

**IN SEARCH OF THE AUTHOR: NARRATIVE VOICE IN  
SVETLANA ALEKSIEVICH'S *CHERNOBYL'SKAIA  
MOLITVA***

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## Abstract

Svetlana Aleksievich is a contemporary Belarusian author whose works straddle the divide between Soviet and post-Soviet time. Based on tape-recorded interviews with eyewitnesses to events of historical and political significance, such as the Chornobyl' nuclear disaster and the Soviet-Afghan war, her works can be considered a hybrid form of journalism and fiction. This form of writing, where the statements of a multitude of individuals are selected, processed and arranged by a single author, raises important questions about representation and authorial agency.

Focusing on Aleksievich's fifth book, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: khronika budushchego* (*Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future*) [1985], this MA thesis examines the unresolved tension between the voices of the eyewitnesses and that of Aleksievich. Its aim is firstly to contextualise and conceptualise the question of authorial agency in Aleksievich's writing in general, and secondly to examine the concrete textual manifestations of authorial agency in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. The thesis will explore the extent to which *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* displays a clear political bias through the ideological position that its implied author occupies in relation to the narrators. Moreover, it will show that in its thematic insistence, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* presents a specific eco-critical perspective on the nuclear accident, a particular interpretation of the relationship between the Soviet state and its citizens, and a specific view on issues related to the possibilities of

language to adequately communicate an experience – points which, contrary to the implicit assertion of the text of being the product of a multitude of authors, can only be attributed to a single consciousness. Thus, this thesis argues that *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* performs two separate functions: “giving a voice” to the witnesses of the event and, through these voices, presenting a particular “message” or “worldview”.

## Transliteration and References

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: khronika budushchego* refer to the most recent edition of the work, published by Vremia in 2016.<sup>1</sup> When referring to the Chornobyl' accident or the city of Chornobyl', I transliterate from the Ukrainian. In the third section of chapter one, I quote extensively from Bakhtin's *Problemy poetiki Dostoievskogo*. In order to make the reading of my text more fluent, I cite the English translation, providing the original Russian in parenthesis where necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva : Khronika budushchego*, (Moskva: Vremia, 2016).

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## Introduction

In 2015 when Svetlana Aleksievich was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, the committee citation read: 'For her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time'.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that the committee stipulates the multi-voiced nature of Aleksievich's work as one of her principal literary achievements. Basing her books on tape-recorded interviews with historical eye-witnesses, Aleksievich is widely seen as a writer who "gives a voice" to other people. Consisting of statements produced by one subject (the witness) and subsequently selected and arranged by another (the writer), Aleksievich's work challenges our understanding of authorship and authorial agency. As Lev Anninskii comments:

Так подкошен жанр, так дерзко обновлено само понятие об авторстве: от повести к повести всесветная слава писательницы растёт, меж тем как тексты ее на девяносто девять процентов принадлежат другим людям! Это - первая загадка.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the names and in some cases professions of the interviewees are given at the end of each monologue, akin to individual

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<sup>2</sup> Sara Danius, 'Press Release', (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Lev Anninskii, 'Oglianut'sia v slezakh', in *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, (1998), (p. 80).

signatures, reinforces the implicit claim that the text is being faithful to what the interviewees actually said. In other words, the text identifies the interviewees as authors, i.e. as agents who produce the text. Thus, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* presents itself as a collective text produced by a multitude of authors. At the same time, it manifests the distinct thematic interests and biases of a single consciousness. As I will argue, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* displays a clear political bias through the ideological position that its implied author occupies in relation to the narrators. Moreover, in its thematic insistence, it presents a certain eco-critical perspective on the nuclear accident, a particular interpretation of the relationship between the Soviet state and its citizens, and a specific view on issues related to the possibilities of language to adequately communicate an experience – points that can only be attributed to a single consciousness.

This duality between, on the one hand, the multitude of authors and, on the other hand, the interests and biases of the single consciousness, does not necessarily imply an overt conflict. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* performs two functions simultaneously: “giving a voice” to the witnesses of the event and, through these voices, presenting a particular “message” or “worldview”. By what criteria then can we distinguish between these two functions? This question can be conceptualized in terms of an opposition between, on the one hand, what we may conditionally call “neutrality”, and tendentiousness on the other. Vladimir Golstein, for instance, criticises Aleksievich for precisely this, saying that her books are seriously flawed by a conflict between



their 'formal polyphony and their monologic message'.<sup>4</sup> Sergei Oushakine notes that it is difficult to determine whether a witness's particular recollections are included in the text because of their mere referential reality, or because of what they communicate within the meaningful structure of the text: 'Сложно сказать, чем они вызваны — реальными воспоминаниями или потребностью подчеркнуть абсурдность происходящего'.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this MA thesis is firstly to contextualise and conceptualise the question of authorial agency in Aleksievich's writing in general, and secondly to examine the concrete textual manifestations of the intentional agency in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*.

In the first section of Chapter One, I discuss the tension between the historical and novelistic in Aleksievich's writing, and the implications of this for the relationship between author and narrator. This relationship will then be further contextualised by looking at the tradition that Sivakova calls 'новая документальная литература'.<sup>6</sup> In particular, I discuss the imperative of 'letting the witness speak' which is at the heart of this tradition. The resultant multi-voiced nature of Aleksievich's work will then be analysed by using Bakhtin's notion of literary

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<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Golstein, 'Svetlana Aleksijevitj – Sovjetintelligentsians röst', (Stockholm: Karneval förlag, 2015), (p. 23). 'Svetlana Alexievich – The voice of the Soviet intelligentsia' was written for a Swedish audience and has not been published in English. All translations of this text are mine.

<sup>5</sup> Sergei Oushakine, 'Oskolki voennoi pamiat: Vse, chto ostalos' ot takogo uzhasa?', *NLO*, 93 (2008).

<sup>6</sup> N.A. Sivakova, 'Funktsii avtora v povestvovatel'noi strukture novoi dokumental'noi literatury', *Izvestiia Gomel'skogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta imeni F. Skoriny*, (2006), 76.

polyphony as a theoretical framework to assess her narrative strategies. The discussion of polyphony in Aleksievich's work, as we will see, is essentially a discussion of authorial agency and control. In connection with this, I will discuss the trial in 1993 where Aleksievich was accused of having misrepresented her interviewees in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (1991), her third book.

In Chapter Two I will discuss the function of the author (rather than a conventional narrator) in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* as a medium for the telling of other peoples' experiences, and the obscured presence of the author within the monologues attributed to the witnesses. Here, I will provide a theoretical framework for addressing the role of the author in Aleksievich's work. First, I will outline the problematic questions surrounding the concepts of intention and interpretation in narrative fiction, discussing the authorial intentionalism proposed by E.D. Hirsch and Roland Barthes's critique of the Author. I will then discuss Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author and its applicability to the intentional agency in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*.

Chapter Three will be wholly devoted to an analysis of the textual manifestations of authorial agency in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. In the first section, I will demonstrate how the text displays a clear political bias through the ideological position that its implied author occupies in relation to the narrators. Section two discusses the recurrent motifs of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, analysing the thematic insistence that emerges in the cumulative emphasis of the many testimonies. In the third section, I will examine the juxtapositions in *Chernobyl'skaia*

*molitva*, which can also be seen as manifestations of the single authorial agency. Specifically, I will look at two of the most frequently recurring juxtapositions in the book: first, that between “official” discourse and spoken language; second, the juxtaposition between, on the one hand, witnesses with higher education, and older members of the rural population on the other. In the concluding section of Chapter Three, I will analyse the relationship between the authorial monologue and the monologues of the witnesses. Discussing the superior position that the author-figure occupies in relation to the witnesses, I will show how her voice guides our reading of the witnesses’ monologues. By examining these aspects of *Chernobyl’skaia molitva*, I will demonstrate the ways in which a single consciousness asserts itself through the multitude of purportedly independent voices.

## Chapter 1: Research Context

### Fact or Fiction?

The Chornobyl' disaster has been treated in political, historical, environmental, technological and social studies as well as in fiction, such as the American novel *The Sky Unwashed* (2000) which tells the story of a Ukrainian woman who remains in the contaminated area after the evacuation.<sup>7</sup> Although all treat an authentic historical event, the content itself cannot define the fictional or factual nature of such works. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* presents itself as a historical source which, akin to a collection of historical documents, collates and gives access to primary sources. To further distinguish itself from historical fiction which has extensively covered the Chornobyl' disaster, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* does not include any of the usual disclaimers of fiction, which for instance *The Sky Unwashed* has:

This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. No reference to any real person is intended or should be inferred.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Irene Zabytko, *The Sky Unwashed*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. Preliminaries.

On the contrary, like a factual text, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is based on the assumption that “nothing is invented”. It is interesting to note that the Library of Congress classifies the work under ‘Environmental Pollution’, while the Hallward Library at the University of Nottingham categorizes the book with works on ‘Environmental Disaster’. Indeed, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* gives us important historical information about the disaster, both about its particularities and its historical context. The testimonies of which the book consists – assuming that these be deemed factually reliable – contribute to the clarification of the circumstances around the accident and provide insights into the workings of Soviet structures. Taken as a totality, they can be read as a historical interpretation of the event, as they give answers to the questions that a historian might ask, such as: How was the evacuation handled? Did the government inform people of the dangers of high-level radiation? Was safety a paramount issue in the operation of Soviet nuclear power stations? What was the accident’s impact on health?<sup>9</sup> However, despite this obvious focus on the historical, the work also flaunts its own textual manipulation and structural devices which would be unusual in conventional historical studies. More important than content, therefore, in considering its factual or fictional dimension are the work’s structural properties and its thematic focus.

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<sup>9</sup> These are some of the questions asked by the Canadian historian David Marples in David Marples, 'Chernobyl: A Reassessment', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 45 (2004).

The problematic classification of Aleksievich's work has been noted in most reviews and critical studies. In a preface to the first edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (1985), the Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich suggests a number of possible genre definitions for this book: 'magnitafonnaia literatura', 'ustnaia istoria', 'epicheski-khorovaia proza', 'dokumental'noe samoissledovanie', 'sobornyi roman', 'roman-oratoria' – and goes on to conclude: 'Раз столько вариантов, значит, все еще не прояснилось, не возникло, не найдено слово'.<sup>10</sup> This ambivalence has persisted ever since. Books covers, blogs, newspaper articles and the author's website put forward various suggestions as to the appropriate description for Aleksievich's writing, such as 'zhurnalistika', 'non-fikshn', 'roman golosov', and 'roman-svidetel'stvo'. Genre definitions suggested in scholarly research include 'testimony',<sup>11</sup> 'polifonicheskii roman-interv'iu',<sup>12</sup> 'zhanr molitvy'<sup>13</sup> as well as the more general 'khudozhestvenno-dokumental'naia proza' and 'dokumental'naia povest'.

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<sup>10</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, (Moskva: Pal'mira, 1985), p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Johanna Lindbladh, 'The Problem of Narration and Reconciliation in Svetlana Aleksievich's Testimony Voices from Chernobyl', in *The Poetics of Memory in Post-Totalitarian Narration*, ed. by Johanna Lindbladh (Lund: Centre For European Studies at Lund University, 2008), pp. 41-53.

<sup>12</sup> Liisa Liiski, 'Kolme kertomusta valkovenäläisestä nykykirjallisuudesta', in *Tuntematon Valko-Venäjä*, ed. by Arto Luukkanen (Helsinki: Edita, 2009), pp. 316-46.

<sup>13</sup> Sonu Saini, 'Chernobyl'skaia molitva: khronika buduschego S. Aleksievich. Problema zhanra', *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta Kul'turologiia i iskusstvovedenie*, (2013).

The most obvious reason for this lack of clarity may be the complexity of the literary form Aleksievich works in. The choice of genre definition is in part a matter of emphasis and tends to reduce the complexity of Aleksievich's work, defining her work through particular terminologies as either fictional or factual. 'Zhurnalistika', 'non-fikshn', and 'ustnaia istoria' suggests that Aleksievich's writing is factual, whereas terms like 'roman golosov', 'magnitafonnaia literatura', and 'epicheski-khorovaia proza' seem to locate her work in the realm of fiction. As such, they remain unsatisfactory in recognizing and recording the co-existence of the factual and the fictional, the historical and novelistic, which defines all of Aleksievich's work. Johanna Lindbladh, for instance, in her study of the polyphonic performance of testimony in *Voices of Utopia* has shown that the 'historical value of Aleksievich's writing [is] intimately connected to the aesthetic composition', thereby challenging a more traditional theoretical standpoint which defines 'fact in a dichotomous relation to fiction'.<sup>14</sup> The same is true for *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* which could be approached equally as novel, factual text, historical work or journalistic report, as in terms of both content and its mediation, it incorporates both fictional and factual elements.

Therefore, to make a *general* claim as to whether *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is a novel or a historical work would mean to

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<sup>14</sup> Johanna Lindbladh, 'The polyphonic performance of testimony in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Voices from Utopia*', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59 (2017), 281.

exclude certain aspects of the text. The purpose of this particular study, however, requires us to set up a dichotomous relationship between the factual and the fictional as it is crucial for our understanding of the author-narrator relationship whether we read a text as pertaining to one or the other. When talking about authorial agency, we cannot ignore the relationship between the historical author and narrator. By historical author, I understand the physical person who produces the text, and, by narrator, the textual subject to which speech is attributed: the “I” of the monologue, in Aleksievich’s case. How we conceive of the relationship between the two depends on whether we approach the text as factual or fictional. A factual text, whether an autobiography, a historical work, journalistic report or academic essay, is based on the reader’s assumption that author and narrator are one and the same. By contrast, a work of fiction, even a work of fiction that imitates a factual text, such as autobiographical novels, relies on the strict separation between narrator and author in order to retain its identity as fictional work. While the author of non-fiction cannot disclaim his text, an author of fiction can distance herself from the produced text through the interpolated narrators. For example, in *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927), the narrator has the same first name as the author – Marcel – and describes the historical and social environment to which the author belonged, that is French high society at the turn of the century. However, this does not mean that the two are identical. (For instance, the author, Proust, was homosexual; the narrator, Marcel, is heterosexual.) Because of the complex operations characteristic of the



fictional work, its implicit meanings and layers of voices, the relationship between author and narrator is never so straightforward that the two can be regarded as one and the same. The fictional text is read and written according to the assumption that author and narrator are separate entities (Author  $\neq$  Narrator). In the factual text, by contrast, the relationship between them can be described in terms of oneness (Author = Narrator).

What clearly sets *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* apart from factual texts are the explicit authorial interventions, determining a particular thematic focus. Full of descriptions of sounds, smells, visual impressions, and renderings of shame, indignation, regret, sorrow, and love, the monologues are often constructed in such a way that they gravitate around, or culminate in the expression of a single emotion that pervades the monologue. The narrators carry something “innermost”, a “secret”, a deeply intimate, often traumatic experience of the event: ‘Можно ли об этом говорить? Называть словами... Бывают тайны...’.<sup>15</sup> The focus on the emotional and the tactile is a factor through which Aleksievich distinguishes her personal histories from more conventional history writing and locates these personal histories at the juncture between the real and the imagined. This emphasis on the personal and subjective in public historical events is reminiscent of Hayden White’s definition of the ‘real’ (as opposed to the ‘true’). White sees the essential difference between the two in that History is

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<sup>15</sup> Aleksievich, p. 293.

interested in the 'true' and fiction in the 'real'. The 'true' is the event as such, that which can be established on the basis of historical evidence to have taken place. The 'real' is all that the event could possibly be imagined to be in terms of human experience. Discussing Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947) as an example, White notes that:

The significance of Levi's book lies less in any new 'truthful' information he gives about the camps than in the artistry (by which I mean literary, poetic and rhetorical devices) he employs in order to conjure up a compelling image of a cosmos utterly horrifying and at the same time horrifyingly present as a possibility for everyone in our time. [...] Primo Levi's book is true in a fictional sense, in the sense that the *image* of Auschwitz conjured up by Levi's poetic prose is 'faithful' as well as 'true' to the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary historical condition of subjection and humiliation.<sup>16</sup>

The same can be said about *Chernobyľskaia molitva*. The human experience is further highlighted in the work through its structural properties, as the book employs literary devices and produces aesthetic effects which are untypical of factual texts. Although *Chernobyľskaia molitva* refrains from using the most explicitly "literary" devices such as

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<sup>16</sup> Hayden White, 'Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality', *Rethinking History*, 9 (2005), 149.

the building of suspense, a clearly defined protagonist and an organised narrative, in its communication of meaning and production of effect, it makes extensive use of such “literary devices” as metaphor, counterpoint, and fragmentation which are more frequently found in creative writing. For example, in ‘Monolog o tom [...] A to, chto v chugunke kipit, tozhe ne vechnoe’, the cast-iron pot becomes a metaphor for the end of an old way of life. Counterpoint, also, is used throughout the work. For instance, the very beginning of the book is marked by a stark contrast between the newspaper excerpts – in which factual information about the disaster is given – and the first monologue, ‘Odinokii chelovecheskii golos’, where we are confronted with the human experience of the same event. This juxtaposition suggests the radical discrepancy between fact and personal experience, between, on the one hand, what we think we know of an event from a mass media discourse, and, on the other hand, how it “really was” to someone who experienced it. Also, *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* makes elaborate use of fragmentation, in the monologues as well as in the composition of the work as a whole, thereby refraining from constructing a coherent narrative about the disaster and leaving us, at the end of the book, with a sense of something inconclusive and unsayable.

It might go too far to say that these structural properties – counterpoint, metaphor, and fragmentation – are typical of the novel, but it is safe to say that they are quite *untypical* of factual texts. Mediated in this particular way, the testimonies become something

more than just biographical statements. In their totality, they constitute an intricate artistic structure which is controlled by the author to produce, through subtle rhetorical and literary devices, certain aesthetic effects. This does not necessarily prevent *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* from attesting to an event that occurred in historical reality. However, it does complicate the relationship between author and narrator to the extent that one cannot be equated with the other (as in a purely factual text). Therefore, the monologues cannot be read as unmediated witness statements by the interviewed witnesses, as the function of the narrators is not only to testify to a factual event – they also serve as meaningful elements in a quasi-novelistic system.

## The Witness Must Speak: Aleksievich and New Documentary Literature

Aleksievich's works are deeply rooted in the Soviet tradition of documentary writing.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, her writing is indebted to the works of Ales Adamovich, in particular his co-authored books, *Blokadnaia kniga* (1981, written together with Daniil Granin) and *Ia iz ognennoi derevni* (1977, written with Ianka Bryl' and Vladimir Kolesnik) which examine the experiences of the Soviet population during the Nazi German invasion that began in 1942. Sivakova sees these two works as canonical for what she conceptualises as 'новая документальная литература' [New Documentary Literature].<sup>18</sup> Defined by its use of oral histories, by the montage of monologues based on interviews, this literary tradition has influenced Aleksievich's writing in a fundamental way.

Works in the tradition of New Documentary Literature tend to be centred around what Sivakova calls 'стречное событие', that is, a single event that unites all the stories of which the work consists.<sup>19</sup>

*Blokadnaia kniga* is compiled of testimonies by Leningraders who lived

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<sup>17</sup> Aleksievich's work has been examined most thoroughly in this context by Sivakova and by Daniel Bush. See N.A. Sivakova, 'Zhanrovye istoki dokumental'noi prozy S. Aleksievich', *Vestnik Brestskogo universiteta Seriya 3*, (2016). and Daniel Bush, "No other proof": Svetlana Aleksievich in the tradition of Soviet war writing', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59 (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Sivakova, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> N.A. Sivakova, 'Osobennosti sub"ektnoi organizatsii dokumental'nykh knig Svetlany Aleksievich', *Vestnik TvGY*, (2014), 151.

through the siege and *la iz ognennoi derevni* describes the experiences of the rural population during the German invasion, whereas *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli* – Aleksievich’s first two books – focus on women who participated in battle and the experiences of displaced children. This highlighting of a female perspective on events that were traditionally narrated from a male point of view is one of Aleksievich’s main contributions to this writing tradition. Attempting to remedy the marginalisation of women’s war experiences in Soviet historiography, Aleksievich’s books made available testimonies that had previously not been a part of the wider historical discourse on the Soviet war experience. The gender-defined perspective is also an integral part of her aesthetics. Daniel Bush has pointed out the special status given to female accounts of combat in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, discussing two important notions of Aleksievich’s understanding of gender. First, whereas stories told by men mainly reproduce the mythologised depictions of war, Aleksievich understands the female perspective as being free from images of war imposed by the socialist realist canon and therefore more authentic: ‘Female means anterior to myth, whereas male means “canonical”’.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, according to Bush, Aleksievich sees female subjectivity as inherently more perceptive to the sensuous. What Aleksievich calls “melochi byta”, the “little details of life” such as smells, colours, and sounds, are supposed to be lacking in stories told by men but abound in women’s accounts. This heightened perceptiveness makes a more “truthful” depiction of the

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<sup>20</sup> Bush, p. 219.

war possible: 'More than once I noticed that [...] women preserved a large quantity of the little details of life at war in their memories... [Most men] forgot [these things] that day or the next'.<sup>21</sup> Another important element that distinguishes Aleksievich's work from that of her predecessors is the varying use of authorial commentary in connection to the reported interviews. In Adamovich's works, the author frequently intervenes with his own observations, describing the person interviewed, her appearance and manner of speaking. For instance, in *la iz ognennoi derevni*, one of the interviewees is described thus:

Рассказывает Барбарка, шестидесятилетняя Барбара Адамовна Слесарчук. Говорит со странной и жутковатой усмешкой - будто страшную сказку, необычайно далекую, пережитую очень давно. Говорит временами почти совсем как сказательница - нараспев, с повторами, что не кажутся лишними, и по-местному, - на трех или четырех языках одновременно: белорусско-украинско-русско-польском.<sup>22</sup>

In *Blokadnaia kniga*, the author comments:

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<sup>21</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, (Moskva: Vremia, 2016), p. 205. Quoted in: Bush, p. 221.

<sup>22</sup> Bryl' Adamovich A., Ia., Kolesnik, V., Granin, D., *la iz ognennoi derevni*, (Moskva: Sov. Pisatel', 1991), p. 7. Quoted in: Sivakova, p. 78.

Она так видит, так чувствует, происходившее тридцать пять лет назад, что как бы снова участвует во всем, о чем рассказывает вам. И вы уже сами не рассказ слушаете, а словно спешите с нею, с ее бойцами самозащиты от барака к бараку, от пожара к пожару, от смерти к смерти...<sup>23</sup>

The influence of this authorial scene-setting is felt only in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, where the author describes her interviewees in a similar manner: 'маленькая женщина с трогательным, девичьим венцом длинной косы вокруг головы'.<sup>24</sup> In later works, this sort of description is altogether absent and the direct authorial commentary is reduced to a minimum. In addition to this a difference in purpose between Adamovich and Aleksievich can be mentioned, Aleksievich being much less concerned than Adamovich with the fact of the historical event and the urgency to establish what happened. Instead, she attempts to record and describe the emotional experience of the event. Thus, another way in which Aleksievich's writing has developed the genre of New Documentary Literature is its explicit focus away from the mere establishing of facts onto the human experience of the event. As Bush puts it: 'If Adamovich's question is *what happened?*, Aleksievich asks *what did it feel like?*'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A. Adamovich, Granin, D., *Blokadnaia kniga*, (Moskva: Sov. Pisatel', 1979), p. 5. Quoted in: Sivakova, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Aleksievich. Quoted in: Sivakova, p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> Bush, p. 219.



The genre of New Documentary Literature must be seen within the context of Soviet authors writing about the Second World War. New Documentary Literature emerged from a tradition in Soviet post-war writing that included such authors as Viktor Nekrasov, Vasil' Bykau, Iurii Bondarev, Viktor Astaf'ev, and Bulat Okudzhava, who all wrote what Il'a Kukulin has termed "unofficial" prose: works that were 'published by the Soviet presses but promulgated non-State memory and experience'.<sup>26</sup> Characterized by an aesthetic that positioned itself against the depiction of war in Soviet state-controlled media, this "unofficial" line of war writers can be considered to have originated with Nekrasov's *V okopakh Leningrada*, a novel in the vein of Remarque that gave rise to the notion of "*okopnaia pravda*" ["the truth of the trenches"]. This concept, as Bush has pointed out, comprises two essential components. First, it makes 'the claim to possess a specific truth about the war (as well as the implication that there were "untruths" out there that needed to be combated)'. Second, it involves 'the notion that this truth is the prerogative of the frontline soldier's trench-level view of the war'.<sup>27</sup> "*Okopnaia pravda*", then, is based on the notion that the war had been appropriated by the Soviet state-controlled media and was used as a propaganda tool in an "official" Soviet discourse. This made it the task of the "unofficial" writers to present the "real" image of the war, in

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<sup>26</sup> Il'a Kukulin, "Regulirovanie boli (Predvaritel'nye zametki o transformatsii travmaticheskogo opyta Velikoi Otechestvennoi/Vtoroi mirovoi voiny v russkoi literature 1940-1970-x godov)'.", in *Pamiat' o voine 60 let spustia*, ed. by Mikhail Gabovich (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2005), pp. 617–58. Quoted in: Bush, p. 226.

<sup>27</sup> Bush, p. 216.

other words the war as it was experienced by people who took part in battle: 'There was a "truth" about soldiers' experiences that was under constant threat of mythologization'.<sup>28</sup>

The use of oral history, which Adamovich was the first to employ, can undoubtedly be seen as a strategy to "combat the mythologised image of the war" and to express the "real truth". For the first time soldiers and victims of war talked about their experiences "in their own words". Nothing is "made up". The truth is given "as it is". In his preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Adamovich metaphorically refers to depictions of the war in state-controlled media as the 'bronze plaque of history' and rhetorically suggests that it is in response to the official dissemination of myths that works such as *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* are written:

Не в ответ ли на внутреннее чувство наше, а может быть, и народное – на протест против того, что пережитое и перестраданное миллионами душ будет заслонено бронзовой плитой истории, холодной, мертвой, а точнее, похоронено под плитой – не в ответ ли на это чувство и возникают такие произведения?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 217.

<sup>29</sup> Aleksievich, p. 49.

The most recent edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* includes a conversation between the author and a censor ('Iz razgovora s tsenzorom') where Aleksievich employs a similar logic. The aesthetic principles of Soviet propaganda are explicitly contrasted with her own aesthetics. The censor accuses her of 'primitive naturalism' ['примитивный натурализм'], for 'degrading and debunking the women-heroes' ['унижаете ... развенчиваете ... женщину-героиню] who are 'holy' ['святые'], to which the author simply replies that what she is trying to show is the 'truth' ['правда']. In the conversation that follows, the two aesthetic systems are presented as a set of binary oppositions, where 'grand ideas' ['великие идеи'] are set off against 'the ordinary person' ['маленький человек'], 'instances of heroism' ['героические примеры'] against 'dirt' ['грязь'], 'grand history' ['большая история'] against the 'little history' ['маленькая история'].<sup>30</sup>

This kind of rhetoric that consciously positions the text against Soviet state-controlled media runs throughout Aleksievich's books. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is no exception. The monologues are full of remarks that assume the interviewer's expectation of an "official" representation of the event. For instance, the clean-up worker Arkadii Filin tells the author that there will be 'nothing heroic', 'nothing for the writer's quill in his story, as if that were what she was looking for: 'Я вас предупреждал... Ничего героического для писательского пера'.<sup>31</sup>

There are also numerous references to slogans used in the

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<sup>30</sup> Aleksievich, p. 27; 29; 31.

<sup>31</sup> Aleksievich, p. 107.

representation of the disaster in Soviet media: ‘реактор побеждён’;<sup>32</sup> ‘а жизнь продолжается’;<sup>33</sup> ‘мы победим!’;<sup>34</sup> ‘работают мужественно и самоотверженно’;<sup>35</sup> ‘выстоим и победим’.<sup>36</sup> In this way, the “official” Soviet discourse is present throughout the book as a kind of polemic background, a distorted depiction against which the authenticity of the witnesses’ accounts can be measured.

Thus, Aleksievich’s depiction of the historical event does not only insist on telling us “how it was”. It also insists on telling us “how it was *not*”. By insisting on their own authenticity (defined against the official discourse) her work claims the right to talk about historical events, re-appropriating them in the process. The privilege to speak of the event – be it the “Great Fatherland War”, the war in Afghanistan or the Chornobyl’ accident – which always belonged to the official Soviet discourse, is reclaimed by people who experienced the event first-hand, which implicitly authenticates their narratives. Sergei Oushakine compares *Poslednie svideteli* to the prose written by American war veterans, pointing out that the fragmentation that characterises these works serves to highlight the immediate and disintegrated perception of war, a sensitivity that belongs exclusively to people who experienced it first-hand. Thereby, according to Oushakine, it functions as a means by which veterans attempt to ‘reclaim power [...] over language and the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

depiction of war, which has been monopolised by official discourse’  
[‘вернуть себе [...] власть над языком и сюжетным оформлением  
войны, монополизированными официальным дискурсом’].<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Angela Brintlinger astutely observes that Aleksievich translates this sense of narrative empowerment into structural devices in her works. The titles of chapters and sections in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* which consists of quotations from interviews with a witness, seem to ‘[elevate] the women’s voices to a position of power and authority and [imply] that the women themselves are in control of the book’s contents’.<sup>38</sup>

Aleksievich frequently comments on these issues of ownership of historical experience in speeches and interviews. For example, recalling her conversations with witnesses in an interview with the Belarusian journalist Dmitrii Gordon, she said: ‘дня два ушло на то, чтобы они перестали говорить то, что в газетах написано’.<sup>39</sup> The depiction of the event in official Soviet discourse, then, has been internalised by the witness who now speaks in “the language of the newspapers”. In a similar vein, in her Nobel Lecture which she begins by emphasising the collective origins of her writing – ‘Я стою на этой трибуне не одна’ –, Aleksievich indirectly addresses the privilege to control historical

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<sup>37</sup> Oushakine, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Angela Brintlinger, 'Mothers, father(s), daughter: Svetlana Aleksievich and The Unwomanly Face of War', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59 (2017), 201.

<sup>39</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, 'V gostiakh u Dmitriia Gordona', in *V gostiakh u Dmitriia Gordona*, ed. by Dmitrii Gordon (2016).

narratives and the dissemination of myths in Soviet official discourse.<sup>40</sup>

Comparing the interviews she conducts to a conversation in Dostoevsky's *Besy* in which Shatov asks Stavrogin to 'drop [his] tone and speak like a human being', Aleksievich juxtaposes two kinds of voice: on the one hand the impersonal and inauthentic, and on the other the "human" and authentic voice. Her interviewees, she says, cannot 'speak out of a void'; their voices are 'tainted by the superstitions of the century, its biases and deceptions, television and newspapers'. This outer layer of the impersonal and inauthentic is what, she, the interviewer, has to reach through in order to gain access to the "human soul":

У Достоевского в «Бесах» Шатов говорит Ставрогину перед началом беседы: «Мы два существа сошлись в беспредельности... в последний раз в мире. Оставьте ваш тон и возьмите человеческий! Заговорите хоть раз голосом человеческим» Приблизительно так начинаются у меня разговоры с моими героями. Конечно, человек говорит из своего времени, он не может говорить из ниоткуда! Но пробиться к человеческой душе трудно, она замусорена суевериями века, его пристрастиями и обманами. Телевизором и газетами.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, 'Nobel Lecture', (2015).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

The imperative to “let the witness speak”, then, is the defining trait of New Documentary Literature as well as of Aleksievich’s writing. *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* quotes the interviewees in the first person and the monologues are explicitly attributed to them. Their names are given in the end of each monologue, usually with the additional information of their occupation: ‘Сергей Гурин, кинооператор’;<sup>42</sup> ‘Анатолий Шиманский, журналист’;<sup>43</sup> ‘Аркадий Павлович Богданкевич, сельский фельдшер’.<sup>44</sup> This reinforces the implicit claim that the text is being “faithful” or perhaps “true” to what the interviewees actually said. Of course, “faithfulness” as well as “truth” is a dubious category. What does it mean to ask whether the text “faithfully” represents what the interviewees said? What it does *not* mean is that the text should literally report every word that they uttered. A mere succession of literally transcribed interviews would make for a completely different book. The selection, processing and arrangement of the statements performed by Aleksievich is an integral part of her claim to depict a deeper, more authentic reality. The claim to faithful representation in *Chernobyl’skaia molitva*, therefore, does not compete with factual accounts of the events (newspaper articles, history books, etc.) but is based on the insistence that it accurately renders the “essence” of what was said. In this way, it identifies the interviewees as authors, i.e. as agents who produce the

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<sup>42</sup> Aleksievich, p. 132.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 133.

text, and, asserts itself as a collective text produced by a multitude of authors.

Like the notion of “*okopnaia pravda*” the imperative informing New Documentary Literature to “let the witness speak” can thus be seen as a strategy to “truthfully represent” the historical event. This concept ties in with the implicit claim in Aleksievich’s works to restore the power of enunciation to the witness and combat the untruths of mythologised history. It is an integral part of Aleksievich’s prose, which insists on the independence of the interviewees as authors by citing them in the first person and naming them. However, to what extent we really “hear” the witnesses in Aleksievich’s prose has been the subject of much debate, both in literary criticism and in the public sphere. In the next section of this chapter, I will outline some of the scholarly debate on this issue. In particular, I will look at the discussion surrounding the question of whether Aleksievich’s writing can be said to be “polyphonic” in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. I will also discuss how Aleksievich, in an appendix to later editions of *Tsinkovye mal’chiki*, responded to the allegations put forward during the trial in 1993 where she was accused of having misrepresented the interviewed witnesses and distorted their testimonies.



## **A Tension of Voices: 'i te – i ia'**

### **Aleksievich and Polyphony**

Aleksievich's books consist of a multitude of voices, telling us about their own experiences, presenting us with "their own truth". Therefore, it is not surprising that her work has been referred to as "polyphonic". In literary criticism, the validity of this description has been both refuted and reaffirmed, most notably by Vladimir Golstein in a polemical essay written in response to the 2015 Nobel Prize announcement, and by Johanna Lindbladh in an article from 2017. Other than that, the question of polyphony tends to be examined in relation to specific aspects of Aleksievich's work, as for instance in Doris Scribner's unpublished MA thesis from 2008 which is concerned with the representation of trauma in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, or Iurii Seppialiainen's thesis from 2016 which examines the book's eco-critical aspects. The concept of polyphony is crucial to understand the question of who the subject of the text is in Aleksievich's work. What is at stake is essentially the "independence" of the many voices of the books. In the polyphonic novel, as Bakhtin defined it, 'the character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky'.<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin opposes this aesthetic attitude to that of the "monologic" novel, in Russian literature paradigmatically

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<sup>45</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 5.

represented by the works of Tolstoy. The monologic novel, by contrast, '[squeezes] the artist's demonstrated plurality of consciousnesses into the systemically monologic framework of a single worldview'.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the polyphonic novel approaches its characters as independent subjects, 'capable of standing alongside their creator', whereas the monologic novel subordinates them to the design of the author and makes them 'serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice'.<sup>47</sup> The discussion of polyphony in Aleksievich's or any other work, therefore, is essentially a matter of authorial agency.

Before applying Bakhtin's ideas to Aleksievich's work it is important to note a methodologically problematic discrepancy in the terms of reference used. Bakhtin developed his notion of literary polyphony drawing on Dostoevsky's works, which can be unequivocally defined as fictional, which is not possible in the same way in the case of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. In Dostoevsky's works, the characters and events are invented, whereas *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* speaks of historical events and actual people. Applying Bakhtin's concept to Aleksievich's work, therefore, may seem counter-intuitive. However, as we recall, the speakers in her work do not only testify to a factual event, they also serve as meaningful elements in a novelistic system. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is not a succession of randomly selected, unmediated witness statements but a carefully structured entity. Through its speakers, the text communicates a certain ideological

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 6; 7.

meaning. Therefore, the speakers can be described in terms of the ideological standpoint they embody and the relation of this standpoint to that of other speakers and to the ideology communicated by the work as a totality. In fact, whether a text is factual or fictional has little importance for the applicability of Bakhtin's literary polyphony, a concept essentially concerned with *structure*. Crucially, what Dostoevsky's and Aleksievich's works have in common are the multitude of characters and the ideologically charged content.

Another methodological concern are the potential flaws in Bakhtin's theory. Bakhtin presents Dostoevsky's works as texts that exist outside any kind of ideological bias. This neutrality is supposedly based on the independence of – and perfect equality between – the various views expressed by different characters. According to Bakhtin, no character in Dostoevsky's fictional universe is more “wrong” or “right” than any other; the work as a whole does not favour any one view but allows for a plurality of equally valid truths. It is easy to argue otherwise. In *Crime and Punishment*, for instance, Raskolnikov's psychological breakdown and eventual confession seem to insist on the impermissibility of his transgression and repudiate his nihilistic views, and the text clearly “sides” more with Sonya's orthodoxy than Luzhin's rational egoism. However, even if one disagrees with Bakhtin that Dostoevsky's novels are in fact polyphonic in the way he describes them, it is possible to conceive of literary polyphony as an ideal notion. Granting that no truly “polyphonic” text was ever written, we can still use Bakhtin's concept as a terminology in indicating the degree of

ideological equality between speakers in a text. Moreover, Aleksievich's texts clearly evoke the concept of polyphony, which at least in part explains why it is frequently used in criticism of her work (for instance by Vladimir Golstein).

Literary polyphony was introduced by Bakhtin in his *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (1929). Bakhtin saw this notion as a defining and unique trait of Dostoevsky's fiction, singling him out in the Russian realist tradition and setting him apart from writers such as Tolstoy, Goncharov, and Turgenev on purely artistic grounds. He defines polyphony as a certain kind of "independence" that the characters retain in relation to the author and to the work as a whole. Throughout *Problemy*, this independence is often defined negatively and in relation to the treatment of characters in the monologic novel. The consciousness of the character 'is *not* turned into an object [*не опредмечивается*], is *not* closed [*не закрывается*], does *not* become a simple object of the author's consciousness [*не становится простым объектом авторского сознания*] [*emphases mine*]'.<sup>48</sup> In the monologic novel, when a character voices a thought or idea, it is either affirmed or repudiated, either true or untrue from the ideological perspective defining the work as a whole. Some ("true") thoughts 'gravitate toward the author's consciousness, and strive to shape themselves in the [...] unity of a worldview'. Other ("untrue") thoughts 'are either polemically repudiated, or else they lose their power to signify directly and become

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

simple elements of characterization'.<sup>49</sup> Literary polyphony, by contrast, allows for a plurality of equally valid truths. The idea voiced by a character is "independently valid", not "subordinated" to the ideological agenda of the work as a whole or of the author:

A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, alongside the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters.<sup>50</sup>

Specifically, Bakhtin identifies three main aspects of Dostoevsky's fiction that together make up for its characters' independence: 1) the character as ideologist [герой – идеолог], 2) the character's unfinalizability [незавершенность героя], and 3) the characters' unmerged voices [неслиянность голосов].

First, the Dostoevskian hero is an "ideologist". His idea defines his relation to the world and to other people. In Raskolnikov, the idea of the Napoleonic figure's right to moral transgression is played out with the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

most extreme consequences. All of his actions, thoughts, and discourse are centred on the idea and determined by it. When he talks about himself or about his immediate reality, his poverty, his sister's marriage to Luzhin, he sees these things through the lens of his ideology. What is more, we know very little of what has happened to Dostoevsky's characters prior to the events related in the beginning of the plot. They are not disclosed as products of their past, or of their social reality. Therefore,

if one were to think away the idea in which they live, their image would be totally destroyed. In other words, the image of the hero is inseparably linked with the image of an idea and cannot be detached from it. We see the hero in the idea and through the idea, and we see the idea in him and through him.<sup>51</sup>

Aleksievich's characters are not "ideologists" to quite the same extent. Of course, they often express their views on Soviet history as well as on the notions of faith, love, death and the like, and several monologues have titles with decidedly philosophical or ideological overtones, for instance: 'Monolog o kartezijskoi filosofii' or 'Monolog o simvolakh i tainakh velikoi strany'. But as characters they are not defined by their ideas in the same way as Raskolnikov or Ivan Karamazov, or, say, Nerzhin, Rubin, Sologdin, and Innokentkii Volodin, the heroes of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

Solzhenitsyn's *V krughe pervom*, a good example of a polyphonic novel in the Bakhtinian sense, as Vladislav Krasnov has convincingly argued. According to Krasnov, the characters in Solzhenitsyn's novel are less products of social reality than they are 'bearers of an idea to which they are utterly committed'.<sup>52</sup> Rubin is first and foremost defined by what Krasnov calls his 'progressive ideology of Marxism-Leninism', just as Volodin is defined by his being a 'disciple of Epicure'.<sup>53</sup> The plot of *V krughe pervom* is designed so as to show their ideas from different angles and explore their consequences when played out within a totalitarian reality. Aleksievich's heroes are not defined by their ideas. Rather, their ideology is an important internalized part of them. Their personal stories are told in a context that is highly ideologically charged. Not unlike Dostoevsky's heroes, therefore, their 'discourse about the world [their ideology] merges with confessional discourse about oneself'.<sup>54</sup>

A second important criterion of polyphony is what Bakhtin calls the character's unfinalizability. It is grounded in the character's self-awareness, i.e. the awareness of his own distinguishing properties, 'his social position, the degree to which he is sociologically or characterologically typical, his habitus, his spiritual profile and even his very physical appearance'.<sup>55</sup> According to Bakhtin, this is how

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<sup>52</sup> Vladislav Krasnov, *Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky – A Study in the Polyphonic Novel*, (London: Prior, 1980), p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> Bakhtin, p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48.

Dostoevsky radically differs from his contemporaries. Whereas writers such as Gogol, Turgenev, or Goncharov would describe a character's distinguishing properties for the purpose of externally characterising him, Dostoevsky presents these properties within the boundaries of the character's self-consciousness, which is what he is essentially interested in uncovering. Unlike Gogol, whose quiet and self-effacing Akakii Akakievich is unambiguously determined, exhaustively described, a "fixed image" ["твердый образ"], Dostoevsky does not present us with a *type*, but with a character's awareness of belonging to that type. Hence his heroes' extreme sensitivity to the anticipated opinion of the Other. The question *Who is he?* 'becomes in Dostoevsky the object of the hero's own introspection'.<sup>56</sup> The best example of this is the Underground Man. With his endless diatribes, appeals, digressions, and "loopholes", he represents the voice of a character who – when talking about himself – cannot utter a single word without being conscious of how his utterance is (or would be) perceived:

Уж не кажется ли вам, господа, что я теперь в чем-то перед вами раскаиваюсь, что я в чем-то у вас прощенья прошу?.. Я уверен, что вам это кажется... А впрочем, уверяю вас, мне все равно, если и кажется...<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 40.

<sup>57</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, (Moskva-Augsburg: Werden-Verlag, 2002), p. 135.



Because of this awareness of the reaction of the Other to his own words, we cannot definitely say who the Underground Man is. No judgement of ours eludes him. There is nothing we could say about him that he does not know himself. His monologue is designed in such a way that he 'retain[s] for himself [the] final word about himself'.<sup>58</sup> In this way, Bakhtin argues, the Dostoevskian hero remains unfinalized [незавершенный]. What is so important about this is that the hero eludes being reduced to a mere function of the author's overall design. He is not an object subordinated to a greater structure allowing the author to express *her* truth.

The third crucial constituent of Bakhtin's literary polyphony is the notion of "unmerged voices". Bakhtin does not devote a separate chapter to this but keeps coming back to it throughout his *Problemy*. Comparing Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, he sees a major compositional difference between the two in that the former shows his heroes in isolation from each other (as in for instance 'Three Deaths') whereas the latter makes them clash and intersect. Dostoevsky's heroes meet, both in the external fictional reality and in their "dialogised" inner monologues. They are aware of the "truths" of the others and relate to them in one way or another. Ivan Karamazov, for instance,

knows and understands Zosima's truth, as well as Dmitry's truth, and Alyosha's truth, and the "truth" of that old sensualist, his father

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<sup>58</sup> Bakhtin, p. 53.

Fyodor Pavlovich. Dmitry understands all these truths as well; Alyosha, too, understands them perfectly. In *The Possessed*, there is not a single idea that fails to find a dialogic response in Stavrogin's consciousness.<sup>59</sup>

Part of this dialogic composition are the many conversations between the characters, Ivan and Alyosha, Raskolnikov and Porfirii, Stavrogin and Shatov. However, unlike the Socratic dialogue, the Dostoevskian dialogue never reaches any form of conclusion, according to Bakhtin. No one voice is given predominance over the others, nor does any singular message emerge implicitly *from* the many contradictory voices. The text does not “side” with anyone; nothing is affirmed or repudiated with finality. The nature of the dialogic relationships in Dostoevsky is not marked by ‘evolution’ [‘становление’] but by ‘coexistence’ [‘сосуществование’] and ‘interaction’ [‘взаимодействие’].<sup>60</sup> In this sense, polyphony is the very opposite of Hegelian dialectics. The antithetical ideas represented by two characters are never resolved by means of a synthesis. They clash and argue, but are never merged or reconciled. Dostoevskian dialogue never ‘leads to a merging of voices and truths in a single impersonal truth’.<sup>61</sup> Hence, there is no ‘merging of the author's and the other person's voice’.<sup>62</sup> In, say, *Besy*, there is not “one truth” that could be said to belong to the author, Dostoevsky, but

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 73.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 117.

only the truths of Stavrogin, Kirillov, Shatov, Stepan Trofimovich, and Piotr Verkhovenski.

Such is the polyphonic novel as Bakhtin understood it. Aleksievich's work could be described in similar terms, given the ideological nature of her subject matters and the multitude of voices, where every character speaks "for herself". In interviews and speeches, moreover, Aleksievich often mentions Dostoevsky as a point of reference and she has more than once insisted on the "plurality of truths" in her work. As she stated in the Nobel lecture: 'Всегда меня мучило, что правда не вмещается в одно сердце, в один ум. Что она какая-то раздробленная, ее много, она разная, и рассыпана в мире'.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in the abovementioned interview with Dmitrii Gordon, Aleksievich stated: 'Никогда я не выступаю элитистским судьей. Это как у Достоевского – каждый кричит свою правду. И я не судья. Я просто собираю время. Оно разное'.<sup>64</sup> Opinions are divided, however, as to whether such statements accurately reflect Aleksievich's poetics. Shortly after she was awarded the prize, Vladimir Golstein criticised Aleksievich for what he calls her "one-sided monologic message".<sup>65</sup> His article raises the issue of authorial agency in Aleksievich's work within the context of literary polyphony.

Golstein argues Aleksievich's work is not actually polyphonic in spirit. Having recognised the qualities of her writing, which 'captures the

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<sup>63</sup> Aleksievich.

<sup>64</sup> Aleksievich.

<sup>65</sup> Golstein.

misery and conveys the experiences of ordinary people who traditionally remain silent', he goes on to argue that her books are seriously flawed by a conflict between their formal polyphony and their monologic message.<sup>66</sup> The form Aleksievich has chosen, the montage of interview-based monologues, the multitude of voices that gravitates toward the polyphonic, should ideally allow a multitude of different opinions and points of view. According to Golstein, this is exactly what her writing is lacking, as the overwhelming majority of stories gives a highly negative image of the Soviet system.

Despite [the formal] polyphony of the voices, they all sound like testimonies in a trial, where they time and again prove to us that wars are evil and transform people in a way that we cannot imagine, just as nuclear accidents are tragic and devastating, as were the efforts of the Soviet government to handle their consequences.<sup>67</sup>

According to Golstein, this turns Aleksievich precisely into what she claims not to be: a judge. 'The majority of her books are structured in the same way', he argues: 'an inhumane Soviet regime is to be exposed and here are my star witnesses'.<sup>68</sup> In other words, Aleksievich only gives us "one side of the story". What we are presented with in

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

*Voices from Utopia* is by no means an “objective” representation of the Soviet system and how people experienced it. Instead, we see a highly subjective image shaped by Aleksievich’s own ideology. This ideology is typical for what Golstein refers to as “the liberal Soviet intelligentsia” or the “pro-west Russian intelligentsia” (hence the title of his article). An axiomatic truth for these intellectuals, he continues, is that ‘Russia is not a fully western country and therefore backward and inferior’, an opinion which, Golstein thinks, underpins Aleksievich’s writing agenda: ‘to convince us that the Soviet experiment was a failure in every way’.<sup>69</sup>

Golstein admits, of course, that it is the prerogative of any writer to depict reality in a subjective way, but he considers it ethically problematic to do so and at the same time claim to be a mouthpiece for other people. As he comments, ‘one moment Aleksievich appeals to her *licentia poetica* and to her right to present the documentary material in whatever form she sees fit, the next she claims to be a journalist who gives a voice to other people’.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the fundamental flaw of her writing method is that it presents a monologic message in a dialogic form. In Bakhtin’s terminology, what Golstein points to here is the absence in Aleksievich’s work of the “unmerged voices” [“неслиянность голосов”]. As opposed to Dostoevsky’s characters whose voices – according to Bakhtin’s reading – remain independent and unsubordinated, the voices of Aleksievich’s books merge with that of the author. According to Golstein, the dialogic composition in

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 26; 20.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

Aleksievich *does* arrive at a synthesis, at a conclusion; the multitude of voices – as Bakhtin would put it – merge in a single impersonal truth.

If the premise of Golstein's account is that we read Aleksievich's work as a representation of the Soviet system, Lindbladh approaches polyphony not from a political but psychological point of view and argues that the polyphonic composition of *Voices from Utopia* 'reflects an empathy with the witnesses' feelings of ambivalence when confessing their traumatic past'.<sup>71</sup> Lindbladh takes her point of departure in the subject's split attitude to the telling of a traumatic event, the contradiction between what Dori Laub has described as the "imperative to tell" and the "impossibility to tell".<sup>72</sup> On the one hand, Lindbladh explicates, the witnesses feel 'the existential need to narrate in order to understand and incorporate the traumatic event in the story of him or herself. On the other hand, the witness is reluctant to represent the trauma in the past, since every word seems insufficient'.<sup>73</sup> In order to convey this ambivalence, the text has to represent the traumatic event as something unfinished. This is accomplished, Lindbladh maintains, by means of an aesthetic strategy that allows the narrators to remain unfinalized in the same way as Dostoevsky's heroes do according to Bakhtin.

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<sup>71</sup> Lindbladh, p. 303.

<sup>72</sup> Dori Laub, "An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival", in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. by S. Felman and D. Laub (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 75–92 (p. 78). Quoted in: Lindbladh, p. 286.

<sup>73</sup> Lindbladh, p. 286.

Lindbladh's suggestion that the absence of explicit authorial commentary (which is characteristic of most of Aleksievich's books, including *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*) makes the voices unfinalized and independent in the Bakhtinian sense is important for the present discussion. Lindbladh observes – correctly – that a 'necessary prerequisite for a polyphonic composition is the avoidance of "a single authorial consciousness"'.<sup>74</sup> She then argues that this is achieved by what she calls 'the significant absence of an external perspective'.<sup>75</sup> Comparing *Voices from Utopia* to Adamovich's works, she observes that, in the latter, a reporter often describes the witnesses externally and inserts questions into their monologues, a device which is largely absent in Aleksievich's work. Aleksievich's prose lacks the degree of direct authorial commentary found in Adamovich. Lindbladh's proposition that 'this absence of an external perspective [...] is symptomatic of a polyphonic aesthetics' is at first sight justified, but the suggested implication that it 'allows the characters/witnesses to speak for themselves' is highly problematic, as the absence of direct authorial commentary does not mean that the character's speech does not become objectified in Bakhtin's sense of the word.<sup>76</sup> As we have seen, literary polyphony is not only the ostensible elimination of the presence of the author in the text. As Bakhtin comments on Pushkin's *Kapitanskaia dochka*: 'Grinev's story is constructed by Pushkin in a fixed monologic field of vision, even though this field is not represented

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 289.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 290.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 292.

externally in the composition because there is no direct authorial discourse'.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Lindbladh claims that the authorial essay, simply because it is presented as an 'Interv'iu avtora s samoi soboi' rather than as a preface, is located 'on the same hierarchical level as the other monologues'.<sup>78</sup> This, she claims, emphasises 'the polyphonic composition of this work'.<sup>79</sup> Yet, the 'Self-interview' is evidently hierarchically *superior* to the monologues, for two reasons. First, it is being uttered by the figure of the Author, Svetlana Aleksievich, elevated post-Soviet intellectual and recipient of numerous awards. Regardless of the way in which her meditations are being presented, a reader is likely to attach greater importance and validity to her words than those uttered by one of the many narrators. Second, as we will see in Chapter Three, the thoughts elaborated in the 'Self-interview' are confirmed in the subsequent monologues. The narrators repeat Aleksievich's observations and suggestions about the disaster, which gives these observations even greater ("empirical") validity. Thus, the voices of Aleksievich and those of the characters are *not* equal.

Scribner (2008) and Seppialainen (2016) have made observations not unlike Golstein's, saying that the voices of the witnesses in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* seem to merge in a single truth and confirm the observations made by Aleksievich in the 'Self-interview'. Scribner, examining the representation of trauma in

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<sup>77</sup> Bakhtin, p. 57.

<sup>78</sup> Lindbladh, p. 292. Henceforth, I will refer to this part of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* as 'Self-interview'.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.



*Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, states that 'through authorial choice of traumatized voices, a deliberate focusing of voices into a single point and addition of her strongly worded 'Self-interview', Aleksievich's opinion seems to overwhelm those of the other witnesses'.<sup>80</sup>

Comparing Aleksievich with Dostoevsky, she goes on to say: 'Whereas in Dostoevsky's polyphonic voice the individual speaks within a collective of voices [...] in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, the collective hero drowns out the individual voice'.<sup>81</sup> In other words, the voices seem to come together in one single voice, rather than reflecting a multitude of independent consciousness. From the perspective of her inquiry, Scribner is able to distinguish a "single impersonal truth", a 'message' attributable to the author, by which the voices are submerged:

'Aleksievich's big message' she says, '[...] insists that man has become dehumanized through Soviet ideology and a race for progress to the point where he has destroyed his habitat and that of the weaker creatures'.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, sounding much like Golstein when he suggests a serious contradiction between Aleksievich's simultaneous appeal to her '*licentia poetica*' and her claim to 'be a journalist who gives a voice to other people', Scribner comments on two public statements made by Aleksievich, one in an interview with Irina Rishina, the other in connection to the 1993 trial. In the former, talking about the importance of a multitude of different perspectives on the depicted event, Aleksievich said: 'The people [in my books] must be from varying

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<sup>80</sup> Doris Scribner, *Title*, Edition edn (unpublished, 2008 ), p. 103.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

professions, generations and ages, so that the event might be seen from various sides with totally different points of view'.<sup>83</sup> And, in the latter, defending her right to describe her own vision of reality: 'As a person, I ask your forgiveness for having caused you pain. But as a writer, I cannot. I cannot, I do not have the right to ask forgiveness for my book, for the truth!'<sup>84</sup> Scribner comments: 'It is difficult to reconcile this uncompromising statement with Aleksiyevich's comments that, in her literary approach, events must be seen from various viewpoints'.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, Seppialiainen, focusing on the ecocritical aspects of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, suggests that the narrators – through their strategic location in relation to each other and the opinions and observations they collectively repeat – serve to convey a message that emerges from the totality of voices. This message is explicitly stated by the Author in the 'Self-interview': 'На чернобыльской земле жалко человека. Но еще больше жалко зверя'.<sup>86</sup> The message is then reaffirmed, "proved" in the monologues: 'Высказывания про жалость к животным и про то, что общество было не готово к техногенной аварии из-за подготовки к войне встречаются на протяжении всей книги'.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, Seppialiainen concludes: «голос автора» можно

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<sup>83</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, "'Chernobyl'skaia molitva'. Mne kazhetsia, ia zapisyvaiu budushchee...", ed. by Irina Rishina (Literaturnaia Gazeta, 1996). Quoted in: Scribner, p. 103.

<sup>84</sup> Aleksievich. Quoted in: Scribner, p. 105.

<sup>85</sup> Scribner, p. 106.

<sup>86</sup> Iurii Seppialiainen, *Title*, Edition edn (unpublished, 2016), p. 49.

<sup>87</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva : Khronika budushchego*, (Moskva: Vremia, 2013). Quoted in: Seppialiainen, p. 49.

считать неким резюме тех голосов, которые заинтересовали Алексиевич'.<sup>88</sup> Throughout the book, a single authorial consciousness asserts itself, a certain set of interests and values that Seppialainen attributes to the author: 'С помощью структуры книги Алексиевич высказывает своё толкование последствий Чернобыльской аварии'.<sup>89</sup>

Although Aleksievich's writing has often been described as "polyphonic", most notably in the committee citation of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, several scholars argue that it is in fact not. While different voices seem to become audible in her book, the principal argument against the description of Aleksievich's writing as polyphonic is the perceived conflict between the formal polyphony (the multitude of voices) and the monologic message (the intentional agency of the single consciousness). This discrepancy does not explain the entire complexity of Aleksievich's work but it provides an important context in which to read her books and will serve as part of a methodological framework for my discussion of unreliable narrators in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* in the first section of Chapter Three. In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss the 1993 trial during which Aleksievich was accused of having misrepresented her interviewees in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, her third book. Specifically, I will look at the appendix to later editions of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, which deals with the trial and can be read as an explication of the author's view on the relationship between

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<sup>88</sup> Seppialainen, p. 49.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p. 48.

her own agency in her works and the responsibility to remain faithful to the documentary material.

### **The Trial**

In 1993, Svetlana Aleksievich was taken to court by four of the witnesses who had contributed to her third book, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (1991), who accused her of having distorted and falsified their statements given in interviews. Some plaintiffs denied ever having uttered statements cited in their name by Aleksievich; others claimed she had misrepresented them by “freely interpreting” what they said. In a later edition of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (1994), Aleksievich added a chapter about the trial, entitled ‘Sud nad “Tsinkovymi mal'chikami” (Istoriia v dokumentakh)’.<sup>90</sup> It covers a little more than sixty pages and consists of excerpts from Russian and Belarusian newspapers covering the trial, court documents, fragments of conversations in the court room, a six-pages long ‘independent literary analysis’ [‘независимая литературная экспертиза’] delivered by Viktor Kovalenko and Mikhail Tychina – two Belarusian writers and critics – as well as an authorial monologue entitled ‘Iz vystupleniia S. Aleksievich, avtora «Tsinkovykh mal'chikov» (iz togo, chto bylo skazano i chto ne dali skazat’)’.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, *Zacharovannye smert'iu*, (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Slovo, 1994). Henceforth I will refer to this appendix as ‘Sud’.

<sup>91</sup> Henceforth I will refer to this particular part of ‘Sud’ as ‘Iz vystupleniia’.

The trial would be a worthy topic for a separate study, as it crystallises important aspects of censorship and political repression in the post-Soviet sphere, as well as issues of freedom and responsibility in the writing of documentary literature. Here, I will limit myself to discussing Aleksievich's own depiction of the trial in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, without taking other material into account (such as court documents and recordings, or newspaper articles). In particular, I will look at 'Iz vystupleniia' – Aleksievich's explicit response to the accusations – as this seems to reflect the author's view on the relationship between her own artistic freedom and her responsibility to remain faithful to the documentary material.

The trial took place in the People's Court of the Central District of Minsk.<sup>92</sup> Four individuals filed lawsuits against Aleksievich: two former soldiers and two mothers of soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan. Speaking in general terms, all plaintiffs accuse Aleksievich of the same thing, namely distortion ['искажение']. Specifically, their accusations fall in three different categories. 1) Aleksievich freely "invented" parts of entire interviews – ('дописала то, что я не говорил'; 'некоторые факты добавила от себя'; 'явная ложь, вымыслы'; 'цитата выдуманная (т.е. не соответствует изложенному)').<sup>93</sup> 2) Aleksievich "interpreted freely" statements by her interviewees – ('сделала самостоятельные выводы, которые я не делал; вольная

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<sup>92</sup> Narodnyi sud Tsentral'nogo raiona goroda Minska.

<sup>93</sup> Aleksievich, p. 171; 74; 77.

интерпретация'.<sup>94</sup> 3) She “omitted” important parts of the interviewee’s statements – (‘многое из моих рассказов опустила’.<sup>95</sup> Throughout ‘Sud’, Aleksievich points out various irregularities in the legal proceedings. For instance, she states that she and her lawyer learned that the presiding judge had been replaced only a few minutes before the beginning of the court hearing. During the hearings, moreover, Aleksievich complains that she is verbally insulted and threatened by spectators, which is ignored by the judges. The plaintiffs are characterised as nervous, inarticulate and confused. In particular, one of them, T.M. Ketsmura, is presented as having changed his statements in a conspicuous way during the hearing, first claiming not to have ever met Aleksievich and later speaking about the person who introduced them to one another. There is also a recurrent suggestion that the plaintiffs have been persuaded, or forced, to file complaints against Aleksievich and that the trial is orchestrated by the Belarusian regime. According to Aleksievich’s presentation of events, the lawsuits were filed with no date and signature and the plaintiffs do not seem to know their exact contents. The wrongful nature of the entire trial is further emphasised by the inclusion in the appendix to *Tsinkovye mal’chiki* of a number of letters of protest, in which prominent post-Soviet intellectuals object against Aleksievich’s having been taken to court, praising her books and commending her talent and courage.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 171; 77.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 174.

'Iz vystupleniia' is strategically placed toward the end of 'Sud', giving it additional weight, and emerges as a statement less about the trial than about the principles of Aleksievich's aesthetics. After two short sections including fragments of conversations and the wording of the verdict (Aleksievich is found guilty on some of the charges), 'Iz vystupleniia' is followed by the independent literary analysis. These two echo each other, the latter confirming and stating more explicitly much of what is said in the former. Delivered by "independent experts", the literary analysis gives additional legitimacy to Aleksievich's statements in 'Iz vystupleniia'. Aleksievich spends a great part of 'Iz vystupleniia' discussing Soviet mentality, history, and depictions of war. She repeatedly suggests that the lawsuit is not the consequence of a conflict between herself and the mothers and soldiers, but between herself and the former (Soviet) regime. For instance: 'не [матери] со мной судятся, а судится со мной бывший режим'.<sup>96</sup> Or: 'За спинами матерей я вижу генеральские погоны'.<sup>97</sup> The implication of this is twofold. First, the suggestion is that the trial was initiated not by the plaintiffs personally but by reactionary "Soviet" political forces (the Belarusian authorities). Second, it divests the plaintiffs of individual willpower and the capacity to think independently, reducing them to anonymous representatives of historical and political forces. Soviet mentality, as it were, "speaks through them".

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p. 200.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p. 202.

The most important point with regard to the questions of faithfulness, authorial freedom and agency, is expressed mid-way through the text of 'Iz vystupleniia':

Что я должна отстаивать? Свое писательское право видеть мир таким, как я его вижу. [...] Или я должна доказать, что есть правда и правдоподобие, что документ в искусстве – это не справка из военкомата и не трамвайный билет. Те книги, которые я пишу, – это своего рода проза. Это – документ и в то же время мой образ времени. Я собираю подробности, чувства не только из отдельной человеческой жизни, но из всего воздуха времени, его пространства, его голосов. Я не выдумываю, не домысливаю, а организовываю материал в самой действительности. Документ – это и те, кто мне рассказывает, документ – это и я как человек со своим мировоззрением, ощущением.<sup>98</sup>

To properly understand this statement we must examine the relations between Aleksievich's notions of 'pravda', 'pravdopodobie', 'proza', 'vydumyvat', and 'dokument'. First, she makes a distinction between 'pravda' and 'pravdopodobie'. 'Pravdopodobie' is a compound formed by 'pravda' ('truth') and 'podobie', which means 'semblance' or 'similarity'. A Russian dictionary defines 'pravdopodobie' as 'сходство с

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p. 203.



правдой',<sup>99</sup> which could be translated into English as verisimilitude; probability; likelihood; plausibility. Further, it is this insistence on 'semblance of truth' rather than 'truth' here that makes Aleksievich's books '*sui generis* prose' ['своего рода проза'].

Interestingly, a comparison of these statements with those from the 2015 Nobel Lecture reveals a number of problematic contradictions. In 2015, Aleksievich says: 'писать *прозу* о кошмарах XX века кощунственно. Тут нельзя *выдумывать*. *Правду* нужно давать, как она есть' [Emphasis mine].<sup>100</sup> 'Proza' is here associated with fiction ('vydumyat'), and as such stands in an oppositional relationship to 'pravda'. In the Nobel Lecture, writing 'prose' about the 'nightmares of the 20<sup>th</sup> century' is 'sacrilege'. In 'Iz vystupleniia', she states that her books 'are *sui generis* prose'.

The inconsistencies in these two statements can at least in part be explained by the gap of twenty-one years between them; the appendix to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* was published in 1994, the Nobel lecture held in 2015. There is also a high degree of coherence in the statements when they are read with a more complex understanding of the binary of fact and fiction. What Aleksievich seems to be saying is that she does *not* "write prose" in the sense that she does not "invent" ['выдумывать'] (like for instance the Strugatsky brothers "invented" *Piknik na obochine* or Tolstoy *Voina i mir*). She *does* write prose,

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<sup>99</sup> S.A. Kusnetsov, *Bol'shoi tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka*, (Saint Petersburg: Norint, 2000), p. 952.

<sup>100</sup> Aleksievich.

however, in the sense that the truthfulness of her books is not grounded in a strict correspondence between referent and signified. Truthfulness is not to cite her interviewees literally. This is probably how her distinction between 'pravda' and 'pravdopodobie' in 'Iz vystupleniia' should be understood. Here (and only here) 'pravda' is an 'official note from the military commissariat' ['справка из военкомата'] or a tram ticket ['трамвайный билет']. These are deliberately simplistic examples of what would and could be deemed a truthful document ['документ'] in a non-art discourse. An artistic document ['документ в искусстве'], however, does not draw its truthfulness from 'pravda' but from 'pravdopodobie', from 'semblance of truth'. Thus, truthfulness in art is for Aleksievich not a matter of correspondence between text and extra-textual reality (text and interview); rather, truthfulness is based on the aesthetic means by which a compelling textual reality is created.

This standpoint brings to mind Hayden White's distinction between history and fiction. As I have already signalled, according to White the significance of Levi's book does not primarily consist in the new *information* he gives about the camps but rather in the artistically refined depiction of them. Aleksievich seems to be saying something similar here. She does not 'invent' ['Я не выдумываю, не домысливаю'] but '*organises the material*' ['организовываю материал'].<sup>101</sup> Part of the truthfulness of her work is thus grounded in the selection and organisation of the material, and the rewriting of a

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<sup>101</sup> Aleksievich, p. 203.

transcribed interview into a fluent monologue, in other words Aleksievich's authorial agency. Of course, this does not mean that the interviewee is completely eradicated as textual subject. The interviewee remains – but to what degree? Or conversely: to what degree does the single authorial consciousness assert itself? It is this question that makes an inquiry into the authorial presence in Aleksievich's books so relevant. Her texts are both 'they and I', as she states in 'Iz vystupleniia': 'Документ – это и те, кто мне рассказывает, документ – это и я как человек со своим мировоззрением, ощущением'.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2: Aleksievich's Author

### The Author as Medium

Considering New Documentary Literature in general and Aleksievich's work in particular, Sivakova notes the 'mediating function of the author' ['особую *медиумную* функцию автора'] who 'by listening to, recording and letting the confessional stories of a multitude of people pass through herself, gives her characters an incitement, an impulse of remembrance, a direction of recollection' ['выслушивая, записывая и пропуская через себя рассказы-исповеди множества разных людей, дает своим героям толчок, импульс памяти, ее направление'].<sup>103</sup> The author acts as a channel by which the first-hand accounts of the nuclear disaster reach the reader. Researching *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, Aleksievich reports having talked to around five hundred people: 'Out of 500 or more interviews 107 were included in the final version; that is, approximately one in five'.<sup>104</sup> The vast majority of the interviewees are people who would not have been able to make themselves heard in the public realm: villagers, soldiers, firefighters, clean-up workers, while more politically and culturally active interviewees such as Gennadii Grushevoi, a Belarusian member of Parliament, would never have been able to reach out to an audience as big and internationally diverse as Aleksievich's. Consisting of material

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<sup>103</sup> Sivakova, p. 76.

<sup>104</sup> Aleksievich.

from a little more than hundred interviews, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* tells stories that would otherwise have remained unknown to the world.

The mediating function of the author is twofold. She not only communicates the stories to her readers by recording and publishing them, but also contributes to producing (or rather eliciting) the stories, by seeking out and interviewing the eyewitnesses who might otherwise have remained silent. The author thus has two roles: that of interviewer and that of writer. In the final text, the function of the author as *interviewer* is mirrored by the narratee: the figure to whom the narrators address their discourse. In a few monologues, the narrators address the narratee explicitly, appealing to her to 'write it down', thereby stressing the urgency of making the testimony known to the world and reminding the reader that she is hearing something that occurred in actuality. For instance: 'Хотя бы вы запишите:'<sup>105</sup> Most frequently, however, the presence of the narratee is just vaguely felt in how the narrators *seem* to address a silent interlocutor. Some of them begin their monologues by replying to an implicit question or imperative, for instance Katia P. who in the beginning of her monologue says: 'Вспоминать? Может, надо на всякий случай оттолкнуть от себя...' – as if answering the question 'What can you recall?'<sup>106</sup> A silent observer and listener, the narratee allows herself no more than short bracketed remarks, reminiscent of stage-directions: '(Закрывает лицо

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<sup>105</sup> Aleksievich, p. 53.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

руками и молчит)'.<sup>107</sup> In this way, she both reveals herself and recedes into the background, giving the narrators near maximal textual space.

The narratee and author are mirror-images of each other, one explicitly identified with the other. Responding to a narrator who is asking what her book will be about, the narratee says: 'Про Чернобыль'.<sup>108</sup> Of course, it is important not to confuse the two. By *author* I mean the human being, Svetlana Aleksievich, born in 1948, educated at the State University of Minsk. Traditionally conceived of as the first instance in a communication model describing the act of narration – going from Author to Narrator to Narratee and Reader – several terms have been suggested for the author as physical person. Wayne Booth refers to it as the 'real author',<sup>109</sup> Harvey Hix calls it the 'creative author',<sup>110</sup> Jorge Gracia suggests the term 'historical author'<sup>111</sup> and Alexander Nehamas simply opts for 'writer'.<sup>112</sup> Virtually synonymous, these terms all signify the author as a physical person, i.e. as the agent who produces the text. They differ only in terms of what they emphasise, Booth's and Nehamas' terms being the more

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 169.

<sup>109</sup> Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 71.

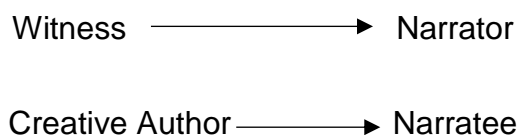
<sup>110</sup> Harvey Hix, 'Morte d'Author: An Autopsy', *The Iowa Review*, 17 (1987), 142.

<sup>111</sup> Jorge J.E. Gracia, 'Can There be Texts without Historical Authors?', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 31 (1994), 245.

<sup>112</sup> Alexander Nehamas, 'Writer, Text, Work, Author', in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. by William Irwin (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 95-115 (p. 95).

neutral ones. I will henceforth use Hix's term 'creative author' because of its useful emphasis on the creative act performed by Aleksievich: the assembling, selection, and aesthetic processing and arrangement of the text. Another reason for choosing this particular term is that the witnesses, too, in a sense, are authors. Therefore it would entail a confusing and misleading contrast to use the term 'real author' or 'historical author' in regard to Aleksievich.

Calling Aleksievich a 'creative author' designates her as physical person, and locates her outside the text. The narratee, by contrast, 'a person to whom the narrator addresses his discourse', is situated within the text and is an object constructed *by* the creative author.<sup>113</sup> In this model, the creative author in the role of interviewer becomes the narratee, an intra-textual author-persona. In the same way, the witness in the role of interviewee becomes a narrator:



### **The Obscured Presence of the Creative Author**

Appearing directly only in the 'Self-interview' and in the sentences attributed to the narratee, the author's presence is at first sight reduced

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<sup>113</sup> J.A. Cuddons, 'Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory', (London: Penguin Books, 2015), (p. 456).

to a minimum. However, as Sivakova has noted: ‘впечатление, связанное с ощущением его отсутствия, совершенно обманчиво’.<sup>114</sup> On the one hand, Sivakova maintains, the author ‘absents herself in order to give way for the heroes and the facts’ [‘уступа[ет] место героям и фактам’], thereby functioning as a silent medium for the witnesses to tell their stories; on the other hand, the author organises the text, selecting and arranging the material and so putting her stamp on it: ‘Документ не убивает творческое «я»’.<sup>115</sup> Therefore, Sivakova suggests:

каждый образ, каждую деталь в книгах Алексиевич необходимо рассматривать в двух ценностных аспектах: в аспекте жизни героя, для которого пережитые события определили всю его дальнейшую судьбу, и в аспекте замысла всей книги: все её содержание подчинено авторским задачам.<sup>116</sup>

But who is the author of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*? Svetlana Aleksievich is *identified* as its author; the copyright of the work belongs to her; she is criticised and praised for it. Yet, the work consists of statements that are produced by a multitude of people. The monologues that constitute the book are based on verbatim recorded interviews and are explicitly

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<sup>114</sup> Sivakova, p. 149.

<sup>115</sup> Sivakova, p. 76.

<sup>116</sup> Sivakova, p. 38.



attributed to the interviewees, who are quoted by name and cited in the first person. If we understand the author to be that person who produces the text, then the witnesses are authors, too. We can thus view them from two perspectives. As interviewees, producers of text, providers of the raw material for the written work, they are authors (witnesses-authors). As speakers in the completed work with a designated function within the artistic design of the book, they are narrators (witnesses-narrators). In their former capacity, they are independent subjects. In the latter, they are constructed objects, whose function is to some degree controlled by another, transcendental agency – that of the creative author (Aleksievich). The first monologue of the book, ‘*Odinokii chelovecheskii golos*’, begins thus: ‘Я не знаю, о чем рассказывать... О смерти или о любви? Или это одно и то же...’.<sup>117</sup> Who is speaking here? On a textual level, the sentence is uttered by the narrator, but the specific function of these words within the wider text is controlled by Aleksievich, who chose to start the monologue at this particular point in the conversation and who gave these words a prime position in opening all of the witness statements. This raises the question of authorial intervention. The only part of Aleksievich’s interview recordings that has become publicly available is a fragment of a conversation between herself and two interlocutors, a man and a woman whom she interviews about their experiences in the Kolyma labour camp. Given its limited extent, this interview fragment does not allow us to establish the exact degree of authorial intervention

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<sup>117</sup> Aleksievich, p. 11.

in Aleksievich's writing, but it does give us an indication of the possible extent of her authorial intrusions not only in this instance:

Aleksievich: Tell me please if it is true that many people who were in positions of power in the camps [Gulag], those who were in management, that many of them committed suicide. They were afraid that they would be sought out, and they would be interrogated.

Man: You see, it was not distinguished people who were picked for these roles, but the immoral careerists, who would sell you for a rouble.

Aleksievich: Tell me, what were your thoughts when you went through that, were they similar to Luliia Pavlovna's [his spouse]. Did you both feel the same way as you went through it? Did you believe that the party would figure it out, that it would bring justice?<sup>118</sup>

The difference between this interview fragment and the monologues that shape Aleksievich's books is striking. What is perhaps most conspicuous is how actively Aleksievich participates in the interview, asking leading questions and steering the conversation in particular

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<sup>118</sup> Volha Isakava, 'Between the public and the private: Svetlana Aleksievich interviews Ales' Adamovich. Translator's preface', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59 (2017), 370. The interview fragment covers two pages in its entirety and has only been published in Isakava's English translation.

directions. In the finished work, as we saw earlier, the narratee absents herself. The text is not presented as a dialogue but a monologue. This alone suggests that the raw material undergoes an extensive editing process. This assumption is also consistent with the fact that the monologues are written according to a strict aesthetic symmetry, as we will see. In 'Odnokii chelovecheskii golos', after the first statement in which the narrator replies to an implied interviewer, she goes on to tell her story. She narrates the night of the explosion, the death of her husband (a firefighter) and her life thereafter. Framing the monologue thematically, the dichotomy of love and death is restated in the end: 'О смерти люди не хотят слушать. О страшном... Но я вам рассказала о любви... Как я любила...'.<sup>119</sup> By ostentatiously leaving the last word to the narrator/interviewee, Aleksievich assigns to these words the function of conclusion which articulates the existential notion of the intricate relationship between love and death. This then raises the question of who controls the overall meaning of both individual monologue and the overall text.

There is a classic typology of narrators suggested by Plato and Aristotle. It identifies three basic kinds, distinguished on the basis of the relationship between narrator and author: 'a) the speaker or poet (or any kind of writer) who uses his own voice; b) one who assumes the voice of another person or persons, and speaks in a voice not his own; c) one who uses a mixture of his own voice and that of others'.<sup>120</sup> An

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<sup>119</sup> Aleksievich, p. 29.

<sup>120</sup> Cuddons, p. 459.

example of the first kind would be the autobiographical novel *My Struggle* by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard in which the narrator is explicitly identified with the author: 'Today is 27 of February. The time is 11.43 p.m. I, Karl Ove Knausgaard, was born in December 1968, and at the time of writing I am thirty-nine years old'.<sup>121</sup> An example of the second type, suggested by Cuddons, is Byron's poem *The Prisoner of Chillon* in which the author assumes the voice of François de Bonnivard who was imprisoned in the castle of Chillon in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: 'My hair is grey, but not with years, / Nor grew it white / In a single night [...]'.<sup>122</sup> Exemplifying the third kind, Cuddons cites Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the poet 'begins in his own voice in the first person to invoke the "heavenly muse"'.<sup>123</sup> Some thirty lines later, the muse responds to Milton's invocation: 'The infernal serpent; he it was [...]'.<sup>124</sup> Thereafter a third voice is introduced, when Satan speaks: 'Breaking the horrid silence thus began. / If thou beest he; but O how fallen! how changed [...]'.<sup>125</sup>

Into which of these categories do the narrators of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* fall? The answer to this question depends on whom we consider to be the author, i.e. the creator of the monologue. If we see Liudmila Ignatenko as its author, then the narrator pertains to

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<sup>121</sup> Karl-Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family: My Struggle 1*, (London: Vintage Books, 2013), p. 22.

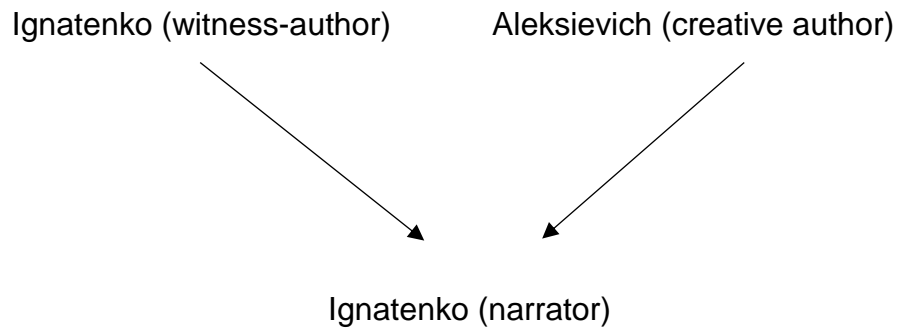
<sup>122</sup> Lord Byron, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>123</sup> Cuddons, p. 459.

<sup>124</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

the first category: the author speaks in her own voice. If we regard Aleksievich as the author, then the narrator belongs to the second category: the author assumes the voice of another person. There is also the possibility of considering the identity of the author not of a single monologue, but of the entire work. From this point of view, the narrators of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* belong to the third kind, a mixture of voices. The author begins in her own voice (in the 'Self-interview') and thereafter assumes the voice of the witnesses. The problem with this way of reasoning, of course, is that Aleksievich does not *assume* Ignatenko's voice in the same way as Byron assumes François de Bonnivard's and Milton Satan's voice. For Byron, de Bonnivard could be said to be a source of inspiration or a literary motif, a vehicle that allows the communication of something about religious freedom, brotherly love, tyranny and isolation from nature. Arguably, Ignatenko is for Aleksievich a literary motif, an entity within the semantic system of the literary work, a vehicle that allows communicating something about love and death, but she is also a historical eyewitness whose statements must be faithfully reported. Refraining from inventing and adding words of her own to the documentary material, Aleksievich is restricted to the statements that Ignatenko made during the interview. These statements she arranges as she sees fit. While she can include and omit particular sentences or parts of sentences, emphasise an utterance by using ellipses, exclamation marks, indents etc., she cannot add anything Ignatenko did not say. On the level of the single monologue, therefore, it makes sense to talk about a double authorship:



What are the implications of this? First of all, the double authorship of the monologue is far from obvious to a reader, as *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* convincingly creates an illusion that we hear the witness “directly”. It does so in four ways. First, actual people are identified as the extra-textual speakers (authors) of the statements. The historical reality of this referent is clearly indicated: we know the speakers’ names and sometimes what professions they have and where they live. Their existence can be verified; it is enough to google Gennadii Grushevoi’s name to read about his work for the Chornobyl’ children and his recent death in 2014.

Second, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* presents itself as a text where nothing is invented. As I suggested in Chapter One, Aleksievich’s literary form is exceedingly ambiguous and *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* can justifiably be approached as novel, journalistic report and something in between. What matters here, however, are the expectations that the referential nature of the text establishes, what Tzvetan Todorov calls the ‘horizon of expectation’. Just as genres function as ‘models of

writing' for authors, he says, they prescribe the reader's attitude to the text, what she expects from it and how she responds to it: '[...] readers read in function of the generic system, with which they are familiar thanks to criticism, schools, the book distribution system, or simply by hearsay; however, they do not need to be conscious of this system'.<sup>126</sup>

In this regard it is illuminating to discuss *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* in comparison to an unambiguously fictional work that shares some of its defining formal traits, the multitude of voices and first person-narration, for instance Milan Kundera's *The Joke* (*Žert*) from 1967. Here, four narrators – Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav, and Kostka – speak in the first person. Stylistically, their voices are clearly distinct, Ludvik's being characterised by a tone of fussy loquaciousness and the use of brackets, Helena's by longish, stream of consciousness-like sentences. Reading the novel, we know that these voices are the result of a number of aesthetic choices and considerations; in other words, that they were created by the author, Milan Kundera, whose name is written in upper case letters on the book cover.

Despite this awareness, however, we listen to Ludvik's voice as if we were actually hearing *him* speak. Unthinkingly, we enter into an agreement with the text based on our suspension of disbelief. Coined by Coleridge, the notion of suspension of disbelief describes 'the mechanisms of assimilation required to appreciate an invented situation, particularly a work of drama or fiction in film, theatre, or

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<sup>126</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 18.

literature'.<sup>127</sup> Whether the reader 'adopts a position of trust' because '[she] expects the work of art to give [her] pleasure',<sup>128</sup> 'holds second-order beliefs about objects of compassion which do not conflict with first-order beliefs [...] that we are dealing with fiction'<sup>129</sup> or 'pretends to believe'<sup>130</sup> is irrelevant for this discussion. The point is the *fact* that the reader, by one mechanism or another, accepts what she knows is fictional as true in some sense. Even though we know that the events described in *The Joke* never happened, that no man named Ludvik travelled to Brno to seduce the wife of his former friend, that no girl named Lucy was raped, we "believe" in these events, in the sense that we respond emotionally to them *as if* to something real: we empathise with Ludvik's bitterness, we pity Lucy. In the same way, we "believe" that we hear Ludvik speak, even though we know that his voice is an object constructed by Milan Kundera.

In *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* the reader's expectation is diametrically opposed, starting with the reader's historical knowledge that on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1986 the fourth reactor in the Chornobyl' nuclear power plant was brought down by a series of explosions. Based on the knowledge that the events described *did* happen, by extension the reader expects that the narrators are real people. Whereas the

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<sup>127</sup> Greg Martin, 'Notes on the Willing Suspension of Disbelief', 1.

<sup>128</sup> Norman N. Holland, 'The "Willing Suspension of Disbelief" revisited', *The Centennial Review*, 11 (1967), 5; 6.

<sup>129</sup> Eva Scharper, 'Fiction and the Suspension of Disbelief', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 18 (1978), 43.

<sup>130</sup> Kendall Walton, L., 'Appreciating Fiction: Suspending Disbelief or Pretending Belief?', *Dispositio*, 5 (1980), 2.



reader of *The Joke* postulates the creative author within the character's enunciations as their omnipresent but invisible creator, a reader of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* locates the author outside of them as an agent who might arrange but does not create the narrators. The reader of *The Joke* "believes" that she is hearing Ludvik speak; the reader of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* believes that she actually hears Ignatenko speak.

Third, the activity of the creative author is further obscured by the presence of an intra-textual author as narratee. This is the second function of the bracketed stage-remarks, concisely observing that a witness starts to whisper, turns silent, cries, gets up or approaches the window. In the first monologue, the narrator says: 'А когда умер, ни разу не позвал. Ни разу...'<sup>131</sup> Then, the narratee comments: '(Плачет)'.<sup>132</sup> The reader thus separates the two – the voice of the "witness" and that of the "author" – and perceives only one of them – the narratee – as a construct by the creative author. Thus, the bracketed remarks deepens the impression that the author limits herself only to absolutely necessary intrusions.

Fourth, there are no obvious indications of the aesthetic elaboration of the interview. The monologues as they appear in Aleksievich's book retain (or construct) the character of fragmentation, spontaneity and temporal and thematic digressions that are associated with face-to-face conversations. The conversational character of the

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<sup>131</sup> Aleksievich, p. 14.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

monologues is further reinforced by the frequent use of ellipsis, exclamation marks, rhetorical questions, slang, cursing, fragmented sentences and omitted pronouns. In this way, the text creates an impression of authenticity around the monologues; they appear to be given “directly”, with only a very low degree of external editing.

Taken together, these strategies make the reader less aware of the monologue as a mediated entity. Paradoxically, even though we recognise Svetlana Aleksievich as the author, i.e. the creator of the overall work, we perceive the witnesses to be the authors of the shorter texts that constitute it. A particularly illustrative example of our blindness to the activity of the creative author in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* are the titles of the monologues, which often paraphrase or directly cite something uttered by the narrator. For instance, in the section entitled '*Monolog o tom, chto tol'ko vo zle chelovek izoshchren i kak on prost i dostupen v nekhitrikh slovakh liubvi*', the narrator says: 'Только во зле человек изощрён. Но как он прост и доступен в нехитрых словах любви'.<sup>133</sup> In the title, the statement has been rewritten from direct to reported speech with the inclusion of '*Monolog o tom, chto [...]*'. '*No*' has been replaced with '*i*' and the full stop with a comma. Apart from that, the wording is identical. As part of the title, the sentence reveals the distinct presence of the creative author. As part of the monologue, the same words are attributed to the narrator. It is tempting to solve this ambiguity by positing Aleksievich as the ultimate

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

author of the words in the title, because Aleksievich clearly a) selected this sentence (out of all sentences uttered by the witness) and b) located it in this particular place and fashion (in the beginning, separated from the rest of the monologue, in capital letters and bold font). But is this not true of *all* sentences in the text, including those uttered by the narrator? The words in the monologue (uttered by the narrator) and those in the title (not uttered by the narrator) undergo the exact same process: from interviewee through creative author to narrator.

The title then is selected with an obvious authorial intention: it encapsulates, often metaphorically, the central topic of the monologue and directs the reader's attention to it. The words of the narrator that mirror the title are there for the same reason. Often, these are positioned at the end of the monologue, recapitulating the title and emphasising a central point. An example would be 'Monolog svidetelia, u kotorogo bolel zub, kogda on videl, kak upal khristos i nachal krichat', where the narrator, in the third passage from the last, alludes to the Russian writer Leonid Andreev's story of Ben-Tovit, a Jerusalem merchant who suffered from toothache on the day of the Crucifixion and remained oblivious to the magnitude of the event. The narrator of this monologue, Arkadii Filin, a clean-up worker who at the time of the disaster was being divorced by his wife, sees himself in the light of the story. Next, he mentions his father, who fought the Germans in Moscow in 1942:

То, что участвовал в истории, он понял через десятки лет. Из книг, из фильмов. А сам вспоминал: «Сидел в окопе. Стрелял. Взрывом засыпало. Полумёртвого санитары выволокли». И все.<sup>134</sup>

These two motifs – Filin’s recollection of his father’s attitude to his wartime experience and his reading of Andreev’s story – reinforce by way of resemblance/contrast the monologue’s central dichotomy of personal experience (divorce) and blindness to historical significance (the Chornobyl’ disaster). Every sentence that mentions the narrator’s wife is part of the same semantic structure. Compositionally, the distribution of these motifs can be described in musical terms, as exposition, development, repetition, recapitulation, and final entry, as in a fugue or sonata:

**Exposition** (first passage): ‘Тогда я думал о другом... Вам покажется странным... Как раз в это время я разводился с женой...’<sup>135</sup>

**Development** (second passage): ‘Мне изменила жена, все остальное казалось ерундой. Сел в этот «воронка»...’<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p. 106.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

**Repetition** (second and third passages): ‘Но от меня ушла жена... Я способен был думать только об этом...’<sup>137</sup>

‘Почему я должен рисковать, когда кто-то будет спать с моей женой. Почему опять я, а не он?’<sup>138</sup>

**Recapitulation** (fourteenth passage): ‘Жена даже письма не прислала. За полгода ни одного письма...’<sup>139</sup>

**Final entry** (nineteenth and final passage): ‘А меня тогда бросила жена...’<sup>140</sup>

All these elements – the Andreev story, the father, the wife’s betrayal – are included in the text because of their meaningfulness for what the story as a whole is intended to communicate, and they are strategically placed within the monologue with consideration to rhythm and thematic emphasis. They are also meaningful as entities in the wider semantic field of the entire work. The story of Arkadii Filin’s divorce is one of many about love relationships and ties in with a thematic concern that runs throughout *Chernobyl’skaia molitva*. The same can be said of the narrator’s meditations on Soviet life, his comparison of the rounding up of clean-up workers with the mass arrests during the Great Purge in 1937, the bribery and disorganised nature of work in the contaminated zone, what he refers to as ‘typical Russian chaos’ ‘[Н]ормальный

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 112.

русский хаос’].<sup>141</sup> Furthermore: his impression of scenic beauty in the area, seemingly incompatible with the horror, the ‘Uzhas’ of the disaster.<sup>142</sup> Or, in connection to the telling of the clean-up workers’ near-suicidal recklessness, the twofold repetition of the following phrase suggests the background polemic with the Socialist Realist narrative of the heroic deed: ‘Я вас предупреждал... Ничего героического...’<sup>143</sup> As we shall see, all these units of content are variations of recurrent motifs in the work. They reflect a general thematic concern and serve to reinforce what could be termed the “messages” of the book.

But why stop there? ‘Ничего я вам не рассказал... Обрывки...’.<sup>144</sup> Why is this noted, as opposed to everything that the witness said but Aleksievich chose *not* to include? What about the narratee’s bracketed comments? On two occasions she observes that the narrator stops speaking: ‘Закуривает сигарету и молчит’ and ‘Останавливается’.<sup>145</sup> Now if he lit a cigarette, he must have put it out, but this is passed over in silence. Or let us imagine that he at some point looked out the window, tapped his fingers on the table, cleared his throat or coughed. None of these details are mentioned, simply because they are not deemed notable by the creative author. In the semantic system of the monologue, the extinguishing of a cigarette would not have any connotative or symbolic value – it would signify

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. p. 107; 11.

nothing. The moments when the narrator lights a cigarette and stops to speak, however, *do* signify: they both occur directly after he mentions his wife and so they indicate the sudden pain of traumatic memory (silence connoting trauma, smoking – pensiveness).<sup>146</sup>

The recording in the text of an event or an uttered word, then, is not occasioned by its mere referential reality, but by the meaning invested in it by the creative author. To think otherwise would be to fall prey to what Roland Barthes calls the ‘referential illusion’, the impression that the referent ‘speaks for itself’.<sup>147</sup> This impression is produced through the various means by which the creator of the text ‘absents himself’ from it, the ‘systematic absence of any signs of the sender of the historical message’.<sup>148</sup> It is not an exclusive property of historical writing, for, as Barthes points out, ‘how many novelists [...] imagine they are being “objective” because they suppress signs of / in the discourse!’<sup>149</sup> ‘/’ here should not be understood as the ‘/’ of first-person narratives but as the selecting and organising agent of the text, i.e. the author, who does not seem to address the reported event for any other reason than that *it took place*: the mere fact of its occurrence appears to be sufficient justification for speaking about it. However, all representational writing inevitably endows reality with subjective

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<sup>146</sup> This is a common device in Aleksievich’s writing, which is very much concerned with trauma and the unsayable. Pauses, silences and suddenly interrupted speech indicate that a point of utmost pain has been reached in the narration.

<sup>147</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986), p. 132.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p. 132.

meaning by virtue of its structure, for example by allocating much or little textual space to an event, presenting it as a beginning or end, a cause or reason. The “objectivity” of historiography (or literature), where the historian (or writer) “never intervenes”, therefore, is an unattainable ideal, for by the mere inclusion in the narrative of one name, event or occurrence rather than another, the writer has already designated some events as important and other as insignificant. Citing Nietzsche, Barthes says:

“There are no facts as *such*. We must always begin by introducing a meaning in order for there to be a fact”. Once language intervenes (and when does it not intervene?), a fact can be defined only tautologically: the *noted* issues from the *notable*, but the *notable* is [...] only what is worthy of memory, i.e. worthy to be *noted*.<sup>150</sup>

In other words, the narrator lights a cigarette not because the witness did so during the interview, but because Aleksievich chose to note it. This is true of everything in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, from the smallest detail – a sudden smile, the momentarily intensified sentence fragmentation in a certain passage – to the most extensive blocks of text. In the abovementioned interview with Lučić, Aleksievich says that out of the 100-150 pages that a transcribed conversation with a witness

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid. p. 138.



comprises, around ten go into the finished book, in other words somewhere between six and ten percent.<sup>151</sup> The documentary material undergoes a careful selection and every word in the monologue is included for a specific purpose. This does not mean that Aleksievich “invents” sentences or details. Rather the monologues in *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* – no less than a chapter in a work of fiction – are the result of aesthetic and thematic considerations on the part of the creative author, contrary to what the rhetoric surrounding the monologues seem to suggest, namely that we hear the witness speak “directly”. Commenting on the literary aspect of her writing in an interview with Nadezhda Azhgikhina, Aleksievich says:

для меня важно было превратить исповеди, которые я слышала, не в документ, но в искусство. Чтобы каждый рассказ был как новелла. Он и строится по законам новеллы, тут есть своя музыка, свой ритм, свой контрапункт.<sup>152</sup>

Thus far I have addressed the question of authorship mostly on the level of the single monologue. I have pointed out its double authorship where the witness provides all the words of which the monologue consists and Aleksievich endows them with meaning by selecting and

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<sup>151</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, 'A Conversation with Svetlana Alexievich', ed. by Ana Lučić.

<sup>152</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, 'Moia sleduiushaia kniga budet o liubvi', ed. by Nadezhda Azhgikhina (Nezavisimaia gazeta, 1996).

distributing them according to her authorial intention and the 'laws of the novella' ['по законам новеллы']. I have indicated why this dynamic eludes the reader of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, the suppression of what Sivakova calls the 'artistic "I"'; or, to use Barthes's term: why a reader of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is lead to believe in the referential illusion.

However, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* generates its meaning not only *within* the monologues, but *between* and *throughout* them. Between them, specific points of contact create juxtapositions. Throughout them, the successions of recurrent leitmotifs present the reader with a well-defined interpretation of the Chornobyl' disaster. On this level, the artistic "I" is still suppressed as the messages are communicated with extreme subtlety. However, as opposed to the level of the single monologue, there can be no such thing as a double authorship here, as the witnesses obviously have no control over which monologues go into the book, or the ordering of them in relation to each other. The meaning produced by the arrangement of larger textual units and thematic insistence can therefore only be attributed to the creative author. The main part of my analysis of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* in Chapter Three will be devoted to this: an examination of the recurrent motifs and juxtapositions as manifestations of authorial agency.

### **Authorial Agency and Intention**

Throughout this chapter, I have used a vocabulary stressing a) the author and b) intention ('artistic "I"', 'obvious intention', 'created by the author', and so forth). The view of the author as the location or source of meaning of the artistic text, however, is far from unproblematic. Since the inception of Russian formalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a long tradition of literary criticism has problematized the importance traditionally given to the author in literary studies, arguing that author-focused readings confuse personal and poetic studies (Wimsatt and Beardsley) and suppress the plurality of meaning of the literary text (Barthes). In the following discussion, I will provide a theoretical framework for addressing the role of the author in Aleksievich's work in general. First, I will outline the problematic questions surrounding the concepts of intention and interpretation in narrative fiction, discussing the authorial intentionalism proposed by E.D. Hirsch and Roland Barthes's critique of the Author. I will then discuss Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author and its applicability to the intentional agency in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*.

The concern with intention and the role and function of the author can be traced throughout the most important movements in literary studies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Russian formalism, New American criticism, Structuralism, and Post-structuralism. These movements and their canonical figures address the issue from their own specific perspectives and with their particular emphasis, but all debates ultimately focus on the question of whether our understanding of a text should be determined by our sense of what the author meant by it. After

all the literary text is not (save for the Dadaist poem) a haphazard collection of words but supposed to be a unified structure developed according to aesthetic principles. As we have seen in the discussion above, the author chooses her words for one reason or another, with a particular intention. Therefore it seems only logical that we should try to determine accurately the author's intended meaning in our reading of her text.

In his *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) and *The Aims of Interpretation* (1976), one of the most canonical proponents of authorial intentionalism, E.D. Hirsch, offers two arguments to support such a view. The first argument is of an ethical nature. It states that it is not a logical imperative but an ethical obligation to *choose* the author's intention as an interpretative criterion, because this mode of enquiry safeguards the text from interpretative arbitrariness and distortion. Viewing 'meaning [as] an affair of consciousness not of words', Hirsch sees an unquestionable link between author and work, message and sender.<sup>153</sup> To divorce the two by interpreting a work of literature without taking authorial intention into account, is therefore tantamount to a moral transgression:

When we simply use an author's words for our own purposes without respecting his intention, we transgress what Charles

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<sup>153</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 4.

Stevenson in another context called ‘the ethics of language’, just as we transgress ethical norms when we use another person merely for our own ends.<sup>154</sup>

Closely linked to the ethical argument is an epistemological one. Hirsch points to the vast number of diverging interpretations of the same text by different critics, and asks:

When these disagreements occur, how are they to be resolved? Under the theory of semantic autonomy they cannot be resolved, since the meaning is not what the author meant, but “what the poem means to different sensitive readers”. One interpretation is as valid as another, so long as it is “sensitive” or “plausible”.<sup>155</sup>

Hirsch, in other words, sees no solid basis for objectively valid interpretation in mere textual evidence, no ‘normative criterion for interpretation structurally implicit in language’.<sup>156</sup> This raises the problem of where we locate the meaning of a text, if not in authorial intention? What are we seeking when analysing it? According to Hirsch, the only solid ground for a valid interpretation is the author’s intention,

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<sup>154</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1976). Quoted in: Kaye Mitchell, *Intention and Text: Towards an intentionality of Literary Form*, (London; New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 24.

<sup>155</sup> Hirsch, p. 4.

<sup>156</sup> Mitchell, p. 25.

which it is in principle possible to reconstruct: '[...] it is the only kind of interpretation with a determinate object, and thus the only kind that can lay claim to validity in any straightforward and practicable sense of that term'.<sup>157</sup>

This view is problematic for a number of reasons. First of all there is an evident methodological problem here. *How* exactly should the author's intention be determined? Should we rely on her statements about her work? What if these are contradictory? What if she is no longer alive? If she is not, to what extent can we trust statements in diaries, letters and notebooks to be accurate indications of her intentions? For instance, what about the time gap between a diary entry outlining a planned chapter in a book, and the time when that chapter was actually written? Second, there is the obvious objection that there may be a discrepancy between intended meaning and textual meaning. If the author did not succeed in communicating what she wished, should we simply disregard the lack of textual evidence for something that she "wanted to say"? There is also the possibility of unintentionally created meaning that does not impoverish the text but enriches it, and that the author cannot account for. If this is so, where does it leave us? The intentionalist interpretative framework seems to assume that the author's intention is necessarily manifested in the text. This is what Monroe C. Beardsley, in an essay from 1968, called Hirsch's "Identity Crisis" – 'the identification of textual meaning with authorial meaning'.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Hirsch. Quoted in: Mitchell, p. 25.

<sup>158</sup> Mitchell, p. 28.

Another inherent problem of authorial intentionalism is that it causes the focus of literary criticism to shift from what is seen to be its proper object – the literary work – to areas of other disciplines such as psychology and history. This kind of literary criticism, which is equally, or more interested in sources *surrounding* the text, such as biographical facts, historical context, notebooks, letters, interviews etc. – ‘the mishmash of philology, biography, moral admonition, textual exegesis, social history, and sheer burbling’ – was the main target the criticism of Beardsley and William K. Wimsatt’s hugely influential essay from 1946, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’.<sup>159</sup> Here, the two critics famously stated that ‘the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art’.<sup>160</sup> The critic’s task is not to determine what the author *tried* to do but what she *did*, in other words to analyse the text itself and the intentions expressed *in* it:

If the poet succeeded [...] then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Wimsatt W.K. and Beardsley M.C., ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, *Swansea Review*, 54 (1946). Quoted in: Andrew Bennett, *The Author*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 77.

<sup>160</sup> M.C., p. 468.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* Quoted in: Bennett, p. 77.

'By this logic', Bennett comments, 'if an intention does not 'become effective' in the text, it is, by definition, not part of the text. And if it is not part of the text, it is not the critic's job to search for it or to attend to it'.<sup>162</sup> The text, to quote Chatman, 'is what it is';<sup>163</sup> regardless of what the author had in mind when writing it, its properties stay the same. This is a fact that author-focused criticism disregards. Moreover, it can justifiably be said to constrain and impoverish the reading of a text because it postulates a single "correct" meaning. Following Hirsch's doctrine of reading we 'try to establish what the author meant and not at all what the reader understands'.<sup>164</sup> This issue was raised by Barthes in some of his most important essays on the author, 'The Death of the Author', 'From Work to Text', and 'Theory of the Text'. Barthes's attack on the author is far more radical than that of Wimsatt and Beardsley. Whereas the latter do not deny the intentional nature of literature and ultimately see meaning in the same way as Hirsch ('an affair of consciousness not words'), Barthes rejects the very idea of writing as an accurate expression of an individual. For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the literary text is still a *product* of intention: the poem 'comes out of a head, not out of a hat';<sup>165</sup> the poet can 'succeed' or 'not succeed'. For Barthes, authorial intention is a non-entity altogether.

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<sup>162</sup> Bennett, p. 77.

<sup>163</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 98.

<sup>164</sup> Barthes, p. 30.

<sup>165</sup> M.C., p. 469.



Barthes's famous declaration of the death of the Author has far-reaching implications that come to light most clearly in his distinction between Work and Text. These notions are not so much classifications of different types of literary works as designations of two methods of reading. The meaning of the Work is interpreted; the meaning of the Text is disseminated. In the Work, we presuppose a single, "right" meaning which we try to uncover – we look for the "message" of the Author-God'.<sup>166</sup> The Work 'closes upon a signified' that is 'said to be secret and final, and must be sought for' with the result that it 'depends on a hermeneutics, and interpretation'.<sup>167</sup>

The Text, on the contrary, practices the infinite postponement of the signified [...] the Text is not achieved by some [...] hermeneutic process of "delving deeper", but rather of a serial movement of dislocations, overlappings, variations; the logic of the Text is not comprehensive (trying to define what the work "means").<sup>168</sup>

The desirable mode of enquiry for Barthes then is to read works of literature as Texts, not Works. The 'disagreements' among critics about a specific text that for Hirsch has to be 'resolved' are not a problem for Barthes. On the contrary: the infinite proliferation of signifieds in the

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<sup>166</sup> Barthes, p. 53.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. p. 59.

reader's production (not reproduction) of meaning is seen as something positive. Liberated from the demand of looking for the meaning supposedly placed in the text by the Author, the reader is not simply a consumer but a co-producer of the text; the 'death' of the author brings about the 'birth' of the reader.<sup>169</sup> Textual analysis no longer implies a search for, but a dissemination of meaning – an endless expansion of associations, ideas, stimuli and intertextual references. In his *S/Z* (1974), a reading of Balzac's novella 'Sarrasine', Barthes put this method into practice. *S/Z* states no hypothesis about the object of study and arrives at no conclusion. Instead, the critical inquiry consists of a meticulous close-reading of the novella where the semantic unities are enumerated one after the other according to what Barthes sees as the universal rules of reading. The aim of the analysis, as Barthes comments in 'Writing Reading', is simply to account for the associations triggered by the text in the reader's mind; to establish not what the author meant but what the reader understood.<sup>170</sup>

This kind of textual analysis, poignantly described as 'Reading, forgetting' in the beginning of *S/Z*, leaves no room for a description of the unity of a literary text. It is the diametrical opposite of traditional analysis where a thesis is tested and proved. Since no textual elements are more important than others, there is no such thing as a "centre", let alone "message". 'Forgetting a meaning', therefore, cannot [...] be seen

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p. 55.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

as a fault'.<sup>171</sup> Or, as Barthes puts it in 'Theory of the Text': 'It is henceforth less a question of explaining or even describing, than of entering into the play of the signifiers; of enumerating them, perhaps [...] but not hierarchizing them'.<sup>172</sup> By this logic it is simply insignificant who speaks. If there is no final meaning, no message to be decoded or even understood, the sender or originator of the message becomes irrelevant. In Barthes's reading of 'Sarrasine' it is neither Balzac nor the narrator, but the *discourse* that is the subject of the novella; the discourse, not Balzac 'lies', 'prolongs the mystery', 'tells us "There is an enigma"'.<sup>173</sup>

To be sure, this analytical approach (like that of Hirsch) is not the result of a logical imperative arising from the nature of the literary text but an ideologically motivated choice. Choosing Barthes' mode of reading, we embrace the potentiality of infinite meaning of a text at the cost of refraining from identifying what could be termed its unity or coherence. As for *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, the fact remains that the book, primarily through its constant return to certain motifs, does exhibit precisely a hierarchy of signifiers. It is characterised by a thematic insistence that serves to unify it as a literary work and gives us an image of what the Chernobyl' disaster *is*, i.e. something that could be termed an "interpretation" or "message". It is therefore inevitable that

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<sup>171</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 11.

<sup>172</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Theory of the Text', in *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader*, ed. by Robert Young (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), (p. 43).

<sup>173</sup> Barthes, p. 29; 30; 31.

the question of the identity of the text's subject should present itself, that is: Who is telling us this? Whose image of reality are we seeing? Who is speaking? To what degree do the witnesses speak through Aleksievich, and Aleksievich through the witnesses? Because of the mediation of one voice by another, the author cannot justifiably be ignored. To pose *discourse* as the subject of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* would be to disregard what perhaps constitutes its greatest enigma: the seamless intertwining of two different subjects in the text – the witness-author and the creative author.

Approaching *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* with these theoretical considerations in mind we have on a scale between radical pluralism and radical intentionalism where Barthes and Hirsch are the extreme opposites, on the one hand, an approach far too permissive in terms of interpretation and indifferent to the role of the author to suit our object of study (Barthes), and on the other hand an untenably exclusionary and methodologically flawed approach (Hirsch). So how *should* we theorize the authorial agency in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*? How to name and where to situate the subject of the text, if not, as Hirsch would, in the creative author, or as Barthes would, in the discourse? In other words, how to resurrect the Author, pronounced dead by Barthes, without falling into the pitfalls of Hirsch's authorial intentionalism? Kaye Mitchell has articulated the dilemma thus:

There is the practical relevance of the author as instigator or performer of a communicative act: it makes sense to ask not only what is being communicated but also who is doing the communicating, and this may justifiably colour our understanding of what is 'said'. How do we mediate between these two positions: [the intentionalistic], which may be seen as undemocratic or elitist or exclusionary, and the permissive or pluralist position which may encourage a certain critical anarchy [...]?<sup>174</sup>

In the following pages, I will discuss the concept of the implied author as a potential escape from this dilemma. The implied author is a kind of author-persona, distinct from the creative author, and denotes the set of moral values, thematic interests and perspectives that are inscribed in the text. The great benefit of this concept is that it allows us to retain the author as an entity in textual analysis without having to presume a real person beyond the text, whose intentions are, to quote Wimsatt and Beardsley, 'neither accessible nor desirable'.<sup>175</sup>

## **The Implied Author**

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<sup>174</sup> Mitchell, p. 14.

<sup>175</sup> M.C., p. 468.

The implied author was introduced by Wayne Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). As the title suggests, it applies the methods of rhetorical analysis to fictional works. Seeing works of fiction as systems of ethical values, Booth attempted to demonstrate how the literary text communicates moral positions to the reader by passing judgements – explicitly or implicitly – on the moral qualities of characters and on the value of their actions. Just like a political speech, although by different means, Booth maintains, the literary text always persuades us of something. In the story of Job, for instance, we are told that Job was ‘perfect and upright, one that feared God, and eschewed evil’.<sup>176</sup> Here, there is nothing to suggest that this judgement should not be taken at face value. Moreover, it is necessary that we have this understanding of Job’s character in order to grasp the meaning of the story. ‘The author pronounces judgement, and we accept his judgement without question’.<sup>177</sup> In Ring Lardner’s ‘Haircut’, by contrast, the narrator describes the main character Jim Kendall as ‘comical’ and ‘rough but a good fella at heart’, but from what we are told about Jim’s neglect for his children and cruel jokes we know that the author’s judgement of him is radically different from that of the narrator: the implicitly communicated judgement on Jim is that he is ‘morally and intellectually deficient’.<sup>178</sup> Or, in *The Brothers Karamazov*,

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<sup>176</sup> Booth, p. 3.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

the story of Father Zossima's conversion could logically be placed anywhere. [...] It is not accident but Dostoevski's careful choice that gives us Zossima's story as the sequel to Ivan's dream of the Grand Inquisitor. It is intended as a judgement on the values implied by that dream, just as everything that happens to Ivan afterward is an explicit criticism of his own ideas. Since the sequence is obviously not dictated by anything other than the author's purposes, it betrays the author's voice.<sup>179</sup>

So even if there is no direct authorial commentary on the nature of things as in the story of Job, 'the author's judgement is always present'.<sup>180</sup> All literary works are products of selection and arrangement; therefore, Booth argues, the presence of the author cannot be avoided: 'He decides to tell this story rather than any other story; he employs his proof rather than any other possible proof. In short, he writes 'this' rather than 'that'.<sup>181</sup>

This of course raises all the problems associated with authorial intentionalism. Booth therefore needed a notion by which it becomes possible to account for the totality of the author's choices without involving the creative author. What he tries to do, in other words, is to 'bring author and recipient back into focus in the academic study of

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. Quoted in: Kindt and Muller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy*, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p. 45.

literature' and at the same time to 'avoid stepping outside the work itself'.<sup>182</sup> His solution is the implied author – the hypothetical author we infer on the basis of the text. Whereas the creative author is an unchangeable entity (a certain human being), the implied author can change from work to work. *Jonathan Wild*, *Amelia*, *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* were all written by the same creative author – Henry Fielding – but the implied authors of these novels are different: 'The author of *Jonathan Wild* is by implication very much concerned with public affairs and with the effects of unchecked ambition on the "great men" who attain to power in the world', whereas 'the author who greets us on page one of *Amelia* has none of that air of facetiousness combined with grand insouciance that we meet from the beginning in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*'.<sup>183</sup> However, the implied author signifies more than just the creative author's persona in a particular text. Rather it 'stand[s] for the text as a whole', covering the totality of elements that constitute it, such as style, tone, theme, and ethical values.<sup>184</sup>

We can be satisfied only with a term that is as broad as the work itself but still capable of calling attention to that work as the product of a choosing, evaluating person rather than as a self-existing thing. The implied author chooses, consciously or

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<sup>182</sup> Muller, p. 50.

<sup>183</sup> Booth, p. 72.

<sup>184</sup> Muller, p. 51.



unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices.<sup>185</sup>

In this way, Booth's notion offers a middle way between the extremities of Hirsch's intentionalism and Barthes's pluralism. It situates the author *inside* the text, highlighting authorial presence without losing focus on the literary work. An important part here is of course the 'conscious or unconscious choice': since it is constituted by everything that makes up for the text – 'the sum of his own choices' – the implied author concept allows for meaning that the creative author might not have intended. In fact, the implied author that the reader infers from the text may be radically different from what the creative author had in mind at the time of writing, and so it sidesteps one of the major problems of intentionalism. Moreover, nothing prevents two different commentators from inferring different implied authors from one and the same text, as long as there is textual evidence to support their readings. Located inside the text, the author does not constitute the repressive force that Barthes has identified. Unlike the creative author, the concept of the implied author does not require us to postulate a single correct meaning or intention and allows for a certain pluralism.

The implied author, then, would allow us to conceptualise the intentional agency that selects, processes and arranges the witnesses'

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<sup>185</sup> Booth, p. 74.

stories in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* without forcing us to turn to the creative author. Since its conception, however, Booth's notion has been developed and found problematic in different ways. If we look more closely to the above quote, we see that it is riddled with contradictions. The implied author is both 'as broad as the work itself' and 'a created version of the real man'; it is something 'created' and at the same time something 'we infer'. After the publication of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, several interpretations of the term have been suggested with the result that it has become somewhat vague. Before proceeding to the textual analysis, a clear definition must be formulated and the principal conceptual issues addressed. First and foremost, these issues concern 1) whether the implied author should be understood as something created or as something inferred, and 2) what exactly it signifies. With regard to each of these issues I will argue that Chatman's understanding of the implied author (as it is put forward in his *Coming to Terms*) is the most sustainable and useful one.

1) Does the implied author refer to something created or to something inferred? This remains unclear in Booth's account of the concept in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth argues that 'as [the author] writes, he creates [...] an implied version of "himself"', yet at the same time he suggests that 'we infer him as an ideal, literary version of the real man'.<sup>186</sup> This then raises the question of whether the implied author is something that the writer constructs, or something that the reader (or

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p. 70; 73.

critic) postulates. As Kindt and Müller have convincingly argued, what Booth introduced was actually ‘a cover term for several concepts or variants of a single concept’ that can be understood both as ‘(1) an intentional product of the author in or qua the work’ and ‘(2) an inference made by the recipient of the author on the basis of the work’.<sup>187</sup>

Closely related to this is the question of whether it is possible to see the implied author as a participant in a communication process. In regard to this question, ‘Booth’s concept stands for the ‘voice’ that gives expression to a work and is therefore hierarchically superior to all the other speakers in a text’ and it should be ‘placed between the author and the narrator or characters in this hierarchy of speakers’.<sup>188</sup> This view was articulated by Chatman who proposed the following diagram to describe the relationship between the instances of the transmission of narrative:

Real author → Implied author → Narrator → Narratee → Real reader<sup>189</sup>

According to this diagram, the real author communicates via the implied author. The implied author then communicates via the narrator, and the narrator addresses the narratee. The problem with this model, as

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<sup>187</sup> Müller, p. 8.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. p. 98; 153.

<sup>189</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Narrative Structure in Discourse and Film*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 151.

Rimmon-Kenan has pointed out, is that since the implied author is merely “implied” – i.e., it does not speak to us directly but ‘instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all the means it has chosen to let us learn’ – it seems ‘a contradiction in terms to cast it in the role of the addresser in a communication situation’.<sup>190</sup> If we conceive of narrative fiction as a process of communication that involves a sender (author), speaker (narrator/transmitting medium) and receiver (reader), there is no gap to be filled between author and narrator. Applied to *Chernobyl’skaia molitva*, the sequence looks like this: the witness tells her story to Aleksievich; Aleksievich writes the monologue, assuming the voice of the narrator; the narrator tells her story to the narratee (which is Aleksievich again). In this chain, there is no place for the implied author. As Genette comments: ‘a narrative of fiction is produced fictively by its narrator and actually by its (real) author’.<sup>191</sup>

This is what makes it so difficult to approach the implied author as the author’s creation. Of course, the author may have had something like a “persona” or “second self” in mind at the time of writing. Booth cites the American novelist and short story writer Jessamyn West who says that ‘it is sometimes only by writing the story that the novelist can discover – not his story – but its writer, the official

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<sup>190</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 88.

<sup>191</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 139.

scribe, so to speak, for that narrative'.<sup>192</sup> Be that as it may, the implied author is far too vague a notion to be theoretically approached as a deliberately created entity. Unlike the narrator, the implied author does not have a direct voice (we can only speak metaphorically of its "voice"). Moreover, what justifies the concept is not its concrete existence but its pragmatic value: 'the question is not whether the implied author *exists* but what we *get* from positing such a concept. What we get is a way of naming and analysing the textual intent of narrative fictions under a single term but without recourse to biographism'.<sup>193</sup> Therefore it makes more sense to consider the implied author as a *postulated* rather than as a real subject. As Chatman suggests, 'we might better speak of the "inferred" than of the "implied" author'.<sup>194</sup>

2) Second, there is the inexact meaning of the concept. Booth sometimes seems to have the presumed personality of the creative author in mind, a 'version of the real man', as with the example of the different implied authors inferred from Fielding's novels. At other times the concept signifies something much broader: it is 'the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole', 'a term that is as broad as the work itself'.<sup>195</sup> Both of these definitions have been adopted and elaborated since Booth coined the term, and it is no longer a question of clarifying its original meaning in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* but

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<sup>192</sup> Booth, p. 71.

<sup>193</sup> Chatman, p. 74.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.* p. 77.

<sup>195</sup> Booth, p. 73; 74.

considering the usefulness of one or the other. The former definition has among others been adopted by Genette, who sees the implied author as 'an image of the author in the text'.<sup>196</sup> This understanding of the notion becomes meaningful only in so far as the moral standpoint of the narrator differs significantly from that of the presumed author, in other words when we are dealing with an ironic text. (Otherwise there is little use in trying to discern what kind of person may be assumed to have written *Amelia* or *Jonathan Wild*.) The latter understanding is far more useful as it is not applicable *only* to ironic texts, but additionally allows us to identify authorial agency with the overall logic that governs a text. Chatman has explicated this interpretation as follows:

The implied author is the agency within the narrative fiction which guides any reading of it. Every fiction contains such an agency. It is the source – on each reading – of the work's invention. It is also the locus of the work's *intent*. [...] The source of the narrative text's whole structure of meaning – not only of its assertion and denotation but also of its implication, connotation, and ideological nexus – is the implied author.<sup>197</sup>

By this definition, the implied author is that entity to which we attribute the totality of meaning produced by the text. It is the logic governing the

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<sup>196</sup> Genette, p. 141.

<sup>197</sup> Chatman, p. 74.

text; the transcendental, intentional agency that manifests itself in the design of the artistic whole. To sum up, the implied author in

*Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is:

- a) Distinct from the witness-author and from the creative author.
- b) Transcendental, in the sense that it transcends the single monologue. It is manifested *throughout* and *between* individual monologues, for instance when several independent narrators address the same issue and a general thematic interest comes to the fore, or when a juxtaposition occurs between two monologues.
- c) Inferred from the text, thereby allowing for the possibility of a discrepancy between textual meaning and meaning intended by the creative author.
- d) Voiceless. Its voice can be heard only metaphorically. It “speaks” through all the other speakers: the narrators, the intra-textual author, the narratee, and the newspaper excerpts.

## Chapter 3: Textual Analysis

### Variations of Distance: (Un)reliable narrators in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*

The implied author in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* emerges as an ideological position against which the narrator's assumed values are measured. The narrators' monologues can be classified in terms of their varying distance to the moral values that implicitly constitute the implied author. Accordingly, the narrators are characterised by the extent to which they comply with Booth's notion of "reliability". I will demonstrate this by comparing the narrators of two different monologues. One of them promotes ideological values that are very similar to those that we infer in the implied author, whereas the views of the second speaker are very far removed from those of the implied author. The first speaker is Gennadii Grushevoi, a Belarusian intellectual and member of Parliament and the narrator of 'Monolog o kartezijskoi filisofii i o tom, kak esh' zarazhennyi buterbrod, chtoby ne bylo stydno'. The second speaker is anonymous and narrates the 'Monolog zashchitnika sovietskoi vlasti'. The former is a representative of what is typically labelled as the Soviet "liberal" intelligentsia, that is, a social strata of highly educated people whose political views are defined in opposition to Soviet values prevalent during the period of Stagnation under Brezhnev. The latter speaker identifies himself as belonging to the "prostye liudi". Whereas the opinions of Grushevoi are typically anti-Soviet, the views of the second speaker, the 'zashchitnik', are typically



pro-Soviet. By virtue of their varying distance to the values of the implied author, the opinions of the former narrator are rendered valid, whereas those of the latter are repudiated.

The concept of a narrator's reliability was introduced by Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* and has since then been widely used in studies of narratives. Rimmon-Kenan provides this excellent definition:

A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect.<sup>198</sup>

The unreliable narrator presents a distinctly subjective version of the truth, sometimes deliberately distorting it. Through her discourse, the author communicates a concealed message to the reader. For this message to be successfully communicated, the reader must "see through" the narrator. In *Lolita*, a crucial point would be lost if the reader did not realise that Humbert Humbert is purposefully manipulating the story. In 'The Haircut', we would miss the point about Jim if we took the barber's ethical evaluation of him as authoritative and reliable. Just like ironically communicated meaning, then, the meaning of unreliable

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<sup>198</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 100.

narration turns away from direct statements. Of course, no irony can be attributed to the *narrator*, who is either unaware of how he comes across (the barber in 'Haircut'), or tries his best not to be exposed as a liar (Humbert Humbert). Instead, the irony is shared between the implied author and the reader, who both understand something about the narrator that the narrator herself does not realise. Humbert Humbert does not realise that we know he is lying, just as the barber does not understand that we disagree with his ethical evaluation of Jim. Booth comments: 'In the irony with which we are concerned, the speaker is himself the butt of the ironic point. The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting'.<sup>199</sup>

But how do we infer a narrator's (un)reliability? What is it that makes us trust or distrust a particular speaker's rendering of the story or commentary on it? Fundamentally, Booth distinguishes between reliable and unreliable narrators by the following criterion: a narrator is reliable if 'he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (that is to say, the implied author's norms), [and] *unreliable* when he does not'.<sup>200</sup> The implied author's norms are those norms that we infer from the totality of the work, the ethical interpretation – implicit or explicit – of actions, events, and persons in the text. These norms tend to correspond with those of a postulated contemporary reader. As Booth comments, 'Jane Austen does not have to convince us that pride

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<sup>199</sup> Booth, p. 304.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.* p. 158.

and prejudice are undesirable', because this particular set of ethical norms are already shared by a generalised "we".<sup>201</sup> The shocking effect of the writings of de Sade, on the other hand, relies on his deliberate transgression of established norms. His ethical interpretation of murder and sexual violence radically differs from that of both contemporaneous and subsequent readers, which is why, more than 200 years after its writing, *The 120 Days of Sodom* can still cause outrage. The ethical value used to judge the material wealth in Bret Easton-Ellis' *American Psycho* can arguably be said to accord with a left-wing, humanist worldview, as material wealth is here associated with structural injustice, alienation, and violence. It would differ radically, though, from the views of a generalised believer in the "American dream", to whom Patrick Bateman's reality may appear a tasteless perversion of a desirable ideal. Regarding *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, the ethical interpretation of the Soviet system is unequivocally negative. To be sure, a major criterion of the author's selection of interviews is their power to bear witness to the crimes committed by the Soviet state.

Aside from the question of whether or not a narrator speaks in accordance with the implied author's norms, there are a number of additional factors determining his or her degree of (un)reliability. Rimmon-Kenan calls these 'signs of unreliability' and lists the following as the most common: 'the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme'.<sup>202</sup> Before discussing

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid. p. 157.

<sup>202</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 100.

the applicability of this terminology to the two speakers I have chosen to compare, I will briefly outline what they say and how they are perceived by the reader.

Grushevoi identifies himself as an intellectual: ‘Я жил среди книг.... Двадцать лет читал лекции в университете...’<sup>203</sup> This signals a certain type of discourse, a highly eloquent, intelligent and erudite one, as well as signifying the starting point of a narrative. Grushevoi tells the story of how the accident motivated him politically and eventually turned him from an academic into a politician (as we are told after the monologue, he is now a member of parliament). The story begins with recollections testifying to the repressive intellectual climate before Gorbachev, when the speaker was discouraged from writing his doctoral dissertation on anything but Marxist-Leninist philosophy: ‘тут не до картезианских размышлений’.<sup>204</sup> Thus, through its title with the reference to a then forbidden topic – *Monolog o kartezianskoj filisofii* – the monologue establishes itself as a space of free speech and the speaker can freely criticize the totalitarian regime: ‘Коммунистическая власть лгала. Изворачивалась [...]’.<sup>205</sup> From its initial discussion of the repression during the Stagnation, the narrative proceeds to a description of *perestroika* – a time of longed-for liberation (‘Время, которое мы долго ждали’) and collective rebirth (‘стали меняться лица людей, откуда-то вдруг появились другие лица. Люди даже

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<sup>203</sup> Aleksievich, p. 148.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

по-другому стали ходить [...] они больше улыбались друг другу').<sup>206</sup>

Grushevoi then talks about the journeys he made after the accident to the areas around the reactor in order to observe and to make people understand the danger in remaining there. Later, he and his wife make a more conscious and organised effort to help the children in the polluted areas: 'Мы решили спасти детей'.<sup>207</sup> There is also an episode telling of a protest rally held in Minsk, three years after the disaster, which Grushevoi was involved in organising. This episode is notable for its powerful description of collective euphoria and the overcoming of fear: 'Над колонной прокатилось мощное «Ур-ра-а-а!» Балконы переполнены... [...] Люди шли и плакали, все держались за руки. Плакали потому, что они побеждали свой страх'.<sup>208</sup>

'Ordinary people' spontaneously join the rally and can finally have their say: 'К наспех обустроенной трибуне сами подходили и без всяких бумажек говорили простые люди'.<sup>209</sup> After the accident, the monologue suggests, collective sentiments of indignation, longing for justice and the need of being heard were more powerful than the fear of state authorities, and in this sense, the speaker suggests, the accident liberated "us", the people: 'Чернобыль освобождал нас...'<sup>210</sup>

The second narrator, 'zashchitnik sovietskoi vlasti', is anonymous. After the monologue, it is emphasised that his anonymity is

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid. p. 148.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid. p. 156.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

self-chosen. As opposed to other monologues where the speakers' names are abbreviated or simply absent, this is the only monologue in the book where it is noted that the interviewee chose not to state his name: '*Фамилию не назвал*'.<sup>211</sup> The setting is very likely to be rural: the death of an 'old lady' concerns both him and people around him, which suggests a tightly knit community. The 'zashchitnik' has none of the eloquence of the intellectual. Quite the opposite – in Aleksievich's rendering of the interview his language is unpolished and extremely crude: 'Э-э-э... такую мать... Э-э-э! [...] Б...ь! [...] Б...ь!'.<sup>212</sup> He identifies himself with the 'ordinary people': 'нас [...] простых людей'.<sup>213</sup> As opposed to Grushevoi, the 'zashchitnik' does not tell us a story. Instead, his monologue consists of an articulation of opinions in relation to the accident, the Soviet system and its collapse. The only narrative element is the death of an old lady, which spans just a few sentences. We are told that she was lying dead in her house for two days, under the icons; that there was no money to buy a coffin; that "we" organised a protest meeting and demanded that the chairman of the kolkhoz pay for the funeral arrangements.

Both monologues are full of explicit and implicit value judgements on the Chernobyl' disaster, the Soviet system and its disintegration. While for Grushevoi, the disaster meant a liberation from a totalitarian system, which for him was a hybrid between a

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid. p. 255.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. p. 254; 55.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid. p. 255.

kindergarten and a prison, for the 'zashchitnik', the disaster meant the end of a great empire, which had benefitted 'ordinary people'.

Grushevoi says:

a) 'Чернобыль освобождал нас...' <sup>214</sup>

b) 'Смесь тюрьмы и детского сада – вот что такое социализм. Советский социализм' <sup>215</sup>

The 'zashchitnik' says:

a) 'Не взорвался бы Чернобыль, держава бы не рухнула' <sup>216</sup>

b) 'Они [the communists] были за нас, за простых людей' <sup>217</sup>

In simplified terms, then, we can say that Grushevoi promotes clearly anti-Soviet views whereas the 'zashchitnik' promotes pro-Soviet views. The narrators' varying degree of reliability renders these views either valid or invalid. The reader trusts Grushevoi and distrusts the 'zashchitnik', agrees with the former and disagrees with the latter. But what exactly marks one statement as reliable and the other as unreliable? The most important aspect, as I have already mentioned, is the (dis)agreement with the implied author's norms. What Grushevoi

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid. p. 255.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

says is confirmed by the totality of the text, which depicts the Soviet system in an unequivocally negative light; what the 'zashchitnik' says is repudiated by that same overall design. Inversely, both narrators contribute to creating this totality. Grushevoi contributes positively: his statements provide a seemingly authoritative commentary which tells us how things are. The 'zashchitnik' contributes negatively: his commentary is suspect and shows us how things are *not*. Herein consists the irony of his monologue. By the time the reader encounters the anonymous speaker and his conviction that 'the communists were for ordinary people' ('Они были за нас, за простых людей'), the reader has already been reminded on numerous occasions of the callousness of the Soviet regime which, according to the dominant view propagated in the book, completely disregarded the well-being of 'ordinary people'.<sup>218</sup> This irony is intensified when the speaker suggests that Aleksievich is inherently biased, saying: 'Почему вы это не записываете? Мои слова. А записываете только то, что вам выгодно'.<sup>219</sup> Here, the author manipulatively gestures toward her own impartiality. Contrary to what the speaker thinks, she *is* 'writing it down', accurately recording his views even if they conflict with her own. At the same time, however, the author undermines the anonymous speaker's views by presenting them as the rant of an "old communist" whose opinions, clearly, cannot be taken seriously. While Grushevoi's monologue is eloquent and devoid of colloquialisms, the crudeness and

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.



aggression of the second speaker signal his lack of education and by extension his missing 'cartesian' objectivity. This together with his obvious paranoia ('Горби действовал по их планам, по планам цэрэу... Они Чернобыль взорвали... Я в газетах читал...'220) are further indications of his unreliability and mark him as one of the "brainwashed". The use of irony in the monologue relies on the assumption that the reader shares the value judgements communicated by the totality of the work, in other words the value judgements of the implied author. If the reader does not agree with the ethical interpretation of the Soviet system as a regime that showed nothing but callousness toward its citizens, she will perceive the monologue as a simplistic distortion of what one may call "pro-Soviet" views. Vladimir Golstein goes further and identifies Aleksievich's underlying conceptions as those of the arrogant intellectual who dismisses the "Russian people" as 'hillbillies, brainwashed by the regime'.<sup>221</sup>

In line with Rimmon-Kenan's idea that 'signs of *unreliability* are perhaps easier to specify, and reliability can then be negatively defined by their absence',<sup>222</sup> the reliability of Grushevoi's discourse can in part be defined negatively, in that it lacks all the signs of unreliability that mark the monologue of the 'zashchitnik'. However, there are also *positive* indications of reliability that make him one of the most authoritative speakers in the entire book. For one, with its fourteen

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Golstein, p. 24.

<sup>222</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 100.

pages his monologue is one of the longest, signalling that what he has to say is important, as it is allocated plenty of space. Second, despite his personal involvement in the disaster, he appears to be one of the most detached narrators. He extrapolates the relevance of his own experiences and observations, raising universal questions about the Soviet system and Soviet identity. His tone is calm and controlled, as opposed to many other narrators in the book. Lindbladh has described the witnesses' ambivalence toward narration as a conflict between 'the imperative to tell' and 'the impossibility of telling': on the one hand, the witness has an inner compulsion to tell about her experience, on the other hand, 'no amount of telling ever seems to do justice to this inner compulsion'.<sup>223</sup> This ambivalence is evident throughout the book. For instance: 'Все не те слова вам говорю... Не такие...';<sup>224</sup> 'Мне про это нельзя... [...] Но я вам расскажу...';<sup>225</sup> 'А мне... (Обрывает фразу. Вижу, что говорить не хочет.)'.<sup>226</sup> In this context Grushevoi stands out – he is one of few narrators for whom narration is not problematic. This makes the communication of his monologue very explicit; he is telling us how things are, and there is very little that has to be inferred. At the same time, his tone is often tentative, careful not to jump to simplistic conclusions. His monologue ends with a question: 'Кто мы?'<sup>227</sup> His erudition, moreover – the frequent name-dropping of writers and philosophers, the fact that we know he is a former university professor,

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<sup>223</sup> Lindbladh, p. 44.

<sup>224</sup> Aleksievich, p. 26.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid. p. 162.

and now a member of parliament – gives him additional authority, as does his morally outstanding selfless concern for the well-being of others, helping children who suffered from radiation exposure.

One could imagine a text in which two equally authoritative and reliable narrators presented these sets of views (anti-Soviet and pro-Soviet, in simplified terms). In such a text, we would come close to Bakhtinian polyphony. In Bakhtinian polyphony, as we recall, ‘the character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of [the author]’.<sup>228</sup> This is clearly not the case with the narrator of the second monologue. His views are already undercut in the title, which emphasises his ideological orientation and by extension bias, describing him as a ‘zashchitnik sovetskoi vlasti’. In Bakhtin’s terms, his testimony is subordinated to the design of the author and he lacks ideological authority and independence. The same can be said about Grushevoi, who, as we said, contributes to the totality of norms positively, instead of negatively as the ‘zashchitnik’ does. There is no polyphonic “independence” in either speaker. They are either right, or they are wrong. The implied author’s norms determine the value of their respective ideological positions in the text.

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<sup>228</sup> Bakhtin, p. 5.

## Recurrent Motifs

As we recall from the theoretical discussion of authorial agency, the implied author is not the direct sender in a communication situation but the 'source of the narrative text's whole structure of meaning'.<sup>229</sup> The implied author "speaks" only metaphorically, through all the different narrators of the text; she 'instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices'.<sup>230</sup> One important way in which the implied author emerges is therefore the thematic interests and concerns shared by the many narrators. The more narrators insist – independently of each other – on one particular point, the more important it becomes for what the totality of the work communicates. In the case of Aleksievich's work then, an important part of the implied author emerges in the cumulative emphasis of the testimonies selected by the creative author for inclusion in her book. While there is no evidence that Aleksievich has altered the wording of the monologues, the persistence of certain themes suggest that coherent criteria for inclusion in the book were applied during the selection process. Therefore, the implied author emerges in the interplay of themes and concerns which are inherent in the interviews and deliberately used by Aleksievich to create a specific interpretation of the Chornobyl' disaster. Here, I will focus on three of the most pronounced themes that run throughout the book: 1) the theme of nature, 2) the theme of the Soviet man, and 3) the theme of the unsayable.

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<sup>229</sup> Chatman, p. 74.

<sup>230</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 88.

## Man and Nature

The presence of animals in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is conspicuous. They are part of the witnesses' stories of life during the evacuation as well as after it. A few more or less identical observations are repeated by a multitude of narrators, defining the significance of animals within the semantic structure of the text. For instance, several narrators insist that where man detects nothing unusual, the animal senses danger: 'Радио, газеты ещё молчали, а пчелы уже знали'.<sup>231</sup> Approaching a river, the cattle stops and turns back: 'коровы подходили к воде и тут же заворачивали назад'.<sup>232</sup> Often, the description of an animal suggestively indicates the absence of man: 'И одичавшие кошки уже сбиваются в стаи и не боятся людей. Память о том, как подчинялись человеку, исчезла'.<sup>233</sup> Throughout the book, cats, dogs, horses, hens, and pigs are being abandoned, shot, and buried. Exposed to radiation, deserted, or killed, the animals are victims of the accident just as much as man is. In one of the more extensive monologues, three hunters talk about their recollections of killing animals in the polluted zone, having been ordered to do so by local authorities for the reason to prevent diseases from spreading. Here, animals are the victims of the ruthlessness of men: 'Обрадовались нам, бегут на человеческий голос... Встречают... Стреляли в доме,

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<sup>231</sup> Aleksievich, p. 67.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid. p. 146.

в сарае, на огороде. Вытаскивали на улицу и грузили в самосвалы'.<sup>234</sup> In the 'Self-interview', man's indifference to, and abandonment of animals is seen as a 'betrayal': 'Человек спасал только самого себя, всех остальных он предал'.<sup>235</sup> The narrators, too, frequently reflect on the relationship between man and nature. A very common comment is the paradoxical impression of the scenic beauty of the area, seemingly incompatible with the 'uzhas', the horror of the disaster that man has caused: 'А места такие красивые! Такое великолепие! Ужас был ещё ужаснее, потому что красиво. И человеку надо отсюда уходить. Бежать, как злодею. Как преступнику'.<sup>236</sup> Through the shared concerns about animal welfare, the narrators address deeper issues which have arisen from the Chornobyl' disaster. Being the first of its kind, the accident is presented as having radically changed the way humanity thinks about the potentially disastrous consequences of nuclear power. The narrators also implicitly posit that the perception in Soviet culture of Soviet technological progress and Soviet man's ability to control nature and use it for his own ends is radically changed by the disaster. Most importantly, this is what the focus on nature in the book amounts to: first, an eco-critical perspective on the accident; second, the failure of Soviet technological progress and colonization of nature, which

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid. p. 113.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid. p. 37.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

ultimately leads to the understanding of the disaster as a symbol for the failure of the communist utopian endeavour.

The notion of the technological superiority of the USSR over “capitalist” countries played an important part in Soviet ideology. Hence the political importance of the space race and technological progress in general. In her article on the colonization of nature in the Soviet Union, Alla Bolotova states that:

Борьба СССР с природой осуществлялась как бы в продолжение борьбы с капиталистическим миром и классовой борьбы и должна была способствовать формированию нового типа человека и общества.<sup>237</sup>

In Aleksievich’s wider work we find among her witnesses plenty of former devotees to Soviet ideas. In her ‘Zapiski souchastnika’, a sort of preface to *Vremia second-khend*, the author states that she intentionally sought out these ideologically committed people: ‘Я искала тех, кто намертво прирос к идее, впустил ее в себя так, что не отодрать - государство стало их космосом, заменило их все, даже собственную жизнь’.<sup>238</sup> In this regard, *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* is no exception. One of the narrators makes the following statement:

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<sup>237</sup> Alla Bolotova, ‘Gosudarstvo, geologi i kolonizatsiia prirody v SSSR’, in *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, (2006), (p. 2).

<sup>238</sup> Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, *Vremia sekond-khend*, (Moskva: Vremia, 2016), p. 8.

‘Даёшь Арктику! Даёшь целину! Даёшь космос! Вместе с Гагариным весь советский мир полетел в космос, оторвался от земли... Все мы!’<sup>239</sup> Of course, the accident seriously undermined this ideology, which, as we learn from the statements of several witnesses, was replaced by a sense of disillusionment, in Soviet technology as well as in the Soviet utopian ideas in general. For instance:

И вдруг там, на этой станции происходит катастрофа... Что это – совпадение? Мистика? Если бы я был верующим... Когда хочешь найти смысл, чувствуешь себя религиозным человеком. А я – инженер. Я – человек другой веры.<sup>240</sup>

The same message is conveyed through the somewhat heavy-handed irony of the title of the second chapter, ‘Venets tvoreniiia’, which is followed by a monologue in which a mother talks about the serious injuries her daughter sustained as a result of the accident:

В медицинской карточке записано: «девочка, рождённая с множественной комплексной патологией: аплазия ануса, аплазия влагалища, аплазия левой почки»... Так это звучит на

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<sup>239</sup> Aleksievich, p. 176.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. p. 209.



научном языке, а на обыкновенном: ни писи, ни попки, одна почка...<sup>241</sup>

The description of their everyday reality is tragic and absurd: 'Где ещё в мире есть ребёнок, которому каждые полчаса надо выдавливать мочу руками? И сколько это можно выдержать? (*Плачет.*)'.<sup>242</sup>

Doctors refuse to admit the causal link between the accident and the child's birth defect, and someone secretly advises her to seek help abroad, that is, in a Western, "capitalist" country: 'Пишите в зарубежные клиники'.<sup>243</sup> This, then, it is implied, is the result, the 'crown of creation' of the technological ambitions of the Soviet Union and the idea to subdue nature to man.

Underlying the concern with nature in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is also a broader eco-critical perspective that Lurii Seppialiainen has explored. Using Greg Garrard's concepts of "pollution", "apocalypse", "animals", "dwelling", and "pastoral", Seppialiainen examines how the relationship between man and nature is represented in the book, noting that its apocalyptic rhetoric cautions its reader of the potentially catastrophic consequences that an irresponsible attitude to ecological questions may have.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid. p. 101.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. p. 103.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. p. 102.

<sup>244</sup> Seppialiainen, p. 3.

Ключевым для экокритики является убеждение о том, что мы живём во время экологического кризиса. Ответственность за глобальные экологические проблемы лежит на человеке. [...] Чтобы приостановить разрушительную силу кризиса, людям надо переосмыслить то, как они живут на Земле.<sup>245</sup>

In *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, this is a crucial point. In the 'Self-interview', we learn that the author, after her trips to the contaminated zone, has reconsidered her previous relation to nature. She has a sensation of closeness to it, and the culturally ingrained distinction between man and animal is no longer self-evident:

Другими глазами оглядываю мир вокруг... Ползёт по земле маленький муравей, и он теперь мне ближе. Птица в небе летит, и она ближе. Между мной и ими расстояние сокращается. Нет прежней пропасти. Все – жизнь.<sup>246</sup>

This statement anticipates the ultimate eco-critical message of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. Humans beings have occupied an unsustainable position with regard to nature that must be reconsidered. We should not try to subjugate nature to ourselves, but co-exist with it in a harmonious way. If we do not, disastrous scenarios like the one in

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>246</sup> Aleksievich, p. 38.

Chornobyl' will be the result. This is what the accident has opened, or *should* open our eyes to. Throughout the book, the grave consequences of the accident are being juxtaposed with the general perception of nuclear power as a safe source of energy. Called up as a clean-up worker and sent to the polluted zone, Arkadii Filin recalls the following newspaper fragments: 'наши атомные станции абсолютно безопасны, можно строить на Красной площади'.<sup>247</sup> Grushevoi makes this observation:

В наших представлениях картина мира выглядела следующим образом: военный атом – зловещий гриб до неба, как в Хиросиме и Нагасаки, люди, в одну секунду ставшие пеплом, а мирный атом – безобидная электрическая лампочка.<sup>248</sup>

What was perceived as safe and unproblematic has caused no less than an apocalypse. References to the 'the end of the world' abound in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, especially in statements made by older individuals from the rural population. For instance: '«Солдатики, это что – конец света?»'.<sup>249</sup> '«Молитесь!! Это – конец света. Наказание божье за наши грехи»'.<sup>250</sup> Also, a number of narrators mention biblical

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid. p. 150.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid. p. 108.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid. p. 278.

prophesies of the Apocalypse. For instance, an unnamed witness calls the interviewer's attention to the meaning of the word 'Chernobyl' in Ukrainian – Wormwood (*Полынь*) – which is also the name of the falling star described in the Book of Revelation:

Откровение Иоанна Богослова: «...и упала с неба большая звезда, горящая подобно факелу, и пала на третью часть рек и на источник вод. [...] Имя сей звезде „полынь“. [...] Все уже предсказано, написано в святых книгах, но мы читать не умеем. Не понятливы. Полынь по-украински «чернобыль».<sup>251</sup>

Additionally, as I have already mentioned, there is the frequent juxtaposition of the “beauty” and the “horror” of the contaminated zone, two notions that seem incompatible but nevertheless co-exist. These irreconcilable impressions are part of the implied author's apocalyptic rhetoric which time and again emphasises the value of that which has been destroyed:

И красота вокруг.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

Больше всего это меня поразило – сочетание красоты и  
страха.<sup>253</sup>

There is also an important future aspect about this irrevocable destruction. The apocalypse has already occurred, but, as we can still not fully grasp its consequences and implications, it is not *over*. At the time of the interviews, the long-term environmental effects of the accident are unforeseeable as the radionuclides that spread across the land will continue to exist for ‘fifty, one hundred, two hundred, a thousand years’: ‘пятьдесят, сто, двести тысяч лет... И больше... С точки зрения человеческой жизни они вечные’.<sup>254</sup> Moreover, there is the possibility of other accidents at nuclear power plants throughout the world. The Chernobyl’ disaster is the first of its kind and therefore a lesson for generations to come: ‘Никто ещё не догадывался, что военный и мирный атом близнецы. Сообщники. Мы поумнели, весь мир поумнел, но поумнел он после Чернобыля’.<sup>255</sup> Even though it talks about something that has already occurred, *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* is a cautionary tale. It is in this sense that *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* is paradoxically presented as a ‘khronika budushchego’, a ‘chronicle of the future’. As the author comments in the ‘Self-interview’:

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid. p. 151.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

‘я смотрю на Чернобыль, как на начало новой истории, он не только знание, а и предзнание’.<sup>256</sup>

The underlying views structuring the book suggest that the Chornobyl’ accident should be seen as symbolic of the failure of the communist utopian endeavour, and in particular the failure of Soviet technological progress and colonization of nature. *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* then becomes a cautionary tale with Christian overtones, which creates an analogy between the Soviet system and the apocalypse. The unreformed anonymous speaker demonstrates the erroneous ways which will lead to damnation. Only the initiated who have seen the light, like Grushevoi, will find redemption.

### **The State and the Citizen**

Another recurrent theme of *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* is its depiction of the Soviet state and the Soviet citizen, and the relationship between the two. A multitude of narrators ruminate on the wider significance of people’s behaviour after the accident as well as the state authorities’ way of handling its consequences. Three narrators ask explicitly: ‘кто мы?’<sup>257</sup> Thereby, the text poses the question of a “Soviet identity” or perhaps “mentality”. Through the totality of judgements made by the

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid. p. 84; 162; 271.

narrators as well as instances of what could be termed “typical” behaviour, the image of a collective Soviet mentality emerges.

The single agency underlying the multitude of voices insists on “fatalism” as a defining trait of the Soviet male citizen. This word is used by four narrators, and in two different senses. In *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* the concept denotes a kind of disregard for one's own well-being, an absence of an ‘instinct of self-preservation’ [‘инстинкт самосохранения’].<sup>258</sup> More specifically, it is either what Sergei Sobolev, vice-chairman of “*Shchit Chernobyl'ia*”, describes as ‘readiness to self-sacrifice’ [‘готовность к самопожертвованию’], or what Natal'ia Roslova, chairwoman of the Women's Committee “*Deti Chernobyl'ia*” calls ‘indifference’ [‘безучастие’].<sup>259</sup> Throughout the book, we hear plenty of witnesses testifying to the clean-up workers' self-destructive behaviour. In the ‘Self-interview’, the author comments: ‘Я слышала мнение, что поведение пожарников, тушивших в первую ночь пожар на атомной станции, и ликвидаторов напоминает самоубийство’.<sup>260</sup> This point is later confirmed by a number of witnesses. For instance:

Я – человек, у которого отсутствует инстинкт самосохранения.

Это нормально, потому что сильно развито чувство долга.

Таких тогда было много, не я один... У меня на столе лежали

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid. p. 252.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid. p. 179; 274.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

десятки заявлений с просьбой: «Прошу направить в Чернобыль.» По зову сердца! Люди готовы были пожертвовать собой, не задумываясь и не требуя ничего взамен. Что бы вы там ни писали, но был он, советский характер.<sup>261</sup>

In 'Soldatskii khor', the clean-up workers talk about their reasons for travelling to the polluted zone. Here, we learn that they were motivated by patriotic feelings, the sense of duty, and the wish to commit a heroic deed, sentiments common in Soviet propagandistic depictions of war. For instance:

Хотелось чего-то героического. Испытать свой характер.<sup>262</sup>

Я – военный человек, мне прикажут – я должен... Я дал присягу... Но это не все... Героический порыв, он тоже был.

Его воспитывали... Он нам внушался ещё со школы.<sup>263</sup>

Надо Родине служить! Родине служить – святое дело.<sup>264</sup>

Psychologically, then, the clean-up workers 'readiness to self-sacrifice' is attributed to obedience, ideals of heroism, a decidedly male "military"

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid. p. 252.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid. p. 88.



mind set, and a strong belief in “communist ideas”. These psychological aspects are shown to be the result of ideological indoctrination, sometimes only implicitly, sometimes explicitly, as in the case of the narrator who says: ‘Он нам внушался ещё со школы’. As it were, the Soviet men are the victims of their own mentality. In the ‘Self-interview’, the author’s attitude to the clean-up workers “suicidal heroism” is somewhat ambivalent. She asks, rhetorically: ‘Так кто они все-таки: герои или самоубийцы? Жертвы советских идей и воспитания?’<sup>265</sup> Answering her own question, she states that they *are* heroes, because they prevented the explosion of the remaining three reactors. At the same time, they are victims of the wrongful acts committed by the Soviet state, because they

работали без защитной спецодежды, беспрекословно отправлялись туда, где «умирали» роботы, от них скрывали правду о полученных высоких дозах, и они с этим мирились, а потом ещё радовались полученным правительственным грамотами и медалям, которые им вручали перед смертью...<sup>266</sup>

Abused and manipulated by the state, the Soviet male citizen is not fully disillusioned with the ideals that prompted the near-suicidal acts.

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid. p. 36.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

Soviet ideology is internalized to such an extent that, even some time after the accident, despite the sustained injuries and meagre compensation granted to him by the state, he still retains a sense of pride in his act of heroism. A narrator in the 'soldatskii khor' says: 'Роботы не выдерживали, техника сходила с ума. А мы работали. [...] хорошо работали. И очень этим гордились...' <sup>267</sup> The widow of a helicopter pilot makes the following statement: 'В Кремле ему вручили награду [...] Приехал домой счастливый... С орденом...' <sup>268</sup> At the same time, the clean-up workers' monologues are characterised by a sense of bitterness and their attitude to their own actions during the work at the reactor is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, there is the memory of the experience of having been mistreated, bitterness, anger, and disillusion: 'Да, пошли вы все...' ;<sup>269</sup> 'Ничего героического'.<sup>270</sup> On the other hand, there is the sense of pride and a great reluctance to let go of "Soviet" ideals. This statement by a narrator in the 'солдатский хор' is particularly illustrative:

он не смог, а я пойду. *Теперь я думаю иначе...* После девяти операций и двух инфарктов... Теперь я никого не сужу, я их понимаю. Молодые ребята. *Но сам все равно бы полетел...*  
[emphases mine]<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. p. 93.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

This, however, is not the case with the women, who are unequivocally hostile to the authorities. Here we see the concealed views on a distinctive male and female psychology which underlies the whole book. Patriotism, the sense of duty and the wish to commit a heroic deed is exclusively a male psychological phenomenon. The same medals that give the men a sense of pride cause their widows nothing but grief and indignation:

Принесли мне Васин орден... Красного цвета... Я смотреть на него долго не могла. Слезы катятся...<sup>272</sup>

«Заберите его медаль и все грамоты! Заберите все льготы! Отдайте мужа!»<sup>273</sup>

The second meaning of “fatalism”, described most explicitly by Natal’ia Roslova and confirmed by a large number of narrators, is what Roslova refers to as ‘безучастие’.<sup>274</sup> This sort of “fatalism” is only indirectly self-destructive. It is not manifested as a disposition to perform “suicidal” heroic deeds, but as a kind of indifference and indolence. The implied message seems to be that the Soviet people have come to depend on the state to such a degree that they have lost the ability to take action

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid. p. 177.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid. p. 272.

and think independently. Natal'ia Roslova makes the following statement:

С одной стороны – нигилизм, отрицание, а с другой – фатализм. Властям не верят, учёным и врачам не верят, но и сами ничего не предпринимают. Невинные и безучастные. [...] Вдоль полей – таблички «Высокая радиация»... Поля пашутся... Тридцать кюри... Пятьдесят... Трактористы сидят в открытых кабинах.<sup>275</sup>

In *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, there are plenty of instances of this kind of indifference. The local population refuses to take warnings about the lethal radiation levels seriously and remains in the polluted zone. Many witnesses consume food containing high doses of radiation, apparently unconcerned about how it may affect their health: 'Объясняли нам, что нельзя. А мы ругались и ели'.<sup>276</sup> This indifference is often the subject for self-reflexion and generalised judgements. For instance:

Я верил... Инженер с двадцатилетним стажем, хорошо знакомый с законами физики. Знал же я, что из этих мест надо уйти всему живому. Хотя бы на время. Но мы добросовестно проводили замеры и смотрели телевизор. Мы

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid. p. 274.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

привыкли верить. Я – из послевоенного поколения, которое выросло в этой вере. Откуда вера? Мы победили в такой страшной войне. Перед нами тогда весь мир преклонялся. Это же было!<sup>277</sup>

If the Soviet citizen displays a readiness to sacrifice himself, obedience, and helpless dependence in relation to the state, then the Soviet state shows nothing but complete disregard for the well-being of its citizens. This is by far the most frequent thematic insistence in the entire text. In fact, it is hard if not impossible to find a single monologue in which the narrator does *not* say something that highlights the inhuman treatment by the Soviet state of its own citizens. In this regard, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* presents us with a fierce indictment of the whole Soviet system, not unlike Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelag Gulag* (1973). For the implied author of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, it is a moral imperative to make the crimes committed by the Soviet authorities known to the public. The most common case of structural maltreatment of individuals mentioned in the book may be the failure of the authorities to provide the clean-up workers with protective equipment. For instance: 'Нужен был хороший защитный костюм, специальные очки, маска. У нас ни первого, ни второго, ни третьего'.<sup>278</sup> Another common complaint concerns the meagre compensation given to the clean-up workers. Having returned home from the polluted zone, they receive little or no financial aid from

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid. p. 208.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

the authorities. 'А потом их увольняли из армии, давали грамоту и премию – сто рублей', says one witness and adds, using a patriotic turn of phrase that in this context becomes bitterly ironic: 'И они исчезали на бескрайних просторах нашей родины'.<sup>279</sup> Also, a large number of narrators mention the spreading of misinformation and the efforts of the state to hide the danger in remaining in the polluted zone from the public: 'По телевизору Горбачёв успокаивал: «Приняты неотложные меры»... Я верил...'<sup>280</sup> Apart from this, a vast number of instances of various kinds of structural abuse are presented throughout the text. For instance:

Мне отказывали четыре года, мне твердили: «Ваша девочка – инвалид детства». Какой же она инвалид детства? Она – инвалид Чернобыля. [...] Хотела подать на них в суд... На государство...<sup>281</sup>

Когда люди читали на этикетках, что молоко из Рогачева и не брали его, оно затоваривалось, вдруг появились банки без этикеток. Думаю, причина не в том, что не хватало бумаги – людей обманывали.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid. p. 178.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid. p. 208.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid. p. 103.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid. p. 207.

In sum, through its insistence on and repetition of instances of structural abuse, the text presents us with a fierce indictment of a totalitarian regime that shows nothing but disregard for the well-being of its citizens. Coupled with the concept of “fatalism”, this interpretation shows the Soviet male citizen as a victim of his own convictions. The indoctrinated ideals are so deeply rooted in him that he, despite the sustained injuries and meagre compensation granted to him by the state, retains a sense of pride in what he regards as his act of heroism. This ties in with the underlying assumptions about gender in the text, as the Soviet patriotic mind-set is seen as a strictly male phenomenon. Whereas the men, although ambivalently embittered, are not fully disillusioned with the Soviet system, the women feel only grief and indignation.

### **The Limits of Expression**

A conspicuously large number of narrators state that they lack the words to properly describe what they saw and experienced in connection to the accident. For instance:

Все не те слова вам говорю... Не такие...<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

Я думал, что расскажу сыну... А приехал: «Папа, что там?» – «Война.» Я не нашёл других слов..."<sup>284</sup>

Можно ли об этом говорить? Называть словами... [...] Я до сих пор не понимаю, что это было.<sup>285</sup>

In the 'Self-interview', the author comments:

Я не раз слышала в те дни: «таких слов не подберу, чтобы передать то, что я видела и пережила», «никто раньше мне ничего подобного не рассказывал», «ни в одной книжке об этом не читал и в кино не видел».<sup>286</sup>

In the following way, she explains the witnesses' difficulties in communicating their experiences:

Прошлое вдруг оказалось беспомощным, в нем не на что было опереться, в вездесущем (как мы верили) архиве человечества не нашлось ключей, чтобы открыть эту дверь.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid. p. 98.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid. p. 293.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.



In other words, the unprecedented disaster is so far removed from normality that culture as we know it fails to accommodate it in a meaningful way. This point is continuously insisted on throughout the book, both in a performative way and by way of conscious reflexion on part of the narrators. Performatively, the text draws attention to its own failure to address the disaster in proper terms. For instance, there is the frequent comparison between the accident and war:

Как в войну...<sup>288</sup>

Ну, думаю, началась война. С китайцами или американцами.<sup>289</sup>

This comparison, however, as we are told both by the author in the 'Self-interview' and by several witnesses, is inadequate. Since the witnesses lack a fitting vocabulary that would describe the accident, they resort to the words they *do* know. Thus, the comparison with war is an imprecise approximation, a kind of groping in the dark for the right word. In the 'Self-interview', the author further comments:

Все, что нам известно об ужасах и страхах, больше всего связано с войной. [...] Поэтому люди смешивают понятия

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid. p. 54.

войны и катастрофы... [...] Чернобыльская информация в газетах сплошь из военных слов: атом, взрыв, герои... И это затрудняет понимание того, что мы находимся в новой истории...<sup>290</sup>

Several narrators make similar statements:

Я думал, что расскажу сыну... А приехал: «Папа, что там?» – «Война.» Я не нашёл других слов..."<sup>291</sup>

Я задумался: почему о Чернобыле мало пишут? [...] Думаете, случайность? Событие до сих пор ещё вне культуры. Травма культуры. И единственный наш ответ – молчание.<sup>292</sup>

С войной сравнивать нельзя, не точно, а все сравнивают.<sup>293</sup>

In what concerns the narrators' conscious reflexion on this problem, two monologues are particularly relevant. In the first, Nina Konstantinovna, a school teacher, tells the interviewer about everyday life after the accident: a pregnant young woman who died suddenly and for unclear reasons; children who faint if they remain standing for more than fifteen minutes; the suicide by hanging of a little girl; the prevailing atmosphere

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid. p. 98.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid. p. 106.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid. p. 133.

of fatigue and gloominess. The narrator then suggests that the existing literature does not provide any means for understanding this reality, saying: 'Все с тем же Пушкиным, который казался мне вечным. Иногда появляется кощунственная мысль: а вдруг вся наша культура – сундук со старыми рукописями'.<sup>294</sup> The accident, then, too alien to be grasped within the realm of traditional Russian "high" culture, has in some sense caused this culture to lose its validity. In a second monologue, Katia P, the daughter of a school teacher, says something similar:

Вот вы пишете, но ни одна книга не помогла мне, не объяснила. Ни театр, ни кино. Я разбираюсь в этом без них. Сама. Мы все переживаем сами, мы не знаем, что с этим делать. Умом я это понять не могу. Особенно растерялась моя мама, она преподаёт в школе русский язык и литературу, всегда учила меня жить по книжкам. И вдруг таких книжек нет... Мама растерялась...<sup>295</sup>

Further, the narrator tells the interviewer about her recollections of the accident: the helicopters hovering over the rooftops; a neighbour watching the fire from his balcony with binoculars; the blue smoke hanging over the power plant; the silence in the bus taking her away

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid. p. 137.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

from Pripiat' where she grew up; the experience of being ostracized in Minsk; the fear of infertility. She then states: 'У нас об этом не пишут, об этом не говорят. А мы есть...'<sup>296</sup> Thus, the text implicitly presents itself as the first of its kind, the first to address these issues; it is a first attempt to grapple with that for which there are no words.

The communication of the Chornobyl' experience is also difficult because of its traumatic nature. This aspect of Aleksievich writing has been researched most notably by Lugačić<sup>297</sup> and by Lindbladh.<sup>298</sup> I will limit myself to noting the mere insistence on the connection between trauma and silence in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, as this emerges as one of the most prominent themes of the book. Often, when a narrator reaches a point of utmost pain in her story, the narration is interrupted or blurred. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is full of bracketed remarks indicating that a narrator cries, falls silent, or starts speaking incoherently:

Ползаю у могилы на коленках... Всегда на коленках...

(Бессвязно.) Я её убила... Я... Она... Спасла...<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid. p. 122.

<sup>297</sup> 'Witnessing the Unspeakable: On Testimony and Trauma in Svetlana Alexievich's *The War's Unwomanly Face* and *Zinky Boys*' (2014).

<sup>298</sup> 'The Problem of Narration and Reconciliation in Svetlana Aleksievich's Testimony Voices from Chernobyl' (2008).

<sup>299</sup> Aleksievich, p. 26.

Я хочу любить! Я люблю! Я молюсь за свою любовь! А мне...  
(Обрывает фразу. Вижу, что говорить не хочет.)<sup>300</sup>

In the beginning of the monologues, many narrators display some sort of reluctance to remember and to tell their story:

Но вы взялись об этом писать... Об этом? А я не хотел бы, чтобы обо мне это знали.<sup>301</sup>

Вспоминать? Может, надо на всякий случай оттолкнуть от себя... Отодвинуть...<sup>302</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Lindbladh has convincingly described the witnesses' ambivalence toward narration in terms of a conflict between the "imperative to tell" and the "impossibility to tell". On the one hand, the witnesses feel 'the existential need to narrate in order to understand and incorporate the traumatic event in the story or him of herself. On the other hand, the witness is reluctant to represent the trauma in the past, since every word seems insufficient'.<sup>303</sup> Particularly illustrative in this regard is the monologue narrated by a woman who tells the interviewer about her recollections of the political turmoil in Tajikistan

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>303</sup> Lindbladh, p. 286.

around the time of the *perestroika*. Torn between the urge to bear witness to her traumatic experience and the instinct to protect herself and the child from that same trauma, she repeats the following statement three times:

*Мне про это нельзя... Я ребёночка жду, я – беременная. Но я вам расскажу... [My italics]*<sup>304</sup>

In sum, then, the cumulative insistence of the narrators tells us that the experience of the Chornobyl' disaster is difficult if not impossible to communicate, for two reasons: first, because of its traumatic nature; second, because the disaster is so far removed from normality that the present culture cannot describe it in a meaningful way, with the result that this culture is invalidated. The theme of silence, although intrinsic to the majority of monologues, is arranged and highlighted by the author to underscore the sense of the uniqueness of the event, hinting at the caesura in Soviet history in particular and human civilisation in general.

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<sup>304</sup> Aleksievich, p. 69.

## Juxtapositions

The implied author speaks not only through what the witnesses say, but also in the silent transitions between their statements. In the point of contact between two monologues, between a monologue and a section with newspaper excerpts, or between two sentences, a certain meaning is created. Two textual units that are meaningfully placed next to each other may constitute two variations on one and the same theme; they may contrast, refute or reinforce each other. In the meaning communicated through juxtapositions in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, the implied author emerges. In this section, I will focus on two of the most frequently recurrent juxtapositions in the book: first, that between “official” discourse and spoken language; second, the juxtaposition between, on the one hand, witnesses with higher education, and older members of the rural population on the other.

One of the most frequent juxtapositions in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is a stylistic one: that between the “official” printed discourse such as newspaper excerpts and propaganda slogans, and spoken language. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* begins with a five-page long ‘Istoricheskaia spravka’ in which we are provided with information about the disaster: the time and place of the explosion, radiation intensity levels in different territories, etc. The following section is made up by Liudmila Ignatenko’s monologue. Between her monologue and the ‘Istoricheskaia spravka’, there are no blank pages so that typographically, the distance between them is minimal. Our eyes move from one page to the other, from the last passage containing “historical”

information about the accident, through the title of the first monologue – ‘Odnokii chelovecheskii golos’ – to its first sentence, which is uttered by a witness who was actually present at the time: “Я не знаю, о чем рассказывать...”.<sup>305</sup> As opposed to the “voice” of the ‘spravka’, which knows exactly what to say and what information is important, the witness emphasises her own confusion, admitting that she does not know where to start or even what to tell us about. It is the literary equivalent of the vertiginous zoom-in: from anonymous mass to individual, from general information to personal experience, from the fast-flowing and clarified to the ponderous and indefinable. The contrast between these two is so striking that it thoroughly changes the effect each of them produces. Were it not for the preceding ‘spravka’, Ignatenko’s monologue would not have been what it is, just as the ‘spravka’ would not be the same without the monologue that follows. The juxtaposition then emphasises the disparity between two concepts which underpin the book, on the one hand, “istoriia”, and on the other hand “propushchennaia istoriia”. “History” here is “pure facts”, that is, the kind of information contained in the ‘spravka’: dates, times, statistical data. “Propushchennaia istoriia”, on the other hand, is the personal, “real experience” of the same event, in other words the witness’ impressions, recollections, and reflexions. This is what the author in the ‘Self-interview’ claims to be concerned with:

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid. p. 11.



Я же занимаюсь тем, что назвала бы пропущенной историей, бесследными следами нашего пребывания на земле и во времени. Пишу и собираю повседневность чувств, мыслей, слов.<sup>306</sup>

This kind of juxtaposition underlines the relative “banality” of one type of discourse and the profundity of the other. Having read the five pages of the ‘spravka’, we may have the impression that we already know a great deal about what the Chernobyl’ disaster “is”. As soon as we hear Ignatenko’s voice, however, the impression is the opposite: we now realise that we are about to come near something that is thoroughly alien to us. The same juxtaposition recurs in the end, but is here reversed. After the final monologue (also narrated by a widow and given the title ‘Odinokii chelovecheskii golos’) two pages of excerpts from Belarusian newspapers conclude the book. Here, we return to the superficiality of “official” discourse and leave what the author in connection to the notion of “propushchennaiia istoriia” calls ‘мир Чернобыля’.<sup>307</sup> This kind of juxtaposition is present, also, on the level of sentences. In Grushevoi’s monologue, for instance, the narrator relates a conversation he had with a woman in the polluted zone, whose husband, a helicopter pilot, died shortly after the accident. Referring to his recollection of the official depiction of the event, Grushevoi says: ‘Помню названия статей: «Герои в небе»,

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

«Чернобыльские соколы»'.<sup>308</sup> In the next sentence, referring to his recollection of the widow, he says: 'Вот эта женщина...'<sup>309</sup> The juxtaposition of these two types of discourse, the Soviet propaganda slogans and the short, pensive sentence suggesting Grushevoi's recollection of the widow facing him during his conversation with her, again emphasises the gap between the "official" and the "real". Of course, this ties in with the way in which Aleksievich's aesthetics are positioned towards an "official" Soviet discourse, which I discussed in Chapter One. As we recall, Aleksievich's aesthetics are based on the assumption that the Soviet citizen's experience – and particularly the experience of war – has been appropriated by the Soviet state-controlled media and is being used as a propaganda symbol. However, there is a wider concern here with *all* mass media. Referring to newspaper and television in public statements, Aleksievich has repeatedly spoken of what she calls 'мир банальности'.<sup>310</sup> In the interview with Dmitrii Gordon mentioned earlier, she states: 'Мы обходимся и живем в мире банальности, в основном. Газеты, телевидение... Они берут только тонкий, верхний слой вещей'.<sup>311</sup> The type of juxtaposition exemplified in Grushevoi's monologue

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> I have found three separate interviews in which Aleksievich uses this turn of phrase. Aside from the interview with Dmitrii Gordon, she made this statement in 2015 in an interview with Radio Svaboda and in 2015 talking to Masha Gessen. See Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, 'The Memory Keeper', ed. by Masha Gessen (The New Yorker, 2015). Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich, in *Radio Svaboda*, (2015). quoted in Golstein.

<sup>311</sup> Aleksievich.

suggests something similar: there is a vast amount of widely reproduced images and narratives that do not tell us anything about the “real” experience of things. If anything, these images only bring us further away from “the truth”. Therefore, it is the task of literature to go “deeper” into things than the images and narratives of popular culture do, and thereby describe something that comes closer to a “truth”.

A second recurrent juxtaposition is that between two different social groups that are conceived of as opposites in the text. As we have seen in the preceding section, witnesses with higher education, such as school teachers and politicians, often make the comment that the existing literature fails to make sense of the Chornobyl’ disaster. By contrast, older members of the rural population, to whom the author refers to as ‘starye krest’iane’ in the ‘Self-interview’, cope better with the consequences of the accident.<sup>312</sup> Whereas the members of an intellectual, urban stratum of the population experience a sense of confusion and disorientation, the sense of reality of the ‘starye krest’iane’ does not disintegrate. This opposition is established by the author in the ‘Self-interview’, where she comments:

Интереснее всего в те первые дни было разговаривать не с учёными, чиновниками и военными с большими погонами, а со старыми крестьянами. Живут они без Толстого и

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<sup>312</sup> Aleksievich, p. 33.

Достоевского, без Интернета, но их сознание каким-то образом вместило в себя новую картину мира.<sup>313</sup>

In the beginning of chapter one, representatives of these two strata take turns in speaking. The first witness to speak is a psychologist who early on in his monologue makes a reference to Tolstoy. In the second monologue, an old woman who has remained alone in the polluted area after the evacuation speaks. In the third monologue, an inhabitant of Pripjat' speaks. Then, in 'Monolog odnoi derevni o tom, kak zovut dushi s neba, chtoby s nimi poplakat i poobedat', which consists of the indistinguishable voices of seven narrators, the 'derevnia' speaks again, now as a single subject which submerges the individual voices. The statements made by older members of the rural population are often characterised by a tone of reconciliation that is absent in other monologues. For instance:

Самая справедливая вещь на свете смерть. [...] Земля всех принимает: и добрых, и злых, и грешников.<sup>314</sup>

Мужчин Бог забирает раньше. По какой причине? Никто нам не переведёт, никто не знает этого секрета.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

Partially, this reconciliatory attitude is attributed to religious faith, as there are plenty of references to God in these monologues. There is also the sense of closeness to nature, and in connection to that, the view of one's own death as part of a natural process: 'А я помирать не боюсь. Никто два раза не живёт. И лист отлетает, и дерево падает'.<sup>316</sup> Apart from this, somewhat paradoxically, the lack of a properly informed understanding of the reality of the accident seems to make it easier for these people to cope with it. For instance: 'Вот вы скажите по науке, как действует та радиация? [...] А что вы думаете в Минске её нет, раз она невидимая?'.<sup>317</sup> This ignorance is especially emphasised in connection to these narrators' use of the word 'radiatsiia', which they utter with a tone of utter unfamiliarity, as if pronouncing a foreign word. The pronoun 'ta' or 'eta' is used before it, underlining how strange this word sounds to the speaker: 'Эта радиация у меня на огороде была'.<sup>318</sup> A notion like 'radiation' is so distant from their perception of reality that it belongs to the fundamentally unknowable. Aleksievich follows familiar patterns here, juxtaposing the traditional collective marked by a degree of innocence and ignorance with the intellectual classes made up of clearly distinguished individuals who are beset by complex doubts and torments.

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid. p. 56.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid. In Gunin and Tait's English translation this is rendered as 'that radiation stuff': Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer : A Chronicle of the Future*, (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 50.

Aleksievich's attitude to the notion of "*derevnia*" in the post-Soviet sphere could be the topic of a separate inquiry. Within the scope of this discussion it is sufficient to note that the depiction in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* of a rural population as close to nature and humbly reconciled with the harsh conditions of life is highly romantic and, arguably, problematic in that it runs the risk of essentialising an imagined "*narod*". In the Russian literary context, what comes to mind in this regard is Tolstoy, for instance his highly didactic story *Tri smerti*. Here, as opposed to the 'gospozha', who helplessly cries at hearing herself uttering the word 'umeret', the proximity of death does not instil any fear in the dying coachman Fedor. Calm and reconciled, since he has no use for them anymore, he happily gives away his boots to a younger man. Talking about death and God with the same familiarity and reconciliation as the narrators in 'Monolog odnoi derevni', he says: 'Нутро все изныло. Бог его знает что. [...] Смерть моя пришла -- вот что'.<sup>319</sup> Not unlike the implied assumptions of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, *Tri smerti* suggests that religious faith, closeness to nature, and a "simple way of life" make the thought of death possible to cope with for the members of the "*narod*".

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<sup>319</sup> Lev Tolstoj, *Sobranie sochinenii tom tretii*, (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1973), p. 63.

## The Authorial Monologue

In my discussion of the recurrent motifs and juxtapositions in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, I have repeatedly referred to the 'Self-interview', the authorial monologue in the beginning of the book. As we have seen, many of the relational terms and themes that run through the book are established here. In fact, the 'Self-interview' can be viewed as a kind of summary of the most prominent topics of the book: the eco-critical perspective; the understanding of the disaster as a symbol for the failure of the communist utopian endeavour; the depiction of the Soviet state and the Soviet citizen; the theme of the unsayable; the opposition between "istoriia" and "propushchennaia istoriia"; the opposition between the urban and rural populations. Located at the beginning of the book, it directs our attention toward certain thematic aspects and prepares us for what is to come. Here, I will expand somewhat on this, as the 'Self-interview' occupies a space where the implied author clearly emerges. First, though, we must remember not to equate the voice of the 'Self-interview' with the implied author. As we recall from the discussion of the concept, the implied author does not designate a direct but a metaphorical voice; it is the locus of the work's intent and ideological assumptions and comprises not only the assertion and denotation of the text, but also its 'implication, connotation, and ideological nexus'.<sup>320</sup> The author-figure in the 'Self-interview', therefore, should instead be viewed as an

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<sup>320</sup> Chatman, p. 74.

authoritative voice whose judgements and thematic interests closely correspond to those of the implied author. As such, the 'Self-interview' serves to determine the ideological parameters within which the following witnessing accounts are to be read. The authorial monologue then "guides" our reading of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* in a direct and, from the point of view of the text, trustworthy way. For instance, during her time in the zone, the author-figure tells us, she heard numerous witnesses express sentiments such as: '«таких слов не подберу, чтобы передать то, что я видела и пережила» [...] «ни в одной книжке об этом не читал и в кино не видел»'.<sup>321</sup> In the ensuing monologues, the witnesses *do* say these things and so the observations made in the 'Self-interview' are confirmed. The same is true for more ideologically charged aspects, for instance the Soviet "fatalism", which the author-figure discusses before it is confirmed by the "evidence" in the monologues and choirs:

Ликвидаторы [...] беспрекословно отправлялись туда, где «умирали» роботы [...] а потом ещё радовались полученным правительственным грамотами и медалям, которые им вручали перед смертью...<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Aleksievich, p. 32.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid. p. 35.



Thus, the author-figure's observations and judgements receive a retrospective "empirical" validity. This makes the author-figure by far the most reliable narrator in the entire work. The reliability of her voice is further heightened by the fact that we identify it as belonging to Svetlana Aleksievich, elevated post-Soviet intellectual and recipient of numerous awards, and also by virtue of its location within the text, in the beginning, separated from the other monologues. Thus, authoritatively, the voice of the 'Self-interview' makes explicit the implied author's messages.

## Conclusion

The structural emphasis on the multi-voiced nature of the material presented in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* suggests at first sight a strong commitment to a plurality of views and perspectives on the Chornobyl' disaster. Yet through the author's deliberate narrative strategies and her subtle manipulation of the arrangement of individual monologues, the narrators' varying degrees of reliability, recurrent motifs, juxtapositions, and the authorial monologue, the implied author of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* emerges as a clearly defined set of underlying assumptions. The totality of the text is thus shaped by a fundamentally anti-Soviet outlook, conservative notions of male and female psychology, eco-critical ideas on the relationship between man and nature, and by a view on the relationship between language and reality marked by the understanding of the accident as causing a caesura in Soviet history in particular and human civilisation in general. These converging views and assumptions of individual monologues both contribute to and benefit from the sense of an emerging collective voice with its attendant notions of authenticity and authority, suggesting an empirical (rather than merely subjective) validity in both individual monologues and the overall book. The impression is deepened by the presentation of the monologues as unmediated texts despite clear indications that Aleksievich has shaped the witness statements for the overall purpose of her book at the stage of initial interview and at the stage of the subsequent editing process. The ideological coherence of the different monologues is further evidence that Aleksievich presents

the reader with a specific interpretation of the accident based on a particular worldview and ideological assumptions. Although the very structure of the book insists on the validity of the single voice, presenting each of them in a 'monologue', Aleksievich integrates these supposedly independent voices into a narrative and artistic design in which the collective subsumes the individual.

The speakers in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* then cannot be said to be ideologically independent in the Bakhtinian sense, as the implied author's norms determine the validity of their ideological positions in the text. We can therefore outright reject Lindbladh's claim that the book successfully avoids a single authorial consciousness (see Chapter One). Golstein's assertion that Aleksievich's writing is in fact not polyphonic in spirit (see Chapter One) with its implication of Aleksievich's writing as inherently "flawed" is too simplistic to account for the complexities of her writing and aesthetics. At the heart of Aleksievich's artistic and historical pursuit lies the question of how human experience can be adequately translated into words. The limits of language are problematized throughout the book, whether in the speakers' reluctance and failure to articulate their suffering or in the book's performance of silence in ellipses and bracketed authorial comments suggesting the witnesses' emotional distress. Aleksievich is therefore less interested in her predecessors' quest to establish historical truth, but is driven by the question of how to record and preserve the individual emotional experience of a historical event. In this regard, Aleksievich formulates a conception of writing as an

authentic expression of a past experience. The contradictory treatment of the witnesses' statements in Aleksievich's work is therefore motivated by the aspiration not only to "give a voice" to other people but also to give an adequate expression of their experience in language. On the one hand, because of its suspicion of "official" Soviet discourse and the fictionalisation of history, Aleksievich's prose presents itself as giving unmediated access to authentic witness statements. On the other hand, because of the need to communicate adequately the human experience of an event, the raw material has to undergo extensive mediation. It is precisely the strict selection and the use of rhetorical and literary devices that makes Aleksievich's depictions of human suffering and Soviet reality so effective. Situated between the mediated and the unmediated, between the fictional and the factual, between art and history, Aleksievich's work both denies and grants audibility to the "unheard voices" of 'propushchennaia istoriia'. The helpless, personal expression of unspeakable suffering finds a voice in the powerful collective prayer, in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*.

## Further Research

In my future research, I shall examine the tension between the mediated and unmediated in Aleksievich's prose in the wider context of the sentiment of the suspicion of "art" and the reluctance to fictionalise history, epitomised in Adorno's famous declaration that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric", which Aleksievich cites in her 2015 Nobel Lecture. In a Soviet context, Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelag Gulag* is an obvious point of reference in this regard and it would be interesting to compare his documentary writings to Aleksievich's. Moreover, I have so far only scratched the surface of the origins of Aleksievich's work in Soviet war writing, and the relation of her work to war depictions in "official" Soviet discourse.

In regard to the use of terminology, Aleksievich's writing transcends traditional genre-definitions and distinctions such as that between "history" and "fiction" to such an extent as to render them meaningless. Applying these categories to her writing, we tend to say more about our own general assumptions about literature than about her work. In principle, therefore, Aleksievich's work should be approached from the point of view of the universal notions and assumptions that underpin it: its suspicion of "prose" and aspiration to authenticity, and its conception of art as the mediation of a personal past experience.

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