The Metaphysics of Numbers in the Eurasian Artistic Mentality: Viktor Pelevin’s *The Dialectics of the Transition Period (From Nowhere to No Place)*

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Subject to information overload in an increasingly complex world, modern man finds himself in a state of heightened anxiety. He is forced to expand his inner reality in order to accommodate the presence of an Other in whose image he can exist without the risk of confronting his own problems. If one extrapolates from observations of an individual’s personal, invented mythology to phenomena within the subjective-objective sphere, it becomes apparent that the significance of this disintegration of a person’s internal world lies in the removal of personal responsibility, which makes it possible to defer crucial decisions, or transfer the responsibility for them to others.

In literature, this type of character expresses himself through obsessive discourse and behaviour, as manifested in a series of protective speech acts and life situations. This complicated system of repetitions is intended to bring about a kind of relaxation – the overcoming of psychological trauma in a series of stages and the elimination of the state of fear. In Julia Kristeva’s terminology, this process acquired the name ‘renunciation’: impulsive activity that is symptomatic of the person’s fight against his impossible desires and which is directly connected to the basic mechanisms of artistic creation.

Somatic impulses, which come about through the person’s suppression of manifestations of instinct, engender a specially rhythmicised network of repetitions, namely, an accumulation, repetition or concentration of certain morphemes or of isomorphic linguistic units and units of plot composition. This is also a source of aesthetic enjoyment (calming). The semiotic structure of a literary text presupposes the suspension of meaning and frees the mental

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1 An obsession is defined as “the condition of being consumed by a single thought; a defensive operation or complicated series of actions that precipitate anxiety if they are not performed”. Laplansh Zh., *Slovar’ po psikhoanalizu*, Moscow, 1996, 237.


space for the unconscious, from which the Other begins to speak. Consequently, the neurotic belonging to the obsessive personality type becomes not only a character peculiar to contemporary society, but also a particularly successful feature of the poetics of the literary work with regard to reader reception (identification). Assigning to their works multiple tasks in this manner has become popular among postmodern writers.

An anankastic character is a person of an obsessive-compulsive personality suffering from a neurosis of obsessive conditions. He is pedantic and internally extremely orderly, tending to ritualise his own life, as well as to keep activity around him under his control. He usually fits easily into any social hierarchy, since he consciously limits his and others’ freedom. He is characterised above all by a megalomaniac devotion to large numbers, a passion for various types of collecting (things, money, women and so on), and a distorted perception of reality.

Rudnev identifies a whole body of similar literary types whose biographical authors – whom he studies in parallel – are known to have suffered from an obsessive neurosis or who had an obsessive-compulsive character. Taking this series of characters chronologically, one finds at the start Pushkin’s anankastic characters: the covetous knight, Salieri, Silvio, Germann and Don Juan. Then Gogol’ took from Pushkin the idea of portraying the anankastic money-grubber, creating Chichikov, the collector of dead souls, and Plushkin, the gatherer of dead things. Naturally, Dostoevskii’s old money-lender belongs to the same category, as do the obsessive, ‘German-like’ characters of Tolstoi (such as Karenin) and Andrei Belyi (Ableukhov); Vladimir Maiakovskii’s enormous numbers, who were the ‘heroes’ of his poems and for whom he had a maniacal love; and Iurii Olesha’s Kvalerov, the writer’s main accountant and the embodiment of his personal creative credo (“not a single day without a line”), who pedantically calculated the age of almost all his acquaintances out of fear of his own death.

A further function of obsession is to bring about the cessation of entropy, time and death. In Rudnev’s opinion, Kharms mastered this obsessive sedative vocational psychology particularly well. Aided by the poetics of obsessive repetitions, he incorporated in his children’s ‘bogeyman tales’ various elements irrelevant to the plot that were ostensibly intended to retard the plot development but which, paradoxically, had the opposite effect, causing the children to

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5 V. Rudnev, Metafizika futbola, Moscow, 2001, 228–265 (the section “Obsessivnyi diskurs”).