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Magic in the Post-Soviet Space: Definitions, Sources, Verbal Markers

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This article examines definitions of magic in the context of the humanities and shows how many working definitions are inaccurate. It proposes that we view magic as an umbrella term, the use of which depends on cultural context, and that the best way to approach the study of magic in the present is to determine its borders anew with regard to each particular culture, carefully examining whether a particular phenomenon belongs to the occult in that specific context. It then aims to provide a guide for historians and scholars of religion on handling primary sources on magic, both print and oral, illustrating the usefulness of the methodology described above by applying it to the study of magic in the post-Soviet space. In the process, the transition of the post-Soviet magician from a person of knowledge to a person of power, the redefinition of previously negative terms (witch [ved'ma] and inhuman [neliud'] or un-human [ankhuman]) into positive ones, and the use of terms borrowed from Western occulture are examined.

Keywords: folk magic, witchcraft, ceremonial magic, anthropology, translations of magical texts, otherkin, folk Christianity, Carlos Castaneda.

Introduction

THIS article examines some of the major developments and tendencies in post-Soviet occulture (occult culture), drawing on oral, written and electronic sources, and situating them in their historical context. The empirical analysis is based primarily on texts, internet discussions and practices commonly found in occulture, re-

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vealing a turn toward voluntarism that is based in novel interpretations of both early twentieth-century sources and modern New Age concepts. In the first section I assess and contextualize the printed materials that are the primary sources for the occult knowledge of today's occultists. In the second section I demonstrate common interpretations of these printed materials and how they differ from the occult interpretations in vogue before the late twentieth century, as well as show how oral tradition influences occulture. In the third section I examine verbal markers—words that a historian or anthropologist should know, because their use in casual conversation or printed texts mark occulture's influence on that text. Verbal markers are of particular importance, because they are essentially universal and visibly demonstrate both the influence of printed materials on oral culture and, correspondingly, the feedback from oral occulture back into printed form.

In working with my primary sources on magic, I utilize a combination of historical and anthropological approaches that I have found supplement one another well. While both history and anthropology yield a great deal of useful information when applied by themselves, the study of contemporary magic requires knowing both its history and the oral discourse surrounding it. It is difficult to apply a purely text-based historical approach to modern magic, because many printed texts rely on additional information being transmitted orally to their reader. This information needs to be known if a scholar is to understand how these texts are put into practice. On the other hand, a purely anthropological approach, making use only of interviews and participant observation, is also not entirely reliable, as it is all too easy to miss the incredible number of references to older cultural phenomena. Many texts put into practice word-for-word today are hundreds of years old, and without understanding these texts, it is impossible to fully understand contemporary practices. I thus examine some of the complex interplay between the influence of written sources on modern practices and the way modern readings of old texts are different from more traditional readings. Untangling this interplay is where my combined approach has shown itself to be most effective.

My temporal scope for print media is 1990 to the present, corresponding with the boom in occult publications that took place as and after the Soviet Union fell apart. I will examine roughly the last five years in the greatest detail, as space will not allow for a comprehensive study. The verbal markers I am focusing on can be found at least from Odessa to St. Petersburg. Like their Western counterparts, local

representatives of the occult are highly active in networking and reading. Where I touch upon folk magic I must limit my examination to the areas with which I am most familiar, Ukraine and western Russia, although I should point out that Belarus, the Russian North, East, and South, and the other post-Soviet republics are vast regions that are home to a great variety of distinctly different folk practices.

My work on magic is naturally based on the work of my predecessors, both historians and anthropologists. The field I work in is called “Western esotericism,” and its *de facto* status was that of a stepchild of the humanities (excepting the work of several notable scholars such as Lynn Thorndike and Antoine Faivre) until the last decades of the twentieth century, when a well-defined field emerged as exemplified by several learned societies and university centers. A good concise overview of today’s scholarship on Western esotericism has been provided by Vadim Zhdanov (Zhdanov 2009), and Randall Styers has published a landmark work on the history of its study (Styers 2004). Importantly, Styers demonstrates how the very notion of “magic” has been used as a “trash bin” for ideas, and he clearly demonstrates the difficulty inherent in finding a single, overarching definition of magic for scholarly use. There are definitions of magic that seem universal at first glance, but almost none of them hold water when checked against data collected in the field, as the material collected always transcends the limitations imposed by the definition. Following Styers’s line of argumentation, I suggest that the best approach to beginning any study of magic is as follows: 1) to establish the boundaries of the concept of “magic” in the particular time and culture that the scholar is studying; 2) once the scholar has chosen a particular subject of study—a practice, a social element, a philosophy—then he or she should locate it within the discourse of magic (where, how, and why did the object come to be called “magical,” and what impact did its entry [and that of any concurrent or concomitant concepts] into the discourse have on the discourse in general). When scholars examine any magical practice, there is a dire need to place it into the appropriate context. The next three sections illustrate this methodology by focusing on occulture in the post-Soviet space from 1990 to the present: first through an examination of the written sources that inform participants in Russian-speaking occulture, then, second, noting how these sources have influenced their definitions of magic in comparison with their folk counterparts and Western occultism, and, third, through an exploration of some of the more telling verbal markers concerning occulture.

Written Sources: Books on Magic in the Post-Soviet Space

There are mainly three types of sources about Russian magic from the 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century: 1) internet and Fi-doNet archives, where a great number of print materials are preserved (the formation and dissolution of particular groups is likely best examined through perusing these archives, at least until we have enough researchers in the field); 2) journals and books, which comprise a significantly smaller volume of print sources; 3) interviews with informants. The third source is generally the most difficult to obtain and interpret, even for trained anthropologists, as one needs to be known and have a reputation in occulture even to be able to ask the right questions, to say nothing of getting answers. Print sources are likely the most available and reliable sources, but many occult writers prefer independent publishing on the internet to pursuing contracts with publishing houses, as that way they can control what remains in circulation and what does not, which texts will represent them, and which texts they can edit and republish. Materials presented on the internet provide the richest trove of primary sources that we have at the moment and for the foreseeable future. To give internet materials the treatment they deserve, however, would require far more than one researcher, so I am limiting their use here to supplementary materials. In the third part of this article, I will be referencing conversations recorded online that I find to be typical of off-line conversations that I have been privy to. A surprising number of points have been repeated almost word-for-word.

Here I will be focusing on print materials and how they have influenced post-Soviet notions of magic along with the way these print sources have actually been read by magicians. I have chosen print sources for one key reason: even though the early days of the internet became the golden age of book piracy in the post-Soviet space, notably, the generation that had come into the internet largely consisted of voracious readers who amassed huge libraries. Many occult libraries, both online and offline, private and public, contain scholarly literature as a major part of their holdings. The home-based Theosophical Library in Kyiv is actively used by students of the humanities, because it has rare books on history, religion and anthropology; the Russian Ordo Templi Orientis Library in Moscow (associated with Aleister Crowley) has a better selection of scholarly literature on the history of esotericism than our own Association for the Study of Esotericism and

Mysticism. Online libraries include uploaded works by historians on such topics as Assyrian magic (Fosse 2001), ancient Greek magic and theurgy (Petrov 2003), Christian folk magic (Drozd 2005), Slavic mythology (Vinogradova 2000), and ancient Slavic religion (Glinka 1993, Rybakov 1981), among many, many others, which are all read and used in practice. Many of them are outdated, but the sources themselves are often classified along with such practitioners of magic as Scott Cunningham or Raven Grimassi: the typical occultist makes no distinction between scholarly and practical texts.

Before the 1990s, the number of books available was sharply limited, and they were a prized commodity. In the 1990s, a flood of translations still left occulture yearning for higher quality. The turn of the twenty-first century saw a robust publishing industry emerge that has been crucial to the development of occulture. The lion's share of the magical book market goes to translations; the number of original texts available in Ukraine and Russia, in Russian or other languages, is far smaller. These translations can be divided into two broad categories: reprints of texts translated at the beginning of the twentieth century or published through *samizdat* (self-publishing) channels in the late Soviet Union; and those translated after the fall of the Soviet Union. Reprints dominated the market in the early 1990s, and since they can be found practically anywhere on the internet, many would-be practitioners still begin their studies with them. For example, in the English-speaking occult world, which is currently the best-studied branch of contemporary occulture and is thus the best measuring stick we currently have for comparison with occulture elsewhere, only the very dedicated know Gerard Encausse (Papus) or Pierre Piobb. Eliphas Levi is somewhat more famous in Anglophone occulture, but he is still not as significant an influence as many authors writing in English. But in the Russian-speaking occult milieu, books by the above-mentioned authors are everywhere, and anyone who has ever been interested in magic has picked up at least one of them at some point in her career. Papus's explanation about the coach driver, horse, and carriage (in which the magician is seen as the coach, the coach driver is his will, the carriage is his body, and the horse is his life force) has been cited to me numerous times, and it is still one of the most prevalent "introductory" explanations of how magic works (Papus 1992).

French influence is also notable in the terms adopted by Russian occulture; for example, the French word *envoûtement* (evil eye, charms, sorcery) has been Russified as *envoltatsiia*, seemingly through the early Piobb translations. The term *volt* (an image or doll used for magical

operations), however, seems to have appeared in Russian spontaneously as a derivation of the term *envoltatsiia*—at the very least I have been unable to find an analogue in the relevant French texts. When one observes Russian magicians or sorcerers stylizing their activity as if they were village wise people, heirs to a unique tradition passed down for generations, using the words *envoltatsiia* or *volt*, one can be completely certain that they are not drawing solely on oral sources, but that they have been influenced by occult books (or at least pulp newspapers, which often reprint texts from books published in the 1990s, in violation of copyright law, without a hint of remorse). French sources also provided Russian occulture with the concept of “animal magnetism” (*zhivotnyi magnetizm*), but, in contrast to *envoltatsiia*, one can hardly find it in use anymore.

There were very few English texts on the occult translated into Russian at the beginning of the twentieth century. This gap was partially filled during the time of *samizdat* and after the end of censorship. The most common *samizdat* books are either written by Theosophists (particularly Annie Besant) or by Carlos Castaneda (his first works). Castaneda’s practices were more popular, and the 1990s and first years of the twenty-first century were a time of *stalkers*¹ and *dreaming*² techniques. Castaneda gave Russian-speaking occulture two notions that nearly everyone who has had any part in it knows (Panin 2012). The first is the concept of *personal power*, which means pure potential for action (something similar to the concept of *luck* among the Scandinavians in the Middle Ages). A practitioner who has *personal power* can do anything, and the circumstances will change to suit her. A magician who has none is doomed to failure, no matter how much theoretical equipment he may have. The second is the concept of *intent*, which here means that pure act of will necessary (and, most importantly, sufficient) for a magical act (Castaneda 2003). Castaneda and his background in phenomenology turned the practitioners’ attention to the idea that a magician’s main instrument is the magician itself, and any supportive means are just that—supportive, useful but not necessary. We will see more about how *personal power* and *intent* changed the concept of magic in the post-Soviet space in the next section.

1. A *stalker* is someone who follows themselves, essentially always being attentive to what they do and why. Stalking is a technique of self-observation.
2. The concept of *dreaming* is based on the idea that dreams and reality are two sides of the same coin, and that the world of dreams is as real as the waking world. This, in turn, means that both worlds are changeable by an effort of will.

Other notable translations include texts on ceremonial magic. The earliest I am aware of was Donald Michael Kraig's book *Modern Magick: Eleven Lessons in the Art of High Magick*, published in St. Petersburg in 1991. Kraig is a representative of one of the many orders that are the successors to the original Golden Dawn, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century magical order whose interpretations of older materials and whose own writings influenced the entire discourse about Western ceremonial magic. Ceremonial magic had initially been reintroduced into post-Soviet space in interpretations of the Golden Dawn, mostly in variations developed by Israel Regardie or his followers. Those who taught themselves ceremonial magic through Kraig and Regardie are usually recognizable by the following elements of their practice: 1) an emphasis on power over the elements, including mastering yourself as part of that training; 2) several basic ritual structures—for example, the Golden Dawn's most basic ritual, the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram (LBRP), exists in an endless variety of interpretations, though the most common one I have seen (known by nearly all my informants, though without a title) uses the seven chakras and not the five sephirot; 3) the four ritual instruments—wand, dagger, cup, and pentacle; and 4), naturally, sexual magic, for where there is power, there is sex, and magic is almost always concerned with power (Kraig 1991).

Naturally, Kraig's book is no longer the only available source. The Golden Dawn was unable to establish a serious foothold in the post-Soviet space, even though some of their texts had been published here—notably, books by the aforementioned Regardie. But Thelemic texts and translations are currently far more influential, because Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) is the only large-scale Western magical order that functions openly and actively in the post-Soviet space. The post-Soviet OTO, as exemplified by its head lodge in Moscow, has several outstanding and productive translators, which allows them to publish a large volume of quality magical texts such as Aleister Crowley's treatises; and reprints of grimoires important to Thelema, such as *The Book of Abramelin*, are now known in Thelemic translations and interpretations.³

The 1990s saw newly translated English literature flooding the market, even though many of the books were 15 to 20 years old. Few of the local publishing houses took enough care to ask permission: the

3. The books translated by the Thelema Creative Group are published by the Ganga Publishing House.

books that were released were mostly pirated. Nonetheless, works by Paul Huson, Laurie Cabot, and Scott Cunningham introduced Wicca to Russian-speaking occulture and started a “witchcraft fad,” just as they had in the West. Up until the early 1990s, the word “witch” had connotations coming purely from folk magic; that is, they were overwhelmingly negative. This change will be examined in the next section in more detail, together with how the aforementioned sources influenced notions of magic. I will compare Western occulture, which is the source for the large bulk of these texts, with post-Soviet occulture, to show how the same texts enjoy a widely different reception.

Print Sources and Changes in Post-Soviet Conceptions of Magic

I shall begin my analysis with the use of sources that still rely in many ways on concepts that originated during the Renaissance. Representatives of Western occulture currently make active use of a wealth of earlier print materials, integrating the rituals, spells, and other elements of these sources into their contemporary practices. This approach places great importance on the use of Renaissance sources, and its adherents decry practices that appeared as innovations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as inauthentic. But the timeframe is not as important here as the fact that Western occultists attempt to follow old instructions as faithfully as possible, especially in the creation of magical objects such as amulets. Russian-speaking occultism differs here; while utilizing earlier sources is something that does happen, and, indeed, reference to early twentieth-century philosophies of magic occurs frequently, precisely implementing instructions laid down a hundred years ago or earlier is rare in post-Soviet territory. To take just one example, in Western occulture there are quite a few practitioners who supplement their income by making “authentic” magical instruments. In Russian-speaking occulture, crafting talismans is also fairly common; however, over the entire course of my work I have only once seen anything like the items sold on the English-speaking amulet market. The item I saw was a lamén (a large magical pendant to be worn around the neck; in this context, its purpose is to demonstrate the authority of the magician to a summoned spirit). The embossed metal lamén was clearly derived from Pápus, but the embossing had not been done in complete accord with Pápus’s instructions. Pápus’s talisman to command spirits was to be “created in the day and hour of the Sun, in the first decade of August [...]”. It can also be de-

picted on a very thin gold sheet” (Papus 1992). The best material for such a talisman was supposed to be virgin parchment, but I have not seen anyone follow the original recipe. The auctioneer’s page reads: “Embossed on thin bronze on Sunday, the day of the Sun. During the Moon’s first quarter” (Auktision 2012). The necessary correspondences between the object and nature are listed, but they are not the same as those provided in their most likely source, but rather similar ones, adapted by the practitioner. While the philosophy of correspondences is still there, the concrete correspondences are not. This is an example of the interesting kinds of discrepancies scholars can find when they take to the field.

My initial hypothesis about the lamens described above was proved wrong by one of my conversations with practitioners, which further underscores the importance of fieldwork. My assumption was that Russian-speaking practitioners had simply become so used to improvising with their material elements during the Soviet era that in the Russian-speaking space there was little demand for magical instruments made to very particular text-based specifications. At least for witchcraft, however, this demand does seem to exist. The proprietor of a recently opened specialized Wiccan shop in Kyiv, the only one of which I am aware in all of Ukraine whose main business concerns imported items, has informed me that the wares most in demand are those that practitioners have a hard time making themselves: athames, altar pentacles, and cauldrons (Personal conversation with Kristina Tverdokhlebova, January 14, 2014). There is simply no local supply of these wares—at least not yet.

Nevertheless, the amulet market in the post-Soviet space is, for the most part, saturated with amulets that do not originate from any historical source but rather are created by the magician, where correspondences are either not utilized at all or at least not as an integrated whole. They are instead used separately: a planetary sign, the planetary hours, a material, a color, and so on. But far more often the amulet is simply created with the practitioner’s aesthetic preferences and the way they perceive correspondences (not necessarily drawing on a source but rather inventing new ones), and then the amulet is implanted with intent (*namerenie*), which means that it is directed toward a particular result. Intent is one of the many terms found in post-Soviet magic that are borrowed from Carlos Castaneda.

This situation is actually a very good illustration of the change I believe to be most prominent in twentieth-century post-Soviet occult discourse: the idea that the meaning of an act is more important than its form, which stands in stark contrast to the orthopraxy of folk

magic. This shift is one of the elements that makes it difficult for anthropologists who are unfamiliar with the history of Western esotericism to work with modern magical contexts. In order to illustrate the importance of this shift, it will be necessary to contrast this new approach to magic with folk magic, which has been studied far more extensively, and the approaches to which are often applied to scholarly interpretations of modern magic. This shift is part of the general voluntaristic turn in Western magic, in which personal power has come to replace the traditional source of power in folk magic, knowledge. Even while magicians seek out older sources, in some cases adhering to their methods as closely as possible, they now operate within a different philosophical framework. The magical will powers each operation, and without it all the books on magic in the world are useless—as opposed to the orthopraxy of earlier magic, in which one can easily stumble into trouble by accidentally reading a formula that has inherent power. So the ritual practice may be the same, but the reasoning behind it is wholly different. From folk sources and anthropological research into them, it is clear that the practitioner of folk magic has historically been wholly dependent on knowledge. Charms (in this context a variety of verbal spells, common to folk magic) can be “passed on,” and many *znakhars* (folk healers, or village wise men and women; for more detail, see Ryan 2006: 135–37) believe that once you pass on a charm, you cannot use it anymore yourself; the knowledge is almost physical (Volodina 2013).

A *znakhar* is not a person of power, but of knowledge. Their power is borrowed: they simply know the right formulas for calling upon God, the saints, and possibly pagan gods. The ritual formula may include the *znakhar*'s right to its use or a sympathetic or homeopathic principle (the classic formula “as [...] is, so [...] shall be”), but the *znakhar* is a mere conduit. His knowledge is equivalent to his strength as a practitioner, and together these are equivalent to his power over nature and the supernatural. This situation seems to continue to prevail in most post-Soviet folk magic, which is usually far less differentiated than city magic. The *znakhar* has no *personal power*—another Castaneda term that has taken up permanent residence in urban magical discourse and which refers to a person's ability to influence the reality that surrounds him or her; a non-magician can have relatively high levels of personal power. The classical *znakhar* does not have personal power in Castaneda's sense—she has only knowledge, which actually is her power. By that knowledge she can command other entities.

But folk magic is just one of the sources for modern magical discourse. Modern occultism is in many ways a product of the Christian magic that developed from Western European folk magic, Christian theology and Renaissance philosophy. Christian magic held to the notion that a human being is integrated into a complex hierarchy of creatures created by God. Naturally, many of its ceremonies are also aimed at establishing authority, explaining who the magician is, where he stands in relation to the spirit that he has summoned, and why he has the right to command that spirit. It is well known that the magical formulae of the Middle Ages hardly differ from exorcism formulae (Kieckhefer 1998). The magician does not master the power, but mastery is given to him. This authority is first and foremost social, but not exclusively. After going through the corresponding rites of cleansing and, possibly, through initiations, the magician stands at a higher place in the sacred hierarchy. This is why he can summon a demon and have full right to command that demon. It is notable that this power is mixed, both “political,” in a certain sense, and physical, and the boundary between the two is not crisply cut. A demon cannot cross the summoner’s circle because he is afraid of God—both as an entity that completely outclasses him, and from fear of the physical pain that touching something sacred will bring.

This element has been preserved in part in contemporary ceremonial magic, where all the elements of the rituals have essential, physical meaning. Moreover, tests for whether the spirits are who they seem to be still exist, and these tests are based on the idea that a spirit is essentially linked to a concept. For example, an undine should have a negative reaction to names of God and symbols connected to the element of fire. Today, however, a magician who surrounds herself with the appropriate symbols can, for all intents and purposes, *be* the required symbol. In practice, this means that even the most complex ritual can be undertaken with whatever is at hand, as the magician can serve as a substitute for any required physical component. A key step down this road was made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the idea that one could use an appropriately attuned practitioner as a replacement for a correspondence. And then another logical step was taken: why do we need physical correspondences at all, if everything can be replaced by a human being and her amazing ability to imagine? If a ritual element imagined with the appropriate intensity is not any worse than the real thing, then why do we need actual correspondences? Thus, a change in practice over time led to a change in ontology. It is this change that makes modern magic so different

from magic as it was practiced in the Renaissance, when it was believed that magic was just part of the book of nature, which man needed to read to get results. Today's magician uses herself in place of any of the letters of the book, embodying those very symbols. In this way, modern magic uses different rationales than earlier magic, despite the use of the same basic texts. Therefore, to approach modern magic it is necessary to look at the extended history of the topic in order to understand how current magical methods and philosophies came about.

The approach centered on the individual practitioner's power is very common in contemporary magic, and it is deeply connected to personal power and the magical imagination. According to the very influential Papus, the imagination is the medium through which the magician interacts with the world, but imagining is not understood as a simple flight of fancy. Instead, the imagination is something that influences the world far more than the uninitiated believe (Papus 1992). This idea developed into the very common explanation that astral journeys and out-of-body experiences consist merely in diverting attention to the astral body and the mind, and that one should not expect (at least at first) those fantastic experiences described by, for example, Robert Monroe (Monroe 1971)—but that astral journeys are no less effective for all that. This development exists both in Western occultism and in post-Soviet occultism. It seems to have been brought to the post-Soviet space through the translations of Kraig and has been adopted by many practitioners. The process of working in the astral collectively often superficially looks like a quiet conversation one would not find out of place in a tabletop role-playing game, the only discernible difference being the seminal questions “Do you see what I see?” (to which the appropriate reply is to describe what you see and to wait for your partner's reaction), and “Do you remember...?” I have never witnessed the “classical” form of astral experimentation, in which a practitioner lies down and is asked to retrieve a particular piece of information hidden elsewhere. In this example, we can see how a change of ontology turns into a change of practice.

To link the above to the notion of transfers of power discussed earlier in connection with the *znakhar*, we need to note that some aspects of this transfer are preserved in contemporary magic, but not in the transfer of actual knowledge. It is not knowledge that is usually transferred, not the information about correspondences and the names of spirits and demons, but power and/or *lineage*, which here is not an anthropological term, but an insider term referring to one's teachers in magic. Learning magic usually means joining a group and com-

ing to share in its earlier treaties with the supernatural world. Being in a group adds “magical authority,” that is, power. This is one of the possible meanings for an initiation: not starting on a particular path, but recognizing that the individual already has certain achievements and has the right to some sort of power. It is also believed to be possible to transfer not only information but the way this information is to be used, the subtle experience of a magical practice, and to show how exactly a practice should be carried out. This demonstration can be pushed forward in time: information and/or the demonstration is turned into an “energetic cluster” that is given to the student (a term that seems to have been borrowed from channeling but that I have seen in the context of witchcraft and ceremonial magic as well. For example, see *Doroga k volshebstvu* 255). This information is then remembered by the student when the time comes.

These two notions and their simultaneous existence gave rise to a particular occult elitism, used only for an inner referential group. It became possible to explain any failure by a lack of personal power or a badly crafted intent, otherwise known as “not trying hard enough.” A person who does not live the right way, who is not magical enough, is doomed to failure or at least to significant difficulties. Post-Soviet occulture, despite being dispersed over a very large territory, is very compact in the sense that every practitioner is not far removed from any other practitioner. This is due to the number of available sources on magic: for most of the 1990s the number of available books was somewhere in the low hundreds, and any interested practitioner would have a common context with any other. There were several groups I will tentatively term “subschoools”: Eastern esotericism, Western esotericism, New Age, Castaneda followers. But due to the sparseness of materials, even practitioners operating within superficially unrelated contexts read each other’s materials. Moreover, each “subschool” had approximately five to ten “gurus” known to most of the interested practitioners in post-Soviet territory. People tended to gravitate to these gurus to learn what they needed and then to fade into either private practice or complete obscurity. Still, this did mean most practitioners had at least heard of one another—and the chances that they knew each other’s “guru” were rather high. This helped restore to magic one of the social functions it once had in the very close quarters of the village: explaining failure through someone’s ill will, through placing blame (for an examination of these functions, see *Khristoforova* 2011). Unlike in the village, however, the blaming takes place among self-identifying magicians. The person who has the right

to place the blame becomes an authority, while those who allow the burden to be placed upon their shoulders become the underlings of the authority figures, often becoming eternal students of magic, never taking on their own pupils but always coming back for more learning. Here, identifying who is to blame for a set of circumstances is not so much a means of reducing social anxiety, as a matter of social status. This is the reason why magical conflicts and battles are so fierce: they are not mere competitions of skill. Instead, they represent competing identities and worldviews—the one who wins is not just a better sorcerer, but a better person.

In this context, Alexander Sekatsky's philosophical novel *Those in Power and Their Powers, or the Mogs and Their Might*s (where "mog" is a pun on magician, *mag*, linking the word visually to the term *moch*' , "to be able") is incredibly spot-on (Sekatskii 1996). Sekatsky is an academic philosopher from St. Petersburg, an assistant professor in the St. Petersburg State University Department of Social Philosophy and Philosophy of History. From its very first page, *Those in Power and Their Powers* gives away that the author is intimately acquainted with occulture. It begins with likely the most common ESP exercise in all of Russian occulture—throwing a ball of energy around. It contains most of Russian occulture's contemporary clichés, and probably introduces one or two in the process. Many aspects of the novel are present in occulture: "curiosity and daring" as important values; living among regular people and subtly yet noticeably influencing them; and different states of consciousness including the so-called OS (*osnovnoe sostoi-anie*, "basic state," whose basic characteristic is "I can")⁴ and the SP ("state of reception," *sostoianie priema*, i. e., extrasensory perception). Sekatsky's dialogues are so typical that one can be certain that he either spent significant time as an insider in occulture or was so good at his vocation as a social philosopher that when he reconstructed the experiences purely from reading about them, he did it so flawlessly that his book was widely accepted in occulture and used as a grimoire.⁵

As I mentioned above, another important trend that Western translations brought were the changes to the concept of witchcraft. Witchcraft went from being a term found exclusively in contexts of folk magic to contexts of occulture, much in the same way as it did in the West. As noted above, until 1990s, the word "witch" carried extreme-

4. Compare the Wiccan formula: "To will, to know, to dare, and to be silent."

5. I use *grimoire* in the broad sense of the word to denote any text with instructions on magical practices.

ly negative connotations that were informed primarily by folk magic. As is well known, the witch in folk belief cannot always control her own power to inflict evil; she is not nearly always conscious of what she is doing. One can be a witch or a sorcerer against one's own will, and no one in their right mind would take up such an appellation for themselves.

A good example of this attitude would be Alexander Aksenov's book series, popular in the 1990s, published under the general series title "I am Not a Sorcerer, I am a Wise Man and a Healer" ("Ia ne koldun, ia znakhar"), which is clearly aimed at those who live in the context provided by folk magic and Christianity. Associations with witchcraft include the evil eye, which can be given by absolutely anyone (either consciously or unconsciously through envy), and fighting sorcerers and witches by removing the curses they place (it is a common belief that a witch whose curse was removed would feel very ill or possibly die). Aksenov styles himself an exorcist; his demons (naturally sent by sorcerers and witches) speak a language common to villages everywhere and are easily recognizable to anyone coming from a village or a small town. The following quotation gives a demonstration of this particular style:

He told me: "Ya know, Sanyok, I'm a full general. I got six shoulder boards and every board has six skulls. I sent some 500 human souls to the other side in my life. I'd sat in [i. e., possessed — Translator] many people over my life. During the war I was in a German *Oberleutnant*. Do you how many people we shot, he and I? And after the war I and his wife Elsa, who was a witch, quickly sent him to his forefathers. Last time I'd sat in a woman who lived in Smolenskaya Oblast. I killed her in just about a year; she liked drinking too much." Vaska often said, "I'm a noble demon." He also told me: "Did you know that we were looking for you, but couldn't find you? We looked among the faithful, the monks, the clergy—you were nowhere to be found" (Aksenov 2008).

The witchcraft borrowed from England and America is very different. We should note right away that what is commonly called "witchcraft" in the Western world can be very crudely and broadly divided into two large categories: Wicca and witchcraft as such. Wicca is first and foremost a religion, even though it emphasizes having no laity; every Wiccan is a priest him or herself. Every Wiccan contacts the gods and the sacred on their own, even though more experienced clergy help and teach. It is also very convenient that basic Wiccan rituals are

very simple, and that Wiccan magic is mostly a simplified version of correspondences borrowed from ceremonial magic. As Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca, borrowed Masonic ritual and protocol, Wicca turned out to be a religion uniquely suited to microcommunities. It has a number of traditional social procedures for the administration of small groups. For example, I do not know of other religious groups that have an established procedure for “graduating” a new group after a critical number is reached, whereas Wicca has its “hiving off” process, which happens when a group reaches the sacred number 13—a number that is very close to the boundary between a small group and a middle-sized group. It is likely not a coincidence that the optimal size for a small group is 9–12 people, whereas the maximum size for such a group—and the moment where the social processes begin to change and it begins splitting into smaller groups, only nominally belonging to the same group—is 20–30 people (*Sotsial’naia psikhologiia* 2002). Wiccans believe that by the time this happens the new group should already have a priest and priestess who are competent enough to lead it. Wicca is a duotheistic religion, which believes in the essential binarity and equality of the two creators of the world, the Goddess and the God. All other manifestations of divinity are believed to be merely masks of these two primordial forces, and preference between them is mostly aesthetic. This is why the Roman Mars and the Irish Morrigan can coexist in one ritual, as can the Virgin Mary and Odin, and the Wiccan will see no contradictions.

In contrast to Wicca, Anglo-American “fam trad” (that is, “family tradition”) witchcraft emphasizes an unbroken family line, how well the craftsperson knows their craft, and trusted and true “folk” methods. I put “folk” in quotation marks because neither England nor America preserves the type of connection between the village or small town and the city that is still actually present in the post-Soviet space. Even though by now second and third generations of witches exist simply because of Wicca, when we compare materials collected by ethnographers and anthropologists (and, in America, experts in folklore studies), one can see that in most cases fam trad witches have more in common with occulture at large than with folk magic. In any case, such witchcraft is more of a practice than a religion, and is aimed not at interacting with the gods but first and foremost at effectiveness (even though the dividing line is, as always, thin). In comparison to Wicca, fam trad also has more hard polytheists or witches who limit their worship to one or several deities.

The post-Soviet space inherited a mix of these two approaches in its borrowings from the English-speaking world, with certain differences. For example, the reception of Wicca in feminism is not nearly as strong here. The initial popularity of Wicca in the United States and Britain owed much to feminists and women's rights activists (for example, Starhawk). There, Wicca had covens that actively restricted male membership as well as groups who only worshipped the Goddess under her many guises. I know of no such groups in the post-Soviet space. The refined duotheism in which it does not matter what guise a deity takes (and all the Goddesses are one Goddess) has also not found much of a following. Local witches have a tendency toward hard polytheism, seeing the gods as manifestations of Deity on about the same level as human beings—that is, as independent entities. Most Russian and Ukrainian witches are neo-Pagan and follow a pantheon (from Greco-Roman to Slavic), but not nearly all Pagans are witches or sorcerers.

Observations in Occulture: Verbal Markers of Occult Discourses and What They Tell Us

In this part of the article, I will be implementing some of the methodology I proposed in the introduction by examining some of the verbal markers that give an occult practitioner away in casual conversation. Verbal markers are words or combinations of words whose use demonstrates a familiarity with a certain culture. They are equally important for work with both oral and print sources: their use in casual conversation shows that a person is either familiar with a particular set of print sources or, at the very least, has been heavily influenced by someone who is familiar with them; at the same time, the use of characteristic turns of speech in writing also gives away the influence of a particular subculture. Here I will note some of the most important verbal markers in recognizing a person or text as belonging to occulture and elucidate the meaning of these markers. I will also touch upon the particularities in working with these markers in occulture.

In the seminal work on Russian folk magic *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia*, William F. Ryan writes about the difficulty of distinguishing “folk” tradition from “learned” or “book” tradition (Ryan 2006: 216), and about how the famous lexicographer Vladimir Dal was accused of borrowing his folk charms from written sources rather than oral ones. This shows how difficult it is to track influences only through analyzing borrow-

ings; a modern researcher might very well meet with the same difficulties. Some researchers not familiar with both print and oral sources believe that post-Soviet occulture is comprised of multiple discourses that have not been significantly influenced either by each other or by folk practices, but I believe the situation to actually be completely reversed. Not only do folk magicians borrow from written sources, as we have seen with the term *envoltatsiia*, but, uniquely to the post-Soviet space, witches and sorcerers turn to actual folk practice very often, either by way of connecting to their roots in villages (it was only 30 years ago that having a plot of land often made a critical contribution to a family's food supply) or through actually reading anthropological material. The works of anthropologists serve as a sources of charms and formulae, sometimes used as found and sometimes serving as a base for further modification. Still, there are some verbal markers that can help us distinguish between those practitioners who have their roots in folk magic and those who are more immersed in Western esotericism. For example, in contemporary urban occulture in the post-Soviet space, most Christian elements are usually replaced with neo-Pagan elements, and elements seen as archaic are preserved as much as possible. A typical example, strikingly similar to explanations often given in fam trad witchcraft, is as follows:

When I was little, I often heard how my great-grandmother calmed down me and my brother when something hurt by calling about the wind or the moon, the Alatyr Stone and the Buyan Island. I now remember that these charms weren't Christian but rather Slavic, because she did not finish them with "Amen" but always with "Goy!" (Aelita 2013).

The marker here is the typically Christian charm structure combined with "Slavic" (whether real or invented) words. It shows the researcher that the charm user has left the traditional "folk Christian" context of magic, which is predominant in villages, and has become a part of contemporary urban occulture instead. There are "Christian witches" in cities, but they can largely be found in magical parlors, where magical services are provided for money and which do not cater to occulture but rather to people who are outside it. Their advertising is aimed at those familiar with magic in villages, and their choice of words reflects it.

Christian sorcerers seem to be strangely absent from urban post-Soviet occulture and the general magical discourse, even though most of the classic texts of ceremonial magic rely on the magician being

a Christian. The Christian sorcerer of the parlor is not interested in theology or dogma, but in folk Christianity. Such a parlor magician is usually skeptical toward non-Christian witches and sorcerers, as well as toward ceremonial magicians. To give an example, V. P. Khazan, a fairly typical and well-known Ukrainian parlor magician, is dismissive of ceremonial magic, referring to “the completely harmless *Practical Magic* by Papus or some other similar work, interesting to read but completely useless” (Khazan 2008: 8). His use of Papus as an example is especially interesting, first of all because it shows how topical 100-year-old magical theory is for post-Soviet occult discourse, and, second, because although Papus’s collection of folk recipes was published in Russian, it is completely ignored in Khazan’s practice. Khazan is thus familiar with occulture, yet he chooses consciously to distance himself from it.

When a scholar needs to distinguish between folk practice and practices associated with Western esotericism, he or she can also attempt to make a judgment based on how money is spoken of. In villages, magic is often bartered for. There is even a rampant belief that taking money for using God’s gift for someone is a direct way either to lose that gift or to bring about other problems (Volodina 2013). But in city witch culture the opposite belief prevails. There is a widespread opinion that someone who was not paid for their work will have difficulties “breaking off” the connection between themselves and the client, possibly resulting in what is usually called “taking the client’s problems onto themselves” (*zabirat’ problemy*) (Kucherenko 2010). “Taking on the client’s problems” is a common notion, prevalent in occulture from witchcraft to clairvoyants. Clairvoyant Stanislav Kucherenko in his FAQ gives a fairly common description of it:

There is a certain chance that someone doing a cleansing will “take on” some of the [client’s] problems. But this can happen only if the “cleanser” is feeling weak, not sure of himself, has “allowed” such thoughts to get inside him and has his own negative energy inside him (that is, has not been “cleansed” himself) (Kucherenko 2010).

Many practitioners repeat this common notion word-for-word, and add that not taking money is something that attracts negativity to themselves. Payment can be made through the traditional channel of barter, but money is usually seen as the simplest and most potent means to restore balance and to clear the practitioner of any

attachment he might harbor. To illustrate the point, consider a typical conversation about taking payment (I have attempted more or less to preserve the style in translation):

I'd also like to say that when a client pays they put their energy into the work, because money is energy, and if you don't put in energy you can't hope that a result will just come falling from the sky. There have also been cases when a person comes and asks for help, you don't take payment and then get sick, because you take the client's bad luck and illnesses on yourself by not taking money. And when someone asks you to do something that is very important for them but is skimping on you or says they'll pay later, then it's usually best not to work with them! Best to think twice before taking them on! First, it might take longer for the result to be reached, or the magician can take the client's karma off them and feel everything himself later. I had a ton of cases even when I did work before I was paid, especially when it concerned removing the evil eye or bad luck, and later you really feel sick, so it is better to take money because it is energy, it is what the client can use to pay you for your energy spent, otherwise it is unlikely something good'll come of it, you'll just take many things on yourself and then you have to cleanse yourself and get sick!" ("Uslovia i oplata" 2008).

Besides being a good demonstration of occulture's perception of money, this conversation displays two important verbal markers: "energy" and "karma." Both terms sound very commonplace to the English-speaking person—even someone not familiar with occulture can say they're not feeling full of energy today or that they've gotten some good karma by giving to charity—but in Russian both words are not used nearly as widely, and so their use can help a researcher identify potential occult influence. I must note, however, that these are still relatively weak markers, and should be considered as such only in conjunction with other characteristic words or sets of words. "Energy" can be both understood literally in occulture or used as an umbrella term to describe the particular set of feelings a practitioner may get from certain practices (tingling, a feeling of connection, or others, all well described in occult literature). In post-Soviet occulture, the notion of karma has gone far from its roots in India and mostly now means cause-and-effect extended to occult causes.

Practitioners from occulture can also be identified by their attitudes toward so-called "parlor magic," from the usual appellation "parlor of magical services." "Magical parlors" are not to be confused with the

“parlor magic” used in prestidigitation: in that context it means “magical tricks done for an audience of approximately fifty people, where the magician can be seen close up.” Opinions on magical parlors in occulture range from “real magic isn’t advertised, practitioners are known by word of mouth” to—although it may seem to contradict the urban occult attitude among professional practitioners laid out above—“You can’t take money for magic” (“Salony magii” 2010).⁶ Both opinions are common enough to mark someone as having participated in occulture, as even though many of the witch-and-practitioner group of occulture take clients and accept money for their services, there is a certain contempt among typical occult practitioners toward those who make a cottage industry out of it, taking as many clients as physically possible. It is widely believed that quality is impossible with such an approach, and the most famous witches and practitioners choose their clients as carefully as the clients choose them. The website of Yulianna Koldovko is a particularly interesting example, because she has published several typical examples of correspondence with clients that she has rejected. Notably, she self-identifies as a black magician and is quite willing to inflict the evil eye upon someone, but nonetheless says: “Please understand and remember: whatever monetary reimbursement you may offer me, I shall never go against the Principles of my work, the Ethical Principles of Black Magic.” These principles include not working with underage clients, not working with insane “in all senses of the word” clients, not working with pregnant women, with those who are skeptical or mistrustful, not working on a problem at the same time as another practitioner, not working on matters that would violate her personal ethics, and so on (Koldovko 2013).

Another good set of identifying markers concerns how the notion of “magic” interrelates with the notions of “work” and “craft.” As in English occulture, “work” (*rabota*) is practically a synonym for magical practice, and carries the same connotations of professionalism and practical results, as well as additional connotations, mostly involving the additional sets of skills a practitioner should know. This usage coincides both in folk tradition and Western esoteric traditions, and is thus rather reliable. There are also a number of other related idioms and words; for example, Daene Sidhe, probably currently the most famous Russian witch, coined the phrase “A witch can’t be all thumbs”

6. The following thread is a good summary of popular opinion about magical salons among people who are part of occulture but not professionals: [http://directmagic.ru/index.php?option=com_kunena&Itemid=0&func=view&catid=8&id=257].

(Shi, n. d.), meaning that there can be no real witch who does not know at least one other craft. Even though in practice this is mostly an ideal, something to aspire to, there is a rather deeply rooted feeling in the culture right now that witchcraft is first and foremost a *craft* (or the “Craft,” *Remeslo*), and a craftsperson must know and understand other crafts. A witch, sorcerer or magician cannot restrict themselves to mere knowledge—they need *to be able* (*moch’*), a verb that in Russian shares the same root with the word “might” (*mogushchestvo*). Crafts that have a certain romantic flair with an element of gender-specificity to them are especially popular: sewing, weaving, and cooking for women; smithing for men; art and creating amulets and magical jewelry for both sexes. In short, when a field researcher encounters the word “work” or “craft” used in a way that implies religion, it is very much a cause for asking additional questions related to magic.

Late twentieth-century magical practice was also heavily influenced by fantasy and science fiction, both in English-speaking occulture and in post-Soviet occulture. I go into more detail in my article “Using Literature to Study Concepts in Modern Magic” (Zorya 2009), and here I will limit myself to just a few examples of word usage explicitly borrowed from fiction. For example, after Sergei Lukyanenko’s *Night Watch* series came out, people who self-identified as “Light” and “Dark” Watchers were seen among the younger members of occulture, especially since Lukyanenko fed into the widespread conspiracy theory that “the Inquisition still exists and it is out to get all practitioners.”⁷ I have also seen the terms “Logrus” and “Pattern” from Roger Zelazny’s series *The Chronicles of Amber* used in magical practice; Andre Norton’s work and Robert Jordan’s “channeling” have also seen use. It can thus sometimes be beneficial in the field to be familiar with fantasy terms in order to see whether there is a reaction in occulture.

Next, I would like to turn to the verbal markers I believe to be the most telling; however, they also require the most explanation. They are related to the fact that many occult practitioners self-identify as *neliudi* (“inhumans” or “un-humans”). When someone calls him or herself a *neliud*, the field researcher in occulture can be all but absolutely certain that she has found a potentially valuable informant. Historically, *neliud*⁸ is a loaded term, applied to someone

7. This observation is based on personal conversations with practitioners in the period from about 2003 to 2008. After that time, Lukyanenko references seem to have disappeared; the Inquisition does still show up from time to time.

8. Ozhegov’s dictionary gives the following definition: “Bad, heartless people. Non-Christians.” It is no wonder that the relatively anti-Christian occulture took it up as a banner.

so evil she cannot be called human. In post-Soviet occulture, however, it almost always means *otherkin*—in short, people who believe themselves to be non-human entities trapped in human bodies, an extremely broad term (see for example Lupa 2007 for the most complete collection of field materials in print that I know of). While the term is broad, the circles associated with it are relatively narrow in the West, whereas identification as otherkin is very common in post-Soviet occulture. It will take further research to determine a precise date by which the term *neliud* came into regular use; however, at this point it is clear that by 2000 the term and its synonyms were very frequently used.

What is important here is that the practitioner who self-identifies as non-human rather believes himself to be an *entity*, separate and distinct from humanity and its defining characteristics, however he may perceive them. The concept of the entity (*sushchnost'*) is in itself multifaceted and would likely deserve separate treatment in the study of Russian occulture, as it has no direct analogy in English-speaking occulture. The English term “entity” usually refers strictly to incorporeal creatures, while *sushchnost'* concerns the inner core of every sentient (and in some cases non-sentient) being. Traditional Christian terms that mean a human being’s eternal, spiritual essence are largely not in use in a specialized post-Soviet magical context. They are replaced by terms coming from theosophy’s wide-ranging influence and, thus, from its system of “seven bodies” (the so-called etheric, astral, mental, and other bodies). Some of these bodies are seen as “the soul in a vulgar understanding” (the “mortal” subtle bodies), and some as the “spirit” (correspondingly, the “immortal” subtle bodies). Entity is, then, most often a synonym for “spirit,” an umbrella term for that eternal core concealed under the husk called “personality” (*lichnost'*).

To be clear: for post-Soviet occult practitioners humans are entities, too, but calling yourself an entity means you define yourself by the immortal part that will survive your death, not just by your mortal body and personality. There are many kinds of entities. Some are animals, some are characters from folklore and religion—angels, demons, fairies, and so on. When talking about a particular person or being, the cognate *sushchestvo* (“being”) is often used (as in: “Hi, being!”). Both *sushchestvo* and *sushchnost'* are abbreviated to *sushch*, which can sometimes be a bit confusing. Still, the use of *sushchestvo* is a very clear marker that the person before you likely has some connection to the occult subculture.

As noted briefly above, the term *neliud'* is not the only term associated with non-human entities. Another term, the “unhuman,” which has its origins in the context of Satanism, means that its carrier is consciously distancing themselves from humans in the worst sense of the word. The choice of ontology here is connected to ethics. Someone who calls themselves an *unhuman* says: “If *that's* a human, then I'm not one!” The fido.ru.unhuman polemics, preserved at Warrax's infamous website (the first large-scale Satanist website on the Russian internet), are likely the earliest example of related discussions that we will be able to identify. I will, however, quote another website here that features a typical conversation that uses “human” as an insult.

Pipa is too hUman to be UNhuman! This is easily proven by what she has been saying in this topic. First of all, all the positions that she is trying to defend about life and its value are completely human. Second, she's doing it in a totally human manner, that is, without trying to get at their essence but just defending her point of view; I notice she hasn't budged an inch after all the arguments given. Third, she interprets others' arguments liberally and “refutes” them in the same manner—see the simple example with the peacock tail. It is obvious that we're talking about humans and UNhumans, but when Pipa sees the word “peacock,” she says, with typically hUman consistency, “speaking of birds,” and gives a half-hour long lecture about the usefulness of tails in evolution (“Neliudi” 2003).

This conversation is typical. When *neliud* is used in an insulting manner (always outside of occulture), it usually means that the addressee is immoral. When *human* is used as an insult (always inside occulture, and also a very good verbal marker), however, it means that the addressee is foolish and self-absorbed, unable to think for herself.

The very concept of being inhuman, along with the concept of the witch, changed connotations completely in post-Soviet urban occulture relative to its origins in folk discourse. Whereas people in the villages see these notions as direly negative, occulture sees them as largely positive. Someone who is “inhuman” has an inherent connection with other worlds. The fact that this connection is “inborn” serves as a defense from the skepticism of colleagues within the occult, which is usually given much more weight than any outside skepticism. Examining the phenomenon of “unhumans” is necessary, as it is an obvious and important change in the way occultists see themselves. Instead of viewing themselves as the best of the best, as saviors or as “the most

advanced strain” of humanity, Russian-speaking occult practitioners largely perceive themselves as simply different. On a very basic level, this allows an occultist to declare different physical and psychological needs. On a level that is more complex it serves to further differentiate the occultists from the regular people, shifting social priorities and even marriage strategies.

There are several more specialized terms that are used to denote the type of “unhuman” one is dealing with; all of them pertain to occulture. Some of them are reminiscent of fantasy terms, and one must take care not to take role-players for occultists (though there is a degree of overlap in the two subcultures). Indeed, the most widespread “unhumans” are all sorts of elves, whether Celtic folklore’s Sidhe, Tolkien’s elves, or generic fantasy, but there are a great many other romantic creatures present, such as dragons, angels and demons. Other common creatures look like they hail from urban fantasy—“vampires” and “werewolves/foxes/cats” being rather commonplace as well. Some “unhumans” are so-called *uselentsi*, or combined personalities. The word itself seems to have come from a crossover between occulture and other youth subcultures. A person with a *vselenets* is someone who believes that his body hosts some sort of other entity, either supplementing or displacing the host entirely (in this latter case, informants usually say, “There used to be a human being in this body, but they are gone now”). This is usually treated by the non-practitioner as the *vselenets* having a mild case of multiple personality disorder; however, practitioners take pride in “not being crazy.” To reiterate: one does not necessarily have to be “unhuman” to practice magic; however, it is highly unlikely that someone who identifies himself as any kind of “unhuman” has never even dabbled. On the contrary, it is very likely that she has been involved in occulture at some point in her life.

Finally, a small but important group of markers examines personal mythologies that speak of prior lives in other worlds, of a different magic that does not work on Earth. There is an echo of Gnosticism in the concept of Earth as a “prison world” (*mir-tiurma*), a world created for exile. This view is not newly introduced to post-Soviet territory—on the contrary, we can find hints of it earlier, for example in the work of the influential Russian esotericist Evgenii Golovin (Nosachev 2012). However, to what extent this neo-Gnostic worldview is borrowed and to what extent it is indigenous remains yet to be determined. I am of the tentative opinion that the concept of Earth as a prison for many lifetimes is likely to have come to modern post-So-

viet territories through Scientology,⁹ but the power of the metaphor and its suitability for local social tensions after the fall of the USSR led to it being spread far outside of that context, and it is likely to have been reinvented more than once. It is interesting that this “Gnostic” concept exists side by side with an idea borrowed from the famous sci-fi writers, the Strugatsky brothers—the idea of the “homeostatic world,” which slowly turned into the abstract internet meme *dorogoe Mrzd* (short for “dorogoe Mirozdanie,” or “dear Wrld”). The “Wrld” is a friendly place, somewhat sentient, which takes care of its inhabitants’ needs carefully and non-intrusively. This is a softer, kinder, New Age variation on the idea of a responsive world. Whether the world is friendly or not can be used as a fairly reliable indicator of which part of occulture the respondent is likely to belong to. If the world, in general, is friendly in a particular group’s conception, they are likely to be mostly influenced by New Age or English-speaking witchcraft. If the world is seen as an enemy, they are most likely to belong to the most radical groups using ceremonial magic or to those for whom magic is connected first and foremost to their past lives.

Conclusion

Here I end my short survey of how the term “magic” and other related notions have been transformed in the post-Soviet space. I have not touched upon many other important topics, such as the relationship between “to know” and “to do” in folk magic and how it has been reinterpreted in city magic; the relationship between the paranormal and the occult; local magical orders and how they grow, die and transform practices; interpretations of the Tarot as a system of both divination and magic, and so on. But I hope that I was able to give an overview of most sources that modern post-Soviet occult discourse relies on, to showcase how Western occulture has brought significant changes to local occulture, and to explain the most common verbal markers of occult discourse. I also hope that I have been able to showcase some of the transformations of “magic” in the post-Soviet space: the

9. My preliminary investigation seems to trace the notion to the old Magic Tower forum group [<http://old.magictower.ru/>]⁹—one of the first magical forums on the Russian internet, and one read in the first decade of the twenty-first century by almost everyone who was looking for information on magic online. Many of its participants went on to write influential texts and to raise whole generations of students. One of them, Silica, had gone through Scientological courses and explicitly borrowed their methods for her own work, likely introducing ideas from Scientology to the rest of this influential group.

way it sees itself as both a craft that the magician can ply and an art, the way skill and personal power trump knowledge or a place in a hierarchy, and the notion that personal responsibility is above all. All of the aforementioned notions deserve further examination, for it is they that define magic in the post-Soviet space specifically, rather than the forms of rituals and the many and varied systems of correspondences.

To sum up my main points: first, there is no single universally definable concept of “magic” to speak of. “Magic” has different meanings depending on culture and is not connected to any one or two key concepts, but rather with a group of them (and not necessarily with all of them in a particular context), and therefore the first thing that a researcher beginning the study of a new context must do is to define what magic is and how it is situated in relation to other discourses. I contend that it is beneficial even for researchers who study magic in a wholly historical context to be aware of magic’s contemporary permutations as uncovered by anthropologists, since the insights they provide into the ways that philosophies of magic become actual magical practices and vice versa can be useful for a comparative analysis of related older sources.

Second, the most important primary sources for the researcher of contemporary magic are (in order of priority for study): 1) oral interviews with practitioners; b) print materials; c) online materials. However, the order of accessibility for these materials is, naturally, reversed. Internet archives are often the best “token of times passed” that we have: they are not to be overlooked but are an important source of material. While they do not tell us which practices are actually in current use—and this is why anyone attempting to work with them for the study of modern magic needs to spend time in the field proper—they are a priceless recording of attitudes and tendencies. Moreover, they are the most accessible source for occultists themselves, which means that they are often more influential than print materials, even though print materials provide essential historical context.

Third, in the post-Soviet space, city magic is slowly moving away from the archaic notion that knowledge equals power equals authority to the idea that power trumps knowledge and authority. The most important element is now “personal power,” a responsibility for one’s own circumstances (including the way the world itself works around the magician). Dry knowledge gives neither authority nor power; authority received as the result of initiation or acceptance into an occult group does not always manifest as direct power to influence the world; personal power, however, is seen as the most direct path to both knowledge and authority. It is possible to transfer pure power,

and with it both knowledge and authority. Thus we see how folk notions that are relatively archaic or originate in the Middle Ages are shifting into elements that have their origin in modernity. Older elements do not disappear altogether—they are still spread rather widely geographically; however, purely archaic elements and worldviews are far more rare in post-Soviet practice than formerly.

Fourth, many notions that were completely negative in folk magic have gained positive connotations in city magic. The terms *witch* and *inhuman* are neither insults nor causes for caution—instead, they are positive ways to identify oneself. Such concepts as “supernatural” or “extramundane” have been transformed into “otherworldly.” Our Earth is often seen as the part of a larger macrocosm, and one can be “at home” in the universe at large but “a stranger” on Earth.

Fifth, Russian-speaking occulture borrowed a great many notions and ways of thinking from Western occulture, but most of them have changed positions and occupy an entirely different place than they do in Western occulture. For example, Castaneda’s concept of *intent* in English-speaking occulture is familiar mostly to Castaneda’s own followers. But in Russian-speaking occulture you would be hard-pressed to find an occultist unfamiliar with it; it has become a far more general term. If Western occulture is now more focused on a variety of practices aimed at establishing magical authority, post-Soviet occulture, by contrast, searches for personal power.

Sixth, magical practice is not only material for literature and cinema, but also plunders them for practical ideas. Any concept developed in popular media that is cohesive and popular enough will be put into regular magical practice by some magician.

Seventh, city magic reflects upon scholarly discourse on itself and incorporates elements from scholarly research into practice. Folk magic does not usually have this reverse influence on such a large scale, although folk healers who use an ethnographer as an informant and/or read books on magic do exist. This influence is, in any case, limited, but is significant enough to be noticed by scholars.

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