



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Shocking Histories and Missing Memories: Trauma in Viktor Pelevin's *Čapaev i pustota*

Noordenbos, B.

DOI

[10.1016/j.ruslit.2016.09.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2016.09.003)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Russian Literature

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Noordenbos, B. (2016). Shocking Histories and Missing Memories: Trauma in Viktor Pelevin's *Čapaev i pustota*. *Russian Literature*, 85, 43-68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2016.09.003>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)



ELSEVIER



Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Russian Literature 85 (2016) 43–68

Russian
Literature

www.elsevier.com/locate/ruslit

SHOCKING HISTORIES AND MISSING MEMORIES: TRAUMA IN VIKTOR PELEVIN'S *ČAPAEV I PUSTOTA*

BORIS NOORDENBOS

Abstract

The article draws on recent developments in trauma studies to analyze the complex “re-organization” of Russian history in Viktor Pelevin’s celebrated novel *Čapaev i Pustota* (1996; translated as *Buddha’s Little Finger*). Pelevin employs the narrator’s individual shock, amnesia and trauma – and the confused historical plot ensuing from it – for a reflection on the possibilities of collective remembrance and mourning in post-Soviet Russia. The article briefly positions its approach among other recent efforts in Russian studies to apply notions of “trauma”. Subsequently, it analyzes Pelevin’s intricate reflections on the confusing traumatic legacies of twentieth-century history in this novel.

Keywords: *Viktor Pelevin; ‘Čapaev i Pustota’; Trauma Studies*

It is a commonplace that the historical revelations of the perestroika era have not encouraged in Russian society profound debates about the cruelties of collectivization, mass deportations, the Gulag, and other forms of totalitarian repression under Soviet rule. The short-lived fascination (in the press and on television) with past atrocities and injustices was not followed by a thorough, nation-wide rethinking of collective responsibility, nor by decisive juridical steps against former Party leaders, or by serious compensations for the victims of Soviet terror and inequities. Russia’s incomplete *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, it is often added, partly explains the current instability of Rus-

sian narratives about the Soviet legacy: ever since the late 1990s popular and political stances toward the Soviet past unpredictably oscillate between rejection and loyalty, denial and nostalgia.

Imaginative fiction from the 1980s and 1990s, however, has often offered more profound engagements with the atrocity-filled twentieth century. Russian novels and stories, especially from the period directly after perestroika, have vividly reflected on the problems involved in the collective remembrance (or oblivion) of Soviet history, and have linked these issues to wider philosophical and historiographical concerns (Marsh 2007: 28). Viktor Pelevin's bestselling 1996 novel *Čapaev i Pustota*, translated into English as *Buddha's Little Finger*,¹ may be considered a prime example of this tendency. While the book has been analyzed from a wide array of different angles, this article focuses on the novel's complex "re-organization" of Russian history, and its intricate reflections on collective memory and oblivion. The novel suggests that the "blank spaces" of history and the disorientation produced by political upheaval undermine attempts to piece together the disparate parts of Russia's twentieth-century past. The book also saliently employs the hero's individual shock, trauma and amnesia – and the confused first-person narration ensuing from it – to reflect on the possibilities of collective memory in the post-Soviet context.

The psychological effects of Soviet rule and the cultural disorientation produced by perestroika were, of course, not new to Russian readers in 1996. These themes had been explored by, among others, Vjačeslav P'ecuch and Viktor Erofeev. Moreover, the "empty spaces" in collective memory and official historiography formed a recurring trope already during perestroika. The "blanks" in history were a key concern, for instance, in the novella *Kapitan Dikštejn* (1987; translated into English as *Captain Dikshtein*) by the scenarist and writer Michail Kuraev. The book deserves some attention here, as it is a key predecessor to Pelevin's particular re-organization of Russian history in *Čapaev i Pustota*. Kuraev's novella deals with the Kronštadt Rebellion of 1921 in a manner that supplements *and* challenges the official version of the event. But it also cautiously investigates the official attempts to airbrush or withhold the episode altogether from Soviet citizens. In one of the most ominous passages in the book the narrator draws parallels between the dark, deadly holes in the ice on the Gulf of Finland – created by artillery and gunfire during the fighting of February and March 1921 – and the "black holes" in Russian history, left by decades of distortions of the past: "Где же еще прикажете искать фантастических героев и фантастические события, как не в черных дырах истории, поглотивших, надо полагать, не одного любопытствующего, нерасчетливо заглянувшего за край!" (Kuraev 1990: 46; "Where are you to look for fantastic heroes and fantastic events if not in the black holes of history, which, one must assume, swallowed more

than one careless, curious man who dared to look over the edge!" [Kuraev 1994: 48]).²

Kuraev's narrator, in a chatty tone, steadily builds up clues that culminate in the revelation of his protagonist's secret: Igor' Ivanovič Dikštejn is actually an anonymous stoker who took part in the Kronštadt mutiny and who has assumed the name of an officer who was executed immediately afterwards. Although Kuraev's hero has increasingly modeled his behavior on the supposed manners and views of the actual Captain Dikštejn (who was of aristocratic German descent), his personality remains "unsubstantial": "заяв один-единственный раз в жизни чужое, скажем так, место, он уже никогда больше никого не теснил, ни на что не претендовал и, строго говоря, места вообще не занимал" (Kuraev 1990: 11; "Having only once in his life assumed someone else's place, so to speak, he never again pushed anyone out, never made any claims and, strictly speaking, didn't occupy any space at all" [Kuraev 1994: 15]). It is hard not to read the story of "Dikštejn" as a parable about the social and cultural effects of a gappy history. The novella implies that not only "Dikštejn", but late Soviet society as a whole, is condemned to an unconfident existence for as long as historical facts remain obscured.

Čapaev i Pustota masterfully condenses some of the concerns already put on the agenda by Kuraev and other perestroika writers. However, the novel intricately links them to themes of shock, amnesia and trauma, developing influential literary modes for reflecting on the traumas of Soviet Terror and the confusion wrought by the unexpected dissolution of the Soviet lifeworld. This article proposes to analyze the novel's struggle with memory and history with the help of trauma studies. Since the 1990s, Western scholars in the humanities have extended the study of trauma beyond its psychological and clinical significance. One of the main branches of this trend is represented by Yale-based literary critics such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman. Combining poststructuralist criticism with a renewed interest in Freudian psychoanalysis, these scholars have set out to investigate the ways that shocking experiences and horrific historical events, typically relating to World War II and the Holocaust, challenge accepted modes of narration and representation. They trace trauma in the avant-garde literature and cinema of, among others, Alain Resnais, Albert Camus and Paul Celan. Through omissions and disturbed structures their works, the Yale critics argue, testify to the shattering force of trauma.

These scholars generally start from Freud's intuition – presented in various of his essays from the early twentieth century – that trauma is essentially an experience which is so shocking and overwhelming that it cannot be fully assimilated into consciousness. It is lodged away in the victim's mind, unavailable to normal retrieval, and it is likely to return in the form of hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks. Both Caruth and Felman suggest

that literature has a privileged relationship to the disarrayed and inaccessible reality of trauma. Literary language is particularly suited to bring out the failure of representation that trauma, in this interpretation, entails: literature can, paradoxically, demonstrate that certain experiences “cannot be phrased in the accepted idioms” (Felman, Laub 1992: 202). Thus, in bringing conventional modes of telling and writing up to their limits, literary texts may convey, in a performative mode, the very impact of a trauma.

Recently, scholars have begun to criticize this poststructuralist emphasis on aporia, the “unsayable”, and the obstacles to a coherent representation of trauma. Noteworthy is the perspective adopted by Roger Luckhurst, who is among those who reject the privileging of “narrative rupture as the only proper mark of a trauma aesthetic” (Luckhurst 2008: 89). Luckhurst is convinced that trauma “generates narrative *possibility* just as much as *impossibility*” (83; italics in original). Analyzing material ranging from Vietnam War films to the horror and gothic novels of Stephen King, he demonstrates that trauma not necessarily precludes established narrative forms. On the contrary, popular culture has developed coherent modes for communicating individual and collective experiences of traumatization. In the West trauma, according to Luckhurst, has been turned “into a repertoire of compelling stories”, that are often mobilized to reflect on “the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood” (80). The Russian figurations of (cultural) trauma and loss are, obviously, different from those in the West, but in the case of Pelevin’s novel they are similarly entangled with questions of memory and identity.

The scholarly interest in Russian narratives of loss and (cultural) trauma is undeniably growing. Recent years have witnessed the publication of various articles and special issues devoted to these topics (e.g. *Slavonica* 2011, Vol. 17, No. 2). Important are Alexander Etkind’s (2004; 2009a; 2009b; 2013) attempts to adopt Western reflections on mourning (ranging from Freud’s classical essays to Dominick LaCapra’s recent writings) for the analysis of post-Soviet discourses. A bulky anthology on trauma, edited by Sergej Ušakin and Elena Trubina (2009), moreover, has recently been published by “Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie”. It features translations of seminal texts by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, but it also contains Russian contributions that embark on the important task of investigating the value of Holocaust-based theories for analyses of the cultural legacy of Soviet atrocities.

Unfortunately, and notwithstanding these important contributions, valuable insights regarding (cultural) trauma are not always used to their full potential in Russian studies. When dealing with themes and tropes of violence, remembrance and grief, scholars have too often had a naturalistic take on trauma, presuming that Russia can be considered a traumatized nation altogether, which expresses its (unmourning and undigested) collective feelings

of loss and guilt in symptomatic cultural expressions. In the conclusion of her otherwise compelling monograph on Russian historical prose between 1991 and 2006 Rosalind Marsh, for instance, argues that recent fiction testifies that “Russian culture and society have not yet had an opportunity to engage in a definitive, therapeutic process of mourning and working through past traumas” (2007: 537). Even if we take Russia’s “traumas” and the necessity for “therapy” as a metaphor, it is not entirely clear what the coping mechanisms of the individual mind could tell us about the complex social and political processes of remembrance in Russia.

A similar discourse has been expressed by Russian scholars, for instance by Dina Čapaeva in her sociological study *Gotičeskoe občestvo: Morfologija košmara (Gothic Society: Morphology of a Nightmare)*. The author argues that a widespread reluctance in post-Soviet Russia to confront the crimes of the Soviet regime has resulted in the estranged, alienated attitudes of Russians toward recent history. For many Russians the Soviet era is, in Čapaeva’s words, altogether a “временная дыра” (“temporal hole”; 2007: 91). Nevertheless, the “травма Гулага” (“trauma of the Gulag”; 84), she asserts, indirectly announces itself in contemporary popular films and novels, which feature ample images of vampires, witches, and werewolves, sometimes modeled after Chekists or KGB agents. Monsters in these works have, allegedly, elbowed out the beings of an anthropocentric world, and “objective” linear time is often replaced here with a nightmarish temporality in which characters move freely from one period to another. Čapaeva acknowledges that many of these “monstrous” features are part of a worldwide fantasy culture that goes back to the tradition of the gothic novel (with its proto-Romantic disillusionment in the power of human rationality). But the sheer popularity of this genre in contemporary Russia, she contends, can only testify to uneasy collective stances toward the “monstrous”, and unfronted, history of Stalinist terror.

As Marsh’s observations, Čapaeva’s study uncritically extends Freud’s psychological observations to culture, implicitly suggesting that Russian “collective consciousness” can be compared with an individual mind suffering from painful memories that it (unsuccessfully) tries to repress. The danger of a such perspective is that it entails a monolithic approach to Russian culture, leaving little room for investigating the varied processes of remembrance in Russia today, as well as their differing political implications. More important is that these approaches incline toward a view of literature, or some of its genres, as symptomatic of this supposed “collective trauma”. As a result, the specifically literary strategies and techniques for reflecting on an atrocious past and its legacy are in danger of being neglected. As the work of Luckhurst and others suggests, instead of seeing literature as acting out collective traumatization, it may be more productive to look at how imaginative fiction creates figures of trauma. Such figurations are anchored in

metaphors, allegories, plot structures, style and narrative constellations, and they may reoccur in various cultural expressions of a certain period, while their exact form and political “orientation” may differ from one author or text to the other.

The analysis of *Čapaev i Pustota* below shows that Čapaeva’s notion of the Soviet period as constituting a “temporal hole” itself participates in a recurring figure or trope of trauma. *Kapitan Dikštejn* already investigated the “black holes” of the Soviet past, and *Čapaev i Pustota* takes this trope to its ultimate consequences. The book is fixated on gaps in history and memory, episodes that can, for political or psychological reasons, not be adequately addressed. The novel intricately reflects on these “temporal holes” through its use of metaphors and references, but also through its narrative structures, and through the characters’ struggles with individual and cultural memory.

Traumatic Histories

The plot of Pelevin’s novel is quite complicated, not least because the narrative perspective switches back and forth between the period of the Russian Civil War (mainly 1919), and the transitional years of the early 1990s. As far as the post-communist scenes are concerned, the hero is Petr Pustota, a schizophrenic young man, suffering from a sort of *Wendekrankheit*. He is incarcerated in a mental hospital on the outskirts of Moscow, though by fits and starts he imagines himself to be a young poet living in the years of the Russian Civil War, who, quite accidentally, becomes the adjutant of Vasilij Čapaev, the legendary Bolshevik Civil War commander who fought the troops of Kolčak in the Southern Urals. Čapaev was immortalized through Dmitrij Furmanov’s famous biography *Čapaev* (1923), and was further mythologized in the monumental 1934 feature film of the same title. More important for the Čapaev myth in Soviet society, however, may have been the immense amount of popular *anekdoty* that feature, besides Čapaev himself, adjutant Pet’ka and machine gunner Anka. Pelevin’s novel indeed regularly alludes to this humoristic genre, but of this trio only Anka in the book resembles her conventional portrayal. Petr or “Pet’ka” Pustota is – at least before he saves himself from Bolshevik persecution by joining Čapaev’s army – a somewhat melancholic poet who has little sympathy for the new regime; and Čapaev himself, besides being a legendary war hero, is a spiritual master, who introduces Pet’ka Pustota to a quasi-Buddhist doctrine of enlightenment.

However, adjutant Pet’ka is not merely a fictive figure in Petr’s hallucinations. He appears to be a protagonist in his own right, and suffers himself from recurring nightmares, in which he, in turn, is a certain Petr Pustota, a mentally crippled young man from late-twentieth-century Moscow. In sum, it

is impossible to decide in this book who is actually dreaming whom, which hypostasis of Petr/Pet'ka is real and which is his schizophrenic other half. What is clear, however, is that the disastrous period of the Russian Civil War, when the Bolsheviks laid the foundation for a future socialist state, is reflected in the dramatic abolition of the communist project. The historical turning point of '91 is literally mirrored in '19, the year in which most of the Čapaev scenes in the novel are set. Much of the book is indeed organized along a "poetic" principle of equivalence, a series of linkages that do not sum up to a linear plot, but rather underscore the similarities and parallels between the two revolutionary periods of twentieth-century Russian history. Without doubt, the most prominent echo is the psychic and social dislocation and disorientation accompanying these two eras of political upheaval.

Both manifestations of the hero are in their twenties and perceive an unbridgeable gap between the values and experiences of their youth on the one hand, and the new post-Revolutionary and post-Soviet realities on the other. It is not arbitrary that the doctor of the mad asylum, a certain Timur Timurovič Kanašnikov, writes a dissertation about split personalities. Petr's case is of special interest to him not only because of its severity, but also because it is, allegedly, characteristic of a more general crisis among post-Soviet Russians. As Kanašnikov explains:

Вы [...] принадлежите к тому поколению, которое было запрограммировано на жизнь в одной социально-культурной парадигме, а оказалось в совершенно другой. [...] Хочу сразу вас успокоить – с этим сталкиваетесь не вы один. И у меня самого имеется подобная проблема. (Pelevin 2000: 48)

You belong to the very generation that was programmed for life in one socio-cultural paradigm, but has found itself living in quite another one [...]. But let me reassure you straight away that you're not the only one struggling with this difficulty. I have a similar problem myself. (Pelevin 1999: 32)³

Pustota's illness thus stands for a wider, collective disorientation in the wake of political revolution and social change. The cultural significance of Pustota's symptoms is, indeed, not merely hinted at in Kanašnikov's remarks. On a more basic level, the two equally valid, but historically disparate, settings of the novel cannot be combined through the focalization of one character (although Petr and Pet'ka are formally manifestations of the same person): the *fabula* of the novel extends beyond the lifespan of an individual, and, consequently, the first-person narration is, paradoxically, invested with a supra-individual, and, as we will see below in greater detail, cultural and historical significance.

The disorientation of Pustota's generation, which Kanašnikov brings up, is repeatedly metaphorized through the protagonist's shocks and traumas. We learn, for instance, that Pet'ka was injured when a bullet grazed his head during one of the battles fought by Čapaev's army. Although the wound itself is not serious, Pet'ka suffers from shellshock, and as a result falls into a coma for two months. When finally regaining consciousness, he has entirely forgotten the ill-fated battle, and remembers only the recurring comatic dreams about the mental hospital in Moscow. Viewed from the narrative perspective of the Civil War, Pet'ka's shellshock appears to be the source and starting point of the nightmares about the madhouse. But the causes of Petr's psychiatric illness seventy years later are far more diffuse. Here too shellshock plays a major role, though, due to a misunderstanding between the doctor and his colleagues, it takes quite some time before this is acknowledged. As one of Kanašnikov's co-workers, the military psychiatrist colonel Smirnov, explains, the apartment of the patient was hit by a shell in the attack on the White House during the Constitutional Crisis in the fall of 1993:

– А может, это от контузии? – сказал полковник.

– От какой контузии?

– А я вам разве не говорил, в чем дело? Понимаете ли, когда по Белому дому стреляли, несколько снарядов пролетело насквозь, через окна. Так вот, один попал прямо в квартиру, где в это время...

Полковник склонился к Тимуру Тимуровичу и что то зашептал ему на ухо.

– Ну и понятно, – долетали до меня отдельные слова, – все вдребезги... Сначала вместе с трупами засекретили, а потом смотрим – шевелится... Потрясение, конечно, сильнейшее.

– Так что ж вы молчали столько времени, батенька? Это ведь всю картину меняет, – укоризненно сказал Тимур Тимурович. – А я тут бьюсь, бьюсь...

(80-81)

“Maybe it's just the shell-shock?” said the colonel.

“What shell-shock?”

“What, didn't I tell you about that? Well, when they were shelling the White House, a few of the shells went straight through, in the windows on one side and out of the windows on the other. And one of them landed in a flat just at the very moment when...”

The colonel leaned over to Timur Timurovich and whispered something in his ear. “Well of course...” – I could just make out odd words here and there – “to smithereens... under security with the corpses at first, and then we saw something moving... Massive concussion, obviously.”

“But why on earth have you kept this to yourself for so long, my good fellow? It changes the entire picture,” said Timur Timurovich reproachfully. “I’ve been struggling so hard...” (59)

Through amnesia, nightmares, and shock, Pelevin alludes to the notion of trauma, which itself has its origins partly in the early-twentieth-century discussions about “shellshock”. As is well known, in the trenches of World War I seemingly healthy soldiers suddenly broke down and started to suffer memory gaps, dissociation from their surroundings, and flashbacks to battle scenes; these symptoms sometimes persisted years after their actual war experience. Freud was among the first to break with the established idea that shellshock – if not maligned as some cowardly trick – resulted from a physical shock to the brain or nerve system inflicted by a bomb explosion. He started to look for a psychic explanation, and examined, as he phrased it in his famous essay ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, “the effects produced on the organ of the mind” (1955: 31). The postwar debate among European physicians and psychoanalysts about the workings of and possible cures for what was now often referred to as “war neurosis” immensely advanced the analysis and conceptualization of psychic trauma (see, for instance, Leys 2000: 83-119).

In *Čapaev i Pustota* shock and trauma, along with the hallucinations, flashbacks, and amnesia that typically come with it, are not merely evoked on a thematic level. In various ways they govern the logic of the book itself. In a manner that evokes the repressions and dissociations of a traumatized mind, the circumstances of the two shellshocks that set in motion the hallucinatory trajectories of the plot are available to both reader and protagonist only through their psychological effects and their derivatives: the machine-gunner Anka tells Pet’ka about his heroic participation in the battle, and in Kanašnikov’s hospital Petr discovers that one of the drawings on the wall, depicting the battle, is his own. Moreover, when Kanašnikov consults with Colonel Smirnov, Petr catches, as seen above, only a few words about the projectile that apparently has gone wide and hit his apartment, but he does not remember the traumatic scene itself. As Cathy Caruth in her Freudian interpretation of trauma asserts, the recollection of traumatic experiences can “only occur in the mode of a symptom or dream” (1996: 60). This impossibility of direct, active memory and understanding in *Čapaev i Pustota* goes hand in hand with overwhelmingly intrusive nightmares and flashbacks⁴ that are realistic to the point where Pustota cannot decide what actually is reality and what is a dream.

More fundamentally even, trauma conditions the relations between the two universes of the novel: pre- and post-Soviet Russia. Pivotal here is what Freud described as the trauma’s *Nachträglichkeit*, its “latency” or “belatedness”, according to which an event in the present, which is similar to a brutal

or shocking experience from the past, may trigger the patient's memory of that original experience and, belatedly, would invest it with traumatic meaning. Indeed, scholars in literary and cultural trauma theory have recently become more sensitive to Freud's belief (expressed at least in some of his essays) that trauma was constituted, as Ruth Leys puts it, "by a dialectic between two events, neither of which was intrinsically traumatic, and [by] a temporal delay or latency through which the past was available only by a deferred act of understanding and interpretation" (2000: 20). The intertwined stories of Pelevin's novel, in my view, not merely bring to the fore the similarities between the two "revolutions" of Russia's twentieth century, but depend on each other according to this traumatic dialectic.⁵ The analogous "shellshocks" suffered by both manifestations of the hero point to a (post-)traumatic "doubling of a wound" as Geoffrey Hartman describes this phenomenon (1996: 160): the two entangled stories of the book may be seen as intrusive traumatic hallucinations that, paradoxically, trigger each other.

The "belatedness" of trauma, the disjunction between the event and its indirect, deferred, and imperfect understanding, has been at the core of the recent poststructuralist interest in the concept. For scholars like Cathy Caruth, Ruth Leys, and Shoshana Felman – but apparently also for Pelevin – the retroactive structure of trauma, blurring the clear distinction between stimulus and response, "refuses", in Peter Nicholls' words, "to accord ontological primacy to any originary moment" (1996: 54). Presenting history as a series of compelling traumatic flashbacks to a past experience, and depicting the present as the deluded projection of a shellshocked mind from the beginning of the century, Pelevin raises a series of unsettling questions about causality and origin, and about the linearity and ontology of history itself. We will shortly come back to this, but for now it should be noted that Pelevin realigns history along a confused psychic temporality. Moreover, psychic shock here clearly merges into cultural shock. As pointed out earlier, the episodes from the Civil War and the early 1990s can hardly be part of the memories of a single person, and the distortions of individual memory are evidently employed as an allegory for the disruptions of post-Soviet cultural memory.

This psycho-cultural trauma expresses itself not solely through its *Nachträglichkeit*. At the end of the book, after being subjected to Kanašnikov's unconventional therapies, Petr is finally released from the insane asylum. He hitchhikes to the center of Moscow and loafs around the Tverskoj Boulevard. The area is now described in almost literally the same words as on the first pages of the book, when Pet'ka, seventy years earlier, walked exactly the same route. After visiting the restaurant where his historic other half recited a revolutionary poem, Pustota meets Čapaev, who, strangely enough, is waiting for his adjutant in an armored car somewhere in post-Soviet Moscow. On the last page of the novel, Čapaev and Petr/Pet'ka set off to "Внутренняя Монголия" ("Inner Mongolia") the spiritual realm "внутри

того кто видит пустоту” (292; “inside anyone who can see the void” [234]). Čapaev’s anachronistic appearance in post-Soviet Russia and the plot’s repetition of its beginning testify, however, that Pustota also embarks on a journey back into history. The plot of the novel thus blazes a cyclic trajectory that not only sheds light on the parallels between pre- and post-Soviet upheaval, but also highlights what remains a blank spot in the narrative structure of the book: the two stories of the novel describe the dramatic beginning and ending of the Soviet era, its pre- and post-history,⁶ but the Soviet period itself is strikingly absent from the plot.

At the same time, the descriptions of the madhouse abound in subtle references to the repressive policies of the Soviet State. In a compelling article, entitled ‘The Hero in the Madhouse’, Angela Brintlinger has noticed that the family name of the hospital doctor, Kanašnikov, calls to mind the most (in)famous insane asylum in Soviet Russia, “Kanaščikova dača”. Moreover, the doctor’s diagnosis of a “split personality”, according to Brintlinger, alludes to the most common medical excuse for the incarceration of healthy political opponents in Soviet psychiatry (which was indeed “split personality” or “schizophrenia”; 2004: 47). Evocative in this respect are also Pustota’s constant fears about the secret police. When brought to Kanašnikov’s mental institution, Pustota decides that he has ended up at the Cheka’s offices. He is convinced that he will be executed soon, and after speaking for a while with Kanašnikov he notes: “Но я что-то слишком долго говорю. По правде сказать, я был намерен молчать до самого расстрела” (53; “But now I am talking too much. In all honesty, I intended to keep silent, right up to the final shot” [36]). He even interprets the anatomical poster in the doctor’s office, depicting a bluish man with his chest “cleaved open” and the top of his skull “sawn off”, as a morbid hint of what is awaiting him. Moreover, Pet’ka considers (the apparently friendly) Kanašnikov as one of the most horrifying characters from his nightmares: when Čapaev asks Pet’ka after his dreams, the latter answers: “вчера действительно снилась лечебница, и знаете, что произошло? Этот палач, который всем там заправляет, попросил меня подробно изложить на бумаге то, что со мной происходит здесь” (256; “the night before I did dream about the clinic, and do you know what happened? That butcher in charge of everything that goes on there asked me to write down in detail what happens to me here” [204]).

Pustota’s fears (in 1919 and in the 1990s), as well as the subtle references to punitive psychiatry, may be interpreted as a glimpse into the past or the future (depending on the perspective), towards a period of state repression. This period itself, however, evoking the mnemonic blanks that come with Pustota’s shellshock, seems to be inaccessible to conscious recall and to resist assimilation into the hero’s consciousness, as well as into an overarching narrative structure in the book. Calling to mind Shoshana Felman’s characterizations of a Western “literature of testimony”, a genre that

openly struggles with the impossibilities of understanding and representing the Holocaust, Pelevin paradoxically represents Soviet terror, and by extension the Soviet period as a whole, by narratively performing its very unrepresentability. Indeed, Felman's observations about the significance of the Holocaust in Albert Camus' *La Peste* can be applied to characterize the place of Soviet repression in Pelevin's book: it "historically occurs through its disappearance as an historical actuality and as a referential possibility" (Felman, Laub 1992: 104). What remains in *Сараев и Пустота* are the narrative loops around the inaccessible cultural traumas of the Soviet past, occasionally alternated with glimpses of a history that otherwise eludes understanding.

A compelling symbol for this negative narratability is the enigmatic "бублик, выкрашенный в черный цвет" (347; "bagel painted black" [280]), figuring in one of the poems that Pet'ka recites for Сараев's soldiers. Later, at the climax of an imagined sexual encounter with Anka, Pet'ka clarifies his own poem to the machine-gunner, underscoring the void in the middle of the bagel:

Вспомните стихотворение, которое я читал этим несчастным. Про княгиню и бублик... Ах, Анна... Как бы он ни манил, наступает момент, когда понимаешь, что в центре этого черного бублика бублика бублика пустота пустота-а-а пу-у-сто-о-о-о-т-а-а-а!! (356)

Remember the poem I recited to those unfortunates. About the princess and the bagel... А-а-аh, Анна... No matter how temptingly it might lure one, the moment comes when one realises that at the centre of that black bagel... bagel... bagel... there is nothing but a void, voi-oid, voi-oooid! (288)

The image of the black bagel is rich in connotations that are all connected with emptiness and voids. Not only does it play on the Russian idiom "дырка от бублика" (the hole of the bagel) to signify something futile or meaningless, but it also resonates with references to Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics in the book: the black bagel recalls the Zen Buddhist notion of *ensō* or "circle". *Ensō* is depicted in Japanese Zen art as a brushed black circle, symbolizing enlightenment, perfection (though these circles are often imperfect), or the spiritual world, but also the void (Yoshiko 1998: 33, 186). More importantly even, the concept of the black bagel is an arresting metaphor for the circular narrative structure of the novel. Its significance is enhanced by the (fictive) foreword, in which we learn that one of the alternative titles considered by the (fictive) publisher was, precisely, "Черный бублик" ("The Black Bagel"⁷ [Pelevin 2000: 9]). The same publisher explains that the aim of the author was to record his "механическ[ие] цикл[ы] сознания" ("mechanical *cycles* of consciousness" [ix]; italics added – B.N.). In fact, the

plot of *Čapaev i Pustota* – looping around a black hole, an unspoken, evacuated traumatic history that forms its invisible center of gravity – mimics the symptoms of trauma. It performs the amnesia, anachronisms, compulsive repetitions, the elisions and ellipses of a traumatized mind. But, in apparent contrast to these tragic and traumatic connotations, the emptiness and amnesia that come with the traumas that split and evacuate the consciousness of the protagonist are repeatedly considered through a lens of Buddhist, and postmodern, celebrations of a void.

Therapies and Cures

Before we come to *Pustota's* and *Čapaev's* philosophies of emptiness, we should note that various attempts are undertaken in the book to deliver the protagonist from his post-traumatic symptoms. Kanašnikov has developed a technique that allows his patients, after various drug injections, to experience in group sessions the psychic delusions of others. The doctor claims that this procedure, in which individual fantasies are temporarily made collective, exerts a wholesome effect, as it confronts the patient with the relativity of his or her individual psychotic reality. Kanašnikov explains his therapy as follows:

После того как сеанс заканчивается, возникает эффект отдачи – совместный выход участников из состояния, только что переживавшегося ими как реальность. Это, если хотите, использование свойственного человеку стадного чувства в медицинских целях. Те, кто участвует в сеансе вместе с вами, могут проникнуться вашими идеями и настроениями на некоторое время, но, как только сеанс кончается, они возвращаются к своим собственным маниям, оставляя вас в одиночестве. И в эту секунду – если удастся достичь катарсического выхода патологического психоматериала на поверхность – пациент может сам ощутить относительность своих болезненных представлений и перестать отождествляться с ними. А от этого до выздоровления уже совсем близко.
(55-56)

When the session comes to an end, a reaction sets in as the participants withdraw from the state they have been experiencing as reality; you could call it man's innate herd instinct in the service of medicine. Your ideas and your mood might infect the others taking part in the session for a certain time, but as soon as the sessions come to an end, they return to their own manic obsessions, leaving you isolated. And at that moment – provided the pathological psychic material has been driven up to the surface by the process of catharsis – the patient can become aware of the arbitrary subjectivity of his own morbid notions and can

cease to identify with them. And from that point recovery is only a short step away. (38)

This “collectivization” of individual delusions promises to be particularly effective in Petr’s case. When Petr, at one moment in the story, sneaks into Kanašnikov’s office and secretly leafs through the files pertaining to him, he reads how he “жалуется на одиночество и непонятость окружающихими. По словам больного, никто не в силах мыслить с ним ‘в резонанс’” (134; “complains of loneliness and lack of understanding from those around him. The patient says there is no one capable of thinking ‘on his wavelength’” [104]). Kanašnikov orchestrates precisely these shared “wavelengths” that Pustota longs for. If we acknowledge that the various experiences of the protagonist relate to one another according to a traumatic *Nachträglichkeit*, it is indeed relevant that the unbidden re-livings of trauma are notoriously difficult to verbalize and share. As Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain, trauma “has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity” (1995: 163). Although Kanašnikov’s therapy turns this solitary activity into a collective experience, thereby apparently providing a remedy for the isolation of traumatized patients, it remains doubtful if and how Pustota really benefits from it.

Nonetheless, through these therapeutic sessions we learn about the psychic universes of three other patients. Their dreams all concern shocking events (a fall from an airplane, drug-induced folly, forced suicide), and in chapters that alternate with the scenes in 1919 the reader and the other patients are plunged into their individual fantasies. The first of these patients is Marija, a homosexual young man, who imagines himself to be “Ипостро Мария” (57; “Just Maria” [40]), the heroine of a popular Mexican soap opera. The dream is about the character’s unsuccessful attempt to marry Arnold Schwarzenegger, and this absurd hallucination ends with Maria being literally fired from her bridegroom’s plane and landing on the spire of the Ostankino television tower in Moscow. The fantasy of the second patient, the drunkard Serdjuk, concerns a job interview with a Japanese company in Moscow. The interview consists of lengthy cultural-philosophical conversations with a Japanese representative of the firm and involves endless ritualistic initiations into archaic and impenetrable Japanese traditions. When the news arrives that a rival company has dealt the corporation a heavy commercial blow, Serdjuk is persuaded to commit ritual suicide so that his “future” employer can save face.

The third hallucination deserves more attention. It emerges from the mind of the gangster Volodin, who dreams about a nighttime drive into the woods in his expensive Japanese jeep. Volodin and his friends Koljan and Šurik gather around a campfire in a clearing in the forest. They take a dose of

the hallucinogenic mushrooms that Volodin has brought with him and start drinking and talking. Philosophizing in their gangster slang, the friends discuss among other things the possibility of an “eternal high”. Volodin hypothesizes that for this never-ending trip one must occupy the position of a fourth agent in one’s mind (the other three being an inner public prosecutor, an inner brief, and an inner accused). The mushrooms, which begin to produce their effect, blur the argumentation ever more and the trio becomes more and more frightened by their hallucinations. The narrator subtly hints that there are four people sitting around the campfire now, and eventually the three men the reader has been introduced to run into the woods, shooting at whatever they imagine to be around. Once their hallucinations start to let up, the men depart in Volodin’s jeep, and the topic of the “eternal high” is picked up again. In the car Šurik stubbornly interrogates Volodin about the “fourth guy”, the apparent key to the ultimate trip, and from the narrator’s comments it appears that the enigmatic fourth person is still with them: “Навстречу пронеслись старые ‘Жигули’, потом колонна из нескольких военных грузовиков. Володин включил радио, и через минуту вокруг четверых сидящих в машине сомкнулся прежний, знакомый и понятный во всех своих мелочах мир” (332-333; “Old Zhigulis came hurtling towards them, followed by a column of several military trucks. Volodin switched on the radio, and a minute later the four people sitting in the Jeep were enveloped in the old, familiar world whose every detail was clear and familiar” [268]).

With the men driving home the chapter comes to a close, but the narrator, whose identity is soon to be revealed, opens the next chapter with questions: “кто же был этот четвертый? Кто его знает” (334; “who could this fourth person have been? Who can tell?” [269]). After sardonically suggesting that it might have been the devil, or perhaps God, he then reflects that this unknown figure is “скорее всего” (“most likely”) the reader: “ты, только что сам сидевший у костра, ты-то ведь существуешь на самом деле, и разве это не самое первое, что вообще есть и когда-нибудь было?” (334; “you, who have just been sitting by the fire yourself, you really do exist, and surely this is the very first thing that exists and has ever existed?” [269]). After a section break the setting shifts back to 1919, and the reader discovers that the narrator of Volodin’s fantasy was actually Pet’ka, who had followed Čapaev’s (and Kanašnikov’s) advice and has put his nightmares down on paper. Having read (with us) Pet’ka’s manuscript, Čapaev immediately critiques Pet’ka’s direct address of the reader as a cheap, pretentious trick:

Это обращение к читателю, которого на самом деле нет, – довольно дешевый ход. Ведь если даже допустить, что кто-нибудь кроме меня прочтет эту невнятную историю, то я тебя уверяю, что подумает он вовсе не о самоочевидном факте своего существования. Он, скорее, представит тебя, пишущего эти строки. И я боюсь...

– А я ничего не боюсь, – нервно перебил я, закуривая папиросу.
– Мне давно наплевать. Я просто записал последний из своих кошмаров так, как умею. А этот абзац возник... Как бы сказать... По инерции. (334-335)

“This apostrophe to a reader who does not really exist is a rather cheap trick. Even if we assume that someone other than myself might possibly wade through this incomprehensible narrative, then I can assure you that he won’t give a single moment’s thought to the self-evident fact of his own existence. He is more likely to imagine you writing these lines. And I am afraid...”

“But I am not afraid of anything,” I interrupted, nervously, lighting up a *paprosa*. “I simply do not give a damn, nor have I for ages. I simply wrote down my latest nightmare as best I could. And that paragraph appeared... How shall I put it... By force of inertia.” (269-270)

As this scene and others reveal, Pelevin’s novel presents two therapeutic paths that are intertwined in complex ways: the collective recall of traumatic memories in Kanašnikov’s therapy cannot always be distinguished from attempts to narrate these memories, and to share them with other characters, or (as seen above) to convey them to an explicit reader. Of course, ever since Freud’s and Breuer’s “talking cure” the therapeutic significance of telling about traumas, of verbalizing one’s traumatic memories, has been acknowledged. Scholars, moreover, have recognized the social dimension of this telling, and more recently theorists have examined the implications of these therapeutic constellations for literature. Irene Kacandes, in a book about various types of literature that “converse” with the reader, underscores the essential role of a listener or analyst, both in therapy and, as she demonstrates, in literature of trauma. Using the metaphor of an electric current, she argues that “the presence of the analyst/cowitness/reader completes the circuit and allows the story to come into being, like the components of electronic circuits that are properly connected so that the current can flow. The listener has to be there so the survivor can re-externalize the event” (Kacandes 2001: 96). In fiction about trauma, Kacandes shows, much significance tends to be allotted to the role of a recipient of the story, who may be a character in the text or an “inscribed reader” (111). Literary texts “*of/as trauma*” (95; italics in original), Kacandes argues, tend to be “orientated to an answering” (95). Kacandes is indebted to Felman and Laub, whose influential notion of “testimony” emphatically involves cowitnessing. Laub asserts that trauma can be healed only through “a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially of *re-externalizing the event*” (Felman, Laub 1992: 69, italics in original). This process can occur only “when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside” (69; italics in original).

In Pelevin's novel both Kanašnikov and Čapaev recommend that Pustota write down his nightmares, and it is indeed because of their interference that many of the episodes we read have (at least within the fictional world of the novel) come into being. On a different level, that of the implied author, the book as a whole may be regarded as an attempt to find, not only a narrative form, but also a narratee for a story that sprouts from a mind isolated in trauma and shock. In the preface to *Čapaev i Pustota* (from which I have quoted earlier) a mysterious publisher expands on the motives of the author (who may or may not overlap with the first-person narrator) for writing this book:

Некоторая судорожность повествования объясняется тем, что целью написания этого текста было не создание “литературного произведения”, а фиксация механических циклов сознания с целью окончательного излечения от так называемой внутренней жизни. Кроме того, в двух или трех местах автор пытается скорее непосредственно указать на ум читателя, чем заставить его увидеть очередной слеplенный из слов фантом [...]. (7)

The somewhat spasmodic nature of the narrative reflects the fact that the intention underlying the writing of this text was not to create a “work of literature”, but to record the mechanical cycles of consciousness in such a way as to achieve a complete and final cure for what is known as “the inner life”. Furthermore, in two or three places, the author actually attempts to point directly to the mind of the reader, rather than force him to view yet another phantom constructed out of words [...]. (ix)

Not only has the author tried to record his circular thoughts, he also has attempted to address a consciousness outside himself, to transmit his story. However, both therapeutic methods in the book – collective dreaming and narrative framing – are finally unsuccessful. Čapaev reminds Pustota, as seen earlier, that the reader is merely a construction in his text, or, in the best scenario, an uninterested other. But also Kanašnikov's unconventional method for sharing traumatic memories is ultimately ineffective: Pustota, after being released from the doctor's collective therapies, relapses into his individualized, cyclic flashbacks.

Absence and Loss

An undermining factor in these therapeutic undertakings may indeed be Čapaev himself, who ceaselessly teaches Pustota to give up his search for meaning and reality. Under Čapaev's supervision, the symptomatic emptinesses and voids increasingly come to inform Pustota's worldview, as well as his perspective on his own, and his country's, identity. Evocative are the reflections on the statue of Aleksandr Puškin in Moscow's city center. When Pustota in the 1990s strolls along the Tverskoj Boulevard, he does not find the bronze statue where he had seen it in early 1919: "Тверской бульвар был почти таким же, как и тогда, когда я последний раз его видел – опять были февраль, сугробы и мгла, странным образом проникавшая даже в дневной свет. [...] Была, впрочем, и разница, которую я заметил, дойдя до конца бульвара. Бронзовый Пушкин исчез [...]" (400; "Tverskoj Boulevard appeared exactly as it had been when I last saw it – once again it was February, with snowdrifts everywhere and that peculiar gloom which somehow manages to infiltrate the very daylight [...]. Some things, however, were different, as I noticed when I reached the end of the boulevard. The bronze Puškin had disappeared [...]" [323-324]). The actual monument by Aleksandr Opekušin was indeed moved, in 1950, to the other side of the road (then Gor'kij Street), and was rotated 180 degrees. But again, events and actions from the Soviet period are not mentioned in the book, and are not even recognized by the protagonist. What Pustota and the reader see are only the effects and "symptoms" produced by seventy years of Soviet rule.

In this particular instance the void left by the statue actually satisfies Pustota. As he continues, "[б]ронзовый Пушкин исчез, но зияние пустоты, возникшее в месте, где он стоял, странным образом казалось лучшим из всех возможных памятников" (400; "[t]he bronze Puškin had disappeared, but the gaping void that appeared where he used to stand somehow seemed like the best of all possible monuments" [324]). Russia's cultural heritage and collective memory, here represented by a major emblem of Russian national pride, are in Pustota's eyes better represented by a void. The implication of Pustota's observations is that an empty space may be the only possible *lieu de memoire* in a "shell-shocked" culture that cannot work through its tumultuous and atrocity-filled past. Here "hard" cultural memory, conveyed through monuments, and the "soft", textual cultural memory (Etkind 2013: 177-179) of Pelevin's novel itself, essentially engage in the same strategy: *Čapaev i Pustota*, weaving narrative threads around the black hole of an incomprehensible past, indeed proposes a form of post-Soviet cultural memory that celebrates a gaping void.

As the novel proceeds the void left by the Soviet period adopts ever expanding forms. Overtly taking a swipe at Aleksandr Solženicyn's famous essay 'Kak nam obustroit' Rossiju?' ('How to Put Russia in Order?', 1990),

Petr towards the end of the book posits his own solution to the vexed post-Soviet question raised in Solženicy'n's treatise. Echoing Čapaev's lessons he expounds to a stranger that

[...] всякий раз, когда в сознании появляются понятие и образ России, надо дать им самораствориться в собственной природе. А поскольку никакой собственной природы у понятия и образа России нет, в результате Россия окажется полностью обустроенной. (403)

[...] every time the concept and the image of Russia appears in your conscious mind, you have to let it dissolve away in its own inner nature. And since the concept and the image of Russia has no inner nature of its own, the result is that [Russia is put in order]⁸ most satisfactorily. (326)

By declaring the void to be a better monument to Russia's cultural heritage than Puškin, and by associating Russia's "concept" and "image" with emptiness and absence, Pustota does more than merely trivialize heavy-handed post-Soviet debates about Russia's identity and future development; he also harks back to a long tradition of philosophical reflections on Russia's place in history and world culture. In particular his views call to mind those of Petr Čaadaev, undoubtedly the main philosopher of Russia's supposed cultural emptiness and lack of civilization. Pelevin's protagonist shares with Čaadaev not only his first name, but also his sympathies towards Catholicism (Pustota had a "католическое воспитание" [366]; "Catholic upbringing" [296], while Čaadaev was famously attracted to the Catholic faith). Moreover, against the backdrop of the references to punitive psychiatry mentioned earlier, it is of note that Čaadaev was pronounced insane because of his biting criticism of Russian society and culture in the *Lettres philosophiques*, and placed under police surveillance. In his later 'Apologie d'un fou' (1837), Čaadaev, rather than apologizing, underlined that he had always felt that Russia's historic isolation was also its messianic advantage: lacking its own national traditions, Russia would be able to avoid, in its path towards civilization, the errors and follies of the West. Through subtle allusions to Čaadaev – whose family name suspiciously resonates with that of Čapaev – Pelevin, then, addresses more than just the cultural traumas of the recent past. *Čapaev i Pustota* seems to suggest that Russia, through the course of the twentieth century, has continued to be the metaphysical abyss in world history that Čaadaev had already declared it to be in the 1820s and 1830s.

However, as for the "madman" Čaadaev, the connotations of emptiness for the "madman" Pustota are not exclusively negative. What started in the book as the individual and collective symptoms of shock under the supervision of Čapaev turns, as suggested above, into a Buddhist and postmodern philosophy of life: Pustota consciously takes a post-traumatic disorientation

and a concomitant feeling of vacuity as the starting point for an exercise in the evaporation of his own subjectivity, and, for that matter, of the world at large. Combining horse sense with an air of erudition, Čapaev incessantly teaches his adjutant about the illusory nature of “reality”, and his philosophy of emptiness reaches its culmination in what appears to be the denouement of the Čapaev episodes. In a clearly metaphorical passage, the machine-gunner Anka dissolves the phenomenological world by shooting “reality” away with a “clay machine gun”, a weapon that derives its power from Buddha’s little finger, which allegedly has been incorporated into the gun’s barrel. Thus Anka transforms the world into an immense reservoir of emptiness, with a last “island” of “reality” floating in it, containing Čapaev, Pet’ka, and Anka herself. The Čapaev plotline comes to an end (or at least so it appears, until the end of the book starts to repeat its beginning) when the three characters, one after the other, jump into emptiness. Pustota now finally comes to accept the vacuity of his own subjectivity and literally becomes what his name means: a void.⁹

Pelevin’s book thus combines a preoccupation with the cultural traumas of the twentieth century (revolution, state repression, cultural upheaval) with a postmodern or Buddhist philosophy of emptiness. This approach calls to mind Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between two dimensions of trauma: “loss” and “absence”. Loss in LaCapra’s terminology stands for the specific traumas of individuals and groups, whereas “absence” is associated with “transhistorical” or “structural” traumas. This latter category essentially boils down to the confusions and uncertainties we are all subject to. It often takes the form of a feeling of “absence of/at the origin” (2001: 77), including the absence of an ultimate ground or truth on which to base individual and collective existence. As LaCapra asserts, “[t]he hiddenness, death, or absence of a radically transcendent divinity or of absolute foundations makes of existence a fundamentally traumatic scene in which anxiety threatens to color, and perhaps confuse all relations” (23). Needless to say, the discourse of absence, with the anxiety, but also with the “elation it evokes” (84), figures prominently in various strands of postmodern thought. In his study *Stranded Objects* Eric Santner already described the postmodern paradigm and especially its deconstructionist philosophical manifestations as a form of “structural mourning” (1990: 31), involved in a “rhetoric of bereavement” (13). For Santner deconstruction continually examines the process of signification in its failure and its “irreducible elegiac dimension” (11). LaCapra also claims that “deconstruction is itself a way of working through and playing (at times acting) out absence in its complex, mutually implicated relations to non-full presence” (2001: 67). Interestingly, he adds parenthetically that “[i]n this respect it may be similar to Buddhism” (67).

LaCapra’s focus is with the frequent conflation of specific, historical losses with general, structural absences, by victims, artists, and trauma theo-

rists alike. He explains that this convergence may often seem natural or necessary, and that in itself it may testify to the disorienting impact of trauma. It comes, however, with a serious risk. Considering historical traumas (such as the Holocaust) through the lens of a wider postmodern anti-foundationalism, theorists such as Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth, in LaCapra's view, tend to obscure the significance of specific historical events. The consequence may be that concrete problems of historical trauma become mere illustrations or manifestations of general postmodernist problematizations of knowledge, language, and historiography.¹⁰

Pelevin's approach strongly resembles the tendency to conflate historical losses with structural absences. Post-traumatic gaps in memory in Pelevin's book are incorporated into a postmodern or quasi-Buddhist doctrine of spiritual enlightenment through the recognition of Russia's – or the world's – fundamental emptiness. As Walter Davis argues in *Deracination: Historicity, Hiroshima, and the Tragic Imperative*, in our “post-traumatic” and “post-nuclear” era cultural texts tend to articulate “the effort to turn horror into the only possible comfort: that of the void, the absence of reference – the endless free play of the signifier” (2001: 130-131). For LaCapra, in contrast, conflating the shattering effects of horrific events with an insistence on the general impossibility of straightforward signification can never be comfortable. He cautions that “losses cannot be adequately addressed when they are enveloped in an overly generalized discourse of absence” (2001: 45-46). Indeed, in the end Pelevin's text presents no possibility of addressing cursed post-Soviet questions, since specific historical conditions (as well as the distinctions between past and present, Self and Other, even “Reds” and “Whites”) are all sucked into a black hole of generalized absences. The details of specific historical losses, and the confusion they have wrought, are subsumed into an insistence on the structural absence of a plot, or in history, of a nation's identity, an individual's coherent subjectivity.

While *Čapaev i Pustota* has been widely praised as Pelevin's best novel, precisely this relativist stance toward important post-Soviet problems has also raised the hackles of certain critics. Emblematic is the controversy surrounding the book's nomination for the 1997 Russian Booker Prize. Explaining the unpopular decision not to include Pelevin among the finalists, the jury's chairman, Igor' Šajtanov, in an article in *Voprosy literatury*, criticized the novel's postmodern impulses:

Я [...] не люблю постмодерна, потому что я живу в постмодерне.
[...] Не Жак Деррида величайший деконструктивист, а Михаил Горбачев, разобравший систему, которой не предвиделось ни конца ни краю. За это ему большое спасибо, жаль только, что конструктивные идеи у нас в явном дефиците и сколь долго пребывать

нам в деконструированной реальности (сиречь в переходном периоде) – неизвестно. (Šajtanov 1998)

I don't like postmodernism, because I am living in a postmodern era. [...] Jacques Derrida wasn't the greatest deconstructionist, it was Michail Gorbačev, taking apart a system that didn't expect to see any end or limit. A big "thank you" to him for this. Too bad, though, that we clearly lack constructive ideas and that we don't know how long we have to stay in a deconstructed reality (that is, in the transition period).

Šajtanov's wariness with postmodern stances points to a sentiment that was proclaimed ever more widely and loudly in Russian society toward the end of the twentieth century.

As is generally observed, the fatigue with a period of transition, and the call for "constructive" alternatives to postmodernism has often resulted in the rehabilitation of forms and ideas associated with the Soviet past. In his study *Paralogii* (*Paralogies*, 2008), Mark Lipoveckij notes that a post-millennial generation of popular Russian writers and filmmakers no longer avoids or rejects the Soviet period, and even readopts its symbolism and artistic styles. He asserts (contradicting Chapaeva's study from a year earlier) that for these novelists and filmmakers totalitarian history no longer constitutes a "черная дыра" ("black hole" [2008: 729]). While Lipoveckij's observations about a renewed cultural interest in the Soviet past are convincing, literary texts from the beginning of the century have enthusiastically recycled the image of the "black hole" as a figure for various aspects of post-Soviet trauma and memory.

In Dmitrij Bykov's *Opravdanie* (*Justification*, 2001) a perfectly round, bottomless black lake, an obvious metaphor for the vacuum of post-Soviet collective memory, functions as the place from which remnants of a nostalgically venerated "Empire" resurface; in Pavel Krusanov's *Amerikanskaja dyrka* (*The American Hole*, 2005) a super deep borehole on Kola peninsula is presented as the home of lethal demons and as an inverted Tower of Babel. The project of drilling a bottomless hole in the native soil is presented as the mystical cause of the collapse of the Soviet Empire (Krusanov 2007 [2005]: 491); and, finally, in Aleksandr Prochanov's novel *Gospodin geksožen* (*Mister Hexogen*, 2002) a patriotically minded character argues that the birthmark on Gorbačev's forehead "повторяет контуры 'черной дыры', куда с колоссальными скоростями утекает наша Вселенная" ("repeats the contours of the 'black hole' through which, with a tremendous speed, our Universe is flowing away" [Prochanov 2002: 310]). While for Pelevin the "black bagel" signified a transhistorical¹¹ and structural absence,¹² for these more recent and more patriotically orientated writers, it seems, images of black holes mark the loss the Soviet Empire, an event that has allegedly left a

gaping void in Russia's cultural identity and national dignity. All these novels, moreover, present fantastic narratives in which these black holes are imagined to be "repaired", and Russia's imperial greatness is restored.

To be sure, these more recent novels may not all be directly indebted to *Čapaev i Pustota*. But without doubt this widely read and discussed book has contributed to the figurations of trauma and loss in Russian literature. The figure of the black hole, starting as a perestroika-era metaphor for the blanks and distortions in official historiography, in *Čapaev i Pustota* takes on new, multifaceted connotations. Rather than to the empty spaces in the history books, it is connected here, this article has argued, to the blind spots in post-Soviet cultural memory and to the collective shocks and traumas of Russian history. The "black bagel" in the novel signals the impediments to the linear telling and coherent remembrance of ugly histories; it questions narratives of continuity and sameness that typically cement notions of cultural identity; it re-activates Čadaev's nineteenth-century anxieties about Russia's supposed position as an abyss in the historical progression of world culture; and, finally, it becomes the emblem of a postmodern or quasi-Buddhist philosophy that teaches the protagonist (and the reader) to accept, rather than repair, all these emptinesses and absences.

University of Amsterdam
(b.noordenbos@uva.nl)

NOTES

An adapted version of this article has been included in: Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity*, New York, NY, 2016, as part of Chapter 1.

¹ Besides the American edition an English translation exists, by the same translator, entitled *The Clay Machine Gun*.

² The English quotations from this novella come from Margareta O. Thompson's translation (*Night Patrol and Other Stories*, 1994). In the quotations I preserve Thompson's transliteration of Russian names and terms.

³ All quotations from the novel are from Pelevin (2000), indicated in the following by page number.

All English quotations from the novel come from Andrew Bromfield's translation (*Buddha's Little Finger*, 1999), indicated in the following by page number. In the quotations I preserve Bromfield's transliteration of Russian names and terms.

⁴ According to Caruth, in trauma the denial of active recollection is paradoxically accompanied by "the capacity to continually, in the flashback, reproduce [the event] in exact detail" (Caruth 1995: 152-153).

- ⁵ Pelevin's juxtaposition of these two psycho-cultural shocks in recent Russian history is clearly connected with anxieties in Russian society of the early 1990s. In her anthropological study on conversation during and shortly after perestroika Nancy Ries identifies (among many other discursive schemes) the "litanies of 'total collapse'" in which a potential civil war figured prominently. She explains that "[t]he history of the civil war years (1918-1921), its massive terror, violence, and famine, and dislocation made widely understood because of glasnost, became a kind of template for envisioning Russia's future. [...] Although there was, as yet, very little open civil conflict taking place in Russia, people widely imagined its possibility and even invoked that term to describe the crime and violence they heard about and experienced in their own milieu" (Ries 1997: 181).
- ⁶ Caruth describes trauma precisely as a fracture in the subjective experience of time. She emphasizes that "[w]hat causes trauma [...] is a shock that appears to work very much like a threat to the body's spatial integrity, but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 1993: 25).
- ⁷ This alternative title is omitted in Bromfield's translation, while another alternative, "The Garden of divergent Petkas" (xi), an obvious nod to Borges' story 'The Garden of Forking Paths', is preserved.
- ⁸ In Bromfield's translation ("everything is sorted out most satisfactorily") the reference to Solženicy'n is lost.
- ⁹ It is noteworthy in this context that in one of the rare interviews Pelevin has given he has labeled his book "the first novel in world literature whose action takes place in absolute emptiness" (Laird 1998: 181).
- ¹⁰ See also LaCapra's earlier, and similar, criticism in *Representing the Holocaust* (1994).
- ¹¹ In its repeated references to Čadaev's characterization of Russia as an essentially empty, imitative culture.
- ¹² In its general postmodern problematization of notions of history and identity.

LITERATURE

- Brintlinger, Angela
 2004 'The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past'. *Slavic Review*, 63, 1, 43-65.
- Caruth, Cathy
 1993 'Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals'. *Assemblage*, 20-25.
 1995 'Recapturing the Past: Introduction'. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore, 1995. 151-157.
 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore.
- Chapaeva, Dina
 2007 *Gotičeskoe obščestvo: Morfologija košmara*. Moskva.

-
- Davis, Walter A.
2001 *Deracination: History, Hiroshima, and the Tragic Imperative*. Albany.
- Erofeev, Viktor
1996 *Strašnyj sud: Roman, rasskazy, malen'kie ésse*. Moskva.
- Etkind, Alexander
2004 'Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany'. *Grey Room*, 16, 36-59.
2009a 'Post-Soviet Hauntology: Cultural Memory of the Soviet Terror'. *Constellations*, 16, 1, 182-200.
2009b 'Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction'. *Slavic Review*, 63, 3, 631-658.
2013 *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*. Stanford.
- Felman, Shoshana; Laub, Dori
1992 *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. London.
- Freud, Sigmund
1955 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 18. London.
- Hartman, Geoffrey
1996 *The Longest Shadow*. Bloomington.
- Hutcheon, Linda
1988 *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London.
- Kacandes, Irene
2001 *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion*. Lincoln.
- Krusanov, Pavel
2007 *Triada*. Sankt-Peterburg.
- Kuraev, Michail
1990 *Kapitan Dikštejn: Povesti*. Moskva.
- Kuraev, Mikhail
1994 *Night Patrol and Other Stories*. Trans. Margareta O. Thompson. Durham, NC. Trans. of *Kapitan Dikštejn*. See Kuraev (1990).
- LaCapra, Dominick
1994 *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca, NY.
2001 *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore.
- Laird, Sally
1998 *Voices of Russian Literature: Interviews with Ten Contemporary Writers*. Oxford.
- Leys, Ruth
2000 *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago.
- Lipoveckij, Mark
2008 *Paralogii: Transformacii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russkoj kul'ture 1920-2000-x godov*. Moskva.

-
- Luckhurst, Roger
2008 *The Trauma Question*. London.
- Lyotard, Jean-François
1990 *Heidegger and "the jews"*. Trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts. Minneapolis. Trans. of *Heidegger et "les juifs"*. Paris, 1988.
- Marsh, Rosalind
2007 *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006*. Frankfurt am Main.
- McCausland, Gerald
2006 'The Post-Soviet Condition: Cultural Reconfigurations of Russian Identity'. Diss. Univ. of Pittsburgh.
- Nicholls, Peter
1996 'The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison'. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Vice. Cambridge, 50-67.
- Pelevin, Victor
1990 *Buddha's Little Finger*. Trans. Andrew Bromfield. London. Trans. of *Čapaev i Pustota*, see Pelevin (2000).
- Pelevin, Viktor
2000 *Čapaev i Pustota; Želtaja Strela*. Moskva.
- Prochanov, Aleksandr
2002 *Gospodin geksožen*. Moskva.
- Ries, Nancy
1997 *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*. Ithaca, NY.
- Šajtanov, Igor'
1998 'Buker-97: Zapiski "načal'nika premii"' *Voprosy literatury*, 3. Acc. 30 January 2013. <http://magazines.russ.ru/voplit/1998/3/shait-pr.html>.
- Santner, Eric
1990 *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Post-War Germany*. Ithaca, NY.
- Sny
2009 Dir. Karen Šachnazarov. Roskomkino, 2009. DVD.
- Ušakin, Sergej; Trubina, Elena (Eds.)
2009 *Trauma: punkty*. Moskva.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel A.; Van der Hart, Onno
1995 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma'. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore, 158-182.
- Yoshiko, Seo Audrey
1998 *The Art of Twentieth Century Zen: Paintings and Calligraphy by Japanese Masters*. Boston.