

Iu. A. Novikov. Skazitel i bylinaia traditsiia

[The Performer and the Bylina Tradition]

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The titles of the four chapters in this volume state the main topics of examination: 1) The dialectics of the existence and historical development of the Russian epic, the *bylina*; 2) The characteristics of regional traditions; 3) The theory of the schools of performers' art within the context of regional traditions, and 4) The oral *bylina* tradition and the printed word. Ten appendices provide graphic representations of the interconnections among the songs of selected performers. To some extent this study represents a continuation of the author's earlier work Bylina i kniga [The Bylina and the Book], Vilnius, 1995.

Investigation of the Russian epic involves diverse problems, many of which arise out of the richness of the tradition. Some three thousand recordings have been made between the middle of the eighteenth century and the 1960's when the tradition became moribund. Collectors have furnished a wealth of information about the performers and the performance context. Textology, or the accuracy of the recordings, must always be kept in mind, because collecting and editing methods have varied considerably over a span of two hundred years. Since the verbal texts of oral epics are subject to change and exist in variants, the question arises as to what extent these characteristics involve innovations by individual performers and to what extent they reflect the gradual evolution of the epics as they are affected by historical, social, cultural, and linguistic changes? Do the epics represent reliable reflections of historical events or are they primarily artistic expressions of oral literature? Does tradition predominate or do individual performers introduce changes into the songs? To what degree and in what ways do literacy and printed editions of epics influence singers and their repertory? Does the Russian epic have a single origin or has it developed regional traditions over a period of many centuries? How do singers learn their songs? Does a close relationship exist between teachers and pupils in the acquisition of songs and the epic idiom? Does the Russian epic consist basically of songs with a single plot or does it exhibit an implicit tendency to develop cycles of songs centered around a single hero, as occurs in some other epic traditions? These are some of the questions which folklorists have raised about the *bylina*. Novikov touches upon most of these topics by summarizing and reevaluating the various interpretations and theories about the characteristics of the Russian epic.

In this sense, his book represents both a logical continuation and a major contribution to investigation of the Russian tradition.

Novikov's work should be viewed within yet another context. Russian folklorists have contributed much toward the development of textological methods for studying the verbal texts of oral literature and they have made numerous studies of the distinctive poetic language in Russian folklore. In these respects, Novikov's investigation represents a skillful application of these methods to the verbal texts of Russian epics and results in a kind of close analysis that he terms "critical textology" (p. 14). He thus further elaborates the means for evaluating the accuracy of verbal texts recorded from a living epic tradition. Novikov's contribution is also timely because efforts to publish a compilation of all Russian epics have been underway for some time. The editors of such an immense undertaking face complex textological problems which in part involve a decision about which texts are suitable for inclusion.

In his first chapter, Novikov addresses the continuing debate about how "historical" the *bylina* may be. The adherents of the "Historical School," which was active from the last part of the nineteenth century into Soviet times and whose tenets are still followed by some folklorists, treat the epics as a kind of historical document. Although, for instance, social classes in Kievan Rus' (ninth through the thirteenth centuries) are reflected in the epics, many archaic linguistic elements are preserved, the hero's code of honor is observed, and archaic ethnographic customs may be retained, for Novikov the "*bylina* is not a historical chronicle, but a poetic story about the past" (p. 22). Little factual information about life outside the world of the epics appears, no language barriers exist between the Russian heroes and their enemies or neighbors, and few descriptions of the seasons, local color, or landscapes are included. In addition, Novikov notes that in texts recorded over the past two hundred years perceptible changes have taken place. The psychological state of the heroes has drawn increased attention, and the role of fantastic and mythical elements has declined. Furthermore, such modifications of a general Russian epic tradition have taken place to differing degrees in different northern geographical regions; women have become the main performers, other genres (laments and magic tales) have been mixed with epic, plots have been simplified or rationalized, and a tendency toward cyclization of songs about a given hero has intensified. Novikov demonstrates all these characteristics through a comparison of the variants of selected epics, in each case also offering well reasoned interpretations. Contrary to a commonly accepted assumption, he shows that the wandering religious singers (*kaliki perekhozhie*) had little influence on the development of the *bylina* (p. 106).

In his second chapter, Novikov devotes attention to the delineation of regional traditions, particularly in Northern Russia where most epics have been recorded. By distinguishing such textological features as redactions, versions, and variants of selected songs, he shows how the individual features of local traditions may be distinguished. He emphasizes that local traditions are highly stable and that innovations are usually avoided. Novikov criticizes the theory that the dissemination of epics in Northern Russia was connected directly with Novgorod's colonization of these regions. His comments particularly pertain to the "Novgorod theory" as it is expressed by S. I. Dmitrieva in her book Geograficheskoe rasprostranenie russkikh bylin [The Geographic Distribution of the Russian Bylina], Moscow, 1975. He notes that she considers only songs recorded before 1917, includes songs mentioned by singers but not actually recorded from them by collectors, and makes no distinction between the place where a song has been recorded and where it has been learned by a given singer. Novikov further points out that it is problematic whether a chronological shift can be detected in the origin of older "heroic songs" and newer "novelistic songs." Early collectors took down songs mainly from men who favored "heroic epics", whereas later collectors often included women performers who preferred "novelistic epics." Each kind of song may have had an early or late origin. Novikov also considers that "historical songs" did not come just from the south but also originated in the north.

In his third chapter, Novikov focuses on the theory about schools of singers, especially as presented in V. I. Chicherov's posthumously published book Shkoly skazitelei Zaonezh'ia [The Schools of Performers in Zaonezh'e], Moscow, 1982. This theory rests on the presumption that a direct connection or genealogy exists between texts recorded from teachers and pupils; it is based on similarities in phrasing, "common places" (short traditional episodes resembling Albert Lord's definition of "themes"), repetitions, versions of the plots, and performance manner (p. 179). For Novikov this approach exaggerates the role of individuals, because he considers that the epic milieu controls and limits innovation. The collective tradition and epic memory in each region represent the true school for each generation of performers (pp. 180-183, 190). For example, the almost legendary singer Elustaf'ev has generally been regarded as the teacher of several outstanding singers. In particular, this pertains to the founder of a dynasty of performers, T. G. Riabinin, who is often considered the finest Russian epic singer. On the basis of his textological analysis and other factual information, Novikov concludes that Riabinin learned his songs from several performers and not just from Elustaf'ev. By comparing the songs of other performers and other information about them, Novikov demonstrates that singers do not learn songs from a single

teacher while they are young, but continue assimilating new songs throughout their lives. He shows that some singers have acquired songs from as many as five to six other performers.

Novikov devotes his final chapter to the influence of published collections of epics on the singers. He emphasizes how important this is for the projected compilation of all Russian epics because many songs, even in "classical" collections, are derived from printed sources and not from an oral tradition. Novikov thus continues the earlier investigations on this topic by A. M. Astakhova. Popular editions of epics, particularly that of V. P. Avenarius (Kniga bylina [The Book of Byliny], 4th ed. Moscow, 1893), which went through fourteen editions at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, usually involve an amalgamation of songs which have been composed about one epic hero and recorded from different singers. Such collections also reflect an effort to "correct" the language according to literary norms. Unfortunately, many students of the *bylina* have ignored the question of the bookish origins of some published texts. Novikov states that his "method for comparative analysis of *byliny* is based on their examination within the context of regional epic traditions and references to extra-textual data" (p. 272). Against the delineated background of a particular regional epic tradition, such "bookish" texts stand out for several reasons. The "grand champion" in the exploitation of printed texts was the literate singer Marfa Kriukova (1876-1954), from whom an astounding total of 250 songs was recorded, only thirty nine of which have traditional sources (p. 330). Novikov remarks that the assimilation of printed texts increased during the Soviet period and deserves study as a separate topic, but he insists that such texts should be excluded from the projected compendium of Russian epics mentioned earlier in this review.

In his conclusion, Novikov sets forth fifteen main points to be considered during investigation of the Russian epic tradition. Thanks to his comprehensive familiarity with this tradition and studies written about it, he has provided a refreshing and path-breaking investigation of Russian epics. His work requires much knowledge on the part of a reader but, through his detailed analysis of individual songs as examples of specific topics, he offers numerous succinct interpretations. One regrets that he did not include an index of the cited songs because this would have made the volume much more accessible to those studying particular epics. Although Novikov, following the conclusion of V. M. Gatask, rejects the validity of the Lord-Parry formulaic technique for Russian epics (p. 216), he might have considered Patricia Arant's book Compositional Techniques of the Russian Oral Epic, The Bylina, New York, 1990, in which she applies this method to a study of the songs of T. G. Riabinin.

Limitations on the length of a review allow only a few of Novikov's interpretations and conclusions to be mentioned here. All students of the Russian epic should read his book carefully and thoroughly.

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