

This observation is partly contradicted in Helena Goscilo's article "Complicity in the Illicit? Liube's Rock Band Bond with the Criminal *Zona*," which discusses the 1994 film *Zona Liube*, a would-be musical drama set in prison, with the songs of the band resonating with the emotions of the inmates. Actually, however, this essay, which associates the early success of *Liube* with the Zeitgeist of Russia's "lawless transition to an unannounced market economy" in the unruly 1990s (114), discusses the prison lore adopted by that band as a matter of a stylized image rather than a complex of signs. The fascination with criminality reflected by the band amounts to "Romancing the *Zone*" (113), partly akin, one may add, to the romanticization of criminal life in Russian literature of the 1930s, which Shalamov criticized in "On One Mistake of the Belle-Letters" (Об одной ошибке художественной литературы).

A recurrent motif of Inessa Medzhibovskaya's essay, "Punishment and the Human Condition," is reversals: observers or perpetrators of confinement eventually are, or imagine being, confined themselves. The article deals with a number of works that represent the human condition as a trap. From the springboard of the author's study of Stalin's derisive handwritten comments in a copy of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, through reflections on West European thought on the role of prison, the essay moves to the discussion of Tolstoy's critique of punishment as a social institution.

Andrei Rogatchevski's closing article "Non-Totalitarian Imprisonment" compares the prison narratives of writer-politicians Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare and Eduard Limonov, imprisoned, in England and Russia respectively, in 2001–2003. Based on Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation, it shows how the prison survival of both was "about engaging in intense self-actualization, despite the acute deficit of gratification of the lower-level needs" (169).

Rogatchevski accepts Maslow's privileging of analogies over differences (181). This preference intermittently transpires throughout the collection, which is part of the concerted scholarly effort to understand developments in post-Soviet Russia in terms of certain continuities with preceding socio-cultural phenomena. A side effect is a downplaying of a distinctive feature of *totalitarian* imprisonment—namely, that in addition to serving variously combined purposes of deterrence, retaliation, isolation, exploitation, or rehabilitation, it also facilitates extermination, at times a precariously inhibited yearning and at times a mandated goal.

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Russian Irrationalism from Pushkin to Brodsky: Seven Essays in Literature and Thought. By Olga Tabachnikova. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. xi, 270 pp. Notes. Index. \$107.99, hard bound.

Olga Tabachnikova's book examines a venerable myth (or cliché) exploited both by Russians and those outside of Russia: that Russia cannot be understood by the mind. This inscrutability in the guise of a positive designation, irrationalism, is the thread tying together the book's seven finely variegated essays, each attempting to discern the distinctively Russian aspect of the irrational. There is a tension between generalization and faithfulness to the particular throughout the book characteristic of the difficult task the book takes on: to give a rational account of what is by definition counter to reason, its Other. Before addressing this difficulty, I will describe briefly the structure of the book.

Tabachnikova offers an introduction that pins down in broad strokes what she means by irrationalism. She then proceeds to describe irrationalism in the Russian

context through studies of individual texts on an almost case-by-case basis. Chapter 1 deals with the possibility of an irrational language (and leaves out, curiously, the most daring Russian experiment in an irrational language, the remarkable *za-um* or “trans-sense” poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov). Chapter 2 studies the fraught tissue of misconceptions that inform the relation of Russia and the west, while chapter three gives an account of that staple of Russian defiance of the real, the practical and the logical: the dreamer. Chapter 4 presents an account of “Russian eros” in all its Platonic glory. Chapter 5, a mere seven pages, considers the difference between the man of nature and the man of culture. Chapter 6 addresses two apostate figures of resistance to irrationalism, Anton Chekhov and Joseph Brodsky. Chapter 7, the final chapter, takes on the difficult issue of Russian laughter, so often dominated by divergent clichés, that of “laughter through tears” and the carnivalesque laughter celebrated by Mikhail Bakhtin.

This overly schematic summary only hints at the richness of examples discussed in the book. While examples abound, there is a nagging tension between the chapters and the governing conceptual structure of the book. If Tabachnikova labors to provide a guiding definition of the irrational, she tends nonetheless to proliferate and thus attenuate the force of this guiding definition within the different discussions that make up the book. This may be unavoidable since the irrational is by its very nature recalcitrant to definition, a problem the book tackles but perhaps not aggressively or incisively enough. It seems to me that the irrational is not as general a notion as Tabachikova suggests. Rather, it is rooted in a specific foundational historical encounter between the west and Russia. What Tabachnikova refers to as irrationalism might be aptly referred to as the resistance of a colonized mind to the norms imposed by a colonizing power, in this instance, a remarkable one for having been imposed from within and not by external military intervention. Moreover, the central vexing problem of the colonized—how to resist the norms of the colonizing power without reaffirming them in order to articulate that resistance—receives scant attention in the lively analyses contained in the book. One senses a deeper avoidance at work here expressed best by Jacques Derrida’s famous critique of Michel Foucault’s account of madness as the “other” to reason.

According to Derrida, any account of madness worthy of the name must transform its quarry merely in order to give an account of it. But articulate madness is not madness. And one may say the same of irrationalism, for an irrationalism that may articulate itself effectively via definition cannot be anything other than a creature of reason no matter how it tries to disguise itself as being of the opposing party. Viewed in this light, the abundant accounts of the irrational in Russian culture begin to appear more precisely as examples of resistance to a power that prevails come what may. Indeed, they resemble, to take one crucial example, the desperate resistance of the underground man that illustrates more profoundly to what extent the underground man succumbs to what he resists in resisting it. The narrative of the underground man is a devastating account of the impossibility of his brand of resistance coupled with adamant refusal to admit that impossibility. One might say the same of Russian attempts to create national myths of resistance to the west via inscrutability, claims that proliferate as a result of their continued failure to achieve the freedom or originality they promise.

As Samuel Beckett says: “Fail again, fail better.” Tabachnikov’s book is an admirable account of the terrible paradoxes of the colonized mind—in this sense the book makes a contribution by raising important questions.

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