

Title: The Clash of Realist Convictions and Revolutionary Impatience in the Criticism of N. A. Dobroliubov

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The work of the “radical” critic N.A. Dobroliubov has gotten lost between the distorting adulation of Soviet scholarship and the Western distaste for Dobroliubov’s apparent instrumentalization of literature. Dobroliubov’s very short career and the impression that he is just a junior version of N.G. Chernyshevsky also contribute to the fact that his writings have not received much sustained critical attention. Yet Dobroliubov deserves our interest, not only for the intellectual vitality and historical significance of his work, but also because he, more than any of his contemporaries, grapples immediately with the core aesthetic conundrums of the civic-minded criticism of mid-19th-century Russia. On the one hand, the “radical” critics proclaimed themselves to be uncompromising realists, committed to a literature that reproduces contemporary life. Yet they also called for social transformation with an idealistic fervor that nearly matched that of the “Romantic” generation they despised. Thus their literary doctrine is shaped by the clash between a present and a future orientation, between sober empiricism and progressive vision—a conflict that had troubled Enlightenment writers in Germany a century earlier, and that flared up anew in the cultural milieu of the reform period in Russia. My talk illuminates Dobroliubov’s critical agility as he attempts to circumvent these problems, particularly in two famous articles from the high point of his career, “Chto takoe oblomovshchina?” (1859) and “Luch sveta v temnom tsarstve” (1860). I will analyze the strained yet occasionally brilliant maneuvers that result from his struggle to remain true to his realist aesthetic even as he desperately searches for signs of a positive hero. And I will show how the model of the realist-positive hero that was successfully theorized by Chernyshevsky falls apart once Dobroliubov engages in practical criticism of actual literary texts.

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