In this paper I investigate Nekrasov’s use of the ballad – a folk genre defined by tragic themes – in two works, “Zelenyi shum” (published in 1863) and “Pro kholopa primernogo, Iakova vernogo” (from the chapter “Pir – na ves’ mir” in Komu na Rusi zhit’ khorosho, written in 1876). Through the prism of genre, I explore the implications of Nekrasov’s broader interest in tragedy and consider why that interest is refracted through conceptions of the folk.

Folklorists describe the ballad as a genre that explores social conflict and paradox. For example, in “ballada o gibeli klevetannoi zheni,” a husband impulsively beheads his wife upon hearing of rumors of her failure to adequately maintain the home. Only when it is too late does he learn that these rumors are false. D. M. Balashov writes that “this ballad … shows that even a model wife cannot save herself from … slander … Hidden behind this picture of family drama is the silent, unspoken idea that there is something wrong with existing conditions.” We might adjust Balashov’s judgment to say that ballads explore social tensions but also insist on the fact that these tensions are inevitable, regardless of conditions. More recently, A. Kulagina emphasizes that in balladic tragedy, in contrast to ancient tragedy, events are not guided by gods but by human emotions such as vengefulness, suspicion, and, most significantly, the failure to curb [obuzdyvat’] those emotions. In the example of the ballad of the slandered wife, the husband is unable to control himself and cannot undo his mistake once an initial wave of emotions has passed. Here, the ballad presents tragedy as a matter of affect, defined as unnamable emotions which are fundamental to social structures and identities. In one sense, affect is irrational, but in another sense, it is the very basis for social rationale, exemplified by the fact that the husband acts according to social norms. Ballads thus reveal the irrational behind the apparently rational and locate the tragic in this tension. Equally tragic in the ballad is the nature of time which, in its linear aspect, cannot be reversed.

For my purposes, balladic tragedy illuminates features of Nekrasov’s own poetry not because it critiques social norms, but because it confronts those obstacles which emerge as if impersonally and are impossible to surmount. What interests me about balladic tragedy in Nekrasov’s work is the sense that there are realities which cannot be overcome, death being the most basic example. We need only to recall the figure of the “broken man” in Nekrasov’s lyric poetry in order to extend this sense of inescapability to social identity. So many of Nekrasov’s lyric heroes find themselves sunk in a social world of noble indulgences which they want to, but ultimately cannot, reject, for doing so would mean rejecting themselves as well as their deepest, albeit socially constructed, desires. Social conflict and injustice thus emerge as realities that are as inescapable as death itself.

Kornei Chukovsky has vividly described death as a leitmotif in Nekrasov’s poetry, and I see the ubiquity of the theme as an indication of certain views on social change that contravene the imperatives of realism. Drawing together themes of social change and tragedy, the image of the folk in the cultural imaginary of the 1860s reveals a provocative ambiguity. On the one hand, the folk contain a sense of fatalism which, buoyed by optimistic political energies, realists sought to overcome. Consider Belinsky’s most famous statement on realism from 1836, one which was renewed, in many ways, by the materialists of the 60s.

…у всякого младенчествующего народа, как у младенчествущего человека, жизнь всегда враждует с действительностию. Истина жизни недоступна ни для того, ни для другого; ее высокая простота и естественность непонятна для его ума, неудовлетворительна для его чувства. То, что для народа возмужалого, как и для человека возмужалого, кажется торжеством бытия и высочайшею поэзиею, для него было бы горьким, безотрадным разочарованием, после которого уже незачем и не для чего жить.

As much as the metaphor of the immature person on Belinsky’s account reads like the romantic, it also models conceptions of the peasantry. A developmental narrative in which the peasant is considered an initial stage is also exemplified by A. Potebnia’s discussion of folk language in his well-known work, Mysl’ i iazyk, published in 1861. Potebnia describes folk language as language in its earliest phase of development, valuable for its child-like creativity but existing in a necessary relationship with more mature language-users. I return to the implications of such conceptions of folk language for Nekrasov’s poetry below. For now, I want to suggest that a poetics of realism expressed in Nekrasov’s poetry does not in fact, overcome a so-called pre-modern fatalism, though it strives to do so by attempting to contain that fatalism in an idea of the folk.

What makes the folk as a concept ambiguous, however, is that it also supplied meaning and purpose to what might otherwise be regarded as a cruel and arbitrary reality. As Dobroliubov put it in 1858, “Мы можем держаться только потому, что под нами есть твердая почва – настоящий русский народ.” Dobroliubov’s language suggests anxieties about an undefined, rapidly changing world in which social identities were fragile, that is, “ungrounded.” Thus, precisely what the genre of the folk ballad insists upon is what realists of the 60s also feared. In a famous phrase that appears to diagnose mid-century modernity avant la lettre, Hegel writes in 1818 that to face death is to face “the absolute melting-away of everything stable.” In many ways, the concept of folk language that builds upon the stabilizing aspect of the folk’s dual significance represents an inversion of balladic themes: linear time becomes cyclical, and emotions are kept in check by a transcendent rationale that overrides social imperatives. Instead of a pre-modern past steeped in pessimism and ruled by fatalism, the folk carve out the space – and supply the sturdy ground for – a holistic and transparent future.

Such are the transformations of the concept of the folk that take place through generic borrowing in Zelenyi shum, a poem derived from a Ukrainian folk song published in Russkaia beseda in 1865 but known to Nekrasov before its publication. Zelenyi shum develops the balladic theme of murderous impulse: a husband has returned home to discover his wife has been unfaithful. However, the typically tragic ending is avoided, and linear temporality is recast in cyclical terms. The image of “zelenyi shum,” described Nekrasov in a footnote to the poem as belonging to the folk, is developed as a natural force that ultimately saves the speaker from his own impulses. The onset of spring, like a rush of calming wind, pacifies the jealous husband and invokes forgiveness through continuity and change.

Под песню-вьюгу зимнюю

Окрепла дума лютая –

Припас я вострый нож…

Да вдруг весна подкралася…

<…>

Слабеет дума лютая,

Нож валится из рук,

И все мне песня слышится

Одна – в лесу, в лугу:

«Люби, покуда любиться,

Терпи, покуда терпится,

Прощай, пока прощается,

И – бог тебе судья!»

Affect, too, is curbed by the pacifying winds of springtime and in this sense, nature appears as rational and moral rather than impulsive and indifferent. Nekrasov’s manipulation of the ballad in Zelenyi shum reveals a conception of folk language as natural, where “nature” is understood in its romantic, idealized sense. Scholars of nineteenth-century culture have studied efforts across cultural and literary discourses to conceptualize a stable, natural basis within language. In mid-century Russia, when the reforms provoked renewed interest among the educated elite in peasant culture, folk poetry was elevated as language’s natural origin and set in contrast to elite formalism. Influential conceptions of language touted by Rousseau and Herder positioned folk language at the origin of human development, configuring the folk as a linguistic complex of practical colloquialisms and poetic imagination. In this paradigm, folk language was language in its most natural form. In the 1860s, Potebnia develops this notion in relation to his exploration of the concept of inner form, or a word’s initial meaning and fresh perception. As Boris Gasparov has argued, Potebnia explores language as “a mutual collaboration between two sets of values … the poetic and the prosaic modes of creation in language stay, respectively, … for the words narod and intelligentsia.” Potebina values folk language for its creativity but cautions against insularity and irrationality. Naturalness is thus curbed by socialization, provided by the guidance of the *intelligent*. In Nekrasov’s poem, the folk evince a special relationship to nature, but nature is itself guided by a moral rationale. One senses both the threat of a natural, impulsive linguistic modality, and the urge to mitigate it.

Zelenyi shum begins by drawing on the creative language of the folk as described in the footnote to the title: так народ называет пробуждение природы весной. Captured by a synesthetic phrase, folk language is also thematized in relation to nature. The verb-phrase “idet-gudet” that accompanies the phrase throughout the poem as a refrain exemplifies the epithets described by Potebnia as folk language’s privileged access to the inner form of language; “idet-gudet” invites readers to consider the etymological roots that might connect the verbs. In general, language’s materiality, rather than its referentially, comes to the fore. The voice of the folk is quite literally the voice of nature, reminding readers that life will be renewed.

Building on a sense of language’s internal stability, language appears in the first half of the poem to speak itself. In the following stanza, such internal linguistic energy is suggested by the repeated “v” sounds in line two, the repetition of “vo” in line five, and the grammatical near-rhyme of verkhovoi/ol’khovye in lines two and three.

Вдруг ветер верховой

Качнет кусты ольховые,

Подымет пыль цветочную

Как облако: все зелено

И воздух, и вода!

The incantatory quality of these lines contributes to the poetic effect of depersonalization, evoking, to quote a scholar of lyric theory, Jonathan Culler, “rote memory rather than the memory of understanding.” From this perspective, vozdukh and voda are brought together on the basis of sound, and only through this connection are we led to consider semantic correlations. Rhyme thus “convinces without sense,” an effect which leads another scholar, Mutlu Blasing, to argue that poetry’s foregrounding of rhythm means that it “takes its power from the public, emotional power of language itself.” Under the influence of a placating springtime wind, such abandonment to language in “Zelenyi shum” is cast in largely positive terms. Here, language is natural in the most desirable way: it assures continuity rather than transience.

In the balladic narrative that follows from the lyrical introduction, however, language emerges in a different guise. The jealous husband’s wife creates unrest precisely by speaking: “Сама сказала, глупая, / Типун ей на язык!". Language overwhelms the naturalness of noise and creates a tense silence. In the narrative portion of the poem, rhythm mimics the husband’s emotional turmoil in disjunctive clauses. Potential voices are fierce in their suppression, offering a very different few of potentiality than that which is offered by the metaphor of spring. As we shift from renewal to rage, language becomes socialized, or marked by an awareness of other people; the husband hears the taunts of the winter’s storms as that of a mocking neighbor: “В глаза твои бесстыжие / Соседи наплюют!” The cyclicality of the seasons may counteract the violence of narrative tension, but nature has already lost its purity, blending with the image of the neighbor into a single public from which language offers no escape. In the balladic narrative, the social and the natural are thus combined into a single site of conflict. Ultimately, however, Nekrasov redraws the boundary between a fatalistic world-view and a sense of continuity. It is at this point that the sound of nature acquires sense as a song heard across meadows and forests. When nature finally speaks, it makes clear its social prerogative to pacify conflicts instead of exposing their inescapability.

In Zelenyi shum, death is present as a threat but is ultimately overcome; in the many tales and songs that comprise Komu na Rusi zhit’ khorosho, tragedy is more common. Like Chukovsky, Boris Korman sees tragic themes as unifying Nekrasov’s oeuvre, though he finds such themes to be balanced by a more optimistic outlook in the poet’s most sustained reflection on the folk in this famous narrative poem [poema]. Korman’s argument is that the lyric hero (or narrator) of Komu na Rusi zhit’ khorosho offers a wider perspective than its peasant heroes. In this way, he assumes that a certain fatalistic myopia prevails among peasants, much in keeping with the cultural imaginary of the 1860s. According to this view, lyric perspective offers reflective distance as a contrast to peasant fatalism. This distinction finds expression in the poema itself, where figures such as Grisha Dobrosklonov supply “happy songs” as a contrast to the “sad songs” with which peasant characters fill the majority of the work.

I have suggested that a merger of the natural and the social lies at the basis of the tragedy which realism sought, in many respects, to avoid. In “Pir – na ves’ mir,” an argument erupts that contrasts – or reveals – the essence of the debate posed in the poema’s title: who in Russia lived worse? In the exchange of stories that follows, tellers and listeners treat social conflict and injustice as matters as inescapable as death. Grisha intervenes to correct this morbid outlook, but I want to suggest that it is precisely this outlook that courses through the poema itself, presenting a much more interesting view of realism and its aesthetic and conceptual possibilities. Grisha composes his song in the chapter’s epilogue only once he distances himself from the crowd. He hears a lament and transforms it with his optimistic vision. Thus constructed, the voice of the peasant lies somewhere beyond the exchange of forms rather than among them. To access this singular voice – akin to the view of reality as a “stable ground” – one must not only distance oneself from the crowd, but also “race through discourse,” in Peter Brooks’s expression, meaning to overstep processes of exchange to arrive at content which is divorced from them. Whereas Grisha’s happy song insists on content, the other character’s tragic laments are steeped in form and in the process of exchange from which those forms emerge. This difference between content and form can be read, I argue, as one between “the firm ground of the people” imagined by mid-century realists and “an absolute melting-away of everything stable” that folk poetry, especially the ballad, actually encodes.

Let me conclude with a brief comment on the dramatic story of “Pro kholopa primernogo, Iakova vernogo,” which stands as perhaps the saddest of the peasant characters’ sad songs in Komu na Rusi zhit’ khorosho. Set apart from the poema’s narrative and drawing on balladic tropes, this story ends in suicide – another common theme in the ballad genre. What interests me about the story in connection to the relationship between tragedy and social change is the moment when Yakov is impelled by natural forces (he drives through a haunted grove) to murder his master. Under the spell of these forces, Yakov nevertheless achieves a level of self-consciousness that is typically characteristic of “social” rather than “natural” language. With a new awareness of injustice, he decides to kill himself rather than his master, thus altering the forces of nature that impel him to murder by turning them on himself. What is more, Yakov’s master, who cannot walk, is impelled to watch. The whole scenario thus depends on a heightened awareness of the other as Yakov performs his own death as the master’s punishment. Insofar as death becomes a matter of will power, that which we cannot control – nature – is brought into parallel which that which we only apparently can: society. In collapsing this boundary, Nekrasov returns to the major theme that underlies tragedy in its connection to the concept of the folk, suggesting that there is no natural core to language – or to history – but only the endless passage of so many forms.