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Review Of "The Occult In Russian And Soviet Culture" By B. Rosenthal

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Review

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Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed. *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. 468 pp., \$59.95 / \$24.95.

The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture is the first collection of its kind, a rich and important edition that proves the importance of the occult for anyone studying Russian culture today. As a whole, it is a monumental corrective for the ways Soviet skepticism or Western rationalism have ignored central cultural factors in approaching individual writers or historical and social movements. Largely because non-Western religion and science tend to be considered occult, the non-Russian parts of the Russian and Soviet Empires appear in several of the articles. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal's introduction and conclusion, together with the sequence of articles, trace the continuity of occult influences from pre-Revolutionary Russia through the Soviet period to the present, and demonstrate that the occult has been a constant thread in the history of Russia's collective psyche.

This topic presents the dual challenge of obscurity and ubiquity: "occult" is defined as the esoteric, secret, or as the excluded from the dominant discourse—censored or marginalized by church and government, often concealed by its adherents out of self-protection or through distrust of the unsophisticated masses. The scholar must be a detective and a very close reader. As the "Other" of science, religion and philosophy, the occult is also almost too various to be meaningful, from pagan rites, gnosticism, alchemy and astrology to Freemasonry, spiritualism, schismatic sects, the Kabbala, to charismatic healing and Theosophy. Never mind that religions or dietary practices become "occult" abroad (Buddhism is not occult in Japan or India). Unorthodox takes on Orthodoxy are also fair game—Vladimir Soloviev occupies as many lines in the index as Rudolf Steiner. Evidently many of the Russians the book studies also construct the occult this inclusively, so while its various aspects can be approached as a totality, it makes for a broad and sometimes confused whole, with occasional repetitions or startling juxtapositions. To the credit of everyone involved in the volume, the writing is clear and the flow of topics logical.

Rosenthal's introduction embraces an enormous amount of material, making it very informative but at times necessarily sketchy or oversimplified, with brief digressions that do not always lead back to her argument. The introduction could profitably refer more to the contributions, synthesizing from them rather than centering on the editor's own considerable knowledge. Rosenthal does an excellent job of explaining the Russian attraction to the occult: her even-handed sympathy and awareness of the appeals of nontraditional philosophies are fine antidotes to the overly academic skepticism and scorn that lead to ignorance and, ultimately, the need for this collection. Rosenthal's "Instead of a Conclusion," with the promising title "Political Implications of the Early Twentieth-Century Occult Revival," frequently repeats, in less depth and detail, material mentioned in the contributors' articles. Rosenthal concludes with an anxious warning that, in today's Russia, "Politically, the occult is dangerous." Linking all manner of nutty politicians (e.g., Ziuganov, Zhirinovskiy) with various occult theories, Rosenthal can exclude them from standard political discourse—but then she appears to tar any political activity by Theosophists, vegetarians, fans of astrology, and healers-by-touch with the same brush. It would be irresponsible indeed to ignore the historical links of fascism and anti-Semitism with occult groups and theories, many of them described in this collection. However, Rosenthal seems to end by repeating the gesture of crowding weird or racist theories into the occult's taboo realm—hoping perhaps that there they will prove easier to control, but also casting doubts on the theme of the book she has just edited.

The anthology is based on a conference held in 1991, and its reach remains primarily pre-Soviet and Soviet. Only two articles deal in significant detail with the present; one of them is Holly DeNio Stephens's well-written and informative examination of the occult in Russia today. Stephens mixes individual quotation with citation from journalistic and general sources to provide both illustrative detail and analysis. Her important point that many present-day

occultists in Russia see their work as reclaiming Russia's past (358) underlines the usefulness of the entire book for current study as well as for historical background.

On the whole, the quality of the collection is excellent: it includes almost all the obvious topics, with contributions by many of the most knowledgeable scholars in this part of the field. Topics include magic and divination in Old Russia (W. F. Ryan); the peasant occult in elite literature (Linda J. Ivanits); the Jewish Kabbala (Judith Deutsch Kornblatt); Satanism (Kristi A. Groberg); Spiritualism and other esoteric movements (Maria Carlson); and Anthroposophy (Renata von Maydell). "Magic" moves into "science" in pieces on Fedorov (George M. Young, Jr.), Russian Cosmism (Michael Hagemester), and "Technology as Esoteric Cosmology in Early Soviet Literature" (Anthony J. Vanchu). The role of the occult in Stalin's era is especially pronounced: the occult in literature (Irina Gutkin), Gorky and Socialist Realism (Mikhail Agursky), Eisenstein (Håkan Lövgren) and Vsevolod Ivanov (Valentina Brougher). Mikhail Epstein writes with particular sophistication on "Daniil Andreev and the Mysticism of Femininity," an outline of Andreev's life, thought and works which considers both their appeal and their oddities and inconsistencies. Epstein shows Andreev's influence in the present and conveys a whole living web of cultural connections rather than limiting his reach to the properly occult. Andreev's demand that men must become more feminine reminds Epstein of the essentialist claims of a certain kind of "radical" or "cultural" feminism in the West. Finally, the book's last section includes an extensive and informative bibliography, the best to date on the topic.

Recitation of the table of contents seems the only way to indicate the full scope of this project, and every article—even the few that are a little dry, or that work to prove the details of an occult connection rather than to illuminate the connection's significance—is worth attention. *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* is recommended to a broad audience, to anyone who works on Russia in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, but also to anyone with an academic interest in the (surprisingly central) Russian contribution to the occult in world culture and history.

Sibelan Forrester, Swarthmore College

A. G. F. van Holk. *Theme and Space: Text-Linguistic Studies in Russian and Polish Drama with an Outline of Text Linguistics*. Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics, Vol. 27. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996. 294 pp. (paper).

The author's stated purpose in writing this book is to "test . . . out the potential of linguistic models to account for the thematic content of dramatic texts and those properties of semiotic space which are peculiar to drama and theatrical performance" (1). The models tested are taken from text-linguistics, a discipline that integrates linguistics, semiotics, mythology, and cultural anthropology to "search for a language-based model of culture" (27). Although occasionally the chapters refer to each other, this is really a collection of separate essays each directed towards a slightly different problem.

The first chapter is introductory. It briefly reviews those text-linguistic methods that the author finds best suited to deal with questions of "the linguistics of the literary theme" and "the semiotics of dramatic space, insofar as it is involved in dramatic performance" (3). Van Holk's choice of examples throughout the book is far-ranging, but in this chapter the majority of quotations analyzed are taken from Ostrovsky's *Groza* and *Bespridannitsa*, Griboedov's *Gore ot uma*, and Turgenev's *Mesiats v derevne*. Chap. 2 uses examples from J. Slowacki's play *Fantazy* to differentiate between the "raw material" of a literary text and its "narrative structure." Moreover, the author describes the basic components of such structures. Van Holk states that *Fantazy* was chosen to illustrate the discussion because it has a clear thematic composition and an imaginative textual surface. It is also "a striking example of the literary