The revival of occult motifs in contemporary Russian literature of recent years has been highlighted time and again by both Russian and Western critics, particularly Eliot Borenstein, Valentina Brougher, Birgit Menzel and Holly DeNio Stephens.¹ Scholars differentiate among occult, esoteric, and mystical, but in the novels to be discussed in this chapter, these terms are used interchangeably, as in most post-Soviet literature addressed to a non-specialized readership.

Contemporary Russian authors turn to occultism for various reasons. For some it is simply a literary device which allows them to give the story a certain vivid, mysterious quality; and, in some cases, to provide a logical explanation for discordant elements in the storyline (as for example in Tat’iana Ustinova’s novel A Shadow for Two (Odna ten’ na dvoikh)). For those postmodernist authors, occultism is a sort of aesthetic conundrum, an intellectual game with the reader (Victor Pelevin’s novels Buddha’s Little Finger (Chapaev i pustota) and The Sacred Book of the Werewolf (Sviashennaiia kniga oborotnia) are examples of this approach). Nationalist, patriotic authors such as Sergei Alekseev often give a political interpretation to occult motifs. And for just a small percentage of contemporary authors—compared to early 20th century Russian literature—the occult theme is directly related to the author’s world-view, a desire to know the unknown and to give expression to his or her own mystical quest in their works.

According to a common belief,² the current popularity of non-rational and mystical trends in Russian culture is a direct reaction to the decades-long ban on religious and mystical practice in the Soviet Union and particularly reflects a radical break with Soviet society’s supposedly rational past. However, this analysis does not explain why, in that case, one of the most popular genres of post-Soviet literature is “counter-history”: historical narrative constructed on


² See the introduction to this book for a definition of terms.
the combination of historical facts and fiction, that is, “what was” and “what might have been”. Important events in Soviet history are interpreted mythologically, and a complete or partial change in the course of history is an indispensable element of the plot. The use of Soviet mythology is a central theme of post-Soviet literature, which carries on an endless dialogue with the past in an ongoing search for identity, using Soviet history and Soviet literature as meta-text and meta-style.

Almost every work that comes under the heading of counter-history contains certain magical, mystical or fantastic features. These range in classification from pseudo-folktales (Pavel Pepperstein’s novel *The Mythogenic Love of Castes* ([Mifogennaia liubov’ kast](#)) is one example) to esoteric mysteries ([Vladimir Sharov’s novel *Be Like Children* ([Bud’te kak deti](#))]. Even so, not all counter-history novels can be called “occult”. For example, Holm Van Zaichik’s *Eurasian Mystery* story series, although it makes use of the folk tale genre and is full of wondrous events, cannot be defined as an “occult novel”. Neither can such (now cult) works as Vasili Zviagintsev’s novel *Odysseus Leaves Ithaca* ([Odissei pokidaet Itaku](#)) or Sergei Luk’ianenko’s *Watch* series, even though magical and esoteric themes are broadly represented in these inherently fantastic novels.

Accordingly, the present article does not aim to analyze the counter-history genre *per se*, nor the specific use of magical or mystical themes in works of this genre; only those counter-historical works which have been defined by their authors either as “mystical/occult” or “esoteric”, and only where the concept of “occultism” is a central theme of the novel. This article centers on an analysis of three novels, all of which interpret the early 20th century (a turning point in Russian history) through an occult and esoteric lens. This choice is no accident. From the late 1980s to the present, dozens of articles (not only academic, but often pseudo-academic and highly polemical) have appeared in the Russian mass media to the effect that both the theory and practice of Soviet ideology in the 1920s—the early period of its development—actively employed the mythologems of various esoteric practices, while outwardly rejecting all mysticism. It could be argued that, in the last twenty years, the Russian mass media has developed a myth of the “occult side” of the Bolshevik Revolution: a myth arising both from the real history of the USSR and from contemporary popular culture.3 Simultaneously, the events of the Russian Revolution and Civil War

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are to some extent the “sore spot” of Russia today, an indicator of the social discomfort and socio-cultural *malaises* of modern Russian society. Soviet history was made in the 1920s; correspondingly, the chance to “replay” that exact period allows for a replaying of the entire corpus of Bolshevik historiography.

The choice of works to be discussed below is also influenced by the fact that, on one hand, the occult interpretation of historical events—primarily the Civil War and Lenin’s death—is identical in every novel. Moreover, this interpretation is characteristic and highly representative of the majority of contemporary novels dealing with the subject of “occultism and Revolution”. At the heart of each novel analyzed here is the idea of immortality and eternal life, refracted through the mythology of the Lenin cult and the idea of the “new man”: an individual created by the Revolution who possesses radically new physical and psychological abilities. The authors of these novels interpret the Revolution not as a political act but as an occult one, originating in sects and secret societies and completed with the aid of magical forces. On the other hand, each novel is an example of a given sub-genre that is representative of the broad mass of contemporary Russian literature. Il’ia Masodov’s novel *The Devils* (*Cherti*) is an example of the postmodern novel, largely aimed at that section of the readership that was the target audience for Sorokin and Pelevin in the 1990s. Vladimir Sharov’s *Be Like Children*, short-listed for the prestigious Russian Booker—the highest literary prize in Russia—was called an “esoteric mystery” by its author. Finally, Polina Dashkova’s *The Source of Happiness* (*Istochnik schast’ia*) trilogy is presented as an esoteric crime novel, aimed at fans of popular literature. This selection represents, at least in degree, the typology of “counter-history” texts and explains the role that occult symbols and themes play in these works. Finally, another common factor in these novels is that the language and style are not original, but consciously and deliberately modelled on the style of the Silver Age and 1920s modernist writers: Fedor Sologub, Mikhail Bulgakov, Andrei Platonov and to a lesser extent Isaak Babel’ and Evgenii Zamiatin.4

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4 For example, take the opening of *The Devils*: “In the twilight, two Red armored trains approached the town and fired resounding shots from their cannons into the silence that would otherwise have descended for the first time after the long cannonade of the spring battles. Behind the fence of the city park, a vertical blizzard of blooming lilacs wilted in fear. The trains had stopped coming two weeks ago... and the day before yesterday, the troops began to retreat, although until the very last nobody believed that they would go. But they went, noiselessly, like...
Lev Trotsky defined revolution as the creative unity of conscious and unconscious, when the masses break down the doors of societal routine with a spontaneous thrust and give victorious expression to the most profound needs of historical development. This is precisely how Il’ia Masodov defines the Revolution: as the mass unconscious breaking through into the consciously established world order. At the heart of the novel is the story of three children—Klava, Varvara and Pet’ka—and their half-real, half-metaphysical journey to Moscow and to Lenin. All three children have lost their parents in the hell of the Civil War. All three have undergone physical and mental torture, which has awakened the slumbering magical powers in their souls and finally transformed them into shades, strange half-alive half-dead creatures. Thus, the Revolution and the Civil War are an instrument of metaphysical liberation for the children, but Bolshevism—releasing all the monsters which slumber in the Russian soul—is presented as a terrible occult power which must be fought.

The meta-style of the novel is unquestionably the style of Andrei Platonov. Masodov consciously employs Platonov’s language, at once parodying and deconstructing both the idea of communism and the mystical and super-

5 Very little indeed is known about Masodov himself. According to the publisher, Masodov was born in 1966, worked as a teacher of mathematics, and currently lives in Germany. Moreover, the subject matter of Masodov’s prose, which is almost always founded on the aesthetic of violence—physical and sexual—and the proximity of the author’s style to the postconceptualist tradition has led to the theory that Masodov’s surname is a pseudonym. On the back cover of The Devils is a line from a review which is difficult to get around: not clear what you mean “It is hard to rid oneself of the impression that the author is not a real person but a literary project, and that even his name is a composite. ‘Ma’ is for Mamleev: the novel’s main characters are zombies, the walking dead. ‘So’ is for Sorokin, and ‘D’ is for others (drugie).” Also, in the context of his works, the name Masodov certainly raises an association with the term Sado-Maso.

6 Il’ia Kukulin considers that Death of a Pioneer Girl, the famous poem by Ėduard Bagritskii, is the source for the character of Klava, the heroine of the novel. However, it seems to me that Klava is more likely a reincarnation of Nast’ia from Platonov’s Kotlovan. All of Klava’s relatives—“representatives of the bourgeoisie”—are killed. Klava is created by the new reality, and her half-living, half-dead shadowy being is a reflection of Nast’ia, whose mother was also a “bourgeois”, and whose principal entertainment is to play with her toys in a wooden “kulak” coffin.

7 As Dmitrii Bavil’skii observed in his review of The Devils, “Previously it would have been written that the novel presents a broad panorama of revolutionary reality, but as if turned inside out and written from the viewpoint of a ghoul or a nedotykomka.” Bavil’skii, “Zapiski pokoinika. Il’ia Masodov, Cherty. Roman,” Topos, 28/02/03, http://www.topos.ru/article/935, (Last accessed November 1, 2011).
human nature of the project, as well as its techno-occult concepts; for example, the deification of machines widespread among Proletkul’t authors, especially Bogdanov and Gastev. In Masodov’s novel the deification of the steam engine image, which is central to Platonov’s prose, takes on a morbid, Gothic fantasy quality:

Trifon did not believe in God, but in the relentless power of the steam engine. This faith originated in him from exhaustion before the rapid movement of the massive iron mechanisms. He could find no equivalent to this in nature, and this meant that there was no God. So Trifon rejected the idea of God as an obsolete opiate, and ipso facto came spiritually closer to the Communists, who also recognized that the steam engine was more important than God.8

Masodov reduces Platonov’s techno-utopian ideas to an absurdity by laying bare their subconsciously magical and occult subcontext. For example, Masodov employs one of Platonov’s central images: “the all-powerful locomotive which will run on light”.9 In The Devils, the armoured train Comrade Sverdlov, created by the “proletarian genius” Ladov, is such a machine:

Ladov puts a piece of sun into the train’s heavy duty armour and sets “the resulting mass on the class enemy”: “A nuclear armored train did not need rails, only a Sovnarkom plan, but in the meanwhile it travelled across the land, burning the life out of it, and not stopping for a moment because a real heart beat within it.”11 Masodov gives the hackneyed metaphor of Bolshevik narrative, the “fiery Bolshevik heart”, a literal interpretation. At night, his armoured train recharges itself from the energy of the Bolshevik heart, drawn from Iakov Sverdlov’s speeches. Sverdlov’s words are absolute nonsense: they are just scraps of slogans and of hysterical ideological speeches, but in the context of the novel they become magical invocations which infuse power into the tech-

8 Masodov, The Devils, 151.
9 See, for example, Rosenthal, “Introduction,” 26.
10 Masodov, The Devils, 97.
11 Ibid., 98.
ology of the Revolution. Masodov’s image of the “magical-scientific armored train” is doubtless a paraphrase of yet another Platonov idea: the “death machine” which will “rework the living, turning them into the dead”. The armored train draws its terrible power not just from the sun and the power of Bolshevik hearts, but from the living souls which, should they stray into its path, it consumes and converts into solar energy.

At first, the reader is convinced—like the young Klava—that the new Russia is under the rule of the wicked and the ghoulish. When Klava sees the Reds for the first time, “their eyes were lit with a dull, bloody flame, and while they looked like the drunkards who used to patrol the margins of the workers’ quarters, Klava instantly realized that they were zombies”. Even the title The Devils (Cherti) is doubtless a paraphrase of Dostoevsky’s The Demons (Besy). Klava’s friend Varvara confirms her impression of the Bolsheviks: “The Bolsheviks are pure evil. And Lenin is their chief sorcerer. He can levitate, and he doesn’t pronounce his ‘r’s; he’s a real demon. They’re all like that, because Satan can’t create them properly.” The resurrection of the dead—one of the major ideas of Russian Cosmism—is a central theme in The Devils. In Masodov’s interpretation, the Revolution turns Russia into the kingdom of the dead—a metaphysical battle between otherworldly forces of good and evil—and historical figures take on a new, occult interpretation. The ghosts of dead soldiers from a White Guard regiment annihilated by the Reds continue to battle the magical armored train. “All the dead power killed by the Bolsheviks” prepares to attack the demon Lenin, led by the witch doctor Old Man Kolchak, “who rose from the earth, and he’s taller than a tree. And his name isn’t that at all, nobody knows his real name, but they called him that after the prophetic words the angel whispered to him: kol-chak.” It is to “Old Man” Kolchak that hundreds of dead kulak troops, bloated with starvation, swim the freezing

13 The result of this experiment is clearly observed in a review in Weekend magazine, stating that The Devils could have been written by Platonov were he bitten by juvenile vampires. (Weekend, 12/10/2002, 14).
14 Masodov, The Devils, 24.
15 Ibid., 156.
16 Ibid., 105–106.
river; an image, once again, from Platonov’s *Kotlovan*.

The principal apocalyptic figure in *Masodov’s* book is the Commissar, initially introduced to the reader as the *Horse Rider*. The main symbol of the Reds, the Rider seems to resemble the four Riders of Apocalypses. He is covered with blood, and is inherently otherworldly (being already dead), but “the infernal joy did not leave his terrible face.” The *Rider* gallops into the town at full speed, and while galloping, decapitates Klava’s friend, the boy Pet’ka. A local sorcerer, Rogatov, finds Pet’kas hat on the pavement, sews the head of a dead dog onto Pet’ka; and the boy lives on like that. “The head of a dog” sewn onto a human being refers, of course, to Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog*. Like Sharikov, Pet’ka behaves like a half-human, half-dog: he talks like a human, but snaps his jaws to catch snowflakes, like a dog. But the image of the dog-headed boy, artificially put together from half a dead human and half a dead dog, is linked not only to the Russian fantastic tradition of the 1920s but also to Egyptian mythology which, as we shall see below, is extremely important in this novel.

At the beginning, the reader, like Klava, is in no doubt as to Bolshevism’s demonic nature. However, as the novel goes on, the reader begins to sense the clear dualism of the author’s relationship to the Revolution. Pavel Alekseevich, an academic and Fedorov scholar who takes Klava in soon after the death of her family, is convinced that the Civil War and Revolution are necessary: they will destroy all life on Earth and establish a single universal Death, through which and after which the rebirth of a new, immortal and all-powerful human being, capable of taming the Universe, will begin. Even Klava, who hates the Bolsheviks at the beginning, gradually forgets her past and realizes that Lenin and Trotskii are creating something immense and holy to which she, Klava, is called. And precisely because of this, in the new world—the world of the dead, created by the Revolution—the Revolutionary leader Lenin turns out to be not a demon, but a saint.

*Masodov’s* Lenin has all the characteristics of the “Lenin myth”.17 He is omnipotent, and at the same time “helpless and defenceless as a child”. Lenin’s speech has the “Leninian” burr; he can levitate with the help of magical forces concealed in his cap, and “his whole figure is bathed in a barely distinguishable electric glow”.18 He is telepathic: “he squinted cunningly, and Klava realized that he knew about her what she did not know herself.” Lenin’s thought is “a

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18 *Masodov, The Devils*, 55.
great wonder, an epiphany, the victory of human reason over the universe.” He outlaws lies with a grand Decree on Truth. Lenin is convinced that Man will “definitely collide with and penetrate the universe.”

At the end, Klava and the Commissar, whom she hates, unexpectedly become one in a final alchemical transformation: “I [the Commissar] was you and you were me, and I had no voice, because time was not yet time or air, air.” Hatred, which ruled the world from the Revolution to Lenin’s death, gives way to conciliation and unity; and at the centre is the ever living Lenin, who guards the world order, and the dead children, who will guard the ever living Lenin forever.

The stylistics of *The Devils*, based on Platonov and Bulgakov, carry a distinct echo of the symbolism of Egyptian mythology. However, it is extremely important to clarify that the novel is not about Egyptian mythology *per se*, but about its occult interpretation, prevalent in the Masonic rites of the time and particularly the symbolism of the Memphis-Misraim rite. Practically all of the characters in the novel are temporal incarnations of the Egyptian occult myth. A meeting of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) plays out like a meeting of a secret lodge, in a room with Venetian plaster wallpaper on which “were depicted columns of fish, birds and insects”: Egyptian hieroglyphs. The same “familiar letters” are also written on the inner walls of the Mausoleum and on the dead Lenin’s forehead: “herons and some kind of rods”. Trotsky also writes the minutes of the VTsIK meeting in hieroglyphs. The nuclear sun of the “Red” armored train, devouring everything in its path, is the Egyptian sun of the dead, devoured every night by the evil spirit Apop, depicted in ancient Egyptian mythology as an enormous snake embodying darkness and evil, the eternal enemy of the sun god Ra. The river across which the bloated corpses swim towards Old Man Kolchak is a metaphorical

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19 Ibid., 55, 103.
20 Ibid., 221.
22 In this interpretation, Masodov does not claim originality; he simply starts out with Soviet symbols and reduces them to absurdity. Shchusev, the architect of Lenin’s mausoleum, deliberately provoked an Egyptian association in the mind of the viewer, and the very idea of embalming Lenin’s body is obviously associated with Egyptian mythology. Moreover, the name of the Memphis-Misraim masonic rite originates in the Hebrew word for Egypt: “Misraim”.
23 Masodov, *The Devils*, 220.
Nile, across which the dead swim to eternal life. As for the boy with the dog’s head, who—as Klava says—has become God and who is shown at the end of the novel as a guard at Lenin’s tomb, holding “a carbon rod terminating in an icy hook;” he is without a doubt Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead and one of the fundamental symbols of “Egyptian” Freemasonry. The final lines of the novel indubitably demonstrate the unity of Pioneer and occult Egyptian symbolism in a kind of initiation:

Varvara walked away and stood at Lenin’s head. [The children] surrounded him, and [their] strength was once more united. [Klava] stretched out [her] left hands, meeting over Lenin’s sleeping face. Blood dripped from her palms and fell on Lenin’s broad forehead, and the dark symbol flared up and disappeared back into the head of the dead leader.

“And you shall become a stone”, said Varvara, “locking the gates of darkness. Forever and ever.”

And Pet’ka placed his rod on Lenin’s corpse, and it lies there to this day, where Pet’ka laid it. And you children raised your hands to block your faces, so that posterity would not know them and nobody could break your spell. Nobody knew, then, that millions of boys and girls would soon lift their hands before their faces just like that, beneath the flame of red flags, repeating your sacred gesture and blocking the way of any deadly gaze into their radiant, joyful eyes. They will draw you like that one day, engrave you on some massive stone wall: two girls, standing over the sarcophagus of a charmed and incorruptible light, and the boy with the head of a dog.26

Masodov interprets the hand lifted in the Pioneer salute as an occult sign of “protection”, and the founders of the Pioneer movement turn out to be ancient Egyptian guardian priests of the ever living Lenin; dead children killed by the Revolution, living forever.27

25 Ibid., 221.
26 Masodov, The Devils, 222.
27 The sacralization of the Lenin myth and the transformation of Lenin’s tomb into an occult symbol—a kind of amulet—appears in Pavel Pepperstein’s fantasy novel The Mythogenic Love of Castes. The Fascist soldiers in the novel are convinced that “the Soviet infidels believe that Lenin’s mummy gives them strength and magically promotes success in business.” However, Pepperstein’s novel is a fantastic, fairy-tale work. Occult and esoteric themes are not central to it.
It would be easy to see Masodov’s novel as a parody of the utopian Soviet modernist narrative, close in spirit to Vladimir Sorokin’s experiments in The Blue Fat. Indeed, it is hard to take seriously the image of the dead members of the requisition brigades, hung up to “cure” by villagers whom hunger has driven to cannibalism, discussing—as if alive—the question of “whether Lenin has a dick, or just electricity.” However, in my opinion, Masodov’s aim is quite different from Sorokin’s. I agree with Il’ia Kukulin, who states that Masodov’s principal aim is a kind of research into the subconscious of early Soviet literature. Masodov’s Satanic-Communist aesthetic is not so much parodical—although undoubtedly parody plays a considerable role in The Devils—but lyrical and even metaphysical. In giving The Devils a completely apocalyptic storyline, Masodov deconstructs not so much the early Soviet narrative of the Revolution as the contemporary occultization of Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution; and where myth, the grotesque and sincere lyricism meet, the author creates his own text.

The magical interpretation of the “Lenin and children” theme which appears in Masodov’s novel is also central to Vladimir Sharov’s Be Like Children. At the heart of the novel is Sharov’s fictional invention, the “children’s crusade”: a mystical crusade for secret knowledge, eternal happiness and everlasting life. The action takes place in the mid-1920s when, on the orders of Lenin and Trotsky, thousands of dispossessed children have to walk to Jerusalem (many of them walking across the sea). As soon as the first child reaches Jerusalem, “the lame walk, the blind see, and the deaf hear. Even the dead rise again.” However, the same images which are portrayed as occult in Masodov’s novel can be read as mystical in Sharov’s. Like Masodov’s prose, Sharov’s language is constructed in the style of Platonov. As with The Devils, Fedorov’s ideas about the resurrection of the dead—“those who died before the victory of Communism”—is central to Sharov’s novel. However, the element of parody which is fundamental to an understanding of The Devils is entirely absent in Be Like Children. The Civil War and Revolution appear in Sharov’s novel not as a

28 A similar mystical and occult interpretation of early Soviet history appears in Sharov’s earlier works, for example his novels The Resurrection of Lazarus (2003) and Rehearsals (1992), but Be Like Children is a more striking example of the author’s treatment of this theme.

29 Vladimir Sharov, Bud’te kak deti (Moscow: Vagrius, 2008), 129.

30 It is worth noting that Fedorov’s philosophical ideas and their influence on Platonov’s work are central to an understanding of Sharov’s own creative philosophy, most vividly expressed in his literary and philosophical essay “Between two revolutions: Andrei Platonov and Russian history”, published in the collection Tempted by Revolution: the Russian leadership (Moscow: Arsis, 2009), 12–54. See, for example, 40–44.
battle between good and evil, but rather as Lenin’s “inner path” to his own personal spiritual enlightenment. The stroke which afflicts him in the last years of his life is portrayed by Sharov as a kind of initiation, opening the door to a secret world in which language has magical powers and humans can see the invisible “that which is accessible only to innocent little children.”

Like Masodov, Sharov stresses the role of language in the Revolution; primarily Lenin’s use of language. According to Sharov, Lenin’s language and his “revolutionary” speeches are in a way invocations, magical “seals”. Moreover, Sharov claims that in the last years of his life Lenin became entirely convinced that human language was imperfect, originating from “cunning”; that “after Adam’s expulsion from Paradise, people began to use a conditional and deceptive language,” and that only Communism could restore the real, esoteric and magical nature of words, which would help people to reach a state of eternal grace and eternal life. Sharov himself defines his novel as an “esoteric mystery” and the Revolution as an unsuccessful attempt at a new and mystical quest in the search for universal happiness.

Accordingly, if *The Devils* can be called an “occult” novel, Sharov’s work, which uses practically the same mythologems and symbols as Masodov’s, presents the reader with a mystical text. However, it is not a mystical text, as it is constructed on individual magical reasoning; accordingly, it is an esoteric text and not one belonging to the Christian mystical canon. Sharov interprets the processes of the Revolution, and those taking place in Lenin’s soul in the last years of his life, as a secret “inner path” to a mystical experience, which—although it might be considered close to Christian in nature—is rather anti-Christian. Hence he regards *Leniniana* not as an opponent to Christianity but rather a counterbalance: the secret personal religion of Bolshevism and the Bolsheviks.

Neither *The Devils* nor *Be Like Children* can be considered popular literature. Both novels are constructed in the style of a literary and linguistic experiment aimed at a fairly narrow, although influential audience: the well-grounded reader with a literary education. By contrast, Polina Dashkova’s *The Source of Happiness* trilogy is aimed at the general reader, and Dashkova has produced an occult, conspiracy-based mystery novel incorporating elements of

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31 Masodov, the Devils, 128.
32 Ibid., 127.
33 By way of comparison, the print run of *The Devils* (2003) was only 1,000 copies; that of *Be Like Children* (2008) was 4,000, while, the combined print run of Dashkova’s trilogy in 2010 was over 50,000 copies.
mystery, fantasy, historical and open adventure narrative, catering to the tastes of that audience. However, the principal “real” protagonists of The Source of Happiness are all the same: the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin, Sverdlov et al. The time period of the action, which unfolds from the first years of the Civil War to Lenin’s death, also remains unchanged. As with Masodov and Sharov, all three of Dashkova’s novels are strongly anti-Bolshevik in character, while displaying a dualist attitude to Lenin. Dashkova defines Bolshevism as a dark, demonic force, in which “evil is elevated into valor and the cruelest instincts of the masses are raised to the heights of a new religion.”

Dashkova’s protagonists—like those of Masodov and Sharov—are convinced that the Civil War and Revolution are an apocalypse; an allegorical death which Man must undergo for resurrection into eternal life. Dashkova styles her narration after the “classical” modernist narrative of the Silver Age and early Soviet period. However, unlike Masodov—whose novel is an example of conscious and strikingly purposeful imitation of a modernist text, teetering on the brink of parody—Dashkova’s trilogy is not a conscious imitation. Rather, as the author of a recent review in the Literaturnaia gazeta correctly observed, Dashkova’s text “reiterates those literary stereotypes describing the revolutionary era which have come to replace the Soviet stereotypes;” that is to say, she does so quite unconsciously in an attempt to write a text capable of immersing the reader in the era of the 1920s, both in content and in style. In this sense, we can assert that Dashkova’s trilogy is an example of that literature which originated in post-Soviet popular culture, but cleverly disguised as “high” literature.

The plot of the novel is fairly simple. A year after the Revolution, the Moscow professor Mikhail Sveshnikov is carrying out experimental operations in the transplant of rat epiphyses—the rounded ends of a long bone of a brain, when he unexpectedly discovers a rejuvenating effect linked to the action of an unknown worm on the brain; a parasite discovered by chance in the pineal gland of a donor rat. Sveshnikov invents a drug with the cysts of the mystery parasite as the main component, and so creates the “elixir of immortality”. As we later discover, Sveshnikov is not the first to find the parasite. In 1547, the

35 It is also noteworthy that, like Masodov, Dashkova could to some degree be called a literary project. The combination “Polina Dashkova” is a pseudonym, and the author’s real name, Tat’iana Poliachenko, was for a long time kept strictly secret. Even now, despite the dissemination of this information on the internet, the author does not welcome the popularization of her real name.
German artist, doctor and alchemist Alfred Plut (a fictional character probably based on the Renaissance occultist and physician Paracelsus) discovered the parasitic worms with the aid of a diamond microscope of his own invention, carved in the form of a crystal skull. He includes the worms in his famous picture “Misterium Tremendum”. The action of the novel unfolds in two parallel time frames: 1920s Russia and 2007 in both Russia and Germany; however, the narrative centres on Sveshnikov and his biologist granddaughter Sonia.

Subject matter drawn from Bulgakov, primarily Heart of a Dog, is central to The Search for Happiness. The reader can easily discern Bulgakov’s Professor Preobrazhenskii in the character of Sveshnikov. However, if Bulgakov aims to dissect the myth of the creation of the new “ideal” man of “Communist formation” from the lumpenproletariat, Dashkova’s aim is to denounce the Bolshevik melodrama of mastery over the secrets of nature and control over the unknown.

Finding out about the drug, the Bolsheviks aim to obtain it. They consider Sveshnikov not so much a doctor as one who possesses arcane powers and the techniques of ancient priestly magic. In contrast to Masodov’s Bolsheviks, who are genuinely “wicked” and possess the real magical powers of demons and ghouls, Dashkova’s characters are to some extent ordinary people, albeit with extraordinary parapsychological abilities. However, their aim is to create a new world, and they need occult science in order to achieve that aim. As one of the characters states, “today’s materialism is a colossal, profoundly elaborated and meticulously organized magical act.” The Bolsheviks are creating their own myth, and in order to sustain that myth they require iron health and, ideally, immortality. Therefore, in Dashkova’s version, the Bolshevik leaders—who do not have real magical powers or occult knowledge—lay down their lives in order to acquire that knowledge and power. According to Dashkova, the Bolshevik leaders and especially Gleb Bokii are closely linked to Gurdjieff and his sect, study the writings of Blavatsky and are members of the Imhotep Masonic lodge. They want to become superhuman, and they seek all means to that

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37 Dashkova specially incorporates a reference leading the reader to the protagonist of Bulgakov’s novel. Under the influence of Sveshnikov’s discovery, a Moscow professor transplants a human pituitary gland into a monkey. Although this case involves a monkey rather than a dog, the transplant of a human pituitary gland into an animal unequivocally reminds the reader of Preobrazhenskii’s experiments.


39 Similar ideas can be traced in other contemporary works dedicated to the links between the GPU and occult and esoteric circles, for example the pseudo-factual novels of Oleg Shishkin,
end, carrying occult artefacts and demanding an injection of the wonder drug from Professor Sveshnikov.

Dashkova’s description of the Bolshevik regime and its leaders constantly teeters on the brink of the fantastic; however, the author always tries to keep that balance, letting the reader decide whether the novel is really about occult powers or about the accomplishments of science. In this it also works from the Russian modernist tradition, in which science is usually perceived as the heir and successor of magic. However, Dashkova constantly insinuates that the main culprits in the nightmare of the 20th century, Stalin and Hitler, were not real people, but shapeshifters, demons with a human face and created by “darkness;” infernal, demonic forces.40 Dashkova accords a considerable role to hypnosis and mesmerism, using examples of mesmerism in order to emphasize the demonic and infernal nature of the Bolshevik regime.41

Reading the text, it is difficult not to think that Dashkova’s novel embodies all the myths about the Bolsheviks and Silver Age occultism thrown up by 1990s Russian popular culture. According to Dashkova, the leading Bolshevik figures were adepts of secret societies, primarily the international Masonic lodge Narcissus. Like Masodov’s characters, they dispose of and use Egyptian occult symbolism, especially the image of the ancient Egyptian priest, doctor and alchemist Imhotep, the architect of the first pyramids, and they consider themselves priests. Dashkova’s narrator (like Dashkova herself, to judge by the

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40 Ibid., 320–321.
41 At times the wealth of such details—incorporated without even a hint of parody or deliberate stylization—can make the reader smile. For example, Sveshnikov’s assistant Valia practices hypnosis during operations when there is not enough anaesthetic available in the hospital or when the anaesthetic is dangerous to the patient. During one such operation a female Cheka agent suddenly begins to ventriloquize in a male voice: “Suddenly, Karaseva opened her eyes and grinned widely. There was a giggle, and then the vibrating hum resumed. It made the head ache. Then there was a squelch, and a voice sounded: a male voice, low and hoars. “Recognize me? Want to play with me?” “Not with you,” said Valia slowly, “You’re nothing. Empty.” The patient’s heart stopped, and the voice kept resounding. “Are you praying? Well, go on and pray. Only I will listen. No other but me!” (221). – Clearly the infernal dybbuk who speaks from the dead woman’s womb demonstrates the genuinely infernal soul of Karaseva the Cheka agent, “who loved shootings and torture”.

The Battle for the Himalayas (Bitva Gimalaiakh) and Red Frankenstein (Krasnyi Franken- shtein). In Dashkova’s work, the Imhotep lodge is fictional. However, it is worth noting that the Imhotep Masonic lodge really exists today in Russia, as part of the Memphis-Misraim rite. (See http://www.memphis-misraim.ru/) It is also worth noting that the image of Imhotep—the ancient Egyptian god of medicine—has often been used in Western popular culture in recent years, primarily in the popular films The Mummy (1999) and The Mummy Returns (2001), which undoubtedly played a role in Dashkova’s choice of this image.
statements she has made in numerous interviews) is convinced that the Revo-
lution was the doing of a secret mystical order which:

has long been trying to destroy the old, unjust world and build a new,
just one. It has many subdivisions in the form of Masonic lodges and
other mysterious organizations. The order supports the Bolshevik party
and leads it. Il’ich is an adept of the order.42

Like Masodov and Sharov, Dashkova constantly emphasizes that the speeches
of the Bolsheviks do not carry a logical message, but constitute a kind of psy-
chological mumbo-jumbo: “Il’ich fills his speeches with utter nonsense. But the
crowd listens enthusiastically. In fact, he uses coded language. It is not the
words that work, or the logical connections, but the signs and symbols.” 43

The character of Alfred Plut—who, it emerges in the third book of the tril-
ogy, has lived for over 400 years—plays a parallel role to Lenin throughout.
Lenin appears as the primary symbol of “Bolshevik alchemy”. Thus, Plut’s
crystal skull—through which one can see a human skull in the picture “Miste-
rium Tremendum”—echoes the following statement by one of Lenin’s com-
rades in arms: “Lenin’s brain is an astounding cupola of forehead in sculptural
contours; and, observe, it glows. A physical emission of light; the inexhaustible
energy of the supreme, universal intellect.”44 However, at the same time
Dashkova actively implements the idea that the disease of the brain which
afflicted Lenin at the end of his life was not the result of atherosclerosis, but
was brought about by hallucinogens and ritual exercises “directed at the inten-
sive stimulation of certain parts of the brain,” to which Lenin was exposed
during his occult initiation, which he underwent as a young man.45

Over the last two decades, Russian popular culture has elaborated and
popularized an occult interpretation of events relating to the making of the
Lenin myth and the period of the 1920s, thus creating an “occult mythology”

42 Ibid., 547.
45 Ibid., 432. It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the character of Lenin, Dashkova interprets the
character of Stalin solely negatively. Having first met Stalin, Sveshnikov emphasises that he
“consisted entirely of special traits: webbed toes, the left arm shorter than the right... even his
pupils seemed rectangular, not like other people’s.” Sveshnikov observes that all these traits
made Stalin “some kind of not quite human being, rather a strange half-human, half-devil”
(The Sky Above the Abyss, 14). Thus it can be argued that, like Masodov’s Lenin, who did not
pronounce his ‘r’s, Dashkova’s Stalin is indubitably one of those “shapeshifters” whom “Satan
could not properly create.”
incorporating rumors, information from the now accessible archives, numerous real historical discoveries and pop-academic speculation. The works considered above are an expression of this mythology in contemporary Russian literature. At the same time, if the popular relationship to Soviet mythology was extremely negative at the beginning of the 1990s, the instability of Russian society in the 1990s and the dissatisfaction of the general public with the social and political situation in the country led to a certain renaissance and “neoromanticization” of Soviet symbolism, creating that dualist attitude towards the fundamental Soviet myth—the Lenin myth—which is clearly manifested in Masodov, in Sharov and in Dashkova. All three novels—The Demons, Be Like Children and The Source of Happiness—portray the Revolution not as a historical process but as an occult and creative one, an alchemical Magnum Opus aimed at reworking mortal material into an immortal synthesis of the soul, eternal matter and renewed consciousness. In this sense, it could be argued that these texts to some degree continue the tradition of early Soviet literature, which also portrays the Revolution as a great metaphysical transmutation. In each of these novels, the everyday events surrounding the Revolution take on mythical, not to say cosmic qualities.

However, in some cases it could be argued that history undergoes either a purely occult interpretation (as for example in Masodov) or that the interpretation of events has a more vividly expressed mystical and esoteric character (Sharov’s work is an example of such a novel). Taking into consideration that both Sharov and Masodov’s novels are more literary, and are not aimed at a general audience, then accordingly one could argue that a complete erosion of the boundaries between these terms is more characteristic of popular than of “elite” literature. In my opinion, this results from the stereotypical perception of the term “occultism” in contemporary Russian popular culture.

The absence of a single version of historical events is superimposed on the broad religious crisis in modern Russian history, creating a situation in which people who grew up in a society propagandizing rationalism and negating any mysticism not only become easily enthused for mysticism and the occult, but try to interpret the well known version of events through an occult and mystical lens, negating theses events and changing them. Although the action of the novels analyzed above unfolds entirely or mostly in the 1920s, in our view

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these books are clearly a product of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, and their subject matter—to paraphrase Vladimir Sharov—is rooted in dissatisfaction with real history, with their historical fate, and in a very strong desire to replay it all and make human life as experimental as, say, physics.47 In the texts discussed above, the Soviet past functions not as an object of historical research, but as an attempt to fill the conditional symbolic space of the culturological “black hole” with new thought and new interpretations, in which the established materialist course of history is transformed into a symbolic quest for power and becomes a secret path to awakening and realising the supernatural essence in human life.