



Buddhist views in the prose of V.O. Pelevin.

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author reviews the influence of Eastern philosophy from various schools, as well as the doctrines of religious Buddhism, which are encountered quite often in early Pelevin's prose. In particular, the early works of V. Pelevin's novels are considered. The novels "Omon Ra", "Chapaev and the Void", "The Life of Insects", "The Caretaker", "Generation P", "Batman Apollo", "The Sacred Book of the Werewolf", "Love for Three Zuckerbrins". The stories "Yellow Arrow", "The Hermit and the Six-fingered".

Keywords:

Postmodernism, intertext, V. Pelevin, "Omon Ra", "Chapaev and Void", buddhism, zen buddhism.

The generally accepted connection of the early works of Viktor Pelevin with the philosophy of the Far East is another interesting perspective in which the rich work of the author of the novel Chapaev and Emptiness is often considered. Moreover, it is worth noting that this connection is interpreted by researchers as a multitude of influences (both at the level of the form of texts and in relation to their ideological layer) in a very wide range of intensity - from ideological involvement and deep spiritual perception of reality to opportunistic (from the point of view of the literary public) oriental aesthetics, functioning only as an ornament or decoration. In the following reasoning, on the basis of relevant critical discourse, we will try to point out the complex network of Buddhist intertext that manifests itself in Pelevin's prose.

In addition, this goal, in our opinion, requires accompanying our reflections with at least an introductory introduction to the theoretical achievements of Oriental studies,

relating primarily to the religion and spirituality of Buddhism.

Many researchers of the culture of the Far East indicate on its enormous diversity and immanent pluralism [1. p. 23-26], caused, first of all, by the transnational nature of the main religious branches and schools of thought. After all, Buddhism, Taoism and Zen - perhaps the most influential religions and philosophies in this context - have functioned for many millennia in the vast expanse of China, India, Tibet and Japan. Moreover, within the framework of each of these schools of thought, we can find the intersection of different traditions, religions, cults, etc., as a result of which a unique Eastern worldview arises, which so strongly affects a number of outstanding thinkers of the broadly understood West. [2. p. 164-165]

Many scientists point to two factors that are a kind of the root cause of the popularity of Buddhism and Hinduism within a broadly understood Occidental culture: a marked

ideological flexibility, allowing to combine even seemingly incongruous, as well as a kind of alternative in relation to the Western axiological system, which has a significant impact primarily during the period of a sharp reassessment of values. [3. p. 11-12] So, for example, in Russia, Buddhist ideas were, or rather: are, very popular in the case of significant cultural, social and geopolitical changes, for example, in the late XIX (XX) and early XX (XXI) centuries. The coincidence of periods of increased interest seems interesting to oriental thinking with a predominance of modernist and postmodern ideas, which confirms the fidelity of both the above qualities of Eastern philosophy. In this context, a particularly interesting phenomenon is Buddhism, which renounces not only the subject-object dualism, but also the essential nature of the subject itself in the spirit of Rene Descartes. It is easy to find here the similarity of these provisions with the general postmodern worldview position, since they focus on the problem of non-substantial ontological support of reality. In addition, according to William Edlglas and Jay Garfield, the Buddhist worldview, in addition to a huge variety of schools of thought and philosophical systems, is based on several main concepts.

These terms constitute the most important part of the ideological and dogmatic layer within the canon of Buddhist theological and philosophical texts, undergoing deep analysis of a significant evolution of understanding over the millennia. Prominent American orientalist list the following concepts that are at the core of the metaphysics of Buddhism: anitya (impermanence), anatman (absence of "I"), pratitya-samutpada (dependent arising) and shunyata (emptiness) [4. p. 3-8.] These ideas often appear in modern literary works, including Pelevin's prose, mainly as textual reminiscences, so it is worth briefly explaining their meaning here. The first three of the above concepts - anitya, anatman and pratitya-samutpada - form a whole in the Buddhist worldview. Anitya points to the impermanence of all existence, excluding its extension in time. This postulate not only means that any object or phenomenon undergoes a cycle of occurrence, existence-death, but

indicates that this cycle occurs completely at every moment of being. [5. p. 13-15] The cause (and at the same time the consequence) of the so-understood frailty is anatman, i.e. the complete absence of the subject of perception. "I" arises when we give our consciousness a duration and independence, which lead to the establishment of a certain core of the phenomena we perceive. In turn, these phenomena, having a stable center in the eyes of the perceiver, undergo only superficial changes. The Buddhist dogma anatman, however, instead postulates the absence of an individual self, and therefore of any essential support of being, in favor of a "continuum of randomly connected phenomena." [6. p. 3] The complement of this image of the world is the mutual dependence - pratitya-samutpada - of the infinity of objects, leading to the following statement: each object turns out to be the sum of causes and conditions arising from the forms that other - just as impermanent and devoid of essence - objects have acquired. The general misunderstanding of this order of functioning of reality, according to the philosophy of Buddhism, leads to the prevailing suffering that fulfills being. All quotations from this edition are in our translation. These "accidentally connected phenomena" are defined in Buddhism with the word "dharma". The totality of dharmas, i.e. the aforementioned "continuum" is samsara. Elements of such thinking are important for the interpretation of Pelevin's texts in *The Life of Insects*. Due to the fact that in the context of studies of Pelevin's work, the concept of emptiness / emptiness (the aforementioned shunyata) turns out to be an essential interpretive key, it should be considered in more detail. The idea of the immanent emptiness of the world plays a paramount role in many branches of Buddhism, since it concerns the very essence of both their etymological and ontological principles. The emptiness of all phenomena can be falsely associated with nihilism, the complete denial of being as such. However, shunyata does not mean that the object of cognition is deprived of the right to exist, since its emptiness refers only to the essence, that is, this object exists, but not in a permanent and substantial way. So, in the

world, objectively, there is not a single phenomenon independent of the rest of being, possessing immanent qualities that "force [it - M. Ya.] to be what it is." Shunyata extends to all cognitive processes, since only its full approval leads to the final truth, allowing being to escape from the endless whirlpool of suffering, from the onslaught of conventional truths. Many researchers notice the importance of Buddhist motifs and philosophy when interpreting Viktor Pelevin's prose. Moreover, as already mentioned above, it is necessary to detect the evaluative maximalism inherent in the criticism of the works of the author of the *Watcher*, which depends primarily on the research position of the interpreter. From the point of view of those who rank Pelevin in a group of purely postmodern writers, Buddhism is undoubtedly only a device used (often on the principle of non-selection) in order to complicate the game with the reader. [7. p. 160] For example, in a sharp response to the novel *Generation "P"*, Mikhail Sverdlov sees the only role of Far Eastern motifs in an attempt to hide the lethargy and vulgarity of Pelevin's style. Buddhist philosophy, according to the Moscow critic, is devoid of content and functions in Pelevin's *Batman Apollo* texts only at the most superficial level. Consequently, the ideological layer of these works is reduced to the "magic word" emptiness, which opens the writer to the endless field of literary freedom, neglecting not only all sorts of moral restrictions, but also the rules of grammar and narrative logic. However, among the publications devoted to the reading of texts of interest to us, in the context decorative use of Buddhism is dominated by a different staging question, which closes the relevant philosophical motives within the aesthetics of postmodernism. A fairly well-known example of this approach is Irina Rodnyanskaya's text titled "*This world is not invented by us*," in which the Russian scholar argues that Pelevin's references to ideas, places, and persons associated with Buddhism are only nominal. [8. p. 27] In addition, Rodnyanskaya notes that this element of the poetics of the works of the author *Omon Ra* is purely ornamental, since the ideological level of Pelevin's prose is completely connected with

traditionally European thought. It is interesting that Leyla Hajizade comes to an identical conclusion, considering Pelevin's work from a completely different perspective [9. p. 65-87] The Azerbaijani researcher considers the core of Pelevin's poetics in the story "*The Yellow Arrow*" to be a non-selective, i.e. deliberately chaotic, set of literary motifs and techniques used by the Russian writer in constructing the narrative. The Far Eastern discourse, which includes not only capacious semantic images, but also a rather specific language, in this regard is one of the stylistic decorations inherent in postmodern poetics. [10. p. 228-233]. However, it is worth emphasizing that in the extensive critical material relating to Pelevin's prose, there is also a statement of the question, according to which, against the backdrop of the continuous aestheticism of modern literature, the desire for deeper knowledge is considered a distinctive feature of the work of interest to us. Gennady Murikov sees it, first of all, in Pelevin's steady insistence on the semantic potential of Buddhist symbolism. In addition, the critic discovers the constant attraction of Pelevin's writing to a deep analysis of the Far Eastern philosophical base, replacing the poetics of the anecdote, which prevails in the early texts of the Russian writer. In this article, Murikov also notes the intertextual connections between the works of the author of the *Holy Book of the Werewolf* and the esoteric works of Carl Castaneda, which, in combination with typically Buddhist motifs, can play a key role in the process of interpreting this material as a kind of rethinking of various spiritual traditions. This remark only confirms the undoubted capacity and certain pluralistic compatibility of Buddhism, the limits of strength, which Pelevin seems to test in his works. Here it should be emphasized that, according to various researchers, in his texts Far Eastern philosophy is mixed not only with postmodern imagery and esoteric reasoning of Castaneda, but also with a kind of social involvement, occult conspiracy theories and many other ways of perceiving reality. It should also be noted that some interpreters try to read Pelevin's works through the prism of a selected, specific component of Buddhist philosophy, trying to avoid general statements in favor of a

more specific analysis of the text. In this context, the most popular categories are emptiness (*shunyata*), disappearance of the "I" (*anatman*) and sleep (life as a dream of *Brahma*).

Ewa Pankowska, in her article devoted to the functioning of the first of the above categories in the work of the author *Omon Ra*, focuses her attention on the ontological status of the cognizing subject and perceived reality [11. p. 66-87]. In the course of analyzing the novel *Chapaev and the Void*, the Polish researcher notices similarities between Pelevin's understanding of emptiness and Zen Buddhism, since it is based on the refutation of the essential reception of being. The Russian writer, however, does not limit himself to the philosophical and existential dimension of this motive, transferring it to the space of historiography. So, in the interpretation of Pankovskaya, Pelevin's work is full of indications of emptiness, that is, the absence of tangible content, not only in the case of past ideologies (for example, Soviet ideology), but also in modern historical, geopolitical and social changes. In addition, the researcher, following Galina Nefagina, considers Buddhist *shunyata* the starting point of the solipsistic perception of reality in the texts of the author of the *Watcher*. An interesting addition to such an understanding of the category of emptiness by Pelevin and a kind of confirmation of its significance can be found in the article by Olga Pleshkova [12. p. 522-526]. The researcher interprets the very title of the novel *Chapaev and Void* as a double allusion, i.e. an indication of both the surname of one of the characters and the generalizing function of *shunyata* for understanding the entire work.

A curious interpretive context when reading the prose of the author of the *Hermit and Six-fingered* is also the problem of the disappearance, or more precisely: the absence, of individual consciousness, inherent in Buddhist thinking. Alexander Kamenetsky, trying to compare some aspects of Pelevin's work with the works of Eduard Limonov, in his reflections discovers a repetitive narrative structure within the works of interest to us. So, the heroes of Pelevin, and the role of a kind of *pars pro toto* in Kamenetsky's response is

played by Pyotr Void from the novel *Chapaev and Void*, go through a semi-mystical path-evolution-personality from a collision with world evil to final victory and salvation. [13. p. 4-5] However, it should be noted that, according to the interpreter's reasoning, evil within Pelevin's writing is both the cause and the equivalent of human suffering in the typical Buddhist sense. Consequently, the only way to escape from him is the complete disappearance of the ego, i.e. the act of renunciation of individual consciousness and approval of the non-substantial nature of being, which in this novel is realized in the climactic scene of the merging of Peter's consciousness with the elements of the symbolic Urals. The last Buddhist context considered in the current part of our reflections is associated with the well-known idea of the *bardo* of dreams, that is, the state of being in the space-time of sleep. An interesting example of studies that base the understanding of Pelevin's artistic method on this aspect of Far Eastern thinking is the article by Alena Afanasyeva, which presents a hypothesis about the dreamlike beginning of the structure of Pelevin's narrative. [14 p. 176-181] The scientist correctly notices two intersecting levels of the texts of the author of the *Holy Book of the Werewolf* - ideological and plot (external) and structural (internal). So, on the basis of the external (in relation to the work itself) idea of an illusory reality, understood as a dream of the *Buddhist* demiurge *Brahma*, the Russian writer, according to Afanasyeva, gives the structure of his writing a certain montage, only seeming careless. The logic of sleep, having become the logic of narration, leads to an immanent absence of predictability of events and the linearity of time. However, it is worth noting that when arguing her hypothesis, the researcher is limited only to the novel *Chapaev and Void*, although Pelevin's work is full of other, perhaps even more expressive, examples. Despite the selectivity of the material studied, Afanasyeva's remarks indicate the impact of Buddhist motifs, which goes beyond the limits of postmodern outrageousness, but also purely ideological background. In this perspective, they sanction both the perception of the surrounding reality and the core of Pelevin's narrative - its dream

logic. On the basis of the brief review of studies of Buddhist motifs in Victor Pelevin's prose proposed above, we can conclude that this context certainly plays a very minor role in the interpretation of the literary texts of the author of *Love for the Three Zuckerbrins*.

It should be emphasized that the main concepts-dogmas of the Buddhist school of thought have a huge potential for expanding the field of possible readings of these works, both at the general ideological level and in relation to the very structure of the narrative. In addition, attention should be paid to the inconsistency, although sometimes seemingly provoked, of responses to the presence of Far Eastern philosophical ideas in Pelevin's work - from merciless criticism to boundless admiration. This evaluative nature of interpretations often proves to be an insurmountable obstacle to an in-depth analysis of a given context.

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