



## Eleazar Moiseevich Meletinsky (22 October 1918 — 16 December 2005)

We, of course, remember Eleazar Moiseevich (or E. M., as we shall call him here), first and foremost as one of the leaders of the structuralist movement in the study of Russian folklore, and of the Tartu-Moscow school generally. But he had originally come to prominence well before Russian structuralism and semiotics started to emerge, and well before his own involvement with the movement. His first book, *Geroi volshebnoi skazki* [The Hero of the Magic Tale] (1958), stood out against the background of other work being published in the 1950s, though the reasons why may not be so obvious now. In hindsight, one can see it as a continuation — in a polemical kind of way — of Vladimir Propp's *Istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki* [The Historical Roots of the Magic Tale]. However, there was a gap of twelve years separating the appearance of the latter book and the former, and during this scholars doing comparative and anthropological work in the Soviet Union had undergone a thorough working-over. For example, Propp himself had published *Russkii geroicheskii epos* [The Russian Heroic Epic], which in many respects represented a compromise between his own views as reached in the 1940s and the demands of 'Soviet folklore studies'. In this context, a systematic 'anthropological'<sup>1</sup> study, par-

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<sup>1</sup> This term can with justice be applied also to E. M.'s later work, which is less marked by the influence of the anthropological school in a direct sense. E. M. always took a very respectful view of linguistics and its role in structuralist methodology, though he himself did not make use of the discipline; rather, he was the pioneering (though not the only) conduit for the ideas of Lévy-Strauss, the leader of the anthropological flank in our intellectual movement.

ticularly one which cited Western studies of folklore and anthropology and which raised questions relating to the origin and place of the hero in the evolution of folk narrative genres, was something quite out of the ordinary. Indeed, to get a sense of how different this text was from other works on folklore being published in the Soviet Union at the time, it was sufficient to cast a glance at the bottom of any page. By now, Soviet readers had grown unused to seeing references to any literature published outside the country, let alone large numbers of them at once. Even Vladimir Propp, one of the most erudite folklorists in Russia, made no attempt to cite Western work in the 1950s. E. M. seems to have been the first scholar to have begun reading Western work again; what is more, he not only read everything relating to his area of interest that he could get hold of, but made it obligatory, by his example, for all later scholars to read it as well.

This was typical of E. M. From the very start of his career as a folklorist, his work embraced two different strands of activity: scholarly work as such, and tireless dedication to an intellectual *mission civilisatrice*. Perhaps the most significant case where these two strands were intertwined was *Poetika mifa* [The Poetics of Myth], which played an enormous role in the formation of general ideas and concepts relating to mythology in our generation — in the intellectual community generally, we mean, not just among academics and, of course, not just among specialists in folklore in a narrow sense.

With regard to E. M.'s function as a conduit for enlightenment and a standard-setter for the discipline, his activities as an editor may have been even more important. They included his work as editor of *Mify narodov mira* [The Myths of Peoples of the World], and in setting up and playing a very active role as an editorial board member, of the series, 'Issledovaniya po fol'kloru i mifologii Vostoka' [Studies of the Folklore and the Mythology of the Orient] (known by the affectionate nickname of 'the tortoises', from the logo on the cover). From 1989, he acted as general editor of this series, along with *Skazki i mify narodov Vostoka* [Tales and Myths of Peoples of the Orient], the second 'oriental' series run by Nauka publishing house. This latter likewise played a huge role in the development of Soviet folklore studies and also in advancing intellectual standards generally (for instance, at least some folklorists learned from it how to put together an index and how to use one). However, it did not have the same level of fame as the 'tortoise' series, the first volume in which, published in 1969, was a reissue of Propp's *Morfologiya skazki* [The Morphology of the Folk Tale], an event that has itself become encrusted with stories and legends (see, for example, Alexander Zholkovsky's collection *Memuarnye vinyetki* [M memoir vignettes]). Thanks to E. M.'s preface, the book not only became a 'retrieval of the past', a setting-straight of the 'historical record'; it was also to all intents and purposes the first survey of the school that developed out of Propp's work in the West, and which was so very important for the evolution of Western scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s — narratology. Thus, *Morfologiya skazki* itself re-emerged not as a monument to 1920s scholarship, but as a living, topical phenomenon, which in turn pre-determined an entire school of modern (as it then was) poetics. Two of Meletinsky's own books also came out in this series: *Poetika mifa* (mentioned above) in 1975 and *Paleoaziatskii mifologicheskii epos (tsikl Vorona)* [The Paleo-Asiatic Mythological Epos (the Cycle of the Crow)] in 1979.

It is notable that E. M.'s first article on the mythology of the Crow had been published back in 1959 (in the journal *Vestnik istorii mirovoi kultury* no. 1 for that year). An analogous, though less striking, instance is the ten-year gap between the publication of *Edda i rannie formy eposa* [The Edda and Early Forms of Epic] (1968) and 'Obschie mesta, i drugie elementy folklor'nogo stilya v eddicheskoj poezii' [Commonplaces and Other Elements of Folkloric Style in the Poetry of the Eddas] (in the collection *Pamyatniki knizhnogo eposa* [Monuments of the Written Epos]. M., 1978). The habit of returning to particular subjects after a gap of a decade or more was one of the factors underpinning E. M.'s 'corpus of texts', which was also unified, as Sergei Nekhlyudov has pointed out, by attention to certain central theoretical questions: *'If one attempts to identify the general framework unifying E. M. Meletinsky's very varied scholarly activity as a specialist in myth and folklore, in the Old Norse Edda, the medieval romance and novella, archetypes in Russian literature of the nineteenth century, myth in twentieth-century prose, and much else, then this framework comprises the historical poetics of narrative forms, running from the mythology of the Ancient World to contemporary literature. Despite all his many shifts in terms of theme, he has for the fifty and more years of his scholarly career remained faithful to this governing interest.'*<sup>1</sup>

One should also mention another area of E. M.'s research interests, which in its time also got surrounded by rumours and legends passed round among younger scholars: his seminar on the folk tale, the results of which got published in two long articles that in time were translated into a whole range of languages. Apart from Dmitry Segal, who emigrated in 1973, the folklorists and linguists who took part in the seminar included Tatiana Tsivyvan, Serafima Nikitina, Alexander Zholkovsky, Alfred Zhurinsky, and Nina Braginskaya. In the late 1970s and 1980s, after Zholkovsky had left Russia, the seminar on poetics that had once run in his flat moved to the Meletinsky household (Irina Mikhailovna Semenko, his first wife, took part in it too).

The central dates of E. M.'s life are directly related to some of the key events of Soviet history. He was born almost exactly a year after the October Revolution took place, graduated from MIFLI (the Moscow Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature in 1940, a year before the outbreak of war, was briefly imprisoned for the first time a year or so afterwards, defended his dissertation for the first time in 1945, was arrested for the second time in 1949, and released in 1954, at the time when Khrushchev's general amnesty of political prisoners took place. From 1956, he began working at IMLI AN SSSR (the Institute of World Literature of the Academy of Sciences), in 1989, he was appointed to a professorship at Moscow State University, and in 1992, he became Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities at RGGU (Russian State Humanities University).

For E. M., the period between the 1960s and the early 1980s was, of course, far more propitious than the 1940s and the early 1950s. From 1968, a

<sup>1</sup> S. Yu. Nekhlyudov. 'Eleazar Moiseevich Meletinsky' // *Eleazar Moiseevich Meletinsky. Bibliograficheskii ukazatel*. [E. M. Meletinsky. A Bio-Bibliographical Guide]. Comp. V. I. Gulchinsky, E. A. Kumpan. M., 2002. (Series 'Uchenye RGGU'). P. 13.

relatively even and tranquil phase of life began. However, there were some earlier stages of clemency too, at which he even held ‘official posts’ of one kind or another (for instance, between 1946 and 1949, he was Chair of the Faculty of Literature at the Finno-Karelian University, and from 1946 to 1947, Chair of the Folklore Section in the Finno-Karelian Office of the USSR Academy of Sciences). But he only achieved the recognition he deserved (we mean of an administrative kind — his scholarly reputation was of course ensured long before) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. His fate is typical of his generation’s, though unlike many of his contemporaries, E. M. fortunately had enough strength and energy to be able to survive into another era, one where long-held desires could be fulfilled and new hopes arise.

At the same time, this era came very late for him, and at a time when some of the achievements and ‘benefits’ were at least occasionally seen by him not so much as ‘rewards’ but as duties, as burdens of a new kind. We should remember that E. M. continued giving lectures at RGGU till not much more than a year before he died. One of us remembers once asking E. M. to contribute an article to some *Festschrift* or memorial tome. E. M.’s reply was, *‘You know, everything is such a struggle for me these days.’*

On the other hand, E. M., unlike his more fortunate (in the Soviet era) colleagues, was spared the necessity of making uncongenial compromises. His success may have arrived late, but that meant it arrived when the Soviet Union no longer existed, so that he never had to be a ‘Soviet boss’. Even his State Prize for *Mify narodov mira* was awarded only in 1990, the last year when that particular state itself existed (an earlier prize awarded for his part in a collection on the structure of the folk tale, the Premio Pitre,<sup>1</sup> expressed recognition from colleagues in Italy) the award of the ‘850th Anniversary of the Founding of Moscow’ medal dated from 1997.

As for academic honours and a general view of E. M.’s life, allow us to cite some passages from an email exchange with Sergei Nekhlyudov:

*AB, GL:* I’d never thought: did E. M. really never get elected to the Academy of Sciences, even as a corresponding member? I was sure he was an Academician of some kind.

*SN:* No, that’s right, he really didn’t ever get elected, even as a corresponding member, and he was very hurt by that. I think it was maybe his only wish in life that didn’t get fulfilled.

*AB, GL:* I’d like to comment on what you say about ‘his only wish in life’. If you can say that about someone, then he’s had a happy life. I always thought exactly the opposite of E. M.

*SN:* I’m not sure either that you could describe his life as ‘happy’. Fulfilled, maybe, but he had to wait too long for some things. At least, that’s how it seems to me, anyway.

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Georgy Levinton*

*Translated by Catriona Kelly*

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<sup>1</sup> It is awarded annually by the Centro Internazionale di Etnostoria at the University of Palermo. [Editor].