

Русская культура в Европе

Russian Culture in Europe

edited by

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Vol.7

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Параболы

Studies in Russian Modernist Literature and Culture

In Honor of John E. Malmstad

Edited by Nikolay Bogomolov,
Lazar Fleishman, Aleksandr Lavrov,
and Fedor Poljakov



PETER LANG
Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Содержание

Александр Кушнер (Санкт-Петербург)	
Джону Малмстаду.....	11
Michael Wachtel (Princeton, N.J.)	
Mudrost' Mal'mstada.....	13
Михаил Одесский (Москва)	
К вопросу об источнике «декадентской» пьесы Треплева: Чехов и Амфитеатров.....	17
Олег Лекманов (Москва)	
Баратынский и старшие модернисты: попытка обобщения.....	29
Роман Тименчик (Иерусалим)	
«Folie vénitienne» по-русски в начале XX века.....	45
Александр Лавров (Санкт-Петербург)	
«Прекрасный рыцарь Парсифаль»: М.И. Сизов – корреспондент Андрея Белого.....	65
Константин Азадовский (Санкт-Петербург)	
Маргарита Сабашникова в 1908 году (из писем к А.М. Петровой).....	101
Фёдор Поляков (Вена)	
Автографы Михаила Кузмина в альбомах И. фон Гюнтера и Р. фон Вальтера.....	123

Magnus Ljunggren (Gothenburg / Stockholm)	
The Son's Liberation from the Father: On the Epilogue to <i>Peterburg</i>	153
Маргарита Павлова (Санкт-Петербург)	
Поэт поэту о поэте: неизвестное письмо Мориса Джанумяна Зинаиде Гиппиус.....	163
Моника Спивак (Москва)	
С.М. Алянский, А.А. Блок и В.Э. Мейерхольд (о том, что не вошло в мемуары создателя «Алконоста»).....	173
Бьянка Сультассо (Рим)	
Неизвестное письмо Нины Петровской к папе Бенедикту XV.....	187
Николай Богомолов (Москва)	
Нина Петровская в «Накануне»: два материала.....	201
Michael Wachtel (Princeton, N.J.)	
Viacheslav Ivanov and the English Language: An Unknown Autobiography.....	213
Павел Дмитриев (Санкт-Петербург)	
Заметки на полях комментариев: почему «Первый удар» первый?.....	225
Александр Грибанов (Бостон)	
Маргиналия к теме «брадобрея».....	233
Манфред Шруба (Бохум)	
«Современные записки» и чехословацкие деньги.....	239

Roger Keys (St. Andrews)	
“An Extremist in All Things” – Georgii Adamovich	
on Andrei Belyi: A Late Unpublished Article.....	269
Роберт Хьюз (Беркли)	
Заметки Ходасевича о «Каменном госте».....	287
Ольга Раевская-Хьюз (Беркли)	
К прочтению Николая Моршена.....	299
Stephanie Sandler (Cambridge, MA.)	
Poetry After Leningrad: Polina Barskova and Sergei Zav'ialov	
Re-Imagine the Blockade.....	315
Елена Невзглядова (Санкт-Петербург)	
Проблема «мелодики стиха»	
(Интонационная теория стиха).....	333
Жан-Клод Маркадэ (Париж)	
Мощь символического у антисимволиста Малевича.....	347
Антонелла д'Амелия (Салерно)	
Из архивных разысканий:	
русская художница Эдита Брольо в Италии.....	355
A Bibliography of John E. Malmstad's Publications.....	367

Viacheslav Ivanov and the English Language: An Unknown Autobiography

Michael Wachtel
Princeton, N.J.

Viacheslav Ivanov was one of Russia's most impressive polyglots, writing fluent verse and prose in a host of ancient and modern languages: Greek, Latin, German, Italian, French, as well as his native Russian. In this list of important European languages, English is conspicuously absent. Ivanov had spent eight months in England in 1899–1900. He could read English sufficiently well to translate poetry, he could converse in it, and later in life he even taught it as part of his duties at the University of Pavia.¹ Nonetheless, Ivanov never felt completely at home in the English language and avoided it when possible. It is typical that, in his correspondence with the Oxford classicist Cecil Maurice Bowra, Ivanov eventually switched from English to French.²

Hence an English autobiography written in Ivanov's hand is a distinct rarity and can only owe its existence to special circumstances. This text was one of a number of remarkable discoveries made in the Rome archive by the late Larisa Ivanova. Together with it she found, presumably dating from the same time, pages of exercises on English verbs and prepositions, likewise in Ivanov's hand.

This flurry of interest in the English language can be traced to one of the more curious episodes in Ivanov's biography – his attempt to gain employment as a Latin instructor at the University of Cairo. After reaching Rome in

1 As an instructor of modern languages, Ivanov taught excerpts from Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" as well as Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis." He also offered conversational English for the more advanced students. A.A. Kondiurina, L.N. Ivanova, D. Rizzi, A.B. Shishkin (eds.), "Perepiska Viacheslava Ivanova s Ol'goi Shor," in *Archivio Russo-Italiano III* (Salerno: Università di Salerno, 2001), p. 246.

2 Strictly speaking, Ivanov opened the correspondence in Latin, with a poem in distichs. He began his first letter proper by noting that he should continue writing in Latin, but that "I prefer to amuse you with innocent solecisms of my virgin english <sic> prose." By the third letter, he opted for French. Pamela Davidson, *Vyacheslav Ivanov and C.M. Bowra: A Correspondence from Two Corners on Humanism* (Birmingham: Birmingham Slavonic Monographs, 2006), pp. 82–88.

late 1924, Ivanov had little incentive to return to his university post in Baku and was desperately casting about for a reliable source of income. In her memoirs, Ivanov's daughter recalls this time as a "мучительный период," in which her father "предпринимает целый ряд попыток практического устройства нашей жизни."³ In a letter from Madison, Wisconsin of 6 June 1925, Mikhail Rostovtsev had dashed any hopes Ivanov might have cherished about finding a teaching position in the United States: "Что касается до возможности устроиться здесь для Вас, то не могу скрыть от Вас, что это дело трудное, если не невозможное."⁴ One can therefore imagine Ivanov's joy a few months later upon receiving word of possible employment in a letter from Thaddeus Zielinski: "Раз Вы так экзотически настроены, то не желаете вы прогуляться в – Каир? Король Фуад основывает там египетский университет на европейский манер и классической основе: лекции по-французски. Требуется латинист (язык и литература); вознаграждение свыше 600–680 французских франков в год, кроме 5 месяцев каникул. Обязательно на 3 года. Обратились ко мне: но так как я связан с Варшавой, то, предвидя мой отказ – просьба указать кандидата. Я и подумал о Вас. Конечно, все это вилами по воде писано, но ведь и риска никакого нет".⁵

Zielinski's description accurately reflected the state of affairs. King Fuad had decided to do away with the provincial university in Cairo and create a new one based on European standards. The founding decree of his university was dated 11 March 1925, and the first semester had only begun in fall of 1926,⁶ – precisely when Zielinski had been approached and only a month or so before Ivanov became involved in the discussions. Part of King Fuad's strategy consisted in paying enormous salaries and thus attracting first-rate faculty. As often in such instances, however, the results were less than ideal, with a wide

3 Lidia Ivanova. *Vospominaniia: Kniga ob otse*. Podgotovka teksta i kommentarii Dzhona Mal'mstada (Moscow: Rik "Kul'tura," 1992), pp. 155, 162.

4 G.M. Bongard-Levin, M. Vakhtel', V.Iu. Zuev, "M.I. Rostovtsev i Viach. I. Ivanov." G.M. Bongard-Levin (ed.) *Skifskii roman* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1997), p. 252.

5 Elena Takho-Godi, "Dve sud'by nedarom sviazuetsia vidimaia nit' (Pis'ma F.F. Zelin-skogo k Viach. Ivanovu)," *Archivio Italo-Russo II* (Salerno: Università di Salerno, 2002), p. 195. The letter is dated 12 September 1925.

6 Donald Malcolm Reid. *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 78.

gulf separating the erudite professoriate and their inadequately prepared listeners. The poet and novelist Robert Graves, who was hired to teach English literature, left an amusing eyewitness account: "The University was an invention of King Fuad's, who had always been anxious to be known as a patron of the arts and sciences. There had been a Cairo University before this one, but it had been nationalistic in its policy and, not being directed by European experts or supported by the Government, had soon come to an end. The new University had been planned ambitiously. There were faculties of science, medicine and letters, with a full complement of highly-paid professors; only one or two of these were Egyptian, the rest being English, Swedish, French and Belgian. The medicine and science faculties were predominantly English, but the appointments to the faculty of letters were predominantly French. They had been made in the summer months when the British High Commissioner was out of Egypt, or he would no doubt have discountenanced them. Only one of the French and Belgian professors had any knowledge of English, and none of them had any knowledge of Arabic. Of the two hundred Egyptian students, who were mostly the sons of rich merchants and landowners, fewer than twenty had more than a smattering of French – just enough for shopping purposes – though they had all learned English in the secondary schools <...> My twelve or thirteen French colleagues were men of the highest academic distinction. But two or three English village-schoolmasters would have been glad to have undertaken their work at one-third of their salaries and done it far better."⁷

Ivanov knew little of the details, but the salary ("колоссальное, по нашим понятиям, жалование," as he noted longingly)⁸ and the necessity of spending only seven months a year in Egypt made the position particularly desirable. Within two months, he was in frequent contact with Cairo. The story of Ivanov's application can be reconstructed from letters in the Rome archive.⁹ Ivanov corresponded not with a functionary, but with the sole Latinist at the University of

⁷ Robert Graves. *Goodbye to All That: An Autobiography* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), pp. 299–300.

⁸ Kondiurina et al., p. 212.

⁹ The letters have been prepared for publication as part of an essay entitled "Nesotshchiisia Egipet Viacheslava Ivanova" by G.M. Bongard-Levin and M.D. Bukharin and should appear shortly in a memorial volume edited by the latter in honor of the former. Bukharin was the first to decipher the name of Ivanov's correspondent

Cairo. A native of Lancashire who had studied classics and comparative philology in Manchester and Cambridge universities, Joshua Whatmough was one of the talented scholars attracted to Egypt by the generous remuneration and the short academic term. Despite his lack of a Ph.D., he was soon to take up a more prestigious post in Comparative Philology (later, upon his insistence, renamed Linguistics) at Harvard University, a position he would occupy with distinction for 37 years until his retirement.¹⁰ However, at the time of his correspondence with Ivanov, he was eager to find a colleague in Cairo. His letters to Ivanov, all written on letterhead from the “Université Egyptienne, Faculté des lettres, Palais Zaafaran”¹¹ allow us to follow the precise sequence of events. The first one, dated 3 November 1925, indicates that Zielinski’s recommendation did indeed carry a lot of weight: “After hearing Prof. Zielinski’s recommendation, together with his communication as to your learning, degrees, original work etc., the Faculty of Arts authorized me to invite you to consider an offer of the position of ‘Maître de Conférence’¹² in the Latin Department here. The work would not be heavy – in the first year (1925–1926) about 4 hours a week lecture and the correction of written exercises [...] You would be required to lecture in English <as> the work of the Latin Department generally will be conducted in English. This is the most severe requirement which is likely to be made of you

and to identify him. I thank him for his generosity in sharing with me a pre-publication version of their article and for allowing me to cite some of the same material.

10 A Festschrift in honor of Whatmough’s sixtieth birthday includes essays by many luminaries, including his Harvard colleague Roman Jakobson, who contributed “Mufaxxama: The ‘Emphatic’ Phonemes in Arabic.” In that essay Jakobson characterizes Whatmough as “one of the first to recognize ‘the gain in the theoretical simplicity and scientific objectivity’ obtainable through applying the ‘principle of binary choices’ to the study of phonemes.” Ernst Pulgram (ed.) *Studies Presented to Joshua Whatmough on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Mouton: ‘S-Gravenhage, 1957), p. 105. The book also features Whatmough’s bibliography through February 1957, numbering 468 items (pp. 1–16).

11 The Zafaran Palace, which housed the Faculty of Arts, was a former harem, complete with ornamental pool and fountain (albeit in a state of neglect). Reid, p. 81.

12 As a later letter (of 31 December 1925) makes clear, this title was essentially that of “assistant.”

and you should consider carefully whether you would be prepared to lecture in English."¹³

For Ivanov this condition must have come as a surprise. It may be remembered that Zielinski had claimed that all teaching would be done in French, a requirement that would have posed no difficulty for Ivanov.¹⁴ Ivanov must have expressed some reservations about his competence in English, because Whatmough sought to reassure him in a letter from 18 November 1925: "From your letter it seems to me unlikely that you will have great difficulty as to <sic> lecturing in English. I feel sure you will be able to meet that requirement." In that same letter, Whatmough requests "a short statement of your career, etc., to be sent by me to the Minister to complete your nomination to the post of 'Maître de Conférence.'" While the faculty was prepared to offer Ivanov a position on the strength of Zielinski's recommendation, the Minister apparently needed something more. The first (and most detailed) description of the necessary document comes in Whatmough's letter of 16 November 1925, where he requests "an account of your scholastic and academic career, degrees, publications (with testimonials), posts already held, etc."

In a letter of 12 December Whatmough assures Ivanov that "the documents relative to your appointment are now all in the hands of the Minister of Education" and that confirmation could be expected within a few days. When

13 Because these letters will appear in full (though only in Russian translation) in the publication of Bongard-Levin and Bukharin, I cite only excerpts, using the original English texts from the Rome archive, kindly made available to me by Andrei Shishkin.

14 The linguistic politics were complicated, and it is difficult to understand what actually transpired. In an article in "The Harvard Crimson" (3 May 1963) devoted to the retirement of the by then legendary Whatmough, one finds the following account of his time in Cairo: "Most of these students spoke English as a second language to Arabic, but by governmental decree, instruction at the University was conducted in French. 'It was a Gilbert and Sullivan situation,' Whatmough recalls, '— teaching Latin in French to Egyptians who knew Arabic and English.'" Ivanov himself wrote to Ol'ga Shor "латинская литература читается там по-английски, тогда как другие предметы по-французски" (Kondiurina et al., p. 212). According to Graves (pp. 300–301), "The Frenchmen lectured, but with the help of Arabic interpreters, which did not make either for speed or accuracy. I found that I was expected to give two lectures a week, but the dean soon decided that if the students were ever to dispense with the interpreters they must be given special instruction in French — which reduced the time for lectures, so that I had only one a week to give. This one was pandemonium."

the eagerly-awaited appointment was delayed, Ivanov understandably became worried. Judging from Whatmough's letter of 31 December 1925, Ivanov had expressed concern that his Soviet passport was the obstacle. This was how he explained the sudden turn of (mis)fortune a few months later in a letter to Olga Shor; it then became part of Ivanov family legend, at times repeated uncritically in the scholarly literature.¹⁵

However, as Bongard-Levin and Bukharin point out, nothing in the letters supports this contention. On the contrary: from the beginning Whatmough dismisses Ivanov's concern, stating (in a letter of 31 December 1925) "I am confident that we shall have no difficulty as concerns your nationality." When the appointment failed to materialize, he unambiguously explained the problem as "a serious dispute" between the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Arts (letter of 6 March 1926). In his final letter to Ivanov (19 April 1926), Whatmough expressed his regret that the dispute had resulted in "the Latin staff being limited for the present to *one* only." Presumably looking ahead to his own move to Harvard, he further noted that "it is quite likely that a vacancy may arise, as I do not consider myself a fixture here. And if I were to go I have no doubt that M. Grégoire¹⁶ would recommend you to succeed me." Had a Soviet passport been the stumbling block, surely Whatmough would have acknowledged it, rather than creating false hopes for his already disappointed correspondent.

Historical evidence corroborates Whatmough's explanation. As Whatmough had mentioned in a letter of 18 November 1925, Latin was only that year

15 In his letter of 30 April 1926, Ivanov wrote: "Министерство все же не утвердило меня, — по-видимому, как гражданина Сов. Республики" (Kondiurina et al., p. 212). This element of uncertainty ("по-видимому") disappeared completely twenty years later in a letter to S.L. Frank of 3 June 1947, where Ivanov described receiving from Cairo University a "предложение занять кафедру истории римской литературы" (!) and ended the sad tale as follows: "Когда в египетском посольстве было обнаружено, что я проживаю по советскому паспорту, моя сказка из тысячи и одной ночи рассеялась маревом: тамошнее министерство немедленно пресекло затеи наивных гуманистов." V.S. Frank (ed.) "Perepiska S.L. Franka s Viach. Ivanovym," *Mosty* 10 (1963), p. 364. Precisely this version is reflected in the memoirs of Ivanov's daughter: "Филологический факультет университета в Каире хотел пригласить Вячеслава. Но этому воспрепятствовал его тогдашний советский паспорт" (Ivanova, p. 161). Takho-Godi (op. cit., p. 197, note 5) cites this version as fact.

16 The eminent historian Henri Grégoire (1881–1964) was at the time the dean; it was he who initiated the correspondence with Zielinski.

to be introduced into the curriculum of the Cairo secondary schools. This plan, controversial from the start, was in fact never realized.¹⁷ Given these broader battles over the relevance of the classical languages to Egyptian education, it can hardly be surprising that there was resistance to expanding the Latin program on the university level.¹⁸ Finally, it should be emphasized that the existence of the USSR was at this time not a matter of concern in Egypt, where the warring spheres of influence were England versus France.¹⁹ In short, Ivanov's application was in all probability derailed by internal Egyptian politics; his Soviet passport was irrelevant.

Returning to the autobiography itself: all things (with one striking exception noted below) point to Ivanov's English autobiography as being intimately connected to his application to Cairo. It is clearly a text in which Ivanov emphasizes his academic qualifications, assiduously avoiding the subject of his career as a Symbolist poet. Moreover, it seems to respond exactly to the *desiderata* enumerated by Whatmough ("an account of your scholastic and academic career, degrees, publications <with testimonials>, posts already held, etc."). The fact that Ivanov mentions his visit to Palestine and Cairo in 1901 – a minor if memorable episode in his biography²⁰ – would appear to send a message to his future employer about his interest in and familiarity with the region.

The complete text consists of two pages in Ivanov's distinctive handwriting, but contains corrections in another hand, obviously that of a native speaker. (In his letter to Olga Shor of 30 April 1926, Ivanov noted that he had been work-

¹⁷ Reid, p. 111.

¹⁸ In a letter to Ol'ga Shor of 11 October 1926, Ivanov himself (perhaps unintentionally) comes close to the truth when he writes that the Egyptian plans fell through "благодаря тамошнему 'сокращению штатов'" (Kondiurina et al., p. 237). The function of Ivanov's quotation marks is not clear; they reflect either bureaucratic jargon ("chuzhoe slovo") or irony (i.e., Ivanov's conviction that this official explanation was a lie).

¹⁹ Reid, pp. 87–99.

²⁰ The fullest account is given in L.D. Zinov'eva-Annibal's letter to I.M. Grevs of 23 August / 5 September 1901. In G.M. Bongard-Levin, N.V. Kotrelev, E.V. Liapustina (eds.), *Istoriia i poeziia: Peregiska I.M. Grevs i Viach. Ivanova* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006), pp. 232–234.

ing with native speakers of English in anticipation of his employment.)²¹ The errors reflect common points of confusion when Russians write English (use of prepositions and articles, verb tenses, syntax). The presence of corrections suggests that the text was made in preparation of a fair copy that was ultimately dispatched.

The text is undated, and the question of the precise date of composition is vexing. The final sentence makes clear that it was written after Ivanov arrived in Rome (according to the text, October 1924, though in fact it was September) and before he took up his position in Pavia (November 1926). The one specific recent event mentioned is Pavel (“Paul”) Vinogradov’s death. Ivanov’s former mentor caught pneumonia and passed away in Paris on 19 December 1925. Vinogradov was a figure of considerable international stature, so it is likely that Ivanov learned of his death quickly.²² Assuming that Ivanov was not falsely informed of his death at an earlier time (he had received a letter from Vinogradov dated 22 May 1925, but nothing subsequently),²³ then Ivanov’s text could have been written at earliest in the last ten days of 1925. This would appear to be too late for the text that was sent to Cairo. On the other hand, Whatmough wrote on 31 December 1925, “I have just received your letter and your packet,” so conceivably Ivanov – worried by the delay in his appointment – added an updated and perhaps more detailed version of his cv (together with his books) in an attempt to quiet any skeptical voices. Ultimately, the most compelling reason for assuming the autobiography to be part of the Cairo episode is the difficulty of imagining any other purpose for its existence. Admittedly, Ivanov was at this time inquiring about employment the world over.²⁴ It is conceivable that he sent

21 “Всю зиму я усиленно занимался английским языком (ибо латинская литература читается там по-английски <...>), и благодаря этому нажил здесь преданных и надежных английских друзей – что высоко оцениваю.” Kondiurina et al., pp. 212–213.

22 For example, *The New York Times* printed his obituary on 21 December 1925, with a byline from London (suggesting that the death had been announced there the previous day).

23 Kondiurina et al., p. 303.

24 In the same letter to Olga Shor in which he reports not receiving the position in Cairo, Ivanov notes: “Университеты здешние для иностранцев (в качестве профессоров) закрыты <...>” and cryptically adds: “если бы была сохранена моя

this letter to other universities.²⁵ In any case, it stands to reason that a similar – if not identical – text was sent to Cairo.

As far as the content goes, the text conforms to Ivanov's other autobiographies. An absence of documentary evidence makes it impossible to corroborate every individual detail in these autobiographies, but they are remarkably consistent and, to the extent that external evidence does exist, it supports Ivanov's statements. In the present case, there are moments where Ivanov is inexact (e.g., while he did spend a year in Athens, he did not spend the full year studying, since he lost three months falling gravely ill with typhus and then slowly convalescing) or shifts emphasis (e.g., the implication that he studied primarily with Mommsen rather than with Hirschfeld), but never does he make false claims. A rare piece of new information is the precise title of Ivanov's first seminar paper for Mommsen (on Roman tax law in Egypt, presumably an early version of the subject of his eventual dissertation, perhaps mentioned here as yet further proof of his longstanding interest in Egypt). Given the obvious slant towards academic work, the emphasis on Vladimir Soloviev and his description as "an intimate elder friend" is striking. Perhaps Soloviev's link to Egypt (as recounted in his seminal poem "Three Meetings") was subconsciously present in Ivanov's mind.

The text is cited according to the corrected version, with the original linguistic infelicities included in the notes. In the catalogue of the Rome Archive (RAI), it is opis' 6, karton 1.

Venceslas Ivanov, son of an Honorary Counselor of the State-Control-Office,²⁶ was born in Moscow on the 28th of February 1866. Having graduated²⁷ from a classical gymnasium with the gold medal, he entered in 1884 as

стипендия, я бы еще, может быть, выжидал бы возможного (в конце концов) приглашения в заграничный (неитальянский) университет." Kondiurina et al., p. 214.

²⁵ Ivanov's daughter (pp. 161–162) mentions vague plans ("казалось") about a university appointment in Cordoba, Argentina, which failed on account of a coup d'état in that country. However, if this autobiography were really part of an application to Argentina, one wonders why Ivanov would have included a reference to Cairo.

²⁶ A rendering of "kontrol'naia palata" (see Ivanov's autobiographical poem "Mladenchestvo," stanza xxix).

²⁷ Originally: "having been graduated"

a student of history and philology in the University of Moscow, where he obtained a prize for Latin and Greek.²⁸ From October 1886 until May 1891 he continued²⁹ his historical and philological studies at the University of Berlin under direction of Prof. Paul Vinogradov in Moscow (later in Oxford, †1925), and was there during 4 years a member of the “Institut für Altertumskunde”, under Theodor Mommsen (to whom he presented as his first essay of historical research an article entitled “über die ägyptische Steuerverfassung unter den Römern”) and Otto Hirschfeld (sources of Roman history and Latin epigraphics); at the same time he took part at the practical Übungen of Prof. Emil Huebner (Greek authors with Latin commentary and Latin philological disputations), of Prof. W. Wattenbach (Greek and Latin paleography), of Prof. Eduard Zeller (Aristotle’s Metaphysics), of Prof. H.B. Bresslau (researches in the field of medieval and Byzantine history).³⁰

After having spent almost a year in Paris for studies in the Bibliothèque Nationale, he came in 1892 to Rome, where he studied archeology at the German Archeological Institute and wrote his dissertation for the doctorate to be obtained in Berlin “De Societatibus Vectigalium Publicorum Populi Romani”. It was presented to the philosophical Faculty of Berlin in 1896, criticized favorably by Mommsen in his report to the Faculty as “far³¹ exceeding the average”, and characterized by the latter, on Mommsen’s proposal, as “diligenter et subtiliter scripta”.

Avoiding a regular academic career for the sake of literary activity, V.I. continued privately his studies in philology and history of religions at <sic> Paris,

28 The fact that Ivanov received the university prize has been documented. N.Vs. Kotrelev, “Neizdannaiia avtobiograficheskaiia spravka Viacheslava Ivanov” in: *Sestry Adelaida i Eveniia Gertsyk i ikh okruzhenie* (Moscow – Sudak: Izdanie Doma-muzeia Mariny Tsvetaevoi, 1997), p. 192, note 8. Kotrelev’s publication begins with a useful overview of Ivanov’s various autobiographical statements.

29 Originally: “Since October 1886 he continued until May 1891”

30 For a full list of Ivanov’s courses at the University of Berlin, see the addendum to my essay “Viacheslav Ivanov – student Berlinskogo universiteta”, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, vol. XXXV [1–2] (1994), pp. 363–366.

31 Originally: “wite” <sic>

London, Geneva and Rome. In 1901 and 1902, after a visit to³² Palestine and Cairo, he spent a year in Athens, studying Greek archaeology and epigraphy under Doerpfeld and Wilhelm, and collecting material for an intensive investigation of the religion of Dionysos. In 1903 he delivered at <sic> Paris a series of lectures about the ancient Greek religion in the Russian "Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales", founded by Prof. M. Kovalevsky. From 1905 until 1912 he stayed at St. Petersburg, where he founded, in collaboration with Prof. Th. Zielinski, a renowned philologist, and Prof. I. Annensky, the Russian translator of Euripides' works, a society for researchers in matters of literary style and poetics. He was elected fellow of the Imperial Archaeological Society, and was professor of Greek and Roman history of literature at the University for Women. He belonged also at St. Petersburg to the presiding board of the Society for the³³ History of Religion, whose task was to develop the religious movement initiated by Vladimir Soloviev (the latter was an intimate elder friend of V.I. from 1895 until his death, in 1900). After having spent a year (1912/1913) in Rome, where he continued his study of the Greek religion, he stayed until 1920 at Moscow, being a member of the presiding board of the VI. Soloviev-Society for Philosophy of Religion and delivering lectures about poetics in many high schools.³⁴ Under the new (revolutionary) regime he was not allowed to go abroad and worked at Moscow as the head of two academic sections of the Office for Public Instruction (the section for history of the³⁵ theatre and that for organization of a high school of poetics) and a member of the directorate³⁶ of a central Scientific Review, department of philology. After public defense of seven chapters of his monography <sic> "Dionysos and the predionysiac Cults" the title of doctor of classical philology was conferred on him by the State-University of Baku (the only university which conserved the old established academic institutions; academical <sic!> degrees being abolished in Russia during the revolution).

32 Originally: "in"

33 The word "the" was added by the editor.

34 Most probably in this and the following sentence Ivanov has in mind the German word "Hochschule" ("university").

35 The word "the" is not in Ivanov's handwriting

36 Originally: "redaction"