

Translator's Introduction

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have heard plenty of postmortems 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. We can read statistics and anecdotes bearing upon church attendance in today's Russia, the ups and downs of the reconstituted Russian Orthodox Church, the pros and cons of the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. But, since the fundamental question concerns people's inner lives, all this information remains dumb without a special sort of guide to make it speak to us intelligibly. Mikhail Epstein 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.

The core of *Cries in the New Wilderness* is an annotated handbook of underground sects brought to light by the vigilant efforts of the fictitious Moscow Institute of Atheism. In this imaginary handbook the reader has a compilation of selected citations from the writings of the sectarians themselves, writings catalogued and analyzed by Professor of Scientific Atheism Raisa Omarovna Gibaydulina in a classified document intended for internal use by the Institute of Atheism. Copies of this classified document, however, were somehow smuggled to the West in the mid-eighties, and the version before us includes an appendix of responses from the bourgeois press, where we hear several Western intellectuals trying to come to grips with the late-Soviet realities described in the handbook. The imaginary documents of *Cries in the New Wilderness* crystallize these realities with rare literary power.

While some of these Western reviewers are most impressed by the splashy collective voice of the sectarians piercing through the numbing insistence of the scientific-atheist commentary, the voice of the commentator herself, Professor Gibaydulina, finally becomes most mysteriously compelling. With her respectable resolve to be a credit to her profession, her struggle to keep her scientific cool in the face of unspeakable folly and depravity, her occasional outbursts of righteous indignation, her optimistic instructions on the most efficient methods of rooting out error from the human heart, her wooden insensibility to everything playful or diabolical in the unruly materials she must reluctantly catalogue—Raisa Omarovna gradually emerges as a fasci-

nating character in her own right, and I always wondered what became of her after the collapse of the Soviet Union took scientific atheism the way of the planned economy. For this Paul Dry edition, Mikhail Epstein has added a special epilogue of materials from her personal archive, in which we can follow the vicissitudes of her career and her inner world up to the time of her death in 1997.

Note on the English Edition

On 15 December 1995 I had my first telephone conversation with Mikhail Epstein, and on the next day, in my first e-mail to him, I wrote: "I am still somewhat amazed that 'Mikhail Epstein' did not turn out to be a figment of the imagination of some comedian at the 'National Council for Soviet and East European Research.'"

This is what had happened. On 25 November 1995 I ordered some titles on religious sects from "Panorama of Russia," an excellent Boston outfit specializing in Russian scholarly literature. When my order arrived in the early days of December and I started leafing through my new books, one of them, called *Novoe Sektantstvo* (*The New Sectarianism*), somehow kept resisting my efforts to categorize it. It seemed to be a publication under the name "Mikhail Epstein" of a previously classified document of the Moscow Institute of Atheism, describing seventeen new sects discovered by that Institute in the waning years of the Soviet regime. But something about it didn't add up—the amateurish printing, the cover illustration of a black cat and a Soviet worker in angel-wings and earmuffs, the crackpot index with its entries for "fire" and "Feuerbachian," "Dante" and "dietology." . . . It had been published in Moscow in 1994 by a house called "Labyrinth," with the following note, in English, on its title page:

The preparation of this manuscript for publication was supported from funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research (USA) which however is not responsible for the contents of this book.

Eventually I called the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, and was told that there was another, perhaps fuller

text, copies of which were held in restricted collections of only two U.S. libraries: the Library of the Department of State and the National Defense University Library. Still, works from these restricted collections could, in some cases, be ordered by private citizens upon submission of a special application form requiring not only U.S. government clearance but also written permission from the author. But who *was* the author, and where could I reach him? The National Council for Soviet and East European Research gave me a telephone number in Atlanta, with a warning that I'd better hurry up since the government was about to shut down because of the budget deficit. It was Friday, 15 December 1995, and indeed the government did shut down the following Monday. But by that time I didn't need government help with my search anymore, since I had made direct telephone contact with the real Mikhail Epstein. My surprise at his existence was as nothing next to his surprise that I was looking for his work in restricted collections of U.S. government libraries.

Cries in the New Wilderness is the fruit of my initial confusion about the genre and author of *The New Sectarianism*.

NOTE: Biblical verses have been translated from the standard Russian (Synodal) Bible, drawing on the King James Version (and other standard English versions) where possible.