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Introduction

Victor Pelevin: Life, Works, Critical Debates

SOFYA KHAGI,
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

The first publication by Victor Pelevin, the tiny story “**Sorcerer Ignat and People**” (“Koldun Ignat i liudi”), appeared in the December 1989 issue of a pop-scientific journal *Science and Religion* (*Nauka i religiia*). At that time, the future preeminent post-Soviet writer worked for the journal, editing translations of esoteric miscellanea by the likes of Carlos Castaneda. As Pelevin’s fairy-tale was published, the Soviet people were preparing for the winter’s celebrations, stocking up on “golden rain” (for New Year trees), tangerines, and peas (for *oliv’e*, holiday potato salad). When not hunting for cans of peas, employees of the numerous NIIs (Scientific Research Institutes) smoked cigarettes and debated recent political developments. Schoolgirls sported gaudy plastic clip-on earrings and equally tasteless lurex sweaters; boys cut their hair punk-style and whirled their lanky legs in break dance moves. The Eastern Bloc, meanwhile, was enthusiastically self-destructing. The Berlin Wall had just fallen, the Velvet Revolution was taking place in Czechoslovakia while a not-so-velvet one roiled Romania. At the Malta Summit the fashionably bespectacled, Southern-accented last Soviet general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev went out of his way to impress a quietly observant American president, George H. W.

Bush. There was a heady, glittery, festive feeling everywhere—as when New Year’s Eve approaches or history is poised to enter a nosedive.¹



А вот высказывания Демирчоглыан о трансураниевых элементах:

«Автор во теоретическом давлении категорически» утверждает, что если даже и возможно открытие новых элементов из числа средних земель, то этого нельзя ожидать из состава 4-го шила, а скорее всего из состава еще вовсе неизвестного 6-го ядра, существование которого предсказывает теория автора... Можно ожидать открытие

Виктор ПЕЛЕВИН
КОЛДУН ИГНАТ
И ЛЮДИ
Сказочка

4 мая 1912 года к молодому Игнату пришел в гости протестант Арсений. Пока Игнат лежал в постели с кашлем, доставлял правник, то есть свирель из металла, долго свистал казном, арестовал и вилкала. Потом она из арестованных табуристов, достав из-под ресы пелену красного кафтана, достала и разложила сказку Игнату:

— Говня-а, чего и похвастал?

— Интересно... сказала Игнат, беру тертый лук... волюх мятель?

— Что вы! — испуганно задала вопрос мед. — Поа тебе!

— «Людe! — сказал св. Феохист, возгласив убогимъ голосомъ. — Христосъ явился мнѣ, вѣстною такъ. Онъ велѣлъ пойти къ вамъ и извѣстять-
ся. Которому изъ васъ?»

— Ха-ха-ха! — засмеялся Ильяш, а сам подумал: «Поспелости этого». Но воду не пил.

— А есть еще? — спросил он вместо этого.

— Ага! — противней дал Ильяшу отведать жидок и тут прочел:

Cover,
Nauka i religia
12 (1989).

целой серии (не менее 14) элементов ковра средних земель, про которые заранее можно сказать, что они будут радиоактивными.

Номера элементов, представленные Демисисликом в 1950—1951 годах: с 93 по 100, 104, 108—123, 125—129, 132.

Что ж, картина жизни армянского ученого, хотя и далекая от полноты, все же дает некоторое представление о его трудах и делах. Возможно, его фигура покажется любознательной историкам науки. Немалые сенсачкам позелоз так, как, скажем, Эдисону или Цикловскому. Но дело не в этом.

У авторов возникли три сомнения. События первой. Было сильное искушение сделать акцент на отречении Деминг-ролла от сана священника: здесь открывается простор для болтовни с добрыми атеистическими уклонами. Но что, для нас вразумительнее, для нас, в первую очередь, вразумительнее, в раздумьи было или естественнее. И отречение от сана в те годы — явление, немыслимое, не очень оправданное, но и не соображаемое. Всю жизнь бы Д. И. Межеловский. Наверное, не стоит лишить его права высказываться, не лишить ли свободы, не лишить ли возможности высказываться на разном уровне о свободе совести в те годы.

Соблазн второй. Очень хотелось сделать упор на приоритетную сторону дела. Не так уж и давно мы искали «своих» во всем, лишь бы утратить нос Запада. Можно было роскошно пофантазировать на тему, что было бы, если бы в свое время Демитрию дали институт, средства, оборудование... Но и варианты на тему «если бы» мы отвергли в самом начале.

Соблазн третий. И самый главный. Неисчерпаемая тема — наука и нравственность, ответственность ученого за плоды своего знания. Сколько от этого гворилось и сколько еще будет сказано! Но в спорных мы не пришли к единому мнению. Кто-то из нас отвечает за свое открытие, — утверждает один из нас, — все, что он может — это мыслить, творить, и если он zároveň будет ставить себе запреты, преграды, ограничения, то он не творит. Истинное творчество невозможно тогда, когда ты полон свободы ума. «Ничего плохого» — возражал другой, — полная свобода — это физика, сплошные расхождения, произвольные результаты, а не творчество. Творчество, тем более культура мысли, — это дисциплина.

А смертоносное неограниченное любопытство — это извращение ума. Каким энергией тыант в атом, — доказывали давки, но никто не хотел слушать, пока не вступил последний гость.

Но на чем сошлись авторы, так это на том, что поступательное движение мысли, разума, познания непрерывно. Границы познания устанавливаются человеком и человеком же преодолеваются, пусть мучительно трудно, иногда со смертельными риском. Но от поколения к поколению идет эстафета познания мира, и так уж устроены люди, что искры неутолимого любопытства могут вспыхнуть в любой благоприятный момент в любом месте.

Может, это трагедия, а может, и счастье, но так уж устроен человек: ему непременно надо допытаться, что там, внутри. Этого соблазна ему иногда не преодолеть.

«КАК МРХАНУ ИВАНУ С УМА СОШЕЛ
И УМЕР»
«Куда бы я ни пошел, — говорил Максим»

Итак, с увеличением срока вы держите, — когда обязательно оказывается ночь один с наследницей. Но вот, наконец, в одиночестве...

«Да и потом,— предостерегал Михаил Иванович с удивленным повизгиванием в скуле,— где бы ты ни оказался, везде обязательно присутствовать. И ты будешь жертвой. Не вот и еда, (слова бегу...)»
«Настало время,— сказал себе Михаил Иванович, с удивлением открывая стазань,— тогда надо о главном...»

«Нет, точно, верность кто, — решил Иван
на ночь опять не спать и вместо этого сказать
— Интересно. Только не спать пенителю глав
ней мысль.

«Нет, — подумал Илья, — что-то бы сейчас было кусты».

«РАССКАЗ О ТАРАХАНЕ ЖУ»

Терзания. Жу неостановимо дамається напівстрі-
чу смерті. Вост ланку ид. Нунио остиндаваться
и повернуть в сторону.

«Устал. Смерть впереди», — отвечает товарищ Жу.

«Успех. Смерть впереди», — отскакивает таран Жу.

Вот в себе шевелится клубок и, вырастая,
иснется в земле. Углубиться уже нельзя
«Смерть», — отвечает таракан Жу.
Никто не знает судьбу. Велела кино-то мучить

— Дверь отпер... Пошел. То-то я думаю —

— Чего вам надо, а? — строго спросил.

— Вот,— сплывшись и перебиваясь с ногой в ногу, ссорачала мушкетер,— убить тебя должен. Всем миром решила. Мир навсегда забуду, убивая.

— Тыфу ты,— слышул протаварей в вер-
ху.

— Так-то разве убивать, — сказал кто-то и
пужался, спрыгнул в ручей. — Никому виден

Viktor Pelevin,
"Koldun Ignat i liudi,"
Nauka i religiia
12 (1989).

The December 1989 issue of *Science and Religion* circulated in 530,000 copies—unremarkable by Soviet standards—cost forty kopecks, and, along

1 This period known as Perestroika was the policy or practice of reforming the economic and political system promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev. Perestroika originally referred to increased automation and labor efficiency but came to entail greater awareness of economic markets and the ending of central planning.

with “Sorcerer Ignat and People,” featured pop-scientific articles and a horoscope for 1990.² The latter is noteworthy. To be sure, neither Gorbachev nor Pelevin suspected at the time that they would end up the last Soviet general secretary or the number one post-Soviet writer. Their compatriots had no idea they would soon be leaving the cozy smoke-filled lounges of the NIIs, their bellies full of dissident fervor, to line up in the marketplace wearing respectable muskrat hats and selling all kinds of garbage. The attempted coup against Gorbachev, the shelling of the Parliament, the Dubrovka and Beslan massacres, the two Chechen wars, the two heavily inebriated terms of the Yeltsin presidency, the sober Putin presidencies (four and counting)—all of these were matters of the future.³ As the Strugatsky brothers have observed, the future “is never good or bad. It is never what we expect.”⁴ But Pelevin himself would point out that the degree of misunderstanding—the non-critical thinking or rather not thinking at all—was much higher than average as the Soviet Union careened its way to disaster.

Companion to Victor Pelevin spotlights one of the most important, original, and thoughtful contemporary writers. Over the three decades since the appearance of his first story, Pelevin has accomplished much: he has chronicled the post-Soviet condition with photographic precision, anatomized global postmodernity, techno-consumerism, and media mirages, laughed his fill and pleaded for seriousness, over-produced books and puns, and along the way delighted and infuriated critics. Perhaps above all, he has continuously encouraged

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- 2 Sergei Polotovskii and Roman Kozak, *Pelevin i pokolenie pustoty* (Moscow: Mann, Ivanov, and Farber, 2012), 48. As of the present, this book is the only extant biography of Pelevin. The only extant Russian-language monograph, Ol'ga Bogdanova, Sergei Kibal'nik, and Liudmila Safronova, *Literaturnye strategii Viktora Pelevina* (St. Petersburg: Petropolis, 2008), examines the Peleviniana of the early to mid-1990s.
 - 3 This is also known as the GKChP, or The State Committee on the State of Emergency, when a group of high-level Soviet officials and the KGB attempted a coup d'état against Gorbachev on August 19, 1991. The constitutional crisis of 1993 was a political standoff between Yeltsin and the Russian parliament that was resolved by military force. The seizure of Dubrovka Theatre by armed Chechens on October 23, 2002 ended with the deaths of at least 170 people. The Beslan massacre by Islamic militants started on September 1, 2004, lasted three days, involved the imprisonment of over 1,100 people as hostages (including 777 children), and ended with the deaths of at least 334 people. The First Chechen War was fought from December 1994 to August 1996, the Second Chechen War from August 1999 to April 2009. The two terms of Yeltsin's presidency ran 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 1999. The terms of Putin's presidencies (so far) have been 2000 to 2004, 2004 to 2008, 2012 to 2018, and 2018 to 2024.
 - 4 Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v odinnadtsati tomakh* (Donetsk: Stalker, 2000–2003), 12:161.

his readers to think—not so they “understand more than anyone else” like Tatarsky, the hapless protagonist of *Generation ‘IT’* (1999), who puts what little he does understand to ill use—but so they try to figure out things about the world they live in and themselves.⁵ If the exercise of reason as such is a virtue—as some people still believe according to the old-fashioned Enlightenment mode—then Pelevin is a virtuous writer par excellence. If “thought work” is a crime under totalitarian regimes (*à la* Orwell), then he is all the more essential. And, besides, it is great fun giving your brain cells a work out along with him.

Beginnings

Pelevin is notoriously averse to media and social appearances. A remark on the 2004 novel, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (*Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia*), is characteristic: “All I wanted to say to journalists I said in this book.”⁶ His interviews, infrequent in the 1990s and the 2000s, have evaporated in the last decade.⁷ As a result, we have little beyond the basic biographical facts and scant direct commentary from the author about his life and work.

Victor Olegovich Pelevin was born on November 22, 1962 into the well positioned Moscow family of Zinaida Efremova, director of a grocery store, and Oleg Pelevin, faculty member in the Military Department of Bauman State Technical University.⁸ He studied in the elite School Number 31 in downtown Moscow, which offered enhanced English-language training. Pelevin attended classes alongside children from the political and cultural elite. After graduating

5 Viktor Pelevin, *Generation ‘IT’* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), 101.

6 Pelevin, “Neskol’ko raz mne mereshchilos’, budto ia stuchu po klavisham lis’imi lapami,” interview by Natal’ia Kochetkova, *Izvestiia*, November 16, 2004, <https://iz.ru/news/296562>, accessed March 10, 2020.

7 For Pelevin’s select interviews, see “Mirom pravit iavnaia lazha,” interview by Anna Narinskaia, *Ekspert* 11, March 22, 1999, <http://pelevin.nov.ru/interview/o-exprt/1.html>, accessed April 6, 2020; “Victor Pelevin by Leo Kropywiansky,” *Bomb Magazine*, April 2002, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/victor-pelevin/>, accessed April 6, 2020; “Otveti: Viktor Pelevin, pisatel,” interview by Lev Danilkin, *Afisha*, September 2, 2003, http://www.afisha.ru/article/viktor_pelevin, accessed March 30, 2020; “Viktor Pelevin: Istoriia Rossii—eto prosto istoriia mody,” *Gazeta.ru*, February 9, 2003, <https://www.gazeta.ru/2003/09/02/viktorpelevi.shtml>, accessed March 1, 2020; “Neskol’ko raz mne mereshchilos’, budto ia stuchu po klavisham lis’imi lapami”; “Vampir v Rossii bol’she chem vampir,” interview by Natal’ia Kochetkova, *Izvestiia*, November 3, 2006, <https://pelevinlive.ru/>, accessed April 1, 2020; “Oligarkhi rabotaiut geroiami moikh knig,” interview by Natal’ia Kochetkova, *Izvestiia*, September 7, 2009, <http://www.izvestia.ru/news/341912>, accessed March 3, 2020.

8 Much of the account here relies on Polotovskii and Kozak.

from school in 1979, Pelevin entered the Moscow Power Engineering Institute (MEI), a first-rate institution specializing in engineering and electronics. He graduated from its Department of Electric Equipment and Automatics with honors in 1985. Two years later he passed exams for postgraduate studies and entered a PhD program at MEI. He did not defend his doctoral thesis and decided to change his career, having developed an interest in writing.

In 1988 Pelevin enrolled in the Moscow Gorky Literary Institute. He combined his studies as a part-time student with work as a journalist, editor, publisher, and staff correspondent in periodicals such as *Science and Religion* and *Face-to-Face* (*Litsom k litsu*) as well as the small publishing house *Day* (*Den'*). There Pelevin edited and translated works on Oriental mysticism. He flunked out of the Literary Institute in 1991. That same year he was appointed head of the sci-fi department in the prestigious "thick journal" (*tolsty zhurnal*) *Banner* (*Znamia*).⁹ As a young man Pelevin came under the influence of bohemian groups interested in esoteric texts, Eastern and Western philosophies, New Age ideas, and altered states of consciousness.¹⁰ His first short stories came out in the late 1980s in the pop-scientific periodicals *Science and Religion* and *Chemistry and Life* (*Nauka i zhizn'*).¹¹

Pelevin's 1990 short story "**Hermit and Six Toes**" ("Zatvornik i shestipalyi") captures in a microcosm much of his cosmology and narrative technique. A story about broiler chickens raised at a chicken farm, it begins with a meeting between two outcasts, the enlightened Hermit and the deformed Six Toes. According to Six Toes, the world in which they live is enclosed within "the Wall of the World," governed by "Twenty Closest," and has at its apex the feeding-trough and the drinking-trough. The Hermit explains to his disciple that, in reality, their world is but one of seventy worlds traveling through space on a black belt within the universe called "Lunacharsky Chicken Factory." The

9 "Thick journal" is a type of literary periodical originating in imperial Russia and continuing in the Soviet Union and modern Russia. It typically runs several hundred pages, appears several times a year, and is a major vehicle of the propagation of culture.

10 "One gathering that influenced the young author was a salon in Yuzhinsky Pereulok (now Bol'shoi Palashevsky). House Number 29 was the gathering place of late Soviet thinkers who blended diverse philosophical movements with everyday life that was very distant from *byt* under socialism." In St. Petersburg Pelevin "got acquainted with Castaneda's translator, a yogi and Zen Buddhist Vasily Maximov. . . . Maximov, the prototype for the guru Chapaev, is featured in many anecdotes." Polotovskii and Kozak, *Pelevin i pokolenie pustoty*, 36.

11 Along with the publication of "Sorcerer Ignat and People," 1989 saw his translation of *The Book of Runes: A Handbook for the Use of an Ancient Oracle*, which appeared in *Science and Religion*.

end of the world is approaching fast since the chickens are to be slaughtered in less than twenty-four hours. In the story's finale, the two protagonists manage to beat the laws of their prison and fly away into freedom.

The Blue Lantern (*Sinii fonar'*, 1991), Pelevin's first short story collection, offers vignettes of life under perestroika that are simultaneously photographically vivid and absurdist.¹² This work raised Pelevin to a new level in his literary career, from fiction section in pop-scientific journals to publishing in literary journals and with major presses. *The Blue Lantern* drew attention with its idiosyncratic combinations of Western and Eastern philosophizing, references to Zen Buddhism, altered states of consciousness, computer worlds, and surreal satires of late Soviet and post-Soviet realities. It introduced Pelevin's favorite motifs such as solipsism, the illusory nature of material reality, the indeterminacy of human consciousness and its relationship to the external world, the blurring of the boundaries between waking life, dreams, and death, and alternative histories and selves.

Among the collection's stories, "**The Prince of Gosplan**" ("Prints gosplana") depicts one workday in the life of Sasha, a minor employee at the late Soviet governmental agency Gossnab. We meet him at his computer console, immersed in his favorite game *The Prince of Persia*. In virtual reality Sasha assumes the role of a valiant prince who must overcome obstacles to progress from level one to level twelve, where he can reach the princess. In "**Vera Pavlovna's Ninth Dream**" ("Deviatyi son Very Pavlovny"), the eponymous character is the cause of changes affecting her country under perestroika: she works in a public toilet and inundates Russia with feces. "**Mid-Game**" ("Mittel'shpil") narrates the adventures of two prostitutes who turn out to be transsexuals and former party functionaries. "**The Crystal World**" ("Khrustal'nyi mir") takes place on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution. A pair of cadets are guarding the Smolnyi Institute, the soon-to-be headquarters of the revolution, as a disguised Lenin is heading there. The cadets fail to recognize the Bolshevik leader, and history unfolds as we know it. "**The Blue Lantern**" ("Sinii fonar'") is about a group of boys who frighten each other with nighttime stories about corpses

12 It won the Little Booker Prize the following year. *The Blue Lantern* also won the Interpresskon Gold Snail Award, established under Boris Strugatsky's patronage. The collection includes "Hermit and Six Toes," "The Prince of Gosplan," "The Crystal World," "The Life and Adventures of Shed Number XII" ("Zhizn' i priklucheniia saraia nomer XII"), "Vera Pavlovna's Ninth Dream," "A Werewolf's Problem in Central Russia" ("Problema vervolka v srednei polose"), "Mid-Game," "Sleep" ("Spi"), and the title story "The Blue Lantern."

that do not realize they are dead. The implication is that the story's characters may be dead themselves.

Pelevin's first longer work, the novella *Omon Ra*, came out in 1992 in *Banner* and in book form from the Moscow publishing house *Text (Tekst)*.¹³ This is the story of a young boy, named by his father after the OMON (a special division of the Soviet police), who renames himself Ra after the Egyptian god of the sun. Omon dreams of space as something that provides the means to escape his life's sordid realities. He is accepted to flight school and the Soviet space program, and learns that the supposedly automated Soviet moon exploration robots have young men hidden in them. There is no way for them to return to earth. The story's finale reveals another layer of deception: Omon never left Earth, and the whole space program is a fake on the part of Soviet authorities doing their best to compete with the US. *Omon Ra* is clearly a spoof on space travel, a staple of Soviet utopianism. However, as early as this novella, the parody of Soviet ideology is intertwined with a more wistful outlook toward the "heroes of the Soviet cosmos" (the novella's epigraph).

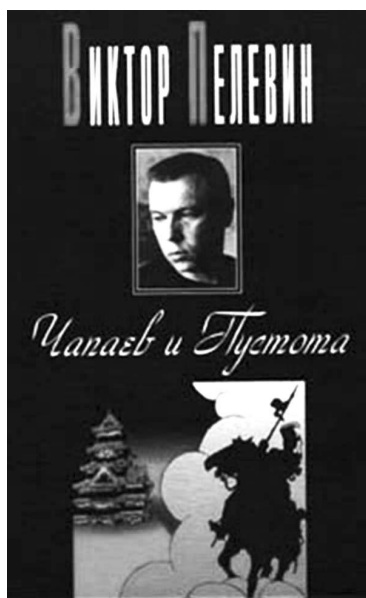
Omon Ra was followed by the novella *The Life of Insects* (*Zhizn' nasekomykh*, 1993), published in *Banner* and by the publishing house *Vagrius*. It is set at a post-perestroika Crimean resort and structured as a collection of interconnected episodes, each focused on the life of an anthropomorphized insect or a group of insects. Several species are depicted—mosquitoes, dung beetles, ants, moths, flies, cicadas—all of them struggling to survive and succeed, searching for the meaning of life, consuming others and being consumed themselves. Except for the story about the moth Mitya who attains literal and figurative enlightenment, rising above the chain of consumption and turning into a glow-worm at the book's finale, the lives of the insects in the novella illustrate the same relentless ethos.

One more novella, *The Yellow Arrow* (*Zheltaia strela*), published in the journal *New World (Novyi mir)* in 1993, uses the trope of a train to comment on late Soviet and early post-Soviet history. The train is moving toward a ruined bridge, and the people inside do not realize they are in fact its passengers and have no idea where they are going. The land outside the train for them is the realm of the dead. The protagonist Andrei comes to see the train for what it is, and when it stops unexpectedly, he disembarks and departs into nature.

13 It received two awards from Interpresskon.

The Classics

Pelevin's most famous and arguably best novel to date is *Chapaev and the Void* (*Chapaev i pustota*, translated into English as *Buddha's Little Finger* and *The Clay Machine Gun*). It first came out in *Banner* (April and May 1996 issues) and was published in book form by *Vagrius* that same year.¹⁴ Two temporal-spatial planes coexist in the novel—the Russian Civil War and the post-Soviet 1990s. The narrative homes in on two critical points of modern Russian history, positioned symmetrically at the turn and close of the twentieth century, and draws analogies between the breakdown of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. In the “common-sense” reading, the novel's action occurs on the outskirts of post-Soviet Moscow where the protagonist Pyotr Pustota is being treated for schizophrenia in a psychiatric hospital while imagining himself to be fighting alongside legendary war hero Vasily Chapaev circa 1919. In a more solipsistic interpretation, Pustota makes the Civil War temporal layer his reality (as real as anything can get—his psychic space) before rejecting both timelines in favor of an even greater freedom—the Buddhist-like emptiness of Inner Mongolia.



Viktor Pelevin, *Chapaev i pustota* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996).

Public domain.

14 The Vagrius edition appeared in bookstores on January 1, 1996, and when thirty thousand copies quickly sold out, twenty thousand more were quickly produced.

Generation 'П' (1999), translated into English as *Homo Zapiens* and *Babylon*, came out on the eve of the twenty-first century, became an instant bestseller, and remains one of the most emblematic texts about the 1990s.¹⁵ Vavilen Tatarsky, the hero of the novel, comes of age as the Soviet Union disintegrates. As a youngster, he was an aspiring poet and a student at the Moscow Literary Institute. With the collapse of the country, he becomes, first, a lowly shop assistant, and later an advertising copywriter, whose job is to produce Russian ads patterned on the latest American advertising techniques. By the novel's end, he presides over Russian advertising as a kind of media divinity. As Tatarsky prospers in the advertising business, there unfolds a savage Pelevinian spoof of Russia's transformation into a techno-consumer society.



Viktor Pelevin, *Generation "П"* (Moscow: Vagrus, 1991). Public domain.

The publication of *Generation 'П'* was followed by a four-year hiatus, during which no new book was published; Pelevin spent part of the time on a writing fellowship in Germany. In 2003 he left Vagrus and signed a contract with the publishing conglomerate Eksmo. His first book with Eksmo, *DPP(NN): The Dialectic of the Transitional Period from Nowhere to Nowhere* (DPP(NN):

¹⁵ The initial circulation ran thirty-five thousand copies; forty thousand more followed; at the end of 1999, twenty thousand more copies went out.

dialektika perekhodnogo perioda iz nioutkuda v nikuda, 2003), was a volume made up of a novel, a novella, and five short stories.¹⁶ The collection includes the opening novel *Numbers* (*Chisla*), a story about a post-Soviet businessperson captivated by the magic of numbers, and the novella “The Macedonian Critique of French Thought” (“Makedonskaia kritika frantsuzskoi mysli”), a black-humor fantasy of Soviet people transformed posthumously into oil and oil money and trafficked to the West.¹⁷

The Sacred Book of the Werewolf came out the following year. It is narrated by a two-thousand-year-old werefox, A Huli, who looks like a teenage girl and works as a prostitute in Moscow, where she meets and falls in love with an FSB general and werewolf, Sasha the Grey. The novel’s central mystery involves the super-werewolf: what it is and how to become one. To Sasha, who metamorphoses into the black dog Pizdets (a continuation of *Generation ‘II’*), the super-werewolf commands the magical ability to destroy things. A Huli’s path, by contrast, moves toward reckoning and potential salvation. The super-wolf is going to atone for the sins of the werefoxes by giving them a book that explains how to enter the mystical “Rainbow Stream.” Since the world created by the tail of the were-fox is brimful of greed and selfishness, the were-creature must learn what love is and direct the feeling of love against her own tail (thereby aborting material reality). On the novel’s last page, A Huli breaks through the illusory material world she herself creates and escapes into the Buddhist Rainbow Stream.

Empire V/Ampir V: A Novella about a Real Superman (*Empire V/Ampir V: Povest’ o nastoiashchem sverkhcheloveke*, 2006), a sequel to *Generation ‘II’*, is another Pelevinian parable about the degradations of techno-consumer contemporaneity. This is the story of an anonymous vampire dictatorship into which Roman Shtorkin, a young Muscovite, is initiated. Neoliberal vampires have converted to a more peaceful form of feeding off humans—no longer drinking blood but living off so-called *bablos* (a word for money in criminal argo). The rulers of the world milk humans for a concentrate of money or, rather, the vital human energy expended in pursuit of money. Exuding frenetic energy in a pursuit of consumerism-based stimulation, human cattle produce money not for themselves but from themselves. Over the course of the novel, Roma learns “glamour” and “discourse,” the two skills necessary for a vampire

16 Since the appearance of *DPP(NN)*, Pelevin has produced a book nearly each year.

17 *DPP(NN)* received the Apollon Grigoryev and the National Bestseller awards.

to milk humans, and becomes (like Tatarsky ascending to the upper echelons of the media world) a highly positioned figure in the vampire hierarchy.

T (2009) exposes the conditions of the modern literary business.¹⁸ To meet the demands of the market, Leo Tolstoy's final flight from his estate to regain freedom and meaning late in life is rewritten in the manner of a retro-detective novel *à la* Boris Akunin's bestsellers. Unlike the elderly Tolstoy, Count T is a handsome youthful nobleman, proficient in martial arts. Each move that takes place in the narrative is determined by marketing considerations: T piles corpse upon corpse on his way to hermitage because the story of a repentant old Tolstoy would not sell well; he strives to reach the Optina Pustyn' hermitage because the book's sponsors want to promote a tale of the excommunicated great novelist reconciled to official Orthodoxy; and there are many other examples. As T discovers, his existence as a character in a popular novel explains his inability to act freely and the lurid quality of the events that befall him. Unlike nineteenth-century writers who created texts that touched human souls, modern-day creators transform life's perceptions into pulp fiction that yields maximum profit.¹⁹

Later Works

In 2010 Pelevin published *Pineapple Water for the Beautiful Lady* (*Ananasnaia voda dlia prekrasnoi damy*), a collection opening with the novella "Operation 'Burning Bush'" ("Operatsiia 'Burning Bush'"). This is the story of a down-on-his-luck teacher of English, a Russian Jew named Semyon Levitan, who is forced by the FSB (the Russian Federal Security Service) to pose as God to George W. Bush, then US president. Levitan is a literal *deus ex machina* who speaks to the White House via a top-secret engineering invention. In turn, CIA agents had been posing as Satan to the Russian side since at least Stalin's time. In this story, the powerful and the powerless of the world alike (the Russians, the Americans, Bush, Levitan, and so forth) are dupes in games of mutual deception conducted by competing secret services and enabled by advanced technologies. "Anti-Aircraft Codices of Al-Efesbi" ("Zenitnye kodeksy Al'-Efesbi"), the second story, depicts the life of Savely Skotenkov, former professor and cultural critic, who finds his true vocation in destroying unmanned American

18 In 2009 Pelevin was voted "Russia's number one intellectual" by openportal.ru.

19 Other texts of the 2000s include *The Helmet of Horror: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur* (*Shlem uzhasa: kreatiff o Tesee i Minotavre*, 2005) and *P5. Farewell Songs of Pindostan's Political Pigmies* (*P5. Proshchal'nye pesni politicheskikh pigmiev Pindostana*, 2008).

aircraft over Afghanistan. Skotenkov takes out drones over the Afghan desert by drawing verbal formulas in the sand that involve politically incorrect invectives aimed at neoliberal values. As a result, a drone's controlling computer begins to experience an intense emotion (anger), which gives rise to artificial intelligence endowed with consciousness and will.

The futuristic dystopia *S.N.U.F.F.* (2011) maintains a strong focus on the problems of media deception, the degradation of humankind under techno-consumerism, and the relationship between the imperialist West (the United States) and the now colonized Russia/ Eastern Europe. *S.N.U.F.F.* portrays a post-nuclear war world divided into Byzantium or Big Biz and Urkaina or Orkland. The former is an affluent, business-oriented, technologically advanced Western society. The latter is an autocratic, devastated, economically backward part of the territories of the former Russia and Ukraine. The uber-consumer "liberative demautocracy" of Byzantium is equipped with all the high-tech of the past but is no longer capable of developing scientifically or culturally. Byzantium considers the Urks/Orks below to be subhuman. It makes use of Orkland as a colony and an energy source (Orkland possesses huge reserves of gas), buys its infants, puppeteers its leaders (a quasi-criminal ring supported by Byzantium), and conducts incessant warfare among its people for entertainment.

Love for Three Zuckerbrins (*Liubov' k trem tsukerbrinam*, 2014) harkens back to the multiple psychic timelines of *Chapaev and the Void*, but with ethical concerns gaining prominence over more solipsistic scenarios. The text reinterprets the multiverse of alternative history as a constellation of individual ethics-dependent projections. Its central event is a slaughter in the offices of the liberal website *contra.ru* carried out by a radical Islamic suicide bomber, Batu Karaev. One of the employees of *contra.ru*, the IT worker Kesha, is an internet troll enamored of violent computer games and online pornography. One of the many victims of the suicide blast, Kesha (along with Karaev) is reincarnated in a twenty-fourth century cyberpunk setting ruled by the Zuckerbrins (a portmanteau word made up from Mark Zuckerberg, cofounder of Facebook, and Sergei Brin, founder of Google). In that future, human bodies atrophy in miniscule cells, while human brains have wires implanted that connect them to the overlaying computer interface. The Internet monitors everyone's thoughts for political correctness and compels the populace to share their private activities via social networks. By introducing a deadly virus into people's internet-induced dreams, Karaev kills everyone for real. The book's final part depicts a reincarnation of the *contra.ru* office custodian Nadya, a compas-

sionate young woman untouched by the climate of violence and indifferent to the media and online diversions. In the future, Nadya reemerges as an angel in a private paradise-like realm inhabited by a group of her former coworkers (reincarnated as animals) whom she takes care of as best she can.

The two-part *The Warden* (*Smotritel'*, 2015) portrays one more alternative historical timeline of a spiritual order, positioned in the consciousness of its protagonist. The hero, Alex, exists in a mental construct called the Idyllium, conjured up by late eighteenth-century mystics Emperor Paul I of Russia, the son of Peter III and Catherine the Great, Benjamin Franklin, and the German-Austrian doctor Franz Anton Mesmer, inventor of the theory of animal magnetism. Since earthly politics cannot be cleansed of cynicism, villainy, and blood, the elect few escape into a parallel psychic reality, mediated by heterogeneous Russian and Western cultural material (such as fiction, esoteric literature, and art). If one cannot improve upon the politics of "Old Earth," one can at least construct a spiritual-cultural bomb shelter.

iPhuck 10 (2017), like *T*, grapples with the theme of artistic exhaustion. The plot takes place in the mid-twenty-first century, narrated by a literary-police computer algorithm called Porfiry Petrovich, namesake of the master detective in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866). Porfiry investigates crimes and composes detective novels about them. When he is loaned to an opportunistic art critic, Marukha Cho, he navigates the arts black market and hunts for coveted *gips* (plasters)—early twenty-first-century art objects that are not original themselves but are valued for striving to breathe new life into earlier, authentic art forms. Like *T* with its team of hack writers, or *S.N.U.F.F.* with its sommelier (professional selectors of previous texts who replace old-school writers), *iPhuck 10* advances a severe critique of contemporary art as parasitizing off older genuinely creative works. This later novel also provides an opportunity for Pelevin to contemplate his extended artistic trajectory and respond face-on to critical charges of auto-repetition: "Writers can be of two kinds. Those who, all their lives, write one book—and those who, all their lives, write none."²⁰

20 Victor Pelevin, *iPhuck 10* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2017), 217. His other texts of the previous decade include *Batman Apollo* (2013), *Methuselah's Lamp, or the Final Battle of the Checkists and the Masons* (*Lampa Mafusaila, ili Krainiaia bitva chekistov s masonami*, 2016), *Secret Views of Mount Fuji* (*Tainye vidy na goru Fudzi*, 2018), *The Art of Light Touches* (*Iskusstvo legkikh kasanii*, 2019) and *The Invincible Sun* (*Nepobedimoe solntse*, 2020), the last publication as of the present. *Batman Apollo* is a sequel to *Generation 'T'* and *Empire V. Methuselah's Lamp* was shortlisted for the Big Book Prize, and *iPhuck 10* received the Andrey Bely Prize.

Critical Debates: Russia

Peleviniana is cerebral, complex, and uncomfortable. It runs on contradictions and paradoxes and is resistant to assimilation under narrow ideological and aesthetic agendas. It is no surprise that debates around Pelevin's oeuvre have proved some of the most heated in post-Soviet cultural circles. As his groundbreaking early works such as *The Blue Lantern*, *Omon Ra*, *The Life of Insects*, and *The Yellow Arrow* made their appearance, prominent critics like **Alexander Genis** lauded the emergence of an original authorial voice. Genis endorsed the author as a gifted representative of a new generation of writers who (unlike a slightly older Sorokin) moves beyond sheer deconstruction and comes up with a trenchant vision of his own: "Pelevin does not destroy; he builds. Using the same fragments of the Soviet myth as Sorokin, he constructs both subject matter and concepts." The mystic Pelevin locates "pure being inside the individual soul" and shows "how to cultivate a metaphysical reality, which does not exist but can be created."²¹

Although *Chapaev and the Void* represents not only the acme of Pelevin's art but one of the most remarkable books to appear on the literary scene since the dissolution of the USSR, at its publication, the novel solidified Pelevin's popular success with readers but incurred a mixed critical reaction. **Irina Rodnyanskaya** praised the author as an outstanding artist, "first and foremost an owner of a creative imagination, a miracle of miracles . . . , and only secondly a philosophizing messenger of 'Inner Mongolia.'"²² **Dmitry Bykov** characterized the book as "not a mere computer game, even if an advanced one, but a serious novel destined for multiple re-readings." Having passed through its labyrinths, "we are left not with emptiness but with a gigantic load of things we've seen and thought about."²³ Rodnyanskaya and Bykov articulated their endorsements of Pelevin's novel in ways that were polemical vis-à-vis a significant group of critics who did not take kindly to his Zen Buddhist "quirks" and

21 Alexander Genis, "Borders and Metamorphoses: Victor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature," in *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, ed. Mikhail Epstein, Alexander Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 214, 224. The essay also appeared in *Twentieth-Century Russian Literature: Selected Papers from the Fifth World Congress of Central and East European Studies*, Warsaw, 1995, edited by Karen L. Ryan and Barry P. Scherr (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 294–306. It was originally published under the title "Viktor Pelevin: Granitsy i metamorfozy," *Znamia* 12 (1995): 210–214.

22 Irina Rodnianskaia, "... i k nei bezumnaia liubov' . . . ," *Novyi mir* 9 (1996): 212–216.

23 Dmitrii Bykov, "Pobeg v Mongoliiu," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 29, 2006, <http://pelevin.nov.ru/stati/odva/1.html>, accessed January 7, 2017.

dismissed him as a frivolous and emotionally deprived gamer. Indeed, the novel earned disfavor from the more conservative side of the literary establishment on multiple counts: as pretentious philosophizing, vacuous play, irresponsible, socially unconstructive—and worse, harmful to the traditional Russian ethos. Its popular success likely contributed to such critical disparagement.²⁴ Some critics, such as **Igor Shaitanov**, condemned *Chapaev* and *The Void* as a collection of dangerous verbal games that distort key Russian values.²⁵ **Andrei Nemzer**, who has been especially hostile to Pelevin throughout his literary career, viewed his Zen Buddhist philosophy as sheer charlatanism and rebuked the author for evading moral judgment.²⁶

Once Pelevin solidified his status as a literary brand in the 2000s, the charges against his mature productions no longer took issue with his subversive play and instead zeroed in on his alleged conceptual and aesthetic ossification: “Pelevin during the period of the appearance of *Omon Ra* and *Chapaev* . . . is one writer. Pelevin working as a thresher in the purely commercial enterprise Eksmo . . . is something completely different.”²⁷ **Bykov** envisioned his fellow writer’s alleged downward spiral as artistic and conceptual self-recycling due to his disappointment with post-Soviet realia.²⁸ Grounded in late Soviet culture and disillusioned with post-Soviet inanities, he chose not to develop as an artist at all out of sheer contempt for his “undeserving” readership.

Indeed, post-*Chapaev*, Pelevin’s metaphysical framework remains basically unchanged: the illusory nature of the world, carnal materiality, solipsism, the failure of the human subject, the promise of Zen Buddhist enlightenment. The real issue, however, is less that he is pedaling the same philosophical-metaphysical notions consistently and obsessively, but that no text after the 1996 novel rivals

24 Pavel Basinsky found Pelevin’s portrayal of the Civil War “offensive to anyone with respect for one’s national, professional, and cultural identity.” Pavel Basinskii, “Iz zhizni otechestvennykh kaktusov,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 29, 1996, 4.

25 Shaitanov justified *Chapaev* not making it onto the Booker shortlist in 1997 by likening the novel to a computer virus destroying Russian culture. Igor’ Shaitanov, “Booker-97: Zapiski ‘nachal’nika premii,” *Voprosy literatury* 3 (1998), magazines.russ.ru/voplit/1998/3/shait.html, accessed March 8, 2019.

26 Andrei Nemzer, “Kak ia upustil kar’eru: Viktor Pelevin. *Chapaev i pustota*,” *Znamia* 4–5 (1996), <http://pelevin.nov.ru/stati/o-nemz/1.html>, accessed March 8, 2019.

27 By “thresher” (a person or machine that separates grain from the plants by beating) Basinsky is referring to the mechanistic nature of Pelevin’s production post-2000. Pavel Basinskii, “Gudvin, vykhodi,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta* 71 (5744), April 2, 2012, <https://rg.ru/2012/04/02/basinskii.html>, accessed March 15, 2019.

28 Dmitrii Bykov, “Pelevin: put’ vniz,” 2014, <https://www.litres.ru/dmitriy-bykov/bykov-o-pelevine-put-vniz-lekciya-pervaya/chitat-onlayn/>, accessed March 6, 2020.

its conceptual and aesthetic execution of said metaphysics. If Pelevin is at his philosophical and aesthetic peak in *Chapaev and the Void*, *Generation 'IT'* and its sequel *Empire V* are likely his strongest social satires. His fin-de-siècle novel excels in its acidic analysis of the 1990s and points presciently to the current millennium. *Empire V* develops Pelevin's scathing account of a contemporary humanity enthralled by techno-consumerism to its richest vision.

By now, Pelevin has entered literary history as the preeminent writer of the 1990s. His recent output has been received much more coldly than his groundbreaking initial productions. Like reviews of the 2000s, critical responses of the last decade tend to charge Pelevin with auto-recycling as well as didacticism and a growing traditionalism. In fact, accusations against the "late" Pelevin are diametrically opposed to critiques of his early work while being equally harsh. The writer whose unbridled play used to discomfit traditionalist critics is now charged with turning conservative himself and indulging in preachiness classic-Russian-style.²⁹ An arc from subversion to traditionalism, if such is the case, is hardly surprising: young people play, older ones teach life's wisdom. But, as **Sergey Kornev** pointed out as early as 1997, Pelevin "combines paradoxically all the formal traits of postmodern literary production . . . with being a genuine Russian classical writer-ideologue like Tolstoy or Chernyshevsky."³⁰ In this light, he did not devolve from a daring postmodernist youngster into a modern-day "Tolstoyevsky" in his dotage. Rather, he was always a subversively experimental writer and an ideologue in the classical Russian mode.

As **Mikhail Berg** argues, Pelevin's shift from the postmodern is pragmatic: he "takes on the power fields of both mass culture and zones where radical practices function. Deconstruction of deconstruction produces an appearance of . . . positive ideology that forms cultural and symbolic capital appropriated

29 Thus, in *Love for Three Zuckerbrins*, Pelevin "explains his message through the example of Angry Birds, interprets through a Soviet cartoon, via an appeal to Ten Commandments, and so forth. . . . When the author writes in the last pages, 'If I felt in myself the makings of a preacher . . .,' it is frightening to think what could have happened if he did not feel enough like a preacher now." Varvara Babitskaia, "*Liubov' k trem tsukerbrinam* Viktora Pelevina. Nas vsekh toshnit," *Vozdukh*, September 12, 2014, <https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/vozdukh/books/nas-vseh-toshnit-lyubov-k-trem-cukerbrinam-viktora-pelevina>, accessed March 1, 2019.

30 Sergei Kornev, "Stolknovenie pustot: mozhet li postmodernism byt' russkim i klassicheskim," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 28 (1997): 244. Nikolai Chernyshevsky was a social critic and novelist, a dominant figure of the 1860s revolutionary movement in Russia.

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