ARTICLES

GAIL LENHOFF

TRUBETZKOY'S "AFANASII NIKITIN" RECONSIDERED

One of the more curious documents in the archives of medieval Rus' is Afanasii Nikitin's tale of his journey to India (1466-72). On a routine trade expedition to the Caucasus, he and his companions were robbed of their possessions and stranded in Shirvan. Rather than return to his native city of Tver', the merchant crossed the Caspian Sea into Persia. There he purchased a horse and, hoping to use it as capital, arranged to have it transported to India. He soon discovered that there were no goods for the Russian market; all "infidels" were heavily taxed and under constant pressure to convert to Islam. After a series of misfortunes and disappointments, he set out for Rus', but died somewhere on the road to Smolensk. His tetrati were brought by merchants to Vasilii Mamyrev, then secretary to the grand prince of Moscow, and received by the compiler of the L'vov Chronicle in the year 1474/75.1

1. See the Etterov manuscript in Khozhenie za tri moria Afanasiia Nikitina 1466-1472 gg., ed. V. P. Adrianova-Peretts, 2nd ed., rev. (Moscow-Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1958), p. 34. All citations are translated by me from this edition (hereafter cited as Khozhenie) and will be taken from the Trinity manuscript (late fifteenth century, GBL M. 8665). Citations will be given in parentheses in the text. For textual criticism, see A. A. Zimin, "Novye spiski 'Khozheniia' Afanasiia Nikitina," Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoi literatury, 13 (1957), 437-39; Ia. S. Lur'e, "Arkheograficheskii obzor," in Khozhenie, pp. 161-82; V. A. Kuchkin, "Sud'ba 'Khozhenia za tri moria' Afamisia Nikitina v drevnerusskoj pis'mennosti," Voprosy istorii, No. 5 (1969), pp. 71-77; and Carlo Verdiani, ed. and trans., Afanasij Nikitin. Il Viaggio al di là tre mari (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1963), pp. lxxxii-ciii (hereafter cited as Il Viaggio). For an alternative theory on the dating of the journey, see L. S. Semenov, Puteshestvie Afanasiia Nikitina (Moscow: Nauka, 1980). My translations of non-Russian passages are based on the readings of Louis Bazin and E. Gabrielli (in Verdiani, Il Viaggio), of I. P. Petrushevskii (in Khozhenie), and of Paul Winter-Witz (Die Reise des russischen Kaufmannes Afanasi Nikitin über drei Meere und sein Aufenthalt in Indien 1466-1472 [Heidelberg: Universität Basel, 1960]). I am especially indebted to Erica Gilson of the University of Pennsylvania, who is currently preparing an article on Afanasii Nikitin's use of Turkish; I have also consulted with Roger Allen (Arabic) Ahmed Evin (Turkish), William Hanaway (Persian) and Svat Souček (Turkish, Persian) in connection with my forthcoming annotated translation, prepared under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Riccardo Picchio, Harvey Goldblatt, Norman Ingham, Charles Halperin, and Angelo Mazzocco graciously offered advice and criticism during various stages of research on this text.
The fact that Afanasii Nikitin was the first Russian to leave a realistic description of India, together with his unusual candor in recording and lamenting his sins and his use of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic lexical elements, have provoked widespread interest in the account and made it the object of extensive scholarly commentary. Under the title Khozhenie za tri moria it has been published in over thirteen editions, not to mention translations, adaptations and retellings. Yet despite the transparency of the traveller’s tale and the attention focused upon the text, fundamental questions continue to puzzle scholars. One such problem was raised in 1926 by the distinguished linguist N. S. Trubetzkoy, who claimed that the Journey Beyond Three Seas was a literary masterpiece. Chiding his predecessors for being deaf to the merits of the medieval Russian literary heritage, he presented an analysis of Afanasii Nikitin’s journey as a test case, a methodological model for approaching other misunderstood or neglected works of medieval art. His study, “'Khozhenie za tri moria' Afonasia Nikitina, kak literaturnyi pamiatnik,” has come to be regarded as a classic in its own right and as an important contribution to literary theory. To be sure, there are sceptics who have questioned Trubetzkoy’s interpretation in passing, but his premises have never been subjected to scrutiny in print. The time has come to re-examine Trubetzkoy’s arguments.

Trubetzkoy’s theory rests on several premises. He contends that Afanasii Nikitin reveals himself to be a fervent Orthodox Christian for whom the journey to India was a profoundly religious experience. Nikitin’s account is, for Trubetzkoy, a chronicle of a lonely exile’s struggle to keep the faith despite overwhelming pressures to forsake it. Trubetzkoy also regards the merchant as an author of some talent, one with a keen awareness of formal devices and

