BOOK REVIEW

Pelevin's Puzzled Protagonist: *The Clay Machine Gun* (1996)

Lotte van den Bosch

> He picked up two onions from the table and began cleaning them. One of them he cleaned until its flesh was white, but from the other he removed only the dry outer skin, exposing the reddish-purple layer underneath. 'Look here, Petka,' he said, placing them on the table in front of him. 'There are two onions in front of you, one white, the other red.'
> 'Well,' I said.
> 'Look at the white one.'
> 'I am looking at it.'
> 'And now at the red one.'
> 'Yes, what of it?'
> 'Now look at both of them.'
> 'I am looking,' I said.
> 'So which are you, red or white?'[1]

Viktor Pelevin's *The Clay Machine-Gun* (*Chapaev i Pustota,* 1996) is full of unexpected and startlingly direct questions like the one above. More specifically, it is full of ontological questions: questions about being, existence and reality.[2] These questions — which, like cleaning an onion, expose reality's multiple layers — haunt and puzzle Pelevin's protagonist, Pyotr Voyd. The pronunciation of Voyd's last name already gives a clue as to his state of being: a state of ontological crisis. Pyotr does not know when or where he belongs, what is real, or who exactly he is. He knows only the persistent and painful presence of an emptiness that he carries with himself: a "void."

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[1] Pelevin, *The Clay Machine-Gun*, 139.

[2] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction,*10 and 27 *et passim.*

The Clay Machine-Gun, translated from the Russian by Andrew Bromfield, is about interactions between the real and the unreal. And it is about a rootless man's search for meaning in light of the incessance of these interactions. This unrewarding search takes place in two different realities that appear alternately by chapter. The first is the period immediately after the Bolshevik-led October Revolution, which took place on 25 October 1917 according to the Julian calendar (7 November according to the Gregorian calendar). In this first reality, Pyotr begins as an experimental poet. At the very start of the novel, he is visited by the Soviet secret police organisation Cheka, which is not pleased with Pyotr's literary works. Pyotr manages to escape the Chekists and flees to Moscow. There, he meets the Red Army commander Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev, who appoints Pyotr as his political commissar. Supporting Chapaev during the Russian civil war, Pyotr finds time to discuss both war strategies and theories of life with this wise war hero. Their discussions lead Pyotr to question his own state of being more and more. Intriguing questions soon start haunting him both during the day and in his dreams. These dreams, with which every Soviet-era chapter in the novel ends, take him to an alternative reality.

In this second reality, the Russia of the early 1990s[3], Pyotr is a patient at a Moscow psychiatric hospital. In this hospital, Pyotr and his fellow patients participate in group sessions where, provoked by a therapy combining shock and drug treatments, they experience delusions and hallucinations. The purpose of these sessions, according to the psychiatrist Timur Timurovich, is for the patients to reach a state of "catharsis" in which each "can become aware of the arbitrary subjectivity of his own morbid notions and can cease to identify with them."[4] In Timurovich's opinion, Pyotr's case is "very straightforward."[5] What is going on with Pyotr, the psychiatrist explains, is that he is constantly confronted with the fact that he is still dealing with his past. He "simply cannot accept the new."[6] One way this condition affects Pyotr's life is in that every time

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[3] I remind the reader here that the novel was first published in 1996.
[4] Pelevin, *The Clay Machine-Gun,* 38.
[5] *Id.,* 32.
[6] *Ibid.*

he falls asleep in the institute, he returns to the period shortly after the October Revolution. Pyotr keeps going back to the past, or the past keeps coming back to Pyotr.

Pelevin's puzzled postsocialist

The tendency to shift from one reality to the other is, according to Pyotr's psychiatrist, a common phenomenon. Timurovich explains to Pyotr: "'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.'"[7] The paradigm shift results in a psychiatric condition or "subconscious conflict" that "nowadays almost everyone suffers from," the psychiatrist adds.[8] That statement is an invitation to look beyond the pages of Pelevin's novel and into Russian history. Pyotr's psychic condition can be seen as a metaphor for the so-called "postsocialist" condition, as described, amongst others, by Boris Groys.[9] Groys identifies the postsocialist condition as the consequence of a confusing transition from a deteriorating socialist era to an insecure future based on a different ideology.[10] This transition took place when the Soviet Union fell in 1991, but one could also argue that the entire period during which the Soviet Union dissolved counts as such a transition. Nancy Fraser describes the "in-between state" this transition brought about as a "skeptical mood or structure of feeling that marks the post-1989 state of the Left."[11] This skepticism is related to the doubt of many former inhabitants of the Soviet Union about their own positions. As Fraser puts it: "[f]raught with a sense of 'the morning after', this mood expresses authentic doubts bound to genuine opacities

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] As does Fraser in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*, I here place the term "postsocialist" in quotation marks. Like Fraser, I want to emphasize the critical postures that are possible in relation to this term. See Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, 3 *et passim*.

Alternatives for this formulation include "post-communist" (see Noordenbos, "Shocking Histories and Missing Memories," 48) and "Post-Soviet" (see Khagi, "From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Zapiens," 560; and Gomel, "Viktor Pelevin and Literary Postmodernism in Soviet Russia," 309-321).

[10] See Groys, *Art Power*, 154-155.

[11] Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, 3.

concerning the historical possibilities for progressive social change."[12] As this quotation suggests, the existential doubt concerns both the past — which, from a Soviet perspective, has disappeared – and a non-Soviet future — which is yet hard to grasp. This doubt-inducing ideological void is what Fraser and Groys call the "postsocialist" condition.

Pelevin and postmodernism
It is not surprising that a postsocialist crisis lies at the core of *The Clay Machine-Gun.* Viktor Pelevin himself experienced the disappearance of the Soviet ideology and the simultaneous emergence of an ideological void. Born in 1962, Pelevin grew up in Soviet Russia and published his first work after the fall of the USSR. Pelevin lived through the transition himself, and in *The Clay Machine-Gun*, he reflects sceptically on it. When the novel was first published in 1996, critics both celebrated and maligned Pelevin as a writer of "New Russia."[13] Pelevin vividly describes these reactions in an interview: "One Booker judge said 'Chapaev' was a virus designed to destroy Russia's cultural memory. After that it sold 25.000 in one week."[14]

Both the enthusiasm and the condemnations could be related to the postmodern character of Pelevin's novel. Just as its author has been "universally recognized as one of the chief practitioners of postmodernism in Russia today,"[15] *The Clay Machine-Gun* has been described as "the most essentially 'postmodern' of contemporary Russian prose."[16] The postmodern nature of the novel can be recognised not only in its aforementioned era-bridging chapter structure, but also in the themes it discusses. Postmodern considerations manifest themselves in the ontological questions that Pyotr and others ponder throughout the work.[17] These questions are in line with what Brian McHale calls the

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Jones, "Viktor Pelevin is Ironic Writer of New Russia."

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Gomel, "Futures at the End of Utopia," 293.

[16] Dalton-Brown, "Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Depair?," 216.

[17] By "ontology" I here refer to Thomas Pavel's description of the term: "a theoretical description of a universe." See Pavel, "Tragedy and the sacred," 234.

"ontological dominance of postmodernist fiction."[18] This type of fiction, McHale writes, "deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like ... 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?'"[19] These questions, Hale explains, "bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects." In *The Clay Machine-Gun*, Pelevin uses narrative structure, themes and deictic terms to create shifts in ontological focus. A striking example of such a shift is this seemingly meta-reflective passage in which Chapaev tells Pyotr about an effective way to fight:

> 'Ah, Petka! D'you know the way I fight? You can't know anything about that! Chapaev uses only three blows, you understand me?'
> I nodded mechanically, but I was listening carefully.
> 'The first blow is where!'
> He struck the table so hard with his fist that the bottle almost toppled over.
> 'The second is when!'
> Again he smote the boards of the table.
> 'And the third is who!'[20]

"Where?", "when?" and "who?": these three questions are relevant in both of the novel's realities, Russia around the time of the October Revolution and "New Russia" around the time of the fall of the USSR. The structure of the novel foregrounds two ontological possibilities that are, as other scholars have pointed out, equally plausible.[21] Since Pyotr falls asleep at the end of each chapter to awake in the alternative chronotope, each world is either real or a dream.[22] This indistinguishability of dream and reality is visible, for

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[18] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction,* 10.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] Pelevin, *The Clay Machine-Gun*, 137-138.
[21] See, for example, Gomel, *Futures at the End of Utopia*, 304.
[22] This is in congruence with what Smethurst remarks on the postmodern chronotope in general, namely that it "is often used against realist representations that rely on linearity and continuous time-space." See Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope*, 221.

example, in the transition from the third to the fourth chapter. The third chapter ends with the following passage:

> I sensed that I should not on any account fall asleep, but there was no longer anything I could do to resist; having abandoned the struggle, I hurtled down headlong between the minor piano chords into the same stairwell of emptiness which had so astounded me that morning.[23]

Does this passage mark the end of a dream or entry into one? The excerpt makes explicit that Pyotr falls asleep. That he does so is confirmed by the first sentences of the fourth chapter: "'Hey there! No sleeping!' Someone shook me carefully by the shoulder."[24] Is this an awakening to reality or to the unreality of things? And what about the "stairwell of emptiness" which Pyotr recognizes for having "astounded" him "that morning?"[25] Two considerations can be derived from this formulation. Firstly, the narrative offers an innovative way of "modeling ... our pluralistic ontological landscape."[26] Secondly, the narrative also plays with the theme of transition. The text makes clear that Pyotr's position in between the two realities is empty. The answer to the questions of "where?" "when?" and "who?" is in the negative.

Embracing emptiness?

It is this same empty position — or perhaps, *condition* — that comes to the surface when Chapaev and Pyotr talk about their own places in the world, which, as it turns out, is the same:

> I wonder, I thought, what he will say if I ask him where this 'nowhere' of his is located. He will have to define the word in terms of itself, and will find his position in the conversation no better than my own.
> 'Can't sleep?' asked Chapaev.
> 'Something is bothering me.'

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[23] Pelevin, *The Clay Machine-Gun*, 85.
[24] *Id.,* 86.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction,* 39.

'What is it, never seen the void before?'
I realized that by the word 'void' he meant precisely the
'nowhere'
which I had become aware of only a few minutes earlier.
'No,' I answered. 'Never.'[27]

The position between two time-space configurations has a name: it is the void that Pyotr crosses as he circles back and forth between chronotopes. He finds himself in the empty eye of the hurricane, or as *The Clay Machine-Gun* puts it with various other metaphors: a bagel,[28] dynamo[29] and a whirlpool.[30] Throughout the novel, Pyotr repeatedly comes to the conclusion that these circles represent the circle of consciousness. The only place which he can be certain is real is in his own head. The reality he knows is not to be found "out there" anymore. He keeps circling around the "out there" in his dreams – or perhaps these are his daydreams – without finding it back where it used to be.

As Chapaev describes this experience, "[e]verything in the world is just a whirlpool of thoughts, and the world around us only becomes real when you yourself become that whirlpool."[31] To become this whirlpool means grounding oneself in one of the two realities – and this is precisely what Pyotr does not succeed in doing. He does not feel at ease in the period around the October Revolution, having to act as if he were a Bolshevik soldier to survive, and in modern Russia he is excluded from society as a madhouse patient. When he is finally discharged from the mental hospital, Pyotr finds that "[t]he doors of freedom swung open in such a banal,

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[27] Pelevin, *The Clay Machine-Gun*, 149.
[28] See, for example, Pelevin, *The Clay Machine-Gun*, 280.
[29] *Id.*, 151-152, 169, 196.
[30] *Id.*, 294-295. A related term that appears throughout the novel is "whirlwind": "the whirlwind of scales and colours of the contradictory inner life" (*Id.*, 334). Another concept worth mentioning is that of the "dialectical dyad": "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 there was no peg on which to hang this magnet, this dialectical dyad. There was nowhere for it to exist!" (*Id.*, 149).
[31] *Id.*, 294-295.

everyday fashion that I actually felt slightly disappointed."[32] His world is instantly transformed, and nothing seems to have changed.

The Clay Machine-Gun evocatively represents the multi-temporal and multi-spatial context within which Pelevin's puzzled protagonist tries to position himself. Both the structure and the themes discussed in this novel visualize and problematize the complex "postsocialist condition." Throughout this work of fiction, Pyotr attentively explores both the Soviet and the post-Soviet period, only to find out that he is situated somewhere in between these chronotopes. The novel emphasises the empty character of this position: whatever he does, he cannot escape the void. Is that why Pyotr ultimately chooses to embrace emptiness? Some scholars have pointed in the opposite direction, arguing that the void might also be read as a positive place.[33] Taking Pyotr's own reflections into account, that statement is rather hard to defend. *The Clay Machine-Gun* does not offer a solution to the problem that is Pyotr: a lived embodiment of the ontological crisis of the postsocialist subject. What it does, however, is confront the reader with a vivid portrait of what this postsocialist crisis might look like. It might even invite us to confront our own emptiness and recognise that of others. As the American monk and writer Thomas Merton once wrote, "art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."[34]

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[32] *Id.,* 321.

[33] See Stakun, *Terror and Transcendence in the Void.*

[34] Merton, *No Man is an Island,* 35.

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