Two hours before dying, on a July afternoon in Rome in 1949, Viacheslav Ivanov turned towards his friend Olga Deschartes: “Save my Svetomir. . . . Finish the tale . . .” and, as she protested: “That I cannot do, I do not know how . . .,” he added in a characteristically sybilline vein the promise: “Finish writing it. You know everything. I shall help.”¹ Five chapters of what was to become a nine part narrative were already completed by Ivanov’s own hand. Deschartes, who as the spiritual companion and confidante of Ivanov’s exile years, had witnessed the text’s mysterious genesis, accepted the poet’s command as a sacred trust. Intellectually, she was intimately familiar with his conception of the tale, but her personal modesty and admiration for Ivanov’s literary mastery made her painfully aware of the difficulty of the task. It would take her more than fifteen years to add the last four chapters of the tale, working on the poet’s old typewriter in the semi-darkened room on the Aventine Hill, under the huge portrait of Ivanov’s Diotima.² The resulting completed narrative is the longest and most important of the hitherto unpublished works in the first volume of Ivanov’s collected works, compiled from the family archives.³

The dramatic death-bed request reveals how much significance Ivanov
attached to his long meditated slovo about Russia. Written almost exclusively in exile, with the exception of the song of Svetomir which came to him in Sochi in 1916, it was intended by Ivanov to be his message into the future of Russia, a spiritual bequest by the poet/seer to the "holy sinner." Ivanov composed the tale in three major phases: 1916 in Sochi, 1928-29 in Rome and Pavia, and 1941-43 in Rome. Significantly, these years preceded or corresponded with some of the most tragic events in contemporary Russian history. This coincidence reinforces the impression that the text gives of being something of a Delphic gloss on the riddle of Russia's destiny in this world.

The theme of Svetomir, the prince-savior, is presented in the setting of a fictional "white kingdom," a Christian state described in terms meant to evoke literary and emotional echoes of Holy Russia. The narrative chronicles the lives of two generations of Christian rulers, concentrating on the inner spiritual drama which accompanies their assumption of worldly power. As for the external events of their rule, these are treated schematically and with deliberate vagueness, as a stylized background on a tapestry which must remain subordinate to the figures of the princes in the foreground. Two interrelated themes from the Slavophile repertory of historical myths are pressed into service by Ivanov: a holy war against a non-Christian Asia is fought by the prince-father, resulting in a world dominion which entitles the "white kingdom" to become the heir of an exhausted Byzantium. The blessed succession of rulers, the father and son, is revealed to be the divinely appointed instrument of Christian revelation. However, both princes must first undergo a discipline of renunciation, an askesis, before they can be invested with the sacred, yet sinful burden of power. The narrative leads into a thicket of Russian meta-political myths and the issue at stake is basically the same as

4. Ivanov developed his theories about the essentially Christian and feminine nature of the soul of the Russian people in the process of interpreting the mythical substructure of Dostoevskii's great novels, especially of Besy. See Borozdy i mezhi, "Opyty esteticheskoi kriticheskoi" (Musaget), Moscow, 1916, p. 66: "Dostoevskii wanted to show in the Devils how the Eternal Feminine in the aspect of the Russian soul suffers violence and rape from 'devils', forever struggling within the people against the Christ to gain dominion over the male principle of the popular consciousness." Ivanov returned to the theme of Russia as a nation of "Christ-bearing" people in a later essay, written for publication in Germany, Die Russische Idee (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1930). Here he formulates his hopes about the spiritual future of Russia by combining the Slavophile doctrine about the apolitical nature of the Russian people with Vladimir Solov'ev's eschatology. See p. 17: "... das religiose Zukunftsideal Russlands ist für die gebildeten ein historisches Ziel, für das Volk eine eschatologische Hoffnung."

5. The Soviet classist and literary historian Sergei Averintsev, whose recent pioneering essay about Ivanov may signal the beginning of the process of his official rediscovery, stresses the Slavophile roots of Ivanov's cultural theories. He also notes the abstract and stylized quality of Ivanov's image of Russia. S. Averintsev, "Poeziia Viacheslava Ivanova," Voprosy literatury, No. 8 (Aug. 1975), pp. 145-92.