

PROPP, VLADIMIR. *Theory and History of Folklore*. Translated by Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Anatoly Liberman. *Theory and History of Literature, Volume 5*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Lxxxii+253 pages. Bibliography, general index, index of foreign terms. Cloth US\$29.50, ISBN 0-8166-1180-7; Paperback US\$12.95, ISBN 0-8166-1182-3.

Two stereotypes seem to dominate our conception of Vladimir Propp since he became "a legend in his own lifetime" through the translation of his early work *Morfologija skazki* (1928a) nearly three decades ago. Firstly, he is primarily seen as a structuralist and a member of the Russian Formalism of the 1920s. Little attention is paid to his non-structuralist research interests. Secondly, he is seen as a victim of some kind of purge or censorship based on the Marxist interpretation of scholarly enterprise. This pressure, political rather than scientific, is assumed to have subdued his voice as one of the very first epoch-making structuralists and forced him to compromise his scholarly integrity by way of Marxist lip service to ideals and research topics to which in his heart he did not really subscribe.

Stereotypes are mostly powerful, one-sided and imposed from outside. The best way to check stereotypes about Propp is, of course, to read his works extensively. But this has been effectively hampered by the fact that his other writings are almost unknown and available only in Russian. The most notable exception is *Transformacija volšebnyx skazok* (1928b), which was translated into Swedish and English in 1971. This early opus complements the picture created by the *Morphology* but does not constitute a gateway to the unabridged Propp.

Thanks to Anatoly Liberman our reading of Vladimir Propp may begin anew. His anthology of translations of Propp's lesser-known later works contains ten article-size texts ranging from 1928 to 1968, no less than seven stemming from the post-war period. Considering that Propp's entire production is not very extensive, the theoretical passages chosen would appear to give a fairly full picture of his thinking over the four and a half decades of his active career. What still remains behind the language barrier is more concerned with the results of detailed research than matters of principle.

Very important articles written during the 1960s on "folklore and reality," on genre theory and classification and on the historicity of folklore constitute the first chapter in the anthology, preceded by an article on the "nature of folklore" from 1946. The second chapter concentrates on the wondertale and begins with Propp's answer to Claude Lévi-Strauss' lengthy review of *Morphology* in 1960, which is also republished in the anthology. This debate is internationally better known, because Propp's answer was originally published in Italian (1966). The other texts in this chapter are earlier, from the one on the transformations of the wondertale (1928) and the masterly essay on ritual laughter in folklore (1939) to the introduction and conclusion of the book on the historical roots of the wondertale (*Istoričeskije korni volšebnoj skazki*, 1946). The third chapter consists of one text only: Propp's introduction to his book on Russian epic poetry (*Russkij geroičeskij epos*, 1955). The translation by Ariadna and Richard Martin is on the whole well done: the moments when one feels the need to consult the original are few indeed.

Anatoly Liberman has the best of editorial ambitions. In a long introduction (72 pages!), he explains all the names and terms in Propp's text which may be alien to the reader, and provides an abundant bibliography on publications relating to Propp.

In some instances he has clearly gone beyond editing. His introduction is not only informative, it develops into a theoretical exercise. It contains lengthy and pro-paedeutic excursions into linguistic theory, Lévi-Strauss and other subjects somewhat distant from Propp. Of greater relevance and value are the surveys on Marr, the Finnish method and Propp's friends and foes on the home front. Some discussion of the history of folklore scholarship in the Soviet Union places Propp in his proper context. There is no doubt that the book will be liked by students, and we can expect to find it on the reading lists for folkloristics, cultural anthropology, literature, linguistics and other disciplines.

These merits notwithstanding, the introduction does have its problems, too. Vladimir Propp is a difficult personality to put across to non-Marxist readers. His Marxist views are likely to irritate some scholars, and this has been the case with Liberman himself, who is not quite willing or able to exclude personal negative emotions concerning Propp and Soviet humanities in general, when discussing their ideological and political overtones. The seesaw of criticism and sympathetic understanding begins to rock a little bit too fast. This ambivalence is probably an authentic reflection of non-Marxist attitudes toward Propp, but if the goal is to create a new understanding of his positive contribution, these attitudes need no enhancement.

Another and perhaps more pertinent remark concerns Liberman's way of handling folklore theory on the basis of incitements provided by Propp. The concept of genre, of tale-type, the role of variation and forms of evolution are among the theoretical domains which the introduction hardly touches upon, although they are focal to Propp. Once the structuralist contribution and the impact of Marxist ideology have been discussed, very little remains to be said. This is probably too meager a picture of one of the most influential folklorists of our time. Propp had his faults, as did Trubetzkoy, Lévi-Strauss and other towering scholars. Liberman does not ponder the question of why these gurus gained such importance despite the blatant errors in their argumentation, and why more orthodox scholars who corrected them remained relatively unknown.

To the non-Marxist Propp's humiliation lies in his outright denial of the goals and methods he had so intensively pursued so far, and, of course, in his obvious surrender to outside political pressure. For Propp, however, the situation must have looked different. It was not the author of *Morphology* who was criticized and bent to belated and reluctant conversion. It was the author of *Historical Roots*, a truly Marxist work. For more than fifteen years its author had been fighting for methodological innovation in the frontline of socialist science. He had criticized both the Mythological and the Historical School severely, his global comparisons had been undertaken in an endeavor to reinforce stadialism or the doctrine of developmental stages in the field of cultural progress, especially in folkloristics. Had he been flirting with bourgeois scholarship, as his critics implied, he might have clarified his views and defended himself, but having tried to create a true Marxist methodology and failed, there was no mercy left for him in his own eyes. So he went beyond political necessity and castigated himself completely. Only one reason could be given for the failure: the strength of previous research traditions. Concerning this point Liberman is not as lucid as usual: the depth of Propp's tragedy—and that of Soviet folkloristics, for that matter—has escaped him.

Oddly enough, the purely folkloristic verdict of Propp's attempt to reconstruct a prehistory of the wondertale is not likely to be much milder. Propp really does seem to have lost sight of the functioning wondertale and its ecological niche, the people that communicate with it in a local cultural environment. His history is clearly the global

developmental history of mankind, to be disclosed by broad-scale cross-cultural comparison and controlled by unilinear and universal stadialism. Primitive cultures hold the key to the explanation, the Russian wondertale is only a starting point. The question of what makes the Russian wondertale Russian is of secondary importance. In saying this Propp actually seems to imply that the Russian/European wondertale is a global genre, a suggestion that would have been rejected by the leading Western folklorists in the 1940s. Where is the history, some of them might have asked, had *Historical Roots* come within their reach. More recent scholars have no difficulty in agreeing with Claude Lévi-Strauss when he claims that Propp studies the wondertale without regard to its context and meaning. This remark was based on *Morphology* only, but it applies also to Propp's more Lévi-Straussian work in *Historical Roots*, if we exclude the hypothetical original context and the meaning derived from it. In other words, Propp's work has nothing to do with the everyday life and variation of the wondertale. The comparative method he applies does not attempt to sort out the old and the new elements of the wondertale, nor does it clarify the routes by which particular tales or sub-genres of folktale have been transmitted. Its "paleontology of the wondertale" does not imply the hunting out of an *Urform* in the spirit of the geographical-historical method. So where is the beef?

*Historical Roots* is a broad vision of the genesis of the wondertale, a genre studied and defined in *Morphology* on the basis of Russian material. It is not genre history in the strict sense of the word: we learn almost nothing about the vicissitudes of Russian or European wondertale traditions in historical time. The plot structure found in Russian wondertales is compared to tales, myths and rituals in other parts of the world in order to find its original place in the cultural system in general. The wondertale genre is taken to be something secondary, an artistic development of something more original. The key is found among peoples still at a stage of development—a preclass stage according to the stadialist pattern—left behind by the Russian people long ago.

Plot patterns may be fairly stable, almost universal, but their semantics are dependent on the developmental stage. They are reinterpreted at successive cultural stages, and new forms and genres may emerge to carry them forward. But it is always the reinterpretation of the culture itself we must look for, not any scholarly overinterpretation of a symbolic or other (including Marxist!) nature. Here we find the demarcation line between Lévi-Strauss and Propp, both actually operating with very similar phenomenological apparatus in their comparisons, but Lévi-Strauss postulating autonomy of myth semantics where Propp, the "incorruptible empiricist," subordinates it to historical development in the sense of stadialism.

At first Propp's solution, the degeneration of myth into the wondertale, does not strike the reader with much novelty. Scholars from the Grimm Brothers to Jan de Vries have made similar postulates. Admittedly, Propp's phenomenological frame is broader and bolder, his conclusions more specific. Most of the recurring motifs in wondertales are traced back to two related primordial rituals and their accompanying myths: the initiation of the neophyte (age-group initiation, wedding) and the sending of the dead to the other world (funeral, commemorative rituals).

The religious nature of North American Indian tales has impressed Propp; referring to them and to those of other cultures of a similar level he says that "the wondertale in our sense of the word is unknown to the aborigines." But what kind of dependency could exist between Russian and North American Indian tales? No historical dependency in the sense of genetic contact between the cultures in question: the possibility of such contact need not be excluded, but it is irrelevant from the stadialist

point of view. Neither contact nor geographical proximity determines the time of appearance, function and composition of the wondertale. It appears at a certain point of development, when ritual dies or is transformed and divorced from the religious tale combined with it and when this profanation of the narrative opens up new ways for the artistic treatment of the material. The oldest and most stable element is the plot structure: it can and must be understood as a survival of the original ritual "plot."

Liberman is probably correct in saying that Propp must have accepted the poly-genetic origin of the wondertale, even if he does not express himself clearly on the subject (lxviii). He was opposed to the Finnish method's theories of particular tale archetypes built on monogenesis. But Liberman is wrong when he states that stadialism is dead in anthropology (leaving it a little bit more alive in folkloristics and literary history; lix). Developmental history remains an important counterpart in anthropology to the vulgar-positivist linear concept of history. Propp, who conversed so much with Dorsey, Boas and other Americans, could well have continued to do so with Leslie White and other neoevolutionists, had the lines of communication survived the Cold War. His unilinear and determinist views had probably been tempered toward multilinear models of evolution, where the leap to the wondertale may take place under different premises in different cultures and where even a return from wondertale to myth would become theoretically possible.

The highlights of Propp's thinking and Liberman's commentaries provide an interesting intellectual exercise in the theory of folklore. The contents of the anthology deserve to be perused much more carefully than is possible within a short review.

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