

Conference Report

The Poetics of Folklore: Seminar in Memory of B. N. Putilov

A scholarly seminar entitled “The Poetics of Folklore” and dedicated to the memory of B. N. Putilov (1919-1998) was held from the first to the third of March in St. Petersburg. He is known to specialists on folklore in many countries, but primarily in Slavic.

Most of Putilov’s monographs (more than 500 works came from under his pen) are devoted to the epic poetry of the Slavs. They begin with the bylina, that is, with one of its earliest genres, and end with its rather late manifestations in the Russian historical song. Slavic historical ballads and the heroic songs of the Montenegrins also formed part of his interests in this field.

Putilov was attracted to the most acute problems in the study of Russian folklore, problems which many historians, philologists, and ethnographers sought to solve. In regard to study of “the epic and real historical fact” he occupied a position close to that of V. Ia. Propp. Putilov considered that the past, which lies at the basis of the bylinas, “is not the past of the chronicles and is not even an idealized historical time.” The most archaic links of the bylina are represented by numerous “ethnographic motifs which lead to mythology, paganism, and magical practices . . .” (This is cited according to Putilov’s last formulations of this problem in his book “Ekskursy v teoriiu i istoriiu slavianskogo eposa” [Excursions into the theory and history of the Slavic epic], St. Petersburg, 1999, pp. 93, 96).

Putilov perceived the method for his work on epic texts to lie in historical typology. He provided an original treatment of this theory although he emphasized his dependence on V. M. Zhirmunskii. The ideas of M. Parry and A. Lord found a response in Putilov’s scholarly activities. He was one of the initiators of a series of conferences which were dedicated to the memory of A. Lord and which took place in various cities of the former USSR. He also was the author of an extensive afterward to the Russian translation of the book “Skazitel” [Singer -- “Singer of Tales] and of an article entitled “Shkola Parry-Lorda v mirovom eposovedenii” [The Parry-Lord school in the study of world epics] (“Zhivaia starina,” no. 2, 1994).

It is difficult to evaluate the true significance of Putilov if one does not know a particular circumstance. Having begun his career during the “struggle with formalism,” he turned out to be one of those who consistently and progressively turned the Soviet view of the folklore text into something independent from the then current requirements to seek in folklore the “correct” views of events and adherence to the canons of “socialist realism.” It is true, however, that in the routine conditions of academic institutes where Putilov worked his whole life, such impulses did not acquire the same impetus and did not provoke the same social resonance that the activity, for example, of the Tartu semiotic school achieved.

The Seminar did not include many reports about the epic. The majority of the talks were connected with a different sphere of Putilov’s interests: Traditional culture and folklore as one of its parts. (In this

regard I refer to his book “Folklor i traditsionnaia kultura” [Folklore and traditional culture], St. Petersburg, 1994, which is still pertinent to the present day situation in Russian folkloristics. The reflection of passing or departed reality formed the basic question of the seminar and was examined in three aspects. First: a refraction of lexicographic problems. As S. E. Nikitina (Moscow) claims, “A frequency count of the folklore language produces dubious results as an indicator of traditional mentality if, when compiling a frequency dictionary of folklore, you do not consider genre.” Second: relationship to individual themes and images in folklore. All reports about the bylina (T. A. Bernshtam, A. A. Gorelov, E. L. Madlevskaia), and reports about archaic conceptions connected with the use of salt in christening ceremonies (A. K. Baiburin) and with the kinship system reflected in non-ritual lyric songs (S. I. Zhavoronok) were devoted to this second aspect. Third: the individual narrative unit. M. L. Lur’e, on the basis of demonological stories (“bylichki”), devoted her talk to one of these units --the motif.

Reports about traditional space conceptions emerging through the tale (K. E. Korepova - Nizhny Novgorod), through fragmentary historical legends (V. V. Vinogradov), or through those enrooted entirely in contemporary life (I. A. Razumova - Petrozavodsk; A. F. Belousov, I. S. Veselova) formed a special part of the Seminar’s program.

In the spirit of Putilov’s interest in the way Parry and Lord studied the transmission of an oral epic, at the Seminar reports were presented about the learning of funeral laments in the Russian North (S. B. Adon’ieva), and about the types of vocal timbers and performance devices in Byelorussian ritual songs (G. V. Tavlaj). Several talks were concerned with various aspects of folklore poetics and stylistics: a general view of the controversial sides of this topic, about the cumulative principle in incantations (I. F. Amroian - Toliatti), about the still debated concept of the “formula” in folkloristics (Iu. A. Kleiner), and about song stanzas (M. A. Lobanov). A. F. Nekrylova talked about the poetics of the formulation of signs or tokens (“primeta”). In his communication G. A. Levinton clarified some points in the study of epic verse by N. S. Trubetzkoy and R. O. Jakobson.

The Seminar was supplemented with communications about folklore phenomena that were little known to the assembled audience: pre-Islamic ritual songs (N. N. Abubakirova), folklore genres accompanying the funerals of the Udmurt pagans (T. M. Miniakhmetova - Izhevsk/Tartu), and Azerbaijanian proverbs connected with the epic hero Kior-ogly (F. Cheleby).

The sessions of the Seminar took place in the Russian Institute for the History of the Arts and in St. Petersburg University. The Petersburg Linguistics Society (with support from the Soros Fund), the Propp Center, and the above named institutions organized the Seminar.

M. Lobanov

Russian Institute for the History of the Arts, St. Petersburg

(Translated by James Bailey)