

Terror and Transcendence in the Void: Viktor Pelevin's Philosophy of
Emptiness

By

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Rebecca Stakun

M.A., University of Kansas, 2011

B.A., George Washington University, 2006

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Chair: Vitaly Chernetsky

Co-Chair: Maria Carlson

Marc Greenberg

Ani Kokobobo

Bruce Hayes

Date Defended: 4 August 2017

The Dissertation Committee for Rebecca Stakun
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Chair: Vitaly Chernetsky

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the Russian experience of the “void” left in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union as it is reflected in Viktor Pelevin’s *Chapaev and Pustota* (1996), *Generation “P”* (1999), *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (2004), and *Empire “V”* (2006). If, as postmodernist theory suggests, there can be no overarching cultural (or other) narratives, then in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse post-Soviet Russia found itself in a void, with no old, established national narrative and no new “Russian idea” to shape future identity.

At the very moment when post-Soviet Russians found their identities in greatest flux, communication and the search for identity were complicated by a global “crisis of signification” in which words lost their power to convey meaning about one’s reality. On the semiotic level, postmodernism posited the breakdown of the binary sign (signifier and signified), severing word from meaning and creating “empty signifiers.” The crisis was intensified by the twin realizations that the pervasive symbols of the Soviet regime had become “empty” and meaningless, while the western capitalism and hyperconsumerism that replaced them were equally empty and meaningless. All that was real was the *void* between signifier and signified.

Many contemporary Russian writers engaged the void in their work, seeing it as a negative concept. Pelevin’s novels are unique in their treatment of the void as simultaneously positive and negative, as both emptiness and potentiality. The void (emptiness), as symbol and as philosophical concept, becomes prominent in times of great change that challenge national and individual identities. Historically, the void has played a prominent role in Russian philosophy and literature. It does so again in the post-Soviet period.

Pelevin uses the East-West binary to explore Russia’s post-collapse void. East and West are the two most important cultural identities with which Russia has historically engaged.

Pelevin explores Western values (specifically capitalism and hyperconsumerism) in *Generation "P"* and *Empire "V"* and portrays them more negatively. This “negative void” is the emptiness that underlies not only the symbols and language of the now defunct Soviet system, but also the advertisements and language of imported Western models. Both turned out to be simulacra—images with no meaning in reality, a mask over the void.

Eastern values predominate in *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*; Pelevin portrays them more positively. Engaging with Mahāyāna Buddhism, Pelevin seeks to resolve the problems of hypermaterialism, empty signifiers, and pervasive simulacra that plague the West. In Buddhism both signifiers and signifieds are illusory, making the problem of the breakdown of the binary sign moot. Pelevin suggests that emptiness, or the void, offers a possible escape from the conundrum that faces the West by transcending its materialism and its ills.

While Pelevin personally favors the eastern Buddhist model of self that embraces the void, he does not recommend that Russia imitate the East, as this would amount to little more than a reversal of Peter the Great’s westernization (and another iteration of Lotman and Uspenskii’s binary cultural model). Pelevin ultimately fails to suggest a new model for Russian national identity in these four novels. The author may still be looking for such a model or, perhaps, the “nothingness” that his search has yielded *is* his answer.

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Notes on Transliteration and Translations

This dissertation conforms to the U.S. Library of Congress transliteration system with the exception of last names of famous authors (e.g., Tolstoy, Dostoevsky). The following rules are respected throughout the text:

1. Titles of Russian works and specialized Russian terms and concepts are presented in English translation followed by the Russian in parentheses.
2. The soft sign is not observed for names mentioned in the main text; e.g.: Gogol (not Gogol’); it is observed, however, when names appear in bibliographical footnotes or in transliterating Russian titles.
3. The characters “э” and “ё” will be transliterated as “e.” The character “й” will be transliterated as “i” (not “i’”).
4. Buddhist terms follow the Sanskrit transliteration system and not the Pali (with the exception of quotations from works in the Pali canon), therefore: *nirvana* (not *nibbana*), Siddhartha Gautama (not Siddhattha Gotama). Diacritical marks have been preserved with the exception of commonly used terms; e.g., *nirvāṇa* will be written as *nirvana*.
5. I quote from the English translations of Pelevin’s novels by Andrew Bromfield (*Buddha’s Little Finger [Chapaev i Pustota]*, *Homo Zapiens [Generation “P”]*, and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*) and Anthony Phillips (*Empire “V”*) and provide the original Russian text in the footnotes. On occasion, I have supplied my own translation to preserve Pelevin’s meaning (noted as either “translation mine” or “translation edited” in the footnote). Translations of all other materials are my own unless otherwise noted.

Bromfield’s translations adhere to a different style of transliteration. When quoting his translation, I leave the transliteration of names in tact but I adhere to the Library of Congress’ system of transliteration; e.g., “Serdyuk” (Bromfield) vs. Serdiuk (LOC).

In his translation of *Empire “V,”* Anthony Phillips capitalizes key “vampire” vocabulary such as “Glamour,” “Discourse,” “Tongue,” etc. In quotations from his edition, I have left these words capitalized, however when I refer to them in the text I leave them in lower-case (as Pelevin himself does).

6. The titles of the novels will be abbreviated in the footnotes as follows:

Buddha’s Little Finger = BLF

Chapaev and Pustota = CIP

Empire “V”: Povest’ o nastoiashchem sverkhcheloveke = EVPNS

Empire “V”: The Prince of Hamlet = EVPH

Generation “P” = GP

Homo Zapiens = HZ

The Sacred Book of the Werewolf = SBW

Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia = SKO

For June

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, citizens of the former USSR found themselves in a world that seemed to make little sense. Statues representing the heroes of the previous Soviet regime, once revered, were torn down. No statues of new heroes were erected in their place. The Soviet promise of a “radiant future” (*светлое будущее*) in communism was reneged on. No new promises were made (or perhaps too many new promises were made unrealistically). The Soviet Union’s vast and complex system of signs, symbols, slogans, historical points of view, personal and national identity politics, economic theory, official culture—its entire societal infrastructure—suddenly had its supporting base cut out from under it. Regardless of whether one had been pro-Soviet, anti-Soviet, or apathetic, everyone experienced the loss of shared language and cultural markers.

Post-Soviet intellectuals began the grueling process of trying to answer the questions “Who *are* we?” and “Where are we going?” The pre-Soviet Russian intelligentsia had struggled with similar questions: “Who *should* we be?”; “Whence did we come?”; “Where are we going?” What the seekers in both the past and present found was a “void,” which some scholars argue is innately linked to Russia’s particular geography, history, and cultural identity. This void

pervades the works of the major post-collapse writer Viktor Pelevin and serves as the focus of this dissertation, which examines how Pelevin uses the imagery and symbolism of “the void” to comment on contemporary, post-collapse Russian culture.

Historically, literature has always reflected social and political issues in Russia. At the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse, postmodernist literature was in the ascendant. It has become an especially strong movement in Russia because of its capacity to deconstruct traditional paradigms. Postmodernism stipulates that there can be no grand, over-arching system to explain reality—something especially compatible to the post-Soviet Russian mind, which saw no grand narrative attempt to succeed communism.

The post-collapse search for meaning has led in more than one direction. As the “void” left by a now-absent Soviet system appeared before them, some Russians sought meaning in politics, others in economics, while others turned to spirituality. Immediately after the collapse the Russian Orthodox Church began to rebuild and slowly return to its pre-communist status.¹ The restoration of religious freedom in Russia also allowed people to experiment with alternative spiritual traditions (such as neo-paganism, New Age, esotericism), among them Buddhism.

Mahāyāna Buddhism was an interesting alternative to some. Like postmodernism, it eschews any higher truth or epistemological system; unlike postmodernism, it suggests an alternative to western paradigms that have temporarily covered over “the void” but have not proved satisfactory in the long term. In Buddhism one strives to understand and embrace the void. An intuition of emptiness (or void) pervades both postmodernism and Buddhism, and both postmodernism and Buddhism heavily influence the works of Viktor Pelevin.

Viktor Pelevin, born in 1962 in Moscow, is a prominent postmodernist Russian author.

¹ Many would argue that the church did not so much return to its pre-communist status as create a new, stronger paradigm of prominence in society. See John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent*:

He graduated from the Moscow Power Engineering Institute in 1985, but by 1989 he had turned to literary pursuits, briefly studying at Moscow's Gorkii Literary Institute. In 1993, Pelevin gained renown when his first collection of short stories, *The Blue Lantern* (*Синий фонарь*, 1991) won the Little Booker Prize. His work has been reviewed by the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, translated into all major world languages, and published by such prominent presses as Farrar Straus Giroux, Penguin, and New Directions. Pelevin's work has contributed to the discussion of how to reinvent post-Soviet Russian identity and culture.

Pelevin is considered Russia's most enigmatic writer, a reputation he has created for himself by avoiding public appearances, book tours, and meetings with his readers. He rarely grants interviews; when he does, they are usually conducted over the phone or via email. He embodies the void. The noticeable absence of such a prominent and popular writer from Russian literary society has led to widespread rumors and mythologization of the author. His official website (run by fans, not by the author himself) has an entire project where fans can upload poems, open letters, and even short vignettes they have written with "Viktor Olegovich™" as the main character, further blurring fact and fiction.

The most prominent rumors about Pelevin concern his actual existence. Sample rumors include claims like these: Pelevin does not actually exist; machines write Pelevin's novels; someone else took Pelevin's place after the publication of the novel *Generation "P"*; Pelevin is actually a consortium of authors whose surnames spell P.E.L.E.V.I.N.² In September 2016 social media reported that Pelevin had died during a spiritualist séance in Germany. Many considered the report a publicity stunt to promote his latest novel, *The Lamp of Methuselah, or The Last*

² This rumor appears in various online forums. The authors are supposedly Pokrovskii, Egazarov, Liapunov, Emelin, Vavilov, Ivannikov, and Novitskii. Teodor Sedin, "Podsest' na Pelevina: pochemu pisatel' vseгда budet aktualen," Accessed July 26, 2017, <https://brodude.ru/podsest-na-pelevina-pochemu-pisatel-vsegda-budet-aktualen/>.

Battle of the Chekists with the Masons (Лампа Мафусаила, или Крайняя битва чекистов с масонами, 2016). Pelevin's own publisher eventually denied the reports, but not until a few days had passed.

Pelevin has also been described as “prophetic.” The clearest example of this is Pelevin's 2011 novel, *S.N.U.F.F.*, which depicts endless wars between Urkaina and a technologically superior society, Big Byz. Many believe that Pelevin's novel shares similarities to the ongoing-war (begun in 2014) between Ukraine (Ukraina) and Russia. Ivan Krastev sees similarities between the current allegations of Russian election interference and Pelevin's story “Operation Burning Bush” (“Операция «Burning Bush»,” 2010), in which a Russian English-language teacher is recruited to speak as the voice of God to George W. Bush through an earpiece.³ While other critics disagree with Pelevin's prophetic abilities, most will agree that Pelevin enjoys such commercial success not only because his novels are playful and witty, but also because they capture the *Zeitgeist* of post-Soviet Russia.

There is a sharp difference between the western and Russian critical literature on Pelevin. In the West, Pelevin has been accepted as a world author worthy of serious literary consideration, while in Russia critics continue to debate the quality of his writing style and the question of Pelevin's target audience—is this writing serious literature or *popsa* (i.e., mass culture)? Pavel Basinskii, for example, has described Pelevin as having a “two-bit inventive talent”⁴ and characterized his works as “‘mass culture’ covered in some kind of layer of intellectual substance.”⁵ Andrei Nemzer has characterized Pelevin as an “advertiser and leader of

³ Ivan Krastev, “America's Dangerous ‘Putin Panic’,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2016.

⁴ “Пелевин с грошовым изобретательским талантом....” Pavel Basinskii, “Iz zhizni otechestvennykh kaktusov,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 29, 1996.

⁵ “‘Массовая культура’ прикрытая некоторым слоем интеллектуального вещества....” “Ubogie talanty,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, June 21, 1993.

kidults of all ages (of which there have always been plenty)—and their ‘product.’”⁶ In his review of *Generation “P,”* Aleksandr Arkhangel’skii admits that Pelevin formerly engaged in “serious literature,” but now he is part of “mass culture,” which, for Arkhangel’skii, is not a positive thing.⁷ These critics consider Pelevin to be a writer of pulp fiction and imply that Pelevin cannot possibly be a serious artist because he has achieved commercial success.

Others in Russia (journalist Sergei Medvedev, for example) agree that Pelevin has “found the most succinct verbal formulas for describing our reality.”⁸ In Medvedev’s interview with *Kommersant* correspondent Anna Narinskaia and literary critic Lev Danilkin, Danilkin suggests that Pelevin, despite his novels being about vampires and shapeshifters, is a realist because “his goal as a writer is to say something about reality.”⁹ Pelevin’s works are so successful (commercially, if not always artistically) because they discuss issues that Russian readers instinctively feel are important.

The Void

Why study the void? Why consider something that by its own definition suggests an absence? For me this topic stems from my interest in Pelevin’s novels, especially his novels of the decade 1996–2006. All of Pelevin’s work deals with some aspect of the nature of “reality.” For Pelevin, physical “reality” is something that is always in intellectual quotations marks: it is

⁶ “Рекламщик и лидер ра[з]новозрастных инфантилов (коих всегда хватало)—и их «продукт».” Andrei Nemzer, “Kak by tipa po zhizni. *Generation ‘P’* kak zerkalo otechestvennogo infantilizma,” *Vremia MN*, March 26, 1999.

⁷ “До сих пор он играл на поле «серьезной» литературы.... Пелевинская проза возвращается к своему истоку, наконец-то становится частью массовой культуры....” Aleksandr Arkhangel’skii, “Pelevin—sistema zerkal,” <http://pelevin.nov.ru/stati/o-sist/1.html>.

⁸ “Нашел самые емкие словесные формулы для описания нашей действительности.” Lev Danilkin and Anna Narinskaia, interview by Sergei Medvedev, *Arkheologiia*, Stolitsa FM, October 27, 2011.

⁹ “Цель его как писателя—высказывания о реальной действительности.” Ibid.

not concrete, it is doubtful. Throughout his novels, Pelevin is constantly questioning the nature of reality and what is “real.” In many cases, he tells us that a void stands behind reality—that nothing really exists. As negative as this might seem, Pelevin’s representation of the void is both positive and negative.

The void, both as a symbol and a philosophical concept, becomes uniquely prominent in times of great change—when national (and individual) identities are challenged. This is certainly its major role in many of Pelevin’s novels, including the ones that will be examined here. I have chosen the novels *Chapaev and Pustota* (*Чапаяев и Пустота*, 1996), *Generation “P”* (*Generation “П,”* 1999), *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (*Священная книга оборотня*, 2004), and *Empire “V”: The Story of a Real Superman* (*Empire “V”: Повесть о настоящем сверхчеловеке*, 2006) to explore in greater detail Pelevin’s use of the void.¹⁰ In each of these novels, the identities of the characters (and often Russia) are in flux. The void plays a role in resolving fluid identity in each novel: however, Pelevin presents a negative void in two novels (*Generation “P”* and *Empire “V”*) and a positive void in the remaining two (*Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*). I wanted to learn why.

My study received its theoretical impetus, in part, from the work of the prominent Soviet semiotician Iurii Lotman (1922–1993), whose theory of “binary models” in Russian culture asserts an intolerance for a neutral semiotic space; that is, Russian culture does not attempt to resolve oppositions through compromise, as in the western Hegelian cultural model, but accepts the dominance of the stronger of two competing models. In Russia, Lotman and Boris Uspenskii propose, the introduction of a new belief system is marked by a decisive break with the previous system, which is then marked as “negative,” while the new system is marked as “positive,”

¹⁰ *Chapaev and Pustota* was published in the United States with the title *Buddha’s Little Finger*. *Generation “P”* was given the title *Homo Zapiens*. The subtitle of *Empire “V”* was changed from “The Story of a Real Superman” to “The Prince of Hamlet.”

creating bipolarity.¹¹ The breakup of the Soviet Union dismantled Soviet identity, but left a “void” when no new belief system succeeded it.

The concept of the void is an integral part of many philosophical, theological, and aesthetic systems. Because the void pervades so many thought systems, examining *what* one (whether a single author or an entire country) thinks about the void tells us something about *how* one thinks in general. Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990) writes that nothingness comes to the fore whenever life is disrupted by doubts or calamities: “When we become a question to ourselves and when the problem of why we exist arises, this means that nihility has emerged from the ground of existence and that our very existence has turned into a question mark.”¹² Russians have faced calamity in the past and their history is filled with examples of the “void.” However, Russians faced a unique calamity in the form of the collapse of the Soviet Union, even if it was not, this time, accompanied by destructive civil war and unrest. The grand narrative of communism had been shattered and no new grand narrative came to replace it, once again bringing “emptiness” to the forefront of Russian consciousness.

Here semiotics helps to understand and discuss the implications of the shattering of the grand narrative. My definition of Pelevin’s postmodern void is based in Saussure’s linguistic concept of signification and Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) defined the sign as a form made up of a *signifier* (the indexical sign—sounds, letters, gestures, etc.) and the *signified* (the concept or image to which the signifier refers). In my examination of Pelevin’s works (and the works of other Post-Soviet writers), I consider

¹¹ B.A. Uspenskii and Iu.M. Lotman, “Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (To the End of the 18th Century),” in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, eds. A.D. Nakhimovskii and A.S. Nakhimovskii (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

It would not have been politic for the authors to have taken their model into the Soviet twentieth century.

¹² Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Winston King (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 4.

“emptiness” to occur when there is a *breakdown* between the signifier and the signified; in other words, emptiness occurs when the image (the outer, physical, observable form of a concept) fails to correspond with the thing it purports to represent.

This definition of emptiness as a loss of connection between signified and signifier dovetails with Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum. Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) claimed that when speech and writing were first created signs (or images) reflected “basic reality.” As advertising and commodification set in, however, the relationship between signifier and signified eroded to a point where the image started first to distort and then to *conceal* reality. Ultimately, the image bore no relation to reality whatsoever—it was its own simulacrum.¹³

Baudrillard writes that an individual experiences “hyperreality” when he/she is overwhelmed with simulacra and, as a result, is often unable to derive meaning from one’s surroundings or situate oneself spatially and temporally. Some scholars, such as Fredric Jameson, suggest that appearance of simulacra and the consequent “breakdown in the signifying chain” is a result of the advent of late capitalism.¹⁴ Following the theories of culturologist Mikhail Epstein, I argue further that Russia has a long history of forcibly severing the connections between signifier and signified, thus creating a void. Rather than evolving in a natural manner, relationships between signifier and signified and the production of simulacra (and by extension the void) were often forced upon the Russian people by fiat.

In “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism,” Epstein argues that Russian postmodernism is self-aware of the simulations and simulacra that have dominated everyday life

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 178.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* I, no. 176 (1984): 71–2.

since the Soviet period. In the Soviet period, reality was meant to correspond to the ideology and ideas that described it. Epstein writes that “ideology did not lie but simply re-created the world in its own image and likeness.... Ideology did not lie; it was the real world itself that tended to disappear and to dissolve in ideological signs.”¹⁵ Because the relationship between ideas and reality, between signifier and signified, had been dissolved, Epstein regards the Soviet period as the first wave of postmodernism in Russia, which paved the way for the free play of signs by the conceptualists and, later, Pelevin.

The Void Between East and West

Another reason Russia has been linked with the void is its unique history and geographical location. Medieval Rus’ experienced a strong Eastern influence, in part due to the centuries it spent under the Mongol Yoke (1240–1480). In the early eighteenth century, Peter I implemented a sweeping program of Westernization. Nobles were made to change their behavior, appearance, and style of dress; this was accompanied by social, political, and economic changes as well. Since then, Russia has never stopped asking whether it belongs to the West or the East, or if it is something different altogether.

This issue became prominent in the nineteenth century, where the debate on Russian identity produced two intellectual camps—Slavophiles and (by default) Westernizers. The former believed that Russia had its own rich, cultural heritage and had no need for Western values. Westernizers saw Russia following the path of progressive, European values. Ironically, both of these movements measure Russia’s identity against a Western European “yardstick” (to use Nikolai Trubetskoi’s phrase).

¹⁵ Mikhail Epstein, “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism,” in *Re-Entering the Sign: Articulating New Russian Culture*, eds. Ellen E. Berry and Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 31.

The geographic void also emerges with the classical Eurasianists—a diverse group of émigré Russian scholars who argued in the 1920s that there existed a third continent within the Old World—Eurasia.¹⁶ Nikolai Trubetskoi (1890–1938) argued that the physical configuration of the geographic territory had conditioned and determined the development of the people (as well as their history and culture) living on the territory. The result was the creation of a single unified Eurasian state system achieved by Genghis Khan.¹⁷ Petr Savitskii (1895–1968) called this “topogenesis”: a mutual interaction between natural and sociohistorical environments. The harmony of Eurasian culture “is neither a European [one] nor one of the Asian cultures, nor a sum or mechanical combination of elements of the former and the latter,” it has a unique geographic character of its own.¹⁸ In many respects, “Russia-Eurasia is a closed circle, a perfect continent and a world unto itself.”¹⁹ To Savitskii, this “closed circle” was positive, but for others it was problematic: If Russia were neither East nor West, what was it?

Pelevin uses this East/West binary in many of his works. Both the East and the West represent different cultural identities with which Russia has engaged. Western values (specifically capitalism and hyperconsumerism) are most prominent in *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V”* and are portrayed as more negative. Pelevin’s negative void is founded in the postmodern realization that one is surrounded by empty simulacra that can no longer hide existential emptiness. Eastern values (especially Buddhism) are dominant in *Chapaev and*

¹⁶ See Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008) and Sergey Glebov, *From Empire to Eurasia: Politics, Scholarship, and Ideology in Russian Eurasianism, 1920s–1930s* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetskoi, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan and Other Essays on Russia’s Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1991), 166.

¹⁸ Translation from Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008), 32. “Культура России не есть ни культура европейская, ни одна из азиатских, ни сумма или механическое сочетание из элементов той и других.” Anonymous, *Evraziistvo (opyt sistematicheskogo izlozheniia)* (Paris: Evraziiskoe knigoizdatel’stvo, 1926), 32.

¹⁹ P. N. Savitskii, *Rossiia osobyi geograficheskii mir* (Prague: Evraziiskoe knigoizdatel’stvo, 1927), 57.

Pustota and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* and are portrayed as more positive. Pelevin's positive void suggests that achieving emptiness is desirable, since it transcends materialism and its ills. Chronologically, Pelevin vacillates between depicting a positive "eastern" void and then a negative "western void."

Hypothesis

In this work I propose to examine the following questions: (1) How much of this void is caused by the "postmodern condition" and how much is specifically rooted in Russian culture? (2) How does Pelevin engage the problem of "nothingness" and the void in his work (specifically in the major novels *Chapaev and Pustota*, *Generation "P,"* *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, and *Empire "V"*)? Why do these works vacillate between negative and positive types of voids? (3) What implications might this have for Russian culture?

I argue that by offering "the void" as both the problem and the solution in post-Soviet Russia, Pelevin is doing three things: engaging the conversation on the nature of Russian identity, deconstructing the binary model (which has influenced both Russian and western scholars' conversation on Russian culture), and articulating an idealistic project that creatively attempts to extract meaning from the paradoxes and contradictions of the present-day Russian condition.

Methodology

My methodology is interdisciplinary and contextual in that it makes use of literary, social, and intellectual history, formalism, psychological criticism, and religious studies. Thus its theoretical foundations stand on semiotics and the semiotic and cultural theory of Iurii Lotman,

the postmodernist theory of Baudrillard, Jameson, and Epstein, the analytical psychology of Jung, modern history, and Eastern Buddhist philosophical thought on the nature of the void. Pelevin's works themselves reference all of these approaches.

Literature Survey

Critics who write about Pelevin tend to focus on several central themes: identity, the nature of reality, and emptiness. Edith Clowes writes (*of Chapaev and Pustota*) that both time and space in the novel is ambiguous, suggesting disorientation. Both pre- and post-Soviet Russia have been replaced by dislocated spaces, such as an imaginary Moscow (seen in the fantasies of some of the mental patients) and Eurasia. Clowes believes that Pelevin parodies ideas like those of Aleksandr Dugin (who formed the modern Eurasia Movement in 2002); Dugin believes that the nation is everything and the individual is nothing. Clowes holds that Pelevin turns this on its head by positing the opposite: the Moscow (the state) at the end of the novel is a semiotic void of empty symbols and it is the patients who have each lost their individual Moscows.²⁰

Angela Brintlinger also explores the role of the individual in a post-collective society in *Chapaev and Pustota*. Brintlinger believes that Pelevin uses the madhouse as a stage to explore different modes of Russian individuality: there is “the philosophical loner who imagines he is a poet (Petr); the young homosexual who has fallen under the influence of Mexican soap opera and American film culture (Maria); the unemployed alcoholic who has raised drinking to an almost metaphysical level (Serdiuk); and the mafia boss who experiments with psychedelic drugs

²⁰ See Edith Clowes, “Illusory Empire: Viktor Pelevin’s Parody of Neo-Eurasianism,” in *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

(Volodin).”²¹ All of these “modes of individuality” are presented as choices available to the modern day Russian citizen, but Pelevin clearly favors this first mode, hence Petr was chosen as the main character.

Gerald McCausland, Sally Dalton-Brown, and Sofya Khagi have all written about national identity in Pelevin’s novels. Gerald McCausland sees an eagerness in Pelevin to return to “the same cursed questions” that have been worked over by so many minds before.²² In his 2006 dissertation, he uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to diagnose this national identity crisis and to analyze the difficulties involved in the struggle either to recover or to create a new and usable Russian identity for the twenty-first century. In her 2006 article “The Dialectics of Emptiness,” Dalton-Brown analyzes *Generation “P”* and suggests that Pelevin charts a process of “Deleuzian/Guattarian deterritorialization,” that is, the loss of content in the search for form, signified by the worship of that which is content-less and lacking in territory.²³ In *Generation “P,”* Pelevin’s characters do not even notice that capitalist advertising (particularly of Western brands) has merely taken the place of Soviet propaganda. In *Chapaev and Pustota*, a similar phenomenon has occurred: symbols of the Russian empire and the Soviet era have disappeared, leaving emptiness (“the best of all possible monuments”) in their place.²⁴ For Dalton-Brown, Pelevin is suggesting that there is a “void created from a void” in Russia, the result of a

²¹ Angela Brintlinger, “The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past,” *Slavic Review* 63, no. 1 (2004): 54.

²² Gerald Matthew McCausland, “The Post-Soviet Condition: Cultural Reconfigurations of Russian Identity” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2006), 146.

²³ Sally Dalton-Brown, “The Dialectics of Emptiness: Douglas Coupland’s and Viktor Pelevin’s Tales of Generation X and P,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 42, no. 3 (2006): 239.

²⁴ Viktor Pelevin, *Buddha’s Little Finger*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Viking, 2000), 324. “Бронзовый Пушкин исчез, но зияние пустоты, возникшее в месте, где он стоял, странным образом казалось лучшим из всех возможных памятников.” *Chapaev i Pustota* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996), 386. Hereafter *Buddha’s Little Finger* will be abbreviated *BLF* and *Chapaev i Pustota* as *CIP*.

continuous process of cultural appropriations from or imitations of the West.²⁵ *Of Empire “V”* she writes that, in Pelevin’s world, humans are kept in a “closed loop of desire,” which creates a “schizophrenic” (in the Jamesonian sense of the word) experience where individuals cannot map their social positions.²⁶ Sofya Khagi offers a similar argument: “Pelevin’s post-Soviet Russia is overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught of Western goods and media....The individual disappears in favor of a homogenous, mind-numbed mass.”²⁷ Thus the individual’s identity has been replaced by western consumerism on a nationwide scale.

Pelevin’s works also question the nature of reality, which some critics equate with solipsism. Pavel Basinskii criticized Pelevin for writing a novel (*Chapaev and Pustota*) in which the hero ignores post-Soviet Russia’s very real problems (e.g., the war in Chechnya and the threatened return of Communism to power) by creating his own reality.²⁸ McCausland believes that Pelevin represents the allure and dangers of a culture that seizes upon fantasy as a way out of the cultural conundrum (by fleeing the surrounding reality to a reality of one’s own making, “Inner Mongolia” for example).²⁹ Other critics have also recognized this danger. In 1997, the chairman of the jury for the Russian Booker Prize, Igor’ Shaitanov, eliminated *Chapaev and Pustota* from the competition, citing that such works are like a computer virus: “Works like this act like a cultural virus—they destroy the cultural memory.”³⁰

²⁵ Dalton-Brown, “The Dialectics of Emptiness,” 242.

²⁶ Sally Dalton-Brown, “Illusion-Money-Illusion: Viktor Pelevin and the ‘Closed Loop’ of the Vampire Novel,” *Slavonica* 17, no. 1 (2011): 33.

²⁷ Sofya Khagi, “From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Zapiens: Viktor Pelevin’s Consumer Dystopia,” *Russian Review* 67, no. 4 (2008): 560-61.

²⁸ Basinskii, “Iz zhizni otechestvennykh kaktusov,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 29, 1996. <http://pelevin.nov.ru/stati/o-dva/1.html>.

²⁹ McCausland, “The Post-Soviet Condition: Cultural Reconfigurations of Russian Identity.”

³⁰ Cited in Jason Cowley, “Gogol à Go-Go,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 23, 2000.

Audun Mørch takes a more positive view of Pelevin's questioning of reality. He examines myth in *Chapaev and Pustota* and suggests that Pelevin juxtaposes myth and reality.³¹ Mørch uses Barthes' conception of myth. For Barthes, myths are a living language that is essential for any popular understanding of all the phenomena of society and the world, including the complex Russian and Soviet mythology in *Chapaev and Pustota*.³² For Mørch, the most important implication of Pelevin's novel is that the myths that surround us cannot be distinguished from the real world—they *are* the real world.³³ N.N. Shneidman agrees with Mørch and notes that at the end of the novel, Petr himself realizes that it is impossible to distinguish between what is real and what is an illusion, because reality is itself an illusion.³⁴

Several critics have examined the theme of emptiness in Pelevin's works—in varying degrees. Boris Noordenbos gives a semiotic reading of *Generation "P"* and *Numbers (Числа, 2004)*. Using Lotman and Uspenskii's theory of binary models in Russian culture, Noordenbos shows how the collapse of the Soviet Union in the novels "often takes the shape of a crisis of signification, a problematic lack of signs to signify and comprehend the new Russia and, conversely, a lack of Russian substance behind the flood of Western texts and signs that started to penetrate the Russian world from the perestroika onward."³⁵ Using the concept of Lotman's semiosphere, Noordenbos notes that the heroes of the two novels simultaneously belong to two different semiospheres. He argues that "the ambivalent cultural, ideological and moral positions

³¹ Audun J. Mørch, "Reality as Myth: Pelevin's Čapaev i Pustota," *Scando-Slavica* 51 (2005): 64.

³² *Ibid.*, 65.

³³ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁴ N. N. Shneidman, *Russian Literature, 1995–2002: On the Threshold of the New Millennium* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 93.

³⁵ Boris Noordenbos, "Breaking into a New Era? A Cultural-Semiotic Reading of Viktor Pelevin," *Russian, Croatian and Serbian, Czech and Slovak, Polish Literature* 64, no. 1 (2008): 87.

of the writer's characters make them perfect cultural translators. They perform the task of the semiosphere's border, the filtering membrane that fits foreign texts into the internal structure of the semiotic space."³⁶ In *Generation "P,"* the hero is unable to form a synthesis of his two semiospheres, the Soviet and post-Soviet—he abandons his Soviet-era dreams of becoming a poet and instead adopts a new, western identity as a public relations magnate in post-Soviet Russia.³⁷

Rajendra Chitnis notes that in *Chapaev and Pustota*, children are able to accept emptiness, but adults can no longer accept the reality of the void and seek to fill it with their own inventions. Chitnis uses his own translation of Pelevin, rather than Bromfield's: "While all the idiot adults are busy reconstructing the world they have invented, children continue to live in reality—amid the snowy hills and sunlight, on the black mirrors of frozen reservoirs and in the mystical silence of nocturnal, snow-covered yards."³⁸ Pelevin aspires to return to a child's way of thinking because a child's mind is liberated from the attachment to a substantial reality.³⁹ In this sense, emptiness is positive because it is transcendent.

Noordenbos and Chitnis both touch on an important aspect of emptiness in Pelevin—creation out of the void. In an interview with Sally Laird (recorded in December 1993 and June 1994) and in a separate interview with Clark Blaise (in 1996), Pelevin admits that for him

³⁶ Ibid., 97.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rajendra A. Chitnis, "Learning to Live with Emptiness: Viktor Pelevin, Václav Kahuda, Vlado Balla," in *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech, and Slovak Fiction of the Changes, 1988–1998*, ed. Rajendra A. Chitnis (Abingdon, UK: RoutledgeCurzon, 1995), 137. "Пока идиоты взрослые заняты переустройством выдуманного ими мира, дети продолжает жить в реальности—среди снежных гор и солнечного света, на черных зеркалах замерзших водоемов и в мистической тишине заснеженных ночных дворов." Pelevin, *CIP*, 88.

³⁹ Chitnis, "Learning to Live with Emptiness," 138.

writing is creating something out of nothing and being able to create a whole other reality and transform it any way one wants.⁴⁰ Other critics have also paid specific attention to Pelevin's productive characterization of emptiness.

Mark Lipovetsky has written extensively on Pelevin. He notes that while postmodernism of the 1960s–80s was concerned with revealing the simulative nature of reality, for Pelevin this is just a starting point for further reflection. Pelevin is not interested in the transformation of reality into simulacra, but just the opposite: the birth of reality out of simulacra.⁴¹ In 2001, Lipovetsky identified two prominent trends in 1990s Russian postmodernist literature: conceptualism and the neo-baroque. Both schools were reactions “to the crisis of ideological language.”⁴² That is, they both attempted to restore the reality that had been destroyed by the increasing aggression of simulacra and the hyperreal. Lipovetsky characterized Pelevin as belonging to the neo-baroque trend, which tries to “re-mythologize cultural ruins and fragments.”⁴³ Lipovetsky notes, however, that contrary to Pelevin's previous neo-baroque works, Pelevin fails in *Generation “P”* to provide a new myth to replace the void created by the simulacra produced by Soviet ideology. I argue that Pelevin indeed presents the void as undesirable in *Generation “P”* compared to the more positive view of the void in *Chapaev and Pustota*.

Gerald McCausland also recognizes that Pelevin treats the void left by the disappearance

⁴⁰ Sally Laird, “Viktor Pelevin,” in *Voices of Russian Literature: Interviews with Ten Contemporary Writers* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1999), 185. Viktor Pelevin, interview by Clair Blaise, *Iowa Digital Library*, 1996, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/ref/collection/vwu/id/1949>.

⁴¹ Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue With Chaos* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 196.

⁴² Mark Lipovetsky, “Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 79, no. 1 (2001): 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

of the Soviet Union differently than his contemporaries. Like many sots-artists (to include painters, prose writers, and poets), McCausland argues, Pelevin

can only seem to create out of the raw material left behind by the only reality he knew—Soviet reality. Unlike the others, however, Pelevin has no need to neutralize or aestheticize this material as autonomous aesthetic objects. With daring and bravado, Pelevin deforms, reforms, and builds a new cultural edifice out of the rubble of the old, the outdated, the discredited, the foreign, and the cheap.⁴⁴

Aleksandr Genis adds, “Pelevin builds instead of destroying. Using the same broken remnants of the Soviet myth as [Vladimir] Sorokin, he creates fabulous conceptual constructions.”⁴⁵

Lipovetsky, McCausland, and Genis all recognize that Pelevin’s works are similar to sots-artists and conceptualists in that Pelevin takes old Soviet myths and tears off their masks to reveal the void beneath them. These critics also agree that Pelevin takes things one step further and attempts to build new myths out of this same void.

Meghan Vicks’s 2011 dissertation and her subsequent 2015 volume, *Narratives of Nothing in Twentieth Century Literature*, are the first in-depth studies of the void in Pelevin. Vicks examines the link between “nothing,” being, and narrative. Analyzing Pelevin’s *Chapaev and Pustota*, *Generation “P,”* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, Vicks shows how the author engages with both a nihilistic nothing and a positive, transcendent nothing that can serve as a creative force. While others have noted a contemporary trend of “the emptying of Russian literary logos of meaning,” Vicks points out that Pelevin presents the void as the highest form of meaning. By positing the void as “the truest reality, Pelevin’s novels recuperate literature’s

⁴⁴ Gerald Matthew McCausland, “Viktor Pelevin and the End of Sots-Art,” in *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, eds. Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgeny Dobrenko (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 236.

⁴⁵ Alexander Genis, “Colonizing Chaos: Russian Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century,” *Russian Culture* 17 (2012): 27.

ability to convey meaning....”⁴⁶ She also concludes that, in Pelevin’s works, “nothing” is both signifier and signified, mutually informing one another. Although I had already developed my dissertation topic of “the void in Pelevin,” Vicks’s dissertation confirmed for me that the topic had merit and encouraged me to delve deeper.

This project has also given me the opportunity to increase my knowledge of Buddhism; this, however, was a lengthy process. For a general overview of the Buddhist religious narrative, I relied on Macmillan’s *Encyclopedia of Religion* and select passages from Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson’s *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*. Peter Harvey’s *Introduction to Buddhism* was an excellent resource for defining specific terms.

Barry Magid’s *Ordinary Mind: Exploring the Common Ground of Zen and Psychoanalysis* was an excellent introduction to Zen and how Zen meditative practices relate to the self (or non-self) and identity. Likewise, T.P. Kasulis’s *Zen Action/Zen Person* examines the self/non-self in Zen. Kasulis’s volume also provided excellent summaries and interpretations of the work of Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150–c. 250 BCE), especially regarding Buddhist emptiness and the shortcomings of language to depict reality.

Finally, two sources gave me an understanding of Buddhism in the context of the West. Carl Jung’s “Psychological Commentaries on ‘The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation’ and ‘The Tibetan Book of the Dead’” characterizes eastern and western spiritual thought as being introverted and extroverted (respectively), based on where one searches for redemption. Roger-Pol Droit’s *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha* examines the western understanding of Buddhism. He shows that many nineteenth-century philosophers characterized Buddhism as the religion that negated the world, giving rise to the belief that Buddhism was a

⁴⁶ Meghan Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing in 20th-Century Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 173.

nihilistic religion. Droit argues, however, that these fears about Buddhism were a reflection of religious, social, and economic events occurring in Europe at the time.

Challenges

I experienced two main roadblocks trying to complete this project. The first, already mentioned, was my lack of detailed knowledge of Buddhism. The second was the difficulty that arises when researching a living author. Pelevin rarely grants interviews and, when he does, he evades questions about his literary influences. Because Pelevin avoids the public eye, very little is known about him; moreover, he is the constant subject of numerous rumors, as mentioned earlier. Finally, as a living author, Pelevin does not have an archive containing drafts of manuscripts, journals, library catalogs, personal correspondence, etc. Consequently, ambiguous areas of Pelevin's texts (for example, the ending of *Chapaev and Pustota*) remain ambiguous.

Chapter Description

Chapter 1, "A History of Russian Emptiness" describes the postmodern "crisis of signification," in which words have lost their power to convey meaning about one's reality. I provide a brief overview of semiotics, focusing on the binary sign composed of a signifier and signified. I trace how this structuralist model breaks down in the postmodern period, leaving "empty signs" (signifiers without signifieds). Together, these empty signifiers and the reduction of reality to simulacra create the void that features prominently in postmodern life as well as in Pelevin's novels.

I argue that while simulacra and empty signifiers are usually found in the postmodern period in the West, they have always been found in Russian culture. The remainder of chapter 1

looks at these voids in Russian culture from the time of Peter I (r. 1672–1725) to the present, taking a few examples from Russian history (such as Peter I’s Westernization project) and demonstrating how they were treated in Russian literature. Finally, using two of Pelevin’s early works (“Ukhriab” and *Omon Ra*), I argue that Pelevin’s treatment of the void is in dialogue with that of his contemporaries and predecessors.

Chapter 2, “The Chaos and Terror of Emptiness” examines how Pelevin’s novels *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V”* reflect the collective void felt after the collapse of the Soviet grand narrative and how they attempt to reconceptualize the “western” capitalist grand narrative in Russia. In an attempt to fill the void that communism left, Pelevin’s characters turn to capitalism, but the author shows repeatedly that wealth and materialism are hollow.

Advertisements are selling simulacra—images with no basis in reality. In addition, both Tatarskii in *Generation “P”* and Rama in *Empire “V”* become aware that capitalism traps people in a vicious cycle of desire and consumption. Although Tatarskii and Rama seem to transcend this cycle, they also perpetuate it, and they themselves are still subject to the will of higher beings.

Chapter 3, “Transcendence in the Void” looks at how Pelevin attempts to construct a positive narrative of emptiness his novels *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*. In these novels, material reality is illusory in the Buddhist sense. Man still perpetuates his own deceptive illusions, but the *entire world* and its reality is revealed to be illusory and something to be transcended. Buddhism proposes a different way of viewing the world, one in which binaries (such as signifier/signified) are not operational and where meaning is not found in grand narratives (such as communism or capitalism), but rather in emptiness. Buddhism resolves many of the problems Pelevin presents in the novels of chapter 2: it not only avoids the problem of material objects and words being illusory, but it also solves the problem of simulacra. If *all*

signifiers (words and images) are illusory, then the distinction between the authentic person/place/thing and its simulacrum is moot.

Finally, the Conclusion ties the previous chapters together by showing how Pelevin's treatment of the void undermines the binary cultural model and provides a third space for the individual (and the collective) to form new notions of identity.

Purpose and Contribution

While some critics may say otherwise, my research shows that Pelevin *is* a serious writer and deals with serious themes, although often in a way that seems to strive for mass appeal; he nevertheless offers much to the serious reader. His works discuss topics that Russian readers intuitively know are important. This project not only elucidates important aspects of contemporary Russian culture but also engages the humanities in the broadest sense. Post-Soviet literature does not merely stake out its own, and some would say small, intellectual corner of a former world power; it contributes to a larger national Russian project that attempts to reinterpret and rebuild ethnic and cultural identity, restore cultural memory, and deal with the traumas that follow in the wake of a failed state. Pelevin's voice informs this post-Soviet project and suggests how Russians might make spiritual, intellectual, and personal sense of the world in which they now live. One cannot understand the nature of change in Russia without considering the historical power of Russian literature to mold national consciousness and behaviors. My dissertation looks at Pelevin's contribution to this national project.

Similarly, one cannot understand the motivations behind Vladimir Putin's Eurasian Union (a customs union that some believe has revanchist ambitions) without understanding the inertia of the long-existing binaries of Russian culture. More recently, Putin has used technology

and postmodern concepts such as simulacra very deftly. According to journalist Peter Pomerantsev, Putin is “whatever Russians need him to be.”⁴⁷ Photos of Putin shirtless, hunting tigers, are love letters to fatherless girls, his tough-guy talk appeals to petty gangsters. In an essay titled “Why We’re Post-Fact,” Pomerantsev recently compared Donald Trump’s “alternative fact” tactics to Putin’s own strategies and (to some extent) blamed postmodernism and critical theory:

This equaling out of truth and falsehood is both informed by and takes advantage of an all-permeating late post-modernism and relativism, which has trickled down over the past thirty years from academia to the media and then everywhere else. This school of thought has taken Nietzsche’s maxim, there are no facts, only interpretations, to mean that every version of events is just another narrative, where lies can be excused as ‘an alternative point of view’ or ‘an opinion’, because ‘it’s all relative’ and ‘everyone has their own truth’ (and on the internet they really do).⁴⁸

Today the simulated politicians in Pelevin’s *Generation “P”* are relevant not only in Russia (a country with a long history of simulation), but in our own society as well.

⁴⁷ Miriam Elder, review of *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, by Peter Pomerantsev,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/books/review/nothing-is-true-and-everything-is-possible-by-peter-pomerantsev.html>.

⁴⁸ Peter Pomerantsev, “Why We’re Post-Fact,” *Granta*, July 20, 2016, <https://granta.com/why-were-post-fact/>.

Chapter 1:

A History of Russian Emptiness

*Россия—это большой сумасшедший дом, где на двери висит большой амбарный замок, зато стены нету;
где потолки низкие, зато вместо пола—бездна под ногами....*

—Tat'iana Tolstaia, "Russkii mir" (1993)

Semiotics and Emptiness

At the heart of Pelevin's novels is language and the way we use it to construct meaning—in particular, the way we deal with the postmodern crisis of signification and the dilemma of language *losing* its ability to convey meaning. This distortion of language is common to all industrialized societies; it is informed by both structural linguistics (which examines language as a system of interrelated structures) and semiotics (the study of signs including words, sounds, and images). This dissertation begins with a brief overview of the linguistic concept of "the sign" and the methodology of semiotics, which looks at how signs convey meaning and build the relationship between language and reality—a topic that has interested humans since at least the

late fifth century BCE.⁴⁹ This overview will help the reader understand the environment in which Pelevin's characters find themselves, for it is the inability to derive meaning from one's surroundings that precipitates the plot of the novels examined here.

For most of the twentieth century, structural linguistics was dominated by the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). He defined the sign as a form made up of a *signifier* (the physical form—sounds, letters, gestures, etc.) and the *signified* (the concept or image to which the signifier refers). The connection between the signifier and signified was, according to Saussure, an arbitrary one. That is, human beings established the relationship at random. A classic example is that English-speakers use the signifier “tree” to designate “an arboreal plant” but it could just as easily be *дерево*, *Baum*, or some other completely invented term. The important thing is that the members of the community using the term agree on the concept or object it references.

Another key figure in structural linguistics was C.S. Peirce (1839–1914). Peirce described the sign as having three distinct parts (as opposed to Saussure's two): the *representamen* (the physical entity which does the representing, comparable to Saussure's signifier), the *object* (an object removed from its real-world context), and the *interpretant* (the meaning one derives from a sign). Peirce's inclusion of the interpretant suggested that some negotiation of meaning was possible according to the particular sign-user and the context of the sign.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See Plato's *Cratylus*. For the sake of expediency I will not discuss the theories of philosophers that deal with epistemological concerns such as Kant's assumption that reality is mediated by our faculties (see *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781) or Hegel's claim that the immediacy of subject-object relations is illusory (see *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807).

⁵⁰ Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 6.

In the twentieth century, theorists began applying Saussure's and Peirce's structural linguistics theories to fields other than linguistics, leading, in the 1950s and 1960s, to structuralism as a critical mode. Structuralism was organized around the centrality of the linguistic model. What the structuralists took away from Saussure was his notion that the sign is a relationship between two related elements.⁵¹ Language is built on these relationships; because language is the basis for our comprehension of reality, all of reality is based on similar relationships. Thus language is the only means of accessing reality. Even the unconscious, according to Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), is permeated by language.⁵²

The rise of postmodernism began in the later 1960s, when several structuralists theorized a breakdown in the sign. These *post*-structuralists rejected the idea that the structural frameworks could serve as a grand master system for explaining reality. These constructs, they argued, are fictitious and even the search for some overarching order or Truth is absurd because there can be no Truth. The binary sign (sign = signifier + signified) could not possibly reflect reality and could no longer be trusted.

In 1957 Roland Barthes (1915–1980) described signifiers that were “floating”; that is, these signifiers were not attached to definite signifieds.⁵³ “Floating” or “empty” signifiers are variously described as signifiers with ambiguous or non-existent signifieds. Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) wrote that, although signifiers seem like stable concepts, they are not stable in our minds. A word does not have an inherent meaning; there is a gap between the signifier and the signified. The word produces meaning because we distinguish it in a series of differences from

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 35.

⁵² Jacques Lacan, “L’*étourdit*,” trans. C. Gallagher, *The Letter* 41 (2009). “The unconscious is structured like a language....”

⁵³ Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 132.

other words. Thus, each signifier produces more signifiers, with the result that meaning is constantly slipping along a “chain of signifiers.”⁵⁴ In a 1955–56 seminar, Lacan applied post-structuralist ideas to psychoanalysis to develop a new theory of personality. Despite the fact that the signified is constantly slipping under a chain of signifiers, Lacan writes that there are certain points of attachment between the signifier and signified where slippage is temporarily halted. A person needs a certain number of these anchor points (*points de capiton*) to be considered “normal.” When these points are not established (i.e., when the signified constantly slips under the signifier, resulting in a crisis of signification), the person falls into a state of psychosis or schizophrenia.⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson (1934–) would later build on Lacan’s understanding of schizophrenia in semiotic terms, suggesting it not only as a clinical diagnosis but also as a model for understanding the postmodern sociocultural condition. Jameson’s work is inextricably tied to theories on capitalism and identity and will be discussed further in chapter 2.

Post-structuralist Jean Baudrillard’s (1929–2007) elaborations on the concept of the simulacrum are perhaps the most important for understanding the works of Pelevin. A simulacrum is the product of simulation. It is something that has the appearance of an object, but does not possess its substance. In other words, it is a surface-level imitation. Simulation and simulacra became widespread phenomena with the advent of the television and mass media. Baudrillard claims that when speech and writing were first created, signs (or images) reflected “basic reality.” As advertising and commodification set in, however, signs were no longer used only for *communication*, but for *representation* as well. The relationship between signifier and signified eroded to a point where the image started to distort and then conceal reality. Ultimately,

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁵⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Book III: The Psychoses* (New York: Norton, 1993).

the image shared no relation to reality whatsoever—it was its own simulacrum.⁵⁶ In simpler terms, we entered the postmodern age of “hyperreality.” Hyperreality denotes the inability of consciousness to differentiate reality from fantasy and is especially common in technologically, advanced postmodern cultures. In this stage of representation, various types of media (e.g., commercials, music videos, films, television, etc.) appear real but actually mask the absence of reality.

An example of hyperreality is necessary to demonstrate its significance. One such example of hyperreality can be found among the countless spheres of artificiality described by semiotician Umberto Eco in his 1975 essay “Travels in Hyperreality.” In the Museum of the City of New York gift shop Eco encounters facsimiles of historical documents—including a bill of sale for Manhattan. In addition to looking and feeling “old,” the reproduction is also scented with old spices. Nearly authentic in appearance, “the Manhattan purchase contract, penned in pseudo-antique characters, is in English, whereas the original was in Dutch.”⁵⁷ Had the document been left in its original Dutch little meaning could have been culled by the average visitor. Thus, the visitor leaves believing he has really experienced the Manhattan bill of sale, although, according to Eco, he has experienced nothing. The example of the Manhattan bill of sale illustrates that more is transpiring than the transmission of meaning. In Eco’s opinion it is not the intention of these institutions to provide the reproduction to stimulate one’s interest in the original, but rather they provide the reproduction *as a replacement* (a bigger and better one at that).

⁵⁶ Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” 178.

Baudrillard uses Disneyland as the ultimate example of a simulacrum—it “is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real....” (172).

⁵⁷ Umberto Eco, “Travels in Hyperreality,” in *Travels in Hyperreality* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1986), 11.

Baudrillard clearly differentiates mere imitation from simulation. An imitation is understood to be *separate* from the original item or action that is being imitated. Simulation, however, is “the place of a gigantic enterprise of manipulation.” He writes, “to simulate is not simply to feign...feigning or dissimulation leaves the reality intact...whereas simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary.’”⁵⁸ For Baudrillard, simulation produces a world in which the signifier does not point to a signified, only to another signifier. In other words, the signifier no longer points to a referent based in reality: the signifier has become the sole reality.

While the West was developing these theories about sign systems, the East was developing their own unique perspective. In 1964, prominent Russian semiotician Iurii Lotman (1922–1993), a leading member of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, expanded Saussure’s theory of the sign and developed a semiotic theory of culture. Lotman (with Boris Uspenskii) characterized Russian cultural evolution as binary; i.e., one cultural system is replaced with a completely new one. Lotman and Uspenskii describe two different scenarios of how this occurs. The first variety is a total transformation of the cultural structures—a complete 180-degree change. Pelevin alludes to this type of transformation in the novel *Empire “V,”* where Rama compares such changes to the film franchise *Aliens*:

In the film a more efficient form of life has developed inside another organism and after some time reveals itself in an original and unexpected way. Much the same happened in Russian history, except that the process occurred not just once but cyclically, as each successive monster hatched inside the stomach of its predecessor.... If Europe could be seen as a succession of identical personages trying desperately to adapt their decrepit frames to the fresh demands of the moment, Russia was eternally young – but her youth could only be maintained by wholesale rejections of her former identity, because each

⁵⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983), 5.

new monster at the moment of its birth ripped its predecessor into shreds, and (in accord with the laws of physics) began by being smaller but quickly gained weight.⁵⁹

The second type involves a superficial “re-naming,” in which the old cultural structures are preserved but a new text is mapped onto the old cultural skeleton.⁶⁰ Pelevin relates these superficial changes to emptiness:

I have a suspicion that at the heart of Russia generally nothing is happening. But something else is happening—the same little demon comes to visit you, who dresses up as a commissioner, or a traveling salesman, or a robber, or an FSB agent. The main task of this little demon is to throw dust in your eyes, to force you to believe that the poles are changing, all the while changing only his attire....⁶¹

This superficial renaming of things (changing of signifiers) figures prominently in *Generation “P,”* where signifiers (i.e., images, words) take precedence over signifieds (i.e., meanings).

⁵⁹ Viktor Pelevin, *Empire V: The Prince of Hamlet*, trans. Anthony Phillips (London: Gollancz, 2016), 365. “В фильме эффективная форма жизни зарождалась внутри чужого организма и через некоторое время заявляла о себе оригинальным и неожиданным способом. В российской истории происходило то же самое, только этот процесс был не однократным, а циклично-рутинным, и каждый очередной монстр вызревал в животе у предыдущего... Если Европа была компанией одних и тех же персонажей, пытающихся приспособить свои дряхлеющие телеса к новым требованиям момента, Россия была вечно молодой - но эта молодость доставалась ценой полного отказа от идентичности, потому что каждый новый монстр разрывал прежнего в клочья при своем рождении (и, в полном соответствии с законами физики, сначала был меньшего размера - но быстро набирал вес). Viktor Pelevin, *Empire “V”: Povest' o nastoiashchem sverkhcheloveke* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009), 385–6. Hereafter the English translation of *Empire “V”* will be referred to as *EVPH* and the Russian original as *EVPNS*.

⁶⁰ B.A. Uspenskii and Iu.M. Lotman, “Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (To the End of the 18th Century),” 36.

⁶¹ Translation by Rosie Tweddle, in Dina Khapaeva, *Nightmare: From Literary Experiments to Cultural Projects*, trans. Rosie Tweddle (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013), 61. “У меня есть подозрение, что на уровне сути в России вообще ничего не происходит. Происходит нечто другое—к вам в гости постоянно приходит один и тот же мелкий бес, который наряжается то комиссаром, то коммивояжером, то бандитом, то эфэбешником. Главная задача этого мелкого беса в том, чтобы запудрить вам мозги, заставить поверить, что меняются полюса, в то время как меняются только его наряды.” “Viktor Pelevin: istoriia Rossii—eto prosto istoriia mody,” *Gazeta.ru*, September 2, 2003, <https://www.gazeta.ru/2003/09/02/viktorpelevi.shtml>.

Lotman believes that Russia's "binary self-consciousness" leaves it prone to this "explosive" type of 180-degree change.⁶² However, in *Culture and Explosion*, Lotman hints that Russia does not have to be caught up in these binary models forever:

The radical change in relations between Eastern and Western Europe, which is taking place before our very eyes may, perhaps, provide us with the opportunity to pass into a ternary, Pan-European system and to forego the ideal of destroying "the old world to its very foundations, and then" constructing a new one on its ruins.⁶³

Later in his career, Lotman attempted to move semiotics away from the concept of a binary sign and instead offered a four-dimensional model of semiotics based on his concept of the "semiosphere"—the space inside which all communication takes place. Lotman defines the semiosphere as "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages; in a sense the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages."⁶⁴ The semiosphere is also marked by a porous boundary, through which non-native languages can pass in translated or borrowed form. Change occurs within a cultural system when new information enters through this boundary and works its way from the periphery of the semiosphere (where it remains an outlying idea) to the center (where it becomes a prominent idea). Lotman argues that these changes can be gradual or explosive.

Pelevin's works rely on Lotman's theory of binary models. The beginning of *Generation "P"* notes that the late 1990s were marked by a "strange uncertainty."⁶⁵ This presupposes that

⁶² Iu M. Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, trans. Wilma Clark (Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 173.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶⁴ Iu.M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1990), 123.

Lotman uses the term "language" to denote *any* system of communication.

⁶⁵ Translation mine. "Во всем царил страшноватая неопределенность." Viktor Pelevin, *Generation "P"* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), 17. Hereafter *Generation "P"* will be referred to as *GP*.

the late 1990s were a transitional period situated between the Soviet Union and the next “big idea” that had yet to come. Boris Noordenbos has noted that “Pelevin repeatedly demonstrates how new meaning and identity is created in the crumple zones of dually presented temporal, ideological, cultural, moral and gender oppositions....”⁶⁶ Whether the binary model is still operating in post-Soviet Russia is almost moot; in Pelevin’s works the model has become subject to postmodernist play.

This brief overview of semiotics began with a narrow, linguistic definition of the sign and progressed to a point in which the sign is viewed as a primary factor in the formulation of (or the inability to formulate) meaning and identity. This devolution of the sign from a bearer of meaning to that of an empty symbol is something that, in the West, is seen as symptomatic of postmodernism and its accompanying “crisis of signification.” One is surrounded by empty symbols—there are signifiers, but no signifieds—and so it becomes difficult to make sense of the world. In western literature, postmodernism begins in the late 1950s; in Russian literature, arguably, in the late 1960s.⁶⁷ One expects to see simulation and simulacra in Russia dating from this time period. However, unlike in the West, simulation occurs *much* earlier in Russia’s history and there is a long tradition of Russian writers and thinkers trying to make sense of words and symbols that they perceive of as “empty.”

⁶⁶ Noordenbos, “Breaking into a New Era? A Cultural-Semiotic Reading of Viktor Pelevin,” 86.

⁶⁷ Hans Bertens writes that the term “postmodernism” began appearing in literary criticism in the 1950s. See Johannes Willem Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Regarding postmodernism in Russia, Sergey Kuznetsov writes that there were many authors whose works would have been considered postmodernist dating from the 1960s but they were usually referred to as “modernist” or “avant-garde.” The term “postmodernism” was not used before the Gorbachev era. Both authors and readers preferred terms such as “modernist” or “conceptualist.” Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moskva-Petushki* (1969) and Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkinskii Dom* (1978) are two examples of early Russian postmodernist prose. Sergey Kuznetsov, “Postmodernism in Russia,” in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, eds. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997), 451.

Russian Emptiness

In the years between the late 1960s and the final collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia found itself plagued by the inability of language to convey meaning in two major and distinct ways. The first was the crisis of signification described above as an epiphenomenon of postmodernism. The second, however, was a specifically Soviet phenomenon: language suffered from the Soviet practice of spouting meaningless political jargon, images, and slogans. When the Soviet Project imploded, so did the big ideas associated with it. The grand narratives that Soviet citizens has been told for seventy years were now null and void, leaving behind only empty words and images—statues of Lenin looking into a future that would never come, posters that proclaimed that “Lenin Lives,” billboards that informed viewers that “The Party and the People are One,” socialist realist novels that depicted reality as it should be but not as it was, and so on. The ubiquity of empty signs made it difficult to extract relevant meaning about reality. The result was a growing void of meaning.

The philosopher and culturologist Mikhail Epstein (1950–) has written the most lucid description of “emptiness,” or the void, as it relates to Russian postmodernism and post-Soviet reality. Epstein’s theories are not “canonical” statements on the topic Russian postmodernism. Mikhail Berg, for example, has criticized Epstein in his volume *Literocracy: Issues of appropriation and redistribution of power in literature* (*Литературократия: Проблема присвоения и перераспределения власти в литературе*, 2000). To be sure, one could cite numerous critics who write specifically on Russian postmodernism.⁶⁸ What I find compelling about Epstein’s ideas is his insistence on engaging with the “void” when discussing Russian postmodernism.

⁶⁸ For example, Mark Lipovetsky, Viacheslav Kuritsyn, Irina Skoropanova, and others.

Epstein asserts that the Soviet period was a “lengthy period of transition between the modern and the postmodern.”⁶⁹ Mark Lipovetsky agrees with Epstein on this point, writing, “Indeed, the Socialist Realism overproduction of ideological images that replaced reality for the absolute majority of the Soviet people, can be compared with postmodernist simulation generated by the mass-media and the Internet.”⁷⁰ Susan Buck-Morss makes a similar point, although specifically in regards to the dissident movement in Russia: “In terms of postmodern culture there were ways one could argue that the Soviet Union was in advance of the rest of the world, having attained this new historical stage *before* the capitalist West. Political cynicism, anti-utopianism, distrust of all totalizing discourses—were not these characteristics of postmodernism already well established in Soviet dissident culture as part of the intellectual legacy of de-Stalinization?”⁷¹

In the Soviet period, Epstein argues, “socialist realism was socialist reality to the same degree, since it appeared as the image and model of itself.”⁷² Actual factories were perceived as the models on which they had been built. Whether reality and socialist realism corresponded, in fact, is another matter. Socialist realism was supposed to be a “truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development.”⁷³ This line appeared in the original definition mandated at the 1934 conference of the Writers Union and remained in all subsequent

⁶⁹ Mikhail Epstein, “Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art,” in *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, ed. Marina Balina (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 22.

⁷⁰ Lipovetsky, “Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s,” 34.

⁷¹ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 232–3.

⁷² Epstein, “Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art,” 7.

⁷³ “Правдивого, исторически-конкретного изображения действительности в её революционном развитии.” Stanislav Lesnevskii and Vladimir Voronov, eds., *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei, 1934: stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990), 3.

versions of the official definition. The very wording implies that actual reality had no “being” but exists only in the dynamic process of “becoming.” As Andrei Siniavskii (1925—1997) snidely wrote in his essay “On Socialist Realism” (1959), “We represent life as we would like it to be and as it is bound to become, when it bows to the logic of Marxism.” Socialist realist authors are not embellishing life; rather they are showing “the seeds of the future it contains.”⁷⁴ Boris Groys notes that authors of socialist realist novels did not “portray” its positive (or negative) heroes but rather “incarnated” them; for they did not exist in reality.

In and of themselves the positive and negative heroes have no external appearance, because they express transcendental demiurgic forces. However, to demonstrate these forces in a manner that is “intelligible to the people”...they must be symbolized, incarnated, set upon a stage. Hence the constant concern of socialist realist aesthetics with verisimilitude. Its heroes...must thoroughly resemble people if people are not to be frightened by their true aspect, and this is why the writers and artists of socialist realism constantly bustle about inventing biographies, habits, clothing, physiognomies, and so on. They almost seem to be in the employ of some sort of extraterrestrial bureau planning a trip to Earth—they want to make their envoys as anthropomorphic as possible, but they cannot keep the otherworldly void from gapping through all the cracks in the mask.⁷⁵

Although we have not reached an era that most would designate as postmodern, we have a culture dominated by simulacra: signs that do not correspond with reality.

In fact, much of Soviet reality consisted of twentieth-century Potemkin villages, where the idea or the model was considered “good enough” and never finished the “becoming” stage to become reality. For example, in a 2013 *New York Times* piece, Ellen Barry describes the Soviet era infrastructure in a town where there are “secondary roads that exist on maps but were never

⁷⁴ Abram Tertz, “On Socialist Realism,” in *The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1960), 200–1.

⁷⁵ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic, Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 63.

actually built.”⁷⁶ This example highlights the degree to which Soviet reality was dominated by “signness” (*знаковость*): signifieds disappeared (or perhaps, never existed) leaving only signifiers, which have become self-referential. This was a significant departure from previous ideologies, which strove toward a new reality and competed with the existing reality. Communism and socialist realism created *hyperrealities*, which strove to replace the existing reality altogether.⁷⁷

Epstein’s argument is that communism did not yet have the technology to create perfect simulacra to create the illusion of a completely transformed, new reality and so it was necessary to violently destroy the old reality. By the time Russia reached the state of mature postmodernism, it was no longer necessary to physically alter reality to match some ideology. Postmodernism is “the kind of ideology that has no need of ideology itself, having replaced it with video technology.”⁷⁸ While communism still relied on the notions that ideas would transform reality, postmodernism posits that there is no reality other than ideas (or words or images) themselves.

One can demonstrate that postmodernism posits a lack of meaning by denying the existence of signifieds; however, Epstein argues that this process is not all that different from communist theory, which critiqued metaphysics in a “negative dialectics.” Soviet Communism was unable to resolve a thesis and antithesis by producing a synthesis. This is consistent with Lotman’s hypothesis that periods of cultural explosions operate differently in Russia (a binary culture that does not tolerate neutral semiotic space) than in the West (a ternary culture that

⁷⁶ Ellen Barry, “The Russia Left Behind: A Journey Through the Heartland on the Slow Road to Ruin,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/10/13/russia/>.

⁷⁷ Epstein, “Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art,” 6–7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

accommodates the compromise that synthesis requires). Soviet Communists foundered in the antithesis where they, almost apophatically, tried to define ideological truth by negating other theses. The result was that *every* positive thesis (such as Trotskyism, Bukharinism, Deborinism, voluntarism, and revisionism) seemed to fall either to the left or the right of this “presumed truth,” which lay not in the center but nowhere.⁷⁹ This type of negative dialectics marked the collapse of dialectics, in which concepts could never develop to “full determinateness”; they were reduced to an “infinite nothing.”⁸⁰

This “nothingness” produced by stalled communist dialectics may not have been intentional, but its successor—postmodern deconstruction—certainly was. Deconstruction is the revelation that *any* rational idea or judgment is incomplete or inadequate. It reduces all signifieds (concepts and ideas) to signifiers (indexical signs, i.e., words, nominations, images) and allows for the free play of these signifiers. Instead of a signifier pointing to some kind of underlying reality, postmodernism claims it only points to another signifier (see above segment on post-structuralism). Thus, the formulation of a higher Truth is unnecessary and untenable because there *is* no higher Truth.

Epstein has noted a tendency to simulacra throughout Russian history, with the emphasis on building some semblance of a particular reality with the hope being that the “actual” reality will soon follow. Often, the initial concept “is more real than the production brought forth by that plan.”⁸¹ Thomas Seifrid has also noted that

Russian culture does seem to be distinguished by a set of practices that work toward

⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 29n2.

⁸¹ Epstein, “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism,” 28.

producing the sign or facade of something in anticipation of obtaining its referent, only to stop there; and...this activity [is] often...state-sponsored or -directed and...linked somehow with the working out of national identity, because the nature or direction of “Russia” is somehow bound up in the facade that has been produced.⁸²

Although postmodernist doctrines came to Russia via the West, Epstein attributes the “readiness of Russian minds to immediately multiply and apply these doctrines to their native culture and make them a banner of spiritual renewal testifies to a certain innateness of postmodernism on Russian soil.”⁸³ Postmodernism as a concept may have come from the West, but Russia has *always* been governed by “postmodernist” principles of the inherent emptiness in culture: it is its normal, unmarked state.⁸⁴

By way of illustrating this important concept, I will examine several seemingly anachronistic postmodernist episodes in Russia’s history and literature. Emptiness is a huge theme in Russian literature, but I will limit my examples to those that fit the definition of the void, i.e., the emptiness resulting from empty signifiers and simulacra. This same emptiness pervades Pelevin’s works.

Historical Emptiness

Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725)

One could argue that emptiness has always existed in Russian culture. Epstein, for example, argues that Russia has produced simulacra since Prince Vladimir forcibly Christianized ancient Rus’ in 988: “The entire reality of pagan Rus disappeared when Prince Vladimir ordered

⁸² Thomas Seifrid, “‘Illusion’ and Its Workings in Modern Russian Culture,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (Summer, 2001): 205.

⁸³ Epstein, “Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art,” 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

the introduction of Christianity and briskly baptized the whole nation.”⁸⁵ Emptiness in *modern* Russian culture intensifies during the reign of Peter I, whose intense Westernization project essentially created an outward façade of a “European” Russia. Peter I’s Westernization project was particularly important because it represented a sharp break with Russia’s past national program, based largely on a religious mission. For Peter’s critics, the tsar’s Westernization project created an alternative timeline that serves as a counterfactual to many: what would Russian culture look like today had Peter not implemented his program? Geoffrey Hosking believes that the building of the Russian empire (“Rossiia”) impeded the development of the Russian nation (“Rus”).⁸⁶ He quotes culturologist Georgii Gachev, who writes, “*Rossiia* is the fate of *Rus*’. *Rossiia* is attraction, ideal and service—but also abyss and perdition. *Rossiia* uprooted the Russian people, enticed them away from *Rus*’, transformed the peasant into a soldier, an organizer, a boss, but no longer a husbandman.”⁸⁷ As a result of Peter’s new order, Russia’s “past was negated, turned into ‘nothing,’” voided in favor of a more western outlook.⁸⁸

Peter’s founding of St. Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland as a “window to the West” was key to his Westernization program. Peter conceived of St. Petersburg as a “*would-be* European city”⁸⁹; build the city, and the “European-ness” would follow (or be imposed).⁹⁰ In other words,

⁸⁵ Epstein, “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism,” 33.

⁸⁶ Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), xix.

Note that other scholars, in contrast, have argued that pre-Petrine Russian cultural traditions did not provide sufficient material for building a modern Russian nation, hence it was inevitable that modern Russia would rely excessively upon Western cultural traditions.

⁸⁷ Translation in Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*. Georgii Gachev, *Russkaia дума: portrety russkikh myslitelei* (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), 150–1.

⁸⁸ Seifrid, “‘Illusion’ and Its Workings in Modern Russian Culture,” 206.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

there was a void between the city's signifier (the city's European façades) and its signified (genuine "European-ness"). In 1839, over a century after the city's founding, the Marquis de Custine astutely noted, "the magnificence and immensity of St. Petersburg are tokens set up by the Russians to honor their *future* power...."⁹¹ What the Marquis is describing is essentially a simulacrum: a copy of something with no original.

By creating St. Petersburg *ex nihilo*, Peter's status was elevated to demiurge, mirroring God's own creation of the world out of nothingness. The similarities were not lost on the eighteenth-century court's official literati. Mikhail Vajskopf notes that, according to the eighteenth-century tradition, Peter not only brought forth a new capital from nothingness, but Russia itself "from non-existence into existence," a phrase which is borrowed directly from the Orthodox liturgy and suggests a void underlying both Petersburg and all of Russia.⁹²

Catherine the Great (r. 1762 – 1796)

Peter I conceived of Russia as a western power and required the nobility to act in accordance with his vision of a Europeanized Russia. This was not a natural evolution: the transition was imposed from above by fiat and the Russian nobility was forced to "imitate" Europeans. As in the case of the city of St. Petersburg, a gap stood between the reality of the Russian nobility (the signifier) and the ideal that the Russian nobility was supposed to represent, i.e., the European nobility (signified). This theatricality continued through the eighteenth century,

⁹⁰ Petersburg is one of many examples of Peter's "putting the cart before the horse." For example, against advice from European advisers, Peter founded an Academy of Sciences in Russia, which had neither a supporting network of lower educational institutions to support it nor native scholars that could staff it. See Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*, 89.

⁹¹ Astolphe de Custine, *Letters from Russia*, trans. Anka Muhlstein (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), 114; italics mine.

⁹² Mikhail Vajskopf, "Imperial Mythology and Negative Landscape in Dead Souls," in *Gøggøl: Exploring Absence; Negativity in 19th-century Russian Literature*, ed. Sven Spieker (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 1999), 104.

particularly during the reign of Catherine the Great. In his essay, “The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture,” Lotman described how the everyday life of the nobility in the eighteenth century mirrored artistic texts and was experienced aesthetically.⁹³ Lotman describes two types of behavior within developed cultures: (1) everyday social behavior which members of the group consider “natural”; and (2) ceremonial or nonpragmatic behavior. Natives of a particular culture learn the first type of behavior as children by direct immersion. The second type of behavior is learned like a foreign language: via grammars and rules.

Since the reign of Peter I, “the Russian nobility underwent a change far more profound than a simple shift in the customary social order. The area of subconscious, ‘natural’ behavior became a sphere in which teaching was needed.” Instructions were issued on proper social behavior; every Russian behavior that had come naturally was considered incorrect and was rejected and replaced with “correct” European rules. In Europe, this type of behavior would have been acquired via direct experience in early childhood. The Russian nobleman, however, had to learn a new code of behavior as an adult: “to behave properly was to behave like a foreigner, that is, in a somewhat artificial manner, according to the norms of somebody else’s way of life.” Lotman notes that this kind of phenomenon was not a straightforward “Europeanization” of everyday behavior. Once Western values were transferred to Russia, they gained currency. Just as mastering a foreign language raised one’s social status, imitating European values elevated one’s status in society. But in crossing the cultural border, these values were modified and reinterpreted by the receiving culture. Significantly, this behavior led to a semiotization of everyday life. Both the image of European life and the imitation that was ritualized in “play-

⁹³ Iu. M. Lotman, “The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture,” in *Semiotics and structuralism: Readings from the Soviet Union*, ed. Henryk Baran (New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976), 67.

acting of European life” operated simultaneously.⁹⁴

The trend of unnatural imitation in the second half of the eighteenth century was not unique to Russia. At that time, European culture had embraced neo-classicism, which strove to imitate (in a broad sense) the aesthetics of classical antiquity (e.g., harmony, order, balance, logic, decorum, etc.). Wanting to conform to European values at the time, Russia began to imitate the imitators. Priscilla Roosevelt has described how, during Catherine’s reign, the Russian nobility transformed their country estates into miniature, self-contained worlds of pleasure on European models. Pre-figuring what Baudrillard and Eco would describe as “hyperreality,” it was no longer enough to build a manor house in the English style; the nobility sought to create a miniature version of England itself. The Russian estate itself was also an imitation of the European-style estate in that it was not the natural result of local landownership and power. For the Russian nobility, power was almost entirely dependent on ties to the court, not land ownership. Catherine’s own estate at Tsarskoe Selo was foremost among these imitative estates. It contained four distinct “ideological worlds” (which, in turn, were replicated on individual private estates): a Chinese village, illustrating the world of “fancy and caprice”; neo-Gothic structures, evoking the world of “medieval melancholy”; Pavlosk served as a model estate; and finally, a “political garden,” which symbolized Catherine’s ambitions of annexing Crimea and gaining access to the Black Sea. This latter garden contained a lake in the shape of the Black Sea, lined with Russian, Turkish, and Moldavian pavilions.⁹⁵

One must consider Potemkin villages of Catherine’s reign in this same spirit. According to legend, during the reign of Catherine the Great (r. 1762–1796), one of her favorites, Grigorii

⁹⁴ Ibid., 68–70.

⁹⁵ Priscilla R. Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 37.

Potemkin, built false villages along the riverbanks to impress the Empress and an entourage of foreign dignitaries during their visit to the South, giving the illusion that the area was more prosperous than it actually was. Larry Wolff claims that “these illusionary transformations pointed to the fundamental illusion that governed all others on Catherine’s voyage to the Crimea: the illusion of civilization.”⁹⁶ Potemkin may have wanted to show what the village *would* look like in the near future, something akin to a model home used in real estate.⁹⁷ In a nutshell, Catherine was selling (and buying) an *image* to the West—a signifier with no underlying signified. What both scenarios have in common, however, is that false structures were erected to conceal emptiness, i.e., something that never existed to begin with.⁹⁸

The Nineteenth Century

Influenced by German idealist philosophy that started to penetrate into Russia in the 1820s, Russian writers and philosophers began reflecting on the nature of illusion in Russia and its implications for Russian identity.

Fichte, Schelling, and later on Hegel, all of whom became popular in Russia during the 1830s, blurred the distinction between things-in-themselves and things-as-perceived, asserting that the human mind not only interprets reality but also forms it. In this view, mind and ultimate reality were fundamentally of the same essence: any change in thought was a change in reality, and vice versa.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994), 131.

⁹⁷ Dimitri Shvidkovsky, *The Empress and the Architect: British Architecture and Gardens at the Court of Catherine the Great* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 143.

⁹⁸ Potemkin Villages continue to appear in contemporary Russia. When Vladimir Putin announced he would be visiting the city of Suzdal, the city spruced up dilapidated buildings large canvases depicting freshly painted buildings. See Aleksandr Nor, “Narisui dlia Putina,” *Live Journal*, November 20, 2013 (7:10 p.m.), <http://pryf.livejournal.com/3903273.html>.

⁹⁹ Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*, 269.

Hosking notes that after the Decembrist Revolt, it became clear that Russia would not follow the path of England or France to a constitutional monarchy. Educated people became painfully aware that they were estranged from both their government and the people (*народ*), whom they wanted to help. The questions of what Russia was and what was its place in the world became “all-consuming.”¹⁰⁰

Russia’s first real philosopher in this respect was Petr Chaadaev (1794–1856). In his *Lettres sur la philosophie de l’histoire: Lettre première* (1830), Chaadaev described Russia as being “neither of the West nor of the East” and being placed “outside of time”—as if the country were situated in a void.¹⁰¹ He writes,

Nothing from the first moment of our social existence has emanated from us for man’s common good; not one useful idea has germinated in the sterile soil of our fatherland; we have launched no great truth; we have never bothered to conjecture anything ourselves, and we have adopted only deceiving appearances and useless luxury from all the things that others have thought out.¹⁰²

Chaadaev’s comments not only claim that nothing of worth ever emanated from Russia, they also imply that nothing *will* come from Russia in the future because Russia merely borrows and simulates, but does not itself create. Even these borrowings cannot be considered genuine but rather “deceiving appearances.” The letter caused an outrage. Russian writer and thinker Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) likened the effect of the letter to a gunshot in the night: “It was like a shot ringing out on a dark night; whether something was drowning and proclaiming its own death, whether it was a signal, or a call for help—whether it was news of the dawn or that

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 269–70.

¹⁰¹ “Мы не принадлежим...ни к Западу, ни к Востоку...Мы стоим как бы вне времени...” P. Ia. Chaadaev, *Filosoficheskie pis'ma k dame*. (Moscow: Zakharov, 2000), 8.

¹⁰² P. Ia. Chaadaev, *Philosophical Works of Peter Chaadaev* (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 25.

there would be no dawn,—all the same, one had to wake up.”¹⁰³ Chaadaev was declared insane, put under house arrest, and forced to issue an apology.

In his apology, entitled “Apologie d’un fou,” Chaadaev still does not deny this emptiness that underlies Russian identity, he only switches the value of his statement from negative to positive. He now describes Russia as a “blank sheet of paper” representing pure receptivity and potentiality and, now that the words “Europe and West” have been written on it by Peter’s strong hand, “the future belongs to us.”¹⁰⁴ Although Chaadaev credits Peter with giving Russia this fresh start, his tone is undeniably negative:

The greatest of our kings, our glory, our demigod, he who began a new era for us, he to whom we owe our greatness and all the goods which we possess, renounced old Russia a hundred years ago in front of the entire world. With his powerful breath he swept away all our old institutions; he dug out an abyss between our past and our present, and he threw all our traditions into it; he went to make himself the smallest in the West, and he returned the greatest among us; he prostrated himself before the West and he rose as our master and our legislator; he introduced Western idioms into our idiom; he modeled the letters of our alphabet upon those of the West.... Since that time, our eyes constantly turned towards the West, and we did nothing but inhale the emanations which came to us from there and nourished ourselves on them.¹⁰⁵

From the time of Peter the Great, then, Russia has experienced a continual identity crisis. Peter showed Russia his path, yet many wondered where Russia’s path would have led had the tsar not forcefully re-directed it.

¹⁰³ A. I. Gertsen, *Byloe i dумы*, 9 vols., vol. I (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1963), 139. “Это был выстрел, раздавшийся в темную ночь; тонуло ли что и возвещало свою гибель, был ли это сигнал, зов на помощь,—весть об утре или о том, что его не будет,—все равно надобно было проснуться.”

¹⁰⁴ Chaadaev, *Philosophical Works of Peter Chaadaev*, 104, 109.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

Slavophiles and Westernizers

Chaadaev's letters can be considered an opening salvo in a debate over Russian identity that preoccupied intellectuals for decades. Various thinkers have responded to Chaadaev and have been traditionally identified as belonging to one of two camps: Slavophiles and Westernizers.

Those who eventually became known as the Slavophiles were the first to respond. They rejected the notion that Russia did not have its own history and culture. Chaadaev had overlooked Russia's authentic culture, they argued, because he, like many others at the time, had been blinded by the superficial culture of the West. One of the founders of the Slavophile movement, Ivan Kireevskii (1806–1856), asserted (based on his studies of Christian patristic literature) that Russia had a rich heritage derived from Byzantium and conveyed by the Orthodox Church. Unlike the West, Russia had managed to preserve the integrity of the Christian faith. Kireevskii maintained that this heritage was threatened because of “the way Russia's elite had been disfigured by alien influences since the early eighteenth century.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, Kireevskii dated the problem to the time of Peter I. The Slavophiles believed that Peter's policies had created a rift between “people of the land” (*земские люди*) and “state servitors” (*служилые люди*). Konstantin Aksakov (1817–1860) wrote, “There arose a rift between the Tsar and his people, and the ancient union of land and state was destroyed. In its place the state imposed its yoke on the land. The Russian land was, as it were, conquered, and the state was the conqueror.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Paraphrased by Hosking without attribution. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*, 273.

¹⁰⁷ Translation from *ibid.*, 274. N. L. Brodskii, *Rannie slavianofily* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo I. D. Sytina 1910), 85–6.

The Slavophiles took issue with Chaadaev's assertion that there had been no "Russian culture" to speak of before Peter the Great. Both Chaadaev and the Slavophiles seemed to agree that Peter I had been the source of Russia's current problems. As Hosking points out, however, the extent to which pre-Petrine Russia resembled the Slavophiles' vision of Old Russia is debatable. For example, the Slavophiles abhorred serfdom and censorship—both of which were firmly entrenched in Russian society long before Peter I came to power.¹⁰⁸

The Westernizers were initially less organized than the Slavophiles. Westernizers represented the status quo in Russian educated society at the time. They were the direct heirs to the Petrine legacy and saw Russia's fate as being tied to the fate of the West. Although they were not against Russian values, they saw themselves as part of the new progressive civilization that would reconcile western culture with Russian values. Westernizers saw a "lack" in Russia and had a desire to try to make up what they saw was a deficit.

Liah Greenfeld notes that the ideological positions of both of these groups, ironically, were "Westernisms, for...both define the West as the anti-model. And both were Slavophilisms, for the model for them was Russia, which they idealized each in its own fashion, and whose triumph over the West both predicted."¹⁰⁹ The result of this debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers is that the conversation about what was perceived to be a "lack" or "emptiness" in Russian culture had been articulated *not* in terms of Russia's relationship to itself and its own history, but rather in terms of its relationship with the West.

Epstein noted that both Westernizers and Slavophiles saw Russia as being a nation of simulations. He quotes from the Marquis de Custine's book, *La Russie en 1839*:

¹⁰⁸ Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*, 275.

¹⁰⁹ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 265.

Russia is an Empire of catalogs: if one runs through the titles, everything seems beautiful. But be careful not to look beyond the chapter titles. Open the book and you will see that there is nothing in it: the truth is that the chapters are all marked, but they still need to be written... How many cities and roads exist only as projects. Well, the entire nation, in essence, is nothing but a placard stuck over Europe....¹¹⁰

Although Custine is describing Russia from a European's point of view, Epstein notes that

Aleksandr Herzen agreed with Custine and thought he had written a fascinating volume. Epstein

compares Custine's comments with those of ardent Slavophile Ivan Aksakov (1823–1886):

“Everything in our country exists ‘as if,’ nothing seems to be serious, authentic; instead,

everything has the appearance of something temporary, false, designed for show—from petty to

large-scale phenomena. ‘As if’ we have laws and even 15 volumes of the code of laws... whereas

half of these institutions do not exist in reality and the laws are not respected.”¹¹¹ Both of these

authors recognized the superficial, simulative nature of Russian society—for one, Russia was not

European enough, for the other, not Russian enough.

¹¹⁰ “Россия—империя каталогов: если пробежать глазами одни заголовки—все покажется прекрасным. Но берегитесь заглянуть дальше названий глав. Откройте книгу—и вы убедитесь, что в ней ничего нет: правда все главы обозначены, но их еще нужно написать.... Сколько городов и дорог существуют лишь в проекте. Да и вся нация, в сущности, не что иное, как афиша, расклеенная по Европе....” Marquis de Custine, *Nikolaevskaia Rossiia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1990), 155–6.

Comedian Stephen Colbert, describing a recent trip to Russia, expressed a similar sentiment: “The strangest thing to me about Russia is that it seems so much like the west... It's like the Uncanny Valley of the west. You think it's western, and then you go, ‘Wait, that's not a leaf; that's a spider pretending to be a leaf.” *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, season 2, episode 175, directed by Jim Hoskinson, aired July 14, 2017 (CBS Television Studios), cbs.com.

¹¹¹ Translation from Epstein, “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism,” 28. “Все у нас существует «как будто бы», ничего не кажется серьезным, настоящим, а имеет вид чего-то временного, поддельного, показного и все это от самых мелких явлений и до крупных. У нас будто бы есть и законы и даже пятнадцать томов Свода Закона... а между тем половины этих управлений в действительности не существует, а законы не уважаются.” K. Skal'kovskii, ed., *Mneniia russkikh o samikh sebe*, (Moscow: Terra—Knizhnyi klub, 2001), 159.

Literary Emptiness

So far I have described how the postmodern semantic “void” has evolved in both the West and in Russia. I have also described how, contrary to the West, empty signifiers seem to occur in Russian culture long before the appearance of postmodernism. The following section focuses on how Russian writers understood and represented the void. I will examine the “negative voids” associated with empty signifiers; however, I will also briefly mention some attempts by the Russian modernists to conceive of the void as “positive.”

Petersburg Literature

In the nineteenth century Russian writers, especially Petersburg writers, began treating the void in their work. The void surfaces in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, which saw the emergence of what would become known as “the Petersburg text.” Several key works in this period characterize St. Petersburg as an unnatural, devilish place. As mentioned above, Peter’s building of the northern capital created an aura of illusion around the city; it is superficial, false, and nothing is as it seems. For example, in Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman* (*Медные всадник*, 1830) the image Peter on horseback (in the form of Falconet’s monument) is poised “above the abyss” (“над самой бездной”). Dostoevsky’s heroes wander in an “invented city,” which has become more of a character in his novels than a backdrop. In his *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky wrote about Petersburg’s penchant for imitation: “In this sense there is no other city like it, in an architectural sense it reflects all the architectures of the world, of all periods and styles; everything has been gradually borrowed and everything had been disfigured in its own way.”¹¹²

¹¹² “В этом смысле нет такого города, как он, в архитектурном смысле он отражение всех архитектур в мире, всех периодов и мод; всё постепенно заимствовано и всё по-своему перековеркано.” Fedor Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh*, vol. 12 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1994), 125.

Julie Buckler writes that, for Dostoevsky, Petersburg's eclectic architectural borrowings have rendered the city characterless and somehow belonging outside of time.

Instead of writing history, the St. Petersburg cityscape *erases* history by redoing its facades “for chic.” Instead of creating order and narrative, the St. Petersburg cityscape expresses chaos and is original only in its fundamental lack of character. For Dostoevsky, the city's architectural eclecticism initially told the story of the world, but was then made to embody the antihistorical principle in modern times.¹¹³

Gogol has also famously described St. Petersburg as a place of deception and (said particularly of Nevskii Prospekt) where “the devil himself lights the lamps only so as to show everything not as it really looks.”¹¹⁴

Gogol's works deserve particular consideration in the context of the void. His description of the deceptive nature of St. Petersburg was extended to the very foundation of Russian reality:

“Everything is deception, everything is a dream, everything is not what it seems to be!”¹¹⁵

Gogol's obsession with emptiness and simulacra extends to many of his characters (often described apophatically), dialogue (marked by ellipses, stutters, aphasia), narration (frequently interrupted by a rambling, digressive narrator), and settings (e.g., places like St. Petersburg where reality goes in and out of focus, and things are not as they seem). Most famously, in his novel *Dead Souls* (*Мертвые души*, 1842) Gogol likened Russia to a winged troika wildly careening into a void outside of space and time: “Rus’, where are you rushing to? Give me an

¹¹³ Julie Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityshape* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 33.

¹¹⁴ Nikolai Gogol, “Nevsky Prospekt,” in *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 278. “. . . сам демон зажигает лампы для того только, чтобы показать все не в настоящем виде.” Nikolai Gogol, “Nevskii Prospekt,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, *Povesti*, ed. N.L. Meshcheriakov (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1938), 46.

¹¹⁵ Gogol, “Nevsky Prospekt,” in *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, 277. “Всё обман, всё мечта, всё не то, чем кажется!” Gogol, “Nevskii Prospekt,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, *Povesti*, 45.

answer! It does not answer.”¹¹⁶

While the topic of Gogol and the void is too broad to discuss here, I will point out one particular example that I believe presages the language experimentation seen later in the modernist period and in postmodernism.¹¹⁷ In Gogol’s “Overcoat” (“Шинель,” 1842), externals define identity. The hero of the story, the copy clerk Akakii Akakievich, lovingly traces the letters (i.e., signifiers) he’s copying, without paying attention to the internal content (i.e., signifieds). At one point, a supervisor wishes to reward Akakii for his service by giving him an assignment in which he has to alter the header and the tenses of the verbs. But, the reader is told, “This was such a task for him that he got all in a sweat, rubbed his forehead, and finally said, ‘No, better let me copy something.’”¹¹⁸ Akakii is only capable of expressing himself with “prepositions, adverbs, and finally such particles as have decidedly no meaning.”¹¹⁹ As the reader learns more about Akakii, it is clear that he is only comfortable with signifiers/outer forms and not at all with what is signified.

While Akakii may be an extreme case, he is not the only person in the story whose actions are governed by signifiers alone. The important person, to whom Akakii appeals when his new overcoat is stolen, has recently received a new title of general and is in a confused state as to how to relate to others. “However, he was a kind man at heart, good to his comrades, obliging, but the rank of general had completely bewildered him. On receiving the rank of

¹¹⁶ Nikolai Gogol’, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, *Mertvye dushi*, ed. N.L. Meshcheriakov (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1951), 247.

¹¹⁷ For a more thorough treatment of the void in Gogol, see Sven Spieker’s volume *Gøggøl: Exploring Absence; Negativity in 19th-century Russian Literature*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 1999.

¹¹⁸ Gogol, “The Overcoat,” in *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, 397. “Это задало ему такую работу, что он вспотел совершенно, тер лоб и наконец сказал: «нет, лучше дайте я перепишу что-нибудь.»” Gogol’, “Shinel’,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 144–5.

¹¹⁹ Gogol, “The Overcoat,” 402. “. . . предложениями, наречиями и, наконец, такими частицами, которые решительно не имеют никакого значения.” Gogol’, “Shinel’,” 149.

general, he had somehow become confused, thrown off, and did not know how to behave at all. When he happened to be with his equals, he was as a man ought to be, a very decent man...”¹²⁰ As a result, this important person ceases being himself and imitates the external actions of other generals. This blind imitation of outward appearance and action is noted by Gogol, “Thus everything in holy Russia is infected with imitation, and each one mimics and apes his superior.”¹²¹

The only signifier that provides any meaning for Akakii is his new overcoat: it comes to define his identity—he becomes its signified. Once he decides to have a new coat made, Akakii’s life seemingly changes for the better. He is livelier and his character grows firmer. When his overcoat finally makes its debut, Akakii’s coworkers (who normally tease him mercilessly) throw a party in his honor. Akakii’s new lease on life is derived from a material object (rather than spiritual qualities) and is therefore fleeting. When the signifier-overcoat is stolen, Akakii loses his signified-identity (i.e., self). The breakdown (loss) of the signifier mirrors the breakdown of Akakii Akakievich—he is completely anchorless in a universe of signifiers without signifieds—and he soon dies.

Russian Modernism – Deriving Meaning from the Void

Russian modernists, specifically the symbolists, may not have liked the shape that their reality was assuming in the early twentieth century, but for them words were powerful instruments with almost incantational power to reshape that reality in an alternate way. Words

¹²⁰ Gogol, “The Overcoat,” 416. “Впрочем он был в душе добрый человек, хорош с товарищами, услужлив; но генеральский чин совершенно сбил его с толку. Получивши генеральский чин, он как-то спутался, сбился с пути и совершенно не знал, как ему быть. Если ему случалось быть с равными себе, он был еще человек, как следует, человек очень порядочный....” Gogol’, “Shinel’,” 165.

¹²¹ Gogol, “The Overcoat,” 415. “Так уж на святой Руси всё заражено подражанием, всякой дразнит и корчит своего начальника.” Gogol’, “Shinel’,” 164.

(signifiers) had this power because they were associated with meaning (signified), and the combination of idea, meaning, and word had creative, even life-changing force. In this the symbolists differ from the postmodern writers of the post-Soviet period, in whose world signifiers have been severed from signifieds. For the symbolists, the word represented an opportunity to create and control the void before the collapsing Russian Empire, the burgeoning revolutionary movement, and technology created the void for them. Post-Soviet writers faced a different task: they were obliged to find a way to use their words in an already created void.

The modernist period was marked by an apocalyptic, millenarian sentiment, and the image of the void or the abyss was not uncommon in Russian symbolist poetry. Not surprisingly, Russian literature and literary criticism of the time concerned itself, in many ways, with semantic voids. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, symbolist Andrei Belyi (1880–1934) and futurist Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) expressed a deep interest in the philosophy of language in both their theoretical and artistic works. From their predecessors the romantics, the symbolists inherited an ambivalent attitude toward the word. They simultaneously believed the mundane word was incapable of expressing deep truths. The symbolists frequently quoted Fedor Tiutchev's (1803–1873) verse "The thought once expressed is a lie" ("Мысль изреченная есть ложь") and saw the "living word" as the key to cognizing a higher reality.¹²²

Although I will not treat Belyi's mystical writings regarding the abyss here, his language experimentation is important for understanding the tradition from which Pelevin comes. Through the writings of Ukrainian linguist Oleksandr Potebnia (1835–1891), Belyi first became acquainted with Wilhelm von Humboldt's concept of language as *energeia*. Humboldt saw language as an active process (*energeia*) rather than a predetermined product (*ergon*): "The

¹²² V. Gofman, "Iazyk simvolistov," in *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* (Moscow: Zhurnal'no-gazetnoe ob"edinenie, 1937), 60.

mutual interdependence of thought and word clearly illuminates the truth that languages are not really means for representing already known truths, but are rather instruments for discovering previously unrecognized ones.”¹²³ In other words, Humboldt recognized that there is not a one-to-one association between a word (signifier) and its meaning (signified); there is, so to speak, a gap between the two in which one can negotiate meaning.

Laura Goering writes that Humboldt’s concept of active meaning creation “resonated strongly with the definition of symbolization as an active synthetic process that [Belyi] had elaborated in his essays throughout the decade.”¹²⁴ Belyi also accepted Potebnia’s interpretation of this principle, which said that in poetic or artistic images “meaning is malleable, it can be determined only in each individual instance, and is in many cases limitless.”¹²⁵ Within every word (or image) there is a tension between the word itself (signifier) and the infinite number of meanings that can potentially be assigned to it (signifieds). Belyi writes, “Every word in this sense is a metaphor, that is, it conceals a number of potential figurative meanings.”¹²⁶ The word, therefore, is a symbol endowing the artist with its power; the artist feels that s/he creates reality in the same sense that the Logos creates the world.¹²⁷ Belyi believed language to be the “most

¹²³ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Humanist Without Portfolio: An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt*, trans. with intro. by Marianne Cowan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), 246.

¹²⁴ Laura Goering, “Belyj’s Symbolist Abyss,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 39, no. 4 (1995): 568.

¹²⁵ “Значение изменчиво, определимо лишь в каждом отдельном случае, а в ряду случаев безгранично.” A. A. Potebnia, *Iz zapisok po teorii slovesnosti* (Khar’kov: Parovaia tipografiia i litografiia M. Zil’berberg, 1905), 110.

¹²⁶ “Символизм языка; всякое слово в этом смысле—метафора, т. е. оно таит потенциально ряд переносных смыслов...” Andrei Belyi, “Mysl’ i iazyk (Filosofiiia iazyka A. A. Potebni),” *Logos* 2 (1910): 246.

¹²⁷ Theodore John Williams, “Velimir Khlebnikov and the Symbolism of Andrei Bely” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1991), 106.

powerful instrument of creation.”¹²⁸ Before one has knowledge of something, that object must be created via the process of naming. Here Belyi likens the poet to the Creator in that both are creating something out of nothing.

Belyi’s notion of the “magic of words” (*магия слов*) is based on his mystical conception of symbolism, which involved using the specific sound qualities of the word in order to reconcile external nature and one’s innate spirit into a new, unified whole—literally to hear the sounds of the cosmos. The inner form (signified, the experience of the artist) and the outer form (signifier, the sound of a word) synthesized to form a third world of sound symbols. In Belyi’s view, the synthesis of inner and outer forms in the word resembled the Holy Trinity and Christ’s role as a mediator between heaven and Earth. In “Thought and Language” (“Мысль и язык,” 1910), Belyi writes that the word’s power lies in its ability to serve as an intermediary between the image of an object and the notion of the object in one’s mind.¹²⁹ In this way, Belyi prefigures Pelevin in that they both see the concept of the word as binary sign as being somehow empty/incomplete and yet with infinite potential.

The futurists elevated the “word-as-such” (“слово как таковое,” as Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh termed it) to hero-status. They shifted their attention from the sign’s *signified* (something with which the symbolists concerned themselves) to its *signifier*, underscoring the form of the word—seeing no need for a grand, mystical idea behind said forms. Words “did not refer to ideas or denote objects, they were objects in themselves.”¹³⁰ The idea that the word could be considered a work of art in itself led Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei

¹²⁸ “Язык—наиболее могущественное орудие творчества.” Andrei Belyi, “Magiia slov,” in *Simvolizm: kniga statei* (Moscow: Kul’turnaia revoliutsiia, 2010), 316.

¹²⁹ Belyi, “Mysl’ i iazyk,” 248.

¹³⁰ Willem G. Weststeijn, *Velimir Chlebnikov and the Development of Poetical Language in Russian Symbolism and Futurism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1983), 14.

Kruchenykh to create “transrational language” (*заумный язык*, often referred to simply as “zaum”), an experimental poetic language using words which were not associated with particular meaning yet evoked indistinct semantic associations or emotional reactions.

For Khlebnikov, the poetic word was neither a medium of rational thought nor a glimpse into the “other world.” The word was a looking-glass into man’s mythical primeval infancy, the word was a “creator of myths.” It was self-sufficient and had value in and of itself. Speech was not a vehicle for expressing ideas and emotions but rather an end in itself.¹³¹ Viktor Gofman writes that the distinguishing feature of Khlebnikov’s work is that the hero of his poetry is language. It was not an element or part of the material of the work but rather its main content.¹³² Seifrid maintains that while Khlebnikov spoke of language as if it were a living organism, a “kind of self in its own right,” he still insisted that language is a necessary condition of the self.¹³³ For Khlebnikov, the rootless self will one day find its true home in language; it will occupy the same space as meaning—a nod to the power of the word to create identity.

Khlebnikov also suggested there was a motivated relationship between the signifier (sound of the spoken word) and the signified (the word’s meaning). The semantic value of Khlebnikov’s neologisms has no direct connection to extralinguistic reality, but rather is dependent on linguistic factors only, specifically the inner structure of the sign and the general semantic “aura” provided by the context. The meaning of the neologism is thus flexible, the “self-sufficient word” (*самовитое слово*, Khlebnikov’s term) becomes a reality, and the

¹³¹ Victor Erlich, “Russian Poets in Search of a Poetics,” *Comparative Literature* 4, no. 1 (1952): 66.

¹³² “Самая характерная черта хлебниковского творчества заключается в том, что главным героем его поэзии является язык: не элементом, не материалом, а основным содержанием, нередко единственным.” V. Gofman, “Iazykovoe novatorstvo Khelebnikova,” in *Iazyk literatury. Ocherki i etudy* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1936), 234.

¹³³ Thomas Seifrid, *The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 67.

relationship between the linguistic sign and its referent are reversed.¹³⁴ In Khlebnikov's *zaum* verse, the object is only a faint echo of the sign, overwhelmed by the interplay of the word's potential meanings.

While Alexei Kruchenykh's *zaum* poems continued to represent verbal play, Khlebnikov deviated from his earlier statements about words being ends in themselves. He began to search for new words and attempted to discover esoteric knowledge in language.¹³⁵ The overall theme of Khlebnikov's various theoretical writings is that language is a symbolic system with opaque surfaces that hide a sea of esoteric absolute meanings—precise denotative systems that could supersede our world or at a minimum be shown to underlie and govern it.¹³⁶ These meanings, natural to primitive man, had disappeared from today's civilized world. Like Belyi, Khlebnikov believed in the potentiality of uncovering the laws governing sound in language. Like the symbolists before him, Khlebnikov lamented language's inability to provide complete information due to a lack of science behind word creation (later he would take it upon himself to create such a science).¹³⁷ Discovering the laws inherent in language and everyday existence remained sacred for Khlebnikov, as he believed language to be the source of absolute knowledge.¹³⁸ Nearly all of his language experiments can be described as attempts to recreate, to reveal the hidden significations of words.

Like Belyi and Khlebnikov, Pelevin is interested in the failure of language to account for his reality, and many of his novels represent attempts to find a new language that is better suited

¹³⁴ Erlich, "Russian Poets in Search of a Poetics," 69.

¹³⁵ Weststeijn, *Velimir Khlebnikov and the Development of Poetical Language*, 18.

¹³⁶ Seifrid, *The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930*, 67.

¹³⁷ Khlebnikov, "Nasha osnova," in *Tvoreniia*, 624. "Это потому, что нет науки словотворчества."

¹³⁸ Williams, "Velimir Khlebnikov and the Symbolism of Andrei Bely," 108.

for describing post-Soviet experience. When there is no suitable word to describe post-Soviet life, Pelevin has been known to create his own vocabulary. In his story “Ukhriab” (“Ухряб,” 1992), the main character Ivan Maralov descends into madness as he realizes that everything around him is “ukhriab,” a word that comes to him as he wakes from a dream. He sees this word in objects all around him, but especially in fading symbols of the Soviet regime (e.g., a banner with cliché pronouncements, a mural featuring objects found in Soviet-style still lifes). Maralov tries to break down the morphology of the word and comes to the conclusion that it is a combination of the word “хребет” (ridge) and “ухаб” (pothole), suggesting a gap between high (ridge) and low (pothole). The notion of a gap is even embedded in Pelevin’s placement of the work “ухряб” across words. For example, “вкручиваясь в раскалённый воздух. **Рябая** гладь....” (“twisting in the hot air. The pockmarked surface...”) and “умял двух **рябчиков**” (“he gobbled up two grouses”).¹³⁹

Daria Kabanova suggests that the story is a metaphor “for the late- and post-Soviet linguistic failure manifested in the disconnect between the signifier and the signified.”¹⁴⁰ The main character sees Soviet symbols all around him, but those symbols that have lost their meaning and left a void. Maralov is aware that “ukhriab” must symbolize something unbearable and is determined to find out what it is. He eventually falls to his death attempting to reveal the secret behind this word that symbolizes the “gap” of missing cultural memory.

The Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras

I find Mikhail Epstein’s premise that the Soviet period was a long transition from

¹³⁹ Viktor Pelevin, “Ukhriab,” in *Vse Rasskazy* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005), 176.

¹⁴⁰ Daria Sergueyevna Kabanova, “Sites of Memory: Soviet Myths in Post-Soviet Culture” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011), 55.

modernism to postmodernism compelling. However, I would like to add my own observation: the Soviet and Post-Soviet periods (as a pair) mirror the dynamic between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As we saw earlier, eighteenth-century Russia was marked by imitations and simulations that created a cultural void. These simulations certainly did not cease in the nineteenth century, but one sees a shift where writers and philosophers become increasingly engaged with the concept of emptiness as the nineteenth century progresses. Similarly, the Soviet Union is filled with simulacra, but one only sees intense awareness of and engagement with emptiness in the late Soviet and post-Soviet period.

Eventually socialist realism (having been further delegitimized after the Thaw period) gave way to new artistic and literary movements. As Aleksandr Genis noted, “Those forces which put Soviet literature—socialist realism—in motion ceased long ago. What remains are only the ruins of words.”¹⁴¹ It was this detritus of meaningless Soviet slogans and icons that would provide fodder for a new generation of artists and writers beginning with the Sots-artists and the Moscow Conceptualists in the 1960s.

The counter-culture conceptualist movement and its sub-movement Sots-Art were the first in Russia to playfully exploit this postmodern emptying of signs. The Sots-Art movement of the early 1970s was an important facet of conceptualism. The term “Sots-Art” (a play on Andy Warhol’s “pop art”) was coined by Russian artists Vitalii Komar (1943–) and Aleksandr Melamid (1945–). Their work uses iconic images from popular culture and socialist realism to reveal the emptiness underlying socialist reality.¹⁴² Epstein notes that Russian Sots-Art

¹⁴¹ Aleksander Genis, “Vzgliad iz tupika,” *Ogonek* 52 (1990): 17.

¹⁴² Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing in 20th-Century Literature*, 148.

differentiates itself from Western pop art in that it insists on “emptiness as the ultimate signified of all signifieds.”¹⁴³

Ilya Kabakov (1933–), a leading conceptualist artist, further confirms the void’s importance for Russian conceptualism. He envisions his native country as a “gigantic reservoir of emptiness.”¹⁴⁴ Russian conceptualism is distinctive in that, unlike Western pop art movements,

the principle of “one thing instead of another” does not exist and is not in force, most of all because in this binomial the definitive, clear second element, this “another,” does not exist. It is as if in our country it has been taken out of the equation, it is simply not there. [...] What we get is a striking paradox, nonsense: things, ideas, facts inevitably with great exertion enter into direct contact with the unclear, the undefined, in essence with emptiness. This contiguity, closeness, touchingness, contact with nothing, emptiness makes up, we feel, the basic peculiarity of “Russian conceptualism.”¹⁴⁵

Kabakov explains this “nothingness” as the result of the complete desemanticization of reality caused by a Soviet overproduction of simulacra (ideological symbols that replace reality and cease to have any meaning). Soviet slogans had already become senseless by the 1970s—they did not refer to anything real and therefore betray a non-reality, a metaphysical emptiness.¹⁴⁶

Conceptualism, although mostly associated with visual arts and poetry, is represented by Vladimir Sorokin (1955–) in prose literature. Alexander Genis notes how Sorokin’s works are usually disrupted by a breakdown in the text: a single word or letter repeated line after line, sheer gibberish, or even blank pages. “Having tracked the emaciation and disappearance of the

¹⁴³ Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 200.

¹⁴⁴ Ilya Kabakov, “On the Subject of ‘The Void,’” in *Total Enlightenment: Moscow Conceptual Art 1960–1990*, eds. Max Hollein, Boris Groys, Manuel Fontán del Jundo (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz 2008), 366.

¹⁴⁵ Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future*, 247.

¹⁴⁶ Lipovetsky, “Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s,” 33.

metaphysical foundation of Soviet life, Sorokin leaves the reader alone with such an unbearable void of meaning that survival in it no longer seems possible.”¹⁴⁷ Sorokin’s textual experiments aim to deconstruct the totalitarianism of discourse (in Foucault’s sense of discourse).¹⁴⁸

Mark Lipovetsky distinguishes between conceptualist writers (e.g., Dmitri Prigov and Vladimir Sorokin) and neo-baroque writers (Viktor Erofeev, Valeriia Narbikova, Sasha Sokolov, Tatiana Tolstaia, and Viktor Pelevin).¹⁴⁹ He writes that conceptualism deconstructs simulacra through cliché and quotation, while neo-baroque constructs new mythologies using excess, circularity, repetition, and fragmentation. These writers share common ground in that they are all trying to create meaning in a way that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional language, which has been stripped of its power. Viktor Erofeev, for example, acknowledges that there is a “strange disparity between objects and the words that name them; the word ‘sofa’ doesn’t designate the object itself. This is an ancient contradiction inherent in the problem of naming, but it also reflects our subconscious and, in every reader, it takes an individual form associated with her or his personal experience.”¹⁵⁰ In response, Erofeev employs what he calls a “flickering aesthetic—a constructive principle of overcoming the widespread twentieth-century concept of literature as a system of formal devices.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Alexander Genis, “Colonizing Chaos: Russian Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century,” *Russian Culture* 17 (2012), http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian_culture/17.

¹⁴⁸ See Viacheslav Kuritsyn, *Russkii literaturnyi postmodernism* (Moscow: OGI, 2000), 112 and Lipovetsky, “Vladimir Sorokin’s ‘Theater of Cruelty’” in *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, eds. Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgeny Dobrenko (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 167–92.

¹⁴⁹ Lipovetsky uses Omar Calabrese’s term “neo-baroque.” See Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*, trans. Charles Lambert (Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁵⁰ Serafima Roll, *Contextualizing Transition: Interviews with Contemporary Russian Writers and Critics*, ed. Thomas R. Beyer, Jr., (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 70.

¹⁵¹ “Мерцающая эстетика—конструктивный принцип преодоления распространенного в XX веке представления о литературе как системе формальных приемов.” V. V. Erofeev, “Boris Vian i ‘mertsaiushchaia estetika,’” in *V labirinte proklyatykh voprosov* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990), 243.

Finally, there are writers who fall into neither the conceptualist nor neo-baroque camp such as Iurii Buida (1954–). Buida’s 1993 novel *Don Domino* (published in English under the name *Zero Train*) is entirely about the void, represented by the “Zero Train” (Нулевой). The novel centers on the people charged with maintaining a top-secret Soviet railway line. The workers are told that the “Zero” holds special cargo, but they are not told what; their only task is to keep the train running on time. Eventually, the secret of the “Zero” begins to poison the workers—they search for the truth only to find there is no truth. After the other workers have gone mad, died, or left the village, only Ivan (Don Domino) remains. Throughout the novel, the void of the Zero starts to affect him.

Ivan took on the toughest jobs he could find so that, dragging himself home, he could bolt down whatever Alyona had for him, crawl to his bed and sink into a dreamless sleep. Without silken women with burnished locks. Or colonels with turds and roses for their whores. No Line. No Zero. Nothing. He was ready to slog on Saturdays, Sundays too, so long as there’s less talking, less words. Silence. Just silence.¹⁵²

When the Zero stops unexpectedly at their station, Ivan makes inquiries via telegraph only to receive a response that there was no such train, no such station, and that he himself did not exist. It was as if their settlement had been suspended in time and space. Unlike the works of the previous authors mentioned, Buida’s novel is not postmodernist; rather, it is a late-modernist allegory of the Soviet regime, in which the “radiant future” is promised to a long-suffering people but never arrives.

Pelevin’s Dialogue with Emptiness

Pelevin is in dialogue with all of the types of emptiness described above—both positive and negative. His early works are conceptualist in that he shows the reader a world of signs that

¹⁵² Yuri Buida, *The Zero Train*, trans. Oliver Ready (Sawtry, Cambs. UK: Dedalus Ltd., 2007), 67.

do not correspond to reality. The clearest example of this can be found in *Omon Ra* (1992), a story about a young Soviet man whose childhood dream is to become a cosmonaut. Omon is among the elite chosen for a space mission to the moon, only to learn that the Soviet space program is nothing but a sham. Omon's mentor Colonel Urchagin explains to him:

We Communists had no time to prove the correctness of our ideas—the war cost us too much of our strength, we had to spend too long struggling against the remnants of the past and our enemies within the country. We just didn't have the time to defeat the West technologically. But in the battle of ideas, you can't stop for a second. The paradox—another piece of dialectics—is that we support the truth with falsehood, because Marxism carries within itself an all-conquering truth, and that goal for which you will give your life is, in a formal sense, a deception.¹⁵³

The entire reality of the Soviet Union's ideologically charged space program is shown to be false as Omon finds himself in a Moscow subway tunnel instead of on the moon. Urchagin's logic is the same logic that Peter I used to reshape Russia: create the appearance (signifier) first and eventually reality (i.e., meaning—signified) will catch up. In later works, Pelevin will not only reveal the emptiness behind such symbols, but (symptomatic of what Lipovetsky calls the neo-baroque) will also construct *new* myths to replace them.

Is Pelevin sincerely in dialogue with his predecessors and contemporaries in an attempt to create new meaning? Or is he merely using them as *texts* to play with (as a true postmodernist would)? I argue that although Pelevin never states his intentions outright, his views can be surmised or extrapolated based on the context that surrounds these texts in his works. The next chapter examines how Pelevin situates the “negative void” in the context of the West and

¹⁵³ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (New York: New Directions, 1998), 56–7. “У нас, коммунистов, не было времени доказать правоту наших идей—слишком много сил отняла война, слишком долгой и серьезной оказалась борьба с эхом прошлого и врагами внутри страны. Мы не успели технологически победить Запад. Но борьба идей—это такая область, где нельзя останавливаться ни на секунду. Парадокс—и, опять же, диалектика—в том, что обманом мы помогаем правде, потому что марксизм несет в себе всепобеждающую правду, а то, за что ты отдашь свою жизнь, формально является обманом.” Pelevin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, *Omon Ra* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2015), 44.

considers its implications. Chapter 3 will look at how Pelevin explores whether or not the East offers a possible solution to negative western influence.

Chapter 2: The Chaos and Terror of Emptiness

Generation “P” and Empire “V”

Woe to him whom Ishtar has honored!

—Felix Guirand

The *superior man* understands what is right; the *inferior man* understands what will sell.

—Confucius

Introduction

As I argued in the previous chapter, Pelevin’s novels do not arise *ex nihilo*, but from a long-standing tradition of Russian *nil*. While the previous chapter traced the history of the Russian concept of void into the post-Soviet period, this chapter will show how the novels of Viktor Pelevin reflect the collective void felt after the collapse of the Soviet grand narrative and how they attempt to reconceptualize the “western” capitalist grand narrative in Russia. Chapter 3 will examine how Pelevin treats “eastern” narratives and show how his treatment of western emptiness is decidedly more negative than his treatment of eastern transcendent emptiness. In this chapter, however, I explore how Pelevin’s *Generation “P”* (*Generation “II,”* 1999) and

Empire “V” (published in Russia with the Latin-character title, 2006) reveal the pitfalls of diving headfirst into Western-style hypercapitalism. His descriptions are often humorous, but they have serious implications: they show the void that underlies this lifestyle.

In both *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V,”* characters are set free from planned economies and ideological slogans that no longer mean anything to anyone. In an attempt to fill the void that communism left, Pelevin’s characters turn to capitalism, but the author shows repeatedly that wealth and materialism are hollow. In other words, many characters only exhibit the trappings of wealth (signifiers), with no substantial meaning to support it (signifieds). For example, Tatarskii uses cocaine not because he enjoys it, but because it signifies that one has money. He reasons, “people weren’t sniffing cocaine, they were sniffing money....”¹⁵⁴

Pelevin is anti-materialistic in both the philosophical and economic sense of the word. From a philosophical view, Pelevin is by necessity anti-positivistic because one cannot verify knowledge in an age of simulacra. Likewise, many of his novels propose a path to transcendence located beyond the material plane. In an economic sense, Pelevin’s anti-materialism stems from his distaste for hypercapitalism—when all spheres of life (culture, society, etc.) have been “subsumed by commercialism.”¹⁵⁵

Both Tatarskii in *Generation “P”* and Rama in *Empire “V”* become aware that capitalism traps people in a vicious cycle of desire and consumption. Although Tatarskii and Rama seem to transcend this cycle, they also perpetuate it, and they themselves are subject to the will of higher beings: for the “content creator” Tatarskii, it is the Chaldeans, who “manage”

¹⁵⁴ Viktor Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Viking, 2002), 54. “Люди нюхали не кокаин, а деньги....” *Generation “P,”* 77. Hereafter *Homo Zapiens* will be referred to as *HZ* and *Generation “P”* as *GP*.

¹⁵⁵ Marina Vujnovic, “Hypercapitalism,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*, ed. George Ritzer (2012). Published online. ISBN: 9780470670590.

Russia and serve the vampires; for the vampire Rama, it is the mysterious “tongues” that the vampires ultimately serve, just as the Chaldeans serve the vampires. Beyond these cycles, other cycles await.

Why Fear The Void? Postmodernism and Hypercapitalism

All of Pelevin’s novels are postmodernist. In critical theory, as we have seen, postmodernism was marked by the breakdown of the binary sign. Post-structuralists (including Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida) and theorists of postmodernism (like Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard) all argued that there could be no totalizing structural framework that adequately explained reality. The traditional semiotic binary sign (sign = signifier + signified) could no longer be trusted. Meaning became relative and truth hard to pin down.

The relativism, simulacra, and contempt for grand narratives of first deconstructionist and then postmodernist critical theory in time undermined the word’s ability to reflect meaning. How does an author, whose craft *requires* words, cope with the fact that those words no longer convey agreed-upon meaning or perhaps any meaning at all? For this reason, many critics believe that it is impossible to reflect contemporary life using realism, which explains why many post-Soviet authors choose to combine realism with pastiches of other literary schools in order to layer language styles and registers. Anna Ljunggren suggests that this multilingual aspect of contemporary Russian literature “attempts to impart ambiguity and multidimensionality to the text.”¹⁵⁶ Such ambiguity instills doubt in readers, leaving them unsure how to approach the text,

¹⁵⁶ Anna Ljunggren, “Closing the Circle: On the Poetics of Contemporary Russian Prose,” *Russian Literature* 65, no. 4 (2009): 453.

Iurii Lotman also endorsed multilinguality in texts and considered it fundamental to the generation of meaning. See Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, 2.

interpret signs, and generate meaning. Contemporary literature's penchant for imitation and pastiche often leads to doubling and creates a situation in which floating signifiers (signifiers without signifieds) and hypertrophied signs (multiple signifieds with a single signifier) abound.

A prime example of just such a hypertrophied sign lies in the titles of the two novels *Generation "P"* and *Empire "V."* Both the "P" and the "V" in each title are floating signifiers—that is, they lack concrete meaning. Lacking meaning, these "floating signifiers" can stand for *anything*, making it difficult for a reader to map meaning onto the symbol. By signifying anything at all, a symbol signifies nothing.

Many, for example, have speculated as to the meaning of "P" in *Generation "P."* While some critics have suggested "Pepsi" or "Pelevin," Sally Dalton-Brown notes that "P" may stand for *pustota* (emptiness or void).¹⁵⁷ Pelevin himself explicated that *Generation "P"* is many things:

First, it's Generation X. Second, it's connected with this Russian term that was used in the end of the book. It's an obscene Russian term, *pizdets*, a really rude word. So it's Generation Pizdets, which means a generation that faces catastrophe [that is, a "fucked-over" generation]. And now, you know, some of our newspapers think that this is Generation Putin. So it's like whatever you like.¹⁵⁸

According to Pelevin's own words, then, *Generation "P"* is a generation of the end and ruin. And yet it is also "whatever you like"—suggesting that the reader (and on a meta-textual level, the post-Soviet everyman) has some control over endowing these "empty signifiers" with meaning. In this way it serves as a harbinger of hope.

How do we get to "empty signifiers" in postmodernism? Fredric Jameson, a Marxist critic, suggests that the postmodern "death of the idea of the referent and the birth of the theory

¹⁵⁷ Sally Dalton-Brown, "The Dialectics of Emptiness," 246n12.

¹⁵⁸ Viktor Pelevin, "Viktor Pelevin: I Never Was a Hero," interview with "The Observer," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/apr/30/fiction>.

of the ‘text’ (as a free play of signifiers without stable signifieds) mark key disconnections where the emphasis falls upon consumption and exchange, not production and utility.”¹⁵⁹ This happens in the period of what Jameson calls “late capitalism,” or hypercapitalism. The term refers to the encroachment of commercialization into all corners of human experience without exception. Hypercapitalism valorizes the forces of greed and selfishness; they in turn create an emphasis on constant consumption, an ever-growing gulf between rich and poor, poverty and suffering, wars for control of international capital, and the disparagement of spiritual, intellectual, and humanistic values. In the hypercapitalist condition, *culture* and *politics* now equal *commerce*; anything that does not serve commerce is denigrated. This results in the denial (destruction) of people’s essential humanity. Vincent Leitch summarizes: “The imperative of capital requires atomizing, dehistoricizing, commodifying, and desacralizing.”¹⁶⁰

Having linked postmodernism with late capitalism, Jameson adds Baudrillard’s notion of simulacrum into this mix. All of reality has been transformed into representations, which may or may not have a bearing on truth. Whereas signs once reflected the basic reality, the advent of television and advertising eroded the relationship between the signifier and signified to a point where reality was distorted and eventually concealed. In the case of simulacra, the sign has *no* relation to reality. Jameson observes that the logic of simulacra “does more than merely replicate the logic of late capitalism; it reinforces and intensifies it” by transforming images of the older, “great modernisms” into mere images on television.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Vincent B. Leitch, “Postmodern Culture: The Ambivalence of Fredric Jameson,” *College Literature* 19, no. 2 (1992): 112. Leitch more succinctly paraphrases Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 18.

¹⁶⁰ Leitch, “Postmodern Culture: The Ambivalence of Fredric Jameson,” 112.

¹⁶¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 46.

Western theorists of postmodernism, like Jameson and Baudrillard, have noted that our brains have trouble processing the transition from modernism to postmodernism and the effects of late-capitalism, globalization, and the quickly-evolving cyber revolution that has become both one of postmodernism's distinctive features and its major disseminator. This process occurred over the span of a few decades, but this represents a very brief time in the history of sociocultural evolution. Although Russia had experienced similar phenomena in its past with regards to postmodernist tendencies such as hyperreality and simulacra (see chapter 1), it still experienced a nearly overnight transition from a centralized state-run economy and controlled society to one of hypercapitalism, intense globalization, and unprecedented access to information, all of which could not but have an overwhelming effect on the process of Russian national and individual identity formation in the wake of the collapse.

In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard writes that, today, “capitalism crosses the entire network of natural, social, sexual and cultural forces, all languages and codes.”¹⁶² He argues that contemporary capitalism permeates every aspect of one's life. By equating consumption with language and code, Baudrillard is stating that when we buy a product, we are actually buying a piece of language that comprises our identity. Simon Malpas adds, “When one desires or purchases a commodity, one is not simply buying the object itself, but also the signs, images and identities that go along with it.”¹⁶³

Jameson describes this phenomenon as the aestheticization of commodity purchases.¹⁶⁴ A consumer no longer purchases items simply because of their utility, but because they are

¹⁶² Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 1975), 138.

¹⁶³ Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 2005), 122.

¹⁶⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 4–5.

presented to the consumer as fresh or innovative or appealing to one's identity or sense of status. This behavior leads to what Jameson calls a "new depthlessness," in which commodities are interchangeable; in other words, they are purchased because they appeal to one's lifestyle and not to any sense of utility or value in the real world. Because these items are commodified and now lack any real-world context, they can lead to schizophrenia or psychosis, which Jameson describes in "negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity."¹⁶⁵ In other words, hyperconsumerism can be both terrifying and euphoric.¹⁶⁶

Pelevin's work engages with the very real social, cultural, and economic postmodern problems that post-Soviet Russia immediately found itself facing after the collapse. He employs multiple postmodernist literary techniques when discussing these problems—these include pastiche, the blending of high and low cultures, intertextuality, simulacra, hyperreality, and metafiction, among others. This chapter will focus specifically on simulacra and hypercapitalism, two elements of postmodernism that have posed a threat to post-Soviet Russian identity construction, a prominent theme in Pelevin's work.

Post-Soviet Identity Construction

Postmodernist texts like *Generation "P"* and *Empire "V"* reflect the ambiguity and disorientation of the postmodern world itself. From the perspective of the individual, postmodernism and hypercapitalism could lead to disorientation or psychosis.¹⁶⁷ Such responses

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 27–8.

¹⁶⁶ Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 120.

¹⁶⁷ If one agrees with Jameson that postmodernism leads to schizophrenia in a Lacanian sense; that is, it leads to the breakdown of the signifying chain.

carry over to the national level as well. If the binary word could no longer explain the world, Lotman and Uspenskii's well-known theory of binary models in Russian culture was equally implicated.¹⁶⁸ We saw in the previous chapter that Lotman and Uspenskii proposed a model in which Russian culture and history were divided into clear-cut, "binary" stages—one stage dynamically overthrowing the next, giving rise to inverted historical periods. This phenomenon often led to cyclical regeneration of older stages of history. The premise of Lotman and Uspenskii's system was that culture "organizes itself hierarchically, canonizing some texts and excluding others."¹⁶⁹

Postmodernism, however, eschews systemic organization. Additionally, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not precipitated by an "explosive" (to use Lotman's term) revolution, but rather a sudden implosion or disintegration. In *Generation "P"* and *Empire "V"* Pelevin questions whether a real 180-degree reversal has in fact taken place. Contrary to previous periods of historical change in Russia (e.g., the Soviet Union succeeding the Russian Empire), what followed the collapse of the Soviet Union was not an inversion of the system, but emptiness and uncertainty, setting many politicians scrambling to identify the next "Big Idea," which would not be forthcoming.¹⁷⁰

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia initially (and predictably, extrapolating from

¹⁶⁸ Lotman's later work on the semiosphere attempts to transcend the notion of the binary model, yet it too is still based on [now shifting and fluid] binaries and hierarchies.

¹⁶⁹ B.A. Uspenskii and Iu.M. Lotman, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (To the End of the 18th Century)," in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, eds. A. D. Nakhimovskii and A. S. Nakhimovskii (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 31.

¹⁷⁰ That is, until the 2000s; Sheila Fitzpatrick notes that, even as early as 2001, Vladimir Putin began to reclaim elements of the Soviet past: "Is there nothing good to remember about the Soviet period of our country? Was there nothing but Stalin's prison camps and repression? And in that case what are we going to do about Dunaevski, Sholokhov, Shostakovich, Korolev, and our achievements in space? What are we going to do about Yuri Gagarin's flight?" Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Becoming Post-Soviet," in *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 314.

Lotman and Uspenskii's theory) made a 180-degree turn: what was once vilified during the Soviet era, now became glorified and vice versa. Sheila Fitzpatrick writes, "In Soviet times, the capitalist West was the Other. Now Russia itself had to become this [western] Other: the 'normal, civilized life' that was the catchword and object of desire of the 1990s necessarily had Western characteristics because it was Westernism that was the familiar antithesis of Sovietness."¹⁷¹ Fitzpatrick cites several examples of this reversal. For example, the positive, Soviet notion of women in the workplace was now replaced with what was seen to be the more "western" image embodied in Nancy Reagan, the homemaker who lived to support and serve her husband. Whereas Soviet media had previously shown images of the cruelty of western capitalism, now the reverse was true and "images of poor people receiving medical care in U.S. clinics were juxtaposed with interviews with Russian mothers who could not obtain medicine or services their children desperately needed."¹⁷²

Just as rapidly as citizens had "become" Soviet in 1917 (whether authentically or inauthentically), they similarly adopted new public identities in the 1990s. Because a new "Russian" identity had yet to be formulated, many turned to the external Other as a source of identity: the West. People reinvented themselves as *biznesmeny* (businessmen), *brokery* (brokers), *rieltory* (realtors), *guru* (gurus), etc. Fitzpatrick writes,

New identities required new forms of behavior, dress, work habits, time habits, interpersonal relations habits, ways of handling money, and so on, all of which had to be rapidly mastered and conspicuously displayed—*ipoteki* [mortgages] for the purchase of *kottedzhy* [cottages], if there were not enough *baksy* [bucks]; *akupunktura* [acupuncture] and *pitstva* [pizza]; repudiation of *seksizm* [sexism]; mastery of the *internet*; interest in *shou-biznes* [show business] and *reitingi* [ratings]; bodies to be subjected to *sheiping* [shaping] by a *trener* [trainer], *bioritmy* [biorhythms] to be observed; the new hobby of

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 304.

¹⁷² Ibid., 307.

shopping to be practiced.¹⁷³

Foreign words, goods, foods, fashion, films, television shows, all flooded into Russia and were enthusiastically consumed by those who could afford it.

In embracing many of the values of the previously external “Other” (i.e., the West), post-Soviet Russia simultaneously demonized the values and expressions of its former Soviet identity in accordance with the new model. Many things Soviet that previously had been marked as positive or neutral, now became marked as negative, while the negatively-perceived symbols of tsarism were reversed. For example, one of the first things that occurred following the collapse of the Soviet Union was the decision to rebuild the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, which Stalin had destroyed in 1931. The cathedral was rebuilt in the same external form on the same site where it previously stood, filling “the void” that Stalin had created with its removal and negating his action.¹⁷⁴

In other cases, too, the recent Soviet past became a void during the first heady years after the collapse. People looked to the pre-revolutionary past for ideas on how to structure their future; the Soviet period, however, was consciously avoided. By popular vote, Leningrad retook its pre-Soviet name of St. Petersburg. The state also received a new name, flag, and emblem “with the double headed eagle and St. George accentuating ties to the Imperial and Orthodox

¹⁷³ Ibid., 304-5.

Foreign words have been entering Russian language since at least the time of Peter the Great (if not earlier). While some of the words that Fitzpatrick mentions are not specific to the post-Soviet era (e.g. *trener*, *pitstsa*), her point is that there was a significant increase in Western loan words in the immediate post-Soviet era.

In addition to the influx of Western culture, we can also see the resurrection of aspects of indigenous folk culture (e.g., *gadalki*) and New Age beliefs and practices (which may have entered from the West but for which fertile ground existed in Russia).

¹⁷⁴ Literally the “void,” as the enormous hole in the ground left by the demolition of the cathedral became the Moscow municipal swimming pool. The rebuilt cathedral is quite different on the inside and now includes an underground palace for receptions and a garage. Thus the new cathedral is not an exact replica, but rather a simulacrum.

past.”¹⁷⁵ An enormous monument to Peter the Great was erected in Moscow. In 2000 the members of the Romanov family were canonized as passion-bearers by the Moscow Patriarchate and their remains were interred in Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in Petersburg. All of these actions signaled, in effect, an attempt to *erase* Soviet history, to make it a “void,” and to return to what came before—imperial Russia.

Up to this point it appears that Lotman and Uspenskii’s binary model of cultural change held. However, by the mid- and late Yeltsin era it became clear that full-scale adoption of the western, capitalist lifestyle would not lead to the utopian lifestyle that Russians imagined existed in the West. Salaries shrank or were in arrears, inflation and homelessness soared, and many lost their savings in insolvent private banks. Freedom to travel, change employment, and move residences may have seemed like welcome changes, but to many the sudden availability of choices was disorienting, and it did not take long for many post-Soviet citizens to become disillusioned with the West that they had initially tried to emulate.¹⁷⁶

To sum up, many in post-Soviet Russia initially embraced Westernization wholeheartedly but were soon disillusioned.¹⁷⁷ Once the utopian image of the West was shattered by reality, a confusing void of meaning remained. This can be seen in *Generation “P,”* where the content creators write scenarios that reflect both pro-Western and anti-Western advertising scenarios. As Boris Nordenboos has noted, a poster for Java Gold cigarettes, a pre-Soviet *and* post-Soviet (but not Soviet) Russian brand, incites Russians by calling for a “counterstrike” against Western culture, yet in a Gucci ad the customer is invited to shed Russian identity and

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 313.

¹⁷⁶ Fitzpatrick, “Becoming Post-Soviet,” 305, 313.

¹⁷⁷ It is important to note that the entire country did not greet Westernization with open arms. Many politicians vehemently opposed the “Western poison” while others accepted the new influx of Western ideas wholeheartedly. Opinions ranged from love to hate and everything in between.

“become European.”¹⁷⁸ The two ads effectively cancel each other out semiotically, leaving a void.

The rapid changes experienced by post-Soviet society led many to renegotiate their identity. In Jameson’s view, identity construction is dependent on social arrangements.¹⁷⁹ For example, in modernist literature one found great men, pathetic misfits, existential antiheroes, and solitary rebels, whereas in postmodern literature one finds a de-centered subject who is part of multiple groups and who occupies multiple social roles and “subject-positions.”¹⁸⁰ The renegotiation of identity is a common theme in many of Pelevin’s novels but especially in *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V,”* where “image” (*умидж*) is everything. In both novels, identity is artifice. For example, Tatarskii, the main hero of *Generation “P”* dreamt of being a poet but has reinvented himself as a “content creator” (*криэйтор, копирайтер*), but he has faith neither in his own ideas (content) nor in anyone else’s. The goal of his creative output is to compel others to buy consumer goods. In *Empire “V,”* Roman is initially given a new identity (vampire) and spends the entire novel negotiating what sort of vampire he will be. For example, Rama worries about the loss of his soul and seeks advice from Osiris, a loner “Tolstoyan” vampire who only imbibes blood (not bablos) and never kills. After experiencing the power and euphoria that comes from drinking bablos, however, Rama accepts the loss of his humanity.

Life in the new, post-Soviet reality is fast, unfamiliar, even aberrant. Both Tatarskii and Rama feel an existential terror as they attempt to deal with it. They are no longer in control of their own destinies; enormous political and social forces are invisibly moving them, enmeshing them in grand schemes beyond their comprehension. In the past, the Party narrative dominated,

¹⁷⁸ Noordenbos, “Breaking into a New Era? A Cultural-Semiotic Reading of Viktor Pelevin,” 101–2.

¹⁷⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 137.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 321–2.

reflecting the Party's communist vision of a radiant future that never came. That vision has now been replaced by an equally inadequate capitalist narrative that focuses on an immediate present that instantly slips away. Like the old narrative, this new narrative is unfamiliar and terrorizing; it is homogenizing, anti-human, and inescapable. Ironically, Russians left behind the socialist experiment that promised equality but delivered totalitarianism only to embrace a western style democracy (or the appearance of democracy in Russia's case) and a market economy that promised individual freedoms and personal choices but led instead to dehumanizing, manipulative, predatory capitalism and psychic isolationism.

Pelevin's characters are also haunted by a crisis of signification. The terror that they experience is derived from the prominence of simulacra in the postmodern (or late capitalist) age: it is difficult to derive meaning from your surroundings when it is impossible to differentiate between actual and virtual reality (i.e., between truth and spectacle). Pelevin leaves the reader with the impression that the entirety of our contemporary world is a simulated reality and that everything material is illusion. *Generation "P"* is particularly radical in its focus not only on the meaninglessness of virtual images, but even the meaninglessness of words: specifically, they lack signifieds. Thus, the everyman can trust neither images (because they are simulacra) *nor* the very foundation of representation: the word (because it is no longer connected to meaning).

Pelevin's characters are faced with the task of deriving new meaning from the reality of their surroundings, with the result that both Tatarskii and Rama find themselves in what Sally Dalton-Brown describes as a

hollow culture of auto-referentiality and of illusion, disempowered by the ideology of their consumerist era, and unaware even to the extent to which they have been subjugated. They exist within an eternal loop of desire, and within the eternal illusions of

self-reflecting simulacra. This postmodern world of rootless images, of illusion, is not a fully human but a vampiric world.¹⁸¹

Humans in both novels are ensnared by capitalistic psychic vampires who have surrendered their humanity in order to profit/feed off human energy.

With the collapse of Soviet metanarratives and the superficial, even “unnatural” adoption of capitalist metanarratives, both Tatarskii and Rama are surrounded by symbols that are empty, devoid of inner meaning. Although both heroes appear to rise to the top in their respective circles—Tatarskii and Rama both become consorts to Ishtar and rise to leadership level among the Chaldeans and Moscow vampires respectively—they fail to fill the void with meaning. Instead, they perpetuate emptiness by keeping humans in thrall to an endless cycle of desiring, earning, and spending. They themselves remain cogs in similar cycles of dependence.

While not the first to write of emptiness in Russian culture or the pitfalls of capitalism, Pelevin is arguably one of the first post-Soviet Russian writers to link these powerful ideas, pull aside the “veil,” and reveal the void to his readers. The conceptualists and meta-conceptualists exposed the false façade and revealed the immobile, deteriorating, hollow thing that the Soviet project had become. Grisha Bruskin’s powerful painting, ironically titled “Fundamental Lexicon” (1986), reduced Soviet reality to a series of clichéd gypsum (i.e., temporary) statues isolated on mountain tops—each a frozen slogan devoid of meaning. But the conceptualists did not describe what concepts would come to take their place, for they did not know. The postmodernist Pelevin goes one step further.

¹⁸¹ Dalton-Brown, “Illusion-Money-Illusion,” 33–4.

Generation “P”

Generation “P” is set in Moscow in the late 1990s, just as Russia was being flooded with Western products and advertising. The narrator of *Generation “P”* describes the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union as a time when “language and life both abounded in the strange and the dubious.”¹⁸² The superficial renaming (*переименование*) of symbols described by Lotman in chapter 1 has occurred: empty Soviet signifiers (slogans) have been replaced by empty capitalist signifiers (advertisements). Playing on the terms Generation X and Generation Y, Pelevin writes that Generation “P” had no choice in the switch from communism to capitalism and that the “children of the Soviet seventies chose Pepsi in precisely the same way as their parents chose Brezhnev,” that is, they really had no choice at all.¹⁸³

Generation “P”’s hero is Vavilen Tatarskii, a young Russian who dreams of becoming a writer but who, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, abandons his plans when he realizes that the world had no use for poets, for poems “with the collapse of Soviet power had simply lost their meaning and value.”¹⁸⁴ Throughout the novel, Pelevin shows the reader that words no longer have the kind of power they used to. One particularly apt advertisement that Tatarskii has written for Gap describes the inability of the word (literature in this case) to provide a sense of higher meaning. The advertisement depicts a pants-less Anton Chekhov with his legs spread, forming a gap. The ad reads: “Russia was always notorious for the gap (*разрыв*) between culture and civilization. Now there is no more culture, no more civilization. The only thing that remains

¹⁸² Viktor Pelevin, *HZ*, 2. “Но в те дни в языке и в жизни вообще было очень много сомнительного и странного.” *GP*, 12.

¹⁸³ *HZ*, 1. “Дети советских семидесятых выбрали «Пепси» точно так же, как их родители выбрали Брежнева.” *GP*, 9.

¹⁸⁴ *HZ*, 5. “С гибелью советской власти они потеряли смысл и ценность.” *GP*, 16.

is the Gap. The way they see you.”¹⁸⁵ Here, the gap refers both to the Gap (the clothing store) and a gap (an empty space), conflating consumerism and nothingness and pointing to the void.¹⁸⁶ The advertisement also blatantly points out that if you buy Gap clothing, you are buying *an image, a brand*. There is no such thing as an identity anymore, only “the way they see you.”

Vavilen eventually takes a job working in a kiosk run by the Chechen mafia. His change in profession marks a transition in Russia from modernism (symbolized by poetry) to postmodernism (symbolized by advertising). One day Tatarskii runs into Sergei Morkovin, a former colleague from the Literary Institute who has put his literary talents to use as an advertising content creator. Morkovin arranges for Tatarskii to come work with him. Tatarskii quickly works his way up to inventing Russian slogans for Western products.

Tatarskii runs into another former classmate, Andrei Gireev, who dresses in Eastern (Tibetan and Nepalese) garb and whose name marks him as a Kazakh or Tatar. Gireev invites Tatarskii home to Rastorguevo¹⁸⁷ where they ingest fly agarics (a psychoactive mushroom). Tatarskii eats too many, sending his friend fleeing. After losing his ability to speak coherently (an episode that reminds Tatarskii of the Tower of Babel¹⁸⁸), Tatarskii notices a strange, abandoned, ziggurat-shaped building nearby. Deciding that his own thoughts had caused the tower to appear, Tatarskii ascends to the top, finding three significant items along the way: an empty Parliament cigarettes pack featuring a hologram with three palm trees, a three-peso Cuban

¹⁸⁵ *HP*, 63. In the original text, Tatarskii’s “pitch” is in English with the Russian below: “В России всегда существовал разрыв между культурой и цивилизацией. Культуры больше нет. Цивилизации больше нет. Остался только Гар. То, каким тебя видят (англ.). Игра слов: *gap* — разрыв, *Gap* — сеть универсальных магазинов.” *GP*, 85.

¹⁸⁶ Meghan Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing in 20th-Century Literature*, 144.

¹⁸⁷ From the suggestive verb *расторговать*: продать по частям всё, без остатка; распродать.

¹⁸⁸ Вавилонская башня (ostensibly in the form of a ziggurat), reminiscent of Tatarskii’s given name “Вавилен,” which also connects to the Babylonian leitmotif in the novel.

coin with Che Guevara on it, and a pencil sharpener in the shape of a television that someone had modified by drawing an eye on the screen. Because he finds them in the “Tower of Babel,” these three objects (along with the mushrooms, which the reader is told are sacred to the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar) will come to be associated with the ancient Babylonian theme that runs through the novel. The three found objects creatively inspire Tatarskii throughout the novel, so it appears that the goddess Ishtar is directly communing with and inspiring Tatarskii through these talismans.

After these adventures in the Moscow suburbs, Tatarskii feels that his professional capabilities have been reinvigorated. He continues to experiment with and escape into a mind-altering state using mushrooms, as well as cocaine and LSD. One night, after consuming a significant amount of alcohol, Tatarskii summons the spirit of the Argentinian Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara via the Ouija board. He asks the summoned spirit to tell him something that will give him an edge in advertising. The spirit of Che describes a spiritual “dark age,” the result of a new type of subject-object division. Previously, there had been only been a subject-object division of the “first type,” for example, a human mind (subject) contemplating a switched-off television (object). The subject could only think about whether the screen of the television (object) was dirty or whether one should buy a bigger television.

Once the television is switched on, however, it becomes an object of the “second type”; in other words, it ceases to be considered a material object in itself and instead transports the subject into a different space.¹⁸⁹ Che Guevara argues that, while watching television (an object of

¹⁸⁹ Brian McHale discusses how television and film act as “ontological pluralizers” in his volume *Constructing Postmodernism*. He defines ontological pluralizers as motifs that introduce a second ontological plane into a fictional world. Important for *Generation “P,”* hallucinations (due to drug use or otherwise) also qualify as ontological pluralizers. See Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 125-26.

the second type), the subject becomes a “subject of the second type,” that is, one whose state is no longer controlled by his or her own attention span. Rather, that viewer’s state is managed by the producers of the television program via a series of cuts. In this state, the viewer is zombie-like or like someone possessed—he or she is being controlled remotely. Through this process, *Homo sapiens* has been transformed into *Homo Zapiens* (derived from “zap,” i.e., to change channels on the television¹⁹⁰), someone who is unable to distinguish between the reality on television and the reality of the material world.

Individual humans now exist only as individual cells of an organism called the Oranus (*роможона*), Guevara explains, which “ingests and eliminates emptiness”¹⁹¹ and whose existence depends on three types of wow-impulses: oral, anal, and displacing. The oral and anal impulses describe the individual’s consumption (accumulation) and excretion (spending) of money. Displacing impulses induce the individual to spend money in order to experience pleasure instead of deriving pleasure via other, more natural means; that is, objects are not purchased out of necessity but to elicit a particular “feeling” or sense of status (the postmodern aestheticization Jameson described). Pelevin will make a similar argument in *Empire “V.”*

Human beings, Che continues, are now caught in an infinite loop of consumption. They have become almost animal-like, caged in their living rooms and mesmerized by the images on their television screens.¹⁹² The Oranus’s cells “no longer possess any inner being” and so “all [humans] can do is to define themselves via the possession of products advertised on television.

¹⁹⁰ “Homo zapiens” is written in English in the Russian novel but also abbreviated with the Russian, “X3,” a vulgar phrase meaning “the f- if I know” or “what the f-?”

¹⁹¹ Pelevin, *HZ*, 84. “Глокает и выбрасывает пустоту” *GP*, 111.

¹⁹² The regression of spiritually depraved human beings into animals has Buddhist overtones. In the cycle of *samsāra*, a human can be reborn as an animal if that individual has not accumulated enough good karma in a previous life. See chapter 3.

Genuine interiority is exchanged for an illusion of interiority, a so-called identity.”¹⁹³ Thus in this brave, new, post-Soviet world, not only has the individual subject disappeared (like Akakii Akakievich in Gogol’s “Overcoat,” see chapter 1) but so has nearly all of Russian reality—identity and spirituality can be purchased in stores like The Path to Yourself (*Путь к себе*) and even politicians have become virtual—Azadovskii’s firm pays people to act as “skeletons” (motion capture actors) and uses green screen to digitally render the faces of public figures. Pelevin (through the spirit of Che Guevara) characterizes this condition as “collective non-existence” and the “unreal”:

But it is not just unreal (this word, in fact, applies to everything in the human world). There are no words to describe the degree of its unreality. It is this piling up of one unreality atop another, a castle in the clouds, the foundation of which is the abyss [i.e., the void].¹⁹⁴

The collective non-existence of which Che speaks is similar to the second noble truth in Buddhism, which frowns upon materialism. This will be discussed in chapter 3, but it is important to note that “Che,” like the Buddha, sees materialism as negative.

As Tatarskii climbs the public relations corporate ladder, he continues to receive inspiration from his drug-use (yet another state of unreal non-existence). He takes several stamps of LSD that have a Babylonian god with a beard and pointed hat on the tab. The reader has already been told that Tatarskii’s preferred fly agarics are supposedly sacred to Ishtar and so it is not the drugs that inspire Tatarskii, but rather Ishtar. The god depicted on the tabs of acid may have been Ishtar herself, who in her warrior aspect was often depicted with a beard and wearing

¹⁹³ Sofya Khagi, “From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Zapiens,” 562.

¹⁹⁴ Translation mine. “Но он просто нереален (это слово, в сущности, приложимо ко всему в человеческом мире). Нет слов, чтобы описать степень его нереальности. Это нагромождение одного несуществования на другое, воздушный замок, фундаментом которого служит пропасть.” Pelevin, *GP*, 105–6.

a pointed hat.¹⁹⁵ Ishtar is associated not only with sexual love but also with war and destruction. In the epic *Gilgamesh*, the eponymous hero incurs Ishtar's wrath by refusing to marry her, citing the number of creatures whom the goddess has loved and then spurned and destroyed. Although she is the goddess of love, she is fickle and dangerous when crossed—a lesson that Tatarskii will ultimately learn the hard way.¹⁹⁶

After Tatarskii consumes the acid, he hallucinates visions of Enkidu (Gilgamesh's friend and former lover of Ishtar; Pelevin identifies him as a "fisher-god"), who holds strings of people who are trying to ascend by swallowing and excreting the strings (a gruesome depiction of the oral and anal wow-impulses earlier described by the spirit of Che Guevara). Tatarskii is also visited by a *sirruf*, a lion-like dragon associated with Ishtar. The *sirruf* asks what Tatarskii was trying to accomplish by consuming so much LSD. When Tatarskii explains that he merely wanted to experience the "pulse of life" (*биение жизни*), the *sirruf* shows him a glimpse of this pulse, which Tatarskii can only describe as a feeling of "black horror" (*темный ужас*).¹⁹⁷ When Tatarskii suggests he had been ascending the Tower of Babel in his hallucination, the *sirruf* corrects him and tells him he was instead descending into a *topheth* (a cremation pit used in ancient Caanan for human sacrifice). The entire material world, explains the *sirruf*, is being consumed in its fires: "Man believes that he is the consumer, but in reality the fire of consumption consumes him."¹⁹⁸ The theme of a horror-inducing black void that underlies life,

¹⁹⁵ Arthur Cotterell, "Ishtar," in *A Dictionary of World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

¹⁹⁶ In *Empire "V"* Rama is told that Tatarskii is all but finished and that he is no longer the Chaldeans' head content creator.

¹⁹⁷ Pelevin, *HZ*, 117. Pelevin, *GP*, 152.

¹⁹⁸ Pelevin, *HZ*, 119–20. "Человек думает, что потребляет он, а на самом деле огонь потребления сжигает его...." *GP*, 155.

disorienting one into thinking up is down and down is up, is another theme that will continue in *Empire “V.”*

It is during this acid trip that Tatarskii hears an inner voice that tells him that “any insight of true breadth and profundity will inevitably be reduced to words. And the words will inevitably be reduced to themselves.”¹⁹⁹ This sentiment is confirmed the next morning when Tatarskii calls Gireev, who confesses that he had given him a sentence from his wife’s Hebrew language workbook rather than a Buddhist mantra to help him endure his bad trip:

—“Hang on. Why’d you give me that sentence and not a mantra?”
—“What’s the difference? In that state it doesn’t matter what you recite. The main thing is to keep your mind occupied and drink as much vodka as possible.”²⁰⁰

Thus, the words are not only deceptive (as the juxtaposition of the Tower of Babel/*topheth* and Buddhist mantra/Hebrew workbook exercise suggests) but also devoid of *any* meaning.

Similarly, when Tatarskii is struggling to come up with a new concept to sell “The Russian Idea,” he attempts to channel the spirit of Dostoevsky via his Ouija board so he can ask him for advice. Disappointingly, the board shudders and leaps into the air in multiple directions, leaving only meaningless scribbles on the page. Tatarskii could only “console himself with the thought that the idea he was seeking was so transcendent that this was the only way it could be expressed on paper.”²⁰¹ Tellingly, the client (Wee Vova or Вовчик Малой in Russian) who has ordered this new concept is killed the evening before Tatarskii’s deadline, and Tatarskii is forced

¹⁹⁹ *HZ*, 115. “Откровение любой глубины и ширины неизбежно упрется в слова. А слова неизбежно упрутся в себя.” *GP*, 150.

²⁰⁰ *HZ*, 127.
— Подожди. Почему ты мне это предложение дал, а не мантру?
— Какая разница. В таком состоянии все равно, что повторять. Главное ум занять и водки больше выпить. *GP*, 164.

²⁰¹ *HZ*, 142. “Можно тешить себя мыслью, что искомая идея настолько трансцендентна, что это единственный способ как-то зафиксировать ее на бумаге.” *GP*, 181.

to drop the entire project. Although Wee Vova and the Chechens play a minor role in the novel, it is significant that Tatarskii (who represents the successors of the intelligentsia class, despite his suggestive name) is unable to come up with a national idea for Russia.²⁰²

For Pelevin, the word as such has become nothing more than a floating signifier, the unstable outer form of the sign. Pelevin takes this paradigm and applies it to countless objects in the novel. For example, Morkovin gives Tatarskii a Rolex to wear into a meeting with a client: “It’s a Rolex Oyster. Careful, you’ll chip off the gold plate; it’s a fake. I only take it out on business. When you’re talking with the client, flash it around a bit, you know. It helps.”²⁰³ The outer form (signifier) of the watch is the only thing that matters to Morkovin, just as Tatarskii’s outer appearance (not his inner content/ideas) is what matters to the client. Tatarskii and the other content creators have false facades. Tatarskii, for one, parrots advertising phrases he has heard other people use in order to further his own career (e.g., “We don’t need writers here, we need creators.”²⁰⁴) Tatarskii’s coworker Maliuta “was a rabid anti-Semite, not because he had any reason to dislike Jews, but because he tried as hard as he could to maintain the image of a patriot...”²⁰⁵ A similar situation will arise at the end of the novel when the goddess Ishtar chooses Tatarskii as her consort and he becomes a virtual image without content: Ishtar is only interested in his outer form (which she lacks).

²⁰² One could also interpret Wee Vova as a veiled reference to Vladimir Putin, who also was “forced” to abandon the search for a new Russian national program because he was suddenly occupied (likely by his own design) by a war with Chechnia. Earlier, in the mid-1990s, Boris Yeltsin had initiated a competition for a “new national idea” for Russia, but it fizzled. See S.V. Rymar’, “Russkaia ideia,” *Vestnik Cheliabinskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, no. 23 (314) (2013): 56.

²⁰³ Pelevin, *HZ*, 12. “Это «Ролекс Уйстер». Осторожней, не сбей позолоту—они фальшивые. Я их только на дело беру. Когда будешь говорить с клиентом, ты ими так, знаешь, побрякивай. Помогает.” *GP*, 25.

²⁰⁴ *HZ*, 159. “Нам нужны не творцы, а криэйторы.” *GP*, 200.

²⁰⁵ *HZ*, 93. “Он был пламенным антисемитом, но не потому, что у него были какие-то причины не любить евреев, а потому, что он изо всех сил старался поддерживать имидж патриота...” *GP*, 122.

The Babylonian imagery in the novel merges with the theme of the fickleness of words and language. The motif of the Tower of Babel and a “confusion of tongues” (i.e., inability to convey meaning) figures prominently throughout the novel. In addition, the “Chaldeans” (the secret society revealed to be running the country) tell Tatarskii that “the mirror and the mask are the ritual requisites of Ishtar.”²⁰⁶ Historically, the mirror was sacred to Ishtar but not the mask. This reference is undoubtedly to Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The Mirror and the Mask,” which demonstrates that words fail to move the soul (and those that do are implicitly destructive).²⁰⁷

Eventually, Tatarskii manages to secure a position working for the top public relations firm in Moscow. The firm is run by Leonid Azadovskii, whose face Tatarskii recognizes from hundreds of television advertisements. After a trial period, Tatarskii is told that the firm not only produces advertisements but news clips as well—most politicians and state officials are in fact computer simulations. Moreover, the American government controls what frequency the Russians can use to broadcast and cuts the frequency as punishment when they do not agree with Russian foreign and domestic policy. When Tatarskii asks questions regarding how, exactly, foreign policy is determined in Russia if his firm creates the politicians and the oligarchs, he is told not to ask questions.²⁰⁸ After this, Tatarskii abandons his attempts to make sense of the world—even through models like oral- and anal-impulses. The world has become one big, photo-shopped, digital image—a simulacrum.

²⁰⁶ *HZ*, 26. “Зеркало и маска—ритуальные предметы Иштар.” *GP*, 41.

²⁰⁷ Pelevin has previously demonstrated an affinity for Borges. The preface of *Chapaev and Pustota* states that the novel was almost named *The Garden of Forking Petkas*, a reference to Borges’ story “The Garden of Forking Paths.”

²⁰⁸ The answer is revealed in Pelevin’s sequel to the novel, *Empire “V.”*

At the climax of the novel, Tatarskii is called to Ostankino and made to participate in an initiation ritual. First he is stripped naked and blindfolded. Then he is led into a room full of people who pay him no notice. The room holds Azadovskii's art "collection," which consists not of the works of art themselves, but only of the notarized certificates of their authenticity and monetary value. Azadovskii joins him and leads Tatarskii into a corridor through a secret door, where people await them. All the participants change into strange, feathery, wool skirts, don gold masks, and take bronze mirrors in their hand.

In the next room, completely gold from floor to ceiling, stands an altar (on which is a crystal eye), flanked by two *sirrufs*. Azadovskii then explains to Tatarskii the history of the ancient goddess Ishtar who, as punishment for trying to achieve immortality by separating her death from her physical body, was reduced to a pure concept (signified)—that of gold, embodying that which everyone desires. Her death became a lame, five-legged dog named Pizdets that slept in the North. The Chaldean society into which Tatarskii is being initiated is charged with serving the goddess and guarding the five-legged dog (who, upon waking, would destroy the world).

Tatarskii learns that he is being considered for the honorable position of Ishtar's consort. If he is successful in assuming this role, he would become "a consecrated Chaldean" and Ishtar's "ritual earthly husband."²⁰⁹ In effect, Ishtar (who is pure signified) is only interested in obtaining an *earthly* husband in material form (one who is pure signifier). Tatarskii's forehead is then anointed with dog's blood and he is forced to look through the pupil of the crystal eye on the altar. This is done in order to identify Ishtar's next earthly husband, an honor currently held by Azadovskii. When Tatarskii looks through the eye, he sees a flash of gold and hears a

²⁰⁹ Pelevin, *HZ*, 27. "Становился посвященным халдеем и ее ритуальным земным мужем...." *GP*, 43.

commotion behind his back—it is Azadovskii being strangled. Tatarskii will now serve as Ishtar’s husband and in time will presumably meet a similar end.

Ishtar is represented by the concept of gold, that which everyone desires. Tatarskii is told

That’s your main sacramental function. The goddess really doesn’t have a body, but there is something that takes the place of her body. Her corporeal nature consists of the totality of all the images used in advertising; and since she manifests herself via a sequence of images, in order to become godlike, you have to be transformed. Then it will be possible for you to enter into mystical union.²¹⁰

In post-Soviet Russia, that which everyone desires is represented by television images, so Tatarskii, in order to become the goddess’s consort, must himself become a digital image. A digital scan of Tatarskii is made and his image is then used in countless advertisements and news clips, just as Azadovskii’s image had been used. Ishtar only requires a signifier; there is no space in this paradigm for Tatarskii to have any “inner meaning” of his own. After Tatarskii has been chosen as Ishtar’s consort, he indeed becomes pure signifier as his image is broadcast everywhere.

Although Tatarskii has gained Ishtar’s favor, the novel implies that the same fate that Azadovskii met inevitably awaits him as well. The periodic replacement of Ishtar’s consort is as arbitrary as Tatarskii’s decision to replace the nation’s preference for Pepsi with Coca-Cola at the end of the novel: it is one meaningless signifier (brand name) replacing another.

To emphasize the deceptive nature of both hypercapitalism and communism, Pelevin juxtaposes the new advertising elite with symbols of Soviet power. For example, one advertising agency is ironically located in the *Pravda* (“truth”) complex, which once housed the editorial

²¹⁰ HZ, 246. “Это твоя главная сакральная функция. У богини действительно нет тела, но есть нечто, что заменяет ей тело. По своей телесной природе она является совокупностью всех использованных в рекламе образов. И раз она являет себя посредством визуального ряда, ты, чтобы стать богоподобным, тоже должен быть преобразен. Тогда вы будете иметь возможность мистически слиться.” GP, 296.

offices of ideological Soviet newspapers. In another scene, Tatarskii's boss Azadovskii sits watching clips in a private home theater while chain-smoking, an image that evokes Stalin's late night viewings in his own home theater. In both of these instances, the name of the object has changed, but the function remains the same. The old *Pravda* ideologues and the new content creators both spin their material to create a desired effect and manipulate the "consumer"; like Stalin, Azadovskii approves films/clips only if they will produce the desired effect on the public. The clips of politicians and oligarchs are filmed using stand-ins called "skeletons." Contributing to the diabolical nature of the operation is the fact that everything is orchestrated by a man named Legion in a Stalinist-style building.²¹¹ The end of *Generation "P"* implies that Tatarskii will eventually be himself consumed and destroyed by this malevolent hypercapitalist system controlled by the Chaldeans and created with his collaboration (as previous Soviet generations had been consumed and destroyed by the Stalinist machine). This fate is confirmed in the sequel to *Generation "P"*—*Empire "V."*

In *Generation "P"* Pelevin shows that the superficial re-naming described by Lotman and Uspenskii (see chapter 1) has occurred in 1990s Russia—old cultural structures have been preserved but a new text has been mapped onto the old cultural skeleton. In *Generation "P,"* this is literally so: the "skeletons" employed by Azadovskii's public relations firm appear with a completely new digital veneer on television. The old *Pravda* complex is now home to a public relations firm but both institutions produced false words with no meaning. Like the substitution of Coke for Pepsi, predatory capitalism has replaced totalitarian communism but a void lies beneath both systems. All of these cases represent not just a showy veneer (signifier) meant to

²¹¹ Azadovskii's given name "Legion" is fitting as his purpose is demonic and his image is everywhere: For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit. And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many. (KJV Mark 5:8-9)

conceal a still-emerging post-Soviet construction of capitalism and democracy (signified); on the contrary, these signifiers are fundamentally deceptive and mask the fact that there is no signified.

The Void as Vampire

The existential terror experienced by Tatarskii in *Generation "P"* gives way to a more conventional form of terror in *Empire "V"*: vampires. The vampires who populate the second novel, however, are not the traditional vampires *à la* Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*. Pelevin's vampires may seem banal when compared to *Dracula*; however, the author himself has said that his vampires are much scarier—"After all, there are different kinds of horrors."²¹² Pelevin's vampires are not so different from the content creators in *Generation "P."* The main difference between the two is that while Tatarskii is uninformed about the Chaldeans' machinations for most of *Generation "P,"* the vampires are explicit with Rama about their role in dominating the human masses in *Empire "V."*

Why Vampires?

"Why vampires?" is a valid question. Pelevin was once asked about his seemingly sudden interest in the topic in an interview.²¹³ However, Pelevin's work reveals that vampires are not wholly unrelated to his interests. The vampires in *Empire "V"* are both like and unlike traditional vampires. Unlike traditional vampires, they are not classically frightening; they do not threaten the physical body. Like traditional vampires, however, they do threaten to annihilate the soul. Featuring vampires allows Pelevin to tap into the rich genre of the vampire text. In Franco

²¹² Natal'ia Kochetkova, "Pisatel' Viktor Pelevin: 'Vampir v Rossii bol'she chem vampire,'" *Izvestia*, November 3, 2006. "Ведь ужасы бывают разного рода."

²¹³ *Ibid.*

Moretti's formulation, "Monsters are metaphors."²¹⁴ Vampires neatly sum up society's fears of what lurks unseen in the darkness, in the past, in the unknown. Fantastic characters like vampires, werewolves, and human/other hybrids that Pelevin features in his works make the reader ponder what it means to be human.²¹⁵ Beth McDonald views the vampire as a "catalyst, propelling characters on a spiritual and philosophical journey." Vampires compel society to directly "confront questions about their innate goodness or evilness and ... belief..." and reflect on one's identity.²¹⁶ Finally, Nina Auerbach makes the point, in her study of what vampires "mean" at various times in history, that every generation gets the vampires it deserves.²¹⁷

Of all of the fantastic creatures, vampires are specifically associated with economic issues in literature and popular culture. While folkloric vampires usually rove around the countryside, vampires became aristocrats in the early nineteenth-century literary tradition. They had the opportunity to accumulate wealth over the course of their unnaturally long lifetimes. The title character of John Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1819) is Lord Ruthven, a wealthy British aristocrat and vampire. In James Malcolm Rymer's series of penny dreadfuls *Varney the Vampire* (1845–7), it is unclear whether Varney most desires the blood of the Bannerworth family or their wealth. In 1867, Karl Marx clearly saw the similarities between capitalism and vampirism when he wrote in *Das Kapital*, "Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives

²¹⁴ Franco Moretti, "The Dialectic of Fear," *New Left Review* 136 (1982): 83.

²¹⁵ While Pelevin only turned to vampires in *Empire "V"* in 2006, his works have previously featured fantastic creatures. For example, the short story "Проблема верволька в средней полосе," in his first collection *Синий фонарь* (1991), features werewolves and the early novel *Жизнь насекомых* (1993) is about creatures that seem to be humans and insects simultaneously.

²¹⁶ Beth E. McDonald, *The Vampire as Numinous Experience: Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004), 2.

²¹⁷ Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”²¹⁸ The vampiric capitalist was a common poster and cartoon figure at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries. Vampires (like capitalists to a certain extent) feed repeatedly from the same victim before the victim dies. Both have the ability to place the soul of the individual human being in jeopardy and both are very difficult to oppose.

Other scholars have connected the vampire specifically with *absence*. Because vampires are neither alive nor dead, they occupy a liminal space that cancels out the other two states, producing zero. The vampire thus occupies the null “void” between being alive and being dead. In her study *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson has argued that the fantastic (including vampire literature) “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent.’”²¹⁹ In other words, fantastic literature is the void laid bare. Both the vampire as capitalist and the vampire as a representative of a postmodern “nullity” are very much in keeping both with *Empire “V”* and its prequel, *Generation “P.”*

Closed Loops

Empire “V” is considered by many to be a sequel to *Generation “P.”* From a thematic standpoint, the two novels are nearly identical. Pelevin’s heroes in both novels are stuck in what Sally Dalton-Brown calls a “closed loop” of consciousness: “a form of solipsistic labyrinth from which there is no escape.”²²⁰ At the end of *Generation “P,”* Tatarskii joins the upper echelons of

²¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1. (London: Electric Book Company, 2001), 336.

²¹⁹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981), 4.

²²⁰ Dalton-Brown, “The Dialectics of Emptiness,” 33.

the ruling establishment and yet he cannot break free of the web of consumerist simulacra; the system is self-perpetuating. As Tatarskii notes,

People want to earn money in order to gain freedom, or at least a breathing space from their interminable suffering. And we [content creators] manipulate reality in front of people's eyes so that freedom comes to be symbolised by an iron, or a sanitary [napkin] with wings, or lemonade. That's what they pay us for. We pawn this stuff off on them from the screen, and then they pawn it off on each other, and on us who write the stuff, and it's like radioactive contamination, when it makes no difference any longer who exploded the bomb. Everyone tries to show everyone else that they've already achieved freedom, and as a result, while we pretend to socialise and be friendly, all we really do is keep pawning...off with all sorts of jackets, mobile phones and cars [on each other]. It's a closed circle.²²¹

While the masses are not even aware that such a loop exists, characters like the content creators in *Generation "P"* and the vampires in *Empire "V"* have become "enlightened" by their esoteric subcultures. However, these elite groups are trapped in a secondary closed loop, of which they seem to be not fully aware. Pelevin does not specify how many other loops might exist.

In *Generation "P,"* for example, Tatarskii learns that mankind is stuck in a capitalistic closed loop—"the goal of advertising magic."²²² This loop is "empty" (in that it "has no center," no periphery, and no beginning or end), although "all objects and qualities are related to each other via a fictional center that is called 'identity.'"²²³ Pelevin compares this loop to the image of the ouroboros (a snake biting its own tail), explaining: "You need a million dollars to buy a

²²¹ Pelevin, *HZ*, 102. "Люди хотят заработать, чтобы получить свободу или хотя бы передышку в своем непрерывном страдании. А мы, копирайтеры, так поворачиваем реальность перед глазами, что свободу начинают символизировать то уют, то прокладка с крылышками, то лимонад. За это нам и платят. Мы впариваем им это с экрана, а они потом вправляют это друг другу и нам, авторам,—это как радиоактивное заражение, когда уже не важно, кто именно взорвал бомбу. Все пытаются показать друг другу, что уже достигли свободы, и в результате мы только и делаем, что под видом общения и дружбы впариваем друг другу всякие черные пальто, сотовые телефоны и кабриолеты с кожаными креслами. Замкнутый круг." *GP*, 135–6.

²²² *HZ*, 86. "Цель рекламной магии" *GP*, 114.

²²³ *HZ*, 86. "Все предметы и свойства соотносятся через фикцию этого центра, называемую *identity*." *GP*, 114.

house in an expensive neighborhood, you need the house to have somewhere to wear your red slippers, and you need red slippers to provide you with the calmness and self-confidence that will allow you to earn a million dollars, in order to buy the house in which you can wear the red slippers, thus acquiring the qualities of calmness and confidence.”²²⁴

In *Empire “V,”* Rama likewise learns that the fate of humanity is to be stuck in a closed loop. Humans feed on money, while the vampires feed on “bablos,” a by-product of the life force that humans excrete while chasing after visions of material wealth and success.²²⁵ These “illusory goals” are those generated by advertising, which is controlled by the Chaldeans and the vampires. The vampires control production of bablos through the twin arts of “glamour” and “discourse.” Glamour and discourse are used to direct humans’ libidinous energy toward the desire of commercial goods. Humans are unable to attain their goals since they are being kept in a “closed loop of desire, in thrall to the...vampires that manipulate their perceptions.”²²⁶ In addition to keeping their human food source enslaved, the vampires also deprive them of access to the truth—that they exist solely to feed the vampires. Toward the end of the novel, Rama thinks,

Somewhere children sleep...dreaming about something childish, but actually they are producing bablos, like adults.... Everyone works from infancy.... I was like that, too.... I remember how this bright red drop of hope matures... It seems that we will somehow understand something, finish something, decide something, and then start another life,

²²⁴ *HZ*, 86. “Миллион долларов нужен, чтобы купить дом в дорогом районе, дом нужен, чтобы было где ходить в красных тапочках а красные тапочки нужны, чтобы обрести спокойствие и уверенность в себе, позволяющие заработать миллион долларов, чтобы купить дом, по которому можно будет ходить в красных тапочках, обретая при этом спокойствие и уверенность.” *GP*, 114.

The image of the ouroboros recurs in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, prompting A Khuli to discover that love is the only thing that can break the circle (loop) between tail (illusion) and head (mind), thereby breaking free from the power of the oral-anal impulse.

²²⁵ Pelevin’s neologism “bablos” derives from the Russian slang term “bablo” (*бабло*), meaning “cash” or “dough.”

²²⁶ Dalton-Brown, “Illusion-Money-Illusion,” 33.

one that is right and authentic. But this never happens because the red drop is always disappearing and we start storing it away again. And then it disappears again and so it continues all through life until we get tired. And then all that remains is for us to lie down on the bed, turn towards the wall, and die.²²⁷

In other words, the vampires rob humans of the hope of finding meaning in life.

Empire “V”

At the core of *Empire “V”* (like *Generation “P”*) lies an illusory reality controlled by a shadow organization. The novel is a coming-of-age tale about a young Muscovite named Roman who is unsure of what to do with his life until he follows a series of arrows on the sidewalk that promise him a chance at joining the elite. He stumbles into a vampire lair and is knocked unconscious. When he awakens, he is greeted by Brahma, a vampire wearing a black mask. Brahma seems to know everything about Roman. He explains that vampires obtain this knowledge by sampling a small drop of their human victim’s blood. Brahma wants Roman to take his place among the vampires; in order to do this, Brahma’s “tongue”—the vampire’s “soul and essence” located on the roof of its mouth—must pass to Roman. Brahma bites Roman, initiating the process. He then writes Roman’s new divine name, Rama, on Roman’s forehead in blood and shoots himself. Roman/Rama loses consciousness.²²⁸

²²⁷ “Где-то спят дети...мечтают о чем-то вроде бы детском, но на самом деле уже вырабатывают баблос, как взрослые... Все работают с младенчества.... Ведь со мной это тоже было, я помню как... Я помню, как вызревает эта яркокрасная капля надежды... Кажется, что мы вот-вот что-то пойдем, доделаем, рассудим, и тогда начнется другая жизнь, правильная и настоящая. Но этого никогда не происходит, потому что красная капля куда-то все время исчезает, и мы начинаем копить ее заново. А потом она исчезает снова, и так продолжается всю жизнь, пока мы не устанем. И тогда наме остается только лечь на кровать, повернуться к стене и умереть...” Viktor Pelevin, *EVPNS*, 346

²²⁸ As in *Generation “P,”* ancient gods and the primal forces they represent have a hidden but real presence in contemporary reality. All of the “vampires” bear the names of the ancient gods: Rama (seventh avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu), the Zoroastrian Mithra, Enlil (Mesopotamian Lord of the Wind), the Norse Baldur, the Judaic Jehovah, Osiris (Egyptian Lord of the Underworld), Hera (wife of Zeus), Baal of the Near East, Marduk (the patron god of Babylon), and the Mesopotamian Ishtar.

When he awakens, Rama is met by another vampire—Mithra, who gives him his first “degustation” (*дегустация*)—a tiny drop of blood (or “red liquid” as the novel’s vampires call it). Upon ingesting the liquid, Rama sees a “personality map” of the human whose blood has been sampled. Mithra tells Rama that he will eventually be able to see much more detail, but the effects of degustation are so powerful that—much like a drug—it takes time to build up a tolerance. After Mithra ensures there are no complications following the degustation, Rama is untied and permitted to go to the bathroom. He has free rein of the apartment but finds, surprisingly, that he has no desire to escape—the tongue desires him to stay.

Mithra explains that a vampire “serves the Tongue.” He further informs Rama that “the Tongue is another living creature, one from a higher plane of nature. The Tongue is immortal and moves from one vampire to another, or rather from one person to another, like the rider of a horse.”²²⁹ Although this description makes the tongue sound like a parasite, the tongue (according to Mithra) actually raises its human host to a higher level. Rama disagrees, noting that he does not feel higher, he feels like he is “at the bottom of some kind of pit” and wonders “if this is higher, why does everything seem so dark...?”²³⁰ Rama’s statement is reminiscent of Tatarskii’s conviction that he is ascending a tower when in reality he is descending into a *topheth*, according to the *sirruf*. Mithra replies with a paradox: “Darkness can be under the earth, and also high in the heavens.”²³¹ The vampires see this kind of “pit” as being superior. Enlil Maratovich will later tell Rama that “sacred symbolism should often be understood as exactly the

²²⁹ Viktor Pelevin, *EVPH*, 31. “Другое живое существо. Высшей природы. Язык бессмертен и переходит от одного вампира к другому—вернее, пересаживается с одного человека на другого, как всадник.” *EVPNS*, 34.

²³⁰ *EVPH*, 31. “У меня...чувством что я провалился в какую-то яму. Если это высота, почему мне теперь так...так темно?” *EVPNS*, 35.

²³¹ *EVPH*, 31. “Темно бывает и под землей, и высоко в небе.” *EVPNS*, 35.

opposite of its superficial appearance. The top is the bottom. Empty is full. The most glittering career is in reality the most abject failure, a stadium is a pyramid, the highest tower the deepest chasm. The summit of Fuji is right at the bottom, Rama.”²³² This echoes the binary paradoxes of *Generation “P”* where signifiers (such as top, bottom, empty, full) either become contradictory or cease to carry meaning altogether. Thus the vampires find power in the abyss or void because that is the “null” place between binaries. The power of the word (e.g., “top” vs. “bottom”) is limited, but the space between word and meaning is unlimited. The void between binaries cancels the binaries, for it is everything *in potentio* and nothing in essence and therefore very powerful. Pelevin describes the void in a similar manner in a scene between Serdiuk and Kawabata in *Chapaev and Pustota*. In chapter 3 I will discuss how a more positive, transcendent void derives from the Buddhist dissolution of binaries.

Mithra explains Rama’s new living arrangements and informs him that he will soon begin his studies with the goal of eventually taking a final examination called the “Great Fall.” The next morning the leader of the Moscow vampires, Enlil Maratovich, pays Rama a visit. He explains to Rama that vampires are superior to human beings and represent a higher level on the food chain. Vampires “breed” human beings so they can “milk” them, consuming small drops of their “red liquid” in order to gain knowledge of the human psyche. The vampires then use this knowledge to manipulate humans so they are constantly earning and spending money in their attempt to achieve happiness. In the process, humans produce a substance called bablos

²³² *EVPH*, 218. “Сакральную символику часто следует понимать с точностью до наоборот. Верх—это низ. Пустота—это наполненность. Величайшая карьера на самом деле абсолютное падение, истинный стадион—это пирамида, а высочайшая вашня есть глубочайшая пропасть. Вершина Фудзи на самом дне, Рама.” *EVPNS*, 233.

(*бaблoс*), and it is on this that the vampires actually feed. Enlil tells Rama that he will understand more once he completes his vampire education.

Rama’s first lessons as a vampire are in “glamour” (*глaмyр*) and “discourse” (*дискyрc*), taught by Baldur and Jehovah. Glamour and discourse are key concepts for the vampires. The concepts are similar to the “PR” tactics used by Tatarskii, although Baldur and Jehovah are unable to give Rama (or the reader) precise definitions. The various definitions offered are confusing and even manipulative. Taken together, their essence is that of “disguise and control, and therefore power.”²³³ They explain,

—“You can put it another way,” said Baldur. “Everything a person says is Discourse...”
—“And how he looks while saying it is Glamour,” added Jehovah.²³⁴

In other words, discourse is manipulation via language (the written and spoken word) and glamour is manipulation via images (especially images promoting consumerism). If one tries to escape the confines of glamour’s manipulation, they find themselves confined by discourse. Consequently, one can never escape the limitations of language, i.e., the tongue. Even vampires cannot escape the control of the tongues unless they are killed or, like Brahma, commit suicide.

As Rama’s education continues, he learns that the deceptiveness of language is, in fact, even more complicated. When Rama asks how a word can be a mirror, Osiris (the Tolstoyan vampire) explains,

Its meaning. When you place a Word in front of Mind “A”, the Word is reflected in the mind, the mind is reflected in the Word, and between them they create the endless

²³³ *EVPH*, 52. “Их сущностью является маскировка и контроль—и, как следствие, власть.” *EVPNS*, 57.

²³⁴ *EVPH*, 53.

—Можно сформулировать иначе, —сказал Бальдр. —Все, что человек говорит—это дискурс...
—А то, как он при этом выглядит— это гламур,—добавил Иегова. *EVPNS*, 58–9.

corridor that is Mind “B”. In this endless corridor appears not only the whole world but the person who is seeing it.²³⁵

Osiris goes on to explain that Mind “B” is actually a reflection of our universe and that the universe in which we find ourselves is a reflection of Mind “B.” Thus, humans are incapable of ever learning any kind of higher truth regarding the universe because they cannot distinguish these truths from reflections of their own minds: “Everything is made of Words.”²³⁶ And all are caught in this loop.

The twin sciences of glamour and discourse are designed to keep humans unaware of their true role as sustenance for the vampires. Later, Rama learns that it is not human blood from which vampires derive their energy but rather *bablos*, a byproduct of glamour and discourse. Bablos is the life force generated by humans’ perpetual quest for money and status. These things, along with all other concepts that seem real to humans, are merely illusions. For example, when Rama asks Osiris why there is a word for God if he does not exist, Osiris responds, “Because this word, together with all other words and concepts, is needed for the production of bablos....God is a creator. Words also create.”²³⁷ Osiris explains that anything they could possibly speak of is the source material of bablos, but also its by-product. It is a closed circle and there is no underlying truth beneath the word:

Truth is essentially chemical, not metaphysical. So long as you possess sufficient life-force, you will always be able to find the necessary verbal forms to reflect it. You can always think up a combination of words that will provoke the required excitation in your

²³⁵ *EVPH*, 306. “То, что оно обозначает. Когда ты ставишь слово перед умом «А», слово отражается в уме, а ум отражается в слове, и возникает бесконечный коридор—ум «Б». В этом бесконечном коридоре появляется не только весь мир, но и тот, кто его видит.” *EVPNS*, 325.

²³⁶ *EVPH*, 308. “Все сделано из слов.” *EVPNS*, 326.

²³⁷ *EVPH*, 342. “Потому что это слово, вместе со всеми другими словами и понятиями, необходимо для производства баблоса....Бог—это создатель. Слова тоже создают.” *EVPNS*, 362.

neuronal pathways, and that you will experience as the blessed breath of truth. But in fact, precisely which words are used is of little importance because one word is much the same as another: all words are merely mirrors in which the mind is reflected.²³⁸

Each year the vampires host a ritual gathering celebrating the friendship between the vampires and the Chaldeans—the sacred sect of humans into which Tatarskii of *Generation “P”* has been initiated and who serve as agents for the vampires, gathering information about human society. As the earlier novel hinted, there was another, higher force manipulating society, one to which even Tatarskii, as consort of Ishtar, was not privy. We now learn that that force is the anonymous dictatorship of the vampires. During the party Rama is presented to the Goddess Ishtar Borisovna. Rama is told that in Chaldean myth, “the Great Goddess lost her body and became gold. Not a piece of metal but the very idea of gold.”²³⁹ Indeed, when Rama meets Ishtar, she is not just the disembodied symbol of gold but “disembodied” in a physical sense: she is a head with no body. Thus, the entire vampire race worships an idea that which has no basis in reality—a hollow, disembodied concept. Rama’s classmate Hera is being groomed to replace Ishtar; by the end of the novel she also has become a disembodied head. The replacement of the Sumerian pantheon’s chief goddess (Ishtar) with the Greek pantheon’s chief goddess (Hera) is reminiscent of Tatarskii exchanging Pepsi for Coca-Cola at the end of *Generation “P”*: both are signifiers devoid of meaning.

²³⁸ *EVPH*, 345. “Истина имеет не метафизическую, а химическую природу. До тех пор, пока в тебе достаточно жизненной силы, для нее всегда найдется словесное выражение. Всегда можно будет придумать заклинание, вызывающее в нейронных цепях твоего мозга возбуждение, которое будет переживаться как священное дыхание истины. А какими будут слова, не играет большой роли, потому что все слова равны друг другу—это просто зеркала, в которых отражается ум.” *EVPNS*, 365.

²³⁹ “Великая богиня лишилась тела и стала золотом. Не куском металла, а самой идеей золота.” “Khaldei,” *Empire “V”: Povest’ o nastoiashchem sverkhcheloveke* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006), <http://pelevin.nov.ru/romans/pe-empire/14.html>.

This quotation appears in the electronic version of the novel on the author’s website but not in the print edition.

The reader can easily deduce Pelevin's attitude toward the vampires by noting how the author compares vampire rule to Soviet rule. Perhaps most telling is the novel's replacement of the Soviet slogan "dictatorship of the proletariat (*диктатура пролетариата*) with the vampires' "anonymous dictatorship" (*анонимная диктатура*): in reality, very little differentiates the two. The vampires, for example, consider themselves to be superhuman, much like the Soviet ruling elite, who were (at least at one time) trying to create a "superman" in the form of *Homo sovieticus*. Likewise, the novel is permeated with symbols from dictatorships, specifically from the period of Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. To give a few examples: Baal Petrovich's house is described as a combination of the Lenin Library and the Reich Chancellery; Mithra's poem in his duel with Rama is described as being similar to a reflection on the life of young Lenin from the last century; finally, Baldur notes, "We have transformed engineers of the human soul into unpaid advertising agents."²⁴⁰ While the change in the outer forms (signifiers) of the two dictatorships gives the illusion of change, they are the same, and a void of meaning lies beneath them. Rama, like Tatarskii before him, has broken free of one illusion, only to end up in another.

While the myth of *Homo sovieticus* is no more, it has been replaced with the myth of the vampire superman. During the Red Ceremony Rama becomes aware of his power and superiority as a vampire. After imbibing his first drop of bablos, Rama realizes that he and the substance are inextricably linked: "One substance makes up everything there is in the whole world. And this

²⁴⁰ *EVPH*, 63. "Вместо инженера человеческих душ мы получаем бесплатного рекламного агента." *EVPNS*, 70.

"Engineers of the human soul" is a phrase used to describe socialist realist authors. The phrase is usually attributed to Stalin (in 1932) but he was repeating Soviet author Iurii Olesha's phrase. See Vadim Serov, "Inzhenery chelovecheskikh dush," in *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' krylatykh slov i vyrazhenii* (Moscow: Lokid Press, 2003).

substance was myself.”²⁴¹ Upon realizing this, Rama experiences a heightened sense of superiority and rapture: nothing in the world could threaten him, nor could he be a threat to anyone or anything else. This feeling dissipates as soon as the bablos wears off, leaving Rama feeling trapped in the illusory world of matter that could only hurt him.²⁴² From this point onward, Rama embraces his “divine” nature and his superiority over human beings. He is hooked on bablos.

The novel ends with a duel between Rama and Mithra, who has on numerous occasions insulted Rama and tried to steal Hera’s affections. The terms of the duel require both Rama and Mithra to write a poem. Although Rama submits the losing poem (another example of the word being ineffectual), Hera takes pity on him: Mithra is killed and Hera assumes her new role as the new Ishtar. Throughout the novel, Rama had been struggling with his new identity, trying to reconcile the existence of vampires with humanity. By the novel’s end, however, he has embraced his vampire identity and loves his “empire,” which does not rule by war and violence but by the perpetuation of illusion. As Rama flies over Moscow to meet Hera, he thinks, “A different millennium now lay over the countryside, and beneath my wings blazed not tanks but the headlights of Chaldeans’ limousines scorching their way out of town.”²⁴³

Empire “V” shares *Generation “P”*’s concern with deceptive simulacra—especially in advertising. Jehovah’s definition of advertising is as follows: “Without ever resorting to outright untruth, to construct from fragments of the truth a picture whose connection to reality is limited

²⁴¹ Pelevin, *EVPH*, 328. “Все на свете было сделано из одной и той же субстанции. И этой субстанцией был я сам.” *EVPNS*, 348.

²⁴² This experience differs from the Buddhist experience of transcendence in that it is chemically induced by the bablos.

²⁴³ *EVPH*, 384. “На дворе стояло другое тысячелетье, и под моим крылом коптели не танки, а иномарки спешащих за город халдеев.” *EVPNS*, 405.

to whatever is good for sales.”²⁴⁴ In *Empire “V,”* these untruthful images are inextricably linked to glamour, which in the novel is a stand-in for simulacra associated with late postmodernism. Glamour manipulates people with images and alters their conception of personal identity. For example, Rama analyzes the name of a trendy vampire clothing outfitter called “LovemarX”: “From the theoretical part of the Glamour course I knew that the word ‘lovemarks’ refers to brand names which people lust after with all their hearts, seeing in them not merely the outward appearance of the object in question *but the framework of their own personality.*”²⁴⁵ Jehovah confirms this: “The key message a human being tries to convey to others is that he enjoys a much more prestigious level of consumption than might at first appear.”²⁴⁶ One might compare this with the above-cited quotation from *Generation “P”* about needing a million dollars to buy an expensive house so that you have a place to wear your red slippers, and you need the red slippers to provide you with confidence that will allow you to earn the million dollars, and so on in an infinite closed loop.

Ishtar Borisovna describes this infinite loop as “illusion-money-illusion.” She explains to Rama that “people are constantly chasing after visions that arise within their heads. But for some reason they do not capture them there inside their heads, where they appear, but pursue them in

²⁴⁴ *EVPH*, 76–7. “Нигде не прибегая к прямой лжи, создать из фрагментов правды картину, которая связана с реальностью ровно настолько, насколько это способно поднять продажи.” *EVPNS*, 85.

²⁴⁵ *EVPH*, 68; italics mine. “Из теоретического курса я знал, что словом «lovemarks» в гламуре называют торговые марки, к которым человек прирастает всем сердцем, и видит в них уже не просто внешние по отношению к себе предметы, а скелет своей личности.” *EVPNS*, 75.

A “marka” in Russian refers to a brand name. Pelevin gives the word a slangy English plural ending (-x), creating a bilingual pun. The term also echoes the past: Love [Karl] Marx. The great communist icon is now a brand name, like the t-shirt featuring Che Guevara in *Generation “P.”*

²⁴⁶ *EVPH*, 74. “Главная мысль, которую человек пытается донести до других, заключается в том, что он имеет доступ к гораздо более престижному потреблению, чем про него могли подумать.” *EVPNS*, 82.

the real physical world, on which the visions are merely superimposed.”²⁴⁷ In other words, humans are unable to distinguish these illusions from reality. This condition is a result of glamour. Jehovah explains, “The aim of Glamour is to ensure that the life of mankind passes in a miasma of ignominy and self-contempt....”²⁴⁸ The vampires have ensured that humans cannot awaken from this fog of deception because “Glamour is always surrounded either by Discourse or by empty space. There is nowhere for the human being to escape to. Empty space holds nothing for him, yet he cannot pass through the Discourse barrier. The only thing left to him is to sleepwalk through the pastures of Glamour.”²⁴⁹ Humans cannot escape the deception of images (glamour) because their only recourse is either resorting to the deception of words (i.e., discourse—which will lead them in circles) or emptiness, the void, which the western mind fears.

Pelevin draws on several uses of the word “glamour.” The first is glamour’s traditional meaning: to cast a spell or illusion over someone. An important aspect of glamour is that it is not merely an illusion, but an illusion designed to mislead and deceive.²⁵⁰ While “glamouring” is not a part of canonical vampire literature, it plays a role in contemporary pop culture. In Charlaine Harris’ *Sookie Stackhouse Series* (2001–13; later adapted in the television series *True Blood* [2008–14]), “glamouring” refers to a vampire’s ability to manipulate someone’s mind simply by

²⁴⁷ *EVPH*, 236. “Люди постоянно гонятся за ними не внутри головы, где эти видения возникают, а по реальному физическому миру, на который видения накладываются.” *EVPNS*, 252.

²⁴⁸ *EVPH*, 82. “Цель гламура именно в том, чтобы жизнь человека проходила в облаке позора и презрения к себе.” *EVPNS*, 91.

²⁴⁹ *EVPH*, 84. “Гламур всегда окружен или дискурсом, или пустотой, и бежать человеку некуда. В пустоте ему нечего делать, а сквозь дискурс не продаться. Остается одно—топать гламур.” *EVPNS*, 93.

²⁵⁰ See entry for “glamour” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*; also consultation with Maria Carlson, 30 June 2017.

making eye contact with them. The first of these novels was translated into Russian in 2005, as Pelevin, a fan of pop fiction, was working on *Empire “V.”*

Glamour also refers to the socio-cultural and economic phenomenon that arose in Russia during the economically prosperous Putin era. Birgit Menzel describes Russian glamour as “a mixture of the new elite’s ostentatious self-representation and a universal cult of luxury, fashion and an exotic and erotic lifestyle promoted by the mass-media. In Russia, it has been nurtured by the desire for prosperity and an individual lifestyle in the here and now, that emerged after the chaos of the 1990s.”²⁵¹ Menzel points out that some sociologists believe glamour serves as a “substitute for the national idea, which was supposed to fill the empty void after the fall of the Soviet Union.”²⁵² “New Russians” (the newly rich business elite) were disparaged during the Yeltsin regime, which was marked by economic woes. Under Putin, however, the glamorous lifestyle of New Russians became an object of mass entertainment and something to which one aspired.

Glamour is linked to late postmodernism in the novel. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union many cultural critics have tried to describe the ideological void in Russia. In *Empire “V”* (and *Generation “P”* by extension) Pelevin suggests that this void is not a true void, but rather the emptiness of simulacra: “Some experts state that there is no such thing as ideology in contemporary society, because none has been formulated in an unequivocal manner. But this is a

²⁵¹ Birgit Menzel, “Russian Discourse on Glamour,” *Kultura*, no. 6 (2008): 4.

²⁵² Birgit Menzel, “Glamour Russian Style: The Putin Era,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 126 (2013), <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD-126.pdf>. Menzel cites Boris Dubin’s chapter “Strana zritelei: Massovye kommunikatsii v segodniashnei Rossii” in his book *Zhit’ v Rossii na rubezhe stoletii* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2007). Olga Mesropova, citing Lev Rubinshtein, also claims that many commentators in Russia believe that “glamour” is the new national idea. See Olga Mesropova, “I Choose Russia – I Choose Glamour!,” *Kultura*, no. 6 (2008).

delusion. The ideology of anonymous dictatorship is Glamour.”²⁵³ One of the Chaldeans, Professor Kaldavashkin, later elaborates on this statement and agrees that while the ideology of the anonymous dictatorship is glamour, “the culture of the anonymous dictatorship is mature postmodernism.... Mature postmodernism is that stage in the evolution of the postmodern in which it ceases to be based on previous cultural formations, but continues its development purely on its own basis.”²⁵⁴ Glamour, like postmodernism (and capitalism), shows no sign of weakening or disappearing. Rama notes, “The most fruitful technique for promoting glamour in modern Russia will be anti-glamour. ‘Deconstructing’ glamour will allow it to infiltrate even those dark places where glamour itself would not dream of trespassing.”²⁵⁵ This is essentially the same problem faced by literary criticism for decades: the deconstructionists recognized the emptiness that underlies signifiers. However, rather than *discredit* structuralism and the binary sign, one could argue that deconstruction perpetuated the structuralist binary model by allowing (perhaps even encouraging) the free play of floating signifiers.²⁵⁶

As Pelevin explains, the vampires’ methods of control are predicated on a culture of materialism and hyperconsumerism. Consumption and the void are linked over the course of all of human history. According to Osiris,

²⁵³ Pelevin, *EVPH*, 61. “Некоторые эксперты утверждают, что в современном обществе нет идеологии, поскольку она не сформулирована явным образом. Но это заблуждение. Идеологией анонимной диктатуры является гламур.” *EVPNS*, 68.

²⁵⁴ *EVPH*, 256. “Культурой анонимной диктатуры является развитой постмодернизм....Развитой постмодернизм—это такой этап в эволюции постмодерна, когда он перестает опираться на предшествующие культурные формации и развивается исключительно на своей собственной основе.” *EVPNS*, 272–3.

²⁵⁵ *EVPH*, 80. “Наиболее перспективной технологией продвижения гламура на современном этапе становится антигламур. «Разоблачение гламура» инфильтрует гламур даже в те темные углы, куда он ни за что не проник бы сам.” *EVPNS*, 89.

²⁵⁶ See Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,” in *The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970).

It's like what happened in camps where nomadic mammoth-hunters lived: the meat got eaten at once, but over the years there accumulated a huge mound of ribs and tusks, which people started using to build dwelling-places. It is precisely because of such ribs and tusks that today we find ourselves living not on a round island in the cosmic ocean, as the church used to teach, but suspended in an expanding void.²⁵⁷

Here the accumulation of material goods is linked to the void.

Ironically, vampires are not immune to the void. Mithra makes the off-handed comment, “The funny thing is that by comparison with the abyss people have themselves fallen into, ours is quite shallow....”²⁵⁸ This quote implies that both humans *and vampires* experience the terrible void associated with capitalism because both species are dependent on money. Ishtar Borisovna explains that money “is the symbolic blood of the world. Everything depends on it, both for humans and for us. But the manner in which we depend on it is different, because we live in the real world whereas human beings live in the world of illusions.”²⁵⁹ The only way in which the vampires are superior is that they recognize the illusions they propagate amongst the humans. Yet vampires are also the victims of illusions. Ishtar Borisovna herself admits to being seduced by advertising: “The only thing is, I too get bored and lonely. After all, I have to watch television, and read glossy magazines, and now there's the Internet. And they're all so full of advertisements! They keep on at you: ‘Buy it! Because you're worth it,’ ha ha...”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Pelevin, *EVPH*, 305. “Это как в стойбище охотников на мамонта: мясо съедают сразу, но за годы накапливается огромное количество ребер и бивней, из которых начинают строить жилища. Именно из-за этих ребер и бивней мы сегодня живем не на круглом острове во всемирном океане, как когда-то учила церковь, а висим в расширяющейся пустоте....” *EVPNS*, 323.

²⁵⁸ *EVPH*, 192. “Юмор в том, что по сравнению с той бездной, в которую сегодня ухнули люди, наша не так уж глубока...” *EVPNS*, 205.

²⁵⁹ *EVPH*, 235. “Что такое деньги? Это символическая кровь мира. На ней все держится и у людей и у нас. Только держится по-разному, потому что мы живем в реальности, а люди—в мире иллюзий.” *EVPNS*, 251.

²⁶⁰ *EVPH*, 238. “Просто мне тоже скучно бывает. Мне ведь и телевизор надо смотреть, и журналы читать, теперь вот еще интернет. Там столько всего разного рекламируют! И объясняют—ты, мол, достойна! Не сомневайся...” *EVPNS*, 254.

That vampires control the universe is, however, the next level of illusion, for they answer to the tongues, superior beings from a “higher plane of nature.” Soon after Brahma’s tongue has taken up residence in Rama, he feels its influence: “I knew what was happening. I seemed not to be in charge of my actions; the Tongue had taken control of my will. I distinctly remember feeling like a horse being ridden into battle by a veteran cavalryman.”²⁶¹ When Rama expresses frustration at the endless comparisons of vampires to horses, Baal Petrovich replies, “There are two paths. If a person is fortunate, incredibly fortunate—as you and Hera have been—he or she can become the horse that carries Napoleon. But by the same token, without that stroke of luck the person will remain a mere beast of burden.”²⁶² If Rama thinks that he will ever rise above being a horse for a rider unknown, he is suffering from an illusion.

In the end, humans are manipulated by advertising (via the Chaldeans) and produce bablos, which serves as life-force for the vampires. The Chaldeans (although superior to most humans) still serve vampires; vampires serve the tongues. The question is, whom do the tongues serve? Pelevin does not say but he implies in both *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V”* that the series of loops may be potentially endless.

Conclusion—Disorientation and Identity

In the two novels discussed here, characters’ identities are in flux for two reasons. First, the Soviet Union and its slogans and symbols have lost their meaning and disappeared, leaving a void. No new ideological system has risen to take their place to fill the void. The second reason

²⁶¹ *EVPH*, 102. “Я понял, что сейчас произойдет. У меня было ощущение, что действую уже не я—язык взял на себя лошадю, которая несет в атаку старого опытного кавалериста.” *EVPNS*, 111.

²⁶² *EVPH*, 320. “В [жизни] есть две дороги. Если человеку повезет, невероятно повезет—вот как повезло тебе и Гере—он может стать лошадю, которая везет Наполеона. А еще он можешь стать лошадю, которая всю жизнь вывозит неизвестно чей мусор.” *EVPNS*, 338–9.

identities were being negotiated is the result of the mass consumerism that flooded post-Soviet Russia. The following quote from *Generation "P,"* sums the situation up succinctly, if ironically:

[And so the Leader finally left the Russia he had long inhabited. His] statues were gradually carted out of town on military trucks (they said some colonel had thought up the idea of melting them down for the non-ferrous metal content and made a lot of money before he was rumbled), but his presence was merely replaced by a *frightening murky greyness* in which the Soviet soul simply continued rotting until it collapsed inwards on itself. The newspapers claimed the whole world had been living in this grey murk for absolutely ages, which was why it was so full of things and money, and the only reason people couldn't understand this was their "Soviet mentality."²⁶³

Throughout both novels it becomes clear that the proliferation of western goods and advertising is not the natural consequence of Russia's newly established free market but rather the machinations of a secret cadre who controls all aspects of life. Total control over the population is achieved not by force but rather by bombarding people with advertisements for products of mass culture that serve as tools of social conditioning. In Pelevin's novel, the stock Russian literary character of the individual searching for truth disappears and is replaced by a "homogenous, mind-numbed mass" searching for a quick-fix identity built around creature comforts.²⁶⁴

In Tatarskii's and Rama's Moscow, a person can only construct an identity through the items he or she purchases. Tatarskii and Rama both acquire new identities but at the expense of their humanity: Tatarskii becomes a pure signifier (image) with no signified (meaning, content)

²⁶³ Translation edited. *HZ*, 19; italics mine. "А вождь наконец-то покидал насиженную Россию. Его статуи увозили за город на военных грузовиках (говорили, что какой-то полковник придумал переплавлять их на цветной металл и много заработал, пока не грохнули), но на смену приходила только серая страшноватость, в которой душа советского типа быстро догнивала и проваливалась внутрь самой себя. Газеты уверяли, что в этой страшноватости давно живет весь мир и оттого в нем так много вещей и денег, а понять это мешает только «советская ментальность»." *GP*, 32.

²⁶⁴ Khagi, "From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Zapiens," 561.

and Rama becomes a vampire, concerned only with manipulating humans in order to keep the bablos flowing to satisfy his personal craving.

Earlier in the chapter, I showed that Baudrillard and Jameson both argued that contemporary capitalism plagued every aspect of human life. In today's hyper-visual culture, product signifiers have all become the same—it does not matter which product one purchases, as long as it produces the euphoria associated with purchasing the newest, coolest product (what Pelevin calls the “Wow-impulse”). Products have become commodified to the degree that one makes a purchase *not* because of an item's utility, but because they appeal to one's sense of identity.

Baudrillard and Jameson were describing the West, which transitioned gradually into this late capitalist state of hyperconsumerism. Because Post-Soviet Russia had far less time to acclimate to these types of changes and lacked the “antibodies” to withstand the assault, the effects of terror and euphoria were intensified. Like the heroes of all four of the novels examined in this dissertation, many Russians felt at sea after the collapse of communism and the sudden influx of hyperconsumerism. Both Tatarskii and Rama experience the intoxicating effects of the “depthlessness” Jameson describes and both make a decision to perpetuate commoditization at the expense of their identities and humanity. But there are alternatives to this state of affairs and potential solutions to Russia's quandary. In the next chapter, I will argue that Pelevin's novels *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* explore a different kind of attempt to escape the loop and find meaning.

Chapter 3: Transcendence in the Void

Chapaev and Pustota and The Sacred Book of the Werewolf

Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.

—Gautama Buddha

I went to the market to realize my soul

What I need I just don't have

—The Clash, “Rudy Can’t Fail”

Introduction

In the previous chapters, we have seen how Pelevin considers the binary model of signifier + signified to be broken, depriving the model of its ability to generate real meaning. In *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V,”* material reality is hyperreal; that is, reality is mostly faked. In the next two novels, *Chapaev and Pustota* (1996) and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (2004), material reality is illusory in the Buddhist sense, i.e., reality does not exist *at all*. Man still perpetuates his own deceptive illusions, but the *entire world* is revealed to be illusory and something to be transcended. Buddhism proposes a different way of viewing the world, one in

which binaries are not operational and where meaning is not found in grand narratives, but rather in emptiness.

By turning to Buddhism, Pelevin not only circumvents the problem of binaries and subjectivity but also *resolves* it, since these problems do not exist in Buddhism. In the previous chapter, we saw the existential terror that confronted the post-Soviet man as a result of words and symbolic images not conveying true (or any) meaning, of signifiers not corresponding to their signifieds. For Buddhists, however, “the reality to which all names refer is utterly ungraspable and inconceivable, possessing absolutely no physical or metaphysical self-existence.” Rather than seeing this inability to truly perceive our surroundings as frustrating, Buddhists see it as a “beautiful, blissful openness and freedom from all limits....”²⁶⁵ Buddhism not only avoids the problem of material objects and words being illusory—it solves the problem of simulacra. If *all* signifiers (words and images) are illusory, then the distinction between the authentic person/place/thing and its simulacrum is moot.

The characters in *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* inhabit the same world as Tatarskii and Roma. This world is full of illusory binary oppositions (East vs. West; good vs. bad; old vs. new) and meaningless symbols (both of Soviet socialism and Western-style capitalism). In all four novels, then, Pelevin shows the world as illusory; it is *how* the heroes of the novels deal with this information that differs.

The Modernist Climate

It is appropriate that the hero of *Chapaev and Pustota* is a modernist poet and that the novel is partly set in 1918–19—in the liminal space between the old regime and the new. Not

²⁶⁵ Lex Hixon, *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditations on the Prajnaparamita Sutra* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1993), 14, 35.

since the pre-war modernist period has there been such an interest in the transcendental in Russia. Boris Groys regards the avant-garde's interest in the transcendental as a response to the rapid technological invasion into all forms of life.²⁶⁶ For example, in his work *On the New Systems in Art* (*O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve*, 1919), Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935) wrote, “All creation, whether of nature or of the artist, or of creative man in general, is a question of constructing a device to overcome our endless progress.”²⁶⁷ Groys notes that Malevich's avant-gardism does *not* come from a “desire to be in the vanguard of progress,” something Malevich thought led nowhere and was therefore meaningless.²⁶⁸ Similarly, in his 1912 *Concerning the Spiritual in Art: Especially in Painting* (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst: Insbesondere in der Malerei*), Wassily Kandinsky (1866—1944) describes art as a spiritual antidote to the “nightmare of materialism.”²⁶⁹ Many modernists (particularly Russian symbolists), rather than focus on the increasing materialism of their world, attempted to find “a higher metaphysical ‘truth’ which lies entirely outside of the material world we may experience by our sense.”²⁷⁰ Could the post-Soviet interest in the transcendental (for example, Buddhism) be a reaction to similar phenomena, those of postmodernism, hypercapitalism, and the ubiquity of technology?

Similar tendencies have been noted in postmodernism. For example, Edith Wyschogrod posits two alternative “threads” of postmodernism. In the first, metaphysical, cognitive, and axiological wholeness is disrupted by delay and difference. The second thread, Wyschogrod

²⁶⁶ Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic, Dictatorship, and Beyond*, 14–15.

²⁶⁷ Kazimir Malevich, “On the New Systems in Art,” in *Essays on Art*, ed. Troels Andersen (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 85.

²⁶⁸ Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 15.

²⁶⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 2012), 10.

²⁷⁰ Edward Mozejko, “Russian Modernism,” in *Modernism*, eds. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 894.

argues, “posits desire as a kind of plenum with nothing to stop its headlong rush other than lines of flight that turn the plenum [fullness] into its obverse [emptiness].”²⁷¹ The first type of postmodernism that Wyschogrod describes is characteristic of Pelevin’s novels described in the previous chapter: meaning is endlessly deferred due to an over-abundance of signifiers. The second “thread,” however, is similar to Pelevin’s engagement with Buddhism as a way to combat the excesses of Western materialism: meaning is found in the opposite of a plenum—in emptiness.²⁷²

In both modernism and postmodernism, the interest in the transcendental derives from the distaste for excessive materialism. One of the fathers of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard, argues that grand narratives of modernity, “the various stories (Enlightenment, Marxist, Hegelian) about human emancipation and progress that once served to ground and legitimate knowledge, are no longer credible.”²⁷³ Thus postmodernism is wary of trying to posit any “big ideas” to combat materialism after a long twentieth century marred by violence that many argue was the result of “big” nineteenth-century philosophical ideas.²⁷⁴ Buddhism, however, believes that both reality *and* all its totalizing belief systems are illusory, and serves as an effective counter against excessive materialism in a postmodern society.

Pelevin is not the only post-Soviet figure to have found Buddhism productive for making meaning. Egor Radov (1962–2009) incorporated many aspects of Buddhism into his works and

²⁷¹ Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 223.

²⁷² As I stated in chapter 2, Pelevin is anti-materialistic in both the philosophical and economic sense of the word. He is also anti-positivist—how can knowledge be verified if one lives in an age of simulacra?

²⁷³ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 5.

²⁷⁴ See Michael Foucault’s “What is Enlightenment?” and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

explained his interest in Buddhism as being connected to the idea of “nothingness”: “The idea of ‘nothingness’ represents for me the kind of enigma that is absolutely essential for artistic work....Nothingness is the absolute possibility of everything; it is a basic component of the correlative pair ‘nothing’ and ‘everything.’ As soon as this nothingness arises, freedom and the possibility of creation also emerge.”²⁷⁵ Inspired in part by Buddhist tenets, Radov constructed his novel *Snakesucker* (*Змеесок*, 1989) to reveal that the philosophical ideas, material images, and the entire narration of the novel are illusory. In 1993, Boris Grebenshchikov, co-founder of the Russian rock group Akvarium, converted to Tibetan Buddhism, and many of his song lyrics are infused with Buddhist themes and logic. Akvarium’s 1994 album *Kostroma mon amour* inserts Buddhist terminology and imagery in a Russian setting; lyrics from the song “Russkaia nirvana” (“Russian nirvana”) include “I sit in the lotus position in the morning / in the middle of the Kremlin....” and “Oh Volga, Mother Volga / Buddhist river.”²⁷⁶ Boris Akunin is an expert in Japanese language and culture who peppers his Erast Fandorin novels with Buddhist images to reflect his hero’s penchant for Oriental martial arts and meditative techniques. For Akunin, however, the inclusion of Buddhist material seems more descriptive or plot-related rather than thematic, but he reflects a popular interest in his choice of imagery. These are just a few examples of Buddhism’s most recent impact on post-Soviet literature and popular culture.

This surge in Buddhism’s popularity begs the questions, “Why?” and “Why now?” Several plausible reasons suggest themselves. Immediately after the collapse, the enormous underground interest in the metaphysical and occult, suppressed by the Soviets, erupted into the

²⁷⁵ Serafima Roll, *Contextualizing Transition: Interviews with Contemporary Russian Writers and Critics*, ed. Thomas R. Beyer, Jr., (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 119.

²⁷⁶ “Я сяду в лотос поутру / Посереде Кремля....” and “Ой Волга, Волга-матушка, / Буддийская река.” Boris Grebenshchikov, “Russkaia nirvana,” *Kostroma mon amour* (Moscow: Triarii, 1994).

public sphere. The overwhelming popularity of the Roerichs in post-Soviet Russia is but one highly-visible example of this phenomenon. Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947) and his wife Elena Roerich (1879–1955) founded their own spiritual school called *Agni Yoga* in 1920. Their teachings drew on Hindu and Buddhist philosophies as well as theosophy. In 1989, interest in the Roerichs was rekindled when their son Svetoslav (1904–1993) founded the Soviet Roerich Foundation; a museum dedicated to his parents’ cultural legacy was opened in 1990. Due to the renewed interests in the Roerichs (and spirituality in general) and the relaxing of censorship laws following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a sudden surge in the availability of Buddhist texts.

Another reason for the interest in Buddhism may be socio-economic. In the nineteenth century, when tales of Buddhism’s popularity reached Europe, Europeans wondered how millions of human beings could be devoted to the “horror of nothingness.”²⁷⁷ According to French philosopher Victor Cousin (1792–1867), however, the success of Buddhism in fifth century BCE India “can be explained by the abyss of misery into which humanity had sunk.”²⁷⁸ Roger-Pol Droit elaborates that this misery “was not just the distress common to any human condition. It was also an economic misery, a social disfavor, a suffering of the dominated.”²⁷⁹ Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, were Russians not in a similar situation? Their previous cultural paradigm had imploded, leaving not only an ideological vacuum but also widespread economic and societal troubles.

²⁷⁷ Jules Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire, “Rapport sur le tome i de *l’Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien* par M.E. Burnouf: Suivi d’observations par M. Cousin,” *Séances et Travaux de l’Acad. des Sc. Morales et politiques* (Paris:1847), ser. 2, vol. 1, quoted in Roger-Pol Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 90.

²⁷⁸ Roger-Pol Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 90.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

The Buddhist Context: What is Buddhism?

For a fuller understanding of Pelevin's novels *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, it is helpful to know the basic narrative of Buddhism. Buddhism is a highly complex, pan-Asian spiritual and ethical tradition or "system" that dates back to the fifth or fourth century BCE.²⁸⁰ The movement is named for its founder, Siddhartha Gautama, who achieved enlightenment in the sixth century BCE and subsequently became known as the Buddha ("awakened one"). Over time Buddhism developed many historical permutations and regional variations as it spread from Siddhartha Gautama's birthplace in modern-day Nepal across Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and adjacent areas. The goal of Buddhism, as defined by its founder, is to understand the meaning of existence by finding the True Way (or Path) and achieving Enlightenment.

The eastern Buddhist tradition differs from the western Christian tradition in significant ways. In his "Psychological Commentaries on 'The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation' and 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead'" (1957), Carl Jung (1875–1961) notes that in the West people are "wholly dependent upon the grace of God, or at least upon the Church as the exclusive and divinely sanctioned earthly instrument of man's redemption."²⁸¹ Thus, redemption comes from *outside* of one's self in the West. It is unimportant whether an individual is a practicing Christian or not—these ideas are ingrained in western culture. Jung notes that even when a person is not Christian, the individual is "small inside" and searches for power elsewhere:

²⁸⁰ Frank E. Reynold and Charles Hawsey, "Buddhism: An Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 1089.

²⁸¹ Carl G. Jung, "Psychological Commentaries on 'The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation' and 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead,'" in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Gerhard Adler, Michael Forham, and Herbert Read, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 481–2.

By fear, repentance, promises, submission, self-abasement, good deeds, and praise he propitiates the great power, which is not himself but *totaliter aliter*, the Wholly Other, altogether perfect and “outside,” the only reality. If you shift the formula a bit and substitute for God some other power, for instance the world or money, you get a complete picture of Western man—assiduous, fearful, devout, self-abasing, enterprising, greedy, and violent in his pursuit of the goods of this world: possessions, health, knowledge, technical mastery, public welfare, political power, conquest, and so on. What are the great popular movements of our time? Attempts to grab the money or property of others and to protect our own. The mind is chiefly employed in devising suitable “isms” to hide the real motives or to get more loot.²⁸²

For Jung, this externality does not only apply to spiritual redemption. He writes, “We in the West believe that a truth is satisfactory only if it can be verified by external facts. We believe in the most exact observation and exploration of nature; our truth must coincide with the behaviour of the external world, otherwise it is merely ‘subjective.’”²⁸³ However, as we saw in chapter 2, sometimes the external world cannot be reduced to facts, and the behavior of the external world can be contrary to our conception of reality, as in the case of pervasive simulacra and hyperreality. The western mind is what Jung calls “extroverted”; man puts his faith only in what can be shown to be true either empirically or via divine grace. The eastern mind, Jung writes, is “introverted”; redemption comes from *within*: man, focused on the inner life, initiates his own redemption using the “self-liberating power of the mind.”²⁸⁴

Like Christians, “Buddhists have, of course, been concerned with living religiously, some with the aim of salvation, and they have created traditions of belief and practice that help to realize these aspirations.”²⁸⁵ Especially important for understanding *Chapaev and Pustota* and

²⁸² Ibid., 482–3.

²⁸³ Ibid., 487.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 488.

²⁸⁵ Reynold and Hawsey, “Buddhism: An Overview,” 1088.

The Sacred Book of the Werewolf are beliefs concerning dependent origination (discussed below) and the Four Noble Truths. The first Noble Truth is the truth of suffering, found in every aspect of existence: “birth, aging, death, grief, lamentation, pain, distress and despair; conjunction with the hated, separation from the dear; and not getting what one wants.”²⁸⁶ Suffering is linked to the cycle of reincarnations (*saṃsāra*). During each experienced life, one’s positive and negative actions and choices determine one’s *karma*, thus forging the “chain of causation” which shapes one’s future lives. Karma is a moral energy and a form of free will, but with consequences. One must truly understand and then remove suffering before one can break out of the chain of causation, escape *saṃsāra*, and achieve tranquility and bliss.

The second Truth is the origination of suffering: passion, delight, power, wealth, possessions and a resulting desire to continue to enjoy these material trappings of reality (i.e., resistance to change). These desires (and with them, suffering) arise from ignorance. In Buddhism, ignorance means having a false view of reality. One is ignorant if one believes in the reality of the material world, which is illusory. One can extinguish this ignorance by realizing that everything in the material world is empty or illusory. According to the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*, sometimes referred to as dependent co-origination or interdependent co-arising), all things/concepts (or *dharmas*, in the sense of phenomena and their properties²⁸⁷) have meaning and “existence” *only* in relation to other dharmas. These concepts and their meanings are constantly in flux and in negotiation with each other (not unlike the

²⁸⁶ Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997), 32.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

In Buddhism, *dharma* has many meanings. Its primary meaning is “the teaching of the Buddha; the practice of those teachings; the attainment of nirvana as a result of that practice; moral law.” This dissertation, however, refers to *dharmas* in the sense of “the basic constituents of all phenomena, mental or physical, in the conditioned realm.”

semiotic structures of Iurii Lotman’s semiosphere, to reference an analogous system). Each dharma exists only because its inter-relationships with other dharmas cause it to exist. If one dharma ceases to exist, then the others also cease to exist, since existence is defined by relationship to the others—not by independent being. Thus, because everything is impermanent and dependent on another dharma for meaning, all phenomena are said to be empty of individual *self*-existence. It also follows that if all things are interdependent, they belong to the same oneness.

For Buddhists, the response to an awareness of the innate emptiness (*śūnyatā*; also termed void, vacuity, or openness, spaciousness) behind reality is simply nonresistance to the impermanence of the world and our lives. In contrast, resistance to this impermanence constitutes an attachment and is thus a source of suffering. Attachments only cultivate one’s personal identity, which is illusory since it is abandoned after a single life incarnation.²⁸⁸ When one becomes “aware” that suffering has its source in the world illusion and that people and things are empty of essential being, one can escape from *karma* and *saṃsāra*, embrace the void, and achieve the transcendent state of *nirvana*.

The Buddha’s third Noble Truth is the cessation of suffering, which states that nirvana can only be achieved once suffering ceases. To achieve nirvana is to extinguish all passions and desires through dispassion, renunciation, and nondependence. There are two types of nirvana. The first, *sopadhiṣeṣa-nirvāṇa* (“nirvana with remainder”), can be achieved in this lifetime and results in a transformed consciousness, free of negative afflictions. The second type,

²⁸⁸ Not all Buddhist systems deny the *empirical self* (the *center of being*, the *human monad* that proceeds through the series of life incarnations), but they reject the primacy of the personal identity associated with any one life incarnation. Buddhism does have a concept of not-self (*anātman*), but this denies personal identity based on the attachments that one associates with desires, possessions, power, etc., when, in reality, all of these things are empty of essential nature. By denying the personal self, you are really subscribing to the idea of “one self”—the idea that everything in the universe is all one.

anupādiśeṣa-nirvāṇa (“nirvana without remainder,” sometimes called *parinirvāṇa* or “final nirvana”), occurs at the time of death. Both of these states are associated with the “unconditioned cessation of all necessary, conditioned phenomena” and they are thus linked to the void.²⁸⁹ It is only in final nirvana that the human being escapes the chain of *saṃsāra* and, at the time of death, dissolves into nothingness. Contrary to what some in the West believe, renouncing all worldly desires is not a nihilistic concept, but a positive one; only then is the empirical self released from *saṃsāra* and able to achieve bliss in nirvana.

The fourth and final Truth is the path of practice that leads to the cessation of suffering: the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path, also called the Middle Way, arose when the Buddha condemned the two extremes of sensual indulgence and severe asceticism, saying that both paths were ignoble and useless. The Buddha claimed to have discovered a Middle Way that “produces vision and knowledge and leads to peace, higher knowledge, Awakening, and nirvana.”²⁹⁰ This Middle Way consists of the Eightfold Path of (1) right view, (2) right resolve, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) mindfulness, and (8) right concentration.

Ultimately, those who have “awakened” see the world as having no material reality. An enlightened soul can either enter nirvana at the time of death, leaving the material world behind permanently, or it can consciously choose to become a *bodhisattva*, one who (with great suffering, compassion, and heroism) returns to the suffering world to help others awaken as well.

Although all of these terms are useful for understanding Pelevin’s literary universe, by far the most important is the Buddhist concept of the void. The void (and its partner, cessation—the

²⁸⁹ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, 2nd ed., Introduction to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 74.

²⁹⁰ Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, 32.

inevitable end of all things, since all worldly existence is impermanent) is a central feature of all mainstream Buddhist schools and a key aspect of the Supreme Truth of Buddhism. The void, however, is not easily defined, for the void cannot be quantified: the void neither exists nor does it not exist. It is neither being (since all things end) nor non-being (since all things have a beginning). The void might be defined as the transcendental state in which all oppositions are synthesized and thus negated as oppositional.²⁹¹ For some, the void represents the Absolute; for others (especially philosophically materialist Westerners), it is a nihilistic concept.

A branch of mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, casts additional light on the subject. Like Mahāyāna Buddhism, Zen also posits an illusory world of multiplicity which results from ignorance and desire. One of the suggested ways to rise above this illusion and to penetrate the Buddha-nature (the potentiality to become enlightened) is to use meditation to achieve a state in which there is complete absence of thought (i.e., neither thought nor non-thought). This is one experience of the void, in which the practitioner can potentially awaken his or her consciousness and achieve intuitive insight.

Zen Buddhism is a more metaphysical version of Mahāyāna Buddhism and conceives of the Buddha-nature as the void precisely because it denies all dualities (male/female, good/evil, living/dead, hot/cold, etc.), which are features of the world illusion. To achieve Buddha-nature is to understand intuitively the emptiness that lies between states of being and non-being as well as all other illusory dualities. In Zen, dualism constitutes “*a developmental failure*, a fundamentally defensive, fantasized attempt to split off the self from a world of potential suffering. In Zen

²⁹¹ Recall that the vampires in *Empire “V”* seemed to derive power in the disorienting void between very pronounced binaries. See chapter 2.

terms, oneness means the absence of dualism's artificial separation between self and world."²⁹² Buddha-nature is thus neither holy nor unholy, neither good nor evil, neither cause nor effect, neither enlightenment nor ignorance, neither happiness nor suffering, neither oneness nor differentiation, neither generation nor annihilation, neither sound nor silence, neither presence nor absence, neither Buddha nor sentient beings, etc.; it is intrinsic emptiness (*śūnyatā*). This emptiness nevertheless exists and defines true reality. In an important sense, the void (or at least the intuitive comprehension of the void) is the Supreme Truth—the sought-for, desired goal.

Most Buddhist thinkers will admit that a complete understanding of *śūnyatā* is incredibly difficult to attain and shatteringly profound if achieved. *Śūnyatā* is the “greatest wisdom.” One thing for certain is that the void is “beyond” all phenomenal, material existence (in that it negates the illusion that is the phenomenal world, which is structured around its illusionary dualities). While it cannot be expressed in words or rationally comprehended, the void can—under the right circumstances—be intuited.

The Buddhist model described above “shapes” Pelevin's literary universe. Many aspects of the void would prove appealing to the post-Soviet, Russian mind grappling with radical change in which familiar words, ideas, and even objects disappear. Barry Magid explains, “words and ideas have their natural use and function, but...we can all too easily become self-consciously bogged down in images and expectations, and thereby create an artificial gap between our selves and how we express ourselves.”²⁹³ To intuit the void, however, one must also eschew the deficient binary model of the word (signifier + signified), as it is considered

²⁹² Barry Magid, *Ordinary Mind: Exploring the Common Ground of Zen and Psychoanalysis*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 45; italics in the original.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

detrimental to the process. Lotman and Uspenskii's cyclical model of Russian culture also becomes irrelevant, as it, too, is based on binaries.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Soviet reality as portrayed by Pelevin was full of words (in the form of propaganda and slogans) that conveyed little to no (or nonsensical) meaning. After the collapse of the Soviet Union meaningless words and phrases (now in the form of advertisements) flooded in. Perhaps Eastern teachings would allow Russia to cope with the mundane world (which requires a physical description) and find transcendence (which has no need for words). Now, Pelevin seems to suggest, Russia could break free of its own eternal closed circle, its own historical loop; Russia would no longer be doomed to repeat its history; Russia could finally embrace the void that has always defined it.

The above discussion provides a brief description of Buddhism and the particular terms that are relevant in Pelevin's works. As I analyze the novels *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* below, I will refer to these concepts in more detail.

Pelevin has spent much time in Buddhist monasteries in South Korea. In February 2000, *Chosun Ilbo* (a major daily newspaper in South Korea) reported that Pelevin had completed his third trip to South Korea, where he spent three months at the Shinwon Temple at Mt. Kyeryong in the winter of 1999–2000.²⁹⁴ Judging from the content of his novels, Pelevin is primarily interested in the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism and Zen (a closely-related variant). Some critics have speculated that Pelevin uses Buddhism ironically in his works (e.g., Shneidman, Zakurenko, Lipovetsky).²⁹⁵ Pelevin has himself said

²⁹⁴ Seung In-bae, "Russian Novelist Finishes Three Month Retreat," *Chosun Ilbo*, February 23, 2000, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2000/02/23/2000022361543.html.

²⁹⁵ See Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999); Aleksandr Zakurenko, "Iskomaia pustota," *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 3, no. 269 (1998); N. N. Shneidman, *Russian Literature, 1995–2002: On the Threshold of the New Millennium* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

I can't...say I'm a Buddhist in the sense of rigidly belonging to a confession or a sect, following rituals, et cetera. I only study and practice my mind for which the Dharma of Buddha is the best tool I know: and it is exactly what the word *Buddhism* means to me. And I also totally accept the moral teaching of Buddhism because it is the necessary condition of being able to practice your mind. But it is not too different from the moral teachings of other traditions.²⁹⁶

I will not try to prove or disprove the extent of Pelevin's commitment to Buddhism. What is important is his documented and self-avowed engagement with and knowledge of Buddhism and Buddhist practices.

In all four novels under discussion, the premise that the material world is an illusion that masks a void is prominent. The void depicted in *Generation "P"* and *Empire "V"* is best described as absence. Where there was previously truth and meaning in symbols, in life, in materiality, and in one's own identity, now there is nothing but a void of truth and meaning. Pelevin's novels *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, however, examine a different type of void: that of Buddhist *śūnyatā* (emptiness). *Śūnyatā* dovetails with Pelevin's postmodern aesthetics in that it expresses the idea that "*any belief* in an objective reality grounded in the assumption of intrinsic, independent existence is untenable."²⁹⁷

Some critics responded predictably to Pelevin's emphasis on emptiness by accusing him of nihilism or solipsism. Angela Brintlinger suggests that both Pelevin and the hero of *Chapaev and Pustota* "propose a self-absorbed variant of Buddhism in answer to contemporary Russian social problems."²⁹⁸ Pavel Basinskii presents Pelevin as irresponsible for suggesting that people

²⁹⁶ Viktor Pelevin, interview by Leo Kropywiansky, *BOMB*, Spring 2002, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2481/victor-pelevin>.

²⁹⁷ Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2005), 46–7; italics mine.

²⁹⁸ Brintlinger, "The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past," 44.

ignore the world's problems and create their own reality.²⁹⁹ Such association between Buddhism and nihilism is nothing new. Roger-Pol Droit notes that the nineteenth-century European philosophical imagination (with the possible exception of Schelling and Schopenhauer) feared Buddhism, perceiving it as a religion of self-annihilation. Such criticism often arises from a lack of familiarity with Buddhist principles. Droit posits that, in criticizing Buddhism, European philosophers were projecting fears about their own time (a “nineteenth century upset by disturbances of all kinds”) and he extrapolates that the same could be said of our own time (“the twentieth century and its ‘worship of nothingness,’ ...its unprecedented wars and massacres, ...its negation of all that is human.”).³⁰⁰

Several of Pelevin's previous works feature characters that indeed “ignore the world's problems.” For example, Andrei, the hero of the dystopian novella *The Yellow Arrow* (*Желтая стрела*, 1993), is caught in the world of a giant train traveling toward a ruined bridge. Rather than attempting to work within the closed world of the train, Andrei (eventually) stops the flow of time with his mind and steps off the train, removing himself from the situation. Similarly, in the story “Hermit and Six-Toes” (“Затворник и Шестипалый,” 1990), the two eponymous heroes are chickens in a slaughterhouse who escape their world by learning to fly.

Not surprisingly, Pelevin anticipated a negative reaction from some critics. This much is clear from the comments of the fictional author of the preface to *Chapaev and Pustota*, who writes that, “literary specialists will most likely perceive nothing more in our narrative than yet another product of the critical solipsism which has been so fashionable in recent years, but the

²⁹⁹ Basinskii, “Iz zhizni otechestvennykh kaktusov,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 29, 1996, <http://pelevin.nov.ru/stati/o-dva/1.html>.

³⁰⁰ Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha*, 23.

true value of this document lies in the fact that it represents the first attempt in the history of culture to embody in the forms of art the Mongolian Myth of the Eternal Non-Return.”³⁰¹

Another concept with which Pelevin engages is dependent origination. Dependent origination is crucial to understanding how Buddhists perceive the world and why this type of worldview would be appealing to Pelevin, given his negative views on hyper-capitalism, which we examined in chapter 2. According to Mark C. Taylor, a leading religious studies scholar engaged with postmodernity, most people see plenitude as their primal state. When confronted with absence or “lack,” they wrongly treat it as a state that must be overcome.³⁰² Taylor’s description of absence as the primal state corresponds to the Buddhist view that the emptiness of all things is due to dependent origination: “lack” is considered to be the original state, since everything is empty. Once one realizes this, one is free from the suffering associated with attachment and plenitude.

Śūnyatā and dependent origination are not nihilistic concepts at all but representations of Buddha-mind or the Absolute. In Pelevin’s novels *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, Pelevin presents two heroes who struggle *with* postmodern emptiness but struggle *for śūnyatā* by attempting to transcend the material world.

³⁰¹ Viktor Pelevin, *BLF*, ix–x. “Специалисты по литературе, вероятно, увидят в нашем повествовании всего лишь очередной продукт модного в последние годы критического солипсизма, но подлинная ценность этого документа заключается в том, что он является первой в мировой культуре попыткой отразить художественными средствами древний монгольский миф о Вечном Невозвращении.” *CIP*, 7–8.

By using the phrase “eternal non-return” instead of nirvana, Pelevin juxtaposes the eastern concept of eternal non-return (i.e., nirvana) found in eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism) with the western idea of eternal return (or eternal recurrence), which states that with enough time and a finite number of events, events will eventually repeat themselves. Most often associated with Nietzsche, the concept of eternal return has its roots in antiquity. In the East, eternal non-return is a positive notion while eternal return is a negative notion, being associated with *samsāra*. In the West, the idea of eternal return is more ambiguous and depends on the experiences of the particular life.

³⁰² Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 146.

Chapaev and Pustota: An Attempt at Transcendence

In her 2015 volume *Narratives of Nothing*, Meghan Vicks notes that, while the emptiness of Generation “Pepsi” or “pizdets” embodies a “nihilistic form of nothing that results from...the loss of grand narratives such as Soviet communism and post-Soviet capitalism,” there is a different sort of void in Pelevin’s work, one representing a “creative form of nothing that may provide meaning, beauty, agency, and respite to those mired in the nihilistic nothing of the post-Soviet condition.”³⁰³ Indeed, the hero of *Chapaev and Pustota* seems to waver between these two types of nothingness. Petr Pustota (whose surname means “Void”) toggles between two realities and two (or more) identities.

In the first reality, Petr is a patient in a Moscow psychiatric hospital in the early 1990s. He and his other wardmates (a man who calls himself Mariia, the drunk Serdiuk, and the gangster Volodin) engage in a new type of therapy (turbo-Jungianism; developed by their doctor, Timur Timurovich Kanashnikov) in which they collectively experience their own delusions in an effort to overcome their neuroses together.

In the second reality, which takes place in 1918 or 1919 during the Russian Civil War, Petr is a poet who, on the run from the authorities, assumes a new identity and joins as commissar to Red Army Divisional Commander Vasili Chapaev (1887–1919) and his machine-gunner Anna. Unlike the historical figure of Chapaev, Anna is a fictional character from the 1934 Vasiliev brothers film *Chapaev* and from dozens of Chapaev jokes that developed later in the Soviet era.³⁰⁴ Petr more or less assumes the double role of the Bolshevik commissar and

³⁰³ Meghan Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing in 20th-Century Literature*, 142.

³⁰⁴ The character may be based on Furmanov’s wife, Anna Steshenko, who was assigned to political duties in Chapaev’s division. The friendly relationship between Chapaev and Furmanov ended when Chapaev engaged in an affair with Anna.

writer Dmitrii Furmanov (1891–1926), who had both a professional and a complicated personal history with Chapaev, and Petr Isaev (1890s–1919), Chapaev’s personal staff officer.

Because Civil War-era Petr lives in 1919 (Timur Timurovich says Petr Pustota is living in “1918 or 1919”), it is tempting to assume that Post-Soviet Petr lives in 1991. However the events in the Moscow psychiatric ward take place no earlier than October 1993, since Mariia’s chapter refers to the shelling of the Russian White House. Petr’s Civil War timeline is also suspect. It makes sense if Petr’s Civil War reality takes place in 1918: Furmanov joined Chapaev in 1919 and the historical Chapaev and Pet’ka (Petr Isaev) were both killed in 1919. However, Baron Iungern (who, like Chapaev, is portrayed as a Buddhist guru in the novel) tells Petr that he (the baron) and his men were executed together; in historical reality, the baron was executed in 1921. It is clear that the Civil War that Pelevin’s Petr is living in does not coincide with the historical Russian Civil War.

According to Timur Timurovich, Petr’s madness is caused by the collapse of the psyche, precipitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Petr is not able to cope with the new reality of post-Soviet life, which we only see in glimpses throughout the novel. Timur Timurovich explains that while “some people actively strive...towards the new...others persist in their attempts to clarify their non-existent relations with the shadows of a vanished world.”³⁰⁵ While Timur Timurovich’s theory explains why Petr’s fantasized reality takes place in the past, this turning to the past is not uncommon among contemporary Russian writers.³⁰⁶ The doctor also explains, “The life of a man, a country, a culture and so on, is a series of constant

³⁰⁵ Pelevin, *BLF*, 33. “Одни устремляются...к новому, а другие так и остаются выяснять несуществующие отношения с тенями угасшего мира...” *CIP*, 47.

³⁰⁶ For example, Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Sharov, and Aleksei Ivanov have all written alternative histories, while writers such as Petr Aleshkovskii and Boris Akunin have chosen to write historical fiction.

metamorphoses. Sometimes they extend over a period of time and so are imperceptible, sometimes they assume acute forms, as in the present case. And it is precisely the attitude to these metamorphoses that determines the fundamental difference between cultures.”³⁰⁷ Here Timur Timurovich could be describing Iurii Lotman’s theory of “explosion” in culture (see chapter 1). In this case, an “explosion” in Russian culture occurred when the Soviet Union collapsed. Even more detrimental, this explosion failed to give birth to a clearly defined successor model, leaving many Russians (like Petr) with no new identity to assume. As a result, Petr has created an alternate identity and (through Timur Timurovich’s experimental group therapy sessions) experiences the identities and delusions of his fellow patients as well.³⁰⁸

Volodin, however, sees Petr’s problem in the following light: “Your surname is Voyd [Pustota]...and your madness is caused by your denying the existence of your own personality and replacing it with another, totally invented one.”³⁰⁹ Forced to make a choice in the end, Petr attempts to follow Chapaev to a mythologized Inner Mongolia—a place outside of time and space—by jumping into the rainbow-colored U.R.A.L. (Undefinable River of Absolute Love, *Условная река абсолютной любви*). However, something prevents Petr from transcending the

³⁰⁷ Pelevin, *BLF*, 34. “В жизни человека, страны, культуры и так далее постоянно происходят метаморфозы. Иногда они растянуты во времени и незаметны, иногда принимают очень резкие формы—как сейчас. И вот именно отношение к этим метаморфозам определяет глубинную разницу между культурами.” *CIP*, 47–8.

³⁰⁸ Ostensibly, Petr experiences the identities of his fellow patients during Timur Timurovich’s therapy sessions. Several parts of the text, however, indicate that Petr has more than one alternate identity. While watching the receding train of weavers, Petr thinks “Oh, if only it were really possible...to leave behind me that dark crowd of false identities which had been tearing my soul apart for so many years!” (*BLF*, 85). In the “real world” of 1990s Russia, there “false identities” might include the experiences of Petr’s fellow wardmates, encountered in group therapy. A Buddhist interpretation would be that Petr is gradually becoming aware of his own past lives. These past identities would inherently be false because they do not represent the monadic self. There are also instances where Chapaev seems to be inside Petr’s head (e.g., he reads Petr’s thoughts).

³⁰⁹ Pelevin, *BLF*, 89. “Ваша фамилия—Пустота....И ваше помешательство связано именно с тем, что вы отрицаете существование своей личности, заменив ее совершенно другой.” *CIP*, 113.

material plane and he finds himself back where he started at the beginning of the novel—in 1990s Moscow.

Closed Loops and Illusions

As was the case in *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V,”* the material world in *Chapaev and Pustota* is marked by closed loops. The novel is paradoxical and cyclical in nature—something that reflects both the Civil War era and post-Soviet reality. When Petr describes the Moscow of 1918–19, the description is full of paradoxes, suggesting a disorienting environment. For example, although Petr has just finished telling the reader how Tverskoi Boulevard was “exactly as it had been” two years earlier, he notes,

Some things, however, were different....The bronze Pushkin seemed a little sadder than usual—no doubt because his breast was covered with a red apron bearing the inscription: ‘Long Live the First Anniversary of the Revolution’. I felt not the slightest inclination for ironical comment on the fact that the cheers were intended for an event which could not by definition last longer than a single day....³¹⁰

In 1990s Moscow, post-Soviet Petr is told, “You belong to the very generation that was programmed for life in one socio-cultural paradigm, but has found itself living in a quite different one.”³¹¹ Petr was raised with a Soviet mentality and now finds himself in a postmodern post-Soviet world (just as Civil War Petr was raised with a monarchical mentality and found himself in a Soviet world). Pelevin highlights Petr’s resulting disorientation by bringing the reader’s attention to several binary pairs, namely same/different and eternal/temporary. At the

³¹⁰ *BLF*, 1. “Бронзовый Пушкин казался чуть печальней, чем обычно—оттого, наверно, что на груди у него висел красный фартук с надписью: «Да здравствует первая годовщина Революции». Но никакого желания иронизировать по поводу того, что здравствовать предлагалось годовщине, а революция была написана через «ять», у меня не было—за последнее время я имел много возможностей разглядеть демонический лик, который прятался за всеми этими короткими нелепицами на красном.” *CIP*, 10.

³¹¹ *BLF*, 32. “Вы как раз принадлежите к тому поколению, которое было запрограммировано на жизнь в одной социально-культурной парадигме, а оказалось в совершенно другой.” *CIP*, 46.

end of the novel, when Petr is discharged from the psychiatric hospital, he again finds himself on Tverskoi Boulevard; he recognizes the buildings, but they are now “lit up with messages in some barbarous artificial language—‘SAMSUNG’, ‘OCA-CO A’, ‘OLBI.’”³¹² Both time periods in which the novel is set, the Civil War period and the 1990s, are transitional and disorienting for our hero.

The paradoxical use of binaries contributes to the feeling that Russia is stuck in a timeless void (see the discussion of Chaadaev’s letters in chapter 1), a sort of national *saṃsāra*. In fact, the heroes of all four novels live in environments dominated by what Sally Dalton-Brown calls a “closed loop” (see chapter 2). Petr Pustota, while preparing to address the weavers’ regiment, looks upon the soldiers and notes that

It was painful to look at those men and imagine the dark maze woven by the pathways of their fates. They had been deceived since childhood, and in essence nothing had changed for them because now they were simply being deceived in a different fashion, but the crude and insulting primitiveness of these deceptions—the old and the new—was genuinely inhuman.³¹³

This episode, significantly, takes place not in the post-Soviet period where Petr (and an entire post-Soviet generation) is experiencing an identity crisis, but rather in the Civil War period where everyone was *also* experiencing an identity crisis, as the old, imperial regime collapsed and the new Bolshevik regime imposed a new political system, a new economy, a new “Soviet” identity. This fragment is similar to the beginning of *Generation “P,”* in which Tatarskii describes a generation who “chooses” Pepsi instead of Brezhnev: the concept of “choice” is deceptive. Here, soldiers are called up to fight for the Red Army against the former Russian

³¹² *BLF*, 324. “На крышах знакомых домов... зажигались огромные электрические надписи на каком-то диком волапоке—«SAMSUNG», «OCA-CO A», «OLBI.»” *CIP*, 386.

³¹³ *BLF*, 74–5. “Было тяжело смотреть на этих людей и представлять себе мрачные маршруты их судеб. Они были обмануты с детства, и, в сущности, для них ничего не изменилось из-за того, что теперь их обманывали по-другому, но топорность, издевательская примитивность этих обманов—и старых, и новых—поистине была бесчеловечна.” *CIP*, 96.

Imperial Army, in which they formerly served during WWI; in both cases, a higher authority manipulates their actions. In *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V,”* the Chaldeans and vampires are doing the manipulating; here, it is the state. Thus the Russians are forever being deceived and are caught in a never-ending cycle, changing in detail but changeless in essence.

The entire novel is constructed in a cyclical manner. Petr’s movements between his two realities are not ruptures in time, but rather suggest a continuation or a cyclical, rather than linear, movement of time. At the end of the third chapter, the warm air in Petr’s train compartment reminds him of the hot bath he had wanted to take all day. He falls asleep and when he awakes in the 1990s, he is indeed in a (now cold) bath in the psychiatric hospital. Each time Petr wakes up there is some connecting factor that ties the two realities together. The novel as a whole is also organized as one big loop: Petr’s story begins and ends in the same cabaret (although it has a new name in the 1990s) and with an encounter with Chapaev. After Petr is released from the hospital, elements of his earlier fantasies start to reappear as he sets out in search of the Musical Snuffbox cabaret. Petr embarks on his train at “Lozovaia Junction” (the Civil War site where the Petr of 1919 had distinguished himself in battle). Finally, Petr’s description of Tverskoi Boulevard at the beginning and end of the novel are nearly identical:

Chapter 1: “Tverskoi Boulevard was exactly as it had been when I last saw it, two years before. Once again it was February, with snowdrifts everywhere and that peculiar gloom which somehow manages to infiltrate the very daylight. The same old women were perched motionless on the benches; above them, beyond the black latticework of the branches, there was the same grey sky, like an old, worn mattress drooping down towards the earth under the weight of a sleeping God.”³¹⁴

Chapter 10: “Tverskoi Boulevard appeared exactly as it had been when I last saw it—

³¹⁴ *BLF*, 1. “Тверской бульвар был почти таким же, как и два года назад, когда я последний раз его видел—опять был февраль, сугробы и мгла, странным образом проникавшая даже в дневной свет. На скамейках сидели те же неподвижные старухи; вверху, над черной сеткой веткой ветвей, серело то же небо, похожее на ветхий, до земли провисший по тяжести спящего Бога матрац.” *CIP*, 10.

once again it was February, with snowdrifts everywhere and that peculiar gloom which somehow manages to infiltrate the very daylight. The same old women were perched motionless on the benches, watching over brightly dressed children engaged in protracted warfare among the snowdrifts; above them, beyond the black latticework of the wires, the sky hung down close to the earth as though it were trying to touch it.”³¹⁵

The chapter numbers in which the passages appear (chapters [0]1 and 10) also seem to point to an endless loop. Even more remarkable is the fact that Petr comments on the similarities of his most recent visit to the boulevard with a previous visit on *both occasions*: “Tverskoi Boulevard was exactly as it had been when I last saw it, *two years before* [italics mine].” This implies that the entire events of the novel have occurred before.

In the second encounter at the cabaret, however, Petr does not repeat the same story with Chapaev; instead he follows him and eventually finds himself in Inner Mongolia, “the place a person goes to when he manages to ascend the throne that is nowhere.”³¹⁶ Petr ultimately decides that Russia is empty. As he explains to his taxi driver on his way to the cabaret, “It is all quite simple. Every time the concept and the image of Russia appears in your conscious mind, you have to let it dissolve away in its own inner nature. And since the concept and the image of Russia has no inner nature of its own, the result is that everything is sorted out most satisfactorily.”³¹⁷ Petr’s description contains elements of the Buddhist idea of dependent origination. The phenomenon (“concept and image”) of “Russia” has no existence in and of itself, but is perceived only as a consequence of interaction among other phenomena. Petr has

³¹⁵ *BLF*, 323–4. “Тверской бульвар был почти таким же, как и тогда, когда я последний раз его видел—опять был февраль, сугробы и мгла, странным образом проникавшая даже в дневной свет. На скамейках сидели те же неподвижные старухи, стерегущие пестро одетых детей, занятых затяжной сугробной войной; вверху, над черной сеткой проводов, висело близкое-близкое к земле небо.” *CIP*, 385.

³¹⁶ *BLF*, 233. “Насчет того, куда попадает человек, которому удалось взойти на трон, находящийся нигде.” *CIP*, 281.

³¹⁷ *BLF*, 326. “А очень просто. Всякой раз, когда в сознании появляются понятие и образ России, надо дать им самораствориться в собственной природе. А поскольку никакой собственной природы у понятия и образа России нет, в результате Россия окажется полностью обустроенной.” *CIP*, 388.

come to this conclusion only after receiving considerable instruction from Chapaev on the nature of illusion.

Although Chapaev never uses specific Buddhist terminology, his explanation of why the world (including both of Petr's worlds) is illusory serves as a description of dependent origination. Toward the end of the novel, Chapaev's weavers' regiment has made camp at an estate in the Urals. While waiting for their next orders, the regiment gets drunk, starts to riot, and burns down the estate. Petr and Chapaev hide from the weavers in the bathhouse, drink moonshine, and discuss Petr's "dreams" of the psychiatric ward and the nature of reality. Chapaev asks Petr to describe *where* he wakes up into when he awakens from his dreams. When Petr replies "I do not know," Chapaev responds:

Good lad....That's the very place. As soon as you are swept up in the flow of your dreams, you yourself become part of it all—because in that flow everything is relative, everything is in motion, and there is nothing for you to grab hold of and cling to. You don't realize when you are drawn into the whirlpool, because you are moving along together with the water, and it appears to be motionless. That's how a dream comes to feel like reality.³¹⁸

When everything (Russia, for instance) is in flux and only defined in terms of other concepts (such as the West or the East), then *all things* are empty of self-nature and their permanence is illusory.

Chapaev had long been trying to teach Petr about the illusory nature of the world. For example, he hints at this concept when Petr asks whether the vision Chapaev shows him in his sword is the result of hypnosis. "No more than everything else," says Chapaev, and nods at the

³¹⁸ *BLF*, 294. "Вот именно туда. Как только тебя подхватывает поток сновидений, ты сам становишься его частью, потому что в этом потоке все относительно, все движется, и нет ничего такого, за что можно было бы ухватиться. Когда тебя засасывает в водоворот, ты этого не понимаешь, потому что сам движешься вместе с водой, и она кажется неподвижной. Так во сне появляется ощущение реальности." *CIP*, 351.

wall of the armored car, indicating the world beyond the wall.³¹⁹ Later, Chapaev is more direct: “Everything that we see is located in our consciousness, Petka. Which means we can’t say that our consciousness is located anywhere. We’re nowhere for the simple reason that there is no place in which we can be said to be located. That’s why we’re nowhere.”³²⁰ In Buddhism, everything is conditioned (that is, it only exists in relation to everything else). Nothing exists that has a “true existent nature” and so all dharmas (i.e., things) are “like a dream or magical illusion,” which is what Chapaev tries to teach Petr.³²¹

Petr clearly has trouble understanding Baron Iungern’s³²² and Chapaev’s lessons, which is understandable if one recalls Kotovskii’s explanation of the rising and falling wax.³²³

It’s very difficult for the wax to understand that it is wax—it’s almost impossible to grasp one’s own primordial nature. How can you notice what has been right there in front of you since the beginning of time? And so the only thing that the wax does notice is its

³¹⁹ *BLF*, 74. “Не более, чем все остальное,—сказал он и кивнул на стену, подразумевая, видимо, то, что было за ней.” *CIP*, 93.

³²⁰ *BLF*, 144. “Все, что мы видим, находится в нашем сознании, Петька. Поэтому сказать, что наше сознание находится где-то, нельзя. Мы находимся нигде просто потому, что нет такого места, про которое можно было бы сказать, что мы в нем находимся. Вот поэтому мы нигде.” *CIP*, 176.

³²¹ Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 117.

³²² Pelevin references the historical figure Baron von Ungern-Sternberg (1885–1921), an anti-Bolshevik Civil War leader who restored the monarchy in Mongolia but was the *de facto* ruler of the kingdom for a short time in 1921. He eventually wanted to free Russia of the Bolsheviks and restore the monarchy. The baron’s brutality earned him the nicknames “the bloody baron” and “the mad baron.” He followed his own mystic variety of Buddhism that (among other peculiarities) justified executing the weak so they might be reborn as stronger beings in their next life. In 1921 his own men betrayed him to the Red Army and he was executed. Pelevin changes his name to Iungern, perhaps in association with Carl Jung (Iung, in Russian).

³²³ The historical Grigorii Kotovskii (1881–1921) was a former bandit turned Soviet general. In the novel, Kotovskii is still a military man but, like Petr, he is an “acolyte” of Chapaev’s and prefers discussing philosophical questions. At the end of the novel, Petr suggests that the entire world is a product of the cocaine-using Kotovskii’s mind.

temporary form. But the form is arbitrary every time it arises, influenced by thousands and thousands of different circumstances.³²⁴

In Kotovskii's metaphor, an individual human being is the waxen form that is constantly changing its form, with each rise and fall, birth and death, representing a cycle of *samsāra*.³²⁵

Petr, like the wax in the lamp, cannot understand anything beyond his present material form.

In all four of the novels treated in this dissertation the characters live in illusory worlds. In chapter 2, we saw that illusion is perpetuated by advertising and hyperconsumerism. Both Tatarskii and Rama were able to escape one closed loop (that of the human masses trapped in a vicious cycle of desire and spending) only to end up in a secondary closed loop, also marked by illusion. Tatarskii becomes part of the power structure that keeps the masses in thrall to their consumerist desires, yet he serves a higher power (which we later discover to be the anonymous dictatorship of the vampires). Similarly, Rama escapes the fate of regular human beings who are “milked” for their bablos by becoming a vampire. Yet the vampires ultimately serve the mysterious “tongues,” which take up residence in their bodies. Both Tatarskii and Rama may have transcended one loop, but they have entered a secondary loop where choice is still an illusion—Pepsi is replaced with Coca-Cola.

In *Chapaev and Pustota* (and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*), however, the goal is to escape *all* closed loops by escaping the material world, all aspects of which are illusory. Petr

³²⁴ Pelevin, *BLF*, 199. “Но весь фокус в том, что воску очень сложно понять, что он воск. Осознать свою изначальную природу практически невозможно. Как заметить то, что с начала времен было перед самыми глазами? Даже тогда, когда еще не было никаких глав? Поэтому единственное, что воск замечает, это свою временную форму. И он думает, что он и есть эта форма, понимаете? А форма произвольна—каждый раз она возникает под действием тысяч и тысяч обстоятельств.” *CIP*, 242.

³²⁵ Aristotle describes the human soul using a similar metaphor. “He said that our body was like a lump of wax and a piece of string; the soul was the arrangement of these into the shape of a candle with its wick. In this metaphor, the essence of the candle—its ‘soul’—isn’t some additional thing added to wax and string, it is simply its functional organization: the assemblage of its parts in such a way that it can function in giving light.” Cited in Magid, *Ordinary Mind: Exploring the Common Ground of Zen and Psychoanalysis*, 60.

does not understand that both of his realities are illusory and that he (and Russia) is seemingly doomed to repeat the past in the closed loop of *samsāra* until he (and Russia) comes to that realization.

The West

Transcending binaries and dualities is essential in order to achieve spiritual awakening. The binary that Pelevin engages most in *Chapaev and Pustota* is that of East/West—a familiar binary in Russian culture. Although eastern thought predominates in the novel, several key characters are associated with the West. For example, Evgeny Pavlov speculates that Petr’s doctor, Timur Timurovich, is associated with Egor Timurovich Gaidar, architect of the controversial “shock therapy” economic reforms in Russia that were designed to rapidly transform Russia’s economy into a western-style market economy.³²⁶ Pelevin, notorious for his puns, is associating a psychiatrist using unconventional treatment on his patients with the economic shock therapist.

Timur Timurovich is a materialist and is well acquainted with western psychological theory and philosophy. He identifies Petr’s problem as his eastern rather than western outlook. As evidence, he cites Petr’s obsession with China (which Petr denies): in Confucian China, each step forward into the future is considered a step away from their Golden Age and is thus degenerative. In the Hegelian West, however, progress and moving forward into the future are

³²⁶ Evgeny Pavlov, “Judging Emptiness: Reflections on the Post-Soviet Aesthetics and Ethics of Viktor Pelevin’s *Chapaev i Pustota*,” in *Russian Literature in Transition*, eds. Ian K. Lilly and Henrietta Mondry (Nottingham, UK: Astra Press, 1999), 94.

Timur Timurovich also brings to mind the Turko-Mongol conqueror Tamerlane (1336–1405, known as Timur in Persian) therefore linking him with the East and perhaps the historic Baron von Ungern-Sternberg (1886–1921), who attempted to revive the Mongol Empire in 1921. Edith Clowes believes that while Baron Iungern is an Asianized European, Timur Timurovich is a Europeanized Central Asian. See Edith Clowes, “Illusory Empire: Viktor Pelevin’s Parody of Neo-Eurasianism,” in *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 80.

considered the ideal—moving from less perfect to more perfect. Timur Timurovich explains, “The same thing occurs at the level of the individual personality, even if individual progress takes such petty forms as redecorating an apartment or changing an old car for a new one. It makes it possible to carry on living—but you don’t want to pay for any of this.... You despise the positions that the times require us to adopt. And precisely this is the cause of your tragedy.”³²⁷ Timur Timurovich’s logic equates materialism with progress, which suggests (as is evident in *Generation “P”*) that one can never be satisfied. The Westerner must continually purchase and “trade up” to feel that any progress is taking place.

The character most associated with the West is a young man who calls himself Mariia, after the 1989 Mexican telenovela *Simplemente Maria*, which became popular in Russia as *Prosto Mariia*. In Mariia’s group therapy session, she seems to be aware that she is a television show character. She makes reference to being in the hearts of millions and to trying to ignore the “whirring of the camera.”³²⁸ Because her own life is that of a TV star, Mariia thinks that all the smoke and explosions along the embankment is the filming of a movie when in actuality it is the shelling of the Russian White House (1993). Sensing that the city is suffering, Mariia thinks that it needs a strong hand to deliver it from evil. After having a vision with the words “Bridegroom,” “Visitor,” and “Alchemical Wedlock,” Mariia holds her arms out toward the West (as she senses that her “bridegroom,” her savior, would come from that direction). Her savior soon appears in the form of Arnold Schwarzenegger—specifically an amalgam of his characters from the films *The Terminator* (1984), *True Lies* (1994), and, finally, *Junior* (1994).

³²⁷ Pelevin, *BLF*, 35. “То же самое происходит на уровне отдельной личности, даже если этот индивидуальный прогресс принимает такие мелкие формы, как, скажем, ремонт квартиры или смена одного автомобиля другим. Это дает возможность жить дальше. А вы не хотите платить за это «дальше».... Вы презираете те позы, которые время повелевает нам принять. И именно в этом причина вашей трагедии.” *CIP*, 49.

³²⁸ *BLF*, 42. “Стрекочущую камеру” *CIP*, 58.

Many critics read Mariia's story as an allegory of Russia's potential "alchemical wedlock" with the West. Although the character Mariia is taken from a Mexican soap opera, in *Chapaev and Pustota* she, too, is a symbol of Russia. Stephen Hutchings points out that, at the time, both Mexico and Russia were both aspiring members of the capitalist world order.³²⁹ This desire is apparent when Mariia becomes angry with Petr in the workroom of the psychiatric hospital: "What I'd do with anyone who doubts the reality of the world," Maria unexpectedly interrupted, 'is put them away for ever. They don't belong in the madhouse, they should be in prison. Or worse.'"³³⁰ The specific object the patients are discussing is a Mercedes-600, which they determine probably belongs to some bandit who killed many people in order to afford it. For Mariia, the material ownership of such a car must be justified or else the bandit's victims have died in vain.

It is not difficult to imagine the Mexican Mariia playing the role of Russia and the Austrian Arnold playing the role of the West. The following passage depicts Mariia (Russia) being jerked and dragged behind Arnold (the West): "He approached the plane. Sunk in thought, Maria remained standing on the spot until she was jerked forward in turn—rather as if Schwarzenegger were a tractor and she were some piece of agricultural machinery casually hooked on to it."³³¹ Mariia has no agency in this scenario. Her encounter with Arnold ends abruptly when, after confusing Mariia's enthusiasm for a band called Jihad Crimson with the terrorist group Crimson Jihad from *True Lies*, he jettisons Mariia from his Harrier jet by firing

³²⁹ Stephen Hutchings, "Introduction," in *Russia and its Other(s) on Film*, ed. Stephen Hutchings (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 17.

³³⁰ Pelevin, *BLF*, 107. "А я бы тех,—неожиданно вмешался Мария,—кто в реальности мира сомневается, вообще бы судил. Им не в сумасшедшем доме место, а в тюрьме. Или еще хуже где." *CIP*, 134.

³³¹ *BLF*, 51. "Шварценеггер пошел к самолету. Поглощенная своими мыслями Мария не сразу струнулась с места, и ее дернуло вперед, как будто Шварценеггер был трактором, а она—наспех прицепленным сельскохозяйственным агрегатом." *CIP*, 68.

the rocket she is snagged on. If Russia (Mariia) shows any affinity for the East (in this case the fictional terrorist group Crimson Jihad), the West has no use for her. Pelevin may also be suggesting that an alchemical wedlock with the West would place Russia in a subservient position and, ultimately, lead to chaos and destruction, as it did for Mariia.³³²

The East

In *Chapaev and Pustota*, most of the Eastern elements appear in Petr's dialogues with Chapaev and Baron Iungern. Chapaev is sympathetic to Petr's dilemma of being trapped between two realities. He tries to make Petr understand that it is impossible to tell which is reality and which is a dream because all of life is a dream. Chapaev tells Petr the story of the Chinese philosopher Tzu-Chuang (c. 369 BCE–c. 286 BCE), who often dreamt he was a butterfly and did not know whether he (Tzu-Chuang) was dreaming of being a butterfly or if the butterfly was dreaming of being Tzu-Chuang. In Chapaev's version of the story, Tzu-Chuang is a Communist and is eventually awoken by being shot in a firing squad. Chapaev tells Petr,

If they wake you up from your nightmares the same way they did that Chinaman, Petka, ... all that'll happen is that you'll drop from one dream into another. You've been flitting to and fro like that all eternity. But if you can understand that absolutely everything that happens to you is a dream, then it won't matter a damn what kind of dreams you have. And when you wake up afterwards, you'll really wake up—forever. If you want to, that is.³³³

³³² As *Simplemente Maria* is a Latin American telenovela, one could argue that Mariia may represent Russia as a post-colonial state. By joining in wedlock with the Arnold, Russia would be culturally colonized by the West, creating a mutant or hybridized culture. From a semiotic view, Lotman's semiosphere also describes the creation of "new" cultural content when it is translated across boundaries.

³³³ Pelevin, *BLF*, 206–7. "Если от твоих кошмаров тебя разбудят таким же способом, как этого китайца, Петька, ... ты всего-то навсего попадешь из одного сна в другой. Так ты и мотался всю вечность. Но если ты поймешь, что абсолютно все происходящее с тобой—это просто сон, тогда будет совершенно неважно, что тебе приснится. А когда после этого ты проснешься, ты проснешься уже по-настоящему. И навсегда. Если, конечно, захочешь." *CIP*, 250.

The final awakening that Chapaev speaks of is Buddhist enlightenment, the embrace of emptiness. And there is reason to think that both Chapaev and Baron Iungern are enlightened, and possibly different aspects of the same person.³³⁴

Pelevin did not randomly choose the historical figure of Chapaev for his novel: like the Buddha, many stories and legends surround both Chapaev and the baron (albeit of a different sort).³³⁵ Because of the proliferation of legends surrounding the two characters, it is impossible to know which details are true and which are false—which fits with the Buddhist idea of non-duality and the idea of reality being subjective. Baron Iungern is also the subject of many stories and legends. When Petr suspects that the baron might be about to awaken him in the same way he did Tzu-chuang, he confronts him about it, and the baron replies, “Oh, come now....Chapaev must have been telling you all sorts of horror stories. That’s not what I’m really like.”³³⁶ Finally, Baron Iungern (and Chapaev) can travel from one reality to the next. The baron takes Petr from Civil War-era Russia to his realm, which he calls Valhalla—a dark field with endless campfires—each representing a different reality.³³⁷ At the end of the novel, Chapaev, too, has traveled to retrieve Petr from 1990s Moscow before they both depart for Inner Mongolia.

³³⁴ Edith Clowes argues that the Baron/Chapaev constitute a spiritual leader in Petr’s Civil War-era reality, and Timur Timurovich in Petr’s post-Soviet reality. See Clowes, Edith. "Illusory Empire: Viktor Pelevin's Parody of Neo-Eurasianism." In *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity*, 68–95. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

³³⁵ The same is true of Pelevin. He is the subject of numerous rumors and myths in the media and fan fiction on his website. See Introduction.

³³⁶ Pelevin, *BLF*, 213. “Ну что вы... Чапаев небось понарасказывал вам всяких ужасов. Я не такой.” *CIP*, 258.

³³⁷ The Baron’s Valhalla has features of Buddhist *bardo*—an intermediate state between cycles of *samsāra* where one is aware of previous past-lives. Valhalla cannot be associated with Inner Mongolia or transcendence because the baron states “In order to reach ‘nowhere’ and ascend that throne of eternal freedom and happiness, it is enough to remove the single dimension which still remains—the one, that is, in which you see me and yourself. Which is what my own wards are attempting to do. But their chances are very slim, and after a certain period of time they are obliged to repeat the weary round of existence.” *BLF*, 223.

Serdiuk, another patient in Petr's ward, is also heavily influenced by the East, specifically Japan. In Serdiuk's narrative, the East is associated with emptiness. Serdiuk secures a job interview with the firm of a certain Mr. Kawabata in Moscow. When he surfaces above the Nagornaia metro station, he sees a region of the city that he describes as "unusual":

If he looked to the west, where the green fence was, he saw a normal panoramic cityscape, but if he turned his gaze to the east, his field of view was entirely filled with a vast stretch of emptiness, with a few street lamps towering above it like gallows trees. It was as though Serdyuk had found his way precisely to the secret border between post-industrial Russia and primordial Rus.³³⁸

Here, the West is a site of urbanization and dynamism, while the East is vast emptiness and quiescence.

During the job interview, Kawabata educates Serdiuk on the essential emptiness of all things—words in particular. He does this using an icon, which Kawabata attributes to the futurist David Burliuk (1882–1967) but which does not exist outside the novel. The "icon" consists of the word "God" written in stencil. Kawabata points out the empty spaces left by the stencil and notes:

It would have been no trouble to colour them in—but then the result would have been so different. Yes indeed, most certainly. A person begins by looking at this word, from the appearance of sense he moves on to the visible form and suddenly he notices the blank spaces that are not filled in with anything—and only there, in this nowhere, is it possible to encounter what all these huge, ugly letters strive to convey, because the word "God" denominates that which cannot be denominated.... There are many who have attempted to speak of this in words. Take Lao-tzu. You remember—about the wheel and the spokes?

"Чтобы оказаться в нигде и взойти на этот трон бесконечной свободы и счастья, достаточно убрать то единственное пространство, которое еще остается, то есть то, где вы видите меня и себя самого. Что и попытаются сделать мои подопечные. Но шансов у них мало, и через какое-то время им приходится повторять унылый круг существования." *CIP*, 269–70.

³³⁸ *BLF*, 158. "Стоило посмотреть на запад, туда, где зеленел забор, и перед глазами открывалась обычная городская панорама. Но стоило посмотреть на восток, и в поле зрения попадало только огромное голое поле, над которым торчало несколько похожих на виселицы фонарей—словно Сердюк попал прямо на секретную границу между постиндустриальной Россией и изначальной Русью." *CIP*, 192.

Or about the vessel whose value is determined solely by its inner emptiness? And what if I were to say that every word is such a vessel, and everything depends on how much emptiness it can contain?³³⁹

Kawabata refers to the founder of Taoism Lao-tzu's (d. 531 BCE) remarks in the *Tao Te Ching*: "Thirty spokes gathered at each hub; / absence makes the cart work. / A storage jar fashioned out of clay; / absence makes the jar work."³⁴⁰ This conception of void shatters the binary model of a word where every signifier has a signified by focusing on the empty space that exists between the signifier and signified. It also demonstrates that there is great power in these empty spaces (see discussion of the void between binaries in chapter 2). Lao-tzu's comments also circumvent the postmodernist position where a signifier's signified is endlessly deferred by positing that the ultimate truth is the *lack of signified*; in other words, meaning is found in emptiness.

This same principle of the "vessel" being secondary to the emptiness it contains applies to actions as well. When Kawabata laments the lack of suitable conditions for the *hara-kiri* (Japanese ritual suicide) ritual, he notes, "Of course, you understand that the most important thing in any ritual is not the external form, but the internal content that fills it."³⁴¹ Kawabata's views reflect an ancient principle found in Chinese and Japanese ink drawings (but also other forms of art, architecture, and even theater) known as *ma*. *Ma* is an interval of empty space and

³³⁹ *BLF*, 167–8. "Их не составило бы труда закрасить, но тогда эта работа не была бы тем, чем она является сейчас. Именно так. Человек начинает глядеть на это слово, от видимости смысла переходит к видимой форме и вдруг замечает пустоты, которые не заполнены ничем,—и там-то, в этом нигде, единственно и можно встретить то, на что тшятся указать эти огромные уродливые буквы, потому что слово «Бог» указывает на то, на что указать нельзя... Много кто пытался сказать об этом словами. Хотя бы Лао-цзы. Помните—про колесо и спицы? Или про сосуд, ценность которого определяется только его внутренней пустотой? А если я скажу, что любое слово—такой же сосуд и все зависит от того, сколько пустоты оно может вместить?" *CIP*, 204.

³⁴⁰ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. David Hinton (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2015), 51.

³⁴¹ Pelevin, *BLF*, 191. "Вы, конечно, понимаете, что главное в любом ритуале—не его внешнее оформление, а то, чем он наполнен изнутри." *CIP*, 232.

time. Ma can also be referred to as a way of seeing, one that privileges that which is intangible or unsayable.

Kawabata is careful to explain that this type of void is not found in western religious painting and that this “gaping void” lies in the depths of both the Russian and Japanese soul, which is why Kawabata says, “What Russia really needs is an alchemical wedlock with the East.”³⁴² Pelevin even gives us a taste of what this grotesque alchemical wedlock between Russia and Japan might look like in the following description of the entertainment Kawabata provides his guest:

Immediately one of the panels in the wall slid to one side and Serdyuk became aware of a rather wild-sounding music. Behind the panel, in a small room that looked more like a broom cupboard, there was a group of four or five girls wearing long colourful kimonos and holding musical instruments. For a moment Serdyuk thought they weren’t actually wearing kimonos, but some kind of long, badly cut dressing-gowns belted at the waist with towels and tucked up so as to look like kimonos, but then he decided that dressing-gowns like that were essentially kimonos after all. The girls waved their heads from side to side and smiled as they played. One had a balalaika, another one was banging together a pair of wooden Palekh spoons, and another two were holding small plastic harmonicas which made a fearful, piercing squeaking noise....³⁴³

Soon after, Kawabata informs Serdiuk that their clan (corporation) is finished due to a hostile takeover by a competing business. The only way they can save their honor is by committing *hara-kiri*. Serdiuk finally gets the courage to plunge the blade into his stomach, however Kawabata (who is supposed to render him a final service by cutting off his head and ending his

³⁴² *BLF*, 168–9. “Поэтому я считаю, что то, что необходимо России на самом деле,—это алхимический брак с Востоком.” *CIP*, 205.

³⁴³ *BLF*, 178. “Тотчас одна из панелей в стене отъехала в сторону, и Сердюк услышал звуки довольно дикой музыки. За панелью, в небольшой комнате, скорее похожей на чулан, стояли четыре или пять девушек в длинных разноцветных кимоно, с музыкальными инструментами в руках. В первый момент Сердюк подумал, что на них не кимоно, а скорее какие-то длинные плохо скроенные халаты, перемотанные в талии полотенцами и подвернутые таким образом, чтобы походить на кимоно,—но потом решил, что такие халаты, в сущности, и есть кимоно. Покачивая головами из стороны в сторону и улыбаясь, девушки играли—у одной была балалайка, еще одна постукивала расписными ложками из Палеха, а у двух других в руках были маленькие пластмассовые гармошки, издававшие пронзительный жуткий звук...” *CIP*, 216–7.

suffering) is overheard in the background trying to sell his car. That Kawabata conflates the traditional notion of clan with his business and that he muddies the ritual of *hara-kiri* by haggling over the phone with a potential buyer signals to the reader that perhaps the East is not unlike the West in its materialism.

Escape to Inner Mongolia

As the novel nears its end, Chapaev, Petr, and Anna can no longer remain with their regiment in the Urals due to increasing unrest in the weavers' regiment. Chapaev instructs Anna to use the "clay machine gun," a weapon made using the little finger of the Buddha Anagama. Anagama did not waste time explaining things to his students, he just pointed at things and their true nature was revealed. In other words, they would turn into emptiness and disappear. The act of pointing is very powerful. It eliminates utterance, thus also eliminating a distinction between signifier and signified and leaving only the object's true character, which is empty. One day Anagama pointed at himself and he disappeared except for his little finger. The finger fell into Chapaev's hands and he uses it to construct the clay machine gun—when the gun is pointed at an object, it disappears.

When the weavers' rioting overwhelms Chapaev, Petr, and Anna, Chapaev instructs Anna to use the clay machine gun. When she does, the entire surrounding world disappears and the trio is left surrounded by emptiness, "nothing was visible except an indistinct, even light, which it would be hard to describe in any way."³⁴⁴ When Petr begins to panic about what the three of them would do on a tiny island surrounded by emptiness, Chapaev reminds him that

³⁴⁴ *BLF*, 306. "За его границей не было ничего—там был только ровный неяркий свет, про который трудно было хоть что-нибудь сказать." *CIP*, 365.

“any form is just emptiness” and “emptiness is any form.”³⁴⁵ Chapaev instructs Petr to close his eyes and when he opens them he sees a beautiful, flowing stream of all the colors of the rainbow. Chapaev calls the stream the Undefinable River of Absolute Love (*Условная река абсолютной любви*), or U.R.A.L. Both Anna and Chapaev jump into the stream and disappear, leaving Petr alone.

This episode plays with the Chapaev mythology. The precise nature of Chapaev’s death is murky, but there is some historical consensus that he died while being rafted from the western side to the eastern (Bukharan) side of the Ural River after being wounded by White Cossacks. Based on other rumors about his death, the 1934 film shows him shot while trying to swim the Ural River (considered the boundary between Europe and Asia and thus neither West nor East) and disappearing. The site of Chapaev’s disappearance is important, because Chapaev disappears into a non-binary, a void. Buddhist enlightenment seeks this very same non-binary state—a fact that was presumably not lost upon Pelevin.

Petr suddenly realizes he is tired and starts to think that perhaps “since the very beginning of time I had been doing nothing but lie on the bank of the Ural, dreaming one dream after another, and waking up again and again in the same place,” a description of *samsāra*.³⁴⁶ He knows that if he falls asleep on this bank again, he’ll just awaken into another dream. Petr then throws himself into the U.R.A.L.

I hardly felt anything at all; the stream was simply on every side of me now, and so there were no more sides. I saw the spot from which this stream originated—and immediately recognized it as my true home. Like a snowflake caught up by the wind, I was born along towards that spot. At first my movement was easy and weightless, and then something

³⁴⁵ *BLF*, 308. Любая форма—это пустота....А то значит, что пустота—это любая форма.” *CIP*, 367.

³⁴⁶ *BLF*, 310. “Мне вдруг пришло в голову, что с начала времен я просто лежу на берегу Урала и вижу сменяющие друг друга сны, опять и опять просыпаясь здесь же.” *CIP*, 369.

strange happened; I began to feel some incomprehensible friction tugging at my calves and my elbows, and my movement slowed. And no sooner did it begin to slow than the radiance surrounding me began to fade, and at the very moment when I came to a complete standstill, the light changed to a murky gloom, which I realized came from an electric bulb burning just under the ceiling.³⁴⁷

Although Petr enters the U.R.A.L. and should achieve transcendence according to Chapaev, something prevents from him from reaching the place he senses is his “true home.” Instead, Petr awakens at the end of the twentieth century in the psychiatric hospital, with Timur Timurovich congratulating him on achieving complete “catharsis.” After Petr’s release from the ward, however, it seems as if he had indeed (as he thought earlier) woken up in the same place, only to start all over again. He visits the Musical Snuffbox cabaret (now renamed John Bull), causes another scene there, and again encounters Chapaev. Only this time, Chapaev does not take him on as his commissar in the Civil War. Rather, he and Petr end up in Inner Mongolia at the very end of the novel.

Transcendence Deferred

Petr has several mentors who try to guide him. Timur Timurovich believes that Petr needs to accept post-Soviet reality and western-style materialism in order to be truly cured. Mariia, the most materialistic of the hospital patients, does just that and is the first to be discharged from the hospital. The baron and Chapaev represent the path of the East and, as the

³⁴⁷ *BLF*, 310. “Я не почувствовал почти ничего—просто теперь он был со всех сторон, и поэтому никаких сторон уже не было. Я увидел то место, где начинался этот поток,—и сразу понял, что это и есть мой настоящий дом. Словно подхваченная ветром снежинка, я понесся к этой точке. Сначала мое движение было легким и невесомым, а потом произошло что-то странное: мне стало казаться, что непонятное трение тянет назад мои голени и локти и мое движение замедляется. А как только оно замедлилось, окружающее меня сияние стало меркнуть, и в момент, когда я остановился совсем, свет сменился тусклой полутьмой, источником которой, как я вдруг понял, была горевшая под потолком электрическая лампа.” *CIP*, 369–70.

baron tells Petr, they hope that they can count Petr among their company one day.³⁴⁸ Chapaev tells Petr that every form is emptiness. Real freedom can only be achieved by seeing the world as it really is—an illusion in matter. At the end of the novel, Petr himself has adopted the eastern mindset of Chapaev and the baron; he realizes that it is impossible to distinguish between what is real and what is an illusion, because reality is itself an illusion.

In many ways, this ending of the novel is ambiguous. Was Petr simply suffering from psychosis the entire time? Which represents transcendence—the U.R.A.L. or Inner Mongolia? If Petr has made it to Inner Mongolia—“the place a person goes to when he manages to ascend the throne that is nowhere,” has he achieved enlightenment at the end of the novel?³⁴⁹ Or if he has failed to learn his lessons, has Chapaev returned as a *bodhisattva* to guide him until he can reach Inner Mongolia? After all, it seems that while Petr has transcended his Civil War-era life cycle, he still awakes in the very real world of post-Soviet reality. Pelevin’s use of the closed loop theme and non-linear time in the novel suggest that time may not be just cyclical, but helical. In other words, the return of Chapaev could mark the start of another round of *samsāra* for Petr, with Chapaev helping him get one step closer to his goal.

I argue that while Petr attempts to transcend earthly reality by jumping into the U.R.A.L., he fails in his attempt to achieve his true home, “the origin of the stream”; slowed down by “friction,” he is sent back to post-Soviet reality to try again. That Petr will eventually transcend the material plane is an argument that I believe Pelevin’s later novel, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, helps support.

³⁴⁸ *BLF*, 234. *CIP*, 282.

³⁴⁹ *BLF*, 233. “Насчет того, куда попадает человек, которому удалось взойти на трон, находящийся нигде.” *CIP*, 281.

The Sacred Book of the Werewolf

Unlike Petr Pustota, the hero of Pelevin's later novel, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (2004), is able to transcend the material world.³⁵⁰ The novel's hero is an ancient werefox named A Khuli (literally "Fox A" in Chinese), who takes the form of a teenage girl and works as a prostitute in Moscow. Pelevin's hero is based on the Chinese *huli jing*—a mythical fox spirit that can take the form of a human (usually a beautiful female) and can be either good or bad. A Khuli never actually engages in sexual acts with her clients, but rather hypnotizes her clients with her tail. She is not all that different from Tatarskii in *Generation "P"* or the vampires of *Empire "V"*: she perpetuates illusions (of love and sex) so that her human clients will continue to give her money.

Illusion

Like most of Pelevin's novels, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* continues the debate about what is "reality" and what is "illusion." As in *Generation "P,"* the idea that words cannot express any "real" meaning is a theme in this novel. More than a thousand years earlier, A Khuli learned several important lessons from the Yellow Master—a monk she met in a Chinese monastery. The most important of these were: (1) "One should not become attached to words. They are only required as fleeting footholds. If you attempt to carry them with you, they will drag you down into the abyss. Therefore, they should be cast off immediately"; and (2) "Words are like anchors—they appear to provide a reliable grasp on a teaching, but in reality they only

³⁵⁰ The Russian title of the novel is *Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia*. *Oboroten'* (оборотень) refers to any shape-shifter. A werewolf is an *oboroten'* but so is a werefox and witches, sorcerers, demons, and other supernatural beings who have that particular power. This is important in explaining why a werefox would be searching for a "super-werewolf": it is an *oboroten'* (shape-shifter) searching for a *sverkhoboroten'* (super shape-shifter).

hold the mind in captivity. That is why the most perfect teachings dispense with words and symbols.”³⁵¹

Buddhism recognizes that signifiers (i.e., words and images) can overpower the mind with expectations of an object’s inner essence (its signified). Since no *dharma* has independent essence (see description of dependent origination above), its signified is always changing and so words and images are “dead husks,” as A Khuli expresses it.³⁵² It was for this reason that Chapaev had explained to Petr how the Buddha Anagama “didn’t waste any time on explanations, he simply pointed at things with the little finger of his left hand, and their true nature was instantly revealed.”³⁵³ These objects revealed their true nature by disappearing entirely. A Khuli also uses the pointing method. When her boyfriend Aleksandr asks her what exists in this world, she simply raises a finger. She explains, “There’s no need to discuss what does exist. It’s right there in front of you anyway. It’s enough just to point to it.”³⁵⁴

A Khuli also quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein as having said that “names are the only things that exist in the world,”³⁵⁵ a statement she agrees with but notes that a name’s meaning can

³⁵¹ Viktor Pelevin, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Viking, 2008), 305–6. “Привязываться к словам не следует. Они нужны только как мгновенная точка опоры. Если ты попытаешься понести их с собой, они увлекут тебя в пропасть. Поэтому их следует сразу же отбросить.” “Слова подобны якорям—кажется, что они позволяют надежно укрепиться в истине, но на деле они лишь держат ум в плену. Поэтому самые совершенные учения обходятся без слов и знаков.” *Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2004), 350–1. Hereafter *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* will be abbreviated *SBW* and *Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia* will be abbreviated *SKO*.

³⁵² *SBW*, 263. “У тебя останутся мертвые корки слов, а ты будешь думать, что в них по-прежнему что-то завернуто.” *SKO*, 303.

³⁵³ *BLF*, 305. “Он не тратил времени на объяснения, а просто указывал на вещи мизинцем своей левой руки, и сразу же после этого проявлялась их истинная природа.” *CIP*, 364.

³⁵⁴ *SBW*, 266. “О том, что есть, рассуждать не надо. Оно и так перед глазами. На него достаточно просто указать пальцем.” *SKO*, 306.

³⁵⁵ *SBW*, 3. “В мире есть только имена.” *SKO*, 8.

This quotation, which is likely not an exact quote, is a nod to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, where he comments on the concepts of both naming and language games.

change even if the name itself does not. Here she refers to her own Chinese name, which sounds like an expletive in Russian. A Khuli points out that she was given this name before this particular expletive existed in the Russian language and before the Russian language even existed. Language is so unreliable that werefoxes consider all philosophical problems to be non-existent; “there is only a suite of interconnected linguistic cul-de-sacs created by language’s ability to reflect the [T]ruth.”³⁵⁶ Because *all* arguments are built from terms that are logically dependent on one another (as all language is), *emptiness* lies at the base of all philosophical directions.³⁵⁷ Buddhists acknowledge that although language is unreliable, it is necessary for the exchange of ordinary knowledge. Language, however, will not allow one access to *higher* knowledge.³⁵⁸

The main source of illusion in the novel lies not only in the microcosmic level of words and their inability to convey meaning, but also in the surrounding world, whether that world is a temporary state created by the tail of a werefox or a seemingly permanent but actually illusory material world created by ourselves. Through her studies of Buddhist texts, A Khuli is already aware of the emptiness lying beneath the phenomenal world. She is a prime candidate for enlightenment, but her problem lies in her inability to come to terms with the nature of her being—a werefox who, by nature and anatomical design, cannot do other than produce further illusion. At the beginning of the novel, A Khuli is not unlike Tatarskii and Rama in that she is a producer of illusion—she spins a “web of illusion” around her clients. A Khuli, however, is *also*

³⁵⁶ Translation edited. *SBW*, 226. “Есть только анфилада лингвистических тупиков, вызванных неспособностью языка отразить Истину.” *SKO*, 260.

³⁵⁷ T.P. Kasulis, *Zen Action/Zen Person* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 24.

³⁵⁸ Magid, *Ordinary Mind: Exploring the Common Ground of Zen and Psychoanalysis*, 54.

aware that the world around her is an illusion but is uncertain whether the possibility of escaping it exists for her as a were-creature.

Even outside the bedroom, the werewolf's external appearance is a masquerade. A Khuli explains, "in order to make ourselves acceptable to our contemporaries, we adopt a new personality to match our face, exactly like altering a dress to suit a different fashion."³⁵⁹ A Khuli's description of changing her appearance is a metaphor for postmodern humans, who adopt new personalities and beliefs to suit their needs. Although A Khuli justifies her shifting appearance by citing her age and the logical necessity of changing with the times, she is not unlike these fickle humans. For example, she also tells the reader that she cannot help but parrot back different views and beliefs that she hears from others. She explains,

We foxes have one serious shortcoming. If someone says something memorable to us, we almost always repeat it in conversation with other people, regardless of whether what was said was stupid or clever. Unfortunately, our mind is the same kind of simulator as the sack of skin under our tail that we use as a prick-catcher. It's not a genuine "organ of thought"—we have no need for that.³⁶⁰

Like her outer appearance A Khuli's mind, she claims, just mimics whatever input it happens to be exposed to. By comparing it to a "simulator," A Khuli may be making the comment that the mind is really emptiness, a lesson Chapaev demonstrated when he shot Kotovskii's lamp and inkwell (both stand-ins for the "mind" in Kotovskii's metaphor of the drop of wax).

A Khuli connects the illusions she uses when working with her clients to the Buddhist idea that the entire world is an illusion. When she seduces a client, A Khuli creates an entirely

³⁵⁹ Pelevin, *SBW*, 4. "Чтобы угодить современникам, мы подгоняем себе по личико новое «я», совсем как сшитое по другой моде платье." *SKO*, 10.

³⁶⁰ *SBW*, 136. "У нас, лис, есть один серьезный недостаток. Если нам говорят что-нибудь запоминающееся, мы почти всегда повторяем это в разговоре с другими, не важно, глупые это слова или умные. К сожалению, наш ум—такой же симулятор, как кожаный мешок-хуеуловитель у нас под хвостом. Это не настоящий «орган мысли»—оно нам ни к чему." *SKO*, 159.

illusory situation. The client sees what he believes is a barely legal redheaded girl and only believes he is having sex with her while the werewolf absorbs the human's sexual energy. If the fox gets distracted, however, it is possible for the client to “slip off the tail” and see the truth. A Khuli describes this scenario as follows,

One of my sisters used to say that when a client slips off the tail during an unsuccessful session, for a few seconds he sees the truth. And for a man this truth is so unbearable that the first thing he wants to do is kill the fox responsible for revealing it to him, and then he wants to kill himself...But other foxes say that in that brief second the man realizes that physical life is a stupid and shameful mistake. And the first thing he tries to do is to thank the fox who has opened his eyes. And after that he corrects the error of his own existence.³⁶¹

A Khuli implies that “slipping off the tail” may be like an instantaneous Buddhist awakening. And yet, A Khuli's cynicism is clear. She diminishes her role in the suicide of a Sikh businessman by introducing the possibility that her client's “slipping off the tail” is really an eye-opening, spiritual experience for him. This is apparent in the glib way she describes an action that ultimately ends in a man taking his own life, “And if he is so profligate that he actually kills himself, does that mean that we're to blame?”³⁶²

Closed Loops

Just as Petr Pustota was caught in the seemingly endless loop of *samsāra*, both humans and werewolves are caught in various types of closed loops in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*.

³⁶¹ *SBW*, 33. “Кто-то из сестричек говорил—когда во время неудачного сеанса клиент соскакивает с хвоста, он несколько секунд видит истину. И эта истина так невыносима для человека, что он первым делом хочет убить лису, из-за которой она ему открылась, а потом—себя самого... А другие лисы говорят, что человек в эту секунду понимает: физическая жизнь есть глупая и постыдная ошибка. И первым делом он старается отблагодарить лису, которая открыла ему глаза. А затем уже исправляет ошибку собственного существования.” *SKO*, 42.

³⁶² *SBW*, 19. “И если своей расточительностью он доводит себя до смерти, стоит ли обвинять нас?” *SKO*, 27.

For example, Pelevin describes one of A Khuli's clients, Pavel Ivanovich, as being "caught in a closed circle" of his own creation.³⁶³ Over the centuries, werefoxes watched as humans continued to traverse their closed circles. A Khuli likens the process to the following verses from Nabokov's "Paris Poem" ("Парижская поэма," 1943):

Life is irreversible—
It will be staged in a new theater,
In a different way, with different actors.
But the ultimate happiness
Is to fold its magic carpet
And make the ornament of the present
Match the pattern of the past...³⁶⁴

A Khuli claims that this poem refers to werefoxes, who (due to their long lifespans) time and again watch an "endless performance" played by "human actors who behave as if they were the first people ever to perform on stage."³⁶⁵ In less idealistic terms, "time after time the human heart

³⁶³ *SBW*, 44. "Получался замкнутый круг" *SKO*, 55.

³⁶⁴ *SBW*, 49. Original: "В этой жизни, богатой узорами / (неповторной, поскольку она / по-другому, с другими актерами, / будет в новом театре дана), / я почел бы за лучшее счастье/так сложить ее дивный ковер / чтоб пришелся узор настоящего / на бывшее, на прежний узор;" (Владимир Набоков, "Парижская поэма").

Note that in Pelevin's original text he changes Nabokov's "на прежний узор" (meaning "earlier," which implies a future) to "на прошлый узор" (meaning "past" without necessarily implying a future). One cannot know whether this misquotation was intentional, but the implication that one may have no future is very Buddhist (i.e., one may be able to break free of the eternal chain of *samsāra*).

³⁶⁵ *SBW*, 49. "Мы действительно без конца смотрим представление, исполняемое суетливыми актерами-людьми, которые уверены, что играют его на земле первыми." *SKO*, 61.

believes in the same old deception, dashes straight at the cliffs of the world and is smashed to pieces against them. And then it dashes at them again, and again—just like the first time.”³⁶⁶

A Khuli’s sister I Khuli inextricably links this cyclicalality with the West. She describes life in London in the following way:

There are three roles you can play here—the buyer, the seller, or the product on the shelf. To be a seller is vulgar, to be a buyer is boring (and you still have to earn your living as a seller), and to be the product is repulsive. Any attempt to be anything else actual means “not to be,” as the market forces are quick to teach any and every Hamlet. All the rest is simply show.³⁶⁷

In other words, as we saw in *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V,”* western identity is tied to hypercapitalism—where all spheres of life are described by market terminology. A Khuli explains to her sister that all of Russia (or at least the elite) is *also* trapped in one of these circles. She writes,

The elite here is divided into two branches, which are called “the oligarchy” (derived from the words “oil” and “gargle”) and “the apparat” (from the phrase “upper rat”). “The oligarchy” is the business community, which grovels before the authorities, who can close down any business at any moment, since business here is inseparable from theft. And “the upper rat” consists of the authorities who feed on the kickbacks from business. The way it works is that the former allow the latter to steal because the latter allow the former to thrive.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ *SBW*, 89. “Человеческая душа раз за разом верит в один и тот же обман, несется на скалы мира и расшибается о них насмерть. И снова несется, несется—как в первый раз.” *SKO*, 106.

³⁶⁷ *SBW*, 139. “На самом деле, здесь у тебя может быть три роли—покупателя, продавца и товара на прилавке. Быть продавцом—пошло, покупателем—скучно (и все равно придется подрабатывать продавцом), а товаром—противно. Любая попытка быть чем-то другим означает на деле то самое «не быть», с которым рыночные силы быстро знакомят любого Гамлета. Все остальное просто спектакль.” *SKO*, 162–3.

³⁶⁸ *SBW*, 85. “Элита здесь делится на две ветви, которые называют «хуй сосаети» (искаженное «high society») и «аппарат» (искаженное «upper rat»). «Хуй сосаети»—это бизнес-коммьюнити, пресмыкающееся перед властью, способной закрыть любой бизнес в любой момент, поскольку бизнес здесь неотделим от воровства. А «аппарат»—это власть, которая кормится откатом, получаемым с бизнеса. Выходит, что первые дают воровать вторым за то, что вторые дают воровать первым.” *SKO*, 101.

The translator has chosen to use “oligarchy” instead of the vulgar “khui” for high (society), which does not translate into English.

A Khuli's comments reflect contempt not only for the cyclical nature of human existence, but more specifically for capitalism, which by its very nature consists of never-ending cycles of supply and demand through the manipulation of advertising (creating a false reality).

I Khuli goes on to describe the “secret horror of life” in the West in the following way:

When you buy yourself a blouse or a car, or anything else, you have in your mind an image, implanted by advertising, of some wonderful place you will go wearing that blouse or driving that car. But there is no such wonderful place anywhere, apart from in the advertising clip, and this black hole in reality is lamented by every serious philosopher in the West.³⁶⁹

A Khuli acknowledges that this attitude has spread to Russia as well. She later muses on the nature of reality and lists “having a dollar equivalent” as one of the definitions of the word “real.”³⁷⁰

The closed loops described by the werefox sisters lead to “black holes in reality” and are similar to the loops found in *Generation “P.”* I Khuli's statement reflects Tatarskii's discovery that content creators “manipulate reality in front of people's eyes so that freedom comes to be symbolised by an iron, or a sanitary [napkin] with wings, or lemonade. That's what they pay us for. We pawn this stuff off on them from the screen, and then they pawn it off on each other, and on us who write the stuff...”³⁷¹ Like the content creators in *Generation “P”* or the vampires in *Empire “V,”* A Khuli considers herself part of this capitalist cycle of exploitation. As a werefox, she practices a form of psycho-sexual vampirism by absorbing her client's sexual energy to keep

³⁶⁹ *SBW*, 139. “Знаешь, в чем тайный ужас здешней жизни? Когда ты покупаешь себе кофточку, или машину, или что-то еще, у тебя в уме присутствует навеянный рекламой образ того места, куда ты пойдешь в этой кофточке или поедешь на этой машине. Но такого места нет нигде, кроме как в рекламном клипе, и эту черную дыру в реальности оплакивают все серьезные философы Запада.” *SKO*, 163.

³⁷⁰ *SBW*, 229. “Имеющий долларовый эквивалент.” *SKO*, 263.

³⁷¹ Pelevin, *HZ*, 102. “А мы, копирайтеры, так поворачиваем реальность перед глазами target people, что свободу начинают символизировать то утюг, то прокладка с крылышками, то лимонад. За это нам и платят. Мы впариваем им это с экрана, а они потом вправляют это друг другу и нам, авторам...” *GP*, 135.

herself “enchanted and eternally youthful.” In addition to receiving life force from her clients, she receives monetary payment as well! A Khuli herself does not consider what she does vampirism, describing a recent experience with a client quite callously: “Is this vampirism? I’m not sure it is. We simply pick up what the irrational human being carelessly discards.”³⁷² While she is more forgiving of her own action, A Khuli describes her sister I Khuli precisely in vampiric terms: “[I Khuli] was punished by the guardian spirits, and she began keeping a low profile, specializing in rich aristocrats, whom she milked dry in the peace and quiet of their country estates, away from the eyes of the world.”³⁷³ Recall that Enlil of *Empire “V”* also used the term “milking” to describe how the vampires feed off humans.

A Khuli’s Search for an Exit

Perhaps A Khuli thinks more highly of herself than of her sister werefox because she is actively striving for enlightenment. The reader learns early in the novel (from a letter that A Khuli receives from her sister I Khuli) that A Khuli has long been on a spiritual journey and is seeking something higher. A Khuli often seems jaded by her own lifestyle, a lifestyle that is the inevitable consequence of being a werefox. I Khuli asks her sister, “How are you getting on? Are you still into moral self-improvement? Searching for the exit from the labyrinths of the illusory world?”³⁷⁴ A Khuli believes the way out of this world is connected to the “super-werewolf,” a figure based on a legend that predicts the coming of a messiah for all were-creatures. In one

³⁷² *SBW*, 19. “Вампиризм? Не уверена. Мы ведь просто подбираем то, чем разбрасывается неразумный человек.” *SKO*, 27.

³⁷³ *SBW*, 38. “И Хули... наказали духи-охранители, и она стала держаться в тени, специализируясь на богатых аристократах, которых она незаметно для мира выдаивала в тишине загородных поместий.” *SKO*, 47.

³⁷⁴ *SBW*, 79. “Как поживаешь? По-прежнему занимаешься нравственным самоусовершенствованием? Ищешь выход из лабиринтов иллюзорного мира?” *SKO*, 95.

version of the legend, the super-werewolf is a Savior who will redeem all werewolves at the end of time. According to Jung, putting one's faith in an entity outside of the self is characteristic of the extroverted western mind. A Khuli's werewolf-cum-FSB officer boyfriend Aleksandr Sharikov comes to believe that *he* is this super-werewolf of legend.³⁷⁵

A Khuli rejects the idea that the super-werewolf is an entity that manifests physically. She believes the super-werewolf is simply a metaphorical expression for a particular introspective state of mind that is potentially accessible to all werewolves. In her correspondence with her sister I Khuli, A Khuli insists that no messiah will ever come to were-creatures, "But each of us can change ourselves by exceeding our own limits."³⁷⁶ A Khuli will eventually attain this state of mind and disappear from the material world, transcend it, after she realizes two things: (1) that the super-werewolf is whatever a werewolf (or any other were-being) sees deep inside him-/herself, even if what the individual sees is the void, and (2) that the key to the process of transcendence is love.

Buddhist Elements in the Novel

Although Pelevin does not engage with the East/West binary in this novel to the same extent he does in *Chapaev and Pustota*, elements of the binary are still present. The balance between eastern and western in this novel is more eastern. The West can be seen in the werefoxes' cynical remarks about capitalism and in Aleksandr's constant reinvention of his image and his rebranding himself to further his career. The East is present in A Khuli's spiritual

³⁷⁵ A reference to the character in Bulgakov's *Sobach'e serdtse*. Aleksandr's real surname is Seryi, but he becomes fascinated with a "Comrade Sharikov," who is spoken of but never appears in the novel. Aleksandr may be interested in Sharikov because, like himself, Sharikov is a combination of two creatures (although Sharikov is the product of vivisection and is not a were-creature).

³⁷⁶ Pelevin, *SBW*, 129. "Но каждый из нас может изменит себя, выйдя за собственные пределы." *SKO*, 151.

development, her interest in sacred Buddhist texts, her encounter with the Yellow Master, and her desire to transcend the material world.

A Khuli tells Aleksandr that her path to enlightenment began 1200 years ago (although she was already familiar with sacred Buddhist texts then) when she met the Yellow Master. Her journey is one that began with illusion (as a werefox who produces illusion) only to culminate in emptiness. The Yellow Master tells her that “life is a promenade through a garden of illusory forms that seem real to the mind which does not see their true nature.”³⁷⁷ A Khuli, in turn, passes this information on to Aleksandr. Aleksandr, however, has trouble learning this valuable lesson and is disappointed when A Khuli tells him that the super-werewolf (that he has come to believe is himself) is actually found deep inside the nothingness that is in us all. The fact that the super-werewolf is so powerful is because he is pure potentiality, proving “that nothing can become anything at all.”³⁷⁸

Aleksandr is not unlike Petr in that they both have trouble learning valuable lessons. Both being Russian, their “eastern” side is open to understanding these teachings but their “western” side gets in the way. One example of this is that Aleksandr appropriates the idea of the super-werewolf and uses it to advance his career at the FSB. He takes the name Nagual Rinpoche. A “nagual” is a shape shifter in Mesoamerican folklore and Rinpoche is a Tibetan honorific reserved for respected teachers (lamas). Likewise, his outer appearance (signifier) changes—when a kiss from A Khuli transforms him into a black dog rather than a grey wolf—but

³⁷⁷ *SBW*, 301. “Жизнь—это прогулка по саду иллюзорных форм, которые кажутся реальными уму, не видящему своей природы.” *SKO*, 346.

³⁷⁸ *SBW*, 310. “Это ничего может стать чем угодно.” *SKO*, 355.

Aleksandr's inner essence (signified) remains the same.³⁷⁹ In other words, he adopts an eastern or mystical signifier (in name) but rejects the signified.

At times, A Khuli seems to put too much emphasis on her inner, spiritual world at the expense of the outer, illusory world, a common critique of Buddhism. Her sister accuses her of ignoring the external world: “You know, it seems to me you have become too bogged down in introspection. Think—if everything that is most important were inside ourselves, then why would we need the external world?”³⁸⁰ Similarly, when A Khuli prepares to reflect on the surge of shameful deeds she has committed in her lifetime (including the most recent episode with the Sikh), she seems to brush off her actions.

At the same time I was serenely aware that what was taking place was simply the insubstantial play of reflections, the rippling of thoughts that is raised by the habitual draughts of the mind, and that when these ripples settled down, it would be clear that there were no draughts and no reflections, and no mind itself—nothing but that clear, eternal, all-penetrating gaze in the face of which nothing is real.³⁸¹

This nihilistic logic, when taken to its conclusion, is perilously close to Ivan Karamazov's conclusion that if God does not exist “everything is permitted.” Although it is not uncommon in meditation to let go of one's troubles or anxieties by reframing them as all part of life, A Khuli

³⁷⁹ As a grey wolf or a black dog there is a disconnect between Aleksandr's outer form (signifier) and his inner self (signified), but perhaps A Khuli's transformative kiss has bestowed upon Aleksandr a more fitting signifier. A black dog has demonic significance in folklore and is often a death omen. Historically, black dog heads are associated with the *oprichniki*—Ivan the Terrible's secret police. At the same time, the dog is known for its loyal service to humans and is a much less powerful symbol than a wolf—perhaps a dig at Aleksandr's pettiness.

³⁸⁰ Pelevin, *SBW*, 141–2. “Ты знаешь, мне кажется, ты слишком увязла в интроспекции. Подумай, если бы все самое важное заключалось в нас самих, зачем был бы нужен внешний мир?” *SKO*, 165.

³⁸¹ *SBW*, 145. “И в то же самое время я безмятежно осознавала, что происходящее—просто игра отражений, рябь мыслей, которую гонят привычные сквозняки ума, и, когда эта рябь разгладится, станет видно, что не существует ни сквозняков, ни отражений, ни самого ума—а только этот ясный, вечный, всепроникающий взор, перед которым нет ничего настоящего.” *SKO*, 169.

dismisses her sins by affirming that nothing in the material world is real.³⁸² Ignoring the material world completely disregards an important aspect of Buddhism—compassion for all living things.³⁸³ In the “Samyutta Nikaya” (“Connected Discourses,” a Buddhist scripture in the Pāli Canon) the Buddha states that because the process of the transmigration of souls has no fixed beginning point, it is difficult to find a being who has not been your own mother, father, brother, etc., at one time in the past. This is a common sutra used to teach compassion and loving kindness for all living things. One must also consider the first Noble Truth in Buddhism—that of suffering. By causing others to suffer, one accumulates bad karma.

Throughout the novel, A Khuli has been spiritually “stuck.” She fluctuates between excessively engaging with the materialistic world or retreating too far into her own spiritual world. She understands emptiness and the concept of the super-werewolf, yet something has prevented her from attaining enlightenment. While trying to explain the nature of emptiness to Aleksandr, she finally comes to understand what was missing in her understanding of emptiness. She discovers that love is the source of transcendence. Love inherently precludes solely existing in one’s inner world because it requires more than one person. Upon realizing this, A Khuli experiences a revelation; she then excuses herself and spends several days in deep meditation. She comes to the following conclusion: “A snake biting its own tail....The inviolable link between the tail and the mind—that is the foundation on which the world as we know it stands. There is nothing that can intervene in this circle of cause and effect and disrupt it. Except for one

³⁸² Magid, *Ordinary Mind: Exploring the Common Ground of Zen and Psychoanalysis*, 51.

³⁸³ Historically there have been some Buddhist sects, for instance the Hongzhou Chan School of the Tang period, that are known for its radical nondualism—believing that all actions (both good and bad) can express Buddha-nature.

thing. Love.”³⁸⁴ Here Pelevin implies that the world is not doomed to remain in a closed circle forever. Love can break one out of the loop.

The love that A Khuli describes is not that of sexual love; sexual love is love that is directed from subject (self) to object and thus perpetuates duality and attachment. A Khuli explains to Aleksandr:

—‘If you think about it properly, there’s nothing real anywhere,’ I said. ‘There’s only the choice with which you fill emptiness. And when you feel happy for someone else, you fill emptiness with love.’

—‘Whose love? If there isn’t anybody anywhere, then whose love is it?’

—‘That doesn’t matter to emptiness....’³⁸⁵

If you love someone, your relationship to yourself changes. You disappear in order to project yourself onto the other. You no longer exist; your ego no longer exists. The object (Aleksandr) no longer has to be there; A Khuli has already emptied herself of her self (in other words, her ego). Aleksandr, however, is still thinking dualistically—he asks A Khuli where the love is coming from, i.e., who is the subject doing the loving. The question is irrelevant and shows that he does not understand.

Love in Buddhism is about loving-kindness, compassion, joy for others; love’s goal is to rid others of ignorance so that they may achieve enlightenment. A *bodhisattva*, for instance, out of love and compassion chooses to repeat the chain of *samsāra* so that he or she may help others

³⁸⁴ Pelevin, *SBW*, 330. “Змея кусает себя за хвост....Ненарушимая связь хвоста и сознания— фундамент, на котором покоится мир, как мы его знаем. Ничто не может вмешаться в это причинно-следственное кольцо и разорвать его. Кроме одного. Любви.” *SKO*, 377.

The image of a snake biting its own tail is used in *Generation “P”* to describe the closed loop of consumption in which humans are trapped.

³⁸⁵ *SBW*, 283.

—Если разобраться, нигде нет ничего настоящего,—сказала я.—Есть только тот выбор, которым ты заполняешь пустоту. И когда ты радуешься за другого, ты заполняешь пустоту любовью.

—Чьей любовью? Если нигде никого нет, чья тогда любовь?

—А пустоте это безразлично.” *SKO*, 325.

break free of the chain.³⁸⁶ By the time A Khuli sorts this out for herself, Aleksandr has left her; she can no longer direct her love toward him, but (as she mentions above) this does not matter, for love does not need to be directed; it radiates toward all. It is an intransitive form of love, transcending the binary of subject/object. A Khuli decides to leave the material world behind, but in a final act of love she leaves behind a teaching for her fellow were-creatures so that they, too, might “cure themselves of death and rebirth.”³⁸⁷ This teaching is the novel we have just read, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*.

The concept of “love” is treated very differently in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* than in *Chapaev and Pustota*. In *Chapaev and Pustota*, Petr’s only love is his physical attraction to Anna and their only sexual encounter occurs in Petr’s dream. Chapaev attempts to teach him that all of his feelings are just constructs of the mind, which does not exist, but Petr fails to learn this lesson. Volodin gets closer to the true nature of love when he describes monks who have attained an “eternal high.” When his friend Kolian asks what the monks are “trippin’ on,” Volodin answers, “It has various names. In general, I suppose you could call it grace. Or love.”³⁸⁸ The only love similar to that which A Khuli experiences is the “infinitely powerful love” that Petr senses from the rainbow stream, U.R.A.L.

In the beginning of *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, love is narrowly defined in a materialistic way: as a prostitute, A Khuli trades physical love for money. In reality, she is only selling her customers the *idea* of sex. This is similar to what the copywriters do in *Generation “P”*: although they sell material goods, they are nonetheless goods packaged with an *idea* tied to

³⁸⁶ See Shōhei Ichimura, *Buddhist Critical Spirituality: Prajñā and Śūnyatā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001).

³⁸⁷ Pelevin, *SBW*, 302. “Как излечиться от смертей и рождений...” *SKO*, 346.

³⁸⁸ *BLF*, 245. “По-разному. Вообще можно сказать, что это милость. Или любовь.” *CIP*, 294.

one's sense of identity (e.g., wear Gucci fragrance in order to "be a European"). What the customer actually buys is a simulacrum—something that has no basis in reality. Over the course of *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, love acquires transcendent qualities for A Khuli. She tells Aleksandr that although all forms are empty, you can choose to fill that emptiness with love. She eventually discovers that there was no feeling in her more powerful than love. Because she is creating the image of the illusory world for herself with her tail, the feeling of love was the only thing stronger than this simulacrum and therefore love was the key to breaking out of the illusory world.

How do we know that A Khuli achieves enlightenment at the end of the novel? Unlike the conclusion of *Chapaev and Pustota*, the ending of *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* is far less ambiguous. At the end of the novel, A Khuli rides her bicycle off a ramp in Bittsevskii Park and, with love in her heart, shouts her own name before seemingly disappearing from the material plane. Although no explanation follows her disappearance, the reader has been told at the beginning of the novel that certain events occurred in Bittsevskii Park at the exact time and location of A Khuli's disappearance. "Members of the public observed a bluish glow above the treetops, ball lightning and a large number of five-coloured rainbows. Several of the rainbows were also spherical in form (according to the testimony of eyewitnesses, the colors in them seemed to shine through each other)."³⁸⁹ These descriptions are remarkably similar to a phenomenon in Tibetan Buddhism known as "rainbow body." When a great master achieves complete knowledge, his death is accompanied by the appearance of a rainbow and bright light. The master will typically have given instructions for his body to remain undisturbed for several

³⁸⁹ *SBW*, xi. "Граждане наблюдали над деревьями голубоватое свечение, шаровые молнии и множество пятицветных радуг. Некоторые из радуг были шарообразными (по показаниям свидетелей происшествия, цвета в них как бы просвечивали друг сквозь друга)." *SKO*, 3.

days. When the rainbow has disappeared, so has the master's body, leaving behind only hair, nails, and clothing.³⁹⁰

Pelevin has dramatized “rainbow body” by having A Khuli enter into what the Yellow Master called the “Rainbow Stream.” Her body immediately disappears but others report seeing the rainbow and bright light in the form of ball lightning. Her clothing is also left behind. This taking leave of the material world in association with rainbows is also reminiscent of the rainbow “stream” of the U.R.A.L river in *Chapaev and Pustota*. The U.R.A.L. river of “absolute love” is the portal to one's “true home”; Petr does not pass through it, but A Khuli apparently does.

Both Chapaev and A Khuli depart this world near some object that represents Russia's ambiguous position between East and West. Chapaev jumps into the Ural River, which is generally considered the boundary between Europe and Asia. A Khuli disappears leaving behind a t-shirt that says “CKUF” on the front. The scholarly introduction to the novel asserts:

What we are presented with here is not an anagram of the English word ‘fuck’, as M. Leibman asserts in his monograph, but a representation of the Russian word ‘скиф’, i.e. Scythian. This surmise is confirmed by the phrase ‘yes, we are asiatics’ on the back of the T-shirt—a clear allusion to Alexander Blok's poems ‘Scythians’....³⁹¹

Blok's poem, which emphasizes Russia's location between Europe and Asia, includes the line “Everyone go, go to the Ural!” (“Идите все, идите на Урал!”)—a phrase that links the U.R.A.L in Chapaev with A Khuli's transcendence.

Because the imagery surrounding the heroes of both novels is so similar, I have come to read the ambiguous ending of *Chapaev and Pustota* in a more informed way. It is my belief that Petr attempted to depart the material world, but something held him back. Love was also the key

³⁹⁰ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 392.

³⁹¹ Pelevin, *SBW*, xii. “Можно предположить, что перед нами не анаграмма «fuck», как утверждает в своей монографии М. Лейбман, а слово «скиф». Это подтверждает строка «да, азиаты мы» на спине футболки—несомненная аллюзия на стихотворение А. Блока «Скифы»....” *SKO*, 4.

to transcendence in *Chapaev and Pustota*—Chapaev, Anna, and Petr all jump into the Undefinable River of Absolute Love (*Условная река абсолютной любви*) and depart their material plane of existence. Petr, however, is not able to transcend, perhaps because he has not learned Buddhist loving kindness and compassion. The only love Petr feels is the sexual attraction he has for Anna, which Buddhism considers a source of attachment. Anna may have achieved transcendence when jumping into the U.R.A.L. because she left behind a yellow rose (a common symbol of separation) for Petr. Because Petr did not learn this lesson, because he was unable to transcend, Chapaev must return, yet again. Chapaev assumes the role of *bodhisattva*, who out of great love and compassion, has come (presumably) to help guide Petr once more. The reader can only assume that Petr eventually transcended the material plane because he sets off for Inner Mongolia with Chapaev at the end of the novel.

Conclusion—Transcendence in the Rainbow Stream

Chapaev and Pustota and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* are structured differently. *Chapaev and Pustota* is about one Russian man's search for new meaning in a new reality, mirrored in his country's search for new meaning. In the end, both Petr and Russia have failed to choose an alchemical wedlock with either the West or the East. They have not learned the lesson—one must learn to experience absolute and unconditional love for humanity before transcending the material world. Instead, Petr leaves post-Soviet Russia behind, follows Chapaev, and repeats the cycle of *samsāra* until he eventually reaches Inner Mongolia. When we last see Petr in the novel, he believes the world is an illusion. He has not, however, figured out

how to reconcile this notion with the fact that (as his taxi driver says) “this world nonetheless exists.”³⁹²

The Sacred Book of the Werewolf, on the other hand, largely tells the story of one individual’s spiritual journey, but the novel implies that Russia must embark on a similar spiritual journey. A Khuli ironically says, “The substance of life doesn’t change much from one culture to another, but the human soul requires a beautiful wrapper. Russian culture, though, fails to provide one, and it calls this state of affairs *spirituality*.”³⁹³ In another instance, A Khuli states that the beauty of the Russian soul lies precisely in the fact that it does not have this type of outer wrapper. She tells her sister, “Just imagine, you have absolutely no idea how to drive, and you’re surrounded by the open steppe and the sky. I love Russia.”³⁹⁴ This image is very similar to Gogol’s metaphor of Russia as a runaway winged-troika at the end of *Dead Souls* (*Мертвые души*, 1842), despite one image being static and the other dynamic. It does not matter whether the vehicle is at a standstill or careening out of control: Russia still does not know where she is going and/or has no way of getting there.

A Khuli is not Russian but Chinese and her scope is global—werefoxes are everywhere. As a non-Russian, she does not have the complex history of being caught between the East and the West, but she seems to have the experience of both. She tries to serve as spiritual guru for her Russian boyfriend Aleksandr, but he only superficially accepts some of her teachings to promote his career path. She may have more success in transcending because of the dual nature inherent

³⁹² *BLF*, 327. “Несмотря на свою кажущуюся абсурдность, жестокость и бессмысленность, этот мир все же существует, не так ли?” *CIP*, 389.

³⁹³ *SBW*, 118; italics in the original. “Человеческой душе нужна красивая обертка, а русская культура ее не предусматривает, называя такое положение дел *духовностью*.” *SKO*, 138.

³⁹⁴ *SBW*, 162. “Представь, ты совсем не умеешь водить, а вокруг степь и небо. Я люблю Россию.” *SKO*, 188.

in being a were-creature (animal/human) and because were-creatures already have an intimate knowledge of illusion. She also has an advantage in her long lifespan. Werefoxes can live for up to 40,000 years and they retain memories of most of their experiences, unlike human beings who (in the Buddhist paradigm) live many lives but do not retain memories of their previous lives. As a werefox from the East, A Khuli has the perspective that allows her to see beyond the materialism that is difficult for western human beings to see through.

In the end, A Khuli is able to break out of the cycle of *samsāra* and transcend because she discovers that love is the key to reconciling the material world with nothingness. Petr has trouble transcending in the course of the novel, but he intuits that Chapaev holds the explanation and follows him at the end of the novel.

Although both Petr and A Khuli use eastern techniques to try to achieve the void only A Khuli succeeds in doing so. Petr fails to transcend, but he should still be set apart from Tatarskii and Rama. While Tatarskii and Rama are aware of illusion, they both make a conscious choice to perpetuate it. They embrace illusion and gain (temporary) power in this world from the experience. Petr intellectually knows that the world is an illusion, that the path to transcendence is available to him, and he tries (yet fails) to achieve it.

Petr fails because his mindset is still western from a Jungian perspective. A Khuli finds the key to the Rainbow Stream (the void) by looking inside herself. Aleksandr will never enter the Rainbow Stream because he believes his redemption will come from an external source—the super-werewolf, a messianic creature that he mistakenly believes is himself. As Jung commented, Westerners seek redemption outside of themselves. Petr cannot find the void because he has not searched within himself (the irony being that his surname is *Pustota*—

”Void”). Like Aleksandr, Petr seeks this redemption in his external relationships with Timur Timurovich, Chapaev, and Baron Iungern.

Chapaev even advises Petr to take a look at who he (Petr Pustota) really is in reality, a suggestion that frightens Petr. Chapaev eventually tells Petr that the answer to “Who am I?” is “I don’t know.” The key to Petr’s identity crisis is to adopt this Buddhist, non-self (*anātman*)—a fluid identity that will allow Petr to *live* in the ever-changing post-Soviet world, not *avoid* it by creating his own world. In the end, Petr chooses not to look inside himself/the void (Pustota). As he sits on a bench in 1990s Moscow, surrounded by signs and symbols that carry no meaning for him (signifiers without signifieds), he asks himself, “And have you any idea what it is like, my dear sir, when you have *nowhere* left to go?”³⁹⁵ Rather than transcend the material world by embracing the void (nowhere) as A Khuli does, Petr chooses to remain in a world of his own making.

Petr wants to find his “golden joy”—shapes and forms in the material world which express the beauty of life. For Petr, these signifiers should express some kind of truth (signifieds). He does not understand that there is no truth to be found—meaning cannot be derived from the material world. As a result, Petr continuously retreats inside himself into a solipsistic world of his own making, which is exclusionary and narcissistic; love cannot flourish here. This is different from looking inside himself (i.e., inside Pustota, the void that is the totality of the universe). Anna asks Petr, “If everything that you can see, feel and understand is within you, in that kingdom of “I” [a reference to the title of one of Petr’s volumes of poetry], does that

³⁹⁵ *BLF*, 324; italics mine. “А знаете ли вы, милостивый государь, что это такое, когда некуда больше идти?” *CIP*, 386.

mean that other people are quite simply not real?”³⁹⁶ A Khuli experiences the same conundrum when she meditates on her past sins, justifying them by telling herself that the whole world is an illusion. When Chapaev asks him what he has learned from the baron, Petr responds that “there is nothing but me”—an idea that Chapaev finds laughable.³⁹⁷ Petr still needs to learn to love the world in which he lives, which is the key to transcendence. In the end, the place Petr ends up in is not radiant, but perhaps Chapaev will succeed in showing Petr the correct path in their next round of existence together.

³⁹⁶ *BLF*, 283. “Если все, что вы можете увидеть, почувствовать и понять, находится в вас самих, в этом вашем царстве «Я», то значит другие просто нереальны?” *CIP*, 339.

³⁹⁷ *BLF*, 270. “А есть только я.” *CIP*, 324.
Petr might have misunderstood the baron: it is not wrong to say that there is nothing but “pustota” in the world.

Conclusions

Searching for Identity in the Void

The discussion about what it means to be Russian seems to have always occupied a place in Russian society. Today, however, this same debate is occurring within a political entity that for the first time claims to be a nation rather than an empire, and a democracy rather than an autocracy. James Billington notes that “new freedom in post-Soviet Russia permitted a much-wider range of thinkers than ever before to participate in the most many-sided public discussion in history of the nature and destiny of Russia.”³⁹⁸ Any major writer who reaches huge audiences and asks important questions about identity is important in such a context. Viktor Pelevin is such a writer. Regardless of whether critics and reading audiences consider Pelevin’s works to be serious literature or pop culture, they deserve attention. Pelevin’s works reflect Russian cultural

³⁹⁸ James H. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (Washington, D.C.; Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), xiii.

mores and, in turn, influence culture. The fact that several phrases and terms from his novels have become popular in everyday speech is one indication of this.³⁹⁹

In my study I chose to examine four Pelevin novels written in a period closely associated with Russia's most recent search for identity. The years 1996–2006 represent an ambiguous period for Russian identity—the years before Generation “P” was firmly established as “Generation Putin.” In these four novels, Pelevin seemed to move between marked positive and negative poles in his exploration of Russian identity, offering rich material for comparison. Finally, I limited my study to a ten-year period, separated by a decade from the present, for practical reasons. After the publication of *Empire “V”* in 2006, Pelevin became much more prolific, publishing a new novel or collection every year. When studying the works of a living author, it is far too precarious a task to offer cultural analysis of the author's current work and events themselves while they are still unfolding. I will save analysis of Pelevin's more recent novels for future examination; this will give me an opportunity to evaluate the validity of the conclusions I have reached in this study.

My initial interest in the void was stimulated by my readings about the Eurasianist movement—both the classical Eurasianist movement of the 1920s and the neo-Eurasianist movement that became visible during Gorbachev's *glasnost*' period in response to issues of Russian identity. An intriguing aspect of Eurasianism was the fact that many contemporary writers and public figures in Russia often use the *language* of Eurasianism to discuss current Russian identity. One concept in particular stood out in this discussion—that of “the void.” The void is a place where many scholars locate Russia—outside of time and outside of space. It is everything and it is nothing. I wanted to understand better why this was so and what it meant.

³⁹⁹ Examples from *Generation “P”* include the phrases “wow impulse” (вау-импульс) and “lave” (лавэ), which stands for liberal values.

While other authors mention the void, Pelevin offered the greatest scope for exploring my interest—his novels address philosophical, semantic, spatial, and temporal voids.

Although Pelevin does not make explicit a decisive direction suitable for Russia, what he does *not* say is important. Russian literature has a long history of writing in the metaphorical spaces between the lines or words, another example of the power of the void. Even though Viktor Pelevin is writing in periods when censorship is much less of an issue than it once was, he respects this literary tradition. Pelevin may also be influenced by certain strains of twentieth-century critical theory that decry any attempt by the writer to depict the reality we live in with words. For example, Michel Foucault's discourse analysis (which looks at power relationships as expressed through language) or Theodor Adorno, who wrote that "Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," serve as examples.

Pelevin's novels and stories repeatedly reveal his awareness of recent trends in linguistic and literary thinking.⁴⁰⁰ The West formulated a semiotic model of communication in which the word consists of signifier and signified. Everything is said and (in general) ambiguity and paradox are avoided. Such a model, built on western epistemological thought since Kant, made sense for the low-context societies of the West. Now, in the postmodern era, the model seems to be broken. This may be one reason why Pelevin is dissatisfied with the western model of signification.

Pelevin is more sympathetic to the models offered by the high-context societies of the East. Eastern beliefs allow for paradox and ambiguity; they encourage contemplation of the void or silence between the words. In this model, linguistic description offers only relative, not

⁴⁰⁰ In many of his works, Pelevin engages in an ongoing dialogue with philosophical thinkers past and present. The most notable example of this is his novella "Macedonian Criticism of French Thought" ("Македонская критика французской мысли," 2003).

absolute, truth. Absolute truth lies elsewhere. The Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna, for example, posits a gap between language and true reality (absolute truth). Buddhism in particular, with its emphasis on silence, paradox, and wordless instruction via gestures like pointing, privileges lack, or emptiness. The West fears silence, solitude, and emptiness (which it sees as a lack that isolates the individual) and fills the perceived voids with language, sound, and other people. When those break down, the gap between language and reality reveals the existential abyss to western eyes.

Pelevin rejects both a western and eastern path for Russia, but he does not offer his own solution—at least not yet. He is certainly not the first Russian author to have difficulty coming up with a new “Russian idea.” I previously described how nineteenth-century authors and philosophers responded to Peter the Great’s westernization program in their works, pondering the destiny of Russia and trying to carve out its place relative to the West. Chaadaev saw Russia’s imitation of other great cultures as an obstacle to becoming a great culture itself. Later, Chaadaev was convinced that Russians “have a vocation to solve a great many of the problems of social order, to bring about the fulfillment of a great many of the ideas which have taken their rise in societies of the past, and to give an answer to questions of great importance with which mankind is concerned.”⁴⁰¹ Chaadaev himself, however, did not speculate how exactly Russia would manage to solve these problems. This kind of Russian messianism pervaded many works of many nineteenth-century including those of Pushkin, the Slavophiles, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Solov’ev, and Tolstoy.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ Cited in Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), 37.

⁴⁰² Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 5.

Pelevin does not claim to advocate a program for the Russian national idea. In an interview in 1999, Pelevin claimed that people do not need national ideas, only ideologists do.⁴⁰³ Pelevin's goal is to arrive at a worldview that works for him. His novels, however, make it clear that Pelevin is no fan of Russia imitating either the East or the West. As Carl Jung pointed out, the eastern and western worldviews are both

one-sided in that they fail to see and take account of those factors which do not fit in with their typical attitude. The one underrates the world of consciousness, the other the world of the One Mind. The result is that, in their extremism, both lose one half of the universe; their life is shut off from total reality, and is apt to become artificial and inhuman.⁴⁰⁴

The only identifiable agenda that Pelevin is pushing in his novels seems to be for readers to reclaim agency—by interpreting the ambiguities of the story of his novels and of Russia's narrative and history in ways that make sense to them.⁴⁰⁵ One can only become a “super-werewolf” by searching deep inside oneself and accepting whatever one might find—even if one finds is the void.

At the beginning of this dissertation I asked whether the void in post-Soviet literature was caused by the postmodern condition or by something specific rooted in Russian culture. Pelevin comes from a long tradition of writers and thinkers engaging with the “void” in Russian literature. While aggressive simulacra associated with postmodernism increased the prominence of the void in the last half-century, I demonstrated that these simulacra have existed in Russia since at least the time of Peter I (r. 1682–1725). Because voids existed in Russian culture well

⁴⁰³ “Национальная идея нужна не людям, а идеологам. Идеологи нужны по большому счету только самим себе.” Anna Narinskaia, “Mirom pravit iavnaia lazha,” *Ekspert*, March 22, 1999, http://www.guelman.ru/slava/writers/pel_int.htm.

⁴⁰⁴ Carl G. Jung, “Psychological Commentaries on ‘The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation’ and ‘The Tibetan Book of the Dead,’” 493.

⁴⁰⁵ Recall Pelevin has said that Buddhism, for him, is not about strictly adhering to a particular confession. He stated, “I only study and practice my mind for which the Dharma of Buddha is the best tool I know.” See chapter 3 for citation.

before the dominance of postmodernism, I lean toward the conclusion there is something distinctive in Russian culture that lends itself to a preoccupation with emptiness. At the very least the void functions as a powerful mythologem in the larger cultural “myth of Russia” and “the Russian idea.”

Remythologizing the Russian void for post-Soviet readers is one of the achievements of the four novels. The “negative void” in Pelevin’s novels *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V”* is characteristic of the emptiness that underlies not only the symbols and language of the now defunct Soviet system, but also the advertisements and language of western-style models. It is the result of the severing of the signifier from the signified. This severing of word from meaning, creating an “empty signifier,” complicated communication and the search for identity at the very moment when post-Soviet Russians found their identities in greatest flux. Many symbols and terms of the Soviet period were gone, and so was Soviet identity. Hollow western-style advertisements promised a new identity based around the consumer goods one purchased. These advertisements turned out to be simulacra—images with no basis in reality. They masked a void.

The postmodern late-capitalist period is marked by a free play of signifiers—with missing or unstable signifieds. Late capitalism, as described by Fredric Jameson, emphasizes consumption—commercialization has encroached on all aspects of life. The effects of hyperconsumerism have led to a devaluation of spiritual, intellectual, and humanistic values, resulting in the destruction of one’s essential humanity. Jameson associates late capitalism and postmodernism with schizophrenia (in a Lacanian sense):

Schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus

does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the “I” and the “me” over time.⁴⁰⁶

The prevalence of unstable signifiers, according to Jameson, assaults one’s personal identity because one is incapable of continuously registering one’s “self” through time.

Pelevin’s novels portray Russia’s turn to hyperconsumerism not as a natural consequence of the newly established free market but rather a conspiracy perpetrated by secret, elite groups to manipulate and control the masses. Humans in both *Generation “P”* and *Empire “V”* are ensnared by capitalistic psychic vampires who have surrendered their humanity in order to profit and feed off human energy. In *Generation “P,”* the Chaldeans manipulate humanity by controlling what is on television—not only advertisements but even politicians are all scripted in an effort to keep a five-legged dog named Pizdets (catastrophe) from awakening. (The dog may be read as a metaphor for the masses who are to remain sleepy and docile.) The only thing that matters in the world of *Generation “P,”* is image—“the way they see you” as Tatarskii’s scenario for The Gap reads. Signifiers (external forms) are the only things that matter, not signifieds (content, meaning). The novel is full of example of “empty” signifiers with no real content. For example, Tatarskii is instructed to wear a fake Rolex watch to a meeting with a client for the sake of appearance, one can purchase spirituality at stores such as *The Path to Yourself*, Tatarskii’s co-worker Maliuta only acts like an anti-Semite because he thinks it is what a Russian patriot acts like, etc.

In *Empire “V,”* the Chaldeans serve vampires who use “glamour” and “discourse” to enslave all humans and keep them in an inescapable cycle of consumption that produces the chemical bablos on which the vampires are dependent. Rama is aware that humans live in a

⁴⁰⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 119.

world of images that compel them to purchase goods and continue to earn money so they can throw it away on even more consumer goods, leaving them in a hollow closed loop. Throughout the novel, Rama laments the loss of his soul and contemplates trying to help humans. By the end of *Empire "V,"* however, Rama accepts his dominance over humanity because it allows him access to power and all of the bablos in the world. His actions, however, are manipulated by even higher beings, the tongues, who make the vampires dependent on bablos and thereby provide the tongues with a living host.

Both novels showcase the breakdown of the binary semiotic sign. Signifiers (images) have become more important than signifieds (reality) and very often there is nothing but a void beneath signifiers. The lack of signifieds, or real meaning, leaves the characters in all of Pelevin's novels disorientated because ultimately it implies a lack of concrete values underlying reality. Tatarskii and Rama both feel like their worlds have been turned upside down. Tatarskii is told by the sarruf that he may feel like he is ascending a tower, but he is really descending into a *topheth*. When Rama is told his vampire status will raise him to great heights, he complains that he feels like he is at the bottom of a pit. Meaning is constantly being negated, reversed, or at the very least, renegotiated.

The novels *Chapaev and Pustota* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* reflect Pelevin's "positive void." The same void precipitated by the post-Soviet, postmodern period permeates these novels: both heroes are searching for meaning in life and their identities are in flux. In these novels Pelevin indicates that the void is not the problem but rather the solution. By engaging with Mahāyāna Buddhism, Pelevin resolves the problem of western-generated hypermaterialism and pervasive simulacra. In Buddhism, all signifiers and signifieds are illusory,

a concept which one must accept in order to reach nirvana. The problem of the breakdown of the binary sign becomes moot.

Petr Pustota rejects the post-Soviet world in which he finds himself and toggles between two identities—the post-Soviet Petr and the Civil War-era Petr. A clue as to why Petr is having such trouble adjusting lies in his profession. Civil War-era Petr is a decadent poet who is trying to find his “golden joy”—meaning to be found in particular patterns, lines, and forms that express the “beauty of life.”⁴⁰⁷ In other words, Petr desperately seeks meanings (signifieds) in the signs and symbols surrounding him (signifiers), only to find none. We are not told Petr’s post-Soviet profession in Pelevin’s novel. In Tony Pemberton’s 2015 film adaptation *Buddha’s Little Finger*, however, Petr is also a poet in the post-Soviet period and (like Tatarskii) must give up writing and work in a kiosk to make ends meet.⁴⁰⁸ Both Petrs are living in time periods of great social change, where there is a void of meaning behind words and images. As a man of letters who finds profound meaning in words and symbols, it makes sense that Petr has trouble adapting to his new environments.

In order to fill the void left by the collapse of the previous regime, Petr considers options for a new individual and, by extension, a new national identity by experiencing his fellow wardmates’ delusions in their group therapy sessions. Russia can form an alchemical wedlock either with the West or the East, neither of which seem to suit Russia. Unsure how to process the

⁴⁰⁷ Pelevin, *BLF*, 104. “Например, в складках шторы или скатерти, в рисунке обоев и т.д. различает линии, узоры и формы, дающие «красоту жизни». Это, по его словам, является его «золотой удачей»....” *CIP*, 130; underlined in the original.

⁴⁰⁸ Tony Pemberton showed his script to Pelevin, who said he liked what the director had done with the novel but there were 5 pages of the script that managed to “almost destroy the whole thing.” Pelevin gave Pemberton extensive notes on what he thought the director should do. Pemberton says he implemented some of Pelevin’s changes but the film ultimately “is Pelevin, but it’s not Pelevin.” Boris Karadzhev and Grigorii Ryabushev, *Pisatel’ ‘P.’ Popytka identifikatsii*, (Moscow: Kinostudiia “KLIO,” 2015). Available on YouTube, accessed August 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjgTvPZkcyw>.

post-Soviet world, Petr decides that the entire world is an illusion and escapes to an alternate reality of his own making.

In *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, A Khuli's identity crisis stems from the irreconcilability of her desire to transcend the material world and the limitations of her being a werefox—a creature whose survival depends on manipulating human desire for material and carnal pleasures. A Khuli is aware that all material images are illusory because it is part of her anatomy as a werefox to manipulate these images so that humans see what they want to see. From her interaction with the Yellow Master, she learns that words cannot reliably reflect the world or certain ideas. A Khuli thus understands and is comfortable with the void that lies beneath signifiers, yet she has trouble finding a way to achieve nirvana.

Unlike Petr Pustota, A Khuli eventually discovers that the key to transcending the material world and achieving the void is love. A Khuli empties herself (i.e., creates a void within herself) by engaging in Buddhist loving kindness (compassion) and, by doing so, finds the key to the Rainbow Stream—the ultimate void that will deliver her from *saṃsāra*.

One of the questions I set out to answer was why Pelevin wavers between a positive and negative void. Although Pelevin finds the negative void associated with western values wanting, he is not satisfied that the positive void suggested by eastern values is “the whole answer.” If it were, he would have stopped writing about it. Instead, the void continues to be a major theme in his works. The void is both positive and negative and both aspects are reflected in contemporary Russian culture.

Pelevin is still exploring what possibilities the void holds; he is honing his own creative program of identity construction and perhaps views his personal quest as part of a larger, national

search for identity. Exploring the void provides him, as an author, with space to create and explore new realities—it is a powerful creative tool that Pelevin has been reluctant to give up.

Pelevin, although arguably presenting a more sympathetic picture of eastern values than of western values, is not saying that Russia needs to choose one identity or another, as this would amount to nothing more than imitation—a strategy that has not always worked well for Russia. Instead, Pelevin suggests that Russia needs to find its own path and the way to do this is to follow his example and *engage* with multiple paradigms.

Vitaly Chernetsky refers to this as “heterotopia,” “a condition when multiple textual regimes come into contact to create a new symbiotic entity, a chronotope of coexistence that is simultaneously asserted and ironically subverted.”⁴⁰⁹ In all four novels, Pelevin engages with numerous paradigms, the most prominent being western and eastern cultural paradigms. The important aspect of Pelevin’s heterotopic experiments, however, is agency. Pelevin is unsympathetic to his characters who seek meaning in authoritative, preexisting cultural paradigms, regardless of whether these paradigms are eastern or western.⁴¹⁰ For example Maria and Serdiuk are depicted in a much more negative light than those who try to negotiate their own paths using the “self-liberating power of the mind,” as Petr or A Khuli attempt to do.

Returning to the conclusion that Russian culture is uniquely occupied with the void—what might this mean for Russian culture? One possibility is that, instead of trying to fill the void with something, Russia should accept the void as its natural state. This concept is similar to Roman Jakobson’s and Nikolai Trubetskoi’s concept of markedness in linguistics (to return to a

⁴⁰⁹ Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 90.

⁴¹⁰ See Edith Clowes’ discussion of *Chapaev and Pustota* in Edith Clowes, “Illusory Empire: Viktor Pelevin’s Parody of Neo-Eurasianism,” in *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

semiotic paradigm for a moment). Jakobson and Trubetskoï developed markedness as a way of explaining binary oppositions in phonological and grammatical markings (e.g., if looking at nasality, a feature could be marked for nasality (+nasal) or unmarked for nasality).⁴¹¹ Russia has a complicated relationship with binaries, particularly the East vs. West binary. Perhaps, rather than striving to become “marked” as +West or +East, Russia might consider that it is simply “unmarked” for either.

This theory is similar to one proposed by Dostoevsky in his “Pushkin Speech” of 1880. Dostoevsky suggests that Pushkin’s greatness lies in his works’ “universality” and “pan-humanity,” two features which Dostoevsky claims are “truly Russian.” He explains that Peter the Great’s reforms were not merely utilitarian imitations of the West, but something much loftier and uniquely Russian:

... The Russian People... accepted the reforms in just the same spirit—not merely one of utilitarianism but having certainly sensed almost at once some further and incomparably more elevated goal than immediate utilitarianism; I must repeat, of course, that they sensed that goal unconsciously, yet also directly and as something absolutely vital. It was then that we at once began to strive toward a truly vital reunification, toward the universal brotherhood of peoples! It was not with hostility (as should have been the case, it would seem) but with friendship and complete love that we accepted the genius of other nations into our soul, all of them together, making no discriminations by race, knowing instinctively almost from our very first step where the distinctions lay, knowing how to eliminate contradictions, to excuse and reconcile differences.... Indeed, the mission of the Russian is unquestionably pan-European and universal. To become a real Russian, to become completely Russian, perhaps, means just (in the final analysis—please bear that in mind) to become a brother to all people, a panhuman, if you like.⁴¹²

⁴¹¹ N.S. Trubetzkoy, *Principles of Phonology*, trans. Christiane A. M. Baltaxe (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969).

⁴¹² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer’s Diary*, trans. Kenneth Lantz, vol. 2 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 1293–4. “...русский народ не из одного только утилитаризма принял реформу, а несомненно уже ощутив своим предчувствием почти тотчас же некоторую дальнейшую, несравненно более высшую цель, чем ближайший утилитаризм,—ощутив эту цель, опять-таки, конечно, повторяю это, бессознательно, но, однако же, и непосредственно и вполне жизненно. Ведь мы разом устремились тогда к самому жизненному воссоединению, к единению всечеловеческому! Мы не враждебно (как, казалось, должно бы было случиться), а дружественно, с полной любовью приняли в душу нашу гении чужих наций, всех вместе, не делая преимущественных племенных различий, умея инстинктом, почти с самого первого

This Russian quality of universal receptivity described by Dostoevsky is similar to Chaadaev's "Apologie d'un Fou," in which he argues (perhaps disingenuously) that Peter's reforms have made Russia a "blank piece of paper" representing pure receptivity. It is also reminiscent of Vladimir Solov'ev's view that the role of Russia in world history was to free the West from its excessive positivism and utilitarianism and to reconcile the East with the West, the spiritual with the material.

Or perhaps Pelevin, by condemning an alchemical wedlock with either the East or the West, is advocating that Russia find its own way forward as Petr Pustota did. If the void represents both pure emptiness and pure potential, why should Russia not be able to find a unique national identity? Petr's quest has been ongoing for several lifetimes; Russia's quest will take as long or longer.

Unfortunately, the question of Russian identity is one of Russia's "eternal questions." Pelevin is unlikely to solve the question himself, but he is far from finished with his search for new meaning in post-Soviet Russian life.

Contributions

The preceding chapters have examined the void in Pelevin. Although my research relies on all available Pelevin scholarship, this dissertation contributes to this scholarship in several key ways. First, it looks at Pelevin's void not just in the current post-Soviet context but also in the larger tradition of Russian culture. I argue that Pelevin is in dialogue with the long-standing

шагу различать, снимать противоречия, извинять и примирять различия... Да, назначение русского человека есть бесспорно всеевропейское и всемирное. Стать настоящим русским, стать вполне русским, может быть, и значит только (в конце концов, это подчеркните) стать братом всех людей, всечеловеком, если хотите." Fedor Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadtsati tomakh*, vol. 14 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1995), 438–9.

debate of Russia's identity vis-à-vis the binary of East vs. West. While Pelevin agrees with past Russian thinkers that choosing an eastern or western path would amount to imitation, the only "middle way" he has suggested is "nothingness." Either the void is Pelevin's final answer, or (as I suggest above) he is still searching for his solution.

Secondly, I considered two novels that have received comparatively little scholarly attention—*Empire "V"* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*. To some extent, Pelevin's later works are less critically acclaimed and so these two novels have not received as much attention as *Chapaev and Pustota* and *Generation "P."* Some critics accuse Pelevin of self-plagiarism and perhaps do not want to bother reading novels that share the same themes as his earlier works.

Although I agree that the later two novels are not Pelevin's strongest work, I found them valuable because they demonstrate how Pelevin's conceptions of the void, hypercapitalism, and Buddhism have developed over time. Because Pelevin's works comment on the same themes (and, in some cases, seem to share the same universe), I was able to come to a different conclusions about his earlier work. For example, most scholars read the ending of *Chapaev and Pustota* in two ways: (1) Petr solipsistically decides to create and live in his own universe or (2) Petr achieves nirvana. By examining A Khuli's transcendence at the end of *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, I determined that Petr may ultimately reach nirvana, but this is not depicted in the novel, leading one to assume he must repeat the cycle of *samsāra* at least one more time (and perhaps many times) with the help of Chapaev.

Finally, very few sources have seriously considered the Buddhist factor in Pelevin's work. In the past, several critics have doubted the veracity of Pelevin's Buddhism (see chapter 3), suggesting that Buddhism serves as another text subject to postmodernist play. Understanding Buddhism's concept of void, non-self, and illusion are key in understanding *Chapaev and*

Pustota and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*. The reason A Khuli had difficulty finding enlightenment is because her ego-self prevented her from practicing loving kindness. Once she emptied herself completely in her love for Aleksandr, A Khuli understood and was able to disappear from the material plane.

The Buddhist concept of dependent origination explains why Buddhism appeals to a postmodernist like Pelevin. Dependent origination says that nothing has independent essence (i.e., a signified) because it is only a consequence of interaction among other phenomena and all phenomena are constantly changing. In the postmodern world, where signifiers “float” or “slip beneath” one another endlessly, a concept of dependent origination could be appealing.

Further Research

One major topic that deserves future exploration is the relationship among the void, Russian nihilism, and postmodernism. Russian nihilism has always been premised on the destruction of existing truths and values (political, religious, moral, etc.). Nihilism’s answer to “By what values/truths should we live?” is also “nothingness.” The most basic, encyclopedia definition of nihilism points out: “In the 20th century, nihilism encompassed a variety of philosophical and aesthetic stances that, in one sense or another, denied the existence of genuine moral truths or values, rejected the possibility of knowledge or communication, and asserted the ultimate meaninglessness or purposelessness of life or of the universe.”⁴¹³ The denial of any

⁴¹³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Nihilism,” accessed July 25, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nihilism>.

For a more detailed philosophical discussion of nihilism’s moral skepticism, sense of the meaninglessness of life, and atheism, see Robert G. Olson, “Nihilism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols. (New York, London: Macmillan, 1967), 5:515-17. Works on nihilism and postmodernity by D. M. Levin, Gianni Vattimo, Ashley Woodward, and others suggest interesting directions, but do not address the Russian context.

overarching system of truth or values and the inability to effectively communicate using language are both qualities associated with postmodernism and Buddhism.

Revolutionary anarchist Mikhail Bakunin's (1814–1876) 1842 essay "Reaction in Germany" was a major influence on the nihilist movement. It contains the pronouncement, "Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!"⁴¹⁴ This destruction is very similar to the void in Pelevin—it is both a destructive and creative force. Pelevin highlights this destructive, nihilistic void with his novels *Generation "P"* and *Empire "V,"* but he has also made it his mission to replace this barren, sterile, oppressive nihilism with something that acknowledges Russia's "void" but that is not negatively nihilistic—the liberating, Buddhist *śūnyatā*.

After examining the void in Pelevin's novels from 1996–2006, an obvious question is "How does Pelevin treat the void in his later works?" Pelevin has been called a self-plagiarist for writing on the same topics over and over again but as time passes and more works emerge, they may offer material for tracking the evolution of Pelevin's personal description of the void, his quest for identity, and the role of the void in that quest.

Originally, I set out to examine not just thematic voids in Pelevin's texts but semantic voids as well. In chapter 1, for example, I mentioned his story "Ukhriab," in which Pelevin creatively incorporates the invented word "ukhriab" into the end of one word and the beginning of another—leaving a gap between the two words (e.g., "умял двух **рябчиков**" "he gobbled up two grouses"). Knowing Pelevin's penchant for word play and the prominence of gaps and voids in his works, there must be more examples like this. These kinds of semantic voids, in which the

⁴¹⁴ Mikhail Bakunin, "The Reaction in Germany," in *Bakunin on Anarchy*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

space, or “void,” between two words serves as a link that creates a neologism that can in turn be endowed with more content, deserves further exploration.

I believe comparing Pelevin’s use of the void with that of other contemporary Russian authors would also be productive. Vladimir Sorokin’s early novels such as *The Queue* (*Очередь*, 1983) or *Roman* (*Роман*, 1985–89) highlight a conceptualist type of emptiness in which simulacra are deconstructed and there is a breakdown in the text itself. Hans Günther has written about Vladimir Makanin’s novel *Underground, or A Hero of Our Time* (*Андеграунд, или герой нашего времени*, 1999) using the concept of kenosis (from the Greek *kenós*—“empty”).⁴¹⁵ Viktor Erofeev has also acknowledged a breakdown in the relationship between the signifier and signified, and Iurii Buida has written a novel (*The Zero Train, Дон Домино*, 1993) about a mysterious train, a “Potemkin village” that serves as a metaphor entire Soviet project. Finally, Olga Slavnikova’s 2010 novel *Light-headed* (*Легкая голова*) features a hero with an empty space in his head, which is blamed for causing all sorts of catastrophes for the Russian state. These authors represent just a sampling of writers in Russia who have engaged with the void.

Finally, where is the void in post-Soviet film? Is it also reflected in other arts (in graphic and musical arts, for example)? In his 2006 dissertation, Gerald McCausland examines the void in Ivan Dykhovichnyi’s 1992 film *Moscow Parade* (a French-Russian co-production, known in Russian as *Пропея* [*Abyss*]), in which a writer succumbs to suicide after attempting to describe the void. This film also deals with renegotiating individual and national identity in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. It would be interesting to explore films with similar themes.

⁴¹⁵ Hans Günther, “Post-Soviet Emptiness (Vladimir Makanin and Viktor Pelevin),” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4 (2013): 100–6.

Final Thoughts

Pelevin's "void" is important because it simultaneously represents metaphysical despair and a search for new values to resolve it. While the broken binary semiotic model of word = signifier + signified may not seem significant in theory, it has palpable consequences in the real world. Language is the way we communicate and create meaning from our surroundings. When language breaks down, it leaves a void—the process of creating meaning is disturbed, affecting one's relationship to one's self and to the surrounding world (personal and national identity).

When language is separated from meaning, we experience a loss of any sense of Truth. Pelevin presents this loss as having two variants. For Pelevin, the western, postmodern void represents the terror of an inability to locate oneself in the world. The eastern, Buddhist void represents a transcendence of the material world—a path that is more appealing than the western void, but arguably not a perfect fit for Russia. What if the eastern void is an escape from the hard work of engaging with the world in this life rather than a true transcendence of the world?

As someone who engages with both postmodernism and Buddhism, one would think that Pelevin would be comfortable living in a world with no higher Truth, but this is not the case. The nostalgia that some critics perceive in some of Pelevin's works is not nostalgia for the Soviet regime, but rather for a time when one still had a grip on reality, where one's feet were planted on terra firma. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russians found themselves living in a world where not just one system had disappeared (i.e., the Soviet Union), but *all systems* (i.e., the postmodern rejection of all totalizing systems). Soviet values had disappeared and the new, postmodern, late capitalist world in which Russians found themselves living made it impossible to acquire a new set of all-encompassing, national values.

While I answered the questions I had at the start of my research, Pelevin's reluctance to give up on his search for Truth has only left me with more questions than can be resolved in the space of a dissertation.

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