

## INDO-IRANIAN VAYU AND GOGOLEAN VIY: AN OLD HYPOTHESIS REVISITED

Yaroslav Vassilkov  
St. Petersburg

Indologists are often tempted to look for some traces of Proto-Indo-Aryan, or Aryan (Indo-Iranian) culture in the lands (such as Eastern Europe) far away from India and in the centuries or even millennia preceding the time of the *R̥gveda*. But this is a dangerous way, and few scholars have been successful in it. Asko Parpola is among them (see Parpola 1988; 1995). Encouraged by his achievements, I dare to present on this solemn occasion a paper dealing with certain motifs in East European folklore which seem to be somehow connected with Indo-Iranian mythology.

One of the best exponents of Russian classical literature, Nikolai Gogol, who lived in the first half of the 19th century, once wrote a romantic horror story entitled "Viy" after a fantastic monster who appears in its final episode. The story runs as follows: Khoma Brut, a young student of philosophy at a theological seminary in Kiev, stays for a night in a peasant's hut and is assaulted by its supposed owner, an old witch, who attempts to use him as a vehicle to carry her to the witches' Sabbath. With his prayers and exorcisms he destroys her charms, after which the old hag turns to a beautiful young lady who seems to be dying. A few days later Khoma is kidnapped by the servants of a rich Cossack officer and is forced to read prayers for three successive nights in an empty church over the body of the officer's young daughter whom he recognizes as the witch he had previously killed. On the first night the dead witch rises from her coffin and tries to catch and kill Khoma; but when he has drawn a magic circle around him, she is unable to get him. On the next night she is joined in her efforts by a horrible host of winged evil creatures, but again they cannot cross the magic circle and are unable to even see the man inside it. Then, on the third and the last night, when the evil creatures once again fail to catch Khoma, surrounded by his charmed circle, the witch summons to her help the most horrible of the underworld's monsters.

"Bring Viy! Fetch Viy!" he [Khoma] heard the corpse cry.

And suddenly a stillness fell upon the church; the wolves' howling was heard in the distance, and soon there was the thud of heavy footsteps resounding through the church. With a sidelong glance he saw they were bringing a squat, thickset, bandy-legged figure. He was covered all over with black earth. His arms and legs grew out like strong sinewy roots. He trod heavily, stumbling at every step. His long eyelids hung down to the very ground. Khoma saw with horror that his face was of iron. He was supported under the arms and led straight to the spot where Khoma was standing.

"Lift up my eyelids! I do not see!" – said Viy in a voice that seemed to come from deep in the earth, and all the creatures flew to raise his eyelids.

"Do not look!" an inner voice whispered to the philosopher [in this way the author ironically designates Khoma – Ya. V.]. He could not restrain himself, and he looked.

"There he is!" shouted Viy, and thrust an iron finger at him. And all pounced upon the philosopher together. He fell expiring to the ground, and his soul fled from his body in terror".

(Gogol 1985: 167.)

In all editions of this short story, there is a footnote by the author on the first page:

Viy is a colossal creation of the popular imagination. It is the name among the Little Russians [Ukrainians – Ya. V.] for the chief of the gnomes, whose eyelids go down to the earth. This whole story is folklore. I was unwilling to change it, and I tell it almost in the simple words in which I heard it. (Gogol 1985: 132.)

However, scholars and commentators never trusted this note by N. Gogol, considering it a case of literary mystification, of which the writers of Romanticism were always so fond. The footnote by editor of the latest American edition faithfully reproduces editorial comments in the majority of 20th-century Russian editions of "Viy":

Gogol' probably never heard it [the story of Viy – Ya. V.] at all. No discovery has been made of the folklore sources of Viy. (Gogol 1985: 132.)

This comment can now be regarded as outdated and incorrect. Gogol told the truth: indeed, he borrowed the image of *Viy* from the Slavic folklore tradition. Scholars recently rediscovered a Russian folktale which previously had been mistakenly considered a folklore reflection of Gogol's story. It is about an old wizard with large brows and eyelashes that covered his eyes, so that he could not see a visitor: he orders the servants "to fetch *iron forks* and lift up ... brows and black eyelashes" so that he could see the man. The authenticity of this folktale is proved by its parallels in the Celtic – namely, Irish and Welsh – folklore. In an Irish myth, among the enemies of the gods, *fomors*, a giant is mentioned by the name Balor, who had an "evil eye" (most probably, he was capable of killing with a glance of his eye). This "evil eye" of Balor remained closed by a very long eyelid which hung down to the earth; but, on the field of battle, *fomors* used a wooden stake as a tool for lifting up Balor's eyelid and as a support for it. In the Welsh epic *Mabinogion*

we find a mention of a similar giant, by the name Yspadadden Penkawr, whose eyelid had to be lifted up with the help of *large metal forks*. The mention of metal forks as a tool for opening the deathly eye both in the Welsh epic and in the Russian folktale gives ample grounds to see, in this motive, a possible survival of the Proto-Indo-European antiquity.

### V. I. ABAEV'S HYPOTHESIS

A search for folklore sources of Gogolean *Viy* began in the middle of the 1950s, when a specialist in Iranian languages, V. I. Abaev<sup>1</sup> produced a startling hypothesis. According to him, *Viy* is the Ukrainian form of a Proto-Slavic name *\*Vey* – from the verb *veyati* ‘to blow’ (cf. Sanskrit *vayati* ‘blows’). In Proto-Slavic, *\*Vey* could be the name of the god of wind, in the same way as the Vedic *Vāyu* (and Indo-Iranian *\*Vayu*) was also a name of the wind-god. The neighbours of Ancient Slavs, related to them linguistically, the Balts (Prussians and Lithuanians), had their own god of wind *\*Veyopatis* (etymologically: ‘Lord of the wind’).

Thus, Gogolean *Viy* is in its origin identical to the Old Slavic god of wind *\*Vey*, related to the Indo-Iranian *\*Vayu*. Both the Slavic *Vey* and the Indo-Iranian *Vayu* can probably be traced back, according to V. I. Abaev, to a common ancestor – a Proto-Indo-European god of wind. But why was the god of wind transformed in Gogol's description into a horrible figure, an underworld monster, resembling rather a god of death? To explain this, V. I. Abaev referred to the ancient Iranian mythological tradition, in which the character of Vayu had an evil side from the very beginning, and being the god of wind, the breath of all living beings, he is at the same time a god of death. In the Zoroastrian liturgy for the dead (*Aogəmadaēča* from the Avesta) there is a passage referring to this god of wind and death, which runs as follows:

The path can be avoided which is guarded by a dragon of the size of a bull, that devours horses and men, that slays men and is pitiless; only the path of the pitiless Vayu can never be avoided.

The path can be avoided which a dusky bear guards; only the path of the pitiless Vayu can never be avoided.

The path can be avoided that is guarded by a robber who slays at one blow and is pitiless; only the path of the pitiless Vayu can never be avoided.

The path can be avoided which (is commanded) by an army equipped with chariots and (lurking) in ambush; only the path of the pitiless Vayu can never be avoided. (Zaehner 1955: 84.)

1 Professor Vasilij Ivanovič Abaev (1900–2001) was an outstanding Russian Iranist, the author, in particular, of the multivolumed etymological dictionary of Ossetian (Abaev 1958–95).

V. I. Abaev also discovered in his native Ossetian<sup>2</sup> mythology a mythic image of a one-eyed giant, the door-keeper of the world of the dead, guardian of the iron gate; the Ossetian term for this demon of death is *waejug*. V. I. Abaev traced its origin to the Ancient Iranian form *\*Vayuka* and, therefore, to the Ancient Iranian *Vayu* as god of death (Abaev 1958; 1958–95, IV: 68–71; 1965: 112–115).

### V. I. ABAEV'S CRITICS

Abaev's hypothesis was received enthusiastically by Russian scholars and had been generally accepted until the late 1960s – early 1970s, when two highly authoritative savants raised their voices against it. First, a specialist in Slavic languages, O. N. Trubačëv, offered a new etymology for the name *Viy* in connection with the Ukrainian word *viya*, *viyka* 'eyelash'. Trubačëv observed that in folklore one can often find some confusion between eyelashes and eyelids (e.g., Gogolean *Viy* has long eyelids, but his counterpart in the Russian folktale has long eyelashes). According to Trubačëv, the original meaning of Ukrainian name *Viy* was "one who has long eyelids/eyelashes". He derived the noun *viya* 'eyelash', from the verbal root *vit'sya*, 'to curl'. This semantics of the name *Viy* "has nothing specific in common", he wrote, "with the [mythology of] Iranian *Vayu*". He emphasized the contrast between the Ukrainian *Viy* as the demon of death (whose name reflects his specific feature of having long eyelids/eyelashes, covering his deadly eye) and Indo-Iranian *Vayu* as the god of wind, whose name originated from the verbal root "to blow" (Trubačëv 1967). However, a derivation of *viya* from *vit'sya* cannot be accepted. There are more sufficient grounds to suggest that this noun is a derivative of the East Slavic verb *\*veyati*, 'to blow, fan' (*viya*, in this case, is 'something which fans') – the same root, from which the name *Viy*, *\*Vey* is produced.

It was another eminent Russian philologist, V. V. Ivanov, who developed Trubačëv's ideas and struck a final blow to Abaev's hypothesis (Ivanov 1971). V. V. Ivanov deserves the credit for the discovery of Celtic parallels to the image of *Viy*. In his opinion, *Viy* is an ancient mythological image, related to the Ossetian one-eyed demon of death *waejug* and to the corresponding characters in the Irish and Welsh folklore. These parallels may be regarded as evidence of some ancient Slavo-Celtic-Iranian cultural ties. V. V. Ivanov emphasizes that in each of these cases we deal with a demon of death, associated with iron (iron forks, an iron face, an iron gate) and characterised by some "deformity of the organ of sight" (moreover, *Viy* and, probably, the Celtic folklore personages are capable of killing with a glance). But, according to V. V. Ivanov, these images have nothing in common

<sup>2</sup> Ossetians – a people in the northern Caucasus who speak an Iranian language, cultural descendants of ancient Scythians.

with the Indo-Iranian *Vayu* and the reconstructed Indo-European god of wind, who had no sinister qualities. It was by pure chance that “in one of his Iranian dualistic forms” this Indo-European god of wind became, at the same time, a god of death. Basically the Indo-European god was of a heavenly and benevolent nature, and nothing in his mythology is reminiscent of the image of Gogolean *Viy* – the underworld demon, “covered all over with black earth”. And, of course, this Indo-Iranian and Indo-European god of wind could not have had, in the scholar’s opinion, an “evil eye” or a “deformity of the organ of sight”, be it hypertrophied eyelashes or eyelids or anything of this kind. (Ivanov 1971.)

After Professor V. V. Ivanov had passed his judgement, scholars did not return to Abaev’s hypothesis and it became practically forgotten. The aim of the present paper is to prove that the verdict was not just, and Abaev’s ideas deserve to be revived. Obviously, his opponents did not take into account all the available data related to the Indo-Iranian *Vayu*. If we take a closer look at the Indian and Iranian data, we realise clearly that the Indo-Iranian *Vayu* possesses the same virulent characteristics as the Gogolean *Viy* does.

#### AMBIVALENCE OF THE ELEMENT OF WIND AND THE GOD OF WIND IN INDO-EUROPEAN MYTHOLOGIES

Firstly, it should be noted that even in the earliest Proto-Indo-European mythology, the image of the Wind-god was probably marked by ambivalence, and combined in itself both positive and negative characteristics. It is evidenced by the fact that in the various IE traditions the wind was considered to be an element of a dual nature. Thus, ancient Greeks from the earliest times considered the wind to be the breath of life present in all living beings, but, at the same time, they dreaded the blind, demolishing force of the storm. Images of horrible winged creatures – Harpies – were mythologically connected with this wind of death. The winds were worshipped as gods associated with the cult of dead ancestors and with funeral rites (Kazanskij 1998: 344–347). In Russian folk tradition, the wind was believed to come into being from the breath of God, or of a primeval cosmic giant, similar to the Vedic *Puruṣa*; but on the other hand, in Slavic folklore there are many spells against a whirlwind, which was thought to be a demonic force that caused the specific disease of paralysis of the heart (Russian *podvey*) in those who would stand in its way. In fairy tales the Wind appears as a kidnapper who takes his victims to the otherworld.

Parallels to \**Vayu* in Baltic mythologies bear even the names etymologically related to his name and to Slavic *Vey/Viy*. Lithuanian *Vėjas* ‘Wind’ is a dreadful gate-keeper of the otherworld; his huge head is bound with *iron hoops*. According to a folk tradition, formerly there were two Winds, two brothers, but now only one

of them still blows, the other one cannot blow because his head was bound with iron hoops in order to cure him of headache; if he starts to blow, the hoops will snap and he will die. The ambivalence of the Lithuanian god *Vėyopatis* ‘Lord of the wind’ is evident even in his iconography: he was represented with two faces, turned in opposite directions (in the manner of the Roman *Janus*), with one hand raised up and the other hanging down. The Lettish *Viesulis* (cf. Lith. *vièsulas* ‘whirlwind’; etymological relation of this word to the same root with *Vėyas* is problematic) is the demon of the whirlwind whose attack can be stopped in the only way: one has to hit him ‘in the heart’ with a *metal pitchfork*. Both *Vėyas* and *vièsulas* often seem to be synonymous with Lith. *velnias* ‘devil’.

### INDO-IRANIAN VAYU AS A GOD OF DEATH

As far as the Ancient Iranian tradition is concerned, the god of wind, Vayu, from the very outset had a maleficent aspect and appeared as a god of death. The conclusive evidence in favour of this is provided by the already quoted Avestan verses about the “pitiless Vayu”, composed long before the single (though ambivalent) image of Vayu split into two, forming a dualistic pair of “the good Vay” and “the evil Vay”, mentioned by V. V. Ivanov. Moreover, the Iranian Vayu (Vay) has some peculiar features in common with the Ukrainian *Viy*. In the Pahlavī (i.e. the Middle Iranian) text *Greater Bundahišn*, there is a passage which describes in what particular way “the evil Vay” puts an end to a mortal’s existence:

... The evil Vay carries the breath-soul away; as it is said: “When he touches a man with his hand, it is sleep; when he casts his shadow on him, it is fever; and *when he sees him with his eye, he smites his breath-soul.*” [*kaδ-as ’pat časm ’vēnēt, ’jān ’bē zēnēt*] (*Greater Bundahišn* 186.12; Zaehner 1955: 85 – italics mine.)

The italicised words leave us no doubt that the Iranian “evil Vay” used to kill mortals in the same manner as the Gogolean *Viy* killed poor Khoma: he paralysed the man’s breath by way of glancing at him. Moreover, if we take into account some later transformations of Vay’s image in the Iranian tradition, we discover in them the feature, characteristic of the Ukrainian *Viy* and his Celtic counterparts, which V. V. Ivanov defined as “a deformity of the organ of sight”. In the course of time “the evil Vay” was absorbed by the image of a new god of death and fate – *Zurvān*, ‘Time’<sup>3</sup> that was still later replaced by *Zamān*, ‘Death; Fate; Time’. In the great Persian epic poem *Šāh-nāmeḥ* by Firdausi, which is a treasury of popular

3 *Zurvān* as the god of death makes himself visible to a dying man against his will (like *Viy* to Khoma), at the moment of dying: “Mayst thou in death fall to hell – says a Pahlavī text – for that is *Zurvān* whom no one can conceal; for *Zurvān* reveals himself of his own accord” (*Yavišt i Friyān* 2,39–40; Zaehner 1955: 240).



Iranian beliefs (often of pre-Islamic origin), it is stated that ‘no one can sew up the eye of death/fate (*Zamān*) with a needle’ (*na čaśm i zamān kas ba-sūzan bi-dūxt – Šāh-nāmeḥ* [ed. by Vullers], I.324.147; Zaehner 1955: 241) – the image that instantly brings to mind the motif of long eyelashes or eyelids which cover the eyes of the Slavic *Viy/Vey*.

The Indian *Vāyu*, like his Iranian counterpart, is not merely a god of wind. As early as in the *Ṛgveda* he is recognised as a cosmic deity: ‘breath of the gods, germ of the universe, this god moves as his own will inclines him’ (*ātmā devānām bhūvanasya gārbho yathāvaśaṃ carati devā eṣāḥ* RV X,168.4). *Vāyu*, the Wind, was born from the breath of the Primeval Divine Man, *Puruṣa* (RV X,90.13). He is also the vital breath of all living beings; this is probably hinted at in the famous “Riddle Hymn” (*asyā vāmāsyā*; RV I,164.31), but is explicitly proclaimed in the *Atharvaveda* (X,4.15) and some later Vedic texts (the *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa* and others) where *Vāyu* (or *Vāta*, *Mātariśvan*) is identical to *prāṇa*, ‘breath’. *Vāyu*’s role as the giver of breath and life is implied in the hymn RV X,186, where he is addressed with the request “to breathe his balm (or: medicine) on us”, to “prolong our days of life”, to “make us (strong) that we may live” and to “give us ... the store of *amṛta* which is kept in thine house”. This cosmic *Vāyu* is represented in the *Ṛgveda* in his beneficial, life-giving aspect. There is also an anthropomorphic image of *Vāyu* as the charioteer of *Indra*, or as a warrior on his own chariot. Here the destructive aspect of the god is quite obvious: he rushes forward on his swift chariot, crushing (*rujān*) everything in his way. This aspect was later developed (or, merely, better revealed) in the Epic mythology where one of the most popular of *Vāyu*’s names is *Prabhañjana*, ‘breaking (into pieces)’. Fierceness and fury are constant characteristics of *Bhīmasena* – a mortal son and a partial incarnation of *Vāyu*, his earthly counterpart in the *Mahābhārata*, whom the epic singers often call “the son of *Prabhañjana*”, using this patronymic instead of his personal name. Such features of *Bhīma*, as blood-thirstiness, gluttony and his friendly relations with the *Rākṣasas* enabled Hermann Jacobi to suggest that *Bhīma* had “a demonic origin” and to see in him “a personification of the destructive power of the storm” (Jacobi 1909: 806). In view of all that has been said above it is clear now that *Bhīma* does not personify the destructive power of the wind directly, but has inherited all sinister features from his “heavenly father”, *Vāyu*.

The malicious aspect of *Vāyu* is best revealed in the chapter of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (7,35) describing the childhood of *Hanuman*, *Vāyu*’s other son. Having discovered in himself the hereditary ability to fly, the baby *Hanuman*, soon after his birth, jumped high into the sky in order to catch the sun, which, he thought, was a red ripe fruit. *Rāhu*, the demon whose duty is to devour the sun at regular intervals of time, producing eclipses, was frightened and reported to *Indra*, king of the gods, that a stranger was going to usurp his ancient privilege. In the encounter that followed,

Indra struck the impudent baby with his thunderbolt. At that moment Vāyu appeared and saw his son lying dead; then ‘the Lord, which is present inside all living creatures’ (*prājasv antargataḥ prabhuḥ*), took the body of his son ‘into the cave’ (*guhām*; the meaning of this “cave” may well be both macrocosmic and microcosmic: the “cave of the heart”) to mourn for him. This retirement of the wind-god from the world caused a universal disaster. Life-breaths, *prāṇas*, left men and gods, who became ‘breathless’ (*nirucchvāsāḥ*) like senseless logs or walls (*kāṣṭha-kudyopamāḥ*). Gods and men appealed to Prājapati:

You made Vāyu the Lord of our life-span (*asmākam āyuṣaḥ patiḥ*), the Master of our breath (*asmān prāṇeśvara*) ... Vāyu is *prāṇa*, Vāyu is bliss, Vāyu is all this world. Without Vāyu the world will never obtain happiness ... Let us not come to destruction ...

It was only after Indra had revived Hanuman and consoled Vāyu that the world was saved from mortal danger.

The archaic nature of this Rāmāyaṇa episode is revealed by the existence of a parallel in Lithuanian folklore: once upon a time the Wind (*Vėjas*) got angry, left the world and hid in the hollow of a tree. For years there were no winds, and the drought threatened the existence of life in the world. It took a lot of effort from the God (*Dievas*) and his messengers (animals and birds) to persuade the Wind to break silence and raise his voice again...

In this episode of the Rāmāyaṇa, Vāyu is described quite unambiguously as the lord of *prāṇa*, who is able, at any moment, to stop the breath of all living beings and thus to turn into a universal killer. Moreover, in the didactic Śāntiparvan of the Mahābhārata, there is a passage where Vāyu is described and defined as a real god of death. Sage Vyāsa explains to his son Śuka the nature of the Wind. First, he enumerates six natural, physical winds which blow in different regions of the Universe and in different directions (the wind driving the clouds across the sky – *pravaha*; the ascending wind that causes the Moon and other luminaries to rise – *āvaha*; the wind that gathers water from the seas, brings it up and imparts it to the clouds – *udvaha*; the wind that melts the clouds for pouring rain and again solidifies them, that also bears the chariots of gods in the sky – *saṃvaha*; the dry wind that hits the earth and uproots the trees – *vivaha*; the wind that supports the waters of the heavenly Gaṅgā, preserving them from falling down – *parivaha* (Mbh 12, 315.32–48).

Contrasted with all these natural winds is the seventh one – *parāvaha* (lit.: ‘taking beyond’, the wind that

destroys the breath of all breathing creatures when the last hour comes,  
[the wind] which is followed on its way by death and [Yama] Vaivasvata

*sarvaprāṇabhṛtāḥ prāṇān yo ’ntakāle nirasyati*  
*yasya vartmānuvartete mṛtyuvaivasvatāv ubhau* (Mbh 12,315.49).



It is also called the wind “which takes yogins beyond the limits of physical time and space, into the immortality”, from where is no return (315.50–52).<sup>4</sup>

The description of this wind of the other world ends in the exclamation: *vāyuh sa duratikramaḥ* ‘this wind is difficult (or: impossible) to get by (or: to pass by, to avoid)’, which is interesting in two aspects. Firstly, it is merely a variation of the very popular epic formula *kālo hi duratikramaḥ* ‘Time (= Death) is difficult to get by (avoid)’, which gives one more reason to link ‘this Vāyu’ with death. Secondly, this expression inevitably brings to mind the refrain of the Ancient Iranian liturgy for the dead: “Only the path of the pitiless Vayu can never be avoided” (see above). This parallel perhaps indicates an ancient Indo-Iranian mythological motif.

Elsewhere in the Mahābhārata (12,15.17), Vāyu is mentioned among “the gods who kill”, exactly between Kāla (Time) and Mṛtyu (Death).

In the post-Epic Indian tradition, Vāyu is usually recognized as the god of a double nature, in one of his aspects being obviously connected with death. In the *Matsyapurāṇa*, Viṣṇu at the time of *pralaya* turns into Vāyu and then pulls *prāṇas* out of all living beings (*Matsyapurāṇa* 165,24). The medical treatise *Caraka Saṃhitā* emphasizes the dualism of Vāyu at all levels. Acting inside the human body in the form of the five *prāṇas*, the wind “inspires all the senses ..., holds together the various elements of the body in their proper form ..., maintains the cohesive unity of the body as a whole”, and fulfils many other functions aimed at supporting life. “But when it is excited in the body, it inflicts on the body all sorts of derangements”, which lead eventually to death. On the macrocosmic level the situation is the same.

While in natural state, when it circulates in the world, ... it supports the world, causes fire to burn, governs the positions, movements and the orbits of the sun, the moon, the constellations and the planetary systems, forms clouds, drops rain ... But when it circulates in the cosmos in its excited state, ... it shakes up the summits of mountains, uproots the trees, causes tides in the oceans, ... produces earthquakes, ... destroys the six seasons, does not allow the crops to grow, brings about calamities to human beings, destroys the existence, produces such clouds, sun, fire and winds which bring to an end the four *yugas* of the world.

And, speaking of Vāyu as a god, the same text adds:

It is the source god of beings, it is imperishable, it brings the beings into existence and is responsible for their exit, it is the originator of well-being and of trouble, it is death, it is the god of death (Yama), it is the overall regulator, it is the Lord of creatures.<sup>5</sup>

4 G. Widengren (1965: 16) reconstructed, among the original functions of the Iranian Vayu, his role as a conductor of the souls of the deceased.

5 Quoted from Sharma & Keswani 1974: 60–61.

Hence it follows that in Indian tradition the god of wind was an ambivalent figure, like in some other Indo-European mythologies. It would be natural to suppose that the Indian epic and post-epic Vāyu is a descendant of the Indo-Iranian – and eventually – of the Indo-European god of wind with the same ambivalent nature. But in this succession there is a missing link. The *Vedic* Vāyu has no distinctly negative features, no explicit connections with death. And in contrast with his Ancient Iranian counterpart, he has no “evil eye”, he does not kill with his glance.

But the image of a god or a demon of death killing his victims with the “evil eye” may be viewed as only a particular form of expression for a more general idea. This universally spread idea can be formulated as the mutual invisibility of the living and the dead, inhabitants of this world – and of the otherworld (demons, spirits). Here lies the reason why “an inner voice” advised Khoma not to look at Viy: as soon as a living man and a demon of death see each other, as their eyes meet, the former is transferred to the category of the dead. For a living man, in normal life the spirits of the otherworld remain invisible.

In different Indo-European traditions one can find a similar notion as regards the wind: it is invisible (at least, for the living), but can be heard. A Russian folklorist thus summarizes characteristics of the wind in Eastern Slavic proverbs:

What does it have? ... Voice (Ukrainian). What does it not have? – Feet, hands, body.  
In what way does it manifest itself? – It is invisible, but can be heard (= makes noise, howls etc.). (Volockaja 1993: 187.)

This motif appears in the Ṛgveda (X,168.4c): ‘His howl is heard, but [there is] no image’ (*ghōṣā īd asya śṛṇvire ná rūpāḥ*); cf. I,164.44: ‘[Of him] the sweep is seen, but [there is] no image’ (*dhṛājir ... dadṛṣe ná rūpām*). Later, in the Epics we find such sentences as: “Bodiless Vāyu wanders among the embodied creatures” (Rām. 7,35.60). Certainly, this feature of Vāyu is usually understood by scholars as an example of poetic realism: the wind really *is* invisible, transparent. But Vedic poetry never limits itself to shallow realism of this kind; every “naturalistic” feature has, as a rule, some mythological background. In post-Vedic texts one can find clear indications that Vāyu’s invisibility is connected with his evil nature: e.g., in the *Harivaṃśa* he is called “the head of the bodiless *bhūtas* (spirits of the dead)”. But in the Ṛgveda too there seems to be at least one passage that provides an opportunity to connect the Vedic Vāyu with death. In the famous “Riddle Hymn” (*asya vāmasya*) of the RV (I,164), the riddles beginning from verse 30 refer, according to some scholars, to Vāyu; of special importance are the words in verse 32ab:

*yá īm cakāra ná só asyá veda*  
*yá īm dadárśa hírug ín nú tásmāt |*

who produced him (who produced Vāyu in the form of *prāṇa*, who produced a breath, i.e., a living being), did not get knowledge of him (i.e., has not yet met him); who had saw him [as the god of death], from that man he [as *prāṇa*, life-breath] immediately went away.

However, this reading, in the same way as the interpretation of this hymn as a whole, remains highly conjectural.

It has to be noted, too, that some passages in early Buddhist literature imply the ability of the “king of death” to kill with a look of his eye. In the words of the Buddha, “the man, who knows that this body is like the foam, ... will pass by the king of death remaining invisible for him” (Dhammapada 46); “the man who looks upon the world as upon a bubble or a mirage, is not seen by the king of death” (Dhammapada 170). Cf. Suttanipāta 1119: “Look upon this world as an empty thing! The king of death will not see a man who looks upon the world this way.”<sup>6</sup> The name of Vāyu, however, is not mentioned, and the title *rāja* makes one rather think of Yama – though, Vāyu too appears in the Ṛgveda at least once (X,168.2) as “the king” (Bodewitz 1992: 52). But the motif of a “deadly eye”, combined with the motif of “passing by” the god of death, who stands across a certain posthumous road, gives a good parallel to the image of Iranian Vay.

Beyond the northern frontier of the Aryan world, in the mythology of the Finno-Ugrian Komi people, there is a god of the death-bringing Northern wind, called Voypel', whose name can be traced back to Proto-Iranian \*Vayu (Steblin-Kamenskij & Semënov 1991). It is remarkable, that some “deformity of the organ of sight” is present in the mythology of this god, or, to be exact, in the image of his one-eyed female “servant” Potös' (Uljašev 1992: 118). “Deformity of the organ of sight” can also be traced in the mythology of the Baltic Wind-god. The Lithuanian *Vėyopatis* appears sometimes as a *blind* old man, and *velnias*, who is often synonymous with the Wind, happens to be *blind* or *one-eyed*.

To sum up: the distinction between Gogolean *Viy* as a “demon of death” and Indo-Iranian Vayu as a “celestial” and “benevolent” god of wind, drawn by some scholars, does not seem valid. Iranian Vayu and Indian Vāyu (at least, in his post-Vedic forms) are obviously connected with death. Moreover, such a specific feature of *Viy* as his ability to kill mortals with his “deadly eye” proves to have certain parallels in Iranian, and probably also Indian, traditions.

The seemingly great distance between the Aryan Vayu and Gogolean *Viy* as the underworld demon, “covered all over with black earth” (Ivanov 1991), shortens significantly if we take into account an image on the wall in one of the “royal” tombs of the Novosvobodnaya (“Majkop”) culture in the Northern Caucasus (Rezepkin 1992). This culture, supposed by some scholars, including Asko Parpola

6 Cf. Suttanipāta, p. 181.

(Parpola 1988: 205; Mallory 1989: 205–206, 231–233), to be a possible stage in the movement of Eastern Indo-European tribes from the North Pontic Steppes into Asia, is now dated from the end of the fourth to the middle of the third millennium BC. Among other pictorial motifs having distinct Indo-Iranian parallels: the bow without string, as a symbol of a king's or a hero's death; bird-like figure (Garuḍa?) over a leather-bag (with *amṛta*?, etc.; see Vassilkov 1994), there is in this tomb a picture of a god, most probably a god of death, which has, instead of a face and the upper part of the trunk, something resembling a grill. The artist's intention could well be to represent in this way *the face hidden behind long eyelids/eyelashes or "sewn up" with threads*. The wild horses (tarpans) are represented running around the god's figure in an antisunwise/anticlockwise direction – a common Indo-European direction of death. The horses in many IE mythologies are connected with both death and the wind. And in the same tomb with this Vāyu-like or Vīy-like figure there were found, among other grave goods, ritual *metal forks* (Vassilkov 1994: 779–780).

### VĪY AS A GOD OF WIND

As we have seen, Indo-Iranian Vayu is not a “celestial” and “benevolent” god of wind; from time immemorial his image obviously had a sinister aspect. On the other hand, Gogolean *Vīy* is not merely a “demon of death”. He retains some characteristics of an ancient Wind-god, which have been miraculously preserved in the text of Gogol's tale.

In the Vedic texts, like in other Indo-European (and, in particular, Slavic) traditions, the Wind-god is described as “having no image” (and invisible for the living), while “his howl is heard” (RV X, 168.4c; see above). Keeping this in mind, let us now have a closer look at Gogol's text.

The appearance of *Vīy*, as described by Gogol, is preceded by the following phenomena:

Suddenly a stillness fell upon the church; *the wolves' howling was heard in the distance*, and soon there was the thud of heavy footsteps resounding through the church. (Italics mine.)

This time, Gogol, mentioning “the wolves' howling”, really mystifies his readers. Because a paragraph or two earlier he himself introduced in the narrative a hint, indicating that in fact this sound was not “the wolves' howling” at all, but rather *Vīy's* own voice. On the third and last night, Khoma and two Cossacks, Dorosh and Yavtukh, who escort him on his way to the church in order to prevent him making any attempt to escape, hear a strange howl:

It was a hellish night. A whole pack of wolves was howling in the distance, and even the barking of the dogs had a dreadful sound.

"I imagine *something else is howling; that's not a wolf*", said Dorosh. Yavtukh fell silent. The philosopher (= Khoma) could find nothing to say.

(Gogol 1985: 167; italics mine.)

## CONCLUSION

Even if Abaev's hypothesis is considered proven, we still face the problem: does the interrelation between Vayu and Viy imply a parallel development from a common Indo-European source, or it is to be traced back to Indo-Iranian cultural influence on Slavic mythology? But the interrelation itself cannot be put in doubt any more. This interrelation even goes so far that the materials of Slavic mythology (as this paper, I hope, makes clear) elucidate some obscure aspects of the image of Indo-Iranian Vayu, while, on the other hand, the knowledge of mythology of the Vedic wind-god helps to reveal the deepest layers of mythological meaning in the image of Gogolean Viy.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is my pleasant duty to express my thanks to the Jan Gonda Foundation, whose grant enabled me to complete the work on this article in the creative and friendly atmosphere of the International Institute for Asian Studies and at the excellent library of the Kern Institute, Leiden, the Netherlands.

I owe a particular debt to Dainius Razauskas, a Lithuanian folklorist who kindly provided me with a database on the Baltic mythology of the Wind-god. I received it while reading the proofs and managed to use only some of the data in this article. A closer comparative study of Indo-Iranian \*Vayu and Baltic *Vėjas/Vėjopatis*, which may prove to be conclusive to the problem of Viy, still remains a desideratum.

## REFERENCES

- ABAEV, V. I. 1958. Obraz Vija v povesti N. V. Gogolja. *Russkij fol'klor*, III: 303–307. Moskva: Akademija nauk.
- 1958–95. *Istoriko-ètimologièeskij slovar' osetinskogo jazyka*, I–V. Moskva Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk (vol I); Leningrad: Nauka (vols. II–IV); Moskva: Institut jazykoznanija (vol. V).
- 1965. *Skifo-evropejskie izoglossy*. Moskva: Nauka.

- BODEWITZ, Hendrik Wilhelm 1992. King Prāṇa. In: A. W. van den Hoek, D. H. A. Kolff & M. S. Oort (eds.), *Ritual, State and History in South Asia. Essays in Honour of J. C. Heesterman*. (Memoirs of the Kern Institute, 5): 50–64. Leiden: Brill.
- GOGOL, Nikolai 1985. *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, II. Ed. by Leonard Kent. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- IVANOV, Vjačeslav V. 1971. Ob odnoj paralleli k gogolevskomu Viju. (*Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, 5.) Tartu: Izdatel'stvo Tartusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta.
- JACOBI, Hermann 1909. Brahmanism. In: James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, II: 799–813. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
- KAZANSKIJ, Nikolaj 1998. Diahroničeskij aspekt izučeniya epičeskoj formuly. *ПОЛЫТРОПОН. К 70-letiju Vladimira Nikolaeviča Toporova*: 325–351. Moskva: Indrik.
- Mallory, James P. 1989. In Search of the Indo-Europeans. Language, Archaeology and Myth. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Matsyapurāṇa* = Hari Nārāyaṇa Āpaṭe (ed.), *Matsyapurāṇam*. (Ānandāśramasaṃskṛtagranthāvalī, 54). Poona: Ānandāśrama.
- PARPOLA, Asko 1988. The coming of the Aryans to Iran and India and the cultural and ethnic identity of the Dāsas. *Studia Orientalia* 64: 195–302.
- 1995. The problem of the Aryans and the Soma: Textual-linguistic and archaeological evidence. In: G. Erdosy (ed.), *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia. Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity*: 353–379. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- RAZEPKIN, Alexej 1992. Paintings from a tomb of the Majkop Culture. *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 20(1–2): 59–70.
- SHARMA, D. C. & N. H. KESWANI 1974. Theory of Pneuma (*vāta*) as propounded by Ātreya Punarvasu. In: N. H. Keswani (ed.), *The Science of Medicine and Physiological Concepts of Ancient and Mediaeval India*: 57–63. New Delhi.
- STEBLIN-KAMENSKIJ, Ivan & Vladimir SEMĚNOV 1991. Neskol'ko zamečanij k personifikatsii u komi severnogo vetra (Vojpelja). In: *Semiotika kul'tury. III Vsesojuznaja škola-seminar. Tezisy dokladov*: 69–71. Syktyvkar: Syktyvkar'skij Gosudarstvennyj Universitet.
- Suttanipāta* = K. R. Norman (tr.), *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-nipāta)*, I. London: Pali Text Society, 1984.
- TRUBAČĚV, Oleg N. 1967. Iz slavyano-iranskih leksičeskikh otnošenij. In: *Ėtimologija-1965*: 3–81. Moskva: Nauka.
- ULJAŠEV, O. I. 1992. Sluh i zrenije v obrazah komi mifologii. In: *Ural'skaja mifologija. Tezisy dokladov Meždunarodnogo simpoziuma (5–10 avgusta 1992)*. Syktyvkar: Komi naučnyj centr.
- VASSILKOV (Vasil'kov), Yaroslav V. 1994. Some Indo-Iranian mythological motifs in the art of the Novosvobodnaya ('Majkop') culture. In: A. Parpola & P. Koskikallio (eds.), *South Asian Archaeology 1993. Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference of The European Association of South Asian Archaeologists held in Helsinki University 5–9 July 1993* (Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, B 271), II: 777–787. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.
- VOLOCKAJA, Z. M. 1993. Ėlementy neživoj prirody v zagadkah slavyanskogo regiona. In: *Slavyanskoe i balkanskoe jazykoznanie. Struktura malyh fol'klornyh tekstov*: 183–196. Moskva: Nauka.
- WIDENGREN, Geo 1965. *Die Religionen Irans*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- ZAEHNER, Robert Charles 1955. *Zurvan. A Zoroastrian Dilemma*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.