

AWAY FROM THE GLOBE. OCCULTISM, ESOTERICISM AND LITERATURE IN RUSSIA DURING THE 1960s–1980s

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They spent a long time looking for us on the Globe,
We did not hide, we merely walked and walked
By different paths we left the Globe behind
And there, praise God, they stopped looking for us.
Grigorii Reinin, Songs of Lotus [Pesni Lotusa]

Before I begin my discussion let me make a few introductory remarks based on my previous research.¹ The existing works on esotericism and occultism focus mostly on the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, and tend to simultaneously underestimate and overestimate the interaction of these traditions with the culture as a whole. They underestimate the interaction because scholars pay more attention to individual figures than to general trends. They overestimate because certain paranormal phenomena once constituted part of generally accepted scientific studies, then were dismissed as imaginary, then became staples of paracultural and/or religious activities, and today are once again being studied by serious researchers.

The difficulties facing the historian of ideas multiply for the historian of literature. Since ancient times the commonplaces, cosmological situations, and narratological motifs of esotericism have functioned inside the genre-creating modi of writing (the *pathoi*, to use the old terminology of Northrop Frye), i.e. utopia, satire, and exotic trips. I believe, for example, that the structure of the utopian idea is contingent on the tradition of “optimistic” occultism, among other things. I mean the assumption of the plasticity of the world, as well as the idea of a knowledge distinct from the “official canon” that envisions the possibility of radically changing and improving man, and the entire world through

¹ For example “Ézotericheskie kody E. Zamiatina,” In: Larisa Poliakova, ed., *Tvorcheskoe nasledie Evgeniia Zamiatina*, vyp. XIV (Tambov: Izd. Tambov. un-ta, 2007); „Organoproektsiia: v poiskakh ochelovechennogo mira,” *Zvezda*, 2006, no.11; “Ézotericheskie élementy v sotsialisticheskom realizme,” In: Rolf Fieguth, ed., *Orthodoxien und Häresien in den slavischen Literaturen, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 1996, SBd. 41; “Mirozdanie Ivana Efremova,” *Vremia i my*, 1977, no. 24; *Utopiia v Rossii* (with Michel Niqueux) (St. Petersburg: Giperion, 2003, French edition 1995, German edition 2003).

man. This knowledge enables the bearer to penetrate the secrets of the universe with the help of magic formulae; afterwards it can be used to subject the world to the will of “the one who knows.” In this sense the utopianist is not offering anything that is not offered by the occultist or the gnostic, and this kinship is illustrated by the way in which many of the great utopian authors depend on the esoteric tradition, beginning with Campanella and Andreae and ending with Fourier. It is no accident that in Russia the utopian novel was born in Masonic circles.

Even more obvious are the links between esotericism and fantastic literature. One example of fantastic-esoteric literature is Jan Potocki’s *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (*Le manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*) (1794-1810), in terms of motifs one of the richest works of European literature, which talks not only about magic, the Kabbalah, heresy, occultism and its illusions, but also about the initiatory journey to the center of the world. In the caves and subterranean paths that link Europe to Africa and Asia we meet the members of an ancient community of Muslim sages, whose aim is the unification of all religions and peoples. There is no doubt: the *Manuscript* is in every regard an example of an esoteric novel, while its famous story-within-a-story narrative structure implements the esoteric principle of circles of secrets and corresponds to this principle’s interweaving of motifs and topical patterns. I mention Potocki because both the novel and the myth that sprang up around him have had a more or less clear impact on Russian literature, beginning with Pushkin. Moreover, Potocki is important for our main topic: according to certain accounts, the publication of his novel in Russian translation and the release of Wojciech Has’ film *The Saragossa Manuscript* in the Soviet Union in the 1960s were significant events for the “underground” (the unofficial cultural scene),² while in the early 1980s a poem by Viktor Sosnora, which was twice set to music by the guitar poets, became extremely popular. Its theme is the legend of Potocki’s suicide with an enchanted silver bullet.³

Potocki’s masterpiece can also easily be read as an attempt at “drawing the conclusions of the 18th century,”⁴ a philosophical novel that synthesizes Enlightenment ideas, or as a novel about exotic travels and the relationship

2 Ian Pototskii, *Rukopis', naidennaia v Saragose* (Moscow: Nauka, 1968). See Stanislav Savitskii, *Andergraund. Istoriia i mify leningradskoi neofitsial'noi literatury* (Moscow: NLO, 2002), 112.

3 See Evgenii Slivkin, “Stikhotvorenie, naidennoe v Saragosse: funktsiia grammaticheskogo roda v stikhotvorenii Viktora Sosnory ‘Ja ostavil posledniuiu puliu sebe...,’” *NLO*, 2008, no. 93.

4 See François Rosset, “Roman grotesque parce que roman-somme: *Le Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* de Jean Potocki,” *Colloquium Helveticum*, 2004, 35.

between East and West. But most importantly, in the novel the magical arts are presented with a healthy dose of irony; the gothic terrors are enveloped in the grotesque, and the reader is given the idea that he or she is reading a parody of occultism and that the author—a knight of the Maltese Order—is presenting the fruits of his own imagination as esoteric tradition. Whether this impression is correct or not is unimportant: Potocki teaches us to keep our distance when approaching the discourse of occultism and about occultism.

A recent collection of critical works about Russian literature in the first five years of the 21st century features two articles on the work of Iurii Mamleev, a leading figure of Russian esotericism. One researcher (Graham Roberts) reads his work exclusively through Lacan's theory of psychological archetypes, the other (Anne Coldefy), denies the psychologism of the same works, referring instead to their link with esotericism.⁵ The "occultness" or "esoteric character" of a given text, even if stated explicitly, is not compulsory for the reader, it does not have absolute meaning.

Science is constantly shedding concepts it has come to regard as false. Occultism, on the other hand, maintains its viability while incorporating scientific concepts, including those that are false, processing them and writing them into its own worldview. Occultism in art and literature, then, is related to them by the same dynamic correlation. It forms part of their history, and occult-fantastic literature depends just as much on occultism itself as on literary evolution.

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The limits of the period considered in this overview are set by two "critical moments," the post-Stalin Thaw and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This amounts to 35 years between 1956 and 1991, almost half of the entire Soviet era. The system opened itself to the past and the outside world hesitantly, but open it did, and that which had been proscribed and forgotten was discovered. The parallel culture made space for different forms of esotericism and occultism and for the activities of individual persons, groups and communities.⁶ But while this space was situated within the underground, it was isolated and for a long time noticed only very selectively. A few publications in the West (the

5 Graham Roberts, "Œdipe ou Frankenstein : vers une lecture lacanienne de la prose russe contemporaine"; Anne Coldefy, "Dans le miroir : sur la trilogie de Iouri Mamléïev," In: Hélène Mélat, ed., *Le premier quinquennat de la prose russe du XX^e siècle* (Paris: IES, 2006).

6 See Birgit Menzel's chapter in this volume. It also provides a bibliography on this issue.

journals *Occultism and Yoga* and *Gnosis*, the books of Iurii Mamleev and Arkadii Rovner) publicized the fact that there were active circles, first and foremost Mamleev's *Iuzhinskii circle*, and that there existed a certain "Moscow-Leningrad metaphysical school", but no more than that. When Rovner, who had been publishing an esoteric journal in New York, sent out a questionnaire in 1979 with the aim of reviving this school, as the only positive phenomenon "in the field of contemporary Russian culture," Iurii Mamleev answered that "many of the authors belonging to this current preferred writing for more or less narrow elite groups." In the same questionnaire, Anri (Henri) Volokhonskii stated that there were three "different meta-social subcultures", Soviet, dissident and "metaphysical."⁷ Living as they were "on another plane," the esotericists did not consider themselves dissidents. Over the last ten years a number of memoirs on the life of the esoteric underground have appeared, providing us with a good depiction of the members of the movement, their energy and certain aspects of their creative activities, but unfortunately not of their work as a whole. The scale of what went on in this sphere is only now becoming apparent. It has not yet been described or evaluated as a whole, and its role within the literary process is poorly understood.⁸

Volokhonskii's thesis about three "subcultures" points to the heterogeneity of the parallel culture and the different function of its components. For example, few esoteric texts were circulated in dissident Samizdat (and only rarely published in Tamizdat, i.e. abroad). Most of what the esotericists produced remained confined to the brochures they published themselves and to the memory of eyewitnesses. Samizdat anthologies usually mention only two or three esotericists. A well informed history of 20th century Russian literature, recently published in Poland, devotes many pages to Samizdat literature without mentioning the esotericists at all.⁹ The reason for this is obvious: most esotericists began to publish in the 1990s or later, which raises the difficult question of how to date the movement and establish its chronology.

The literary historian will have to complement Volokhonskii's thesis. Its secrecy notwithstanding, the esoteric scene interacted with all the other scenes. Daniil Andreev's *The Rose of the World* (*Roza mira*), one of the most outstanding manifestations of the new esotericism in Russia, circulated widely in Samizdat in the 1970s. And official culture was not monolithic either (our

7 See *Gnosis VII-VIII* (New York, 1979), 253, 254, 260.

8 I do not consider myself an expert on the esoteric underground, which is why a number of my remarks are hypotheses and mark areas deserving more thorough analysis.

9 Andrzej Drawicz, ed., *Historia literatury rosyjskiej XX wieku* (Warsaw: PWN, 2007).

criterion for officialness is publication within Soviet edition structures). Two phenomena in censored literature show evidence of links to esotericism and will be discussed in this article: science fiction and the wave of mythological prose. The particularities of the science fiction genre sometimes made it possible to express the forbidden in official publications. Science fiction that ignored the proscriptions too blatantly ended up in Samizdat or Tamizdat. Mythological prose, on the other hand, was written by established writers and published in the usual channels.

If we are schematic we can imagine a certain “esotosphere” within the literary field, which is divided, just like the field as a whole, into two parts—a Soviet part and an uncensored one. The border between these two parts is permeable, and each part comprises two sectors: on one side, science fiction and the mythological wave, on the other side, spiritual Samizdat and esoteric literature proper. These sectors function under different conditions and according to different rules, but they are in contact with each other. Their evolution looks approximately like this: the publication of Ivan Efremov’s utopian fantasy *Andromeda: A Space-Age Tale* (*Tumannost’ Andromedy*) in 1957 marked the beginning of the flowering of science fiction, which slowed down after 1968. The 1960 and 1970s were the high point of Samizdat (in their memoirs the esotericists insist that Samizdat existed at the end of the 1950s). The early 1980s saw the swell of a wave of literature that can be called mythological, and before the end of the 20th century members of the esoteric underground began to publish their books and carry out their activities in the open.

Let us have a brief look at the question of influence. During the Thaw it became evident that among the survivors of Stalinism were not just isolated disciples of Nikolai Fedorov and some anarchists, but also members of the esoteric societies of the 1920s. One who reports about the experience bequeathed to him by these people is Vladimir Stepanov.¹⁰ The Thaw also made it possible to identify their teachers, the esotericists of the early 20th century. Gurdjieff and Uspenskii were especially important. Paradoxically, it was Soviet scholars themselves who pointed to still other trails that could be followed. Gothic novels proved to be a good source of information about alchemy, the Kabbalah, and occult traditions in the West.¹¹ Naturally, acquaintance with the East fos-

10 See the interview with Stepanov in Vladislav Lebed’ko’s book *Khroniki Rossiiskoi San’iasy*, vol. II. The first of the four volumes was published in 2000 by the Institut obshegumanitarnykh issledovaniy, St. Petersburg. All volumes can be read online: <http://sannyasa.narod.ru/>, <http://sannyasa.narod.ru/chronicles/vol2/stepanov.htm> (accessed 8 August 2011).

11 For example, V.M. Zhirmunskii, N.A. Sigal, “U istokov evropeiskogo romantizma,” In: *Uolpol*.

tered a new form of esotericism. One of the first to tread this path was Efremov himself: his novel *Razor's Edge* (*Lezvie britvy*, 1963), about an inquiry into man's paranormal abilities and the mystical encounter between Russian and Indian wisdom provided a reminder of esotericism's link with India. Alongside the classics of the genre (Jules Verne, Herbert G. Wells, Jack London), translations of contemporary American science fiction furthered the evolution of science fiction in the Soviet Union. At the same time, the genre was also nourished by Soviet science fiction of the 1920s and by the fantastic tradition of Nikolai Gogol. A key influence was Stanislaw Lem, in particular his novel *Solaris* (translated into Russian as early as 1961) with its rich structure of irrational and metaphysical motifs, which can be read in a Gnostic vein. An important figure who emerged ten years later was Gabriel Garcia Marquez with his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and after him, the entire Latin American school of "Magic Realism." The latter, together with Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, which was first published in 1966, established the coordinates for a new form of fiction, this time not science fiction, but "mythological fiction."

After the almost twenty-year break imposed by Stalin's censorship, the geologist and palaeontologist Ivan Efremov returned to Soviet literature the utopian and the space-trip novel in one book, *Andromeda*. In this book, he made the first attempt to create an integral world view, based on the concepts of scholars who would subsequently be labelled "cosmists"—Vladimir Vernadskii and Konstantin Tsiolkovskii—and on his own interpretation of history. In the novel we once again find motifs that belong to both traditions: the idea of the transfiguration of man through the attainment of physical and mental perfection; something akin to the mysticism of light (the tale is about the transformation of solar energy and an encounter with the dark forces of the cosmos); and the idea of a certain syncretic wisdom that mankind attains once it is unified. There is documentary evidence for Efremov's interest in esotericism: he was acquainted with the son of Nikolai Roerich, the creator of Living Ethics (Agni Yoga), a continuation of the Theosophy of Blavatsky, and with Blavatsky's system itself. While working on *Andromeda* he copied passages from Roerich's books, including quotations from dialogues between the characters.¹²

Although the adventures of the spirit take centre stage in Efremov's novel, he also sketches a narrative scheme for inter-stellar travel and encounters with

Kazot. Bekford (*Walpole. Cazotte. Beckford*). *Fantasticheskie povesti* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1967); Igor' Belza, "Posleslovie," In: Potocki, *Rukopis', naidennaia v Saragosse*.

12 See A. Iuferova, "Ivan Efremov i ,Agni Ioga'," *Nauka i religia*, 1991, no.4.

aliens, contrasting them with the scheme of the American space opera. In the sequel to *Andromeda*, the novel *The Bull's Hour* (*Chas byka*), Efremov synthesizes his experience of the cosmic and the communist utopia and of encounters with India—a synthesis of scientific and mystical knowledge. After the initial publication in 1968 the novel was banned and re-published only during Perestroika. It plays with the themes of David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus*¹³ (which is mentioned in *The Bull's Hour*) and provides a comprehensive concept of the life of the universe. The main axiom is the infernality of all natural evolution, something akin to an inexorable principle of entropy, the reason for the pain and suffering of every living being, who is unable to escape from the mechanism of selection and the struggle for survival. Efremov calls the infernal tendency towards the increase of suffering, and consequently the evil in nature, “the arrow of Ahriman.” An example of this is the tyrannical regime on the planet Tormance, a mixture of traits from the Soviet, Chinese, and capitalist systems. The path of initiation leading to man's inner enlightenment and liberation from animal feelings and instincts is identified as the only way to eliminate social problems and, over time, form a society without suffering. Subsequently, in a concerted effort similar to Nikolai Fedorov's “Common Cause”, a pan-human project aimed at the ultimate abolition of death, Ahriman's arrow would be averted and the world improved. Here the Manichean motif of the eternal struggle between Good and Evil, the Gnostic idea of the suffering of all physical existence, and the esoteric approach to initiation and spiritual quest are combined with the alchemical faith in transmutation (the earthling starship is called the “Dark Flame”) and the improvement of nature, as well as with the Hindu idea of karma.

Similar motifs can be found in the most monumental Soviet cosmic opera, Sergei Snegov's *Men like Gods* (*Liudi kak bogi*; a reference to H.G.Wells' novel). Its three volumes, crammed with adventures, encounters with a multitude of different worlds, and techno-magical transformations of time and space were published over a ten-year period between 1966 and 1977. It intertwines utopia, anti-utopia and futurology. The people of the future are all-powerful, like magicians. But unlike Efremov, Snegov introduces a hierarchy into his cosmic population: some of the inter-stellar races resemble snakes, others are invisible, still others look like angels; they are at different stages of development. There are inter-galactic giants, who are more ancient and more developed than the human race, and people are embroiled in a million-year

13 David Lindsay, *A Voyage to Arcturus* (London: Methuen, 1920; republished many times). Efremov took the name for the planet Tormance (torment + romance) from this book.

long intergalactic war with the “evil-mongering demiurges,” the incarnation of cosmic evil. Somewhere there is also a civilization that matches its powerful gods. The way in which Snegov’s epic combines occult motifs is almost parodic, turning them into a genre stereotype.

The cosmic operas of Oles (Aleksandr) Berdnyk, the “Ukrainian Efremov”, are hardly inferior to Snegov’s work in terms of scale and the scope of adventurous fantasy. Written in Ukrainian, they were quickly translated into Russian, and became widely known. They presented an esoteric worldview without a hint of parody. Let us look at Berdnyk’s tale about the end of Atlantis, *The Heroic Deed of Vaivasvata (Podvig Vaivasvaty, 1965)*. The tyrannical state, led by very powerful magicians, unleashes a war against an island, the fairyland Shvet-Dvip, which is inhabited by immortals who are inter-stellar aliens from the planet Shakra. The immortals move matter by the power of thought, and it is they who gave fire and science to the inhabitants of the earth, two tools that the magicians from Atlantis turned into tools of power and oppression. As it turns out, the aliens oversee the development of inter-stellar civilizations. They defeat Atlantis, but except for a few chosen ones, Atlantis must perish, because it has transformed knowledge into evil and is able to harness the power of evil in order to drag other worlds in the same direction. “Every phenomenon has its higher manifestations in Infinity. Everything within the universe is connected. A feather dropping from a bird’s wing can be heard as thunder in other worlds (...). Every movement, every thought and every action have an impact on the planet.” This is because the force of nature’s creation consists “in the magnet of unity, the Great Cosmic Magnet.” Each atom, each cell of life has preserved the memory of unity. Each of them strives towards unification through evolution. “Primal substance itself, scattering into an infinite number of primary fractions, gives them the impulse to search for the lost unity.” And reason, over the course of its development, tries to merge with matter, “to pour itself into the fiery primal substance, to vanish as a separate entity.”¹⁴ It is already obvious that this story ostensibly paints an esoteric picture of the world, drawing on Theosophical and Hindu sources, and does so more openly than Efremov’s work. Berdnyk’s subjects, which recur in his other writings, are clearly esoteric: immortality, the interrelatedness of all elements in the world, a link between micro-and macrocosm, the striving for the reunification of all things into One, the Cosmic Magnet, and alien gods. In Sanskrit, the word *Shakra*, the name of the planet from which the aliens have come, means “the powerful” and is an epithet of the god Indra. Shvet Dvip is the island of the

14 Oles’ Berdnyk, “Podvig Vaivasvaty,” *Raduga*, 1965, no. 10, 145, 146, 147.

Light of the White Island mentioned in the Mahabharata and also described by Blavatsky. It is sometimes identified with the Tibetan Shambhala: a site in the centre of the Gobi Desert which is, according to legend, the place where the dwellers of Atlantis re-settled and ancient wisdom is preserved.¹⁵

We must add that Berdnyk developed his worldview in a labor camp after the war, just like Daniil Andreev. Berdnyk was arrested for the second time for his involvement with human rights causes. As a result, the print run of his main novel, *The Star Warrior (Zorianii korsar; Zvezdnyi korsar, 1971)* was confiscated, and it took twenty years for the novel to be translated into Russian. As a fighter for the national idea, Berdnyk was very well known in Ukrainian Tamizdat throughout the 1970s. He maintained contacts with India, Tibet and Roerich's heir, and for almost twenty years, until his death in 2003, he was leader of the movement for a Ukrainian Spiritual Republic, which was meant to be a member of the "Spiritual Nations" of the future. None of this was known in the 1960s, and Berdnyk's writings were often criticized, as their esoteric traits were interpreted either as evidence of a naïve idea about the future or as a declaration of his opposition to Marxism.¹⁶ This example clearly shows how views change as a result of shifts in temporal and critical perspectives.

The esotericism of Efremov or Berdnyk is easy to identify as it is self-evident. In other cases the indications are less obvious. For example, in Mikhail Emtsev and Eremai Parnov's story *The World Soul (Dusha mira, 1963)* the reader encounters a flower, created by accidental mutation, which begins to feed on the human energy field, keeps growing and eventually sucks into itself the souls of people, who lose their memory and self-awareness. The story is preceded by an epigraph from Goethe's neoplatonic poem *Die Weltseele* about life that separates from Unity for the sole purpose of returning to it. However, the collective soul is presented in a negative light, and the heroes of the story fight against its omnipotence. In another story by the same authors, nature is described as a "dog biting its own tail" (a variant of the Uroboros?): "Our distinction between the infinity of Micro and the infinity of Macro is artificial.

15 See, for example, Sergei Volkov, "Legenda o belom ostrove," *Baikal'skaia zemlia*, <http://baikalk.irkutsk.ru/index.php?rubr=13&doc=13#top1> (accessed 8 August 2011).

16 See for example Dmitrii Bilenkin, "Fantastika i poddelka" In: *Fantastika 1965, vyp. II* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1965); Leonid Geller, *Vselennaia za predelom dogmy* (London: OPI, 1985), 177–178; Iwan Hryniuch, *Oles Berdnyk – Utopist oder Charismatiker am Horizont des zweiten Jahrtausends des Christentums in der Ukraine* (München: Ukrainische Freie Universität, 1981).

(...) Nature is one and integral. (...) That means there must be a place or, maybe, a moment in which the two great infinities merge into one....”¹⁷

The conversation about contemporary science allows for recourse to esoteric formulae and motifs camouflaged as emotionally accentuated scientific discourse. Writers are either criticizing esotericism or (apparently) taking it seriously. We can assume that these vacillations are part of a strategy against censorship, especially when we know that later on Parnov would popularize occultism with the help of his status as a specialist in the struggle against occult prejudices.¹⁸

References to Charles Maturin’s gothic (and occult) novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) constitute an important leitmotif in the work of Gennadii Gor, a recognized master of intellectual fantasy. In his cycle of stories *Uera, A Dweller in Two Worlds*, *The Electronic Melmoth (Elektronnyi Melmot, 1964)*, *Larvef the Wanderer (Skitalets Larvef, 1966)*, *The Great Actor Johns (Velikii akter Dzhons, 1966)* we meet an alien from another planet who spends hundreds of years living on earth, travels through time and space many times and has the ability to be reincarnated. His immortality and his memory of his home planet mark time as contingent. Gor was the first Soviet writer to dare, in his story *Ol’ga Nsu* (1965), to remember Nikolai Fedorov with admiration and to call “great” his book on the “Common Cause”. In the novel *The Statue (Izvaianie, 1971)* people turn into pictures and vice versa, as in the work of Maturin and Gogol, and one person amalgamates within himself different forms of memory, different characters and different viewpoints. Reality is not divided by strict lines; subject and object merge, as does the imagined and the real. The world is integrated and plastic, and it is plastic because it is integrated. We do not know about Gor’s real attitude towards occultism, but his stories present the world as it could be seen by an occultist and a romantic.

The hero of Vladimir Savchenko’s¹⁹ story *Trial by Truth (Ispytanie istinnoi, 1973)*, a scholar, is looking for a way to overcome the reductionism of science that is unable to embrace the world as a whole. According to his theory of world vibrations, the image of the world created in human consciousness, works like a model that can coincide in its oscillations with the “harmonics” of

17 Mikhail Emtsev, Eremai Parnov, *Dusha mira*, In: *Uravnenie s Blednogo Neptuna* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1964), 57.

18 Eremai Parnov, *Tron Liutsifera. Kriticheskie ocherki magii i okkul'tizma* (Moscow: Izd. politicheskoi literatury, 1991).

19 Vladimir Savchenko is one of the writers who came to define the style and themes of Soviet science fiction in the 1970s.

the environment, i.e. the universe. The energy accumulated inside consciousness is set free when the oscillations of the model and reality resonate, when “truth” is found. The scholar understands that “resonance-understanding” is attained outside theory and outside societal contingencies. He abandons his career and becomes a vagrant. And then comes the moment when he feels the impulse of the world rhythm. Then there is a flash and the scholar literally dissolves: “The environment took the Discoverer up into itself.”²⁰ Savchenko describes mystical experience and its limits, or rather, infinity, almost without covering his tracks—a rare case in Soviet literature, even in the science fiction genre. He presents this experience as gained outside the church and conventional religious forms, the preconditions being solitude and meditation. Without negating the rational image of the world, it demands the participation of all man’s psychological and physical powers. The story lacks the motif of “passing on tradition” in order to be called esoteric in the direct sense of the word, but there is the figure of the Teacher, the birth of a knowledge which in the future will become tradition.²¹

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Finally, if we look at mythological prose, let us put together a group “Tradition and History” from the stories about the cycles of time, the flowering and decline of ancient and exotic civilizations, earthly and cosmic versions of Atlantis, and the encounter between East and West. Naturally, under censorship the most important elements were kept under wraps. Contact with supernatural forces was subject to exposure and secret knowledge was not an open topic of debate. And yet many things were said, and the richness of the topics which science fiction incorporated in a comparatively short period, and which can be interpreted within the categories of esotericism, is astonishing. In the 1970s a practice from the 1920s returned to Soviet literature, with almost all mainstream writers trying their hand at fantastic literature. Leonid Leonov, one of

20 Vladimir Savchenko, *Ispytanie istinnoi*, in *Antologija. Biblioteka sovremennoi fantastiki*, vol. 25 (Moscow : Molodaia gvardiia, 1973), 329, 339, 336–337.

21 The vibration theory of the structure of the world and its implications, the theory of world rhythms and synaesthesia or correspondences (each one by itself, feelings perceive the cosmic vibrations which are one in their nature and therefore act together) had a strong impact on modernism and often went hand in hand with an interest in Theosophy (for Kandinsky, Scriabin, Kupka, Mondrian et al). See for example Serge Lemoine et al., eds., *Aux origines de l'abstraction. 1800–1914. Catalogue de l'exposition* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2003).

the Soviet classics, published in the almanac *Fantastika* 75-76 (i.e. 1975-76) a fragment under the title *The Universe according to Dymkov* (*Mirozhdanie po Dymkovu*), a chapter from a metaphysical novel, colossal in concept and with strong Gnostic elements, in which post-revolutionary Russia turns into the arena for the struggle between the forces of good and evil, angels and demons, and the heroes wander about in search of a new religion. The novel finally appeared in 1994 *Piramida* (*The Pyramid*) and was acclaimed by Russian critics as one of the greatest literary achievements of the 20th century.

The publication of Leonov's fragment coincided with the fashion for Latin American Magic Realism, books such as Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, the general excitement about Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, and the sustained interest in topics that science fiction had raised but could no longer pursue after 1968. The result was that the realist canon made room for what we have called the "mythological wave." Myth, magic, extravaganza, and fantasy once again entered Russian literature in the works of Mikhail Ancharov, Vladimir Tendriakov, Chingiz Aitmatov, Vladimir Krupin, Vladimir Orlov, Anatolii Kim, Vladimir Makanin, Mikhail Kuraev and Liudmila Petrushevskaia.²² The wave lasted two decades and facilitated the entry, in the next century, of the grotesque and fantastic postmodernism of Viktor Pelevin, Tat'iana Tolstaia, Dmitrii Prigov, Anatolii Korolev, Andrei Kurkov and Vladimir Sorokin.

Naturally, not all the writers mentioned above use clearly recognizable esoteric motifs. But they are united by a will towards the poetics of myth, an understanding of myth as part of reality, a tendency to re-assess old myths and create new ones, and often also a striving to fit into the scope of the quest for a new faith that characterized the period of stagnation and the end of ideology. Makanin's *The Forerunner* (*Predtecha*, 1982) tells the story of a healer who, perhaps, laid the foundations for a new religion. In Aitmatov's novel *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (*I dol'she veka dlitsia den'*, 1980), the new mythology of space flight meets the ancient myths of the Kirgiz people. In *The Executioner's Block* (*Plakha*, 1986), Aitmatov arguing with Bulgakov, brings up

22 For a discussion on post-Soviet occult revival as a phenomenon of popular culture see Valentina Brougher, "The Occult in Russian Literature of the 1990s," *Russian Review* 56 (1997), 111-24; Holly de Nio Stephens, "The Occult in Russia Today," In: *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, 357-376; Eliot Borenstein, "Suspending Disbelief: 'Cults' and Postmodernism in Post-Soviet Russia," In: *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 437-462; idem, "Survival of the Catchiest. Memes and Post-Modern Russia", *Slavic and East European Journal* 48 (2004), 462-483.

the figure of Christ once again and sends his hero out to follow in His footsteps and to atone for the modern decline in faith, drug dependency, cruelty, and destruction of nature.

Let us now concentrate on one of the best and most characteristic works of the mythological wave: *The Squirrel (Belka)*, 1980) by Anatolii Kim, a Russian writer of Korean origin. The framework of the novel is a message to the lost object of youthful love, written by a narrator whose childhood impressions are centered on a squirrel that has taken upon itself the role of his mother when the latter died of hunger in a Korean forest. The hero, brought up in Russia, develops an artistic talent and travels to Moscow to study; his life and the fate of his three artist friends provide the subject for the novel. The narration is organized in a non-linear way, with the action running ahead, looping, breaking into parallel episodes. This intricacy is motivated by the supernatural qualities of the hero (we never discover for sure whether these are real or imaginary), who is capable of transforming and transmutating himself. He explains:

I can from one moment to the next transform into a squirrel and back, take on human form during special moments that are marked by some strong emotion or fright. (...) These transformations happen to me while my bodily essence remains unchanged—it is just that my soul enters one or another human being, and not only human beings, but even a butterfly or a bee—and this doesn't depend on my will and happens totally unforeseen. (...) I can undergo hundreds of transformations in a single minute...²³

When talking about his life, the hero describes this whirl of different consciousnesses. It happens that the viewpoint changes within a single paragraph and the narrating “I” moves from one character to another, sometimes fudging identification and forcing the reader to pay very close attention in order to guess who has stepped into the narrative focus. Such a stroboscopic perception is complex, but the hero's own perception is even more complex. Looking into the “mirror of time”, he sees himself at different times, encounters incarnate allegories in the street—a flat man, death as an old woman—converses with the dead (his friend, who was murdered, is leading a life after death) and, what is most important, begins to see clearly the beasts under the human masks. Being a shape-shifter himself, he recognizes in the people around him the animals who make up their inner being. He sees fighting dogs in two editors at a publishing house who are embroiled in an argument, guinea pigs in the in-laws of

23 Anatolii Kim, *Belka. Roman-skazka* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1984), 10.

an acquaintance, and so on. In fact there are far more shape-shifters than human beings around. They are shown in their transformations, and sometimes in the coexistence of human and animal nature. Some of the animals are amenable, like the hero-squirrel himself, but the majority instils fear through its bestiality. They fight against human beings and convene congresses with the aim of organizing the takeover of the entire world. It turns out, then, that the main theme of this book, which is so permeated by love of nature and animals, is the struggle for humanity. The life of nature, the “green maya” of the Forest “is happening in the inviolable concord of mutual annihilation”, we read at the end of the novel. “At this moment the thinking squirrel understood that man is called to proclaim the great replacement of death by immortality.” Mankind will enter a new state, the “human ether.” The world is renewing itself. “But the immutable higher precondition that must be fulfilled in order for death to transform into immortality is that everyone builds his life in a human fashion...”²⁴

Other esoteric motifs, apart from transformation and transmutation, apart from life after death, not in the form of an eternal soul but in the form of a specter that is roaming the earth, are the very principle of the thinness of the material world, visible in the incessant leaps of a many-layered reality and the flickering of consciousness and appearance. The Fedorovian theme of immortality is present against the background of Eastern esotericism. It has been written about Kim that “the sequence of transformations his heroes undergo can be easily described in the categories of Buddhist philosophy,” and his novel has been presented as the site of an encounter between Russia and the East.²⁵ In contemporary Russian literature this novel about the sublimation of the beast in man constitutes probably the most successful variation on the topic of shape-shifters, and the one that is richest in meaning.²⁶ Kim anticipated Pelevin’s *Life of Insects* (*Zhizn’ nasekomykh*) by ten years. In turn, *The Squirrel* is dependent on the poetic fantasy of Gor’s metamorphoses, and the entire lineage that brought about Gor, a younger member of OBĒRIU—the line of Andrei Bely, Velimir Khlebnikov and Konstantin Vaginov. All the writers following this line had links to some forms of esotericism, from Anthroposophy to

²⁴ Ibid., 269.

²⁵ Lev Anninskii, “Posleslovie”, In: Anatolii Kim, *Nevesta moria* (Moscow: Izvestiia, 1987), cited after: Iurii Mamleev, *Sud’ba bytiia*, <http://rvb.ru/mamleev/03philos/01sb/sb.htm#9>. (accessed 8 June 2011).

²⁶ The analysis of *The Squirrel* was not included in my article on this topic, “Oboroten’: iz natsional’nykh mifov,” *Slavic Almanac. The South African Journal for Slavic, Central and European Studies*, 2006, vol.12, no. 2.

Hermetism and neo-occultism. In their literary works they experimented profusely with stylistic and narrative conventions, and Kim is a worthy heir to this tradition.

As a rule, experiments of this kind in Russian literature of the 1960s-1980s reached the reader through Samizdat and Tamizdat. Many of them had no direct link to esotericism, but were preoccupied with comprehending literary models that had been suppressed in the Soviet system, from Bunin and Nabokov to Platonov and from Gumilev and Mandel'shtam to OBÈRIU. And yet for many authors of both prose and poetry formal innovation, oneiric complexity of style, the prevalence of fantasy and the provocative infringement of linguistic decorum were directly related to a spiritual and metaphysical quest.

It is difficult to draw a definite line between these two areas, and exactly where it is drawn depends on the observer. If the reader so wishes, it is perfectly possible to read the guest from space in Andrei Siniavskii's story *Pkhents* (around 1964), who has become soiled by the grey everyday on earth, as an allegory to the Gnostic "inner man" who has been thrown into physical existence and remembers his heavenly origin less and less frequently. In Mark Kharitonov's story *Ahasfer* (*Agasfer*, 1975) we can recognize the topical tradition of picturing the power of the (esoteric) book and its power over readers, and we might consider his longer story *A Study of Masks* (*Etiud o maskakh*, 1976) as a tract on the deceptiveness of the visible outside world. Both Siniavskii and Kharitonov became famous in Samizdat independent of any possible links to the esoteric underground. As mentioned before, a writer's decision to choose the fantastic or phantasmagoric convention automatically destroys the reliability of that which is depicted and affirms the multi-layeredness of reality, thereby justifying an esoteric reading. This also applies to the greatest cult book of 1970s Samizdat, Venedikt Erofeev's above-mentioned story—"poem" *Moscow to the End of the Line* (*Moskva-Petushki*). The characters constantly change their appearance, first assuming reality and then dissolving like spirits; among them we find servants of Evil. The delirious is on the same level as the real, the hero moves within real geographical space, but is surrounded by oneiric decorations. Everything in the book is motivated by the intoxicated state of the hero and his fellow travellers, but can just as successfully be interpreted as the description of a spiritual quest. The hero is in contact with another world and converses with the voices of mysterious beings only he can hear, with "angels", and when he keeps devising recipes for alcoholic drinks—magic potions—he behaves like a real occultist who is drawing up formulae for the study of secrets.

Just like the “new sectarians” described by Mikhail Epstein²⁷ and the heroes of Makanin’s *Forerunner* and Aitmatov’s *The Executioner’s Block*, Venichka Erofeev is looking for a new religion. Aleksandr Zinov’ev, who recorded the ideological and intellectual, as well as emotional, atmosphere of the 1960s–1970s, described the trial of the founder of such a religion. Below are a few sentences from the defendant’s speech:

Our society engenders evil and is incapable of fighting it by official means. I wanted to teach people to oppose evil on their own initiative and with their own strength. (...) The beginning is a flash of inspiration—the realization that there is a certain (...) higher secret of being in which we are complicit and the state of suffering as a consequence of this. And then the state of compassion with that towards which the awareness of the higher secret is directed. For man, this state achieves the highest value in life, a value he is no longer prepared to exchange for any of the good things in the world. (...) My system is designed for a person living in our society, who is forced to go to work, to use public transport, to queue for things etc. The main goal of my system for training the body is to give the Soul the possibility of concentrating as fully as possible on its business.²⁸

This scene, drawn with Zinov’ev’s characteristic directness and strength, has echoes of the episode of the trial of Christ in *The Master and Margarita*, showing the new heresiarch as a conscious and rational fighter against the evil that is growing in the world. He is building a system for mastering the body and distinguishing between everyday physical routine and matters of the Soul. “Training the body” for the fight against evil, something that forms part of the tradition of the Manichean sects, places this system in the proximity of those mystics in the Soviet Union who are practicing yoga and Eastern martial arts for the sake of self-edification, meditation and spiritual perfection. From our point of view the figure of the heresiarch himself is important, too, as a contrast to the loners engrossed in dreams and “spiritual inebriation,” such as Erofeev’s Venichka. Venedikt Erofeev’s poem constituted the height in Russian literature of an original frenzied style, which uses alcohol or psychological derangement as a means of entering the world of the spirit.

27 Mikhail Epshtein, *Novoe sektantstvo. Tipy religiozno-filosofskikh umonastroenii v Rossii (70-80 gg.)* (Moscow: Labirint, 1998), engl.: *Cries in the Wilderness* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2002).

28 Aleksandr Zinov’ev, *V preddverii raia* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1979), 353–356.

Vagrancy, seclusion, the collision with the darkest and most monstrous sides of life and its brutality constitute the range of themes evident in this original strand of spiritual fantasy, combined with gothic imagery, visions, and the untrammelled and out-of-order chatter of the “underground man” and the “ridiculous man.” Metaphysics, including direct references to the Gospel, are framed in soteriological and apocalyptic tones. We find an early example of this style in the story *Nobody: Or the Disgospel according to Maria Dementnaia* (*Nikto. Disangelie ot Marii Dementnoi*, 1966) that was circulated anonymously. Its author, Nikolai Bokov, provided valuable comments in the appendix to the online *Samizdat Anthology* (*Antologiiia Samizdata*).²⁹ He writes that in the Soviet world, “in a system in which only death is infinite” a new Christ is not possible, because what the spirit encounters is emptiness. “There are references, perhaps, to Buddhism or to the Kabbalah (as found by the translator of the story into English). This is not what is important. What is important is that both God and your neighbour are no longer there, there is only emptiness, and emptiness you must love.” The remark of the Western translator, who was puzzled over which esoteric school the author followed, is a measure of the current distance between explanatory reading and the activity of the writer. When the journal *Gnosis* invited Bokov to fill in a questionnaire on the “metaphysical school” he replied “I am not sure that it existed. What existed were ‘mutual influences’.” Almost in the spirit of Viktor Shklovskii writing about Andrei Bely’s Anthroposophy, Bokov added: “And anyway, why ‘metaphysical’? A literary school is characterized by language, and ‘metaphysics’ or whatever else it may be can be an aesthetic idea, a theme, but it nevertheless remains the cart and cannot become the horse.”³⁰

Spiritual fantasy provides an opening to postmodernism. Egor Radov’s novel *The Snake Sucker* (*Zmeesos*, 1992), which was typical of the first stage of Russian postmodernism opens with the foreword of a prominent critic who affirms that

[In postmodernism] literature stops being art, turning into the glad tidings about another form of being, and subsequently into an unmediated magical act that transforms the world, returning it to its Origins. The

29 Published in the revue *Grani*, 1971, no. 82. See Nikolai Bokov, *Nikto. Disangelie ot Marii Dementnoi* (1966). In: Mark Barbakadze, ed., *Antologiiia Samizdata*, <http://antology.igrunov.ru/authors/bokov/1159693106.html> (accessed 8 August 2011).

30 Nikolai Bokov, “Otvēt na anketu,” *Gnoziz VII–VIII* (New York, 1979), 257. Compare Viktor Shklovskii, „Andrei Belyi“ in his *Gamburgskii shchet: stat’i, vospominaniia, esse* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990), 212–239.

Gospel according to Sasha, Dmitrii, Valeriia, Egor (Sokolov, Prigov, Narbikova, Radov...).³¹

Such affirmations should not be understood too literally. Nevertheless they are characteristic. While the creative manner motivated by the spiritual quest of the underground writers acquired the status of a trademark of an artistic movement, this happened only in the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s, during Perestroika and the beginning of the post-Soviet era.

This was the time when Russian readers first came into unmediated contact with émigré culture and with works that had been forcibly excluded from literary history. Specialists in magical and mythological topics returned, such as Pavel Muratov and Aleksandr Kondrat'ev.³² The researcher will find a fount of esoteric themes in the work of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii. And we must mention Aleksandr Barchenko, a doctor who began researching paranormal phenomena in the 1910s. He engaged in telepathy, collaborated with the famous physiologist and psychologist Vladimir Bekhterev, and in the early 1920s sought traces of ancient civilizations in the Russian North.³³ Before 1917, he wrote several occult short stories; his multi-volume novel *Doctor Black (Doktor Chernyi)*³⁴ was published only in 1991, and is still awaiting its researcher. The prototype for the novel was Barchenko's guide to the esoteric sciences, Petr D. Uspensky, who was also the author of occult tales (some of which might have inspired Nabokov).³⁵

From the standpoint taken in this article, the most important event of that time is the process by which the esoteric underground left the unofficial sphere behind. Only a short time ago, the conviction that "behind the iron curtain," literary occult motifs had disappeared, because there they were "not tolerated, just as religious and philosophical themes on the whole", was generally accepted.³⁶ But religious and philosophical quests did not disappear despite attempts at suppressing them and were pursued in different and sometimes

31 Oleg Dark, "Strashnyi sud Egora Radova," in the volume Egor Radov, *Zmeesos* (Moscow, Tallinn: Gileia, 1992), 4.

32 See Aleksandr Kondrat'ev, *Belyi kozel. Mifologicheskie rasskazy* (St. Petersburg: Golike & Vilborg, 1908); idem, *Satiressa. Mifologicheskii roman* (Moscow: Grif, 1907); idem, *Na beregakh Yaryni. Demonologicheskii roman* (Berlin: Mednyi vsadnik, 1930); Pavel Muratov, *Magicheskie rasskazy* (Moscow: Delfin, 1922); idem, *Egeriia* (Berlin, St. Petersburg: Grzhebin, 1922).

33 On Barchenko's life and his ties to the Cheka see Oleg Shishkin's chapter in this volume.

34 See: Aleksandr Barchenko, *Iz mraka. Roman, povest', rasskazy* (Moscow: Sovremennik 1991).

35 See note 55.

36 D. Klenovskii, "Okkul'tnye motivy v russkoi poëzii nashego veka," *Grani*, 1953, no. 20, 76.

extreme ways. What is known about the esotericists does not tally with conventional ideas about life in the Soviet Union. Aleksandr Zinov'ev, Venedikt Erofeev and 'alcoholic' or 'frenzied' literature revealed the life of either straightforwardly marginal figures, new sectarians, or simply people who drown their everyday hopelessness in alcohol. But we are talking about a milieu that had a common network in which experiments with drugs, alcohol, training of the body (above we mentioned the practice of yoga and martial arts) and sex were defined by spiritual goals—experiments that distinguished Volokhonskii's metaphysical subculture or, to use contemporary terminology, the "schizoid paradigm."³⁷ In brief, the appearance on stage of the esotericists retrospectively changed the picture of the Soviet era, as well as the image of the Samizdat milieu and the idea of how the culture functioned.

Beside Arkadii Rovner and Iurii Mamleev, whose work often reached the readers and was held in high esteem by the critics, who called them the "misty,"³⁸ there appeared the names of already two generations of adherents of secret knowledge: Evgenii Golovin, Vladimir Stepanov, Anatolii Arlashin, Valentin Sidorov, Valentin Provotorov, Vitalii Akhramovich, Igor' Kalinauskas, Sergei Riabov et al.³⁹ Many of them are introduced in Vladislav Lebed'ko's book of interviews. The majority of them were writing in the 1960s and '70s, and continue to write today. In terms of quantity we are looking at an impressive body of works that have been published since Perestroika, but also include works that were written much earlier. This body of works is heterogeneous, including a large number of translations and also pragmatic texts—manifestoes and treatises which expound doctrines and behavioral rules without belletrization and poeticization. There is also a rich body of criticism and essays, and much documentary literature in the form of memoirs, travel logs etc. Finally there is belles-lettres, where the small forms play the main role, as in fairy tales and parables. The genre boundaries are not absolute. Andreev's tract *The Rose of the World* (*Roza mira*) can be read as a poetic work—the poetic and shamanistic qualities of his terminology and intonation are beyond doubt. But it is also clear that esoteric literature is differentiated and, while changing the scale,

37 See various interviews in Vladislav Lebed'ko's *Khroniki Rossiiskoi San'iasy*.

38 Iurii Mal'tsev, *Vol'naia russkaia literatura* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1976), 116–123.

39 See Evgenii Golovin, *Priblizhenie k Snezhnoi Koroleve* (Moscow: Arktogeia Tsentr, 2003); idem, *Tumany chernykh lilii* (Moscow: Enneagon Press, 2007); Valentin Sidorov, *Sem' dnei v Gimalaiakh* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1986); idem, *Znaki Khrista. Rasskaz o dukhovnoi Rossii* (Moscow: Kniga, 1992); Igor Kalinauskas, *Zhit' nado!* (St. Petersburg: Meduza, 1994); idem, *Naedine s mirom* (St. Petersburg: Liki kul'tury, 2002); Vitalii Akhramovich, "Skazki dlia magov", <http://eurasia.com.ru/mystery/ahromovich/> (accessed 8 August 2011).

reproduces the functional and genre structure of literary production overall. A case in point: the poetry of the esotericists, previously little known or not known at all, or incomprehensible outside the circle of the initiated (to give an example, hardly anyone recognized the esoteric allusions in the openly published poetry of Valentin Sidorov), has found special publishing outlets in the form of retrospective collections.⁴⁰ Almanacs of “free Russian poetry” are now appearing as part of the project *The Mystery of Infinity (Misteriia beskonechnosti)*.⁴¹

This entire continent of literature and esotericism has not yet been much explored, and in the period that interests us it consisted of an archipelago of islands under water. When we look back we can see interesting achievements among them, for example some of Valentin Provotorov’s poems or the fables of Vitalii Akhramovich, who died in 1995 and was a talented stylist whose circle also included the author of fantastic prose Viktor Pelevin. In this sense the esoteric milieu continues to nourish literature today, one example being Vladimir Sorokin’s popular trilogy *Ice (Led, 2002)*, *The Path of Bro (Put’ Bro, 2004)*, and *23000 (2005)*. But we must also note that this trilogy does not introduce any fundamentally new motifs into the selection of science fiction and mythological fantasy themes mentioned above: there are space aliens, the arrival of a new man, supernatural abilities, transformations, initiatory wanderings. What drives the development of the genre is not new motifs, but a livelier narration. The same is true for the poems which can be classified as esoteric: it is difficult to consider them a new phenomenon in Russian poetry. Most of the time they are illustrative and express more or less provocative imagery, recognized as symbolic, within a traditional form of versification.

Люблю я пустынные гулкие улицы
из домиков ярких, узорчатых труб,
где в каждом за ставнями в кресле сутулится
какой-нибудь вежливый, маленький труп.

Валентин Провоторов

I love deserted resounding streets
of bright houses, patterned pipes
where in each behind the blind in an armchair
huddles
some small, polite corpse.

Нам нравится эстетика дома престарелых,
Фейерверк проклятья разорванных губ,
Когда рыдает на свалке опустелой
Забытый смертью раскрашенный труп...

Евгений Головин

We like the aesthetics of old peoples’ homes
fireworks of curses from parched lips
When on the deserted dump sobs
A colored corpse who death forgot.

40 See Sergei Riabov, ed., *Unio mistica. Moskovskii ézotericheskii sbornik* (Moscow: Terra, 1997).

41 The project “Misteriia bezkonechnosti”, <http://eurasia.com.ru/mystery/mamleev.htm>. (accessed 8 August 2011).

Today we see the landscape of esoteric prose in the 1960s-1970s as dominated by Rovner and Mamleev. A characteristic feature of the new situation is that the old masters are very active, as if making up for the years they had to spend underground. They write, publish their own work and that of others, and are present in the mass media and the internet. Rovner is directing the Institute for the Cultivation of Inner States,⁴² and in recent years has published, beside a two-volume collection of prose, more than a half dozen novels, essays and memoirs.⁴³ Mamleev is even more active: he founded the literary school of “metaphysical realism” and managed to arrange a special section on it in the Writers’ Union of the Russian Federation. Mamleev is now considered a cult author; it seems that his role in Russian literature is significant. His stories and novels—the first of which, *The Idlers* (*Shatuny*, 1966), brought him fame and became the basis for a trilogy on which he worked until recently⁴⁴—are populated by astonishing, monstrous characters, each of which passes through a terrible initiation and often undergoes a metamorphosis. They kill, rape, cannibalize and devour themselves. The physical world is holding them captive, death allows them to free themselves from the body, to break through into another world and the next incarnation. Mamleev combines Hindu teachings with the Gnostic perception of physicality as evil and a very strong experience of the “infernal” and illusory quality of the world. He is being compared to the authors of the Gothic school of horror tales, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe. “It seems that the monstrous characters in the story “Tough Encounters” (*Krutye vstrechi*) came straight out of the etchings of Hieronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya: a body with two heads, a living corpse, a man-bear.”⁴⁵ People are fond of comparing Mamleev to the Latin American Magic Realists. Distancing himself from the latter, Mamleev in an interview explains his poetics as follows: in his work he used.

not the genre of myth but the genre of traditional prose, but I infused the realia of this prose with “metaphorical fabric”. Actually this is a new

42 See the site of the Institute: <http://www.sostoyanie.ru/> (accessed 8 August 2011).

43 Arkadii Rovner, *Izbrannaia proza*, vol.1-2 (Moscow: Mif, 1998); idem, *Veselye sumasshedshie ili Zarskie besedy* (Kaunas: Gera Diena, 1998); idem, *Peleinaia predka* (Moscow: Nomos, 2005); *Legkaia substantsiia sostoianii* (Moscow: Zolotoe sechenie, 2009); idem, *Vspominaia sebja. Kniga o druz’iakh i sputnikakh zhizni* (Moscow: Zolotoe sechenie, 2010).

44 Apart from *Idlers*, the trilogy consists of the novels *Wandering Time* (*Bluzhdaiushchee vremia*, St. Petersburg: Limbus-Press, 2001) and *The Other* (*Drugoi*, Moscow: Ast, 2008).

45 Roza Semykina, “Kto est’ ia? Metafizicheskaia antropologiya Iurii Mamleeva,” *Oktiabr’*, 2003, n. 3, <http://magazines.russ.ru/october/2007/3/se9-pr.html> (accessed 8 August 2011).

genre in which into the “body” of a realistic tale I introduce something metaphorical, metaphysical, symbolic. The result is a synthesis.⁴⁶

To the literary historian it is clear that Mamleev’s formula describes not a new genre, but an established tradition in Russian prose that is evident in the work of modernist writers such as Fedor Sologub. In 1922 Evgenii Zamiatin, a student of Fedor Sologub and Andrei Bely, advocated a new literary current he called “synthetism,” which he defined as “a synthesis of fantasy and the everyday.”⁴⁷ Almost forty years later Andrei Siniavskii would finish his famous essay on overcoming Socialist Realism with hidden quotations from Zamiatin, refer to Hoffmann, Goya, Dostoevsky, and Marc Chagall and confess: “I put my hope in fantasmagoric art with hypotheses instead of goals and the grotesques instead of descriptions of everyday life.”⁴⁸ There can be no doubt that Siniavskii’s three-legged visitor from space, the half-plant and half-man Pkhents, is a very close relative of Mamleev’s monsters. The onereic characters of *Moscow to the End of the Line* with their changing contours are close to them as well. Even more obvious than the link to the tradition of Sologub, Bely and Zamiatin is Mamleev’s relation to the tradition of the Russian absurdists Kharms and Andrei Platonov, which had a direct impact on the frenzied writers of the 1960s–1970s. Mamleev, Rovner and other esotericists never tire of stressing the need to break free from the prison of rationality; this is the reason for their interest in alogisms, the absurd, the grotesque, the creation of new forms through mutation and accidental hybridization.

Mamleev insists, especially in his last public statements,⁴⁹ that the source of his “metaphysical realism” is the encounter between two traditions, Russia and the East. He was enthusiastic about Kim’s *Squirrel*, as proof that “life in the 20th century is not entirely cut off from the bottomless Source of Eastern Wisdom.”⁵⁰ Let us not forget, however, that his metaphysical realism is also heavily indebted to West European Gothic and romantic phantastic tradition. In my view it is even more interesting to consider Mamleev’s extreme schizoid physi-

46 Iurii Mamleev, “Metafizicheski realizm pisatel’ia-optimista. Beseda s A. Voznesenskim,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 2000, May 25.

47 Evgenii Zamiatin, “O sintetizme” (1922), in idem: *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Kniga, 1988), 416.

48 Andrei Siniavskii, “Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm?” In: *Fantasticheskii mir Abrama Tertsia* (New York: Mezhdunarodnoe literaturnoe sodruzhestvo, 1967), 446.

49 Compare the web-resource “Arctogeia”: <http://www.arctogaia.com/public/mamleev> (accessed 8 August 2011)

50 Iurii Mamleev, *Sud’ba bytiia*, <http://rvb.ru/mamleev/03philos/01sb/sb.htm#9> (accessed 8 August 2011).

ologism (and, to a lesser degree, that of Rovner) in the context of the avant-garde experiments in art contemporary to him—Vienna Actionism, body art, and performance. These movements peaked right at the turn of the 1960s–1970s and, in turn, can be traced back to Dadaism and often constituted Western artists’ answer to the philosophical and aesthetic challenge of the East. In other words, such a position was not unique to Russia, and many of the things that appear to be a direct dialogue between the Russian esotericists—and Russian culture—with the East, are in fact an indirect argument with the West.⁵¹ It is no accident that almost everything that is listed as a specific trait of the work of esoteric authors—eclecticism, abundance of quotation, absurdism, oneirism, the aesthetics of cruelty and monstrosity, the struggle against norms—is at the same time construed as a postmodern quality, while the “schizoid paradigm” forms part of the more general paradigm of postmodernism.⁵²

Shklovskii stated in 1924 that Bely in his prose was overcoming Anthroposophy, while fifty years later Nikolai Bokov called “metaphysics” in literature a cart that had been put before the horse. They both pose the same question about the interrelation of ideology and aesthetics, i.e. esoteric ideas and the poetics of esoteric works of literature. In other words, does the turn towards esoteric motifs and themes entail distinct poetic and formal consequences or do they function independently of their poetic realization? In the introduction I gave a partial answer: the fantastic, oneiric, fairytale, or more broadly, deformativ mode of the writing clearly corresponds to the principle of “maya” that is characteristic of esotericism, i.e. an unsteady or plastic reality. Is that all? Let us move away from fantasy—and from poetry, too, which requires slightly different methods of analysis—and turn to our experience of reading those prose writers of the early 20th century who were interested in esotericism (Bely, Briusov, Sologub, Kuz’min, Muratov et. al.), risking an approximate, by no means exhaustive description of “esoteric poetics”. It is characterized by

- intellectualism (the clash between acknowledged and new or marginal concepts of the makeup of the world, a comedy of ideas);
- affectedness (the construction of situations that are attractive or very repulsive, with both of these cases requiring an emotional and aesthetic evaluation);

51 See i.e. Leonid Heller, “The Russian orientalism: an encounter with the West”, In: Emanuel Waegemans, ed., *Russia and the West: Missed Opportunities, Unfulfilled Dialogues* (Brussels: Contactforum-Universa Press, 2006).

52 See Natalia Tamruchi, “Bezumie kak oblast’ svobody,” *NLO* 2009, no. 100. On the “schizoid paradigm” in painting see Viktor Tupitsyn, *Kommunal’nyi (post)modernizm. Russkoe iskusstvo vtoroi poloviny XX veka* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1998).

- mythologization of rhetorical commonplaces and tropology: play with images derived from various myths, the investment of characters and situations with mythological potential, heroization (even in the paradoxical scale of the everyday, in inverse order);
- the principle of descriptive transgressiveness and provocation;
- a highly complex composition as a result of the struggle against conventions on the narrative level, too: multiplication of plot lines, deliberate discontinuity, involved chronology, shifts in and blending of viewpoints (the implementation of the principle of metamorphosis);
- stylistic tendencies: stylization (the reproduction of speech patterns of different eras or different discursive situations), multilingualness, parody and humor as devices for “making strange” (still the same action against the usual norms, the liberation of “discourse”).

The majority of these particularities (though not necessarily simultaneously and to the same degree) is also inherent to the work of Mamleev, Rovner, Erofeev, Kim and the Strugatskii brothers, and it is a curious coincidence that they are all distinguished by Leonid Leonov’s manner in *The Pyramid* (*Piramida*). One can of course point out that the writings of Efremov or Berdnyk cannot be described in these poetic terms. But this is natural as they function in the didactic mode and allegory that is characteristic of utopian discourse. It is more difficult to understand why Petr Uspenskii, in his time, chose poetic reductionism, a simple plot, and a direct style for his occult stories.⁵³ One possible reason is that narrative situations such as scientific discovery, the megapolis, and time travel that had not yet been cultivated but would soon become staples, provided the required distance by making strange. Another explanation is also possible: against the background of normative narration, minimalism is perceived as a transgression—this is the style of Daniil Kharms, an adept of the study of secrets and thoroughly acquainted with the writings of Uspenskii. Sometimes the younger OBÈRIU-writer Gennadii Gor approached a similar style.

We have seen that esotericism and occultism provide inspiration for literature in very different situations; and we have also seen that the territories of the

53 Petr Uspenskii, *Razgovory s d’iavolom. Okkul’nye rasskazy* (Petrograd: Izd. Brenchaninova, 1916); his *Kinematodrama (ne dlia kinematografa), Okkul’tnaia povest’ iz tsikla idei ‘Vechnogo vozvrashcheniia’* (Petrograd: Izd. Brenchaninova, 1918); another version of this novel was published in English as *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* (London: Stourton Press, 1947); see in Russian: *Strannaia zhizn’ Ivana Osokina* (St. Petersburg: Komplekt, 1995).

esoteric space in Russian literature that we have been able to identify do not just communicate with each other, but constitute an entity composed of complex elements. They are served by approximately the same complex of motifs and topics. But it is not just conditions that are changing, but also the vectors of writers' activities. After leaving Stalinism behind, and independent of where they were standing, most adepts of esotericism were busy searching for individual or small-group alternative solutions against the dominant, compulsory way of thought, life, and art. Approximately since the late 1960s they were influenced by several factors simultaneously: the turn towards nationalism of part of the party establishment, Orthodox Christian dissent, the encounter with the East and, paradoxically, the influence of such Western revilers of liberal culture as Julius Evola and René Guénon. As a result, many esoteric currents experienced a significant shift to the right. Followers emerged for the ideas of Grigorii Klimov, the author of a book about Satan's power over the world.⁵⁴ Evgenii Golovin (for a short time) declared himself Reichsführer of the "Black Order of the SS," while he and his student, Aleksandr Dugin, both took part in the formation of National Bolshevism and resurrected Eurasianism, adding a mystical component to both. Mamleev would create the *Patriotic Teaching of Eternal Russia (Patrioticheskoe uchenie Vechnoi Rossii)* and, having found support from the younger generation in the person of Dugin, become the leader, within the Eurasian movement, of the project *The Mystery of Infinity* and, more generally, of the cultural activities designed to cast Russia in the role of the "spiritual centre of the world."⁵⁵

Mystical wanderings became entwined with Russian nationalism, became equal to an obtrusive obsession with identity,—it seems that this evolution is what nowadays separates many Russian esotericists from the world of The New Age, which is based on the principles of tolerance and universalism.

54 See for example: Grigorii Klimov, *Kniaz' mira sego* (New York: Izd. Rossiia, 1972). Klimov's concept is radicalized to the limit by Vladimir Istarkhov, *Udar russkikh bogov* (Moscow: Institut ekonomiki i svyazi s obshchestvennost'iu, 2000).

55 See for example: Elena Seifer, "Naedine s Rossiei Iuriiia Mamleeva: 'Ia shel ot ada k raiu...,'" *Gazeta kz*, 4.05.2009, <http://articles.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=131197> (accessed 8 August 2011).