

SEEING THE VOYD

*Buddha's Little Finger and the Empty Dialectic Between Geography and History*

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## ABSTRACT

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Victor Pelevin's novel, *Buddha's Little Finger* is a modern Russian novel that seems to deal with the question of the Russian identity, but is told through a narrative that is frustrated by frequent internal contradictions. The contradictions arise because the novel deals largely with Buddhism and mythology; two topics that are resistant to logic and must be understood in their own terms. Current scholarship on *Buddha's Little Finger* deals primarily with identifying a place for the novel within a broader literary context, but finding a place for the novel forces it into a certain genre and limits the ways that it can be interpreted. This thesis intends to understand *Buddha's Little Finger* through a formalist close reading of the text and to reconcile paradoxes and contradictions into a coherent analysis that describes the purpose of the novel by making use of Buddhism and mythology.



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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I had never understood my own poetry particularly well, and had long suspected that authorship is a dubious concept, and all that is required from a person who takes a pen in hand is to line up the various keyholes scattered about his soul so that a ray of sunlight can shine through on to the paper set out in front of him.<sup>1</sup>

Впрочем, я никогда особо не понимал своих стихов, давно догадываясь, что авторство -- вещь сомнительная, и все, что требуется от того, кто взял в руки перо и склонился над листом бумаги, так это выстроить множество разбросанных по душе замочных скважин в одну линию, так, чтобы сквозь них на бумагу вдруг упал солнечный луч.<sup>2</sup>

### OVERVIEW

*Buddha's Little Finger* is a modern Russian novel written by Victor Pelevin. The novel reimagines the Russian folk hero Vasily Chapayev through the adventures of his commissar Pyotr Voyd and addresses Buddhism and mythology. This novel is peculiar because it feels accessible and totally enigmatic at the same time. The language of the novel is easy to digest and the story is entertaining, but the meaning of the text is locked away behind Buddhist paradoxes and mythological references. Pelevin is one of Russia's most famous modern writers and has attracted a significant amount of attention, both in Russia and abroad. Buddhism appears as a theme across many of his novels, and *Buddha's Little Finger* deals with the dichotomy between East and West with regards to the Russian identity in terms of Zen Buddhism.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Pelevin, *Buddha's Little Finger*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 275. I frequently cite quotes from *Buddha's Little Finger*. To reduce clutter, all citations at the end of sentence of the format: (pg. #) refer to page numbers from *Buddha's Little Finger* and the citation above.

<sup>2</sup> Виктор Пелевин. *Чапаяев и пустота*. (Москва: Вариус, 2004), 342.

For all block quotes I will provide the Russian text from this source underneath. All page numbers after Russian block quotes are from this source.

Scholarship on *Buddha's Little Finger* seems to shy away from dealing with the difficult paradoxes that the novel presents. In her dissertation titled *Satire, Parody, and Nostalgia on the Threshold*, Krystyna Steiger analyzes *Buddha's Little Finger* as a parodic work and tries to contextualize it within a larger field of literature.<sup>3</sup> Her approach, however, does not try to understand what is happening within *Buddha's Little Finger* and she is more concerned with looking at how themes from the novel operate in an extra-literary context. Edith Clowes, in her book, *Russia on the Edge*, includes a chapter about *Buddha's Little Finger* that identifies the novel as a satire of the Russian Neo-Eurasianist movement and analyzes how Russia's geographical peripheries interact with the center.<sup>4</sup> These interpretations are well supported by the novel, but the paradoxical content is problematic for any interpretation that tries to identify where *Buddha's Little Finger* is located within a political or cultural landscape. The question of the Russian identity and whether or not it is rooted in the East is one of the novel's clearest paradoxes. Within the novel some chapters support the view that Russia should look towards the East while others mock it. Thus an analysis that tries to place Pelevin in one camp or the other is bound to find evidence to substantiate its claim. However, this is because the novel simultaneously takes two different stances on the same issue, not because it is an explicit proponent of either. Identifying meaning in *Buddha's Little Finger* requires a synthesis between opposing perspectives, not just a single interpretation that leans one way or the other. My approach to this novel does not try to place Pelevin in any sort of political or cultural context; I work almost entirely within the text and use a balanced interpretation of the internal contradictions to identify what meaning, if any, this novel carries.

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<sup>3</sup> Krystyna Steiger, *Satire, Parody, and Nostalgia on the Threshold: Viktor Pelevin's Chapaev I Pustota in the context of its times* (McGill University, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Edith Clowes, *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell Paperbacks, 2011), 68-95.



Furthermore, I am conscious of the fact that I approach literature with a formalist lens and I am rarely satisfied unless I can eliminate all contradictions within my analysis. Much to my dismay, the more I have worked on this thesis, the surer I have felt that this novel is fundamentally built on paradoxes. To work through this problem, I employ many different techniques of literary analysis and I work very closely with specific passages from the text. Generally, the paradoxes that fill this novel stem largely from Pelevin's use of mythology and Buddhism. This shapes my strategy for interpreting the novel since analyzing mythology is different from analyzing literature and looking for logic in myth often causes one to entirely miss the meaning of myth. Because of this, and with respect to a formalist interpretation, I will primarily analyze this novel in its own terms and only hold it to its own internal logic.

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS ANALYSIS

Below, I outline the following six chapters and describe my methods and goals in each:

### **Chapter 2**

The novel follows a very unusual narrative structure. To help make sense of its structure, I introduce Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope and the Russian formalist terms, *syuzhet* and *fabula*. Also in this section, I establish credible characters whose opinions can be given more weight in my analysis. I need credible characters because there are places where the novel provides paradoxes that cannot be resolved except by trusting one character over another. This section explains my justification for the characters I have chosen.

### **Chapter 3**

Buddhism plays a large role in this novel and in this chapter, I describe the basis of Zen Buddhism and why it is applicable. After describing Buddhism, I look back on Chapter 2 and discuss the ways in which Buddhist concepts can be applied to the narrative and credibility. Finally I provide an explanation for the structure of the rest of my analysis, namely why I am concerned with geography, history, and myth.

### **Chapter 4**

In this chapter I explain Yi-Fu Tuan's concepts of place and space and use them to examine the way that the novel treats geography. I also define the empty dialectic and describe how it is useful for working with geography in the novel. I intend to prove that according to Buddhism and the novel's credible characters, geography is just an empty concept.

### **Chapter 5**

This section endeavors to do much the same thing as Chapter 4, but this time looking at time instead of geography. I also look back at Chapter 2 and consider the narrative once more in light of the new information that has been introduced in chapters 3-5.

### **Chapter 6**

I have asserted that *Buddha's Little Finger* makes use of mythology, I delve into mythology and how Pelevin has built it into the novel. I explain Carl Jung's theory on mythology and supply an example of how a Jungian archetypal analysis can be applied in the novel. I also look at what it means for Chapaev to be a mythological figure and relate characteristics of

Buddhism to those of myth. Finally, I end this chapter by revisiting how the novel treats time and history with respect to mythology.

## **Chapter 7**

I conclude this analysis by addressing the concept of the empty dialectic and identifying how it can be applied to geography and history to reveal the novel's fundamental meaning. I will also step outside of the text briefly and describe the purpose of the novel as a whole with relation to what I have found in earlier chapters of my analysis.

## CHAPTER 2. THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

...I came plummeting out of the leaden clouds of sleep.

For several seconds I struggled to understand where I actually was and what was taking place in this strange world into which some unknown force had been thrusting me for the past twenty-six years. (62)

...я вынырнул из свинцовых туч сна.

Несколько секунд я пытался сообразить, где я, собственно, нахожусь и что происходит в том странном мире, куда меня вот уже двадцать шесть лет каждое утро швыряет неведомая сила. (84)

### BAKHTIN'S CHRONOTOPES

The plot of *Buddha's Little Finger* winds through time and space and it is often difficult to keep track of how the novel moves through these spatiotemporal locations. It is useful to apply Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to help keep track of all of this movement. The chronotope is the interconnectedness of time and space, and the specific context that a blend of time and space produces within a novel. There can be as many chronotopes as there are combinations of time and space, and the term chronotope is used to refer to a specific combination of the two.<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin used different types of chronotopes to categorize texts and to observe and analyze patterns that appear within genres. My analysis does not focus on fitting the chronotopes of this novel into one of Bakhtin's molds, but I will leverage the general form of the chronotope to capture the differences of literary versus extra-literary space-time. Bakhtin says, "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully

<sup>5</sup> Steinby, Liisa, and Klapuri, Tintti, eds., *Bakhtin and His Others : (Inter)subjectivity, Chronotope, Dialogism*. (London, GBR: Anthem Press, 2013), 105-112, Accessed December 13, 2014, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/colgate/detail.action?docID=10686963>. ProQuest.

thought-out, concrete whole.”<sup>6</sup> This “whole” that Bakhtin speaks of is not a reference to a space and time that corresponds to an extra-literary location, but it is a location that is specific to the literature, or sometimes, the genre of literature that produces it, a point that will take on significance in a later discussion of *syuzhet* and *fabula*. In this paper I divide the novel into chronotopes based on their primary association with certain characters, the most important of which are Pyotr’s chronotope, Jungern’s chronotope, and Timurovich’s chronotope which, for the sake of brevity, I will refer to as PC, JC, and TC respectively. The descriptions of the chronotopes are as follows: Pyotr’s chronotope (PC) refers to the world of 1918 Civil War Russia in which Pyotr fights as a commissar; Jungern’s chronotope (JC) refers to the world of campfires and darkness that Pyotr briefly visits; lastly, Timurovich’s chronotope (TC) is in a Moscow mental ward after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The two largest chronotopes in the novel are TC and PC and they are presented in partial opposition to one another where each chronotope regards the other as a dream. Chapaev encourages Pyotr to cooperate with the psychiatrist, Timur Timurovich, to release himself from TC and Timurovich treats Pyotr by trying to eliminate PC. I have emphasized the strictly literary nature of the chronotope because some of the novel’s chronotopes seem to correspond closely to an extra-literary context. Interpreting the similarities between an extra-literary context and a chronotope is sometimes dangerous because it colors any interpretation of a novel with extra-literary content that may or may not be relevant or appropriate for the chronotope. TC is an example of when it is inappropriate to consider a chronotope as synonymous with its extra-literary counterpart. In TC, it is tempting to understand the gloomy world defined by the walls of the Moscow mental ward as somehow more authentic than the novel’s other chronotopes

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<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, M., & Holquist, M. *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 84-85.

because doing so resolves conventionally impossible scenarios. For example, when Baron Jungern summons a six-tusked white elephant onto a field in JC, it is easiest to attribute the moment to Pyotr's insanity. Understanding TC as an anchor point constrains my analysis because every other chronotope is subject to the logic of TC. For this reason, I have found that abandoning the assumption that TC serves as a "real" anchor point for the other chronotopes has led to a much more productive interpretation.

When I use the term anchor point I speak to the trend in literature and film of using flashbacks as a plot device. A flashback usually involves some sort of chronological development of plot followed by an interruption by an earlier moment that provides some new information, after which the narrative returns to its original location in the chronology. I define the anchor point as the chronotope from which the flashback departs. As a literary device, the flashback is insufficient to encompass all the movement between chronotopes in *Buddha's Little Finger*, but the movement is described well in the Russian Formalist terms: *fabula* and *syuzhet*. *Syuzhet* is more or less equivalent to the English concept of plot—it is the path that the narrative takes in a novel. If *syuzhet* is the path that the narrative takes, *fabula* is the landscape of content that *syuzhet* passes through. *Fabula* is the raw content of a novel that is extracted into a chronology of moments and locations. The *syuzhet* of *Buddha's Little Finger* is the path the narrative takes through the chronotopes where there is no primary chronotope to which the others are subsidiary. *Fabula* is more difficult to interpret because there is no objective chronology from which the chronotopes are extracted; instead, there are disjoint chronotopes united by *syuzhet*. Making sense of *fabula* in the novel requires examining the way *syuzhet* interacts with the chronotopes, and understanding how content can exist outside of chronology.

## NARRATIVE AS A DREAM SEQUENCE

Every chapter in *Buddha's Little Finger* begins and ends with someone entering or waking from a dream. For the most part, the transitions between chapters are smooth and do not draw attention to the fact that the *syuzhet* has just moved into a new chronotope. Common experience dictates that there should be a reality that one wakes up into; the rest can be dream, so long as there is a persistent reality from which the dreams originate. The chronotopes confuse the notion of any sort of *fabula*. As I indicated earlier, there is no chronotope from which the rest of the chronotopes are derived. Each of the chronotopes is distinct and, although they are connected, they exist independent of one another. Not only does the reader struggle with the border between reality and dream, but Pyotr does as well: "'What is real in actual fact?' Chapaev repeated after me, closing his eyes again. 'That's a question you're not likely to find an answer to. Because in actual fact there is no actual fact'" (205). Chapaev then goes on to say:

I once used to know a Chinese communist by the name of Tzu-Chuang who often dreamed the same dream, that he was a red butterfly fluttering through the grass and the flowers. And when he woke up, he often couldn't make out whether the butterfly had dreamt it was engaged in revolutionary activity or the underground activist had had a dream about flitting through the air from flower to flower. (205)

Знавал я одного китайского коммуниста по имени Цзе Чжуан. Ему часто снился один сон—что он красная бабочка, летающая среди травы. И когда он просыпался, он не мог взять в толк, то ли это бабочке приснилось, что она занимается революционной работой, то ли это подпольщик видел сон, в котором он порхал среди цветов. (257)

On this occasion, and many others like it, Chapaev teaches Pyotr that there is no objective reality—just dreams. Thus if we trust Chapaev, the dream sequence of the novel does not contain any objective reality, and every chronotope is a dream. One dream picks up when the other ends, but

one dream is not truer than another. Pyotr must be the dreamer, since in every instance he is the one entering or waking, but other people can be experiencing the same dream simultaneously with Pyotr. On this subject, the namesake of JC, Baron Jungern, tells Pyotr: “The world in which we live is simply a collective visualization, which we are taught to make from our early childhood” (235). In TC, Timur Timurovich gives his patients injections which draw dreams and symbols forth in a way that allows them all to see dreams together. The ability for all of the patients to experience the same dream simultaneously is explained by Baron Jungern’s description of collective visualization.

Additionally, if we look at *fabula* and consider the novel as a dream sequence, it makes sense that *fabula* should be insubstantial. *Fabula* demands an objective chronology, but there can be no objective chronology in a dream sequence because there is no objective chronotope in which to anchor a chronology. Of course there is content in the novel, so *Fabula* must have some substance to it, but that substance cannot be separated from *syuzhet*. This is a paradox inherent in all narratives, but Pelevin draws special attention to it by not allowing for any objective chronotope. One strategy for assembling *fabula* out of the narrative that Pelevin provides might be to go through the novel, pull out all of the chapters that are in PC, and then arrange them sequentially. The same could be done for TC, but this still does not create a stable *fabula*. This attempt at sequencing produces two blocks of content, one for PC, one for TC, but they are not chronologies as specified by *fabula*. Events that occur in TC are referenced in PC, and the reverse is also true, which means that an attempt at a chronology that involves only one chronotope is impossible because of dependencies between the two. Thus, even though the novel wanders through different chronotopes, the *fabula* of the novel cannot be organized in any other way than as it is presented by the narrative.



The crux of my interpretation hinges on the assumption that TC cannot be an objective chronotope. I proposed that reading TC as an anchor point for the novel does a disservice to a balanced interpretation of the text, but before continuing, it is necessary to prove that TC cannot be an anchor point. The evidence to prove that TC cannot be an anchor point is rooted in the conclusion of the novel. The end of Chapter 9 shows Pyotr and Chapaev destroying PC and forever ending that chronotope. The final paragraph of Chapter 9 describes Pyotr waking up into TC, and in that moment, both he and Timur Timurovich understand that PC is gone forever. This is an important branching moment in the novel, because it seems that TC has claimed some degree of permanence over PC. However, at the end of the next chapter, the novel ends when Pyotr staggers out onto a street in TC and sees Chapaev waiting for him there. Pyotr joins Chapaev and the two of them disappear from TC together.

There are two clear interpretations of this conclusion. The first requires that TC is an objective chronotope. In this interpretation, every chronotope besides TC is a dream generated by Pyotr's madness and the conclusion of the novel represents a relapse back into madness. The second interpretation, and the one that I have been arguing for involves no objective chronotope and as such, in the moment when Chapaev and Pyotr leave TC, TC is also destroyed. This interpretation preserves *syuzhet* as a dream sequence and maintains that there is no objective chronotope in this novel. However, since Pyotr's sanity is in question, the only way to prove this interpretation is to consider who in the novel is credible, and how the structure of the narrative supports my interpretation.

## CREDIBILITY OF CHARACTERS

I have established that *syuzhet* moves the narrative between characters and chronotopes, but there must also be something that drives that movement – the motivation that causes *syuzhet* to develop towards a particular conclusion. In *Buddha's Little Finger*, I believe that the *syuzhet* is motivated by the goal of destroying all of the novel's chronotopes. Chapaev is Pyotr's mentor and he educates Pyotr using the Socratic Method. Almost every conversation between Pyotr and Chapaev touches on the subject of dreams, for instance in Chapter 7, Pyotr asks Chapaev, “‘But why is everything that is happening to me a dream?’ ‘Because Petka,’ Chapaev said, ‘there just isn't anything else’” (207). This sentiment is echoed everywhere in the novel, and is not unique to conversations between Chapaev and Pyotr. The motivation that drives the novel to its conclusion in TC is generated by discussions of dreams and PC is destroyed because Pyotr finally understands that PC is nothing more than a dream. *Syuzhet* describes Pyotr's process of understanding the chronotopes as merely dreams. If the novel ends with Pyotr succumbing to madness, it would represent a significant divergence from the motivation for *syuzhet* in almost every other place in the novel. In other words, the content of the novel would not align with the conclusion of the novel.

I mentioned earlier that it is easy to try to impose the world we live in onto the world we read about and that in this case it does not transpose well. Everything we are exposed to inside the novel is in turn inside Pyotr. This is proven because every chapter, regardless of the chronotope is introduced as one of Pyotr's dreams. Since there is no objective chronotope, i.e., no reality from which these dreams originate, it must also be the case that not only is Pyotr experiencing these dreams, he is composed of them. What else could we possibly assert that Pyotr is, if the *fabula* of the novel is only dreams and there is no anchored reality? All chapters

are components of the dream sequence that cumulatively constitute the individual, Pyotr Voyd. When Pyotr exits TC with Chapaev, there is an understandable tendency to interpret TC as reality and insist that it persists outside of and indifferent to Pyotr. But TC only exists because Pyotr thinks he exists there, once he defeats that notion, TC is also destroyed. Analyzed this way, there is no reason at all for TC to exist after Pyotr leaves with Chapaev, and even less reason to interpret TC as some sort of familiar reality.

Throughout the novel, Chapaev is Pyotr's mentor, but he only appears in PC and because Chapaev only exists in this chronotope, his ethos seems to be contingent on Pyotr's sanity. My goal in the rest of this section is to establish credibility for Chapaev and some of the other characters. A credible character is someone whose actions and opinions support the interpretation of the conclusion where TC is destroyed, not the interpretation where Pyotr remains a madman. Credibility is important because this novel is full of disagreeing philosophies about the metaphysics of the self and of dreams. Using credibility, I will eliminate paradoxical interpretations of the text, because I can resolve disagreements between the opinions of characters by referencing their credibility or lack thereof.

The credible characters understand that Pyotr occupies a dream sequence, and can manipulate the dreams to an extent. There is also a hierarchy of credibility in the novel; there are two primary credible characters—Chapaev and Baron Jungern—and other secondary credible characters whose credibility is derived from a primary character. During JC, Baron Jungern is able to remove Pyotr from PC and bring him to JC—transporting him between dreams and demonstrating their illusory nature. Also, as I mentioned before, Chapaev is able to destroy dreams which also reveals their formlessness. Chapaev and Jungern teach Pyotr that all of the episodes in the novel are dreams and not reality. Furthermore, Chapaev and Jungern can

manipulate those dreams, whereas other characters who assume a certain chronotope constitutes reality cannot. Someone like the psychiatrist, Timur Timurovich, would argue that there is only one reality and everything else is a dream—he asserts that PC is a malignant product of Pyotr’s fractured psyche and that Pyotr is healthy when PC is removed. However, Chapaev is able to move from PC and appear in TC, something that would be impossible if TC was some sort of reality. Timurovich cannot be a credible character because what he indicates is impossible, Chapaev can do. In every chronotope there are individuals who consider that chronotope a reality. Chapaev and Jungern’s credibility is validated because they traverse between, and destroy those “realities.” As I progress forward in my analysis of *Buddha’s Little Finger*, I will frequently refer to credible characters, because oftentimes I can only resolve contradictions and produce a useful interpretation through assessments of credibility.

### CHAPTER 3. ZEN BUDDHISM IN THE NOVEL

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... (Preface ix)

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... (7)

#### OVERVIEW OF ZEN BUDDHISM

Zen Buddhism (also called Chan Buddhism) is a sect of Buddhism that focuses on meditation to achieve enlightenment. Zen began with the monk, Bodhidharma, the twenty-eighth successor of the first Buddha, Shakyamuni. Bodhidharma changed Buddhism by deemphasizing the importance of scripture, recitation, and memorization and instead giving more value to meditation and the transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil. Zen Buddhism is relevant to this analysis because in the preface to *Buddha’s Little Finger*, the author claims that in several places the novel attempts to point directly to the mind of the reader. This is a reference to a quote attributed to the Bodhidharma, that is central specifically to Zen Buddhism:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;  
Without dependence on words or letters;  
Direct pointing to the essence of mind;  
Seeing one’s true nature and attaining Buddhahood<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Nyogen Senzaki & Ruth Strout McCandless, *Buddhism and Zen* ( San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 10.

The verse above describes the transmission of knowledge in Zen Buddhism. This transmission is not based on the written word, but is instead done through instruction and “pointing to the essence of mind.” Bodhidharma was the twenty-eighth successor of the Buddha Shakyamuni. Further successors in the Zen tradition are said to receive the “Lamp of Dharma,” an act which represents the Zen instructor’s recognition of enlightenment in a disciple.

In *Buddha’s Little Finger*, the author of the preface comments on Pyotr’s attempts to point directly to the mind of the reader, “rather than force him to view yet another phantom constructed out of words...”, but goes on to say, “unfortunately this is far too simple a task for his attempts to prove successful” (Preface ix). The author is not making fun of Pyotr’s account, but is describing one of the features of Zen Buddhism, “When you can open both your subjectivity and your objectivity carrying your day’s work smoothly and happily, you will be living in Zen. The teaching of Buddha is too simple, so people hesitate to practice it”.<sup>8</sup> Zen Buddhism’s purpose is to teach individuals how to see the void (achieve enlightenment) which is something that takes place in an instant, however, finding the truth inside oneself that unlocks that instant can take many lifetimes—Buddhism proposes a simple goal, but not one that is easy. Buddhism is about finding *anatta* a Pali word meaning no-self. Buddhism teaches its adherents that everyone is a Buddha (an enlightened being) but we are blinded from our true Buddha-nature by our senses and emotions. Enlightenment is found in *anatta* by abandoning emotion and form and thereby finding oneself nowhere.

This novel is about Zen Buddhism, specifically about Pyotr as he learns Zen Buddhism from Chapaev and eventually finds enlightenment for himself. There are references to Buddhism throughout the novel, but I will not spend time cataloging all of them here, since I will analyze many in later sections. I will, however, speak about *syuzhet* and the novel’s chronotopes as they

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<sup>8</sup> Nyogen Senzaki & Ruth Strout McCandless, *Buddhism and Zen* ( San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 72.

are related to Buddhism. To find himself nowhere, Pyotr must identify the true nature of each of the chronotopes. True nature is described by Chapaev as he prepares to destroy PC.

...[L]ong before the Buddha Dipankara and the Buddha Shakyamuni came into the world, there lived the Buddha Anagama. He didn't waste any time on explanations, he simply pointed at things with the little finger of his left hand, and their true nature was instantly revealed. When he pointed to a mountain, it disappeared, when he pointed to a river, that disappeared too. It's a long story, but in short it all ended with him pointing to himself with his little finger and then disappearing. All that was left of him was that finger from his left hand... (305)

...[З]адолго до того, как в мир пришли Будда Дипанкара и Будда Шакьямуни, жил Будда Анагама. Он не тратил времени на объяснения, а просто указывал на вещи мизинцем своей левой руки, и сразу же после этого проявлялась их истинная природа. Когда он указывал на гору, она исчезала, когда он указывал на реку, она тоже пропадала. Это долгая история—короче, кончилось все тем, что он указал мизинцем на себя самого и после этого исчез. От него остался только этот левый мизинец... (377)

As Chapaev demonstrates, the true nature of everything is nothing. 'Anagama' is another Pali word which means non-returner, a person who has found enlightenment and no longer has to live among forms and suffering. The finger that Chapaev references is his "clay machine-gun", the namesake of the British edition of the novel and the means by which Chapaev destroys PC.<sup>9</sup> He orders that the clay machine-gun sweep its fire across PC and as it does, PC vanishes, leaving only a rainbow-hued stream. Chapaev calls this stream the "Undefinable River of Absolute Love. Ural for short" (309). This river appears once PC is vanquished and it is synonymous with nirvana. For the rest of this thesis, I will refer to the Ural as Chapaev understands it as URAL in capital letters to differentiate between nirvana and the river that divides Europe and Asia. Although it is not directly stated as in PC, when Pyotr and Chapaev leave TC, that chronotope disappears in the same way. Once Pyotr leaves a dream definitively, that dream ceases to exist.

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<sup>9</sup> Viktor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine-gun*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

Because TC is the last remaining dream that belongs to Pyotr, destroying it removes the last vestige of form and reveals nirvana.

## CYCLES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

One of the key beliefs in Buddhism is that existence is suffering. There are happy moments and sad moments throughout life, but even the moment of greatest elation is nothing compared to nirvana. To help describe Zen Buddhism, I will make use of an analogy used by Jeff Shore in his 2004 lecture series on Buddhism.<sup>10</sup> We start by considering the self as a person sitting on the end of a seesaw. When we fall in love or find an activity we are passionate about, we rise to the top of the seesaw, but inevitably, something will happen that drops us again, at which point the moment of elation passes, yielding to sadness. With the seesaw analogy, it is clear that as long as we sit on one end, we have almost no control over how we feel. We are at the mercy of whoever is on the other end of the plank, and in this analogy that can be anything or anyone. All sorts of factors can drive our mood up and down and we are left to ride the seesaw and suffer the back and forth.

Somewhere inside of all people there is some notion of a consciousness—the location where “I” is stored within the body. This is the self, and the self is what tethers us to the seesaw. The emotions that we feel are not in fact dependent on other people, but are actually dependent on the self. Consider love as an example: love in its purest form is limitless compassion and forgiveness. On the seesaw, this sort of love can only be approximated. Love is always contaminated by the self in some way. The self turns love into jealousy, lust, and desire. The

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<sup>10</sup> Jeff Shore "No-self in Zen Buddhism." Lecture, Lectures for Buddhist Retreats, , January 1, 2004.



only way to access compassion and pure love is to remove self from the equation. The final step in Buddhism and one that can be said much more easily than can be done is to step off the seesaw and leave the self behind. Without self, there is no need for, and indeed nothing possible, besides compassion.

There are two main cycles that are introduced by the self: the cycle of life and death and the cycle of emotion. People are born, grow up, and die all trapped within the confines of their perception of self. Upon death, they are born again in some other form to live the cycle forever until they can break free of it.<sup>11</sup> In the preface the author claims that the novel attempts to describe the mechanical cycles of consciousness and to point directly to the mind of the reader (Preface ix). The mechanical cycles of consciousness in question are equivalent to life and death and the seesaw analogy. There is the macro cycle which is the karmic cycle of life and death where individuals die and are reborn until they achieve enlightenment and break free of the cycle of suffering. Then there is the micro cycle which is the daily flux of emotions which is constantly bringing us up or down. Chapaev educates Pyotr and teaches him that his consciousness is trapped within these cycles and within dreams.

If the goal of this novel is for Pyotr to find *anatta*, one may very well argue, “then what is the point of the narrative?” If understanding is represented by nothing, why is a narrative used to describe enlightenment. The narrative in the novel necessarily has some development via *syuzhet*, yet it does not have any definitive and objective chronology, or *fabula*. However, it is unavoidable that the meta-narrative in which the novel begins on the first page and progresses sequentially to the last page must have an objective chronology. In other words, the narrative as we read it page by page is a chronology even if the dream sequence within the narrative is not. The answer to why chronology can still be used to describe progression to enlightenment is

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<sup>11</sup> Nyogen Senzaki & Ruth Strout McCandless, *Buddhism and Zen* ( San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 16-17.

found in the concept of cycles of consciousness. Every moment in *Buddha's Little Finger* is tangent to the cycle of consciousness. While we are blinded by the self, we circle around suffering and do not understand enlightenment. The chronology that we are exposed to as readers is Pyotr's departure from that cycle into enlightenment. Consider a ball tethered to a rotating axle which spins the ball in a circle. If Pyotr's consciousness is the ball and its revolutions around the axle represent the cycle of suffering, then the narrative is the tangent line that the ball describes as it is cut free from its tether. The novel takes on a linear progression because once Pyotr reaches enlightenment he is not part of the cycle anymore.

#### CHAPAEV AS A BODHISATTVA

When I discussed credibility earlier, I indicated that Chapaev and Baron Jungern are credible characters. At that stage I argued for their credibility because they are able to manipulate the dream sequence of the novel whereas other characters are powerless. The reason Chapaev and Jungern have this sort of power is because they are both enlightened in the Zen Buddhist sense. The dialogues involving Chapaev and Jungern follow themes of Zen Buddhism, and they both appear as powerful and knowledgeable characters. Neither of them is ever explicitly referred to as an enlightened individual, so the best evidence of their Buddhahood is the badge called the Order of the October Star that each wears on his military tunic. In Chapter 5 I devote several pages to discussing the October Star, but at this point will say that the October Star is not a Soviet Symbol, however, my evidence for this resides in Chapter 5. Baron Jungern provides some evidence for the Buddhist nature of the October Star while he is walking through JC with

Pyotr. In JC, Pyotr observes pentagrams burning like campfires across the steppe and he asks Baron Jungern about them. The Baron replies, “[they are] the eternal flame of the compassion of Buddha. And what you call a pentagram is really the emblem of the Order of the October Star” (216). The October Star is representative of Buddha, and if credibility of a character is dependent on enlightenment, then the prime credible character in the novel must be Shakyamuni, the first Buddha, who provided access to Buddhahood for all other sentient beings. The October Star originated with Shakyamuni but it is also worn by Chapaev and Jungern. It is a symbol of enlightenment that, like the Lamp of Dharma, is conveyed from teacher to pupil once the student understands ultimate truth. This is confirmed in Pyotr’s own moment of enlightenment, “For several seconds we gazed at each other in silence, then Chapaev rose, went over to the bench on which his tunic lay, unpinned the silver star from it and threw it across the room to me” (301).

Chapaev is a Buddha, but he is also a Bodhisattva. A Buddha is someone who has enlightened, and a Bodhisattva is a Buddha who, through great compassion, chooses to remain in the world of forms and suffering to help others achieve enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> Zen emphasizes the importance of a relationship between pupil and teacher. The only people who claim to be Zen instructors have been given that title by their own instructors before them. In fact, every Zen instructor should be able to trace their lineage of teaching all the way back to Siddhartha by following the path of the “Lamp of Dharma” through the generations. Teaching is important in Zen and this is reflected in the relationship between Chapaev and Pyotr. Chapaev tries to educate Pyotr about Buddhism and by the end of the novel, Pyotr finally understands thanks to Chapaev’s instruction. Zen is simultaneously an individual and a cooperative practice. Reaching enlightenment requires assistance from a Zen instructor but it is also an intensely individual and

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<sup>12</sup> "Bodhisattva." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed December 13, 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bodhisattva>.

personal undertaking. Chapaev's teaching is a blend of the Socratic Method, a deep knowledge of Zen Buddhism, and a disposition that alternates between martial strictness and drunken stupor. Chapaev attempts to empty Pyotr of all forms and reveal *anatta*. He does so by eliminating the three dimensions that compose both Pyotr's dreams and the novel's chronotopes—time, space, and the self. In the passage below, Chapaev defines time, space, and the self as three blows in his fight against ignorance:

‘Ah, Petka! D’you know the way I fight? You can’t know anything about that! Chapaev uses only three blows, you understand me?’  
 I nodded mechanically but I listened carefully.  
 ‘The first blow is where!’  
 He struck the table so hard with his fist that the bottle almost toppled over.  
 ‘The second is when!’  
 Again he smote the boards of the table.  
 ‘And the third is who!’ (138)

— Эх, Петька! Да ты знаешь хоть, как я воюю? Ты этого знать не можешь! Всего есть три чапаевских удара, понял?  
 Я механически кивал, но слушал невнимательно.  
 — Первый удар — где!  
 Он сильно стукнул кулаком по столу, так, что бутылка чуть не опрокинулась.  
 — Второй — когда!  
 Он опять с силой опустил кулак на доски стола.  
 — И третий — кто! (176)

According to Bakhtin, time and space meld together so closely in literature that the two appear as a concrete whole. Time weaves snapshots of space together into a continuum, which Pelevin's characters interpret as reality or dream. Chapaev's first task is to defeat Pyotr's concept of “where” (geography) the second is to defeat “when” (history) and the final is “who” (the self). I have structured my thesis in the same fashion, and intend to prove that Chapaev succeeds in helping Pyotr defeat these concepts and consequently he helps Pyotr achieve enlightenment.

Pyotr frequently grapples with the non-existence of time and space. He desires an objective and substantive space-time because he considers his identity as a living being tied to those dimensions. For example, regarding place, Chapaev and Pyotr have the following exchange:

[Chapaev asked] ‘What can you see in front of you right now?’  
 ‘A pillow,’ I answered, ‘but not very clearly. And please do not explain to me yet again that it is located in my consciousness.’  
 ‘Everything that we see is located in our consciousness, Petka. Which means we can’t say that our consciousness is located anywhere. We’re nowhere for the simple reason that there is no place in which we can be said to be located.’(144)

[Чапаев спросил] — Ты что сейчас перед собой видишь?  
 — Подушку, — сказал я, — но плохо. И не надо мне опять объяснять, что она находится в моем сознании.  
 — Все, что мы видим, находится в нашем сознании, Петка. Поэтому сказать, что наше сознание находится где-то, нельзя. Мы находимся нигде просто потому, что нет такого места, про которое можно было бы сказать, что мы в нем находимся. (183)

During the night referenced by the passage above and on many other occasions, Chapaev guides Pyotr towards solipsism but he does not stop there. By demonstrating that Pyotr cannot possibly know anything outside himself he even defeats solipsism because not even the self exists.

Time and space are both ways of knowing that appear to provide evidence for knowledge. A series of moments in time is known as history, and history is a way of knowing through precedent. To know using space as evidence is to know through geography. Importantly, geography is not a location on a map, but it is knowledge through features of a landscape, both natural and manmade, as well as through cultures and ethnicities. Throughout the novel, Pelevin includes moments where geography and history break down as epistemological terms. These

moments are the most important for my paper and they also build towards the conclusion of the novel. Time and space compose the framework of dreams, and within that framework history and geography are the only ways in which Pelevin's characters can assert knowledge. Chapaev fulfils his role as a Bodhisattva by invalidating both history and geography and in doing so he simultaneously exposes the emptiness of knowledge and the truth of the void. In the following chapters, I will work through analyses of geography and history to demonstrate how Chapaev helps to bring Pyotr to enlightenment.

## CHAPTER 4. GEOGRAPHY AND THE EMPTY DIALECTIC

God knows what is going on, it really is quite frightening. Yesterday [Chapaev] ran out into the street with his Mauser, wearing nothing but his shirt, fired three times at the sky, then thought for a moment, fired three times into the ground and went to bed. (129)

— Черт знает что творится, даже страшно. Вчера [Чапаев] выбежал на улицу в одной рубахе, с маузером в руке, выстрелил три раза в небо, потом подумал немного, выстрелил три раза в землю и пошел спать. (165)

### DESCRIPTION OF SPACE AND PLACE

Chapaev's first blow against Pyotr's ignorance involves defeating his concept of 'where.' To help analyze Chapaev's method, it is useful to break down 'where' into two constituents: place and space. Within human geography, the terms place and space are not synonymous and for the rest of this thesis, each word will carry a specific meaning. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, "'space' can be described as a location which has no social connections for a human being. ...No meaning has been described to it. It is more or less abstract."<sup>13</sup> If people have never been there, occupied it, or placed value in it, then as far as humans are concerned, such a geography may as well not exist - space is just a concept. Conversely, Tuan says "a place can be described to the extent to which humans have given meaning to a specific area."<sup>14</sup> Tuan draws these distinctions because he believed that people organize geography around themselves, and that all human geography is necessarily relative to the humans that live there or know of it.

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<sup>13</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) 6.

<sup>14</sup> Tuan, 6

The distinction between space and place is useful for me as well, but I must refine them slightly to make them appropriate for this analysis. Tuan says that space must be abstract because it is devoid of human connection. I claim that Pelevin also challenges traditional notions of space—in his narrative the true nature of everything is nothing; there is no objective dissociated geography. Thus space is a void and does not have any substance. Now we consider place, which is a space to which humans have attached meaning. If we substitute my definition for space, we get: place is the void to which humans have attached meaning. All countries and continents are places, masses of people who all are looking at the same nothingness and therein perceiving substance.

Place can be further broken down into two subjective categories which I will term near places and far places. A near place is one where an individual can easily interact with the place using human senses and perception; a far place is one that is outside of the senses. Both places are always inherently subjective and dynamically changing. For example, sitting in a coffee shop, I can hear noise from the tables around me, I can taste the drink in front of me - I am able to interact with the place using all of my senses. Should I leave the coffee shop and walk down the street, it may be the case that I can't smell the coffee anymore and I can only see the storefront, and eventually if I keep walking, I cease being able to sense the coffee shop at all. As sensory perception fades into no perception, so too does a near place fade into a far place.



## ALTAI-VIDNYANSK

The concepts of near and far places are best demonstrated by Pyotr's brief stay in the town of Altai-Vidnyansk, a small town on the border of the Russian steppe. Altai-Vidnyansk is part of PC, and Pyotr wakes up there with no recollection of any of the events that brought him to the town. The company machine gunner, Anna, informs Pyotr that one month before, Pyotr fought in the battle of Lozovaya Junction against the Whites, during which he sustained a blow to the head and had been unconscious since. Pyotr spends several days in Altai-Vidnyansk, and as the division mobilizes and leaves the town, Pyotr looks back and reflects that, "[all towns] are simply variations of one and the same nightmare which nothing can change for the better. The only thing that can be done with this nightmare is to awaken from it" (207). The physical geography of Altai-Vidnyansk is important and full of symbolism. The town is located at the bottom of a valley with mountains rising high up into a plateau on all sides. At the very lowest point, which is also the center of the town is an ugly statue of Alexander II, and looking out on this monument is a small restaurant called "The Heart of Asia" (207). When Pyotr first approaches the square, he notices the adjacency of the monument to the restaurant and comments that the whole scene ought to be put into a poem.

However, the meaning of the relationship between The Heart of Asia and Tsar Alexander II disappears when Pyotr ascends into the mountains and leaves the city below him. From above, the monument and the restaurant are indistinguishable, the only thing observable is how the "the town was rather unkempt and reminded [Pyotr] more than anything of a heap of rubbish washed down into a pit by torrential rain" (206). According to Pelevin, the differences and relationships involving Russia and Asia mean nothing, the difference between them is miniscule – the distance across a town square – and both are just motes at the bottom of the "sinkhole of creation" (206).

Pelevin maintains that there is no intrinsic substance in either Russia or Asia, both are geographies and the concept of both must be eliminated for Pyotr to reach enlightenment.

Relative to Pyotr's position on the steppe overlooking the town, Altai-Vidnyansk is a far place and the steppe is a near place. The steppe is all around him and he can feel it with all of his senses, but the town is just a speck at the bottom of the valley, barely visible and only perceived by sight. Pyotr is able to see the true nature of Altai-Vidnyansk because, as he leaves, the town ceases being a near place and turns into a far place and it is easier to see the true nature of a far place. As far as knowing through geography is concerned, when we do not hold a place directly in our senses, that place is reduced to a concept, it is still a place, but we cannot feel physically attached to it. We can assert that it exists because at one point we sensed it, but that is no longer a knowledge claim through geography, it has become an assertion based in time and history. Because Pyotr cannot directly sense a far place, he finds it easier to dissolve that place in his mind and accept its emptiness. The more difficult task is trying to understand that near places are also only concepts and forms and can be dissolved in the same way.

## THE EMPTY DIALECTIC

Chapaev's first blow in his spiritual fight against Pyotr's ignorance is defeating his concept of "where" and this can be seen in terms of near and far places. There is a moment shortly after Chapaev delivers his fighting strategy to Pyotr, when the two of them have a conversation about the nature of "I" over a bottle of moonshine. Chapaev asks Pyotr where his consciousness is located to which Pyotr replies:

‘Right here,’ I said tapping myself on the head.  
 ‘And where is your head?’  
 ‘On my shoulders.’  
 ‘And where are your shoulders?’  
 ‘In a room.’  
 ‘And where is the room?’  
 ‘In a building.’  
 ‘And where is the building?’  
 ‘In Russia.’  
 ‘And where is Russia.’  
 ‘In the deepest trouble Vasily Ivanovich.’  
 ‘Stop that,’ he shouted seriously. ‘You can joke when your commander orders you to. Answer.’  
 ‘Well of course on Earth.’  
 ‘We clinked glasses and drank.’  
 ‘And where is the Earth?’  
 ‘In the Universe.’  
 ‘And where is the Universe?’  
 I thought for a second.  
 ‘In itself.’  
 ‘And where is this in itself?’  
 ‘In my consciousness.’  
 ‘Well then, Petka, that means your consciousness is in your consciousness doesn’t it? (139)

— Вот здесь, — сказал я, постучав себя по голове.  
 — А голова твоя где?  
 — На плечах.  
 — А плечи где?  
 — В комнате.  
 — А где комната?  
 — В доме.  
 — А дом?  
 — В России.  
 — А России где?  
 — В беде, Василий Иванович.  
 — Ты это брось, — прикрикнул он строго. — Шутить будешь, когда командир прикажет. Говори.  
 — Ну как где. На Земле.  
 Мы чокнулись и выпили.  
 — А Земля где?  
 — Во Вселенной.  
 — А Вселенная где?  
 Я секунду подумал.  
 — Сама в себе.  
 — А где эта сама в себе?

— В моем сознании.

— Так что же, Петька, выходит, твое сознание — в твоём сознании? (178)

This passage is reminiscent of Andrei Bely's symbolist novel, *Petersburg*, where the first page develops the setting by focusing first on Petersburg, and then slowly zooming out until the reader is shown all of Russia. Just as Bely's narrator shows the paradoxes of mental and physical geographies, Chapaev wraps this place back on itself, trapping Pyotr into recursive logic and invalidating Pyotr's notion of place. Everything that can be said to have a place (including the concept of place itself) must only exist in the consciousness. Pyotr mulls over his conversation with Chapaev and realizes that, taken in Chapaev's terms, "If the entire world exists within me, then where do I exist? And if I exist within this world, then where, in what place in the world, is my consciousness located?" (149). Pyotr must either exist somewhere in the world (but where in the world can his consciousness be said to exist), or the world must exist somewhere inside Pyotr (but then where does Pyotr exist). These two options compose a circle; investigating one always leads to the other. Chapaev pries this circle apart and turns these options into poles of a dialectic, and as Pyotr observes, if the concept of the dialectic exists then there must be a place to put it too (in the universe or in the mind) which only compounds the problem. The only possible place for all of it (Pyotr, Earth, Russia, the dialectic) is nowhere.

The dialectic is traditionally the discourse between thesis and antithesis in order to produce synthesis. It is common in Russian literature and especially in Soviet formulations. For example, in Fyodor Gladkov's Socialist Realist novel, *Cement*, the protagonist, Gleb embodies spontaneity and instinctual action, whereas the Baltic German engineer, Klaus, represents conservative mindfulness. They live in a small town adjacent to a factory, but both places

become rundown and fall into disrepair and stagnation. The dialectic between spontaneity and consciousness is productive, and the interactions between the two poles of the dialectic eventually save the town and factory.<sup>15</sup> Pelevin does not follow convention with his interpretation of the dialectic; instead he uses a variation which I will define as “the empty dialectic.” The empty dialectic situates thesis and antithesis as poles of the dialectic, but this yields no synthesis, it yields only the understanding that there is nothing in between those poles. In fact, even the poles are nothing, they are only nodes of form that are swallowed up by the void once emptiness is glimpsed between them. Altai-Vidnyansk is an example of the empty dialectic. Near and far places situate themselves in opposition to one another, but neither is real, both are only places and truth is between the two. This is not to say that Altai-Vidyansk is one pole, the steppe is the second, and truth is a plot of land at the midpoint. A far place is the concept of every place that the self believes to exist but cannot sense and a near place is the concept that includes every place that the self can sense. The categories of near place and far place thus must constitute every possible geography, since every place within cognition can be placed into one of those two categories. The union of near place and far place constitutes the whole of geography, but the empty dialectic pulls geography apart and exposes its fundamental empty nature.

The empty dialectic should also be applied more broadly to dreams. When Pyotr shares the dreams of his fellow inmates at the mental asylum in TC, he is inside of those dreams and does not seem to realize that he is not part of the dream until he has been released from it. When he wakes up from one of these dreams, Pyotr comments, “I found the dreamlike facility with which these delirious ravings acquired for several minutes the status of reality quite amusing” (59). Generally, experience supports Pyotr’s observation. When we dream, we are not aware of the fact that we are dreaming, and we cannot judge and assess the dream until we are done with

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<sup>15</sup> Fedor Gladkov, *Cement: A Novel* (New York: F. Ungar, 1960).

it. For example, Chapaev's story of the communist Tzu-Chuang which I referenced in Chapter 2 is applicable again: "When [Tzu-Chuang] woke up, he often couldn't make out whether the butterfly had dreamt it was engaged in revolutionary activity or the underground activist had had a dream about flitting through the air from flower to flower" (205). Places function exactly the same way for Pelevin. In a near place, it is hard to identify the true nature of that place, but from a far place, it becomes very clear. The empty dialectic is the tool that Chapaev uses to show Pyotr that he is not a part of any dream.

#### PARIS: THE SELF, THE NATION, AND HEAVEN

Paris is a place that appears as a motif in the novel. Chapaev's other disciple, Grigory Kotovsky leaves for Paris as the weavers are burning down Chapaev's camp in Altai-Vidnyansk; the novel, *Chapaev*, was published in Paris; and Vladimir Volodin, another patient from TC, has a dream that involves Paris. I do not think that there is any particular significance related to the choice of Paris in each of these moments, I think that it is just convenient for Pelevin to choose an area outside of Petersburg, Moscow, or something that could be broadly lumped into the category, "The East". Paris should be considered as a far place, one that is not part of the relationship between Moscow and the East and one that is never visited in the novel. In terms of the empty dialectic, Paris is useful because it can be juxtaposed with any other place from one of the novel's chronotopes to reveal emptiness. When Pyotr is in the center of Altai-Vidnyansk it is a near place and he contemplates what it means for the Heart of Asia to reside right next to Alexander II, however, from the steppe looking down, he realizes it is all just part of the dump of

creation. Similarly, Pelevin makes Paris a motif in the novel, because when his characters are not in Paris, they can see its falsehood and begin to understand the emptiness of their own near places. This doesn't mean that Paris, Moscow, or even the steppe is significant; it only demonstrates that it is harder to understand that you are nowhere when you are among the swirling false perceptions of place and form. The self is actually no-self, *anatta*, and is located nowhere. Pyotr dreams that he exists in a world with Moscow, Petersburg, and Paris, and lets his senses confirm his dreams and blind him to enlightenment.

The first moment involving Paris that I will discuss begins with Kotovsky, who is the character that speaks the most about Russia. Specifically Kotovsky “thinks” about Russia, a process which has just as much to do with cocaine as with philosophy. Despite this, Kotovsky is the only character to leave Russia and become an émigré. When Kotovsky leaves, he encourages Pyotr to journey with him, but Pyotr declines, opting to stay with Chapaev and attempt to sort out the weavers. Later, Pyotr asks Chapaev about Kotovsky, specifically what will happen to Kotovsky when Chapaev turns his clay machine-gun on PC. Chapaev tells Pyotr that Kotovsky, just like everyone else, is perfectly capable of creating his own world. Pyotr then asks Chapaev whether either of them would occupy a place in that world. Chapaev hesitates and then responds, “[h]ow should I know what kind of world Kotovsky will create in that Paris of his? Or perhaps I should say—what Paris he will create in that world of his?” (308). The distinction between the two questions is best viewed in terms of space versus place. The first question suggests that there is an objective space, Paris, in which Kotovsky will create a place for himself. The second indicates that there is no space at all, and that every space in which Kotovsky might believe he exists is an empty creation. Kotovsky is obsessed with capturing some degree of objectivity

within geography. He sought it in Russia, and then fled to Paris when he became too fearful that he would be killed by Chapaev's mutinous division of weavers.

The other notable mention of Paris from the novel involves the New Russian mobster, Vladimir Volodin. Volodin is a patient in the mental ward in TC alongside Pyotr and each of the patients in TC takes a turn sharing his dreams while hooked in to a machine of Timur Timurovich's own design. In Volodin's dream he sits by a fire with his two lackeys, Shurik and Kolyan, and the three of them discuss enlightenment. Volodin has considerably more knowledge about Buddhism than either Shurik or Kolyan, so most of the conversation involves Volodin explaining and the other two posing questions. Volodin tells them the story of Globus, a big-shot New Russian who was stuck in a prison camp during the Soviet Period. After getting out, he struck it rich, took himself and all of his money to Paris, and bought a Porsche and some prostitutes. Volodin then makes the point that "if he ended his life with ideas like that still in his head, it means he never really left the prison camps at all. He just got so big that he started driving around them in a Porsche and giving interviews. And then he even found his own Paris in the camps" (258). Globus' Paris is equivalent to a prison camp, though Globus does not realize it. Part of the collective visualization of the world involves creating a prison. This notion is articulated by Pyotr earlier in the novel:

If one tries to run away from other people, one involuntarily ends up actually following in their path throughout the course of one's life. Running away does not require knowing where one is running to, only what one is running from. Which means that one constantly has to carry before one's eyes a vision of one's own prison. (32)

— Да в том, что если пытаешься убежать от других, то поневоле всю жизнь идешь по их зыбким путям. Уже хотя бы потому, что продолжаешь от них убегать. Для бегства нужно твердо знать не то, куда бежишь, а откуда. Поэтому необходимо постоянно иметь перед глазами свою тюрьму. (47)



Globus tried to run away from prison, but in doing so, he creates a prison for himself in Paris. The passage above is from an early point in the novel when Pyotr has not been taught by Chapayev and is thus not entirely credible. In this passage Pyotr does not understand that the prison is formed not only by running away from other people, but also by running away from oneself. This is the prison of the self and it is equivalent to ignorance in Buddhism. As long as Globus tries to run away, he will always be trapped in a prison, “If you cannot find [Buddha] where you stand, where do you expect to wander in search of it?”<sup>16</sup> The self is trapped in a prison but the prison is not a labyrinth constructed around the mind, rather, the mind thinks the labyrinth is there and dashes through it, becoming hopelessly lost. Escaping the prison is no more than simply stopping the mind and realizing that there is no place for the prison or the mind to exist. The prison is not specific to Globus either; the prison is built by everyone who has not found Buddha. The self is just one level of imprisonment; there is also the prison of the state and the prison of religion.

Government is a prison, it is on a larger scale than the prison of the self, but they function in the same way. Volodin describes the prison of the self by using a Kantian styled analogy of the mind to an inner courtroom. Guilt and responsibility are the inner prosecutors who bring up charges against the inner defendant. There are also inner defense lawyers who represent the self and try to get the charges dropped. The whole affair culminates in the self always imprisoning itself. On the level of nations, the analogy is not even necessary. The self is held to all of the rules and laws of governments, but even governments and nations have no real substance.

Religion is the same as government though, once again, on a different scale. Religion describes how people in the past have transferred their state on Earth into the heavens. Volodin

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<sup>16</sup> Nyogen Senzaki & Ruth Strout McCandless, *Buddhism and Zen* ( San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 41.

talks to Shurik and Kolyan about the nature of heaven and hell, specifically how living under Christianity is akin to living under Stalin.

Turns out life under Stalin was like life after death is now!... [U]nder Stalin after death there was atheism, but now there's religion again. And accordin' to religion, after death everyone lives like they did under Stalin. Just you figure it the way it was. Everybody knows there's this window lit up in the Kremlin at night, and He's there behind it, and he loves you like a brother, and you're shit-scared of Him, but you're supposed to love Him with all your heart as well. (257)

— Человек, значит, при Сталине жил, как теперь после смерти!... [П]ри Сталине после смерти атеизм был, а теперь опять религия. А по ней после смерти все как при Сталине. Ты прикинь, как тогда было. Все знают, что по ночам в Кремле окошко горит, а за ним -- Он. И он тебя любит как родного, а мы его и воишься до усеру, и тоже как бы любить должен всем сердцем. (319-329)

Pelevin even capitalizes “Him [Он]” in this passage, capturing the religious associations between “God” and “Stalin”. Ultimately it seems that every location is a prison. Heaven has God, who serves as chief prosecutor. In order to make it through the gates, you have to withstand all the charges he lays against you at trial, and if you should fail, then its punishment straight away and you're cast off into hell. It's the same on Earth, but it's attributed to different places and different prosecutors, and finally it's also in the mind. Volodin comments that Earth and Heaven reflect one another, and it's not clear which one is the prison and which is the reflection, nor does it really matter, since both are just illusions of a prison anyhow. Recall the issue of location, where Pyotr tried to determine whether the universe was in his mind, or his mind occupied a space in the universe, the resolution that he came to was that there is not even a place for dialectic between the two—the whole paradox is located nowhere. The same is true in this circumstance. Volodin says, “as it is above, so is it below. And as it is below, so is it above. And when everything's bottom up, how can you explain that there isn't any above or below?” (259). I have

strayed away from discussing Paris, but I hope to have shown that Paris is just Pelevin's empty location. It is a place where characters can point to and imagine a place that is different, though as we have identified, the place really isn't different at all.

Pelevin describes three prisons: the self, the country, and the heavenly. Each of these prisons is managed by a court that subjugates the individual and stops him from being truly free. Additionally, these courts seem to work on different scales, going from small (individual) to large (heavenly). In analyzing this relationship, we find ourselves trapped in the same sort of tautology in which Chapaev traps Pyotr during their discussion of place (English ed. page 139, Russian ed. page 178). If the individual is in the country, and the country is on Earth, and Earth is under the heavens, then, surely, the only place the heavens can be said to be located is in the mind of the individual. If this is the case then there can be no court that is supreme over the others, in fact, there can be no court at all. The only place the whole affair can be located is nowhere. This cyclical understanding of the systems of moral court is perfectly captured by Chapaev during a moment in the novel when he and Pyotr step outside after discussing the nature of place. Pyotr looks up at the sky and begins talking in terms of Schopenhauer about how beautiful the sky is, but Chapaev ignores his comment and rebukes him.

Chapaev looked at the sky for another few seconds and then transferred his gaze to a large puddle which lay at our feet and spat the stub of his *papyrosa* into it. The Universe reflected in the smooth surface of the water suffered a momentary cataclysm as all its constellations shuddered and were transformed into a twinkling blur.

'What I've always found astounding,' he said, 'is the starry sky beneath our feet and the Immanuel Kant within us.' (142)

Чапаев еще несколько секунд глядел в небо, а потом перевел взгляд на большую лужу прямо у наших ног и выплюнул в нее окурок. Во Вселенной, отраженной в ровной поверхности воды, произошла настоящая катастрофа — все созвездия содрогнулись и на миг превратились в размытое мерцание.

— Что меня всегда поражало, — сказал он, — так это звездное небо под ногами и Иммануил Кант внутри нас. (181)

Pyotr instantly accuses Chapaev of confusing Kant with Schopenhauer. However, rather than respond to Pyotr's description of beauty, Chapaev disregards what Pyotr said and ends their discussion of place. Chapaev chides Pyotr for speaking about beauty as an objectification. Chapaev's point is that true beauty is enlightenment and it can ever be objectified. Chapaev sees the heavens in a muddy puddle which generates the same effect that Pyotr experienced when he looked down on Altai-Vidnyansk: it is easier to understand the true, empty nature of a place by viewing it as a far place rather than a near place. Chapaev causes Pyotr to look down and see the universe as a reflection instead of a reality and then he effortlessly destroys that reflection. It is also significant that the sky is reflected in a puddle because the reflection emphasizes Volodin's description of the mirroring of a prison between heaven and Earth. Finally, Chapaev ties the individual into it by invoking the "Immanuel Kant within in us" which is clearly a reference to Kant's moral law and Volodin's inner prosecution and inner defense. Lastly, Chapaev resolves the nature of the whole penitentiary trinity by spitting his *papyrosa* into the muddy water, destroying the reflection of the sky and indicating that these moral courtrooms are just an illusion.

## CHAPTER 5. TIME AND THE OCTOBER STAR

[The poem] was about the stream of time washing away the wall of the present so that new patterns keep appearing on it, and we call some of them the past. Our memory tells us that yesterday really existed, but how can we be sure that all of these memories did not simply appear with the first light of dawn? (7)

[Стихотворение] было о потоке времени, который размывает стену настоящего, и на ней появляются все новые и новые узоры, часть которых мы называем прошлым. Память уверяет нас, что вчерашний день действительно был, но как знать, не появилась ли вся эта память с первым утренним лучом? (17)

### COMMENCEMENT

The Order of the October Star is a frequent Buddhist motif within the novel. Descriptions of the October Star are given at various points, but it features most prominently on Chapaev and Baron Jungern. The Order itself is a “silver star with small spheres on its points” (67). Chapaev wears one on the breast of his military tunic, Baron Jungern wears three of them hung straight in a row, and Pyotr is finally given one by Chapaev at the end of the novel. The Order of the October star is not a medal that is awarded in the conventional sense—in the smaller chronotope involving Serdyuk, the samurai, Kawabata, explains that “certain people have simply realized that they are entitled to wear it. Or rather that they had always been entitled to wear it.” Serdyuk then asks what it is for, to which Kawabata explains: “There is nothing that it could be for” (171). Serdyuk crudely associates the Order of the October Star with the Order of the Red Labour Banner which offends Kawabata, but the relationship the Order shares with the Soviet Union is obvious. The Order of the Red Banner was awarded to those who have shown great bravery and courage in combat and the Order of the Red Star was awarded for valor in the

defense of the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> In the novel, the Order of the October Star references the October Revolution which overthrew the provisional government; it is nominally similar to the Order of the Red Star, and it is compared to the Order of the Red Banner by Serdyuk.

The Order of the October Star is clearly Buddhist; awards and orders are just objects that, if sought, manifest desire, and if held, promote self-admiration. Kawabata's statement that everyone is entitled to wear the Order of the October Star defeats both of those problems. Egoism is impossible because everyone has already been bestowed the highest honor, even if they haven't realized it, and there can be no desire for the same reason. Baron Jungern builds upon this idea when he tells Pyotr that every individual has a throne and their "throne is entirely legitimate" (223). The image of the empty throne is an example of aniconism, or the rejection of idols and symbols. However, I will put the discussion of aniconism on hold and return to it in greater detail during Chapter 6.

In one of the most important moments in the novel, the Baron Jungern describes the origin of the Order of the October Star to Pyotr. This moment takes place in JC where there are campfires shaped like pentagrams burning in rows off into infinity. The Baron explains that the flame is "the flame of the compassion of the Buddha... [and the] pentagram is really the emblem of the Order of the October Star" (216). The Baron and Pyotr then have the following exchange:

'The October Star?' Jungern replied. 'It's really very simple. It's just like Christmas, you know—the Catholics have it in December, the Orthodox Christians have it in January, but they're all celebrating the same birthday. This is the same sort of thing. Reforms of the calendar, mistakes made by scribes—in other words, although it's generally believed to have happened in May, in actual fact it was in October.'

'But what was?'

'You astonish me, Pyotr. It's one of the best-known stories in the world. There was once a man who could not live as others did. He tried to understand what everything

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<sup>17</sup> "Prezidium Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR." Biblioteka Normativno-Pravovykh Aktov SSSR. Accessed December 13, 2014. [http://www.libussr.ru/doc\\_ussr/usr\\_10277.htm](http://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/usr_10277.htm).

meant—all the things that happened to him from day to day; and who he himself was—the person to whom all those things were happening. And then, one night in October when he was sitting under the crown of a tree, he raised his eyes to the sky and saw a bright star. At that moment he understood everything with such absolute clarity that to this day the echo of that distant second... (217)

— Октябрьская звезда? — переспросил Юнгерн. — Очень просто. Знаете, как с Рождеством. У католиков оно в декабре, у православных в январе, а празднуют один и тот же день рождения. Вот и здесь такой же случай. Реформы календаря, ошибки переписчиков — короче, хоть и считается, что это было в январе, на самом деле все было в октябре.

— А что было-то?

— Вы меня удивляете, Петр. Это же одна из самых известных историй на Земле. В свое время был один человек, который не мог жить так, как другие. Он пытался понять, что же это такое -- то, что происходит с ним изо дня в день, и кто такой он сам -- тот, с кем это происходит. И вот, однажды ночью в октябре, когда он сидел под кроной дерева, он поднял взгляд на небо и увидел на нем яркую звезду. В этот момент он понял все до такой степени, что эхо той далекой секунды до сих пор... (271-272)

The man that the passage refers to is the Buddha, and the passage describes the moment of his enlightenment. The word Buddha is most commonly invoked to reference the Guatama Buddha (alternatively, Shakyamuni), though this is a slight misnomer, since Buddha is a title meaning enlightened one and the man to which the title, Buddha, is most often applied is Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha was born into a royal family and it was prophesied that he would become either a powerful ruler or a monk. Siddhartha's parents shielded him from witnessing any suffering in the hope that by living in shelter he would not choose the ascetic life of a monk. Despite his parents' attempts to stop him, Siddhartha left the palace and saw death, sickness, age, and poverty. As a result of these experiences, he decided to abandon his royal heritage and become an ascetic. Eventually Siddhartha renounced asceticism as a futile practice and turned instead to moderation. One day, he sat down to meditate under a tree, and during this meditation, Siddhartha was assaulted by the demon Mara who tried to tempt him and distract his thoughts. Siddhartha was unfazed by Mara, defeated him, and emerged from his meditation as

the Buddha. From this point, the Buddha traveled the countryside, gathering disciples and teaching love, compassion and the truth of the void. After his death, his teachings continued to promulgate through his disciples and these teachings are known broadly as Buddhism.<sup>18</sup> This ties into Jungern’s teachings because the tree from that passage is the Bodhi Tree and the night in October is the same night on which the Buddha defeated Mara.

Pelevin’s English language translator, Andrew Bromfield, slightly mistranslates a fragment from the passage above. Bromfield’s translation reads: “although it’s generally believed to have happened in May, in actual fact it was in October.” In the table below, I have included the Russian text on the left and Bromfield’s translation on the right. My emendations to Bromfield’s translation appear in italics:

<p>...короче, хоть и считается, что это было в январе, на самом деле все было в октябре.</p>	<p>...although it’s generally believed to have happened in <i>January</i>, in actual fact it was <i>all</i> in October.</p>
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Bromfield translates the first month referenced in this quotation as *May* instead of *January* (*январе*) - which is the month that appears in the original text. Bromfield also omits the word *all* (*все*) from his translation. Restoring Pelevin’s original language has significant implications for my analysis. In the passage below I have included these changes in a slightly larger context, once again with my emendations in italics:

It’s just like Christmas, you know—the Catholics have it in December, the Orthodox Christians have it in January, but they’re all celebrating the same birthday. This is the same sort of thing. Reforms of the calendar, mistakes made

<sup>18</sup> Robert Graves, and Félix Guirand, *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, s.v “Legend of Buddha.” (New York: Prometheus Press, 1968; 1959), 348-59.



by scribes—in other words, although it’s generally believed to have happened in *January*, in actual fact it was *all* in October.’

The pronoun “it” in this passage is not defined until the following paragraph, but it refers to the moment of the Buddha’s enlightenment. In the first sentence, Jungern combines Catholic and Orthodox Christmas celebrations with the celebration of Buddha’s enlightenment by treating them all as birthdays. Adding the word “all” to the second sentence of this passage changes what takes place in October. Buddha’s enlightenment takes place in October and so does every other birthday celebration and anniversary.

The reference to October in this passage is clearly a reference to the October Revolution, the Order of the October star, and by extension, it is also connected to Buddhism. The comparison between Buddha, the October Revolution, and Christianity is undeniable and yields many complicated interpretations. The immediate interpretation—the October Revolution is for Russia what enlightenment is for the Buddha—is ironic and not supported anywhere else in the novel. As I described in Chapter 3, *Buddha’s Little Finger* adamantly denies the reality of cultural and political constructions. It doesn’t make sense for the October Star, Pelevin’s emblem of enlightenment, to betray the principles that are so carefully formulated and upheld elsewhere in the novel. I propose that Bolshevism is a subset of Buddhism and that the key to understanding the October Star lies in the notion of anniversaries.

On the first page of the novel, Pyotr walks down Tverskoi Boulevard and observes a red apron draped over the statue of the Bronze Pushkin that reads “Long Live the First Anniversary of the Revolution.” Pyotr notes the “fact that the cheers were intended for an event which could not by definition last longer than a single day” (1). The first anniversary of the October

revolution was celebrated in 1918, but it is four months later in February when Pyotr walks by the Bronze Pushkin. This is ironic because there was another revolution in February 1917 which installed the provisional government that the latter revolution in October was bent on destroying. Thus it appears, to an observer like Pyotr, that the Bolsheviks are celebrating the wrong revolution. The confusion over the date for the revolution and about which revolution is being celebrated emphasizes that neither the revolution nor the date is particularly important.

Dates can be easily confused; Pyotr's experience on Tverskoi Boulevard is evidence of this. Nonetheless, people have always insisted on the importance of anniversaries, especially those associated with commencement. The birth of Jesus is celebrated by Christians, the anniversary of the revolution is celebrated by Bolsheviks, and the enlightenment of the Buddha is celebrated by those who wear the October Star. These events are all commencements, but the celebration of the enlightenment of the Buddha has primacy over all others. Buddha's enlightenment and his teachings provided every single person access to their own throne and a way out of the squalor of the world of forms. Anniversaries are cyclical by definition and according to Buddhism, people live within a cycle of suffering. Ultimately, anniversaries are nothing more than tickmarks on that cycle of suffering; however, the enlightenment of the Buddha is a true commencement and not an anniversary. When the Buddha achieved enlightenment, he left the cycle of suffering forever. Jungern claims that the enlightenment of the Buddha is celebrated in October, but every commencement ought to be celebrated in October because the Buddha gave everyone the possibility for understanding.<sup>19</sup>

The Order of the October Star does not suggest that the October Revolution is for Russia what enlightenment was for the Buddha. It suggests that there is one primary commencement—the awakening of the Buddha—and that every revolution or sacred anniversary fits inside that

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<sup>19</sup> Outside of the novel there is no definitive date or month in which Buddha's awakening is placed.

moment. Every other commencement purports to have changed the world in some significant way, but every one of them is an illusion. For example, consider the mental ward in TC, when one of the patients, Maria, comments to another: “Under Soviet power we were surrounded by illusions. But now the world has become real and knowable” (108). Maria bears witness to another revolution, the fall of the Soviet Union, and claims that since the first moment after the Soviet Union fell, the world ceased to be illusory. What Maria doesn’t understand and what is symbolized by the Order of the October Star is that the world is always illusory. The Buddha revealed the illusion and made this knowledge available to everyone. Thus every moment of commencement since Buddha’s enlightenment is false because there can be no realization more profound than the Buddha’s and there can be no other commencement, when what the Buddha realized has never stopped.

## QUANTIZED CHRONOTOPES

According to *Buddha’s Little Finger*, there is no time, only the moment of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Every holy event and anniversary fits inside that moment and this is demonstrated by the transitions between chronotopes. When reading the novel, every moment is quantized. The smallest unit of information that the novel offers is a single word so mechanically, the novel must be read in quantized moments, one word at a time. This aspect of literature makes it hard to understand how time operates in relation to the chronotopes. The sequential nature of the narrative and the obvious adjacency of chapters (and thus chronotopes) to one another encourages readers to think of the transition between chapters as a boundary. However, Chapaev scoffs at the notion of a boundary dividing time: Pyotr asks Chapaev, “Does

it mean that this moment, this boundary between the past and the future, is itself the door to eternity?” to which Chapaev responds “This moment, Petka, is eternity, and not any kind of door... how can we say that it takes place at any particular time?” (237). The transition between chronotopes is the same as Pyotr’s “door to eternity.” In Chapters 2 and 3 I talked about the narrative as a dream sequence and described how nirvana is located behind Pyotr’s dreams. Pyotr can catch glimpses of nirvana when he passes between chronotopes. For instance, in JC, Baron Jungern takes Pyotr on a tour of the steppe and when their time draws to a close, the Baron shoves Pyotr and pushes him into a different chronotope. Pyotr describes the experience:

During the moment when my body was falling to the ground, I was somehow able to retain my awareness of that imperceptibly short instant of return to the usual world—or rather, since in reality there was absolutely nothing of which to be aware, I managed to grasp the nature of this return. I do not know how to describe it; it was as though one set of scenery was moved aside and the next was not set in its place immediately, but for an entire second I stared into the gap between them. And this second was enough to perceive the deception behind what I had always taken for reality... (226)

И когда мое тело падало на землю, я словно бы успел осознать неуловимо короткий момент возвращения назад, в обычный мир—или, поскольку осознавать на самом деле было абсолютно нечего, успел понять, в чем это возвращение заключается. Не знаю, как это описать. Словно бы одну декорацию сдвинули, а другую не успели сразу установить на ее место, и целую секунду я глядел в просвет между ними. И этой секунды хватило, чтобы увидеть обман, стоявший за тем, что я всегда принимал за реальность... (282)

The transition between chronotopes is no boundary; the conclusion of each chapter is a glimpse into the void. In fact, every moment is eternity according to Buddhism, or perhaps, there is eternity, and we interpret it as something sliced into moments. It cannot be otherwise because the void is not defined by forms. Understanding transitions between chronotopes as boundaries

implies that the boundary only exists relative to the content that it falls between. As Pyotr observes, eternity is not a boundary, it is infinite and encompassing; a gap into which all form can be dissolved.

The transition into and out of JC is a particularly jarring event which highlights the falsity of time. The chronotope always changes during transitions between chapters, but this doesn't have to be the case. For example, JC takes place entirely within Chapter 7 of the novel, which is a chapter that in turn takes place within PC. The moment of transition between PC and JC is spurred by Chapaev, who overhears Kotovsky trying to describe the self. Kotovsky gets it wrong and mistakenly asserts that there is a single large consciousness to which all individuals belong (where can we say the single large consciousness is located?). In a rage, Chapaev shoots an inkwell resting on the table which signifies the beginning of JC. We only learn that this moment is the beginning of JC, because the conclusion of JC also involves Baron Jungern shooting an inkwell which returns the narrative back to PC with Chapaev standing at the door holding his smoking pistol. All of JC is contained between two moments which, relative to PC, are temporally adjacent to one another: "Chapaev fired another shot, and the bullet transformed the ink-well standing on the table into a cloud of blue spray" (201) and later we read that "...minute fragments... hung in the air before scattering across the table" (236). These excerpts flow perfectly into one another, but they are separated by 35 pages belonging to JC.

The perception of passing time is explained by the "mechanical cycles of consciousness" that I discussed in Chapter 3. The relevancy of this term is drawn out by considering past, present, and future in the same way that I considered transitions between chronotopes. I argued that there is no boundary between chronotopes because a boundary is established by a dependency on its surroundings. According to Zen the present moment is eternity, but it is often

mistaken for a boundary between past and future. Past and future are only concepts, but the mind interprets them as categories of time and defines the present based on those concepts.

Enlightenment is located in the gap between past and present. In Zen, existence is a cycle of suffering around which ignorant minds revolve. Zen recognizes that, “In other religions past, present and future are set in a straight line, but to Buddhists they are mere names for an endless cycle.”<sup>20</sup> The cycle is what Pyotr perceives as time and *Buddha’s Little Finger* chronicles Pyotr’s departure from the “mechanical cycles of consciousness” and thus his departure from time.

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<sup>20</sup> Nyogen Senzaki and Ruth Strout McCandles, *Buddhism and Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 16-17.

## CHAPTER 6. PELEVIN'S MYTHOLOGY

The kerosene lamp flared up, followed by the spilt moonshine, and the room was illuminated by the dim glow of a fire just beginning to take hold. Deep shadows were cast across Чапаев's face by the flames from beneath, and it suddenly seemed very ancient and strangely familiar. (300)

Вслед за керосином вспыхнул разлившийся самогон, и комната осветилась мрачным светом занимающегося пожара. Лицо Чапаева, на которое легли глубокие тени от горящего на полу огня, вдруг показалось мне очень древним и странно знакомым. (371)

### ANICONISM AND THE SYMBOL HIERARCHY

Analyzing a myth requires working patiently with a huge number of symbols and with a corresponding plenitude of theories outlining how to interpret them. One of the most important symbols in the novel is the October Star. In Chapter 5, I discussed the October Star and introduced the concept of aniconism (the rejection of all idols and symbols). Aniconism is deeply rooted in Buddhism because of the eternal and universal nature of enlightenment. Buddha is not a god, he is you and you are him—every person is a Buddha, only very few have been able realize it. Furthermore, one of the principle tenets of Buddhism is defeating form and realizing the primacy of the void, therefore, the Buddha is not venerated as an icon, but his ideals are respected and represented by an empty throne. The empty throne emphasizes the absence of form and simultaneously the accessibility of ascension to the throne for anyone who has realized Buddha's teachings.<sup>21</sup> Baron Jungern explains: “[The throne] belongs to everyone by right. But it is almost impossible to ascend it, because it stands in a place that does not exist... It is nowhere”

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Huntington, “Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism” *Art Journal* 49 (1990): 401-408, accessed December 13, 2014, <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-ADM/huntin.htm>. Digital Library & Museum of Buddhist Studies.

(223). The Baron's description of the empty throne, the description of the Order of the October Star, and the concept of Zen Buddhist nirvana all align perfectly with one another. Both the order and the throne belong to everyone by right, but they can only be claimed by those who realize the fact of their own possession. A symbol that is an example of aniconism is an oxymoron, but it is still a valid expression of enlightenment. These are empty symbols and they are the most pure symbols in the novel because they draw attention to the void rather than form. In Chapter 10 of the novel, Pyotr is released from the mental ward and walks listlessly through Moscow. On Tverskoi Boulevard, he observes, "The bronze Pushkin had disappeared, but the gaping void that had appeared where he used to stand somehow seemed like the best of all possible monuments" (324). The absence of the bronze Pushkin is an example of an empty symbol. It introduces the void into the bustle of Moscow and uses some form to highlight the absence of form which in turn hints at enlightenment.

The Russian steppe is another example of a relatively pure symbol. In Chapter 4 I demonstrated that the concepts of near and far places relative to Altai-Vidnyansk show that Russia and Asia have no intrinsic substance, and what substance it seems to have is ascribed to the minds of the people who think about it. While Pelevin does discredit defined places, he gives some credit to the undefined vast expanses of Russian steppe. After leaving Altai-Vidnyansk, the red army under Chapaev's control rushes away from the town across the plateau, though with no apparent direction. After some time, Chapaev, calls for a faster advance and Pyotr notes that outside the world turns into a blur of colors around him as the driver spurs the horses faster across the terrain. This moment of whirling colors and movement is very similar to the final moment of the novel where Pyotr is taken to nirvana by Chapaev's armored car. In this instance, they do not go to nirvana, but instead to Baron Jungern who teaches Pyotr about the self. As they



traverse the steppe, Pyotr notices the emptiness and flatness all around him. The landscape is almost devoid of features except for the red cavalymen. The steppe is still a place and only a concept, but it is a purer place than a city. In the hierarchy of symbols, the steppe is better than many symbols because it is a more useful tool for seeing nirvana than other places. By virtue of its emptiness, the steppe retains some purity of character despite its station in a world of forms.

Symbols at the bottom of the hierarchy are symbols that do not include any degree of emptiness. The Red Army officer, Grigory Kotovsky, is an excellent resource for identifying lowly symbols. Kotovsky is caught up in the belief that there must be some objective physicality and despite Chapaev's teaching, he is unable to break free of the notion. At the beginning of Chapter 7, Kotovsky tries to explain consciousness through an allegory to beads of wax rolling down a lamp. Kotovsky imagines beads of wax as individual consciousnesses which are tragically mortal because they are too fixated on their own form to realize the reality of their situation:

The conclusion is that the only route to immortality for a drop of wax is to stop thinking of itself as a drop and to realize that it is wax. But since our drop is capable only of noticing its own form, all its brief life it prays to the Wax God to preserve this form, although, if one thinks about it, this form possesses absolutely no inherent relation to the wax. Any drop of wax possesses exactly the same properties as its entire volume. Do you understand me? A drop of the great ocean of being is the entire ocean, contracted for a moment to the scope of that drop. (200)

— А следует то, что единственный путь к бессмертию для капли воска, это перестать считать, что она капля, и понять, что она и есть воск. Но поскольку наша капля сама способна заметить только свою форму, она всю свою короткую жизнь молится Господу Воску о спасении этой формы, хотя эта форма, если вдуматься, не имеет к ней никакого отношения. При этом любая капелька воска обладает теми же свойствами, что и весь его объем. Понимаете? Капля великого океана бытия — это и есть весь этот океан, сжавшийся на миг до капли. (251)

In the allegory, each drop of wax is a conscious mind and as it travels down the lamp it realizes that it has form and becomes obsessed with its own form. What the drops don't realize, Kotovsky claims, is that that all of the wax beads return to the same pool at the bottom of the lamp and spend the entire journey fearing for the destruction of their own fleeting form. Chapaev overhears the conversation and in a rage, he shoots the lamp that Kotovsky is using for his allegory: "That was smart talking there, Grisha [Grigory Kotovsky], about the drop of wax... but what're you going to say now?" (201). What Kotovsky fails to understand, and what Chapaev demonstrates is that while there is no form, there is also no place that all consciousnesses return to because the lamp is also an empty form. Kotovsky is unable to construct an empty symbol because he does not understand emptiness.

As mentioned in Chapter 5 of this thesis, by shooting Kotovsky's lamp, Chapaev begins JC. Unlike Kotovsky, Baron Jungern understands empty symbols very well and demonstrates his understanding in JC. The Baron tells Pyotr that he used to be a White Army General who led a cavalry division during the Russian Civil War. Pyotr is introduced to the Baron's Asiatic cavalry division, and the Baron explains that "we were all executed together by firing squad in Irkutsk. I wouldn't exactly say it was my fault, but even so... I feel a certain responsibility for them" (225). Pyotr meets one of the cavalry men named Ignat who talks with Pyotr about his experience serving under Baron Jungern. Ignat sits with Pyotr while the Baron and his men sing a Cossack folk song called *Oĩ, to ne vecher* [Ой то не вечер] which, according to the Baron, is a song built with empty symbols. Each of the lines given below are sung by Baron Jungern and his men, but the song is spread out over two pages because Ignat interprets between each line. I have imposed some order on the song and condensed it into a table. The left column contains the

lyrics sung by the Baron and the right column contains quotes from Ignat's interpretation. I have included the Russian verses above the table with no commentary interruptions.

Ой, то не вечер да не вечер  
 Мне малым-мало спалось да во сне привиделось  
 Мне во сне привиделось, будто конь мой вороной разрезвился, расплясался,  
 разыгрался подо мной.  
 А есаул-то наш догадлив был, он сумел сон мой разгадать  
 Ой да пропадет, он говорил мне, твоя вуйна голова  
 Ой, да подулин ветры злые  
 Да с восточной стороны  
 И сорвали желту шапку  
 С моей буйной головы

(284-286)

(1) And I have slept hardly at all, but I have seen a dream.	“...it makes no difference whether you sleep or you don't, it's all a dream.”
(2) And in my dream my black steed gamboled, danced and pranced beneath me.	“...in India they have a book called the <i>Oopsanyshags</i> ...it says in the book, a man's mind is like a Cossacks horse always carrying you forward...now its not the rider as controls the horse, but the horse as carries him off wherever it fancies. So the horseman's not even thinking any more about how he has to get any place in particular. He just goes along wherever the horse wanders.”
(3) And our captain quick of wit, heard my dream then read me it	“The captain, like—well, that's clear enough, that's just the way his lordship the baron writes about himself.”
(4) Oi, your wild and woolly head you are bound to lose, he said.	“...that's straight out of the <i>Oopsanyshags</i> . All this human wisdom will have to be left behind here anyway, like.”

(5) And, oh, the bitter winds did roar / From out the East so cold and heavy,	Pyotr interprets these lines: “I can understand the part about the winds from the East myself... <i>Ex oriente lux</i> as they say.”
(6) And the Yellow hat they tore	“[The cap gets blown off] So as he won’t have any more attachments... [Its yellow]...because we’re Gelugpa. So we have yellow hats. If we was Karmapa, they’d be red hats...where freedom begins, colours don’t mean nothing no more.”
(7) From off my head so wild and woolly	“If the head’s a gonner, then what’s it care what kind of hat it used to wear?”

In the novel, only the last four lines of this verse are given consecutively, the rest are interwoven with commentary as Ignat discusses the meaning of the song with Pyotr. Pyotr recognizes the song as *Oĩ, to ne vecher*, but does not explicitly mention the title.<sup>22</sup> However, he tells Ignat that he knows the song, to which Ignat replies, “No... You’re mixing things up. This is a song his lordship the baron wrote specially for us so that chanting it would make us think. And so it’d be easy for us to remember, the words in it are the same as in the song you’re talking about, and the music too” (228). The song is exactly the same as the one that Pyotr knows, but Ignat interprets it in terms of empty symbols and gives it a new meaning. In the Upanishads, the mind is described as a horse, dragging an individual around; only the horse is now wild and goes off in all sorts of directions. Recalling aniconism, just as the Buddha can be represented by an empty throne, in the same way he can be represented by a headless rider. In his interpretation of line 6, Ignat tells Pyotr that he is a “Gelugpa,” then lists off several other titles and each of these

<sup>22</sup> Zheleznova Aleksandra, Zheleznov Vladimir. *Pi ẽsni Ural’skikh Kazakov* (Sankt-Peterburg: S-Peterburgskoe otd-nie, 1899), <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=fcg-AAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA12>.

is a sect of Buddhism. Gelugpa is a relatively young branch of Tibetan Buddhism that gained strength through a close alliance with the Mongols.<sup>23</sup> However, as Ignat observes, once the head is gone, it hardly matters what color hat (what version of Buddhism) an individual wears because they will all be located nowhere.

Earlier I talked about the steppe as an empty symbol because it is empty compared to other locations like cities. By the same logic, Pelevin describes the East as more influential and powerful than the West. Pyotr's response to the winds that come howling from the East to blow the cap off of the heads of Cossacks is "*Ex oriente lux*," a Latin phrase which means "From the East – light," in other words, wisdom and enlightenment can be found in Eastern religions. Buddhism originated and took hold in the East, and as a result, the East is more familiar with the concept of Buddhist enlightenment. The Eastern location that Pelevin most commonly references is Mongolia. The geography of Mongolia is characterized by the steppe and the people there are familiar with Buddhism. Thus, the symbol of Mongolia is more pure than western symbols because emptiness is more familiar to them, not because there is some objective substance inherent to Mongolia but absent from the rest of the world.

When Chapaev is first describing Baron Junger to Pyotr, he says, "[the Baron] despises all manner of symbols, no matter what they might refer to" (210). Initially I found this problematic because the Baron's Cossack song is all symbolism. Ignat says as much—every line is meant to make the Cossacks think and understand the Buddhist meaning present there. This contradiction is resolved by aniconism and the hierarchy of symbols. The Baron dislikes symbols "no matter what they might refer to" and that is why the Baron's symbols refer to nothing. Baron Jungern takes a classic Cossack song and reinterprets it as a Buddhist parable. The baron proposes the headless rider as an empty symbol analogous to the empty throne. The headless

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<sup>23</sup> Sam Schaik, *Tibet: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) 129-133.

rider emphasizes the nothingness of the void and is a symbol for enlightenment. Once the head is gone, so are all human attachments, and at that point, neither the horse nor the body is needed at all. The truth of the void surpasses symbols and form entirely since it is the only thing that could possibly remain.

## JUNGIAN MYTHOLOGY

The title of this chapter is “Pelevin’s Mythology,” but to understand how Pelevin works with myth, I must first explain how Carl Gustav Jung works with myth. Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist whose work has been influential, not only in psychiatry, but also has important resonance in philosophy, religious studies, and comparative mythology. Pelevin refers to Jung in the novel and specifically his work in psychiatry. Timur Timurovich professes to employ a “turbo-Jungian” method (91). Jung’s method involved sitting down with patients and discussing their dreams and experiences at length, sometimes even over the course of several years. During that time, he would draw out the symbols that his patients were expressing, and use the symbols to form a synthesis between the unconscious and the conscious, thus restoring his patients’ mental health. Timur Timurovich’s “turbo” version of Jung’s method treats his patients with less conversation and more brute-force. To this effect he informs Pyotr: “we just give you a little injection, and then we observe the symbols that start floating to the surface in simply va-a-ast quantities” (92). The fact that the “turbo-Jungian” method is the way in which readers experience the stories of each of the characters in the mental ward demonstrates the importance of Jung in understanding the novel.

The widespread knowledge of myth and the plethora of adjectives that refer to myth are evidence of its importance and prominence in the mind of modern humans. Mythology is an incredibly rich field, due in part to the quantity and diversity of theorists and subject matter that constitute its foundation. This sort of diversity, though it is certainly not without merit, has resulted in dozens of wholly incompatible theories that challenge one another using the same lexicon but referencing meanings that are quite different in almost every instance. Today, Jung's theories about myth and psychiatry are no longer generally accepted, but since Pelevin directly refers to him, his theories are more privileged in this context than all others.

To help concisely describe Jung's understanding of myth and psychiatry, I will follow the method employed by Robert Segal in his book, *Theorizing About Myth*.<sup>24</sup> Segal attempts to disentangle the confusion apparently inherent to the study of mythology, by systematizing the different theories through three questions about myth: "what is its subject matter, what is its origin, and what is its function?"<sup>25</sup> Strangely, the process of answering these questions about myth does not begin with mythology, but instead with dreams.

The concept of the unconscious is fundamental to understanding the subject matter of Jungian mythology. Jung proposes that the mind is a duality composed of the ego and the unconscious. The ego is the conscious and rational part of the mind that generally governs the lives of modern humans. The unconscious is not led by rationality, but by instincts which incline us towards fantasy. In contemporary and scientifically minded society, there is far less occasion for unconscious thought and, as a result, unconscious thought finds its outlet primarily through dreams. A dream is an attempt by the unconscious to communicate with the conscious mind. For the most part this is an individual phenomenon where dream and individual experience correlate;

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Alan Segal, *Theorizing About Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Segal, *Theorizing About Myth*, 2.

the dream speaks from the unconscious and therefore through fantasy and not by reason. On occasion, however, a dream may be so profound in nature that it cannot be rooted in the experience of an individual, and will often deal with phenomena, never actually learned or seen by the dreamer. From this special case, Jung's notion of the collective unconscious is derived.

The collective unconscious provides the unconscious mind with a new inventory of expressions which are passed to the dreamer. Contrary to what the name might suggest, the collective unconscious is not some ocean in which all unconscious minds amalgamate and reside while we sleep (sorry, Kotovsky), but it is an inherited component of the psyche. Jung proposes that as humans have evolved, there are some concepts so profound and fundamental that they have been preserved by heredity in the mind of each person. There are many experiences and emotions that reside in the unconscious of every person. The collective unconscious is a category within the unconscious of the individual in which concepts that have been passed down by inheritance are kept. The result is that dreams from the collective unconscious are communicated to individuals because the predilection to dream with those profound motifs is inherited. Myth is the product of the distribution of motifs from the collective unconscious that have been given form by oral tradition and have been adopted by a group. In the words of Joseph Campbell who was strongly influenced by the Jungian method: "Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream."<sup>26</sup> This description of the collective unconscious brings us closer to understanding the content and origin of myth according to Jung, but a key term is still lacking—the archetype.

In common parlance, an archetype is a typical object representative of some category. However, in the context of mythology as understood by Jung, an archetype is a fundamental component of myth and is essential to mental well-being. The archetype is neither a symbol nor

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with One Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).



an image; it has no form and, in its entirety, is totally beyond human comprehension. When we refer to the hero archetype, we don't refer to any physical hero, or in the case of the child archetype there is no actual child. The archetype, as we can perceive it, is an instinct from the unconscious that only suggests a physical form. It is constructed from symbols that belong to that archetype, but the totality of the archetype cannot be reconstructed from the set of symbols that it suggests. The archetype is a formless core of unconscious meaning that influences the formation of symbols that seek representation of the archetype.

The number of symbols that can be generated by an archetype is infinite and as a result, the archetype can never be precisely defined. The only way to understand the archetype would be to understand the infinite number of symbols emanating from it which would prove to be an impossible undertaking. Symbols are specifically the forms through which archetypes find expression in the unconscious. The best that can be done is to approximate the meaning of the archetype from the incomplete set of symbols provided by myths and dreams. Myths and dreams are the method of conveyance because they are the only conduits through which the collective unconscious can communicate with the ego. Thus the archetype as we can interpret it is twice diluted: once by translation from instinct to symbols, and again by translation from symbols to words<sup>27</sup> This description of archetypes is very similar to the description from the preface that the novel attempts to point directly to the mind of the reader from the preface, "rather than force him

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<sup>27</sup> For facility in understanding, consider the system as I have described as a library containing an infinite number of books written in a foreign language where the dreamer has taken on the role of a researcher. The researcher is not fluent in the language, but understands fragments of it. Every researcher has their own computer which provides access to a catalog of books in the library. The researcher is tasked with entering a search term into the catalog and withdrawing as many books as possible on the topic. He then must work in reverse to describe the search term only using the information that he has translated from the books.

The online catalog in this scenario is the collective unconsciousness and the search term is representative of the archetype. The books represent symbols belonging to the archetype and every search term the researcher tries will display an infinite number of books – for the dreamer, every archetype yields an infinite number of symbols. The researcher cannot possibly read and understand every book, just as the dreamer cannot experience every symbol of an archetype. The books must then be translated from the foreign language so that the translated material can be used to describe the search term. Analogously, symbols from an archetype must be translated from the unconscious symbolic representations into words which can be understood by conscious thought.

to view yet another phantom constructed out of words...” (Preface ix). Words cannot adequately convey archetypes, just as they cannot adequately convey Buddhist truth.

At this point, it is finally appropriate to address the question of what subject matter myths contain, from where they originate, and what function they serve. Myths are the expression of symbols as they are structured and interpreted by the conscious mind, and on the whole myth approximates and develops the archetype(s) that the symbols belong to. Myths originate because archetypes desire expression. The origin of archetypes and the reason that people desire to express them would be another rather long discussion. To put it briefly, archetypes originate because the unconscious wants the outer world to parallel the inner. This means that changes in the outer world may produce psychic dissonance in the inner world to which the unconscious must adapt. Jung writes that “[Myths] are the symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man’s consciousness by way of projection – that is, mirrored in the events of nature.”<sup>28</sup> This answers both the question of why and how do myths originate. Myths and archetypes could be discussed in far greater depth, in fact Jung did just that over the course of a prolific writing career, but this discussion will be sufficient as preliminary information for interpreting myth in *Buddha’s Little Finger*.

## ARCHETYPAL ANALYSIS OF MARIA

In TC, Pyotr and his roommates are kept in ward No. 7, which appropriately evokes Chekhov's short story, *Ward No. 6*, since there is far more philosophy than medicine practiced at this facility. Timur Timurovich is in the process of writing his dissertation titled “The Split False

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<sup>28</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R.F.C Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 6.

Personality” and each of the ward mates demonstrates a condition relevant to that title. There is very little description of the mental hospital. From the inside, we are only shown a main room where each character has a bed, an art room where they practice aesthetic therapy, and Timur Timurovich's office. The main room has a chair with rubber straps for restraining the wrists and ankles of the occupant. Pyotr refers to it as a “garotte” however, Timur Timurovich assures him that it is a couch used for group therapy and chastises Pyotr for being morbid.<sup>29</sup>

Before Pyotr’s dream about Maria begins, Timur Timurovich prefaces the experience with some information about Maria’s condition. Maria is biologically male, but identifies with the heroine of the Mexican television serial *Just Maria?*. Maria’s dream involves the clash between his television alter-ego and the Hollywood celebrity Arnold Schwarzenegger as he appeared in the film *True Lies* (1994). In the dream, Maria walks along an embankment in Moscow and encounters Schwarzenegger who is assembled out of the fog, and created for her right there on the embankment. Maria and Arnold walk together through a setting of gunfire and smoke which is attributed to the news channel CNN. Eventually they arrive in a courtyard where an A-4 Harrier Jet is parked. Arnold flies the jet and Maria straddles the fuselage at which point the dream takes on an erotic tone as Maria describes the mechanical phallus of the Harrier’s antenna and its missiles. Maria accidentally breaks the antenna off, apparently angering Schwarzenegger and causing him to launch a missile with Maria in tow at the Ostankino television tower. Moments later she and the missile impact the tower and the dream promptly ends.

Pyotr’s dream about Maria deals with several mythological elements, but primarily with the anima archetype. The anima is the collection of all repressed female qualities that men harbor

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<sup>29</sup> The garotte is an execution device from medieval Spain where an unfortunate individual was tied down and then strangled from behind.

and unconsciously project onto dreams and the outside world. The anima archetype only manifests for males and the animus only for females and it is complicated by the fact that Maria is biologically male. This binary pair opposes one another and is a common and essential archetype because all people are prefigured by the collective unconscious to formulate their respective animus/anima archetype according to their gender. Society also encourages the formation of these archetypes because masculinity is generally discouraged for women and likewise femininity is discouraged for men. If a male declines acceptance of his female qualities, the anima archetype is far more likely to form due to that repression. The unconscious causes the anima archetype to manifest in dreams in an attempt to communicate to the ego the necessity for synthesis of masculine and feminine qualities into a unified whole. In Jungian psychology, a fragmented psyche is unhealthy, but a fragmented psyche full of repressed elements is far worse. Therefore the Jungian approach stipulates first identifying and acknowledging the presence of the anima archetype, and secondly assimilating the qualities projected by that archetype back into the ego.

It is also worth mentioning that the Jungian anima archetype is commonly broken up into four stages of development, where each stage is an improvement over the former and brings the male individual closer to psychological unity. The stages are: (1) Eve – a reference to Genesis, describes the development of women as an object of man's desire; instinctual and biological (2) Helen – a reference to Helen of Troy, this stage is an erotic and aesthetic sexual depiction of women, though one in which they are more respected and capable of success (3) Mary – invoking the image of the Virgin Mary, this stage envisions women as virtuous, and provides possibilities for women beyond social and biological drives (4) Sophia – from the Greek word

for wisdom, this stage represents the completion of the anima archetype.<sup>30</sup> Realization of this stage indicates that the male subject is aware of his female qualities in their entirety, both strengths and weaknesses, and has created parallelism and understanding between the unconscious and the ego. It is also worth noting that in Freudian psychology, and to some extent in Jungian psychology, the infantile stages of development are broken down into erotic stages that correspond to the sensory organs that take precedence at varying ages of development. In order they proceed: (1) oral (2) anal (3) phallic (4) latent (5) genital.<sup>31</sup>

After Timur Timurovich explains Maria's circumstance to Pyotr, he comments that "it would be a quite banal case, if not for the subconscious identification with Russia, plus the Agamemnon complex with the anal dynamics" (39). The Agamemnon complex is something that Pelevin has invented but the Electra complex and the Oedipus complex are likely associated with it and they exist outside of the novel. These complexes are the desire for a child to kill his/her same sex parent to remove competition for the other parent. If the Electra and the Oedipus complex can be considered sufficient precedent, then complexes named after tragic Greek figures tend to involve the desire to kill another for personal gain. Agamemnon was the king of Mycenae during the Trojan War and was killed upon his return from Troy by his wife Clytemnestra. Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon primarily because he sacrificed one of their daughters to the Goddess Artemis to appease her and to thereby secure friendly winds and safe passage for the warships bound towards Troy.<sup>32</sup> It follows that Pelevin's Agamemnon complex is

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<sup>30</sup> Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell, 1964).

<sup>31</sup> Dino Felluga. "Modules on Freud: On Psychosexual Development." Introductory Guide to Critical Theory. last updated, 1/31/2011. Purdue U. accessed 5/2/2015.  
<<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/freud.html>>.

<sup>32</sup> Electra was one of Agamemnon's daughters who convinced her brother Orestes to avenge Agamemnon and kill their mother, Clytemnestra. The Electra complex is thus the female counterpart to the Oedipus complex in which a woman endeavors to kill her mother to remove competition for her father.

likely the inclination to kill one's offspring in order to pursue an instinctual desire such as war or a woman (Helen).

In this dream, Maria is representative of the anima archetype and Schwarzenegger represents the animus archetype. This sort of union between animus and anima is called the syzygy and is the dialectic between two opposites to form a coherent whole. Jung proposes that we seek a syzygy in our romantic relationships, but just like archetypes, they can only be approximations because the syzygy is a construct of archetypes. In the realm of the unconscious there are also ill-fated syzygies such as the relationship between Arnold and Maria.

Maria represents the anima that has reached the second stage of development. Through her sexual interactions with Arnold, it is clear that she appears as an object of pleasure and of aesthetic appeal. This aligns with both the Eve and Helen stages of the anima. Eve is not referenced, as presumably the anima Maria has moved past being an object of pure carnal instinct. Helen, however, is alluded to when Maria laments “how many more of our handsome young men must we see fall on the roadway and spill out their heart’s blood on the asphalt?”(42) [...сколько еще молодых красивых ребят упадет на асфальт и зальет его кровью из пробитого сердца (60)]. This sentence carries a Homeric tone and appears to reference the siege of Troy where young men died for ten years for the sake of a woman’s beauty. The second reference to Helen is, once again, the Agamemnon Complex, since Helen was the woman that Agamemnon sought to bring back from Troy. It is also abundantly clear that the anima has not reached the Mary stage of development. When Schwarzenegger first approaches Maria, he greets her saying “Ave Maria” more commonly expressed as “Hail Mary.” This expression is a salutation to the virgin mother, Mary, in the Christian tradition. In response to this greeting, Maria responds, “No my sweet... Just Maria” (46) Capitalizing the word *Just* [Июсто]

emphasizes both that Maria should be associated with the Russian television serial of the same name<sup>33</sup>, and that she is emphatically not an anima of the Virgin Mary.

The solutions that Maria sees in the world around her are simplistic and characteristic of the Helen anima. She envisions “a hospital ward full of people all bandaged up and lying on uncomfortable beds, and there was her image hanging on the wall in a place where everyone could see it. They gazed at her from their beds and for a while they forgot all about their woes...”. (42) Her relationship with Arnold further proves that she is not beyond the Helen stage, since all of her interactions with Arnold are petty niceties that culminate in a purely erotic and mechanical relationship.

Maria is associated with Russia and appears as the anima for Russia, and Arnold fills the animus role for the West. He and Maria are both “purely conventional being[s] woven by the thousands of individual Russian consciousnesses which were thinking about [them] at that very second” (47). They are both projections since their forms are exact reflections of the dreams of the unconscious masses of Russia. The masses of Russia propose Arnold Schwarzenegger as the necessary animus to complete the syzygy, but their “alchemical wedlock” fails when Maria proves that she is unready to accept Schwarzenegger’s love. Additionally, Arnold is not a fully developed animus. The animus also has four stages, though they don’t correspond nicely to famous men from mythology. Instead there is the man of physical power, the man of action and romance, the man as a professor and clergyman, and man as a guide to understanding himself.<sup>34</sup> Schwarzenegger is a man of action and romance, when Maria asked him to take her soaring through the sky, “he grabbed her [Maria] decisively by the arm and dragged her onwards. Maria was startled by this sudden transition from poetic abstraction to concrete action, but then she

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<sup>33</sup> Prosto Maria, Just Maria

<sup>34</sup> Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell, 1964).

realized that this was the way real men were supposed to behave” (50). Maria’s development parallels Schwarzenegger’s development, but neither is sufficiently prepared for a successful union and thus Maria is launched into the Ostankino tower.<sup>35</sup>

Earlier in the novel, Pyotr comments that all revolutions have a feminine nature (15). The revolution that Maria represents is the fall of the Soviet Union. The fallout from the dissolution of the USSR, the rush of westernization, and the emergence of the New Russians as a class resulted in a damaged generation of Russian youths. Ideology no longer dictated a collective teleology, but a personal one. Every individual had their own fortune and their own wealth to claim and to do so was to take it at the expense of others. The Agamemnon complex, as I have identified it, figures into the revolution since Maria desires Arnold and the West even at the cost of sacrificing her sons e.g. those Russians who have dreamed her. Forcing a relationship between Russia and the West is ill-fated and this fact is demonstrated by Maria and Arnold.

At the conclusion of the dream session, the military type who was observing the dream commented about the frequency of phalluses in the dream. Timur Timurovich stops his analysis, commenting, “Let’s not be too hasty. What’s important here is that the cathartic effect is quite evident, even if it is attenuated” (58). Although Maria does not unite with Arnold and does not fully destroy the dream, to an extent, she does manage to succeed. Maria dies in the dream as she smashes into the Ostankino tower, but in doing so, she destroys an enormous phallus, which is part of her mania. Maria also successfully consummates her affair with Schwarzenegger even if it did not develop into a lasting relationship. Pyotr observes after the session ended that Schwarzenegger had become pregnant thanks to his time spent with Maria. In these two regards, Maria achieved some degree of catharsis—she partially destroyed her world by force and

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<sup>35</sup> It is likely that Pelevin chose the Ostankino Tower because he has a poor relationship with television in Russia. In his novel, *Generation P*, he writes about television as the content of reality in modern Russia and explains it as a sort of divine correspondence broadcast by the ruling elite in order to placate the masses.



partially united with Schwarzenegger and the West. Maria is the first character to be released from the mental ward and the mild success of this dream in the eyes of Timur Timurovich likely contributes to this fact.

Maria has a dream that says something about Russia and is relevant to a discussion of the problems in Russia following the end of the Soviet Union. For the first time so far in my discussion, it seems that there is something concrete that Pelevin posits about Russia. The truth of the matter is that Pelevin makes statements that have some relevancy to Russia all the time. Semyon Serdyuk's complicated relationship with the East could demonstrate a resistance to the generation of New-Russians but a hesitance or uncertainty about the mysticism of the East and Pyotr's struggle to understand TC could be read as resistance to change and a shattered worldview produced by the collapse of the Soviet Union. I will talk more about how the novel can use symbols and mythology to comment on forms in Chapter 7. I included this section with Maria to demonstrate that *Buddha's Little Finger* is not only composed of Buddhist symbols. PC and JC deal almost exclusively with Buddhist themes, but the other chronotopes frequently say things about Russia's identity in relation to East and West, however, the symbols that they invoke are not as pure as empty symbols and ultimately, according to the novel, they hold far less value.

## OVERWRITING HISTORY WITH MYTH

Outside of TC, Jungian mythology becomes less relevant. It is still important, but emphasis shifts away from specific applications of the collective unconscious and archetypes, to archetypes in general and their inherently empty nature. My description of mythology in PC and

JC must begin by revisiting Baron Jungern. Chapaev and the Baron are the two characters that are tied most strongly to mythology, but the Baron more so if for no other reason than for the mess of connections and references that compose his character. He is primarily derived from the Lieutenant-General, Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, who fought in the Russian Civil War. He was born in Estonia but was affiliated with many members of the Russian nobility and sided with the monarchists in the Civil War. Baron Ungern-Sternberg was a Buddhist and believed in the divine authority of the Mongolian Khanate. Following this belief, he led his legion of soldiers across the Russian steppe and brought them to war against the Chinese forces occupying Inner Mongolia. He was eventually successful, wrested Inner Mongolia from Chinese control, and reinstated the Mongolian Khanate. While in Inner Mongolia, the Baron strengthened his Cossack force with many fierce Mongolian recruits and fought both the Chinese and Bolsheviks until 1921 when his new empire collapsed and he was captured and executed by the Bolsheviks.<sup>36</sup>

In *Buddha's Little Finger* Baron Ungern-Sternberg is referenced by Chapaev as “Baron Jungern von Sternberg. The real baron preferred to be called Ungern von Sternberg, as opposed to his real name, Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, because of his uncomfortable Jewish ancestry.”<sup>37</sup> Pelevin reflects Baron Ungern-Sternberg’s preference by reordering his name in the same way. Pelevin also substitutes Ungern [Унгерн] with Jungern [Юнгерн], which suggests that Pelevin wants to make a comparison between Baron Jungern and Carl Jung. Chapaev describes Baron Jungern to Pyotr: “He is the defender of Inner Mongolia. They say he is an incarnation of the god of war” (210). This was true of the real baron as well and he was greatly feared by both Chinese and Bolshevik forces alike on the eastern front of the Civil War.<sup>38</sup> Genghis Khan was also called

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<sup>36</sup> James Palmer, *The Bloody White Baron: The Extraordinary Story of the Russian Nobleman who became the Last Khan of Mongolia* (New York: Basic Books, 2009) 1-9.

<sup>37</sup> Palmer, *The Bloody White Baron*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Palmer, *The Bloody White Baron*, 144.

the god of war, and the Baron is frequently compared to Genghis Khan since he wanted to reinstate the Mongolian empire of the Golden Horde. The final connection is between Baron Jungern and the Hindu God Shiva but this comparison must be explained with some additional context.

In JC, Baron Jungern and Pyotr wander through the world of campfires and at each campfire, a couple of people are seated, huddled close together. All of a sudden in a burst of light several figures appear at a campfire and one of them begins shouting. The baron rushes over and tosses a grenade at the newcomers. Pyotr dives to the ground and when he stands up again, the campfire is empty. Pyotr tells the Baron “I am almost sure...that I have seen the bald one with the little beard somewhere before – in fact, I am absolutely certain” (222). The bald one in question is Volodin, one of Pyotr’s ward mates from TC. In the corresponding moment from TC, Volodin and Pyotr are in the room used for practical aesthetics therapy when Volodin asks Pyotr: “‘Do you by any chance have an acquaintance with a red face, three eyes and a necklace of skulls,’ he asked, ‘who dances between fires? Mm? Very tall, he was. And he waves these crooked swords around’” (100). This description is that of Baron Jungern, and the Baron himself says that “I usually appear to my friends in the guise of the St. Petersburg intellectual whom I once actually was. But you should not conclude that is what I actually look like... I won’t bore you with all the details,’ said the Baron. ‘Let me just say that I hold a sharp sabre in each of my six hands’” (224). This description ties Baron Jungern to Shiva, who is the god of both creation and destruction in Hinduism. Shiva’s dance has the power to destroy the world, and his drum has the power to create it anew.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Robert and Guirand, *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, 374-78

Baron Jungern does not have any real form, but the form that other people project onto him has a rather terrifying visage. In summary, the Baron is connected to Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, Genghis Khan, Carl Jung, and Shiva. The notable commonality between these figures, excepting Jung, is their aptitude for destruction. Ungern-Sternberg was a violent marauder who slaughtered Bolsheviks and lynched Jews in his crusade across the steppe. Genghis Khan is the most famous warlord in history who conquered nearly all of Asia and Russia. Shiva is the Hindu God who periodically destroys the entire world and then creates it once more. The Baron is related to these famous destroyers for two primary reasons. The first is that they are all powerful Eastern figures and the transformative power of the East is emphasized through the Baron. Ungern-Sternberg is a lesser known, and altogether more malevolent figure, but he is important because it is his history that shapes this chronotope. Pelevin likely chose to use Ungern-Sternberg because he was fighting in the Civil War at the same time as Chapaev, and he fought and died for Buddhism. Pelevin uses figures of destruction because destruction is essential to enlightenment. Destruction of illusions provides one with the ability to see the void, and simultaneously creates awakening. Additionally, the paradox of destruction as a means of creation is closely associated with Shiva. In Baron Jungern, Pelevin has repurposed history to serve Buddhism. In *Buddha's Little Finger* Baron Jungern does not act at all the way Baron Ungern-Sternberg did, yet the circumstances remain similar. The Baron was a warlord who was compared to Genghis Khan; he conquered Inner Mongolia and led a division of Cossacks across the Steppe. Pelevin does not change the premise of the history so much as he changes the meaning. In the same way that the Baron turns a Cossack song into a Buddhist parable, Pelevin takes history and turns it into a Buddhist parable.

Baron Jungern is tied to all sorts of people, both real and mythological. Chapaev is also closely tied to myth; he is a hero of Russian folklore and the subject of countless Russian jokes. Vasily Chapaev was an actual commander in the Civil War, but it is difficult to come across concrete information about Chapaev since his legacy and exploits have taken on the proportions of myth. *Chapaev* is the title of a book by Dmitry Furmanov which was later adapted into a movie of the same name by Georgi and Sergei Vasilyev.<sup>40</sup> The movie was tremendously popular in the Soviet Union and caused Chapaev to become a household name. His bluster and skill on the battlefield coupled with his peasant background caused him to be well liked, though somewhat comical, since his adventures, as a rule, are exaggerated and implausible. Unlike Baron Ungern-Sternberg, Chapaev had nothing to do with Buddhism and was just a military commander with peasant origins fighting on the steppe. However, as the preface to the novel informs us: “All this, however, bears absolutely no relation whatsoever to the life of the real Chapaev—or if there is some relation, then the true facts have been distorted beyond all recognition by conjecture and innuendo” (Preface, x). Pelevin appropriates Chapaev’s history in the same way that he takes Baron Ungern-Sternberg’s history and imposes Buddhist meaning onto it. The movie, *Chapaev*, engendered its own type of joke that finds humor in the various exploits of the hero. Examining one of the Chapaev jokes is a good way to understand how Pelevin manipulates history. In TC, Pyotr’s ward mates are familiar with the Chapaev joke genre and make several quips to Pyotr about Chapaev’s misadventures. Pyotr is disgusted by how they portray Chapaev and he defends PC as the true representation of Chapaev. The passage below contains one of the jokes told to Pyotr by Semyon Serdyuk:

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<sup>40</sup> Dmitry Furmanov, *Chapaev*. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955); Vasilyev Georgi, Vasilyev Sergei. *Chapaev*. Lenfilm, 1934.

Petka and Vasily Ivanovich are swimming across the Ural, and Chapaev's clutching this attaché case in his teeth... he's almost on the point of drowning, but he won't dump the case. Petka shouts to him: 'Vasily Ivanovich, drop the case, or you'll drown!' But Chapaev says: 'No way, Petka! I can't. It's got the staff maps in it.' Anyway, they barely make it to the other bank, and when they get there, Petka says: 'Right then, Vasily Ivanovich, show me these maps we almost drowned for.' Chapaev opens up the case. Petka looks inside and sees it's full of potatoes. "Vasily Ivanovich," he says, "what kind of maps do you call these?" So Chapaev takes out two potatoes and says: 'Look here, Petka. This is us – and this is the Whites' (312)

ПереplываюТ Петька с Василием Ивановичем Урал, а у Чапаева в зубах чемоданчик... он уже тонет почти, а чемодан не бросает. Петька кричит ему: « Василий Иванович, брось чемодан, утонешь! » А Чапаев говорит: « Ты что, Петька! Нельзя. Там штабные карты ». Короче, еле выплыли. Петька говорит: « Ну что, Василий Иванович, покажи карты, из-за которых мы чуть не утопили ». Чапаев открывает чемодан. Петька смотрит, а там картошка. « Василий Иванович, какие же это карты? » А Чапаев берет две картофелины, кладет на землю и говорит: « Смотри, Петька. Вот мы, а вот белые ». (386-387)

Assessing this joke requires some more background information from the novel for context. This context comes from two sources: one is the Vasilyev Brothers' film, *Chapaev*, and the other is PC. The Ural River cuts longitudinally through Russia and was the river in which Chapaev was shot as he was retreating from the Cossacks in the film. As I mentioned early in this thesis, the URAL is an acronym for the "Undefinable River of Absolute Love" and only appears in PC once the rest of the chronotope is destroyed (309). The mention of the staff maps is a reference to a scene in the movie when *Chapaev* delivers a brilliant lecture on military strategy simply by shifting around potatoes on a table. There is a corresponding moment in PC where Chapaev describes a topographical map of consciousness while he and Pyotr eat onions and drink moonshine together.

“[Chapaev] picked up two onions from the table and began cleaning them. One of them he cleaned until its flesh was white, but from the other he removed only the dry outer skin, exposing the reddish-purple layer underneath... When you look at the red onion, do you turn red?... And when you look at the white onion, do you turn white?... There are Reds. And there are Whites. But just because we’re aware of Reds and Whites, do we take on any colours? And what is there in you that can take them on?” (139).

[Чапаев] взял со стола две луковицы и принялся молча чистить их. Одну он ободрал до белизны, а со второй снял только верхний слой шелухи, обнажив краснофиолетовую кожницу... — Когда ты на красную луковицу смотришь, ты красным становишься?... — А когда на белую, становишься белым?... — Вот красные. А вот белые. Но разве оттого, что мы сознаем красных и белых, мы приобретаем цвета? И что это в нас, что может приобрести их? (176-177).

The original joke is based on the film’s portrayal of Chapaev and suggests that instead of staff maps, Chapaev uses potatoes for all of his strategizing, furthermore, these potatoes are worth dying for. In PC, Pelevin redefines this joke by mapping it to serious events within that chronotope. The Ural is actually the URAL and drowning in that river represents the pinnacle of enlightenment, the attaché case holds a topographical map of consciousness, not staff maps, and in any event, the attaché case contains onions, not potatoes. When evaluated in PC the joke about Chapaev is no longer a joke at all, but is an account of Pyotr’s moment of awakening and the dissolution of PC. Again, Pelevin takes something that is documented and well known; in this case a joke about Chapaev, keeps the structure, but overwrites the information with his own. The Chapaev that Pelevin presents is not the Red Army commander with whom Russia is familiar, but is a Bodhisattva who encounters the same scenarios as the Red Army commander but treats them in entirely different ways.

In Chapter 4, I talked about time in the novel and about how time is impossible because the only moment is eternity, but I didn’t address history. Early on I stated that history is a way of

knowing through time, and geography is a way of knowing by place. I dealt with geography in some detail, but I never touched on history. Now with this information about mythology in mind, it is clear that mythology is Pelevin's antidote for history. Pelevin makes history abstract by creating different versions of it between the chronotopes and making those versions serve Buddhism. Pelevin can manipulate history in this way because time is nothing more than a perception. Within the novel, one cannot claim that Pelevin presents a false history because there is no true objective history with which by comparison Pelevin's can be made false.



## CHAPTER 7. THE FUNCTION OF PURE MYTH

‘Where exactly can you wake up to?’  
 I had no answer to that question.  
 ‘I do not know,’ I said.  
 Чапаев raised his eyes to look into mine and smiled...  
 ‘Good lad,’ he said. ‘That’s the very place.’ (294)

— А куда именно просыпаться?  
 На этот вопрос ответа у меня не было.  
 — Не знаю, сказал я.  
 Чапаев поднял на меня глаза и улыбнулся...  
 — Молодец, — сказал он. — Вот именно туда. (364)

### SORTING OUT THE EMPTY DIALECTIC

At this point, I have shown that *Buddha’s Little Finger* tries to disavow geography and history as ways of knowing, I have tried to understand symbolism in a novel that despises symbols, and I have introduced how Pelevin and Jung work with mythology. The novel provides evidence for all of these things, but Russia and Russian history is still the vehicle that delivers the message. Recall the conclusion of my archetypal analysis of Maria, that analysis uses symbols from Maria’s dream and produces a thesis on Russia. I am faced with a paradox: on one hand, the novel presents valid symbols that yield interpretations of the Russian identity, on the other hand, the novel as a whole despises symbols. I will pause before delving into this question only to say that I have tried to reconcile this paradox as best I can, but I have found myself walking a very fine line between religion and literary analysis. Zen masters teach students by using a sort of riddle called a *ko’an* which encourages students to consider enlightenment in smaller terms. For example, “When I clap my hands together, there is a sound. What is the sound

of one hand?”<sup>41</sup> This question is not one that can be resolved by logic and reason, it is something that just needs to be understood. Zen Buddhism claims that understanding one *ko'an* is equivalent to understanding enlightenment, there can be no half-measure or semi-enlightenment. True understanding, no matter how it is glimpsed is irreducible and cannot be anything less than true understanding.

Conversely, my approach to this novel is a formalist and monist one. I have tried to reconcile all paradoxes, and explain everything as best I can through evidence and logical proof. When I encountered something that could not be explained by logic, for example *anatta* (no-self), I did not try to crack it with logic, I just let it be and allowed it to figure into a larger logical argument. I picture my work space within this thesis as an inventory of Buddhist concepts and terms that are themselves immune to logic, but which I can organize into a logical structure. It has turned out that this resolution works well on a small scale, where Buddhist paradoxes are the smallest common denominator of my argument. Now, the question of why the novel takes place in Russia and uses Russian history arises as another paradox, but this one is much grander in scale. The other paradoxes are kernels of Zen Buddhism around which I have constructed an argument, but in this case my entire argument seems to be buried within one large paradox. Buddhism cautions its students about chasing after enlightenment with reason because enlightenment is not something that can be intellectualized. In concluding my analysis, I have tried to heed this advice while also not forsaking the pillars of a good literary analysis. I will not resolve the paradox of why the novel declaims all symbols yet uses Russian symbols freely. However, I will explain this paradox in terms of other Buddhist concepts and try to justify the inclusion of Russian symbols in *Buddha's Little Finger*.

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<sup>41</sup> Nyogen Senzaki & Ruth Strout McCandless, *Buddhism and Zen* ( San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 30.

I have demonstrated in the previous sections that this novel pulls together a disparate collection of figures and places that do not obey any sort of conventional geography or history. The only way to understand the amalgam is to understand each moment in terms of the others and in terms of the rules that Pelevin has built using the authority figures in the novel, Chapaev and Baron Jungern. The novel frequently deals with the dichotomy between East and West but does not ever become eastern or western. As Chapaev demonstrates with the onions: “When you look at the red onion, do you turn red?... And when you look at the white onion, do you turn white?...” (139). When Russia looks to the East, it does not become eastern, and when it looks to the West, it does not become western. The novel respects the East because it is more likely to generate empty symbols than the West but neither one is any more than an idea. It is also productive to deal with the question of the Russian identity in terms of the empty dialectic. East and West are excellent examples of near and far places, they are general terms and together they constitute all geographies; if one travels far enough East, then East becomes West and vice versa. The novel’s various chronotopes experiment with treating East and West alternately as near places. For example, in the chronotope of Semyon Serdyuk the East is treated as a near place. Serdyuk’s mentor, Kawabata, says, “...what Russia really needs is alchemical wedlock with the East” (168). However the wedlock fails because the chapter concludes with Serdyuk killing himself and not finding enlightenment. The West is tried as a near place in Maria’s chronotope, “[she] held out her arms towards the West—somehow it seemed clear that the Bridegroom would appear from that direction” (45). Again, the wedlock is unsuccessful because Maria is also killed when she is shot into the Ostankino tower. Looking for wedlock with the East is equivalent to experimenting with the East as a near place, and treating the West as a far place. The opposite can also be constructed by using the West as a near place and the East as a far place, however, no

matter the order both are unsuccessful. Moments in the novel that examine Russia's identity are moments that test the validity of the empty dialectic. Pelevin situates East and West as two nodes in opposition to one another in order to expose the truth of the gap between them. The exchange between Kawabata and Serdyuk in the passage below does an excellent job of explaining the empty dialectic:

‘What a beautiful drawing,’ said Serdyuk. ‘You know, it reminds me of a song I know, about cranes. How does it go, now? “...And in their flight I see a narrow gap, perhaps that is the place for me...”’

‘Yes, yes,’ Kawabata cut in. ‘And why would a man need any greater gap? The Lord Buddha can easily fit the entire world with all its problems into the gap between two cranes. Why it would be lost in the gaps between the feathers of either of them...’ (184)

— Какой красивый рисунок, — сказал Сердюк. — Даже, знаете, песню одну вспомнил, про журавлей. Как там было-то... « И в их строю есть промежуток малый — быть может, это место для меня... »

— Да-да, — подхватил Кавабата. — А и нужен ли человеку больший промежуток? Господин Шакьямуне, весь этот мир со всеми его проблемами легко поместится между двумя журавлями, что там -- он затеряется между перьями на крыле любого из них... (232)

The empty dialectic is a teaching tool of sorts that is used to hint at enlightenment. Thus, one of the reasons that *Buddha's Little Finger* makes use of symbols to comment on the Russian identity is because the empty dialectic requires specific symbols to invalidate all symbols.

The Ural River is considered by many as the dividing line between Europe and Asia. To one side is the West and to the other, the East. When Pyotr sees the URAL, it is clear that he is not standing at the border between East and West, but the gap between East and West. East and West are not even appropriate here, since those terms imply that the URAL is contingent on the geographies East and West. The URAL is encompassing, infinite, and empty. East and West are

just like Kotovsky's beads of wax or Pyotr's dreams— a void. Pyotr describes the URAL from his vantage point on the last remaining pile of hay in the universe that exists after PC has been destroyed:

...the rainbow-hued stream was everything that I could possibly think of or experience, everything that I could possibly be or not be, and I knew quite certainly that it was not something separate from myself. It was me, and I was it. I had always been it, and nothing else.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Nothing' replied Чапаев.' (308-9)

... этот радужным поток и был всем тем, что я только мог подумать или испытать, всем тем, что только могло быть или не быть, — и он, я это знал наверное, не был чем-то отличным от меня. Он был мною, а я был им. Я всегда был им, и больше ничем.

— Что это? спросил я?

— Ничего, — ответил Чапаев. (381)

One might question the purpose of a novel, whose plot leads to nothing, but nothing should not to be avoided; in fact nothing is the pinnacle of absolute truth. The process of enlightenment by which a person finds himself in the void is important, and so is the teaching that brought him there. In this case, Russia is the medium that the novel takes place in, and the symbols that resolve the true nature of Russia come from Russia itself. In terms of the hierarchy of symbols, Russia presents an array of symbols: some these represent emptiness and are the most pure, and others that are ingrained in form. These symbols interact with each other in the novel and produce interpretations from the novel that are not relevant to Buddhism. However, a complete interpretation of the novel sorts through the mass of symbols and draws forth the pure symbols as truth and destroys impure symbols using the empty dialectic. In this thesis, I have concentrated broadly on one instance of the empty dialectic, the dialectic between geography and history, but as I have shown, this is not the only possible dialectic. Taken together, geography

and history constitute every possible way of knowing. Through the empty dialectic, these concepts can be pulled apart to reveal that there is not a way of knowing. The only possible knowledge is “I don’t know.”

The scene that best captures this realization takes place at the end of PC. Chapaev’s division of weavers have grown restless and are torching all of the buildings in the camp. Meanwhile, Chapaev and Pyotr sneak away from the weavers through a trapdoor underneath one of the burning buildings. While they are crouched in the tunnel, Pyotr breaks out into irrepressible laughter. He gestures upwards to where the weavers are dashing about looking for them, and laughs, saying: “they don’t even think that they are weavers... They *know* it... (302)” Pyotr finds this funny because there is no way of knowing anything in *Buddha’s Little Finger* because geography and history have both been discredited. To compound this point, I want to introduce the scene where Pyotr, Chapaev and Anna are all standing along the bank of the URAL following the destruction of PC. Anna asks Chapaev if Pyotr has understood, in other words, she wants to find out whether Pyotr has achieved enlightened. Chapaev curtly replies “He didn’t understand a thing... It was just that the shooting started up back there...” (303). Pyotr attempts to argue the point, but then realizes “Chapaev was right, as always; there had not been anything that I could be said to have understood” (303). Chapaev’s comment is not a criticism of Pyotr, it is instead a veiled commendation because Pyotr does not understand anything which is paradoxically the height of understanding.

## BUDDHA'S LITTLE FINGER AS A MODERN MYTH

The empty dialectic partially resolves the issue of forms in the novel, but the archetype is also important to *Buddha's Little Finger* because it resolves the final meta-paradox between the novel and its reader. If the novel attempts to defeat other epistemologies and produce an understanding of the void, the task is doable within the novel. However, stepping out of the novel for a moment, it is clear that the novel is filled with symbols, places, and references to history that tie it up into a messy web of forms. The question then is what does it mean for a novel to reject all form when empirically the novel is a form and makes use of forms to produce its conclusion. The most satisfactory answer I have found is that myth breaks free of form or at least makes use of form to defeat the same. Furthermore, Pelevin has attempted to create a sort of modern myth in *Buddha's Little Finger*.

There is a point in the novel where Pyotr is talking to Anna about love and beauty. In this conversation, Pyotr references a quote by Edward Bernstein from his book, *The Preconditions of Socialism*. The original quote is "The final goal, no matter what it is, is nothing; the movement is everything."<sup>42</sup> Pyotr tries to quote him but forgets Bernstein's name: "I believe there was a certain opportunist by the name of Bernsteen who said that movement is all and the goal is nothing...Not Bernsteen, but Bernstein" (286). Pyotr takes Bernstein out of context, and repurposes a quote about socialism to serve Buddhism. Bernstein clearly meant that the goal of *socialism* is not so important, and that the journey towards it is the most important thing. Pelevin twists this around. The phrase "movement is everything" refers to movement towards the void or any sort of progress and understanding that comes with practicing Buddhism. In a different context, "the goal is nothing" might seem to indicate that the goal is unimportant, but to Pelevin

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<sup>42</sup>Rosa Luxemburg. "Reform or Revolution." Marxists.org. November 28, 2008. Accessed May 2, 2015. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/intro.htm#f1>.

it means something very different. In this case, “nothing” doesn’t devalue the importance of the goal because nothing is equivalent to nirvana. This emphasizes the importance of the journey that leads a person to enlightenment, in Zen Buddhism the journey involves meditating on *ko’ans*, but in *Buddha’s Little Finger*, it is Pyotr’s adventures with Chapaev.

At the beginning of this thesis, I addressed my understanding of the purpose of the novel, indicating that it is a progression towards enlightenment. Even though the goal is nothing, the progression must be important because otherwise no one would know how to get to that goal. Chapaev is a Buddhist guru, a Bodhisattva, who is enlightened but still lives in dreams to help others achieve the same understanding. Pyotr understands thanks to Chapaev and *Buddha’s Little Finger* is Pyotr’s documentation of that journey. Myth is a necessary form that those who seek understanding must use in order to abolish form. Just as symbols are a necessary form emanating from archetypes and Russian symbols are necessary forms for the empty dialectic, so are myths necessary to defeat the form of the novel’s narrative. *Buddha’s Little Finger* references myth frequently and operates within a fantasy narrative. Drawing out mythology from the novel highlights a relationship between archetypes and enlightenment. Archetypes are empty, they don’t have shape or form in the conventional sense, rather, they are suggestions of form which people interpret into dreams and myths.

The question of why does the book have a form is equivalent to the question of why does myth have form because they are attempting to do the same thing. Myth tries to unite the inner and outer world—uniting the void with the world of forms and in doing so dissolving the physicality of the self. This is the essence of Pyotr’s journey, he must discredit time and space as epistemological terms which makes time and space hollow concepts and causes the boundary between them to become abstract and malleable. In other words myth, allows an individual to see



“reality” from a different perspective, and in doing so glimpse the gap between the two and the falsehood of each. Mythmaking, the process of the journey, and myth itself all speak to the empty dialectic. Myth establishes an alternate dream, a space-time that is similar to that of the dreamers, but different and equally empty. The dreamer can analyze the myth and observe that it reduces to archetypes and in turn nothingness and then he can see the reflection of that nothingness in his own supposed reality. This is the point of myth, and this is the point of the novel in general – to generate opposition to reveal truth. Along the way, it may mock the Eurasianists, poke fun at the Soviets and lambaste the West, but to point to any one of these things and assert that it stands above the others as a substantive claim falls apart because Pelevin never imbues any of his apparent satire with substance. With *Buddha’s Little Finger*, Pelevin has created a modern myth, weaving paradoxes and obscure references into a massively complex story. The purpose of his myth is enlightenment; to provide a patient reader with the possibility of glimpsing the void by comparing extra-literary reality with *Buddha’s Little Finger*.

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