Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature

Olga Froidenberg

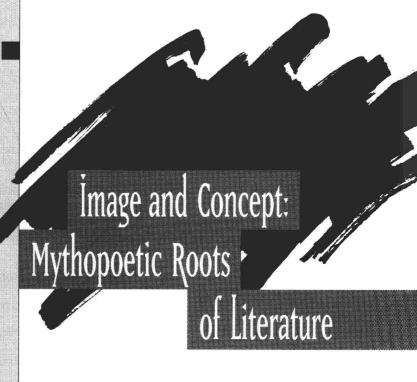
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Volume 2

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Olga Freidenberg

> Edited and Annotated by Nina Braginskaia and Kevin Moss

Translated from the Russian by Kevin Moss

Foreword by Vyacheslav V. Ivanov



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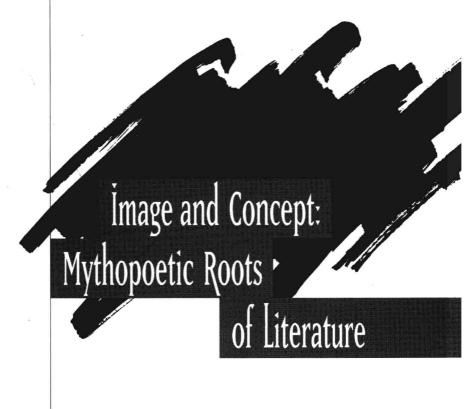
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Introduction to the Series

Many of the changes that have swept through Eastern Europe during the last several years have been linked to a wholesale transformation of symbolic systems. Streets, cities, regions, and countries have been renamed. Coats of arms and national hymns have been replaced. Churches and historical monuments have been restored. Previously forbidden literary, religious, and philosophical works have been published. The most radical avant-garde styles in literature, theater, and art have been revived and developed. Entire social systems and their component parts have been reshaped. As a result, the discipline of semiotics—the study of signs and texts that originated with the Greek Stoics and flowered in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from the 1960s on (despite official prohibitions and pressures)-offers a privileged insight into human behavior. More than ever, to comprehend contemporary society and culture we must approach them through the realms of literary and artistic texts, symbols, traditions, and myths.

The monographs and collections of articles featured in the book series Sign/Text/Culture: Studies in Slavic and Comparative Semiotics are concerned with comparative semiotic analysis of Slavic and other cultural traditions. In keeping with the broad sweep of semiotics, the subject matter of these studies ranges from individual works and authors to entire periods of Russian and European cultural history; at the same time, like Elementa, the journal with which

it is linked, this series pays special attention to several distinct areas. Since major steps in developing a new cross-disciplinary methodology in the humanities were made principally in dialogue with the science of language (by the Prague Linguistic Circle, the Moscow-Tartu School, and their predecessors in the Slavic world and elsewhere), the series encourages further study of the possibilities and limitations of strictly linguistic models for semiotics. Some of the volumes will explore the link of linguistics to poetics and possible alternate approaches to analysis of texts. The series will also feature further investigation into discrete units and rules of their combination, an approach that has proved fruitful in folklore and some other narratological studies, as well as probabilistic models aimed at understanding the behavior of continuous systems with a high degree of complexity.

As in other fields of contemporary research, one of the most prominent parts of semiotics has been the reconstruction of the past and of primeval sources of different structures in modern society. It is often impossible to grasp the original function of symbols or other elements of a Slavic text or other modern verbal compositions without recourse to their sources in Indo-European mythological and poetical discourse. Thus, a principal concern of the series is the relationship between mythology and literature, as it evolved across time and various cultures.

In an attempt to develop a new synthetic vision of the Russian and other Slavic traditions, as well as the traditions of Central and Western Europe, the series will focus on selected chapters of literary, cultural and social history and characteristic figures from those periods. It will explore the connections between Slavic cultures and other traditions of Eurasia, ranging from the distant past (particularly the Indo-European) to the present. It will pay special attention to the discoveries of the Slavic artistic and scholarly avant-garde in this century, and to those works that have not been accessible to readers due to the historical situation of the last decades.

Vyacheslav Ivanov

Foreword

I write this foreword to *Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature* with mixed feelings. As is often the case when one speaks about contemporary Russian culture and its outstanding representatives, one blurs the distinction between scholarly work and personal memories, between recent history as it forms new myths and the history of ancient mythology.

I first came to learn of Olga Mikhailovna Freidenberg through her relatives. Boris Pasternak, her cousin, had been a close acquaintance of my parents and later also became my own good friend. His son Evgenii Pasternak frequently discussed his aunt Olga and her wonderful studies on classical Greek literature. Their family stories and narratives were my initial exposure to her writings. Later, during my first year at the university, I read her 1936 book, and was deeply impressed by her innovative methods and the wealth of materials she used.

In the spring of 1955 I visited Leningrad and finally had an occasion to call her, to convey some family information from Evgenii. We made an appointment to meet. I was looking forward to seeing her, but on the designated day I was running a bit late while talking to other new acquaintances, the great Leningrad orientalist Igor D'iakonov and his students. I called Olga Mikhailovna to apologize for my tardiness. She answered, "Well, it is impossible for us to meet. I have had a serious fit of my illness; I was just wondering how

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I could contact you to postpone our meeting." We never met; her illness proved fatal and she died soon thereafter. Our telephone conversation was mentioned in one of her last letters to Pasternak. When I subsequently read through their correspondence, I was struck by the likeness between her and Pasternak's descriptions and observations: a family similarity or a common cultural legacy shared by both.

I came across her unpublished works much later, in the 1970s, when Iurii Lotman decided to publish her writings in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (*Studies in Sign Systems*), a series on which I served as an Advisory Board member. By that time several members of our Moscow–Tartu group discovered in Freidenberg one of their most brilliant predecessors. As shown in Kevin Moss's Introduction, Freidenberg was a forerunner of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mikhail Bakhtin. Both she and Izrail Frank-Kamenetskii, whose scholarly views were particularly close to her own, had anticipated the structural and semiotic approaches to myth and literature.

Even earlier, when I began studying the unpublished scholarly papers of the great filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, I realized that both he and Freidenberg shared certain features common to several pioneers of Russian structuralism and semiotics. They both were primarily interested in analysis of semantic structure; in this, they differed from the formalists, although some of the latter (such as Iurii Tynianov) were also moving toward semantic studies and away from the purely "syntactic" (in the semiotic sense) direction of the early 1920s. Other noteworthy scholars in this area include Iakov Golosovker (the author of the wonderful Logic of Myth), Vladimir Propp (who already in an unpublished chapter of his Morphology of the Folktale supplemented his "syntactic" schemes with some diachronic semantic observations—developed later in his Historical Sources of the Fairy Tale and several essays), and Petr Bogatyrev (at that time working in Prague with Roman Jakobson). For all of them, the topic of carnival was particularly important, as it was for Bakhtin (regarding his connection to Freidenberg, see Moss's Introduction). We may find similar themes in the works of the gifted writer and scholar Adrian Piotrovskii (who unfortunately did not survive Stalin's purges). Piotrovskii probably borrowed this notion from his father Faddei Zelinskii (Tadeusz Zieliński, 1859-1944), who had been one of Bakhtin's university teachers. Thus, it appears that the carnival theme was a productive topic of study at least within the

circle of St. Petersburg classical specialists. One can find similar ideas in the works of many of these thinkers, such as the gifted linguist and literary scholar Iosif Tronskii, whose specific contributions on the mythological basis of Greek linguistic ideas came close to those of Freidenberg, although for social and personal reasons they were not well disposed to each other.

Freidenberg's evaluation of carnival was linked to her general view of dualistic (binary) oppositions that she probably derived from the writings of Aleksandr Veselovskii, the Russian founder of the new conception of "historical poetics." For the contemporary reader, binary oppositions in rituals and mythological texts, described both by Veselovskii and Freidenberg (and later in Bakhtin's study on Rabelais), seem to anticipate the structural approach. The modern summit of the latter may be found in Jakobson's marvelous study "Medieval Mock Mystery," first published in 1958.¹

Another aspect of Freidenberg's book, and of her research in general, was an interest in the irrational, which was typical of the intellectual atmosphere of Russia in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Her ideas precede modern studies on this aspect of Greek culture by several decades. To mention Eisenstein once more, he founded at that time a circle of scholars interested in the archaic layer of consciousness as revealed in the human psyche, myths, language, and cinema. He himself based an entire aesthetic theory on the role of these layers in the structure of artistic form (as revealed in his manuscript "Grundproblem," still waiting for the possibility of publication). The eminent linguist Nikolai Marr, together with two great Russian psychologists, Lev Vygotskii (a man with many followers among American psychologists, and author of The Psychology of Art and many other outstanding works now available in English) and Alexander Luriia (a founder of modern neurolinguistics and neuropsychology with whom I had the privilege of working on aphasia in the 1960s), also participated in the discussions of this circle (until Marr's and Vygotskii's deaths brought the meetings to a halt).

In his Introduction, Moss describes the relationship between Freidenberg and Marr, a man of linguistic genius. Some of Marr's intuitive ideas are fruitful even now—such as those regarding the comparison of Georgian (Kartvelian) and Semitic (Afro-Asiatic) languages, and the independent existence of "Japhetic" languages as separate from the Indo-European family. But particularly thought-

provoking are his ideas concerning ancient mythology. Marr was an unusual person; some of his visions even verged on madness (for example, his notion of the four word elements from which all languages supposedly derive, a topic which Freidenberg did not pursue at any length). The almost hallucinatory quality of his thinking enabled him to make sense of several features of archaic prelogical thought (his debt to Lévy-Bruhl was stated by Marr himself).

Of the various scholars who facilitated this flourishing study on archaic thought in Russia, Ernst Cassirer was probably the most strongly grounded in prestructuralism. After he emigrated to the United States from Germany, he participated in the small circle of émigré scholars attended by Roman Jakobson and the young Lévi-Strauss. Cassirer's prestructural study of myth as a symbolic form also approximates Freidenberg's.

The unusual yet productive approaches to uncovering archaic motifs, elaborated by Freidenberg and Frank-Kamenetskii, can be illustrated through some concrete examples. While their studies of Greek culture were in the context of broader ancient Near Eastern parallels, discoveries in this field during the last decades may be used to prove (or in more technical terms "to falsify") some notions suggested by Freidenberg.

One of Freidenberg's early studies (printed posthumously) presents an analysis of the king-entering-the-city-on-an-ass motif, which perhaps seemed shocking to more traditional classical scholars. Here the respective Old and New Testaments' locations are compared not only to data from different Semitic religions but also to such later works of literature as Apuleius's novel. Long after Freidenberg's death, an Old Hittite story concerning Zalpa was discovered. In this mythological narrative of the early second millennium B.C., the erotic (phallic) symbol of an ass appears before an episode in which twin brothers, borne by the queen, reenter their native city of Kanish (or Nesa, the ancient Hittite capital). The resemblance between this story and Freidenberg's reconstruction is striking.

We can find another, perhaps even more impressive, example of Freidenberg's brilliant insights into Greek mythology in several of her articles written in the 1930s (and only recently made available in English under the editorial guidance of Nina Perlina). Freidenberg suggests an extraordinarily interesting archetypal protoimage for the Phaedra plot. According to her studies, the plot of Phaedra is

linked to the image of a sea monster. At the same time, Freidenberg understood Phaedra as a continuation of the image of the goddess Ishtar in her old warlike function: "in the person of Phaedra, we find the aspect of the goddess of love in which she is Ishtar the Destroyer."2 Some recent publications on ancient Near Eastern mythology provide a similar interpretation, independently of Freidenberg. In the alphabetic cuneiform poetical texts of the XIV-XIII centuries B.C. in the Semitic (Canaanite) Ugaritic languages from the city Ugarit (Ras Shamra), there is a story about the Goddess Anat that contains some incipient forms of this motif. The goddess was insulted by the hero 'Aght, who refused to give her his bow, and she urged her father the god El to take revenge.3 On the basis of recently discovered Hittite and Hurrian texts, one may confirm a part of Freidenberg's hypothesis. Mythological topoi, such as the goddess Ishtar's (a favorite object of Freidenberg's studies) attempt to seduce sea monsters like the Hittite-Hurrian Ulikummi and Hedammu, seem to correspond to her reconstructions: "Poseidon sends a water monster in the sea tide that destroys Hippolytus. I have already mentioned that Phaedra, Theseus's wife and Minos's daughter, fell in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, and repaid him with death for his failure to return her love. Here the 'water beast' is Hippolytus's double, and Pasiphae's daughter repeats the same romance with the 'sea monster' as experienced by her mother and grandmother. We know from the sources that Pasiphae and Ariadne were local variants of Aphrodite. Andromeda, too, represented Aphrodite but in the myth remained her priestess; Europa, too, belongs to this category. What we have here is a female deity of water, the netherworld, and the sun that goes back semantically to a cosmic world view with the addition of agricultural fertility features, a deity associated with the motif of productivity that under feudal conditions became the motif of love."4 It might be interesting to attempt to prove another suggestion of Freidenberg; she supposed that the myths she reconstructed had been reflected in the medieval Celtic legends. One may try to analyze the Middle Irish Aided Mael Forthartaig maic Rónáin from this point of view.⁵

Olga Freidenberg's reconstructions of archetypal images, corroborated in several cases by recently discovered materials, show the strength of her intuitive powers. We are all indebted to Nina Braginskaia for her steady publication of Freidenberg's writings. Among Freidenberg's posthumously released contributions, the

most prominent is her Myth and Theatre⁶ (in a way parallel to the work on theater by the great anthropologist Victor Turner, written in the last years of his life in the United States). Some ideas in these studies are close to the results of recent investigations. Thus, Freidenberg's view of Greek tragedy as a special and unique form, its link to logical thinking and spatial symbols (such as the circle), its connection to Greek law, and her discovery of the two kinds of Dike's in Greek tragedies approach the conclusions of J. P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet. The whole notion of a movement from image to concept in Freidenberg's book is very much in keeping with popular trends that arose after works on mythopoetical thinking were published in the last decades. One may try to reinterpret her conclusions in the light of neuropsychology, but, in any case, these recent developments demonstrate that Freidenberg remains our contemporary. Her writings read as if they were written only a month, and not a half a century, ago.

The recent publication of several translations under the editorship of Nina Perlina has revealed to the English-speaking world a plethora of early work by Freidenberg.⁸ These studies appeared while the present volume was being prepared for print.

This first attempt to bring out an entire book by Olga Freidenberg in English has been made possible by the extraordinarily energetic efforts of Kevin Moss. He has translated a most challenging scholarly text—not only because of its complex subject matter but also because of its intricate stylistic devices, worthy of a cousin of Boris Pasternak. He has supplemented the translation with a valuable introductory article expressing his own view of Freidenberg's writings and their merits. Without this outstanding achievement as translator and commentator it would have been impossible to begin the task of introducing the book-long studies by Freidenberg to a wider scholarly audience outside Russia. Let us hope that the continuation of this enterprise will be as successful as the work accomplished by Kevin Moss.

Vyacheslav V. Ivanov

Notes

- "Medieval Mock Mystery (The Old Czech Unguentarius)." Studia philologica et litteraria in honorem L. Spitzer, ed. A. G. Hatcher and K. L. Selig (Bern: Francke Verlag), 245–265. Reprinted in Roman Jakobson, Selected Writings VI, Pt. 2, ed. Stephen Rudy (Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1985), 666–690.
- 2. Olga M. Freidenberg. "The Plot of *Tristan and Iseult* in the Mythologems of the Aegean Region of the Mediterranean Sea," in: *Soviet Studies in Literature*, Winter 1990–91, vol. 27, n. 1, p. 69; for more information on Freidenberg see issue 3 in the same volume; cf. also "The Plot Semantics of the *Odyssey*," *ibid.*, 22–32.
- 3. Delbert R. Hillers. "The Bow of Aghat: The Meaning of a Mythological Theme": Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, ed. Harry A. Hoffner, Alter Orient und Altes Testament 22 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1973), 74-78; for another interpretation of the scene see a recent work: *Ugaritskii epos*. Vvedenie, perevod s ugaritskogo i kommentarii I. Sh. Shifmana, Pamiatniki pis'mennosti Vostoka, CV (Moscow: Nauka, Izdatel'skaia firma "Vostochnaia literatura," 1993), 237-250. This mythological variant in which the female hero was a goddess may be found in other cuneiform literary traditions, as may be seen from a fragment of a Hittite myth of Ugaritic origin about the goddess Asertu/'Atirat, whose role is described as resembling that of Potiphar's wife: Harry Hoffner. "The Elkunirsa Myth Reconsidered," Revue hittite et asianique, 1965, n. 76: 5-16. (I rendered the Hittite fragment into Russian in my book: Luna, upavshaia s neba. Drevnie literatury Maloi Azii. [Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978]). On a comparable function of the Akkadian goddess Ishtar in the Gilgamesh epic see Susan Tower Hollis, "The woman in ancient examples of the Potiphar's Wife Motif, K2111," Gender and Differences in Ancient Israel, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 28-42. As E. Speiser has pointed out, the description of the goddess Ishtar's interest in the hero Gilgamesh is similar to the phrase used in Genesis 39 to characterize Potiphar's wife's obsession with the Hebrew slave: E. A. Speiser. The Anchor Bible: Genesis (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 303. An anticipation of some parts of the future research may also be found in a rare mimeographed work: Joseph Plessis. Etudes sur les textes concernant ISTAR = ASTARTE. Recherches sur sa nature et son culte dans le monde semitique et dans la Bible (Paris: Librairie GEUTHNER, 1921). The archetypal interpretation of Ishtar may be parallel to the controversial indentification of Joseph and Tammuz; cf. regarding this hypothesis: G. R. Wright. "Joseph's Grave," Vetus Testamentum, 1972, vol. XXII; S. Niditch. Folklore and the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
- 4. O. M. Freidenberg. "The Plot. . . ," 74.
- Miles Dillon. Early Irish Literature (Dublin, 1948), 87; cf. J. Fontenrose. Orion: The Myth of the Hunter and the Huntress (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 160–167.

- 6. O. M. Freidenberg. *Mif i teatr* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi Institut Teatral'nogo Iskusstva, 1988).
- 7. J. P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet. *Mythe et tragedie en Grèce ancienne*, vol. 1 (Paris: Editions la decouverte, 1986).
- 8. In addition to the two articles cited above, the issue of *Soviet Studies in Literature* guest edited by Perlina contains three other translations— "Thamyris" (pp. 33–40), "The Architectural Semantics of the Vertep Theater" (pp. 41–53), and "The Main Goals Used in the Collective Study of the Plot of *Tristan and Iseult*" (pp. 54–66),—as well as Perlina's own article, "From Historical Semantics to the Semantics of Cultural Forms: O. M. Freidenberg's Contribution to Russian Literary Theory" (pp. 5–21). Translations of several additional articles by Freidenberg are also found in *Soviet Studies in Literature* 27, no. 3.

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Kevin Moss

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