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# LYRIC RITUAL AND NARRATIVE MYTH IN RUSSIAN MODERNISM: THE CASE OF VIACHESLAV IVANOV

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At the height of the revolutionary fervor of 1905, a leading Russian symbolist issued a call for his fellow poets to translate their lyric creativity into social action: "from now on the poet will bear full responsibility if he fails to scorch the crowd with his dithyrambic flame: the crowd has gathered and is obediently awaiting the revelations that have been prepared in the quiet of recent solitude. Will the poet utter something important, true, necessary?..."<sup>1</sup> Implicit in this pregnant statement is an entire history of Russian modernism, which arose in the 1890s as a movement within lyric poetry but always sought to extend its influence into the social realm. This extra-literary influence was often imagined in terms of an interaction between lyric poetry and ritual. Indeed the predominance of lyric genres in the early twentieth century can be traced to a perceived link between lyric discourse and cultural and religious rituals, rituals which were widely felt to be suspended uneasily between pre-modern tradition and a borrowed Western modernity. The classification of modernist lyrics as intervention in ritual leads to a set of related claims. First, the modernists' narrative works can by extension be viewed as explanations of their lyric interventions in ritual, whether in terms of ideology or of myth. Further, the distinction between lyric and narrative is reflected in their respective modes of signifying: if lyric discourse communicated ritual experience in mimetic symbols, then narrative discourse provided an allegorical myth that grounded the experience theoretically and his-

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<sup>1</sup>Viacheslav Ivanov, [Review of Péladan. *Sémiramis*.] *Vesy* 9 (1904) 54-5: 54.

torically. I will explore these interrelated hypotheses with reference to the poetic works and poetic theory of Viacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949), a major modernist poet and the most influential theoretician of Russian symbolism, with particular reference to his central aesthetic concepts of symbol and tragedy.

#### a. The lyric mode and cultural alienation in Russian symbolism

As Dmitry Merezhkovsky announced in 1892, the symbolists believed that "Literature rests upon the elemental force of poetry just as world culture rests upon the primitive force of nature [...] Any literary movement begins with poetry."<sup>2</sup> The Russian symbolists advocated not only the rejuvenation of lyric poetry as such, after the decades-long dominance of prose, but also the extension of the lyrical mood to other genres, such as literary criticism. Again Merezhkovsky: "The poet-critic reflects not the beauty of real objects, but the beauty of poetic images which reflect these objects. This is the poetry of poetry."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the Russian symbolists were not disavowing the social engagement of the prose "realists" whom they ostensibly countered in their theoretical pronouncements; instead they elaborated their lyrical visions into metaphysical and social ideologies, in the belief that the "elemental force of poetry" would drive a new ethics and pragmatics. According to Merezhkovsky, the mimetic reflection of reality in the lyric would lead to thought and action.

In essence, the Russian symbolists came to view lyric poetry as intervening in the rituals which stood at the heart of their volatile historical situation.<sup>4</sup> The symbolist engagement with ritual was more problematic than in the Western modernisms because of the ritualistic nature of Russian culture and its precarious position by the turn of the twentieth century. Symbolism formulated its the-

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<sup>2</sup>D. S. Merezhkovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Tipografiia T-va I. D. Sytina, 1914) vol. 18, pp.177, 178.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 198.

<sup>4</sup>I owe the formulation "intervention in ritual" to Danielle Allen of the University of Chicago, who in turn refers to Ralph Ellison's writings on ritual and on art as a means to "revivify" "traditions and values" (see *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. with an introduction by John F. Callahan, preface by Saul Bellow [New York: Modern Library, 1995] pp.525-34; cf. 96-9). My usage of the formulation combines the roles of "ritualizing" and "experimental" poetry identified in modernism by Jacob Korg. For Korg, "Ritual elements entered modern poetry through two channels: the survival in modern forms of ancient practices, and the self-conscious adoption of ritual language and symbols"; on the other hand, citing Renato Poggioli, he defines experimentalism as "an expression of [modernism's] desire to align itself with the modern scientific temper of its time" (Jacob Korg, *Ritual and Experiment in Modern Poetry* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995] 7, 12). In Korg's terms I am essentially positing ritual experimentalism and experimental ritualism.

oretical pretensions at a time when Russia was making a transition from an uneasy (and borrowed) *modernity* to an even more uneasy *modernism*, a period I define as the *self-consciousness of Russian modernity*. Modernism in Russia was both a result of coterminous processes in the West and an indigenous search for alternatives to Western civilization as such. A key factor in this rise of self-consciousness in a borrowed culture was the assumption by modernist literature of the unifying role previously performed in Russia by religion. In other words, in a ritualistic culture that had been deprived of its ritual authorities, literature effectively adopted the function of ordering life through lyric discourse and grounding this order in narrative.

A vivid illustration of the modernists' obsession with ritual is provided by Ivanov's review of J. K. Huysmans, the prototypical decadent writer:

Catholicism possessed in him an incomparable interpreter-artist, and one can only wish the Eastern church one equal to him in the flexibility, insight, the genius of his perceptivity and re-creation [of religious art]: through its own Huysmans Orthodoxy would make countless hidden riches of liturgical beauty and mystical art accessible to our consciousness and available for future generations, otherwise they might be lost due to the modernization and rationalization of ritual tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Ivanov and the other religious modernists, from Andrei Bely to Pavel Florensky, preached the *preservation* of traditional religious ritual by means of its radical *aestheticization*. It has sometimes been commented that the symbolists' lyric fecundity was matched with impotence as historical agents, but in any case it was the tragedy of these modernists that their worldview both posited and prevented engagement with "the people." This predicament may be inherent to any predominantly lyrical movement. As Theodor Adorno has noted, "The danger peculiar to the lyric [...] lies in the fact that its principle of individuation never guarantees that something binding and authentic will be produced. It has no say over whether the poem remains within the contingency of mere separate existence."<sup>6</sup>

The need to provide etiological accounts or explanations—*myths*—for their lyric interventions in ritual was a major factor in the symbolists' turn to narrative in a range of forms, from the drama to the narrative poem and novels. Often these myths were autobiographical and meta-aesthetic, as in Fedor Sologub's

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<sup>5</sup>V. I. Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Brussels: Foyer oriental chrétien, 1971-1986) vol. 2 p.564.

<sup>6</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1., ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 38.

novel *The Petty Demon* (*Melkii bes*, 1905), Aleksandr Blok's "lyrical dramas" such as *A Puppet Show* (*Balaganchik*, 1906), or the symbolists' narrative poems such as Ivanov's *Infancy* (*Mladenchestvo*, 1913/1919). Non-self-referential narratives were rarely completed and have met with little popular acceptance, with the notable exception of Blok's poem *The Twelve* (*Dvenadtsat'*, 1918), which in a certain sense cast the revolution precisely as a reform of cultural rituals. Still, the tension between lyric intervention and narrative explanation remained productive throughout the flowering of modernism, up to Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1958).

### b. Defining the modernist lyric

In his early theoretical pronouncements, Viacheslav Ivanov privileged lyric poetry as the most direct and authentic expression of the modern "state of consciousness" and the source of new collective ritual: "The Poet wants to be alone and detached, but his inner freedom is the inner necessity of a return to and communion with his native element. He invents something new and achieves something ancient."<sup>7</sup> The individualistic lyric was thus a temporary stage on the path back to "grand" or "universal" [*vsenarodnyi*] art, when art would return to its origins in ritual and merge with religion. The lyric was a bridge from non-rational music, which Ivanov saw as a more direct expression of universal energy, to the rational Word, which would blossom in much-heralded myth. The psychological detachment of the lyric artwork was a precondition for the engagement of the new myth. In his aphorisms "On the Lyric" ("O lirike") from 1908, Ivanov gave the ascendancy of the lyric a more global interpretation: "The epic and drama are occupied with temporal events, and with the decisions of opposed wills. For the lyric there is only one event—the chord of the moment which is carried by the strings of the universal lyre."<sup>8</sup>

Evidently, Ivanov held a rather expansive interpretation of genre, defining it not in terms of structure, but according to its "spirit." Speaking of the lyric, Ivanov means not so much a historical form, but *lyricism*, what Brigitte Peucker has called "an orientation of the imagination that is at once (ambiguously or simultaneously) inward-looking and epiphanic."<sup>9</sup> Historically, Ivanov tied the

<sup>7</sup>Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, p.714.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 3, p.119.

<sup>9</sup>Brigitte Peucker, *Lyric Descent in the German Romantic Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987) 3.

emergence of the lyric to a particular moment in the history of human consciousness:

the individual's sense of himself became a "melos," i.e. a melody, and the individual soul began to pine and sing—in the epoch when the chorus performed on the square, a chorus still foreign to epic creativity, a chorus which with its many-voiced melodic word and harmonized movements praised the gods and heroes, and meritorious citizens and politicians who had pleased the people, opening up an expanse for the lyrical self-definition of the all-national state.<sup>10</sup>

Thus lyrical self-expression was linked to the rise of individual consciousness and even of democratic institutions. The epic, by contrast, bore two guises: traditional epics were often associated with the interpretive tyranny of reason or some other supreme principle, inappropriate for a "democratic" art<sup>11</sup>; on the other hand, Ivanov expressed hope for future "mysteria" which would lead to a new, more authentic type of epic, capable of codifying and preserving new rituals for modern humanity. Applying this prescription to modern drama, Ivanov wrote that "elements of sacred Rite, Sacrifice, and Mask, after long centuries of lying dormant in the drama, have now been revealed in it on the strength of the tragic worldview that has matured in people's minds, are gradually transforming it into a Mysterium, and are returning it to its source—liturgical *service* at the altar of the Suffering God."<sup>12</sup> As in Ivanov's reconstruction of ancient Athens, the modernist lyric was moving ritual out onto the public square, eventually to give rise to a new collectivism, which would see the rise of new, syncretic forms of the "grand style": "epic, tragedy, mysterium."<sup>13</sup> This curious grouping of genres of the "grand style" is united by their connection to *narrative*. Thus Ivanov anticipated Gérard Genette in reducing the Aristotelian classification to two basic modes, the tragic and epic, which cut across the boundaries of discrete genres.<sup>14</sup> From another viewpoint, Ivanov's eagerness to rejuvenate narrative genres with

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<sup>10</sup>V. I. Ivanov, *Alkei i Safo* (Moscow: Izdanie M. i S. Sabashnikovkh, 1915) 10.

<sup>11</sup>On the connection between the epic and "despotism" see "The Crisis of Individualism" ("Krizis individualizma"): Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, p.838; *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia, 1890-1924*, trans. Marian Schwartz, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak [New York: Fordham University Press, 1990] 163-73: p.71.

<sup>12</sup>Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.77.

<sup>13</sup>Viacheslav Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, trans. Robert Bird, ed. Michael Wachtel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001) 49; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p. 602.

<sup>14</sup>Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1979) 24-5 (*The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E Lewin [Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1992] 18-9).

lyric authenticity is similar in crucial respects to Bakhtin's efforts to highlight the carnivalistic aspects of the novel.<sup>15</sup>

The ambivalent status of narrative or epic discourse is illustrated by a telling exchange in Ivanov's correspondence with his young acolyte Aleksei Skaldin, who in 1912 was overseeing the printing of Ivanov's poetry collection *Tender Mystery* (*Nezhnaia taina*). Skaldin quite audaciously asks whether Ivanov might not profit from re-casting his poem "The Stallion Arion" ("Kon' Arion") in "epic form," since "in this poem it is precisely the form which is not fused with the content (or vice versa)."<sup>16</sup> Ivanov's indignant answer sheds much light on his view of the lyric and epic:

Recall Pushkin's dithyramb "Arion"... (True, there Pushkin is speaking not of the stallion Arion, but of the poet Arion). Great lyric tension, and a condensed epic narration of the moment of the lyric event. My poem "The Stallion Arion" is also a dithyramb of the same type. To turn it into a pure epic, as you mistakenly advise, is unthinkable due to the essence of the events it describes. The epic is foreign to Dionysus.<sup>17</sup>

Ivanov equates the Dionysian (as evidenced in lyric inspiration, dithyramb, the tragic) with mystical reality itself, and appears to view the lyric as the most appropriate and legitimate means for expressing this level of intuition directly, without even the mediation of symbols, and without compromising the integrity of the mystery. This hints at a purely performative mimesis, which resists objectification in material signs.

Yet Skaldin's subsequent explanation perceptively and boldly asserts the limitations of such a reliance on the lyric mode.

Of course, the poem "The Stallion Arion" is something only indirect, but at the same time something mystically-real for you... and for me. But how about for others? [...] I shall only note that, although the epic is foreign to Dionysus, the epic still speaks of Dionysus: recall the Homeric hymn about Dionysus turning the Tyrsenian pirates into dolphins.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Indeed, one may posit influence here via Ivanov's analysis of Dostoevsky's "novel-tragedies." See R. Bird, "Understanding Dostoevsky: A Comparison of Russian Hermeneutic Theories," *Dostoevsky Studies: The Journal of the International Dostoevsky Society*, New Series Volume V (2001) 129-46.

<sup>16</sup>Aleksei Skaldin, "Pis'ma Viacheslavu Ivanovichu Ivanovu," *Novyi zhurnal* no. 212 (1998) 135-92: p.168.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Wachtel [Vakhtel'], "Iz perepiski V. I. Ivanova s A. D. Skaldinym," *Minuvshee, istoricheski al'manakh* 10 (Paris: Atheneum, 1990) 121-41: p.131.

<sup>18</sup>Skaldin, "Pis'ma Viacheslavu Ivanovichu Ivanovu," p 173.

While Skaldin admits that the lyric may allow for a kind of sacramental participation of the reader in the poet's experience and thus for a new ritual, he senses that it is insufficiently discursive to communicate the full range and significance of this experience. The lyric may establish new rites, but it relies on the epic to codify them, interpret them, and pass them down to future generations.

### c. Lyricism and tragedy

Ivanov not only restored the Aristotelian dichotomy of tragedy and epic as the two basic literary modes underlying all discrete poetic forms, he also adopted concepts from Aristotle's discussion of tragedy—mimesis and catharsis—which allowed him to define how lyrical discourse lies at the basis of all artistic discourse. Of course, in a historical sense Ivanov differentiated between the genres of lyric and tragedy, positing between them a genetic link and a substantial identity: for Ivanov, tragic drama evolved from the dithyramb, which was in turn the basic, ritual form of the lyric.<sup>19</sup> "Tragedy" thus denotes any communication of a sacrificial attitude:

[...] the tragic element [...] appears when one of the participants in the Dionysian chorus is separated from the dithyrambic throng. The impersonal element of the orgiastic dithyramb gives rise to the sublime image of the tragic hero, who is revealed as an individual personality and is condemned to death precisely for being separated and exposed. For the dithyramb was originally a sacrificial service, and he who stepped into the middle of the circle was the sacrificial victim.

In any ascent—"incipit *Tragoedia*."<sup>20</sup>

All tragic art was also a reflection of vicious primitive religious sacrifices. As Ivanov wrote in his first monograph on Dionysian religion, "That which in time immemorial was reality turned into a sacrificial tragedy, into the ritual depiction of heroic suffering."<sup>21</sup> "Tragedy," Ivanov stated firmly in his later book on Dionysian religion, "was ritual."<sup>22</sup> Ritual in turn bestowed on tragedy (and, by extension, the lyric) its foremost means of expression—mimesis, which in Ivanov's most common definition denotes the symbolic replacement of the sac-

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol.2, p.94.

<sup>20</sup>Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p. 7; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol.1, p.825.

<sup>21</sup>V. I. Ivanov, "Religiia Dionisa. Ee proiskhozhdenie i vliianie." *Voprosy zhizni*, no. 6 (July 1905) 122-48: p.120.

<sup>22</sup>Viacheslav Ivanov, *Dionis i pradiionisistvo* (Saint Petersburg: Aleteiia, 1994) p.250.

rificial victim by the priest.<sup>23</sup> Aesthetic mimesis further substitutes the tragic actor for the priest (and then the lyric poet for the tragic actor, and the lyric work for the poet himself), a process that preserves the structure of sacrificial ritual in all aesthetic expression.<sup>24</sup> Such mimetic substitutions are possible because Dionysian religion was a system not of conceptual beliefs, but of “emotional states,”<sup>25</sup> primarily ecstasy, which tragedy communicates by means of catharsis. Paradoxically, then, the religious source of mimesis and catharsis ensures the authenticity of aesthetic expression, both in the lyric and in the narrative genres that derive from it.

Attributing the origin of art (especially of tragedy) to ritual was a commonplace in Ivanov’s time, for instance in the writings of Jane Harrison, who speculated that ritual and art share the same impulse: “to utter, to give out a strongly felt emotion or desire by representing, by making or doing or enriching the object or act desired.”<sup>26</sup> Ivanov was also referring to a rich Russian tradition of thought that located the origin of secular art in the “disintegration of ritual,” in the words of the eminent philologist Aleksandr Veselovsky.<sup>27</sup> This kind of thinking has lately begun to be questioned, most notably by Jean-Paul Vernant, who notes that Aristotle traced the origin of tragedy to dithyramb only in order to show how it had, in the process, become something other than ritual.<sup>28</sup> Tragedy

<sup>23</sup>E.g. Viacheslav Ivanov, “Ellinskaia religiiia stradaiushchego boga.” *Novyi put’* no. 2 (February 1904) 48-78: 52; no. 5 (May 1904) 28-40: 38-9. The link between mimesis and ritual has recently been disputed by Stephen Halliwell in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 15 n. 32.

<sup>24</sup>V. I. Ivanov, “Religiia Dionisa. Ee proiskhozhdenie i vliianie,” *Voprosy zhizni* no. 6 (June 1905) 185-220: p. 208

<sup>25</sup>Viacheslav Ivanov, “Ellinskaia religiiia stradaiushchego boga.” *Novyi put’* no. 3 (March 1904) 38-61: 39.

<sup>26</sup>Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (New York: H. Holt, n.d.) 26. For a convenient overview of the writings on tragedy of Nietzsche, the Cambridge School and subsequent scholars see: Simon Goldhill, “Modern Critical Approaches to Greek Tragedy,” *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge, et al: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 324-47. On Harrison’s influence in British modernism see: Martha C. Carpentier, *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998).

<sup>27</sup>A. N. Veselovskii, *Istoricheskaia poetika*, ed. V. M. Zhirmunskii (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1940) p. 430. Ivanov explicitly refers to Veselovsky in his 1911 essay on Dostoevsky (Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, p.407; cf. Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky*, Introduction by Robert Louis Jackson [Wolfboro, NH: Longwood Academic, 1989] p.9).

<sup>28</sup>Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990) p.183. For a discussion of the distinctions between ritual and drama see: Simon Goldhill, “The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology,” *Nothing to Do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, eds. J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 97-129; Rainer Friedrich, “Everything to Do with Dionysus? Ritualism, the Dionysiac, and the Tragic,” *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, ed. M. S. Silk (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 257-83.

was instead a manifestation of a secular public culture that brought into question public religion and virtues. Unlike rituals in the proper sense, tragedies were not yearly events, but unique performances; their authorship belonged not to religious authorities, but to individual writers. Vernant concludes:

Tragedy's connection with Dionysus lies, not so much in roots that, for the most part, elude us, but rather in whatever was new in what tragedy introduced, in whatever constituted its modernity for fifth-century Greece and, even more, for us. [...] Tragedy thus opened up a new space in Greek culture, the space of the imaginary, experienced and understood as such, that is to say as a human production stemming from pure artifice.<sup>29</sup>

For Vernant, tragedy is the moment at which individuals achieved a questioning consciousness, acquired the ability to project imaginative fictions, and applied these fictions to the inherited hierarchy of values and beliefs. It is a historical rupture that has remained expressive of the conflict between individual (the "tragic subject") and ritual community.<sup>30</sup> In our terms, then, tragedy is not ritual, but a form of discourse oriented towards ritual which implicitly holds aesthetics to be a means of intervening in religious practice. This aestheticism was rooted in the Greek invention of independent art and artists, but it flowered only in modernity and became the basis of widespread reflection in European modernism, by which time tragedy was no longer extant as an artistic genre, but had become a properly philosophical concept. Ivanov's advocacy of tragedy—more accurately, of the tragic or of "tragism"—associates him less with Aeschylus and Shakespeare than with Hegel and Nietzsche.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Vernant, Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p.187.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p.237-47.

<sup>31</sup>Ivanov revered Aeschylus and Sophocles as pinnacles of literary art, as witness his translations of most of Aeschylus' dramas. Yet Ivanov's own tragedies were not true to his models, nor did he ever provide much in-depth analysis of specific tragedies. Exceptions are Ivanov's allegorical readings of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Viacheslav Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p.173-4; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, p.381; "Klub-masterskaia iskusstv 'Krasnyi Petukh'," *Vestnik teatra* 3 [8-9 February 1919] 4) and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, pp.474, 476). See also Ivanov's typological discussions of tragedy in "On the Essence of Tragedy" (Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, pp.190-204) and "The Aesthetic Norm of Theater" (Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, pp.205-218), and his unfinished essay on fate in Aeschylus and Sophocles (RGB 109.5.25). Ivanov viewed Nietzsche himself as the foremost representative of tragedy: "[Nietzsche] turned the funereal yearning of pessimism into the flame of a heroic funeral repast, into the Phoenix fire of universal tragism. He gave life back its tragic god... 'Incipit Tragoedia!'" (Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p. 179; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.717).

By linking lyric poetry to the philosophical category of the tragic, Ivanov was able to apply to it the ritualistic language that has been applied to tragedy since Aristotle. In his 1909 essay "On the Russian Idea" ("O russkoi idee), Ivanov discusses a triad of aesthetic concepts that reveals his Aristotelian roots: *cleansing* (*katharsis*), *learning* (*mathesis*), and *action* (*praxis*).<sup>32</sup> Ivanov defines catharsis as "the awakening of the mystical life of the personality" as "the first and necessary foundation of religious work": "Here one comprehends that all the values of our critical culture are relative values, and this prepares the way for the restoration of all true values in their connection with divine all-unity."<sup>33</sup> If catharsis clears away obstacles to communication, then the communication itself imitates some higher reality and transforms the beholder. Thus mimesis can be interpreted as a certain teaching, or *mathesis*. Art cleanses the beholder and then communicates some content, which translates into an ethical imperative. This leads to the third member of Ivanov's triad, *praxis*, which he defines as the "moment of descent," "social action" or "asceticism."<sup>34</sup> The conceptual triad *catharsis-mathesis-praxis* explains how aesthetic works are able to affect non-aesthetic aspects of human life, renewing and revising practices in social or religious spheres. Indeed, this hermeneutic triad explains why Ivanov believed that, in his secular era, aesthetic works presented the most effectual way to influence social and religious processes.

Ivanov's triad of *catharsis-mathesis-praxis* bears comparison to several key works of literary theory in the intervening century,<sup>35</sup> but I would stress its similarity to Kenneth Burke's tripartite "dialectic of tragedy" in *The Grammar of Motives*. Applying to all ethical situations the terminology of drama, Burke reduces them to its basic components: act, scene, agent, agency, purpose, and attitude. Within this framework Burke posits three (simultaneous) moments of tragedy inherent to all ethical action and communication: *pathemata*, *mathemata*, and *poiema*. "[T]he act organizes the opposition (brings to the fore whatever factors resist or modify the act)"; "the agent thus 'suffers' this opposition, and as

<sup>32</sup>Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p.142; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, p.337.

<sup>33</sup>Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p.143; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, p.337.

<sup>34</sup>Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p.143; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, p.337.

<sup>35</sup>See for example Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw, Introduction by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 35; Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*, [Trans. W. Glen-Doepel], second, revised ed., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1999) 129-32.

he learns to take the oppositional motives into account [...] he has arrived at a higher order of understanding."<sup>36</sup> Any act, whether of a practical or communicative nature, brings understanding and issues in new acts, transcending itself through its manifold consequences. The symbolic acts of art, i.e., acts in the realm of fiction, also have real reverberations in the understanding and action of their recipients; as Burke declares, "a poem is an act, the symbolic act of the poet who made it," and "it enables us as readers to re-enact it."<sup>37</sup>

In summation, lyric discourse, in Ivanov's view, spans the gap between ritual and imaginative literature; it causes in its audience a state of mind akin to that experienced in ritual while preserving aesthetic detachment from ritual reality, with the effect that the lyric is able to intervene in the experience of ritual. Thus a love poem may affect the reader's attitude towards courtship, or a religious ode may affect one's prayer. Altering rituals in this way is serious business, and often requires justification in the form of a narrative: the reader may tell a story of how his feeling of love was changed, or the prayer changed. Thus the non-intellectual intervention of the lyric gives rise to verbal narratives, which Ivanov termed *myth*.

#### d. The epic as narrative myth

Ivanov's delimitations of the epic were as variable as his definitions of lyric and tragedy. In Ivanov's historical scheme, the ancient epic forms were usually admitted to be chronologically prior to tragedy. Logically, however, Ivanov followed such philologists as Veselovsky in deriving the epic mode from an originally synthetic discourse, closer in spirit to tragedy or the lyric. I propose that within the limits of Viacheslav Ivanov's creative universe the epic can be defined quite precisely as an etiological narrative supporting lyrical interventions in ritual, i.e., as *myth*. This etiological *myth* codifies new rituals, justifying them and explaining them through a narrative of origins. This definition, broad as it is, encompasses most of the characteristics that are traditionally attributed to the epic, such as totality, *diegesis*, narrative detachment, formulaic plots, and a convergence with sacred texts; it also accounts for the traditional subject matter of epics: myths (especially origin myths), heroic feats, redemptive transgressions of

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<sup>36</sup>Kenneth Burke, *The Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and London: The University of California Press, 1969) pp.39-40.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p.447.

boundaries, etc.<sup>38</sup> If lyrics are marked by tragic beginnings, then reflection from the middle, narration from the midst of things (*in medias res*), is the epic. Already in 1904 Ivanov had written of “grand, universal art” as “secondary art” where the artist is “the completer, not the initiator.”<sup>39</sup>

The epic has often been seen in this way as a derivative mode of discourse. In the words of Adorno, “no narrative can partake of truth if it has not looked into the abyss into which language plunges when it tries to become name and image.”<sup>40</sup> So also for Ivanov any non-lyrical work must originate in an authenticating experience beyond language—in the realm of the tragic (or, in terms of modernist practice, in the lyric). It is not just that rituals are useful for narrative art as convenient “beginnings and endings”<sup>41</sup>; rather narrative art owes its very origin to a ritual experience—“tragedy,” and must always contain this origin within itself, even if it views this origin from afar. As Ivanov wrote in 1912, “The epic presents the dyad [i.e., the tragic conflict] as if from a distance; it is the triumph of the Apollonian monad.”<sup>42</sup>

In an excursus to his 1911 essay “Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy” (“Dostoevskii i roman-tragediia”). Ivanov broached a definition of myth which he later repeated and which therefore bears citation in full:

We define myth as a synthetic proposition where the subject-symbol is attributed a verbal predicate. In the oldest history of religions such is the type of the Urmyth which conditions the original rite. Only later out of the rite there blossoms a luxuriant mythologeme, usually etiological, i.e. geared towards making sense of a cultic phenomenon that is already given; examples of Urmyths are: “the sun is born,” “the sun dies,” “god enters man,” “the soul flees the body.” If the symbol is enriched with a verbal predicate it has received life and movement; symbolism becomes mythopoesis.<sup>43</sup>

In a later exposition of this same idea, Ivanov adds that “the mythologeme is created for the etiological explanation of the pre-existing rite, but once created it

<sup>38</sup>For other discussions of the epic in modernism and post-modernism see: Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London, New York: Verso, 1996); Frederick T. Griffiths and Stanley J. Rabinowitz, *Novel Epics: Gogol, Dostoevsky, and National Narrative* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990); Paul Merchant, *Epic* (London: Methuen, 1971) (*Critical Idiom*, v. 17). For a useful compendium of critical definitions of the epic see: R. P. Draper, ed., *The Epic: Developments in Criticism. A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

<sup>39</sup>Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, p.727.

<sup>40</sup>Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, p.27.

<sup>41</sup>James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, Expanded edition (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994) 166.

<sup>42</sup>Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p. 203.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p.437; cf. Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life*, pp.50-51.

may in its turn change the rite."<sup>44</sup> The "etiological myth" "reproduces [...] the rite in the ideal projection of a mythologeme or in the ideal-historical projection of a tale."<sup>45</sup> Making sense of a cultic phenomenon thus involves setting it into action, involving it in history, and emplotting it in narrative.

In his 1916 essay "The Two Moods of the Russian Soul" ("Dva lada russkoi dushi") Ivanov provided a schematic psychological analysis of the tragic and epic modes of being.<sup>46</sup> Ivanov's immediate concern is to reconcile two seemingly conflicting strands in Russian culture, whose dialectic is particularly evident in Tjutchev and Dostoevsky: tragic enthusiasm and an epic sense of national life, typical of Slavophilism. The two artists differ from purely "epic" Slavophile philosophers by their ineluctable sense of the individual's inner conflict with the world, which turns their vision of national life into a powerful artistic vision: "The tragic man's consciousness coincides with the very creative juices of life; he is woven of life's living, pulsing, sensitive threads."<sup>47</sup> Despite his partiality for the tragic, Ivanov concludes that both moods are necessary: "due to its normative tendency, a one-sidedly epic worldview may sometimes find any enthusiasm harmful for one's health, while a one-sidedly tragic worldview, in its purely Russian hysteria, is capable of smashing even the most beautiful Greek vase [...]."<sup>48</sup> So also in art, writes Ivanov, the tragic and epic must work together, ensuring sublime power and conceptual breadth. In his central 1914 article "On the Limits of Art" Ivanov claimed that the Symbolist must be "an artist as much of the drama and the epic as of the lyric."<sup>49</sup> In a sense, all of Ivanov's non-lyric writings, including even his scholarly monographs, are epic reflection on a lyric beginning. Indeed, as Friedrich Schlegel once opined, "Philosophy is an *epos*, begins in the middle."<sup>50</sup>

### c. Dithyrambs

Thus far I have treated Ivanov's thought as aesthetic theory, but it can also be used as a heuristic guide to his poetry. Ivanov's poetry reveals two discrete

<sup>44</sup>Ivanov, *Dionis i pradiionisiistvo*, p.203.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.270.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Ibid., p.226.

<sup>47</sup>Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii* vol. 3 p.349.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., vol. 3, pp.350-1.

<sup>49</sup>Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p. 80; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.639.

<sup>50</sup>Quoted from Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) p.83.

modes of representation: his lyrics are characterized by mimetic symbols, while his narrative works tend toward allegory. Although it would be simplistic to differentiate absolutely between the two modes within individual texts, it is possible to trace how an original symbolic-mimetic lyric, oriented towards performance, grows into a narrative work that is dominated by allegorical modes of signification, intended as if to explain the original lyric. There are many historical examples of such a discursive dichotomy between related series of texts. For instance, a similar phenomenon is noted in the so-called Gold Leaves, which preserve cultic texts of the Hellenistic period.<sup>51</sup> Some of these texts combine narration, given invariably in dactylic hexameter, with "mimetic prose" consisting of non-metrical exclamations, supposedly borrowed from ritual. Thus the prosodic form reflects a difference not only in the origin of the text (i.e., literary vs. ritual), but also in its type of discourse (i.e., narrative vs. ritual performance). In Russian modernism one sees a similar heterogeneity between lyrics, which preserve a mimetic relation to the originating experience (whether it actually be ritual or is simply modeled on ritual), and poetic narratives, which are based on an allegorical myth concerning that experience and often include the originating, mimetic lyric within the narrative whole.

Very often one can even trace a direct lineage from lyric poems to narratives that grew out of them. One example in Ivanov's work is how his allegorical dramas grew out of published lyrics which he denoted explicitly as "dithyramb," a prosodically liquid form which Ivanov traced to ritual incantation, an intermediary stage between ritual and tragedy.<sup>52</sup> Typical of such dithyramb are a rhythmical drive, formulaic or hieratic diction, a lexicon combining religious terminology and markedly folk language, and a tonic meter that bears associations with both ancient and folk rituals. For example, the dithyramb "The Fire-Bearers" ("Ognenostsy," 1906) was published in the first issue of the almanac of the mystical anarchist movement *Torches (Fakely)*, which contained mostly program-

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<sup>51</sup>Fritz Graf, "Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology: New Texts and Old Questions," *Masks of Dionysus*, eds. Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 239-58; Christoph Riedweg, "Initiation—Tod—Unterwelt: Beobachtungen zur Kommunikationssituation und narrativen Technik der orphisch-bakchischen Goldblättchen," *Ansichten griechischer Rituale: Geburtstags-Symposium für Walter Burkert* (Stuttgart and Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1998) 359-98.

<sup>52</sup>Ivanov also translated a dithyramb by Bachilides, which he published in *Transparency* with a "Note on the dithyramb" (Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, pp.816-9), and freely applied the term to other lyrics of his own (see p.88 above). Cf. also Genette's discussion of the dithyramb in Aristotle's *Poetics*: Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte*, 12-3 (*The Architext*, 6-7).

matic statements of metaphysical belief and political intent. "The Firebearers" was placed immediately following a militant introductory note that promised "implacable opposition to the power of obligatory external norms over man" and raised its "torch" "in the name of affirming the individual personality and in the name of the free union of people, united by their love for the transfigured world of the future."<sup>53</sup> Continuing the trenchant mood set by this declaration, "The Fire-Bearers" depicts an ancient ritual attended by choruses of Okeanides and Fire-Bearers, a hierophant, and the prophetess Pythia. The choruses intone incantations to Prometheus, whom they await as a mystical bridegroom:

И там у брачной  
Даню чертога  
Ждать во полуночи  
Пришельца-Бога, —  
О духа бурного  
Во тьме язьки,  
Слаголь Хаоса,  
Немые клики!...<sup>54</sup>

And you are to wait  
By the bridal chamber  
At midnight  
The God Who will come;  
O, the flames  
Of the stormy spirit in the darkness,  
The words of Chaos,  
The silent calls!...

Here, an unusual meter (iambic dimeter with feminine and dactylic rhymes) mimics the sound of tragic choruses, while the bridal imagery is borrowed from the Orthodox Christian services of Holy Week. Pentacost is implied by the "flames" (or "tongues") of the stormy Spirit, "words of Chaos" which appear to inspire glossolalia. It is as if the reader (or performer) of the text is led through the events of the Resurrection to the descent of the Holy Spirit, just as he is being led through language to a universal, rhythmic expression; language and sovereignty are two aspects of the selfhood that must be abandoned in ritual ecstasy.

The frenzy of expectation eventually leads Pythia to reveal the god:

<sup>53</sup>[G. I. Chulkov], "Predislovie," *Fakely* 1 (1906) [3].

<sup>54</sup>Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.241.

.Вѣно на по пурпурное  
 Вѣчалъное кольцо, —  
 Яви, смѣтное бурное,  
 В лазурности — Лицо!<sup>55</sup>

The wedding ring  
 Lay on the purple seabed;  
 Reveal, o stormy tempest,  
 In the azure depth: the Face!

Typically, Ivanov here releases the mimetic tension to provide a literary context. He adumbrates a favorite image, taken from Schiller's ballad "Ring of Poly-crates," where to mollify the gods in the face of danger the hero sacrifices his most treasured possession—his ring—by casting it into the sea, only to have it promptly returned in the belly of giant fish. The image was widespread in Russian poetry through Zhukovsky's translation of Schiller's ballad and through Tiutchev's use of it in his own verse. In "The Fire-Bearers," Ivanov's sacrifice of his beloved results in the revelation of the god, which implicitly heralds the return of his love on a higher plane. Thus self-abandonment leads to self-discovery.

The poem provides a mimetic representation of a religious event which communicates to the beholder the cathartic energy of its transcendence. This transcendent power inheres in the text, requiring no extrinsic reference. Moreover, symbolic art presupposes a re-enactment of the experience by the beholder; this makes symbolic art cathartic and also ensures the efficacy of its communication (*mathesis*) and call to action (*praxis*). In this way the poem is capable of affecting the beholder's consciousness and performance of religious ritual. Read in this manner, its imagery may be defined as *symbolic* insofar as the images communicate transcendent meaning through mimesis without reference to temporal existence, i.e., history.

In addition to its performative aspect, however, "The Fire-Bearers" implicitly contains a significant element of reflection and temporality. While in its rhythmic drive and play of images, it would seem designed to foster a more direct experience, its complex references to literary and ritual texts make the poem an allegorical argument *about* ritual. Apart from the intertextual references noted above (from Schiller, Zhukovsky, and Tiutchev), the original 1906 version of the

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

poem ends with a stage direction: "The noiseless burning of torches accompanies the prayerful silence [bezmolvie] of the Chorus."<sup>56</sup> This is descriptive of the ritual, but it is also a reminiscence from the conclusion of Pushkin's tragedy *Boris Godunov*, where faced with self-perpetuating cycles of usurpation and regicide the "people are silent [*narod bezmolvstvuet*]." Implicitly, Ivanov is identifying the false gods of Olympus with the Russian government, and the tragic chorus with the Russian populace. As a commentary on the 1905 revolution, perhaps Ivanov is suggesting that the populace has conceded too much in complying with the promise of democracy, or perhaps that the nation is wisely withholding its judgment until the government enacts the concessions to democracy that it agreed to. In either case, Ivanov's poem claims a Pushkinian lineage for its intervention in Russian history. These intertextual references construct a narrative about the literary origins of Ivanov's new ritual—from tragedy, through Christianity and German romanticism, to modernism. Apart from its intertextual history, "The Fire-Bearers" also relies on a linear narrative, particularly in the more discursive speech of the hierophant, who interrupts the choruses' incantations with the story of Prometheus and his continuing captivity. The narrative concludes with an explicit exhortation to the choruses to bear Prometheus' flame to liberate him and free the world from evil.

#### f. Narrative and allegoresis

Although Ivanov's dithyrambs are primarily imitations of ritual events, they contain the seed of elaborate cosmological allegories that are key to Ivanov's intellectual constructions. Both the narrative and the intertextual myths are allegorical, not symbolic, since, instead of reproducing the transcendent event or the extrinsic text, they order them in categories of history and time, relying for their aesthetic effect on the mediation of memory. If the performative and ritual efficacy of Ivanov's dithyramb can be linked to its use of *symbol*, then the narrative and intertextual myth relies on *allegory*, which refers the reader to conceptual systems eccentric to the text itself.

There are correspondingly two different kinds of memory in action here, both of which rely on the allegorical mode of signification. First, the narrative establishes an order of events and, as it were, creates in the reader memory of the

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<sup>56</sup>Viacheslav Ivanov, "Fakely: difiramb," *Fakely* 1 (1906) 5-9: 9. In this publication Ivanov's poem was called "Torches" and lacked the choruses of the Okeanides.

events leading up to the performance of the text; this can be termed *narrative memory*. In the case of "The Fire-Bearers," the reader adopts the hierophant's knowledge of the usurpation of power by the Olympians and of Prometheus' transgression and punishment. Second, intertextual references use memories of other texts to establish the order of cultural events leading up to the creation of the text and to place the text in that history; this is *cultural memory*. The importance of cultural memory in verbal expression has led Renate Lachmann to christen literature "the mnemonic art par excellence":

Literature supplies the memory for a culture and records such a memory. It is itself an act of memory. Literature inscribes itself in a memory space made up of texts, and it sketches out a memory space into which earlier texts are gradually absorbed and transformed.<sup>57</sup>

One way in which literature exercises this power over cultural memory is through intertextuality, "the process by which a culture continually rewrites and retranscribes itself."<sup>58</sup> Ivanov's texts are exemplary insofar as they simultaneously rely on readers' knowledge of texts and create the knowledge (or at least consciousness) of an entire canon. Ivanov cannot expect all his readers to know Dante and Goethe well enough to recognize and understand all his allusions, but he does expect to clear a space for them in his readers and form a context within which this cultural legacy may become vividly relevant. I differ from Lachmann and Genette only in seeing Ivanov's intertextuality not as a mimetic device that copies other writers' utterances, but rather as allegorical, embedding a mimetic depiction of immediate reality in the history of others' utterances.<sup>59</sup>

This leads to a second major point concerning myth in Ivanov's lyrics. Not only is myth presented as allegory through the medium of memory, it is also basically self-referential and concerns the creation and/or performance of the poem itself. Of course, Paul de Man considered that "any narrative is primarily the allegory of its own reading."<sup>60</sup> For Ivanov, however, this idea has deeper

<sup>57</sup>Renate Lachmann, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*, Foreword by Wolfgang Iser, trans. Roy Sellars and Anthony Wall (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p.15.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.196-200 and *passim*; I likewise take issue with Gérard Genette's definition of intertextuality as the presence of one work within another, rather than as the relationship implied by their cross-contamination; see Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Chauna Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 6-7, 73-84.

<sup>60</sup>Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979: 76.

roots. Just as ritual for Ivanov is the substitution of the god by the priest, and the substitution of the priest by the victim, so the aesthetic symbol replaces the sacrificial ritual. Each poem imitates the self-sacrifice of the poet (as priest and victim) and therefore must appeal for its justification to the poet's origin and his creative act.

The mixed symbolic and allegorical nature of "The Fire-Bearers" demonstrates Ivanov's overriding strategy for intervening in rituals and, at the same time, justifying this intervention through narrative and intertextual myth-making. This justification was continued in larger works which often grew from lyrical beginnings. Indeed, "The Fire-Bearers" was subsequently included in Ivanov's full-length drama *Prometheus* (*Prometei*, 1915/1919), which can be read precisely as its explanation in narrative form.<sup>61</sup>

#### g. Ivanov's *Prometheus* as an allegorical mystery play

I have defined Russian modernist narratives as etiological myths that originated in the need to explain the artist's lyric interventions in ritual, and have linked narrative to allegory, a figure that signifies within a text by referring to external ideas or texts. One of the numerous examples of narratives arising from lyrics in Viacheslav Ivanov's poetic oeuvre is his tragedy *Prometheus*, which actually began life as the dithyramb "The Fire-Bearers." Ivanov himself indicated that *Prometheus* could be read as an allegorical myth, linking it to such texts as Goethe's *Faust* and Byron's allegorical mystery plays.<sup>62</sup> I shall focus on the convergence between Ivanov's *Prometheus* and the medieval and baroque traditions of mystery plays, miracle plays, and *Trauerspiele*, as analyzed by Walter Benjamin.<sup>63</sup>

Although *Prometheus* incorporated the 1906 dithyramb "The Fire-Bearers," there is little further evidence on the composition of the work until it was published in 1915 under the title *The Sons of Prometheus* (*Syny Prometeia*). When

<sup>61</sup>Ivanov did write several explicitly political anthems combining lyric discourse and political ideology, such as "The Choral Song of New Russia" of 1917 (Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, pp.60ff). For discussion of allegory in Ivanov's later poetry see: Robert Bird [Berd], "Obriad i mif v pozdnei lirike Viach. Ivanova (O stikhotvorenii 'Mily sretenskie svechi')," *Viacheslav Ivanov—Peterburg—mirovaia kul'tura* (Tomsk, Moscow: Vodolei Publishers, 2003) 179-93.

<sup>62</sup>Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, pp.157, 168; cf. S. V. Stakhorskii, *Viacheslav Ivanov i russkaia teatral'naia kul'tura nachala XX veka. Lektsii* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi institut teatral'nogo iskusstva, 1991) pp.3, 12.

<sup>63</sup>Among Ivanov's papers are unpublished plans for "lyric scenes" on scriptural stories, similar in design to mystery plays; RGB 109.4.6.

issued as a separate book in 1919, with some variant readings and a different division of the text, it was accompanied by an introductory essay by Ivanov entitled “On Action and Ritual” (“O deistvii i deistve”), which presented a framework for the tragedy’s interpretation and which can be seen as an extension of the mythical work into explicitly theoretical discourse. Although the two publications of the work were heralded by two completely different cultural situations—the patriotic upsurge of World War I and early Soviet Prometheanism—it has never been staged and has attracted little scholarly attention.<sup>64</sup> Still, together with “The Fire-Bearers” and Ivanov’s essay, it is a remarkable testament to the movement in Russian modernism from lyric to narrative, from ritual to myth, and from symbol to allegory.

In his interpretive essay Ivanov proposes to read his drama as the “metaphysical genealogy of human will”<sup>65</sup>: created (following the Orphic cosmology) out of the Dionysus-bearing ashes of the Titans and the clay of Mother Earth, humans sense their hidden divine origins and battle the false gods who have usurped divine power. Prometheus forms the new race—humanity—for *action*. Ivanov writes:

In truth [Prometheus’ sons] are the first fruits of fate and the initiators of the Titanic tragedy that is called world history [...] When he summons the human race to being he knows that it will betray and crucify him, but still he believes that it will save him.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, at the end of *Prometheus* one discerns the eschatological restoration of the entire universe through the individual’s sacrifice.

At the very beginning of *Prometheus*, in verses taken from the dithyramb “The Fire-Bearers,” the chorus of the Okeanides proclaims the Orphic cosmology: the archaic order of chthonic gods has been overthrown by the upstart Olympian pantheon, which faces threats from an alliance of archaic powers,

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<sup>64</sup>There have been few significant studies of *Prometheus*: A. F. Losev, *Problema simvola i realisticheskoe iskusstvo* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1976); Tomas Venclova, “On Russian Mythological Tragedy: Vjaceslav Ivanov and Marina Cvetaeva,” *Myth in Literature*, eds. Andrej Kodjak, Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1985) 89–109.

<sup>65</sup>Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.166.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 2, p.168.

including chaos, goddesses and other female entities (such as “night”), and the heroic sons of the matriarchal order:

Непавигом оковы  
Светлозлашного строя  
И под кровом родных ночей  
Колесбем ослонвы  
Мирового покоя.  
Прометей! [...]  
Непрошвы и новы  
Олимпийские троньы:  
Древний Хаос в темнице — святей.  
Слышьшь черные зовы,  
Неукорные слоны,  
Прометей?<sup>67</sup>

We despise the chains  
Of the radiant order  
And under the cover of native nights  
We shake the foundations  
Of universal calm  
Prometheus! [...]  
Unstable and new  
Are Olympian thrones  
Ancient Chaos in the dungeon is more holy  
Do you hear the dark cries  
And rebellious moans,  
Prometheus?

Prometheus is a New Testament figure, overthrowing a religion of hierarchy and law in the name of individual faith in authentic divinity. Although his impious attitude towards Zeus may remind one of Cain, he is in fact acting in the name of his children's freedom.

Prometheus is analogous to John the Baptist, who belongs to the Old Testament but ushers in the New. The actual work of redemption is to be borne not by the Titan Prometheus, but by his divine-human children, to whom he addresses prophecies reminiscent of John's words to Christ:

Как я ты — бог: как ты я — человек...  
Но ты гонит меня мной безмерье.  
Я свет и совершил Ты же — будущее.  
А я же — только слыхи Чтоб видеть.  
Послал ты на сына Твоем павигой.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., vol. 2, p. 109-110.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., vol. 2, p. 118; cf. John the Baptist's words about Christ (Jn 3:30): "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Like me, you are god; like you, I am man...  
 But I am burdened by immortality.  
 I have become and am finished. You, though, are to be.  
 But now [you are] only a seed. You have been sown  
 On the field of dark Gaia in order to be destroyed.

Prometheus' main task is to preach the new freedom that is to be enjoyed by the humanity he creates, a freedom rooted in man's inner consciousness of divine sonship and of the responsibility this entails. Prometheus sees his own immortality as a burden, since he is condemned to spend eternity in the dungeon of death; humanity, by contrast, can act to transform eternal death into eternal life:

Мои темные сем премудрым нежит лесом  
 Любом паторных, тоююю Земли  
 И прелеюююю Превды.<sup>69</sup>

My dark seed will rise as a dense forest  
 Of mountain oaks, as the voice of the Earth  
 And as nether Justice.

The central dilemma of Ivanov's tragedy is precisely the challenge of new-testament freedom for the "sons of Prometheus."<sup>70</sup> Yet they face a series of temptations that shake their resolve and cause them to choose the less demanding burden of obeisance to the law. The chorus of Okeanides in particular is mindful of the new burden of spiritual freedom that poisons men's lives instead of liberating them, calling Prometheus the "forger of new chains."<sup>71</sup> These words bear more than a passing resemblance to those addressed to Christ by Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. Prometheus later wonders whether his sons might not seek "to redeem the abundance of the world by light captivity and the generosity of the clouds by the meekness of their prayers"<sup>72</sup>; such passive piety before established rituals would be a betrayal of the labor to which Prometheus summons. His sons, however, continue on the path of Cain, using the fire of freedom as a weapon of internecine conflict. Due to his fallen state modern man has to choose between differing elements of a single spiritual heritage. Rigid religious doctrine has been superseded, and man must seek to confirm the triumph of the New Testament in creative action. Ivanov's tragedy turns out to be an allegory for his

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., vol. 2, p.114.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., vol. 2, pp.126, 112.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., vol. 2, p.113.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., vol. 2, p.127.

own creative predicament as a lyric poet combating spiritual complacency and establishment religion. It places the *lyric* poet at the center of contemporary spiritual history, which it views through an allegorical drama comparable in some respects of the late-medieval mystery play.

Ivanov's own valuation of the mystery play is unclear. Although he seems to have distinguished clearly between the genres of "tragedy" and "mystery play" [*misteriia*], the precise difference for him—as for such fellow theorists as Andrei Bely—remained vague.<sup>73</sup> In a 1906 prescription for modernist theater, Ivanov wrote that "divine and heroic tragedy, such as was ancient tragedy, and mystery, more or less analogous to medieval mystery plays, most closely correspond to the forms that we expect the synthetic rite to take."<sup>74</sup> Ivanov's most extensive discussion of the mystery play comes only in his 1923 work *Dionysus and Pradionysianism*. Here Ivanov quotes Goethe identifying the mystery play as the modern form of tragedy: "Just as Greek tragedy issued from the lyric, so in our day we have a notable example of how drama sought to liberate itself from the historical or, rather, epic narration; we see this in the way that Holy Week is celebrated in Catholic churches with a passion play."<sup>75</sup> Further, Ivanov projects the mood of the mystery play onto tragedy:

If we imagined in a Christian society a special stage for spiritual mystery plays, the content of which would be borrowed mostly from the lives of the saints, a stage on which images of God could appear only in the distance and only

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<sup>73</sup>Cf. also George Kalbous, *The Plays of the Russian Symbolists* (East Lansing, MI: Russian Language Journal, 1982) 10-11, 24-6, 31-56 (brief discussion of Ivanov's *Tantalus* as "mythological mystery play" on 37).

<sup>74</sup>Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p. 108; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.100). Cf. also Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p.108; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.103. I distinguish the mystery play [*misteriia*] from the homophonous *Mysterium* [*misteriia*] which Ivanov projected as one of the forms of the "grand style" (see Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p.48; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.602). In his diary Ivanov noted cryptic "thoughts about dramas" which indicate a planned mystery play "[a]bout an epic vita of Christopher (not a mystery)" (Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.752). In 1907 Ivanov called Leonid Andreev's play *The Life of Man* (*Zhizn' cheloveka*) "a tasteless dramatic poem or, if you please, mystery play" (S. S. Grechishkin, N. V. Kotrelev, and A. V. Lavrov, eds., "Perepiska s Viacheslavom Ivanovym (1903-1923)," *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, Vol. 85: Valerii Briusov. Ed. V. R. Shcherbina (Moscow: Nauka, 1976) 428-545: pp.498-9), but in 1908, Ivanov contrasted modern theater to "the medieval spectacles of universal and holy events as reflected in miniature and purely signifying forms on the stages of the mystery plays" (Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p.21; Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.546).

<sup>75</sup>Ivanov, *Dionis i pradionisiistvo*, p.240; Ivanov quotes Goethe's letter to Karl Zelter of 4 August 1803; *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter in den Jahren 1799 bis 1832*, ed. Ludwig Geiger (Leipzig: Reclam, n.d.) 77.

<sup>76</sup>Ivanov, *Dionis i pradionisiistvo*, p.252.

episodically, in visions, prologues and epilogues, we would approach an understanding of the religious reserve that prescribed that tragedy not go beyond the bounds of a holy golden legend about the heroes.<sup>76</sup>

This seems a quite transparent reference to *Faust*, with its “Prologue in Heaven” and with the allegorical visions of Part II. Faust and the heroes of Byron’s mystery plays are precisely such ancient heroes filtered through the Christian concept of sainthood.<sup>77</sup>

Ivanov’s theory of tragedy finds points of contact with Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the medieval mystery play and the religious dramas of the baroque, which Benjamin contrasts to ancient tragedy:

The *Trauerspiel* is [...] a form of the tragedy of the saint by means of the martyr-drama. And if one only learns to recognize its characteristics in many different styles of drama from Calderón to Strindberg, it must become clear that this form of the mystery play still has a future.<sup>78</sup>

Instead of myth (as in tragedy) or eschatology (as in the mystery play), the distinguishing characteristic of the *Trauerspiel*, according to Benjamin, is that “Historical life [...] is its content, its true object.”<sup>79</sup> Yet in the final analysis both the mystery play and the *Trauerspiel* depict history as a process of redemption. Benjamin notes that practical virtue had no real place in these dramas: “[virtue] has never taken a more uninteresting form than in the heroes of these *Trauerspiele* in which the only response to the call of history is the physical pain of martyrdom”<sup>80</sup>; “Death is not punishment but atonement, an expression of the subjection of guilty life to the law of natural life.”<sup>81</sup> If at the end of his action the tragic hero achieves silence, in the *Trauerspiel* the heroes are fully conscious of the “dialectic of their fate” and make sure they relate the lessons they have learned before expiring. This is what Benjamin calls “baroque teleology”: “Devoted neither to the earthly nor to the moral happiness of creatures, its exclusive aim is their mysterious instruction.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Cf. George Steiner’s discussion of *Faust II* and Byron’s mysteries as “a kind of dramatic cantata” and “a foreshadowing of Wagnerian opera”; *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Knopf, 1961) 198–210 (passages quoted from 208, 210).

<sup>78</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York, London: Verso 1998) p.113.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 108, 170.

Indeed, it is just such “mysterious instruction” that Ivanov pursued in his dramas, not catharsis or other properly aesthetic aims, and thus his main rhetorical figure was allegory. Ivanov’s drama was not to be experienced, but to be understood, much like that of the key baroque dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca, of whom Ivanov wrote:

In him everything is but a signification of the objective truth of divine Providence, which governs human destiny. A pious son of the Spanish Church, he was able to combine all the daring of naïve individualism with the most profound Realism of the mystical contemplation of divine things.<sup>83</sup>

This description is reminiscent of Ivanov’s discussion of modern dramatists whose works “are marked by a demonstrative gesture, like the outstretched finger that points to something beyond the border of the canvas on the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci.”<sup>84</sup> Such an attempt to present an allegorical “demonstrative gesture” as symbol is also explicable in the terms of Benjamin’s analysis:

the profane world [...] is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance. [...] all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them.<sup>85</sup>

Benjamin provides an entire tirade against the profligate use of the concept of the symbol as “a romantic and destructive extravagance,” quoting Creuzer to the effect that: “There [in symbol] we have momentary totality; here [in allegory] we have progression in a series of moments. And for this reason it is allegory, and not the symbol, which embraces myth..., the essence of which is most adequately expressed in the progression of the epic poem.”<sup>86</sup> Ivanov elevates his fictional narratives to the level of sacred history in an allegorical key, in what Benjamin calls “the eccentric embrace of meaning.”<sup>87</sup> However Ivanov’s allegorical diction stops short of specifying and foreclosing this history insofar as it is unable to dictate its application to the reader. The narrative, at its base, is founded upon a cathartic event, a kenotic emptying of meaning, which inherently preserves the reader’s freedom of interpretation, even in the presence of a determinate interpretive grid. The reader still has to place him- or herself *into* this narrative, and

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<sup>83</sup>Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p. 21; *Ivanov, Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.546.

<sup>84</sup>Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, p. 95; *Ivanov, Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, p.86.

<sup>85</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.175.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 160, 165.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 202.

the mythical-allegorical poet cannot control the reader's experience as he can in the lyric.

In conclusion, the mystery play is a key narrative form of Russian modernism, insofar as it is born of the need to present religious myth in secular images, to translate liturgy into spectacle and art into ritual, and to place the artist himself at the center of history as its motive force and martyr. As the symbol led to allegory, the simulation of ritual became the simulation of myth—artistic, religious, and finally historical. In this respect the revolution as a cultural event was both the ultimate intervention in Russian rituals, and the mark of a new period, when history avenged itself and became increasingly resistant to the intervention of imaginative literature.