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Genre-Performance 'Doubles' in Russian Epic Tradition

Since the 1850s, it has been customary to consider that the far North (particularly the Lake Onega and Pechora regions) was the area of Russia where folk culture was preserved in its most pristine form. The assumptions underlying this consideration were circumstantial, relating to the fact that the region had never been enserfed, that it was not subject to Tatar-Mongol domination in the Middle Ages, and that, latterly, it was relatively unaffected by industrialisation and urbanisation (in contrast to central and Southern Russia). They ignored both the multi-ethnic nature of the Russian North itself, which has substantial non-Slav populations, particularly of Finno-Ugric groups, and the actual nature of its folk culture, which directly reflects the ethnic mix in the area. The following article is concerned with one specific area — the musical performance of the Russian *bylina*, folk epic — which is a particularly good demonstration of the issues involved. At the same time, it propounds a different model of cultural evolution, according to which the *bylina* did not modulate from a performance tradition of one kind to a performance tradition of

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another kind, but developed according to a system of 'genre doubles' (or triples, or quadruples), where epics would be performed simultaneously in a variety of different ways, according to the particular needs and aesthetic standards of a given cultural milieu. This model suggests a way of reconciling the long-term and sterile debates about whether the *bylina* was a product of the cultural elite or of the Russian 'folk', and means that due recognition can be accorded to the activities of certain outstanding individual performers — in this case the eighteenth-century singer Kirsha Danilov, a collection of whose works performed a vital role in the upsurge of interest in Russian folklore that accompanied the Russian Romantic movement.

I am convinced that the mode of performance in which the Russian *bylina* is preserved to this day (solo performer without instrumental accompaniment) has only ever existed in the north of the country, and then never amongst Russians. The epic was created (or rather re-created) by the peoples of the north, apparently with reference to the vigorous epic tradition of their new Russian neighbours, with whom contacts seem to have been strong and multi-faceted. In short, the Russian unaccompanied solo *bylina* is a product of the Russian north, created in the 'inter-ethnic space of the traditional culture' of the region [Vasilyeva, Lapin 1993]. The style of their musical performance indicates that the northern *byliny* can have had no other place of origin.

K. V. Chistov [1978] was without doubt correct in his assessment — *all* north Russian culture is indeed 'late' or 'secondarily archaic'. However, the recognition of this has not yet prompted anyone to draw the radical conclusion that all song forms of the Russian north, strictly speaking, must be secondary, too. (I see T. A. Bernshtam's bold idea that the north of Russia saw '*yet another revival of the memory of the heroic past, which led to a veritable explosion in epic poetry*', as a preliminary expression of this hypothesis.)¹

On the basis of the available facts, the north Russian *bylina* can be regarded as a 'secondary epic', or even, in my view, as an *epic-recollection* of a 'primary' ethnic epic. (It is for precisely this reason that *byliny* are popularly known as *stariny*.)² We are dealing with Russians' recollections in song, as it were, of *their own* 'old' epic, which had gradually been created *afresh* in the new historical conditions, of co-existence with other peoples. The mode of performance and intonations of the Russian epic changed, one may presume, to incorporate the structural norms and, to some extent, the imagery of the Finno-Ugric folk epics of the northerners. And

¹ As set out in a recent oral presentation.

² The noun *starina* also means 'olden times'. [Editor].

in this altered form it *re-entered* that most idiosyncratic of domains, that of the north European folk epic, where from archaic times existed (and in part this situation is still preserved) a number of very different epic traditions: Russian, Finno-Karelian, Komi-Zyrian and Komi-Permyak, Saami, Scandinavian, and others.¹ This may account for the ‘mist of antiquity’ which hangs over Northern Russian epics, and which is not characteristic of most ‘primary’ folk epics; for the elegiac veneer of musical ‘memorates’,² as it were, which is sometimes tangible in *byliny* as they are performed. I would, by extension, argue that this ‘secondariness’ explains why the *byliny* lack that ‘primeval ardour’, that passionate and incandescent narration about a living epic world, that is so clearly evident in modern versions of South Slavonic or Turkic folk epics, for instance.

I am in no doubt that all types of group performances of Russian epics should be regarded as being to some or other degree secondary or indeed tertiary modifications and metamorphoses. We can make guesses (and speculate) as much as we like about what types of epic singers were known in Kievan or Muscovite Rus, or about how the singing of the *bylina* hero Dobrynya Nikitich³ might have actually sounded, but I believe it to be beyond dispute that *if Dobrynya had in fact broken into song, it would have been much closer to Kirsha Danilov than to any of the Ryabinin dynasty*.⁴

From my point of view it is the figure of Kirsha, together with his repertoire and his manner of ‘presentation’, the mode of performance, the instrument, the surrounding milieu, etc., which offers the surest key (among those currently available) to one of the musical enigmas of the Russian epic. Kirsha’s repertoire was both rich and extremely varied. It included almost all the classic subjects of the Russian *bylina* (24 different songs), and also historical songs (21

¹ See [Honko *et al.* 1994]; [Steblin-Kamenskij 1982].

² The ‘memorate’ is a specific genre of stereotyped recollection: see further Steve Smith’s article below. [Editor].

³ Dobrynya Nikitich is one of the most important heroes of the *bylina* (Russian folk epic): among other roles, he is represented as a dragon-slayer (in the epic ‘Dobrynya and the Dragon’, recorded in many different variants). [Editor].

⁴ Kirsha Danilov’s biography is only just starting to emerge, thanks to newly-discovered archival documents. We are learning that Kirsha was a real historical personage of the mid eighteenth century; his name has long been linked with a unique (unique in international terms too) collection of more than seventy Russian epic and historical songs — poetic texts with musical settings alongside. In 1739–1742 Kirsha (his full name was Kirill Danilovich) Danilov was a favourite of the rich Siberian mine-owner Akinfy Demidov (1678–1745). For more information, see [Gorelov 2000]; [Putilov 1958]. The Ryabinin dynasty of epic singers of Northern Russia lasted from the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century; its roots may be traced back to the eighteenth century. The best-known epic singers from the family are Trofim Grigoryevich Ryabinin (1801–1885), Ivan Trofimovich Ryabinin (1844–1908), whose voice was recorded on phonograph in Moscow, 1894, and Petr Ivanovich Ryabinin-Andreev (1905–1953). See [Zemtsovsky 2001].

items, embracing both extremely rare archaic subjects and material from the very recent past, in the reign of Peter the Great, among them Cossack and soldier songs on historical themes), and also satirical and comic songs. To judge by the melodies cited in the manuscript, and also by the material that has been discovered about Kirsha's biography, his performances were characterised by vocal and instrumental unity, i.e. he would sing the songs to his own accompaniment.

There are five types of evidence to suggest that the performance of the Russian *bylina* originally involved both voice and instrument: (1) the data provided by the texts of the *byliny* themselves; (2) the form of musical notation found in Kirsha Danilov's Collection; (3) documentary evidence that Danilov himself played a stringed '*tarnoboi*', most likely a type of psaltery or zither, to accompany his singing; (4) the *gudki* (instruments with three strings played with a bow) still found in the Urals, which are similar to medieval Russian and, apparently, to Turko-Mongol varieties of this instrument, and which are used for accompanying song performances; and (5) extensive comparative and typological data on similar modes of performing epic songs among Finno-Ugric ethnic groups related to Russians, and particularly among the Turko-Slavonic ethnic groups of Ukraine, the Balkans, and Central Asia. Taken together, these pieces of direct and indirect, artistic and historical evidence are eloquent enough in themselves. No less revealing is the indisputable fact that performances of *byliny* using both voice and instrument are not attested among Russians in the north, where, according to my hypothesis, the Russian epic is performed not only in its secondary form (a), but also in its to all intents and purposes folkloric form (b), which latter is close to the autochthonous northern epic traditions of Finno-Ugric ethnic groups (c). However, in professional performances resembling the form which is generally supposed to be 'primary', the Russian epic, as preserved for us by the genius of Kirsha Danilov, is always executed by both voice and instrument.

The typology of Kirsha Danilov's artistic position cannot be treated separately from the highly complex issue of the sources and the fate of the Russian epic in general.

Epics of the Kievan period have not survived in their original mode of performance, perhaps because they basically never were folklore (or, to put it more carefully, because they were never *just* folklore: rather, the epic *became* folklore, a process which A. N. Veselovsky called *obnarodnenie*, 'folkification').¹ In the beginning they may

¹ i.e. became what is known in German folklore studies *gesunkenes Kulturgut* ('sunken cultural material'). [Editor].

have been the work of professional composers, most probably singers in the princes' retinues, and *skomorokhi*¹ of the day, and in their original forms they may gradually have disappeared as such people themselves did. Remarkably, though, 'the people' (an entity represented by different strata within Russian society at different times) remembered these epics and lovingly went on singing some of their tunes, effectively creating a new mode of performance.

In the oral tradition, nothing ever disappears completely without trace. Thus the Russian folk epic did not disappear all of a sudden, though certain forms in which it had been created and transmitted gradually 'disappeared'. The past claimed just some of the 'genre/performance hypostases' of the epic. Nevertheless, this was always sung in some fashion or another; while one or another of its main features, themes, images and motifs might be modified, epic tradition as such survived. When the matter is looked at in this way, it is logical to assume that at first only the 'court' epic proper 'disappeared' — together with the historically attested disappearance of the princes' retinues. The 'skomorokh epic' disappeared much later — together with the barbaric annihilation and enforced social assimilation of the *skomorokhi* as a group.² And only in the twentieth century did we begin to see the disappearance of the third historical type of epic known in Russia — the folkloric and semi-folkloric epic so fortunately recorded over 140 years ago in the Russian north. It has declined as the way of life and the environment to which it corresponds have been destroyed, and as folkloric consciousness and mentality have broken down. In the process of this decline, however, the epic has also undergone partial transformation, sometimes being modulated into new types of orally-transmitted song, and sometimes, when preserved in the form of books, sheet music, records and compact discs, reaching the 'penultimate' historical stage of being acknowledged as an immortal piece of Russian cultural heritage, — I say 'penultimate' because the epic does not actually die out even at this point, but rather becomes frozen in time, waiting to be taken up again by some new socio-cultural movement, to become one of the various types of so-called performance-folklore. No-one knows if even this form of existence will really be its 'last': traditions, let me repeat, never disappear altogether: they are endlessly transformed and re-interpreted, leaving traces of some kind or another in the culture as they go.

¹ Professional entertainers of Kievan and early Muscovite Rus; while the term is often translated 'minstrel', 'jester' would be more appropriate. Descriptions of their shows have come down in proscriptive legislation and in the descriptions of foreign travellers. Discussions in English include Russell Zguta. *Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi*. Oxford, 1978; Catriona Kelly. 'The Origins of the Russian Theatre' // R. Leach, V. Borovsky (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Russian Theatre*. Cambridge, 1999. [Editor].

² Under Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich in the mid seventeenth century. See Zguta. *Russian Minstrels*; Kelly. 'The Origins'. [Editor].

Setting aside all the intricacies of detailed argument (which will find their place in my as yet unpublished study of Kirsha Danilov's collection of folk songs) and schematically simplifying historical reality, which is in fact extremely complex, I would argue that it is possible to distinguish three levels of epic consciousness, and three corresponding 'genre-performance versions' of the epic works of medieval Rus': 1) the professional level as proper to members of the princes' retinues, representatives of the so-called military democracy;¹ 2) the professional level as proper to *skomorokhi*, who added their own versions for voice and instrument to the repertoire, and who at the same time created their own special epic songs (e.g. *skomoroshiny*), and 3) the counterparts to these two traditions on (a) the semi-folkloric level (i.e. informed by specialised knowledge of performance techniques, as current among *skazitel*-rhapsodists²), and (b) the folkloric level itself, as represented by both soloists and ensemble performers, who may in turn have disseminated *sung* folkloric versions of those same narrative compositions.³

This situation can with justice be compared to the interesting phenomenon of 'genre doubles' discovered by Alma Kunanbaeva [1989, 2002]. She identified and analysed a system of binary genre relationships among different varieties of folk epic in the Kazakh oral (song and instrumental) tradition. Kunanbaeva begins from an assumption that every event and assertion within the system of traditional genres is interpreted at three distinct, but interconnected levels: the level of everyday consciousness (i.e., in genres of folk song); the level of ritualised consciousness within a particular clan (i.e. within the creative practices of the so-called *aqyn* as professional singers who take part in the performance of the most important rites of passage, e.g. birth, marriage, funerals); and the level of 'scholarly', so to speak, 'pedagogical', and 'historical' consciousness — in epic tradition as such, which among the Kazakhs is without question professionalised. In relation to this, Kunanbaeva put forward her own, highly original, interpretation of the structure of Kazakh musical and poetic culture, which she saw as consisting of three different traditions, corresponding in turn to three socio-artistic institutions — in her terminology, the folkloric, the *aqyn*, and the

¹ A term current in Soviet historiography to refer to the cultural attitudes of the 'martial retainers' (*druzhina*) of the domain princes (*udelnye knyazya*), who were considered to form a special elite group in feudal society. [Editor].

² i.e. traditional performers of epics in folk culture. [Editor].

³ One might compare recent work on the production of carpets and flatweaves in Central Asia, which distinguishes three types: an elite tradition (for important mosques), produced to individualised patterns recorded on paper; artisanal carpets woven according to standard templates; and 'tribal rugs', worked to stereotyped patterns that are held in the memory of their producers, rather than set down in writing. There is a useful introductory account of this in Jon Thompson. *Tribal Carpets: From the Tents, Cottages, and Workshops of Asia*. London, 1988. [Editor].

epic. Moreover, the *aqyn* and epic traditions each in its own way ‘doubles up with’ the folkloric tradition: for instance, one can find *aqyn* and epic ‘doubles’ of ritual songs. The most interesting point for my argument here lies in the fact that epic songs are known among the Kazakhs at all three levels: in the capacity of epic songs (1), in the capacity of *aqyn* texts on epic subjects (2), and in the capacity of extended epic tales, the so-called *zhyr* (the epos as such) (3).¹ Texts of a comparable kind (in terms of content, rather than poetics, or performance style) will be performed simultaneously in distinct socio-cultural milieux, with performance traditions varying according to the poetic and musical style of a given genre.

Genre doubles represent the only real constellation of cultural phenomena in oral traditions. They indicate that plurality was in existence *from the very beginning*, rather than pointing to an evolution from one form into another. In a traditional society, this plurality results from institutional, social and regional factors, as is reflected in every system of functional genres. Genres are reduplicated among diverse traditions within the same culture — folklore, the professional oral tradition, the epic tradition (broadly understood). A tradition replicates itself (1) in order to strengthen itself and endure, (2) in order to gain control over local reality by looking at the world through different eyes. (That is why it is so difficult to eradicate an oral tradition completely, without leaving something behind.) Within a given culture, representatives of various social classes whose creativity found expression in different genres acted rather like ‘communicating vessels’. The creative echoes within oral culture never existed merely at the level of borrowing — such interaction was how *the basic phenomenon of self-reduplication* at different levels of culture was realised.

To judge from the picture which I have outlined, in relation to Russia we ought perhaps to talk of genre ‘triples’ which may have co-existed for some period of time in the past. In saying this, I am inadvertently *reconciling* the advocates of three different theories of the origins of the Russian epic (in the princes’ retinues, among the *skomorokhi*, in folklore), since in reality all three types most likely *co-existed*.

It is only natural that since the folkloric tradition was not the ultimate source of the epic, and since this tradition is intrinsically conservative, it should have enjoyed the greatest longevity. We see it interacting with a sort of *skomorokh* tradition in the artistic personality and musical inheritance of Kirsha Danilov, although it seems to me that he set all three traditions on a new historical path when he bequeathed to us perhaps the most ancient forms

¹ English-speaking readers might also like to consult [Kunanbaeva 1990]; [Kunanbaeva 1995]; and [Kunanbaeva 2002].

in which the epic had existed, those for voice and instrument, but did not allow the epic to become confined to any one possible hypostasis.

Both as an individual and as a type, Kirsha Danilov is genetically and typologically linked with all three genre hypostases of the Russian epic, yet according to the available facts he is also markedly different from them all, towering above them thanks to his rare quality as a performer. Thus, when Kirsha's experience is taken into account, one can picture the history of the Russian musical epic as a kind of 'pyramid': the three original versions form its base, and its apex is formed by the version of the epic 'embodied' by Kirsha Danilov. While the top rests firmly upon its base and is connected to it on all sides, it also faces boldly into the distance.

I therefore suggest that the solution to the riddle of the Russian epic is not to be sought in the late, 'secondarily archaic' tradition of the Russian north, no matter how enchantingly beautiful and majestic it may be, nor in the tradition of the Cossack periphery of Russia, which retained its creative vigour despite continuing ethnic tensions; it can be arrived at instead by means of a comprehensive study of Kirsha's Danilov's unique Collection, in every respect a remarkable achievement of eighteenth-century Russia.

Only by making this document and its compiler the starting-point for our investigation do we have a chance of truly understanding the Russian (not necessarily pan-Russian!) musical epic as an essentially *individual* artistic phenomenon (its 'heredity' merely confirms this interpretation).¹ In other words, the question as a whole should be re-stated in a different way.

It follows from what has been said so far that, when all known forms of Russian epic songs are taken into account, the following hypothesis can be put forward. The Russian epic evidently existed in four basic genre-performance doubles: 1) a form which has been lost entirely — a reciter who accompanied himself on an instrument; 2) a solo reciter with no instrument, 3) two types of group performance: a soloist with 'backing' and ensemble singing, 4) the choral song.

The first type could have had sub-types; it appears to have been included in the repertoires both of performers in the princes' retinues and of the *skomorokhi*: the two groups had their own versions of 'the same' *byliny*. It would be incorrect to claim that in some of these types alone the *instrument* was lost — *the entire genre-double 'epic with instrument' was lost*, at first because princes' performers disappeared as a class, and later because the *skomorokh*

¹ Cf. the significant body of recent work by classicists on the importance of individual performance in epic tradition. [Editor].

tradition was subject to persecution in Aleksei Mikhailovich's 'crusade' against Russian folk culture, which included the complete eradication of all instruments.

The third type evidently comprises peasants' versions of the *byliny*, which effectively became a part of folklore as locally disseminated, down practically to the level of individual families. For their part, the second and fourth types, while usually taken as 'typical', belong not to simple peasants, but to the coastal inhabitants and hunters of the north of Russia, and to the Cossacks (i.e. the military aristocracy) of the south; they are not pan-Russian phenomena, but are known only in the geographical periphery of European Russia; furthermore, they have both been subject to strong non-Slavonic influences (at the very least from the Karelian Finns, Vepsy, Nentsy and/or Komi-Permyak peoples in the north and north-east, and from the Mordvin and Turko-Kypchak peoples in the south¹). Crucially, among the Don Cossacks epic songs are only ever performed as part of the wedding ritual [Listopadov 1954: 247, 253], and thus they are not simply choral re-workings of northern *byliny* which arose under the influence of the 'genre and stylistic leitmotifs' of the lyric song (as argued by [Lapin 1995; Vasilyeva 1989]). They are a different phenomenon entirely — a typical genre *double* (specifically, a *ceremonial double*) of the Russian epic tradition. Therefore such texts cannot be considered 'epics' in the proper sense of the word. Nevertheless, within the conceptual framework of genre doubles, the choral wedding songs of the Don, like the southern Russian ceremonial variety of the epic, are part of the pan-Russian genre system of the epic as a whole.

The concept of genre doubles makes it possible to describe in a new way the entire system of epic genres, including their poetics. For example, the so-called *skomoroshiny* and *nebylitsy* etc. prove not to be parodies or satires on the 'high epic', but *debased* 'genre doubles' which exist at a completely different level of folk culture.² The 'novelistic *byliny*', too, are a special type of 'genre double', a sort of 'cruel romance'³ within the epic... The epic also has genre doubles which do not take the form of songs — the so-called '*heroic fairy-tale*' (a term coined by V. M. Zhirmunsky), the '*religious epic based on saints' lives*' (as named by A. N. Veselovsky), and others. There are no grounds for supposing that '*a period of narrative performances*

¹ [Korguzalov 1966: 138] went so far as to see in the *bylina* a 'Russian *zheldirme*', analogous to the rhythm of the epic horse-races in the Kirghiz 'Manas'.

² i.e. are not intentional *imitations* of 'high' tradition, but an autonomous 'low' tradition of their own. [Editor]

³ 'Cruel romance': a street ballad, song about some tragic circumstance in the recent past, most often a *crime passionnel*. Such 'romances' have been enormously popular in Russia since the late nineteenth century. A study in English dealing with such material is G. S. Smith. *Songs to Seven Strings*. Bloomington, Indiana, 1984. [Editor].

preceded musical versions' [A. L. Maslov 1911: 296] — rather the two could have existed side by side, as indeed actually happens in traditional culture to this day.¹

To sum up, the concept of genre doubles makes it possible to evaluate all the material collected so far and to make principled conjectures regarding material which is not yet known. It also comes closest to the bearers' own perceptions of traditional folk culture, because it regards the oral tradition from within, not without. It is natural to assume that the concept will become an organic part of subsequent stages of international research into folk epics, and that it, together with a typological approach, will have appreciable results. The hypothesis set out here is just the first, very tentative, step in this direction.

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¹ See, for example, the image of Fedor Tiron, the child dragon-slayer, who is the main character of three narratives at once — mythological, folk-tale and epic — and who is known to the Nekrasovets Cossacks in a 'religious *bylina*' [Ivanov 1994].

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