lend validity to his polemic with de Vogüé.

Accusations regarding the historical inaccuracy of *Russian Women* often stemmed from the lack of information available to the general public. In particular, the scene depicting Trubetskaia's conversation with the Governor of Irkutsk, who exercised all his eloquence, charm, power, and intimidation to stop the Princess and make her return to European Russia, gave rise to doubts about the likelihood of such cruel treatment of a noblewoman by a government official. The publicist and literary critic, Vasilii Avseenko, questioned the existence of a document signed by Trubetskaia and Volkonskaia in Irkutsk in which they renounced their noble rank, status, and concomitant legal rights and privileges and pledged to abide by new regulations in accordance with their new status as the 'wives of state criminals'.<sup>47</sup> The same critic also called into question Nekrasov's negative portrayal of a silver train convoy officer, whom Volkonskaia encountered in Siberia on her way to the Nerchinsk mines.<sup>48</sup> To Avseenko, the poet's representation of the convoy officer as rude, heartless, and insensible to the Decembrist woman's plight was typical of radical Russian publicism of the time, constrained as it was by conventional stereotypes, prejudices, and standardized understanding of social relations and social rules: 'An escort officer in contemporary belles-lettres must necessarily be represented as a *monster*'.<sup>49</sup> The critic's hardest blow, however, was aimed at Nekrasov's alleged lack of creativity and artistry which, to him, symbolized nothing less than the decline of Russian literature and art: 'In our spiritual realm, creativity has disappeared; and we live on tendencies. But tendentiousness cannot replace literature, just as craft cannot replace art. Tendentiousness will always remain a yoke for spiritual activity and we have seen how ominously this yoke has subjugated writers who display any traces of talent'.<sup>50</sup>

Harshly criticized by writers and critics, the poem also failed to meet the universal approval of the Decembrists and their families, whose representations of their womenfolk differed starkly from that provided by Nekrasov. Maria Volkon-

<sup>47</sup> V. G. Avseenko, 'Poeziia zhurnal'nykh motivov', *Russkii vestnik*, no. 6 (June 1873), 913–917.

<sup>48</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Avseenko, 'Poeziia motivov', 917.

<sup>50</sup> Avseenko, 'Poeziia motivov', 917–8.



skaia's sister, Sofiia Raevskaia, wrote and almost published a scathing critique of Nekrasov's representation of her sister in the journal *Voices*, which was much less politically-oriented than Nekrasov's *Notes of the Fatherland*. Nikolai Orlov, Sofiia's nephew, barely managed to talk her out of submitting the article for publication.<sup>51</sup> Possibly, Raevskaia's ultimate decision not to publish her article was influenced by her (and her family's) reluctance to engage in an unedifying public dispute with Nekrasov about their private matters, when the only source that could prove the correctness of her arguments – Maria Volkonskaia's memoir – was still unpublished. Although historians and literary scholars have been unable to locate the article, one can discern Raevskaia's critical attitude to Nekrasov's depiction of her sister from her letter to Volkonskaia's daughter, Elena Rakhmanova:

Nekrasov's poem, so strongly criticized by men of letters, is, in my opinion, an ignoble work. The story put into the mouth of my sister would be suitable for a peasant woman: it has no nobleness, no dignity, and no knowledge of the role he makes her play. Compare this poem with the work by Khmyrov, *Countess Golovkina*, and you will see the difference. That is how one should treat a plot when it deals with a person who is admired and respected.<sup>52</sup>

Raevskaia deplored the lack of aristocratism in the poet's depiction of Princess Volkonskaia, the character's crudeness and vulgarity so out of place in the portrait of a model noblewoman.

Raevskaia's criticism struck at the core of the problem that Nekrasov faced in his depiction of the Decembrist women. The incongruity between the poem's elevated subject matter and its low poetic style was, indeed, striking, to say the least. Born into an impoverished gentry family, one of fourteen children and forced to earn his living from an early age, Nekrasov was not directly familiar with either the aristocratic way of life or aristocratic discourse.<sup>53</sup> The language

<sup>51</sup> S. A. Reiser, 'Nekrasov v rabote nad *Russkimi zhenshchinami*', *Zven'ia* 6 (1936), 708.

<sup>52</sup> S. M. Volkonskii, B. L. Modzalevskii, eds., *Arkhiv dekabrista S. G. Volkonskogo* (Petersburg: 1918), vol. 1, xv. In her letter, Sofia Raevskaia refers to Mikhail Khmyrov's book on Countess Ekaterina Ivanovna Golovkina (née Romodanovskaia) who followed into exile her husband, Count Mikhail Golovkin, arrested and convicted in 1741, during the reign of Elizaveta Petrovna. For more information about Ekaterina Golovkina, see M. D. Khmyrov, *Grafinia Ekaterina Ivanovna Golovkina i ee vremia, 1701–1791 goda: istoricheskii ocherk po arkhivnym dokumentam* (Saint Petersburg: Izdanie knigoprodavtsa S. V. Zvonareva, 1867).

<sup>53</sup> V. E. Evgen'ev-Maksimov, *Nekrasov kak chelovek, zhurnal'ist i poet* (Moscow, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1928).

of the Decembrist women in his poem was Nekrasov's own vernacular, the prosaic language of the masses, the low style, not the polite lofty language of the aristocracy. The coarseness of the language describing the two noble women reflects the social gap that separated Nekrasov's world from that of the women he was glorifying.

The first, unedited, version of the poem is full of vulgarities which clearly illustrate the poet's inability to create an authentic image of a Decembrist noblewoman. For instance, in the original draft of *Princess Trubetskaia*, the princess refers to other women of her class as *dury*, for whom the only imaginable happiness in life was a sign of the Emperor's favour at a ball: 'Мазурку танцевать с царем есть счастье этих дур' ('To dance a mazurka with the tsar is these idiots' happiness').<sup>54</sup> In the second part of the original draft, Maria crudely admits her own feeble-mindedness: 'Совсем не умею я думать! Отец ошибся – я дура большая' ('I cannot think at all! Father is mistaken – I am a total idiot').<sup>55</sup> Even Volkonskaia's father, the famous general Nikolai Raevskii, a hero of the Patriotic War of 1812 and an aristocrat to the backbone, sounds more like a commoner than a noble in Nekrasov's representation: 'You do not know yourself what you are babbling about! Can your head think? Do you consider us, both your mother and your father, to be your enemies? Or are they stupid?'<sup>56</sup> Yet another vulgarity in the poem refers to the head of the Nerchinsk prison, who had no knowledge of French, and thus could not understand the Emperor's permission for Princess Volkonskaia to follow her husband, written in French: 'He did not know French, stubborn fool'.<sup>57</sup> These and many other instances of the poet's linguistic blunders reveal Nekrasov's inability to think in, and use, the language of the nobility, which would have come naturally to writers of aristocratic origin, like Tolstoy or Turgenev.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, however, Nekrasov's unintentional vulgarization and 'popularization' of the Decembrist wives' language made his heroines closer,

<sup>54</sup> N. A. Nekrasov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem (PSSP)* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1949), vol. 3, 430.

<sup>55</sup> Nekrasov, *PSSP*, vol. 3: 437.

<sup>56</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3: 57.

<sup>57</sup> In the published version, Nekrasov changed «дурак» (fool) into «чудак» (oddball). Compare Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3: 79.

<sup>58</sup> Compare the use of aristocratic language by Lev Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev in their novels, L. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 91 tt.* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1928–1964); I. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v 12 tomakh* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1961–1966). Also compare Volkonskaia's language in the poem with her own

if only linguistically, to the Russian reading public at large, evoking genuine popular sympathy and empathy for the ordeal of these aristocratic women and contributed to the poem's immediate success.<sup>59</sup>

The vulgarity of the poem's language made it more understandable to the general public. Not only the speech but also the mores of these fine ladies are described in the coarse and unadorned language of a social outsider rather than that of someone at home in this world. For instance, in his description of Volkonskaia's allegedly superficial upbringing and fashionable education, the poet relies heavily on the conventional tropes of a high-society upbringing: knowledge of foreign languages, dancing at balls, small talk, music, and horse-riding: 'I've studied a lot; I read in three languages. I was to be seen in the *grand salon*, at *society* balls, skillfully dancing, playing; I could talk about almost everything; I knew music; I sang; I even excelled in riding, but I could not think at all'.<sup>60</sup> A closer look at this passage, however, might suggest that the adjectives in the phrases *grand salon* (парадная гостиная) and *society* balls (светские балы) are redundant in the speech of an aristocratic lady, for whom a ball is, by definition, a 'society ball', and whose appearance in the *grand salon* (as opposed to less grand public rooms) is so common as to be unremarkable. Such nuances, so easily missed by the non-aristocratic reader, reflect and further stress the social distance between the poet and the society he seeks to portray. At the same time, however, this unsophisticated and unrefined description of the noble lifestyle proved more comprehensible to, and thus more popular with, the non-aristocratic public.

Nekrasov's linguistic misrepresentation of the Decembrist wives artistically distanced them from their own social milieu and brought them closer to their social inferiors. In the published version, Nekrasov decided to exclude all vulgarisms, but preserved the gap between the Decembrist wives and the noble society they had left behind. In the poem, Volkonskaia emphatically sympathizes with the *narod*, the common Russian people, in whose hardships she recognizes her own:

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language in 'Pis'ma M. N. Volkonskoi and A. G. Murav'evoi V. A. Murav'evoi', *Rossiiskii arkhiv* XI (2001), 41–59.

<sup>59</sup> *Arkhiv sela Karabikh: Pis'ma N. A. Nekrasova i k Nekrasovu* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo K. F. Nekrasova, 1916), 12.

<sup>60</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3: 58. The italics are mine – AB.

I want to say thank you, Russian people! On the road, in exile, wherever I have been during this difficult time of exile, – people! With you, I have carried my back-breaking burden more vigorously. Many sorrows may have fallen to your lot; you share the sadness of others. Wherever my tears are about to drop, your tears have already fallen long ago!<sup>61</sup>

Removed from a political context, deprived of the implied or ascribed populist connotations of Nekrasov's representation of the Decembrist wives, the princess's expression of gratitude to the Russian people can be perceived as a humanitarian message affirming the universal nature of human suffering that knows no boundaries of class, age, sex, religion, race or any other potentially dividing social categories. This has been remarked upon by several critics, among whom the first to applaud Nekrasov's lyrical convergence of the classes was Petr Kapnist. To Kapnist, Volkonskaia's tribute to the patience, generosity, and heroic humility of the Russian people manifested the reconciliation of the classes through the love and mercy of God:

A wonderful thing! [What] Elevated poetry and [what] a lofty deed of a contemporary Russian poet! In the present time of our woeful internecine discord, you found noble reconciliation, having represented how great sorrow evokes a great feeling, typical of the Russian soul and muffled by trivial rules of society, and how, in this grief and in this feeling, upper and lower social classes merge in their endless and divine love.<sup>62</sup>

In other words, according to Kapnist, *Russian Women* appeals directly to the hearts of the reader regardless of his or her social status. And if a poem could evoke in the reader such genuine feelings of compassion for another's misfortune, if the poet's vivid lyrical descriptions of someone's misery brought tears of empathy to the reader's eye, then the poet had succeeded in bringing together the various elements in Russian society by establishing an emotional link between them – whatever the degree of historical truth in the poem itself.

The publication of Princess Volkonskaia's memoir in 1904 triggered renewed interest in and a critical reevaluation of Nekrasov's poem, and in particular of its second part, which is devoted to Volkonskaia. The memoir appeared at a unique

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<sup>61</sup> Nekrasov, *SS*, vol. 3: 30.

<sup>62</sup> Letter of January 26, 1873. *Literaturnoe nasledstvo: N. A. Nekrasov* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1949), book II, vol. 51–52, 310.

time of spiritual awakening and reviving interest in the memoir literature of the past generations, as well as of the efflorescence of Russian prose and art against a background of political and social upheaval.<sup>63</sup> While the Decembrist families, some of their friends and a few men of letters had known of the existence of Volkonskaia's memoir long before its publication, it is likely that the appearance of this memoir in print came as a bombshell. Many critics turned to Volkonskaia's memoir as a unique and precious source of information, in order to identify and publicly correct alleged mistakes in Nekrasov's *Russian Women*, as well as to rid the poem of its obvious political bias.

The analysis of Volkonskaia's *Notes*, however, had an unexpected result. The published memoir disproved the argument advanced by many sceptics that Nekrasov had invented the existence of Volkonskaia's *Notes* altogether, and that many scenes described in the poem could not have taken place because of their psychological, logical, or historical inconsistencies.<sup>64</sup> The examination of the memoir revealed how closely Nekrasov had followed the original and confirmed the historical accuracy of many scenes hitherto assumed to be the work of the poet's imagination or a contrived projection of his own experiences onto the poem. The publication of Volkonskaia's *Notes* opened up a new venue of literary research for Nekrasov scholars by presenting them with a primary historical source for his artistic work. The comparative analysis of the two sources, historical and fictional, made it possible to recreate the process of the poem's creation, the nuances of the poet's craftsmanship, the evolution of his oeuvre and his artistic persona, and the impact of the social and political atmosphere of the 1870s on his literary work.<sup>65</sup> It showed that, just as Nekrasov's poem embraces incongruities of style, language, and genre, the poet himself cannot be made to fit neatly into the Aristotelian categories of 'the poet' and 'the historian'; rather, he boldly, if spontaneously, transgresses established literary canons.

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<sup>63</sup> For a broad discussion of Russia over the turn of the twentieth century, see Ian Thatcher, ed., *Late Imperial Russia: Problems and Prospects* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005); Galina Rylkova, *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy* (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> A. Gornfeld, *O russkikh pisateliakh* (St. Petersburg: Prosveshchenie, 1912), vol. 1, 181.

<sup>65</sup> For a detailed comparative analysis of Nekrasov's poem with Maria Volkonskaia's memoir, see Gornfeld, *O russkikh pisateliakh*, vol. 1, 175–226.