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PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ITS DISCONTENTS: VLADIMIR NABOKOV AND VICTOR PELEVIN'S *THE SACRED BOOK OF THE WEREWOLF*

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Abstract. For the Russian postmodernists of 1990s–2000s, Nabokov was perhaps the most influential author among those whose works were "repatriated" to post-Soviet Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nabokov became a symbol of writerly success as someone who had won recognition both in Russia and the USA and had succeeded as an author in both languages. Moreover, one of his languages, English, was growing in popularity among post-Soviet Russians, who yearned for their country to reenter the international arena. For Victor Pelevin, who strives for acknowledgement in Russia and abroad, Nabokov became a role model. As one of the most prominent representatives of Russian Postmodernism, Pelevin could not but engage with the Western discourses that inspired it. In post-Soviet Russia, psychoanalysis was one of those discourses, enjoying renewed popularity because of the information explosion of the 1990s. However, for Pelevin, Freud's theories can-

not exist outside the context of Nabokov's aggression, nor can they exist outside the Postmodern refutation of authoritarian metanarratives. That is why Pelevin's characteristic attempt in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* to embody a given Western theory in literature acquires Nabokovian undertones. This article looks at the novel as the materialization of certain psychoanalytic concepts with reference to Nabokov's interpretation of these concepts as limiting for both the creative process and one's personal life. It also considers Pelevin's signature proto-Buddhist themes. The Nabokovian context presents itself mainly in the form of references to *Lolita*. The Buddhist subtext turns the novel into a characteristically Pelevinian soteriological fable with social commentary.

Keywords: Pelevin, Nabokov, psychoanalysis, Freud, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, Pelevin's Buddhism, Postmodernism, *Lolita*

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ПСИХОАНАЛИЗ И ЕГО ВРАГИ: ВЛАДИМИР НАБОКОВ И «СВЯЩЕННАЯ КНИГА ОБОРОТНЯ» ВИКТОРА ПЕЛЕВИНА

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Аннотация. Из всей возвращенной литературы Владимир Набоков, пожалуй, оказался одним из самых влиятельных писателей для поколения русских постмодернистов 1990-х и 2000-х годов. Признанный как в России, так и в США, сумевший добиться успеха как художник на двух языках, один из которых становился все более привлекательным для постсоветской России, пытавшейся вернуться на арену мировой культуры, Набоков стал символом писательского успеха. А для Виктора Пелевина, явно ориентированного как на российского, так и на западного читателя, Набоков даже стал моделью для подражания. Как один из самых ярких представителей русского постмодернизма, Виктор Пелевин неминуемо взаимодействует с европейскими дискурсами,

которые вдохновили это течение. Одним из таких дискурсов в постсоветской России был психоанализ с его вновь обретенной популярностью, вызванной информационным бумом 1990-х. Однако для Пелевина теории Фрейда не могут существовать вне набоковской агрессии, как и вне постмодернистского отрицания авторитарных метанарративов. Поэтому типичная пелевинская попытка воплотить западную теорию в художественный текст в случае «Священной книги оборотня» приобретает набоковские нотки. В данной статье роман Пелевина рассматривается как материализация некоторых психоаналитических выкладок с учетом их интерпретации Набоковым как ограничивающих свободу творчества и свободу личности, а также в свете пелевинских про-буддийских тенденций. Набоковский контекст проявляется в отсылках к «Лолите», а буддийский подтекст превращает роман в традиционную для Пелевина сотериологическую притчу с социальным комментарием.

Ключевые слова: Пелевин, Набоков, психоанализ, Фрейд, «Священная книга оборотня», пелевинский буддизм, постмодернизм, «Лолита»

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Perhaps the most vigorous refutation of Freud appears in Vladimir Nabokov's memoirs *Speak, Memory*: "I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for sexual symbols and its bitter little embryos spying from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents" (Nabokov, 1989, p. 20). Nabokov's strong irritation later traveled to post-Soviet Russia to be discovered there together with psychoanalysis itself during the turmoil of 1990s, and became an important point of reference, especially for those who held Nabokov and his art in high esteem. One of their number was Victor Pelevin, whose novels and stories are filled with references and reverences to Nabokov as a mythical figure, to his art, and to his theory of art.[1] For Nabokov, who "believes every work of art should be a new and singular cosmogonic act, unrelated and unrelatable to any archetypal reference" (Oklot and Walker, 2018, p. 214), the Freudian notion of art was vulgar, limiting, and simplifying. The exiled Russian novelist believed that Freud's

[1] For the analysis of these parallels see (Desyatov, 2004; Cenys, 2019).

universalizing theory, which finds the source of the creative processes in an individual's childhood traumas, which are essentially and universally the same in every case, replaces the creative force with neurosis. In a sense, for Freud art is always a manifestation of the inner truth, while for Nabokov it is always a purposeless lie, a deceit for the pleasure of deceiving. He formulated his idea of art by using the old tale about the boy who cried wolf:

> Literature was born not the day when a boy crying wolf, wolf came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy came crying wolf, wolf and there was no wolf behind him. That the poor little fellow because he lied too often was finally eaten up by a real beast is quite incidental. … the magic of art was in the shadow of the wolf that he deliberately invented, his dream of the wolf; then the story of his tricks made a good story.
>
> (Nabokov, 1980, p. 5)

Literature is ultimately a trick, an enchantment which may or may not point to an empirical reality only to interrogate any verisimilitude it has so carefully created. For Nabokov, the writer is a magician who follows Nature's lead in his deception.[2] But for the mythical figure behind the texts that are published under the name "Victor Pelevin," it all goes even further: the world is the ultimate deceit; the boy keeps crying wolf, but there is no wolf, even if he happens to be eaten by one. Indeed, there is no boy, no valley, and no villagers, since all this is just a figment, a way for consciousness to convince itself of its own existence.[3] Therefore, Nabokov's imaginary wolf might just as well materialize in post-Soviet Moscow as a secret service agent, transforming Pelevin into the exemplary artist, the boy who cried "wolf!"

Pelevin's 2004 novel *Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia* (*The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*) combines Nabokov, Freud, and Nabokov's Freud in a supernatural love story of two werecreatures. The novel takes the form of a tale told by a werefox, A Hu-Li, who finds herself in post-Soviet Russia. She works as a fake prostitute by hypnotizing her clients so that they think she is fulfilling their wildest sexual fantasies. During one of these encounters, she gets into an argument about Nabokov with a masochistic philologist, who makes her lose control and fake-hit him too hard (in the sense that

[2] "Nature always deceives. From the simple deception of propagation to the prodigiously sophisticated illusion of protective colors in butterflies or birds, there is in Nature a marvelous system of spells and wiles" (Nabokov, 1980, p. 5).

[3] For Pelevin's insistence that any reality, including fictional ones, are nothing more than the play of irreferential signs, see his interview with Kristina Rotkirch (Rotkirch and Ljunggren, 2008, pp. 78–86).

the blow in question is in his, her, their heads). The outraged philologist turns to his FSB protector for help, which leads to A Hu-Li meeting Alexander (Sasha), a ranking member of that organization who finds himself enticed by her. Soon after, A Hu-Li ends up in his apartment, where she tries to pull her usual hypnotic trick, only to discover that it does not work on Sasha, because he happens to be a werewolf. This is the beginning of a long and passionate love affair, in the course of which A Hu-Li learns a great deal about the inner workings of the Russian economy. The love affair leads to a mutual transformation, with Alexander becoming an all-powerful weredog who has powers over matter, and A Hu-Li dissolving into liberating, proto-Buddhist nothingness. All this is heavily sprinkled with Freudian references, allusions, and dialog infused with sarcasm and ridicule of a recognizably Nabokovian kind.

Denying Psychoanalysis: Direct Addresses

There are several explicit references to Freud and psychoanalysis in the novel. The first one is A Hu-Li's choice of cocktail, which she explicitly marks as anti-Freudian, denying the connection between the name Rusty Nail and "the impending meeting, as anybody of a psychoanalytical cast of mind might be inclined to think" (Pelevin, 2008, pp. 8–9). This impending meeting is, of course, of a sexual nature, for she is a prostitute who is waiting for a client in a high-end Russian hotel. Employing a Nabokovian disgust toward the simplification and universalism typical of Freudian discourse, A Hu-Li offers a different explanation of the name, based on the bilingualism of the situation. She notices that the Russian translation offered in the menu was in fact a transliteration accidentally constituting a call "Расти, Наил!" (Pelevin, 2004a, p. 17). Contradicting the simplifying Freudian interpretation of the name Rusty Nail as anticipating intercourse, she instead invents a story about the pitfalls of emigration: "Mawkish Nail grows somewhere in Zhmerynka, makes big plans and doesn't even suspect that after emigration he will have only one way to go — to join the rusty nails. Or another idea: a story of a Russian American, who left to the lights of the great dream, but found himself vProzak"[4] (Pelevin, 2004a, p. 17). A Hu-Li's invention is based on an untranslatable play upon words. Russian 'попасть впросак' is a near-homophone of Prozac, the famous brand of anti-anxiety drug. Merging 'впросак' and a metonymic reference to "anxiety" into one word, A Hu-Li creates a completely different scenario, unrelated to the Freudian interpretation, and based on a Nabokovian strategy of wordplay. The connection A Hu-Li makes is more relevant to the Russian post-perestroika situation with its strange mixture of languages and newly discovered emigration possibilities.

[4] All translations, unless specified otherwise, are ours. This passage is absent in the English translation.

This acknowledgement, however, does not imply the internalization or even privileging of Freudian discourse. Thus, later A Hu-Li faces a scenario that on the face of it is perfect for a Freudian interpretation, but instead offers a list of non-Freudian explanations formatted to resemble Freud's own numerical-list-style elucidations. When confronted with the confusing case of Nelly, an ugly 50-year old transsexual who has more foreign clients than the young ex-model Karina, A Hu-Li scripts a degrading image of Western man to explain this disparity. According to A Hu-Li, Western man either cares too much about women's equality, or refuses to follow the standards constructed by consumerist society or is concerned about "the individuals least capable of competing in the conditions of the market," or is simply cheap (Pelevin, 2008, p. 9). Any psychoanalytically-minded person would immediately recognize that she is missing the main explanation: as an older woman, Nelly resembles "Western man's" mother and may thus serve as her substitute in fulfilling his oedipal phantasy. The omission is, of course, telling: for the highly educated Nabokovian A Hu-Li, this hypothesis is not even worthy of consideration, being as vulgar (пошло) as the satisfying of one's "sexual needs with the help of a photographic model" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 9).

Another direct play with the psychoanalytic discourse occurs when A Hu-Li provides an explanation for a preference she noticed while working in *National*: "Anal sex is the favourite sport of portfolio investors. There's a simple psychoanalytical explanation for this — just try comparing the prison slang term 'shoving shit' (толкать говно) with the expression 'investing money' (вкладывать деньги) and everything should be clear enough" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 23). In this Freudian comparison, A Hu-Li defines the whole professional life of a person by pointing to its alleged linguistic similarity to a piece of prison slang. The parallel, however, is not at all psychoanalytic: what the narrator offers is a disguised commentary on the market and investors, not a psychological observation about sexual habits. Circumventing the obvious references to the anal stage and thus the state of psycho-sexual development of portfolio investors, A Hu-Li instead shifts the attention from the person to the market itself, engaging in a completely different universalistic discourse by means of what she calls "a simple psychoanalytic explanation" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 23). Instead of revealing the truth about human nature (whatever that may be in this context), she reveals the "truth" about the market economy and its agents by proposing anal eroticism as the *driving force* behind it.

Materializing the Freudians

Despite all this anti-Freudian skepticism, A Hu-Li still feels comfortable engaging with the psychoanalytic discourse as a means of revealing reality's crude nature, as

compared with romanticized narratives. Thus, when Alexander offers her a fictional frame for their future relationship, in the form of the Russian tale *Аленький цветочек* (*The Scarlet Flower*), she immediately deromanticizes it with this psychoanalytic interpretation:

> It's one of those folktales that express the horror and pain of a woman's first sexual experience … It's a metaphor of how a woman discovers the essentially bestial nature of man and becomes aware of her own power over that beast. And the little scarlet flower that her father picks is such a literal symbol of defloration, amplified by the theme of incest, that I find it hard to believe the story was told by a housekeeper. It was probably composed by some twentieth-century Viennese postgraduate to illustrate his thesis. He invented the story, and the housekeeper Pelagia, and the writer Aksakov.
>
> (Pelevin, 2008, p. 103)

> Who is a housekeeper? A woman who keeps the keys… Not even the keys, but the ring, on which the keys hang. Should I explain?
>
> (Pelevin, 2004a, p. 123)

The Viennese postgraduate is, of course, a Freudian, and his authorship of the folktale, the legend behind it, and the writer who composed it is an expression of Pelevin's usual quasi-conspiratorial discourse, here as it relates to the topic of folktales.[5] According to Eliot Borenstein, Pelevin is "the bard of zombification," a term Pelevin himself coined as a reflection on the media's brainwashing effect on humans, which ultimately undermines the act of speaking itself: "Pelevin is taking part [in] the corrosive cynicism of the post-Soviet era, tacitly encouraging his readers to assume all speech, particularly political speech, is suspect precisely because it is persuasive" (Borenstein, 2019, p. 194). This paranoid logic of total brainwashing is supplemented with plots where "[w]hat man has created is shown at times to be the creator of man's universe, as Pelevin follows his own mocking line of thought on man's ability to believe precisely what he wants to and the consequences thereof" (Dalton-Brown, 1997, p. 227). Usually, the creators are parts of an European cultural discourse, typically generated in France by someone characterized as a drug-addict. For instance, in *Чапаев и Пустота* (*Buddha's Little Finger*, 1996), the main character, Petr Pustota, realizes that post-Soviet Russia wherein he dwells is so crude and confusing because

[5] Although *Аленький цветочек* was (re)created by Sergei Aksakov in 1856–1857, the plot itself is, of course, much older. For the typology and interfusion of folkloric and literary sources in the creative process, see (Begunov, 1983).

it was created by an important figure in the Red Army pantheon, Grigory Kotovsky, a one-time highwayman, who is now an émigré in Paris (Pelevin, 2000, p. 327).

In *The Sacred Book*, A Hu-Li is a demiurge whose personality changes depending on what is expected of her, based on her appearance at any given time. In other words, "from a human point of view, at any given moment" her "inner reality corresponds completely" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 4) to her external appearance. Hence, the reality A Hu-Li creates is based on the discourse of post-modernity in a way it was understood and represented in 2000s Russia. That is why *The Scarlet Flower* is materialized in its Freudian interpretation, as offered by A Hu-Li herself.[6] Right after discussing the folktale, the fox finds herself in a very similar situation, having her first sexual experience and discovering an actual beast in that what she thought was a man: when he sees her in a compromising position — "on all fours with … tail up in the air and … defenceless behind stuck out in his direction" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 108) — Alexander rapes her.[7] Immediately after that, A Hu-Li realizes her power over him: "although my tail apparently had no effect on him, it seemed that my words affected him quite powerfully" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 111). Thus, A Hu-Li's own (although in no way original) Freudian interpretation materializes in the text when she verbalizes it, unveiling the way Pelevin uses Western theory in his novels: giving them fictive substantiality to test (and essentially disprove) them. Here the interpretation works almost perfectly, with the exception of the absence of a permanent transformation, for Alexander turns into wolf only when he has sex with A Hu-Li. A permanent change will only come about through the development of "real love," signified by a kiss on the lips. Moreover, this transformation will not be into a prince; nor could it be seen as something positive, especially by A Hu-Li. On the contrary, instead of a hypermasculine, glorious, and beautiful wolf, as he was in the beginning, Alexander turns into a blueish black mutt (Pelevin, 2008, p. 242), who possesses supernatural powers, to compensate for his shoddy appearance. This transformation ends A Hu-Li and Alexander's relationship, signifying her complete disenchantment with her partner, who turns out to be just a dog of a man. The Freudian myth is materialized in order to show its creative power *when* it is recognized and articulated.

[6] Lipovetsky refuses to recognize the parallelism as anything more than a feint, because what he sees here is the reenactment of the tale (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 245) instead of the reenactment of its interpretation: the beauty is also a beast, but this does not change anything. The myth is laid bare, but it does not prevent anyone from reenacting it.

[7] The scene is framed as a simple misunderstanding, with A Hu-Li paralyzed in a position that can be interpreted as suggestive, and Alexander dismissing her pleas as her being 'coy.' Her rant afterwards is framed as an intentional overreaction, a test of her power over him. A Freudian would explain the paralysis as an instance of unconscious wish-fulfillment (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 6, p. 181), if not an open provocation, as her sister later suggests (Pelevin, 2008, pp. 164–165).

This principle was exposed and ridiculed when A Hu-Li and Sasha started role-playing based on *Little Red Riding Hood* and its alleged psychoanalytic potential: Sasha playfully invites A Hu-Li to "a colloquium on the psychoanalysis of Russian folktales" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 192), implying the vulgarization of psychoanalysis that came to interpret all cultural texts and all human behaviors in a sexual vein. However, as compared to A Hu-Li, he does not engage with the actual psychoanalytic discourse around the tale, but simply generates a simplistic sexual metaphor: "We're going to throw pies into Little Red Riding Hood's basket. Unfortunately, we only have one pie today. So we'll have to throw it into the basket over and over again" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 192). This diminution of style is reflective of Sasha's crudely reductionist style of thought.

A Hu-Li on Freud

Although employing the psychoanalytic discourse to satirically deromanticize the folktale, A Hu-Li does not really trust Freudian notions. When her sister suggests that she should visit a psychoanalyst who would explain her motives to her, A Hu-Li erupts, angrily reproducing the aggressively barbaric utterance Sasha had offered in response to her interpretation of a folktale *The Scarlet Flower*: "doesn't it seem to you that it's high time to take an aspen stake and stuff all this psychoanalytical discourse up the cocaine-and-amphetamine sprinkled backside that produced it?" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 165). This instance of verbal aggression is, of course, justified as an emotional response to the accusation that she had provoked her own rape. However, a further clarification by A Hu-Li allows for a better understanding of her issues with Freudianism. According to her, all of Freud's theories were induced by cocaine, which is

> a powerful sexual stimulant. And so all that stuff Freud invented — all those oedipuses, sphinxes and sphincters — they all exist exclusively in the mental space of a patient whose brains have been scrambled by cocaine. … The bourgeoisie love him *because* he is so loathsome. For his ability to reduce everything in the world to the asshole. … Because portfolio investors need prophets who will explain the world in terms they can understand. And who will prove yet again that nothing threatens the objective reality in which they have invested so much money.
>
> (Pelevin, 2008, p. 166)

This rant contains several typical criticisms of Freud. First, he is dismissed as a drug user, which is the philistine view of the figure of the fin-de-siècle decadent. At the same time, it is followed by a Nabokovian opinion on the matter, attributing Freud's appeal to his пошлость (Nabokov, 1973, pp. 100–101). Only the last argu-

ment, however, is relevant to A Hu-Li's own worldview (as much as a fox can have one)[8] — the fact that it does not challenge so-called objective reality, and the facility with which it dismisses such challenges. Employing a simplified version of Freud's theory of sublimation,[9] A Hu-Li's sister retorts, "Is the tendency to deny objective reality really based on sexual deprivation?" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 166). For A Hu-Li, the answer is quite simple: "The way a pig's neck is made means it can't look at the sky. But it certainly doesn't follow that the sky is a sexual neurosis" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 167). Thus, the main problem of Freudian theories in not so much their vulgarity, as their short-sightedness, or, more precisely, their inability to see beyond the presumed objectivity of empirical reality, even though they are presented as something that goes beyond sheer empiricism. Freud was, after all, a materialist, and thus could not possibly commune with the spiritual universes that are so central to Pelevin's narratives, where "the realization that everything around … is a simulative illusion is only the starting point for further meditation" (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 195).

Demonic Lolita, or Humbert's Apology

The perception of Freud as vulgar and reductive is not the only thing that unites Pelevin with Nabokov. In fact, one of the key references of *The Sacred Book* is Nabokov's scandalous novel *Lolita*. The presence of this text is made obvious from the very beginning, in the epigraph which was taken from the poem Humbert wrote to his stepdaughter/lover Lolita (Pelevin, 2008, p. 1). The eponymous novel has a formative influence on *The Sacred Book* and its use of psychoanalysis as an organizing cultural referent. Despite Nabokov's numerous proclamations of his strong dislike and even contempt for psychoanalysis, some researchers suggest that this was just a mask that hid the genuinely Freudian nature of his works (Hiatt, 1967, pp. 360–370).[10] Others ig-

[8] Foxes do not have human-like minds, they are devoid of any originality, being only able to "give people back the ideas and opinions that we have borrowed from them" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 136). At the same time, A Hu-Li develops her own worldview based on these borrowed ideas, which allows her to escape the world by dissolving into the Rainbow Stream (Pelevin, 2008, p. 331).

[9] It would be Freudian if "sexual" is replaced with "libidinal," referring to the extremely broad definition of the libido as the drive to "combine organic substances into ever larger unities" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 18, p. 43), which Freud developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. There, he claimed that the best and most valuable achievements of civilization, as well as "an untiring impulsion towards further perfection can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 18, p. 42). This notion finds expression in the beginning of the novel, when A Hu-Li discerns an erotic subtext in Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, making a pun out of the Big Bang: "my conviction was growing that Stephen Hawking wasn't writing about physics at all, but about sex — only not about squalid human intercourse, but the grandiose cosmic coitus that gave birth to matter" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 25). In a way, the realization of libidinal impulses engendered the universe.

[10] Others have suggested that the parodic treatment of Freud in Nabokov somehow manages to leave the Freudian psychoanalytic structure "intact, in place, and wholly legible" (Shute, 1984, p. 648).

nore it altogether as an indication of authorial intention which, after the proclaimed death of the author, cannot dictate our interpretation of his works, even if the very nature of the analysis hinges on a reliance on the personal details of the empirical author's life (Green, 1988). In this regard, *Lolita* is often considered the most acidulous example of anti-Freudian satire (Durantaye, 2005), yet some scholars have been apt to analyze it through Freudian lenses. Such an approach either involves psychoanalyzing Nabokov by conflating him with Humbert (Ingham, 2002)[11], or "uncovering" Humbert's intention to model *Lolita* after Freud's "Dora's case" (Linetski, 1996). However, these interpretations are beside the point because they are predicated on the notion of the novel as a mimetic simulacrum of some empirical reality. For Nabokov, as later for Postmodernism, this view is obsolete and irrelevant, since a work of fiction is endowed with the power to create a new, fictional world, which operates according to its own fictive laws.[12] That is why *Lolita*, like any other fictional text, ought not to be psychoanalyzed, lacking the ontological referent of the empirical psychic reality that is required for such a procedure. That said, it is clear that Nabokov's novel actively engages with the Freudian *discourse*, but only to mock and parody it. Pelevin follows the same Nabokovian path, both in interpreting fiction ("the books never contain cities and people; they only contain words" [Pelevin, 2004b, p. 15]) and ridiculing psychoanalysis. However, the writerly agenda that undergirds *his* approach is even more text-focused than Nabokov's. In this reading, *The Sacred Book* becomes an inversion of *Lolita*, permeated with a Nabokovian disdain for Freud and his acolytes, situated in post-Soviet Russia.

The connection between *The Sacred Book* and *Lolita* is hardly unnoticeable and has received several scholarly interpretations. Thus, Aleksandra Vorob'eva considers it a symbol of "the Russia we lost:" like Nabokov, who lost Russia in his youth when he was forced to emigrate, Pelevin (and his generation) lost Russia during perestroika

[11] A more refined example of this type of reading can be found in Teckyoung Kwon's *Nabokov's Mimicry of Freud* (Kwon, 2017), where she investigates the concept of mimicry in biology and in Nabokov's fiction, suggesting that he mimics Freud in his fiction like some animals mimic their predators. While extensive, this account still insists on the unfounded idea that "[i]n Nabokov's work, the term author does not suggest an implied author but the real author, Nabokov himself. His own desires are reflected in the character's actions" (Kwon, 2017, p. 39). Although Kwon claims that "[t]he evidence for this is overwhelming, and much of it is supplied by the author himself" (Kwon, 2017, p. 39), this evidence never really materializes in the book, apart from the unclear: "[i]n the "Afterword" of *Lolita*, for example, Nabokov hints that Humbert is the disguised author" (Kwon, 2017, p. 39). Without a quote or reference, this statement remains quite obscure.

[12] See Alfred Appel's introduction to *Lolita* (Nabokov, 1970, pp. xvii–xxvii). Brian McHale called this idea of art the ontological dominant, where questions about the reality generated by the fictional text become the most relevant (McHale, 2004, p. 10). For McHale, Nabokov's *Lolita* is a transitional text from Modernism, with its epistemological dominant related to the uncertainty about knowledge, to Postmodernism, with its ontological dominant. Considering Nabokov's own idea of an artist as an all-powerful demiurge, and his tendency to mix word-play with world-play, positioning him in the middle seems applicable.

(Vorob'eva, 2010, pp. 96–97). Olga Os'mukhina sees *The Sacred Book* as "if not a paraphrase, then an obvious parody of Nabokov's *Lolita*, starting with the plot, which is 'turned inside out,' and the direct references to the novel, and ending with the use of a narrative mask … representing an obvious allusion to *Lolita*." (Os'mukhina, 2010, p. 126) The diegetic narrator herself verbalizes this allusion:

> I took Lolita's story very personally and very seriously. For me Dolores Haze was a symbol of the soul, eternally young and pure, and Humbert Humbert was the metaphorical chairman of this world's board of directors. Apart from that, in the line of verse describing Lolita's age ('Age: five thousand three hundred days') it was enough to replace the word 'days' with 'years' and it would more or less fit me.
>
> (Pelevin, 2008, p. 51)

According to Os'mukhina, A Hu-Li can be called a nymphet, looking almost the correct age, having a demonic essence, and arousing complicated and ambiguous feelings in men (Os'mukhina, 2010, p. 126). However, this scholar seems to be too trusting of A Hu-Li's stated self-image, which the werefox carefully crafts for her own purposes, heavily relying on the character of Lolita. Notably, Os'mukhina misreads A Hu-Li's statement about her age, ignoring the phrase "more or less" in the text (Os'mukhina, 2010, p. 127), and ignoring also the fact that nobody knows how old A Hu-Li actually is, including the fox herself (Pelevin, 2008, p. 5). Her demonic and enchanting features indeed correspond to those of *Humbert's* Lolita, and A Hu-Li can be confidently called a resident of the "intangible island of entranced time" (Nabokov, 1970, p. 19), being an immortal fox who feeds on male sexual energy and thus preserves her youthful looks down the generations (Pelevin, 2008, p. 19). However, her perceived age is about 14–17 years old (Pelevin, 2008, p. 5). Both of these numbers are meaningful for Humbert, as they encompass Lolita's age when Humbert was supposed to lose interest in the "real" Lolita (as far as "real" can be applied here)[13] while still being in love with her never-aging image (Nabokov, 1970, p. 67); and her age when she rejected his final offer of a fairy-tale "happily ever after" ending (Nabokov, 1970, pp. 279–281). Hence, A Hu-Li is like Lolita after she *ceased* being a nymphet, and after Humbert realized that he still loved her; what the Chinese werefox identifies with is exactly what she could not be: a girl who is loved despite her age.[14] The *Lolita*

[13] Nymphets, in Humbert's definition, are aged 9–14 (Nabokov, 1970, p. 19).

[14] A Hu-Li was obviously insecure about admitting her advanced age to the wolf-man she loves. When Sasha asks her about it, she blushes and avoids the question (Pelevin, 2008, p. 193), and she reacts in the same way when he says she looks "three hundred years old" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 204) in her fox-form.

allusions, as well as the epigraph taken from Nabokov's novel, belong to A Hu-Li as the diegetic author of the book, and represent her attempt to balance her self-image as a demonic parasite with "a symbol of the soul, eternally young and pure" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 51). However, in her elusive vulpine personality she is more like Humbert: she longs for the lost beauty and complexity of the world, she is transformed by her real love for a crude, uneducated person (Os'mukhina, 2010, p. 127), and she writes a book immortalizing the story of that love (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 249). She also possesses extraordinary erudition and intellect, which far surpass those of her lover. Moreover, she takes the image created by Humbert at face value and, following his lead, justifies her parasitic existence by creating a work of art, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*. Like Humbert, A Hu-Li is a diegetic narrator who controls the narrative and assigns definitions, but, being a postmodernist (and a fox), she recycles already existing signifiers, "reflecting them from another angle, giving them a different spin, sending them into a vertical climb" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 136). Lipovetsky sees this analogy as a deconstruction of *Lolita* (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 250), considering A Hu-Li a parody on a generic Russian contemporary writer (Danilkin, 2004, p. 153). However, the admiration A Hu-Li has for Lolita suggests a certain longing for eternal love, including its physical dimension: after all, she has had "an old maid complex" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 121) for the last fifteen hundred years.

Life-Affirming Russian Masochism

Although A Hu-Li is a Chinese fox who identifies herself with an American girl created by a fictional European of mixed and indeterminate origin who was, in turn, invented by an exiled Russian-American novelist, the context of her writing is explicitly Russian or, more precisely, post-Soviet Russian. This context manifests itself in various ways, one of them being *The Sacred Book*'s engagement with the Russian stereotypes scripted by Freud. Arguably, the most influential of these is the alleged Russian propensity for that which Freud calls moral masochism.[15]

Moral masochism, as described by Freud, is rooted in the unconscious sense of guilt and a corresponding unconscious "need for punishment at the hands of a parental power" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 19, p. 169). As compared to sexually motivated masochism, in the case of the moral variety "the suffering itself is what matters; whether it is decreed by someone who is loved or by someone who is indifferent is of no importance. It may even be caused by impersonal powers or by circumstances; the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow"

[15] This stereotype famously prevented Freud from recognizing the death drive when it was first introduced by his Russian-Jewish colleague Sabina Spielrein (Rice, 2017, p. 18).

(Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 19, p. 165). This need for suffering manifests itself in a neurosis that disappears in the presence of actual misfortune, such as an unhappy marriage or a dangerous illness, which thus serve as a substitute punishment (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 19, p. 166). According to Freud, the need for punishment is motivated by an overactive super-ego, evolved from the suppressed aggression (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 19, p. 54). Because for Freud aggression is a manifestation of the death drive (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 18, pp. 53–60), masochism is the other side of the same Russian coin which compelled him to identify (self-)destruction as one of the defining features of Russian national character. According to Freud, moral masochism is "exemplified in so many Russian character-types," who "perform 'sinful' actions, which must then be expiated by the reproaches of the sadistic conscience" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 19, p. 169). In this sense, the Russian submissiveness to the outside powers should be seen as collective oedipal guilt, requiring collective punishment from a strong paternal figure. Moral masochism infantilizes the Russian people, making them seek a father figure who can provide relief from the individual and national sense of guilt. In the post-Soviet context, this idea acquires an additional dimension. According to Freud, the innate guilt in each person comes from the first patricide performed by sons in prehistoric times (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 13, pp. 141–143). Arguably, Russia faced a symbolic repetition of this patricide by murdering the last tsar, the father of the people, after the Revolution of 1917, which might have restarted the compulsive cycle of submission to an outside power as soon as there occurred the need for repentance. In other words, after Nicholas II, the last tsar, was canonized as a martyr in 1981 (by the Russian Orthodox Church abroad) and then in 2000 (by official Russian Orthodox Church) (Bol'shakova, 2017, p. 163), Russia "punished" herself by submitting to the epistemic power of the West, and acquired a strong, cruel and hypermasculine father figure: 2000 was the year when Vladimir Putin was first elected to the presidency.

This myth of the masochistic Russians and their purifying suffering appears in derogatory form in *The Sacred Book*, when the main character, who makes a living as a human prostitute, obtains her first client via the internet, one "Pavel Ivanovich[,] … an elderly scholar of the humanities" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 44). His peculiar request is "to take a flogging once or twice a week from Young Russia, which he had condemned to poverty by forcing it to earn a living by flogging old perverts instead of studying in university" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 45). The symbolism here is obvious: Russian intelligentsia assuming blame for the misfortunes of the Russian people in the form of self-sufficient guilt, which historically frequently resulted in actions that reduced the people to the same state of misery they had always known. Or as A Hu-Li puts it, it all comes "down to … the choice, from all the possible versions of the future, of the one that is the most

disgusting (пошлый)" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 85).[16] This metaphorical guilt over an unspecified fault was indeed passed down generations of the Russian intelligentsia beginning somewhere in the mid-nineteenth century. According to Tibor Szamuely, "guilt was the driving force that cleaved off the intelligentsia into a separate group, the cement that held them together" (Szamuely, 1974, p. 151). For a Freudian, this type of behavior can only be motivated by moral masochism. In *The Sacred Book*, Pelevin actualizes its material counterpart, erotogenic masochism, by depicting Pavel Ivanovich's sexual proclivities. Freud's "moral masochism" is assigned to a despicable and unbearably condescending pervert, yet one who can hardly qualify as a Dostoevskian figure.

In this scene, A Hu-Li is the one who engages with the self-improving value of pain, embarking on a spiritual journey of suffering by listening to Pavel Ivanovich's speeches, which induce in her "uncontrollable spasms of wild fury" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 45). Her "masochistic" decision is equivalent to the spiritual practice of repentance she later undertakes, using her own tail, which acts as a shame-inducing organ for her (Pelevin, 2008, pp. 143–144). According to Lipovetsky, "it indirectly correlates with the sensitivity of folkloric werefoxes to injustice and human baseness. But the shame which A Huli feels when she tugs her tail is directed at herself, putting her in touch with a physically piercing emotional reaction to the pain which she has caused to others" (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 259). The inward direction of this sensitivity is caused by the usual didactic dimension of Pelevin's books, which insists on Buddhist-like self-improvement as the only path to freedom.[17] Shame is instrumental in achieving the transformation into the Rainbow Stream (Pelevin, 2008, p. 331), a metaphor for reaching the Buddha's level of enlightenment, which Pelevin borrowed from Tibetan Buddhism (Rinpoche, 1999, p. 137). At the same time, pain, according to Lipovetsky, warrants the reality in the fictional world of *The Sacred Book*, embodied by A Hu-Li as a kynical trickster (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 261).[18] This corresponds to the Buddhist worldview, where suffering "is seen to be inherent to life itself" (Buswell and Lopez, 2014, p. 271)[19] and is inseparable from life. A Hu-Li explains this condition by means of the following metaphor:

[16] Although her description is not concerned with guilt, it represents her view of the unchanging situation in Russia throughout the centuries: "Every time the reforms begin with the declaration that a fish rots from the head, then the reformers eat up the healthy body, and the rotten head swims on. And so everything that was rotten under Ivan the Terrible is still alive today, and everything that was healthy five years ago has already been gobbled up" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 85).

[17] On Pelevin's Buddhism, see (Kornev, 1997; Sukhonos, 2010, pp. 87–128). Also, see his interview where he explains his attraction to Buddhism in terms of its ideological discordancy with totalitarian systems (Pelevin, 2002).

[18] Lipovetsky uses Sloterdejk's juxtaposition of cynicism and kynicism, where a kynic is the opposite of the negativistic cynic.

[19] Suffering and physical pain are signified by the same word in Sanskrit, *duḥkha*.

> Münchhausen suspended in a total void, squeezing his own balls as hard as he can and screaming in unbearable pain. Look at it one way and you feel kind of sorry for him. But look at it a different way, and he only has to let go of his own balls and he'll immediately disappear, because by his very nature he is simply a vessel of pain with a grey ponytail, and if the pain disappears, then he'll disappear as well.
>
> (Pelevin, 2008, p. 33)

Lipovetsky interprets this metaphor with reference to Sloterdejk's algodicy (a metaphysical justification of pain), which is the only value left in modernity (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 261). However, the justification of pain here is not so much metaphysical as ontological: pain ensures existence, because existence is nothing but pain. In this case, Sloterdeik's algodicy is hardly more relevant than Freudian masochism, although the latter provides a connection between pain and pleasure that is instrumental in Buddhism, where the desire for sensual pleasure (especially in the sense of sexual desire) is considered the root of suffering. The illustration of this connection appears in the sexual scene where extreme pain catalyzes "a monstrous, shameful pleasure that was too enthralling to be abandoned voluntarily" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 151). According to Lipovetsky, this scene makes it "clear that reality arising from pain — i.e., the desire for death — can just as well arise from love — i.e., the desire for the Other, entailing shame before the Other, as well as pleasure in that very shame" (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 263). His interpretation is surprisingly (and probably unintentionally) Freudian: the death drive is always accompanied by the sex drive, they are intertwined, and can easily turn into each other (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 18, p. 56). The pulling of the tail activates A Hu-Li's conscience, which is a function of the superego governed by the death instinct (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 18, p. 53). The death instinct is then transformed into the libidinal instinct by the accompanying pleasure of the act, as well as the pleasure derived from satisfying Nirvana principle, an expression of the trend of death instinct Freud borrowed from Barbara Low (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 18, p. 56). In view of Pelevin's borderline obsessive interest in Buddhism, the "Nirvana principle" would be a much more relevant designation for the destruction-related drives, although this is not a term commonly used in psychoanalysis. In Buddhism, Nirvana is the death of death, the ultimate extinction of a person together with their circles of reincarnation, and represents "the soteriological goal of the Buddhist path" (Buswell and Lopez, 2014, p. 589). The soteriological component is connected with the Buddhist interpretation of life, with its strivings and desires, as eternal suffering which can only be ended by the elimination of desire, which equals the elimination of life. In accordance with this notion, Freud defined the Nirvana principle as "the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli" (Freud, 1981–

1986, vol. 18, p. 55–56). In other words, the death instinct is the destructive tendency of the human psyche that is emphasized as an ideal striving in Buddhism, hence the appropriation of the Buddhist term by Freud.[20] The intensification of pleasure from pain comes not from the realization that reality can arise from love as much as it can from pain, as Lipovetsky concludes, but from the inward-applied death instinct, which equates the two, making it all the more obvious that pleasure is truly a form of suffering.

In addition, it is worth noting that neither the pleasure nor the pain in this sex scene are physical: the pain is caused by an acute sense of shame connected with the activation of conscience (Pelevin, 2008, p. 151), while the pleasure comes from an exchange of energies rather than the sexual act itself. A Hu-Li does not have genitalia; instead, she has a "prick-catcher," a hole intended for a penis should she find herself subjected to rape, similar to the plastic cylinder worn by the employees of the great ape reserve (Pelevin, 2008, p. 112). It is hard to say if this organ actually transmits any pleasure, since A Hu-Li never says anything about it, but she admits that for her, sex is more about the "connection between the energies of two beings, a joint trip" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 230). That is why A Hu-Li achieves the highest levels of pleasure after she and Sasha abandon physical contact in favor of a hypnotic journey created by the joint effort of their tails, the organs of hypnosis for were-creatures (Pelevin, 2008, pp. 231–232). Thus, they progress from Freudian physicality with its intermingling of the death and sex drives to a Lacanian absence, where a "sexual relationship … doesn't exist" (Lacan, 1999, p. 61),[21] because the subjects can never interact with each other without the mediation of the Symbolic, and the images it imposes on them.

Flickering Lacan and the Impossible Woman

The Sacred Book uses Freud's works because of its strong polemical connection to Nabokov and his abhorrence of psychoanalysis. However, there are also several, albeit fleeting, references to Jacques Lacan. By 2004, only a few of his works had appeared in Russian, among them Seminars 1, 2 and 5. Lacan's name appears once in the text (Pelevin, 2008, p. 265), but only as a symbol of an esteemed intellectual, and his ideas are never explicitly derided, possibly because they are much closer to the "truth" that the implicit author tries to impose. Or, perhaps, it was just that in the Russian cultural space Lacan's ideas were not yet known well enough.

[20] An appropriation, but not of the full Buddhist concept. For Freud, only the first step on the path to Nirvana was relevant, but the subsequent reincarnations were irrelevant, due to their non-existence in Freud's reality.

[21] The Russian translation of this Seminar appeared only in 2011, so it is not clear if this is an actual reference or just textual happenstance.

The best example of the way Freudian thought interacts with its later Lacanian development is presented in the main character's name, which constitutes a common Russian obscenity (Pelevin, 2008, p. 1). The diegetic narrator, A Hu-Li, is Pelevin's appropriation of the Chinese mythological fox, *huli jing* (fox essence) or *huxian* (fox spirit). Among all the variations of the name of this creature in Chinese mythology, Pelevin chose the word *huli* — *possibly* because *huli jing* is also a colloquial expression that "connotes a dualism recognized by all: the enchantment of a female beauty and her power of lustful destruction" (Kang, 2006, p. 2);[22] and *definitely* because *huli* sounds like a cognate to the Russian obscene word for penis. For a Freudian, A Hu-Li's status as a sex worker would be directly motivated by the obscenity of her name, which seems to mock her, being a constant reminder of the object she lost without ever having it — a penis.[23] The problem with this interpretation, apart from its obvious anachronism (A Hu-Li "was given the name at a time when the obscene phrase didn't exist in the Russian language, because the Russian language itself didn't even exist yet" [Pelevin, 2008, p. 3]), is that being a mythical fox, A Hu-Li also does not possess a vagina or any of the other female reproductive organs (Pelevin, 2008, p. 17). However, this is exactly what makes her a perfect representation of a female within the Freudian paradigm, where a woman is seen as a person without a penis.[24] In other words, a woman is defined through lack, not difference, and that is exactly the textual case with A Hu-Li: "you could never take a fox for a man" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 16).[25] Moreover, as she does not possess a clitoris ("a woman's real small penis"

[22] Lipovetsky connects this form to "the name of the patron werefox Hu Li Tsing (Huli Jing)" (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 240).

[23] She does have a Freudian substitute for it, a tail, which has penis-like qualities, namely the ability to grow in length "like a fountain when the pressure is increased several times over (I wouldn't draw any parallels with the male human erection)" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 17). She refuses to draw parallels, yet references the possibility in plain text.

[24] See Freud's description of the phallic stage, where "*maleness* exists, but not femaleness. The antithesis here is between having a *male genital* and being *castrated*. It is not until development has reached its completion at puberty that the sexual polarity coincides with *male* and *female*. Maleness combines [the factors of] subject, activity and possession of the penis; femaleness takes over [those of] object and passivity" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 19, p. 145).

[25] Although Freud declares that "the concepts of 'masculine' and 'feminine' ... are among the most confused that occur in science" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 7, p. 219), he insists on explaining the psychological development of a woman by means of the castration complex and penis envy (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 22, pp. 124–130), often using language that implies that little girls not just merely imagine their castration (which in itself is a questionable assumption), but are indeed castrated: e.g. "a girl may refuse to accept the *fact* [my italics. — *MF*] of being castrated" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 19, p. 253); "the unwelcome fact of women's castration" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 21, p. 156), "she acknowledges the fact of her castration" (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 21, p. 229). Lipovetsky interprets this detail as a sign of Pelevin's lack of trust in A Hu-Li's femininity, comparing it to the castration of women as described by Luce Irigaray (Lipovetsky, 2011, p. 266), completely missing the point that this is exactly how Freud defined women — by reference to men. Lacan will make this view even more explicit, describing woman as being virtually nonexistent (see below).

[Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 21, p. 157]), her body is a more plausible site for the castration complex, since it escapes the problem of Freudian penis-clitoris equivalence. Thus, the only woman who fully and physically embodies Freud's theory of femininity, biologically happens to be not a woman at all.[26]

This makes sense, of course, in the light of Lacan's impossibility of a woman. Lacanian psychoanalysis is centered around the concept of the phallus, a symbolic object, a signifier of an unspecified signified and a designator of the presence of desire itself.[27] In this schema, a man possesses a penis, an organ that symbolizes the phallus (Lacan, 2006, p. 579),[28] while a woman has no corresponding organ: "strictly speaking, there is no symbolization of woman's sex as such. … [t]he phallus is a symbol to which there is no correspondent, no equivalent" (Lacan, 1993, p. 176). That leads to the conclusion that a woman is by definition "not whole": "everything revolves around phallic jouissance, in that woman is defined by a position that I have indicated as 'not whole' (*pas-tout*)[29] with respect to phallic jouissance" (Lacan, 1999, p. 7). That is why

> There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital W indicating the universal. …
>
> That 'woman' (*la*) is a signifier. With it I symbolize the signifier whose place it is indispensable to mark — that place cannot be left empty. 'Woman' (*la*) is a signifier, the crucial property (*propre*) of which is that it is the only one that cannot signify anything, and this is simply because it grounds woman's status in the fact that she is not-whole.
>
> (Lacan, 1999, pp. 72–73)

[26] As she herself puts it, "Foxes don't have any sex in the strict sense of the word … In actual fact we're like angels — that is, we don't have any reproductive system" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 16). Note that the absence of a reproductive system brings up a comparison to an angel, a pure and divine and sexless creature, which corresponds to Freud's overestimation of the sexual component in human negative behavior, which should be tamed by superego acting as a conscience (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 19, p. 37). Despite her possession of this angelic absence, A Hu-Li is an ancient evil spirit (Pelevin, 2008, p. 26) who parasitizes on human sexual energy (Pelevin, 2008, p. 19).

[27] Lacan changed the signified of the phallus several times throughout in the course of his researches (Evans, 1996, pp. 143–146).

[28] Notably, here Lacan considers the clitoris an organ that can be symbolized with a phallus in the same way that a penis can be (Lacan, 2006, p. 579). However, he later ignores this similarity, probably because "the symbolization isn't the same, it doesn't have the same source or the same mode of access as the symbolization of man's sex. And this is because the imaginary only furnishes an absence where elsewhere there is a highly prevalent symbol" (Lacan, 1993, p. 176).

[29] It is not clear why Lacan uses the masculine pronoun here. Bruce Finke, the translator who left substantive commentaries, notes that fact but does not comment on it apart from admitting its curious nature (Lacan, 1999, p. 7). — *MF*.

In other words, there is no eidos of a woman in the same way as there is an eidos of a man: the sexual difference between male and female is defined via the phallus, of which the man possesses the symbol, while the woman does not. She is left with a supplementary jouissance within the phallic function (Lacan, 1999, 73), and therefore does not exist on the symbolic level. Thus, A Hu-Li, who does not have any sexual organs, and is not anatomically a female, can exist within the Lacanian schema as a perfect representation of the non-existent woman.

The obscene meaning of A Hu-Li's name, brought about by the Revolution, which, as she says, "took away the final prop of my self-respect, the old Russian letter 'i' that rendered my name printable" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 3), is a taunting aside at the psychoanalytic discourse, with a Lacanian twist. The primacy of the signifier (Lacan, 2006, pp. 412–441) allows for a valid interpretation of A Hu-Li's unfortunate name, but not in a sexual vein. Sliding along the chain of signification, one concludes that the name 1) is symbolically unstable, 2) conceals in itself a question, thus condemning its bearer to a constant existential crisis. This fictive meaning is illustrated by the presence in the novel of a sheet of calligraphy a Confucian once wrote for A Hu-Li: "A Khuli iva nad nochnoi rekoi..." (Pelevin, 2004a, p. 14) the absence of a dash, or any other punctuation mark, suggests an interpretation such as: "why is the willow above the nighttime river?," or, possibly, "what is the willow [doing] above the nighttime river?," both readings pointing to doubt about the meaning of existence. A Hu-Li later inadvertently revisits this ontological quandary when she comes up with a fake name for her passport, Alisa Li (Pelevin, 2008, p. 11). She explains her choice by referring to her "Asiatic face" (Li being "a common Korean surname," [Pelevin, 2008, p. 11]), and to the hidden question "Alisa li?" (Pelevin, 2004a, p. 18), is she really Alisa? However, there is one more question, which A Hu-Li ignores: "A lisa li?" in Russian means "Is she really a fox?", which adds to the existential or even ontological conundrum.

Lacan's famous "flickering signifiers" appear in the novel directly, in A Hu-Li's recollection of the enlightening conversation she had with the Yellow Master. Explaining the soteriological teaching that was allegedly bequeathed by the Buddha for the were-creatures, the Yellow Master explains that the ultimate goal of the super-werewolf is the Rainbow Stream, and the super-werewolf is "a were-creature who succeeds in entering the Rainbow Stream" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 304). Thus, "the former is defined in terms of the latter, and the latter is defined in terms of the former" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 305). This is the most profound meaning there is, because "no signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification" (Lacan, 2006, p. 415). Commenting on the treacherous nature of language in the description of the track no. 2 in the CD attached to the Russian book, A Hu-Li says: "words, like spintriae,

can connect in threes or even fours in a wide variety of French ways. And every time some resemblance of a meaning will stick, and that is what all the amphetamine discourse is built on" (Soundtrack no. 2: *Filosofia*, 2004). Thus, Lacan's discovery plays a constitutional role in the text of *The Sacred Book*, since A Hu-Li realizes that, like Humbert, she "has only words to play with" (Nabokov, 1970, p. 34).

Which is all there is anyway.

Dreams and the Literary Unconscious

The novel includes that statutory trope cum topos, a dream. This nocturnal figment asks to be interpreted within a psychoanalytical framework, which the diegetic narrator immediately rejects as too obvious and therefore irrelevant: "I had suspiciously Borgesian dreams about the defence of a fortress — something like the storming of a city during the Yellow Turban rebellion. I was one of the defenders and I was throwing heavy javelins down from the walls" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 78). Here the fortress would seem to signify A Hu-Li's self, and her protecting it from the attack is a defense against her first sexual experience, resulting in her first love. However, the diegetic narrator rejects any interpretation whatsoever, instead referring to her experience with "entertaining psychoanalysis" in the Soviet 1920s and offering this mocking coda, overloaded with Freudian symbolism: "And then our tails fell off and they told us they were lying in a coconut hanging above a waterfall" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 78). Her rejection of any possible interpretation has a simple motivation: "Life's less cluttered that way" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 78). Thus, A Hu-Li's disdain for psychoanalysis is based not so much on a conceptual disagreement, but more on what she perceives as its irrelevance and uselessness. Being one of the "human ideas" werefoxes play with, psychoanalysis does not have the soteriological potential A Hu-Li is looking for. At the same time, A Hu-Li offers a possible clue for actually interpreting the dream, calling it "Borgesian". She does not go into great detail when she recounts it, but by evoking the name of the Argentinian Modernist she allows us to imagine a vivid picture of a fortress under attack, referencing the oldest of the four plots he identified in "Los cuatro ciclos" (The Four Stories): the siege of a city defended by brave men, as exemplified by the siege of Troy (Borges, 1989). Pelevin was definitely aware of this essay, since he referenced it in the book he published next year, *The Helmet of Horror* (Pelevin, 2006, p. ix), which contains a plethora of references to Borges, including an exploration of the four stories Borges describes.[30] The importance of Borges for Pelevin is frequently noted. For instance, in the preface to *Buddha's Little* Finger he claims that one of the

[30] On the comparison of Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" to *The Helmet of Horror*, see (Chebonenko, 2012).

working titles for the novel was “Сад расходящихся Петек,” (A garden of forking Pet’kas), a clear allusion to “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” (The Garden of Forking Paths) (Berlina, 2009; Sukhonos, 2010, p. 88). Now, Borgesian stories belong to the same realm as A Hu-Li, namely, fiction. According to Freud, dreams are manifestations of the unconscious, which is also a place of residence of one’s “family history” (Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 23, p. 167). In other words, through dreams, as per Freud, a person also has access to the events of their family’s past. However, A Hu-Li’s dream connects her to the past of *her* kind, which is world literature.

Later on, she has another dream, which she does not frame with an anti-Freudian commentary, although it fits perfectly within Freud’s wish-fulfillment hypothesis. In this dream, A Hu-Li moves a stone slab from the entrance to a cave, freeing some chickens that were stuck there (Pelevin, 2008, p. 240). She sees that the chickens have realized a path to freedom, which mirrors her situation: although she has not discovered her own path yet, she has found the key she needed to dissolve in the Rainbow Stream — her love for Sasha. The freeing of the chickens comes from the activity that corresponds the most to the animal part of her identity, which is materialized in her actual transformation into a fox. To stimulate this transformation, A Hu-Li “hunts” chickens — an activity traditionally attributed to foxes — but for *human* reasons. The elaborate process involved in the “hunt” is aimed at inducing an excessive feeling of shame and thrill through having an audience for the hunt, that is, the humans who own the chickens. These feelings, with the help of a “living catalyst,” open the possibility for her transformation into a fox (Pelevin, 2008, p. 153). The chicken should be alive throughout the hunt: if a chicken dies, A Hu-Li will turn back into a human (Pelevin, 2008, p. 196). It is set free at the end of the hunt (Pelevin, 2008, p. 153). In the dream, A Hu-Li liberates multiple chickens at once while inhabiting her animal form (Pelevin, 2008, p. 240), thus achieving both objectives of the hunt, and without involving humans. The thrill is absent as well; instead, there is a certain tranquility to this idyllic dream; recognizing the chicken she stole the night before, A Hu-Li waves at it, but is not offended at its lack of response, and she remembers the dream fondly when she awakens (Pelevin, 2008, p. 240). The feeling of placidity tied to the liberation motif acts as a prediction for the ultimate freedom A Hu-Li will achieve in the future; and by writing *The Sacred Book* she outlines the path other freedom-seekers can follow. Freedom for herself and potentially for others was her life-long dream (Pelevin, 2008, p. 303), which in her case was soon to be fulfilled after she realized that she had already found the key that was missing, — her love for Sasha (Pelevin, 2008, p. 319). Freudian wish-fulfillment is prominent in this dream, as well as the fact that the wish in question is neither unconscious in the Freudian sense, nor connected to the subject’s childhood, nor linked to her id.

The same misappropriated unconscious manifestation, which has soteriological implications instead of actualizing the Freudian sex- or death-drives (although theoretically this soteriology itself can be attributed to the death drive, i.e., to the wish to return to the pre-living state [Freud, 1981–1986, vol. 18, pp. 7–64]), appears in A Hu-Li's realization of the reasons for her hatred of the word "blowjob." In her theory of the socio-political situation in Russia, the 'upper rat' (a pun on аппарат) is "engaged in slobbering self-satisfaction" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 177) by letting the oligarchy, metaphorically represented by an obscene reverse pun on the English term "high society" (х‹-›й сосаети), to steal while the oligarchy is letting the 'upper rats' steal in their turn. A Hu-Li explains: "that's why I hate the word 'blowjob', … there you have it — the psychopathology of everyday life" (Pelevin, 2008, p. 177). Here, as elsewhere, A Hu-Li refuses to pursue Freudian or Freudian-inflected explanations, instead crediting the sage of Vienna only with irrelevant, superficial meanings. In a letter to her sister, A Hu-Li compares the rat with the uroboros, a Nordic snake that bites its own tail (Pelevin, 2008, p. 85). The word "uroboros" is used by her frequently, and eventually she realizes why: she herself was a doing the same thing. With her hypnotic organ, a tail, she hypnotized not only her clients, but also, first and foremost, herself. Like the uroboros's tail, A Hu-Li's own tail has gone right into her head to deceive her mind, creating an illusion, which is the world she lives in (Pelevin, 2008, p. 318). Her dislike for the word "blowjob" comes from the fact that she associates it with the condition she is putting herself into, which prevents her from setting herself free and ceasing her constant world-imagining, the cycles of her demiurgical activity. What Freud saw as manifestations of the unconscious, driven by suppressed wishes, appears in the novel as a manifestation of that which is behind consciousness, that which can lead a person to an ultimate freedom not bound by desire.

* * *

Pelevin's use of psychoanalysis in *The Sacred Book* shows a Nabokov-inspired love-hate relationship with Freud's theory, based on its creative potential for drafting a new illusory vicious circle that leads away from ultimate freedom. Inheriting Nabokov's strong abhorrence for the universalizing totalitarianism of psychoanalysis, Pelevin creates his own version of Humbert's "trifling with psychiatrists" (Nabokov, 1970, p. 36) — A Hu-Li's trifling with psychoanalysis. However, she is willing to give Freudian theory more of the benefit of the doubt than Humbert did. While trifling with psychoanalysis (and the readers), the diegetic author concedes that Freud's theories possess a certain veracity, though she dismisses the value of that veracity as irrelevant. Even if psychoanalysis can offer minor on-point interpretations, they all

appear to be only half-truths, relevant for the moment as myths also are, but treacherous sub specie aeternitatis, for they take a person on a false path of fake unveilings, which are relevant exclusively because of the textual reality they generate. Freudianism can interpret sexual experiences or visions or one's dislike for the word "blowjob," but only as long as the implicit author or diegetic narrator allows it. As soon as the subject rises above the level of the superficial or crude, psychoanalysis turns into a pig which cannot lift its neck to look up at the sky.

And that is exactly the point.

The ultimate truth, as is always the case in Pelevin, lies in Buddhist philosophy and practice. This novel, like all of his texts, shows that any grand narrative, any revolutionary epiphany is ultimately an illusion that a given consciousness creates in order to persuade itself of its own existence. The true path to freedom lies in the realization that ultimately, *everything* is an illusion, and in one's liberation from all desires, i.e. the suffering of the world. As Nirvana is the death of death, in order to be attained it requires an epiphany of epiphanies, or bodhi. Thus, the libido, which is so important in the Freudian discourse, both in its original and demotic meaning, is an obstacle that keeps people from realizing what it is that lies beyond the pleasure principle — that is, the Nirvana drive.

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