

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN

Almost Island Acknowledgements

“Doomsday Sects and Everyday Sects” contains excerpts, by kind permission, from Mikhail Epstein’s “cult classic” translated, by Eve Adler, as Cries in the New Wilderness: From the Files of the Moscow Institute of Atheism (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2002)

The narrator’s voice and persona in these extracts is not that of Epstein himself, but of professor Raissa O. Gubaydulina, a committed and evangelical atheist researcher into remnants of religious sects; the indented passages are quotes from Gubaydulina’s archive at the former Institute of Atheism. The book is supposedly a reprint of an obscure 1985 study from the Soviet era. Needless to say, it is not quite clear whether or not the cults that Gubaydulina presents to us have ever existed. As Epstein notes in his “auto-commentary”: “...the characters of the Comedy of Ideas, perhaps, need no names—they are well enough served by initials, abstracted from concrete names as ideas are abstracted from concrete persons.”

Preface to the English Edition (by Eve Adler)

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have heard plenty of post-mortems on the communist economic and political project. But the Soviet Union was also the first great attempt to realize the ancient dream of an atheist society. How did that experiment turn out? Did Soviet atheism take root in Russian souls? Did it manage to form a radically new type of human being, to change the landscape of the human heart, to replace the typical spiritual experiences of Western civilization with unheard-of novelties? Do today's Russians still belong to the same spiritual world as today's Americans, today's Europeans? On these questions there has been a resounding silence. Of course we can read plenty of statistics and anecdotes bearing upon church attendance in today's Russia— the ups and downs of the reconstituted Russian Orthodox Church. But, since the fundamental question concerns people's inner life, all this information remains dumb without a special sort of guide to make it speak to us intelligibly. Mikhail Epstein's book is such a guide, with the sympathetic heart of a participant, the erudition of a scholar, and the cool eye of a curious observer. But above all — Mikhail Epstein hears voices, and his literary art enables us to hear those voices for ourselves.

In *Cries in the New Wilderness*, Epstein takes us inside the disintegrating Soviet Union by sounding the voices of a whole orchestra of late Soviet types. This is satire, but of an unusually loving and revealing variety — more in the line of Horace or Musil, say, than of Juvenal or Swift. Epstein is representing people who are on or over the edge, but he does it with a delicate touch that shows not only the wildness and absurdity but also the pathos and plausibility of the everyday half-madness in the hearts and minds of ordinary people, its connection to things heard on the radio and read in forbidden books, seen in the street and daydreamed in the kitchen. There is a striking absence here of wickedness, vice or monstrosity, and correspondingly a striking absence of indignation; instead, ordinary confusion and everyday hopes and longings are represented in all their disorienting connections to the most spectacular ambitions, surmises and claims of the philosophic and Biblical traditions. The voices Epstein hears speak in a luxuriant interplay of styles: the everyday, the poetic, the Marxist-Leninist-scientific, the romantic-literary, the bureaucratic-Soviet, the mystical-paranoid, the foreign-Western-bourgeois, the literary-critical; they brood portentously on implausible etymologies, on half-cracked, half-revelatory antics with allusions, associations, quotations; they attribute an ineffable significance to stray bits of terminology or snippets of forgotten manifestos and anthems. Under Epstein's direction, these voices add up to an intimate drama of the inner worlds of ordinarily confused and striving people.