

THE NOTION OF DESTINY IN EPIC SONGS AND BALLADS

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Abstract: The article analyses two Russian ballads in which the hero and plot are close to those of epic songs. Human destiny is a central notion of the ballads; its portrayal is compared to the way destiny is shown in rites and epic songs. The portrayal of time characteristic of the epic song (historic present) acquires new function in the ballad where circular time is replaced by the portrayal of linear, irreversible human fate.

Keywords: destiny, rite, archaic epic song, female and male heroes of ballads, archaic symbolism

The destiny of man is a complex and ambivalent notion. In ancient times it was believed that people inherit their destiny from their mother, parents or ancestors. The notion had been materialised by mythological thinking. Happy people are born in a “shirt” (*pileus naturalis*); the thread indicated that people were bound by ties to their tribe. The same intent was expressed when the hands of the bride and groom were tied by a kerchief in the church. A similar symbol is found in German children’s songs: a silk ribbon (*Windelband*, *Sidelband*) brought from Engelland and Heeland.¹ According to Russians, the bride is “promised” (*suzhenaja*), marriage and death are “predestined”.²

Besides the Russian expression “*sudjba*” (destiny) which stems from “*sud*” meaning court, there is also “*uchastj*”, “*dolja*” which stem from the root meaning part and mean to be part of the common lot. According to popular thinking, the human lot is also influenced by unforeseen events.

The historical and ethnic experience of the different peoples brought different characteristics in the development of the notion of destiny. For example, the interpretation of destiny by two Slavonic people – Russians and Serbs – is very different. Russian people preserve more archaic and outmoded notions. In their songs they rather reproduce the feeling of pressure and the constraint of conventions in notions like sorrow (*gore*), evil (*obida*, *kruchina*) and misfortune (*nedolja*).³

At the same time the event of “encounter” (*sreha*) in the Serbian language had brought a new notion. This spread among Croats, Romanians, Ukrainians and Hun-

¹ VESELOVSKIJ 1889: XIII, 208–209.

² Ibidem: 201–202.

³ Ibidem: 259.

garians and means luck.⁴ Luck is often embodied in a clever, successful, beautiful girl who brings happiness to an unsuccessful lad. In traditional societies rites regulated the course of human life full of conflicts and socialised children from birth, led people from one age group to the other, sanctified their marriage, gave them the last honours and after their death rites initiated them as ancestors. “It is paradoxical,” writes Albert BAJBURIN, “that rite which is a conventional phenomenon, has an unconditional pragmatic sense. Moreover, its basic function is to help ... absolute biological processes such as death or birth to become conventional categories. ... This makes it possible to play a sort of intellectual game with nature. It is important for people to be considered a worthy partner in this game.”⁵

A similar area of play is opened in folklore, but here aesthetics play a dominant role. I have chosen the widespread popular song “Potuk Mihajlo Ivanovich”. Its elements and topic originate from different periods and were probably shaped in different epic traditions in Northern Russia. In some songs Potuk kills the dragon, in others his wife, the wicked wizard, is transformed into a snake.⁶ The song starts with an archaic hunt which becomes a marriage feast. The hero sets out for the coast at the request of Prince Vladimir to hunt for “geese, white swans and little grey ducks”. He sees

“... the white swan,
Its feathers are all of gold,
Its little head is bound with red gold
and decorated with round pearls.”⁷

This description belongs rather to a wedding song. Although the girl is not a bride (who in epic songs is always passive), but a wizard, she forces the hero to swear that if one of the married couple dies, the other will follow her or him alive to the grave. In this way the motif of treason and deceit lies like a burden on the motif of the wedding.⁸

At midnight in the tomb the hero does battle with all terrestrial snakes and with the big snake “burning him with flaming fire”. But he burns candles and pulls a rope that ties him to the church bell. His wife is resurrected with the snake’s blood which is contrary to epic traditions.⁹ The protagonist has luck, he lives a long life. After his death his wife follows him alive to the tomb. There are other texts where Potuk, realising the wickedness of his wife, kills her.¹⁰

The course of the hero’s fate and the way epic texts become plots are reminiscent of Greek epic poems and tragedies. According to Aleksej LOSEV, in Greek

⁴ Ibidem: 213.

⁵ BAJBURIN 1992: 18–19.

⁶ NOVIKOV 2000: 63, 67.

⁷ DANILOV 1977: 116.

⁸ LOBODA 1904: 102.

⁹ ASTAFJEVA 1993: 43.

¹⁰ PUTILOV 1997: 443.

poetry “destiny works like an aesthetic category”. “Antique destiny is objective reality with unknown laws. Their existence does not disturb the strong personality, on the contrary it provides him with an opportunity to act as a hero.”¹¹

The protagonists in epic songs are outstanding figures, while the heroes of ballads are ordinary people whose lives are changed by unexpected events. This is a special conventional phenomenon in the ballad: the destiny of its heroes is extraordinary, the circumstances are exceptional. The hero in Greek tragedy, convinced of the justness of his cause, pursues his path, committing more and more mistakes. His awakening to the realisation of his sins leads him to a catharsis: he either repents his sin or becomes irrevocably wicked.¹²

The protagonist of the ballad also has to face his lot. In ballads there is no prophesying as there is in epic songs and fairy tales. “Early topic forms did not contain prophesying.”¹³ Epic songs often begin with prohibition, which is the most important element of the epic movement. It is probably the prohibition on naming the totem that lies behind this.¹⁴

In Russian epics we find only the “promised” bride, the faithful wife and the hostile but active wife. In ballads a variety of female characters can be found. I have selected for analysis ballads recorded in the summer of 1843 in the Moscow region.

In one of them “a beautiful girl” has “discredited” her lover. He is accompanied to the scaffold by his wife and young children on his right and the “beautiful girl” on his left and his parents following behind. The girl tells of her betrayal: “I lived with my friend to my heart’s content. I did not reveal my secrets. I discredited my lover, because of me he was whipped.”¹⁵ At the end her friend does not say anything; there is no farewell to the “beautiful girl”, speaking only about the fate of his wife and children as orphans.

In another song the young man “beats a path” to a girl, ruins her reputation and abandons her. The girl plans to kill him with the help of her brothers. She will make a bedstead from his arms and legs, prepare a dish from his flesh, wine from his blood and a candle from his fat. She invites the young man’s relatives and asks a riddle: “I am sitting on my lover, I am offering food together with him, I am looking upon my shining lover”. The young man’s sister understands the riddle and becomes very sad. Why didn’t her brother listen to her, why did he go to a place where he was invited late at night, where people lived in drunkenness.”¹⁶

So we see that in the centre there are eternal sentiments, conflicts, love, infidelity, jealousy, revenge. Do we find catharsis in these songs? I think that by stressing the dead-ends of human destinies, hopelessness and desperate situations, the ballad creates a sort of catharsis. The deceived girl builds a whole house out of the body of the young man she has killed, as a compensation for their common life. In ballads a

¹¹ LOSEV 1965: 539.

¹² PROPP 1976: 294–295.

¹³ *Ibidem*: 263.

¹⁴ ASTAFJEVA 1993: 180–181.

¹⁵ KIREJEVSKIJ 1983: 80, No. 142.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*: 80, No. 144.

whole cosmos is built around the tragic events. In another ballad, for example, the crying of a boy who has been driven away from his home is compared to a symbolic “white burning stove” from beneath which wells spring up. His sisters set out to find him.

“The oldest goes as an animal to the forest,
The middle as a star to heaven,
The youngest as a pike to the sea.”¹⁷

In another song a young woman sets out to visit her mother and has to stop “in the dark forest”. “Dark clouds come, with a storm, snow, frost and heavy rain.” “The wide road is full of ruts, it is impassable.” The woman sends a bird from the forest to her mother whom she cannot reach.

These symbolical pictures magnify human feelings and nature takes an active role in the plot. Human destiny in ballads is placed on a higher level, together with cosmic forces. Most scholars share the opinion that ballads were created later than epic songs. Nevertheless, the ballads seem to have been created also in ancient times, using archaic mythological symbols which are common to the wedding songs, rites and epics. The mythological symbols are still alive in ballads.

However, besides the archaic symbols, other features can also be seen in the ballads in the portrayal of human destiny and the world around man. These point to the difference between the ballad and epic songs. But in the centuries of the late Middle Ages the ballad was incorporated into the system of new genres, together with the verse chronicles and religious folk songs.

Rolf W. BREDNICH, an expert on German religious folk songs writes that the performance of religious songs “is characterised by festive gravity, in the same way as the ballads”¹⁸

A Russian folk tale researcher, Yelizar MELETINSKIJ considers that this is characteristic of the world of tales too, where “the individual is made cosmic in a certain sense; the life of the hero corresponds in many ways to numerous rites of passage, above all to initiation when the child passes through temporary ritual death and harsh trials to become a full member of the tribe”. But, here too it is not “the awakening of individual consciousness that is involved, but rather the socialisation of the individual and even his merging into the tribe”.¹⁹

The ballad generally deals with family and everyday conflicts and human relations. The person’s individual traits also become visible in these conflicts, although the range of ballad heroes is not very wide. The unexpected event which determines human life is never explained, but a great variety of human responses are shown. In the same way as the epic, the ballad portrays events in the historic present tense. In epic songs this portrayal of events in a non-closed time leads to continuous repetitions, to eternity. The event in the ballad takes place in individual time and makes

¹⁷ KIREJEVSKIJ 1977: t. 1, 186.

¹⁸ BREDNICH 1969: 11.

¹⁹ MELETINSKIJ 1994: 15.

the course of human fate irreversible. This individual, non-repeating and irreversible event is not placed in the circular time of the epic song but on the modern linear time plane. Human life is irreversible in the ballad.

We can see here the birth of the new historical consciousness, the emergence of a new view of human life, human destiny and historical events. "The religious folk songs, ballads and verse chronicles are different genres and are about something else: man's faith and man's life on earth. But they are all the product of the same age, when man pondered over the fate of the individual (in religious songs and ballads), over the significance of great events and the importance of individual actions (in the verse chronicles)."²⁰

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²⁰ KÁMÁN 1999: 11.