

The Evolution of the Concept of Prison in Viktor Pelevin's Works

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Abstract. This article describes the evolution of the concept of the prison in the texts of Victor Pelevin. The prison image changes throughout the author's works, and the article compares his early stories *The Yellow Arrow* and *Hermit and Six-Toes* with his later story *Stolypin*. The article describes the evolution of the paired heroes as well of the stories: the student and the teacher. Using the evolution of the heroes as a model, the article shows how in Pelevin's early stories the prison becomes a place from which one can escape, a metaphor for Soviet and post-Soviet society of the 90s, and the heroes of early Pelevin are able to escape with the help of their connection to culture and clues scattered in the surrounding world. The heroes of the story *Stolypin* – oligarchs, in spite of staying within the same student–teacher paradigm, represent a deconstruction of their predecessors, devoid of any interests other than mercantile ones, and in many ways parody the heroes of *The Yellow Arrow* and *Hermit and the Six-Toes*. The image of the prison wagon from the story *Stolypin* is a metaphor for modern Russia.

Keywords: Victor Pelevin, prison, student and teacher, Stolypin, post-Soviet literature..

Kalėjimo sampratos raida Viktoro Pelevino kūryboje

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje aprašoma kalėjimo sampratos evoliucija Viktoro Pelevino kūryboje. Kalėjimo įvaizdis autoriaus kūryboje kinta, straipsnyje lyginamos jo ankstyvojo periodo apsakos „Geltonoji strėlė“ ir „Atsiskyrėlis ir Šešiapirštis“ su vėlyvuju „Stolypinu“. Taip pat aprašoma kūrinių herojų – mokinio ir mokytojo evoliucija. Remiantis herojų evoliucija kaip pavyzdžiu straipsnyje parodyta, kaip ankstyvosiose Pelevino apsakose kalėjimas tampa vieta, iš kurios galima pabėgti/ Tai Sovietų ir posovietinės dešimtojo dešimtmečio visuomenės metafora. Ankstyvosios Pelevino kūrybos herojai, puoselėdami ryšį su kultūra, gali iš tokio kalėjimo ištrūkti. „Stolypino“ apsakymo herojai – oligarchai, kurie nors ir toliau veikia toje pačioje mokinio-mokytojo paradigmoje, yra savo pirmtakų dekonstrukcija, jie neturi jokių interesų, išskyrus merkantilinius, ir daugeliu atžvilgių parodijuoja „Geltonosios strėlės“, „Atsiskyrėlio ir Šešiapirščio“ herojus. Kalėjimo vagono vaizdas apsakyme „Stolypinas“ yra šiuolaikinės Rusijos metafora.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Victoras Pelevinas, kalėjimas, mokinys ir mokytojas, Stolypinas, postsovietinė literatūra.

Viktor Pelevin is one of the most prominent and popular contemporary writers in modern Russia. This article aims to show how the metaphor of the world as a prison is interpreted in his early and later works. In essence, the narrative paradigm presented in his short novels *The Yellow Arrow* (*Zheltaya strela*) and *Hermit and the Six-Toes* (*Zatvornik i*

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Shestipalyi) is transformed and almost deconstructed in his story *Stolypin* while changes in the characters of his heroes correspond to the sense of decline and degradation in modern Russia. This evident transformation of the style of Pelevin's writing has been already noted by the literary critic Mark Lipovetsky in his article "Blue Lard of the Generation, or Two Myths of One Crisis ("Goluboe salo pokoleniya, ili Dva mifa ob odnom krizise"). Describing the similarities between Pelevin's novel *Generation P* and Sorokin's novel *Blue Lard (Goluboe salo)* he has noticed Pelevin's attempts to distance himself from the traditions of Russian modernism, and shift from a paradigm of modernist hero, poet, and creator of his own world to a commercialized version of a protagonist, whose act of creation is satirized in an act of advertisement. As a result, the protagonist loses his identity and becomes a brand itself, collapsing under the power of his own name (Lipovetsky, 1999).

Dmitry Bykov in his lectures bemoaned the disappearing poetics of childhood in Pelevin's writing, comparing the evolution of his works to a "nosediving bomber" and emphasizing the sense of disappointment and apathy which appear in the author's recent books (Bykov, 2016, p. 13). After the start of the war in Ukraine, in his interview to Alexander Genis, Lipovetsky goes as far as putting on Pelevin some part of the blame for creating a grounding for the aggressive fascism, which he calls *rashism*: "Victor Pelevin in the 2010s writes novels which most carefully prepare the ideological ground for rashism" (Genis, 2022). In Lipovetsky's opinion, in his 2010s novels Pelevin devotes too much time to criticizing the hypocrisy of the western society going as far as claiming that in comparison with the hypocrisy present in the West, Russia is merely an epigone of the western society, and cannot compete with it. Even though criticism of Pelevin's description of the West can be largely warranted, Pelevin's story *Stolypin* shows that the author is in no way inclined to justify the realities of modern Russia. In the stories *Zheltaya strela* and *Zatvornik i Shestipalyi*, published in 1993 and 1990, one can see completely different narratives. Both stories begin with the depiction of a fictional world as a prison. In *Zatvornik i Shestipalyi* it is a cage where broiler chickens are being kept, in *Zheltaya strela* it is a train 'Yellow arrow' ('*Zheltaya strela*'). Both prisons are moving to their inevitable doom: the train is heading towards a broken bridge and the cage with the broiler chickens is going to a processing plant where they will be slaughtered. This is telling that most inhabitants of these prisons either fully accept their inevitable fate or are oblivious of it. Most people travelling on the train can't hear the sound of the train wheels and even forget that they are "passengers" ('*passazhiry*'); most of the broiler chickens are willing participants in a "society" who waits for "decisive stage" ('*reshitel'nyi etap*'), which is the procedure of killing all the chickens.

Both short stories feature two protagonists: a master and a student. In *Zheltaya strela* they are Andrei and Khan and in *Zatvornik i Shestipalyi* – a pair of broiler chickens Hermit and Six-fingered. Both pairs understand that their worlds, which serve as their prison, are moving to a collapse. To avoid the imminent catastrophe they search in their surroundings for the clues that could lead them to a salvation. Hermit notices and tells Six-fingered that there are 70 bulbs on the conveyor which mark the approaching of the cage destined

for the processing plant, and that they have already reached the 69th bulb. Through his window Andrey sees footsteps on the snow after which he receives cryptic letters from his master Khan and interprets corresponding mystic signs in his book “India’s Railways Guide” (*Putevoditel’ po zheleznym dorogam Indii*). The protagonists are also distinguished and united through their connection to culture. Hermit and Six-fingered recite a poem dedicated to the cage-world every time they are leaving one cage and travel to the next one. Khan and Andrei discussing a letter from a person who left their train, have a comical but an extremely honest conversation concerning their connection to the culture and earth:

I told you, there are letters all around us – it just takes someone to read them. For instance, the word ‘earth’ is another letter with the same meaning.

Why?

Think about it. Imagine yourself standing at the window looking out. Houses, kitchen gardens, skeletons, mileposts – in a word, everything the intellectuals call ‘kulture’.

‘Culture’, Andrei corrected him.

Yes, and most of this ‘kulture’ consists of dead bodies mixed up with bottles and bedsheets. In several layers, with grass on the top. This is also called ‘earth.’ The stuff that bones rot in, and the place where we live are called by the same name. We’re all inhabitants of earth.

(Pevlevin, 1994, p. 39)

Pevlevin’s early protagonists are mostly modernist heroes – they feel a longing for the lost connection to the *world culture*. This longing is revealed through certain mistakes they make while using cultural terms, thus creating comical effect, but also underlining the complete isolation of Pevlevin’s post-Soviet hero from modern culture.

The short story *Stolypin*, although representing the same model, can be regarded as opposite of the before-mentioned stories. The heroes of this story are prisoners who are being transported in a railway carriage. The language of the story presents a kind of prison jargon – the device which Pevlevin used in his earlier books – for example, it is used to explicate Buddhist philosophy as expressed in a dialogue between gangsters in his novel *Chapaev i Pustota*. The story *Stolypin* begins with the discussion of the difference between two terms – *petukh*¹ (‘cock’) and *drakony* (‘dragons’) – which are used by prison guards to designate their prisoners. One of the prisoners is saying that “Dragon is the same cock only with long crest” (Pevlevin, 2019, p. 367). The other prisoner disagrees and tells a story explaining the difference. In his story which took place in a different *Stolypin* carriage, a prisoner arrives and shows his disregard for all the rules set in this place by the inmates. He tells all the other inhabitants of the carriage that they are *suki*,² and for this reason is about to be beaten and raped by inmates. But according to the Russian prison rules the inmates of the carriage cannot punish him because he is considered impure, and if they touch him, they themselves will end up being molested. At some point he draws a boat on the carriage wall and offers everybody a place in it, thus promising them a chance of escape with him. The only person who took up the offer was the storyteller himself.

¹ *Petukh* or *opushchennyj* (‘brought down’) are terms used in Russian prison jargon to describe inmates who were raped and are considered lowest cast in prison.

² In Russia’s prison slang a term used for inmates collaborating with prison administration.

Later that night he was woken up by the guards and shown that their carriage was just a simulacra of a carriage which was installed on a yacht. The narrator turned out to be a Russian oligarch, who derived a peculiar pleasure from mixing with prisoners pretending to be one of them, and then getting back to the life of luxury he enjoyed on his yacht. Finally, we learn that the first Stolypin carriage was also a simulacra and the first narrator was also an oligarch, who wanted to show off his simulacra to his counterpart. The title of the story *Stolypin* is very telling. It refers to Pyotr Stolypin – Russian prime minister and interior minister who was assassinated in 1911, and whose name is synonymous with tough punishments in the late Russian empire. “Stolypin” is associated with the notion of *Stolypinskii vagon* (‘Stolypin’s carriage’) – a type of railroad carriage in the Russian Empire, Soviet Union and modern Russia used to transport prisoners. If both *Zatvornik i Shestipalyi* and *Zheltaya strela* depict society as a prison, as a closed space and may be considered to be a metaphor for the Soviet society, in the story *Stolypin* the metaphor of the world as a prison becomes much more pivotal, prison being mentioned in the title of the story. Here we see a continuation of the motive of the master and his pupil typical for many of Pelevin’s novels. The master in this story is a rich oligarch Rinat Musaevich, and the pupil is Fedor Semenykh who happens to be less well-off. The master’s status is demonstrated only by the bigger size of his yacht and the replica of the Stolypin’s carriage housed in it. The motive of escape also becomes deconstructed – although both oligarchs “escape” to their yachts, paradoxically they know that they didn’t escape prison because Stolypin’s carriage is metaphor not only for prison but also for the whole of Russia as a prison system: “Because Russia, Fedya, is Stolypin. And Stolypin is Russia. And the fact that you have a secret exit to the deck does not change anything” (Pelevin, 2019, p. 409–410).

Just as the prisoners in Stolypin’s carriage, the oligarchs perceive themselves as prisoners in Russia. But instead of trying to escape, like the protagonists of *Zheltaya strela* and *Zatvornik i Shestipalyi*, they feel very complacent about their situation, which makes them more like the passengers of *Zheltaya strela* or the broiler chickens in *Zatvornik i Shestipalyi*. They even discuss that one of the replicas of the Stolypin have a bath, implying that somewhere in Russia there is a new model of a real Stolypin with a bath, and that it can be viewed as a sign that things are improving in Russia. They see their conversations with the inmates as a twisted way to communicate with and educate people: “We’re not just travelling with a special contingent, Fedya. We speak heart to heart with people in the language they understand, we educate... We plunge into people to their full depth” (Pelevin, 2019, p. 414).

The elements of satire are present in the whole corpus of Pelevin’s works, but *Stolypin* presents a particularly dim and dark satire of the Russian society, not only because everyone here is complacent (even though they do feel like they are living in prison) but also because characters representing positive values and seeking to escape and gain freedom, like that of Andrei or Six-fingered, are absent from Pelevin’s later works. If in the early stories there was a cultural connection between a student and his master which could reveal a path to escaping the dying world, in *Stolypin* this connection is completely

deconstructed in the characters of oligarchs who parody Pelevin's earlier heroes. Although their dialog is presented as that of a student and a master, the only thing they are concerned about is how to build a bigger yacht and a bigger Stolypin carriage inside it, thus building a bigger prison for themselves. To follow the evolution of the depiction of prison, we can compare the opposing worldviews of two great Russian writers, who described the Soviet gulag system – Varlam Shalamov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. In *The Gulag Archipelago* Solzhenitsyn describes the horrors of the Soviet repressive system, but shows that his heroes can resist and escape it with their spiritual core and humanity intact. The continuation of this tradition is seen in Pelevin's early works. But the style of *Stolypin* is much closer in its depictions of prison to Shalamov's *Kolyma stories*. He describes a system which strips people of their humanity, corrupts and denigrates even the strongest of them, thus showing the limits of resistance of which human nature is capable of. Evgenii Shklovskii writes that in comparison to Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov's experience in Kolyma was much grimmer: "...a person is subject to corruption; his spirit is dependent on the body, few are able to resist; at the bottom of each and everyone of us is hidden a 'scoundrel and a coward'" (Shklovskii, 1993, p. 49). The transformation of Pelevin's characters paints a very similar picture. In *Stolypin* one can see how prison bleeds out and poisons the Russian society, where there is not much difference between prisoners sitting in Stolypin's carriage and the oligarchs lounging on their yachts. In Pelevin's depiction of Russia there is no place for characters striving for their freedom, only prisoners who are content with their life in confinement.

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