

# **A New Reading of the Classics of Russian Folkloristics**

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Russian folkloristics, characteristically, interprets from time to time the scholarly inheritance of the past from contemporary positions. This is confirmed by A. L. Toporkov's book, The Theory of Myth in Russian Philological Scholarship of the Nineteenth Century (Teoriia mifa v russkoi filologicheskoi nauke XIX veka), which was recently published by Indrik (Moscow, 1997, 456 pp., boards).

The monograph consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, an index of names, and a bibliography. In the introduction the author clearly states the subject of his research -- "not the mythological school in Russia, but the interpretation of mythology in Russian scholarship" (p. 20). In connection with the selection of names for the study becomes especially significant -- not only "mythologists," but also scholars from other trends in Russian philology. The four chapters are entitled: "F. I. Buslaev's Research on Myth: From a Philosophy of Language to Comparative Ethnography"; "Myth and Slavic Mythology in the Creative Legacy of A. N. Afanas'ev"; "A. A. Potebnia: The Linguistic Theory of Myth"; "A. N. Veselovskii on Myth: A Complex Program for Philological Investigations." The evolution of interpretations of myth and mythology in Russian scholarship of the last century are examined through the prism of the creative biographies of the most prominent representatives of Russian philology in the nineteenth century, against a background of competing and coexisting schools. However, the significance of the book under review is not that the works of outstanding philologists about myth in the nineteenth century are examined diachronically (this is to be expected), but that they have been read in parallel and in conjunction with each other. Section titles such as the following play a basic role in Toporkov's monograph: "Buslaev on the Early Works of Veselovskii," "The Influence of Buslaev on Afanas'ev," "Afanas'ev and Buslaev: A Creative Dialogue," "Afanas'ev and the early Potebnia," "Potebnia and Buslaev," "Potebnia on Afanas'ev," and "Veselovskii and Buslaev: A Creative Dialogue." This method of reading the classics of folkloristics enables the author of the monograph to avoid the characteristic mistakes that lie in wait for any investi-

gator who is studying the scholarly inheritance of this or that major scholar -- ascribing priorities to one's hero where they do not exist.

Without a doubt the most important methodological merit of this work is that the mythological theory of the last century is examined in close connection with the philosophy and theoretical linguistics of the time. The names of Schelling and Humboldt are not accidental on the pages of Toporkov's monograph. One other side of his investigation attracts attention -- the contiguous treatment of scholarly thought and artistic creation in Russian culture from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Many investigators before Toporkov have already drawn attention to the fact that Afanas'ev's The Slavs' Poetic Views of Nature (Poeticheskie vozzreniia slavian na prirodu) was a source of inspiration and the formation of aesthetic conceptions for such prominent verbal masters as Aleksandr Blok, Velimir Khlebnikov, Sergei Esenin, and Aleksei Remizov. The study of sources is usually the central point in examinations of this question. Toporkov points out the typological uniformity in the views of nature as an object of mythologization with Afanas'ev on the one hand, and with Fedor Tiutchev (pp. 202-203) and Evgenii Baratynskii (pp. 206-207) on the other. The typological identity in Russian philosophical lyrics of the nineteenth century and in Afanas'ev's scholarly research are noted with great accuracy and subtlety by the author of the monograph.

An attentive reader will discover in this book a multitude of approaches to various individual questions that play far from the least important role in Russian folkloristics. We will point out one of them -- establishing the sources on which Afanas'ev based his work, The Slavs' Poetic Views of Nature. Toporkov indisputably proves that the works of Potebnia were to a large extent fundamental to Afanas'ev, both for material and for conception. The book cites numerous examples of textual echoes between Afanas'ev and Potebnia's works On Several Symbols in Slavic Folk Poetry (O nekotorykh simvolakh v slavianskoi narodnoi poezii, 1860), On the Mythological Meaning of Several Rituals and Beliefs (O mificheskom znachenii nekotorykh obriadov i poverii), and On the Connection of Several Conceptions in Language (O sviazi nekotorykh predstavlenii v iazyke, 1864) (pp. 226-230). The parallel reading of Buslaev and Afanas'ev, as proposed by Toporkov, discloses just as large a relative weight of hidden citations from the studies of the former in Afanas'ev's The Slavs' Poetic Views of Nature (pp. 186-188).

Afanas'ev even has clear echoes with Max Müller's Comparative Mythology (p. 201).

Toporkov's monograph without doubt does not completely cover the question it addresses. In light of this work, it becomes clear that in order to carry out a fuller interpretation of the paths of development of the "mythological school" in Russia in the nineteenth century (more precisely, of the evolution of the theory of myth), it is necessary to include the equally important names of A. A. Kotliarevskii and Orest Miller in the circle of scholars examined by Toporkov. The scholarly legacy of these researchers deserves just as diligent and scrupulous an analysis as Toporkov's treatment of Buslaev, Afanas'ev, Potebnia and Veselovskii. Moreover, this analysis should not be carried out on the folklorist's work in isolation, but connected with the work of other folklorists.

In his monograph Toporkov completely bypasses the names of the epigones of the mythological school, such as A. S. Famintsyn (*The Gods of the Ancient Slavs* [Bozhestva drevnix slavian], SPb, 1884) and M. E. Sokolov (*Old Russian Sun Gods and Goddesses* [Staro-russkie solnechnye bogi i bogini], Simbirsk, 1887). Undoubtedly the author has the right to make such a choice in his research. Nevertheless, interpretation of the epigones in scholarship, just as in art, can at times be useful and fruitful.

Like any serious research, Toporkov's monograph has in principal an open character. After becoming acquainted with this book, a reader not only receives answers, but also is given questions and begins to see more clearly further perspectives for the study of other problems. We see this as the main merit of this publication.

Translated by James O. Bailey