

1999

Review: Olga Freidenberg, *Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature*, ed. Nina Braginskaia and Kevin Moss, trans. Kevin Moss

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Recommended Citation

usanne Fusso. "Review: Olga Freidenberg, *Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature*, ed. Nina Braginskaia and Kevin Moss, trans. Kevin Moss" *Slavic Review* 58.3 (1999): 718-719.

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Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature. By Olga Freidenberg. Ed. Nina Bragin-skaia and Kevin Moss. Trans. Kevin Moss. Foreword by Vyacheslav Ivanov. Sign/ Text/ Culture: Studies in Slavic and Comparative Semiotics, vol. 2. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997. xvii, 492 pp. Notes. \$69.95, hard bound. \$24.95, paper.

As Kevin Moss points out in his introduction to *Image and Concept*, Olga Freidenberg, a classical philologist and literary theorist active in Leningrad from the 1930s to the 1950s, has been known in the west mainly for her correspondence with her cousin Boris Pasternak. That situation is undergoing radical change, as Freidenberg's rich and difficult works are being brought to a wider public by scholars such as Nina Perlina and Nina Bragin-skaia. The present publication, the first book-length work by Freidenberg to appear in English, is an important addition to the corpus.

Image and Concept is centrally concerned with classical Greek literature, primarily tragedy. But it is of great interest to anyone concerned with literary theory in general, for Freidenberg confronts the question of the very origins of literature itself. Freidenberg sees in classical Greek literature the moment when the concrete mythological image becomes the abstract, figural concept, thus giving birth to "literature" in the modern sense: "The old image is the mythological concrete image, with its one-dimensional unique time, with frozen space, immobile, without quality, and resultative—finished, without causality and without coming into being. This very image begins to take on a second meaning, an 'other' meaning . . . it, the same thing, appears in the form of something else with which it merges and from which, in essence, it differs. The other-saying of the image, the figurality of the image has a conceptual character: concreteness takes on abstract features, uniqueness—the features of multiplicity, the lack of quality becomes tinged with sharply delineated, at first monolithic qualities, space opens up, the element of movement from cause to its result is introduced" (48).

Freidenberg elaborates on this basic idea in breathtaking variety, using it to elucidate the origins of temporally based narrative out of the static "showing" of myth; the movement in philosophy from Socrates and Plato, in whom the concrete image is still alive in the emerging concept, to Aristotle, in whom "formal logic works out its basic laws" and "concept no longer rests on image" (123); and the link between philosophy and Old Comedy, based on their shared concern with the relations between the authentic and the seeming.

The entire second half of the book is devoted to tragedy, and here Freidenberg achieves her most impressive results. Freidenberg is a true forerunner of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics in her ability to "see unity in spite of difference," in Moss's words (22). She uses the "image-to-concept" idea to find invariant meanings in a dizzying number of tragedies, whose details she races through at breakneck speed, constantly resolving apparent diversity into the unity of a few basic mythological images. There is not room here to explain Freidenberg's method fully, so I will give only one example of the way she captures the essential features of the structure of tragedy without being reductive: "Death hovers over the heroes of tragedy. But the problem each time is who should die, for what, and how. In mythological thought 'lot,' 'portion,' is understood completely objectively as a definite 'part' of something, as a 'piece' . . . The lot of life or the lot of death is received by every participant in eschatology during the division of moira, pieces of the cosmic animal. . . . The mythological image of division of 'parts' later took on ethical meaning of the fate that falls to one's lot, i.e., the meaning not so much of 'lot' as of Fate with a capital F. . . . The main idea of tragedies . . . is that the death of the protagonist, received in the form of 'fate' in the eschatological division of moirai, is always a redemptive death, death of a purifying sacrificial victim" (204, 205).

As the passages I have quoted may indicate, this is not an easy book to read. Moss acknowledges the difficulty of Freidenberg's style, which was compared to *zaum'* by Lev Shcherba. *Image and Concept* was not published in Freidenberg's lifetime, so it never had the benefit of an editor's eye. As one begins to read each new section, it is hard to escape the dismaying feeling of wading through the exposition once again, but the prose is so dense that it is impossible to skim. The rewards, however, are great. Moss does a good job in his introduction of distinguishing Freidenberg's ideas, especially on parody, from those of Mikhail Bakhtin, whom she would seem superficially to resemble. As Moss points out,

“Freidenberg’s view that parodic forms are based on a genetic identity with official forms provides a provocative counterpoint to Bakhtin as well as an antidote to modernization of ancient literature” (20–21). Perhaps the most important contribution of Freidenberg’s study is that the reader with the tenacity to finish it comes away with the feeling of having truly witnessed the birth of literature out of myth.

Given the difficulties of Freidenberg’s style, Moss’s translation is an impressive accomplishment. It is unclear why he chooses to include certain untranslated Russian words in the text (*balagan rayoshniki*, 154; *pirozhki*, 183; *kisel’*, 237), but nowhere discusses the original words for “image” and “concept,” which are so basic to Freidenberg’s argument. Freidenberg seems to be quoting Aleksandr Potebnia when she writes at the outset, “The opinion has become firmly established in criticism that poetry is everywhere and at all times due to thinking in images” (31), so some discussion of the relations between his thought and hers is in order. It would also be helpful to know where Freidenberg’s work stands in the context of modern-day classical studies. Moss hints here and there that some of her theories have been discredited, but a more systematic discussion of this issue would be useful. In general, though, this edition is an extremely important and intelligently executed contribution.

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Delicate Markers: Subtexts in Vladimir Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading. By Gavriel Shapiro. Middlebury Studies in Russian Literature, vol. 19. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. xii, 212 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. \$29.95, paper.

A huge amount of research has gone into this book. Gavriel Shapiro finds subtexts for Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading* in painting, in the Christian tradition, and in Russian and French literature. He refers to Vladimir Nabokov’s fiction, interviews, lectures, and letters and uses Nabokov scholarship scrupulously.

Shapiro makes many interesting connections. For example, he suggests that Rodrig’s nickname “Rodrigo” comes from Vasilii Zhukovskii’s and Pavel Katenin’s poems about el Cid; he relates Cincinnatus’s repeated exclamation, “What anguish!” to Aleksandr Pushkin’s dying words; and he finds a convincing source for the novel Cincinnatus reads, *Quercus*, in A. K. Tolstoi’s *Prince Serebrianyi*. Shapiro ingeniously identifies associations with paintings and drawings, finding Pushkin’s sketch of himself and Evgenii Onegin on the embankment underlying the image of Cincinnatus’s rag doll as “little hairy Pushkin in a fur carrick” (132). The strongest argument is made for the presence of three “voyage” poems from Charles-Pierre Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal* in *Invitation* (chapter 5).

Shapiro treats Christian tradition and iconography in chapter 3. Certainly *Invitation* provides ample material encouraging this approach. The discussion of the relevance of the story of John the Baptist with Emmie as Salome is rich and productive. But in other cases Shapiro presents such a welter of features that, for example, everything and everyone appears to be connected to the Devil. Shapiro associates the worm with the Devil but gives insufficient interpretation to counter the possibility that the worm suggests mortality, the decay of the body. Yellow, green, brown, grey, and black are said to be associated with the diabolic, but since motif studies are not provided, we cannot be convinced that Nabokov is using a given Christian tradition (Shapiro draws from a variety of sources) and not another system of his own that obtains within his novel.

Shapiro provides insufficient interpretation of Nabokov’s motives for using many of the subtexts he identifies. He sees them as “bait” for a false interpretation, but it is not clear how that would function within the novel, even as a parody of the subtext. Why Nabokov should chose to include a particular parody in this novel is not sufficiently explored. In the afterword, which summarizes the arguments made in the five chapters, Shapiro suggests that the Christian associations with Cincinnatus present him as “a high moral example” (210) and the multiple references to the Russian literary tradition of the nineteenth century “serve as a distinctive survey and a farewell tribute to the nineteenth-century culture