

DOI: 10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-3-472-481

EDN: DZLVNQ

UDC 82-192

Research article / Научная статья

## Soviet as personal: about Mikhail Elizarov's song "Mr. Main Wind"

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**Abstract.** The article represents an interpretation of M. Elizarov's song "Mr. Main Wind". It is shown that the Soviet cultural code forms a 'double' lyrical and historical 'narrative' of this song. On a superficial level, the text presents the plot of collapse of the USSR; on a deep level, the historical narrative encodes the personal drama of the lyrical subject. A linguistic analysis of deictic structure of the song made it possible to determine mechanisms of formation of this plot. It was shown that the deictic 'configuration' identified in the analyzed song is also present in other poetic texts of Elizarov, that allows us to talk about its plot-generating potential. It has been proven that the identification of personal catastrophe and historical drama turns out to be the 'topos' of Elizarov's poetics as a whole. The interference of these lines at the psychological level is apparently ensured by a common emotional field of experience, within which both events are endowed with high emotional and personal significance. This leads to the complexity of the interaction between the spheres of the personal and public: the 'floating' point of reception leads to difficulty of determining the dominant line of meaning, because the personal is 'hidden' in the public, and the public is 'encrypted' by the personal. All this makes it possible to significantly correct the current idea of Elizarov's work as postmodern and to discover other sources of his creative method related to the poetics of Mayakovsky.

**Keywords:** Soviet cultural code, Mikhail Elizarov, song poetry, literary tradition

**Acknowledgements and Funding.** The study was supported by a grant from the Russian Science Foundation No. 23-28-00995, <https://rscf.ru/project/23-28-00995/>.

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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**Article history:** submitted February 10, 2024; revised May 20, 2024; accepted: June 20, 2024.

**For citation:** Temirshina, O.R. (2024). Soviet as personal: About Mikhail Elizarov's song "Mr. Main Wind". *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 29(3), 472–481. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-3-472-481>

## Советское как личное: о песне Михаила Елизарова «Господин Главный Ветер»

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**Аннотация.** В статье дается интерпретация песни М. Елизарова «Господин Главный Ветер». Показано, что советский культурный код формирует «двойной» лирико-исторический «нарратив» этой песни. Так, на поверхностном уровне в тексте представлен сюжет распада СССР, а на глубинном уровне исторический нарратив кодирует личную драму лирического субъекта. Определить механизмы формирования этого сюжета позволил лингвистический анализ дейктической структуры песни. Было показано, что выявленная в анализируемой песне дейктическая «конфигурация» присутствует и в других поэтических текстах Елизарова, а это позволяет говорить о ее сюжетогенном потенциале. Доказано, что отождествление личной катастрофы и исторической драмы оказывается «топосом» елизаровской поэтики в целом. Интерференцию этих линий на психологическом уровне, по-видимому, обеспечивает общее эмоциональное поле переживания, в рамках которого оба события наделяются высокой эмоционально-личностной значимостью. Отсюда проистекает сложность взаимодействия сфер личного и общественного: «плавающая» точка рецепции приводит к трудности определения доминирующей смысловой линии, ибо личное «прячется» в общественном, а общественное «зашифровывается» личным. Все это позволяет существенно скорректировать бытующее представление о принадлежности творчества Елизарова к постмодернизму и обнаружить иные истоки его творческого метода, связанные с поэтикой Маяковского.

**Ключевые слова:** советский культурный код, Михаил Елизаров, песенная поэзия, литературная традиция

**Благодарности и финансирование.** Исследование выполнено при поддержке гранта Российского научного фонда № 23-28-00995, <https://rscf.ru/project/23-28-00995/>.

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**История статьи:** поступила в редакцию 10 февраля 2024 г.; отрецензирована 20 мая 2024 г.; принята к публикации 20 июня 2024 г.

**Для цитирования:** *Темиршина О.Р.* Советское как личное: о песне Михаила Елизарова «Господин Главный Ветер» // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2024. Т. 29. № 3. С. 472–481. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-3-472-481>

## Introduction

M.Yu. Elizarov, a writer, critic, and poet-musician, stands out as one of the key figures in the contemporary literary scene. Elizarov is primarily known for his epic works, which literary scholars interpret within a wide artistic spectrum ranging from “dirty realism” (Benevolenskaya, 2004, p. 9) to conceptualism and postmodernism (Merkushov, 2013, p. 227–232).

Due to its stylistic marginality, Elizarov’s song lyrics have been the subject of study far less frequently than his prose works. Nevertheless, as noted by U.S. Kuznetsova, they represent a fascinating “intertextual, stylistic, and genre experiment” (Kuznetsova, 2022, p. 46). Thus, in Elizarov’s songs, intriguing cases of ‘semantic repackaging’ are discovered, wherein the song text requires decryption due to the collision of layers that are incompatible from a content perspective. This is precisely the structure of the song “Mister Main Wind” (written in 2023), the semantic organization of which has become the subject of the article.

## Two plots

The song “Mister Main Wind” presents a lyrical monologue that peculiarly intertwines themes of love and historical ideology, which prompts interpretations of the song either as a narrative of unrequited love or as a historical account of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The intriguing aspect lies in the lively reader reception of this song within Elizarov’s community in VKontakte social network, where listeners present arguments in favor of both interpretations. Indeed, thematically, the text itself is structured in a way that abundantly provides ‘evidence’ for both the historical and lyrical concepts.

**Historical plot.** From the images and motifs associated with the Soviet past, we can construct a plot narrating the demise of the USSR. The song begins with the acknowledgment of defeat in war (“troops are retreating”), followed by the appearance of Yu.B. Levitan’s image – the announcer recounts that plans have been thwarted (“our tender plan has been ruined”) and the country is on the brink of collapse (“The artillery is smashed to pieces, / We crawl through recent rear areas...” (Elizarov, 2023a)).

The culmination of the country’s demise is presented in the third verse, where another announcer – I.L. Kirillov – reports on Brezhnev’s death, stating: “The All-Union with columns hall, / Even the announcer Kirillov

said, <...> This is Brezhnev rising up...” (Ibid.). This historical fact is accurate: Kirillov indeed commented on Brezhnev’s funeral. Apparently, this situation became the reminiscent source of the song, as seen from Kirillov’s comments: “The coffin with the body of Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev is carried out of the Column Hall...”<sup>1</sup>.

Brezhnev’s death marked the beginning of the country’s decay. That’s why in the final part of the song, Levitan and Kirillov give way to Malakhov, whose image is meant to symbolize the new cynical bourgeois civilization, where commercial and monetary relationships are paramount. For instance: “Malakhov told me as an expert, / Handing over an envelope with money...” (Elizarov, 2023a).

This interpretation of the text (the country’s transition from socialism to capitalism) seems convincing at first glance. However, its weakness lies in the fact that there are elements in the song that do not fit into this plot. The images and motifs in question are connected to the personal and lyrical line. Interestingly, they do not form a narrative structure (unlike motifs related to the historical theme), but somehow complicate the historical narrative itself: they ‘disrupt’ it, making it non-self-identical.

**Love storyline.** Semantic discrepancies arise already in the first verse of the song. The image of retreating troops, which from a historical perspective could be interpreted as a metaphor for the defeat of the Soviet Union, is endowed with the predicate “my” (“And my troops are retreating” (Ibid.)), immediately casting doubt on the interpretation of the unfolding plot as purely historical-political. If the focus were solely on the historical event, one would expect the pronoun “our” (compare “our troops are retreating”). However, the pronoun “my” used by the author seems to *internalize*<sup>2</sup> the external situation, translating it into *an internal psychological plane*.

The personal dimension of the song is also tied to the key image of the text – the unnamed female character, appearing in five out of six verses. Levitan and Kirillov talk about a certain woman, the lyrical subject of the song addresses her, and even Brezhnev dies because of her. This image is interpreted negatively, in derogatory terms: she is called “bitch”, “scum”, and so on.

The motive of emotional resistance, expressed through the image of “my troops”, together with the negative female image, clearly points to a love-lyrical line in the song. In the final verse – and this is a strong stance of the text! – the motif of undivided love is explicitly expressed, compare: “So that the model of my drama / Would be included in the anthology / Of the ‘Club of Broken Hearts’” (Ibid.).

<sup>1</sup> Funeral of Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev – listen to the unique voice of Igor Kirillov. (In Russ.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9Tibkxnovw>

<sup>2</sup> Here and elsewhere, italics is mine. – O.T.

The thematic elements listed do not fit into the historical plot outlined above (and indeed, why do Levitan and Kirillov speak of the hero's beloved, while Brezhnev – even dies because of her?). In connection with this, the following questions arise: how are the love and historical lines of the text connected, and can one of them be considered dominant? Answering these questions and delving into the inner world of the analyzed song will help analyze the deictic organization of the text.

### **System of images and deictic organization of the text**

For a simple lyrical monologue, the song contains too many characters (this, incidentally, is a characteristic feature of Elizarov's lyrics – influenced by his 'epic training'). These characters can be divided into three types, each of which is associated, firstly, with a set of homogeneous themes, and secondly, with a specific personal pronoun indicating the involvement of a particular character in the communicative situation.

The **first type** includes the historical characters of the song, who are denoted by third person singular pronouns (*he-deixis*). The historical-political plot discussed above is linked to the images of Levitan, Kirillov, Brezhnev, and Malakhov. These characters are the heroes of the narrative led by the lyrical subject. Accordingly, as elements of the narrative, they are not included in the lyrical communicative situation and are denoted by third person pronouns, which are always functionally separate "from indicating the participants of the speech act" (Bondarko, 2002, p. 570). For example, one of the contexts: "It was Brezhnev who rose up high, / He couldn't survive..." (Elizarov, 2023a).

The **second type** is represented by the lyrical subject, marked by the pronoun "I" (*I-deixis*). It is noteworthy that the register "I" is opposed to the register "he", as in: "but he is not I and the problem is solely mine" (Ibid.). Here, the lyrical subject is contrasted with Kirillov, leading to a 'separation' of the lyrical voice from the historical and ideological plane, and "my problem" (like "my troops"!) may indicate the translation of the historical conflict into a psychological, lyrical mode. However, the main feature of the "I-deixis" lies in the fact that "I" is always included in communication.

The **third type** is associated with the Mister Main Wind and the unnamed female character (*you-deixis*). Thus, the lyrical subject of the song, denoted by "I", is immediately associated with two communicative situations, related to the two specified addressees. If the first addressee is fully designated (it is to him that the lyrical subject refers in the refrains, naming him "Mister Main Wind"), then the female character remains as if empty, she is not named, but is referred to through the pronoun "you".

It seems that the main ‘participant’ in the modeled lyrical communicative situation is indeed this unnamed female character, which is confirmed by two facts.

Firstly, the image of the female addressee, denoted by the pronoun “you” and its forms, appears in four out of six verses of the song. Interestingly, there is a symmetry here – the pronoun “you” is absent in the *first* and *last* verses.

Secondly, this addressee is simultaneously associated with two planes: the historical (related to real figures of the era) and the lyrical (implying the personal point of view of the subject). Levitan, Kirillov and Malakhov speak *of her*, and the lyrical subject addresses *her*. As a result, a complex narrative structure is built: the hero tells us about Levitan, and Levitan tells about her, and the hero also tells about all this – to her.

Therefore, the female character acts both as a communicative instance and as an object of narration. Thus, *she* becomes a kind of center where the communicative intentions of the lyrical subject, linked to the theme of love, and Levitan and his *comrades*, associated with the political register, converge. In this sense, it is the female character that combines the historical and lyrical-psychological layers into a unified construct: by intruding into the foreign historical-political plane, this character as if ‘asserts’ the dominance of the lyrical theme.

This situation diminishes the significance of the Soviet plot, but does not nullify it, as it does not explain all the semantic oddities of the song. So, if the central theme of the song is a love drama, what role does the Soviet code play in it, and why does love disappointment lead to Brezhnev’s death?

### What is the connection?

If we look at the analyzed song in a broader artistic and biographical context, the connection between the spheres of lyrics and history becomes clear.

The writer has repeatedly declared his love for the Soviet past. “The meta-physical Soviet Union”, says Elizarov, “was a fantastically whole country. A perfect country. The tragedy is that it did not materialize”<sup>3</sup>. Also, “For me, the Motherland is the Soviet Union”<sup>4</sup>. “All the problems we face”, the writer believes, “are the result of a monstrous social tragedy happening in Russia. As long as we build this ugly capitalism, we are doomed to problems”<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> “I don’t play in the dirt...”. A famous writer answers questions by *Zavtra*. *Zavtra.ru*, October 30, 2007. (In Russ.) <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/2007-10-317>

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Elizarov: “For me, the Motherland is the Soviet Union”. Interview with M. Elizarov. *Free Press*, January 4, 2017. (In Russ.) <https://svpressa.ru/society/article/163723/>

<sup>5</sup> “A person has the right to be a fool”. Interview with Mikhail Elizarov. *Gazeta.ru*, November 29, 2010. (In Russ.) [https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2010/11/29/a\\_3449601.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2010/11/29/a_3449601.shtml)

In these statements, taken from interviews over the years, attention is drawn to the opposition of the USSR to the modern capitalist society – a theme openly realized in the external plot of the song “Mr. Main Wind”.

However, even more interesting material is provided by the artistic interpretation of the collapse of the USSR, ascribed to the characters of Elizarov’s prose. For example, in the story “Exchanger”, the country appears as a pitiful and helpless creature, *inexplicably linked* to the soul of the main character. Compare: “A huge worm, penetrating the tender apple of book-television fiction. It was not I who bled on that wasteland, but Soviet artistry – its devastated womb, from which I emerged into the light” (Elizarov, 2023b, p. 247). In the story “Hospital”, the motif of this truly blood connection reappears: Shapchuk, the hero of the story, tore up the map, and there was a feeling that he was tearing himself apart along with “his own skin”, because, by destroying the country, Shapchuk was destroying himself (Elizarov, 2023c, p. 352).

Thus, in Elizarov’s artistic-philosophical view of the world, the country and the individual are bound by indissoluble ties, with the connection between a person and their homeland being profoundly emotional. It’s no coincidence that the theme of the country’s collapse correlates with the motif of a torn human body (remember that the physical body in artistic text is the figurative embodiment of the emotional sphere).

And here we come to a possible answer to the question of the correlation between the historical and the personal. The personal catastrophe in the song “Mr. Main Wind” is interpreted in terms of a historical catastrophe because within the framework of individual creative consciousness, these tragic facts are interconnected. Personal and historical situations, literally following the principle of dreaming, charged with one strong emotion, seem to attract each other: the collapse of the USSR is Elizarov’s personal drama, just like the departure/infidelity of a loved one. In this sense, *the analyzed song can be interpreted as a kind of psychodrama, where the psyche of the hero is likened to the country, and the inner, personal spiritual forces are personified in the images of Soviet figures*. The collapse of the unified country in this context denotes the extreme mental discord of the personality, which the hero cannot overcome.

The idea of the connection between the internal and external in the song “Mr. Main Wind” is further confirmed by the fact that similar semantic structures are found in other lyrical compositions. For example, in the song “Ragnaryok”, there is also a conjunction of the ontological and psychological, although here it does not find its plot expression, but is realized only on the level of content and theme and in the deictic composition.

At the **thematic and content** levels, the songs “Mr. Main Wind” and “Ragnaryok” share three motifs.

Firstly, both texts distinctly resonate with the theme of unhappy love. In the song “Mr. Main Wind”, this theme recedes into the subtext, forming a ‘secondary’, lyrical plot, while in the song “Ragnaryok”, it is explicitly expressed, as seen in the line, “You left, and I am free...” (Elizarov, 2015).

Secondly, the personal, individual drama in both songs is accompanied by the destruction of the entire world: in the song “Mr. Main Wind”, the country collapses, while in the song “Ragnaryok”, the end of the world is imminent. Thus, in the last stanza of the song “Ragnaryok”, the theme of the Scandinavian apocalypse is heard (“Fenrir howled in death throes / The gods perished, and the world ended” (Ibid.)). The theme of the finale also appears in the concluding lines of the song “Mr. Main Wind” (“Mr. Main Wind, / As you can see, the business is finished” (Elizarov, 2023)). It is necessary to note that Elizarov, in his artistic prose, interprets the collapse of the USSR precisely in apocalyptic terms (compare an example from the story “Exchange”: “The old world burst like a fragile Christmas bubble” (Elizarov, 2023b, p. 247)).

Thirdly, these songs bring up the theme of the protagonist’s departure or escape from an unbearable situation. In the song “Ragnaryok”, this escape is explicitly indicated (“And I’m a deserter again...” (Elizarov, 2015)), while in the song “Mr. Main Wind”, it is indirectly referenced through an allusion to Veniamin Kaverin’s fairy tale “The Flying Boy” (the motif of escape is a key motif in this tale). It is in this fairy tale that the source of the phrase “Mr. Main Wind, I’m in touch” is found – it became a kind of conspiracy for the characters, which they read to learn to fly (compare: “Mr. Main Wind... can you hear me?” (Kaverin, 1988, p. 357)).

At the **level of deixis in the composition** of the songs, they also surprisingly resemble each other. Both songs have dual addressing, which is reflected in poetic deixis. On one hand, their texts are directed towards some external addressee, who is designated by name. In the song “Ragnaryok”, this addressee turns out to be a certain Igoryok, whom the protagonist invites to “the planned downfall of the gods”: “Oh, Igoryok, Igoryok / Come with me to Ragnaryok” (Elizarov, 2015). In the song “Mr. Main Wind”, the addressee is Mr. Wind himself. On the other hand, they also have a second addressee – a female figure remaining in the subtext, to whom the protagonist’s monologue is also addressed. In both cases, this female figure is designated by “you”: in the song “Ragnaryok” – “You left, and I’m free” (Ibid.), and in the song “Mr. Main Wind” – “Levitan told me, / That you bitch...” (Elizarov, 2023a).

Thus, the songs simulate similar communicative situations: the lyrical subject simultaneously addresses two addressees, one of whom is named (a male character), while the other - a woman - is referred to through personal



pronouns. Thus, the two analyzed songs seem to unfold from the same semantic matrix – this is indicated by both their thematic commonality and elements of the compositional structure of the text itself. This similarity may be associated with the fact that they are based on the same psychological model, which is fixed in the semantic structure of the texts.

### Conclusion

Thus, in the song “Mr. Main Wind”, a ‘double’, ‘lyrico-historical’ plot emerges: personal tragedy is modeled with the help of historical figures, and the historical catastrophe is likened to personal drama.

However, Elizarov’s lyrical texts rarely contain direct allegories; in this regard, it seems incorrect to assume that the historical plot is merely a form into which personal meaning is mechanically ‘poured’. The specificity of this form is such that it already contains some ‘residual’ content. Not only does not Elizarov obscure this content but also emphasizes it, which, on the one hand, leads to the reader’s confusion, accustomed to clearly distinguishing allegorical plots, and, on the other hand, initiates the merging of personal and societal.

At the same time, the ancient symbolic analogy of “Motherland – Beloved” undergoes structural transformation; the ‘border lines’ between the two substantive layers seem to disappear, and a simple allegory turns into a complex symbol. Such neutralization of semantic boundaries between different systems of meaning, their *fusion*, paradoxically leads to a certain degree of *autonomy* in the perception of the song’s text. As a result, there arises a ‘volatile’ point of reception, which makes it difficult to determine the dominant semantic line. *What is the subtext of what: personal hiding in the societal or societal encrypted in the personal?*

This technique of working with meanings raises questions about the historical-literary foundations of Elizarov’s lyrics. At a superficial level, the ‘repackaging’ of meanings should refer to postmodernism (Elizarov’s work is often associated with the postmodernism of the Sorokin type). However, the mechanical ‘attachment’ of the technique to one or another direction/trend in some cases may be incorrect because the technique must be functionally loaded; it is only a means by which a certain artistic goal is achieved, lying in the value-meaning domain. From our standpoint, the interference of the historical and personal described in the article ‘on the output’ gives not a postmodern ironic game but rather resembles Vladimir Mayakovsky’s installation on the utopian union of personal and societal, for example, in the poem “Letter to Tatyana Yakovleva. Moreover, this paradoxical combination of the personal and the social can refer to the era of romanticism, but this is the topic of another work.

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