

D.A. PRIGOV'S POEM "KULIKOVO FIELD" WITHIN THE HISTORICAL-LITERARY TRADITION

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Abstract: This article examines D.A. Prigov's poem "Kulikovo Field" within the broad sweep of historical-literary tradition, with particular emphasis on its intricate connections to Alexander Blok's cycle "On Kulikovo Field" and ancient Rus' literary monuments. We delve into Prigov's masterful deployment of antinomies and compositional techniques, alongside his rich intertextual dialogues, including parallels with icon painting and "The Tale of the Mamai Massacre." The analysis reveals that Prigov's apparent "anti-patriotism" is, in fact, meticulously constructed upon a profound cultural dualism, wherein the "Russians-Tatars" opposition unpacks the deeper internal contradictions inherent within Russian culture itself.

Keywords: D.A. Prigov, "Kulikovo Field," A.A. Blok, "On Kulikovo Field," Old Russian literature, "The Tale of the Mamai Massacre," antinomy, composition, iconography.

Introduction: Prigov's Poetic Dialogue with History

D.A. Prigov's 1976 poem, "Kulikovo Field," stands as a singular literary achievement, engaging in a vibrant dialogue with the rich historical and literary tradition surrounding the Battle of Kulikovo. Notably, it exhibits profound resonances with Alexander Blok's renowned cycle "On Kulikovo Field" and echoes ancient Rus' literary artifacts. This article aims to explore the distinctiveness of Prigov's interpretation of this pivotal historical event, uncover its intricate intertextual threads, and meticulously analyze the compositional strategies through which the poet crafts his unique rendition of "Kulikovo Field."

The Nuances of Prigov's "Anti-Patriotism"

The perceived "anti-patriotism" evident in D.A. Prigov's "Kulikovo Field" (1976) is ingeniously rooted in the antinomy of "Russians – Tatars" (a polarity that fluidly shifts to "Tatars – Russians"). Following a tradition subtly established by A.A. Blok, this opposition transforms into an intrinsic cultural dualism, manifesting most vividly and organically from the perspective of Rus' and the Russian people. Scholars such as G.A. Levinton and I.P. Smirnov conclude that "the first part of 'On Kulikovo Field' (NMK) evidently carries the idea of an internal connection between Rus' and the Tatars, so evident in 'The Scythians' (hence, the 'eternal battle' is explained not only by its 'eternal return' but also by its nature as an internecine, irresolvable conflict), and the notion of a Tatar legacy within Russian culture, clearly absorbing the tradition of Solovyov's 'Pan-Mongolism'" [1, p. 82].

Compositionally, each poem within Blok's cycle is structured around a movement "from darkness and night towards light and day" [Ibid., p. 91]. This undeniably features imagery signifying "light" and "day," contrasted with images embodying "darkness" and "night" [1]. While this precise contrast isn't explicitly found in Prigov's text, the overall character of its composition strongly suggests the presence of an internal antinomy: "today – tomorrow."

The Battlefield as Icon: Prigov's Visual Composition

The opening twenty lines of "Kulikovo Field" serve as a compelling exposition, unfurling a precise tableau of the battlefield where every detail and image is meticulously placed by the author's will. The opposing forces, unnamed but implied by the title of the first part of Prigov's cycle, strategically occupy positions on the right and left. The deliberate postponement of mention of Poles, French, and Germans not only hints at the historical succession of subsequent conquerors of Rus' but also alludes to the later parts of the "Three Battles" cycle, of which only "Borodino" survives (the text of "The Battle of Stalingrad" is no longer extant). Angels, ravens, and other birds "above" are juxtaposed with the lower, earthly realm of the battleground, adorned with trees, studded with bushes, carpeted with grass, and inhabited by insects. This profound opposition between the celestial, divine world and the earthly, human realm intertwines with the broader tapestry of antinomies that enshroud the extensive bibliography devoted to the Battle of Kulikovo (e.g., Rus' and the Horde, darkness and light, Russian field and Tatar steppe, including Blok's antinomies, which the poet drew upon in his cycle and which are noted in scholarly works).

Prigov's compositional choice in depicting the Kulikovo Field strongly evokes a parallel with the Orthodox icon. This hypothesis is supported not merely by the presence of angels in the poem, but by the overall framing arrangement of images, clustered around a single focal point (Kulikovo Field), and the stark contrast between Russians and Tatars positioned at the edges of the impending battle. To corroborate this, we can cite the principles of composition in traditional Old Russian painting: "Perspective in Old Russian painting assumes the presence of several viewpoints... By introducing different viewpoints, the artist emphasizes the most significant parts of the work's composition. An example of this widely used technique in Old Russian art can be seen in the depiction of architecture in icons. Buildings are typically placed at the edges of the composition. They are often turned so that the painter depicts the right structure as if standing to its right; the left one is presented as if positioned to its left. The horizontal lines forming these buildings, if mentally extended, converge on the figures depicted in the center. Each object is depicted from its most advantageous viewpoint. Therefore, an icon has as many viewpoints as there are significant objects" [2, p. 25]. In this context, it is impossible to overlook Prigov's transposition of the iconic "viewpoint" technique, manifesting in the unique architectural arrangement of the Russian and Tatar forces.

The supreme will of the author-demiurge, akin to a divine decree and commencing with the word "let" ("Let everyone live.../ Let everyone die.../ Let everything be..." [3, p. 245]), resounds four times in the lines following the exposition. The fourth repetition of this anaphora introduces the core semantic section or compositional nucleus of the poem ("Let the Russians win today" [Ibid.]), which, in turn, is sharply divided into two opposing camps, as if balanced on scales: Russians and Tatars. The description of the Russians spans six lines, with the first and sixth almost mirroring each other (1st line: "Let the Russians win today," 6th line: "Thus the Russians will win today"). The portrayal of the Tatars comprises seven lines, excluding a comparative line that seemingly interjects into this fragment ("Though the Russians are somewhat tidier" [Ibid., p. 246]), numerically balancing both camps. Reverting to the parallel between iconography and Prigov's text, the artist "creating an Old Russian icon always strives to convey maximum information to the viewer about the depicted object" [2, p. 26].

The adherence to iconographic tradition in text construction extends to the law of statics and dynamics, as "in essence, the icon is dynamic only in individual localized spots, but static in

composition, the form of the saints, as well as in its formats and exposition" [4, p. 268]. Accordingly, based on the contrast between static and dynamic, the expositional part is juxtaposed with the central section, which portrays Kulikovo Field on the eve of battle and is situated between the two descriptions of the converging sides (ten lines):

What will be here, if even now
The earth crumbles even now
And the sky is dusty even now
Underground strata crumble
And underground waters thrash
And underground beasts thrash
And earthly people run
They run hither and thither, earthly
And heavenly birds have gathered
All the heavenly ravens... [3, pp. 245-246].

Intertextual Resonances: From Ancient Texts to Blok

In its key images, which propel the dynamism of the events unfolding on the field, this verbal canvas primarily draws upon the ancient Rus' literary tradition. Compare this section with the text of "The Tale of the Mamai Massacre": "When deep night fell, Dmitry Volynets, taking only the Grand Prince with him, rode out onto Kulikovo Field and, standing between the two armies and turning towards the Tatar side, heard a loud thud, and shouts, and wails, as if markets were converging, as if a city was being built, as if great thunder was rumbling; from the rear of the Tatar army wolves howled very fearsomely, on the right side of the Tatar army ravens called and bird chatter, very loud, and on the field side it was as if mountains were shaking – a terrible thunder, by the Nepryadva River geese and swans flapped their wings, portending an unprecedented storm" [5].

In the aforementioned excerpt from the poem, the cosmography of Kulikovo Field expands to encompass the underworld, drawn into the overall chaos preceding the battle. Furthermore, the ability to hear the crumbling of subterranean strata and the thrashing of underground waters and beasts directly correlates with a purely plot-driven insertion in Blok's work: "And, bowing his head to the earth, / My friend says to me: 'Sharpen your sword, / So as not to fight the Tatars in vain / To die for a holy cause!'" [6]. This episode aligns with the ancient Rus' primary source mentioned, in whose extended version we find the lines: "And again he said: 'And I have another sign to check.' And he dismounted from his horse, and leaned his right ear to the ground for a long time" [5].

The prophetic nature of all that unfolds on the field shortly before the battle is underscored, in particular, by the repeated mention of ravens, which, in accordance with ancient Rus' book tradition, are harbingers of war and its associated calamities. By the same established tradition, alongside swans, they can symbolize the enemy army (in contrast to falcons – an allegory for the Russian host). Also noteworthy is the mention in "The Tale of the Mamai Massacre" of the deep night before the battle, indirectly confirming the compositional structure of Prigov's text in its correlation with Blok's cycle.

The concluding lines of the poem's central semantic section ("So let the Tatars win / From here everything will be visible to me / The Tatars, then, will win" [3, p. 246]) summarize the preceding characterization of the Tatars (in the language of iconography – the viewpoint from



the Tatar side), shifting the author's ("divine") will in their favor. The line "From here everything will be visible to me" harks back to the conflict in Homer's "Iliad," specifically the "curating" of both warring factions—the Hellenes and the Trojans—by the Olympian gods led by Zeus, depending on their preferences and advantages. The allusion in these lines is further enriched by A. Blok's poem "The Factory" (1903), where, in direct accordance with ancient mythology, the presence of omnipotent fate is expressed by the verbal formula: "Someone motionless, someone black / Counts people in the silence" [7]. Simultaneously, the presence here of the author-observer, emphasized specifically ("I hear everything from my peak..." [Ibid.]), argues for the existence of a higher, divine principle contained in the first "I" (corresponding to the ancient concept of Zeus and the biblical singular God-judge of all being). In this regard, compare all that has been said with the lines of the fourth poem from "On Kulikovo Field": "I hear the rumblings of battle / And the trumpet calls of the Tatars, / I see far over Rus' / A wide and quiet fire" [6].

Conclusion: Prigov as a Master of Intertextuality

D.A. Prigov does not merely re-evaluate a historical event; he meticulously constructs a complex intertextual landscape where motifs from ancient Rus' literature, Blok's lyrical poetry, and iconography are intricately interwoven. Prigov's "anti-patriotism" is unveiled through a profound cultural dualism, predicated on the "Russians-Tatars" antinomy. The poem's compositional choices, alongside its adept utilization of imagery and motifs from "The Tale of the Mamai Massacre" and A.A. Blok's "On Kulikovo Field" cycle, firmly establish Prigov as a poet who actively engages with the historical-literary tradition, producing a truly unique artistic work upon its foundation.

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