

Review . . .

Studies in Russian Epic Tradition, second issue: Justina Besharov, *Imagery of the Igor Tale in the Light of Byzantino-Slavic Poetic Theory*, published by E. J. Brill, Leiden, under the auspices of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University 1956, vii, 155 pp.

A new and significant aspect of Byzantine cultural influence in Eastern Europe, particularly of the impact of Byzantine poetic theories on early Russian literature, is treated by Justina Besharov in this second issue of the new publication, *Studies in Russian Epic Tradition*. Although it has long been generally recognized that Kievan Russian literature developed according to the literary patterns of Byzantine letters, it has usually been regarded by both Russian and Western scholars that Byzantine literary influence was transmitted to Kiev predominantly through Old Slavonic and Russian translations and readaptations of Byzantine writings. It has been considered that the poetic theories of Byzantine grammarians were unknown to Kievan authors, and while a reflection of Byzantine poetic devices is visible in early Russian literature, no serious attempt has been made until now to trace their development.

The discovery of the *Sviatoslav Codex of 1073*, which occurred some 150 years ago, did not shake this well-established conception, although this collection contained, along with some patristic writings, the "Treatise on Tropes and Figures" by George Choeroboscus, an early Byzantine rhetorician and grammarian. The *Codex* itself was a Bulgarian readaptation prepared in the early tenth century for the Bulgarian King Simeon from a Greek collection. In 1073 this miscellany was recopied for the Russian prince Sviatoslav from an unknown Bulgarian manuscript, and later enjoyed apparent success with Russian readers, for the *Codex* was recopied several times.

Some five years ago in an article devoted to the puzzles of the greatest Russian literary monument of the pre-Mongolian era, the *Igor Tale*, Professor Roman Jakobson pointed out for the first time that "early Russian writers learned their craft from Greek models, and not only from originals or translations but also from a Slavonic adaptation of Choeroboscus' treatise on poetic tropes and figures."¹ Professor Jakobson added that "it is worthwhile to examine and classify Old Russian poetic imagery in the light of this treatise, and some constructions that sound rather false to the contemporary scholar find their complete justification in the precepts of this Graeco-Slavonic manual."

¹R. Jakobson, "The Puzzles of the Igor Tale," *Speculum*, 1952, XXVII, 44, and *La Geste du Prince Igor* (New York, 1948), 331.

Justinia Besharov, a talented student of Professor Jakobson, has accepted this suggestion and in the work under review has reexamined the entire poetic framework of the Igor Tale in the light of Choeroboscus' theories on tropes and figures. In the first part of the study Miss Besharov compares the Greek and Slavonic texts of Choeroboscus' treatise and finds that the original version was subjected by its Slavic adapter to a certain purge, reduction and clarification. It might be added that the text was purged entirely of all non-Biblical lay examples, and only quotations from the Holy Scripture were preserved. Miss Besharov states that it will forever be a matter of conjecture whether the author of the Igor Tale ever read the treatise, but she very correctly points out what is of greatest importance, that he "actualized" Choeroboscus' theories of figurative terms. The author of the Igor Tale endowed these figurative terms, these abstractions, "with a function: made them the instruments of composition." According to Besharov, there was already a "tradition of style" in Russia at that time—a parabolic, figurative style which required speaking in riddles. In this respect Besharov follows Professor Jakobson's theory that Russian literary development underwent the same pattern of development as that of contemporary Europe, as reflected in many Russian writings of the time such as "Lazarus in Hell" or "Supplication of Daniel the Exile."² Some Soviet scholars have attempted to deny the impact of such a style on the Igor Tale,³ but in the opinion of this reviewer they can hardly refute the conclusions which Professor Jakobson and J. Besharov have drawn from a careful analysis of the style of the Igor Tale.

One of the strong and attractive points of Miss Besharov's work is her wide use in the study, along with illustrations from the Igor Tale and Choeroboscus' formulations, of abundant material from contemporary medieval letters, the Greek classic tradition, modern interpretations of medieval arts, and even from ancient Russian plastic arts. For instance, in interpreting the promise of the author of the Igor Tale to tell "his mighty tale in mighty words," Miss Besharov does not shun a comparison of Igor's challenge to Fate with that of Achilles, and of the anonymous author's affiliation with the famous Russian singer Bojan to Homer's descent from Apollo. "The whole continuity of mightiness in song and valor is as if gathered up and projected in the single homely epithet, *vnuk* (grandson)." Similar circumstances create similar associations and development. In another place Miss Besharov applies H. Focillon's observation on poetics and specifically medieval poetic styles: "To the poet, in the same way that an abstraction is visualized, the past is

²*Ibid.*, 45.

³Professor D. Likhachev's review of J. Besharov's book in *Izvestija Akademii Nauk SSSR, Otdelenie jazyka i literatury* (1956), 549-552.

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present, not recollection." (p. 55) She explains the entire poetic system of the Tale in terms of the Weltanschauung and background of the medieval man, whose poetic world was not a realm of pure perception achieving the complete fusion of image and concept, but the realm of consistently used symbolism. The same image, the same thought can be presented in a variety of forms, and the same words change semantically and are conditioned by circumstances of events and developments. Says Besharov, "This merging of time with eternity on the plane of legend is intimated in the exordium by the suggestive use of grammatical tenses." (p. 80) The author of the Tale, for example, uses various tenses—perfect, imperfect, aorist and present—not for the purpose of determining the chronological sequence but primarily, according to Besharov's explanation, for the purpose of expressing various degrees of immediacy. The medieval poet, a narrator of the past, actually presented the past as a part of the present. So, for instance, the main personages of the Igor Tale, Russian princes, are presented according to Besharov's interpretation, as "the princes of preceding ages . . . [who] come to life not in their historical setting but as the personages of an irrational world of song and story, caught in the power of metamorphosis as inexorably as the swan in the falcon's talons and conjured up at will by magic fingers and witching strings." (p. 79)

The falcons, traditional Russian symbols of bravery, take the reader or hearer of the Tale into the world of pure ornamentation. Besharov carefully traces the symbol of the falcon in folklore, in illuminated manuscripts and in the tympanium of King David's church, and remarks that "what had been rendered through paint and stone is now reiterated in words" (p. 57) Instead of color the poet uses sound, i.e. the repetition of *s* and *o*, for the purpose of embellishing his images.

Besharov offers an interesting interpretation of the poet's use of the words "*Rusici*," "*Russkii synove*" (Russia's sons) with "*deti Besovy*" (children of the Devil) (p. 56): the juxtaposition of Russians and pagans. The feeling of Russia's exclusive selection by God for inclusion in the world of Orthodoxy can be observed in the earliest Russian monuments,⁴ and the dualistic opposition of metaphysical good and evil, of the world of Christ and that of Evil, played an important role in the entire evolution of the Russian mind.

Examples of Besharov's inventiveness in her explanation of the poetic system of the Tale are extremely numerous and in the great majority of cases convincing. It can be regretted that the author of this excellent analysis of Russia's most outstanding medieval artistic

⁴For instance, Primary Chronicle, year 1093; see *Povest' vremennyx let* (Moscow, 1950), 147.

work did not use in addition examples from the wealth of early Russian literature nor from the allegoric world of Russian and Scythian animalistic imagery, both of which would be of the greatest help in such a study of artistic ornamentation and symbolism and could contribute to an explanation of the figures in the Igor Tale.

Miss Besharov does not limit her investigation to an interpretation of the Tale's symbolism. She classifies the poetic figures of the work according to Choeroboscus' system and shows that a large number of them fit into his theoretic framework. A major question remains unanswered by Miss Besharov, however. All the figures and tropes of the Slavonic version of Choeroboscus' treatise are illustrated solely by Biblical examples and, as mentioned above, the treatise was carefully purged of all pagan and lay embellishments. The Igor Tale, on the other hand, is the creation of a basically lay, non-clerical and non-religious mind which widely reflects the pagan tradition of pre-Christian Russia. Therefore the question arises whether this treatise, based in the Slavonic version on purely Christian symbolism, could be so integrally reinterpreted and "actualized" in a heroic and a-religious epic.

But neither this unanswered question nor some not wholly convincing interpretations of the Igor Tale's symbolism in the least diminish the capital importance of this book. Miss Besharov has done a splendid pioneering work in interpreting early Russian poetry in the light of Medieval mentality. Future students of early Russian poetics in particular, and of Medieval literature in general, will profit greatly from the fruits of her research.

Serge A. Zenkovsky

Russian Research Center
Harvard University