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Victor Pelevin's Novel about Vampires as the form of Reflection on Postmodernism

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Abstract

The current stage of culture development is usually defined as post-postmodern. Although this term is not well established and is interpreted differently, in any case it involves the overcoming of postmodernism. In Russian literature we should mention Victor Pelevin among the authors, whose works demonstrate the post-postmodernist tendencies most clearly. The evolution of his prose testifies that the postmodern worldview and the very mechanism of postmodern writing has become the subject of critical reflection in the late works of the writer. The novel by V. Pelevin "Empire V" (2006) is the material of the analysis in the article. The aim of the study is to reveal the nature and the forms of postmodernism reflection manifested in this work. During the analysis the authors established that Pelevin plays with a popular genre of mass culture - a novel about vampires, using it as a kind of metaphorical way to clarify the nature of postmodern literature, which appropriates, absorbs and exploits the forms, ideas and motives earlier developed in culture. Postmodernists, like vampires, borrow information from different sources and use "someone else's blood" for their own purposes. Combining the "languages" of mass and elite cultures, activating the intertextual links, Pelevin eventually pursues antipostmodernist goals: he reveals the totality of the simulativity, proves that mass culture is ready to absorb postmodernism, and turn it into an empty signifier. This can be defined as a kind of cultural reflection, as a form of the self-reflection and writer's cognition on the state of modern culture.

Keywords: Post-postmodernism, Victor Pelevin, Reflection, Mass culture, Novel, Vampires, Post-modern technology.

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1. Introduction

Scholars note "a radical shift in the self-awareness of culture" (Epstein, 2005: 463), which occurred at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries. This new stage of development is called post-postmodern. This term is interpreted differently by researchers, as, indeed, modernism, and postmodernism (Epstein, 2005; Epstein, 1995; Lipovetsky, 1999; Mankovskaya, 1999; Krylov, 2014). Thus, N. Mankovskaya argues that "Post-postmodernism (...) puts forward some new aesthetic and artistic canons, (...), seeks to create a fundamentally new artistic environment" (Mankovskaya, 1999: 22). According to the scholar one of the most important characteristics of this "environment" is the interactivity of the virtual world. At the same time, "the concept of virtual world" embodies a dual meaning: imagination, appearance, potentiality and truth" (Mankovskaya, 1999: 22). Mikhail Epstein suggests "another and matured shift in "post-post-postmodernist" culture to be designated by the prefix "proto", and, thus, emphasizes "the radical transition from finitude to primacy as a mode of thinking" (Epstein, 2005: 466). In his understanding, "proto" (...) indicates not an order in time, but an open possibility, an embryonic stage of some phenomenon. This is a sign (...) of potentiality, hypothetic nature and subjunctive mood" (Epstein, 2005: 471).

"The transition from finiteness to origin" implies the rethinking of postmodernist attitudes. Viktor Pelevin is one of the Russian native writers, whose work expresses a critical reflection on postmodernism.

2. Materials and methods

Researchers have drawn the attention repeatedly to the fact that Pelevin's work stands out against the background of postmodern literature (Genis, 1999; Kostyrko, 1992; Blinova et al., 2015; Bogdanova et al., 2008). The authors of the collective monograph devoted to the study of V. Pelevin's literary strategies write: "Pelevin converges with postmodernism, perhaps only "by an external form" and in that total rejection of the society and the entire human life in its modern forms, which the "new" writers declare. If postmodernists are mostly satisfied with the realization of "nihilism", the deconstruction of the external world, then Pelevin creates his own world. If postmodernists, speaking of the external world destruction, mean simultaneously the total destruction of the inner world, then Pelevin does not accept the denial of some positive essence of a man, the inner psychological sense of a subject (be it a man, an animal, an insect, a plant, a sunbeam or a speck of dust)" (Bogdanova et al., 2008: 6).

The subject of our study is the author's reflection on postmodernism, which has not attracted the attention of critics and literary critics. In our opinion, it is appropriate to use the prefix

"proto" in relation to V. Pelevin's prose within that new meaning, pointed out by M. Epstein: "Under the sign of "proto" culture can do everything that was forbidden by postmodernism: novelty, history, metaphysics and even utopia. (...) "Proto" is the period of changing projects that do not subordinate to our only reality, but multiply its alternative possibilities" (2005: 471).

We believe that the evolution of Pelevin's creativity testifies to the writer's overcoming of the prohibitions imposed by postmodernism. At the same time, he actively uses the whole arsenal of postmodern methods and his "technology" in his works. Thus, Pelevin "fights" with postmodernism using his own weapons.

The material of the study in this work is the novel by Victor Pelevin "Empire V" (2006) as the most revealing in the aspect of interest to us and which was little studied so far. The purpose of the analysis is to clarify the nature and forms of the author's reflection on postmodernism in this work. The main method of the study is hermeneutic one as the most appropriate to the subject of study. The work also uses the methods of intertextual analysis, since Pelevin's novel is based largely on the laws of the literary game.

3. Results and discussion

In "Empire V" the author uses the fable of the novel about vampires, which has become one of the popular genres in modern mass culture (B. Stoker, E. Rice, S. Mayer, S. Lukyanenko). In this regard, it should be recalled that Russian literature has a long tradition of mystical plot use (see: Shamina, 2016). However, Pelevin goes his own way. The mystical plot is put into the service of rather realistic author's attitude.

His novel is based on the story of Muscovite Roma Shtorkin, who finds himself in a parallel world - the vampire empire, where he must also become a vampire after the completion of the necessary training. In the interpretation of this popular story in mass culture, it would seem that one can see some of the features marked by N. Mankovskaya as the characteristic features of the post-postmodern "environment" - the interactivity that determines the relationship between the real and virtual worlds, the combination of "appearance" and "truth" in the characteristics of the virtual world (Mankovskaya, 1999: 22). However, it should be noted that interactivity manifests itself not only in the works of post-postmodernism, so it is important to understand the ways this virtual world is represented. In our opinion, the author's position in "Empire V" can be expressed using the term "anti-irony", proposed by Vladimir Muraviev in relation to the poem by Venedikt Erofeev "Moscow-Petushki" (Muraviev, 1990: 8). Clarifying the meaning of this term, Mikhail Epstein writes: "If irony turns out the

meaning of a direct, serious word, then anti-irony turns the meaning of the irony itself, restoring seriousness, but without straightforwardness and uniqueness" (2005: 422).

According to the principle of anti-irony, Pelevin involves the mass-cultural genres, codes, models, aesthetic methods and philosophical principles of postmodernity in the game field, parodies them using their own artistic "arsenal".

In the novel "Empire V" vampires are represented as super-people, the highest link of the evolutionary ladder. Their main difference is language - a special organ that passes from a vampire to a vampire. One of his functions is to "read" a person through blood, penetrating into his memory, thoughts and feelings. Due to the language, vampires can use the knowledge and experience of other people, apply other people's skills and talents in their lives. This already allows us to assume that the image of a vampire here is a kind of metaphor for a postmodern writer. As you know, postmodernism lost the notion of creativity as an individual act, the creative process is based on rethinking, borrowing, exploitation of forms, plots, ideas and motives elaborated in the culture of the past. Postmodernists, like vampires, read information from different sources and use "someone else's blood" for their own purposes.

It is remarkable how Roma expresses his new sensations after his first taste of the "red liquid". He uses the words of the popular "Soviet song" for this: "(...) Something with my memory has become, / Everything that was before me, I remember ..." (Pelevin, 2009: 67). In this quote, the mistake made by the hero attracts attention: the words by the poet R. Rozhdestvensky from the song "For that guy" "everything that was not with me - I remember" are replaced here with "everything that was before me, I remember". This "reservation" conveys accurately the essence of the postmodern game in the situation of "déjà vu".

Another argument in favor of the fact that Pelevin uses the novel about vampires as the method of critical reflection on postmodernism is the interpretation of the library image. It can be found in many iconic works of postmodernism: "The Name of the Rose" by U. Eco, "The Babylonian Library" by H. L. Borges, "Khazar Dictionary" by M. Pavic, etc. And it's not accidental, the image of the library appears as the metaphor here for the key postmodern thesis "the world as a text". Pelevin also has a library of "red liquid" in the empire of vampires, in which a huge amount of information is collected, but it is written not in books but in test tubes with blood, which a vampire can "read" only by drinking them:

"The tubes were labeled with numbers and letters. Each drawer of the card index had an index - a combination of several letters and numbers. Apparently, the library had to have a catalog" (Pelevin, 2009: 45).

The first test tube, which the new vampire Roma Shtorkin takes out, was called: Pasternak + ½ of Nabokov. This cipher, first of all, demonstrates the idea of simulation - the most important attribute of the postmodern world picture, where everything turns into empty signifiers, the words that are meaningless, and secondly, this cipher allows us to visualize the mechanism of postmodern creativity: a game with the signs of culture makes it possible to mix anything with anything, in any proportion. Thus, Pasternak + ½ of Nabokov is the algorithm for any postmodern "dish" preparation.

The novel "Empire V" is oriented simultaneously to an elite and mass reader. This can also be seen as a characteristic feature of the postmodernist text, which has a two-level nature. However, Pelevin in his novel about vampires not only realizes this principle, he intentionally reveals the technology of postmodern writing.

In addition to the "pop" story about vampires, the writer also plays another popular genre of modern popular literature - fantasy, and in particular, the famous novels by J.K. Rowling about Harry Potter. This cycle is built on the principle of education novel. The hero is surrounded by false and true teachers, who either hamper his personal development, or on the contrary, help him in this. Pelevin's novel can be called a fantasy novel of upbringing. It is not by chance that the reference to Harry Potter appears at the very beginning of the book. Roma, who "wanted a wonderful childhood" as a child, dreams of "becoming (...) a sorcerer's apprentice, like Carlos Castaneda or Harry Potter" (Pelevin, 2009: 41). And indeed, Roma Shtorkin - a gifted boy from a poor family, becomes a new Harry Potter. Pelevin's hero enters the Fifth Empire (Empire V), where he receives a new name - Rama II (from old Indian "Rama" - "dark"). It is not just citation, but a parody citation: this name refers simultaneously to the ancient Indian mythology, and to the works of the mass culture - the novels by Sergei Lukyanenko, where vampires are presented as "dark ones". As in the novel about Harry Potter, in the empire Rama has teachers who teach him "magic". The "kind" and mighty curator-wizard Enlil Maratovich reminds Dumbledore from the novel by Rowling and even his farewell phrase after the first meeting with Rama - "We are glad that you are with us again" almost duplicates Dumbledore's "We are glad you are back!". "Thoughts from the test tube," which were mentioned earlier, resemble the memories described in the books about Potter, "activated" in the case of placement in the Whirlpool of Memory. In general, "Empire V" has a lot of such allusive references to the novels about Potter. The theme of vampires and "potter" cycle became peculiar signs of mass culture, so Pelevin's appeal to them is quite natural.

In the empire vampire novices are taught two main subjects - glamor and discourse. Rama's, Jehovah's and Baldr's teachers say that they determine the ideology of modern society. These

are the basic concepts of politics, culture, spirituality and everything else. A vampire needs to master them in order to merge with people. People are represented as a biological species, bred for vampire feeding; The mind that distinguishes it from animals is the monetary gland; His culture is cake, left from the process of money production. Glamor and discourse are the means to keep this "herd" "in check". The whole life of people revolves around money, while glamor and discourse are their direct embodiment. Due to them, vampires may not worry that people will start to think about the true state of things, since they are too busy "milking money". But it gradually turns out that the world of vampires duplicates the world of people completely, so the vampire's happiness is mixed up with the same idea of money and the circulation of thoughts about it.

The central ideologeme of glamor is disguise, and it includes not only the change of clothes, but for example, "the moving from Kashirka to Rublevka and from Rublevka to London, skin transplantation from buttocks to face, sex change and all that stuff" (Pelevin, 2009: 75). Modern discourse is also reduced to "dressing up" - "or a new package of those few topics that are allowed for public discussion". They are represented by everything that allows you to represent your glamor.

Glamor and discourse are represented by Pelevin as simulacra - the concepts that have only an external form, but do not have any real content - only "pointless images" and "meaningless meanings". Nevertheless, the whole human life is built exclusively around them and on their basis. Explaining the role of glamor and discourse, Pelevin brings the reader to the understanding of mass culture role: it does not simply implant a certain way of life, but destroys a person. Postmodernism (it is ironically called "developed postmodernism" in the novel like the popular ideology "developed socialism" of the 1970s) becomes the part of glamor discourse, the part of a beautiful fashionable life and a simulacrum word gradually. So, according to the principle of anti-irony and according to the law of negation negating, the postmodern thesis about the blurring of boundaries between high and low, elite and mass art is played out again.

4. Conclusion

So, on the basis of the performed analysis, we came to the conclusion that Pelevin's novel "Empire V" is not just another version of the vampiriade, not a new modification of fantasy in the spirit of "Harry Potter" or a postmodern novel, but a pamphlet novel whose author, reflecting on the fate of modern culture, reveals the postmodern and masscult technologies.

The author's reflection in this case can be defined as a kind of critical cultural reflection, as a form of cognition and self-awareness of modern culture state. Pelevin embodies the serious content in the genre model of the novel about vampires due to "anti-irony".

The writer uses postmodern techniques and principles of a text organization in order to expose the reality simulator. Combining the "languages" of mass and elite culture, activating intertextual links, Pelevin ultimately pursues antipostmodernist goals: he reveals the totality of simulation, convinces that mass culture is ready to absorb postmodernism, and turn it into an empty signified one.

Thinking about the danger of mass culture spread leads to the intensification of anti-utopian tendencies in the novel "Empire V", as well as in Pelevin's prose as a whole.

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