

A. A. Gorelov (ed.). Byliny v 25 tomakh: Byliny Pechory [Byliny in Twenty Five volumes: The Byliny of Pechora]. Vols 1-2. (Svod russkogo fol'klora.) St. Petersburg and Moscow: Nauka, 2001. 772 + 782 pp. ISBN 1-59051-029-1.

The present review concerns the first two volumes of a compendium of Russian epics (byliny) which will consist of twenty-five volumes. These splendid dictionary size volumes, which were completed for publication in 1984, but appeared only in 2001, contain 281 songs and eighty melodies from the far northern region along the Pechora River, which empties into the Barents Sea. Numerous photographs of folklorists and performers are also included. The first volume opens with three sections which are devoted to the principles of publication (pp. 11-20), a general introduction to the Russian epic (pp. 21-78) and to the epic tradition in the Pechora region (pp. 79-150). The third section comprises seven essays, devoted to the ethnicity, history and publication of Pechora epics, to other genres, the language and melodies of the epics. Different groups of specialists have contributed to each essay. Extensive commentaries, eight appendices, and four indexes are also provided in the two volumes. Melodies have been included before the pertinent verbal texts. It is unfortunate that a CD accompanies only two hundred of the two thousand copies, especially since the inclusion of a CD with anthologies or studies of folklore has become common practice. Ultimately works of “oral literature” should be heard and not just read.

For many decades Russian folklorists have dreamed about publishing a compendium of Russian epics. The folklorists at the Academy Institute of Russian Literature in St. Petersburg have at long last begun to realize this dream. One can appreciate the magnitude of their accomplishment only by understanding some of the difficulties involved in such an undertaking. Some two thousand variants have been published, and perhaps a thousand more exist in manuscripts scattered in numerous archives. Since the appearance of the collections of Rybnikov [1861-1867] and Gil'ferding [1873] scholars have expressed different opinions about how the texts should be grouped, that is, by collector, singer, plot, genre, geographical region or chronology. Perhaps the most influential approach was introduced by Gil'ferding who arranged epics from the Onega region by performers. He also included a short introduction about each singer, about the person from whom they had learned their songs, their repertoire, occupation, the number of melodies they used, and the quality of their performance. Thus Gil'ferding anticipated practices which were accepted later by collectors working in other traditions, and which led to a focus on individual performers and the characteristics of “oral” as opposed to “written” literature.

In the compendium under review the songs are presented first by geographical region, next by subject or plot (*siuzhetnye gnezda*), and finally by chronology. This permits a focus on the features of the epic tradition in a given region and its sub-regions. In the past folklorists sought to distinguish the characteristics of a general Russian tradition which was assumed to be present in all geographic areas inhabited by a Russian population. However, in recent decades many scholars have endeavored to determine the unique characteristics of a folklore tradition or genre in a specific region. This latter approach offers several advantages; determining local realizations of a particular plot, delineating singers who diverge from the tradition by improvising their individual versions of a song, and detecting the influence of printed sources on the singers, especially as the Russian epic gradually declined in the twentieth century. The addition of detailed indexes allows one to find all the epics of one singer or those recorded by a given collector.

Several principles have been observed in the selection of suitable items from the existing mass of material, which includes fragments, prose versions, retellings from popular publications, artificially created Soviet epics called “noviny,” “hidden reprints” and extensively edited but questionable texts. Only someone who has worked closely with the verbal texts of folk songs and is familiar with studies of folklore textology can appreciate the enormous work that has gone into the preparation of these two weighty volumes. Not only does the quality of performers range widely from those who are outstanding, average or poor, but the quality of the recordings themselves varies greatly, especially those made before the introduction of the tape recorder in the 1950s. Gil’ferding was the first to discover that an accurate text can only be obtained from a sung performance and not from a spoken retelling [Astakhova 1966: 192], which often omits repetitions and filler particles so essential to the creation of the verbal rhythm. Besides problems which arise from different techniques used to take down the verbal texts under field conditions, yet others may occur when collectors “correct” the texts, for instance, by adapting them to the norms of the literary language. Singers may remember only parts of songs, may combine one song with another, may confuse the names of characters, and may lapse into prose. In some cases collectors first wrote down a spoken retelling and then revised it during a subsequent sung performance. In the commentary to each song the compilers of these two volumes have assiduously compared and quoted textual variations.

Another problem concerns the composite epic (*svodnaia bylina*) in which a singer may join together several or all the songs about a particular hero. In many cases composites can be

traced to publications intended for popular consumption, especially that of Avenarius which went through several editions in the second half of the nineteenth century. For the most part, Russian folklorists have considered that Russian epics consist of a single episode or exploit of a hero, and that the combination of two or more episodes represents “contamination.” This is in contrast to other epic traditions, such as those in Central Asia, where composite epics are both common and accepted. It might prove worthwhile to examine the Russian tradition from a somewhat different viewpoint, that is, to consider that it falls somewhere between the two poles of plot singularity and plot multiplicity, and that it had an incipient tendency to develop composite songs but did not fully realize that potential [Astakhova 1948: 98-105; Putilov 1988: 15-16, 33-38].

In the general introduction about the Russian epic for the entire series (pp. 21-78), it is stated that “here we will not touch upon the nature of epic verse ..., the composition, or even the problem of the epithet, but we will note the main features which delineate the epic and which also connect the epic of various peoples with each other” (p. 24). The approach is not explicitly defined, but myths are evidently regarded as forming the most ancient epic plots, which over time are modified and become obscured. Although a number of *byliny* are examined from such a viewpoint, we will mention only “Potyk,” an extremely complex epic whose variants differ greatly. Briefly stated, Potyk is sent by Prince Vladimir to hunt along a river, where he is about to shoot a swan when it turns into Mar’ia the White Swan. She asks him to marry her on the condition that when one of them dies, the other must enter the tomb. Eventually she dies, Potyk enters the tomb, and, after various complications, she is revived only to be enticed away by the king of Lithuania. After a long search, Potyk finds Mar’ia, who three times offers him a poisoned drink. Twice he takes the drink, dies, and is miraculously revived, but the third time he kills Mar’ia with the help of her sister whom he afterwards marries.

The interpretation of “Potyk” is based on the assumption that Kievan Rus originated in the second through the fourth centuries of our era, and that marriage in this epic reflects a conflict between the Slavs and the Iranian speaking Scythian peoples in the steppes during this early period (pp. 34-35). In the further development of this *bylina* Potyk ceases to be a “cultural hero” and becomes a *bogatyr* of the Kievan cycle. Even later the action is transferred to Lithuania and the Lithuanian king who abducts Mar’ia the White Swan. Although it is mentioned that neighboring Germanic peoples left no trace in the Russian epic (p. 30), Iarkho [1910], Georg Polívka [1903] and Boris Sokolov [1927-1929] point out a number of similar motifs and themes, especially that of the “unfaithful wife,” which appear in Germanic tales, sagas, and epics.

Furthermore, Zhirmunskii [1979: 206-07] cautions that the presence of mythological elements does not necessarily prove that an epic is ancient in origin, because they may have been absorbed from other genres, especially the magic tale, at a later time. As one of his examples, Zhirmunskii cites the bylina "Potyk." One could add that the theme of the "swan maiden" occurs in many traditions, especially in those of Central Asia and the Arctic regions.

Although one cannot expect all aspects of the bylina to be covered in such a limited introduction, in such a major and comprehensive work about the Russian epic one nevertheless would have appreciated some presentation of the bylina as oral literature. For example, mention could have been made of compositional devices such as the traditional introduction (*zachin*) and conclusion (*kontsovka*), or the Slavic negative antithesis, all of which are just as meaningful as "hyperbole," which is singled out as the main feature in the composition of the bylina (p. 24). Skaftymov [1924], reacting against the Historical School, delineated many characteristics of the bylina as an expression of "artistic literature," in particular emphasizing the role of the "resonating background" in enhancing the central hero as opposed to other personages. One also misses references to Putilov [1976] and the typological historical approach that he applied to the comparative study of Russian and South Slavic epics in an effort to combine aspects of the historical and mythological approaches. Although the history of the collection of byliny is covered in detail, the history of the study of byliny is incomplete, one-sided, and subjective. One would have preferred a more objective and systematic survey of the various interpretations of Russian epics, their origins, their interaction with history and their evolution over time. The remaining essays in the first volume are distinguished by the high quality of their scholarship and their thoroughness.

Considerable information is presented about the ethnicity, occupations, way of life, and epic tradition in Pechora. In this regard only a few main features will be pointed out. In the twelfth century Russians migrated from Novgorod to the Pechora area which was then and is still today inhabited by the Nenets (Samoed). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Old Believers moved to the region, an event which has probably contributed a strong religious element to Pechoran epics. The main occupation of the men in this isolated region was fishing both on the Pechora River and in the Barents Sea, something which also is reflected in the texts. Unlike other northern areas, few women learned to perform epics and family traditions of passing on songs were rare. Although Chicherov [1982] sought evidence to support his idea that schools of singers developed in the North, the materials available about the Pechora tradition do not

confirm the existence of such groups. On the contrary, singers appear to have used a variety of sources for their byliny rather than having a single teacher (p. 92-94). Onchukov [1904] first discovered and recorded byliny in the Pechora area in 1901. In the years 1929 to 1929 Astakhova [1938, 1951] led an expedition which collected epics in several northern regions including Pechora. From the 1930s into the 1960s other expeditions were carried out to the Pechora area but only a few of the materials on epics were published at the time, a situation which the first volumes of the compendium rectify.

It is fortunate that musicology has been given a firm place in the presentation of the bylina and that accessible melodies have been included in the first two volumes. Even though the accompanying CD is derived from recordings made as early as the first decades of the twentieth century on wax cylinders, the sound quality is exceptionally good and reflects the culmination of years spent deciphering materials in the Fonogrammarkhiv in the Institute of Russian Literature. In regard to the melodies of the songs the late V. V. Korguzalov concludes that Russian epics were sung according to a “free rhapsodic form” and a “tirade recitative” (*rapsodicheskoe svobodnoe intonirovanie* and *tiradnaia rechitatsiia*, pp. 133, 138) by which the melody is varied, an embryonic but fluctuating stanza form emerges, and the lines in the verbal text are subject to wide syllabic variation. Although Trubetskoi’s study of the rhythm of the verbal text is cited [Trubetskoi 1987], no mention is made of Roman Jakobson’s influential article in which he conjectures that the original East Slavic epic line consisted of ten syllables, was related to the Serbo-Croatian *deseterac*, and in Russian was subsequently transformed into an eleven-syllable line corresponding to a trochaic pentameter with a dactylic ending [Jakobson 1966].

Using a system of transcription developed with the German linguist Christian Sappok at Bochum University, the contributors to the essay on the language of Russian epics present a phonetic analysis of several songs (pp. 126-31). The varying accentuation of many words is accurately indicated and phonetic variation, even in the performance of a single singer, becomes apparent. This represents a vast linguistic improvement over attempts, often dilettantish, by some early collectors to convey phonetic detail in their publications of the bylina. On the one hand, such analysis has an important place in the study of the language of epics, even though it emphasizes how close the language, at least in regard to phonetics, is to the dialect of the peasant singers. On the other hand, scholars such as Evgen’eva [1963] and Ossovetskii [1979] have endeavored, mainly on the basis of vocabulary and, to a lesser extent, morphology and syntax, to establish the poetic features of a supradialectal and traditional folklore *koine*.

On the whole the folklorists who have contributed to the first two volumes in the compendium of the Russian epics are to be congratulated for the immense and painstaking effort that they have made in a highly complex and enormous undertaking. Apart from the few points of criticism raised above, these two volumes provide a solid basis for investigating the Russian epic tradition for many years to come. They also demonstrate the high scholarly standards of Russian folklorists and of their contributions to the study of Russian epics. One can only hope that the ensuing volumes will appear regularly, and that they will be as thoroughly and conscientiously well prepared as the first two have been.

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