

## Review

**Thorsten Botz-Bornstein. Vasily Sesemann. Experience, Formalism, and the Question of Being.** Preface by Eero Tarasti. (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), xiii + 134 pp. Illustrated. \$30.00/€42.00 paper.'

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As Vol. 7 in the series "On the Boundary of Two Worlds: Identity, Freedom, and Moral Imagination in the Baltics," this welcome monograph connects the dots between the scattered manifestations of an intriguing figure who pops up in several of the worlds his life and thought straddled, though he had remained elusive for Western readers until now, because his writings in three languages did not appear in book-form before being collected in independent Lithuania. Vasily Sesemann (1884-1963) is considered that country's greatest philosopher, even though he only learned the language upon accepting a position there at the suggestion of his old friend Nicolai Hartmann. These two Baltic Germans followed parallel paths in St. Petersburg and Marburg, although Sesemann came from a Finland-Swedish milieu in Carelia and introduced semiotics to Finnish thought, through his critique of Formalism. For he also remained much closer to Russian intellectual life, be it Soviet or émigré, even providing philosophical grounding for the Eurasian movement in its review, with an abiding interest in Orthodox-inspired thought, which cost him years in the gulag after the war. The author of the first Russian review of *Sein und Zeit*, Sesemann was part of the return to Being as a valid question for philosophy that Heidegger's early work epitomized, along with Hartmann's. Both Balts were indebted to the Russian twist of Neo-Kantianism : a gnoseological idealism illustrated by Symeon Frank and especially Sesemann's teacher Nikolai Lossky. Having written a thesis on the philosophy of gymnastics (as a life-long practitioner) and focussed on the issue of rhythm in many aesthetic writings, Sesemann was however not one to give in to an intuitionism that merely shifted from the outside to the inside the scientific identification of objects of knowledge with mental representations. Knowledge entails empathy with another that remains such : a concrete thing, not a rationally assimilable object, especially in self-knowledge, so that neither science nor art can deal only with pure structures to the exclusion of particular contents. Arising from the attempt to know Being —and not inherent in it, "logic itself depends here to a very large extent on contingency," and thus on possibility, evident in Being's temporality and in human activity as the "interplay of psychic and real life"(75). Thus, "Sesemann's work culminates in a new logic of dream," critical of "undue objectivization of the subjective"(77-78) even in Freud, yet anticipating Lacan while presenting parallels with Bergson. Fine points like the latter's Russian reception and Russian networks in German academia may help intellectual historians fill many gaps in tracing cultural transfers, and a host of judicious comparisons are made with later developments in various fields. Yet one misses the discussion of Gadamer that seems begged for by both the Marburg connection and the hermeneutic thread Sesemann ties between Russian and German thought —of which Botz-

Bornstein displays equal command, providing many bilingual citations, while unfortunately unable to exploit the important Lithuanian sources. His precious study of this overlooked philosopher includes useful bibliographies, with revealing, hard-to-find Eurasian texts in appendix.

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