

FREEDOM AND THE REALITY OF OTHERS IN *CHAPAEV AND THE VOID*

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[T]he sufferer confronts us as actually worthy of awe only when his gaze has risen from the individual to the general, when he regards his own suffering only as an example of the whole of suffering and, becoming in an ethical respect a genius, one case counts for him as equivalent to thousands, from whence his whole life, apprehended as essentially suffering, then brings him to the point of resignation. [...] We always imagine a very noble character as having a certain touch of quiet sadness, which is anything but constant annoyance over daily displeasures [...] but rather a consciousness that proceeds from cognizance of the nullity of all goods and the suffering of all life, not only one's own.

Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*

But you have not answered my question: what about other people?

Anna in *Chapaev and the Void*

Appearing amid Russia's radical social and political transformations of the 1990s, Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void* (*Chapaev i Pustota*, or *Chapaev and Pustota*, insofar as the latter word is here also the surname of a main character), was topical in more ways than one. Not only did it express the pervasive sense of chaos and disorientation endemic to any such upheaval, but it also diagnosed the dissolution of the Soviet subject and proposed a new technology of self, aimed at establishing a subject position in lieu of this newly formed void. The novel provoked vastly divergent interpretations, but the critical consensus still seems to identify this new subject position with solipsism and extreme disengagement.

Individuality and agency appear to be incompatible with the existence of the collective, which consists of other human beings, and with the existence of the body, which binds one to others. It is seemingly this epiphany that drives the protagonist, Pyotr Pustota, to seek freedom in withdrawal from physical reality and from being with others. Here I aim to argue, however,

that Pelevin's model of a new subjectivity is far more complicated than the above resume would have it. Even though the protagonist's search for authentic being and self-definition leads him to eschew the meanings and structures that others would impose on his life, the novel does recognize the ethical problem of minimizing the reality of others. In fact, the novel seeks a transcendence of master-slave dialectics, conceptualizing a relationship in which the singularity of neither self nor other need be threatened. Pelevin's response to the transformations of the 1990s is not a solipsistic retreat, but rather a careful negotiation of the borders of self and other. The realm of aesthetics constitutes an ideal space for this project.

Between Postmodernism and Didactic Solipsism

Readers and critics had already perceived in Pelevin, especially amid the discursive play in works like *Omon Ra* and *The Life of Insects*, an earnest allegorical strain that distinguished him from the more purely ludic postmodernists. In *Chapaev and the Void*, his foregrounding of the religio-metaphysical became quite explicit. The latter novel featured various formal elements of postmodernism, but the road to spiritual enlightenment it seemed to chart greatly complicated any reading of it as some lighthearted, parodic play with mutually negating discourses—a hallmark of postmodern skepticism. Whereas it had previously been possible to read Pelevin as deconstructing the competing discourses his characters espoused, now, to the contrary, critics diagnosed him with didacticism. In Sergei Kornev's description, Pelevin sounds much like Tolstoi, "a classic writer-ideologue, who with every word persistently and openly pounds one and the same moral-metaphysical theory into his readers' heads." Soon after *Chapaev and the Void* appeared, Dmitrii Bykov declared it Pelevin's most successful treatment yet of the two-world idea, central to the author's oeuvre and religious in its essence (4). Kornev's perception of Pelevin as combining postmodern playfulness with spiritual gravitas is seconded by Alexander Genis: "Despite the popular view that the new wave literature lacks spirituality, Pelevin tends toward spiritualism, proselytism, and hence didacticism. Most critics consider him a satirist: in truth, he is closer to being a fabulist" (219).

All these critics deem the essence of Pelevin's spiritual lesson to lie in the cultivation of one's personal, authentic reality as an escape from the realm of necessity characterized by the (invariably pernicious) collective/social reality. Freedom, or escape from contingency, is a central concern of the novel, which structurally alternates between two chronotopes, the Russian Civil War and a lunatic asylum set in the twilight of the Soviet era. Each milieu challenges the protagonist Pyotr Pustota with radical physical constraints: in 1919 he is a symbolist poet who barely escapes the Red Terror by fortuitously managing to kill his would-be assassin and take his place; in 1991 he is an institutionalized sufferer of schizophrenia who imagines himself a symbolist poet and

personal adjutant of the famed Russian Civil War hero Vasilii Chapaev. In both timelines, Pustota constructs an alternative identity in an attempt to free himself from the entanglements of external reality. While external reality appears to be a contentious zone, the parallel spaces/narratives converge in Pustota's assumed identity of Petka. Like Chapaev himself, Petka, or Pyotr Isaev, has become a Russian cultural icon, having played, along with Anka (on whom more later), a supporting role to Chapaev's major one in the immensely popular 1934 film *Chapaev*. Based on Dmitrii Furmanov's 1923 novel, the film was foundational for the socialist realist canon; its central trio (Chapaev and his two sidekicks, Petka and the machine-gunner Anka) would go on to be immortalized in countless Russian jokes, becoming true heroes of Soviet folklore. Imagining himself as Chapaev's trusty assistant, Pyotr Pustota relies heavily on details from Furmanov's film and the jokes it spawned. However, he reshuffles these details into his own idiosyncratic vision: Chapaev is transformed into a Buddhist guru espousing emptiness as enlightenment, Anka into an aristocratic femme fatale named Anna, and Petka into himself, a refined symbolist poet.¹ Using the social imaginary as a springboard for the construction of his own parallel reality, Pustota in effect follows Chapaev's advice: "All these constructs are only required so that you can rid yourself of them for ever. Wherever you might be, live according to the laws you find yourself in, and use those very laws to liberate yourself from them. Discharge yourself from the hospital, Petka" (*Buddha's Little Finger* 270).² This, however, is only the penultimate step on the way to complete liberation. As the guru Chapaev proceeds to teach Pustota, freedom from others can be achieved via the realization that external material reality is an ephemeral product of the collective unconscious, and enlightenment consists in complete renunciation of this reality. In keeping with the religious tradition of apophaticism, authentic freedom is defined here in negative terms, as emptying out, deleting all traces of external reality from one's consciousness. It is also the only way to cognize the true nature of being: nothingness, or void (glaringly reflected in Pustota's very name).

This lesson is provided by Chapaev close to the culmination of the novel, where he explains the origin and purpose of a "clay machine-gun" appearing in a parable of his about Buddha Anagama, who "didn't waste any time on explanations, he simply pointed at things with a little finger of his left hand,

1. Since the novel extends the same ontological validity to both chronotopes (the Civil War in 1919 and the late/post-Soviet madhouse of 1991), this paper will bracket the possibility that Pyotr Pustota's alleged schizophrenia might compromise the veracity or validity of philosophical tenets and points declared in sections that might be his hallucinations. The paper will treat all views advanced by Chapaev, Pyotr, Anna, and Kotovsky as amounting to coherent worldviews and worthy of serious analysis.

2. Further citations in this article are to Andrew Bromfield's translation; in a few instances I have opted to provide my own translation, in which case Pelevin 1999 will be cited.

and their true nature was instantly revealed. When he pointed to a mountain, it disappeared, when he pointed to a river, that disappeared too. It's a long story, but it all ended with him pointing to himself with his little finger and then disappearing. All that was left of him was that little finger which his disciples hid in a lump of clay. The clay machine-gun is that lump of clay with the Buddha's finger concealed within it" (305).

Pelevin's persistent allusions to Buddhist teachings in this and other novels suggest that, along with Chapaev, he may perhaps be advocating the salvific potential of emptiness and prescribing detachment as a liberator from mundane and false reality; as one's ticket to pure, authentic being—a state many critics of the novel interpret as profoundly solipsistic, accusing Pelevin (and by extension, Buddhism) of espousing solipsism. For example, Kornev compares emptiness in Buddhism with the emptiness in postmodernism, to the latter's advantage: Buddhism, he says, allows for the possibility of absolute liberation, absolute emptiness, while in postmodernism, emptiness is always provisional, and signals incompleteness. In Buddhism, emptiness is the ultimate realization of one's potential; while the piecemeal postmodern subject requires the other to complete her. Quite persuasively, Kornev argues that postmodern subjectivity might be encapsulated in Bakhtin's declaration that "a human being does not have an inner sovereign territory; he is fully and always at the border. When he looks inside, he is looking [...] with the eyes of the other." For Foucault as for Bakhtin, Kornev continues, the conceptual other is essential for one's own completion, whereas in Buddhism and in Pelevin, the other is a hindrance. The later Foucault attempted to construct an inner other from the fragments of social others, while Pelevin's program is far more radical: "it demands that all inner Others be completely banished" (Kornev).

While differing in his assessment of Buddhism, Evgeny Pavlov ultimately agrees with Kornev that Pelevin's philosophy is solipsistic. Surveying critiques of Pelevin's rendition of Buddhism published in such journals as *Buddhism of Russia* (*Buddizm Rossii*), Pavlov sides with Pelevin's Buddhist detractors who argue that the author neglects the inseparability of metaphysics and ethics in Buddhism and misses the ethical component of enlightenment. Pavlov cites Buddhist theoreticians who draw a connection between emptiness and engagement with the world, and concludes, "Any reader approaching Pelevin's novel from a Buddhist perspective would find the grand finale wanting; the love and compassion of the Ural River remain pure abstractions" (100–101). Emphasizing that compassion is key to the Buddhist conception of enlightenment, Pavlov argues that Pelevin's Pyotr chooses aesthetics over Buddhist ethics: instead of sharing his wisdom with others, the poet smashes a chandelier by shooting it with his pen-pistol, then flees from the world into his Inner Mongolia.

But Pelevin is not a cold aesthete. Critics have noted, for instance, the consciousness of an Other in his works. Mark Lipovetsky contends that *The Sa-*

cred Book of Werewolf adds a hitherto-unknown value, love, to the formula of freedom found in Pelevin's earlier novels, where the escape to pure emptiness leads not only to the erasure of others but also of the self (254). But I would argue that the very quality Lipovetsky discovers in Pelevin's later novel is already present in *Chapaev and the Void*. In what follows, I will demonstrate that Pelevin does not separate ethics from aesthetics, which for him form one coherent system of being.

Contrary to the critical consensus, relations with others and their potential role in the achievement of authentic being and enlightenment is a central, albeit somewhat obscured, motif of the novel. The narrative's very structure points to the salvific presence of another consciousness and the necessity of incorporating in one's spiritual life the truth of one's essential relatedness to others.

Answers and Questions

The book's title itself points to two contending approaches to truth; the conjunction "and" between Chapaev and Pustota suggests that their relationship is one of complementarity (rather than equivalency). Chapaev's position is primary and initiating, while Pyotr Pustota's is reactive but also finalizing; coming second but last, it is more definitive. Chapaev is Pustota's mentor, but the latter's education is ultimately dialogic. Pustota is not a fully compliant student; his questions seem to supplement, and not just flesh out, Chapaev's conception of emptiness. Notice of others, which preoccupies Pustota and is a matter of ethics, proves ultimately more lasting than the penultimate drowning in Chapaev's Ural (which, while evoking a specific physical place, the Ural River, in fact denotes an abstract concept, the Conditional River of Absolute Love (309)).

In the Socratic method, truth is subject to scrutiny; questions test the validity of truth vis-à-vis other truths.³ Chapaev's teaching does not imply Pustota's passive acquisition of wisdom, but rather provokes his scrutiny. Pustota continuously formulates questions not so much to receive ready-made answers, but to probe them. Furthermore, the novel abounds in dialogues, where Pustota is not the only questioning presence. Anna asks her own questions that test the validity of Pyotr's truth, and her queries often imply doubt about Chapaev's teachings.

Critics seem generally to view Anna (aka Anka) as a purely auxiliary character, mediating between Chapaev and Pustota; but she has her own set of concerns and misgivings. Anna and Chapaev do not see eye to eye, for instance, regarding Pustota's idealism. Chapaev encourages Pustota to embrace the idea that the external world is simply a nightmarish dream, from which it

3. On the structural similarity of Socratic dialogues and some Buddhist *suttas* (teachings), see Gowans 57.

would be best to awaken. When Pustota concludes that nothing exists beyond his own self, Chapaev does not contradict him, but only adds, chuckling, that the pupil has neglected to include the self in this ultimate negation (270). Anna objects to Pustota's "Kingdom of I" on completely different grounds.⁴ She questions the whole underlying concept of Pustota's ideal reality by repeatedly asking: "What about other people?" (284). The first time Anna poses this objection, Pustota attempts to deflect it toward a discussion of the aesthetic quality of his poems, but Anna redirects him toward ethics: "But you haven't answered my question: what about other people?" In response to Pyotr's puzzlement, Anna explains further, "If everything that you can see, feel, and understand is within you, in that kingdom of I, does it mean that other people are quite simply unreal? Me, for example?" (*ibid.*). Here Anna forces Pyotr to see the logical fallacy of such thinking: Pyotr must concede the reality of Anna—how could he not, given their earlier falling-out? If she had indeed been just a figment of Pyotr's imagination, wouldn't this imagination have orchestrated a more desirable outcome to their relations? It is their discord (and Anna's preference for his rival, Georgy Kotovsky, on whom more below) that makes her independent reality more palpable. And yet she again attempts to reroute this purely ontological discussion toward ethics when she asks Pyotr how much she means to him. The text assures us of Pyotr's sincerity when he responds: "You mean everything to me" (*ibid.*).

This phrase, of course, could be dismissed as simply a figure of speech, a romantic cliché. But Pelevin's language often incorporates two contrasting levels of signification.⁵ Thus it might be productive to consider the meaning of this "everything," uttered, after all, in the context of a novel whose central theme is nothingness. If Chapaev leads Pustota to accept all-encompassing nothingness, Anna pushes him toward a different perception of totality—as a matter of addition rather than subtraction. Pustota's answer crystallizes the idea of identification with the other; being "everything" in Pustota's life, Anna is *de facto* equated with it. Pustota's answer, then, refers us back to Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and its conception of compassion.

In Buddhism, compassion arises from the realization of the oneness of all. This is not a matter of respecting differences, but denying them. Buddhist transcendentalism is the understanding that others are also "I" and my enlightenment, the realization of my authentic being, is incomplete without this same realization on the part of others. Thus for example the eighth-century

4. Anna and Pustota discuss his book of poetry, entitled *Songs of the Kingdom of I*.

5. Sofya Khagi has persuasively argued that Pelevin's key mode is irony, expressed in multiple paradoxes and other self-contradictory statements: "*Chapaev i Pustota* engages irony in the form of paradox by presenting operative contradictions (and the problem of critique from within the system), such as consciousness that questions itself and language that challenges language" (385).

Buddhist monk and scholar Shantideva describes compassion embedded in the process of awakening⁶:

Strive at first to meditate upon the sameness of yourself and others. In joy and sorrow all are equal; Thus be guardian of all, as of yourself. The hand and other limbs are many and distinct. But all are one—the body to be kept and guarded. Likewise, different beings, in their joys and sorrows, are, like me, all one in wanting happiness. (122–23)⁷

When Pyotr says to Anna that she is everything to him, he is acknowledging—in a manner befitting a proper bodhisattva, a Buddha-to-be—their essential oneness and interrelatedness. One of the foundational Buddhist beliefs is that a bodhisattva postpones his own nirvana out of compassion for suffering mankind.⁸ Pyotr Pustota's eventual escape from Chapaev's conditional river of love and compassion may in fact be read as the bodhisattva's postponement of nirvana and an exercise in compassion.

After all, Pyotr Pustota's compassion extends not only to Anna—who is his love interest, which makes his feelings for her not exactly selfless—but also to less significant others. After Chapaev and Anna obliterate the surrounding world with their clay machine-gun, Pyotr reinitiates Anna's former line of questioning, echoing her reservations, and even heightening the ethical quandary implied. Anna had insisted that Pyotr acknowledge her own reality, but Pyotr now asks about the existence of others. Moreover, in contrast to pre-

6. On the influence of Shantideva's thought on the formation of the Tibetan Buddhist ethics, see Amod Lele, "Śāntideva" in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/santideva/>. Accessed May 31, 2017.

7. In her study of Shantideva's moral philosophy, Barbara Clayton explains that this realization of one's interrelatedness with others stems in fact from the recognition of emptiness and leads toward altruism: "[w]hen one sees that self and other exist only relatively, like the two shores of a river, and that self, like all things, is conditioned and impermanent, [...] one will be able to see that all others are as much 'the self' as one's own body-mind complex, and in this way, the suffering of others, and the good of others, will become as much a concern as one's own good and happiness. [...] Through seeing one's true nature as empty, one will also see that there is no real happiness if others are in pain. Having realized this, one ought to endeavor to eliminate suffering wherever it is found, and vow to remain in samsara [i.e., mundane existence], undertaking the good of all beings" (93). A slightly different argument for the inseparability of the awareness of emptiness and the realization of compassion is offered by Paul Williams in *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. On the basis of Shantideva's second meditation for developing bodhicitta (awakening), called "Exchanging the Self and Others," Williams argues that "The bodhicitta is said to have the nature of emptiness and compassion." He then proceeds to describe the structure of the meditation thus: "First, one meditates that all are equal in that all beings, like me, desire happiness and the avoidance of suffering. [...] Next, one becomes aware that each person individually is as important as I am, and therefore, objectively, since others are greater in number than I am so, as an aggregate, others are always more important than myself, therefore it is rational to help others rather than myself" (198).

8. Tracing the cognitive path of a bodhisattva, the one who seeks awakening, Williams writes: "In some manner the Bodhisattva is able to combine simultaneously his direct meditative awareness of emptiness with awareness of others, of his project of helping them" (61).

vious allusions to “other people”—which conjures a faceless collective hindering Pyotr’s self-definition and freedom⁹—these others now gain specificity. Pyotr expresses solicitousness for particular people. Others thus no longer constitute an abstraction, nor is concern for them something merely theoretical; they are endowed with markers of human specificity (names, professions). Confronted with the world’s demise as a *fait accompli*, Pyotr’s immediate reaction is a rather trivial sense of physical craving (for a cigarette). However, the minute this is expressed, he follows up with a more serious inquiry as to the fate of their driver. What has the obliteration of the world meant specifically for that person’s life? “‘That’s it,’ said Chapaev. ‘That world no longer exists.’ ‘Damn,’ I said, ‘the *papyrosas* were still in there [the vanished car]... And listen—what about the driver?’” (307). Chapaev responds that “[t]here wasn’t really any driver,” but Pyotr interprets this answer in a manner inconsistent with Chapaev’s teaching (and we are already practically at the very close of the novel!). Rather than coming to terms with the driver’s essential nonexistence as consistent with the emptiness Chapaev espouses, Pyotr thinks his teacher means the man had been just a golem-like doll. Had Pyotr truly been an adept in Chapaev’s doctrine, he would have found the latter’s answer not only acceptable, but applicable to everything he had formerly thought real. And yet his questioning continues: “But, wait, what about Kotovsky? I asked excitedly. ‘Has he disappeared too, then?’” (308).

Kotovsky’s Existence

Little if any attention is paid Kotovsky in the critical literature; yet his role in the novel is second only to that of the two titular characters. Georgy Kotovsky, like Chapaev a legendary Russian revolutionary and Civil War hero, plays the role of Pyotr’s romantic rival. But, importantly, he vies with Pyotr not only for Anna’s love, but also for primacy of authorship. Pyotr comes to suspect that the world of 1991, as it encroaches upon Pyotr’s own preferred reality of 1919, has in fact been created by Kotovsky. The relationship between the two men thus goes well beyond the narrow confines of the love triangle.

In matters of love, however, Pyotr suspects that Anna prefers Kotovsky’s dashing horsemanship to Pyotr’s interior wealth. In this scenario, Kotovsky’s wager is on his own physicality, which is consistent with his philosophical opposition to Chapaev’s monistic idealism. Kotovsky adheres to a body/mind dualism (especially evident in the discussion of the relationship between form

9. “The harder I try to avoid other people’s company, the less successful I am” (31). Later, Pustota punningly decodes the “coming round” of (re)gained consciousness as a form of social enforcement: “[T]he words to ‘come round’ actually mean ‘to come round to other people’s point of view, because no sooner is one born than these other people begin explaining just how hard one must try to force oneself to assume a form which they find acceptable’” (111).

and content in a drop of wax).¹⁰ Chapaev appears to win that particular argument; but Pyotr's later concern for Kotovsky's survival in the face of the purportedly salvific nothingness espoused by Chapaev reads as a peculiar clinging to the idea of the material reality of others.

Chapaev interprets Pyotr's "Wait, what about Kotovsky?" as anxiety for a fellow human being and responds to it with another plug for the idea of the ultimate emptiness of everything: "'Inasmuch as he never existed,' said Chapaev, 'it is rather difficult to answer that question. But if you are concerned for his fate out of human sympathy, don't worry. I assure you that Kotovsky, just like you or I, is quite capable of creating his own universe'" (311). But Pyotr finds little satisfaction in this answer. To this vision of human existence in the form of separate universes, he poses a question that in and of itself defines his attitude: Will he and Chapaev exist in Kotovsky's universe? This query crystalizes the difference between Chapaev's and Pyotr's understandings of subjectivity and its foundational emptiness: Chapaev responds that this question, which is so vital for Pyotr, has never occurred to him.

But why, most importantly, does Pyotr care about Kotovsky's fate? After all, he is a rival. And even if we assume, along with Chapaev, that Pyotr is simply humane enough to not wish even an enemy's demise, why would it not suffice for Pyotr to abide in his universe and know that Kotovsky abides in his own? Why should it matter that the former exists in the latter's world? The line of questioning strongly suggests that Pyotr finds Chapaev's recipe for enlightenment somewhat wanting. In contrast to the oblivion proffered by Chapaev, Pyotr in fact seems to desire continuity. Pustota's name itself signifies the very emptiness Chapaev champions. And yet, Pyotr Pustota fears this void. A fellow asylum inmate even explains Pustota's schizophrenic identification with the legendary hero Petka as an attempt to escape the emptiness alluded to in his name: "'Your last name is Void,' Volodin replied, 'and your madness is caused by your denying the existence of your own personality and replacing it with another, totally invented one'" (89).

Pustota fears the void because he imagines it as finitude rather than infinity. The exit into nothingness is unnerving rather than liberating, frightening him precisely with its restrictedness: "One might say, I thought, that on the one hand the world exists in me and on the other I exist in the world, and these are simply the poles of a single semantic magnet, but the tricky thing was that

10. In this argument, Kotovsky likens a human being to a drop of wax; while the form of the drop is temporary, he observes, the wax itself endures. Kotovsky's view of content/mind as more essential and lasting than form/body is predicated on the existence of both. Chapaev rejects this outlook, since for him there is no essential difference between the two; they are both ephemeral constructs, which Chapaev attempts to prove by shooting a lamp and reducing both its form and content to naught (Pelevin 1999, 219).

there was no peg on which to hang this magnet, [this dialectic dyad]. There was nowhere for it to exist” (149).¹¹

This constraining thought suffuses Pyotr with such terror that he decides to leave his room and seek out other people: “I was suddenly afraid to be alone. Throwing my uniform-jacket over my shoulders, I went out into the hallway and saw, in the bluish glow of the moon shining outside the window, the banister of the down staircase, and headed for the exit” (Pelevin 1999, 166). Pyotr is so disturbed by the absence of an outside space to site this self-referential system that he voices the exact same concern almost verbatim in the last chapter of the novel: “And where are you planning on hanging this dialectic?” (Pelevin 1999, 350).

It seems significant, then, that after the clay machine-gun’s erasure of the external world, Pyotr senses the tenuousness of resulting existence—which seems to want for the validation of other human beings: “Suddenly the thought struck me that 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. But if that were really the case, I thought, then what had I wasted my life on? Who, I wondered, who would read the descriptions of my dreams?” (310). At the heart of emptiness Pyotr still yearns for another human being. His dreaming is meaningless in the absence of one he might share it with. The wistful tone of this passage, which precedes Pyotr’s final dive into the river of nothingness, makes it difficult to read this last act as some serene welcoming of the end of all suffering. Resignation shades into despair. Pyotr is the last to make this leap. In fact, he tries to forestall it, beseeching Chapaev, before the latter’s dive, not to abandon him: “You can’t just leave me like this” (309). Having been deserted by all, Pyotr finally jumps, apparently out of abandonment and futility. He drowns himself in the conditional river of absolute love, it seems, to erase the disquieting realization that if the world of external reality is nonexistent, then his own life is a meaningless illusion as well. It is precisely this moment of illumination, the wisdom of absolute emptiness, to which Chapaev had been leading Pyotr all along. But this awareness of the all-encompassing void, which is supposed to lead to the cessation of suffering, itself appears to be quite insufferable. It lacks the cathartic release of, say, the finale of Tolstoi’s “Death of Ivan Ilyich.” Pyotr’s awakening from the dream of life, moreover, appears inconclusive, as shortly thereafter he finds himself in the “murky gloom” of the lunatic asylum (310).

Pyotr’s anxious wondering as to his own presence in Kotovsky’s universe receives an answer in the last chapter. At first glance, the action that takes place in 1991 appears more solidly physical, while that occurring in 1919

11. “[H]о фокус был в том, что этот магнит, эту диалектическую диаду не где было повесить” (Pelevin 1999, 166).

seems less plausibly “real,” as if concocted, perhaps, by the inflamed mind of a madman. But in the last chapter, it is revealed that the world in which Pyotr finds himself in 1991 has its own creator, Kotovsky. As Pyotr tells the cabbie who drives him away from the asylum upon his release at the end of the novel: “[A]s for the creator of this world, I am rather briefly acquainted with him. [...] His name is Grigory Kotovsky and he lives in Paris, and judging from everything that we can see through the window of your remarkable automobile, he is still using cocaine” (327). Pyotr is aghast at the coarseness of Kotovsky’s imaginary universe, but at least it affords him his desired continuation. Pyotr’s resurrection after drowning in the Ural River is enabled by the alternate reality that is the other. One survives, that is, in the consciousness of another. The existence of Kotovsky’s universe is the grounds of Pyotr’s rebirth, that very continuity which he desires more than any final enlightenment. Continuity is more fulfilling than nothingness. Via Kotovsky’s imaginary space, Pyotr is not only reunited with his beloved mentor Chapaev (who somehow manages to break through into Kotovsky’s 1990s), but is also finally able to escape into his “Inner Mongolia,” a space of autonomy and freedom. The synthesis of Kotovsky’s and Pyotr’s imaginary spaces makes it possible to overcome the earlier impasse.

In contrast to the deathlike stillness of the Ural River, the “Inner Mongolia” Pyotr finds in Kotovsky’s universe is characterized by movement, palpable in the falling water and the fast driving in Chapaev’s armored car in the novel’s final sentence: “[W]e kept moving faster and faster, and soon, very soon we were surrounded by the whispering sands and roaring waterfalls of my dear and so beloved Inner Mongolia” (335). Most importantly, however, movement is implied when the mysteriously reappeared Chapaev, upon conveying Anna’s greetings, seems to look forward to the books Pyotr has yet to write. Chapaev’s comment that “it seems that you promised her some books or other” in effect answers Pyotr’s earlier anguished question: “Who, I wondered, who would read the description of my dreams?” (335, 310).

The promise of future books suggests a reversal of the earlier leave-taking; it offers an alternative to the end by drowning and oblivion. It also combines ethical with aesthetic imperatives: The books must be written because they had been promised to a fellow human being. The presence of the other, then, is not incidental but essential to Pyotr’s enlightenment, and his earlier question about his potential presence in Kotovsky’s universe must have stemmed from this, perhaps intuitive, realization.

The Starry Sky and Moral Law

This infusion of inner freedom with an ethical and aesthetic dimension is not accidental. It crucially organizes the well-known passage, often brought up in the critical literature, in which Pyotr and Chapaev take in the sublimity of the star-lit sky with tellingly different emotions. Pyotr initiates the conver-

sation with the comment that “Beauty is the most perfect objectification of the will at the highest possible level of its cognizability.” Chapaev responds by spitting his cigarette butt in a puddle reflecting the sky, and announcing: “What I’ve always found astounding [...] is the starry sky beneath our feet and the Immanuel Kant within us.” To which Pyotr offers a reply that might initially seem both obscure and absurd: “I find it quite incomprehensible, Vasily Ivanovich, how a man who confuses Kant with Schopenhauer could have been given the command of a division” (142–43).

This might appear absurd: Is being conversant with these philosophers a prerequisite for military command? It is obscure, moreover, because it insists on the relevance of Schopenhauer, whereas Chapaev’s preceding line clearly refers to Kant’s famous dictum in the conclusion to *The Critique of Practical Reason*: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me” (Kant 133).

But both the absurdity and obscurity diminish as we realize that what is at stake here is the Kant-Schopenhauer debate on morality. In Chapaev’s revision, the question of morality, so prominent in Kant’s famous statement, has faded somewhat, but not disappeared altogether. In fact, only our mental restoration of the unspoken moral law can make sense of Pyotr’s reply: Yes, someone in a position of command, whose decisions bear on human life and death, *should* be well versed in moral philosophy.

But on what basis does Pyotr accuse Chapaev of confusing his German philosophers? Leaving absurdity aside, there seem to be two other possible explanations: 1) By trampling on the starry sky and replacing absolute moral law with a brilliant but finite philosopher, Chapaev negates the affirmative aspects of the sentiment. In its new rendition, it echoes Schopenhauerian pessimism: instead of the starry sky, a puddle with a cigarette butt; instead of the moral absolute, the human mind conscious of its limitations. Chapaev’s formulation thus seems to depart from the Kantian perspective, and is more akin to the Schopenhauerian affirmation of nonbeing as the only way to reduce suffering, nonbeing as preferable to being. 2) The second possibility, one that strikes me as more consistent with the rest of the novel, is that when Pyotr reproaches Chapaev for confusing the two philosophers, he refers not to Chapaev’s revision of Kant, but rather to his own Schopenhauerian sentiment about beauty with which the conversation began.¹² Not only does Pyotr’s rebuke attempt to reinstate the absent moral law, but it also pivots the discussion back to Schopenhauerian aesthetics.

Let’s attempt to untangle the constellation of beauty, will, and the absent moral law implicit in this Chapaev-Pustota dialogue. In *The World as Will*

12. In his article on aesthetics in Pelevin, Pavlov points out (102) that it is Pyotr who channels Schopenhauer.

and Representation, Schopenhauer launches a critique of Kantian moral philosophy, specifically Kant's postulate that moral laws exist a priori and are not grounded in empirical reality. Instead, Schopenhauer proposes that compassion, the primary ethical phenomenon, arises in the absence of meditation and abstraction. In *On the Basis of Morality*, he explains that "compassion operates in the individual actions of the just man only indirectly, by means of principles, and not so much *actu* as *potentia*. [...] Compassion, however, always remains ready to come forward *actu*" (151). Compassion, and the ethical action it generates, is always experiential rather than intellectual: "It is the everyday phenomenon of compassion, of the immediate participation, independent of ulterior considerations, primarily in the suffering of another, and thus in the prevention [...] of it. [...] Only insofar as an action has sprung from compassion does it have moral value; and every action resulting from any other motives has none" (144). Schopenhauer argues, moreover, that ethics is not a law, but rather a mysterious occurrence (*ibid.*); for him, of course, the only law of existence is will. Pure egoism is the rule, and moral deeds are exceptions to it. The only trigger that would compel a person to help a stranger in need is a sudden experiential apprehension of the ontological inseparability of self and other: "[I]n the case of his woe, I suffer directly with him, [...] but this requires that I am in some way *identified with him*, in other words that this entire difference between me and everyone else, which is the very basis of my egoism, is eliminated" (*ibid.* 143–44). In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell summarizes Schopenhauer's ethics as "a breakthrough of a metaphysical realization, that you and the other are one" (110). In other words, as opposed to Kantian abstract moral law, for Schopenhauer, ethical thinking arises from the identification of the self with the other, which resembles how compassion is conceived in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as discussed above.¹³

Furthermore, since ethics for Schopenhauer is empirical rather than purely conceptual, aesthetic experience plays a major ethical role. As Pyotr claims in the Schopenhauer-channeling remark cited above, beauty is will in its cognizability. Aesthetic experience bears a cognitive dimension. We gain knowledge of the will through the apprehension of beauty and this knowledge allows us to make an ethical choice, to accept or reject the will: "Will alone exists; it [is] the thing in itself, it [is] the source of all those phenomena. Its self-cognizance and its consequent decisive affirmation or denial is the single event in itself" (Schopenhauer, *Word as Will* 1: 227). Artistic work and compassionate acts constitute extraordinary events because they overcome the will's egocentric pull. In fact, Schopenhauer describes the work of an artist much as he describes ethical acts: "[G]enius is the capacity [...] for withdrawing cognizance from service of the will that it existed originally but to serve, i.e., en-

13. On Schopenhauer's indebtedness to Buddhist thought in the formulation of his moral philosophy, see for example Vandenebeele 2016, 388.

tirely losing sight of one's interest, one's willing, one's purposes, and thus getting utterly outside one's own personality for a time" (*ibid.*, 229). The only difference is that genius is self-aware, while a person acting compassionately may do so without explicitly understanding the connectedness of all being. The basic intuitive knowledge at the root of compassion, that we are not separate but one, can thus be derived from aesthetic contemplation.

This excursion into Schopenhauer's views on ethics and aesthetics clarifies the gist of Pyotr's disagreement with Chapaev. In the conversation about the starry sky, Chapaev relativizes or erases the moral absolute without proposing anything in its place; Pyotr, however, sides with Schopenhauer and proposes the aesthetic-cum-ethical experience as an alternative to Chapaev's negation. Schopenhauer envisions the almost mysterious emergence of a subject from the void of nonbeing and the blind instrumentality of being; and significantly, this phenomenon is described in *The World as Will and Representation* in part by examples from literature. By citing Schopenhauer, Pyotr suggests that an aesthetic experience turns us into cognizant and ethical beings, i.e., subjects.

Later, Pyotr makes an unsuccessful attempt to recant this theory during an erotic encounter with Anna, in which he bashes Schopenhauer's aesthetics. During lovemaking, the unusually talkative Pyotr advances a perhaps inopportune attack on Schopenhauer's empiricism: "Imagine that everything which a beautiful woman can give one adds up to one hundred per cent. [...] [S]he gives ninety per cent of that when one simply sees her, and everything else, the object of a thousand years of haggling, is no more than an insignificant remainder. Nor can that first ninety per cent be subdivided into any component fractions, because beauty is undefinable and indivisible, no matter what lies Schopenhauer may try to tell us. As for the other ten per cent, it is no more than an aggregate sum of nerve signals which would be totally without value if they were not lent support by imagination and memory" (287). Despite his desire to underscore the illusoriness of beauty, the relative insignificance of the other's physical presence in comparison with the potency of one's imagination, and the triumph of transcendental emptiness over the presentness of the moment in physical reality, he fails to fully eliminate the role of empirical contact with beauty (here, in the form of another human being) and the physical experience of love. Disassembling the experience of beauty into its constituent elements, he wishes to play up the creative mind and minimize external influence. Nevertheless, despite the overwhelming portion ascribed to imagination and memory (a whopping 90 percent), 10 percent still does belong to the physical experience.¹⁴

This 10 percent exists in the gaps of the conversation, and it is up to the reader's imagination to fill these in, mentally completing the aesthetic/erotic

14. Incidentally, as a retrospective perception of previous experiences, memory presupposes continuity and causality rather than timelessness and emptiness.

experience. By eavesdropping on this episode of lovemaking and recognizing the physical connection between Pyotr and Anna in lacunae of the text, the reader summons the scene's voided elements into being, substantiating the reality of Pyotr's dreams. On the diegetic level, a similar role is played by Kotovsky. A dualist with a keen sense of empirical reality, this ostensible rival in fact supplies, by his very being, the external space on which Pyotr's Inner Mongolia can be hung.

The Void

Pustota ends both his lovemaking and his mathematical attack on matter with the visual and semantic void: "No matter how temptingly it might lure one, the moment comes when one realizes that at the centre of the black bage ... bagel... bagel... there is nothing but a void, voi-oid, voi-oi-oid!" (289). At the moment of orgasm (which Russian denotes with the verb *konchat'*, lit. "to finish," obviously connoting a greater finality than the English "to come"), Pyotr, who began his mathematical calculations at 100 percent, or "everything," arrives appropriately at zero, or nothing. One would imagine that matter has been conclusively dematerialized. The zero, however, can signify both an end and a beginning, and the sequence of scenes here suggests as much. Pustota's orgasmic vocalization of the void is followed by the shout of "Void?" from outside. Someone is calling out to Pustota. Now the word refers not to nothingness, but to a singular being. It does not evoke absence, but provokes presence. And as Pustota realizes that it is he who is being addressed, the other's call summons, interpolates Pustota into being with others, and hence with matter. The void is thus transformed from a marker of the end into that of a beginning. This stratagem is repeated at the end of the novel when Pustota is suddenly mobilized into martial and poetic activity by the intervention of another; by his emergence, that is, in a world created by Kotovsky.

The novel thus proposes several different possible voids Pustota must contend with. In his article "Post-Soviet Emptiness (Vladimir Makanin and Viktor Pelevin)," Hans Günther argues that emptiness is the condition of cultural vacuum of the 1990s and that *Chapaev and the Void* "can be read as an agonizing—and unsuccessful—attempt to escape from Soviet nightmares" (105). Void, however, also constitutes the transcendental emptiness to which one should aspire, and of which Chapaev is the greatest advocate. Finally, void is the condition of (non)-being from which the subject must arise. I would differ with Günther's interpretation of Pustota's attempts as futile. The novel resounds with triumphant notes both in the foreword and the final passage, and I see no reason to read these as ironic. Or rather, I propose that their irony should be read as Khagi reads Pelevin's irony generally, as paradox—not just a form of travesty, but also a serious questioning. If the void is indeed a historical and ontological given, Pustota does succeed in both drawing upon it and foregoing it simultaneously in at least one key respect: the creation of a

text dedicated “to the good of all living beings” (Pelevin 1999, 9). What the novel espouses, then, is that emptiness can counteract nihilism only if it is balanced by compassion, by awareness of others as, as Schopenhauer puts it, “fellow-sufferers” of the world (*Parerga* 18), and by cognizance of the value of their existential condition.

Pustota is stuck between two voids, Chapaev’s transcendental and Kotovsky’s historical one. Under such conditions, his manuscript, composed in search of the self, is a careful balancing act. What he has written shows traces of others’ authorship and leaves gaps for the future reader to fill, because subjectivity can only be constructed in discourse, via interaction with others (and other characters). Perhaps this is why Pustota’s process of coming to terms with emptiness never reduces his concern, need, or desire for others. Relying on the insights of mathematical set theory, the philosopher Alain Badiou conceives of the void as “inconsistent multiplicity” (76). As I understand it, this term means that if being is indeterminate and empty, it is also variable and un-unified. When an unpredictable, inconsistent situation arises, the void is exposed. The shared unpredictability of being, grounded in a void, is an impetus for subject formation; it compels one to face one’s contingency and formulate a response. As Pustota comes to experience, nothing forces one to apprehend this void, and become a subject in the face of it, so much as aesthetic and ethical encounters.

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Тезисы

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Свобода и действительность Других в ‘Чапаеве и Пустоте’

Ссылаясь на заложенную в буддистском понятии “пробужденного сознания” (бодхиचितта) неразрывную связь между озарениями, которые сулит абсолютная пустота, и этическим поведением, данная статья утверждает, что роман «Чапаев и Пустота» озабочен отношением между субъектом и другими, а также потенциальной ролью последних в достижении просветления и подлинного бытия. Мысль о другом приносит, в конечном итоге, более глубинную актуализацию себя, чем то опустошение, которое дарует утопленнику чапаевская Условная Река Абсолютной Любви. Статья демонстрирует, что рецепт, предложенный Пелевиным для преобразований 1990х, — это не побег в солипсизм, а вдумчивое согласование границ между Я и другим, причем эстетическая сфера предоставляет идеальное пространство для данной операции.