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ONEGIN AND MANAS, VALIKHANOV AND BELINSKY; RUSSIAN LITERARY CRITICISM AND KYRGYZ ORAL POETRY

Abstract

This paper examines the original context of the words 'encyclopaedia' and 'epic' concerning *Manas*. A New Historicism approach to the origin of this association, an 1861 Russian-language publication by Chokan Valikhanov, illuminates his likely use of a formulation - both verbal and conceptual - of literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, and placing Valikhanov's interest in epics in pan-European (and Russian) early-nineteenth century socio-political context. Valikhanov's comments display the placing of an interpretative framework from Russian literary criticism onto Kyrgyz oral poetry. This paper questions the continued use of the terminology related to nineteenth-century Russian colonialism and its significant impact on the *Manas* interpretation and valueing.

Keywords: epic, encyclopaedia, *Manas*, Valikhanov, Belinsky, New Historicism, terminology, Russian literary criticism, Kyrgyz oral poetry, colonialism, 19th century.

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ОНЕГИН ЖАНА МАНАС, ВАЛИХАНОВ ЖАНА БЕЛИНСКИЙ; ОРУС АДАБИЙ СЫН ЖАНА КЫРГЫЗ ООЗЕКИ ПОЭЗИЯСЫ

Кыскача мазмуну

Бул макалада "энциклопедия" жана "эпос" сөздөрүнүн "Манаска" карата баштапкы контексти каралат. Бул ассоциациянын келип чыгышына жаңы историзмдин ыкмасы боюнча - 1861-жылы Чокан Валихановдун орус тилинде жарыяланышы - Виссарион Белинскийдин адабий сынчысы, ошондой эле Валихановдун эпосторго болгон кызыгуусу, жалпы европалык (жана орус) 19-кылымдын коомдук-саясий контексттеги көз карашы. Валихановдун комментарийлери оригиналдуу чөйрөдө каралса, орус адабий сынынын интерпретациялык алкагынын кыргыз оозеки поэзиясына өтүшүн көрсөтөт. Бул терминологиянын 19-кылымдын башындагы орус колониализми менен байланышын жана анын "Манасты" чечмелөөгө жана баалоого олуттуу таасирин эске алып, бул макалада мындай терминологияны мындан ары колдонууга байланыштуу суроолор туулат.

Түйүндүү сөздөр: эпос, энциклопедия, "Манас", Валиханов, Белинский, жаңы историзм, терминология, орус адабият таануу, кыргыз оозеки поэзиясы, колониализм, 19-кылым.

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ОНЕГИН И МАНАС, ВАЛИХАНОВ И БЕЛИНСКИЙ; РУССКАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРНАЯ КРИТИКА И КЫРГЫЗСКАЯ УСТНАЯ ПОЭЗИЯ

Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается первоначальный контекст слов "энциклопедия" и "эпос" по отношению к "Манасу". Согласно подходу нового историзма к происхождению этой ассоциации - русскоязычной публикации Чокана Валиханова 1861 г. - прослеживается вероятность использования им формулировок - как словесных, так и концептуальных - литературного критика Виссариона Белинского, а также интерес Валиханова к эпосам в общеевропейском (и русском) социально-политическом контексте начала XIX века. Комментарии Валиханова, если рассматривать их в оригинальном окружении, демонстрируют перенос интерпретационных рамок русской литературной критики на кыргызскую устную поэзию. Учитывая связь этой терминологии с русским колониализмом XIX века и его значительное влияние на интерпретацию и оценку "Манаса", данная статья ставит вопросы относительно дальнейшего использования такой терминологии.

Ключевые слова: эпос, энциклопедия, "Манас", Валиханов, Белинский, Новый историзм, терминология, русское литературоведение, кыргызская устная поэзия, колониализм, XIX век.

This paper examines the original meaning and context of the words 'encyclopaedia' («энциклопедия») and 'epic' («эпос») that frequently appear in discussions of *Manas*. While often appearing sound when presented with little context, close examination of their earliest usage reveals the imposition of the ideology and value system of nineteenth century Russian literary discourse on understanding of Kyrgyz oral poetry. This study continues earlier work, soon to be published in Kyrgyz translation, that outlined the impact various generations of collectors had on the understanding of *Manas* [1]. This piece is a small contribution to recent discussions, popular and academic, regarding the impact of Russian colonialism upon Kyrgyz scholarship, education, culture, and self-perception, and intends to provoke reconsideration and further research of oft-repeated claims made regarding *Manas*.

The original source for the terms 'encyclopaedia' and 'epic' and *Manas* is

an 1861 Russian-language publication [reprinted, in modern Cyrillic, in 2, vol. 3, pp. 325-356]. As the title 'Sketches of Dzungaria' [«Очерки Джунгарии»] suggests, *Manas* was not the main focus. The ethnographic report presents Central Asia in a manner similar to views discussed in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

“Над Средней Азией висела до сих пор какая-то таинственная завеса. Несмотря на близкое соседство двух могущественных европейских держав, России и Англии, большая часть ее все-таки остается для европейской науки во многих отношениях недоступною. Наш ученый товарищ по Обществу П. П. Семенов, издавая II том своего перевода Риттеровой [книги] «Erdkunde von Asien», пришел к тому заключению, что Центральная Азия исследована никак не более внутренней Африки. Действительно, сбивчивые и противоречивые данные, суще-

ствующие в нашей географической литературе о Средней Азии, делают эту страну, если не совершенной terra incognita, как говорилось в старину, то, по крайней мере, трудным научным ребусом, а о среднеазиатском человеке мы почти ничего не знаем” [2, vol. 3, p. 325].

The text claims that Central Asia, despite being geographically close to Russia and England (via their respective empires), is claimed to be inaccessible to European science. Positioning Russian-language research within this framework of ‘European science’, the text repeats the conclusion of the academician P. P. Semenov (1827-1914) that the region is close to being a *terra incognita* from being as little explored as inner Africa. The author of the sketch uses the term ‘we’ («мы») when noting how little ‘we’ know about the Central Asians. The imperial tone fits with the institution for which the author was working, the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (RGO/«РГО»), in whose journal (*Записки Императорского Русского Географического общества*) his 1861 work was published. The author’s use of ‘our’ («Наш») when discussing the learned society might make a reader assume that the author is an erudite Russian geographer overlooking the empire from the heart of the RGO; he is rather the Central Asian-born Chokan Valikhanov (1835-1865), descendent of Ablai Khan (1711-1781), the last Kazakh khan. The views of a member of the Kazakh elite writing for Russian-language readership challenges the comfortable idealised depiction of Valikhanov. Rather than the ‘first scholar-enlightener’ [«первый ученый-просветитель»] of the Kazakhs in Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship [3, p. 4], he resembles a local informant-administrator facilitating exploitation as outlined later in Franz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961). Valikhanov presents Central Asia as a wasteland ripe for development and organization, a presentation

that fits with the claims of Said’s *Orientalism* concerning research that prepares a region for colonization. It is worthwhile to quote at length from Valikhanov’s text to establish the tone, type of discourse, and the attitude of the author at this stage of his career.

“Средняя Азия в настоящем своем общественном устройстве представляет явление крайне печальное, какой-то патологический кризис развития. Вся страна, несколько не преувеличивая, есть не более не менее, как одна громадная пустыня с заброшенными водопроводами, каналами и колодцами, усеянная развалинами; пустыня, занесенная песком, заросшая уродливыми кустами колючего саксаула и обитаемая только стадами диких ослов и пугливых сайгаков. Среди этой сахары разбросаны по берегам рек небольшие оазисы, осененные тополевыми, тузовыми деревьями и вязами, там и сям попадаются рисовые поля, дурно возделанные, плантации травянистого хлопчатника, который снимают незрелым, виноградники и фруктовые сады, предоставленные ленивым человеком исключительно попечению аллаха. На этих оазисах, на развалинах многовратных городов стоят жалкие мазанки и в них живет дикое, невежественное племя, развращенное исламом и забитое до идиотизма религиозным и монархическим деспотизмом туземных владельцев, с одной стороны, и полицейской властью китайцев – с другой” [2, vol. 3, p. 325].

Though Valikhanov’s ‘individual identity’ was ‘rather unique’ among the RGO, comparison of this publication with others of the institution suggests that the ‘tenor of his career and the type of research contributions that he made to the reconnoitering of Central Eurasia were not recognizably different

from those of other scholar travelers' [4, p. 140]. It is in this context that Valikhanov first publicised *Manas* and used the terms 'encyclopaedia' and 'epic'.

Valikhanov's use of the term 'encyclopaedia' can be placed in its original context within its original publication and the historic discourse in which it originally featured. Here is Valikhanov's famous statement, often shortened and often unattributed:

“«Манас» есть энциклопедическое собрание всех киргизских мифов, сказок, преданий, приведенное к одному времени и сгруппированное около одного лица – богатыря Манаса! [2, vol. 3, pp. 349-350].

Following the approach of New Historicism – an 'intensified willingness to read *all* the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only to literary texts' [5, p. 4] – the likely influence is discoverable. Valikhanov's phrase, well known, in some variant, to most school students in Kyrgyzstan, was probably composed in imitation of a phrase known to most Russian language students made by Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848) about Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (*Евгений Онегин*, 1833) published in 1845:

“«Онегина» можно назвать энциклопедией русской жизни и в высшей степени народным произведением” [in modern Cyrillic, 6, vol. 7, p. 501].

Valikhanov, while a child of the steppe, was educated at the Tsarist Omsk Cadet Corps and was steeped in Russian literature. Grigory Potanin (1835-1920), in his nostalgic recollections, recalled Valikhanov inside a Kazakh yurt telling stories by Turgenev, Lermontov, and Tolstoy in Kazakh, and explaining their value with reference to Russian literary authorities such

as Belinsky [republished in 2, vol. 5, pp. 311-313]. Valikhanov was familiar with the writings of the critic who had urged Russian writers to 'clarify their national identity by investigating the whole, far-flung empire' and the 'conviction that *literature* would contribute to knowledge' [7, pp. 15-16]. Belinsky presented Pushkin as the discoverer of the Caucasus, believing the poet could be read for both education and enjoyment. Valikhanov presented *Manas* in a manner that would appeal to armchair ethnographers and bored officials. Included between his categorizing of other poetic legends of the region and his ordering of Kyrgyz tribes is his account of *Manas*, an exotic interlude that features an overview of the narratives that emphasise dramatic violence, pretty women, and themes of status and revenge. Such elements would appeal to a Russian-language reader familiar with comparable elements in Pushkin's *Prisoner of the Caucasus* (*Кавказский пленник*, 1822) and Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (*Герой нашего времени*, 1840). After including this narrative summary, a digression of sorts from the rest of the publication, Valikhanov reiterates the educational aspect of such material by putting into print his ambition to produce a translation and a dictionary to assist orientalists. As he publicises his prospective work on *Manas*, Valikhanov marks his territory by showing the breadth of his knowledge. Given Valikhanov produced this report while in St. Petersburg, where he networked among those with an interest in the region he had travelled, the labelling of *Manas* as an encyclopaedia can be understood as an attempted placing of himself and his research to interest potential supporters. In the later memoirs of Nikolai Yadrintsev (1842-1894), Valikhanov himself was viewed by his Russian colleagues as an object of curiosity, regarded with a patronizing mixture of racialized orientalist clichés and elements of European romantic literature [reprinted in 2, vol. 1, pp. 95-99]. In this context, Valikhanov was writing

himself, following Belinsky on Pushkin, as the discoverer of Central Asia with *Manas* as the point of entry.

Valikhanov's use of the term 'epic' can similarly be historicized. Examination of his reading, and the scholarly discussions in which he engaged with, highlight to a modern reader connotations and significance. The literary historian Shamshiyabanu Kanysheva [8, p. 114] noted he was both familiar with the Homeric epics through translation – Nikolai Gnedich's *Iliad* (1829), and Vasily Zhukovsky's *Odyssey* (1849) – and with the 'Homeric Question', a scholarly debate about the authorship, composition, and transmission of the long poems. This pan-European interest in the Homeric poems meant classical studies became an elite feature of Russian education, and, consequently, a comparison to signify the importance of Central Asian material to Russian readers [noted in 8, p. 113]. The 'epic' was subjected to assumptions and prejudices. Romantic conceptions, following the writings of German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), of the 'folk' and the 'nation' saw a typology that went from the primitive folk song (the oral product of a collective) to the written production of an individual genius representative of their nation. Valikhanov's own brief comments show him presenting *Manas* to his Russian-language readership using this academic framework. Boldly claiming *Manas* is like the *Iliad* of the steppe (and *Semetey* the *Odyssey*), he shows his awareness of the scholarly discussion with his use of Greek loanwords associated with epics and with his mentioning – in an earlier paragraph – of the noted scholar Matthias Castrén (1813-1852). Audaciously, with little supporting evidence, he makes assertions about the formation of *Manas*, claiming they are separate stories that have, over time, been given the semblance of unity around a single character and a single period.

“Это нечто вроде степной Илиады. Образ жизни, обычаи, нравы, география, религиозные и медицинские познания киргизов и международные отношения их нашли себе выражение в этой огромной эпопее. Поэма эта, по нашему мнению, очевидно, подверглась новейшим добавлениям и изменениям. Может быть, самое сложение ее из прозаических джумуков (сказок) в одноцелое есть дело позднейших времен. «Манас» состоит из многих отдельных эпизодов, имеющих вид целого. Другой эпос «Самятей» служит продолжением «Манаса», и это – бургутская Одиссея. Киргизы говорят, что трех ночей недостаточно, чтобы выслушать «Манас» и что столько же нужно для «Самятея», но это, вероятно, преувеличено” [2, vol. 3, p. 350].

Valikhanov's successor in collecting *Manas*, Wilhelm Radloff (1837-1918), provided a more detailed comparison in his introduction to his *Proben der Volksliteratur der Nördlichen Türkischen Stämme*, vol. 5, *Der Dialect der Kara-Kirgisen* (1885). Radloff compared *Manas* with the ancient written Homeric texts and the more recent *Kalevala* (1835, enlarged 1849), a creation of Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884), a colleague of Castrén, who had collected Karelian and Finnish oral poetry from performers and collated them into a single literary work. Such productions had patriotic connotations: a national epic indicated a uniqueness and comparative authority to that of ancient Greece. Pointedly, while Valikhanov appears to be sympathetic towards Kyrgyz poetry by making it the subject of such focus, the aspect that Belinsky attached to Pushkin's *Onegin* of being a supremely national work («в высшей степени народным произведением») is absent; *Manas* is presented as the work of a folk, the Kyrgyz. With his 1861 publication, Valikhanov placed *Manas* in this framework.

This perspective, shaped by Russian literary criticism, present in the 1861 publication, can be traced to earlier writings by Valikhanov concerning oral poetry and to his treatment of the original performance that he witnessed. In his unpublished ‘On the Forms of Kazakh Folk Poetry’ («О формах казахской народной поэзии», с. 1856), he stresses that features of the poems are passed down the generations.

“Поэтические произведения киргиз: эпосы, похвальные оды, плачи – так называется песня по умершен муже жены, по сыну – матери; даже песни импровизаторов имеют рифму и размер и передаются изустно из рода в род, из поколения в поколение особым сословием певцов ахунов, как в древней Греции передавались песни Гомера рапсодами; ахуны эти пользуются особенным уважением народа и похвальными словами богатым султаном и биям наживают себе известность и богатство” [2, vol. 1, pp. 285-286]

In another piece of writing («Заметки по истории южносибирских племен», с.1856), Valikhanov claims that such material is comparable to poetic tales («поэтические сказания») by Homer. They provide, if not a strictly accurate reflection of history, insights into language, culture, and morality like legends collected by Herodotus. These are aspects that would later, in relation to the ‘epic’ *Manas*, he would describe an ‘encyclopaedia’.

“Если поэтические сказания Гомера и преданья, собранные по слухам Геродотом, имеют сколько-нибудь достоинство историческое, если всякое искаженное, баснословное предание имеет в основании своем происшествие и истину, то, нет сомнения, что положительные и последовательные сказания киргиз, их образ жизни, обычаи и нра-

вы современные, отражающие быт их предков и при сличении во всем согласные с историческими указаниями, могут иметь значение историческое. Как... произведения чисто народного ума, обуславливающие чувствования, жизнь и прогресс всей массы общества, наконец, как... произведения, вылившиеся из уст всего народа как от лица одного существа, они не лишены как исторического, филологического, так и психологического интереса” [2, vol. 1, p. 302].

His view of epics as a mode of passing traditions and values through the generations – a view comparable to oral epics being described later as a ‘tribal encyclopedia’ in Eric Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* (1963) – is repeated in his 1861 article.

“Ученые уже давно заметили важность для этнографии изучения памятников народной словесности, в которых лучше всего выражается характер народного быта и нравов. Любовь к старине и богатство преданий составляют особое достояние кочевых пародов Северной и Средней Азии. Предания эти сохраняются свято или в виде родовых воспоминаний в памяти старейшин, как например юридические предания и генеалогические, или в форме эпоса передаются из рода в род особым сословием певцов. Многие слова и обороты, не употребительные в настоящее время, показывают их древность” [2, vol. 3, p. 347].

Valikhanov valued performers and their performances for the historical and cultural content they transmitted, a viewpoint influenced by literary criticism and scholarship on the Homeric question. This can be seen by comparing his transcription of the performance, lost for nearly a hundred years, with his posthumously published Russian-language partial summary. His focus was on

the distant past rather than the contemporary. References to current events appear to have not been noted by Valikhanov. The poet's placing of a Kazakh early in the narrative [9, p. 1, l. 12, and p. 106], a likely reference to Valikhanov's presence, received no comment, and the likely connotations of the narrative with recent conflict between the Bugu and Sarıbagış over a game of *ordo* went unremarked. Valikhanov's antiquarian interests went as far as altering the story. Elements associated with Islam in the transcription [9, p. 4, l. 61: 'kibıłaga'] are, in his translation, rendered to suggest a pre-Islamic milieu [2, vol. 2, p. 91: «на восток»]. Details in the narrative about the abode of an ancestral khan [9, p. 10, l. 349, and pp. 130-131], reminiscent of material from a recent 1851 publication from the Russian orientalist Bichurin (1777-1853), suggest unintentional interference in the story by Valikhanov. He possibly asked the poet in advance about the subject, and the poet, happy to oblige the patron's interests, included these details in his narrative. Valikhanov's choice in regarding the narration he witnessed for its historical content, its encyclopaedic significance, and the relationship of this metrical narration to an overarching epic narrative, resulted in his underappreciation of the poet's choice, talent, agency, and individuality. Valikhanov, keen to publicise in print his transcription (and intended study) of what he claims is the most significant part of the epic, and boldly claiming that he is likely the first to commit Kyrgyz to paper, Valikhanov omitted a significant detail: the performer's name. The name of the poet, later identified as Nazar Bolot uulu (d. 1893), was likely overlooked by Valikhanov owing to the contemporary assumption in the scholarship he was rooted in, that oral performance is a folk tradition that was the creation of a group rather than an individual talent. In his treatment of Nazar's distinct creative performance, Valikhanov made *Manas* an epic.

This label of 'epic' has determined how *Manas* has been understood and valued. The

categorisation that he applied was influenced by his close familiarity with near-contemporary literary criticism, and has, subsequently, placed upon particular assumptions, value judgments, and an interpretative framework that Russian intellectuals had adapted from the West onto Nazar's individual performance and *Manas* narration. Two caveats can be added: one concerning Russian genres, the second concerning possible alternatives from other languages – including Kyrgyz. Genres and categories are not fixed; they can be altered and changed. Pushkin's verse *Onegin* features on its original titlepage the category 'roman' («роман»), while Gogol's prose *Dead Souls* (*Мертвые души*, 1842) is labelled a 'poem' («поэма»). Phrase! Valikhanov, as quoted above, labelled the Homeric epics 'poetic tales' («поэтические сказания»), using the word *skazki* («сказки»), for entertaining narratives. A later Russian collector, making the first sound recording of Kyrgyz poetry in 1903/1904, audibly used the same term to label a performance of *Semetey* by Kenje Kara (c. 1859-1929) [10, p. 82]. Valikhanov could also have opted for the term used later by Kyrgyz literati. A manuscript associated with Maldıbay Borzu uulu, the earliest known to containing *Manas* narratives, features two texts with the title 'رورتوب ىاتامىس مصق' ('Qissah-i Sımıtāy bū turūr', 'This is the tale of Semetey') [11, pp. 295-297]). The Arabic loanword *qissa*, indicating an enjoyable tale knowingly fictitious, a fable, also appears in the title of the supposed 1896 publication *Qissah-i Saykal* [11, p. 176 fn. 421]. Valikhanov could also have opted for the Kyrgyz word *jomok* («жомок»). The comparative literature scholar Jutta Wintermann has highlighted how definitions of this term differ (12, pp. 59-60). The *Manas Encyclopaedia* follows the framework suggested by Valikhanov by stressing the similarity with the global conceptions of the epic:

“Мааниси ж-а негизги белгилери б-ча ж. оозеки көркөм чыгармачылык

ж-дөгү дүйнөлүк илимде кабыл алынган эпос түшүнүгүнө туура келген, к. *Эпос*” [13, vol. 1, p. 223].

Judahin’s dictionary [14, vol. 1, p. 259] provides two definitions, the first making comparisons to the Russian *bylina* («былина»), heroic epic («произведение богатырского эпоса»), tales about a hero («сказ о богатыре») or heroic feat («о богатырском подвиге»); the second definition a single word, already noted: *skaza* («сказа»). If, instead of opting to emphasise the ‘encyclopaedia’ element of an ‘epic’, Valikhanov had opted for one of these alternatives for Nazar Bolot uulu’s creation, other elements, such as its humour and creativity, may have received more attention and appreciation.

The words ‘encyclopedia’ and ‘epic’ attached to *Manas* by Valikhanov reveal the placing of an interpretative framework from Russian literary criticism onto Kyrgyz oral poetry. Valikhanov saw in *Manas* particular elements that he considered to be of value for him and his Russian-language readership. His intention, his perspective, and his rationale for using these specific terms, and the intended meaning and likely significance of the terms, becomes clearer when examined in their original contexts. The entanglement of these terms with cultural assumptions, colonial attitudes, and a particular historical moment raises questions about their legacy, their shaping of understanding and appreciation of *Manas* and Kyrgyz culture and identity, and the suitability of their continued use.

Coda Post-Conference Comparisons

The study above has examined the placing of Russian literary criticism onto Kyrgyz oral poetry using the example of Chokan Valikhanov’s engagement with Nazar Bolot uulu’s performance of a narrative featuring *Manas*. Comparison can be made with a description of Yakutian oral storytelling by the folklorist I. A. Khudyakov (1842-1876). Similar details, similar comparisons, and a similar framework feature.

“Якутская сказка неразлучна с песней. «Скажи – спой сказку» (ыллаа – олонхолоо), – говорят сказочнику. И начинает сказочник «петь-говорить» целую эпопею, в которой упоминается множество событий, множество богов, дьяволов, героев; описания разных мест бывают чрезвычайно подробны до самих мелочей. [...] Когда-то во время студенчества, мне казалось невероятным, чтобы один народный певец мог знать и петь наизусть такую большую сказку, как Илиада и Одиссея, упоминая множество собственных имен, вдаваясь в подробности, не пропускающие корабельного гвоздя. Якутские сказочники сказывают стихами и песнями не менее длинные сказки и еще с более мельчайшими подробностями. [...] Сами якуты иногда изумляются их длине» [Quoted in 15, p. 366].

This Russian framework can soon be compared with a Hungarian example. A forthcoming study, ‘An Uncollected Corpus: *Manas*, Gyula Mészáros, and Microhistory, 1911-1915’, examines how a proposed collection, and collation, of *Manas* material by the Hungarian ethnographer Gyula Mészáros (1883–1957) similarly reveals historic attitudes and assumptions when an external framework was placed upon Kyrgyz oral poetry.

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