

Zhivago's Magpies: Magic and Modernity in Soviet Literature

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rationalistic and mechanistic worldview advanced by Soviet Socialism, a fascination with magic emerges in the fictions of many prominent Soviet writers. A variety of possible explanations suggest themselves: First, the Revolutionary belief in the power of ideas and, especially, words, to transform reality is itself a form of magical thinking. Twentieth-century Russian writers could also draw on a rich tradition of magical folklore (anthologized for easy borrowing by belletrists only in the mid-nineteenth century, and thus far from exhausted by the time of the Revolution), and on a rich tradition of Orthodox Christian ritual, which was often magical in form and intent. Then, too, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a surge of interest in the occult among poets, artists, philosophers, and anthropologists; a sudden explosion of scientific and scholarly work on magic (most famously, Tylor's *Primitive Culture* [1871], Frazer's *Golden Bough* [1890], and Freud's *Totem and Taboo* [1913]) was accompanied by the florescence of Symbolist poetry and prose, with its emphasis on the mystical powers of the word, and its side interests in the demonic and—conversely—in the mystical cosmologies of theosophy and anthroposophy.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for Soviet writers' seemingly anomalous interest in magic, however, consists in the usefulness of magic as a category for thinking about the world at moments when a culture confronts, as John Mebane puts it, "the sometimes exhilarating, sometimes profoundly disquieting fact that the limits of human knowledge and power ha[ve] not been finally established."¹ Mebane, writing about early modern England, describes an "intense struggle between those who maintained the continuing validity of traditional sources of knowledge and those who asserted that inherited beliefs must be tested and, if necessary, rejected." Such moments—revolutions not only in politics but in epistemology—occurred more

¹ John Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989), 6.

than once during the life of the Soviet Union, most notably in the 1920s, following the Revolution that swept away the old ways of life, and in the 1950s, after the death of Stalin.

A survey of the published scholarship on magic in literature reveals rich resources clustered around particular epochs; the scholarly literature on ancient Roman, medieval European, and Renaissance English literary magic is especially abundant. Further, a substantial body of scholarly writing across several disciplines examines the importance of magic and the occult at the turn of the twentieth century (discussed above). Astonishingly little has been written, however, on magic in *Russian* literature, and almost none of that work deals with the Soviet era. (Significant research has been done on the adjacent territories of Slavic folklore and arcane aspects of Orthodox ritual, but very few studies in either English or Russian address magic in “high” literature of the twentieth century, especially when compared to the wealth of material available on the Western cultures mentioned above.) *Magic and Modernity in Soviet Literature* addresses itself to this gap.

The proposed book

A central premise of my project is that magic, as a literary discourse, does political work. Indeed, one reason the booming Western scholarly industry around magic in literature has not crossed over much into the Slavic realm may be that it is structured by specifically Western political preoccupations, as Randall Styers suggests (“The scholarly discourses on magic have regularly conformed to the interests of the dominant classes of Europe and America seeking to regulate and control both their colonial possessions and their domestic populations”).² One point of convergence between Russian and Western uses of magic, however, is the centrality of *modernity*—however the word may be understood from the perspective of a given era—as a driving, if ambiguous, force behind surges of interest in magic. On the one hand, modernity is a source of disruptions to the established order that create epistemic upheaval, making space for magic; conversely, it frequently portends the arrival of rational, mechanistic modes of knowledge from which “magical” systems of thought must be systematically excluded. In Soviet literature,

² Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford UP, 2004), 16.

as in its early-twentieth-century Western counterpart, magic is persistently associated with the irrational, benighted past—an association that simultaneously detracts from its prestige, and adds to its appeal. Accordingly, *Magic and Modernity in Soviet Literature* takes as its point of departure the need for a comprehensive examination of the sources and uses of magical discourse in Russian culture, before narrowing its focus to the Soviet period. A brief outline of the planned volume follows.

The introductory chapter, “**Doing Things With Magic**,” will investigate Russian concepts of magic as they emerge from folklore and from Orthodox Christian beliefs and practices. Drawing extensively on the insights of Western scholarship on magic, I seek to place Russian magic in a broad comparative and theoretical context, and to juxtapose it provocatively with the discourses of modernity that preoccupied Russian writers, poets and thinkers at the turn of the twentieth century. Chapter Two, “**Enchantment and Disenchantment in Soviet Russia: The Revolutionary Fairy Tale**” will examine the paradoxical relationship of Soviet writers to magic as, on the one hand, a cultural “survival” with no place in the modern world, and, on the other, as a powerful expression of faith in the capacity of the human individual to comprehend, manipulate, and transform the material world—a faith central to Revolutionary politics. Literary fairy tales by Yury Olesha, Alexei Tolstoy, the Strugatsky brothers, and others provide fertile ground for an exploration of this relationship over four decades, from 1924 to 1964. Chapter Three, “**At the Borders of Rationality: Magic, Politics, and Science in the 1920s**,” will explore the ambiguous border between magic and science through close readings of three texts: Olesha’s *Envy* (*Zavist’*, 1927) and Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Fatal Eggs* (*Rokovye iaitsa*, 1924) and *Heart of a Dog* (*Sobach’e serdtse*, 1925). Chapter Four, “**Bulgakov, Faust, and the Politics of Magic**,” takes up Bulgakov’s Faustian novel, *The Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*, 1928-40), examining it in the context of the Faustian canon stretching from the German chapbooks through Marlowe, Goethe, Gounod and Berlioz. Finally, Chapter Five, “**Doctor Zhivago and the Magic of Politics**,” explores the variety of magical phenomena on display in Pasternak’s novel, shedding fresh light on a work that has been maligned as philosophically incoherent almost as often as it has been hailed as a masterpiece.