

A. N. Veselovsky. "On the method and tasks of literary history as a field of scholarship" (1870)

Translation and introductory note by Boris Maslov

### **Introductory note**

Alexander Veselovsky (1838-1906) is widely regarded as Russia's most distinguished and influential literary theorist before the formation of *Opoyaz* (the "Society for the Study of Poetic Language"), whose members – Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum, Yuri Tynianov, Roman Jakobson, and others – developed the approach generally referred to by the name of "Russian Formalism." English readers of Shklovsky may note the prominence accorded to Veselovsky in *Theory of Prose* (1925), where he is both an object of polemic – as a representative of the "ethnographical method" – and Shklovsky's ally against psychologism and aestheticism. Some will also recall the use of the term "historical poetics" – a reference to the method put forward by Veselovsky – in the subtitle of Mikhail Bakhtin's widely read study "The Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel: Notes towards a Historical Poetics" (1937-8, publ. in 1975). Another testimony to Veselovsky's influence is the concluding paragraph of Vladimir Propp's path-breaking *Morphology of the Folktale*, where Propp humbly asserts that his "propositions, although they appear to be new, were intuitively foreseen by none other than Veselovsky" and ends his study with an extensive quote from Veselovsky's "Poetics of plot" (Propp 115-116). It is rarely recognized, however, that Veselovsky is not only an important intellectual predecessor to much of Russian literary theory, but that his method, in its rudimentary form, constitutes a common denominator of such widely divergent approaches as those of the Russian Formalists and Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>1</sup>

*Historical poetics*, Veselovsky's *magnum opus* that was left incomplete at the time of his death, is generally held to be the foundational work of Russian literary criticism. Veselovsky himself conceived of it as a summation – to borrow his own term, the ultimate "generalization" – of his life's work, which included numerous monographs (including books on Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Pushkin's older contemporary, Zhukovsky) and studies on topics as diverse as

Italian Renaissance culture, Slavic folklore, comparative epic studies, the Ancient Greek novel, and East-West literary ties.<sup>2</sup> These studies are exemplary in their erudition and meticulous attention to detail. To quote René Wellek's assessment in *A History of Modern Criticism*, Veselovsky "must be classed among the greatest literary scholars of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century in breadth of knowledge and scope of competence" (278-9). Indeed, Veselovsky should justly be regarded as one of the pioneers of the discipline of comparative literature.

In this light it comes as a surprise that the only piece of Veselovsky's work that has up to now been available in English is a fragment of a fairly specialized discussion (Veselovskii, "Istoricheskaia Poetika"). The present publication is a translation of one of Veselovsky's early theoretical pronouncements, a lecture entitled "The Method and Tasks of Literary History as a Field of Scholarship" (1870). In this lecture, which has become one of the cornerstones of his posthumous reception, Veselovsky issued the first call for a method that he would later term Historical Poetics.<sup>3</sup> The present translation is thus intended to restore an omitted chapter in the early history of comparative literature, as well as fill a lacuna in the Anglophone reception of Russian literary criticism.

Furthermore, this text, read today, is also likely to provoke serious theoretical reflection. In this lecture, delivered in 1870, Veselovsky speaks directly to some of the concerns that are central to the literary-critical profession in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as the methods of literary-historical analysis that place canonical authors in dialogue with the larger social context and with popular culture; the (in)adequacy of the universalizing claims of aesthetics rooted in (primarily) German philosophy; the viability of the discipline of comparative literature and its place in the university curriculum; the "colonial" ambitions of literary scholars who intrude on the territory of cultural and intellectual history.<sup>4</sup> Part of the excitement of reading Veselovsky's lecture *ex post facto* comes from the recognition that it goes further than merely raising or debating these questions: it provides a tentative solution that, while infused with the spirit of the age (its empiricism, belief in progress, trust in the universal applicability of linguistic methodology, etc.), proved appealing to several subsequent generations of literary scholars.

What is the essence of historical poetics as a method, as it was developed by Veselovsky and taken over by the Russian tradition of poetics? At the cost of simplification, I would single out the following ingredients of this approach: (i) sustained attention to the *longue durée* of literary and cultural history, particularly to the formation and mutation of styles, genres, and

paradigms (what Veselovsky calls “literary epochs”); (ii) radical historicism, in that texts of the past are approached not with modern standards (aesthetic or ideological), but as cultural products of the period in question; the idea of an “organic” unity of a work of art, in particular, is dismissed as an aesthetist prejudice; (iii) consideration of literary history (viz. literary evolution) as a semi-autonomous domain of social praxis that both involves immanent laws or regularities and must be correlated with the history of culture and the history of consciousness; (iv) preoccupation with those aspects of literary form that escape the attention of the individual author and that therefore defy psychological or narrowly sociopolitical explanation.

The lecture translated here is an early formulation of a method that evolved significantly in the following decades. Following his graduation from Moscow University, Veselovsky spent about seven years (1860-1867), part of which were sponsored by the University, studying and travelling in Western Europe. He served as private tutor in Spain and studied in Berlin and Prague, before settling for several years in Italy (mostly Florence) where he engaged in his own research.<sup>5</sup> Upon his return to Russia, he was invited to chair the department of General History of Literature (*vseobshchei istorii literatury*) at St. Petersburg University. This lecture was delivered as an introduction to the proposed course of study at the department. Here Veselovsky not only does not use the term “historical poetics”, but even shuns the word “poetics”, which at that time still carried the taint of the Neo-Classical proscriptive tradition. (It is a mark of Veselovsky’s wide-ranging influence that, once he reintroduced “poetics” as a term for the ‘scholarly/scientific theory of literature’, it enjoyed such prominence in 20<sup>th</sup> c. literary criticism.<sup>6</sup>) One also notes a unidirectional treatment of the form/content dialectic, whereby form is viewed as inert substance; the history of literary forms will become the object of increasingly more focused attention in Veselovsky’s later work (Peretts; Shaitanov in Veselovskii, *Izbrannoe* 26).

In this lecture, Veselovsky’s interests are elsewhere: the rejection of an approach to literary history that is based exclusively on canonical authors (what Yuri Tynianov will later term the “history of the generals”<sup>7</sup>); the announcement of a new method of comparative literary inquiry, based largely on the comparative method of Indo-European linguistics<sup>8</sup>; a notably broad conceptualization of the tasks of literary history, which encompass history of culture and history of consciousness; a definition of the standard of scholarly work in the humanities, which reveals Veselovsky’s wariness of transposing the criteria of objective exactitude and verifiability directly

from science (an attempt at such a transposition was indeed undertaken in early French and Soviet structuralism). All these principles will remain fundamental to Veselovsky's method.

Veselovsky's work is remarkable in its combination of two critical strands that 20<sup>th</sup> c. theory has taught us to regard as distinct: (i) the "linguistic" assumption (nowadays associated with Saussure's *Cours*) of the primacy of grammar over individual usage, which became fundamental to French structuralism as well as many post-structuralist thinkers; (ii) commitment to historically contextualized study of literary texts, which has become almost *de rigueur* in the last two decades, in part due to the influence of New Historicism. By bringing together formal genealogy and social content, Veselovsky's historical poetics points a way for a *renovatio* of literary theory that is alternative to recent work (part of it known as "New Formalism") that shuns both of these critical strands, aligning itself instead with the New-Critical tradition. No less importantly, Veselovsky's inaugurating lecture stands as a reminder of the original promise of comparative literature – a discipline that would offer a synthesis of the study of literatures, both Western and non-Western – that scholars today are increasingly mindful of (as reflected in the wide currency of the notion of "World Literature," which so far has had more impact on pedagogy than on research).

Note on translation:

Brackets contain clarifying additions that have no equivalent in the original.

Russian does not encode the distinction between English *science* and *scholarship*; both these notions are conveyed by the word *nauka* (cf. German *Wissenschaft*). I have accordingly rendered *nauka*, *nauchnyi*, etc. with different English words depending on context. *Riad*, a key term in Veselovsky's discussion of the procedure of scholarly generalization (and a term used in the *Opoyaz* for any ordered set of phenomena), is here translated as *series*. Veselovsky used the word *fakt* to refer to concrete, pre-theorized historical phenomena; I render *fakt* as *fact* throughout to distinguish it from *iavlenie*, the proper Russian equivalent of *phenomenon*.

In translating *vseobszhaia literature* I have opted for *world literature*, inasmuch as *vseobszhaia* 'general' here is synonymous with *vsemirnaia* 'world'.<sup>9</sup>

I have made no effort to update Veselovsky's use of gendered linguistic markers to the contemporary standards. In a discussion of the great men of the past, linguistic convention of the time allowed for no alternative to the use of generic masculine pronouns.

In general, I have sought to preserve Veselovsky's distinctive style, with its combination of direct, even colloquial-sounding usage, terminological rigor (which can account, e.g. for recurrence of a single word within a sentence), and vivid, mildly baroque imagery. The conversational quality, and occasional syntactic looseness, of this text in particular is due to the oral style of the original lecture.

I have used the text of the lecture reprinted in Veselovskii, *Izbrannoe* 9-20. When identifying bibliographic references and quotations, I have drawn on notes by Zhirmunskii, Mochalova, and Shaitanov (in Veselovskii, *Izbrannoe*).

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## Summary

Veselovsky begins his lecture with a summary of teaching and research methods current in the 1850s and 1860s at the departments of literature and philology in Germany and France, discussing their applicability to comparative inquiry into literary/cultural history. He then proceeds to reject the historical approach that focuses on lone, heroic figures of the great authors, suggesting that it goes along with an uncritical acceptance of preconceived historiographical schemata as well as a denial of popular involvement in history. In a polemic with this approach, Veselovsky puts forward a definition of the scholarly method that is grounded in the comparative analysis of primary sources of different kinds. As an example of the application of this method, Veselovsky points to the Herderian project of studying popular (“folk”) lyric and epic traditions which unsettled age-old dogmas on (e.g.) the nature of Homeric poetry and broader patterns of genre evolution. Illustrating the applicability of a comparative approach to modern period, Veselovsky discusses the Romantic redeployment of the forms of Medieval romance in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. The lecture concludes with a redefinition of literary history as inquiry into the history of consciousness that manifests itself in the inflection of inherited forms of representation.

Alexander Veselovsky (1838-1906)

## On the method and tasks of literary history as a field of scholarship

Introductory lecture in the course on the History of World Literature, read at St. Petersburg Imperial University on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October of 1870

Esteemed gentlemen!

You expect and are entitled to demand from anyone who first addresses you from the professorial chair that he set forth his program to you. If the subject that he represents is new, and has never before been part of the schedules of Russian universities, this demand of yours is all the more well-grounded. I find myself in both these situations. Instead of a program, however, I bring to you something like a promise, a few general guidelines that have been worked out by science, and a few personal convictions of my own, which, perhaps, have still to attain to scholarly value. I do not want to promise now anything more, as it is not my wish that the promise exceed its fulfillment. Indeed, both the actual character of my subject, which only recently has become the object of a special discipline, and its place in the context of the Russian university curriculum, which has not yet been clarified, invite caution. Does the research conducted at Russian universities demand a department of world literature? What will its place be among other departments? Will it serve the purpose of what is customarily called general education, or will it be permitted to pursue more specialized scholarly objectives? These all are questions that practice will resolve, and the complete program of teaching will only be revealed at its end in accordance with the directions provided by experience.

In Germany, as is well-known, departments of world literature exist as departments of Romance and Germanic philology. The name of “philology” by itself well conveys the character of these departments. A professor reads [with his students] some Old French, Old German, or Provençal texts (you will note that predominantly old texts are involved). First, a brief summary of grammatical rules is provided; paradigms of declensions and conjugations, and (if the text is in verse) distinctive metrical features are dictated. Then the actual reading of an author follows, accompanied by philological and literary commentary. In this fashion one reads the *Edda*, *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungen[lied]* and the *Song of Roland*. Such specialization is beyond our reach, at least at this early stage. In any case it would not have met with sufficient interest, even though the indubitable benefit a student of Russian antiquities could derive from a closer acquaintance with the monuments of Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian literatures could easily dispel doubts about the usefulness or immediate applicability of such studies.

Sometimes the German program expands to encompass literary commentary proper. In relation to the *Nibelungen[lied]*, for example, no professor would omit a discussion of the strife that still divides German scholars on the issue of manuscripts in which this ancient monument of German poetry has been preserved. Yet he could go further: he would address this text’s relationship to preexistent folk and literary renditions of the same saga, its echoes in later song and in toponyms, its place in the overall context of sagas on German heroes, etc. In this way a task that was initially formulated on a narrowly philological basis can grow into a broader problem, the problem of German popular epic taken in general. Similarly, an analysis of French “chansons de geste” easily provides an impetus to numerous such studies, as, for example, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne* by Gaston Paris [1865] and *Guillaume d'Orange.[Chansons de geste des XIe et XIIe siècles]* by [W.-J.-A.] Jonckbloet [1854]; or else, a reading of Old High German texts could lead to a certain series of generalizations and raise, for example, the question recently provoked by [Wilhelm] Scherer regarding the relative antiquity of German literature.

Thus, leaving behind the narrow specialization that is constrained by the reading and interpretation of an ancient text, one proceeds to a more productive analysis. Here again,

however, one faces the question of the applicability of such a course of study. Obviously, one cannot speak of the usefulness of studies of this sort for general education; yet the question of their application to research – I mean their application to scholarship in Russia – at the very least, provokes doubts. The murky fortunes of Old High German literature cannot excite our particular interest; we are eager to learn the results of studies in this field, yet we would hardly engage in such studies ourselves. On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that the problem of German sagas and French “chansons de geste” can shed light on many features of Russian song culture or that Russian 18<sup>th</sup> c. literature could not be understood without a good knowledge of contemporary English and French thought. All these are tasks put before the student of the history of Russian literature, or those still awaiting his attention. The historian of world literature can prepare material for him, yet he would not approach solving this task himself, for fear that in his hands, the instrument of analysis would grow comically disproportionate with the significance of the phenomenon he undertakes to illuminate.

The history of world literature has taken on an entirely different character in departments of France, and more recently, Italy. I would have called this character general-educational had this name not called for further clarification. Examples of such courses are lectures at the Collège de France; books by Philarète Chasles [1798-1873]; *Michel de Cervantes: sa vie, son temps, son oeuvre politique et littéraire* [1866] by Émile Chasles; [Alfred] Mézières’s [1826-1915] writings on Shakespeare and Petrarch; finally, [Hippolyte] Taine’s *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* [1864; 4 vols]. One usually selects as the object of study an epoch that is remarkable with respect to culture: for example, 16<sup>th</sup> c. Italian Renaissance, English drama, etc.; yet most frequently a certain great man is called upon to guarantee the unity of vision and the coherence of generalization: Petrarch, Cervantes, Dante and his time, Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The time and the contemporaries do not necessarily play the pitiful role of loose-hanging ornaments or bricks for the great man’s pedestal. One could say that, on the contrary, in the last years the milieu surrounding the protagonist is notably pushed into the foreground and no longer merely sets off the great man, but explains him, while also – to a significant degree – being explained by him. Nevertheless, the great man remains at the center of

things, as a connecting tissue visible to the eye, even if he owes this position not to the substance of his activity, which had subsumed all the vectors of the development of his time, but rather to a rhetorical calculation on the part of the modern researcher who relies upon the external impression of unity that a celebrated name or a well-known event suggests to us and that we are inclined to accept as internal unity.

Other rhetorical ploys are adapted so as to increase this artificial impression: the great man is the end point and the summation of all paths of development, he is the source of all influence, as in a garden planned in the fashion of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. where all alleys are meant to lead, just like radii or beams of a fan, to a palace or to a certain pseudo-classical monument. Yet it always happens that the monument is not visible from all sides, or that it is poorly illuminated, or that it is not of a kind that befits a central placement in a well-planned garden, a placement that commands perspectives in all directions. It is clear why the theory of heroes – those leaders and makers of humanity, as Carlyle and [Ralph Waldo] Emerson depict them – is good and poetic only when it is maintained in its integrity and brought to completion. From this viewpoint, they indeed might appear as heaven's elect, who only rarely visit the earth: solitary actors, they stand on high and need neither milieu nor perspective. Yet modern scholarship has dared penetrate the masses who stood behind them, deprived of voice. Therein it noticed life, movement that cannot be seen with the naked eye, as everything that occurs in all too large expanses of space and time. It was there that the hidden springs of the historical process had to be sought, and along with a lowering of the material level of historical research the center of gravity was transferred to the life of simple folk. At this point the great personalities appeared as reflections of this or that movement prepared in the masses – reflections more or less bright depending on the extent of self-conscious awareness [*soznatel'nost'*] with which they treated the masses or on the force of energy with which they helped the masses to express themselves. To speak of them as spokesmen for the *entirety* of their period, while also surrounding them with cultural material that points to the movements of the masses, is to confuse an old approach [*postroenie*] with a new one, and not to notice the absurdity of this mixture. Either great men lead, and their time follows – in which case all the details that pertain to their milieu and contemporary everyday life, with

which essayists are so generous, are mere additions lacking in solid significance; or all of this has meaning – in which case the work of history is performed from the bottom up, and great men receive it out of its swaddling-clothes, and experience it self-consciously. Yet this means that to represent the hero as a spokesman for the *entirety* of his period is to ascribe to him the supernatural size of a Gargantua, ignoring all the diversity of historical thought, which no single individual is able to embody. Whether this is a mixture of an old and a new viewpoint, or merely a return to an older position, there is a certain element of a lie, which I am inclined to explain by the pursuit of the rhetorical effect, in this use of popular and everyday colors to brush up an old priming so that it more blazingly reveals the hero's grandiose stature.

In spite of all the downsides of such an approach to literary history, which characterizes the French school, it also has outstanding advantages.

This very approach allows an ever greater place for what we could call the material of general education: broad-minded vision of history, discussion [*karakteristika*] of culture, and philosophical generalizations of the historical development. It is the scholarly validity of these generalizations, however, that we are often inclined to doubt.

By the word 'generalization' we are accustomed to refer to notions that are quite distinct and far removed from one other. In practice it is not a great vice, yet in scholarship it is often of interest to distinguish what is [commonly] accepted from what is permitted. For example, if you study an epoch and wish to develop your own, independent view of it, you need to get acquainted not only with its outstanding phenomena, but also with the down-to-earth particulars that conditioned them; you strive to trace a cause-and-effect relationship between them; for the sake of the convenience of research you would approach the object part by part, from one angle or another; in each case you will arrive at a single conclusion or a series of preliminary conclusions.

You've gone through this operation several times, applying it to different groupings of facts; as a result, you have obtained several series of conclusions and along with it a

possibility to cross-check them and to work on them, as you previously worked on bare facts, by positing more abstract principles from which what is common or kindred in them can be derived – in other words, by reaching second-order generalizations by using logic, yet constantly controlling for the facts.

In this way, by ascending to an ever higher level, you will reach the last, most complete generalization, which, in essence, will express your final view on the domain studied. If you then undertake to portray this domain, this view will communicate to it a natural color and an organic integrity. This generalization may be called *scholarly*, obviously to the extent to which one observes both the succession of stages of research and the procedure of checking [of conclusions] based on facts and to the extent to which no element of the equation is omitted from the generalization. This work is more or less lengthy, depending on the expansiveness of the object. Gibbon's book took him twenty years of labor; Buckle's, his entire life.

One can also make one's task easier. For example, your attention is drawn to the history of the 16th c. French thought. You have studied its main representatives – Rabelais, Montaigne, Ronsard, and Marot. You reason as follows: if these personalities have advanced forward and their writings keep attracting more attention than the writings of others, then it must be because they had more talent and, by virtue of being more talented, they had more success in perceiving and reflecting the movements of historical thought that were contemporary to them. And lo and behold, Rabelais and Marot appear as representative of old France, of that "esprit gaulois," which was fated to come to full bloom again at the court of François 1<sup>st</sup> and Marguerite de Navarre. Ronsard comes somewhat later; he already represents a transition to the later literary monarchism. Montaigne is the type of an eternal skeptic, who good-naturedly departs to an isolated island as a storm rages around him, etc. Based on these three quasi-ideas [*ideikakh*] one could, if one should wish, outline a narrative of the French Renaissance. Attached to them, strictly categorized, one would find connecting phenomena; those that don't fit would constitute transitional phenomena; the picture could emerge as complete.

Following this exact procedure, some attempted to explain the history of English literature and life as a change from the Anglo-Saxon to the Norman element, their struggle and reconciliation, and it so appeared that facts fitted into these generalizations. Yet these generalizations are *incomplete*, since they were obtained without the condition of [the application of] successive stages discussed above. They may not contradict [generalizations obtained based on] these conditions of scholarly inquiry, yet their coincidence will be fortuitous. The majority of books, whose title says *So-and-so and his time*, display this kind of generalization. They abound in French literature.

It's even worse when a generalization is based not even on a one-sided, incomplete investigation, but accepted on faith from some other source, be it a preconception, an opinion of a socially engaged writer, etc. Let's assume I hold the opinion that a sensual-realistic view of the outside world is characteristic of the Old Russian worldview. I begin to search for facts that confirm this opinion; some respond willingly, others yield when somewhat forced. Facts are collected, united under a single vision, and a book is published. The book is good, the viewpoint is to a large extent correct; yet neither is scholarly, because they lack proof. The main argument is not proven; perhaps it even cannot be proven. Some may note that the worldview that is presented as characteristically Russian is not characteristic of Russia at all; that there was a time when it predominated in the West; that, if it characterizes anything, it is not a race, a nation, or a given civilization, but a certain cultural period that recurs when the same conditions are met, in [the history of] different nations. It follows then that either the generalization is incomplete, that is, it is based on insufficient material for comparison; or it is taken on faith, rather than obtained from facts, while facts are made to dovetail with it. In this case the generalization is *unscholarly*.

It stands to reason that I will try, as best as I can, to avoid un scholarly and incomplete generalizations. Several hypothetical truths, which I will propose to you in the beginning of this course in methodology, may appear to deviate from this rule, inasmuch as they are insufficiently supported by facts. Yet they are proposed rather as a personal view on the genesis of science and poetry, and must in what follows be subject to verification by

facts; they seemed to me to be necessary as a point of departure, whose mere operational value [*uslovnost'*] or validity must be revealed during the inverse movement from the results to the presuppositions. As for the account of facts, which will preoccupy us in the following courses, here our program of study will have to vacillate between complete generalization, which we are ready to designate as the ideal of the historical science, and that kind of narrowly-specialized investigation, whose examples we observed in the German departments. The scholarly generalization applied to large literary epochs that are most likely to attract your attention is possible only at the end of long scholarly activity, as a result of a mass of preliminary conclusions obtained from the analysis of a whole series of concrete facts. You will understand that I cannot in earnest promise you such a laborious undertaking. On the other hand, a generalization that is limited to a more narrow, factual sphere, can easily lead to the kind of specialization that the unique demands of a Russian department compel me to shun. What is needed is then an informed choice, the golden mean.

I do not advance it as my ideal; I have only conveyed the negative side of my program. Its positive side – that which most interests me – consists in the method, which I would wish to teach you and, along with you, to learn myself. I have in mind the comparative method. Later I expect to tell you how, in literary-historical investigations, it came to replace the aesthetic, philosophical, as well as (I would risk saying) the historical methods. Here I would like merely to point to the fact that this method is far from being new, nor does it put forward a certain peculiar principle of investigation. It is merely a development of the historical method, it is the same historical method, yet multiplied, repeatedly applied to parallel series of phenomena, with a view of reaching a maximally complete generalization. I am referring now to its application to facts of historical and social life. When studying series of facts, we notice their succession, the relation between the one preceding and the one following; if this sequence is repeated, we begin to suspect a certain regularity; if it is repeated often, we no longer speak of the preceding and the following, but rather of cause and effect. We are even inclined to go further and are eager to transfer this narrow notion of causality to the most proximate of the intermediate facts: these [are seen] as either provoking the cause, or as an echo of the effect. For verification

let us take a parallel series of similar facts: here the relation of a given antecedent and a given ensuing fact may not be repeated, or it may happen that the proximate members differ and, conversely, there occurs a similarity in more distant elements in the series. Accordingly, we either narrow down or expand our notion of causality; each new parallel series of facts may contribute a new dimension to this notion; the more such repetitions are performed for the purpose of verification, the more likely the resulting generalization will approximate the exactness of a law.

It is well known what a transformation in the [mode of] inquiry, as well as in the value of results obtained, the application of the comparative method has brought about in the field of linguistics. More recently it was transplanted to the fields of mythology, folk poetry, the so-called migrating legends; it has also been applied to the study of geography and judicial practices. Overzealous application, which is a mark of fascination for any new system, should not bring into doubt the validity of the method itself: the successes of linguistics on this path give hope that we will also eventually reach conclusions that are, even if not quite as exact, then at least more or less exact in the field of historical and literary phenomena. In some cases, these results have already been obtained or are expected in the near future. For example, in the domain of literature, the historical-comparative method has in many respects modified the accepted definitions of poetry, as it has destabilized German aesthetics. German aesthetics was weaned on the Classics; it believed and, in part, still believes in Homer's personhood. The Homeric epic, for German aesthetics, is the ideal of *epopoeia*; hence the hypothesis of personal authorship. Along with Winkelmann, German aesthetics idolized the beauties of Greek plastic art, as well as the plasticity of ancient poetry: hence the hypothesis that beauty is the necessary content of art. The transparency of Greek literary development, as it is revealed in the succession of epic, lyric, and drama, was accepted as the norm and has even received philosophical treatment, according to which drama (for example) came about not only as the necessary summation of the nation's literary life, but also as a [result of the] mutual interpenetration of the objectivity of epic and the subjectivity of lyric, etc.

When [F. A.] Wolf dared to doubt the reality of Homer, he proceeded from the Homeric textual criticism – in other words, the material for his comparisons remained specifically Greek, and he was working with facts belonging to one series. But then Herder appeared with his *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1778-79]; the British, and then the Germans, discovered India; the Romantic school has extended its sympathies from India to the whole of the Orient, as well as deep into the West, to Calderon and to the poetry of the German Middle Ages. Thus there appeared a possibility of studying similar phenomena in several parallel series; along with it the preceding generalizations not only had to become more complete, but in many cases also had to change radically. Next to Homer's personal *epopoeia* there now stand several impersonal *epopoeiai*; the theory of personal creativity has been uprooted: German aesthetics is still at a loss as to how it should react, for example, to the *Kalevala* or to the French "chansons de geste."

Alongside literary lyric there have been revealed the riches of popular song, with which the theory of beauty as the exclusive aim of art found it difficult to cope. Finally, it became known that drama had existed long before epic and, moreover, that it had a fully epic content: examples are provided by Medieval mysteries and folk games, which accompanied annual festivals and had a markedly dramatic character. The same, indeed, may be said about lyric: the Vedic hymns and those brief songs, cantilenas, that formed the basis of great national epics, display the lyric mode. German aesthetics professes to ignore the mysteries; to popular song it has assigned a minor subsidiary role under the rubric of lyric. Yet this disregard leads nowhere; aesthetics will still have to restructure itself, it will have to distinguish more rigorously the issue of form from the issue of worldview. What we could call an epic, lyrical, and dramatic worldview, indeed, would have to follow a particular sequence, in accord with the greater development of personality, although I dare think that this sequence was not correctly inferred in German aesthetics. As for the form of epic, lyric, and drama, which have given names to poetic genres and epochs of poetry, they are present long before the emergence, in history, of those peculiarities of worldview to which we have assigned the definition of epic, lyrical, etc. These forms are natural expressions of thought; to come into being, they did not have to wait for history. Dramatic form occurs already in the *Vedas* and in the conversations of

the gods in the *Elder Edda*. Between these forms and the changing content of worldview there emerge relationships, so to speak, of natural selection, determined by the conditioning of everyday experience [*byt*] and by historical contingency. Thus, the patriarchal-aristocratic feasts and gatherings in the halls of Alcinous or in the castle of a Medieval knight had to conjure the memory of heroic feats, the stories of the *aoidoi* and the troubadours. Vedic hymns and the Delphic lyric develop in an immediate link with sacrifice and the praise of the gods, along with the development of the sacrificial class; Greek drama is conditioned by the street life of Athens, the public activity of popular meetings and the solemn procedures of the Dionysian festivities. Obviously, this particular selection could have not existed, and so the given worldview would be complicated by a form different from the one that now gives it its name. Just as Aristotle regards Homer as the chief among the Greek tragedians, we still today speak of a dramatic situation in a novel or yarn because of the epic long-windedness of a drama.

All of this contains not just the dismantling of an old, decrepit viewpoint, but also the intimations of a new approach. Unless I am mistaken, comparative study of poetry is bound in many respects to modify the widely accepted notions of [literary] creativity. This you will verify yourselves. Let us suppose that you have no notion of the romantic pleasantries of the Middle Ages, of the mysteries of the Round Table, of the quest for the Holy Grail and Merlin's ruses. You first encountered this world in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and it appealed to you because of its fantastic and poetic qualities; you have come to be fond of its heroes; and you have referred their hopes and sufferings, their love and hatred – all these things – to the poet who could conjure up in front of your eyes this reality which, perhaps, had never existed on earth. Your judgment rests on your recent experience of reading this or that novel, which announces itself as the personal creation of its author. After that you chance upon the old poems of Hartmann von der Aue, Gottfried von Strassburg, and Wolfram von Eschenbach: there you encounter the same content, familiar characters, and adventures – Erec and the miserable Enid, Vivian who cast her charms on Merlin, and the love between Lancelot and Guinevere. The motivations of action, however, are different; emotions and characters, more archaic, to fit with the distant age. You conclude that the modern author has borrowed from the

ancients, and you will detect a poetic progress insofar as older images were infused with more humane motifs, with a psychology that is more understandable to us, and with a reflective quality that is more modern. Evidently, you will refer to the 19<sup>th</sup> c. the fondness for the Flemish aspect of life, which pauses on life's details that are sometimes deprived of all interest, and to the 18<sup>th</sup> c., the artificial attitude toward nature, which tends to frame any action in a landscape and to express one's own empathy for human action in nature's murky and allusive language. A Medieval poet could recount Erec's feats of valor, but it would never occur to him to tell us how he entered the court of Yniol's castle, how his horse trampled prickly stars of thistle, which stared out from clefts of rocks, how he turned around and could only see ruins around him:<sup>10</sup>

Here stood a shatter'd archway plumed with fern;  
And here had fall'n a great part of a tower,  
Whole, like a crag that tumbles from the cliff,  
And like a crag was gay with wilding flowers:  
And high above a piece of turret stair,  
Worn by the feet that now were silent, wound  
Bare to the sun, and monstrous ivy-stems  
Claspt the gray walls with hairy-fibred arms,  
And suck'd the joining of the stones, and look'd  
A knot, beneath, of snakes, aloft, a grove. (Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*: Enid)

These details of reality are modernity's marks; they are the green shoots of ivy that have clasped the grey walls of an old legend; yet you have recognized the legend itself and [therefore] keep speaking of a borrowing. In this way you have correctly solved one side of the problem; what remains is to provide a generalization of it.

You cannot stop, however, at this stage of comparison; proceeding from the Medieval German romance, you will find the same stories in the French novellas of the Round Table, in the popular legends of the Celts, and – at a still further remove – in the narrative literature of the Indians and the Mongols, in the fairytales of the Orient and the Occident. You [next] pose the question of the boundaries and conditions of [literary] creativity.

[Rudolf Hermann] Lotze deems the tendency of great poets to rework plots that have once been subject to poetic rendition as an instinct of poetic genius. This, as is well known, is Shakespeare's method [*priem*]: his dramas are mostly built on Italian novellas, historical pieces, on Holinshed's chronicle. Next to Shakespeare Lotze also mentions Goethe. Numerous similar examples can be collected; they may, however, appear too specialized, sought-out and therefore lacking in conviction. What convinces is day-to-day experience: there is no novella or novel whose situations would not call to mind similar ones that we encountered in a different context, perhaps in a somewhat modified form or using other names. The intrigues [here: plot situations] that circulate among the novelists can be reduced to a small number which can further be reduced to a still smaller number of more general types: we encounter scenes of love and hatred, struggle and pursuit in similar form [*odnoobrazno*] in the novel and in the novella, in a legend and in a fairytale; or rather, better put, they accompany us in similar form from the mythical tale to the novella and legend before reaching the modern novel. The Faust legend under different names has travelled around new and old Europe; Aeschylus' Prometheus may be divined in Spielhagen's Leo, in **Pramantha** of the Indic epic, in the myth of the transfer of heavenly fire to earth. The answer to the question posed here may be formulated as yet another question: is poetic creativity not constrained by known definite formulas, set motifs, which one generation has received from the preceding generation, who in turn borrowed them, and whose prototypes [*pervoobrazy*] we will inevitably encounter in epic antiquity and, further removed, at the mythical stage, in the concrete definitions of the primeval word? Does each new poetic epoch not work on images bequeathed from antiquity, being of necessity constrained by their boundaries, venturing only new combinations of old [images] and merely filling them with the new understanding of life that, in fact, constitutes this epoch's progress with respect to the past? The history of language, at least, presents us with a similar phenomenon. We do not create a new language, but receive it from birth as quite complete and not subject to annulment; the factual [*fakticheskie*] changes, conducted by history, do not impinge on the original form of a word [*pervonachal'naya forma slova*] or do so only incrementally, unnoticed by the two proximate generations. New combinations occur within set boundaries, on the basis

of already chapped material: as an example I would point to the formation of the verb in Romance. Each new cultural epoch, however, enriches the inner content of the word with new advances of knowledge, new notions of being human [*novymi poniatiiami chelovechnosti*]. It is enough to trace the history of any abstract word to realize this: the distance from the [Russian] word *dukh* [lit., ‘breath’; fig. ‘spirit’] in its concrete meaning to its modern usage is about as great as that separating the Indic **Pramantha** and Aeschylus’s Prometheus.

This inner enrichment of content – the progress of social thought within the word or within a set poetic formula – would attract the attention of the psychologist, philosopher, and aesthetician: it belongs to the history of thought. Alongside this, comparative inquiry has uncovered another, no less significant fact: the series of unchanged formulae that extend far in history, from modern to ancient poetry, to epic and myth. This material is as stable as the material of the word, and its analysis will bring results that are no less solid. Some such results are already being worked out by modern scholars; others were expressed earlier, albeit tentatively. “A work of great interest might be compiled upon the original of popular fiction,<sup>11</sup> and the transmission of similar tales from age to age, and from country to country” – says Walter Scott in a note to *Lady of the Lake*<sup>12</sup> – “the myth of one period would then appear to pass into the romance of the next century, and that into the nursery tale of the subsequent ages. Such an investigation would serve greatly to diminish our ideas of the richness of human invention.”<sup>13</sup>

I would like to conclude by defining, in a few words, the notion of literary history. Literary history, broadly conceived, is the history of social thought, to the extent to which it was expressed in philosophical, religious and poetic movements and was cemented in language [*zakreplena slovom*]. If I am right in my belief that literary history should pay particular attention to poetry, then the comparative method, applied to this narrower domain, will uncover a quite new task for literary history: to trace how a new content of life, this element of freedom that rushes in with each new generation, penetrates old images, these forms of necessity, which ineluctably cast into their mould any antecedent

development. Yet this is an ideal task, and I can only take it upon myself to suggest to you what can be achieved on this path given the present state of knowledge.

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I am grateful to Beppi Chiupanni, Tamara Chin, Christopher Faraone, Leslie Kurke, Michael Kunichika, and Lina Steiner for their reactions to this translation and the introductory note; special thanks are due to Michael Kunichika for his many suggestions for stylistic improvements.

<sup>1</sup> Igor Shaitanov (“Aleksandr Veselovskii’s Historical Poetics”) makes an argument for the centrality of Veselovsky’s method to the *Opoyaz* and Bakhtin. In his magisterial *A History of Modern Criticism*, Wellek utters a curiously partial, possibly even politically biased, judgment to the same effect: “[Veselovsky] transmitted an all-embracing universalism, an anti-individualistic, almost collective approach, a concern for literary evolution and its social causes to later Russian literary scholarship, but he also saddled it with a technological methodology that tries to drain literature of its aesthetic and thus finally of its deepest human appeal. Veselovsky is the patron of comparative literature in Russia and one of the originators of Russian formalism.” Note that these words were written before Bakhtin’s work became known in the West. Other Russian literary scholars whose work is available in English and who, in their various ways, engaged with and built on Veselovsky’s legacy are Lidiia Ginzburg, Olga Freidenberg, and Mikhail Gasparov.

<sup>2</sup> A bibliography of Veselovsky’s works can be found in Veselovskii, “Spisok trudov” and Veselovskii, *Izbrannoe* 654-672 (the latter includes literature on Veselovsky). Engel’gardt and Zhirmunskii (“A. N. Veselovskii”) provide introductions to Veselovsky’s methodology and overviews of his scholarly work. A succinct summary of Veselovsky’s works and method in English can be found in Erlich 26-32.

<sup>3</sup> Since Zhirmunskii’s 1940 edition, this lecture is usually published as the opening, propaedeutic piece of Veselovsky’s posthumously reconstructed *Historical Poetics*. This would most likely not have been Veselovsky’s choice had he lived to complete this work.

<sup>4</sup> Tynianov speaks of the field of literary history as a “colonial empire” in his 1927 essay “On Literary Evolution” (66).

<sup>5</sup> See Veselovsky’s “Autobiography” reprinted in *Izbrannoe* 29-35.

<sup>6</sup> Note that in his survey of poetics in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. René Wellek (“Poetics, Interpretation, and Criticism” xxii-xxiii) singles out Veselovsky: “Only in Russia did Alexander Veselovsky try undaunted to construe an historical poetics, a universal evolutionary history of poetry in which the history of poetic devices, themes, forms, and genres would be traced through all literatures: oral and written. No wonder that his project remained incomplete.” Wilhelm Scherer’s work is a case of parallel development, yet his *Poetik*, published posthumously in 1888, represents a departure from the historical method (Zhirmunskii, “A. N. Veselovskii” 126; Mikhailov, 199-213; cf. Veselovsky’s own comments on Scherer in Mochalova 193-194); it also had almost no impact on German scholarship (Reiss, xi: “eine Wirkung im offiziellen Kanon der Literaturwissenschaft ist kaum feststellbar”; cf. Richter, 164-73). The principal agent in the dissemination of the term *poetics* in the Veselovskian meaning in the West was Roman Jakobson.

<sup>7</sup> The link with Tynianov (66) has been repeatedly pointed out (e.g. *Izbrannoe* 22). In 1886, H. M. Posnett engaged in a similar polemic with the “great-man theory”, which he viewed as inimical to the discipline of comparative literature (85-86). Perhaps particularly pertinent to Veselovsky’s lecture are reflections on the role of solitary heroes vs. the masses in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (published 1865-1869).

<sup>8</sup> For this aspect of Veselovsky’s project, it is interesting to compare a similarly programmatic lecture by Charles Chauncey Shackford, delivered at Cornell in 1871 (in the words of his modern editors, “the first known formal presentation concerning the discipline of comparative literature to be given in the United States”). Shackford argues that the comparative method, “which is pursued in anatomy, in language, in mythology” presents “the only satisfactory course in which general literature can be pursued.” Similarly to Veselovsky’s 1870 lecture, Shackford insists on the stability of literary form: “Literature begins, when thoughts and emotions are expressed in artistic forms, whether spoken or written. And these expressions may be grouped under different forms and divisions, each the embodiment and unfolding of man’s nature adapting itself to great human wants. These forms present themselves under the same characteristic features; for no form was ever invented, and none ever will be. Hence as there is nothing arbitrary, isolated, or purely novel in literature, the process of development can be traced, and each work can be brought into connection and affiliation with its own kind.” In contrast to Veselovsky’s pan-culturalism, however, Shackford seeks to preserve the traditional privileging of Greek literature: “And herein is the chief value of Greek literature as a basis of comparison with other literatures, that it pursues a normal order of development, and can be studied in its essential laws, free from extraneous influences and modifying elements” (Shackford 42-44).

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<sup>9</sup> Mochalova 308. On the term “general literature,” cf. Wellek, Austin 17.

<sup>10</sup> [Veselovsky’s own note contains the following excerpt from the English original:]

Then rode Geraint into the castle court,  
His charger trampling many a prickly star  
Of sprouted thistle on the broken stones.  
He look’d and saw that all was ruinous.  
Here stood a shatter’d archway plumed with fern;  
And here had fall’n a great part of a tower,  
Whole, like a crag that tumbles from the cliff,  
And like a crag was gay with wilding flowers:  
And high above a piece of turret stair,  
Worn by the feet that now were silent, wound  
Bare to the sun, and monstrous ivy-stems  
Claspt the gray walls with hairy-fibred arms,  
And suck’d the joining of the stones, and look’d  
A knot, beneath, of snakes, aloft, a grove. (Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*: Enid)

<sup>11</sup> [V.’s translates this phrase as *proiskhozhedenie narodnoi poezii* ‘the origin of popular poetry’.]

<sup>12</sup> [This is note to Bk. 4.15, “But all is glistening show”.]

<sup>13</sup> [V. cuts off the last sentence: “Such an investigation, while it went greatly to diminish our ideas of the richness of human invention, would also show that these fictions, however wild and childish, possess such charms for the populace as enable them to penetrate into countries unconnected by manners and language, and having no apparent intercourse to afford the means of transmission.” Cf. Shaitanov’s note in Veselovskii 2010, 25-26.]