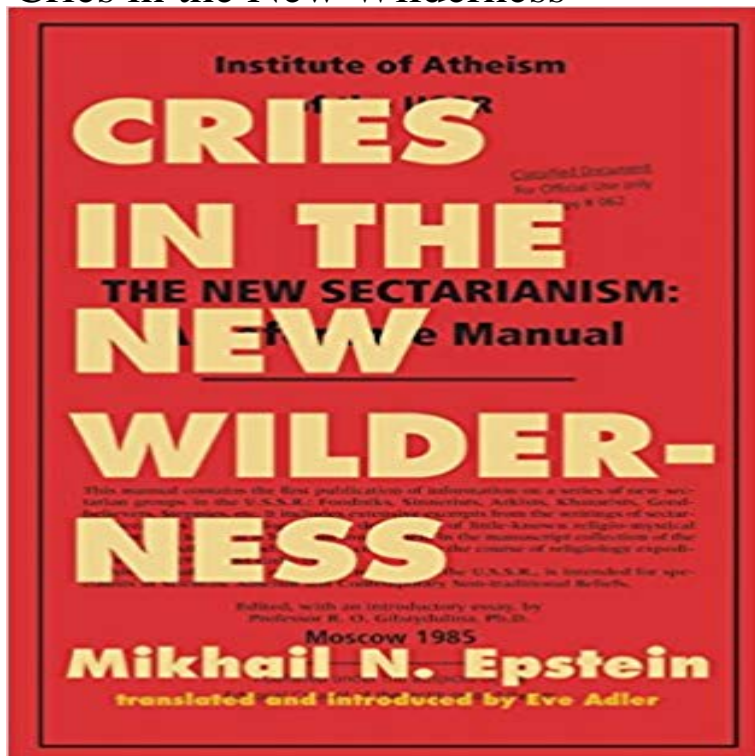


Cries in the New Wilderness



Cries in the New Wilderness presents a completely new view of the spiritual life of Russian society. The book is full of tragicomic tension and brings to mind the multivoiced novels of Dostoevsky. Ilya Kabakov. Inside the disintegrating Soviet Union, a professor compiles *The New Sectarianism*, a classified manual of manifestos, articles, and sermons by members of banned religious sects from the mystical Thingwrights and the absurdist Folls to the messianic Khazarists and the doomsday Steppies. *Cries in the New Wilderness* is filled with the voices of these groups. As a counterpoint to this medley of comic, grotesque, poetic, banal, poignant, and harrowing voices is the voice of the commentator, Professor Gibaydulina, who struggles to maintain the objectivity of her scientific atheism in the face of an amazing variety of religious experiences. Epstein's depiction of the inner drama of Gibaydulina's response to the crumbling of the Soviet Union and her quest for a new, creative atheism adds a tragic note to his polyphonic work. Mikhail Epstein's *Cries in the New Wilderness* is a work of extraordinary artistic and philosophical imagination, begun in Moscow in the mid-1980s and now available for the first time in English translation in an expanded version. Drawing on his own participation in Moscow's intellectual associations and in expeditions to study popular religious beliefs in southern Russia and Ukraine, Epstein recreates the spiritual experience of a whole Russian generation. His is not a documentary book, however, but a comedy of ideas, in which he constructs from the voices he hears in the culture around him the religious and philosophical worldviews of Foodniks and Domesticans, Arkists and Bloodbrothers, Atheans and Good-believers, Steppies and Pushkinians. An award-winning essayist and critic, Mikhail Epstein has been compared to Jorge Luis Borges for his

literary inventiveness and to Walter Benjamin for his acute observation of cultural phenomena. Transcending genres and disciplines, *Cries in the New Wilderness* is a brilliantly original work, a virtual document that illuminates the spiritual condition of the Soviet Union as it reveals unsuspected affinities between Russian and American culture. In the mirror of Soviet society, we recognize our own enthusiasm for alternative spiritual experiences, our worship of technology, our doomsday cults. We may also recognize that we ourselves are participants in many of the sects Mikhail Epstein describes, sects that seem at first fantastic and outlandish, but prove to be the religious basis of our own lives. The prolific, inexhaustibly inventive Mikhail Epstein has produced a novel almost *Cries in the New Wilderness* is fiction, but (according to Epstein's own philosophy of possibilism) not untrue: it has merely realized some of the vital potentials of post-atheistic Russian culture, where people thirst for a faith that can sacralize everyday practices while at the same time endorse a transcendent Whole. Whether you do Russia for a living or simply love the spectacle of dullness broken up into a thousand crazy glittering points of light, you will recognize, in reading it, a passion of your own. Caryl Emerson, Princeton University Mikhail Epstein is probably the most important figure in Russian literary theory in the post-Bakhtin, post-Lotman era. What he has to say is of great interest to everyone interested in cultural studies. Walter Laqueur, Chairman, Center for Strategic and International Studies *Borgesiana* in its design, *Cries in the New Wilderness* is the best example of that rare genre of theological fantasy that strikes a precise equilibrium between search for God and struggle against God. Alexander Genis, author of *Red Bread*

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