

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

U. Kleinhempel

RILKE’S TRANSLATION OF “THE SLOVO O POLKU IGORYEVA” (“THE SONG OF IGOR’S CAMPAIGN”) IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS SPIRITUAL AND POETOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT¹

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) translated “The Slovo o Polku Igoryeva” (“The Song of Igor’s Campaign”), a 12th century Russian epic poem, which is rich in metaphors and motifs of Slavic Paganism, as part of his spiritual and aesthetic quest. “The Song of Igor” covers events in Southern Russia and present Eastern Ukraine in the years 1185–1187. The epic was probably composed shortly after that.



Figure 1. *Viktor Vasnetsov*. After the battle of Igor Svyatoslavich with the Polovttsy (Illustration of a scene of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign”, 1880, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow)

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¹ This paper is the extended version of the paper “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” (“The Slovo o Polku Igorevye”) – as a document of dvoeverie and its translation by Rainer Maria Rilke in the context of his religious quest” delivered at the 5th ESSWE Conference on “Western Esotericism and the East” organised by the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism in cooperation with: the Latvian Society for the Study of Religions, the Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia, the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Daugavpils University, 16–18 April, 2015. Venue: the University of Latvia in Riga, see: <http://www.esswe.org/Conference-2015>.

Introduction: the mediaeval Russian “Song of Igor’s Campaign” as a document of Pagan – Christian dual consciousness

The image of the battle of Prince Igor with the Polovtsians – as depicted on this painting by Victor Vasnetsov in 1880, and soon exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, was well known to Rainer Maria Rilke. He viewed it repeatedly and wrote about it. It depicts a scene from an iconic piece of Russian literature, the 12th century mediaeval epic poem, “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” (“Слово о плъку Игоревѣ, Игоря сына Святъславля, внука Ольгова”), which R. M. Rilke translated in 1904¹ and which was first published in 1949².

The epic song describes the ill-fated military campaign of Igor, “son” of Svyatoslav (942–972, “grandson” of Olga (890–962)), against the Polovtsians, a pagan Turkish tribe in what is today chiefly the Eastern Ukraine. The anonymous author, probably a clergyman of Igor’s entourage, framed, what is substantially a plaint about the foolhardiness and selfishness of the nobility of the Rus, in the guise of a praise song. He contrasts their present divisions with the unity of the Rus under Igor’s ancestor, Svyatoslav I of Kiev who had made the Kievan Rus the largest European state of his time.

Another tension characterises the Song. Overtly a praise of the Christian knights in their battle against the Pagan Turks (V. 217–218), the Slavic Pagan metaphors and figures of thought and argument prevail in the epic: Igor and his brother Vsevolod are called descendants of “Dazhbog” (V. 64, 76), a Slavic God – the epithet “the Giving God” refers to a solar deity or “Sun-God”. A similar phenomenon existed at the time in England and Scandinavia, where noble families would claim descent from pre-Christian pagan gods, who were – possibly – reinterpreted as culture heroes³. Possibly all the nobility of the Kievan Rus are included in this descent⁴. The sun appears in “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” as acting as a deity, sending omens of nature, such as an eclipse to warn of an ill-fated campaign (V. 9, 27), – which the hero ignores, even as the sun appears fourfold (V. 44). In the description of an omen, earlier in history, even the opposite aspect to the solar deity, the moon – related to the sun in myth as complementary aspect or as spouse – appears in double shape in an omen, an allusion obviously understood, even without naming the deity (V. 103). The sun apparently also figures as representation of Dazhbog: at the end of the song, when Prince Igor has fled captivity and returned safely to Russian land, the divine sun shines again (V. 211), after having eclipsed itself in so many omens before (V. 27, 43–44). So we may assume that the numinous aspect was still well in the mind of the author.

¹ *Rothe H.* Was ist “altrussische Literatur”? Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher, 2000. S. 10.

² *Rilke R. M.* Das Igor-Lied. Eine Heldendichtung. Der altrussische Text mit der Übertragung von Rainer Maria Rilke und der neurrussischen Prosafassung von D. S. Lichatschow, Leipzig: Insel, 1960.

³ *North R.* Heathen Gods in Old English Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. P. 171.

⁴ *Rilke R. M.* Das Igor-Lied. Eine Heldendichtung (V. 76).

Other gods of the Slavic Pagan pantheon are mentioned as well: Hors, a solar god to (V. 159). Veles, the underworld god of magic, music, cattle and, as the ancestor of the seer-poet (V. 17), Boyan, whom the author refers to as model even though he wishes to distance himself somewhat from him (V. 3–5, 14–18, 162–163, 209–210). Yet he quotes him and his poetics (V. 15–18, 209–210).

The god Stribog is presented as commander of winds, but also as the sender of arrows against prince Igor (V. 48) who does not heed the warnings shown to him in many omnia by the Pagan gods (V. 27–29).

A “Daeva” as a lesser divine being is mentioned in the Song as crying out warnings from a tree.

And a dragon forces lands into his power by its cry (V. 29, 108). As an underworld being the dragon belongs to the realm of Veles. A link may be recognised in the analogy to the power of the of the seer Boyan, descendent of Veles, to sing events into the course he foresees, or even desires (V. 3–4), – a power which the author of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” disputes only half-heartedly (V. 5), since he follows his model even in the “negativity” of a campaign which does not rely on the harmonious concord of the forces of the gods, of nature and the actions of the heroes, which still remains the ideal of this author.

The motif of shape-changing faculty of an earlier ruler, Vseslav, of whom it is said that he became a wolf by night, crossing the path of the sun-God Hors to outrun him (V. 159). The seer Boyan is also attributed with the power of “shape changing” as by entering the realm of his tale and events in imagination and in the guise of “spiritual animals” (V. 3).

Prince Igor and his Polovtsian companion, Ovlur, are described as changing shape into the form of animals, as weasel, as duck, as wolf or as falcon – significantly after undressing and continuing their flight naked (V. 189) by night, as if entering a re-naturalised state – a motif known from Norse mythology in the “berserkergang”, the rite of ritually becoming a bear or a “wolf-man”. (The power of changing into animal shape was also attributed to Odin.) It is likewise attributed to those endowed with magic powers – the “shamans” – as in this epic to the “seer” and poet Boyan¹. In Yaroslavna’s plaint the wind is addressed as a living being (V. 173), likewise the Dnepr as “lord” (V. 178), and likewise the sun. The river Denez speaks himself in answer to Prince Igor (V. 192). The night too appears as an agent, acting with omens (V. 28). Trees and the grass act with compassion – and this is not meant as a metaphor (V. 74). Similarly, the animals react to the course of events and sometimes act as performer of the divine omens (V. 28, 201–202). The “earth” arises, in the face of tragedy and raises elements with it (V. 49). The “Russian land” withdraws “over the hills” repeatedly in the face of misfortune, as an animate being (V. 32, 47).

It is astonishing how intact the web of a deeply Slavic Pagan world view manifests itself in this epic song, even though it is overtly dedicated to the victory of Christian Russian princes of their Pagan Turkish foes. There is a thin layer of Christian theology, discernible in a few verses, as possibly in the metaphor of the

¹ *Rilke R. M. Das Igor-Lied. Eine Heldendichtung.*

“blood-wine” (V. 72) in the reference to God’s judgement (V. 163) – a literal quote from Boyan – in the description of the ringing of bells for matins in Polozk for the hero (V. 160), or in the mentioning of a pilgrimage to an icon of the Mother of God (V. 213). However, these references do not interfere with the rather consistent pagan logic of the epic. There is no divine intervention in terms of Christian theology here, nor does Christian prayer have a role. The course of events is derived solely from the interaction between Prince Igor culpable of hubris and the divine pagan powers he ignores as they send him warnings after warnings through natural phenomena. His defeat at the hands of the pagan Polovtsians and the death of so many of his troops is the inevitable result. His failure and his narrow escape are attributed to actions of in the field of the interplay between the realms of the social (friendship, loyalty, cunning), the divine and the divinely imbued realm of nature. It would be an anachronism to speak of “nature spirituality” here, but the links between the Slavic Pagan gods and the elements of nature are essential to the spiritual world view presented in “The Song of Igor’s Campaign”. Both of the latter are interrelated in terms of Slavic Pagan world view. Interestingly, the author extends this to the realm of history and the military, political sphere. The defeat of Igor is not only a result of inferior military power, capability and judgement, but also attributed to his failure of spiritual judgement to take heed of the tokens of the gods. This finding gives an illuminating insight into the world-view of an author some two centuries after the baptism of the Kievan Rus. It shows how slow the transition to an in-depth Christian world-view may have been in many cases.

In a psychoanalytical perspective it appears as if a repressed “pagan Unconscious” of the author of this song expressed itself in the symbolic form of this epic song, within the overt frame of a Christian identity. Rilke seems to have sensed this duality when he spoke of the Russian “pagan soul” expressing herself in Orthodox worship¹. It obviously appealed to him since this figure enabled him to share in both realms, the Pagan and the Christian, on a fringe where he located himself at the time². Given the fact that the author of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” was most likely a cleric, a widespread religious consciousness, which has been described as “double belief” (“dvoeverie”) in Russia in the late 19th century, appears as the dominant spiritual world view of the time, as preserved in this epic.

Rilke’s apparently deeply fascination with this epic is thus only in part to be attributed to its literary qualities. The aspect of finding the spiritual world view of “ancient Russia” expressed here, must have been equally important, if not more so. This will become clearer, as we look at the history and motifs of Rilke’s fascination with Russia and Russia’s spiritual culture. It may be a bit of a surprise that motifs of Orthodox theology came to have an important role in this endeavour. However, Rilke deliberately sought to integrate the Orthodox and the Pagan in the image of an original Russian (spiritual) world view, as some of his poems and the-

¹ *Rilke R. M. Moderne Russische Kunst // Rainer Maria Rilke. Sämtliche Werke / Hg. von E. Zinn, R. Sieber-Rilke. Bd. X. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1976. S. 613–622, 615 f.*

² *Rilke R. M. Das Stundenbuch – Erstes Buch: das Buch vom mönchischen Leben // Rainer Maria Rilke. Sämtliche Werke. Bd. I. S. 295.*

oretical statements suggest. In this approach he follows an opinion, widespread in Russian cultural self-reflection from the late 19th to the 20th century and beyond¹.

A veritable pagan world-view or epistemic can be discerned in this epic song, which guides and governs the poetics of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign”. Rilke was certainly fascinated, which is evident by the trouble he took to learn the mediaeval “East Slavonic” language of the Song. It is also apparent, that he took cues from this epic for his own poetics, as may be shown by details of his translation. This will be matter for the final considerations.

R. M. Rilke’s Esotericism – monistic and spiritistic features

Without doubt Rainer Maria Rilke was perceived as an esoteric poet by his contemporaries² and he is widely read as such at present. It is may thus be suitable to approach the issue of his translation of the mediaeval Russian epic from the perspective of his esoteric legacy, which is succinctly expressed in his Duino Elegies, written some years later. The esoteric element of Rilke’s world-view has been met with reluctance in research for a long time³. To the degree however, that the strong esoteric and occultist currents in the artistic movement of Symbolism have been acknowledged, this aspect of Rilke has gained acceptance. An exhibition on Symbolism and its spiritual and occult foundations in Frankfurt at “Schirn” Kunsthalle in 1995 has created a break-through in public awareness in this respect⁴. Rilke’s own readings and contacts in the fields of Esotericism and Spiritism have been researched in recent years and it is safe to posit him in this field in his later years, even though he has not been a formal member of any organisation nor has he declared to adhere to any organised movement in this realm⁵.

Rilke saw his own poetry as a medium of spiritual perception and creation, – as “medium” in the precise mediumistic sense of the word of this world-view⁶. The period covered in this paper belongs to an earlier stage, in which Rilke would not have identified himself as Symbolist yet, and during which his esoteric convictions were yet in the making. Looking back the theological motifs of his poetry in the years up to 1900 have a definitely esoteric character already. However the forma-

¹ *Fedotov G.* The Russian Religious Mind. The Kievan Christianity, from the 10th to the 13th Century. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1946. Vol. I. P. 3.

² *Magnússon G.* Rilke und der Okkultismus // Metaphysik und Moderne. Von Wilhelm Raabe bis zu Thomas Mann / Hg. von A. Blödorn, A. R. Fauth, S. R. Fauth. Wuppertal: Arco, 2006. S. 144.

³ *Ibid.* S. 145.

⁴ Okkultismus und Avantgarde. Von Munch bis Mondrian 1900–1915 (Catalogue of the Exhibition at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 3.6–20.8.1995) / Hg. von V. Loers. Ostfildern: Kunsthalle Schirn, 1995.

⁵ *Magnússon G.* Rilke und der Okkultismus. S. 150.

⁶ *Magnússon G.* Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik. Esoterische und okkultische Modernität bei R. M. Rilke. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009.

tive influences which he experienced in these years were those of Russian spirituality¹.

Rilke's Symbolist period proper began after 1900² and his Russian encounters. His intensive preoccupation with Spiritism and Esotericism goes back to 1896–1897, when he met with Carl du Prel, a German advocate of Spiritism, whose ideas he supported enthusiastically³. At this time – Rilke was 21 years old – the foundations for his esoteric world view which included the phenomena of Spiritism had been laid. Spiritism was aligned with Monism. Rilke increasingly tended towards Monism and he was not the only German poet of his time to be an adherent of spiritual Monism⁴. The monistic outlook also comprises Rilke's fusion of the sensual with the spiritual⁵. This feature became stronger over the years⁶. The suggestion, that Rilke's religious motifs should be translated into metaphors for a sacralised "eros" as W. Riedel does from the perspective of his late life⁷, fails to acknowledge the essentially spiritual character of Rilke's early poems and world-view, which marks the period up to 1900, which is in the focus of this paper.

It is doubtful whether Rilke's world view in the time of his Russian experience can be adequately described as "monistic". The frequent occurrence of figures of "polarity", of an "I–Thou" relationship in his poems of this period in the trilogy of poems entitled "The Book of Hours" ("Das Stundenbuch")⁸. We may assume that Rilke had a more fluid concept of the transcendent or divine than the label of "Monism", suggesting systematic consistency, would suggest. The ascription to Monism may however be justified in terms of a discursive formation or network, to which Rilke was connected.

Rilke, Russian Symbolism and Sophiology

The encounter with Russia and with Russian culture had a deep impact on the formation and development of R. M. Rilke's spiritual views and poetology. Even though he visited Russia somewhat before the onset of "Russian Symbolism"

¹ Destro A. Per uno nuovo inizio. La riflessione religiosa nel Rilke maturo // Rilke R. M.. Alla ricerca dello "spazio interiore del mondo" tra arti figurative, musica e poesia, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore [Cives Universi Centro Internazionale di Cultura / Ed. by A. Frigerio]. Milano: EDUCatt Università Cattolica, 2008. P. 32 f.

² Selva G. Introduzione. Rilke, Duino, Orfeo // R. M. Rilke. Alla ricerca dello "spazio interiore del mondo" tra arti figurative, musica e poesia. [Cives Universi Centro Internazionale di Cultura / Ed. by A. Frigerio]. Milano: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2008. P. 28.

³ Magnússon G. Rilke und der Okkultismus. S. 152.

⁴ Fick M. Sinnenwelt und Weltseele – der psychophysische Monismus in der Literatur der Jahrhundertwende. Diss. habil., Univ. Heidelberg. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993. P. 122 ff.

⁵ Riedel W. "Homo natura". Literarische Anthropologie um 1900. Berlin: Walther de Gruyter, 1996. S. 272 ff.

⁶ Ibid. S. 277.

⁷ Ibid. S. 278.

⁸ Rilke R. M. Das Stundenbuch. Vom mönchischen Leben // Rainer Maria Rilke, Sämtliche Werke. Vol. 1.1. Gedichte. Erster Teil / Hg. von E. Zinn, R. Sieber-Rilke und Rilke-Archiv. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1987. S. 249–366.

proper, the circles of artists to whom he was introduced, in St. Petersburg and the “Wanderers”, were engaged with the integration of art and spirituality. They were formative towards the development of Russian Symbolism with its marked theosophical orientation¹. Rilke is to be situated at this junction, where Russian Orthodox, Pagan and Esoteric, Theosophical ideas were integrated in art. Rilke’s affinity to Russian Symbolism has been noticed, also in Russia. The fact that the leading theoretician of Russian Symbolism, Vyacheslav Ivanov, esteemed Rilke highly and intended to write the introduction to Rilke’s posthumously published translation of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” – he published his essay independently later on² – testifies to this affinity³. Rilke knew the magazine “Мир искусства” (“World of Art”), the leading organ of Russian Symbolism⁴ and its editor, Alexander Benois. The fact that Rilke intended to translate A. Benois’ “History of Russian Art in the 19th Century” (“История русской живописи в XIX веке”, 1902⁵) into German, as late as 1905, testifies to Rilke’s indepth familiarity with Russian art and with contemporary movements, even after the time of his most intensive preoccupation with Russia.

In a sweeping definition the historian of art A. Gusarova describes the endeavour of Russian Symbolism thus: “Symbolism aspired to convey in art intuitive insights into different realities – the reality of dream ... fairy tale, legend, or that of a different higher world. This new worldview, replacing positivism, became one of the features of the cultural Silver Age in Russia, and embraced all areas of creative endeavour, including literature, painting and music. Writers such as ... Vyacheslav Ivanov, and the religious philosophers Vladimir Soloviev, Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov became evangelists and interpreters of the new movement: they preached about the mystical and even divine essence of art which was bound to transform the world”⁶.

Unlike the more markedly esoteric western European Symbolism, Russian Symbolism included Russian Orthodoxy in its sources, motifs and themes⁷. This statement however has to be qualified: This integration of Orthodoxy as a spiritual and religious source was not exclusive but integrated Pagan and Esoteric elements and viewpoints on the basis of the concept of “double belief” (“двоеверие”/“dvoeverie”) which was culturally accepted as characteristic of Russian culture in

¹ *Lenjaschin W.* “Zwischenwelten” des russischen Symbolismus // Sehnsucht und Aufbruch. Der russische Symbolismus als historische und aktuelle Dimension. St. Petersburg und Koblenz: Palace Editions Europe, 2002: S. 8.

² *Ivanov V.* Vom Igorlied // Corona. 1936. N. 6.

³ *Wachtel M.* Russian Symbolism and Literary Tradition: Goethe, Novalis and the Poetics of Vyacheslav Ivanov. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. P. 16, fn. 54.

⁴ *Rilke R. M.* Moderne Russische Kunst. S. 623.

⁵ *Бенуа А. Н.* История русской живописи в XIX веке // Товарищество передвижных художественных выставок // [URL]: <http://www.tphv-history.ru/books/benua-istoriya-russkoy-zhivopisi.html>.

⁶ *Gusarova A.* Symbolism and Russian Art // Галерея. 2013. Iss. 2 (39) // [URL]: <http://www.tretyakovgallerymagazine.com/articles/N2-2013-39/symbolism-and-russian-art>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

this period of the late 19th and early 20th century. This is manifest in the work of Vasily Vasnetsov, who accepted the task of painting the St. Sophia cathedral in Kiev, following the traditional canon of iconography, as Rilke remarked affirmatively, but who also painted scenes of Russian pagan folk tales and myths, which Rilke likewise mentions, on a common spiritual basis¹.

Likewise the Russian Orthodox religious philosophers who inspired Russian Symbolism taught that the world had a discernible divine quality, of “divine wisdom”, which they referred to by the hypostatic entity called “Sophia” in the Old Testament. We may also consider that this metaphysical notion of “Sophiology”, of the presence of the divine “wisdom” in the world, proposed by Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900) and Sergey Bulgakov (1871–1944)², are based on the Christian Orthodox adaptation and transformation of Platonism. The cultural presence of this notion in Russian epistemology – and also in the theory of arts, as in Russian Symbolism – is best understood on this background.

The doctrine of “Sophiology” was criticised as not fully Orthodox by the Russian Orthodox Church. The doctrine of Sophiology however supported the Symbolists’ conviction of a unified and integral worldview in which rational phenomenological and spiritual, intuitive perceptions of transcendental significance were complementary elements, necessary for a full understanding of reality. The obvious convergence of this theology with the epistemology of esotericism certainly contributed to the reticence with which it was received in the church, regardless of the affirmed orthodox identities of Soloviev and Bulgakov who had both converted from Nihilism to Orthodoxy. On the other hand the doctrine of Sophiology created an epistemic continuum to an Esoteric world view, which allowed for the integration of Orthodox and Esoteric views in the artistic movement of Russian Symbolism and among the spiritually oriented predecessors, the “Wanderers”/“Peredvizhniki” (“Передвижники”) who inspired Rilke and with whom he was familiar.

Rilke admired the “Wanderers”, for their devotion to ancient (mediaeval) Russia to Russian folk art as well as for their renewal of Orthodox Church art. In particular he mentions the Abramtsevo Church which was built in 1880 in collaboration by the artists who had joined the artists’ colony which Savva Mamontov had founded on his estate³. The estate which had formerly belonged to Sergey T. Aksakov had a legacy of Slavophile orientation. In this spirit the artists of the colony did careful research into mediaeval traditions of church architecture, iconography and folk ornaments, in order to create a church true to the models and spirit of mediaeval Russian Orthodox Christianity, including the folk traditions. Their conscientious research did not preclude artistic innovations, as of spatiality in the icons. This church appears as a symbol for Rilke’s own endeavours in retracing a medi-

¹ *Rilke R. M.* Moderne Russische Kunst. S. 618 ff.

² *Булгаков С. Н.* Свет невечерний: Созерцания и умозрения. М.: Республика, 1994.

³ *Gray C.* Das große Experiment. Die russische Kunst 1863–1922. P. 177 ff. Cf.: Church of the Saviour // Abramtsevo. Federal State Cultural Establishment Historical, Artistic and Literary Museum–Reserve // [URL]: <http://www.abramtsevo.net/eng/guidway/saviors-church.html>.

aeval Russia, which to him symbolised a state of mind and culture in which the Symbolists' desire for a unified world-view was fulfilled. His translation of "The Song of Igor's Campaign" has to be understood in this perspective, as the document of a Russian mediaeval world view in art which integrates Orthodox and Pagan elements on the basis of an assumed unified spiritual world view which Rilke – and many Russian contemporaries found to be manifest in Russian "dvoeverie" and which they sought to renew in the fine arts. Rilke's translation of "The Song of Igor's Campaign" can thus be understood as the application of this world view as hermeneutic approach to a strongly pagan work of art of the mediaeval Rus.

Rilke expressed his distance to literary Realism even before his journeys to Russia in a discussion of Lev Tolstoi's essay "What is Art?" in 1898. In Russia Tolstoi's essay came to be a focal point for the emergent Symbolist movement to clarify their own outlook and was criticised by theoreticians of art like Alexandre Benois. Rilke rejects Tolstoi's Realism and his receptionist view of art in his essay "Über Kunst" (1898) he states: "Art presents herself as a view of life, like religion or science and socialism too. She differs from the other views only therein that it does not result from time... If the world should break apart under her feet she survives independently as the creative, and she is the musing potentiality of new worlds and times¹". This invocation of a timeless, transcendent reality – of a reality already present but concealed, or of a future reality, yet to become – is a mainstay of esotericism and the basis of the sense of a transcendent "mission" of Symbolism. The artist's role in this endeavour is that of a diviner.

The Orthodox concept of the "icon" and Russian Symbolism

The idea that "things" or phenomena of nature can reveal a spiritual meaning and reality hidden to the "secular eye", is a fundamental conviction of Symbolism. According to Symbolism the objects of the world, of empiric experience and of ideation, are not "objects" in terms of a Cartesian "res extensa", but materialisations of a divine origin or meaning. They point at a transcendent reality which emerges through them. The Symbolist poet's concept of "reality" is sacramental in a way. It is an idealistic concept of the symbol, that transcendental truths of a higher order can reveal themselves through particular things to the mind attuned to it². A platonic world view is the background.

Roots of this idea can also be traced to the Orthodox concept of the "icon", which Rilke came to know in Russia and which has influenced Russian conceptions of art in Symbolism. The icon represents a "window" to the divine "Other-world" and requires both a spiritual attitude by its creator – the writer of icons – as well as by its viewer who should not view it as a visual depiction of any sacred person or event, but as a medium of epiphany. The idea of the "icon" is based on

¹ Rilke R. M. *Über Kunst* // Rainer Maria Rilke. *Sämtliche Werke* / Hg. von E. Zinn, R. Sieber-Rilke. Bd. 10. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1976. S. 426 f.

² Hofstätter H. H. *Symbolismus und die Kunst der Jahrhundertwende: Voraussetzungen, Erscheinungsformen, Bedeutungen*. Köln: Du Mont, 1978. S. 32.

the Christian notion of the incarnation of Christ as the self-limitation of “the Unlimited”, present in the limitation of the strictly stylised painted (“written”) icon¹.

The moment of “epiphany” in face of an icon – of which Rilke took notice² – involves an inversion of perception, in that the object becomes subject to the viewer. A few years after Rilke’s travels to Russia Pavel Florensky, orthodox priest and philosopher connected to the movement of Russian Symbolism, wrote about the “icon” as being characterised by an inverted perspective which makes the icon and the reality or divine being represented by it the subject and the viewer the recipient in whom this reality has to unfold its being³.

In a sense Rilke countered the crisis of Western de-sacralisation or “disenchantment” by applying concepts of Christian Orthodox theology, in order to find a model for a re-spiritualised Symbolist approach to poetry and artistic creation. The result is neither wholly Christian – to the irritation of some theological Rilke exegetes – nor pristinely Pagan, and certainly not “secular”, to the irritation of several literary exegetes of the late 20th century, who explain that Rilke’s “God” is rather a figure of his “Unconscious”⁴, – read: sexually repressed – without caring much about Freud’s limitations of the concept nor about Rilke’s expressed intentions.

*The roots of Rilke’s affinity to Russia: his native Bohemia and ideals
of a spiritually encoded Pan-Slavism*

Born in Prague in 1875 to parents of the German minority, Rilke spoke the Czech language. On a psychological level, Czechia and its popular culture was a symbol of “motherland” with a particular emotional quality. This came to be overlaid with his Russian discoveries – certainly mediated by the spirit of Pan-Slavism of his age. Here Julius Zeyer, a German-Austrian by origin and poet of the Czech language, who had lived for some time in Russia and who engaged in the pan-Slavic cause, conveyed a Slavophile image of Russia to the young Rilke in Prague, that Russia was a country still close to God and essentially unharmed by modernity. Zeyer had lived in the house of an Old Believer, who introduced him to the rites and the cultural heritage of this traditionalist offshoot of the Russian Orthodox Church⁵. Rilke’s vision of Russia was firmly shaped by Zeyer. From him he also first heard of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign”, in a Czech Version. Rilke was thus

¹ Felmy K. C. *Orthodoxe Theologie – eine Einführung*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990. S. 65.

² Rilke R. M. *Russische Kunst // Rainer Maria Rilke. Sämtliche Werke*. Bd. 10. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1976. S. 496.

³ Florenskij P. *Die umgekehrte Perspektive // Pawel Florenski. Leben und Denken / Hg. von F. Mierau, S. Mierau*. Ostfildern: Tertium, 1996. Bd. 2. S. 126–136.

⁴ Mason E. C. *Zur Entstehung und Deutung von Rilkes Stundenbuch // Exzentrische Bahnen – Studien zum Dichterbewusstsein der Neuzeit*. Göttingen, 1963. S. 188. See: Pagni A. *Rilke um 1900 – Ästhetik und Selbstverständnis im lyrischen Werk*. Nürnberg: Hans Carl, 1984. S. 4.

⁵ Tavis A. A. *Rilke’s Russia: A Cultural Encounter*. Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1994. S. 14 ff.

conditioned to his formative Russian voyages by the Romantic Slavophile vision of Russia as a spiritual and cultural alternative to the more Western Europe.

Rilke's introduction to Russia through Lou Andreas-Salome

Rilke translated the "Slovo" in the most formative period of his life, between 1897 and 1900, when he was introduced to Russia and to Russian artists and theoreticians of art by Lou Andreas-Salomé (1861–1937) who was born from a Russian-German family in St. Petersburg. She was well connected in both Russian and German intellectual circles, being a formidable writer herself who took an active part in cultural and social movements of her lifetime. During this time she took him twice to extended visits to Russia. These have been initiatory voyages to him. They were formative experiences in the sense that he entered a country which he felt spoke to him in many ways. Visiting Russia meant to him to participate in the symbolism of her land and culture.

1897, shortly after they had met in Lou Andreas-Salomé took him on their first voyage of Russia. They visited St. Petersburg, several ancient Russian cities and finally Moscow. Here he attended the Easter Night Vigil service. Rilke, who shared in Nietzsche's experience of the loss of God, wrote that here he experienced "Easter" for the first and only time in his life¹. Given the theurgic character of Orthodox liturgy and of the Easter Vigil Service² in particular, Rilke's sense of an overwhelming spiritual experience is understandable. Without making him a Christian, he may have felt reassured that he found in Russia the sense of participation in the divine which he sought so dearly and to which he devoted his poetry and his existence as a poet. He described the experience of the Easter Night Vigil in terms of Plato's "Anamnesis" as a recollection of something which was inherently his own and deeply familiar³. From then on Russia became the country of "epiphany" to him.

On this journey R. M. Rilke was introduced to Lev Tolstoy, Sophia N. Schill, Ilya Repin, Leonid Pasternak, Alexander Benois, some of the most influential personalities of aesthetic and cultural discourse in Russia of the age. From then on Rilke studied Russian intensively.

Rilke's second voyage to Russia

In February 1900 Sophia N. Schill sent Rilke a copy of "The Song of Igor's Campaign". He was immediately fascinated⁴. Rilke was thus prepared for the journey which would lead him through the areas and cities which are mentioned in this

¹ *Rilke R. M.* Letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé. [Without Editorials], 1904. P. 28.

² The Church Year. Easter Sunday: The Holy Pascha // The Orthodox Church in America. Vol. II. Worship // [URL]: <http://oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/worship/the-church-year/easter-sunday-the-holy-pascha>.

³ *Epp G. K.* Rilke und Russland. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984. S. 28.

⁴ *Rilke R. M.* Das Igor-Lied. Eine Heldendichtung. S. 73.

epic. To Rilke it was a voyage of pilgrimage. This is reflected in the route his journey took. The other important elements are an encounter with traditional Orthodox Russia, encounter with Russian art and meetings with Russian artists in the beginnings of Russian Symbolism.

Lou Andreas-Salomé saw clearly that her friend was on an initiatory voyage¹, and she, as his muse was resolved to be his guide. Apart from that this long voyage from May to summer of 1900 had a very personal meaning to both of them. One dimension of it was to retrace the “original Russia”. In this respect their visit to Kiev had the aspect of a pilgrimage. Both visited the Cave Monastery, the Pecherskaya Lavra there, participating in services there as pilgrims. Rilke picked up the figure of the monk as persona of spiritual-aesthetic experience e. g. in his “Book of Monastic Life” (“Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben”).

Rilke and Andreas-Salomé were aware of the Ukraine as a distinct culture, yet saw her as part of an encompassing Rus. They took interest in the particular Ukrainian tradition, as by their visit to Taras Shevchenko’s grave, in the perspective of encountering here ancient poetic tradition. Rilke refers to his figure of the “kobzar”, the traditional bard.

In Moscow Rilke spent his days visiting the Tretyakov Gallery. Here he saw paintings of Victor Vasnetsov and Mikhail Vrubel. Rilke became familiar with the ideas of the artists group the “Wanderers”/“Peredvizhniki” (“Передвижники”) (1871–1923), who dedicated themselves to a rediscovery of Russian nature and the life of the people. Their attention to the Russian landscape, life, society and culture was inspired by Slavophile elements of an appreciation of Russia’s unique culture, in rejection of a neo-classical orientation towards Western European models. The Wanderers emphatically strove for a new appreciation of the landscape and the culture of the people, in particular the ancient Russian, pre-modern elements, which were rediscovered enthusiastically as source of national culture. This included the spiritual realms, both of Orthodox Christianity as well as of pre-Christian pagan traditions of the people. Rilke was deeply influenced by this programme. Russian Symbolism is rooted in these ideas.

This combination of motifs which also informed the nascent Russian Symbolism has become a formative and essential element of Rilke’s artistic biography and poetics.

Rilke’s view of Russia as a land not “dis-encharmed” but in communion with the divine and the Slavophile concept of Russia’s universal mission

The Slavophile self-concept of Russia certainly influenced Rilke’s perceptions. Their origin in late Romanticism may be reflected in their belief in the “Russian Idea”, the conviction that Russia has a special spiritual mission to the world. Rilke affirms this indirectly in his essay on Russian Art. Remembering the impression which the exhibits at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow had made on him, Rilke wrote: “Then it seemed to me, as if the latest developments in Russian art,

¹ Tavis A. A. Rilke’s Russia: A Cultural Encounter. S. 32.

which does not become narrow as it assumes a more national character, might indeed be able to express what is highest to mankind and most general of her, when all that is strange and contingent to her (i. e. Russian art), will have been wholly forgotten”¹. The mediaeval theological belief in the unique messianic mission of Russia is adopted here by Rilke in the medium of art². The theological cosmology of Russia as the “third Rome” with its eschatological connotations may be found transformed in Rilke’s perception of Russia as a “timeless land”, which reflects an Esotericist perception of Russia as being in a state of eternal “originality”, “close to God”, as Rilke formulated it, “outside of history”. Visiting Russia meant to him to enter a realm which had not participated in Western Europe’s original “Fall from Grace” and expulsion from Paradise. Russia symbolised a land which had never been separated from God and which thus represented a means to return to the “Origins” of a non-secular state of consciousness and perception. The eschatological perspective of Russian messianic mission is turned backwards in time.

In his essay on Russian art of 1901 “Russische Kunst” Rilke called Russia: “The wide country in the east, the only one by which God is still connected to the earth...” (“Das weite Land im Osten, das einzige durch welches Gott noch mit der Erde zusammenhängt... ”³) Given Rilke’s theurgic concept of poetry, this means that to him visiting Russia and participating in this land were means of divination and a pilgrimage to the “point where heaven and earth meet”. Accordingly, to connect to Russia and to its arts meant to find a way to restore this connection to the divine which is the foundation of all art in Rilke’s view.

Rilke’s experience of the “death of God” as background for his quest for re-sacralisation of perception, culture and poetry

Rilke’s obsession with the spiritual dimension of art and of Russia stems from an epochal experience which is mirrored in his own: the experience of the loss of God. Rilke had experienced as an adolescent what F. Nietzsche had diagnosed as the “death of God” in his contemporary culture. “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him. How do we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?” (Aphorism 125)⁴ Rilke shared this observation but was not too sure about the permanent “death of God”. He sorely felt a sense of loss and of estrangement

¹ *Rilke R. M.* Russische Kunst. S. 504.

² *Aizlewood R.* Revisiting Russian Identity in Russian Thought: From Chaadaev to the Early Twentieth Century // *The Slavonic and East European Review*. January 2000. Vol. 78. N. 1. P. 20–43 // [URL]: http://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/67559/mod_resource/content/0/chaadaev2.-pdf; cf.: *Маслин М. А.* Русская идея // *Русская философия: Словарь / Под общ. ред. М. А. Маслина.* М.: Республика, 1995. С. 421–423.

³ *Rilke R. M.* Russische Kunst. S. 494.

⁴ *Nietzsche F.* Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft. Leipzig: Verlag von E. W. Fritzsche, 1887 // *Nietzsche Sources. Digital Critical Edition* // [URL]: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB-/FW>.

from the divine which he shared with several artists of his time¹. As a poet he dedicated himself to the task of bridging this divide while sharing the epistemological predicament of a loss of authoritative mediation of the divine. In this endeavour he shared the aspirations of Symbolism, of Russian Symbolism in particular at re-spiritualisation through the means of art.

The task of reconstructing pathways to an experience of the divine and of its expression were a major theme of movements in culture and science of this era of the late 19th and early 20th century, accompanying the widely felt “disenchantment of the world” (Max Weber)². A series of devoted counter-movements aimed at re-integrating science and religion in an encompassing world-view, from spiritual Monism and Spiritism through Theosophy up to Esotericism and even C. G. Jung’s “Depth Psychology”. All of them shared the assumption that spiritual insight or perceptions on this basis had to be universal. A more or less marked distance from Christianity, based on particular revelation, was implied in many of these movements. The “disenchantment” of the world view was accordingly also experienced culturally as a collapse of the Christian faith’s claim to validity or as personal loss of faith. This is the point of departure for many protagonists of these movements.

Accordingly, the concept of God appears in two distinct but related meanings: as a metaphysical supreme being and as a subjective entity manifested in personal faith or spiritual experience. Rilke oscillates between these two meanings without fully opting for either one. In some of the poems of his Russian period he attempts to relate them in the figure of mutual interdependence of God and a “monk”³, his poetic “spiritual persona”. Rilke posits the focal point of validation of the spiritual more on the subjective side. Rilke’s observations about a Russian artist of the early 19th century, Alexander Ivanov, are a reflection on this predicament: “One day he, whose life was a pilgrimage to God, believed to have become an atheist. In truth however it was piety, deep Russian piety, which demanded in him to be expressed in painting. [my translation]”⁴. Here again the focus of spiritual verification has shifted towards the subjective side.

In this perspective Rilke was interested in the role of icons in Russian Orthodox piety: “We are concerned here with a people (in a state) before Giotto. All of their experiences are of a religious nature and (they) are so strong that they let us behold in darkened byzantine images a beauty, which the state-of-art copies of Athonite monks never had. <...>. They see countless Madonnas into the hollow icons and their creative longings vivify the empty ovals. Here the artist has to begin”⁵. Rilke emphasises the subjective power of spiritual perception as by projection into traditional, suitable forms which he believes has been retained by the

¹ *Ehmann A.* Die Sprache der Engel – zu angelogischen Quellen und Motiven moderner Lyrik // Erfahrung und System. Mystik und Esoterik in der Literatur der Moderne / Hg. von B. Gruber. Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1997. S. 148.

² *Asprem E.* The Problem of Disenchantment. Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse 1900–1939. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2014. P. X ff.

³ *Rilke R. M.* Das Stundenbuch. Vom mönchischen Leben. S. 255.

⁴ *Rilke R. M.* Moderne Russische Kunst. S. 617.

⁵ *Rilke R. M.* Russische Kunst. S. 496.

people. He calls upon the artist to take this role of the icon as means of spiritual-aesthetic divination as point of departure for his endeavour of a spiritual art. It may be applied to his translation of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” as a theurgic exercise to recreate the essence of that period by the creative process of translation of this “iconic” text.

On the Orthodox concept of “theosis” (divinisation) and Rilke’s perception of Russia as a divinised culture

It is strange that Rilke did not reflect on the marked Orthodox element in Russian (pre-)Symbolist thought. He might have discovered that essential elements which Rilke attributes to the supposed “archaism” of Russian culture and her alleged not participating in western European movements like the Renaissance – are rather to be traced to central tenets of Orthodox theology. Whereas Sophiology relates in particular to the perception of the world and of man – of the outer and the inner world and of their relation – “Theosis” (divinisation) is more focused on the active side, thus relating to processes of spiritual practise as well as to artistic creation. Rilke grasped its essence intuitively.

Rilke’s concept of Russia as a divinised culture draws – probably unbeknown to Rilke – on the concept of “theosis”, of divinisation, as participation in the divine which is accessible to man and even to nature according to Orthodox theology: “that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world”¹. It is the centrepiece of Orthodox soteriology².

These lines also have aesthetic and epistemological meanings in Orthodox thought. Thereby beauty and art become means of divination and of divinisation. Thus Staniloae writes, following Dionysius the Areopagite: “If beauty consists in the manifestation of the spirit through matter, the irradiation of living spirit through the living body is the greatest beauty”³.

Orthodoxy has always insisted on the presence of the divine in the world, in nature and in man. The very concept of salvation in Orthodox understanding is based on the reinforcement of such presence through the idea of divinisation (“theosis”). The primordial Biblical “Fall” is interpreted as lapse into a state which requires healing by theosis, by divinisation, and not as the basis for a factual exclusion of the divine from the sphere of the world. The divine however is firmly believed to be ever-present in the world and accessible: Thus at the beginning of the hours’ services, as of Vespers, and in the Entrance prayers of the Divine Liturgy the priest recites the Usual Beginning which invokes the Holy Spirit: “O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Who are everywhere present and filling all

¹ 2. Peter 1. 3–4 (The Bible, King James Version).

² Felmy K. C. *Orthodoxe Theologie – eine Einführung*. S. 133 ff.

³ Staniloae D. *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*. Vol. 2: *The World: Creation and Deification* / Tr. by I. Ionita, R. Barringer. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000. P. 122.

things, Treasury of blessings and Giver of life: Come and dwell in us, and cleanse us of all impurity, and save our souls, O Good One”¹.

The resulting cultural perceptions and practises have fascinated Rilke immediately. Here he found a culture which was not marked by the rift of “disenchantment” which he – like many of his generation and the next - so sorely experienced in his own culture. He traced this rift back to the Western Renaissance and to be present in Western Christianity too. Rilke did not take a closer look at Russian Orthodox thought. He rather absorbed Orthodox world views as part of a “mystical Russia”, marked by “archaism”. From the point of view of this supposed “archaism” of Russia he drew both on Orthodox and on Pagan motifs, and sought to combine them in this frame.

The image of the Orthodox monk and the pilgrim as figures of Rilke’s poetological and self-perception in the perspective of Russian Symbolism

In Russian Symbolism the artist was to play the role of theurgist. “From the very beginning, the Symbolist is a theurgist, in other words, a possessor of the secret knowledge with the secret action behind it”², Blok wrote in 1910³. Rilke relates this task to the figure of the Orthodox monk, for several reasons: firstly, for the shift towards personal spiritual practise as condition for the “validating” spiritual experience, also for the solitary aspect of this endeavour, and secondly, in view of the monk as artist: as creator of icons and also as writer of chronicles, such as “The Song of Igor’s Campaign”.

The figure of the pilgrim, popular in Russian spiritual imagination, refers to the motif of the spiritual quest as a journey. The alleged account of a Russian spiritual wanderers travels, published in 1884 in two parts as “The Way of a Pilgrim” and “The Pilgrim Continues His Way”⁴ were immediately a success in Russia, and may have been very much present in Russian cultural imagination at the time of Rilke’s visits.

Rilke perceived himself in these figures. Accordingly the first part of his collection of poems of his “Russian period” is entitled “The Book of Monastic Life”, published 1899. The second part, published in 1901 is entitled “The Book of Pilgrimage”, the third part, published 1903 has the title “The Book of Poverty and of Death”. Rilke aptly joined them together as “The Book of Hours”. Whereas the themes of the first book are often related to Italy, the following are often situated in Russia and in an Orthodox context.

A leitmotiv of these poems is an aesthetic response to the “Death of God”. Poetry, according to these poems is an act by which God “becomes” or “comes in-

¹ The Divine Liturgy according to St. John Chrysostom with Appendices. South Canaan, Penn.: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1984. P. 3.

² *Блок А. О современном состоянии русского символизма // Аполлон. 1910. N. 8. С. 22.*

³ *Gusarova A. Symbolism and Russian Art.*

⁴ *The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way / Tr. by R. M. French. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1973.*

to being. The “Book of Monastic Life” begins with the verses: “I encircle God, the ancient tower / and I circle for centuries / and I do not yet know: am I a falcon, a storm or a grand song”¹. The figure of pilgrimage is transformed into images of nature – the falcon and the storm – and of poetics – the “great song”. Both images are echoed in “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” by theophoric elements of nature and poetry.

The figure of inversion, orthodox monasticism, synergy and poetic theurgy

The figure of “inversion”, which relates to the task of theurgy, aimed at “raising God” or invoking the divine “presence” is related by Rilke to the theme of the (imminent) “death of God” in the following verses:

“Thou neighbour God, if I disturb you many times / deep in the night with hard knocks on the wall, – / it is because I rarely hear you breathe / and know: you are alone in the hall. / And if you need something there’s no one to offer a drink to your groping hand. / I always listen: Give a small token. / I am closely nearby. / Just a thin wall is there between us, and perchance: a calling of your mouth or mine – will let it crumble / without noise or sound”².

The poet’s call might make the wall break down which separates him from the aging God, and cause “epiphany” – an apparently ambivalent idea to Rilke. Thus the monk merely asks for a small signal from God. The inversion shows the poet as active in the sustenance of God as in a mutually sustaining relationship. It is the figure of “poetic theurgy” which Rilke maintains throughout his work. About the spiritual task of the poet Rilke wrote: “Others have left God behind them like a memory. To the creative person God is the final deep fulfilment. And where the pious say “He is”, and the sad ones feel “He was”, the artists smiles: “He will be”. And his faith is more than faith, for he himself is in construction of this God. That is the duty of the artist”³.

*On the motif of divine “darkness” and the theurgic task in Rilke’s poetics.
The Orthodox concept of God’s “darkness” and Rilke’s image of Russia as a
“dark land”*

The “land” of the poems is a metaphor of God. The “land” designates Russia. It is also likened to a “darkening painting surface” which alludes to the darkening icons that bear the image of the divine. It is the “Grund” in the sense of divine origin. Of this “land” Rilke continues, as he moves towards addressing it more obviously as God:

“You darkening ground, patiently you bear the construction, and you may allow an hour more to the cities and two hours you grant to the churches and lonely

¹ Rilke R. M. Das Stundenbuch. Vom mönchischen Leben. S. 253.

² Ibid. S. 255.

³ Rilke R. M. Über Kunst // Rainer Maria Rilke. Sämtliche Werke. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1976. Bd. 10. S. 427.

monasteries. You see seven hours more to the daily labour of the farmers -: before you become woods again and water and growing wilderness,

in the hour of unnameable anguish, when you reclaim your unfinished image from all things back.

Give me some more time; I will love the things as no one else, until they are all dignified of you and far remote. I want just seven days, seven on which no one has written yet. Seven days of solitude”¹.

Here nature, undisturbed becomes the image for the paradisiacal “origin” which is to be retrieved in the apophaticism of “darkness”. The image of an icon darkened by the veneration with candles becomes a metaphor for God’s return from the realm of cult and culture, which produces his image, to that of “darkness” – a reflection of the Orthodox idea of the mystical darkness of God², to create on a “dark ground” means to create images suffused with the divine.

To Rilke the mediaeval “The Song of Igor’s campaign” represented such an “archaic” state. The poem has a strain of definite critique of culture as estrangement from the divine “ground” (“arché”).

The image of “darkness” is also related by Rilke to the Slavophile notion of “community as communion” (“sobornost”). In a poem describing St. Sophia’s cathedral in Kiev Rilke he combines the motifs of “darkness” with the Theotokos and with incarnation. This particular church, recognisable by the detailed description of her apse, is generalised by calling her “sobor” (cathedral): “*Selten ist die Sonne im Sobór*”³ (“Rarely is the sun seen in the sobor”). Picking this word alludes to the idea of “sobornost”, which signifies both the mystical community within the Orthodox community and with the God. The concept has a wide range of implications within Orthodox and Slavophile thought, regarding the ideas about social life, nation, culture, community and even the relation to nature as based on spiritual communion⁴. It was an important idea in Russian culture of the time.

*Russia as a land “still close to God” – on apophaticism, nature
and double faith (Двоеверие/dvoeverie)*

Looking for an explanation of his “felt presence” of the divine in Russia Rilke drew on the idea of a supposed “archaism” of Russian culture. In this perception of Russia he eclipsed most of Russian history. A timeless “ancient Russia” however also figured on the artistic depictions of Russia’s past in Rilke’s time, as by V. Vasnetzov. Russia to Rilke is a different “chrono-tope”, marked by slowness, archaism and eternity: “I stayed with the eldest monks, the painters and heralds of myth / who calmly wrote stories and carved runes of fame / And I see you in my

¹ *Rilke R. M.* Das Stundenbuch. Vom mönchischen Leben. S. 296 f.

² *Felmy K. C.* Orthodoxe Theologie – eine Einführung. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990. S. 25.

³ *Rilke R. M.* Das Stundenbuch. Vom mönchischen Leben. S. 292.

⁴ *Valliere P.* Modern Russian Theology – Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov. Orthodox Theology in a New Key. Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 2000. P. 359 ff.

visions with winds, with waters and woods, that rustle at the margins of Christianity – o land not to be enlightened”¹.

Rilke sees Russia in opposition to the lands of enlightenment which have extinguished the “darkness of God” – God’s apophatic mode of self-disclosure as Orthodox theology emphasises – by a “light” (of reason) which is illusionary rather than illuminating. It appears as if Rilke had absorbed central tenets of Orthodox apophatic theology intuitively, rather than through any readings of theology. Rilke coined the expression of “God’s darkening” as God’s self-disclosure through poetry.

Rilke depicts these ancient monks also as (icon) painters, as “tellers of myth” who write “runes of fame”. Here the images of orthodox monasticism merge with those of mediaeval epic bards and with the allusion to pagan “runes of fame”. Rilke evidently follows the idea of “dvoeverie”. This Russian “double faith” was a leitmotiv of Russia’s cultural and spiritual self-identification since the late 19th century, widespread in the works of those circles of painters with whom Rilke was familiar. It is a feature of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign”, which Rilke was to translate soon after the completion of this trilogy of poems which make up the “Book of Hours”.

*“The Song of Igor’s Campaign” as a document of mediaeval
“double belief” (“dvoeverie”)*

It has been shown that the concept of “dvoeverie” has no systematic meaning in mediaeval Russian literature and theology. The word is used at the time in a pejorative sense². There is no deliberate attempt at fusing the Christian and the Pagan in Mediaeval Russia. Rather there is a slow process of amalgamation and gradual integration by which Slavic Paganism was partially integrated into the Christian Orthodox system³. The resulting fusion, by which Slavic Pagan elements were integrated into the personages of various saints, as well as into festivals, folk customs and beliefs, did not imply any deliberate syncretism. On the contrary, there have been repeated moves at purging the Slavic Pagan elements from the Russian Orthodox.

The obvious manifestations of “dvoeverie” by the poet of “the Song of Igor” – presumably a cleric, who understood himself and his heroes expressly as Christian – is rather to be explained with a different model, which we can just outline here:

Paganism and Christianity in mediaeval northern cultures did not cover the same points in religious perception. They were not fully symmetrical religious epistemologies. Rather they complemented each other in the perceptions of medi-

¹ *Rilke R. M.* Das Stundenbuch. Vom mönchischen Leben. S. 295.

² *Rock S.* Popular religion in Russia. “Double belief” and the Making of an Academic Myth. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. P. 106 ff.

³ *Мильков В. В.* Двоеверие // Русская философия: Словарь / Под ред. М. А. Маслина. М.: Республика, 1995. С. 132.

aeval authors – save for a few theologians who consciously understood them as irreconcilable opposites. To most people they probably represented mutually augmentative epistemologies, with few points of inevitable conflict. This may explain the long period of several centuries in which Christian and Pagan epistemologies and beliefs were held alongside each other – in Russia as in Germany, Scandinavia or in England. The phenomenon of authors who were Christian in their self-perception but who wrote Pagan or Pagan-inspired poetry in the Middle Ages – we may think here even of Snorri Sturluson, the Icelandic poet and theoretician of literature – appeared as no self-contradiction to them.

*On the notion of “dvoeverie” in Russian cultural thought
at the turn of the 20th century*

In the cultural thought of late 19th century Russia the union of the Pagan and the Christian – also to be found in “the Song of Igor” has been conceptualised as an example of “double faith”, of “dvoeverie”. This has been hailed as manifestation of the specific Russian spirituality and as expressive of Russia’s integrated spiritual world view. Thus the early 20th century historian of Russian culture Georgy P. Fedotov (1886–1951) presents this concept as central to an understanding of Russian spiritual culture and history in his classic “The Russian Religious Mind”¹. To the cultural milieu of late 19th century Russia the idea of Russian dvoeverie became a guiding motif by which the own cultural heritage of peasant culture and of the rich pre-Christian legacy preserved on folk tale, customs, rites associated with orthodox saints and festivals, artwork and popular song were re-appropriated and integrated into the present high culture. In this cultural movement the “Song of Igor” had iconic value and it is thus that Rilke became familiar with it through a Russian friend in culture, Sophia Schill².

Alexander Borodin composed his opera “Prince Igor” based on this epic after he was introduced to the “Lay of Igor” by an art critic belonging to the movement of the “Wanderers” in 1869. After his early death in 1887 Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov completed the composition. The opera was first performed in St. Petersburg in 1890. The predominantly pagan themes of the Lay resonated well with Rimsky-Korsakov’s own intentions, since he composed on pagan motifs alongside with his church music.

The pagan studies of the early 20th century, as e.g. by Boris A. Rybakov³, are based on this re-evaluation of Russia’s pagan past and its surviving features. The interest the “Wanderers” took in folk traditions and ornaments in the visual arts, are based on the same sense of the pagan traditions as essential elements of Russian culture right into modern times. Rilke was evidently influenced by these convictions.

¹ Fedotov G. P. The Russian Religious Mind. Vol. I. The Kievan Christianity, from the 10th to the 13th Century; Vol. II. The Thirteenth and the Fifteenth Centuries.

² Rilke R. M. Das Igor-Lied. Eine Heldendichtung. S. 73.

³ Рыбаков Б. А. Язычество Древней Руси. М.: Наука, 1987.

Rilke adopted the idea of “dvoeverie”. His description of Vasily Vasnetzov’s art is based firmly on this concept. In his essay “Moderne Russische Kunst” (1902) Rilke wrote: “Among those who seriously began new paths (in art) someone more has to be named: Victor Vasnetzov. He too strove to connect art with the Russian soul...; he sought the great common soul of the people, sought her in the life of the peasants, in their customs, in their faith and superstitions, in their most ancient songs, the Bylini... He has explored the paganism of this soul and her piety. He has let her lead him into the churches, in front of the darkened old icons... For the Russian church is not dead; she lives a life, which is infinitely silent, infinitely slow and related to the innermost life of the people”¹.

Here Rilke defines the “Russian soul” by opposite qualities, claiming that Paganism is integrated in it. To Rilke the idea of Russian “dvoeverie”² means to overcome the “disenchantment” of Western European culture and religion. Rilke accordingly chose a piece of Old Russian literature that had an extraordinary symbolic value in his time, and it is certain that Rilke was informed about its cultural significance.

The fusion of these heterogeneous elements was hailed as spiritual complement and as enrichment. The Russian Orthodox historian of culture, G. P. Fedotov, an emigré, expressed this succinctly in 1946: “All Christian nations must be “twice-born”, but since Grace transforms nature rather than destroys it, they carry deep within them traces of their heathen past. The process of transformation is never complete. In the most civilised of modern peoples there are survivals of the prehistoric ages, now degraded to the rank of superstitions or “folklore”. Perhaps this tincture of native heathendom accounts primarily for the national features of Christianity. <...> Christianity was incorporated into each nation by undergoing a kind of <...> investment of the pre-Christian legacies which hide in the subconscious of the national soul. <...> The Russians are no exception. With them the tie between Christian and pre-Christian elements is perhaps still stronger than in most nations of the west”³.

This is a passionate argument for the appreciation of the Pagan past on the specific basis of the Christian Orthodox concept of divinisation. In this perspective “dvoeverie” is a treasure-basket, as containing and preserving the treasures of any (Christian) nation’s specific national past, whose knowledge is essential to come to an understanding of the essence of the own national soul. It is reminiscent of C. G. Jung’s concept of a collective subconscious and an understanding of the Pagan past as a “repressed” element of the (natural) soul, which is to be consciously explored and integrated.

¹ *Rilke R. M.* *Moderne Russische Kunst*. S. 615 f.

² *Мильков В. В.* *Двоеверие*. С. 132.

³ *Fedotov G.* *The Russian Religious Mind*. Vol. I. *The Kievan Christianity, from the 10th to the 13th Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946. P. 3.

On Russia' supposed "archaism" and the "bylini", epic folk song

Following the idea of Russia's supposed "archaism" – which to him meant "originality" – Rilke explains: Russia "still has her age of martyrs. <...> The West has unfolded itself in the Renaissance, in the Reformation, in revolutions and empires as if within a single moment <...> whereas in the empire of Rurik the first day still lasts, the day of God, the day of creation... Just recently, in the seventies, the eldest tales have been extracted from the beards of shaking old men, and only hereby has her era of antiquity been concluded. Her Homer has just died. In his old songs, the so-called Bylini, all the heroes are named in plain aptness as if they were contemporaries"¹.

What emerges from the allusions in this passage from his essay "Russische Kunst" is that he took the mediaeval epic of Igor's campaign as an example of a Bylina – or as a close representation of it in the sphere of literary art – and that it represented to him a work of theurgic significance².

R.M. Rilke's spiritual and poetological quest and the "pagan poetology" of "The Song of Igor's Campaign"

A central feature, as stated before, of "The Song of Igor's Campaign" is the interrelatedness of the spheres of: 1) the divine powers; 2) the living elements of nature; 3) the course of history, and 4) the powers of divination and 5) of poetry and magic song. The latter two are represented and enacted by the seer-poet Boyan.

This idea of interrelation of these spheres had a powerful appeal to Rilke. He presented similar ideas, as in his poem "Du Nachbar Gott", on the monk speaking to the aging god whom he wishes to sustain³.

The idea of a "living nature" is an essential tenet of esoteric world views, as identified by Antoine Faivre⁴. The notion of interrelation conforms to the principles of theurgy⁵.

The opening lines of "The Song of Igor's Campaign" contain a passage of poetological reflection, which unfold these ideas as a poetological approach of an era just passing, but still prevailing, to set the model and standard for the author of this song himself. This passage reflects Rilke's own endeavours.

To Rilke "The Song of Igor" with its defining features of "dvoeverie" represents a primordial state of a divinatory mind-set and poetology, which is to be retrieved.

¹ *Rilke R. M.* Russische Kunst. S. 494 f.

² On theurgy and its symbolic means see: *Uždavinys A.* Philosophy and Theurgy in Late Antiquity. San Rafael: Sophia Perennis, 2004. P. 204 ff.

³ *Rilke R. M.* Das Stundenbuch. Erstes Buch: das Buch vom mönchischen Leben. S. 255.

⁴ *Faivre A.* L'ésotérisme. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992.

⁵ *Uždavinys A.* Philosophy and Theurgy in Late Antiquity. P. 70 f.

On Rilke's translation of the poetological verses of "The Song of Igor's Campaign" and the Symbolist idea of the artist's task

Let us look at his translation of the opening passages of "The Song of Igor's Campaign", in particular to the figure of the poet-seer endowed with magic powers of the word, as example of a pagan theurgic model.

Details of Rilke's translation show that he was aware of the pagan spiritual element in "the Song" and that he endorsed it. His emphasis becomes apparent when we compare his translation to that of Vladimir Nabokov.

The opening lines of "The Song of Igor's Campaign" read as:

“Не лѣпо ли ны бѣшетъ, братіе, начяти / старыми словесы / трудныхъ повѣстий о пълку Игоревѣ, /

Игоря Святъславлича? / Начати же ся тѣмъ пѣсни / по былинамъ сего времени, / а не по замышленію Бояню”¹.

Nabokov's translation: "Might it not become us, brothers, to begin **in the diction of yore** the stern tale of "The Campaign of Igor", Igor son of Svyatoslav? / Let us, however begin this song in keeping with the **happenings** of these times, and not with the **contriving** of Boyan" (lines 1 – 10 VN).

Rilke: "Wie wäre es, Brüder, wenn wir anfangen, **nach den alten Überlieferungen** die schwere Geschichte vom Zug Igors zu erzählen, vom Zuge des Igor Swatoslawitsch? Anfangen aber wollen wir das Lied nach den **Bylinen** unserer Zeit, nicht nach der **Erfindung** Boyans".

The difference. Nabokov conveys the idea of the author that he wishes to distance himself from the "diction of yore" of that exemplary author, which he yet invokes, of Boyan. However, he interprets this gesture as motivated by the desire to follow "the happenings of these times and not the contriving of Boyan". Thus Nabokov has the author of the tale juxtapose the mythopoetic fiction of Boyan with an empirical approach guided by the facts of the present times. (Nabokov comments here: "по билінам: according to actual events, to facts and not to fiction"²).

Rilke however opposes two styles: he interprets the old Russian phrase "начяти / старыми словесы" as referring to ancient style: "nach den alten Überlieferungen", to which he contrasts: "anfangen aber wollen wir das Lied nach den Bylinen unserer Zeit" ("We wish to begin however according to the Bylini of our age".) The "Bylini" are an ancient literary genus of epics, preserved alive in oral tradition of Russia even in Rilke's time. Rilke has his poet declare that he wishes to renew the genus of "Bylini" according to his time – and we may readily interpret this as a poetological declaration of Rilke's own intentions, as wishing to renew this genus by his translation.

Whereas Nabokov translates "по замышленію Бояню" – literally: "according to what Boyan has in mind" – somewhat disparagingly by "according to the con-

¹ Слово о пълку Игоревѣ, Игоря сына Святъславля, внука Ольгова // Изборник // [URL]: <http://litopys.org.ua/slovo/slovo.htm>.

² The Song of Igor's Campaign / Tr. by V. Nabokov. New York: Ardis Publishers, 2003. P. 82.

trivings of Boyan”, Rilke uses a term with positive connotations: “inventio”, and translates: “nicht nach der Erfindung Boyans” (“not according to the invention of Boyan”).

Thereby Rilke attains a double refraction: Boyan’s mythic poetry becomes the background for a more contemporary mode of epic poetry, the “bylini” which yet retain a mythopoetic quality.

Rilke does therefore not insinuate that Boyan’s style is inferior in any way – rather the idea of a lost mode of poetic myth presents itself which is yet recalled and invoked in this exordium.

The phrase “трудныхъ повѣстїй о пълку Игоревѣ” indicates a genus in mediaeval poetry: that of heroic epic. “труд”: “labour”, “toils” refers to knightly arduous endeavours, as in the contemporary “Nibelungen-Lied” (composed around 1190 in Passau, Bavaria on the basis of elder epic traditions¹): where the corresponding phrase: “von grôzer arebeit” – also invokes the labours of the heroes, which are told according to the ancient tales, which are to be retold here: The “toil-some tale”: “трудныхъ повѣстїй” thus signifies a heroic epic which follows. Yet in both epics, spiritual powers guide the course of events. Whereas one might expect an account of the knightly endeavours to follow now, a tale of the campaign proper, a strange reflection on an elder mode of poetry by the magic poet and seer Boyan is now inserted.

At this point the author of the “Slovo” introduces the poetics of Boyan. It is remarkable that he does so, after having distanced himself expressly in the beginning. Apparently Boyan’s mode is invoked as exemplary. This can be supported by observing that some of the techniques described here as employed in fragments across the Song of Igor. – We should however be careful to speak about “techniques” and about “style” since we are no longer on merely poetic ground, but in the realm of magic speech or incantations.

This gesture of turning back to the ancient mode of Boyan’s poetry implies a change of genus. The present epic is told with reference to Boyan but also in differentiation from him.

Boyan is introduced as “вѣщїй”, as a “seer”. The connotations of this concept in the times of transition become apparent in its attribution to Oleg, the Wise (Oleg Veshchi, the 9th century ruler of Novgorod and of Kiev, of Scandinavian descent.) This attribute has been derived from a misreading of the Norse form of his name “helgi” as “holy”². That seems far-fetched. More likely he was attributed some powers of divination, as of magic quality, which earned him this title. Boyan is characterised as a “vates”, a poet endowed with shamanic powers³. Boyan’s epi-

¹ “Uns ist in alten Mären...” Das Nibelungenlied und seine Welt. Ausstellung im Karlsruher Schloss, 13.12.2003–14.3.2004 / Hg. von Badischen Landesbibliothek, Badischen Landesmuseum. Darmstadt: Primus, 2003.

² *Verndasky G.* Kievan Russia. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973. P. 22.

³ *Иванов В. В., Топоров В. Н.* Боян // Мифы народов мира. Энциклопедия. В 2 т. М.: Советская Энциклопедия, 1991. Т. 1. А – К. С. 184.

thet as “Велесов внук”, as “grandson of Veles”, confirms his attributes of magic-sacred powers.

To Boyan the second part of the Slovo is dedicated. He is addressed here in the beginning as “seer”, with a description of his magic poetic song, then, towards the end he is addressed as “nightingale of olden times” (“О Бояне, соловію старого времени”) and finally as “seer Boyan, grandson of Veles” (“в Ёщей Бояне, Велесовъ внуче”) with brief verses of how he would have described the events to follow in his mythic mode.

We may call his mode of poetry “shamanic” to state that the author of “The Song of Igor” attributes to his poetry not only a divinatory, “prophetic” aspect, as of a seer of future events, but also the powers of creating reality in song or chant, as in a “performative speech-act”. The literary form of “performative speech acts” of poetic quality and magic powers, which can conjure up movements in nature – as are described in this second part of “The Igor’s Song”, are known from Germanic and Mediaeval German texts too. We may refer here to the “Merseburg Charms”, recorded on a manuscript of Fulda monastery from the 10th century¹. In this charm Woden and two goddesses appear as healers. Woden is associated with charms and with the powers of poetry, and of magic spells². By reciting the charm a mythic situation (“Ur-Situation”) is invoked and repeated, so as to convey its powers on the present situation. This pattern has been identified in ancient Indian spells of the Atharvaveda (Text IV.12 in the Śaunakīya-Version)³. A similar power of invoking scenes of nature to reflect, to predict and to guide the events of history are presented by the author of the Song of Igor as features of Boyan’s style and song – both in success and in failure of the heroes. Therefore a comparison of the poetics of Boyan in “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” to the properties of the healing charms of German and of Vedic tradition is permissible.

The Edda describes how Woden acquired the power of mantic divination and relates it to his powers of writing runic spells. The Havamal tells that Odin (Woden) attained the powers of divination through his self-sacrifice, hanging nine days and nights on the tree: “I know that I hung on a windy tree / nine long nights, / wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin, / myself to myself, / on that tree of which no man knows / from where its roots run. / No bread did they give me nor a drink from a horn, downwards I peered; / I took up the runes, screaming I took them, / then I fell back from there”⁴. A few verses further on the powers of these “songs” are described thus:

“4. Then fruitful I grew, and greatly to thrive, / in wisdom began to wax. / a

¹ Althochdeutsche Literatur – mit Proben aus dem Altniederdeutschen. Ausgewählte Texte mit Übertragungen / Hg., übers. von H. D. Schlosser. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1970. S. 358.

² *Hasenfratz H. P.* Die religiöse Welt der Germanen. Ritual, Magie, Kult, Mythos. Freiburg: Herder, 1992. S. 96.

³ *Eichner H.* Kurze “indo-germanische” Betrachtungen über die atharvavedische Parallele zum Zweiten Merseburger Zauberspruch (mit Neubehandlung von AVS. IV 12) // Die Sprache. 2000/2001. 42. Heft 1/2. S. 214.

⁴ The Poetic Edda / Tr. by C. Larrington. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1999. P. 34.

single word to a second word led, / a single poem a second found.

5. Runes will you find, and fateful staves, / very potent staves, very powerful staves, / staves the great gods made, stained by the mighty sage, / and graven by the speaker of gods. ...

7. Do you know how to write? Do you know how to read? / Do you know how to tint? Do you know how to try? / Do you know how to ask? Do you know how to offer? / Do you know how to send? Do you know how to slaughter? ...

9. These songs I know, unknown to wives / of kings, or to mankind/ help is the first, and help it will / in sickness, sorrow, and strife”¹.

Now this comparison of the magic poetry of Boyan in “The Song of Igor” to the magic use of poetry of a Scandinavian skáld in appropriate ritual contexts, presupposes similarities of culture and the religious situation.

The characterisation of Boyan as the “grandson of Veles” implies the “seer” Boyan is presented as having magic powers of shaping the reality depicted and of influencing the spiritual powers of nature as in the following passage:

“For he, vatic Boyan, / if he wished to make a laud for one, ranged in thought [like the nightingale] over the tree; / like the gray wolf across the land; / like the smoky eagle up to the clouds. /

For as he recalled, said he, / the feuds of initial times, / he set ten falcons / upon a flock of swans, / and the first one overtaken, / sang a song first” – / to Yaroslav of yore, / and to brave Mstislav / who slew Rededya / before the Kasog troops, / and to fair Roman / son of Svyatoslav. /

To be sure brothers, Boyan did not really set ten falcons upon a flock of swans; / his own vatic fingers / he laid on the live strings / which then twanged out by themselves / a paean to princes. /

So let me begin, brothers, / the tale – / from Vladimir of yore / to nowadays Igor, / who girded his mind / with fortitude, / and sharpened his heart / with manliness, [thus] imbued with the spirit of arms, / he led his brave troops / against the Kuman land / in the name of the Russian land”².

(“Боянь бо вѣщій, / аще кому хотяше пѣснь творити, / то растѣкашется мыслию по древу, / сѣрымъ вѣлкомъ по земли, / шизымъ орломъ подѣ облакы. / Помняшеть бо, речь, / пѣрвыхъ временъ усобицѣ. /

Тогда пуцашеть 10 соколовъ на стадо лебедѣй: / которыи дотечаше, / та преди пѣснь пояше / старому Ярославу, / храброму Мстиславу, / иже зарѣза Редедю предѣ пѣлки касожьскими, /

красному Романови Святъславличю. / Боянь же, братіе, не 10 соколовъ / на стадо лебедѣй пуцаше, / нъ своя вѣщія прѣсты / на живая струны вѣскладаше; / они же сами княземъ славу рокотаху. /

Почнемъ же, братіе, повѣсть сію / отъ стараго Владимера до нынѣшняго Игоря, / иже истягну умъ крѣпостію своею / и поостри сердца своего му-

¹ Odin’s Rune Song // Odin’s Gift // Tr. by J. Hart // [URL]: <http://www.odins-gift.com/poth/O/odinsrunesong.htm>.

² The Song of Igor’s Campaign. P. 32 f.

жествомъ; / наплънився ратнаго духа, / наведе своя храбрѣя плъкы / на землю Половѣцькую / за землю Руськую”¹).

Here the state of primordial unity of poetry, “seer-dom”, divinely ruled events of nature and of history is recalled and evoked – only to be “disillusioned” by stating that it was in fact the power of music by the seer Boyan’s own fingers on the chords that create such a spell.

The shamanic powers of Boyan the poet-seer are not wholly disputed in “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” but rather evoked as a model of bygone times. It is on a more modest level of a merely metaphorically raised union of nature and history that the poet of the Song of Igor wishes to continue his epic. Rilke affirms the model and poetic hermeneutics of Boyan, by quoting him literally at the end of the song² and, more importantly, by following his mode throughout in the depiction of the negativity which arose through the discord between the actions of the hero and the divinely enacted events of nature and history.

Rilke follows a strain of belief in this epic that the land of Russia can still be evoked and addressed as a living entity, in which a harmony of nature and history and divine powers may exist, which provide the space for the poet-seer to rove in the guise of a nightingale.

However, as things go wrong with this campaign and misfortune befalls the heroes, this “Russian land” withdraws herself: “O Russian land, you are already behind the culmen”³ (“O Русская земле! Уже за Шеломянемъ еси”⁴). To Rilke too the “Russian land” vanished behind the horizon. The primordial unity he experienced and sensed here became however the guiding image for his poetry to last.

Rilke was confronted with the same condition. Like the poet of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” he longed for the theurgic powers of a divinely empowered seer-poet who could call things into divine life by creation. However his solution to this “disillusionment” was different.

The poet of “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” depicts a course of events where the omens of nature are disregarded and the union of nature and divine powers and historical action if broken and disregarded. The misfortune which befalls his hero and his narrow escape from death appear to reflect this rift.

Metaphors of shamanic perceptions and phenomena appear only here and there. They do not add up to a harmonious or heroic course of events. They appear as fragments.

Rilke dealt with the condition of fragmentation in his subsequent poetics. He concentrated on individual “things” whose “vatic” or “symbolic” qualities he sought to re-establish. He forsook the notion of a harmonic cosmos of universally affirmed mutual references – which A. Faivre described as one of the fundamental features of Esotericism – in favour of the powers of epiphany of single objects, which disclose a higher reality. This however is a development which only began

¹ Слово о плъку Игоревъ, Игоря сына Святъславля, внука Ольгова.

² *Rilke R. M. Das Igor-Lied. Eine Heldendichtung* (V. 209–210).

³ *The Song of Igor’s Campaign*. P. 38.

⁴ Слово о плъку Игоревъ, Игоря сына Святъславля, внука Ольгова.

after his “Russian period”. The image of the author as a “shaman-poet” which he encountered and recognised in Boyan, seems to have remained with him as an ideal throughout. With an uncanny sense Rilke had discerned the pre-modern and pre-Christian world view in “The Song of Igor’s Campaign” in order to retrieve it and its poetics for the divinatory and theurgic task of the poet in a modern Esoteric and Symbolist understanding. The poetic and spiritual views of Russian culture of his age provided the lead to his often intuitive understanding of these elements which guided him even after he turned his attention to the France and the West. In his translation and his adoption of Russian spiritual motifs during these years he has shaped a lasting image of a “spiritual Russia” in these terms in the German cultural mind.

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