

Igor Lecture

The first question that I want us to begin with this evening is: What is literature (poetry)? What has its function always been? What kind of truth does it convey?

It is not simply the expression of an emotion, nor is it mere entertainment, nor autobiographical confession, nor therapy. Nor is it information, of the sort that we consider historical studies to give us. We do not gain "information" from the Beowulf, for instance, though it is based on physical details from its own time. But it surmounts those details to speak of human hopes and fears. It is a formed vision of life, seeing in the life of the hero Beowulf a model not of our outward actions but of an inward one: a force, an urge, a thrust within our psyches in a region to which we do not ordinarily have access: a region of that primordial oneness which was the origin of the human race, so that differences of sex or age or race fall away from our consciousness when we reach this place--and we reach it only through prayer, love, and poetry. And though prayer and love enable us to grow in grace, poetry enables us to grow into culture--into that harmonious and virtuous sense of community that shapes all good societies.

Hence, poetry gives us a wisdom about what life is, a coming together of virtues which, if they are not constantly created and preserved (for they must be created all over again with each new age; they cannot be inherited), the human race will sink into barbarism.

Barbarism is what our cities today are fast approaching--a condition that is essentially a-cultural, contra-cultural, in which the young are brought up with no culture, no myth, no concept of the virtues. Barbarism is not the tribal state, nor the less developed state of many third-world cultures. It is the condition of having and desiring no culture, instead living by that concept of nature that modernity has given us: nature as the law of the strongest, of the one who can take matters in his own hands against other people, the survival of the fittest, the raw individual will. And the fittest has come to mean the one who will stoop to the greatest atrocities. (Saddam

Hussein would seem now, in most eyes, to be a barbarian by this definition, as was Adolf Hitler. The Native American or African king who ruled for the well being of their people is not.)

Poetry, then, has the task of forming culture.

But this is its effect, not its intention: its intention is to give form to a particular event, place, person, or thing that is so remarkable that it deserves not to be allowed to die without being remembered. The poet want to insert into memory something remarkable. But he cannot be sure that it will endure in memory unless he finds that in it which is universal, which will speak to everyone who encounters it, in whatever age. Keats' Grecian urn is instructive on this point: the urn is a foster child, an orphan, he tells us--but it is also a bride awaiting consummation. It is an orphan in that its original parents--the artist and the age-- are vanished, lost. We know nothing of them. The "facts,"

so to say, of the age that produced the urn are obliterated. We know only what this mute witness tells us: of those universals of love and death. But we do not know the local fact: what men or gods are these, what pipes, what timbrels, what mad pursuit? what wild ecstasy? What we do know, what the urn really testifies to, is not that such people lived in such and such a way, so that a little town is emptied on this pious morn--but the urn testifies to a metaphysical value: beauty is truth, truth beauty. It has in a sense demonstrated this verity to us by saying that nothing else lasts of human life except that which has been given "form," or beauty. AND, he implies, that beauty, that realm of being, will go on until the end of time, as we will not. It is a bride, awaiting consummation. (This is one of the great poems of all time that we must try to make our youngsters experience.)

As I see it, a work of literature comes, originally,

from the deepest access that the human person has into the original "place" from which he came (physicists speak now of searching for a TEO, theory of everything, and are busily seeking whatever information they can find about the origins of the universe. Poets find that origin, from time to time--if they are dedicated and sufficiently sturdy. At that point of origin, they are given an "intuition" of reality; they must come back into rationality, but on the way back into normal ways of knowing, they encounter archetypes that associate themselves with the "seed" of the work that they are beginning to develop around that insight they were given.

The original insight is into wholeness and joy; the genre of the piece that is being composed is into how far the vision of the poet is from blessedness. In lyric, his insight is completely governed by the right order of the human heart and of the community; in tragedy, he is suddenly aware of irreconcilable conflicts within

himself and the world; in comedy, he begins to find his way back into a community of love; in lyric he yearns for something supernal, beyond the ordinary blessing and happiness. It is in epic that the poet sees into the entire landscape of history: he intuits the grand design behind earthly happenings, and finds himself given the task of relating the past to the present and future, of bringing together his own people and the whole world; of discerning the forces that move human history.

The poet thinks in symbols and metaphors, analogies and allegories. He never approaches his subject directly; and if his task is, as epic poet, to inspire and record and further the designs of history, then he must take that history that he knows about, not to himself, so that his use of things will be accurate.

But he is not simply writing about his own people,

his own times. These are his vehicle; these are his instruments.

The second question that I want to make preliminary to our study of Igor this evening is: what is the epic? How does it differ in intention from the other genres?

Aristotle calls it the "imitation of an action"-- and says that it is more philosophical, "truer" than history, since history is about what happened, whereas poetry is about what ought to happen.

He speaks of the four major "kinds" of literature: tragedy, comedy, epic, and lyric. These kinds are divided not by structure, rules, characteristics, formal matters, but by their internal cast: their outlook. This outlook of which I speak is like a mood, permeating the entire work, not simply added on, or, in a separate

fashion, put together with all the other elements.

the epic is not simply another kind of genre, the story of a hero; it is the genre out of which civilization comes, the originary poiesis that gives form to the basic myth of society--its corporate world, its sense of destiny, its standards by which to judge the good. And though the view of epic is retrospective--looking back on its communal treasure of inherited nobility--the vision of epic is always of a world in the making. It depicts the movement from the earliest origins of tribal history to that "divine, far-off event" that is a people's ultimate destiny.

The learned battles that apparently are still taking place over the authenticity of the Igor poem --

its date, its origins, its authorship, its status as oral or written, its influences, its author's religious orientation -- give one a sense of deja vu. This is the "Homer Question" all over again, as well as that of the Beowulf, the Bible, Gilgamesh, Shakespeare -- any great work of which we do not know the origins -- that stands, a mystery like the silent Grecian urn of Keats' ode, a "bride of quietness," witnessing only to the beauty and truth of its own vision. And like the urn, the Slovo can "tease us out of thought/ As doth eternity."

The poetic features of the Slovo and its vast scope in gathering up and reshaping history, along with its heroic tone, give us an indication that the Igor belongs among epics rather than geste, as Nabokov would have it, and rather than tales or lays or folk epics.

However it came to be, the poem is a work of art by a conscious poet, an epic that stands within the major

world tradition. The general expectations for epic are so expansive, however, that some authorities hesitate to use that designation for a poem of such brevity. But if, with Mikhail Bakhtin, we regard genre as an internal perspective -- I would say a vision of things -- rather than a set of formal characteristics, then perhaps we can admit that whatever its external form, whatever its length, whatever its authorship, whatever its faith (Christian or pagan) the perspective of the Slovo is epic.

According to Bakhtin (in The Dialogic Imagination), three constitutive features characterize an epic:

- 1) a national epic past -- in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology, the "absolute past" -- serves as its subject;
- 2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic;
- 3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer [the author and his audience]

lives.

I think we can see that the Igor poem manifests these characteristics. The Igor poet was aware of a line of poets before him; Boyan is the one to who he speaks, asking his blessing almost, and trying to convince the older poet of a past age that this age too has its heroes.

(Just as Vergil called upon Homer, Dante upon 'vergil.)

In so short a poem, he makes the reference fairly obvious, so that it is rather startling. Thus it indicates more certainly than a more subtle practice would have done, the necessity of making contact with the past.

I would go on to add my own convictions concerning its epic nature, finding in it three further distinguishing features that I believe are in all epics, even if widely separated in place and time: First, the Igor poem envisions the entire telos of a people,

recalling their past, accepting the painful conflicts of their present, and prophesying their future. Second, it delineates a entire cosmos, in which the divine and the human interrelate with nature. Third, the Igor poem apprehends a realm of kleos, a permanent repository of values realized and preserved only in poetry, speaking across the ages from bard to bard. The Greeks recognized it this realm of immortal fame the achievement of spirited-ness, the repository of valorous and beautiful deeds, whether or not successful. King Alkinoos of Scheria, in the Odyssey, goes so far as to say that men suffer so that there may be songs sung about them. If we take this idea seriously, we could say that Kievan culture existed so that the Igor poem could come into existence! (I believe Nikolai Berdyaev has said something of the same sort about Dostoevsky -- "So great is the work of Dostoevsky that he justifies the whole existence of the Russian people.")

This would not be, however, the deepest implication of kleos; its real significance rather lies in its being a vision of things from a divine, not a human, viewpoint. It is revealed to mortals through prophecy. It is trust in such prophecy that impels epic heroes to strive for the absolute, committing their deeds to kleos,

I mean to be saying, then, that the task of the epic poet is huge: it is nothing less than the delineation of the completeness of time and space, and of a realm beyond time and space wherein reside the permanent things.

The author of the Igor poem converses with the earlier vatic bard Boyan, seeking vision into his realm of honor and fame, as Vergil looked back to Homer and Dante to Vergil; Read p. 32

O Boyan, nightingale/ of the times of old!
 If you were to trill these troops/ while
 hopping, nightingale,
 over the tree of thought,/flying in mind
 up to the clouds/ weaving paeans around these

times,
 roving the Troyan trail,/across fields onto
 hills,
 then the song to be sung of Igor,/ that
 grandson of Oleg [would be]:

Robert Mann, in his survey of the relation of oral poetry to the Slovo, establishes convincingly that Troyan, an ancient god, was associated with the dragon and became, then, symbolically the dragon of paganism which, in the Kievan poems of conversion, had to be slain. (Remember Beowulf. The old pagan heroes had to contend with the dragon. of paganism itself.) "roving the Troyan trail" then, would seem to indicate that Boyan was a pagan poet, one who lived before the Christianizing of Kiev, but one whose imagination soared like a nightingale "over the tree of thought, flying in mind" and who consequently made something enduring of his culture. But "let us begin this tale, brother" (the Igor poet declares-- p. 31) "in the manner of a tale of today/

and not according to the notions of Boyan." And our tale is to concern not the great Vladimir of yore, but "nowadays Igor/ who girded his mind with fortitude,/ and sharpened his heart/ with manliness;/ imbued with the spirit of arms, he led his brave troops/ against the Kuman land/ in the name of the Russian land."

The epic poet, as we have said, is called to make clear the presence of the heroic virtues in his own day, though he evokes the past as memory and seems to establish its supremacy.

In the first engagement they are successful.

On the next day (38) very early, "bloody effulgences/ herald the light/ Black clouds come from the sea," indicating the coming storm.

P. 39: Here lances shall break
 Here sabers shall blunt
 Against Kuman helmets
 O Russian land
 You are already behind the hill.

1. 200 The earth rumbles
 The rivers run sludgily

Dust covers the field
 The banners speak
 The Kumans are coming
 from the Don and from the sea and from
 all sides.

40 Wild Bull Vsevolod (or "fierce Aurochs, wild
 ox") The magnificent way in which he
 fights.

41 The account of the battle is interrupted. We
 are not yet told its outcome.

We turn to the memory of the Wars of Oleg.

[Russian tradition retained the memory of Vladimir
 Monomakh, Grand Prince of Kiev, as the ideal of the
 Christian prince--one who defended Russia against the
 Kumans and who united the various Russian princes. Oleg
 of Chernigov was his principal competitor. Oleg was
 an energetic and talented man; but his pride and egotism
 brought ruin to the Russian land. 42

43 Then Igor's battle is resumed; and "the black sod
 under hooves/ Was sown with bones/ and irrigated with
 gore/ As grief they came up throughout the Russian land."

44 Metaphor of feasting -- for battle

Nature sympathizes

45 Discord among brothers

46, 47, 48 Castigation of IGor and his broth

The Song of Igor presents the present as that of a people in crisis, separated by feudal contentions, having to suffer disgrace before they recognize the claims of Russian unity. It portrays the supernal valor of Prince Igor, captured during his bold but foolhardy campaign against the invading Polovtsi. Igor's tragic hybris (based on his hamartia) is made clear in the poem, uttered by the author (46-47)

P. 48: The Germans, Greeks, Venetians, and Moravians
 chide Prince Igor / for he let abundance sink /to the
 bottom of the Kayala/ And filled up Kuman rivers / with
 Russian gold. And now he must suffer the ironic
 reversal, from being a wealthy and honored leader to
 being a captive of war:

Now Igor the prince/ Has switched/ from a saddle of gold/
 to a thrall;s saddle/ Pined away/ have the
 ramparts of towns/ and merriment/ has drooped.

(48)

But the severest blame attached the Igor's action is that uttered by Svyatoslav, the Great Prince of Kiev and uncle to Igor. Svyatoslav must anguish over his nephews' rashness; like Nestor and Phoinix in the Iliad, he represents the traditional warrior code and hence s remaining part of that "absolute past" that Bakhtin speaks of -- the past that must always be overturned, though lived up to.

This Grand Prince of Kiev has a troubling dream
(Read p. 49)

50-51 His dream is interpreted for him by his boyars.

They show him that his dream has already come true:

52Svyatslov laments the lack of prudence of his two

nephews: 52

O my juniors, Igor and Vsevolod!

Early did you begin
To worry with swords the Kuman land
etc. p.52

He cannot refrain from admiring their valor, however,
at the same time that he laments their rashness:

Your brave hearts are forged of hard
steel
And proven in turbulence!
But what is this you have done
To my silver harness!

Consequently, though his dream of death foretells the
end of his way of life, he must rejoice in the bold,
creative courage of the two young men, despite the fact
that they have watered the black earth with blood and
sowed it with bones, raising a crop of sorrow in the
Russian land. He goes on to lament, however [53],
indicating that great theme of the elders: why must you
do thing in your own way; why cannot you continue in
the line that has been marked out for you? Cf. with
Beowulf.

[I think we shall see that we are given in these two epics two contrasting ways of heroism in Wiglaf and Igor. One--Wiglaf--takes the way of piety and reverence toward the inherited tradition, like Aeneas; the other takes the way of spiritedness, which cannot be contained by any precedent, the Achillean way. This is the way of Igor.

54-63 The poet "digresses" in an extended apostrophe to the long line of the Russian heroic tradition. And these impulsive young heroes have placed it in jeopardy.

In depicting this union of grief and joy, centering on Igor's defeat and capture and then his subsequent escape and jubilant return to his people, the poem expresses both the suffering and the triumphal Russia, the Russia in time and the Russia of the end.

The hero, like an Achilles, then, must "step over the line" in an ambiguous action in order to realize a creative vision among the Russian people, must attempt the impossible and undergo humiliation and defeat.

Accordingly the ancient warrior's code proves inadequate for the truly heroic as Igor represents it. For though in this bold and rash prince the hero is depicted as potentially destructive of society, nevertheless by his excesses he engenders a new sense of destiny among his people and opens for them an entrance into spiritual transcendence. The poem ends by extolling the achievement of such absolute valor, even in its defeat:

Glory to Igor son of Svyatoslav;
To Wild Bull Vsevolod,
to Vladimir son of Igor!
Hail, princes and knights
fighting for the Christians
against the pagan troops!
To the princes glory
and to the knights. Amen.

Despite the defeat, despite the damage done to the Russian land and to the unity Svyatoslav had precariously established, Igor is--inexplicably--a hero to the people, the head for the body. And his return is cause

for general rejoicing.

When this poem was rediscovered, in 1864, Russian readers and writers alike were startled to discover that a great poem had been written in Russia at the end of the twelfth century. They learned also that this bard had discerned the sanctity of the Russian soil and the unity of the Russian folk, and that Russia had early in its history produced the "positive hero" for which Nineteenth-century Russian writers and

thinkers so earnestly sought. Though defeated, Igor had won glory for Russia and hence seemed a triumphant, historically authentic replacement for the "superfluous men" and "nihilists" that the current Russian writers were portraying as protagonists: Onegin, Chichikov, Oblomov, Pechorin, Bazarov, and Raskolnikov.

One commentator on the poem, Vladisav Khodasevich, considers the Igor poem remarkable because "in it is given a profound contemplation of life's consoling and elevating tragedy." The Igor poem is remarkable, I want to say further, because in its epic vision is conveyed the fundamental and enduring myth of Holy Russia.

Myth, as I am using the term, is the shared psychic pattern that binds a people together as a people, expressing in a subliminal structure their nature and destiny. Mythological fables express portions of this unconscious psychic pattern; but the myth itself first

begins to be known through the mythopoeic imagination which, like the prophetic imagination, is the property of an individual person though revealing the reality of a whole people. As Richard Slotkin has written, "The narrative action of the myth-tale recapitulates a people's experience in their land, rehearses their visions of that experience in its relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and vision to a paradigm." Going on from Slotkin, I would say that the epic in particular, in its story of a hero, establishes a moral cosmos and gives form to the values that constitute the vital energy of a community's life.

It not only portrays a world in the making, in which the heroic past is held up as model, but, in looking toward final things, brings about a new order and fulfills the implicit mythic promise. Thus, we could say, the true myth of a people comes into being when an epic can be written combining a rich folk culture

with a high religious purpose (as in The Iliad, the Aeneid, Beowulf, the Divine Comedy). But the myth cannot be depicted abstractly; it must be found within history, in the concrete strivings of actual men and women. And since the purpose of the epic is not theological but cultural, it seeks to render its characters in their flesh and blood reality--their hearts rather than their minds. Hence at a time of cultural change -- as in Kiev from paganism to Christianity -- the poet is compelled to represent his people as they truly are in their depths. And though Kievan Russia had been officially Christian for two centuries when the poem was written, no doubt this faith was only beginning to become a valid mode of feeling encompassing all of Kievan culture.

The Russian people were, as G. P. Fedotov remarks, "twice-born." And the old pieties, though not intentionally destroyed by Christianity, tend to drop

away or die of inanition if they are not brought into a new configuration and portrayed in a heroic light. The Igor poet had the same problem as the Beowulf poet four centuries earlier -- to view a declining paganism through Christian eyes without deprecating its genuine virtues -- indeed enhancing and ennobling its qualities so that they may be taken into the new order without loss. Such epic poets must therefore situate their allegiance in the past, though their imaginations are Christian, and their aspirations are for a transformed order that is yet to come. Hence, at a time of a profound cultural shift, the Igor epic apprehends the mysterious entity that has been variously called "the idea" or "the soul" of Russia.

But if we read the poem with the same seriousness with which we read Homer or Vergil, we see in it something of a palimpsest, indicating that Rus was perhaps not only "twice-" but "thrice-born." For,

along with the Christian hope (which permeates the poem, even though there are only four overt Christian references in its body) and the masculine warrior society of princes, one encounters in its resonating lines the presence of a more ancient feminine culture, perhaps stemming from the old religion -- the matriarchal worship of the great goddess. Fedotov has spoken of the cult of the Earth among the ancient Russians:

In Mother Earth, who remains the core of Russian religion, converge the most secret and deep religious feelings of the folk. Beneath the beautiful veil of grass and flowers, the people venerate with awe the black moist depths, the source of all fertilizing powers, the nourishing breast of nature, and their own last resting place. . . . Earth is the Russian "eternal Womanhood," not the celestial image of it: mother, not virgin, fertile, not pure; and black, for the best Russian soil is black.

In the Igor epic is portrayed a greater bond with the earth itself than in any other epic that we could name: "O Russian Land, you are already behind the hill" is the passionate cry at the outset of the campaign. The

Achaeans of Homer's poems showed no such ties, nor did the Trojans in Vergil's Aeneid, whose pietas was toward a city destined to be transplanted to another land as the great Rome. In Beowulf the earth is alien; nature is unfriendly; for warriors the most sacred bonds are those that tie them to the comitatus, to the royal thane and to each other. The same is true, in differing degrees, in the Norse epics, the Cid, and the Chanson de Roland. In the Igor poem, in contrast, though the warrior code is strong, the deep and abiding devotion is to the Russian land, to nature, and to the elements.

When Igor and his men ride out, all nature warns him of impending disaster.

After he has been defeated and taken captive, has changed his golden saddle for the saddle of a slave, it is in the famous lament of Jaroslavna, the wife of Igor, "an unseen cuckoo/ that sings at dawn," that we encounter the most intimate affinity with natural

elements.

"I shall fly," she says,
 "As a cuckoo, along the Danube.
 I shall wash my sleeves of beaver
 IN the river Kayala.
 I shall cleanse the bleeding wounds
 On the mighty body of my prince.

Yaroslavna weeps at dawn
 On the walls of Putivl, saying:

Read, pp. 64-65.

Jaroslavna speaks to the elements of nature as a goddess would speak -- as Thetis, Achilles' mother, speaks in the Iliad to Zeus in behalf of her son Achilles, for instance; or Athena for Odysseus; and as Venus, Aeneas' mother, speaks to Jupiter. But Jaroslavna speaks with great intimacy and authority to the cosmic elements themselves, not to the supreme god over them, as the others do; she reproaches them, reproves them, beseeches, and commands them. Only Hera among Greek goddesses addresses the elements directly (and Kerenyi and others inform us that Hera is an ancient deity who,

before her alliance with Zeus, was worshipped in cults as the great goddess.) At any rate, Jaroslavna's grieving represents the turning point of the poem. It is immediately after her entreaties to the elements that

The sea tosses at midnight
 The whirlwind comes in clouds,
 And God shows Prince Igor the way
 From the Polovetsian Land
 To the Russian Land,
 To the Golden Throne
 of his fathers.

This is that moment that Thomas Grene speaks of [in his book Descent from Heaven] in which the epic hero, caught in an apparently helpless situation, in stasis, is aided by a divine messenger. In the Odyssey, it is Hermes who comes from Zeus (in answer to Athena's reproaches), finding Odysseus on Kalyпсо's island, living as her husband, offered the gift of immortality, In the Aeneid, Mercury comes to Aeneas, who, lolling like an oriental potentate in Dido's city, has forgotten his sacred

mission. In the Divine Comedy, a "gracious lady" in heaven whose pity outweighs divine judgment appeals to St. Lucy, who then turns to Beatrice, who sends a poet, Vergil, to Dante as guide out of the dark forest. In Beowulf, it is the divine help given him by the miraculous sword found on the wall in the underground cave. It is not too inconceivable, perhaps, to maintain that Jaroslavna has elements in her of the ancient great goddess as well as the Christian great mother, the mediatrix of grace, the intercessor, and that it is in answer to her reproaches and supplications that "God shows Prince Igor the way." The way is the way of hope and grace, out of his seeming hopelessness and despair.

In his difficult escape, nature is friendly to him, aiding him, lending him its powers, the river cradling him, the usually noisy birds falling silent, with only the woodpeckers, "with their tapping/

Show[ing] the way to the river."

(Read 67-69)

One could go on to say, then, that the two most important aspects of the Russian psyche are given form in the Igor epic: the suffering maternity of the earth, with its yearning for unification; and the tragic, always defeated masculinity of heroic desire, with its drive toward separation. The action of the poem is to deflect the tragic drive and bring the two forces together in a joyous resolution.

Dostoevsky has written:

"There are ideas which remain unexpressed, unconscious, and are only strongly felt; there are many such ideas fused together, as it were, within the soul of man. They also exist in a whole people as well as in mankind taken as a whole. So long as these ideas are unconsciously embedded in the life of the people and are strong and properly felt, only so long can the

people live a powerful living life. All the energy of its life is but a striving to make these hidden ideas clear to itself." (Diary, 1873, no.2)

Though one cannot say with certainty how much the discovery of the Igor epic directly influenced the entire body of 19th c. Russian writers, its witness to those "strongly felt, fused together ideas" at the heart of Russia was matched again only in that extraordinary flourishing of Russian fiction that constitutes a high point in world literature. Dostoevsky's own writing in particular demonstrates once more the epic vision that was first given form in Igor. His novels are epic novels, filled with images of a sacred past that is embodied completely only in the monk Zossima in his final work. Testimony to the holiness of the earth that men have dishonored is to be found throughout his novels: Sonia, in Crime and Punishment, commands the murderer Raskolnikov to "bow down and kiss the earth"; The dying

Fr. Zossima, in The Brothers Karamazov, enjoins Alyosha and the attending monks to "Love to throw yourself on the earth and kiss it. Kiss the earth and love it with an unceasing love . . . Water the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears." One particular passage in The Devils, however, most expresses the sense of the holiness of earth: the mad girl Marya Lebyadkin is describing her time in the convent, when she encountered an old woman who asked her, "What is the mother of God?" Marya had replied, "The great mother, the hope of the human race." "Yes," the old woman answered, "the great mother--the damp earth, and thereon lies great joy for men." Further, Dostoevsky's masculine characters are versions of Igor, gone astray in the modern world in their heroic aspirations, and longing for the healing love of the earth: Raskolnikov, Myshkin, Stravrogin, Stepan Verkhovensky, Ivan Karamazov.

Finally, I want to maintain that the image of Holy Russia, first incarnated in the Igor poem, was kept alive in the hearts of the people, not to be lost under the Mongol occupation, under the severe autocratic Muscovite tsars, under the westernizing Petersburg regime of the 18th and 19th centuries; or -- as we are now seeing -- even under the three-quarters of a century of Soviet domination. And, like other genuine epics, Igor has added an authentic image to the store of images that make up our universal ikon of the epic.

The epic world, we could say, then, is distinguished not so much by triumph as by striving (as lyric is marked by yearning, tragedy by suffering, comedy by loving).

The epic cosmos contains a force that strives to overcome currently existing codes and conventions to move toward the fulfillment of prophecy. Though such a force is portrayed through the actions of one person,

it affects the life of all, symbolizing an elemental energy within a people, unrecognized among them without the hero's striving.

Such a struggle requires superhuman effort. And in depicting so furious an endeavor, the epic tests and affirms the inchoate divinity of human beings, the almost infinite spiritual capacity of the soul. Thus epic action portrays heroic achievement that strains beyond natural limits. It is of this peculiarly ambiguous kind of heroism that Cedric Whitman writes in his last book, The Heroic Paradox, speaking out of a lifetime of pondering the Greek heroic spirit. He asserts that Homeric heroes feel very strongly the "urge toward divinity"; and yet, he maintains, they also have a "desperate self-knowledge" that they are mortal and destined to die. It is likely that Whitman has articulated the basic drive not only of the Homeric hero but of all true epic protagonists. For, as previously

suggested, the epic incarnates the heroic by incorporating the divine into mortal life; and the tension thereby generated is well-nigh unbearable. But it is out of this tension, this accumulated energy, that the force of the epic is generated. The topoi of epic are therefore noble, harsh, and terrible: war, honor, courage, friendship, death and dying. The mortal virtues--prowess, skill, and courage come up against and are virtually obliterated by the sense of limitation and the powerful eros of the epic hero.

But the epic is more than a heroic poem or a saga, more than the celebration of one man's achievement. As a formal literary genre, it depicts, within a culture and a cosmos, a complete action in which a hero takes part--or perhaps it would be better to say in which he leads the action, following the guidance of prophecy.

But its total action is greater than the deeds of the hero. In depicting the movement of a people toward the

fulfillment of their spiritual destiny, the epic leads its reader into a state of contemplation. One is made to brood on the nature of the human enterprise, as well as on the cosmic powers that control the lot of humankind.

Epic celebrates, then, the kinship of the human and the divine, using the vehicle of a local event. In focusing on this one remarkable event, epic retrieves a sacred past, brings it into memory so that it will not be forgotten, and lifts it from the known community to a larger world, deserting the familiar cosmos for an unknown, more universal vision of order. But to achieve the new order there must first be intense and terrifying disorder.

[Omit the following if time is short:]

Milton understood the action of all epics when he saw it as the movement away from the garden to the

outer, larger, less ideal world, where divine protection is more remote and less certain. Sometimes, as with Aeneas, the epic hero can take his household gods along on the journey of expatriation, but even then the forces that he must confront are more bizarre and primordial (the Harpies, Polyphemus, the serpent on Anchises's tomb (for instance) than those to which the familiar lares and penates were accustomed. What begins for the epic hero as a mission for his people ends by being a more severe test of his own inner being than he could ever have imagined. It is not quite as Shakespeare's Hotspur has it when he says, "Out of this nettle danger we pluck this flower safety." It is not safety that one plucks from deliberately confronted menace; it is more that we pluck from it the ideals by which we consider ourselves human. Or as Faulkner comments in Go Down Moses concerning the little fyce that, terrified, nevertheless must run at the huge towering bear: he had to do it "so

that he could go on calling himself a dog."

[Here]

The epic, then, is a vision of the heroic in action: that action is remembering the sacred past, daring to contend with the ambiguous present, aspiring to the prophesied future. (Archetypally, the past is the tribal order, the "old wild free life," as Faulkner has spoken of it; the present is the confusion of any NOW; the future is the good city, the New Jerusalem. The epic begins with a code. But soon in the action, that code is broken or violated and the hero dares to create the new moral order in himself. This essentially lonely struggle becomes a "giant leap for mankind." Its story echoes in caverns of our being; it awakens in us aspects of our selves that would otherwise drowse, half asleep.