

# SLAVIC REVIEW

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Im Zeichen des Dionysos: Zur Mythopoetik in der russischen Moderne am Beispiel von  
Vjaceslav Ivanov by Jurij Murasov

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the other hand, may not have even seen the landscapes he “described.” Those who spent a considerable time in the country (Ivanov, Voloshin) recorded personal tragedies set against the backdrop of the Alps. Best known of the poems discussed is Ivanov’s “Al’piiskii rog” (from the collection *Oready*), which contains the essence of his aesthetics.

Staikov thus tackles a fairly limited subject that has yielded relatively few and not always significant texts, but her work is part of a much larger project that researches Slavic-Swiss cultural interaction. Hers is a thorough and informative work, but one that has not freed itself of the framework of the dissertation from whence it originates. Survey chapters present the well known, biographies go into great detail, and paraphrase plays a major role. Certainly one becomes acquainted with some lesser known texts (also in often congenial translations into German by Ch. Ferber), but the most innovative ideas are left by the wayside. For example, a discussion of the development of “mountain philosophy” from Zhukovskii to Konevskoi and Ivanov would have offered opportunities for presenting new perspectives. Staikov does succeed in conveying the importance of the Swiss theme in Russian culture—the task now may be to approach the topic in intertextual and interdisciplinary ways (for example, to examine the Swiss painter Arnold Boecklin and the Russian symbolist literature he inspired).

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*Im Zeichen des Dionysos: Zur Mythopoetik in der russischen Moderne am Beispiel von Vjačeslav Ivanov.* By Jurij Murašov. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1999. 328 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. DM 98.00, paper.

Although the past decade has seen a proliferation of studies of Viacheslav Ivanov, Jurij Murašov’s book is in many respects unique. Rather than examining Ivanov’s work on its own or in relationship to that of his predecessors or contemporaries, Murašov views it primarily in the context of subsequent twentieth-century European thought. His intent is not to study influence but to demonstrate patterns characteristic of specific cultures. Such a broad atemporal perspective on Ivanov is a welcome complement to the author-intensive focus that has heretofore reigned supreme.

The book’s lengthy title faithfully reflects its content. Murašov is interested in the phenomenon of myth, of making myth and thinking in myth. Ivanov’s writings have been selected for close analysis insofar as they offer rich material for such study. The book begins with a brief but excellent introduction on myth as an ahistorical and prehistorical phenomenon and its somewhat surprising resurgence in twentieth-century culture. It then moves to a very close reading (approximately 100 pages!) of Ivanov’s series of lectures *The Religion of the Suffering God*, concentrating not on the sources or the author’s accuracy but on the narrative strategies employed. Murašov argues that Ivanov attempts to overcome the paradox of writing about orality (myth being an essentially oral phenomenon) by creating a mythical text in the guise of a scholarly treatise. Borrowing terminology from Roman Jakobson, Murašov sees Ivanov as placing all value on the paradigmatic plane (metaphor, the transformation of one mythological figure into another), which occurs at the expense of the syntagmatic axis (metonymy, sequentiality). Indeed, Ivanov generally argues away plot-oriented or “motivated” versions of myths as later additions, putting his faith in earlier versions that tend to eliminate differences. This tendency in Ivanov’s thought to privilege likeness has been noted by other scholars, but Murašov explores the implications in a number of unprecedented ways.

The second part is devoted to tragedy. Using Ivanov’s early essays on theater as a point of departure, Murašov focuses on *Tantalus*. There are many insights here, particularly the reading of the constellation of the lesser characters as being metonyms of the protagonist. Again, one of the emphases is to show how Ivanov attempts to recover the Dionysian spirit by creating in his new myth an effect of orality (understood very broadly). The close reading of the play is not always convincing, however. Murašov so relentlessly fixates on the issue of orality/literality that he finds it virtually everywhere. For example, a less biased

reader might not agree that “brada, kak tuman, razmetalas’” (about Zeus) “connotes literality in two ways” (235) and even recalls the traditional motif of writing as concealment of the author.

The third and final part of the book moves to larger questions of myth, using a detailed comparison of the Tartu school (Iurii Lotman, Zara Mints) to Claude Lévi-Strauss. Murašov concludes by contrasting the myth of Dionysos (which he sees as underlying Russian conceptions) with the Oedipus myth (seen as the key myth in the west in the twentieth century).

Such a summary does not do justice to this work, in part because the most valuable passages are sometimes found in the excurses (on Andrei Belyi, icons, the Old Testament versus the New Testament, and so on) and lengthy footnotes, where a number of important thinkers (Sigmund Freud, C. G. Jung, Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Cassirer) make cameo appearances, often in suggestive juxtaposition to Ivanov. On the other hand, these comparisons at times deteriorate into almost meaningless digressions; one really must wonder about the purported relevance of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* or Marquis de Sade's *La philosophie dans le boudoir*. It seems that Murašov himself is not entirely innocent of that passion for the paradigmatic.

Murašov's bibliography indicates that, although he has consulted theoretical works of the most recent vintage, his somewhat spotty coverage of the Ivanov literature grinds to a complete halt in 1989. Given the sheer number of publications that appeared after this date, this is unfortunate. But the real problem is that Murašov has only read a small portion of Ivanov's own writings. The fact that he repeatedly gives 1904 as the publication date for *Cor Ardens* makes clear that he could not possibly know that work. Still, as a book of poetry, it is outside Murašov's immediate purview. More troubling is that he knows almost nothing of Ivanov's writings on myth beyond the few works he examines closely. Murašov's entire view of Ivanov's conception of Oedipus is based on a passing reference in *The Religion of the Suffering God*. But there are far more extended discussions of this topic in Ivanov's later essays (e.g., “Discorso sugli orientamenti dello spirito moderno,” 1933). Perhaps most problematic, Murašov mentions only superficially the work that Ivanov himself considered his major contribution to the study of Dionysos (the Baku dissertation). Surely it would have been valuable to determine the extent to which this later work reflects those strategies that Murašov deemed essential to the earlier one.

Murašov's study is not an easy read, but if one gets acclimated to the ambitious, sometimes turgid poststructuralist style, it can be provocative and ingenious. The volume is compromised, however, by surprising gaps in Murašov's knowledge of the primary literature and extraordinary gaps in his familiarity with the secondary literature. Nothing deflates abstract theoretical musings so quickly as a lack of spade work.

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*Twentieth-Century Russian Literature: Selected Papers from the Fifth World Congress of Central and East European Studies, Warsaw, 1995*. Ed. Karen L. Ryan and Barry P. Scherr. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. xvi, 348 pp. Notes. Index. Tables. \$69.95, hard bound.

In his introduction to this wide-ranging volume, coeditor Barry P. Scherr notes that most of the chosen contributions from the Fifth World Congress concern the extremes of the century. In other words the period between the two world wars gets rather short shrift here, to say the least. Instead we have particular attention afforded two rubrics: the early decades of the century and those following the death of Iosif Stalin. Into the former category fall studies on Ivan Konevskoi, Maksim Gor'kii, Elena Guro, and (in three separate research endeavors) Maksimilian Voloshin. Boris Pasternak, Andrei Siniavskii, Iurii Trifonov, Andrei Bitov, and more contemporary writers such as Tat'iana Tolstaia, Joseph Brodsky, or Viktor Pelevin represent the later time period. Some rather unexpected, yet potentially enlightening, connections suggest themselves between these most interesting papers that in toto cast light on the object and operations of Slavic studies in the mid-1990s.