

Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov: A Giant Among Us

In Memoriam

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Some demises are epoch-making. Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov's death on October 7, 2017 in Los Angeles is beyond all doubt one that terminates a great period in the long history of linguistic sciences and philological research in Russia. He was an outstanding scholar and an incontestable leader in a wide array of fields and sub-fields belonging to these disciplines. I dare say many of them would linger at nil-point had he not been their courageous and inveterate promoter. I give below a summary of his life and some personal remembrances of the man whom I consider my teacher and creative inspirer.

Born in Moscow on August 21, 1929 into the family of the famous Russian writer Vsevolod Ivanov, he was severely crippled by tuberculosis of bone for a long period of his childhood and youth. Medical progress and personal fortitude have been helpful, and he was lucky to be able to leave aside his crutches. But before that, he needed them to climb to the fourth floor of the Faculty of Letters of Moscow University and it happened that he was even expelled from the University for having been too often late to lectures... That event had its sequel some years later when in 1958, the young professor of Indo-European linguistics (whose seminars I had the privilege of attending, until they were—alas!—too abruptly ended) was again dismissed—this time, on the decision of overzealous Party lackeys from the University's Academic Council because of his fearless support of Boris Pasternak at the time when disgraceful attacks were being instigated by the KGB and Soviet authorities against one of the best Russian poets. Add that Ivanov also became friends with Roman Jakobson, a Russian émigré and Harvard professor whose name at that time could only be furtively whispered (I vividly remember a warning nudge I got from a fellow student when I mentioned Jakobson's phonological discoveries that were much in vogue: "Shh, somebody might hear you... and you would be sure to have troubles...").

And still Ivanov kept boldly to his convictions and had to the benefit of all of us a successful academic career through all the Soviet years, in spite of the overt hostility of the bureaucratic establishment. In particular, he suffered from harassment by the extra-academic body in power: constant denial of being in live contact with scholars outside the Soviet Union. After a unique visit to Oslo, Norway, in 1957, he was, to his utter dismay, never again allowed to attend any important scholarly meeting abroad, and that in spite of being well known and respected by colleagues all over the world for his achievements in linguistics and semiotics. His fame was certainly instrumental in his appointment as professor of Indo-European linguistics at the University of California (Los Angeles). But this

confirmation came only after the colossus that was the Soviet Union began to quiver and finally collapsed.

Semiotics in a very broad sense was Ivanov's foremost field of research (frequently in fruitful collaboration with Vladimir N. Toporov, another outstanding Russian philologist): he uncovered the semiotic vistas in the works of very different researchers: to name but a few, the psychologist Vygotsky, the chemist and visionary thinker Vernadsky, and even the Soviet film director S. Eisenstein. In spite of being distant from each other, Ivanov saw in them the pioneers of a unified theory of signs. And this, I believe, was only possible because he was himself a pioneer struggling to build up a modern science of signs. Indeed, he significantly contributed to the creation of the scholarly movement known subsequently as Moscow-Tartu semiotic "school," although in fact it was just the annual (sometimes biennial) series of summer seminars held in Kääriku, the suburban resort of the University of Tartu, Estonia, under the presidency of Yuri M. Lotman.

Our field, comparative mythology, was always a substantial part of Ivanov's research with special emphasis attached to Indo-European, Baltic, Slavic, Anatolian, and Ket (Yeniseian) myths; he listened to the latter when he found living narrators in Siberia. Ivanov's interest in myths was, I think, a natural outcome of his broader involvement in the study of culture as a complex sign system which generates art, artefacts, narratives, rituals, and myths to ensure informational survival to its bearers. For him as for other Moscow-Tartu scholars, culture as viewed in semiotic perspective is analyzed, largely by analogy with language, whose speakers use linguistic signs as conceptualized in Saussurean theory. His seminal semiotic work ran parallel to his theoretical work as well as to his properly linguistic analysis of texts in various languages, primarily the ancient ones that preserve Indo-European features (Hittite, Sanskrit, Slavic and Baltic), and to the studies on Indo-European poetics. As conceived by Saussure, linguistics is indeed just a part of semiotics and Ivanov's awareness of their intimate relations produced brilliant results.

Ivanov played a pioneering role in various disciplines, including early support of the structural approach to language (disguised by ideological necessity in the late fifties as research in cybernetics and theory of the automatic treatment of language data: structuralism was officially denigrated and in fact almost banned from authorized research activity). I am convinced that his tireless efforts aiming at the development of these fields were in accordance with the obvious need for progress in research. He ideally matched Roman Jakobson, whom he so much admired as possessing the quality of *будетлянин* as they used to say in the twenties in Russian: a neologism hard to translate, it is based on the word *будет*, 3 sg. of the future of the verb 'to be', augmented with a composite suffix-like sequence *-лянин* which makes the whole word into an agent noun. It means something like "turned to the future, working for the future, and dreaming of the future." That is one of Ivanov's prominent characteristics: he was firmly in his epoch, but he was lucidly prospecting further pathways for scholarship. One of his last published books is *Лингвистика третьего тысячелетия. Вопросы к*

будущему (“Linguistics of the Third Millennium. Questioning the Future”)¹. A quite remarkable *coup d’oeil* on what has been done in Russian, European and American linguistic sciences and theory of information and on what we have to expect in their future development. Here is a highly significant statement that I extract from his preface:

“Although [modern] linguistics comes closer to the possible synthesis of synchronic description and diachronic treatment reminding of what is realized in such natural sciences as astrophysics and molecular biology, possible ways that promise new achievements in understanding of the most archaic periods of the history of contemporary mankind attract for the time being only few daredevils. Ahead looms the not yet obtained synthesis of the descriptive and historical linguistics, of the mathematically strict methods of detailed synchronic description which would take advantage of experimental results reached in neuropsychology and some other contiguous scientific disciplines.”²

An exciting program which really requires new daredevils!

Ivanov’s challenge to the linguistics of the future contained a second thrilling program: linguistics has the urgent duty to describe disappearing languages, for their loss would be a catastrophe for general linguistics and for the comparative historical linguistics, especially of the macrofamilies of languages. That sub-discipline would in time allow the collocation of linguistic results with results achieved in biology, archaeology, and anthropology and would trigger revolutionary insights into mankind’s past.

Ivanov was also a gifted poet. I would like to quote an unpublished strophe that I incidentally found handwritten in an author’s copy sent to a common friend of ours. The strophe represents in its own way Ivanov’s life motto, one I admire:

Со мною дружен лист осенний
И призрачная ясность дня,
И длится жизнь без опасений,
Жизнь, а не просто западня.

The autumnal leaf is a friend of mine,
As is the illusory clarity of day,
Life is going on without fear,
Real life, not just a trap.

Requiescat in pace.

¹ Ivanov, V.V. 2004. *Lingvistika tret’ego tysyacheletiya. Voprosy k buduschemu* [Linguistics of the Third Millennium. Questioning the Future – in Russian]. Moscow: Yazyki Slavyanskoj Kul’tury.

² Ivanov 2004: 10-11; translation is mine – B.O.