Re-Conceiving old english Culture through literature: images and values

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Abstract:

The article explores literary images of the Old English period and cultural values embedded into them. A notion of value binds a literary image with national culture. As values are a core of culture they can preserve cultural meanings long after the historical period they appeared in is gone. The author argues that the images transform a variety of cultural values that correspond to different historical periods of national development. In order to discover these semantic facets a number of research methods are applied: conceptual, lexical and semantic, stylistic, genre and discursive analyses. The research showed that the dominant values reflected in Old English literary images are war, fame, treasure, kinship.

Keywords: imagology, literary image, value, axiological meaning, concept

1. Introduction

Reconstruction of the distant past, its worldview and values on the basis of literature of the epoch is always a tricky thing for a researcher as it may involve a number of challenges. First, there is an incomplete corpus of survived texts of the epoch. Besides, these dispersed fragments of texts are divorced from the original social and cultural context that used to predetermine its structure and content. Third, there is a dominant role of ritual, religion and tradition in early human societies and an unusual, sometimes even weird way of reflecting this fusion in their works of art. Fourth, there are close ties of old literatures with music that left a considerable imprint on rhythm and verse of the texts that used to be songs which accompanied people at all stages of their personal and social life. Fifth, there is a symbolic character of early literatures, with each and every text component being immersed into a universe of sacred meanings and concepts the early people were guided by.

All these – to name but a few – provide for a peculiar, non-direct way of reflecting histor-

ical reality and cultural domains in early literatures as "the textual product reveals only traces of the process behind it, and often seems to hide the forces of culture, history, and language that have consciously or unconsciously shaped it" (Liuzza 2002).

Thus, deciphering the enigma of early human cultures through their texts should rely on as firm a research foundation as possible. There can be several ways to approach understanding of culture through fiction text analysis developed within the paradigms of literary criticism (Niles, 2016), stylistics (Leech, 1973), cultural linguistics and poetics (Turner, 2015). The current paper offers to navigate the world of Old English culture within the scope of imagology, an interdisciplinary research perspective that appeared at the junction of comparative literature and cultural studies, discourse analysis, linguistics and linguistic stylistics (Leerssen 2016; Folie 2018; McGlynn/Woodacre 2014; Trojanowska 2016). Despite an abundance of research tracks the unit of study is common for all these approaches: it is the image that is viewed upon from different perspectives. This paper focuses on interpreting the notion of literary image as a culture-related and axiologically marked text / discourse unit. It is tied to culture through a notion of the value and is immersed into an axiological sphere of the nation. Literary image is close to a cultural ideal, the latter may be defined as its referential foundation (Gulyga, 2000). In texts literary images are capable of transmitting cultural meanings at all levels of their representation: plot and motive roles can reflect behavioral values of the society, names of characters represent the key values associated with them, conceptual content of the image helps to reconstruct the 'archeology' of values embedded into it, as any image is infused with cultural/symbolic meanings related to different historical periods. Even if the archaic past loses its touch to reality its values can be preserved in the image content, thus connecting several time scales within one image, e.g. a fusion of pagan and Christion values (Niles, 1991). This is acutely characteristic of Old English literature, as a long period of oral poetic tradition, co-existence of different literary samples due to constant exposure to other cultures through invasions; conversion to Christianity made it a 'boiling pot' of values, worldviews, mentalities.

2. Methods

Reconstruction of values should transgress the boundaries of the text and involve an insight into a broader historical context, through a combination of textual and extratextual analysis methods.

The textual analysis methods may include:

theme, plot and motive analysis – to determine dominant behavior patterns / scripts / scenarios the images are associated with in a culture;

stylistic analysis – to determine a general coloring of the image through an insight into dominant stylistic devices which represent the image in texts (Leech, 1973);

genre analysis – to determine genres that shape a speech portrait of image-representing character; it will help to reconstruct driving forces and communicative values of the image-representing characters;

conceptual analysis – to determine cultural values (their types, chronology) that are central or peripheral for the image.

The extratextual analysis methods may include:

contextual analysis with a focus on a broad cultural setting – to determine major historical peculiarities of the epoch under study;

semiotic analysis – to determine the cultural characteristics of the epoch through analyzing a variety of its sign systems and their languages.

This approach can help to decipher and describe cultural content of the literary images and reconstruct values embedded into them.

3. Results and Findings

A variety of images in the certain historical period may be presented as a system that is structured as a field (in analogy with field structure in linguistics). Such a systemized approach provides an opportunity to view it as a structure with nuclear, central and peripheral zones. The less the image is represented in literature of the epoch, the farther it is from the system's nuclear zone. Thus, the nuclear zone is filled with the key images; the peripheral zone, on the contrary, consists of the images that are not very characteristic of the literature of the epoch.

The Old English period is characterized by a system of nine literary images: hero, warrior, God, Saint (male and female), king, queen, wife / the beloved, enemy. The nuclear images of the Old English period are the images of the warrior and God. The warrior is the best developed image: it is represented by 33 characters (a maximum amount among other images): Wiglaf, Unferth, Ecgþeow, Breca, Guðlaf, Oslaf, Æschere, Eadmund, Garulf, Sigeferð, Eaha, Guðlaf, Eadric, Byrhtnoð, Wulfstan, Ælfere, Maccus, Oswold, Eadwold, Wistan, Æþeric, Guðhere, Deor, Wulf, Widsið, Ælfnoth, Wulfmær, Ælfwine, Offa, Leofsunu, Dunnere, Æscferth. Besides, it has a wide scope of genre representation:

warriors can be found in Old English epic, lyrical and battle poems. Such a detailed representation of warriors in literature corresponds with the importance of a lexical group 'warrior' in the language. It is one of the biggest in Old English, with 90 lexemes, each of them characterizing warriors from different angles: as a soldier at a battlefield (beadurinc, cempa, cumbolwíga, dryhtguma, dryhtmann, fierdesne, fierdmann, fierdrinc, folcwiga, gúðfreca, gúðfremmende, gúðgelæca, gúðmæcga, guþwiga, heaðurinc, hererinc, hildefreca, hilderinc, hildeþremma, hildstapa, wígmann, wígsmiþ, dreng); as a strong male soldier (gumrinc, heremæcg, rinc, secg, swán); as a young soldier (cniht, dreng, hagosteald, hagostealdmann, hyse, magorinc, magu, fyrdesne); as a great soldier (þéodwiga, þrymma, werbéam); as a brave soldier (heoruwulf, herewósa, wælwulf, freca, hearding); as a soldier famous for his heroic deeds (hreþmann, hreþsecg); as a hero (beornwiga, eorl, freca, gúðrinc, oretmæcg, oretta, hæleþ); as a victorious leader (sigebeorn, sigecempa); etc. Warrior as a literary image represents a wide array of values reflecting pagan, tribal and traditional heroic values. Other images with such a wide scope of these values are a hero and a king. The key heroic values transmitted by these images are war (and everything connected with it), fame, wealth, kinship.

War is a macro-conceptual group that comprises lots of sub-groups: armory, battlefield, battle rituals, enemies, victory. Such an importance of this concept for Old English literary images reflects its value for the epoch on the whole: it is quintessential for the notion of heroism, a place to display the heroic qualities.

Fame as a key value of the heroic worldview is interpreted in these images as eternal fame for heroic deeds at the battlefield that can live long after a warrior perishes. Old English words to characterize warrior's fame are mærða, rof, tir, lof, and their composites: the warriors are depicted as mærða gemyndig (striving for fame), ellenmærþ, ellenrof (famous for bravery), mægnes rof (famous for strength). Such a fame transcends the boundaries of the warrior's tribe and makes him widcuþ / wideferhþ (widely famous). Such a fame commemorates the warrior after death; that is why fame (dom) appears in conjunction with death while characterizing Old English heroes and warriors. The warriors are happy to die on battlefields and gain true fame (soðfæstra dom):

… wyrce se þe mote domes ær deaþe (Beo 1387 – 1388)

… dædcene mon dome gewurþad, him of hreðre gewat (Beo 1644 – 1645)

… sawol secean soðfæstra dom (Beo 2819 – 2820).

Treasure is another important value that appears in Old English heroic images of

the warrior, hero and king. It is interpreted as gifts that are distributed by a king to his loyal chieftains and soldiers: rings (hringas, earmreade); necklaces (healsbeag); armory (hrægl); richly decorated saddle (sadol since gewurþad); beaker (maðþumfæt); guilted helmet (goldfahne helm); sword (golde sweord). Old English king is portrayed as gift-giver: maþþumgyfa, beahgifa, sincgyfa, sinces brytta, boldes brytta. By granting gifts (or their parts) to warriors, the kings shared their military fortune with them as well as fame of their royal kin. That is why in characteristics of kings and heroes, the Old English word maðmas (riches) alliterates with words denoting kinship: maðmas - mægnes – mede (Beo 2146) maðma – mæg (Beo 2143), sinc – symbel – sibbe (Beo 2431), maþðumgife – mærum (Beo 1310). One of the most negative characteristics of Old English kings was their unwillingness to share gifts with their warriors that may cause feud (king Heremod): Nallas beagas geaf Denum æfter dome; dreamleas gebad þæt he þæs gewinnes weorc þrowade, leodbealo longsum. ðu þe lær be þon (Beo 1719 – 1722).

The role of kinship for Old English images proves the fact that tribal values were in full swing at the time of song composition. This concept has a wide system of nominations: sunu, bearn, faeder, brothrum, modor, maeg, cyn, sib, folc, leod, theod. The biggest amount of them are found in the image of the hero. It may indicate that this image has the deepest value 'archeology', i.e. goes back to the pre-state, tribal past of the British Isles. It may be seen at the plot level as well: as a token of gratitude, after Beowulf's victory over Grendel, Hrothgar adopts Beowulf, thus including him into his blood relationship as a son: Beowulf leofa, mine sunu Beowulf.

As Old English period is an epoch of transmission from pagan to Christian worldview, its literature reflects an axiological synthesis that may be defined as a co-existence of these worldviews. Pagan (tribal, ritual and mythological) values are predominantly reflected in the images of the warrior and hero: even their names (Beowulf, Wulfstan/Wulfmær, Deor, Æscferth) contain zoomorphic concepts (ash, bear, wolf, deer) that connect the images with the pre-Christian mythological past. The images of God and the Saints (female and male) are a literary space to declare Christion values. Though it must be noted that they are presented through a prism of pagan axiology. Thus, God is named 'middangeardes weard'. Besides, heroic worldview is a source of poetic nominations of God in words and phrases like hæleð, beorn, cempa: beorna breogo, hæleða scyppend, halig cempa, manna scyppend, gast hæleða cynne, hæleða wuldor, halga helm, helm alwihta, ælwihta æðelinga helm of yðlide, halga helmwearde, æðelinga helm, wuldres helm, hæleða helm. The

above-described heroic tradition of gift-giving gave rise to appearing such nominations for God as gifa brytta, engla eadgifa, weoruda wilgeofan, beorht blædgifa, lifes brytta, sawla symbelgifa, sincgiefa, tires brytta, folca feorhgifa, gæsta giefstol. Tribal axiology is reflected in the following God nominations: fæder engla, fæder folca gehwæs, heah-fæder, frumweorca fæder, fæder mancynnes, beorht fæder, bilwit fæder, felameahtigne fæder in heofonum, fæder frefergendum, wuldorfæder, waldend fæder, fæder frumsce-afta. wuldres aldor, godes bearne, wealdendes bearn, beorn ofer bolcan, suna meotudes, bearn miltsum hergen, wuldres æþeling, weoroda ealdor. The same tendency is revealed for the literary images of the Saints (Andreas, Daniel, Guthlac, Elena, Juliana, Judith): they are portrayed from the traditional heroic perspective. The Saints are categorizes as warriors (hæleð, þegn, wiga, æscberend, sigebroðor, lidweard, oretta), and their most typ-ical characteristics contain lexemes belonging to the semantic groups of armory (sweord, gar, lind, segl, wæpen), army (here), battle (beadu, guþ, morðorcræftum, guðgewinn), battle wounds (heorudolg), victory (sige). The Saints are struggling for the sake of Christ and His teachings, against paganists, and he wins in this battle regardless of his death as a Christian martyr:

… gleawmode guman, on gastes hyld. (Daniel 439)

… Þa se wisa oncneow þæt he Marmedonia mægðe hæfde siðe gesohte. (Andreas 843 – 845)

… Swa se halga wer hergende wæs metodes miltse and his mihta sped rehte þurh reorde. (Daniel 333 – 335)

Due to a transmission to new Christian outlook, an axiological climate of the era was marked by a coexistence of two value systems: pagan and Christian. Consequently, the value concepts were dynamic, i.e. they could change their content or connotation in dif-ferent discursive spaces, in relation to different images. For example, the above-described concept of fame has different semantic facets. In heroic images (the hero, the warrior, the king) its content fits within a heroic conceptual paradigm and is associated with the war-rior's pursuit of fame (mærða gemyndig), fame for courage (ellenmærþ, el-len-rof) and strength (mægnes rof), for military merit (fyrdwyrð, heaðomære), widespread fame (widcuþ / wideferhþ / breme), post-humous fame (dom). In Old English religious epic and religious songs fame is referred to God and Saints and is saturated with Christian ax-iology: it is interpreted as divine glory (tireadig, wuldorspedig), light of divine glory (wuldres scima), the Saints are named as persons to have earned divine glory (wuldor-

mæg). Thus, fame as a major motivator for a heroic life is transformed into divine glory in Christian images.

The same axiological ambivalence is typical of the Old English values of fate, wealth, love, victory, war.

4. Conclusions

The findings clearly indicate that imagological research from axiological perspective can make the distant past closer and contribute to an understanding of its values, cultural scripts of behavior and communication. Through analyzing values embedded in literary images it is possible to establish axiological highlights of the era, discover the ways these concepts are interpreted, analyze their ability to transform in the images and accumulate different meanings. These meanings correspond to different historical periods and different worldviews.

Besides, imagological research contributes to specifying linguistic peculiarities of a certain historical period as it is based on the analysis of the linguistic 'substance' of the images. This approach can be of particular interests for historical linguistics as it helps to penetrate into hidden shades of meanings of words and word combinations.

The question raised by this study may be continued in a cross-cultural perspective as a comparative analysis of literary images of several periods or cultures. It would help to discover and explain similarities and dissimilarities in their cultural values and ways of their reflection in literature.

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