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Kevin Moss
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FREIDENBERG AND MARR

Freidenberg was a Marrist, or at any rate, it was her association with Marr in the early years of her career that guaranteed her position in 1932 as founder and chairman of the Department of Classics at LIFLI (the Leningrad Institute of Philosophy, Literature, Linguistics, and History, soon to become Leningrad State University). Marr died in 1934, but his influence survived him and dominated Soviet linguistics and humanities until 1950, when Stalin denounced Marr and Marrism in Pravda. The same association with Marr that had been a guarantee of Freidenberg's success now assured her downfall.

To this day the Freidenberg revival in the Soviet Union is centered in Moscow rather than Leningrad, where she lived and worked. The Leningrad Classicists have made something of a scapegoat of Olga Mikhailovna: they find it hard to treat her objectively. In part this reaction is the legacy of Marrism and its administrative excesses, but in part it must be the result of Freidenberg's own difficult personality, of which the diary provides some glimpses.

The milieu in which Freidenberg lived and worked could only contribute to the exaggeration of dubious claims. In the new Soviet state a completely new science had to be created based on completely new principles; the problem of the "origin" of life, language, and man had to be solved posthaste. Because science had to be completely new, and the urgency of its acceptance precluded lengthy testing of new principles, originality counted for more than accuracy.

Marr's theories are a case in point. From the initial claim that Georgian is related to Semitic, Marr (urged on by eager disciples) went on to solve the problem of the origin of all human language.

The new Soviet science of Marxist linguistics proved its originality by rejecting out of hand long-accepted theoretical assumptions. Marr rejected language families and linguistic borrowing. Freidenberg rejected literary borrowing. Like the manifestoes of the Futurists, Marr's and Freidenberg's works were calculated to shock. This was true of Freidenberg even before she came under Marr's spell. Her dissertation on the Greek novel as acts and passion must have raised some eyebrows among the traditionalists with its contention that the Christian Gospel and the Greek erotic novel are genetically related.

One of the most important questions in the development of Freidenberg as a scholar is the role played by Marr. How did she view her relation to Marr? How close were their theories? Can her Marrist connections be written off as an expedient compromise with the dominant ideology? Because Marr's legacy is so controversial, because so many of those who suffered at the hands of Marr's followers are still alive, Soviet scholars would like to de-emphasize Freidenberg's connection with Marr or to present it as something inessential. In fact there are numerous parallels in the theories of the two scholars.

Freidenberg's success -- even her freedom -- was in part thanks to her association with Marr. But it was not merely a question of career. Even before Marr was consigned to oblivion in 1950, Freidenberg was careful to point out the differences between them. Freidenberg was introduced to Marr in 1924, when most of her ideas had already taken shape and before Marr's New Theory of Language became the only acceptable school of linguistics.

Marr's theories appear to have been strongly influenced by his romantic-nationalist approach to his native Georgian, combined with his bad impressions of Western linguists, who were ignorant of Caucasian languages. As early as 1886 Marr thought he saw an affinity between his native Georgian and Semitic, a "discovery" which was rejected out of hand by Marr's teachers, but which eventually became the cornerstone of his theories. Marr extended his "Japhetic" family to include Georgian, Armenian, all native Caucasian languages, Basque, Etruscan, Pelasgian, Dravidian and the native languages of America. He generally looked at ethnic and geographical names as

the most archaic forms in existing languages. As he found more and more "Japhetic" cognates in the languages of the world, Marr was forced to give up the idea of Japhetic as a linguistic family. Instead it became a stage through which all languages passed in what Marr perceived as the "single glottogonic process." In Marr's "paleontological analysis" of language origin he sought the most archaic elements and found twelve ethnic terms, which were reduced to seven, then five, then finally four in 1926: sal, ber, yon, and rosh, sometimes designated simply as A, B, C, D. "All the words of all languages--so far as they are the product of a single creative process--consist entirely of these four elements."¹

According to the New Theory of Language, the languages of the world all developed according to one pattern and went through stages which corresponded to stages in economic and social development. Marr based his linguistic stages on stages of mentality such as had been outlined in anthropology by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and in philosophy by Ernst Cassirer.

It is obvious from the diary that Freidenberg's closeness to Marr was natural and actually preceded his influence. Several times she protests that the ideas expressed in some of Marr's articles were anticipated by her own unpublished writings². She is also outspoken about Marr's personal limitations: "he thought about one thing all the time, night and day. Nothing existed for him except paleontological semantics as applied to separate words. Here he was a master, an artist, a genius, a god."³ But he was also incapable of the "love of the teacher for his student."⁴ In 1936, she wrote her own recollections of Marr, which have recently been published.⁵ As she puts it, "I was driven to it by the sickeningly sweet and false recollections printed

¹"Vstupitel'naia rech' k kursu obshchego ucheniia o iazyke, chitannomu v Azerbaidzhanskom universitete" (1928), Izbrannye raboty, vol. II, 16.

²Diary, III, 182, 203, 207.

³Diary, III, 80.

⁴Diary, I, 48.

⁵"Vospominaniia o N. Ia. Marre," Vostok-Zapad: Issledovaniia, perevody, publikatsii (M: Nauka, 1988), 181-204.

that year."⁶ But her version was not allowed by the censor at the time.

Freidenberg was equally outspoken about those who surrounded Marr, and she seems to support the opinion that the worst crimes of Marrism have more to do with these followers than with Marr himself: "Around Marr," she writes, "there swarmed some worthless toadies, incapable of any kind of scholarship, ignoramuses, terrible fanatics, some kinds of Komis, Chuvashes, Armenians, Georgians... When Marr wanted to promote his theory and started to ingratiate himself with the authorities, all of these Chuvashes in the role of party secretaries and chairmen of local committees turned into a huge force that Marr himself feared."⁷

Marr and Marrism affected Freidenberg both after his death and after hers. When Marrism became obligatory, Freidenberg was forced to claim even closer connections to him. This was particularly painful during the publication of the Poetics of Plot and Genre in 1936. "They demanded that I recognize that my book was written after Marr; all my own breath was driven out of it. In the section on 'things' they forced Marr on me -- and this was incorrect, since I followed German archaeology, Usener and his metaphoristics of the thing."⁸ Marr was artificially introduced everywhere, and the foreword was rewritten 5 times to include more Marr. When the book came out, Freidenberg complains that "phrases about Marr written in my style were inserted."⁹

Valerian Aptekar is characteristic of the kind of people who rode the wave of Marr's popularity. Aptekar helped Marr clothe his theories in appropriate Marxist slogans, as Freidenberg suggests in a description of her first meeting with him in 1928: "Happily and self-confidently he admitted his lack of education. Guys like Aptekar, ignoramuses, would come from the villages and out of the way places, bone up on party slogans, Marxist schemes, and newspaper

⁶Diary, III, 178.

⁷Diary, III, 134.

⁸Diary, V, 183.

⁹Diary, V, 184.

phraseology and feel like rulers and dictators. With a clear conscience they would instruct scholars and were sincerely convinced that for the correct systematization of learning ("methodology") knowledge itself was not necessary."¹⁰ When Poetics was published, Aptekar was disappointed, because there was not enough Marr in it. His comments to Freidenberg give an idea of what the atmosphere was like in 1936: "Now in the situation of open and hidden persecution of Nikolai Iakovlevich, or rather of his great work -- it is essential to pour full cauldrons of tar and other similar spices on the heads of the vermin, every wrong step is particularly dangerous, every insufficiently deep analysis plays into the hands of the enemy."¹¹ Freidenberg recognized and deplored the change in the Marrist school: "Those many years I fought for Marr I was fighting for progressive thought and its independence; now I saw that that thought itself had become despotic, intolerant, small-minded."¹²

For Freidenberg, the more popular Marr became, the harder it was for her to remain with him. Freidenberg's natural tendency was to protest against any orthodoxy, so it was a trial for her, when her mentor's theories were accepted as canon and polemicizing with him was forbidden.

From the point of view of Freidenberg's scholarly production, Marr no doubt inspired Freidenberg to continue her studies, but he can also be blamed in part for the unrestrained claims of her early articles that make some of them practically unreadable. The case of Marr and Marrism also provides insight into the abominable conditions in which Freidenberg was forced to work. Constant scheming, threat of arrest, denial of access to scholarly works -- all were commonplace in the Soviet academic community of the day. Scholars were judged not on their scholarly merit, but on their associations with foreigners or with newly excommunicated Soviets -- such was the case with Freidenberg and Marr. When they were

¹⁰Correspondence, 125.

¹¹ Diary, VI, 8.

¹² Diary, V, 145.

supported, they were isolated from real scholarly debate, a situation that led many scholars to lose all sense of critical perspective. Freidenberg, however, refined her theories and grew more restrained -- even when she was denied access to scholarly materials and barred from the classroom.

Marr's linguistic theory was dominated by what Jakobson would call the paradigmatic pole. He was interested in similarity and would set out to prove the genetic identity of two words on the basis of semantic identity. The transformational rules required to get from one form to another were invented ad hoc--they were less important to Marr than the identity of the forms. Contiguity in space and time was for all practical purposes ignored: there were no borrowings, linguistic elements did not travel, sound changes were determined neither by phonological conditioning (of contiguous sounds) nor by temporal conditioning (implying linear, horizontal change in a fixed sequence). Syntagmatic rules were also invented ad hoc. Syntax was effectively ignored.

The development of Marr's own theories resembles the process he describes through which the original four roots proliferated through bifurcation, qualitative contradiction, mixture, and stadialism to produce the many languages of the world. In view of the many directions he took, it is not surprising that he contradicted himself. In spite of Marr's excesses, there was some wheat among his theoretical chaff, and the New Theory of Language did allow progress in fields in which interpretation and creative invention are at least as important as empirical reality. One of these fields is paleontological semantics in literary criticism.

Paleontological semantics in folklore and literature were the domain of Freidenberg and Frank-Kamenetskii. In effect they were the only representatives of a "school" which seems to have had more names than practitioners: "paleontological," "Marrist," "Japhetidological," "semantic," "genetic." "Marrist" speaks for itself. "Japhetidological" comes from Marr's designation of what he once thought was a linguistic family: Georgian, for example, belongs to the "Japhetic" branch of the "Noetic" family, of which Semitic was another branch, the terms coming from two sons of the Biblical Noah,

Shem and Japheth. Later he applied "Japhetic" to a stage through which all languages were thought to have passed. Marr was interested in the pre-historical "paleontological semantics" of words, in their origins ("genesis") in ethnic and geographical terms.

In a definition of paleontological semantics, Marr wrote that "in various phases of stadial development in semantics the same words receive different apprehensions of meaning content."¹³ In other words, while the form remains the same, the meaning may change with time. This idea, Marr rightly perceived, had been overlooked by bourgeois formalists (including the Indo-European comparative historical school Marr was opposing) in favor of morphological analysis and phonological laws. Marr, and even more Freidenberg turned their attention to the interpretation of semantics of what might be a single unchanging form in the context of various stages in the development of society. The transition from Marr's paleontological semantics as a linguistic phenomenon to Freidenberg's paleontological semantics in poetics is fairly straightforward. Marr believed that the same form designated different meanings in various stages (thus the same word might signify "dog" in one stage and "horse" in another). In living languages, Marr's primary field of study, it is easy enough to establish the meaning of the word in question--one simply asks a native speaker. In written language, the object of Freidenberg's study as a Classicist, the problem is more complex. Meaning must be derived from context if the form remains the same. When the same form is used in a different context to signify something other than what it had meant (in an earlier stage) the empirical result is what we usually call figurative language. We consider figurative language to be the use of words to signify something other than what they normally signify. Freidenberg simply reverses this polarity: the natural use of words to signify something other than what they normally (or previously) signify produces the effect of figurative

¹³"K semanticheskoi paleologii v iazykakh neiafeticheskikh sistem," *Izbrannye raboty*, vol. II (L: Sotsial'noe-ekonomicheskoe izd., 1936), 255.

language. Hence Freidenberg's interest in the historical poetics of metaphor and simile.

It was the early infatuation with Marrism that led Freidenberg to her most exaggerated claims. Marrist phonological laws, which could be applied with no constraint to all the languages of the world, allowed her to compile huge lists of related terms. Her justification for identifying widely scattered terms is that "semantic localization is more reliable than topographical."¹⁴ Freidenberg is often guilty of such excessive identification. In her article on Thersites she links Thersites to Achilles, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Zeus, and scapegoats as a "diffuse image of the heaven-underworld."¹⁵ In her article on Makkus and Maria she links some hundred terms from various language by deriving them from the Marrist roots mak (fak) - mag - mar.¹⁶ But most often she left the Japhetic analysis of her material to the linguists. For example, in her article "Thamyris" she analyses names and the plots associated with them without giving Japhetic etymology as "raw material for the linguist."¹⁷ In her "Recollections of Marr" she writes that she "never published a single article without checking it with Marr. Usually I would come to him and tell him my conclusions; he would take a piece of paper, begin to break the word into its elements, and read me their semantics. There was not a single case in which the result of literary analysis did not coincide with the linguistic result."¹⁸ But her memory deceives her: Marr did not in fact confirm the material on the name Thamyris.¹⁹ Often she compares motifs from widely scattered cultures and different historical epochs in the spirit of Marrist linguistics: "I take issue with the unacceptability of widely scattered geographical comparisons."²⁰ She herself realized she was exposing herself to attack from many

¹⁴"Thamyris," *Iafeticheskii sbornik*, 5 (L: 1927), 76.

¹⁵"Tersit," *Iafeticheskii sbornik*, 6 (L: 1930), 250.

¹⁶"K semantike fol'lkornykh sobstvennykh imen 'Makkus' i 'Maria,'" *Sovetskoe iazykoananie*, No. 2 (L: 1936), 3-20.

¹⁷"Thamyris," *Iafeticheskii sbornik*, 5 (L: 1927), 72.

¹⁸"Vospominaniia o N. Ia. Marre," *Vostok-Zapad: Issledovaniia, perevody, publikatsii* (M: 1988), 196-97.

¹⁹*Diary* 3, 194-95.

²⁰"Thamyris," 76.

fields through her far-ranging claims: "instead of ten enemies I will have a hundred,"²¹ she once wrote.

This theory resulted in the claim that any myth variant was as reliable as any other, no matter what the source or when it was attested. Lévi-Strauss similarly avoids the issue by defining the myth as "consisting of all of its versions." His unity is based on the structure of the human mind, rather than in the process of cultural development. But even so, it is for this acceptance of all variants that the structuralist mythologies most often come under fire from more rigorous critics.

In her diary Freidenberg says that she came to Marr on her own: "It is easy for me to show my complete independence from the chronology of Marr's works. But I did not live a single year in a free scholarly milieu. Marr's authority and the orthodoxy of his fanatic disciples in part threw me off course and in part suffocated and terrorized me. But internally I very quickly learned to throw off any pressure from outside. It was precisely because I met Marr through my independent parallel work that I valued, respected, and understood Marr and was organically in no condition to betray him."²² Freidenberg already began to feel herself a heretic among Marr's entourage while working on Poetics. "The theory of stadialism was always foreign to me. I found it superficial and evolutionary. For me the most interesting thing was that differences define all life, all functioning, existence: this was the original and only possible form of expression of universal unity... Open opposition to stadialism was forbidden. But how strange that Marr was not suspicious of the fact that the theory of stadialism was accepted by everyone immediately! And I considered the theory of four elements incorrect. At first intuitively, then logically I strove to derive "that" from "this," "this" from "that," in other words, to draw a

²¹Correspondence, 85.

²²Diary 3, 205, "Vospominaniia o Marre," 200 N. 14, Druzhba narodov, 1988, No. 7, 204.

qualitative line between the factor and the fact; according to Marr, the fact derived from the four archetypes."²³

In her introductory lectures on the theory of ancient folklore, which she wrote in the '40s, Freidenberg openly opposes Marr: "All objects were thought of as identical. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that multiplicity was not recognized, it was objectively reflected in the image. This was not considered by Marr and his school."²⁴

Freidenberg was interested in precisely this multiplicity of the formal variants of the image. On her manuscript she later added the following note: "Criticism of the theory of Marr, whom I respected deeply, was brought on by purely scholarly considerations. At the height of the enforced acceptance of his theory I could not imagine what would come in 1950."²⁵

Freidenberg got her job thanks to her Marrist connections, but she lost the department for the same reason. In the 1948 anti-cosmopolitan campaign her opponents accused her of distorting Marr and supporting Veselovsky's theories. Freidenberg survived these ordeals. In the anti-Marr campaign of 1950, however, she was not so lucky. In her diary she describes the last trial, led by Natalia Moreva-Vulikh, a former student: "I was the witch. Vulikh was the judge. When Marr was in power she foamed at the mouth to prove we had nothing in common. Now she drew between us an equal sign of absolute identity."²⁶ While everyone around her recanted, Freidenberg, who no longer believed in the four elements, in the theory of stadialism, and no longer used Marrist terminology expressed her respect for Marr and refused to deny her former mentor and colleague. When she asked to be released from her post, the request was granted.

Yes, Freidenberg was a Marrist. But though she was granted her department thanks to her Marrist connections, she came to Marr

²³Diary 5, 205; N. V. Braginskaia, "O rabote O. M. Freidenberg, Sistema literaturnogo siuzheta, Tynianovskii sbornik, Riga, 1986, 277.

²⁴O. M. Freidenberg, Vvedenie v teoriuu antichnogo fol'klora, Mif i literatura drevnosti, M 1978, 20.

²⁵"Vospominaniia o Marre," 200, N. 13.

²⁶Diary, 14, 138.

independently, not as a career move. And she paid for her Marrism and the courage of not renouncing Marr first by losing her department, then, after her death, by a quarter century of neglect of her own work. In the area of literary theory, the school of paleontological semantics proved productive. The works of Freidenberg and Frank-Kamenetsky on literature are far from the excesses of Marrist linguistics. But only now are Soviet and Western scholars who are no longer afraid of the ghost of Marr beginning to look at them. Now, when the legacy of the Stalinist period is finally undergoing critical reevaluation, perhaps Freidenberg too will benefit from objective and unbiased analysis to take her place in Soviet intellectual history.