

CONFERENCE REPORT

“Le chemin, la route, la voie dans la littérature et la civilisation russe,” (The path, the road, the way in Russian literature and civilization), University of Paris-Sorbonne, May 21-23, 2003

Sponsored by the Slavic Studies Center at the Sorbonne, the international conference “Le chemin, la route, la voie” featured a number of papers on folklore topics. Francis Conte, the director of the Sorbonne Slavic Studies Center and the organizer of the conference opened the meeting with a paper entitled “A General Introduction to the Topic of the Road, the Route, the Path.” He spoke about the differences between animal migration and human travel, pointing out that animal migration, as much as it may follow a specific route, is instinctual while human travel is conscious. He then contrasted the path, which follows natural contours, to the constructed road, which often requires overcoming nature to build a thoroughfare that suits human needs. His purpose was to focus the attention of the conference participants on the relationship between humans and the road. Next was Al’bert Baiburin of the European University in St. Petersburg presenting a paper entitled “The Road of Remembrance and Forgetfulness.” His presentation drew attention to another aspect of consciousness, namely how travel is conceived and how remembering or forgetting places left behind influences the course of human life. The final paper of the first session, “The Additional Element in the Structure of the Expeditionary Group,” written by T. Shchepanskaia from the Kunstkamera in St. Petersburg and read by Kabakova of the Sorbonne, talked about folklore and ethnographic fieldwork and the effect of travel on the collection of data. Shchepanskaia analyzed interactions among the members of ethnographic expeditions and their perceptions of self and other.

The second half of the morning program began with a paper by Tat’iana Tsivian of the Slavic and Balkan Studies Institute in Moscow, “The Fatal Journey of Kolobok.” She took the Russian children’s story, “Kolobok,” compared it to the equally simple-sounding nursery rhyme “Humpty-Dumpty,” and revealed a serious, ritual substratum. Afternoon papers with folklore content included S. Vieillard’s “Proverbial Reality and Poetic Message: On Catherine II and her Description of a Voyage to the Crimea.” Natalie Kononenko of the University of Virginia talked about “Road as Symbol in the Ukrainian Funeral” in which she described the funeral procession through the village. She postulated that the funeral procession is believed to separate body and soul, permitting them to undertake their respective journeys. Lesia Britsyna of the Folklore Institute in Kyiv spoke on crossroads, a sacred place and one often prohibited to humans. She pointed out that certain lexemes are routinely associated with crossroads and claimed that the stability of verbal expression mirrors consistency of belief. The afternoon ended with a concert of folk songs on the topic of roads and travel performed by the group “Tsvetnitsa.” One folklore paper was presented on the second day of the meeting, when Elena Berezovich of the University of Ekaterinburg spoke on “Road Names in the Topography of the Russian North and the Folk Picture of the World.” She used the extensive data collecting conducted by her university to isolate folk concerns. The names of roads are based on where they lead and other points of orientation. They can also be named after their conditions and their use, she said.

The rest of the conference featured papers on literature and history. Speakers discussed Karamzin, Chekhov, Belyi, Mandel'shtam, Il'f and Petrov and Iordan Radichkov. They looked at groups of writers, such as those who dealt with utopian subject matter and those who wrote in the 1960s-80s. French travel accounts were contrasted with Russian. They described the rise of the institution of the war correspondent and the picture of the Russo-Turkish conflict in the Balkans presented by correspondents to their readers back home. Russian Populist movements were the subject of one paper, while another author showed the conference participants how tariff records could be used as a source of data. Plans are afoot to place further information on the conference on the Sorbonne web site: <http://www.recherches-slaves.paris4.sorbonne.fr/>.

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