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## Olga Freidenberg

### A Creative Mind Incarcerated

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Olga Freidenberg penned her own biography in a 2,000-page memoir *The Race of Life* (*Probeg Zhizni*); an epigraph in ancient Greek with a line from Pindar's *Nemean Ode* 4.41–3, says: 'Well I know that the lapse of time will achieve its preordained perfection.' Thereby she predicted her own posthumous fate: from oblivion to fame.<sup>1</sup>

It would be incorrect to surmise that Olga Freidenberg is totally unknown to the Anglophone reader. She is known to some through her lifetime correspondence with her famous cousin, Boris Pasternak.<sup>2</sup> Those engaged in semiotic and Bakhtinian studies are familiar with her scholarly works. Yet Freidenberg remains to this day an important figure in her own right in the landscape of classical studies.

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on the material from Olga Freidenberg's archive; her correspondence with relatives and friends; the documents from the state archives; her published and unpublished private papers and scholarly works. The archive also contains Freidenberg's memoir *The Race of Life*, 2,000 typed pages long, written between 1939 and 1947. Some of the events in her memoir were written as they happened, in real time. So far, a small part of this literary work has been published in Russian; some excerpts are inserted into the correspondence with Boris Pasternak in many languages (see next footnote). The Memoirs are being prepared for publication.

<sup>2</sup> The volume of correspondence between the two cousins was published in 1981 in Russian as *Perepiska s Ol'goj Freidenberg*, and translated into the main European languages, into English as *Pasternak* (1982).

Olga Freidenberg was a pioneer in many respects. She scorned the traditional education available for women of her time, and received her education only after Petrograd (formerly Petersburg, later Leningrad) University opened its doors for women in 1917.<sup>3</sup> In 1924, she became the first woman in Russia to defend her PhD thesis in Classical Philology, *The Origins of Greek Novel or The Greek Novel as Acts and Passions*; her MA work on the Acts of Paul and Thecla was dated to 1920–21.<sup>4</sup> Freidenberg was also the first woman who received the highest degree, the doctorate in Literary Studies, when in 1935 she defended her dissertation entitled *The Poetics of Plot and Genre: The Classical Period of Ancient Literature*.<sup>5</sup> This dissertation was published in 1936 but taken out of circulation shortly after an ideological denunciation by the authorities. It was republished in 1997 and is currently included in the university curricula. In 1932 Freidenberg was appointed Chair of the Department of Classical Philology, which she had to construct anew since all of the Classics Departments in Russia had been shut down since 1921. There were practically no women among department heads at that time, and even fewer among the creators of new academic programmes. To a large degree, Freidenberg's achievements as the pioneer in her field were made possible by the 1917 revolution, which offered women opportunities formerly unavailable to them.

This essay charts the story of Olga Freidenberg's life, her unconventional academic career and the fate of her rich scholarly legacy. It addresses several contentious facts of her biography: the degree to which she was forced to bend herself, her life, and her scholarship to fit into the ideological straightjacket of Soviet dictatorship; her relationship with the talented and

<sup>3</sup> It was during World War I that women first enrolled into several departments of Tomsk University (Siberia) and Saratov, then the new branch of the University of St. Petersburg. Two women were hired as professors, both graduates of the Bestuzhev Higher Courses for Women who completed their education in Germany: one was the ancient historian S.I. Protasova (1878–1946), and the other, classical philologist S.V. Melikova (1885–1942); see 'Imperial Rescripts' (1915). On the Bestuzhev Higher Courses for Women's higher education and N.P. Raev's Historical and Literary Courses for women (1907–17), see Goldberg (2010).

<sup>4</sup> The first woman to defend a Master's degree (then identical to PhD in Russia) at Petrograd University was M.A. Ostrovskaya, who graduated from Bestuzhev Courses (in Russian history; Sankt-Peterburgskii vedomosti. 18 March 1914). A Medieval historian, O.A. Dobiash-Rozhdesnenskaya, first defended her thesis at the Sorbonne (1911) and then in St. Petersburg (1915). In 1916, she was the first woman to teach at the Petrograd University and the first woman in Russia to be awarded, in 1918, the next academic degree of Doctor of Sciences (in general history).

<sup>5</sup> Up until today the system of degrees in Russia follows the German rather than Anglo-American model; see, on women's education in Russia, Perlina (2002) 45–53.

controversial linguist Nikolay Yakovlevich Marr, and his role in her life. Finally, the essay deals with Freidenberg's posthumous fame which brought her works out of oblivion and revealed the scale of her contribution to Classical Philology.

Olga Mikhailovna Freidenberg (hereafter OF) was born in Odessa. Her mother was Anna Osipovna Pasternak (1862–1944) and her father, a self-taught engineer, inventor, actor, and journalist, was Mikhail Filippovich Freidenberg (1858–1920), who never finished gymnasium but made several impressive inventions. Although few of them were put to practical use it is worth mentioning the most important of them: the invention of the kinetoskope two years prior to the brothers Lumière, and an automatic telephone station for 10,000 numbers which was patented in Great Britain; the Bell Telephone Company paid him £50,000 for the invention to ward off possible competitors; at the start of the Russian-Japanese War he offered the Russian government a submarine project which got lost, whereas a similar project was realized abroad. Mikhail Freidenberg died in 1920 in Petrograd from hunger, cold, and the shock induced by the devastation of post-revolutionary Russia.<sup>6</sup> In more than one way, the father's fate foreshadowed his daughter's: both were brilliantly talented, uniqueness and loneliness marked both their lives, and both died unappreciated. The daughter thought of herself as her father's double.

OF's parents were assimilated Jews. Her father left his parental home when he was 16 and lived a life unrestricted by societal or religious considerations. Anna Pasternak married him against her parents' will and lived without her dowry and their blessing. Her husband wanted his family to get baptized to escape educational and societal limitations instituted for Jews by Tsarist Russia. His wife regarded baptism as the betrayal of her people. In the end, OF's father and brother got baptized; OF, although young and without actual ties to Judaism, did not follow suit, and prevented her mother from getting baptized. She herself was a freethinking European with her own conception of the world and a most perfect 'supra-personal' divine entity of whose presence in nature, history, and the human heart she was aware, although this awareness did not fit into any religious doctrine. She called God 'Lohengrin', whose name ought not to be revealed to anyone. Her conception of God did not

<sup>6</sup> Fortunately M. Freidenberg's archive and models were preserved in Moscow, Petersburg, and Odessa museums; owing to that, the memory of his inventions did not die away.



Fig. 15.1 Photograph of Olga Freidenberg, 1912 by Thalmann frères, Vevey (Switzerland). Reproduced with kind permission of the Olga Freidenberg Archive.

contradict her conception of science: ‘Scientific method,’ she observed in one of her letters to Leonid Pasternak, ‘is a measurement with a ruler; while in its possession and studying a cell, a phrase, a text, or a layer of clay, one unavoidably brushes against God the Lord’ (February 1921<sup>7</sup>).

The family had no stable income, but sometimes Mikhail Freidenberg’s inventions brought in considerable amounts of money. Since 1903 the family had lived in St. Petersburg, and after graduating from the private gymnasium that did not have any restrictions on the admittance of Jews, OF led the life of a daughter from a well-to-do family—attending theatres, reading, and contemplating. She did not strive either to get married or acquire a profession. She travelled a lot around Europe and for long periods of time lived in Germany, Sweden, Italy, and Switzerland [FIG.15.1]. After the Revolution of 1917 she could never visit Europe

<sup>7</sup> The text of the letter to Olga’s uncle survived copied in her notebook and she quoted it in her memoirs.

again. OF studied foreign languages, read world literature in its original languages and sometimes attended lectures at the Higher Courses for Women.<sup>8</sup>

The admittance of Jewish women without the golden medal to the Higher Courses for Women was well-nigh impossible.<sup>9</sup> OF had only a silver medal. Her response was not to lament the case. Instead she declared that a third-rate education for women was not something to strive for.

Sometimes she made attempts to earn money by tutoring or working as a folder in a printing office. Like her father, OF crossed the established socio-economic boundaries with relative ease. When World War I began, she worked as a nurse in one of the private hospitals, participated in many cultural events offered to the wounded and befriended many of them. Her archive contains letters of nearly illiterate peasants which many years later they sent to the 'sister' and 'young lady Olga Mikhailovna' to tell her about the hardships of their lives and share with her the misery of their existence.

In 1910, a sudden closeness developed between OF and her coeval cousin Boris Pasternak, later to become the famous poet but who at that time was only a student. They were raised in the same nursery, but after the families of the Pasternaks and the Freidenbergs settled in Moscow and St. Petersburg respectively, they met only rarely and for short periods of time.

An ordinary family reunion, this time at the sea resort of Merrekuhl where Boris' family vacationed, turned into something out of the ordinary. After that meeting, they wrote to each other breathless, stunned, and, undoubtedly, love letters, as if denying space itself the right to separate them. Each of them knew the other as their own teenaged cousin, and suddenly each apprehended in another a compressed fount of future creativity. They were drawn to express themselves to a 'familiar stranger'; they sensed the absolute uniqueness of each other. Could one distinguish this from love?

OF recalls: 'We could not bear to be parted for a moment in Petersburg. When he left for Moscow it was with the understanding that I would go to him there and then he would bring me back to Petersburg. When he was gone I was in a state of distraction. I waited

<sup>8</sup> On Bestuzhev Higher Courses for Women see the references given in note 3.

<sup>9</sup> Jewish quotas were instituted at the Bestuzhev Higher Courses for Women in 1892. See Nathans (2002) 267, note 35.

for news of him in a frenzy, bereft of feeling and reason, sat in one spot and waited. And he? He had scarcely arrived when he sat down and wrote me a long letter'.<sup>10</sup> In this letter Boris describes OF as eternal femininity, as his Muse to whom he belongs: 'you were freer than I was; you belonged only to your own world, while I belonged to you, to you as a soundless event that made demands just by its presence . . .' (23 July 1910).<sup>11</sup> Their failed love affair converted into a lifelong attachment nurtured by memory of their adolescent love and the correspondence that had lasted for over forty years. The feeling that somehow both of them were chosen, and chosen together, never left them, and Pasternak's letter communicates it: 'You do not know how my tormenting feeling grew and grew until it became obvious to me and to others. As you walked beside me with complete detachment, I could not express it to you. It was a rare sort of closeness, as if we two, you and I, were in love with something that was utterly indifferent to both of us, something that remained aloof from us by virtue of its extraordinary inability to adapt to the other side of life'.<sup>12</sup> After 1936, the cousins never met again. OF never married and never shared her bed with the men she loved. She remained a spinster and was rumoured to be a lesbian. In those days, this type of gossip, which aimed to lower women's ambitions in the professions, accompanied women suspected of striving to assume the positions traditionally occupied by men; that was also true in the case of women in academia. Thankfully, OF knew nothing about that gossip.

OF lacked in her scholarly career any familial support of the kind which most women in academia back then received from their fathers, brothers, husbands or lovers. Her own uncle, Leonid Pasternak, was a Member of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts. He painted the portraits of famous scientists in Germany and attempted to advance his niece's works through his contacts amongst them. His attempts, however, did not meet with any success. When, already the recipient of the degree, OF had to register with the Labor Department's unemployment office, Boris Pasternak tried to help her find employment, but nothing came out of this.

In 1936, the only book by OF published during her lifetime was viciously attacked in press;<sup>13</sup> its author was repeatedly censured and

<sup>10</sup> See Pasternak (1982) 10.

<sup>11</sup> Pasternak (1982) 11.

<sup>12</sup> Pasternak (1982) 15.

<sup>13</sup> Leitenzen (1936).

chastised at the Leningrad State University.<sup>14</sup> Boris sent a letter to Nikolai Bukharin, who at that time was still the editor-in-chief of *Izvestiia*, where the scathing review of her book appeared. In this letter he requested to put an end to his cousin's harassment.<sup>15</sup> The gesture was recklessly bold since Bukharin, as Stalin's political antagonist, was already under house arrest and shortly thereafter was eliminated. One could only be thankful that this letter did no harm. It certainly could be of no help. Nonetheless, Pasternak played a special role in OF's fate as a scholar, of which more later.

To return to the beginning of OF's professional training in 1917, at the age of 27, OF entered the University as a 'non-registered auditor'. In the post-revolutionary university the professors used to announce their courses and the students would choose whatever course they pleased. This short-lived period of exemption from rules went together with the singularities of OF's late start in her education—that is, she was independent in her thinking, was in possession of a fully shaped worldview, and knew eight languages, reading literature in them in the original. Almost from the start, her education went the way of independent research. Her first advisor was A.K. Borozdin, a biblical scholar, a specialist on heresy and on Old Russian literature. He was, however, gravely ill, taught at home and allowed his new student to dig in his vast library.

OF wrote that he taught her two things: how to read the primary sources and how to process the secondary literature. The third step, how to write a scholarly work, she could not learn from him for Borozdin died in the summer of 1918, and many of those whose courses she took also perished because of the hardships of extreme poverty in their daily lives.<sup>16</sup> In the cold and hungry Petrograd of the 1918/19 winter, the unheated university became akin to a ghost town; only the indomitable classicists continued teaching, but at home. That is how OF became a student of classics and took courses with future Members of Academy of Sciences, first I.I. Tolstoy and later S.I. Zhebelev. Under Zhebelev's

<sup>14</sup> See the detective story of the blaming, confiscation, and saving of the book: Braginskaya (1997) 421–33. On the basis of my research, N. Perlina in her critical biography (2002) compiled a chapter: '*Habent sua fata libelli*: Suppression and Release of the Poetics of Plot and Genre', 151–65.

<sup>15</sup> OF copied the letter skipping any mention of Bukharin's name; later she inserted it into her memoirs. See excerpts in English in Pasternak (1982) 167–8.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed account see Perlina (2002) 45ff.

supervision she started working on the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, comparing Slav Medieval and Greek manuscripts of these Apocrypha. Her thesis included an introduction, translations of both Slavonic and Greek versions, and a copious commentary. In 1923 OF graduated from the university. While working on the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, she defined their genre as a species of the Greek novel—not ‘erotic’ but instead ‘enchratic’, since it celebrated chastity and celibacy in the manner characteristic of early Christian writings. Her choice of Thecla’s Acts as a subject of her research was not apparently conditioned by gender issues, although one can notice in the Acts of Thecla, a virgin and protomartyr, a pattern prefiguring OF’s own life, devoted to scholarship. OF skipped graduate studies but a year after she had finished the university her dissertation was completed.<sup>17</sup>

The comparison of plot patterns of the Greek novel and Christian literature found further development in her dissertation as she moved from analysing the Apocryphal Acts to a more general conception of the genesis of the ancient novel. An admirer of the eminent Classical Philologist Hermann Usener, the author of the famous study *Götternamen* (*Names of the Gods*, 1896), OF paid attention to the characters’ names, but unlike Usener, she did not interpret myths as the stories of personified celestial bodies or local heroes. She argued that these names stipulate particular plot motifs which she then discovered in the novels. In this way she arrived at the formulation of a law of plot composition in myth and then in folklore: the semantics of the character’s name, that is, the character’s metaphorical essence, develops into action which comprises

<sup>17</sup> While OF deeply respected her university teachers, she advanced her scholarly growth by perusing outstanding scholarly literature. She loved German scholars of religions such as A. Dietrich and F.K. Movers. In her interpretations OF owes much to H. Usener and O. Weinreich, later and with great enthusiasm she read J.J. Bachofen. In her works, she systematically referred to J.G. Frazer and Cambridge scholars of ritual, singling out F.M. Cornford. She was well acquainted with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Conrad Preuss as well as with É. Durkheim and Paul Saintyves. O. Spengler was important for her because he emphasized the limitations of causality. Among Russian scholars she singled out A.A. Potebnia and A.N. Veselovskii and later V. Ia. Propp’s *Historical Origins of the Fairy Tale*. There is no evidence of OF’s familiarity with Carl Jung’s theories, although she knew the book of his co-author, C. Kérenyi (1927), on the ancient novel (see note 20). As time went by, as a result of the Iron Curtain, Russian scholars abandoned the very idea of communicating with foreign scholarship. In the middle of the 1940s, while writing a book on lyrics OF praised Maurice Bowra but it appears that she never heard the ideas of B. Snell’s and E. Fraenkel’s which were akin to her own.



the motif; the protagonist's deeds are circumscribed by what his or her name means.<sup>18</sup> The analysis of the names suggested to OF the Orient as the novel's homeland. Henceforth in her future research OF considered Greece not in isolation but among other cultures, ancient Oriental, Eastern civilizations, primitive cultures, and cultures of Medieval Europe. In this approach as in many others she was very much ahead her time and unorthodox.

Contrary to E. Rohde's opinion, considered irrefutable in those days,<sup>19</sup> OF saw that the novel does not consist of the combination of different motifs and genre models of classical literature, but is in fact built into the context of Hellenistic literature of the Eastern Mediterranean. Long before the papyrological discoveries relating to the ancient novel OF was able to date the birth of the novel to as early as the second and first centuries BCE; in her opinion, it was the Hellenistic era that created this metaphorical realism, in which the ancient mythological theme of fertility gods' passions was assimilated into the realm of human passions. Soon Carl Kerényi connected the origins of the Greek novel with Egypt and the cult of Isis but he did not touch on genre similarities between the narratives of martyrdom, Acts, Gospels, and the novel.<sup>20</sup> For OF, Egypt in the novel became the top layer of the historical formation of the ancient plot at the time when the Greek novel began taking shape, but she did not see Egypt as the novel's point of origin. She devoted her next work *The Poetics of Plot and Genre* to the similarities between the Hellenistic novel and the myths of the deep Archaic period, emphasizing that its authors were unaware of those similarities.<sup>21</sup>

OF singled out two cycles of mythological ideas, tentatively naming one 'Adonias' and connecting it with death and resurrection, and the other, 'Heraclias', linked to the struggle and victory over death. The cult of the fertility gods corresponds to the first one, and the cycle of solar and zoomorphic images to the second.

Myths convey the change of seasons, alternation of day and night, rising and setting of the Sun and the Moon, cycles of death and life, the perpetual whirlpool of blossoming and wilting as the protagonists' vanish

<sup>18</sup> See OF's analysis of the name Falconilla in Freidenberg (2002a).

<sup>19</sup> See Rohde (1876).

<sup>20</sup> See Kerényi (1927) and Friedenberg (1919–1923) Table of Contents and 82–6.

<sup>21</sup> See Braginskaya (2002) 64–76; Perlina (2002) 47–58.

and re-appear, as the vicissitudes of their fates; the journey to Heaven or the Underworld is conveyed as the gift of death, loss of life and the birth of progeny. The introduction of an ethical or religious perspective into these narratives turns these concrete images into a didactic allegory. The 'Heracles' cycle is the foundation of the plots of suffering, temporary disappearance, 'martyrdoms' and 'deaths' in those episodes of the novel where the heroes 'freely and happily emerge from fire, beasts' jaws and the sea abyss', as well as in the episodes of Christian hagiographies and Apocryphal Acts. OF was the first to advance the idea that, while the Greek novel was a new and unprecedented phenomenon in ancient literature, yet unbeknownst to the novels' authors, they absorbed and gave shape to a thousand years of antiquity and the mythological pattern got shrouded in the fabric of pseudo-historical 'contemporaneity'.

Being a pioneer in many things, with a propensity to approach scholarly problems in an unorthodox manner, OF allows one to consider the role of the marginal figure in various professions. Indeed, OF was an adult among the newly enrolled young students, a Russian scholar studying Western civilization, a Jew among Russians, a woman among men. Whether any of these experiences of marginality influenced her singular ability for innovative approaches in her work is a contentious question.

To arrange the defence of her doctoral dissertation on the novel, OF turned to N. Ia. Marr, who was destined to play an enormous role in her fate. Nikolai Iakovlevich Marr (1864–1934) was a specialist of the East and the Caucasus, a philologist, polyglot, historian, ethnographer, and archaeologist, most famous for his excavation of the ancient Armenian capital of Ani and publications of ancient Georgian and Armenian manuscripts. He had been a member of the Imperial Academy since 1912 and was extremely influential in academic circles. After the revolution his renown became even more widespread due to the creation by him of the 'New Teachings of language' or so called 'Japhetic theory',<sup>22</sup> which targeted the origins of language and challenged Indo-European linguistics.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This term introduced by Marr stood for a group of archaic languages shaped by Marr himself and named after Biblical Japhet.

<sup>23</sup> Marr suggested that all languages undergo the same stages of the so-called 'glottogonic process' and that different language families do not exist. Instead all the languages, after undergoing similar stages of development, produce hybrids of themselves after they come into contact. The Japhetic languages—Caucasian and Basque—do not belong to a family; they represent the most ancient stage of that 'glottogony',

In his eager pursuit to advance and spread his theory, Marr identified 'the areas of sameness' between his teachings and the regime's ideology, one of which was, for example, his view about the 'class essence' of the language. From the late 1920s, and all the way to 1950s the new doctrine on language enjoyed state support in the USSR. The new people in the academic world who started rising to governing positions from the mid-1930s made their career not through scholarship but by way of Komsomol and Communist Party organizations, and they began using Marr as the ramming machine for their advancement. Some contemporaries and historians of science regarded Marr in his later period as mentally impaired and their evaluation of his theories reflected this attitude. After Marr suffered a stroke in 1932 and then died in 1934, to use Marrism as a linguistic equivalent of Marxism became even more convenient.<sup>24</sup>

OF produced a remarkable characterization of Marr: 'For him nothing existed except palaeontological semantics applied to individual words. In this he was the master, artist, genius, and god. For that he would flatter, be wilful, join the Party, keep a mistress, have a wife and a son. It is not that he was despotic or intolerant, it is that he tolerated nothing save his own scholarly method, created by him, and suffered no divergence from his own passion. There was something about him that made him look as if he existed beyond class or any other convention, the way children do. He was cunning, ambitious, power hungry, unjust, yet simultaneously he struck one with his sincere naivety, lofty simplicity, placidity, and there was neither greed nor pettiness in him as if he were cleansed of them. As a true artist, he was smaller than his own art, did not know how to interpret it, writhed in it as if in snares. As a genius, he was one-sided and owned nothing except creativity'.<sup>25</sup>

with different centers of origin. In his theory the touch of genius went hand in hand with lack of critical thinking and complete randomness, although one can detect in his works the inchoative stages of linguistic typology and an approach to studying a unified Afro-Eurasian protolanguage. Marr did much for the description of languages of the peoples in Russian Empire who did not have written language; he combined the study of culture, thinking, and the language; in the social sphere in 1920s he shielded scholars from persecutions.

<sup>24</sup> On Marr and his role in the scholarly career of OF see also Perlina (2002) 69–83, 97–115.

<sup>25</sup> Friedenberga (1939–1947) Notebook 5 f. 67.

For a historian of scholarship, OF's 'Marrism' occupies a centre-stage position in her biography. Her critics, predominantly among classical philologists, *believe* that to identify her as a Marrist is enough to discredit her as a scholar and invalidate her ground-breaking works as Marrist nonsense. There are indeed references to Marrist etymologies in some of her works. Yet, OF was not a linguist but was, undoubtedly, independent in her work on mythological semantics, unlike Marr who followed such scholars as A.N. Veselovskii, A.A. Potebnia, E. Cassirer, and L. Lévi-Bruhl. To list OF among 'Marrists' can be supported by the facts of everyday scholarly life rather than by the content of her works.

Marr highly evaluated OF's work on the Greek novel and on 11 November 1924, at the Institute of Comparative Study of Literatures and Languages of West and East (ILlAZV) directed the defence of her dissertation despite the hostility with which the academic milieu received her. It is hard to say whether scholarly or social causes were behind this attitude. Perhaps Marr's note sent to OF during the heated debate, and saved in her archives as a relic, can serve as a commentary about the atmosphere at her defence: 'Please, do not be nervous: it is clear your interpretation is overly novel and original'.

Neither should one overlook OF's status as an outsider in the academic world. She was an 'alien' and during the defence behaved without any regard for the protocol of the debate, partly intentionally and partly on account of her lack of experience. Even her application to ILlAZV requesting the admission of her dissertation for defence was written in an impermissibly personal tone: 'My research that took me five years to complete, from 1919 to 1923, was done under the conditions of the revolutionary period, and so it should be treated in accordance with its character and execution. There is no press currently and no way to make my work public in any of the ways previously possible. Having overcome thousands of obstacles, struggling to keep my work in existence, I finally have the good fortune to give it life with the Institute's help and I hope that being a scholarly centre, it will help me and not suffocate my work' (Leningrad, 9 April 1924<sup>26</sup>).

After the Revolution, all the degrees and dissertation defences were abolished along with the nobility titles. It was precisely because academic

<sup>26</sup> An application is on its way to press together with the dissertation.

titles and degrees still retained significance for the academic milieu that this milieu had for some time resisted their restoration under the new regime; it was especially true in case of a woman who received her education after the Revolution. This conservative attitude was in stark contrast with OF's: 'I am not offering my work to those who wish to treat scholarship placidly, with the assessment established once and for all, and always dispassionate. My explanations are directed toward those for whom scholarship is above all the expression of life nurtured by it, from which it derives good and evil and to which its results stream back—to its hostile womb. Should we forget our epoch, face the unfolding of our life dispassionately, with the standard assessments of the Ice Age? Let him who can do that. I do not wish to forget the days in which I have lived and continue living; the acuity of my time is my corner stone. Hence a formalist should not embark on the criticism of my work, for it is the work of an apprentice and for this reason alone, from an ordinary point of view, is not to be considered seriously . . .' (Introduction to Dissertation).

This introduction antagonized those who identified themselves with the word 'Formalist', that is, both the old academic school and the young formalists of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language.<sup>27</sup> She, in all likelihood, meant academic positivist scholarship. Her 'Ice Age' comment was not about wearing overcoats in unheated university lecture halls but about the pre-Revolutionary ways of doing things, which she labelled as hackneyed although the academic majority perceived those ways as the 'eternal values' of positive knowledge, threatened as they were even without OF's attacks. Seeking to receive recognition in the scholarly community, OF seemed to be doing everything to oppose herself to that community.

Besides, OF's discovery of genetic and generic affinity between the Christian apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the pagan Greek novel was for that time too new and shocking. Although Zhebelev recognized OF's conclusions and they were in time accepted by the famous A. von Harnack,<sup>28</sup> OF's younger colleagues from Zhebelev's seminar, the

<sup>27</sup> OPOIaZ was a prominent group of linguists and literary critics in St. Petersburg founded in 1916 and dissolved by the early 1930s; under political pressure 'formalism' came to be a political term of opprobrium.

<sup>28</sup> L.O. Pasternak handed to A. von Harnack a concise report of the theses written in German. In his reply on 28 October 1926 Harnack wrote that the work by OF persuaded

philologists with the 'pre-revolutionary experience', immediately noticed that OF's method was at variance with traditional classical philology and rejected it as non-scholarly. At her defence the petition collecting signatures against awarding OF the degree was passed around. Virtually ostracized by her university colleagues and only one year later, OF received an adjunct position at ILIaZV thanks to Marr's efforts.

As time passed, the works of the French folklorist Pierre Saintyves (Émile Nourry) and of Kerényi became known in Petrograd and the similarity of these foreign scholars' approach to OF's method<sup>29</sup> somewhat reconciled her colleagues with her works. Her own milieu, 'the hot pulse of scholarly life, the atmosphere of important scholarship', OF found not at ILIaZV, where she worked officially, but at the Japhetic Institute's workshop that studied mythology, folklore, plot structure and, in general, so-called 'paleontological semantics'.<sup>30</sup> The Japhetic Institute, where she worked for free, with only ten scholars listed as its members at the outset of its existence, was situated in Marr's apartment and due to the informal atmosphere that reigned there attracted numerous humanities scholars of Leningrad.<sup>31</sup>

It was at this workshop that OF developed a close relationship with I.G. Frank-Kamenetsky (1880–1937), a scholar of Hebrew and Egyptology educated in Germany, with whom she shared her scholarly interests and ideas. She called him 'a husband given by nature, the way grace is given from God', although nothing in their relationship resembled marriage, except strong affection and similar ideas about mythological thought. Frank-Kamenetsky introduced her to the works of Ernst Cassirer.<sup>32</sup> OF was actively involved in the workshop's activities: she regularly gave talks at its sessions; she also initiated and organized the only collective volume

him and that several ambiguities cannot disprove the principal conclusions. He also complimented the erudition and critical sense of the author.

<sup>29</sup> Saintyves (1922) and (1923).

<sup>30</sup> The members of the 'mythic' department were V. Th. Shishmarev (chief), V.L. Komarovich (Russian studies), I.G. Frank-Kamenetskiy (ancient Israel and Egypt), V.V. Struve (Egypt), T.S. Passek (archeology), B.A. Latynin (archeology and linguistics), B.V. Kazanskiy (classicist and member of OPOIaZ), B.M. Engelgardt who wrote on Veselovskiy, formal school etc.

<sup>31</sup> With the lapse of time the Japhetic Institute with its informal atmosphere turned into a 'normal' academic institution (Institute of language and mentality named after Nikolay Marr; contemporary Institute of Linguistic Studies in Petersburg).

<sup>32</sup> See Perlina (2002) 88–95.

produced by that scholarly group, which included two major contributions of her own.<sup>33</sup>

In these particular studies, Marxist influence is clearly pronounced. In her memoirs, OF writes with irritation that the notion of stages of cultural development were attributed to her and expressed hope that the future reader would separate her own thoughts from those forced on her. By and large, those were vain hopes.

The period of 1930–1933 was characterized by OF's most active societal and public involvement. She was appointed to various administrative positions in research institutions and not only did she perform her duties diligently, but she also expressed a naïve and boastful pride about various signs of her power and status of which she wrote to L. Pasternak's family. However, the turn of the 1920s in the Soviet Union has been described by many historians of the period as an obvious and irrevocable breaking point. OF wrote about it while Stalin was still alive:

Those were the years when the creeping bloody regime suddenly became a fact . . . The entire Soviet society with its intelligentsia have been trying to comprehend the events that were occurring, trust their logic, understand, learn . . . In 1931 I was already a Soviet human being eager to gain insight, understand, respect and build the new. But with Stalin's reign came the system whose essence nobody as yet comprehended and could only knock their heads against it. In hindsight one can see how simple it was: the strangulation of the country through hunger and carefully managed destruction; total suppression of personality, thought, creativity, human individuality. This system was put into effect through record numbers of denunciations, political and 'ideological' persecutions as well as public abuses. I remember overall perplexity at the first instance of printed abusive language accompanied by personal names and mudslinging. I remember the first campaigns undermining all and any competent authority, whether professional, political or moral. The destruction as a political end in itself was at its very beginning.<sup>34</sup>

It was also then that the revolutionary period in education came to an end and the return to old forms necessitated the resurrection of Classics Departments. The Petersburg classicists were not 'Soviet' enough, since by origin and upbringing they belonged to the upper crust of society. The offer to set up and chair the department was awarded to OF by virtue of her democratic origin, post-revolutionary education, and her association with

<sup>33</sup> Freidenberg (1991a) and (1991b).

<sup>34</sup> Freidenberg (1939–47) Notebook 7, f.230v.

Marr. She invited the 'dubious' nobility to join the department where all professors were entitled to their own 'schools', which was as unusual according to the unanimous view of the totalitarian system as hiring exiled scholars or returnees from the camps and exile, which she did. OF was in charge of the department until 1949, with a disruption caused by evacuation to Saratov between 1941 and 1944.

While OF's association with Marr assisted the advancement of her career, she herself, in 1931, moved away from him and especially from the group surrounding him, which turned into a sect and used the influence of its leader to secure their own position. The theory of four elements out of which the words in all the languages were created was regarded by her as nonsensical mysticism. The dislike was mutual. The 'Japhetologists' rejected OF's articles in the periodicals under their control, and they even blocked her work's publication in the collection dedicated to Marr's memory;<sup>35</sup> her *Memoirs of Marr* was published only half a century later.<sup>36</sup>

It was I.I. Meschaninov, an archaeologist, who became an Academician owing to Marr and, although at that time he did not conduct any research in linguistics, became Marr's successor. As time went by, awards, positions, and titles were showered upon him and he became the official head of Soviet linguistics. He did not need any noticeable and especially independent figures in Marr's ambit. It was, in fact, Meschaninov who through his acolytes organized the ideological defamation of OF's *The Poetics of Plot and Genre*, defamation which at that time endangered not merely the career but the freedom and life of its author.

Fate spared OF's life, but the space within which she could be active was limited to her department; till the end of her life she was barred from publishing outside the Leningrad University editions; the latter were deposited in the country's most important libraries but were otherwise difficult to access.<sup>37</sup> Fortunately, Meschaninov's desire to force out his potential rival coincided with OF's own desire to distance herself from the 'Japhetic' school. In 1937 Frank-Kamenetsky was hit by a car and died. Henceforth nothing connected OF with Marr's milieu. It was a hard blow for OF when her monograph on Hesiod was rejected for publication

<sup>35</sup> Freidenberg (1991c).

<sup>36</sup> Freidenberg (1991d, 1988 in Russian).

<sup>37</sup> Unlike the Western universities Proceedings and Bulletins published by the universities in the USSR accepted mostly authors affiliated with the home institution.



(1933–1939, over 700 typed pages).<sup>38</sup> Thereafter, her only printed output consisted of the abstracts of her monumental research. This situation persisted until the end of her life—her last publication was the abstract on Sappho of which she wrote to Boris Pasternak: ‘I am suffocating from being unable to publish. The members of the editorial board publish only themselves (*Once Again Concerning the Question of . . .*). It is not only because they don’t publish *me*— they don’t publish anyone but themselves. And I write one book after another. Like the Wandering Jew, I am the itinerant pharmacist peddling extracts. Oh, this tragedy of summaries and abstracts! And even they exist only under the best circumstances’ (24. XI. 1946).<sup>39</sup>

Simultaneously OF composed her memoirs about the years of Stalin’s dictatorship: ‘The notes, written amid searches, arrests, executions are my protest as a human being against the Antichrist’s artillery’.<sup>40</sup> To the extent that OF preserved her own personality, she was nevertheless doomed to obscurity as a scholar; inasmuch as she maintained her reputation in the academic circles as a follower of the ‘New Teachings on Language’, as the department chair and a Soviet university professor, her personality was imperilled.

During the blockade of Leningrad, OF had stayed in the city. The goods stored by OF for her brother, A.M. Freidenberg, who was arrested in 1937 and thought by her to be in the camps, allowed her and her elderly mother to survive the hunger of the winter of 1941/42. She did not know at the time that the sentence ‘ten years without the right of correspondence’ meant that her brother had been executed. Her testimony about the siege is a matter of future publication, since so far only isolated excerpts have appeared in Russian and English.<sup>41</sup> Her account about life under the siege makes an overwhelming impression not only due to its description of the unspeakable suffering and monstrous treatment of the population by its government, but also due to the scope of her vision of the events. It is not simply the testimony of a human being who survived the siege, because she measured the events against her life in historical context rather than only as an individual experience.

<sup>38</sup> Post mortem four chapters and excerpts from the book were published, as Freidenberg (1973), Freidenberg (1988a), Freidenberg (1990), and Freidenberg (2007).

<sup>39</sup> Pasternak (1982) 263. <sup>40</sup> Freidenberg (1939–47) Notebook 34, f.19.

<sup>41</sup> Freidenberg (2002b) and (1987).

OF's grasp of the essence of Stalin's regime, that she felt compelled to write about at the time when Soviet people burnt everything they had ever written, is stunning. The most astonishing fact was that in the besieged Leningrad, although emaciated and scurvy-ridden OF continued to write, producing three monographs,<sup>42</sup> and the part of her memoirs entitled *The Siege of a Human*. In the post-war years she completed another three books, none of which was published during her lifetime.<sup>43</sup>

After the war, the atmosphere in the country was hardly better than during the war.<sup>44</sup> When the department members returned from the evacuation, OF was again appointed the department chair. She had been striving repeatedly to give up her position so as to escape the necessity of participating in never-ending kangaroo trials, to be neither a victim of, nor a witness to the defamation of the country's best scholars and the destruction of the University. The Anti-Semitic campaign conducted under the slogan of the struggle against so called 'cosmopolitanism' was directed both against the Jews and any contacts between Russian and foreign scholarship.

In 1948–1949, Marrists intensified their rabble-rousing activity. Suddenly in 1950 Stalin interfered in the linguistic debates initiated in *Pravda*, the Communist Party main newspaper. Against all expectations he took the side of the opponents of Marr's teachings. Thereafter defamation and expulsions befell adherents of Marrism as before they had befallen the people accused of being partial to Western scholarship; in both cases public repentance was required.

<sup>42</sup> The first, written between 1939 and 1943, *Introduction into the Theory of the Folklore in Antiquity. Lectures*, first published (with cuts) in Freidenberg (1978a) 9–169. The second (1998) and third (2008) editions were complete. The second was *Homeric Etudes* (1941–1949), consisting of (i) *Komicheskoe do komedii* (*Comic before comedy*), published 45 years later as Freidenberg (1988b), and (ii) *Gomerovskoie sravneniie* (*Homeric similes*) published as a concise paper as Freidenberg (1991e), first published in Russian in 1946; The third, *Gomerovskij primer* (*Homeric Example*), is not published. *The Origins of Description* (1939–1945) is not published.

<sup>43</sup> 1) *Palliata* (1945–1946) on Roman comedy partly published as Freidenberg (1988c): see also Freidenberg (1995). 2) *Obraz i poniatii* (1945–1954) with a large section on tragedy, published as Freidenberg (1997). The section on tragedy is at pp. 189–458. This was first published in Russian in 1978 (abridged version), then twice (1998, 2008) in full (*Obraz i poniatie in Mifi literatura drevnosti*). 3) *Sapho: k proiskhozhdeniiu grecheskoi liriki* (*Sappho: on the origins of Greek Lyric*; 1946).

<sup>44</sup> See selection from the memoirs: *Budet li moskovskij Nurnberg?* (*Is the MoscowNurnberg Process Coming?*) (from the Diary of 1946–1948) ed. Jud.M. Kagan//Sintaksis.—Paris, 1986.—N. 16.—P. 149–63.

OF did not 'repent'. She gave up her position as the department chair in 1949 and in 1951 she retired. After her retirement, OF spent her time putting in order her private papers and scholarly writings while completing her book *Image and Concept*, which summed up all of her findings and years of research. In 1955 she died from cancer; only six people attended her funeral, not a single person from the official world was there, and for many years her thoughts and manuscripts sank into the protective silence of a private archive. At the end of the 1940s, Iurii Lotman, a future renowned creator of Russian semiotics, was a student at the Leningrad State University. He recollected that he had never heard of the scholar called Olga Freidenberg, nor of her works and theories. One of the most remarkable innovative minds of the twentieth century was remembered by many as a kind and compassionate person, who eagerly helped poor instructors and students with money and was not afraid to protect the persecuted and even—something unthinkable in Soviet Russia—the arrested. Many others thought of her as a Marrist with a difficult personality far removed from classical philology. But nobody saw or wanted to see her scholarly achievements, much the same way as in the post-War Budapest University there was no place for Karl Kerényi. Three quarters of a century after OF's last publication in her lifetime, Iurii Lotman published three articles about her,<sup>45</sup> and wrote about her as an outstanding theoretician of culture.<sup>46</sup>

If decades after the death of a classical philologist, the philologist's works are recovered from dust, published and translated into foreign languages, and if the person known only to a narrow circle of colleagues becomes the subject of scholarly articles, academic surveys<sup>47</sup> and dissertations<sup>48</sup> this is a sufficient testimony to OF's unique fate. During her lifetime OF published twenty articles, one monograph, ten short abstracts and excerpts from her essays, and served as an editor of three volumes. In her iron trunk she left ten scholarly monographs, dozens of articles, thirty-four notebooks of her memoir *Race of Life* and among her correspondence there were 130 letters from her cousin Boris Pasternak. Posthumously over 100 of her works have been published in different

<sup>45</sup> *Iz nauchnogo naslediiia O.M. Freidenberg: Proischozhdeniie parodii; Proischozhdeniie literaturnoj intrigi; Chto takoe eschatologiii?*, ed. in Lotman (1973) 490–514.

<sup>46</sup> Lotman (1976). <sup>47</sup> Perlina (2002); Kabanov (2002).

<sup>48</sup> Moss (1984); Nikonova (2003).

languages, primarily in Russian. In addition, over 200 publications and significant fragments in other scholars' works about OF should also be included in this list.<sup>49</sup> The number of references and allusions to her are hard to estimate.

She was not recognized by her classicist colleagues because she was a philosopher of culture who used the material of the ancient world for her work. For a classicist the scope of her vision was too grand and for the reader without a classical education her works were too difficult to comprehend. She did not declare herself to be a philosopher, and the sole reason was not that in her time and country the only philosophy allowed to exist was the Soviet brand of Marxism. She herself did not immediately identify her works as philosophical. At the beginning of the 1970s, it was Russian semiotic studies, the theory of signs and symbols, of cultural communication based on linguistics and philology, which turned out to be the scholarly trend that claimed OF's works.

During the time of Khrushchev's thaw (1954–1961), the field of linguistics assumed the function of a new post-totalitarian humanities discipline and crafted a model of scholarship for all humanitarian disciplines emancipated from ideology. Marr was a symbol of ideologized anti-scholarship and therefore was denounced twice—first under Stalin and then from the standpoint of a new structural linguistics and of the resurrected field of Indo-European language studies. Nonetheless, the leading names in the structural and semiotic school in Russia, such as Iu. Lotman, V.V. Ivanov, and E.M. Meletinsky were interested in OF's legacy even though Lotman identified her association with Marr as the reason for her being erased from memory.<sup>50</sup> Her first posthumous publication was in fact prepared by Lotman rather than by classicists, or her students, or younger colleagues; the second one was overseen by Meletinsky and myself, N.V. Braginskaya.<sup>51</sup> The scholars of the 1970s gathered anything valuable that had survived under Stalin. That explains why the first translations of OF's works into English appeared in the volumes devoted to Russian semiotics and formalism.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See the bibliography at <http://freidenberg.ru/>.

<sup>50</sup> Lotman (1976) 257–8.

<sup>51</sup> Freidenberg (1991f), published in Russian in 1973.

<sup>52</sup> See Freidenberg (1976) and (1978b). The first draft of the latter was published in Russian in 1926.

In OF's scholarly fate two people played serious if exactly opposite roles: N. Ia. Marr and Boris Pasternak. The former helped her during his life and harmed her reputation posthumously. The latter could not help his cousin in any practical way, but it was thanks to him that, after their deaths, her works did not sink into oblivion. Pasternak's world-wide fame as a poet and a Nobel Prize winner, allowed OF to emerge from the darkness of oblivion, when their correspondence in English translation became a bestseller and attracted the attention of the press and the public. The reader was surprised to discover such a previously unfamiliar correspondent of a famous poet.

Usually when the famous writers' correspondence is published, their correspondents' letters are used for commentaries at best. In this case, the letters of both sides were published and the great poet's cousin appeared to be his equal in the power of the word and inner freedom. Aiming for sensationalism, reviewers proclaimed OF to be the first and most important love in the poet's life. This journalistic reception reflected a certain degree of awe for the poet's correspondent. Neither the historians of Russian literature nor the classicists of Europe and America have ever heard anything about this professor of classical philology. This correspondence was passed from hand to hand in the circles of the intelligentsia and was even forwarded to Andrei Sakharov in exile. This way the Correspondence and simply the hearsay about it awoke an interest in OF's legacy. (I discovered the letters at the end of 1973, or beginning of 1974).

OF's theoretical ideas are important. As an introduction to these ideas and a concise way of winning the interest of the Western readers a synopsis of her ideas is provided in this chapter, to encourage further work with her ideas and with the hope that her works will find their translators. A contemporary of Russian formalists, OF was never theoretically close to that school. Admittedly, she did share with the formalists some common opponents, such as those who considered the evolution of culture as a linear chronological process. She was close to the theory of nomogenesis developed by a biologist L.S. Berg, which significantly contributed to the modern synthetic theory of evolution. She approached the dynamics of culture, not unlike Goethe or Cuvier, as a complex, iterative, recursive, spasmodic, polygenic, and catastrophic movement: interference and interaction between separate and ever new phenomena, which collide, encompass or amplify each other, constitute the uninterrupted process of

the whole in which, paradoxically, the proximate repels, and the opposite ensures continuity. From this it is rather obvious that although OF was a professor of classical philology who wrote on Homer, Hesiod, Aristophanes, tragedy, Plato, the Greek novel and the Apocrypha, Archaic lyric, Sappho, and *fabula palliata*, she hardly fitted the conventional standard of a classicist. Generally speaking, this is not untypical of major classical scholars, which is why they are often resented by their peers.

In her works of 1925, primarily in the *Idea of Parody*<sup>53</sup> and *The System of Literary Plot*,<sup>54</sup> OF in a condensed way, and sometimes rather enigmatically, presents many far-reaching insights that she would develop in her later scholarly life. In the former she reviews the Medieval *sotties* and clownish liturgies (all those genres which decades later received the name of 'carnavalesque culture' and became known as Mikhail Bakhtin's discovery). She then turns to the presence of the serious and the sacred in the lowered form in comedy, in the shape of hymns, theogonies, mysteries, as well as in the representations of the gods in hilaro-tragedy and in the archaic genres of the satyricon and the phlyax. The archaic parody, which, unlike the individual, literary one, is based on ritual and on the 'substratum of the impersonal psyche', was not, according to OF, a result of the decline of religious consciousness.

As archaic parody demonstrates, the proximity of tragedy and comedy must be explained by their common origin, rather than by the influence that the older genre exerted on the younger one. OF deemed naive the explanation of the two-tiered structure of the tragedies of Shakespeare and Spanish playwrights by reference to the author's great knowledge of life, even if the modern reader and spectator might see it as such. The two-tiered structure—serious drama accompanied by comic relief, interlude or intermission—is a general phenomenon found in Hindu and Japanese theatre, and if one looks carefully, in theatre all over the world. It follows that what is at issue is not Shakespeare's genius, but the origins of drama itself. Later OF would write a work about 'the comic before comedy', in which she will develop the idea that the archaic laughter or 'the comic' have mythological semantics linked to fertility. It is from such a comic genre similar to satyr play, that tragedy was born. We learn about satyr play later when this as it were 'embryonic' form of tragedy

<sup>53</sup> See previous note.

<sup>54</sup> Freidenberg (1988d).

stuck to its historical form, entering the tetralogy of performance. The content that is satyric, political, and comic (already in the Aristophanic meaning of these words) fills the archaic form that was left behind by rituals of fertility with their apotropaic invective. 'The comic before comedy' did not deride anything lofty or sacred, but rather affirmed them with the help of the benevolent element of trickery and laughter.

According to OF, the specificity of the comic-realistic genre lies in the selection of only one cluster or filiation of images, specifically one that conveys the semantics of fertility. The metaphors of fertility are the closest to everyday life. Food, the reproductive act, and physical deformity live as metaphors in folklore and also exist as real facts of life. The particular connection between cult laughter and the image of fertility is traced in the monograph *The Comic before Comedy*. OF links the appearance of the comedic, in the place where the mythological comical used to exist, to the emergence of the category of quality and thereby of evaluation and of ethical concepts. This special quality of ancient realism is the subject of the chapter 'Vulgar realism' in *Poetics of Plot and Genre*. OF notes that the idea of 'real' is presented as something void of beauty and grandeur, as something deformed by excessive characterization and similar to grotesque. Greek classicism does not create noble realistic characters; it creates only the lofty and the base, praise or invective. If in Greek literature reality signifies something debased and comical, in Greek philosophy reality is conceived of as a negative value, contrasted with the 'positive principle of the abstract and the substantial'. The comical is created long before comedy from the peculiar cognitive or 'gnoseological' given: reality is perceived as the semblance of true being.

In another work dating from 1925, *The System of Literary Plot*, OF formulated the main thesis of the so-called genetic method: plot and genre present the worldview in its genesis. In other words, mythological content, once it has lost its actuality, undergoes sedimentation as literary form. The simplest illustration of this tenet is the well-known phenomenon of the reconceptualization of ritual: religious performances, more conservative than words, outlive their own meanings and become customs for whose explanation the 'sacred stories' are then invented. When analysing ancient literature one does not need to emphasize the structure of the genre: genre in this case is not the formal part, but almost a 'biological' basis of the work. The generic structure can

also function separately outside the confines of the literary material, as can be observed in folklore and in pre-religious cult. The Saturnalia exist in reality as well as in the religious calendar, and the inversion of master/servant relationships finds its place in the literary *fabula palliata*. Whereas the traditionality of a genre is intrinsic to its very definition, considering plot as a similarly tradition-bound element was a novel thought at the time when OF began to ponder the origins of plot. OF put forward a notion of the long-lasting epoch of the 'ready-made plot', which continued in Europe all the way to the eighteenth century and after which the time of relatively free fictional plots arrived.

Looking for a name for what she was researching, OF put forward the neologism 'semantology'. Under *semantics* she understood not the realm of meaning in general, but only the mythological system of meaning. For OF, the meaning of the myth is always hidden and does not exist outside its expression through 'metaphors'. OF calls the mythological metaphors 'pre-metaphors' since they do not involve an actual transfer of meaning. Mythological 'metaphor' endows an amorphous meaning—the mythical image—with a capacity of being expressed and localized, a certain state of concentration. According to OF's definition, myth is an imaginative representation in the form of several metaphors, from which logical causality is absent and where objecthood, space, and time are understood in a way that is non-differentiated and concrete, where human being and the world, the subject and the object are one. Myth penetrates all of primitive life: actions have mythological semantics, as well as things, speech, and 'gods'. There is no single pattern according to which myth circulates. Having from their very beginning a linguistic and rhythmic texture, verbal myths function as lamentations, wailings, invocations, addresses, curses, laudations, exclamations, and exchanges of questions and answers. When OF speaks of the verbal, material, and performative aspects of myth she is not referring to separate and parallel circulation of these forms. Verbal myths are staged, performative ones are verbalized, and both accumulate material accoutrements. Myth is imagistic, but—as if to tempt naïve historicists—it takes forms that employ realistic categories.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> All mythologies, whether given in a verbal or non-verbal plot, are nothing but 'cosmogonies-eschatologies' yet, inasmuch as a hunting collective conceives of its being as the dying and the resurrection of 'totems', their fight or journey (totem being a conventional name for the subject-object totality comprising the world and the self). Myths are to such an



Since in traditional cultures, according to OF, content does not generate new forms for itself, a system of images that belongs to one code (for example, zoomorphism) is not superseded by other systems of images (such as vegetative or agrarian metaphorical systems) but is instead placed in a relationship of 'synonymity' to it. The peculiar systematicity of ancient plots that are founded on mythology derives from the anti-causality of their principle of construction, which combines elements whose legitimacy is grounded in different eras. Since the sequence of these elements does not follow the rules of logic and lacks a unifying centre, the 'syntax' of a literary work in antiquity is informed by the principle of 'apposition'.<sup>56</sup>

The rewriting of myths in conceptual terms, the role of conceptual processes in the emergence of poetic categories, and literature approached as material for a theory of cognition are topics that preoccupied OF in the 1940s and 1950s. In *Image and Concept* OF demonstrated that the ancient concept is formally built on the semantics of the image. Thus an emergent conceptual phenomenon is christened using old imagistic diction, that is, the content of a concrete mythical image is transformed into the texture of an abstract concept. In such a contradictory fashion, with the abstract comprehended through the sensuous, the artistic image is born as a symbiosis of image and concept. Ancient concepts emerged in the shape of metaphors (lit. 'transfer' or 'transposition'), whereby the old identity of meanings of the 'original' (mythological semantics) and its 'transposition' (mythological pre-metaphor) was replaced by a mere illusion of such identity. Exact correspondence was transformed into a patent lack of veracity, into an instance of saying one thing by means of another (*allegorein*).

Poetic metaphor thus resulted spontaneously as a form of image in the function of concept. In order for a metaphor to come into being, there is one necessary precondition: 'two concrete meanings should be

extent devoid of the tendency to lay bare their content, they are so distant from it morphologically that, being self-sufficient, they immediately take on an autonomous function 'of being emplotted (*siuzhetnost'*)'.

<sup>56</sup> This principle, often incorrectly interpreted as that of 'insertion', is discussed in OF's *Semantics of the composition of Hesiod's 'Works and Days'*.

torn asunder, one of them remaining concrete, and the other being its transposition into the conceptual realm' (*Image and Concept*). The difference between the ancient and the modern metaphor consists in the fact that underneath the ancient 'transfer' there must be found a genetic identity between the semantics of that which supplies properties that are being 'transferred' and the semantics of that onto which these properties are transferred. Image can carry logical and cognitive functions even as it remains an image, whereas concept may become a determining factor in the rise of poetic categories. Mythical image originates in antiquity as the lowest form of thought, yet eventually, when concepts come to inform poetic images, it emerges as the highest cognitive form. Conversely, logical conceptual thought may become enervated and vacuous; once formal exactitude has been achieved, and the production of images becomes the highest form of cognition in science, including physics.

It is no easy task to summarize theoretical works that, rather than containing one or two insights, are permeated by thought. Neither should we forget that, beginning in the 1930s, OF lived in a society closed to the outside world and was deprived of any contact with foreign scholars. As result, she remained unaware of many achievements of her contemporaries. The converse is also true of modern scholars, such as George Lakoff who was ignorant of her *Image and Concept*, a work that anticipated his books by decades. OF's works call for translation into European languages: I am confident that they have not dated, and that some of her thoughts still await us in the future.

One of the most striking things about OF is her own earnest hope that her prolific works on so many aspects of ancient literature would one day be read and her contribution appreciated; that the manuscripts which somehow escaped fire during the icy winters of the siege of Leningrad and which somehow avoided annihilation by the bombs and disappearance in the KGB archives will survive and reach the readers. It seems appropriate, given the degree to which she was silenced in her own lifetime, and vilified at other times both from within the Communist establishment and by its critics, to leave her with her last word written on her last book *Image and Concept*, translated now into many languages. That note was written not in pen but in stylus, as if she were returning to the times of the papyri:

I shall have to begin with the same thing: the prison-like conditions in which this work was written.

I do not have the right of access to scholarly books. Therefore I have written from memory. I have been isolated from scholarly thought. My pupils and my friends have turned away, my classroom has been taken from me.

Under these conditions I decided to synthesize my thirty-seven-year experience in research and fall silent.

Passer-by! Pause at this work and pray for scholarship.

20 March 1954

Olga Freidenberg

# Women Classical Scholars

*Unsealing the Fountain from  
the Renaissance to Jacqueline  
de Romilly*

EDITED BY

Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall

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