ON READING RUSSIAN MYSTICAL LITERATURE UPSIDE-DOWN

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This is no clever allegory of communist idealism gone wrong, or even a parody of Aryan Übermenschen, . . . Sorokin is not being ironic about Bro’s membership in the children of the Light; he is, to channel Bro’s voice, dead serious. Not that 23,000 cosmic rays incarnated as humans exist anywhere outside his own imagination, of course, but rather that experiential mysticism is a real phenomenon whose personal, social, and spiritual implications deserve to be examined and critiqued.

—Victoria Nelson, “Meat and Light,” on Vladimir Sorokin’s Ice Trilogy

In her essay for this volume, Birgit Menzel describes how “Mikhail Meilakh would stand on his head in the breakfast-room of the Leningrad Interhotel for foreign guests.” After a while, he “would turn to each table and ask the puzzled or amused foreign businessmen or diplomats most politely in various languages if they could bring in any information or material about Gurdjieff on subsequent trips.” There is a parable in there somewhere. We are, after all, each upside-down to the other—often literally, on this spinning cosmic ball—but many of us are all also listening, in our own ways and terms, for the circulating rumors, the astonishing story, perhaps even, strangest of all, that gold nugget of scholarship on these secret teachings and astonishing stories that will throw new light on our own individual questions.

The little story also speaks volumes about the travelling, global character of esoteric movements. Religions are often primarily local phenomena whose main function is to build and maintain stable communities and clear religious identities, but esoteric movements are almost never simply local and, let us admit it, they are usually very bad at maintaining stable communities and forming clear, clean religious identities. We might better speak here of global networks of intellectuals, writers, and seekers who are questioning, and largely denying, the very notion of a single community or religious ego.

The Theosophical movement, to take one obvious example, may have been born in American Spiritualism around New York City in the 1870s, but it quickly became a force from England to India and Russia, and its tendencies to include just about anything and everything within its metaphysical embrace—from an imagined ancient Egypt and Tibet to the astral plane itself—are well
known. It also seems relevant here, as the present essays explore in rich detail, that the Roerichs claimed to have met Master Morya not in the Himalayas but in London’s Hyde Park, and that they dreamed of a Buddhist superland embracing everything from Tibet to Siberia; that Gurdjieff was a Greek Armenian whose career spanned the Russian Empire to Parisian society; that Russian science fantasy was inspired by both Euro-American science fiction and Latin American magical realism; that a figure like Aleksandr Dugin thinks of all of Eastern Europe and Asia as a single cultural block; that Henry A. Wallace was probably inspired by a Russian occultist (Roerich again) when, as Secretary for Agriculture, he proposed in 1934 to put the Great Pyramid on the American dollar bill; or, finally, that the entire earth is too small for the dreams of Russian cosmism. Are there any more apt symbols for the global reach of esoteric movements than the dollar and outer space?

One can see similar, if more academic, global networks in the psychical research tradition, which in its beginnings (not accidentally in those same Spiritualist 1870s), was largely an elite intellectual club moving between London, Cambridge, and Harvard. The friendship, for example, between Cambridge-trained Frederic Myers and Harvard’s William James was real and deep. More dramatically still, when Myers died, women around the world soon claimed little bits of channeled English, Latin, and Greek from him—the famous “cross-correspondences” that crisscrossed the globe like some occult Internet. Similar intellectual and global currents are apparent in the modern human potential movement. It may have begun in northern California in the early 1960s and expressed a distinct individualism and American “democracy of the soul,” but it always relied for its vision and direction on cosmopolitan writers and intellectuals—from the Cambridge trained Bengali Sri Aurobindo, the exiled German theologian Frederic Spiegelberg, and the British-American writer Aldous Huxley to the globe-hopping Fritz Perls and the Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof. No Indian and European intellectuals, no American human potential movement.

One wonders if this tendency to downplay national boundaries and develop global networks is a function of the esoteric/exoteric structure of these movements, with local culture and religion falling into the exoteric half of the equation. One wonders if this is a function of the often learned and bookish nature of those attracted to such movements; books, after all, travel exceptionally well, and cosmopolitanism and education often go together. One wonders, more radically, if the same tendencies to downplay the local for the universal might be a function of the phenomenology of the mystical states out of which these esoteric movements claim to flow. One wonders.
There are numerous exceptions and qualifications to make, of course. The present essays, for example, treat non-conformist spiritual seekers who often display both these global networks and a very distinct sort of nationalism, localism, even messianism, with Russia commonly portrayed as “the spiritual center of the world.” One thinks here of Roerich’s “New Country,” which may embrace huge chunks of Asia but looks more than a little like an expanded Soviet Union; of the conservative, Eurasian Movement of Aleksandr Dugin; and of the anthropological and personal fascinations with local Russian shamanic traditions. Similarly, the explicitly nationalist and communal character of cosmism has been noted, and contrasted sharply, with the individualist and transnational directions of occultism. All fair enough.

Exceptions and qualifications aside, my comments here emerge from an interest in these learned global networks, mystical phenomenologies, and—my own particular soap-box—the manner in which the latter esoteric forms of mind have helped produce particular types of comparative practice, including the modern comparative study of religion.¹ Although I work on movements and ideas that clearly participate in the same cosmopolitan conversations (North American guru traditions, American metaphysical religion, the human potential movement, and popular cultural expressions of the paranormal), I do not possess any expertise in this or that body of Russian literature. One might say, then, that I read, listen, and ask questions upside-down, rather like Mikhail Meilakh. Put less playfully, one might say that my questions are comparative ones in the sense that they seek to understand the Russian material in the mirror of the American material and the American material in the mirror of the Russian material.

What can be seen in this double mirror? Other than oneself, of course. Let me conclude by making just two observations. Both involve the historical production of gaps, silences, and secrets.

**How Gaps Become Secrets**

The first thing that I see in this double mirror is that mystical literature—by which I mean literature that claims to encode secret teachings about the true relationship of the human condition to a more fundamental transcendent or sacred order—presents very similar promises and problems to the reader,

¹ I will not pursue this idea here, as I have developed it elsewhere at some length. See my *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
wherever such teachings are found. The challenge confronted by the historian of mystical literature of any sort—be it from medieval Hindu India or Christian Europe, Soviet Russia, or contemporary North America—boils down to this: how does one read the relationship between a presumed mystical event and the text it helped to produce? Like the relationship between the mundane and the transcendent orders that it replicates and re-enacts, this relationship between event and text is inevitably a complex one, as many of these mystical experiences do not and cannot be neatly slotted into the cultural narratives of the place and time.

More importantly still, these events are often even mysterious and finally unspeakable to the psyches in which they occur. We might say that the mystical event cannot be spoken because it cannot be “languaged” or reasoned at all. It is, quite literally, beyond language and any linear logic. It is not a product of the left brain, the cognitive scientist would say (okay, I would say). That is, the mystical event may not only be culturally or politically dissident; it may also be cognitively and epistemologically dissonant.

Sometimes, moreover, this cultural and epistemological ineffability is radicalized further by what we might call psychological, religious, and political factors, say, because the event is heavily sexualized or morally problematic (as we saw with the Tantric experiments of Anatolii Ivanov or with the esoteric embrace of “sacred drinking”), or doctrinally heretical (as we saw with the Orthodox condemnations of Roerich and transpersonal psychology), or appears to undermine the reigning political ideology (well, where to begin?). For all these reasons, and more, it is most appropriate to name these kinds of events and their subsequent literatures “mystical”—literally, secret or hidden. They are.

Saints or mystics doctrinally committed to a particular religious tradition have handled this gap between the mystical event and their own cultural and psychological surrounds in one way. Nineteenth-century British or French occultists handled it another. Contemporary American New Age writers in still another. But in each case, the challenge is the same: how to bridge the gap between an experience and what can be said about the experience to those who have not experienced it, or, and this is where it gets especially complicated, to those who have known a similar, resonating but finally different sort of altered state. There is, then, a fundamental gap between what happened and what can be said about what happened, and the basic hermeneutical challenge is to bridge that gap through interpretation of some kind, be it traditionally religious, occult, or academic. Which is another way of saying that the saint, the occultist, and the historian share a great deal.
What the historian can see and say that the saint or occultist generally cannot is that the textual articulations of previous mystical events often inform the phenomenology of later mystical events in profound and exquisite ways. There is a kind of “loop” mechanism going on here, then, whereby earlier texts help inform later experiences, which help produce further texts, which help inform further mystical events, which help . . . you get my point. The historian of mystical literature enters this stream (which we call a “tradition”) at some point and tries to locate some of those gaps, processes, earlier influences, present shapes, and so on.

Finally, let me also observe that the historian of esoteric literature must also deal with an entire barrage of gaps and silences, if not actual silencings, and these from multiple sides. He or she does not only have to deal with the facts that the sources have usually been heavily censored or suppressed by the political and religious climate under study, and that any scholarly discovery or interpretation that challenges these political and religious forces is likely to be vigorously rejected and framed as “blasphemous,” “slanderous,” or, my personal favorite, “Western” (consider the case of Vladimir Rosov’s dissertation on Roerich discussed in two of the essays here2). He or she also has to deal with the censoring and suppressing ideologies of the modern-day academy, which we might describe as materialist and contextualist in orientation. Any open discussion of a mystical event or figure that implies some transcendent or universal dimension (which is all of esoteric literature) is, in principle, deemed inappropriate and so must be immediately reduced to a local “discourse,” a “historical construct,” and so on.

Orthodoxies (of all sorts) aside, I cannot help but think that these mystical literatures force metaphysical questions, and that we will never really understand these texts and events until we allow our own ontological assumptions to be questioned by these same questions. I also wonder, deep down, if our general failure to compare across cultures and times is not really a product of this basic ontological timidity. I mean, once we insist on everything everywhere being flattened out into purely material, local, surface processes, what is there to compare about esoteric movements, whose very raison d’être is to point beyond this material, mundane historical, surface realm? Our lenses focus

2 American Indologists saw the exact same attempts to conflate their historical-critical methods with Western imperialism/colonialism among right-wing Hindu propagandists seeking to actively suppress and censor professional scholarship in the late 1990s and turn of the millennium. These moves are clearly from the same playbook. I suspect historical influence here, from the Hindutva ideologues to the Rosov-Roerich case.
expertly and efficiently on the historical detail and the social functions of what
we study. We can talk forever about political circumstance and historical influ-
ence. All well and good. But this very focus blinds us to other aspects, includ-
ing and especially the central claims of the texts and figures themselves. We
ourselves are silenced by the rules of our own game.

Victoria Nelson has traced this fundamental hermeneutical problem beau-
tifully in a recent essay on the Ice trilogy of Vladimir Sorokin, whose gnostic
sensibilities we do not have to guess at. In 2008, Sorokin told an interviewer
this: “I believe that humanity is not yet perfect, but that it will be perfected, that
contemporary humans are thus far imperfect beings, that we still do not know
ourselves or our potential, that we have not understood that we are cosmic
beings. We are created by a higher intelligence, and we have cosmic goals, not
just comfort and reproduction. We are not ‘meat machines.’”

Potential. Cosmic goals. These are the watchwords of every modern evolutionary mysticism.

Nelson’s essay, appropriately titled “Mean and Light,” traces these convic-
tions through the trilogy, demonstrating in the process that one cannot fully
appreciate these three sci-fi novels without being challenged by Sorokin’s
Gnostic Transcendentalism. The Children of Light of the trilogy, all 23,000 of
them, are beings of light incarnated as paranormally gifted human beings all
over the planet (there is that global network again). They eventually all seek re-
union with a huge chunk of divine cosmic ice that has crashed into Russian soil
(the famous Tunguska event).

Are these Children of Light simply fictitious tropes for Sorokin, or reflec-
tions of his real convictions about the deeper esoteric nature of the human
condition? Nelson gives the correct, basically fantastic answer. They are both.
“Sorokin himself splits the difference,” she writes, “and this is what I think his
‘metaphor’ amounts to: The children of the Light are us. We humans, all of us,
are part meat machine, part cosmic ray.” The Ice trilogy then, is, in the end,
not just another piece of Russian literature. It is also a metaphysical challenge
of the deepest sort. “Let it be noted,” Nelson observes, “that these days, pre-
senting transcendental experience as real is a far more subversive and unset-
tling proposition than any of the conveniently shifting positions taken inside
the boundaries of late-twentieth-century postmodernism.” Indeed.

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3 Victoria Nelson, “Meat and Light: Vladimir Sorokin’s Ice Trilogy Considers Gnostic Trans-
cendentalism, the Potential of Human Collective Energy, and the Changing Russian Socio-
political Landscape,” REF, 25.
5 Ibid., 21.
In short, it is not just the Russian esotericist who has a problematic relationship to a militant atheism and official materialist culture. So do professional historians, anthropologists, and literary critics. Little wonder, then, that we have invented so many new shiny categories—the mystical, the occult, the psychical, the paranormal, and now the esoteric—to name and try to understand these historical processes of silencing and occultation. These, after all, are not just secrets. These are secrets within secrets within other secrets. And they are ours as well.

**A Most Instructive Silence**

The second thing I see in the double mirror of the Russian and American materials is that this multiple censoring of the mystical takes on especially excessive forms in the Russian materials, and that these extend far beyond anything we can find in the American literatures. In the Russian case, it is obviously the fact that mystical writers had much more to deal with than, say, cognitive ineffability, internal psychological censors, or academic respectability. They had real censors to deal with. They had threatening intelligence officers and secret police to worry about. They were working in an immense and intricate Soviet system that rigorously denied claims concerning anything beyond the material realm as deluded, dangerous, and, in some cases, punishable. These were no gaps to bridge with a few metaphors or a tenure case. These were yawning abysses to fear for one’s livelihood, if not one’s life. One did not end up in cognitive dissonance or joblessness here. One ended up in Siberia.

Or dead. “Almost all of them were physically annihilated during the Great Terror in 1937–1938.” So writes Burmistrov on the Russian Templars. “Almost all members of the secret society, **United Workers’ Brotherhood**, were captured and shot. Bokii was the first to perish. He was to receive a bullet in the back of the head on 15 November 1937.” So writes Shishkin on Barchenko’s research and colleague.

This overwhelming political and social fact appears to have produced what is one of the most marked features of this volume’s essays for me personally: their almost total silence in regards to any first-person accounts of mystical, occult, or esoteric experiences. Where are the experiences? I ask the question not to criticize the authors, but to underline the super-secrecy of modern Russian mystical literature, and to catalyze a discussion about how we might read these literatures in relationship to other forms of esoteric literature that are not as politically fraught. I mean, what would we get if we put, say, Euro-American ufological literature in conversation with Russian cosmist literature? There are
plenty of secrets in both, to be sure, but the political lines drawn around, say, unknown aerial phenomena are quite different, and so too are what can and cannot be said. Could one set of literature be used to plumb and scan the other, and vice versa, like a kind of double radar scan? And what would such a scan reveal?

Experiences are hinted at, for sure, in the present volume. Burmistrov, for example writes about how the founders of occult groups in the 1920s and 30s created their movements out of a double source: earlier occult literature and their own paranormal experiences. They then constructed new initiation rituals, manufactured lineages, and invented traditions in order to support and pass on the implications of their original paranormal experiences. We might say that the fiction of tradition was wrapped around the fact of experience, but that this fact of experience was formed by an earlier literary tradition, and so on. Still, we get no descriptions of these initiating paranormal experiences, probably because we do not have them in the historical record.

Osterrieder, it seems to me, asks exactly the right question in his careful essay on the Roerichs and their experience of channeling occult wisdom. “On the other hand,” he writes, “if one assumes that ‘communication’ actually took place – which the Roerichs perceived as their reality and as the motivating source of their actions –, did the medium (i.e. Elena Roerich) then distort the ‘messages’ through personal defaults or ambition? Or did the ‘communicator’ have a concealed identity and a quite different agenda from what was transmitted to the Roerichs?” Note here how the questions themselves depend on the factuality of the original channeling events. We cannot even ask these questions, much less try to answer them, if we assume that the communications did not take place, that they were simply inventions or clever ruses.

I have worked with channelers in the States. In many cases, and almost certainly in the Roerich case, we can just remove Osterrieder’s careful “if.” Which of course does not answer how we are to understand these historical events: as unconscious phenomena to be interpreted psychologically; as sincere subjects unknowingly acting out a social structure or script; or, the impossible option, as human beings channeling discarnate beings. Still, the point remains the same: however we choose to interpret these experiences, they remain actual historical events that deserve our attention and analysis, and we will get nowhere by simply denying that they happened. They happened.

Similarly again, Laruelle describes “the intellectual experience of cosmism,” but we hear of no actual cosmist experience, say, an encounter with an alien intelligence or a mystical experience in space on the part of a cosmonaut. We certainly hear of Tsiolkovskii talking to angels, but in the end we get no angels.
Part of this is no doubt due to what Laruelle identifies as the movement’s socialism: “according to cosmism, hidden reality will become obvious to all of humanity, not for a small group of the privileged. The secret character of the activities of connectedness, as a sort of ‘lodge’ for the initiated, does not comprise part of the intellectual and organizational apparatus of cosmism which, on the contrary, likes to speak of the greatest number.” This certainly goes a long way in explaining the silences around individual cosmist experiences, but does this mean that there were or are no such experiences?

Two American comparisons might be instructive here, again as radar scans of sorts. We encounter a very similar “cosmist” or mystical evolutionary worldview (with significant differences, of course) among American science-fiction writers, ufologists, and alien abductees. Indeed, we even have multiple instances of the alien body, at once spiritual and physical, being seen with or around dead acquaintances or loved ones of the visionary. We are very close here to the resurrected dead. And if we take these accounts as a whole now, we have thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of reports and detailed descriptions of individual experiences. Indeed, the historian of religions who ventures into this realm is positively swimming, or drowning, in psychological data. To take a single dramatic case, when the horror and sci-fi writer Whitley Strieber published his Communion in 1986, on his own dramatic (and erotic) experience of abduction, he put an address at the back of the book for readers to write him. As a result, he received half a million letters from all over the world, mostly from people who recognized the alien face on the cover or saw their own abduction experiences mirrored and scanned in his.

My point is this: virtually all of these half-million experiences would have been completely invisible to any practicing historian, but they were, and still are, there nonetheless. Moreover, these half million historical documents were invoked by a fiction writer writing about his own esoteric experiences in a book one of whose central features is the blurring of the fictional and the factual in such paradoxical events (Strieber is very conscious, and very clear, about the ways that the religious and cultural imagination shapes these sorts of encounters). The cognitive and cultural loops here between fiction and fact, between literature and the occult, between private and public, between the physical and the spiritual are nearly unimaginable in our present block-headed materialist epistemologies. And, once again, we can only begin to trace and track them if we take the original experiences as historical facts.

Or consider Apollo XIV astronaut Edgar Mitchell. While floating in space on his way back to earth, Mitchell experienced an overwhelming yogic union or “samadhi” (his term) involving what he calls the “dyadic” unity of matter
and mind within an evolving conscious universe. This event changed everything for him. He later founded a still thriving scientific research institute to study psychical phenomena (the Institute of Noetic Sciences, in Petaluma, California) and wrote a detailed autobiography about his adventures in the “material” and “mystical” worlds. He has also, by the way, gone on record stating that he believes in the reality of UFOs. As with the Strieber case, the fact and the fiction merge and mirror one another here. The Institute of Noetic Sciences, originally inspired by Mitchell’s outer-space event, was prominently featured in a work of esoteric pop-literature, Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol*. There is the feedback loop again.6

We do have at least one reported individual experience in the essays above. It involves an atheist science schoolteacher by the name of Vera Khromtsova and the author of the essay, Natalia Zhukovskaia. A neighbor asks Vera why she pulled sacks out of her cellar the previous day. She replies that “Badma came” and told her to do so. Badma had been dead for two years. But Badma knew what she was saying:

> Three days later the upper end of the Tunka valley saw very strong rainfalls, which led to the groundwater rising and flooding all cellars, destroying the food reserves that many people kept there. Those who had been “visited by Badma” and “warned” to take out the food reserves (sacks of potatoes, carrots, cabbages, turnips, jars of jam and pickles – all that which can be destroyed by water in the cellar) did not suffer damage from the elements.

This is exactly the kind of narrative we need to forward the interpretive project. Once we have such a narrative, we can then ask new questions. Like whether “Badma” was an actual discarnate spirit, or some aspect of Vera’s psyche transmitting a very useful piece of precognition in the only way it knows how—through the folklore of the culture; or, or what?

It seems relevant, to me anyway, that the only clear occult experience we have described in this volume was preserved as such only because the researcher-scholar was present and was willing to write about it. In other words, the scholar, i.e., Zhukovskaia, played a major role here in invoking, recording, and passing on this precognitive narrative to us. In the process, she teaches us about Russian anthropologists and intellectuals taking on the practices and

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roles of the shaman themselves, in essence, going native. This is where it gets especially interesting and, as I have argued elsewhere, especially fruitful.7