Chapter Seven.
Historical Roots
of the Wondertale:
Premises

The Basic Question

Before the Revolution folklore was produced in Russia by the oppressed classes—illiterate peasants, soldiers, artisans, semiliterate apprentices, etc. In our time folklore is indeed produced by *the people*. Before the Revolution the science of folklore looked to other areas of knowledge for its concepts. It ascribed to folklore some abstract philosophy, was blind to its revolutionary dynamic, subsumed folklore under literature, and viewed folklore only as part of literary criticism. Now the science of folklore is becoming independent. Methods of prerevolutionary folklore were powerless to deal with its complicated subject; theory supplanted theory, yet none of them holds water. At present the method of Marxism-Leninism—the method of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin—makes it possible to abandon abstract theorizing for concrete investigation.

What does a concrete investigation of the tale mean? Where do we begin? A mere comparison of tales will leave us within the framework of comparativism, *but we wish to find the historical base that brought the wondertale to life.*

At first it seems that nothing is new in this goal. Folklore has certainly been studied historically before. The Russian science of folklore has known an entire historical school headed by Vsevolod Miller. Thus, M. N. Speranskij (1917, 222) said in his course in Russian oral literature, "We attempt to guess the historical fact on which the bylina is based and with that in mind to prove the identity of the bylina plot with some historical events." I intend neither to *guess* historical facts nor prove their *identity* with folklore. I will try to ascertain to which past phenomena (rather than events) the Russian wondertale corresponds and in what measure the past really determines and brings forth the tale. My aim is to discover the sources of the tale in historical reality. However, to study *the genesis* of

a phenomenon is not the same as to study its *history*. The study of history cannot be carried out all at once. It needs the efforts of several generations and should be accomplished by our young science of Marxist folklore. The study of the genesis is the first step in this direction.

The Significance of the Premises

Every investigator sets out from some premises. As early as 1873, A. N. Veselovskij insisted on taking a theoretical stand and on a critical assessment of one's method (see Veselovskij 1938, 83-128). On the example of Gubernatis's *Zoological Mythology* (1872), Veselovskij showed how the lack of such an assessment could lead to false conclusions despite the author's erudition and power of synthesis.

Properly speaking, a critical history of folktale studies is in order here, but I will do without it, for such a history has been set forth more than once and is well known. But if we ask why we still lack solid and universally accepted results in this field, we will see that the cause of it lies in the authors' false premises.

The Mythological school believed that the external similarity between two phenomena, i.e., the presence of analogy, testifies to their historical connection. Thus, if a hero grows "not day by day but hour by hour," this rapid growth was supposed to reflect the rapid growth of the rising sun (Frobenius 1898, 242). Yet the sun diminishes, rather than increases, to the eye of the observer; in addition, analogy and historical connection are different things.

According to the Finnish school, the more frequent forms belong to the original state of the plot. Aside from the fact that theory of plot archetypes itself needs proof, we will see more than once that truly archaic forms are rare and that they have often been superseded by widely current new ones (for more details see Nikiforov 1926).

Such examples are numerous, and the fallacy of the initial premise is usually quite obvious. The question arises: Why did the authors themselves fail to see the mistakes that are so clear to us? We will not blame them for their mistakes; they were made by the most outstanding scholars. The crux of the matter is that these scholars could not think differently! Their ideas were determined by the epoch in which they lived and by the class to which they belonged. The question of premises was not even raised in most cases, and the voice of the brilliant Veselovskij, who constantly revised his own premises and started anew many times, remained a voice crying in the wilderness.

Definition of the Wondertale

My aim is to find and investigate the historical roots of the wondertale. Later I will explain what I mean by historical roots, but first it is necessary to discuss

the term *wondertale*. The folktale is so rich and varied a phenomenon that one cannot study the whole of it everywhere. Since the data must be limited, I will limit them to wondertales, that is, I postulate the existence of tales that can be brought under this category. Such in fact is my premise. I will designate those tales as wondertales whose structure I have studied in *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 1928; 2nd ed. 1969; English translation 1958; 2nd ed. 1968a). In my book, the genre of the wondertale is defined in precise terms. A wondertale begins with some harm or villainy done to someone (for example, abduction or banishment) or with a desire to have something (a king sends his son in quest of the firebird), and develops through the hero's departure from home and encounters with the donor, who provides him with a magic agent that helps the hero find the object of the search. Further along, the tale includes combat with an adversary (the most important form is slaying a dragon), a return, and a pursuit. Often this structure is more complicated, for example, when the hero is on his way home and his brothers throw him into a pit. Later he escapes, is subjected to a trial by difficult tasks, and becomes king and marries, either in his own kingdom or in that of his father-in-law. This is the compositional core of many plots in brief outline. Tales reflecting this scheme will be called wondertales here, and only they will serve as the object of my investigation.

Thus, my first premise is that among folktales there is a particular category called wondertales which can be isolated and studied independently. Such an approach may cause doubts: have we not violated the principle of the interconnection of all phenomena? In the final analysis, all things are interrelated; yet science always isolates some of them. The point is when and how the line is drawn.

Although wondertales are one part of folklore, they are not a part inseparable from the whole; they are not like an arm in relation to the body or a leaf in relation to the tree. While remaining a part, they nonetheless form a whole and are here taken *as a whole*.

Research into the structure of wondertales shows how closely related they are; as a matter of fact, their plots cannot be delimited. This circumstance leads to two more important premises: first, all wondertale plots should be studied with reference to one another; second, all wondertale motifs should be studied in their relation to the whole. My approach to the problem is quite new. Hitherto this sort of work has been conducted as follows: the investigator would select some one motif or some one plot, collect all the accessible written versions, and then draw conclusions by putting the data side by side and comparing them. Jiří Polívka (1924) studied the formula "Russkim duxom paxnet" [it smells Russian], Ludwig Radermacher (1906) the motif of people swallowed and spat out by a whale, and Walter Baumgartner (1915) the motif of people sold to the devil ("give me that which you don't know in your own home"). These authors reach no conclusions and refuse to draw any.

Individual plots have been studied in the same way. For example, Lutz Mackensen (1923) studied the tale of the Singing Bone, and Sven Liljeblad (1927) the tale of the Grateful Dead Man. Such works have seriously advanced our knowledge of the dissemination and life of individual plots, but they have not solved the question of origins. Therefore, at this stage, we should not study tales according to their plots: the wondertale is a whole, and all its plots are interconnected and mutually determined. For this reason, if for no other, it is wrong to study motifs in isolation. If Polívka had not only collected all the variants of the formula but had also posed the questions: Who pronounces this formula? Under what conditions does it occur? Who is greeted with such an exclamation?—that is, if he had studied it *in its connection with the whole*, he might well have come to a correct conclusion. A motif can be studied only within the plot system; plots can be studied only in their mutual interconnection.

The Wondertale as a Phenomenon of the Superstructure

Earlier I indicated that many premises are the product of the epoch in which the author lives. We live under socialism and have developed our own premises for the study of culture. But in contrast to the premises of other epochs, which led the humanities into a blind alley, our epoch has formulated premises showing them the only correct path. I mean a general law for studying all historical phenomena: "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general" (Marx 1962, 363). It follows that we must find in history the mode of production that gave rise to the wondertale.

The most cursory glance at the wondertale will show that capitalism did not bring it forth. This does not mean that the capitalist mode of production is not reflected in the wondertale. The cruel factory owner, the greedy priest, the officer flogging soldiers, the deserter, the landowner oppressing farmhands, and the poverty-stricken, drunken, ruined peasantry—all figure in it, but the genuine wondertale, with its winged horses, firespitting dragons, fabulous kings, princesses, etc., is obviously not determined by capitalism; it is much older. The wondertale is also older than feudalism, as will become evident further along. It does not correspond to the mode of production in which it is current. The cause of this lack of correspondence was also explained by Marx: "With the change of the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed" (Marx 1962, 363). The words "more or less rapidly" are very important. A change in ideology does not always occur immediately after a change in the economic base. There is a "lack of correspondence" that is extremely interesting and valuable for scholarship. The wondertale arose on the basis of precapitalist modes of production and social life, and we must discover exactly on which ones.

Lack of correspondence of a similar type allowed Engels to shed light on the origin of the family. Citing Lewis H. Morgan, and referring to Marx, Engels (1962, 192) wrote:

"The family," says Morgan, "represents an active principle. It is never stationary, but advances from a lower to a higher form as society advances from a lower to a higher condition. . . . Systems of consanguinity, on the contrary, are passive, recording the progress made by the family at long intervals apart, and only changing when the family has radically changed." "And," adds Marx, "the same is true of the political, juridical, religious, and philosophical systems generally."

The same is true of the wondertale. Originally, it was not tied to the mode of production of the early nineteenth century, the time when it was first recorded. This fact leads us to the next premise, which we will formulate, for the time being, in general terms: the wondertale must be compared with the historical reality of the past, and its roots should be sought there. This premise contains the undeciphered concept of the historical past. If we understand it as did Vsevolod Miller, we may reach the same conclusions he did, claiming for instance that Dobrynja Nikitič's[1] combat with a dragon goes back to the conversion of Novgorod to Christianity. We have to decipher this concept and determine just which element of the past explains the wondertale.

The Wondertale and the Social Institutions of the Past

If the wondertale really has a certain economic basis, we must examine the forms of production reflected in it. Direct references to production occur rarely in wondertales. Agriculture plays a minimal role in them, whereas hunting is reflected somewhat more broadly. Plowing and sowing are usually mentioned only at the beginning of the story. (The beginning is especially prone to change.) Further on in the narrative, a large role is played by marksmen, royal and free huntsmen, and various animals.

However, a survey of the forms of production in the wondertale only from the point of view of its *object* and *technique* will not tell us too much about its sources, for not the production technique but the social conditions that correspond to it are important. Such an approach narrows down the concept of the historical past in relation to the wondertale: now we have to determine under what social conditions separate motifs and entire tales sprang up.

"Social conditions" is, however, a very general notion. We need less abstract entities, for instance, social institutions. We cannot compare the situation in the wondertale with the situations in tribal society, but we can investigate some wondertale motifs in light of certain institutions of that society insofar as the

wondertale reflects them or is conditioned by them. The roots of the wondertale must be sought in the social institutions of the past; this important premise refines the concept of the historical past relevant for the origin of the wondertale. For example, we see that the wondertale contains forms of marriage different from those of today. The hero goes in quest of a bride far away, rather than to his own people. This practice may reflect exogamy: it could have been forbidden to take a bride from one's own kin. We must examine forms of marriage in the wondertale and find the system, stage, phase, or level of social development that these forms reflected. In another instance, we see that the hero occupies the throne not of his own father, but of his father-in-law, whom he very often kills. This raises the question of what forms of power succession are reflected in the wondertale. In short, we set out from the premise that the wondertale preserves traces of vanished forms of social life, that these survivals should be studied, and that such study will reveal the sources of many motifs.

Of course, some motifs reflect institutions that once existed, whereas others do not. Consequently, not everything can be explained by the existence of social institutions.

The Wondertale and Ritual

It has long been recognized that the wondertale has some connection with cults and religion. Strictly speaking, cults and religion can also be called institutions. However, just as social conditions are manifested in institutions, religion is manifested in certain cult activities. Each of these activities cannot be called an institution: and the connection of the wondertale with religion poses a special question. In his *Anti-Dühring*, Engels (1966, 344-45) formulated the essence of religion quite clearly:

All religion, however, is nothing but the phantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces. In the beginnings of history it was the forces of Nature which were at first so reflected, and in the course of further evolution they underwent the most manifold and varied personifications among the various peoples. . . . But it is not long before, side by side with the forces of Nature, social forces begin to be active; forces which present themselves to man as equally extraneous and at first equally inexplicable, dominating them with the same apparent necessity as the forces of Nature themselves. The phantastic personifications, which at first only reflected the mysterious forces of Nature, at this point acquire social attributes, become representatives of the forces of history.

Just as one should not compare social systems described in wondertales with

existing social systems in life *in general*, one should not compare religion in general with the religion as we find it in wondertales; only concrete manifestations of religion should be compared. Engels stated that religion is a reflection of natural forces and social forces. This reflection may be twofold: it may be either cognitive and result in dogmas and teachings or volitional and result in actions intended to *influence* nature and subjugate it. We will call such actions rituals and customs.

Ritual and custom are not the same thing. If corpses are cremated, that is custom, not ritual. But custom is accompanied by ritual, and it is methodologically incorrect to separate them. The tale has preserved traces of numerous rituals and customs, and the origin of many motifs can be explained only by reference to rituals. For example, there is a tale that narrates how a maiden buries the bones of a cow in a garden and sprinkles them with water (Afanas'ev 1957, no. 100). Such a custom or ritual really existed: animal bones were for some reason not eaten or disposed of, but buried (Propp 1934). If we could demonstrate which motifs go back to which rituals, the origin of these motifs would find an explanation. But the wondertale is not a chronicle, and between the wondertale and ritual are various forms of relations and various forms of connection.

Direct Correlation Between the Wondertale and Ritual

The simplest case is the complete congruence of ritual and custom with the wondertale. This case is rare. For instance, in the wondertale there is an episode of how bones are buried, and the same practice was known in life; or a wondertale narrates that royal children are locked in a dungeon, kept in darkness, and fed in secret, and exactly the same thing was done in life. Discovery of such parallels is important for the folklorist; it may turn out that the motif goes back to some ritual or custom that will explain its genesis.

Reinterpretation of Ritual in the Wondertale

More common is reinterpretation of the ritual, i.e., the replacement in the wondertale of one or several elements of the ritual that have become superfluous or incomprehensible with another element that is easier to understand. Reinterpretation is usually concomitant with a change in form. Most often it is the motivation that undergoes change, but other components of the ritual may be changed as well. For instance, the hero of a wondertale sews himself into the skin of a cow or horse to escape from a hole or reach a faraway kingdom. He is then seized by a bird; the skin, with the hero inside, is taken to some place on a mountain or beyond the sea that the hero would not have been able to reach in any other way. There is a well-known custom of sewing corpses in a skin. Systematic study of the custom and the motif demonstrates an indubitable connection between them;

they are congruent both in form and content: the meaning of the motif in the story parallels the meaning of the ritual in life. Yet there is one difference: in the wondertale the hero sews himself into the skin alive, whereas in the ritual it is *a corpse* that is sewn into it. Such a discrepancy is a simple instance of reinterpretation: in the custom, sewing into a skin made it possible for the deceased to reach the kingdom of the dead; in the wondertale a similar action makes it possible for the hero to reach the faraway kingdom. In other cases the original basis has become so blurred that it no longer can be found.

The term *reinterpretation* conveniently indicates the process of change. The fact of reinterpretation proves that in the life of a people some changes have occurred that entail a change in the motif.

Inversion of the Ritual

In one special case of reinterpretation all the forms of the ritual are preserved in the wondertale but are given an opposite meaning. I will call such cases inversions. Let us look at some examples. Formerly it was customary to kill aged people, but the wondertale narrates how an old man was spared. During the time that this custom existed, a person who showed mercy to the old man would have been held up to ridicule, perhaps castigated, or even punished; in the wondertale, the person who shows mercy to the old man is depicted as a praiseworthy hero who acts wisely. Similarly, it was customary to sacrifice a virgin to the river whose flood ensured good crops. This would be done at the beginning of sowing and was supposed to facilitate the growth of vegetation. But in the wondertale the maiden is rescued from the monster by the hero. As long as the ritual existed, such a "liberator" would have been torn to pieces as the greatest of profaners, as one who jeopardized the well-being of the people, the crops. The plot, therefore, sometimes displays a negative attitude toward an earlier historical reality. Such a plot (or motif) could not have sprung up in a wondertale while the system requiring the sacrifice of virgins still existed. But with the decay of the once sacred system, the custom in which a virgin went (sometimes willingly) to her death became needless and repugnant, and the role of the protagonist switched to the former profaner who interfered with the sacrifice. This is a highly significant discovery. It shows that the plot arises not in an evolutionary fashion by direct reflection of reality but by a negation of it. The plot stands in reverse relation to reality. Thereby we have confirmed Lenin's juxtaposition of development as evolution with development as the unity of opposites. "The second *alone* furnishes the key to the 'self-movement' of everything that exists; it alone furnished the key to the 'leaps,' to the 'break in continuity,' to the 'transformation into the opposite,' the 'destruction of the old and emergence of the new' '' (Lenin 1961b, 360).

All these ideas and preliminary observations allow us to put forth another premise: the wondertale should be compared with ritual and custom so that we may determine which motifs go back to which ritual and what their interrelation is.

A specific difficulty arises here. Ritual, which arises as a means of struggling with nature, does not die out when rational means of struggling with and influencing nature are developed; instead, it is also reinterpreted. It may happen that the folklorist, while tracing a motif to ritual, will find that the motif goes back to a reinterpreted ritual, which itself has to be explained. Sometimes the original foundation of a ritual is so blurred that it demands special study. But that is the business of the ethnographer, not the folklorist.

There is another difficulty. Like ritual life, folklore is composed of thousands and thousands of different elements. Is it necessary to find economic causes for every element? In this connection Engels (1942, 482) says:

> The low level of economic development in the prehistoric period is supplemented and also partially conditioned and even caused by the false conceptions of nature. And even though economic necessity was the main driving force of the increasing knowledge of nature and has become ever more so, yet it would be pedantic to try and find economic causes for all the primitive nonsense.

These words are clear enough. We may add that if the same motif can be traced to tribal society, to slavery (as in ancient Egypt), to antiquity (a very usual case), etc., and if we are tracing the development of the motif, we need not point out each instance when the motif has changed owing to a new historical situation, rather than from within. We will try to avoid both pedantic and overly abstract schemes.

To return to ritual: generally, if a link has been established between ritual and the wondertale, it is the ritual that serves as the explanation of the corresponding motif in the tale. An abstract scheme admits only this conclusion, but sometimes the opposite is true: although the wondertale goes back to ritual, the ritual may be obscure, whereas the wondertale may have preserved the past so fully and accurately that the ritual (or some other past phenomenon) can be understood in its true light only through the wondertale. In some cases, the wondertale, instead of requiring explanation, itself explains something, namely, it serves as a source for studying the ritual. "The folk narratives of various Siberian tribes have served as our main source for reconstructing ancient totemic beliefs," said D. K. Zelenin (1936, 232). Ethnographers often rely on wondertales, though they do not always know them. This applies particularly to Frazer: the grand edifice of *The Golden Bough*[2] was erected on premises taken from wondertales, which he neither knew well enough nor understood properly. A meticulous study of the wondertale will allow us to introduce a number of corrections to that work and even shake its foundations.

The Wondertale and Myth

If we examine ritual as a manifestation of religion, we cannot ignore its other manifestation—myth. There is an enormous literature on the relationship of the wondertale and myth, which I will pass over. For the moment we may simply propose to study the problem and to include myth among the possible sources of the wondertale.

The variety of existing interpretations of myth makes it necessary to define this concept in precise terms. By myth we mean a tale about divinities or divine beings in whose reality people believe. Faith is not a psychological but a historical factor. Tales about Herakles are very close to the wondertale, but Herakles was a divinity, the object of a cult. The wondertale hero, who, like Herakles, sets out in search of the golden apples, is the protagonist of a fictional work. Myth and the wondertale differ in social function, not in form (Tronskij 1934). The social function of myth itself is not always the same and depends upon the stage of culture in which it is current. The myths of peoples in tribal society are one thing; the myths of ancient civilizations, known to us through their literature, are something quite different. Myth cannot be formally distinguished from the wondertale. Wondertales and myths (particularly the myths of preclass societies) sometimes overlap so much that in ethnography and folklore myths are often called wondertales. There has even been a certain fashion for "the wondertales of primitives," and many anthologies of such tales have been published, both scholarly and popular. A study of these texts as endowed with a social function reveals that most of them are myths rather than wondertales. Contemporary bourgeois folklore ignores the *all-important message of these myths*. They are collected but hardly studied. Thus, in Bolte and Polívka's index (1913-32), the "wondertales of primitives" occupy a modest place. However, such myths are not "variants"; they are products of earlier stages of economic development, products that have not yet lost their connection with their economic base. What has been reinterpreted in the contemporary European wondertale is frequently contained in myth in its original form. Myths often provide a key to understanding the wondertale.

Some scholars realize the message of primitive myths, but the matter does not progress beyond declarations. The fundamental significance of these myths has not been understood because the scholars have a formal, rather than a historical, point of view. Myths have been ignored as a historical phenomenon, whereas particular instances of the reverse dependence (of the folklore of "savage" peoples on that of "civilized" ones) have been noted and investigated. Only in the most recent times has the idea of the social significance of myth surfaced somewhat in bourgeois scholarship, which is now beginning to acknowledge the close link between the spoken word, *myths*, and sacred tales with the social organization

of the tribe, ritual, moral, and even practical actions. Still these observations have never been extended to European wondertales; such an idea seems too bold.

Unfortunately in most cases myths have been recorded in an unsatisfactory way. Usually only the texts are given and nothing more. Often editors do not even say whether they know the language and whether they recorded the texts directly or through an interpreter. Even in the texts collected by such an outstanding scholar as Franz Boas there undoubtedly are retellings; however, he does not specify the fact anywhere, though the smallest details, minutiae, nuances, even the intonation, are important. Still worse is the situation when indigenous people narrate their myths in English. A. L. Kroeber published a number of such recordings in this fashion: his collection *Gros Ventre Myths and Tales* (1907) contains fifty texts, of which forty-eight were narrated in English, but this is mentioned in the middle of the book, in a footnote, as if it were a point of minor importance.[3]

We have already said that myth has a social significance and that its significance is not the same everywhere. Anyone can see the difference between Greek and Polynesian myths. Even preclass societies vary in this respect and should not be lumped together. Myths of individual countries and peoples differ according to their stage of culture. It has so happened that for my purposes the most valuable data have come from America and partly from Oceania and Africa and not from Europe or Asia, as one might expect from their territorial proximity to Russia. Asiatic peoples as a whole were on a higher cultural level than the peoples of America and Oceania when European ethnographers and folklorists began to study them. Moreover, Asia is a continent of very ancient civilizations, a melting pot in which streams of peoples resettled, mixed, and displaced one another. On the expanse of this continent are all stages of culture, from the nearly tribal Ainu to the most highly civilized Chinese,[4] and at present it is also the home of the socialist culture of the USSR. For this reason, the Asiatic data constitute a mixture that makes research difficult. Thus, the Yakuts tell the tale of Il'já Múromec along with their probably authentic Yakut myths. In Vogúl folklore are mentions of horses, of which the Voguls are ignorant[5] (Černecov 1935, 18). These examples show how easy it is to take the imported and the foreign for the authentic. As we aim at studying not the *phenomenon itself*, not the *texts*, but the connections of myth with the soil that gave rise to them, we run the great risk of misconstruing a phenomenon borrowed from India, to cite one example, for a phenomenon from the hunting stage only because it is found among a hunting people.

The same is also true of Africa, but to a lesser degree. On this continent are peoples at the lowest level of development, like the Bushmen, as well as cattle-raising peoples like the Zulu, and farming peoples already familiar with forging; nevertheless, mutual cultural influences are not so strong as in Asia. Unfortunately, African tales have sometimes been recorded no better than American ones. But American scholars are immediate neighbors of the American Indians, whereas Africa has been studied by newcomers, colonizers, and missionaries—French,

English, German, and Dutch—who have taken little trouble to learn the languages, and when they have, their purpose has not been to record folklore. Leo Frobenius, one of the most distinguished African scholars, knew no African languages, which did not prevent him from publishing great lots of African data without as much as a mention of how he obtained them. His practice cannot but put us on our guard. Even though America is by no means free from extraneous influences, it is America that has yielded data unregistered elsewhere.

The myths of Greco-Roman antiquity, Babylon, Egypt, and, in part, India and China are quite different. We do not know these myths directly from their creators—the lower strata of society—but only through literature: the poems of Homer, the tragedies of Sophocles, the works of Vergil, Ovid, and so on. Wilamowitz (1925, 41-62) refused to see any connection between Greek literature and folk culture. He asserted that Greek literature is as unsuitable for the study of folk plots as the works of Hebbel, Geibel, and Wagner for the study of the Nibelungen legend.[6] This approach, which denies any folk quality to ancient myth, opens the way to all kinds of reactionary theories. We will recognize a genuine folk quality in these myths but will remember that they have not come down to us in their pure form and consequently should not be equated with recordings from genuine oral tradition. By and large, the same applies to Egyptian myths, which again have not been obtained first-hand. The ideas of the Egyptians are known through gravestone inscriptions, the *Book of the Dead*, and so on. For the most part we know only the official religion, cultivated by priests for political ends and supported by the court and nobility. The lower strata may have had different concepts and even different plots. Nonetheless, the myths of ancient civilizations form part of my subject. They are *indirect* sources, while the myths of preclass societies are *direct* sources. They *reflect* popular notions, without *representing* them. It may turn out that the Russian wondertale is, in a way, more archaic than the Greek myth.

The wondertale should be compared with the myths of ancient civilizations as well as with those of primitive, preclass societies. This is my next premise and the final clarification of the concept *historical past*, introduced earlier for the comparison and study of the wondertale. I am not interested in individual events from the past, which by themselves are usually meant as history and were meant as history by the Russian Historical school.

The Wondertale and Primitive Thought

As pointed out earlier, we are looking for the foundations of wondertale images and plots in the reality of the past. However, the wondertale also contains images and situations that do not hark directly back to any reality. Among such images are the winged serpent and the winged horse, the little hut on chicken legs, Koščej, etc.

It would be a great mistake to take a purely empirical position and view the wondertale as some sort of chronicle, as do those scholars who search prehistory for real winged serpents and assert that the wondertale preserves recollections of them. Winged serpents and huts on chicken legs have never existed. Yet they are historical—indeed, not *in themselves* but *in their origins*.

Ritual and myth are conditioned by economic interests. If, for example, people dance to bring on rain, this behavior is caused by a wish to influence nature; but it is not clear why they just dance, sometimes with live serpents (Warburg, 1938-39, 286). We could more easily understand them if they poured water (as is frequently done), for such an action would be no more than an instance of sympathetic magic. This example shows that the action is not caused *directly* by economic interests, but is a result of a certain *thought-process*, conditioned by the same factors as the action itself. Both ritual and myth are products of thought. Although it is sometimes difficult to explain and determine the forms of thought, the folklorist must not only take them into account but also find out what ideas underlie certain motifs. Primitive thought does not know abstractions; it manifests itself in behavior, forms of social organization, folklore, and language. Occasions arise when a wondertale motif cannot be explained by any of the premises adopted so far. For example, some motifs rest on an understanding of space, time, and number different from ours. It follows that the forms of primitive thought must also be considered if we wish to explain the genesis of the wondertale. Here I can only indicate this enormously complex question as supplying another premise of my research. If we recognize that thought is a historically determined category, we will not need to "interpret" myths, rituals, and wondertales. And indeed my objective is not to interpret them but to trace them to their historical antecedents. Myth has its own semantics, but fixed, absolute semantics divorced from history does not exist. The entire situation is fraught with great danger: one can easily mistake the reality of thought for the reality of actual life, and vice versa. If Baba Jaga threatens to eat the hero, it does not necessarily follow that we are dealing with a vestige of cannibalism. The figure of the ogress could well have arisen in another way—as the reflection of certain mental (and in that sense, historical) images, rather than of images borrowed from reality and everyday life.

Genesis and History

The present work aims at discovering the genesis of the wondertale. A genetic investigation, though always historical, is not the same thing as a historical investigation. Genetics attempts to discover the *origins* of things, whereas history concentrates on their development; genetics precedes history and paves the way for it. This book, too, concerns itself with the movement of phenomena, and all institutions to which the wondertale is traceable are examined in it as processes. For example, when I establish the connection between some wondertale motifs

and notions of death, I view death as a developing, rather than an abstract, concept. The reader can even get the impression that he is presented with the history or prehistory of individual motifs, but, though I treat several processes in relatively great detail, the result is not history. It is also a common occurrence that the phenomenon to which the wondertale has been traced is clear in itself but cannot be developed into a process. This happens with some very early forms of social life, surprisingly well preserved in the wondertale—for example, the initiation rite. Their history requires a special historical and ethnographic investigation, which may be beyond the folklorist's means. Numerous attempts fail just for want of an exhaustive ethnographic analysis, and therefore, the historical treatment of many phenomena is not always equally profound and broad. Often, one can at best point out the existing connection. A certain disproportion is also caused by the different "specific weights" of wondertale motifs. The more important, "classical" motifs of the wondertale will be discussed in detail, while other, less important, ones will not.

Method and Material

Although the principles set forth here may seem simple, their realization presents serious difficulties. The greatest of them lies in mastering the data. Scholars often make the mistake of confining their material to one plot or one culture or of fixing some other arbitrary limits. A case in point is Hermann Usener (1965), who studied the plot, or myth, of the world flood only in ancient texts. Surely, a subject of this kind can be narrowed down, but all-embracing conclusions about genesis should not be drawn from limited data. Folklore is an international phenomenon. Granted this universality, the folklorist is at a great disadvantage in comparison with specialists in Indology, classics, Egyptology, and so on, who are complete masters of their fields. The folklorist only touches those fields as a guest or wanderer, to make a few observations and go on. One cannot have a full command of everything; but it is absolutely necessary to broaden the framework of folklore studies. One must risk errors, annoying misunderstandings, and inaccuracies. This is a dangerous practice but it is less so than methodologically incorrect premises based on perfect mastery of partial data. A similar broadening is necessary even for specialized research, which, too, must be illuminated by comparative data. So many preliminary works on individual cultures and peoples exist that we must at least try to use them, even though our knowledge is imperfect.

Thus, I believe that an investigation can begin even if the data have not been exhausted; this is my next premise. I defend my view not out of necessity; I really find it acceptable as a principle. Here I agree to differ with most scholars, but I find support for my position in the recurrence and inner organization of folklore facts. I am going to study the *recurring* elements of the wondertale, and

it matters little whether I have considered all 200, 300, or 5,000 variants and versions of each existing element. The same applies to rituals, myth, and so on. "If one should wait until the material for a law was *in a pure form*," said Engels, "it would mean suspending the process of thought in an investigation until then and, if only for this reason, the law would never come into being" (1940, 159). All facts either require explanation—for us this is first and foremost the wondertale—or provide it. Everything else is only *test material*. A law always reveals itself gradually, and the initial choice of data is not predetermined. Therefore, the folklorist does not have to consider the entire mass of facts; if the law is true, it will be true everywhere.

The principle proposed here is at variance with current practice. Usually the first order of business is to exhaust the material. But even where this goal has been achieved, questions have been solved incorrectly, because they have been asked incorrectly. I believe that a question correctly asked will result in a correct method and the correct solution.

The Wondertale and Later Formations

It follows from the foregoing remarks that I consider rituals, myths, forms of primitive thought, and some social institutions as belonging to the wondertale world; I believe that they can explain the wondertale. But folklore comprises more than the wondertale. Related to the wondertale in plot and motif are the heroic epic and all sorts of tales and legends—for instance, the *Mahabharata'*, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad,* the *Elder Edda,* bylinas, the *Nibelungenlied,* etc. Generally these monuments will be disregarded, for they themselves can be explained by the wondertale and often hark back to it. True, it sometimes happens that epic poetry has preserved elements and features absent elsewhere. For example, in the *Nibelungenlied,* Siegfried, after killing the dragon, bathes in its blood and acquires invulnerability. This is an important episode; it explains something about the image of the dragon (serpent) that cannot be found in the wondertale. In such cases, for lack of other data, we may make use of the heroic epic as well.

Prospects

My premises are now clear, and so is the main task. What prospects will open to us through our comparison? Suppose we have found that in the wondertale children are thrown into a dungeon and that in historical reality this was also done. Or suppose we have found that a maiden preserves the bones of a slaughtered cow and that in reality this was also done. Can we conclude that in such cases the motif entered the wondertale from historical reality? Undoubtedly we can. But will we not then obtain an unusually fragmented picture? We do not know yet. It is usually believed that the wondertale has absorbed elements of primitive

social and cultural life. We will see that they are, indeed, its very substance. As a result, we will obtain a picture of the sources of the wondertale.

The solution of this problem will advance us in our understanding of the wondertale but will leave us facing other equally difficult questions, for example, Why did people tell such stories? and, How did the wondertale take shape as a narrative genre? By discovering the source of individual motifs as plot components, I will lay bare the source of storytelling and of the wondertale as such. As regards the questions formulated above, I will try to answer them in the final chapter; here we have to consider a more special problem. It is impossible to separate the telling of wondertales from the telling of other tales, e.g., animal tales, and until other genres have been studied from a historical point of view, all our conclusions about the wondertale will be preliminary and hypothetical.

Obviously, a search like this can never be considered finished; the present book is only an *introduction* to the study of the wondertale. This work is like an exploratory expedition to lands yet unknown. We make note of the mineral deposits and draw outline maps, but a thorough mining of each deposit must wait until the future. The next step can consist of a detailed study of the individual motifs and plots in conjunction with the whole. At this stage it is more important to examine the connection of phenomena than to delve deeply into each of them. A last reservation is in order here. This study is based on the Russian wondertale, especially northern. As indicated above, the wondertale is international and its motifs are also largely international. Russian folklore is varied, highly artistic, and well preserved. For this reason it is only to be expected that a Soviet scholar should first turn to his native, rather than foreign, folklore. I have considered all the basic types of wondertale. These types are represented in the world repertoire by both Russian and foreign material. In comparative studies it makes no difference which examples of a given type are chosen. Where Russian data have proved insufficient I have used foreign examples, but my book is not research into the Russian wondertale. It examines comparative historical folklore, with Russian tales as its point of departure.