

THESIS DEFENCE: TOMS ҔENCIS

DISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF LATVIAN MYTHOLOGY

Toms Ҕencis: *A Disciplinary History of Latvian Mythology*. Dissertationes Folkloristicae Universitatis Tartuensis 19. Tartu University Press, Tartu 2012, 218 pp.

I had the honour of evaluating Toms Ҕencis's doctoral thesis "A Disciplinary History of Latvian Mythology" (supervisors: professor Kristin Kuutma, professor Ҕlo Valk; Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, Faculty of Philosophy) already in spring 2012, and it was my real pleasure to participate in this significant event for the humanities of both Baltic countries – the defence of the thesis in Tartu on October 5, 2012.

I have to admit that it is not a simple task to evaluate a thesis in the pre-defence period and to be the reviewer of the same work at the defence. Anyway, I am pleased to say that the necessary dialogue between me and the aspirant has taken place, and therefore I can once more ascertain that Toms Ҕencis's doctoral thesis is an original and innovative academic research. From the viewpoint of Latvian humanities, as I see it, the originality and novelty refers, above all, to the chosen approach. What I mean is that instead of traditional methodological approach – to treat the process of the formation of a phenomenon from a diachronic perspective, which might be expected in view of the thesis title – the author has chosen to dissect the material with the methods offered by postmodernist theory, to deconstruct well-known truths and to display them in a new perspective. The selected form of analysis – reflexivity – has been presented here as a progression from the sociocultural context towards particular researchers, their works and concepts, as well as a demonstration of the significance of these aspects in the process of disciplinary formation. The author presents it as "investigation into the knowledge production process rather than the content of knowledge, analysis of representational form rather than the object of representation" (p. 8). And this investigation process should reach the goal "to demonstrate how a particular object of study is constructed, how it gains or loses its scientific legitimacy, how its variations are related to the theoretical, social, institutional, and political positions of its creators during different periods of time and within various traditions of research" (p. 13).

Due to such a form of analysis, a kind of postmodern study has been produced, where the object and the context of study, as well as the author's personal intention have become textual elements of equal value. It can be concluded that, based on the chosen approach, interesting details of opinions and mutual relations of persons involved in the research of Latvian folklore and mythology, as well as significant nuances in their



*Toms Ҕencis. Photo by Alar Madisson
2010.*

attitudes towards the dominant power of their time can be outlined. This adds to the topicality of the work, as the analysis of the disciplinary formation process can draw certain parallels to the modern situation in the field of humanities.

The author has successfully balanced the so-called inner and outer perspective in his research. As he represents the main Latvian folklore and mythology research institution, he knows well the values and the research style of this institution as well as the contents of its archives, and he also has access to the most recent research in the field. At the same time, his studies at the revered University of Tartu provide for dispassionate and objective (as much as it is possible in the humanities) perspective of the research object, and, what is of no lesser importance, spread new knowledge on the topic not only within the academic circles of one country but in a much wider audience. By the way, with the accessibility and distribution of the newly produced knowledge in view, I would like to express my gratitude to the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tartu, for the publication of this thesis in monographic format. This is a nice practice, promoting the distribution of the latest research and fresh findings and boosting the self-confidence and daring of new scientists, as well as their responsibility for the quality of the study.

Reverting to the contents of Toms Kēncis's research, I have to admit that I was surprised at the author's boldness and ability to create a certain intrigue just in the first passage of his opus. Thus, in the very first line of the introduction he announces that his research focuses on a non-existent subject, claiming that "this is a thesis on the history of a discipline that does not exist" (p. 7), and the relations of the object of the study with the academic and professional nomenclature have been chosen as a criterion of existence. In my opinion, a certain tribute to positivism can be seen in this phrase as well: it is difficult to rationalise the world view, and it does not fit into the field of science because of the non-empiric character of the study object. If one can ignore the phenomenological method of analysis for religious experience as the starting point in the study of the mythic world perception, then it is possible to perceive Latvian mythology as a system of views, rituals and cults, not subject to reconstruction due to a considerable lack of historical material. Anyway, separate segments – conception of life after death, cult relics, mythic images and figures and their functions – have been subject to reconstruction. Certainly, since its very beginning at the end of the 19th century the process of reconstruction has attracted the attention of not only scholars, but also of the general public or laymen, because it is exciting and, as it seems, accessible to almost everyone who, paraphrasing Algirdas Greimas, "likes detectives and mind games". It is possible that Latvian mythology does not exist as a discipline in the process of specialisation of modern sciences. Fragments of world view are attested in archaeological, written and historical sources, in language, folklore, daily routines, literature and art, religion, psychology and other spheres, studied by certain branches of natural and social sciences and the humanities. Thus, in the age of extreme specialisation and fear *not to know, not to be a specialist, not to be competent*, who will be the one to dare to propose a clearly definable object of mythological study? On the other hand, if mythology is treated as a certain *type of speech, narrative* or text (in terms of Roland Barthes and Paul Ricoeur) – no matter if constructed, reconstructed or deconstructed, verbalised or expressed indirectly – it has been, is and will be an indispensable part of every live culture. As an ideological structure, it exerts influence upon and takes

over several different forms of collective life and thought: political mythology, ethnic mythology, eschatological mythology, mythology of conspiracy, etc. Thus, mythology as a form of figurative thinking possesses certain regularities which can be perceived, systematised, typologised and, consequently, studied in cross-, multi-, trans-, inter- or even non-disciplinary ways. Coming back to the aspect of imperceptibility of Latvian mythology as a discipline, I would like to point out the author's successful solution to the situation, a kind of emic position – in order to define mythology and the object of his study, he uses the definition of mythology provided by the authors who have produced mythological discourse. So far, the object of the study exists.

To characterise the epistemic context of the history of Latvian mythology, the author has chosen to view it through the Foucauldian power/knowledge dyad prism. From this point of view it seems to me that the author overestimates the symbiotic connection between power and knowledge, presenting it as an irreversible abstraction or inevitability, absorbing almost all spheres of social relations, including scholarly and academic. I admit that mythology and folklore studies are closely related to the strong, politically and socially organising ideology such as nationalism (p. 185); anyway, it should be mentioned that not a single society, even a totalitarian one, can be represented as an amorphous mass, just for the reason that it is comprised of individualities who are conscious subjects capable of preserving their basic structures in spite of the change of economic, political, psychological and legal conditions or status. I tend to agree with the late Foucault and his thesis about the individual as a rational subject, who can actively resist normalisation and reach ethical freedom through self-confidence, self-discipline and self-constitution. Regardless of a separate chapter in Toms Kencis's work devoted to personalities in Latvian mythology research, the role of individual and personal factors or the significance of personal willpower in the process of knowledge construction has been undeservedly neglected in the publication.

Thus, the model of research history of Latvian folklore and mythology, proposed by the author, is balancing on the edge of determinism, and it provokes us to think of a certain inadequacy in the title of the thesis, which might be changed to a more adequate one, for instance, "Disciplinary History of Latvian Mythology from the Perspective of the Theory of Power".

The author's idea of the absolutisation of the Foucauldian theory of power takes us to one more question, which is connected with the chronological frame of the research. In view of the author's statement: "Writing of any history is an action of selection and interpretation, possible only from a certain distance: therefore there is no history of today, while yesterday already becomes an object of history writing. This is also the reason why this thesis defines its subject matter as temporally bounded to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, covering the most recent developments only in the form of overview" (p. 179). Here a question should be asked about why he concludes the history of mythology research with the re-establishment of independence in the 1990s. The author's 'today', as a matter of fact, has been continuing for almost a quarter of a century. The end of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century were so rich in new research in the field of Baltic and Latvian mythology, because at last both exile and Latvian scholars could exchange their views without ideological limitations, global literature and the most recent research became accessible for Latvian scholars, Latvian folklore and mythology research underwent certain institutionalisation, young

scholars were awarded research grants, etc. This is why the author's argument for the chronological framing of his work is not convincing. Thus, it can be concluded that the contents of the thesis only partly corresponds to its title, and it would be more appropriate to call it a disciplinary history of Latvian mythology from the 1890s until the 1990s.

Anyway, it is the perspective intended by the author, it is consequent in respect to theory, it is based on selected factography and pointed quotations from authoritative works. My opinion is that the thesis displays high scholarly standards, and it is a significant contribution to the humanities of both countries.

When reading Toms Ķencis's work, it makes the impression that not only Latvia and Estonia but all the three Baltic countries are comparably similar in their search for academic reconstruction of pre-Christian mythologies, regardless of the cultural historical differences outlined by the author in Appendix III. I dare say that it would be worthwhile to continue in the same direction, and from the author's proposed perspective of reflexivity to analyse the formation and evolution of the school of Lithuanian mythology research. This approach may yield different results, because Lithuanian scientists strongly rely on historical written sources, whereas folklore is attributed a much lesser role.

In any case, I am grateful for the possibility to get acquainted with the work which suggests that its author is a young developing scholar, a self-sufficient and creative person, whose preferences are not towards well-known paths, but towards his own. And, finally, I wish this research to receive a proper evaluation and recognition not only in Estonian, but also in Latvian and Lithuanian humanitarian spheres. We have much more in common than different. May the author's hopes of his research and of the applied methods becoming a model for scholars from other countries and other academic disciplines (pp. 10–12) come true.

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