

*The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*. A Novel. Viktor Pelevin. Andrew Bromfield, trans. New York: Penguin Books, 2008, 333 pages.

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In midsummer 2003, Russia's Interior Ministry undertook a wildly televised anti-corruption operation: several colonels and one general were arrested for running "a crime corporation" that extorted protection money from small retailers, restaurant, and casino owners (see Brooke 2003). Covering the operation, the Russian media could not hide their fascination with the policemen's huge *dachas* in Moscow's

suburbs, with their 16th-century icons, gold-plated toilets, gold-plated guns, \$3 million of cash, and two kilos of gold bars that were discovered during the arrest. Some publications optimistically perceived the arrest of the policemen-turned-racketeers as the beginning of the ministry's long-awaited process of self-cleansing. Such an interpretation, however, was promptly dismissed by the police itself. Displacing the focus of attention from the corrupt institution to the abnormal individuals, the ministry's officers insisted that the arrest should not be compared to the Italian "Clean Hands" campaign against corruption in political parties and state institutions. The purpose of the ministry's operation was to reveal "werewolves with police epaulets" (*oborotni v pogonakh*) hidden within the "power structures" (Trofimov 2003).

The initial uncovering of the seven "werewolves" started a chain of similar events. Emphasizing an urgent need for more public exposures of this kind, Boris Gryzlov, the head of the ministry at the time, went as far as to advise "every car-owner" to keep with him or her a photo or video camera—so that "any attempt at money extortion undertaken by the road police could be documented right away" (Strana i mir 2003). As a result, more and more "werewolves" were unmasked: among the border police at the Moscow largest international airport, at customs offices and other state institutions in the capital and throughout the country (Khinshtein 2005).

Of course, it was not post-Soviet corruption itself that was so surprising. After all, the policemen's huge dachas were hard to hide. What drew the public attention to these showcases was the authorities' sudden desire to offer a new language of criminality, a new modality of reading within which the mundane daily corruption of the powerful could acquire a graspable, though somewhat blurred, meaning. The trope of the "werewolf with epaulets" provided if not a justification then, at least, an image for the constant shape shifting of the post-Soviet state. "Werewolf" helpfully epitomized a generally shared assumption that everyone could indeed easily combine contradictory and even opposite identities. Perhaps even more important was the fact that unlike the English *werewolf*, the Russian original—*oboroten'*—emphasized a possibility of permanent transformation (*oborotit'sia* means to turn out, to spin, to take a turn), not just a particular stage of it ("wolf"). Triangulating the human, the animalistic, and the authoritative, *oboroten' v pogonakh* became a key post-Soviet figure that personified political volatility and embodied ethical and social liminality. In short, the werewolf with epaulets represented a perpetual (somatic) conversion of power, state, and criminality in postmillennial Russia.

Just like “werewolves with epaulets,” *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* achieves most of its rhetorical power through the active deployment of oxymoron. In some sense, such a predominance of the oxymoronic in the post-Soviet discourse in general reflects the overall state of post-Socialist capitalism. Published originally in 2004 in Russian, Viktor Pelevin’s *The Sacred Book* is both a response to and an indicator of a general cultural striving to stabilize in words and images the elusive meaning of radical economic and political changes. Since the early the 1990s, Pelevin has been at the forefront of this process, providing a never-ending supply of ironic metaphors, witty expressions, and hilarious slogans for what he himself called “a transitional period from no-where to no-place” (see his *Dialektika perekhodnogo perioda iz niotkuda v nikuda*. Moscow: EKSMO, 2003). His *Homo Zapiens* (like *The Sacred Book*, it was also superbly translated by Andrew Bromfield) has become a major text that shaped the perception and the vocabulary of those who were coming of age after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Generation “P.” *Homo Zapiens*. Andrew Bromfield, trans. New York: Viking, 2002). When in the end of 2009—ten years after the publication of *Homo Zapiens*—the Russian Web portal Openspace.ru asked its readers to nominate and vote for the most influential Russian intellectual, Pelevin easily won the competition (Openspace.ru 2009).

*The Sacred Book* is not exactly Pelevin’s best novel; it is, nonetheless, an interesting (and rare) poststructuralist exercise in narrating Russia’s postcommunist experience. Framed as a contemporary fairy tale (with multiple references to Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk Tale*), *The Sacred Book* interweaves political clichés, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist lingo, familiar folkloric characters, and Buddhist concepts. Peppered with radically nontraditional erotic scenes and obscene language, the novel, however, is a simple story about two unusual personages who fall in love in very complex circumstances. The main character succinctly summarizes the plot:

That was it. Two lonely hearts met among the pale blossoms of the Moscow spring. One told the other she was older than the city around, the other confessed that he had claws on his dick. For a short while they twined their tales together, spoke of the highest truth and howled at the moon, then went on their way, like two ships passing at sea. . . . *Je ne regretted rien*. [p. 322]

“She” here is Adel’, a 2,000-year-old fox from China. Under a disguise of a 16-year-old girl, she works as a hotel prostitute in today’s Moscow. “He” is Sasha Seryi, a Russian lieutenant general, enlisted with the Federal Security Service (a successor of the KGB) who periodically transforms himself into a superwolf.

Indeed, Pelevin's story about the love relationship of the Ginger Fox and the Gray Wolf is more than just an eroticized rendition of the familiar narrative about Little Red Riding Hood and a big Wolf. Predominantly, *The Sacred Book* is a caustic commentary on power—its influence and its pitfalls—in today's Russia. Werewolf and werefox function here as an artistic device that helps to envision (and to normalize) fleeting loyalties, allegiances, and subjectivities. Unlike familiar images of the duplicitous late-Soviet subject who sustained his or her cynicism by radically separating the public and the private forms of his or her existence, the post-Soviet werewolf emphasizes not the primary fissure but the fundamental fusion of contradictory lifestyles. In fact, it is precisely the idea of inseparability of incompatible features that made the figure of werewolf (with epaulets or without) especially effective. To push it even more: the post-Soviet werewolf signifies a peculiar historical condition, in which operations of differentiation that usually establish and institutionalize social, economic, legal, or political distinctions, have been somewhat halted. As a result, shape shifting—just like corruption—is often more a response to a lack of fully formed barriers and borders between different forms of existence rather than a transgressive (or criminal) attempt to impose the logic and practices of one cultural field onto another. Again, the oxymoronic here is a form of cultural logic, rather than a deliberate confusion of categories. Famous for his wordplays, Pelevin, for instance, provides (through the fox) the following etymologic and genealogic story of this post-Soviet state of nondifferentiation: “the elite” here is divided into two branches, which are called “the oligarchy” (derived from the words “oil” and “gargle”) and “the apparat” (from the phrase “upper rat”). “The oligarchy” is the business community, which grovels to the authorities, who can close down any business at any moment, because business here is inseparable from theft. And “the upper rat” consists of the authorities, who feed on the kickback from business. The way it works is that the former allow the latter to steal because the latter allow the former to thieve” (p. 85).

For Pelevin, this fusion of the “oil-garglers” and the “upper rats,” however, is sustainable as long as the Russian state retains its status of a major *petrostate*: oil is the fluid that animates exchanges. More significantly, oil makes the very existence of the “crime corporation” of oil-garglers and upper rats possible. Hence, the unexpected twist in the novel. The superpower of Sasha the werewolf with epaulets is mobilized to achieve one constant goal: to secure the constant flow of oil. The process of this securing is far from being traditional, though. Periodically, it requires a particular form of communication with the earth itself. In a scene that

mocks peasants' prayers for rain, Sasha Seryi—turned into a wolf and accompanied by his FSB colleagues (werewolves of a lesser strength)—howls to stir the pity of the mother-earth:

You are the soul of all those who died believing in the happiness that would come in the future. And now see, it has come. The future in which people do not live for something else but for themselves. . . . You had someone to live for, but we do not. . . . You can only give oil to ignominious wolves, so that kukis-yukis-yupsi-poops [an allusion to the name of a major Russian oil company *Yukos*, forcefully re-nationalized by the state in 2006] can shell out to its lawyer and the lawyer can give the head of security a kick-back, the head of security can grease his hairdresser's palm, the hairdresser can grease the cook's, the cook can grease the driver. [p. 219]

After the howling prayer, oil resumes its flow, enriching again those who have nobody to live for but themselves.

Despite its pointed social criticism, *The Sacred Book* is less concerned with the vacuity of neoliberal consumerism and a lack of social and existential anchors in postsocialist Russia. Similar to Pelevin's earlier works, such as *The Life of Insects* (A. Bromfield, trans. London: Harbord, 1996) and "The Yellow Arrow" (*Omon Ra*. A. Bromfield, trans. London: Harbord, 1994), *The Sacred Book* explores how liminality morphs into a way of life, how existential instability is grounded and constantly reproduced. With their decentered subjectivities, fluid identities, and polyphonic consciousness, Pelevin's werewolves and werefoxes have no point of ultimate arrival. Spinning is the basic form of their existence. Yet no matter how much they spin, as one character in the novel points out, these canines "are still 'God' spelt backwards" (p. 182).

As many other Russian novels about love, *The Sacred Book* ends up being a story about the impossibility of love. Yet it offers a substitute of sorts. When asked by her sister what she likes about Russia most, Adel' responds: "The Russian language." "You do right to induce that feeling in yourself," responded her sister, "Otherwise you would find it unbearable to live here" (p. 162). Not unlike his characters, Pelevin's virtuoso language turns the unbearable into palatable, making living possible.

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