

FLY ME TO THE MOON: Modernism and the Soviet Space Program in Viktor Pelevin's *Omon Ra*

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The impetus of European and Russian Modernism that was officially promoted in the consolidated Soviet state of the 1930s and beyond was that thematic underpinning of Futurism that celebrated science and technology. Socialist Realism rejected other thematic concerns of Modernism that were deemed skeptical, erudite, or indecent (e.g., the questioning of conceptions of reality or the nature of the divine and the interest in human sexuality). Likewise, the "elitist" Modernist interest in stylistic innovation and the relationship of the literary word to reality contradicted the tenet of Socialist Realism, *narodnost'*, according to which literature was to reflect the nature and concerns of the people. In the eras of post-revolutionary reconstruction and Stalinism, literature had to be optimistic, "morally acceptable," and accessible. Granted, both Modernism and Marxism-Leninism opposed the culture of late capitalism. Yet Modernism constituted an individualist, high-culture, often escapist, response that was, by definition, removed from the Soviet program for the masses. Only Futurist scientism and "futurism" bridged nineteenth-century positivism and Soviet literary utilitarianism.¹ The irony of the Soviet

inheritance of nineteenth-century literary tastes has not escaped the attention of writers and literary scholars. In Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties*, a Dadaist poet (Tzara) observes that: "the odd thing about revolution is that the further left you go politically, the more bourgeois they like their art." Even though Modernist aesthetics thrived in the 1920s and continued to influence the Russian arts, it is specifically the representation and celebration of science and technology in *gosizdat* literature that constitutes the continuous link between Modernism and Soviet letters.

The literary representations of scientific and technological concerns in the early Soviet period were associated with government initiatives such as reconstruction, electrification, and industrialization (in such works as Gladkov's *Cement* (Tsement), Ostrovskii's *How the Steel Was Tempered* (Kak zaklialas' stal'), Leonov's *Soviet River* (Sot') and Marietta Shagianin's *Hydrocentral* (Gidrotsentral'). Yet these programs bore various taints (e.g., of collectivization, displacements of populations, and urban ills). The Soviet space program, by comparison, served as a constant source of satisfaction and pride. The successes (most notably, first nation into space) secured the country's place internationally, while the failures were relatively few and, when possible, concealed. The Soviet space program unified and invigorated a nation that had otherwise weathered too often the *failed* promises of Soviet ideology.

¹ In *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), Terry Eagleton describes succinctly the ambivalent relationship of Marxism to modernism: "Marxism...at once outdoes the Futurists in its praise for the mighty achievements of modernity, and outflanks the romantic anti-capitalists in its remorseless denunciation of the very same era. As both the offspring of Enlightenment and its immanent critique, it cannot be readily categorized in the facile pro- and anti-modernist terms now fashionable in Western cultural debate" (7).

In the first short chapter of his 1992 novella *Omon Ra*, Viktor Pelevin constructs the many-layered significance of space for his little Soviet hero.² Omon (whose name the Russian recognizes as the acronym for Otriad' Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniia—what in the USA we term a SWAT team) functions as the narrator and relates the particulars of his childhood. Yet, his story sounds familiar. He tells us his father was a policeman and although he had shot at people, he was at heart a kind man who only wanted to retire to his dacha, and for his boys to have a better life than his. Yet quick upon the narrator's sympathetic depiction of his father as an unlucky fellow, he recalls his only memory of his mother, in which she was disheveled and clutched at his drunken father's arm to keep him from pulling a pistol out of his holster. Omon concludes that she died when he was very young. He begins with this characterization to construct an atmosphere of ambivalence.

We learn that Omon's brother Ovir (Office of Visas and Registrations) died at age 11 of meningitis, along with their father's hope that Ovir would become a diplomat. In describing his brother's sad fate, Omon makes mention of the family name, Krivomazov. We cannot help but ponder the relationship between the Krivomazovs and Dostoevsky's infamous family of "black stains," the Karamazovs.

Is the family tainted with a crookedness that is real (like the Krivonosovs or Krivosheevs?) or spiritual/psychological, as in *krivda* (falsehood) or *krivliaka* (poseur)? (Let us not forget that Chichikov "listed" when he walked and the emblematic significance of *his* crookedness.) In the first page and a half of the novella, Pelevin has already destabilized the reader. Reminiscent of our ambivalent reaction to Gogol's Akakii Akakevich, we are unsure whether we should sympathize with the plausible ill fortune of Omon and his family or privilege the grotesque exaggeration and blatant parody.

Yet when the focus of Omon's biography shifts from his father to himself, the narrative evokes a palpable nostalgia and poignancy. Omon describes how, after his mother's death, he was raised by an aunt who was indifferent to him and kept him whenever possible in the care of others (in extended-day

² Viktor Pelevin, *Omon Ra* (Moscow: Tekst, 1992).

programs during the school year and in pioneer camps in the summer). Omon would visit his father on the weekends, and he remembers his derelict condition, his foul-smelling room, and the detached nature of his drunken and ritualized conversation. Against this background of neglect, Omon recalls: "Everything I remember from my childhood is linked in one way or another with a dream of the sky" (5).³

This recollection then releases other pleasant memories, all tied, it is interesting to note, to the Soviet institutions that defined life outside his family:

...there was a long, bright room full of other children and large plastic cubes scattered haphazardly about the floor; there were the icebound steps of the wooden slide that I plodded up with eager haste; there were the frost-cracked models of young mountaineers made of painted plaster in the yard; and lots more besides. (5)

If Pelevin at first implicitly derides Soviet *byt* with its tolerance for alcoholism and domestic abuse and its institutionalized pressures on the nuclear family, he also evokes the comraderie and comforting fantasies of life in Omon's children's collective.⁴

Omon returns in his narrative to the "sky" motif. His district had a Cosmos cinema as well as a metal statue of a rocket. What held even more significance for him, however, was the toy house on his playground that had been transformed, with the addition of a plank on each side, into a makeshift airplane. The uppermost compartment of this structure the children considered to be the cockpit. Omon always attempted to be the pilot. Finally, there was the sensation of flight that he experienced when watching old movies on his aunt's television. During this pastime he came to the realization that proved so fateful for his future:

if I'd just been able to glance at the screen and see the world from the cabin where the two fliers in fur-lined jackets were sitting, then there was nothing to prevent me from getting into this or any other cabin without the

³ Quotations are from the English translation by Andrew Bromfield (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).

⁴ This ambivalent exposition of Soviet life calls to mind other recontextualizations of Soviet *byt* in the new Russia, such as the (now) nostalgic representations of life in the communal apartment by performance artist Il'ia Kabakov.

help of the television, because flight is no more than a set of sensations, the most important of which I'd already learned to fake, sitting in the attic of the winged hut with the red stars... (7)

He continues this train of thought: "That means, I thought, I can look out from inside myself like looking out of a plane, it doesn't really matter at all where you look from, what matters is what you see" (7-8). The reader recognizes for an instant a post-modern observation on how each individual imposes a unique paradigm on the chaos of non-meaning. It is proffered almost at the outset of Pelevin's narrative, preceded only by Omon's ambivalent account of his father (hapless, but kindly man or violent, neglectful drunk?). Yet Omon makes his philosophical observation on varying perceptions only in passing and returns quickly to the significance of his realization for his child's world. It meant he could walk the streets in a state of "flight," tilting his head to watch the world tilt in response.

It is not long after Omon discovers his ability to "fly" that he recognizes his destiny. At a visit to VDNKh, the Exhibition of Economic Achievements in Moscow, he sees a picture of a cosmonaut in space. He is overwhelmed by the depiction of weightlessness: "I realized once and for ever that only weightlessness could give man genuine freedom" (8). His inclination toward flight, coupled with the associated motifs present in his little boy's world and the Soviet milieu, merge at this moment into a recognition of the potential for absolute freedom. Omon defines this liberation both in political and existential terms:

all my life I've only been bored by all those Western radio voices and those books by various Solzhenitsyns. In my heart, of course, i loathed a state whose silent menace obliged every group of people who came together, even if only for a few seconds, to imitate zealously the vilest and bawdiest individual among them; but since I realized that peace and freedom were unattainable on earth, my spirit aspired aloft, and everything that my chosen path required ceased to conflict with my conscience, because my conscience was calling me out into space and was not much interested in what was happening on earth (8-9).⁵

⁵ Much has been written on the options for escape in Soviet society—drunkenness, madness, "aberrant discourse," and exile. Yet only cosmonauts could realize the symbolic

Just after Omon realizes that he "could aspire beyond the thin blue film of the sky into the black abyss of space," he glances around and sees another boy, about his own age, who greets him with a knowing wave. It turns out the boy lives not far from Omon. Mitek knows that he will be a pilot, and that he will fly to the moon. Thus ends this brief, but dense, first chapter whose plot has doubled back upon itself. From the exposition of the narrator's evocative "Soviet" biography it has moved to the world of young boys and their frequent fascination with flight, to the potential for freedom, first from a particular reality, then from human consciousness. When Omon meets Mitek at VDNKh, the narrative "returns to earth" and to the story of a couple of typical Soviet boys and their love of space.

In the chapters that follow, the "space" motif is overshadowed by that of "deception" (which played a role in the first chapter as well—with respect to the narrator's shifting attitude). And as chapter 1 revealed a movement from the concrete to the abstract (the earth to the sky), the layering of deceptions reveals the same dynamic. Omon and Mitek enroll in a military college in Zaraisk that is named for the World War II military hero Aleksei Petrovich Mares'ev. This courageous pilot, who was memorialized in Boris Polevoi's *The Story of a Real Man* (*Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke*), was shot down behind enemy lines, crawled 18 days to reach the front, had his legs amputated, and after receiving prostheses, asked to be sent back to the front. In Zaraisk, however, Omon and Mitek discover a morbid travesty of Mares'ev's valor. The school produces sham "copies" of the hero—they amputate the legs of would-be fighter pilots, fit them with prostheses, and expect them to due their duty. Yet the substantive memorializing of Mares'ev at the military school proves impossible. The Soviet Union does not possess, cannot afford, a real air force. The training is "for show."

While at the flight school, Omon and Mitek learn of another deception (a deception within a deception). For inspiration, they are visited by "professional heroes." Omon recalls especially Major Ivan

transcendent (vertical) escape and go "out of this world." See, for example, Cynthia Simmons, *Their Fathers' Voice: Vassily Aksyonov, Venedikt Erofeev, Eduard Limonov, and Sasha Sokolov* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

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Trofimovich Popad'ia, whose sacrifice to the state also involves a deception. After a Party official was killed by a wild boar he was hunting at a game reserve for the ruling elite, Popad'ia agreed to take part in a charade that was devised to protect the officials, and one which they were all aware of. Popad'ia would dress up as some wild animal, don a bullet-proof vest, and when shot, would "fall dead." The hunters would try to aim at his vest, but occasionally he would get wounded in other parts of his body. Popad'ia performed this service with his son Marat, until Marat met with an accident. Once, when Henry Kissinger was visiting to negotiate a treaty on nuclear-arms reduction (which the Soviets were eager to sign, as they did not want the West to learn that they in fact had no nuclear weapons), he was brought to the reserve to hunt bear. When Kissinger failed to shoot Marat Popad'ia, he charged him with a knife and stabbed him through his bullet-proof vest. Marat died. Later on the reader learns that Kissinger was deceiving his hosts as well and knew all along that he was attacking a man.

Omon and Mitek are chosen to train as cosmonauts. Their senior officers reveal to them that the country does not have the technology or resources to get cosmonauts to the moon and bring them home again. But in order to save face with the West, they will send a group of cosmonauts on a one-way trip. They must be prepared to sacrifice their lives to make it seem that Russia can hold its own in the space race. Omon and Mitek accept their fate for the sake of the greater good. As the Flight Leader explains:

"We Communists had no time to prove the correctness of our ideas—the war cost us too much of our strength, we had to spend too long struggling against the remnants of the past and our enemies within the country. We didn't have the time to defeat the West technologically. But in the battle of ideas, you can't stop for a second. The paradox—another piece of dialectics—is that we support the truth with falsehood, because Marxism carries within itself an all-conquering truth and the goal for which you will give your lives is, in the formal sense, a deception." (44)

At various points in his narrative, Omon observes higher-order "deceptions," if you will. These resonate with the now commonplace postmodern subversions of all paradigms of epistemology. For example, when Omon and Mitek, as part of their cosmo-

naut training, go for a "reincarnation check," Omon is given a liquid to drink and is told to watch an hourglass. When all the sand runs out, he is to leave the room. Omon observes:

I remember watching the hourglass and being amazed at how slowly the grains of sand tumbled down through the narrow glass neck, until I realized that it was because each grain had its own will, and none of them wanted to fall, because for them that was the same as dying. And at the same time they had no choice, it was inevitable. The next world and this one are just like this hourglass, I thought; when everyone alive has died in one direction, reality is inverted and they come to life again; that is they begin to die in the opposite direction. (74)

Mitek fails the reincarnation test. Under the influence of the drug, he speaks as various personae; one of them is a Nazi pilot. Mitek is given a confession to sign and is shot.

Omon realizes several other "higher-order" or literally celestial deceptions on the flight to the moon. For instance, he ponders the starlight and recalls that the source of that seemingly vital force, by the time it is seen on (or above) earth, may have already died. Another possible grand illusion comes to him in a dream he has on his journey. Omon dreams of the son of the professional hero Ivan Trofimovich Popad'ia who had visited the flight school in Zaraisk. In Omon's dream, Marat Popad'ia (who had been killed by Kissinger while acting the part of the bear at the hunt) observes: "I and the entire world are nothing but a thought someone is thinking" (109).

As Omon nears the end of his flight to the moon, he comes to the realization that his life's goal constituted nothing more than a deception of self:

All my life I've been journeying towards the moment when I would soar up over the crowds of what the slogans called the workers and the peasants, the soldiers and the intelligentsia, and now here I am hanging in brilliant blackness on the invisible threads of fate and trajectory—and now I see that becoming a heavenly body is not much different from serving a life sentence in a prison carriage that travels round and round a circular railway line without ever stopping. (112)

But the joke is not only on Omon. Pelevin has in store for us one final deceit. When Omon's spacecraft arrives, he follows the instructions he was

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given. He exits the capsule and while holding his last breath of air, he sets a beacon that is to radio the USSR's message of success and good will back to earth. He then takes a loaded pistol and inspired by the supreme sacrifice made by his comrades in the already-expelled stages of the spacecraft, he shoots himself. His mind briefly registers that the gun misfired, but he loses consciousness as he "chokes on emptiness." And then he wakes up. Omon is subsequently chased by dogs and fired upon by Landratov, of the Zairaik flight school, who had been at Central Flight Control. He runs through passages that appear to be abandoned metro tunnels, jumps over a wall and finds himself on a television sound stage. The ceiling is covered to resemble outer space and a space ship is suspended in the air. The newscaster announces that they are "going live," and Omon watches a sham space walk. After this performance, Omon passes out from exhaustion, unobserved. When he awakes, the newscast has ended, but as he wanders around the area, he is spotted by the "cosmonauts" and is pursued again. Omon escapes through a ventilation shaft, up some stairs, and through a door. He is met by an inscription, "Lenin Library," and the single thought—"the earth"! Omon's "flight to the moon" had been staged, in the Moscow subway underneath the Kremlin.

With this realization, it would seem that the narrative has arrived at the cynical dead end. But just as Omon's and Mitek's willingness to martyr themselves for the Soviet idea is proffered as a counterpoint to the system's depravity, Omon's integrity is foregrounded by the revelation, in the last few pages of the novella, of the advice Urchagin had whispered to him just before the bogus moon shot:

"Remember, Omon, although man, of course, has no soul, every soul is a universe. That's the dialectic. And as long as there is a single soul in which our cause lives and conquers, that cause will never die. For an entire universe will exist, and at its center will be this [he gestures toward Red Square]...Just one pure soul is enough for the banner of triumphant socialism to be unfurled on the surface of the distant moon. But there must be one pure soul, if only for a moment, because the banner will be unfurled within that soul..." (150)

Omon does more than simply survive the ruse. He takes a seat on the train that soon arrives and begins to imagine his new life. "The flight continues," he

thinks to himself. The "SWAT-team King Ra" has "surfaced" from an even more subterranean defiled space—the Moscow subway tunnels that had been appropriated for the government's travesty of space travel. Yet he remains within the Soviet otherworld or "interworld" of the Stalinist Moscow metro. Like the Egyptian king, he has risen out of the night and has brought the "day," But it is still the *Soviet* day. The symbolic significance of the Moscow subway has been described by Svetlana Boym as "the ideal blueprint of Socialist Realist culture, with neoclassical columns, mosaic portraits of great poets and great leaders, and plenty of exotic vegetation to adorn the Russian tropical utopia under the ground,"⁶ and by Scott Palmer as a "Copernican description of the universe, with Moscow serving as the center or 'sun' within the system."⁷ Both Venedikt Erofeev (in *Moscow-Petushki*) and Pelevin himself (in *The Yellow Arrow* [Zheltaia strela]) have confronted the tenacity of the Moscow subway's or Soviet cosmography's "orbital forces."

Pelevin's devices are decidedly postmodern: subversion of his own narration, representation of the postmodernist concern with repetition and mirroring that leads to meaninglessness (a world of simulacra), and observations on the vulnerability of all paradigms of existence. Yet thematically he offers us a way out. That is Omon himself. He fulfills Urchagin's prophesy of the salvation of socialism in one good soul. He may be embarking on his new "flight" within the bowels (and control) of Moscow, but he can eventually surface upon a less mythological topography beyond the official boundaries of Moscow and its fiercest gravitational forces. On his journey he is accompanied by ordinary citizens, his "fellow-travelers" in the subway car, who carry in their net shopping bags the ingredients for the soup that has nourished him since childhood—rice, macaroni stars, and chicken.

The confrontation of postmodern devices and the possibilities for modernist transcendence underlies

⁶ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994):114.

⁷ Scott W. Palmer, "Shklovskii and the Machine: Modernist Visions and the Promise of Technique," unpublished paper presented at the AAASS National Convention, Honolulu, 1993.

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the controversy over (re-)interpretations of such works as Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada* and Venedikt Erofeev's *Moscow-Petushki*. It is interesting that Liudmila Petrushevskaja, whose prose is unarguably postmodern, shuns the characterization, while Pelevin embraces the label. Yet it is Pelevin's *Omon Ra*, stylistically postmodern, that offers the modernist "way out." The SWAT-Team/Sun God Ra, who carries within him the pearl of the universe of socialism, sets out on the Moscow subway to give rise to another new day. Modern or postmodern? As Colonel Urchagin would say: "That is the dialectic."

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