# Reflexive Thoughts about a Medieval Russian Epic

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Successful application of Lefebvre's reflexive model to the analysis of natural language texts depends on the analyst's ability to consistently determine ethical values associated with meanings of words and sentences. Medieval epic texts are particularly difficult to analyze due to: differences between ancient and modern ethical standards; highly formulaic language; and reliance on information known to contemporaneous audiences but not necessarily to a modern reader.

A good example of the challenges and benefits of such an analysis is the *Igor' Tale*, an anonymous Russian poem which describes a failed military expedition by prince Igor' of Novgorod Seversky against a tribe of Polovcians. According to Russian chronicles, the events narrated in the *Tale* took place in 1185 - 1186.

The *Tale* describes the following sequence of events: prince Igor' sets out on his expedition, ignores a string of bad omens, and engages the enemy; after a brief initial success, Igor' suffers a disastrous defeat and is taken prisoner. Little is said about Igor''s life in captivity; instead, the author recounts a bad dream of Igor''s father (prince Svjatoslav), describes the sorrow of orphaned subjects, and complains about the lack of unity among the rulers of Russian lands. This is followed by a lament by Igor''s wife, Jaroslavna. Finally, after God shows Igor' the way out of captivity, Igor' rides home, making a detour to worship at an Orthodox temple.

The complex, archaic structure of the text and the abundance of metaphoric and metonymic imagery make it particularly difficult for a modern reader. Furthermore, as is often the case with Russian texts of the Kievan period, the *Tale* may be easily misunderstood through deceiving analogies with the later Muscovite literature [2].

As Roman Jakobson demonstrated in his pioneering work [1], reliable interpretations of the *Tale* may be achieved through detailed analysis (often based on linguistic data) of its structure. A more recent article by Dean Worth describes a formal evaluation procedure for determining ethical values of certain types of sentences in *Igor' Tale* [4]. Worth proceeds from the assumption that the author of the *Tale* evaluates characters and events using a strict binary system rather than a bipolar continuum; in other words, from the viewpoint of the *Tale*'s author, people and things can be either good or bad, with no intermediate values. Worth concludes that nouns which represent Russians and their metonymic equivalents (falcons, trees, grass, scarlet standards, and praise [*xvala*]) express a positive evaluation, while Polovcians and related images (swans, *Div* [a mythical bird-like creature], gray ravens, and infamy [*xula*]) have a negative ethical value. Furthermore, in the language of the *Tale*, verbs associated with high position or upward motion are evaluated positively, and verbs which refer to low position or downward motion are negative. Worth determines that the author of the *Tale* employed a stylistic device that generates positive or negative images by combining two or more ethically significant words: a sentence has a positive meaning if a positive predicate is combined with a positive (i.e. "Russian" nominal argument, or if a negative predicate is associated with a "Polovcian" noun. Similarly, a combination of a "positive" predicate with negative arguments or a negative predicate with positive arguments creates a negative meaning. For example, the images of high-flying Russian standards and of the enemy heads rolling on the ground are equally positive, while the ominous *Div* crying from the top of a tree (an enemy symbol in a high position) is negative.

Using this evaluation procedure, Worth concludes that, with the exception of the beginning of the *Tale* (part of which is a reminiscence of the glorious past) and the final episode which describes Igor''s return, the text is dominated by negative imagery. Although the author has an unambiguously positive view of the protagonist, the description of Igor''s behavior is hardly flattering; the prince, who is repeatedly referred to as "gallant", declares at the outset of the expedition that he would rather die by the sword than be taken prisoner, but he turns out to be unable or unwilling to avoid captivity. Although the author of *Tale* says almost nothing about Igor"s life in captivity and is a bit evasive in explaining how Igor' gained his freedom, the audience of the *Tale* could probably know (as we know from Russian chronicles) that Igor' had to engage in some kind of a diplomatic compromise, which included the marriage of his son to a Polovcian princess (this is tacitly admitted by the author, who notes that the enemy plotted to "trap the young falcon with a maiden's beauty"). All this however does not affect the author's positive evaluation of Igor"s personality.

Furthermore, although the author of the *Tale* laments the defeat of the Russians and the sorry state of Igor"s principality after the defeat of his army, the scenes of Igor"s escape and return home consist almost entirely of positive images; it appears that the patriotic poet treats the return of the defeated prince who had to make a painful peace with the enemy as a victory – even though little had changed in his military or political standing.

Finally, many scholars have noted that the story of a Christian prince's war against a pagan enemy told by a Christian poet does not mention God until the very end, when God shows Igor' the way out of prison. This is in stark contrast to the abundance of references to pre-Christian Slavic deities and magic forces which appear throughout the text. These pagan and animistic images may appear in a positive context and are often associated with the Russians (Jakobson refers to this pre-Christian imagery as "a kind of 'neo-paganism' " [2]).

These apparent contradictions, the positive evaluation of a defeated hero, the positive evaluation of his less then triumphant return, and the abundance of "neo-pagan" imagery in a Christian epic can be explained if we assume that the subject of the *Tale* is not a failed military expedition, but rather the inner world of the protagonist.

From the beginning of the *Tale*, the author assigns a positive value to Igor"s personality and to the goal of the intended raid (dubious though it may appear to a modern moralist). However, Igor' does not have a clear view of the situation or, in the author's words, "the prince's desire burned his wisdom". As the prince and his army set out on the ill-fated expedition, he ignores numerous bad omens, represented by a sequence of negative images. (From a modern viewpoint, the shadow that descends upon the army or the cry of the demonic *Div* from a tree top – in both cases, a combination of a "negative" subject with high position – may not be considered valid intelligence, but again, we cannot expect a medieval observer to share our views on military planning.) In other words, Igor' receives and misinterprets a string of negative inputs; the bad omens serve as eloquent proof of Igor"s blind confidence: for him the situation remains positive. In terms of Lefebvre's reflexive model, such a character "knows not what he does"; regardless of the character's intentions, any negative pressure from the outside world will be transformed into a negative action. Using Lefebvre's notation, Igor"s inner state before the defeat and captivity may be represented as:

$$f(x_1, x_2, x_3) = X_1 \tag{1}$$

where $x_1 = 0$ and $x_2 = 1$; according to the author of the *Tale*, $x_3$, the variable which represents Igor"s own intentions, must have a value of 1, but this does not affect Igor"s choices: according to Lefebvre's axiom of credulity, for every $x_3$

$$f(0, 1, x_3) = 0 \tag{2}$$

([3], p. 7).

While almost nothing is said about Igor"s life in captivity, the description of the sorrow that the rout of the Russian army caused Igor"s subjects and family contains what Worth describes as an "almost uninterrupted string of negative images". Positive images appear only at the end of the narrative, shortly before Igor"s escape; thereafter, the final scenes depicting Igor"s return are almost entirely positive, apparently as a manifestation of a change in Igor"s inner state. Since Igor"s character and intentions remain positive throughout the text, the only possible change in the character's state of mind should be in the way he interprets reality. Indeed, if a positive view of the situation becomes negative, the character's status must be rewritten as

$$f(0, 0, x_3) = X_1 \tag{3}$$

In Levebvre's model, this is the case when the subject acquires free will, i.e. the ability to transform his intentions into readiness to act, regardless of any outside pressure. Strong evidence in favor of this interpretation lies in the fact that the only thing that the author says about the circumstances of the escape is that God shows Igor' the way out of captivity. In sharp contrast with the core of the text, which is populated by pagan deities and animistic imagery, it is the Christian God who opens Igor"s eyes. It appears, therefore, that the prevalence of positive imagery at the end of the *Tale* celebrates a fundamental change in Igor"s personality: in the enemy prison, God gives Igor' the gift of free will. Or as Lefebvre put it, prison made Igor' free.

## References


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[2] Jakobson, R., The puzzles of the Igor' Tale on the 150th anniversary of its first edition. [Reprinted in: *Roman Jakobson. Selected Writings. IV. Slavic Epic Studies.* Mouton, The Hague - Paris, 1966, 380 - 410.]

[3] Lefebvre, V., *A Psychological Theory of Bipolarity and Reflexivity*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter, 1992

[4] Worth, D., Vertical imagery in the "Igor' Tale", *Cyrillomethodianum*,**8-9**, 29-36 (1984-1985).