THE ENIGMA OF THE MOON IN 'POVEST' NEPOGAŠENNOJ LUNY' 1

ROBERT W. VAAGAN

Context and Subtext

The novella 'Povest' nepogašennoj luny' by Boris Pil'jak (1894-1938) 2 has always been viewed as an incrimination of Stalin for the death of Frunze, the popular People's Commissar for the Army and Navy. 3 It was immediately suppressed on appearing in Novyj mir in May 1926 4 and was only republished in the USSR in 1987. 5 Yet as noted by Edwards, it is far more than a commentary on Frunze's death. 6 Russian youths are now taught that it also reveals the sinister ruthlessness of Bolshevism. 7 Elsewhere I have offered a contextual reading of the novella based on the politics and literary issues of the 1920s. 8 In the present article I argue that the novella's full artistic richness and meaning only emerge with the subtext. Of particular interest is the leitmotif of the moon which, occurring 21 times in all, remains an enigma to many. 9

The novella had been completed by early January 1926. In late January Pil'jak set out on a six-month travel to China and Japan and was absent from Moscow on its publication in May. Almost the entire edition was impounded by the OGPU and a new, expurgated May issue without Pil'jak's contribution was printed. 10 Yet enough copies of the first edition were in circulation to set in motion further action. In a foreword dated 28 January 1926 Pil'jak rejected any connection between the story and the death of Frunze. During interrogation by the NKVD in 1937-1938 Pil'jak attributed this improbable disclaimer to Polonskij, co-editor 1926-1931 of...
Novyj mir. The novella also carried a dedication: "Voronskomu družeski." Elsewhere I have shown that Pil'njak had all reason to be grateful to the editor and literary critic Voronskij who in 1922 had advanced Pil'njak's career by portraying him as the first in a series of literary portraits in the new and influential journal Krasnaja nov'. Always a nuisance to the party, especially after the publication in Berlin of his novella 'Krasnoe derevo' (1929), the flamboyant Pil'njak, who married three times, nonetheless enjoyed unique privileges until 1932, including extensive travelling abroad. His good connections could not, though, prevent his arrest in October 1937. As the NKVD interrogation protocols confirm, 'Povest' nepogašennoj luny' was cited against him and he was shot in April 1938.

Compositional Aspects

Among the many compositional aspects worth commenting on I shall limit the presentation to the structure and plot, the narrative perspective and the use of contrasts as well as some comments on the chronology, location and protagonists.

The tale is structured into 4 numbered chapters, of which only one – the third – carries a title: 'Smert' Gavrilova'. Chapter 4 is termed simply 'Glava poslednjaja'. In the Novyj mir edition chapter 1 consists of 5½ pages, chapter 2 of 11½ pages, chapter 3 of 10 pages and the last chapter of less than one page; the full text runs to 28 pages. Edwards views it as a novella, which the brevity, rigid economy of style, the concentration in time, action and scope as well as the limited character gallery all justify. That the "Povest" of the title nonetheless has been translated both as the "Story" and – which is more usual – the "Tale" only testifies to the generic and terminological complexities of the Russian short form.

To briefly recapitulate the plot, in chapter I we meet Commander Nikolaj Ivanovič Gavrilov, hero of the Civil War, and we learn about his ulcer of the stomach. He has been hastily summoned from the sunny Caucasus for an operation he himself deems unnecessary. Demonstrating the technique of defamiliarization, Pil'njak lets Gavrilov arrive in a hostile town in the cold north, with only one friend to meet him, the party official Aleksandr Popov. Popov has been abandoned by his wife and been left alone with his two-year old daughter Nataša. Chapter 1 is the only chapter in which the moon is not mentioned.

In chapter 2 Gavrilov is brought to House No. 1 for an audience with the "Negorbiaščijja čelovek" ("Unbending Man"). His name and identity remain undisclosed, and he has already ordered the operation to take place. Gavrilov, being a disciplined Bolshevik, accepts this ominous fait accompli. Anticipating the outcome, he writes three last letters, to be opened after his
death. To calm his nerves, Gavrilov takes Popov on a frenzied car drive out of town. We then meet the medical professors Anatoliy Koz'mič Lozovskij, 35 years old, and his senior, Pavel Ivanovič Kokosov. In chapter 2 the moon makes 6 appearances, which I shall return to.

In chapter 3 the two medical professors prepare for the operation. As personalities they are opposites. Kokosov is a gentleman exponent of tradition, honour and the Hippocratic oath. He drinks tea and kisses his wife's hand and rejects an offer to be picked up by a limousine sent from House No. 1. By contrast the wine- and coffee-consuming Lozovskij kisses the shoulder of his mistress and gladly accepts the offer to be driven by a limousine from House No. 1. Yet it is he who has been elected to operate on Gavrilov, with his senior Kokosov to assist him. For some unexplained reason Lozovskij telephones House No. 1 and is ordered to appear immediately after the operation to make a report. In the meantime Gavrilov is being prepared for surgery. Lozovskij asks his senior Kokosov to commence the operation. The anesthesia does not have the desired effect and Lozovskij administers what turns out to be a fatal overdose of chloroform. Only after almost one hour does the patient lose consciousness and the operation can start. It quickly transpires that the ulcer has healed, and the operation has been futile. Gavrilov stops breathing and resuscitation fails. Hurried telephone calls precede the arrival of a detachment of Red Guards and Lozovskij is severely reprimanded at House No. 1. The "Negorbjaščijja čelovek", having alerted the other two members of the leading trojka, arrives at the deathbed of Gavrilov, ostensibly remorseful. Replicating Gavrilov's mad car drive, the "Negorbjaščijja čelovek" orders the car driven at full speed out of town. In chapter 3 the moon appears eight times, which I shall comment on later.

In the final chapter after the burial Popov is alone with his daughter and reads Gavrilov's letter, in which he proposes that Popov marry his widow. Nataša attempts to blow at the moon, to extinguish it, just as she in chapter 2 had attempted to blow out a match in Gavrilov's hand when he lit his pipe. The full moon, though tired of hurrying, remains unextinguished from the point of view of the two-year-old Nataša. The text does not state that her father was watching her doing this although he may well have been doing so. The moon appears no less than six times in the very brief and concluding chapter, which indicates a climax in its use as a leitmotif. Possibly we may here find a clue to the symbol of the moon in the novella.

In 'Povest' nepogašennoy luny' third-person omniscient narration is employed, and the narrator's identity is not divulged. The text is not autobiographical if we accept Lejeune's argument that a prerequisite for an autobiographical account is that author, narrator and principal character are identical. Still, as in many of Pil'njak's texts some autobiographical elements are felt. Thus the two-year-old Nataša, like the sympathetic heroine Natal'ja Ordynina in Golyj god, carries the name of Pil'njak's first child, his daughter...
Natal'ja (Nataša) born in 1918. Our confidence in a reliable narrator, in Culler's terminology, is crucial since the text – despite the improbable foreword – purports to be realistic and even documentary as far as plot and character portrayal are concerned. Within a realistic framework the most reliable and probable narrator would be Popov who may have been modelled on Voronskij. Assuming he did see his daughter attempting to extinguish the moon he could have been so taken by this scene following his close friend's death that he as narrator inserted into his third-person narrative the moon as a leitmotif, focalizing on it through the eyes of Nataša. Such a reading would explain why the 21 appearances of the moon are the only non-realistic elements in the text. As Culler has reminded us, the functions of focalizer and narrator need not be identical, and focalizing events through the eyes of a child can be a very effective narrative technique. Less convincing in my view is the possibility that the narrator could be Nataša herself in later life, reminiscing and fusing political rumours with her father's account. This would not correspond with the novella's final "Moskva, na Povarskoj, 9 janv. 1926", which indicates that the narrative was completed soon after Gavrilov's death.

Pil'njak relies on structural and stylistic contrasts on several levels: the contrasts between the sunny south versus the cold north; the morally upright Kokosov versus the opportunist Lozovskij; the white-dressed medical staff and white hospital walls versus the red blood of the operation wound; the noisy factory sirens versus the calm of Gavrilov's dead body; the rigid "Negorbaščijsja čelovek" versus the delicate Nataša etc. If we turn more explicitly to some elements bearing on the realism of the story we see that the chronology is straightforwardly linear. Following a 24-hour cycle it begins and terminates in the early morning in late autumn. The events described are stretched over a couple of days at most. This concentrated time span means that the moon, which is twice described as being full, remains full throughout. No year is stated but as shown by Reck, several newspaper insertions date the story to 1925. The location is an unnamed town in the north, identified by Browning as Moscow. While this may well be correct the text does not provide any specific identification. We are told, though, that the unnamed town hosts House No. 1 at the juncture of the two main streets, and that a river runs nearby.

Apart from Gavrilov, Popov, Nataša, the "Negorbaščijsja čelovek", Kokosov and Lozovskij, the characters include peripheral figures like Kokosov's wife and Lozovskij's mistress, and several military and medical attendants. Maguire has justifiably criticized Pil'njak's protagonists in general for insufficient depth. Here the characters are at least given realistic though sketchy backgrounds. Thus Popov and Gavrilov grew up at Orechovo-Zuevo on the river Kljaz'ma near the town of Pokrov, which are all authentic names. The dating, location and the verisimilitude of the protagonists, including the
collage of credible journalistic news items, all give credence to the realistic and even documentary qualities of the text. This sets it apart from much of Pil’njak’s other short prose, e.g. the semi-surrealist ‘Zenich vo polunoći’ (1926) written only half a year earlier.\textsuperscript{26} The novella is thus a departure from the mainstream of Pil’njak’s work\textsuperscript{27} and is seen by Golubkov as an attempt by Pil’njak to abandon his ordinary impressionism.\textsuperscript{28} There can be little doubt Pil’njak was commenting on Frunze’s death, as realistically as he could under the circumstances. Not only was the novella completed just nine weeks after Frunze’s death on 30 October 1925, but as shown convincingly by Reck, the parallels between Gavrilov/Frunze and the “Ngorbjaščija čelovek”/Stalin are too many and evident to be ignored.\textsuperscript{29} Volkogonov cites sources according to which Stalin and Mikojan went to the hospital and insisted that Professor Rozanov operate on Frunze. On balance, though, Volkogonov found that the evidence of Stalin’s wilful murder of Frunze was not conclusive.\textsuperscript{30} It follows from what has been said that the entire text, including the role of the narrator, can be interpreted within the parameters of realism. The only violation of the realistic-contextual paradigm is the animated moon, occurring 21 times. If we accept Edwards’ view that Pil’njak’s work, like Zamjatin’s and Bulgakov’s, is often marked by the irrationality of Dostoevskij,\textsuperscript{31} we may find an answer to the enigma of the moon in the subtext.

\emph{Subtextual Readings} 

In the West ‘Povest’ nepogašennoj luny’ has been interpreted not only politically but also symbolically.\textsuperscript{32} In Browning’s estimate the novella was Pil’njak’s “perhaps aesthetically most successful brief treatment of the implacable antagonism between civilization (The City) and nature (the moon)”.\textsuperscript{33} More recently Fal’čikov has interpreted it as a conflict between individual personality and the power of the state, between emotional spontaneity and an awareness of one’s insignificance in the historical process.\textsuperscript{34} In the wake of its first republication in the USSR in 1987,\textsuperscript{35} Soviet scholars for the first time had an opportunity to openly discuss it. Early contextual and politicized interpretations soon gave way to subtextual readings, as if taking note of Maguire’s contention that “all Pil’njak’s works are allegorical”.\textsuperscript{36} While mostly concerned with the text’s political aspects Latynina states that the story is fundamentally about how fear can compel someone (Lozovskij) to take part in a crime.\textsuperscript{37} Later Šajtanov, while being preoccupied with politics, ventured into the subtext and viewed the moon as a metaphor connecting history and nature.\textsuperscript{38} The first specifically Russian subtextual reading appeared in 1993. Krjučkov, asserting that the central metaphor of the moon remained an enig-
ma, stated that no one had given an account of the last scene where Nataša attempts to extinguish the moon. He disagreed with those who focussed on the negative connotations of the moon in the story, claiming that this only applied to the last sentence of the text. Instead he argued that all references to the moon prior to the last sentence are positive. The story illustrated in his view the contrast between two types of movement: that of nature and that of history. While Krjučkov noted that the often fragmentary nature of Pil’njak’s texts excludes a unitary conceptualization, he argued that this did not apply to ‘Povest’ nepogašennyj luni’: Under the gaze of man the moon becomes a hiding, frozen lump of ice, and little Nataša symbolizes future mankind who attempts to extinguish it. Nature and man are therefore irreconcilable due to man’s fault. The moon revenges itself for man’s forcible intrusion upon its natural course. And therefore it was “soveršeno ponjatno, čto etimy gudkami voet gorodskaja duša, zamorožennaja nyne lunoju”.39 Despite his plausible reading Krjučkov did not comment on Pil’njak’s use of animation and personification to bring the moon to life, a technique I have elsewhere demonstrated was very successfully used by Boris Pasternak in Doktor Živago.40

The Enigma of the Moon

Seen in the context of Pil’njak’s primitivism and e.g. his use of meteorological motifs noted by Lewis,41 his attraction to the moon is not surprising. The appearance of the moon had fascinated Pil’njak long before he wrote ‘Povest’ nepogašennyj luni’. In ‘Snega’ (1916) we find e.g. “Nad bezmolvnymi poljami prochodila luna”, “luna pljasala” and “luna prygala naverchu v oblakach”.42 An entry in his diary on 17 September 1923 informs us that: “Večer byl neobyknovennno choroš, luna svetila […] Domoj vernulis’ kogda už pošlednja luna.”43

But the moon as seen in the northern hemisphere had carried mostly negative connotations with heartlessness, coldness and even death in Pil’njak’s early short stories ‘Celaja Žizni’ (1916), ‘Smertel’noe manit’ (1918), ‘Zavoloč’е’ (1925), ‘Neroždenaja povest’ (1925), and also in Golyj god (1921). Yet a change took place around 1925, the year before Pil’njak set out on his first visit to the southern hemisphere. In particular two stories which were first published in 1925 anticipated a new and more favourable conception of the moon which was expanded further in ‘Povest’ nepogašennyj luni’. These were ‘Neroždenaja povest’ and ‘Mat’ syra-zemlja’. In the former, which Pil’njak republished the same year under the title ‘O luni’, he stated that he could not find words to describe the moon.44 In ‘Mat’ syrzemlja’ we find the first notion of an unextinguished or unextinguishable moon: “[…] gde lunu nikogda i nikak ne potušiš.”45 In this story I agree with
Browning that the negative connotations of the moon had been replaced by positive associations, linking the moon (and earth) with images of life's natural fluctuations. 46

Pil'njak prepared for his first travel to the Far East in late January 1926 by studying ancient cultural traditions and art, 47 possibly also the lunar calendar. In many societies the appearance of the full moon has been considered an occasion for celebration, the waning moon as a time for anxiety, and the eclipse of the moon as a cause for dread. 48 Moving through its phases of 29½ days, equal to 354 days a year, the lunar calendar provided a basis for the time reckoners in many ancient cultures before eventually being supplanted by the 11-day longer solar year calendar. 49 It is not coincidental that in Russian "mesjac" signifies both month and moon. Neither can it be a coincidence that it is the full moon, not the waning or the eclipse of the moon, that Pil'njak describes in 'Povest' nepogashennoj luny'.

As already noted, the symbol of the moon appears 21 times in 'Povest' nepogashennoj luny', making it effectively a leitmotif. The moon is referred to consistently as "luna", not "mesjac", and it is not conceived metaphorically, e.g. as a "crustal'nyj serp" ('Smeritel'noe manit'). 50 The moon's prominence is not only reflected in the title, but by the fact that it is also the final word in the final chapter, a feature repeated in the novella 'Kitajskij dnevnik' (1927). Below I have de-contextualized all 21 appearances of the moon. The numbers in brackets refer to the relevant page in Novyj mir, May 1926:

Title
1) Повесть непогашенной луны (5)

Chapter 2
2-4) [...] над домами поднялась ненужная городу луна; облака или
очень поспешно, и казалось, что луна испугана, торопится, бе
жит, прыгает, чтобы куда-то поспеть, куда-то не опоздать, беляя
луна в синих облаках и в черных провалах неба. (18)
5) Над городом шла луна. (18)
6) Луна спешила над городом. (19)
7) На запасных путях луна скользила по рельсам. (20)

Chapter 3
8) [...] там на горизонте умирала за снегами в синей мгле синяя лю
на. (26)
9) В этот час по небу ползли облака, и за ними торопилась полная,
уставшая торопиться луна. (31)
10) Улицы качались под луной в неподвижной пустыне ночи, вместе
с Лозовским. (31)
11) В облаках торопилась, суматошилась луна [...]. (31)
12) [...] неподвижными стали [...] — только луна за облаками, да эта машина, да человек [...]. (32)
13) [...] погна за облаками луну (32)
14) [...] и над ним спешила луна (32)
15) От луны в небе — в этот час — осталась мало заметная, тающая ледяная глышка. (32)

Chapter 4

16) В окно лезла белая луна, уставшая спеши́ть. (33)

17-21) [...] она надувала щеки, трубкой складывала губы, смотрела на луну, целилась в луну, дула в нее. [...] "Я хочу погасить луну", — ответила Наташа. Полная луна купчихой плыла за облаками, уставала торопиться. [...] Было совершенно понятно, что этими гулками веет городская душа, замороженная нынче луной. (33)

We note that the moon is unextinguished, it rose, is afraid, it hurries, runs, jumps, tries to be on time/not be late, went, crept, died, hurried, was fatigued, hurried, became frantic, was chased behind clouds, hid itself like a merchant’s wife, crept, was tired of hurrying, crept, was tired of hurrying and finally freezes the city soul. While the moon thus comes to life there are only two anthropomorphisms proper: 11) “V oblakach toropilas’, sumatošilas’ luna” and 20) “Polnaja luna kupčichojo plynja za oblakami”. The full moon occurs twice, in 20) as just shown, and in 9) “V ýot čas po nebu potzli oblaka, i za nimi toropilas’ polnaja, ustajušaja toropit’sja luna”. If we at this point call to mind Popov as narrator and Nataša as focalizer, we can see how the narrative allows us as readers to see the full moon, agitated and stressed, and how it subtextually punishes man’s transgressions by freezing the city soul, thus prevailing in the end. The moon expands from a contextual leitmotif into becoming, through the subtext, one of the main characters of the story, thereby justifying its prominence in the novella’s title. Although the two anthropomorphisms noted infuse the moon with certain human qualities, its other 19 appearances are only animations, not personifications. Nonhuman major characters were nothing new to Pil’njak who in e.g. ‘Mat’ syrazemlija’ (1925) had made the wolf pup Nikita a protagonist. Pil’njak may also through this novella have influencend Sergej Klyčkov’s folkloristic novel Čertuchinskij balakir’ (1926), in which the moon is one of the principal characters.

Viewing the moon as one of the main characters in ‘Povest’ nepogašennoy luny’ would seem to be consistent with Pil’njak’s narrative technique and with what Alberg Jensen has termed “nature as code” in Pil’njak’s oeuvre. Pil’njak’s preoccupation with the moon did not cease with ‘Povest’ nepogašennoy luny’. On returning from Japan in August 1926 one of the first
short stories he wrote was ‘Olenij gorod Nara’ where the moon is favourably conceptualized in the very first lines:

И те вечера в Наре были очень лунны.33

Conclusion

‘Povest’ nepogašenoj luny’ has been interpreted both in the West and in Russia first and foremost within a realistic-contextual paradigm. Such readings have considerable scope, also in terms of explaining the role of the narrator. To explain the leitmotif of the moon, however, we need to turn to subtextual readings. While these have long been commonplace in the West, they have only appeared during the 1990s in Russia. Rather than contradict each other, contextual and subtextual readings can prove mutually enriching. I have argued that the full artistic richness and meaning of the novella only emerge with the subtext. The moon rises from the subtext to become one of the principal characters in the novella. This transformation is best understood if we view Popov as narrator and Nataša as focalizer. By thus merging context and subtext, we realize as readers that the moon is no longer an enigma in the novella.

NOTES

1 This article is a revised version of a lecture given on 18 June 1999 at The University of Oslo, Faculty of Arts, in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree doctor philosophae.
4 Novij mir, 1926, No. 5, pp. 5-33.
5 Znamja, 1987, No.12, pp. 105-128.
7 V.M. Akimov, Sto let russkoj literatury. Ot serebrjanogo veka do nasich dnej (Posobie dlja star'seklassnikov i postupaju'stich v vuzy), Sankt-Peterburg, 1995, pp. 282-283.
9 V.P. Krju'ckov, 'Pochemu luna 'nepoga'sennaja'' (O simvolike 'Povesti nepoga'sennoj luny' B. Pil'njaka), Russkaja literatura, 1993, No. 3, pp. 121-127. A recent illustration that the moon remains an enigma is provided e.g. by M. Fal'čikov, 'Boris Pil'njak glazami zapadnogo slavista', in: Po materialam nau'cenoj konferencii, posvyashchennoj 100-leiju so da'ja ro'deniya pisatelja, Moskva, 1995, pp. 33-41. Here Fal'čikov merely noted the moon's "ambiguous shape" (p. 35) without further comment.
14 B. Pil'njak, Povest' nepoga'sennoj luny, Letchworth 1971, runs to 55 pages.
15 Edwards, op. cit., p. 87.
19 Browning, op. cit., p. 12.
21 Boris Pil'njak. Rasplesnutoe vrenja. Rasskazy, povesti, romany, Moskva, 1990, p. 606. This would make Voronskij's rejection of the dedication all the more understandable. Being a very close friend of Frunze, Voronskij rejected the dedication since it suggested he had been Pil'njak's source of information. Being also cast as the narrator could have proven doubly incriminating and damaging to his career, cf. Vaagan, op. cit., 2000, pp. 107ff.
22 Culler, op. cit., pp. 89-90.
The Enigma of the Moon in ‘Povest’ nepogašennoj luny’

24 Browning, op. cit., p. 152.
27 Fal’čikov, op. cit., p. 35.
31 Edwards, op. cit., pp. 87ff.
32 There is a consensus within the field of pil’njakovedenie that Christianity was not part of Pil’njak’s worldview, although he on occasion resorted to religious imagery, cf. Browning, op. cit., pp. 9, 102. The possibility of a Christological reading of ‘Povest’ nepogašennoj luny’ has been suggested by Edwards, op. cit., pp. 129-131.
33 Browning, op. cit., p. 152.
34 Fal’čikov, op. cit., p. 35.
36 Maguire, op. cit., p. 115.
38 Šajtanov, op. cit., pp. 35-72.
41 K.B. Lewis, ‘The Representation of Social Space in The Novel: Manhattan Transfer, Naked Year and Berlin Alexanderplatz’ (Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Comparative Literature in the Graduate College of the University of Iowa, 1976), pp. 71-72.
43 B. Pil’njak, Romany, Moskva, 1990, p. 32.
46 Browning, op. cit., p. 218.


53. Andronikašvili-Pil'jnak, op. cit., p. 239.