

Theory and History of Folklore. By Vladimir Propp. Translated by Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin and several others. Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by Anatoly Liberman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Pp. lxxxi + 252, \$12.95 paper, \$29.50 cloth.

Reviewed by Felix J. Oinas.

This volume contains a selection of the works of Vladimir Propp, the famous Russian folklorist. In addition to seven articles, two chapters from the book **Historical Roots of the Wondertale** and the introduction of the book **Russian Heroic Epic Poetry**, the volume includes a seventy-three page Introduction by Professor Anatoly Liberman and an appended critique of Propp's **Morphology of the Folktale** by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Although this selection of Propp's works is truly representative of his untranslated materials, one of his major works, **Russian Agrarian Holidays**, was left out entirely.

The Introduction by Anatoly Liberman, editor of the volume, gives a detailed critical overview of Propp. A versatile scholar of Indo-European linguistics and literature, Liberman presents a broad survey of Propp's works in folklore: the impulses that led to their inception, their characterization and evaluation, their position in Russian folklore, and their reception (which was mostly negative) in Russia. He also provides a fascinating, lively account of the adversities and vicissitudes against which Propp struggled in the ever-changing political climate of the Soviet Union from the late 1920s to the 50s. The Introduction furthermore contains a detailed account of Propp's views of Marxist theory, on Marr, on history, historical songs, structuralism, and a comparison between Propp and Lévi-Strauss. Liberman's evaluation of Lévi-Strauss is thought-provoking: "Lévi-Strauss's method bears the most superficial resemblance to the methods of linguistics and is too undeveloped to arouse more than a passing curiosity" (p. xliii).

Only one work by Propp, **Morphology of the Folktale**, qualifies as "great" and will retain its value in folkloristics. All the other works typically reflect the level of Russian folklore scholarship at a particular

period, and thus have primarily historical value. With **Morphology**, Propp followed his own imagination, judgment and free will, during the rather free intellectual atmosphere of the mid-twenties. His other works were written under the stress and strain of the Stalinist regime, when Damocles' sword was constantly hanging over his head. To make sections of them available in translation, however, is most beneficial, since they acquaint us with the less well-known works of this leading Russian folklore scholar and with the thorny path of Soviet folkloristics.

The selection begins with articles on "The Nature of Folklore," written mostly in 1976. They deal with theoretical questions, such as the principles for the classification of folklore genres; the relationship between folklore and literature, ethnography and history; the reflection of reality in folklore; and others. Some of them are strongly polemical, directed against M.M. Pliseckij and B.A. Rybakov. We have to agree with Propp that the contribution of the archeologist Rybakov to Russian folkloristics has been, on the whole, of questionable quality.

The volume focuses on the wondertale and heroic poetry. The chapters chosen from **Historical Roots of the Wondertale** introduce Propp's basic ideas about the origin of the wondertale. Propp thought these had originated in stories told to initiates at initiation and funeral rites which were later divorced from the ceremonies and desacralized. His ideas were not new, for they had already been elaborated by Saintyves and several other scholars, but Propp's contribution was to gather together a sizable body of material from all over the world. When the data did not fit the pattern, he manipulated them at will by "transformation." This procedure permitted any hocus pocus deemed necessary. The section on the wondertale also contains Propp's discussion of transformation and a polemical article on Lévi-Strauss' structuralism.

Propp's major study **Russian Heroic Epic** was based on Belinskij's premise of the "idea," a notion supposedly underlying each lay and expressing a certain ideal. The volume on the whole is mediocre, but as Liberman points out, it is "an invaluable book for all those who investigate the impact of Marxism on comparative and historical literature, including folklore" (p. lxxxi).

The image of Propp the man and scholar clearly emerges from Liberman's Introduction and the selected articles and chapters. He stands out as a kind, mellow man, endeavoring to adjust to the changeable political winds, which he miraculously survived. (For this, he was accused of "political demagoguery" [p. lxxix]). On the other hand, he was a stubborn opponent of trends in folkloristics of which he didn't approve, such as the Finnish school and the Russian historical school. He attacked the Finnish school because of its alleged use of statistics to determine the oldest form of the plot. In this case he was mistaken. His fight against the historical school was also ill advised, for its perspective proved to be a solid one in the science of Russian heroic poetry. Propp furthermore stuck steadfastly to his theory that heroic poetry grew not out of mythological poetry, but from prestate poetry, in which the hero's enemies were monsters.

Propp was merciless and severe in his criticism of those espousing views that were different from his own. This appears graphically from the following statements: "The reason lies in their [eight folklorists are mentioned] erroneous methodology" (p. 55); "Followers of the old Historical school do not understand the nature of epic poetry as a specific genre; hence their mistakes" (p. 57). Statements like those have caused a colleague of his to point to Propp's "disrespectful tone of criticism" (p. lxxix).

Propp's theoretical pronouncements and his actual practice were occasionally inconsistent. Thus he stressed that "in folklore one can use only the inductive method, that is, one proceeds from data to conclusion" (p. 57). And he spoke out against deduction, i.e. proceeding from a general theory or hypothesis to facts, in accordance with a set of postulates (ibid.). Actually, all of Propp's major works were built upon deduction. As I have shown in my obituary of Propp (*Journal of American Folklore* 84[1971]:340), each of his larger works depended on a single basic principle: **Historical Roots of the Wondertale**, on the initiation rites; **Russian Heroic Epic**, on the notion of the Belinskij inspired "idea"; and **Russian Agrarian Holidays**, on economic necessity as the explanation of

holidays. This tendency to build the whole work on one preconceived idea and make the facts conform with the theory has led to strained conclusions, schematism and onesidedness.

Theory and History of Folklore has a bibliography of over 400 items, which refer directly or indirectly to Vladimir Propp. We can add only a few more:

Mary C. Coote, "Beyond Morphology: Vladimir Propp's *Istoriceskie korni volsebnj skazki*," **Russian Language Journal** 31 (1977): 133-39; Isidor Levin, "A Belated Open Letter to Vladimir Propp," **Linguistica Biblica** 23/24 (1973): 63-68; Carl Stief, **Studies in the Russian Historical Song** (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1953).

The detailed notes help to clarify questions the reader in Russian folklore may have. Professor Anatoly Liberman and his staff of translators have done an excellent job of organizing and translating this collection of studies previously unaccessible to Western readers. Executed with extreme care, this work is one of the best specimens of American Slavic scholarship.

The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil. Third edition. By C. Scott Littleton. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. Pp. xvii + 319, bibliography, index, paper, no price.

Reviewed by Hugo A. Freund

The study of comparative mythology, so predominant in the 19th century, has been almost completely discredited. 20th century anthropologists and folklorists place myth in the context of a group that exists in the here and now. Consideration of Indo-European mythology and culture has been forgotten except for the French scholar Georges Dumézil and a corps of his students and disciples. C. Scott Littleton's book is an introduction to the thinking of Dumézil and the work of his disciples. Littleton traces the criticism leveled at them, but is less of a critic himself, although he does quibble with Dumézil on his use of the word 'function'. As Littleton points out in the "Preface to the First Edition" this book is not an intellectual biography.