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INCARCERATION, ALIBI, ESCAPE? VIKTOR PELEVIN'S ART OF IRONY

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Abstract

Many discussions of Viktor Pelevin's oeuvre give a nod to his irony. This essay subjects the issue to closer scrutiny. I examine key ironic modes in Pelevin's oeuvre – from stable (Augustan) irony that exposes the follies of society and humans, to a less secure Romantic irony that stresses the limits of language vis-à-vis life and selfhood, and plays with paradoxes and self-refuting speech acts, to the highly unstable postmodern irony that destabilizes all kinds of discourses and envisions the subject as an effect of narration. Both irony and self-irony run through his works but it is the latter that, I argue, is pivotal to Pelevin's poetics. Pelevin constructs ironic mechanisms by which the narrative turns on itself, and directs ironic ire at himself as much as at external targets (everyday concepts and values). This multiplication of ironies, I hypothesize, suggests authorial attempts to escape his own bounds and is analogous to a key motif of Pelevin's works – his protagonists' struggle to make a break from their prison-like existences.

Keywords: Viktor Pelevin; Irony; Postmodernism

That Viktor Pelevin is a consummate ironist is apparent to critics and casual readers alike. Indeed, many scholarly treatments of his oeuvre as well as the multitudinous reviews of his books give a nod to his irony, which is occasionally characterized as gentle and inoffensive, but more often as sharp and all-consuming and, most frequently, in a kind of shortcut, as simply

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postmodern.¹ Naum Lejderman and Mark Lipoveckij express the common view when they call Pelevin's irony "distinct" and "tangible".²

But even the persistent characterizations of Pelevin as an ironist tend to be delivered in passing, and so this essay will subject the issue to closer scrutiny – a task both obvious and challenging with an author notorious for the proliferation of tricks in his texts, the complexity of his narratives, and the elusiveness of their meaning. I will examine key ironic modes in Pelevin's oeuvre, showing that his ironies are multi-faceted, ranging from the rhetorical to the situational, from stable to unstable, from the micro-level to the macro-level. While both irony and self-irony run through Pelevin's works, it is the latter that, I argue, is pivotal to his poetics.

My conception of irony relies on its modern, postromantic meaning. It is more than a rhetorical device by which what is said is undercut by what is implied; more broadly, it must be understood as the creation of an enigmatic personality or text, and a capacity to maintain a distance from any particular definition or context.³ By contrast, self-irony hinges on the inability to disengage from the world even as one puts its values to question.⁴ As it broadens from a local trope to a core characteristic of lives, selves, and texts under the aegis of Romanticism, irony takes on several interrelated corollaries. It inhabits issues of the subject, language, and the paradox.⁵ For one thing, the concept of Romantic irony is tied to the problem of the subject.⁶ It begets itself as an inescapable condition of consciousness that is unable to reach beyond itself (solipsism) and that emphasizes continual self-revision. In the deployment of Romantic irony, the author switches between contradictory viewpoints throughout the text, and emphasizes a refusal to succumb to the temptation of closure.⁷ Second, the Romantic agent uses language ironically,⁸ always aware that life and selfhood exceed their verbal manifestations.⁸ Third, rather than merely asserting both "a" and "not a", the ironist also deploys logically contradictory speech acts such as the claim that there is no such thing as truth or that one does not mean to speak.⁹ If irony was initially theorized by the Romantics, its modern version reaches its apogee in post-modernism, where it inheres in the use of language itself, always quoted and "other", where the very self is seen as produced by language.¹⁰

Pelevin uses a variety of strategies, from stable Augustan irony that exposes the follies of society and humans, to a less secure Romantic irony that stresses the limits of language vis-à-vis life and selfhood, and plays with paradoxes and self-refuting speech acts, to the highly unstable postmodern irony that destabilizes all kinds of discourses and envisions the subject as an effect of narration. Pelevin's use of irony is varied and pervasive, but its prominence always points to the importance of self-irony.¹¹ Perceiving existence as a cosmic joke, he recognizes himself to be the foremost object of that joke. He constructs ironic mechanisms by which the narrative turns on itself and tosses off contradictions and paradoxes that evade resolution: cases of critical

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