CHERNOBYL TRAUMA AND GOTHIC

Testimony, Cultural Memory and Global Literary Perspectives

Stuart Lindsay

Chernobyl Trauma and Gothic

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INTRODUCTION

At 01:23 a.m. on 26 April 1986, the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant Reactor Number Four in Northern Soviet Ukraine marked the outset of the world's worst nuclear accident. The emergence of this disaster, like all genealogies of mass trauma, reveals the inadequacy of fixed concepts structuring a painful event's origins, comprehension, perpetrators and victims. The explosion and subsequent radioactive cloud that spread gradually through international airspace cast a long shadow across the history of the USSR. The immediate aftermath activated a Soviet public discursivity around the legacy of governmental incompetency and ideological dogmatism in the civilian nuclear programme which until then had been the subject of sociopolitical repression. As the paranoid effects of Chernobyl swept through the Union's satellite nations, spreading radiation poisoning and fear of infection, anxieties arose concerning the event's impact on future generations and even on the Soviet socialist dream. In effect, the disaster's radiation leaked through human containment measures (despite emergency response teams' best efforts to prevent this), through national borders within and beyond the USSR and through time – as symptoms of psychological trauma transmitted from one generation of people to their children and from the Soviet political period to those of its successors.

The traumatic history of the Chernobyl disaster, then, can be viewed as an extended emergency rather than an immediate crisis of the past, revealing causes prior to the initial explosion and ongoing effects. One nuclear technician, Valeriy Ilych Khodomchuk, was killed the instant the reactor exploded, and – officially at least – a further thirty individuals, whose occupations included plant workers, security guards, and military personnel, died as a direct result of this event (Marples 1996, p. 23). A published Chernobyl Forum study conducted between 2003 and 2005, referring to an earlier United Nations Select Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) report published in 2000, stated that in 1987, 134 emergency workers suffered Acute Radiation Syndrome (ARS) due to contamination from the site (The Chernobyl Forum 2006, p. 14).

What is disputed by historians, however, is the number of long-term deaths and injuries in the years following this initial period. It is impossible to reliably ascertain the extent to which radiation doses absorbed by the approximately 510,000 Chernobyl response and recovery workers at the site between 1986 and 1990 contributed to their physical and mental health issues (UNSCEAR 2008).

Chernobyl Trauma: A Diagnosis

The possibility of psychological trauma's transmissibility is a key ethical issue in Trauma studies. The question of who is, or can be, traumatised by mass violence or catastrophe has undergone intense theoretical consideration from prominent scholars in the field. For historian Dominick LaCapra, 'the indiscriminate generalization of the category of survivor and the overall conflation of history or culture with trauma, as well as the near fixation on enacting or acting out posttraumatic symptoms, have the effect of obscuring crucial historical distinctions' (LaCapra 2001, xi). The case of Chernobyl, as an indiscriminate, international emergency, threatens to obfuscate the separation between victim and perpetrator, eyewitness and onlooker.

To fully grasp the scientific, legal, political and psychological aspects of the Chernobyl disaster, other issues within Trauma studies must also be considered. The developments in this academic field throughout the twentieth century have been shaped by contemporary mass traumas, some of which, such as the Holocaust or Apartheid, have involved judicial inquiries into crimes against humanity. The influence of legal proceedings on the discipline has often privileged clinically verifiable traumatic symptoms as evidence of crime and historical fact, independent of the victim's subjective experience, to aid survivors in the often difficult and drawn out process of substantiating court claims for the purpose of reparations (Leys 2000, p. 263). This factor, coupled with a more recent, technological turn to the psychobiology of trauma (van der Kolk 2014), has had the unintended effect of overlooking valuable insight of the individual's memory of, and testimony to, the past. Also, time delays caused by the traumatic symptoms of amnesia and shame often result in survivors only able and willing to seek justice for their historical experiences of criminal trauma belatedly. History is thereby disjointed, often perforated by missing or destroyed documents from old regimes that might otherwise support claimants' cases.

In contrast to the primacy of historical veracity are legal concerns around the theory of recovered memory, in which repressed yet complete memories of traumatic events such as physical or sexual abuse can be extracted by

therapeutic intervention and constitute decisive evidence for the prosecution in criminal proceedings. This presents an opposite danger: to privilege victim or eyewitness testimony above all other forms of factual proof in court. In the mediation of collective traumas, LaCapra (2016, p. 376) argues persuasively for memory as a corrective rather than alternative to written, archival sources, an understanding of history and memory as mutual co-mediators.

Political responses to the Chernobyl disaster have contributed to the social aspects of related traumatic experience. First-hand scientific accounts of the environmental conditions shortly after the explosion of Reactor Four were obfuscated by Ukrainian and Russian Soviet government reports in the interest of limiting the spread of public panic. The emerging discrepancies between official narratives and personal memories about the biological and psychological effects of radiation generated confusion, mistrust and alternating traumatic states of unawareness and hyper-awareness around the event. In the absence of reliable, objective facts, individuals directly affected conveyed their experiences through a testimonial literature which oscillated between vivid disclosure and stark repression. The Soviet authorities dismissed the concerns of cleanup crews sent to Chernobyl (termed ‘liquidators’ in Soviet parlance) who were suffering from what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), since its third edition published in 1980, broadly identifies as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The government diagnosed them as having ‘radiophobia’ and supported the idea that one could handle an encounter with radiation easily by simply respecting it or not worrying about its danger at all (Higginbotham 2019, p. 1). The issue of Chernobyl trauma, then, is at once psychological and political, and calls for a study of the interaction of cultural and literary memory with the existing archival, Soviet history of the disaster. As it is an extended traumatic episode that straddles the Soviet and (sometimes nominally) post-Soviet eras, an analysis of this topic must grapple with the USSR’s legacy of government bureaucracy, misinformation and political silence, and engage with survivors’ imaginative yet compelling articulation of testimony.

In the weeks following the explosion, an ever-expanding region around the nuclear power plant, encompassing the surrounding forests, towns, villages and the ‘atom city’ of Pripyat, underwent a staggered yet rapid evacuation of its residents. Long-term trauma resulted from this sudden civilian displacement and relocation to mostly urban areas, particularly in many of the older populations from smaller, rural farming communities. Neither the evacuees nor the military ranks which comprised the liquidator units were obliged with a clear understanding of the accident as developments became known to the Soviet government and, to a lesser extent, the international

community.[1] As the days and weeks after the explosion turned into months and then years, eyewitnesses' many questions, worries and pleas remained unaddressed. The 1987 Soviet trial of the plant's senior management served as an exercise in scapegoating to protect the overall reputation of Soviet atomic power. Though confusing, fragmentary, compromised by political prejudice and on occasion impossible to recollect, Chernobyl passed into the realm of partially recovered memory. This understanding of the nuclear disaster as a physical, psychological and social wound, and of the alteration by time of a shocking event into painful memorialisation, reflects the broad theory of collective trauma. The incurrence of trauma has been explored thoroughly in both clinical and academic, literary studies with reference to the diagnostic criteria of PTSD. The fifth edition of the *Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 2013, defines PTSD as:

> exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:
>
> 1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s). 2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others. 3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. 4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g. first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse) (*DSM-5* 2013, p. 271).

A persistent feature of the *DSM*'s definition of PTSD has been its communal aspect. Criteria 2 and 3 acknowledge PTSD incurrence as the personal witnessing of an event and interpersonal interaction with others, respectively. The *DSM-5* has updated the APA's definition of PTSD via the addition of Criterion 4, expanding the diagnostic to include recurring confrontations with a specific trauma or set of traumas in either a personal or professional capacity.

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1 Information outside the USSR informed the international community of the developing event via US satellite imagery and international radiation monitoring. However, in the absence of concrete on-site details about Chernobyl and an official response by the Soviet government, some press outlets resorted to speculative reporting on the disaster's magnitude. Newspaper articles' sensational headlines such as the *Daily Mail*'s '"2000 Dead" in Atom Horror' (29 April 1986) and the *New York Post*'s '"2000 Die" in Nukemare' (29 April 1986) came from uninformed or mistranslated sources. See Higginbotham 2019, p. 177.

The *DSM-5*'s conception of PTSD incurrence through repeated experience transmitted across close social groups and a public duty to engage with trauma is particularly relevant to the study of traumatised Chernobyl populations. It effectively describes the trauma of many civil inhabitants from the affected region who did not witness the blaze at the reactor first-hand but experienced a drip feed of ensuing biological and social symptoms: changes in the natural environment and in animal behaviour, the state of emergency about which few official details were made publicly available and frightening rumours that came in the aftermath of the explosion. Many also saw the physical and psychological effects of radiation on a loved one or relative who worked at the plant during the initial disaster, contributed to putting out the fires around the destroyed reactor afterwards or had a role in the long-term liquidation of the contaminated area. These traumatic aspects of Chernobyl's collective experience can be identified using PTSD Criterion 3. Criterion 4 helps to provide a specific understanding of the liquidators' traumatic experience of 'deactivating' the site. This activity involved burying entire villages, replacing irradiated topsoil, shooting dead the evacuees' abandoned pet animals that had absorbed unsafe levels of radiation in their fur and enduring extremely dangerous radioactive conditions while clearing the Reactor 3 and 4 roofs of debris thrown by the blast. Taken as a whole, the *DSM-5*'s definition of PTSD provides a view of Chernobyl trauma as an ongoing process rather than a singular event, one in which traumatic reexperience occurs through continual encounters with the disaster region and its encircling testimonial anxiety.

The *DSM-5* provides a clinical formulation of trauma in individuals and accounts for the social manifestation of trauma horizontally across communities and vertically across family generations (Rinker and Lawler 2018, p. 151). Drawing upon this model, the central purpose of my book is twofold. First, it examines literary dimensions of Chernobyl trauma's incurrence and transmission through the testimonials of an expanded social group of survivors consisting of civilians evacuated from localities surrounding the power plant and the emergency response and long-term liquidation personnel who confronted the disaster. Second, it analyses the cultural inheritance and transformation of this Chernobyl literature by the memorial practices of subsequent generational and international populations. The book achieves these interrelated aims by exploring particular discursive strategies through which survivors testify to traumatic experience and the manner in which these approaches evolve across the historical and geographical dissemination of Chernobyl trauma in fiction. To do this, it employs the theoretical and structural aesthetics of Gothic. The haunting and excess of authority's non-disclosure become, respectively, scenarios wherein the displaced survivor as the repressed other returns to and transgresses the Soviet self.

Chernobyl Gothic: A Structural Aesthetics of Haunting and Excess

Why Chernobyl trauma and Gothic? Why Chernobyl trauma and then Gothic? Gothic scholars have studied the intersectionality between trauma and the Gothic in a number of ways that are foundational to the latter field. As a literature of anxiety and excess emerging in late eighteenth-century Great Britain through the rise of secular government, the impact of science and industry on everyday life and the historical process of the French Revolution, Gothic fiction sought to fashion the sociopolitical fears attached to these events into ornately aesthetic narrative structures of repression and return. Because Gothic fiction refuses to reference these social upheavals explicitly, however, symptomatic literary preoccupations have emerged from the genre's structural embeddedness of social trauma. As David Punter writes in the first volume of *The Literature of Terror* (1996), Gothic fiction's antirealist narrative complexity, 'its tendency to raise technical problems which it often fails to resolve', and its 'evasive response to a difficulty […] in the taboo quality of many of the themes to which Gothic addresses itself' have resulted in its displaced, if intense, engagement with actual social and political problems (Punter 1996, pp. 17, 54). To draw upon the ways in which Gothic constitutes or anticipates literary trauma narratives, then, one must explore 'the various ways in which terror breaks through the surfaces of literature, differently in every case, but also […] certain distinct continuities of language and symbol' (Punter 1996, p. 18).

One must also examine the Gothic's relationship to Trauma theory. The burgeoning field of literary and cultural Trauma studies in the early 1990s was marked by the influential work of Cathy Caruth. Her model of trauma incurrence and transmission by victims to onlookers revolves around a specific understanding of the traumatic wound as an aporia that is completely unassimilable into personal or historical understanding. Roger Luckhurst identifies Caruth's conception of trauma as 'the dominant trauma paradigm' (Luckhurst 2008). As Caruth writes, 'traumatic experience suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it' (Caruth 1996, pp. 91–92). Such a crisis of witnessing acts as an affront to testimonial and historical truth. Because trauma's 'history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence' belatedly, 'in connection with another place, and in another time' (Caruth 1991, p. 7), it is rendered dangerously transmissible between people, generations and even those who have no personal connection with the traumatic event in question. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub exercised this theory's discursivity when the former's students studying Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), a film collating

survivor testimonials to the Nazi genocide of the Jews, experienced the very crisis of witnessing that the Holocaust constitutes. For Felman, Laub and Caruth, the compulsive revisitation of this traumatic event that cannot be integrated into historical understanding enables new pedagogic possibilities for grasping the dissemination of historical trauma as intense shock among those at geographical or generational distance. It is beyond the scope of this book to fully explore this aporetic theory of trauma, but it is important to bear in mind that the landmark late twentieth-century publications in which it was developed continue to exert a powerful influence over the field (Bond and Craps 2020, p. 72), to the extent that subsequent trauma theorists have argued vigorously against and in defence of it.

I now turn to the ways in which the Gothic both reflects and offers alternative structural models to the dominant trauma paradigm. The English Gothic's own historical paradox combines sociopolitically conservative reactions to contemporary upheaval with aesthetic stabilisations of the Medieval past to shore up a sense of modern national identity. The interplay of the genre's middle-class pedigree and its culturally transgressive plots concerning taboo sexual practices and terror in the face of supernatural or monstrous threats has helped scholars' understandings of its ambivalent engagement with trauma. Gothic fiction's anxiety around and refusal to directly incorporate the historical traumas of the late-eighteenth century makes it highly adaptable to a trauma theory of unspeakable witnessing. Conversely, as a literature of excess in narrative aesthetics and their affective impact upon readers, Gothic revels in hypervisibility and disclosure. Ashlee Joyce has synthesised theories around the ways in which the Gothic resists categorisation under a trauma-oriented anxiety model. The pleasurable aspects of Gothic as a literature of terror complicate the ethically situated reader of any trauma narrative it might contain (Joyce 2019). These aesthetic dimensions – the comic, grotesque and carnivalesque, as well as the focus on Gothic 'surface, spectacle, and performance' (Spooner 2006, p. 27) – operate under a model of distance that reflexively explores the complex and diverse relations between traumatic events and survivors' recollections. Resisting the aporetic trauma model's claim on all Gothic fictions, Luckhurst highlights the 'hybrid assemblages' of trauma theory in disciplines such as psychology, the law, poststructuralism, neuroscience and therapy. The Gothic's own hybridity, in the form of 'imbroglios that mess up our fundamental categories of subject and object, human and non-human, society and nature' (Luckhurst 2008, p. 14), might, in combination with a continually evolving discursivity of trauma, help navigate the diverse ways in which a mass, traumatic event is recollected by a survivor community and transmitted to other social groups.

How does this configuration of trauma and the Gothic interact with the particularly Soviet nature of Chernobyl's testimonial literature? In 1934, the Bolshevik State's establishment of Socialist Realism and total exclusion of all other literary styes would appear to have stopped pre-Revolutionary supernatural fiction dead in its tracks. It seems that the Gothic, as a profoundly antirealist and bourgeois genre, would be afforded no opportunity to flourish in the emerging Soviet communist society. Indeed, that same year, as Muireann Maguire remarks, Soviet novelist and bureaucrat Konstantin Fedin announced that fantastic literature, including Gothic, had been "shut in its coffin"' (Fedin 1934, p. 2, in Maguire 2012, p. 3). As many scholars have pointed out, however, such grandiose pronouncements of the literary Gothic's death have always been premature.

This irrepressible Gothic style, wrought in typically undead imagery, can be read as a return of repressed literary phantoms and haunting voices. The genre writing in Soviet Science Fiction satire that precedes the Chernobyl disaster and the testimonies of the event's survivors displaced by evacuation and political silence draw on the Gothic to shape cultural memories of violence, terror and technological upheaval in the USSR. Dina Khapaeva conceptualises a Gothic aesthetics and society (Khapaeva 2013) which, in reflecting on the regime's history through literature of the post-Soviet period, 'aim[s] at examining the sociopsychological mechanisms exercised by supressed memories' (Khapaeva 2009, p. 372).

Timothy Jones's study of Carnival in *The Gothic and the Carnivalesque in American Culture* (2015) informs my theoretical basis upon which the Gothic's hybridity and excess might also transgress the structural aesthetics of the aporetic trauma paradigm in Chernobyl survivor testimony and contextual Soviet literature. For Jones, historicist, political and psychological readings of Gothic texts overlook their playfully macabre, affect driven aesthetics. Though his study focuses on the American Gothic, his engagement with the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of Carnival provides a useful understanding of the exchange between immediate pleasure and careful reflection in literature (Jones 2015, p. 23). Chernobyl survivor testimony also challenges the ethical imperative of reader empathy with the victimised subject through carnivalesque irruption. This "distancing model," in which the unruly experience of real trauma breaks with expected literary conventions of trauma narrative (Joyce 2019, p. 464), 'may share significant narrative similarities with the tall tale, or the joke, working towards a horrific "punchline"' (Jones 2015, p. 24).

In Chapters 1 and 2, I explore examples of Soviet Science Fiction satire that I deem relevant to Chernobyl memory and eyewitness accounts of the disaster respectively. Chapter 1 analyses the ways in which two Soviet satires

by Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog* (1925a) and *The Fatal Eggs* (1925b), and the Strugatsky Brothers' novel, *Roadside Picnic* (1977), deal ambivalently with the serious themes of sociopolitical upheaval and trauma using the excessive aesthetics of Gothic carnival in the body, language and laughter. Chapter 2 examines the manifestation of this carnivalesque and grotesque inflection in the testimony of the Chernobyl survivor, in which jokes and the imaginative permeability between human and nonhuman animal categories distance the witness, and by extension the reader, from psychological trauma, thereby inhibiting overidentification with Chernobyl trauma.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyse Chernobyl fiction from the displaced diaspora of Soviet nuclear trauma and international community of nonwitnesses, respectively. The psychoanalytic theory of the phantom and the crypt, formulated by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, introduced to Gothic studies by Jody Castricano via the poetics of Jacques Derrida's writing, supports an understanding of the uncanny effects of my chosen literature. The sociopsychological phenomenon of cryptomimesis conceives the Chernobyl text, subject and setting as haunted by an inaccessible interiority, a "non-place" altogether othered by the defence against trauma (Castricano 2001, p. 24). This repression by another – other family members, generations, institutions, and entire political regimes – lodges the trauma in a hermetically sealed part of the self's unconscious, rendering the individual silent. The centralised Soviet government's initial denial of a serious nuclear emergency to the residents of the Chernobyl region – that the evacuation would only be for three days and not, as it turned out, permanent – establishes the phantom and crypt in the structure of Chernobyl Gothic fiction.

Chapter 3 analyses two novels in this light: *The Sky Unwashed* (2000) by Irene Zabytko and *The Dead Lake* (2014) by Hamid Ismailov. These titles reflect the conventional trauma paradigm, employing 'the dynamic and uncanny structural principles of the Gothic: a sense of the unspeakable; a correspondence between dreams, language, and writing; and traces of the theme of live burial' (Castricano 2001, p. 13). The novels' depictions of nuclear haunting exteriorise a cryptic partition, turning them, topographically speaking, "inside out" (Rand, in Abraham and Torok 1986, lxviii). Their depictions of the Soviet nuclear programme's ghosts through characters' intergenerational trauma and the post-Soviet Gothic mode express literary Chernobyl trauma through the notion of inarticulable, psychic wounding that can only be known through its emergence in characters' behavioural symptoms.

Chapter 4 develops an attunement for listening to the call of the other in the structure of Chernobyl fiction. Mario Petrucci's elegiac cycle, *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl* (2004), and Emmanuel Lepage's graphic novel,

Springtime in Chernobyl (2019), propose strategies for witnessing the Chernobyl survivor that resist overidentification with trauma through fixed literary–psychological understandings derived from a traditional Gothic aesthetics of haunting and mourning. The texts posit and overcome these literary constraints by staging a dynamic 'play of phantoms' (Castricano 2001, p. 7) to articulate the spectral indeterminacy of the survivor's pain. Petrucci's speakers and the characters in Lepage's graphic novel respond self-reflexively to the testimony of the other through considerations of rhizomatic Gothic surfaces – what Derrida might call (s)cryptograms (Derrida 1986, lxviii) – to explore attempts, failures and creative offshoots in the representation of traumatic Chernobyl radiation.

Chapter 5 analyses two examples of Postcommunist Chernobyl new media. First, the biopic *The Russian Woodpecker* (2015) immerses viewers' engagement in a Gothic aesthetics of post-Soviet selective amnesia, literary nightmare and uncertainty about the Ukrainian past, present and future (Khapaeva 2013). Through a documentary focus on Ukrainian artist and Chernobyl survivor Fedor Alexandrovich, the film reveals the viral way in which long-term Chernobyl trauma and Soviet political secrecy effect dramatic productions of identity performance and contentious conspiratorial paranoia. *The Russian Woodpecker* exposes its audience to the collapse between a Soviet prison camp mentality and its subject's highly emotive expression of the post-Soviet nightmare.

Second, the First-Person Shooter videogame trilogy, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (2007–2009), in which players explore, survive and engage in armed conflict with nonplayer characters in the Chernobyl Zone of Alienation, employs the embodied Deleuzian manifold to locate and unsettle the player's identity in the Gothic aesthetics and society of the games' violent power struggles. I claim that their heterotopic system design generates emergent, rhizomatic player experiences of Gothic affect in the form of psychic disorientation and horror. The titles also manifest a Gothic society through their nonplayer character factions' cross-sectional representation of the Soviet prison consciousness. Bandits, paramilitaries, religious cultists and corrupt military personnel present the player with an interactive experience of the Postcommunist legacy of Gothic society, which Kapaeva describes as situational: 'an entirely deictic gesture […] a concrete judgement decided upon under specific circumstances here and now, and which therefore does not need to be described in abstract and universal terms' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 222).

The final chapter of this book explores radiation as a hyperobject assemblage through the Nuclear Inhumanities (Fetters, 2022) of two British Chernobyl fictions: Dave Thorpe's illustrated novella *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect* (1988) and Tony White's novella, *Dicky Star and the Garden Rule* (2012).

Doc Chaos interpolates excessive aesthetics of queerness, nonconformity to heteronormative gender norms and posthumanist exuberance into a concept–horror depiction of the nuclear hyperobject. It narrates the collapse of hypersubjects (Morton and Boyer, 2021) by the Chernobyl disaster through portrayals of transgressive sex, sexuality and gender playfulness in a Gothic idiom.

My consideration of *Dicky Star* invokes recent scholarship on Gothic objects as object-oriented in nature (Weinstock, 2023). Object-Oriented Ontology, a philosophy developed originally by Graham Harman (2002), supports my analysis of the Chernobyl reactor's representation in White's novella as a Gothic object. Its silent affect of horror and dread is conveyed through an affinity with Gothic fictional representations such as an enchanted castle and Margaret Thatcher as the devil, displacing the global onlooker in a series of sensual objects unable to convey the true horror of the nuclear disaster.

This monograph concludes by reflecting on the representation of Chernobyl trauma through a Gothic aesthetics. Textual constructions the disaster and its collective psychological impact, from novels inspired by first-hand accounts to computer software offering users a simulated experience of the Zone, offer unique ways of understanding survivor memories of, and cultural responses to, the nuclear disaster. The Exclusion Zone also circulates in the popular imagination through its commercialisation as an international destination for Dark Tourism – the practice of visiting sites of mass death, suffering or tragedy. Gothic aesthetics are firmly rooted in this experience, with tour guides often structuring their itineraries to include stops at the buildings represented in the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* computer games and noting that the Autumn and Winter seasons are popular with visitors wishing to experience the site at its gloomiest or most frightening (Yankovska and Hannam 2013). Also in line with the Gothic's commercial properties is the fact that Chernobyl tour companies sell souvenirs, such as tee shirts, versions of the traditional Ukrainian national dress emblazoned with the radiation trefoil symbol and glow in the dark fridge magnets, keychains and mugs. Global configurations of Gothic might homogenise culture and rewrite local tradition as commodity (Byron 2013, p. 2); the work of Gothic consumerism and spectacle in turning sites of mass traumas into intriguing destinations for international tourists threatens to obscure their long-term biosocial impact.

My final consideration, then, is on Chernobyl's textual repackaging as Gothic repression, excess and affect in light of the sudden, violent return of lived trauma through the 2022 and, at the time of writing, ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Is Gothic an inappropriate representational strategy in current Ukrainian testimonial production, or does it find cultural purchase in the manifestation of trauma in lived experiences of the war? The Lviv Centre

for Urban History of East Central Europe is currently documenting and archiving oral histories, social media conversations, photographs, personal diaries and dreams of this conflict.

Two Further Literary Structures: Gogolian Gothic and the Cosmicism of the Strugatsky Brothers

While post-Soviet Gothic aesthetics and sociopolitical discursivity have now been widely studied through contemporary literary and cultural production across Eastern Europe, its historical antecedent, Russian Gothic, had only by the 1990s 'enjoyed a great deal of currency in critical studies of Russian literature' (Cornwell 1999, p. 3). Before this, Gothic was frequently subsumed within the more recognised genres of Russian romanticism or the Fantastic. This phenomenon perhaps owes itself to the strictures of literary criticism during the Soviet period, in which, at its most restrictive phases, even the words 'romanticism' or 'Dostoevskii' 'were [viewed as] dirty' (Cornwell 1999, p. 3). Russian Gothic during Soviet times was a liminal genre occupying a hermeneutic site in national literary history. Never referred to directly by its name and only under the vague umbrella of fantastic or supernatural literature, remarks like Konstantin Fedin's about the killing off and entombment of nonrealist literary styles serve to encrypt rather than exorcise Gothic. This results in an unintelligible language that, like the psychic manifestation of Abraham and Torok's phantom, appears totally foreign to the official Soviet self but is in fact a memorial symptom 'that bespeaks a wilfully disregarded event': the persistence of a native Gothic style. The pronouncement of Gothic's death to sanction a formal literature of the Party erects a monument with a 'mnemonic trace', 'raised on the occasion of such an establishment of identity' (Abraham 1968, in Abraham and Torok 1994, p. 92). Even in the post-Soviet era, Maguire notes, 'the single most surprising aspect of Soviet Gothic is critics' refusal of its existence. […] Few, if any […] acknowledge that a Gothic tradition could survive within the monolithic culture of Stalinist Russia' (Maguire 2011, p. 77).

In an archaeological sense – for the psychological investigation of a mental crypt, as Derrida remarks, is analogous to an archaeological dig (Derrida 1986) – literary critics unearthed the composition of Russian and Soviet Gothics from this "nontime" of the Soviet literary realist past (Khapaeva 2009, p. 364). For Maguire, the Gothic shifts and morphs from one political era to the next, spilling Russian Gothic's native folkloric, demonic and grotesque, alongside its foreign, Germanic and other European literary–historical influences, into the Soviet period, at times through the very orthodox style of Socialist Realism that sought to repudiate it. Ostensibly

conformist Soviet writers of the early Revolutionary period interpreted this Gothic past to articulate serious misgivings about the contemporary Bolshevik transformation of culture, science and industry (Maguire 2011, p. 76).

Gothic fiction continued to haunt the USSR in the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, expressing a growing crisis of confidence in the Soviet project's sustainability. Testimonies of Chernobyl survivors are often articulated through the structural aesthetics of Gothic. Victor Latun, a photographer who worked as a builder in the Zone, reveals its imagistic style through testimony:

> We'd been afraid of bombs, of mushroom clouds, but then it turned out like this; we know how a house burns from a match or a fuse, but this wasn't like anything else. We heard rumors that the flame at Chernobyl was unearthly, it wasn't even a flame, it was a light, a glow. Not blue, but more like the sky. And no smoke, either. The scientists had been gods, now they were fallen angels, demons even (Latun, 'Monologue about the Shadow of Death', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, pp.191–192).

The testimony of Nadezhda Vygovskaya, an evacuee from the town of Pripyat, similarly reflects the dualistic clash in the Gothic idiom of the natural with the supernatural, the spiritual with the material, and religion with science (Cornwell 1999, p. 6): 'I can still see the bright-crimson glow, it was like the reactor was glowing. This wasn't an ordinary fire, it was some kind of emanation […] We didn't know that death could be so beautiful' (Vygovskaya, 'Monologue About What We Didn't Know: Death Can Be So Beautiful', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, pp. 151–152). The disaster at Chernobyl, transcending conventional understandings of fire, frequently finds expression through Gothic style. The explosion at the reactor produced a flame that was at once ancient and modern, sacred and evil; it was a factual blaze and an imaginative 'glow'. It revealed a fire without smoke, questions without answers and a crime with many victims but seemingly few perpetrators. The burning reactor constitutes a speakable occurrence in a manner exceeding the conventional critical construction of trauma as inarticulate pain that takes hold of the subject entirely of its own volition. Vygovskaya's observation of the glowing reactor's beautiful yet deadly crimson colour demonstrates how testimony can convey personal trauma beyond its wounding properties through a sensorial and emotive aesthetics.

To read Chernobyl testimony solely through the alleged orthodoxy of unconventional conventions in trauma writing (Bond and Craps 2020, p. 116) is to limit one's understanding of Chernobyl trauma. The containment and

decontamination of the irradiated disaster region by soldiers and other personnel drawn from across the USSR was positioned in Soviet cultural memory by official State reports as an emerging restoration of the peaceful atom. But to maintain public confidence in a compromised Soviet nuclear programme, the "peaceful atom" had to be fought, and this was, in a sense, an extraterrestrial war, not against visible forces of the Earth, such as fire, but of matter omnipresent throughout the cosmos. Subsequently, some liquidators perceived the developing Zone isolated for decontamination as an alien landscape. As part of the liquidation measures, irradiated villages and topsoil in the Chernobyl region that had to be removed and buried were replaced with white dolomite sand. Yevgeniy Brovkin, an instructor at Gomel State University, recalls that '[i]t was like not-earth. This vision tortured me for a long time' (Brovkin, 'Monologue About a Moonlit Landscape', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 85). This perception of the alienated Zone as an other place, both in the mind and as if on the surface of another planet, casts Chernobyl as personal trauma and crisis of ontology. After the reactor explosion, the category of organic life began a process of alteration, requiring new representational strategies through which to understand the world. A soldier recalls: 'Your mind would turn over. The order of things was shaken. A woman would milk her cow, and next to her there'd be a soldier to make sure that when she was done milking, she poured the milk out on the ground' ('Soldier's Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 37). Trauma narratives of Chernobyl's aftermath reveal the absurdist nature of this conflict with the unleashed atom. Keith Gessen, in his 2005 Translator's Preface to Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl*, notes that several accounts, particularly those about the 'deactivation' of the physical landscape of the Zone—the digging up of earth and trees and houses and their (haphazard) burial as nuclear waste—also have this quasi-Gogolian feel to them: they are ordinary human activities gone terribly berserk (Gessen 2005, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, x).

Gogol's literary style complements the Gothic's dualistic aesthetic in Chernobyl eyewitness testimony. 'This union of opposites', Donald Fanger writes, 'is a constant feature of Gogol's technique, making the comic verge constantly on the tragic, the melodramatic on the mundane, the supernatural on the trivial. The hard core, the nexus of all these ambiguities, is the grotesque (Fanger 1967, p. 115). Many of the Chernobyl testimonies reflect this Gogolian collapse of Manichaeism in their own tragicomic structures. Survivors reconstruct their experiences of the disaster through the Gogolian–Gothic intersection of jokes and laughter.

The carnival and grotesque properties of this aesthetic at once make the painful process of testifying possible and challenge the culturally codified relationships between survivors, their trauma and the ethical act of listening to testimony. How the public ought to respond to Chernobyl eyewitnesses' jokes and laughter – events which by their nature require an audience to function – is an issue I take up through my literary–theoretical analysis of these testimonies.

A final feature of Chernobyl testimony's literary dimensions is its cosmic aspect. As a profound disruption of life at the atomic level, the nuclear disaster brought attention to the relationship between human life and the structure of the universe. Latun's recollection of his service in the Exclusion Zone highlights this philosophical consideration:

> There were teachers and engineers among us, and then the full international brigade: Russians, Belarussians, Kazakhs, Ukrainians. We had philosophical debates—about how we're prisoners of materialism, and that limits us to the objects of this world, but Chernobyl is a portal to infinity. I remember discussions about the fate of Russian culture, its pull towards the tragic. You can't understand anything without the shadow of death. And only on the basis of Russian culture could you begin to make sense of the catastrophe. Only Russian culture was prepared for it (Latun in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 191).

Chernobyl exposes the limits of human ontology, tied as it is to the physical realm. National and cultural considerations of the event, however, contextualise its transcendence beyond sociopolitical life by grappling with its cosmic nature. Latun continues:

> Not long ago we buried a friend of mine who'd been there. He died from cancer of the blood. We had a wake, and in the Slavic tradition we drank. And then conversations began again, until midnight. First about him, the deceased. But after that? Once more about the fate of the country and the design of the universe (Latun in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, 193).

The cosmicism of Chernobyl sits at the interface of Gothic's representational aesthetics and East European cultural traditions. Philosophical dialogue between individuals and small social groups attempting to comprehend the vastness of the universe and the role of the human race within it is a

literary trope common across the novels of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. In particular, *Roadside Picnic* reveals anxieties surrounding the Soviet politicisation of scientific epistemology. The enduring cultural legacy of the novel, particularly through the figure of the stalker, replete with social isolation and an utter contempt for bureaucracy, has shaped the public reception of Chernobyl in the form of fiction and tourism. The persistence of the stalker as a virtual avatar in the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* computer games and of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone as a dangerous, anomalous force are derived from the novel's literary legacy of individualism and cosmicism. The negative affect expressed in *Roadside Picnic*, I argue, continues to structure cultural experiences of Chernobyl, transforming the objects, landscape and history of the region into a strange and otherworldly aesthetics.

Translating Chernobyl Trauma

The act of translating Chernobyl testimony into English from its native Russian, Ukrainian or Belarusian plays a crucial role in the theorisation of survivor memory. Interpreters do not merely provide reliable translations of eyewitnesses' personal, experiential representations but invariably structure them through interpretative strategies and theoretical models. Translation reveals the power relations between interviewer, interviewee and the connection of their exchange to established configurations of memory theory. This dynamic often favours international and Western cognitive and literary traditions – an imbalance to which English translation may contribute. While Eurocentric and Anglo-American strategies of therapeutic memory recovery are frequently 'troubled' by non–Western coping mechanisms (Rothberg 2014, xvii), Chernobyl testimony's framing by national literary heritages also shape their critical and public reception.

The most significant compilation of Chernobyl survivor testimony translated into English, Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*,[2] organises eyewitness accounts into an archive palatable to both Western and Belarusian tastes. Though my primary

2 Alexievich revised and updated the UK version of this book, entitled *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (2016) for its English translation, which forms part of a larger series of English-translated testimonials from Soviet soldiers returning from the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989) in *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* (1992) and of life during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in *Second–Hand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2016), called "Voices from Utopia." My book focuses on the initial 2006 English translation of *Voices from Chernobyl* for reasons of relevance and space.

analysis of this collection is on the return of haunting and excess to a Soviet testimonial and aesthetic culture that had formally repressed the presence of a native Gothic, it is also important draw attention to Alexievich's own intended literary technique. She fashions her interviews with Chernobyl survivors into a "collective novel," "novel evidence" or "epic chorus" – identifiers of a Belarusian literary genre invented by the national writer Ales' Adamovich that she claims heavily influenced her own style (Bausells 2015). Drawing upon this cultural legacy enables Alexievich to elevate ordinary voices in a documentary manner and shapes dialogic conversation into heightened monologues recognisable to the English-speaking world. 'In this novel choir', she explains, 'the voices of witnessing sing in tune but, at the same time, are isolated' (Marchesini 2017, p. 319). Alexievich navigates her role as 'writer, reporter, sociologist, psychologist and preacher' (Alexievich 2016, in Marchesini 2017, p. 317) through the friendly, personal connections she establishes with her interviewees.[3] However, the national traditions with which she engages and the international acclaim of her resulting work may also facilitate an overly straightforward assumption of the project's place among the global developments of Chernobyl fiction and Trauma studies.

A key issue in my study of literary Chernobyl trauma, then, is the interrelation of language and culture. At the most straightforward level, survivor testimonies that are articulated only in their native language, in non-verbalised traumatic expression or, due to personal or institutional silence, not expressed at all, are in danger of disappearance. Existing only at a local level and dying out along with the generation of survivors to whom they belong, these traumatic experiences are situated increasingly beyond the reach of Trauma and Gothic studies in the Chernobyl disaster. An English-speaking piece of research must necessarily rely on quality translations of testimonials and other texts while grasping the native cultural significance of literary inheritances and untranslatable expressions therein. Its function in this regard is to study the literary interactions between local and international communities in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster without appropriating survivor suffering on behalf of an English-speaking, Western model of traumatic memory (Eaglestone 2014, pp. 12–13).

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3 In a 2016 videorecorded interview at the New York Public Library, Alexievich stated that the relations she forms with the people required to gather primary material for her books are conversational and frequently nontraumatic: 'I come to them as a friend, I come to them as a neighbour in time, and it's not an interview; we talk about life'. See Alexievich (2016a) and Marchesini (2017, p. 317).

Chapter 1

COUNTDOWN TO CATASTROPHE: *THE HEART OF A DOG* AND *ROADSIDE PICNIC* AS A LITERATURE OF CRISIS

Part I. 'The Animal as Eschatological Adolescence': NEP Gothic in *The Heart of a Dog*

Soviet literature published during the New Economic Policy (NEP) period, which lasted from 1921 to around 1928, reflects and attempts to tackle the ideological and political anxiety of the era. As Eric Naiman writes, the NEP was a pragmatic compromise of the revolutionary zeal and progress in class consciousness displayed throughout the preceding years of War Communism (Naiman 1997). To briefly historicise this transition, though the Russian Revolution and Civil War were largely perceived by communist citizens as ruggedly confident demonstrations of a newly emerging Bolshevik socialism, the State's abolition of private enterprise and ownership, large-scale diversion of resources to support the Civil War effort and military conscription of labour had harsh economic consequences. Industrial and agricultural production fell sharply. Peasants were no longer incentivised to produce crops surplus to their own minimum requirements; starvation and disease were rampant (Richman 1981, p. 90). The Party hoped that its reversal of the total collectivisation of agriculture, reintroduction of the option of private enterprise (albeit with government regulation) and restoration of a capitalist-style currency and banking system under NEP would appear to the proletariat as a necessary yet temporary stop on the road to communist utopia. As Naiman states, Bolshevik leaders Vladimir Lenin and Nikolai Bukharin framed this development as a period of ideological maturation from the infantile immediacy of demands and simple gratification of pleasures attached to public life during War Communism (Naiman 1997, p. 8). They encouraged the need to set aside direct requirements for near-sighted revolutionary achievement via the supply chain for the Red Army during the Civil War and assume NEP's sublimation to the demands of a post-Oedipal reality. Nevertheless, the difficulty of

Soviet citizens and Party members in squaring the promised goal of socialism with a market-based deferral rendered NEP a turbulent period of struggle, controversy and anxiety (Slonim 1977, p. 43). An emerging literature of Soviet satire with an internalised Gothic aesthetics exposed the psychological ideology of this era.

This Lacanian reading also originates in specific scholarly interpretations of the English Gothic's literary revival. The heroine's imprisonment and sexual threatening separate her from the presexual, idealised community of her childhood (DeLamotte 1990). Unlike the Bolshevik nostalgia for War Communism during NEP, Mikhail Bulgakov's NEP Soviet–Gothic satires, this chapter argues, portray both eras as politically uncertain, conflate the social body with the corporeal grotesque and consider ways in which the nascent State's ideological excess in science, class relations and the category of everyday life might be managed during this transitional phase. I have chosen to focus primarily on the novella *The Heart of a Dog* for its re-emergence during a subsequent development of Soviet political history: the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. When the story was published in its native Russia in 1987, the year in which the trial of Chernobyl acted as a test of Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's political reforms, it was received enthusiastically by Soviet literary critics and the general public. A flurry of Russian screen and stage adaptions quickly followed, and '[t]he work was being heatedly discussed with many an accusing finger being pointed at the Shvonders and the Sharikovs[1] for the ruination of the country' (Sahni 2005, p. 211). The novella's Gothic portrayal of the systemic crises rocking early Soviet society and engagement with individual culpability through the extremes of scientific hubris, ideological dogmatism and the body's biological and behavioural mutability is useful for understanding post-Chernobyl public discursivity. This potential will be explored at the conclusion of the chapter. Before this, however, it is necessary to explore the story's representation of contemporary Soviet Life.

The two satirical Gothic tales under discussion in this chapter – *The Fatal Eggs* (1925b) and, chiefly, *The Heart of a Dog* – employ descriptions of hunger and intense Winter weather to convey the exhaustion of Soviet life during the Russian Revolution and Civil War. In *The Fatal Eggs*, many valuable amphibian and reptilian specimens held at the Moscow Zoological Institute, and Vlas, the institute's watchman, die in 1920 from what its director, Professor Vladimir Persikov, bluntly diagnoses as 'Lack of feed'.

1 Shvonder and Sharikov are two characters in the novella whose social interactions are antithetical to the smooth functioning of Soviet life under NEP.

(Bulgakov 1925b, p. 54). The narrative holds this era's political hardship responsible for such decimating starvation: 'Persikov thought of shifting the remaining twenty examples of the tree frog to a diet of cockroaches, but the cockroaches had also disappeared somewhere, demonstrating their malicious enmity toward War Communism' (Bulgakov 1925b, p. 55). The cold temperatures also yield disastrous effects:

> […] the windows of the institute froze over altogether, and the inner surface of the glass became encrusted with patterned ice. The rabbits died, then the foxes, the wolves, the fish, and all the grass snakes. Persikov went about in silence all day. Then he caught pneumonia, but did not die. After recovering, he came to [the] Institute to lecture twice a week in the amphitheatre, where the temperature for some reason remained a constant five degrees below freezing regardless of the weather outside. Standing in his galoshes, in a hat with earflaps, and a woollen muffler, exhaling clouds of white steam, he lectured to eight students on "The Reptilia of the Torrid Zone." The rest of the time Persikov spent at home. Covered with a plaid shawl, he lay on the sofa in his room, which was crammed to the ceiling with books, coughed, stared into the open maw of the fiery stove that Marya Stepanova was feeding with gilded chairs, and thought about the [recently deceased] Surinam toad (Bulgakov 1925b, p. 55).

This biological and intellectual deficit begins to reverse in 1921, the year of NEP's introduction: a new zookeeper is appointed to replace his predecessor, the institute's heating is reactivated and the terraria restocked. Where before the story interconnected animal, human and social death, it now compares the causal relationship between foreign venture capitalism and Persikov's revival to that of the amphibian body:

> [j]ust as amphibians revive after the first heavy rain following a long drought, so Professor Persikov revived in 1926, when the united Russo-American Company built fifteen fifteen-story houses in the center of Moscow […] ending once and for all the frightening and absurd housing crisis which had caused the residents of Moscow so much hardship from 1919 to 1925 (Bulgakov 1925b, p. 56).

The terms 'revival' and 'rejuvenation' were political bywords in Bulgakov's fiction for the economic and social recovery brought around by NEP. Satirical depictions of class anxieties in the developing economy and urban sphere that evidently troubled the early Soviet consciousness coalesce around

the animal body. *The Heart of a Dog* opens with the narrative of a stray dog bemoaning his luckless fate:

> But my poor old body's been knocked about by people once too often. The trouble is that when that cook doused me with boiling water it scalded through right under my fur and now there's nothing to keep the cold out on my left side. I could easily get pneumonia – and if I get that, citizens, I'll die of hunger (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 6).

The dog calls the offending cook a greedy pig and a hard-faced crook with a fat, ugly face (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 6). He is identified in the dog's narration as a proletariat as well as an employee of the National Economic Council, a self-interested exploiter of reorganised resource distribution known in Soviet satire as the NEPman, and a very different character to Vlas, who 'used to throw you a bone [on which] there was always a good eighth of an inch of meat on it. He was a great character, God rest his soul, a gentleman's cook who worked for Count Tolstoy's family and not for your stinking Food Rationing Board' (Bulgakov 1925a, pp. 6–7). It is important to note that class conflict in Bulgakov's fiction is not intended to level serious criticism at the nascent Soviet regime. Rather, its aim is to provide a critical if humorous response to the contemporary sociopolitical quandary of life under NEP and project its possible development and resolution. The character of the novella's protagonist, Professor Philip Philipovich Preobrazhensky, represents pre-Revolutionary, bourgeoise identity under these new, uncertain conditions. The dog identifies Preobrazhensky as an aristocratic noble with 'a carefully trimmed, sharp-pointed beard and grey moustaches, bold and bushy ones like the knights of old' (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 9). The Professor offers the stray a piece of sausage and christens him Sharik:

> The dog gathered the last of his strength and crawled fainting out of the doorway on to the pavement. The blizzard boomed like gunfire over his head, flapping a great canvas billboard marked in huge letters, "Is Rejuvenation Possible?" Of course it's possible. The mere smell has rejuvenated me, got me up off my belly, sent scorching waves through my stomach that's been empty for two days' (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 10).

The ideological properties of the storm and Sharik's appetite converge in a Gothic aesthetics of fear and pleasure (Naiman 1997, p. 197). The blizzard's booming gunfire and the alluring scent of sausage revolve around NEP's

potential destruction or recovery of the body. NEP Gothic as affective excess is palpable at the outset of both *The Heart of a Dog* and *The Fatal Eggs*. In the latter, Persikov's observation of the organic effects of a newly discovered red ray of light on the colour spectrum reveals a monstrous development. Under a microscope onto which the beam is directed,

> gray amoebas, stretching their pseudopods, strove with all their might toward the red strip, and, reaching it, revived as by a miracle. Some force seemed to infuse them with living energy. They swarmed in flocks and fought each other for a place under the ray. Within it went on a frenzied (no other word can properly describe it) process of multiplication. […] The newborn amoebas furiously attacked one another, tearing their victims to shreds and gobbling them. Among the newly born lay the tattered corpses of those which had fallen in the battle for survival. Victory went to the best and strongest. And these best ones were terrifying (Bulgakov 1925b, pp. 62–63).

The regenerative power of NEP reveals a Gothic pleasure and terror in the reproduction, consumption and violence of the excessive animal body. As Naiman claims, NEP literature is preoccupied with the body's corporeal and carnal chaos – a reflection of the Party's internal conflict over its attitudes and anxieties towards the policy's ideological appropriateness during the Revolution (Naiman 1997, p. 4). The Party's identity, in other words, was never truly its own, always contaminated by the disastrous potential of NEP. For the literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, cultural focus on the lower bodily functions of eating, copulating and defecating constitutes a topsy-turvy world of uncertainty in which established social hierarchies are temporarily upended. It is a carnival ambivalence placed between death and rebirth, terror and laughter. Bakhtin writes:

> To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth (Bakhtin 1984, p. 21).

The State's attempt at economic rejuvenation via NEP draws upon a Gothic aesthetics of sex, science and the grotesque, inside-out body. The stray dog identifies Preobrazhensky as 'a world-famous figure thanks to male sex glands' (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 10), and the Professor's research involves surgically

exchanging Sharik's pituitary with that of a recently deceased man with criminal tendencies, Klim Chugunkin, for the purposes of life enhancement and longevity. During his operation on Sharik,

> Philip Philipovich clenched his teeth, his eyes took on a sharp, piercing glint and with a flourish of his scalpel he made a long, neat incision down the length of Sharik's belly. The skin parted instantly, spurting blood in several directions. Bormenthal swooped like a vulture, began dabbing Sharik's wound with swabs of gauze, then gripped its edges with a row of little clamps like sugar-tongs, and the bleeding stopped. Droplets of sweat oozed from Bormenthal's forehead. Philip Philipovich made a second incision and again Sharik's body was pulled apart by hooks, scissors and little clamps. Pink and yellow tissues emerged, oozing with blood (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 54).

Sharik's surgically opened body parallels the potentially fatal intervention of NEP in the State's failing organs. Preobrazhensky hisses to his assistant, Bormenthal: 'no time to argue whether he [Sharik] is alive or not […] I'm at the saddle. So what if he does die […] hell […] "the banks of the sa-acred Nile" […] give me the gland'. (Bulgakov 1925a, p.56). For Bakhtin, the regenerative ritual of carnival has the power

> to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body, or at least a body ready for conception and fertilization, the stress being laid on the phallus or the genital organs. From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other (Bakhtin 1984, p. 26).

The feverish attempt to alter and revive the animal body operates not only as a biological metaphor for questions concerning Soviet communism's economic, political and social survival but also the fear that transition via NEP might yield something terrifyingly alien and hostile to the Revolution's ideal programme of communist utopia. Klim Chugunkin's gradual resurrection through Sharik's post-surgical transformation posits the social-scientific notion of regeneration as the inverse of the nineteenth-century Gothic's literary–aesthetic degeneration, in which devolution was enshrined in the criminal's body, behaviour, class and language (Fratto 2020, p. 47). The transitional anxieties surrounding NEP were intensified by an accompanying effort to transform Soviet culture; 'NEP presided over a determined effort to renew literary language as well as economics'. Just as '[t]he authorities sought to abolish the upper classes' literary language' (Slonim 1977, p. 56) so too did

they attempt to shape the future of workers' political identities and voices. The reorganisation of life by scientific[2] and ideological means was intended to fashion a new Soviet citizen able to successfully engage with the social conditions brought about by NEP (Fratto 2020, p. 49). Through Gothic expressions of terror, *The Heart of a Dog* conveys authority's anxiety surrounding the incompatibility between the preexisting Revolutionary consciousness, the excesses of everyday life and the new Soviet society. The depiction of systemic sociopolitical malfunction, without directly criticising the NEP, fuelled the novella's controversy and prevented its original publication.

Bakhtin's overarching concept of heteroglossia and its interaction with carnival enables a critical understanding of Bulgakov's text as an example of NEP Gothic. Heteroglossia suggests that meaning in speech and writing is essentially plural. In Bakhtin's definition,

> [A]ll transcription systems—including the speaking voice in a living utterance [and its in-text representation]—are inadequate to the multiplicity of meanings they seek to convey. My voice gives the illusion of unity to what I say; I am, in fact, constantly expressing a plenitude of meaning, some intended, others of which I am unaware (Holquist, in Bakhtin 1981, xx).

Bulgakov acknowledges the fundamental impossibility of a monistic language in *The Heart of a Dog* – an open yet sensitive secret during NEP. Party attempts to reform citizens' sociolinguistic conduct were never able to fully extricate identified others and purify the body politic. The novella portrays excess in the decadent pre-Revolutionary professional class, the imbuement of War Communist sensibilities with new totalitarian potential and the everyday social conditions under NEP, 'such as searching the papers for work, standing in long queues, and drowning one's poverty in drink' (Shaw 2010, pp. 124–125). Sharikov's rapid development in verbal expression and conflicts with Preobrazhensky and the State embody tensions between the unitary language and 'language-diverse chaos' arising from the heteroglot (Bakhtin 1981, p. 298). This is a feature of the novel, Bakhtin argues, but it also has

2 Endocrinological research pioneered in the 1920s includes Sergei Voronoff's (1866–1951) experimental transplantation of animal glands under the skin of humans to harness hormone function and promote mental and physical rejuvenation. Voronoff, a French surgeon of Russian extraction, is likely one of the inspirations behind *The Heart of a Dog*'s Preobraskensky, whose name is Russian for 'transform'. In the novella, the Professor says to one of his private clients: 'I am going to implant some monkey's ovaries into you, madam' (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 25).

implications for the political sphere. Bormenthal writes in a diary entry dated 8 January 1925: 'transplantation of the pituitary induces not rejuvenation but *total humanisation*'; Sharik's body begins to morph into that of the deceased organ donor, Klim Chugunkin (Bulgakov 1925a, pp. 63–64). This animal transformation as an 'eschatological adolescence' (Naiman 1997, p. 12) of the Revolution's ideological growing pains and possible destruction through NEP pushes terror beyond the biological metaphors of Gothic science and onto the heteroglossia of the new Soviet system.

Sharik begins to pronounce words and then utter whole sentences. Bormethal's hastily scribbled diary records: 'It is as if they had been lying frozen in his mind, and are melting and emerging' (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 65). While Bormenthal hypothesises that the pituitary's hormones determine man's image and could revolutionise the scientific understanding of human subjectivity, Sharik's linguistic development exposes fears around the integration of language, class and the nonhuman animal into a purified sense of Revolutionary progress and Soviet identity during the phase of NEP. Among Sharik's vocabulary are the words 'delicatessen' and 'liquor', phrases such as 'Get off the bus – full up' and 'American recognition', and every known Russian swear word (Bulgakov 1925a, pp. 62, 65). The original pronouncer of these words remains undetermined. Are they Klim's or those of the stray dog? (Recall that we are presented with the latter's narration at the start of the novella, so the dog can also think as a human does, initially.) This play of language and difference constructs an inner world of heteroglossia in Klim–Sharikov's identity. 'In Bakhtinian terminology', Fratto explains, this configuration of 'an intertwining of two verbal worlds results in the dog-man's discourse, and this mixture is unstable and transitory as it constantly evolves together with the creature' (Fratto 2020, p. 51). This phenomenon is a source of immense fear for Bormenthal:

> A further hypothesis of mine is that during its canine stage Sharik's brain had accumulated a massive quantity of sense-data. All the words which he used initially were the language of the streets which he had picked up and stored in his brain. Now as I walk along the streets I look at every dog I meet with secret horror. God knows what is lurking in their minds (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 67).

As rumours of the experiment's nature begin to spread around town, the authorities attempt to unify political consciousness. Newspaper articles clamp down on public speculation and highlight the experiment's ideological apostasy to identify Preobrazhensky and his creation as class enemies. In doing so, they expose the underpinnings of political anxiety. Bormenthal

records in his diary: ‘Amazing report in the morning papers: *The rumours of a Martian in Obukhov Street are totally unfounded. They have been spread by black-market traders and their repetition will be severely punished*’ (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 63). Later, Professor Philipovich reads the following, a personal retribution from the Moscow Housing Committee for refusing to let them appropriate some of his rooms to house proletarian tenants:

> *There’s no doubt that it is his illegitimate (as they used to say in rotten bourgeois society) son. This is how the pseudo-learned members of our bourgeoisie amuse themselves. He will only keep his seven rooms until the glittering sword of justice flashes over him like a red ray.* (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 67).

Heteroglossia and the newly emerging sociopolitical incompatibilities of class create a dialogism of many voices and a literary carnivalesque that promotes terror as much as rejuvenating laughter in the Bolshevik State. Sharikov’s identity and behaviour become a problem for the Moscow Housing Committee as well as for Preobrazhensky and his domestic staff. The impasses resulting from Sharikov’s registration as a citizen through legal documentation portray the challenges of legitimising NEP through integration of the new Soviet subject.

The novella reflects fears around the bureaucratic and ideological collapse of NEP through an inability to define Sharikov’s unique circumstances of parentage satisfactorily and sublimate his identity to political orthodoxy. The former issue enacts concerns about bourgeois legitimacy – ‘a fear reflected in the Gothic novel’s obsession with mysteries of parentage’ (Naiman 1997, p. 151); ‘And where, pray, am I supposed to register you?’ Preobrazhensky asks Sharikov. ‘On that tablecloth or on my own passport? One must, after all, be realistic. Don’t forget that you are […] h’m, well […] you are what you might call a […] an unnatural phenomenon, an artefact […]’ (Bulgakov 1925a, pp. 76–77). The unnatural phenomenon may in fact be the survival of the bourgeoisie itself, which, as a legitimate component of class collectivity under NEP, became increasingly untenable. The novella satirises the political union of classes when Sharikov chooses the invented patronym Poligraphovich to be used on his identity papers and accuses an increasingly exasperated Preobrazhensky of hypocrisy: ‘I mustn’t swear. I mustn’t spit. Yet all you ever do is call me names. I suppose only professors are allowed to swear in the RSFSR’. (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 77).

As Sharikov’s linguistic range develops, his streetwise earthiness, selfishness and verbal threats begin to engage with his exterior environment. When he learns that his identity documents also register him with the police for military service in case ‘war suddenly breaks out with the imperialist

aggressors', Sharikov refuses all participation in potential armed struggle: 'I'll register, but I'm damned if I'm going to fight'. Shvonder, the Moscow housing committee chairman, then accuses Sharikov of being 'an anarchist-individualist', constructing him as a political other (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 80). Sharikov becomes an object of anxiety and terror for other characters. The problem of where to house an increasingly argumentative and destructive creature illustrates the class conflicts central to NEP's Gothic affect:

> "I suppose you don't have a room to spare in the house, do you? I'd be prepared to buy it." Yellowish sparks flashed in Shvonder's brown eyes. "No, professor, I very much regret to say that we don't have a room. And aren't likely to, either." Philip Philipovich clenched his teeth and said nothing. Again the telephone rang as though to order. Without a word Philipovich flicked the receiver off the rest so that it hung down, spinning slightly, on its blue cord. Everybody jumped. "The old man's getting rattled," thought Bormenthal. With a glint in his eyes Shvonder bowed and went out. Sharikov disappeared after him, his boots creaking (Bulgakov 1925a, pp. 80–81).

These tensions surrounding Sharikov follow his performance of working-class identity and conflation of Soviet political consciousness with violent, criminal tendencies. During the power vacuum left by Lenin's death in 1924, 'the various factions struggling for power within the Party were quick to accuse each other of being excessively frightened – or desirous – of the interclass conflicts that supposedly characterized NEP' (Naiman 1997, p. 149). Throughout the novella, Sharikov is feared and weaponised by the opposing sides of Preobrazhensky and the housing committee. The Professor says to Bormenthal that Shvonder

> doesn't realise that Sharikov is much more of a threat to him than he is to me. At the moment he's doing all he can to turn Sharikov against me, not realising that if someone in their turn sets Sharikov against Shvonder himself, there'll soon be nothing left of Shvonder but the bones and the beak. (Bulgakov, 1925a, p. 110)

Sharikov, as a scientific creation, is inserted into the midst of NEP abruptly, raising the possibility of incompatibility between the programme and its citizens. Without NEP's effective restructuring of social order, Sharikov's outbursts of aggression become unpredictable and his ideological sensibilities unstable. His status as outsider to NEP's political hegemony and the novella's early-1925 setting parallel the contemporary turn of the Soviet Union towards

Stalinism. Though Stalin never openly criticised NEP during this phase, his concealed attachments to militant socialist reconstruction and class warfare against the State-incorporated bourgeoisie reveal his determination to restore the proletarian fighting spirit enshrined in War Communism, but from his own power base through a 'revolution from above'. (Himmer 1994). Anxieties about Stalin's consolidating influence over the Party following Lenin's death in January 1924 are captured in the portrayal of Sharikov's dangerous political growth. Bulgakov constructs the character as an unnatural perversion of the Soviet worker. Created by Preobrazhensky's misdirected bourgeois expertise, Sharikov embodies Gothic fears of an imperilled NEP through his excesses in pleasure, violence and political strategy. When asked, his proposals for governance reflect the Stalinist desire to purify Soviet revolutionary progress through embracing the past ideals of War Communism, demonstrating a subjectivity caught between an ideological past and a future blind to the expedient compromises of NEP. Sharikov, or Klim's identity that is reasserting itself within him, argues for the State requisition and redistribution of resources against the Revolution's old class enemy: 'Take everything away from the bosses and divide it up […] here's one guy with seven rooms and forty pair of trousers and there's another guy who has to eat out of dustbins'. (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 94). Sharikov's veiled reference to his class relationship with Preobrazhensky enrages the Professor, who then retorts:

> "You belong to the lowest possible stages of development […] You are still in the formative stage. You are intellectually weak, all your actions are purely bestial. Yet you allow yourself in the presence of two university-educated men to offer advice, with quite intolerable familiarity, on a cosmic scale and of quite cosmic stupidity, on the redistribution of wealth […] and at the same time you eat toothpaste […]" (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 95)

The Gothic model of possible regression to the formative stage of War Communism is framed in atavistic terms. Preobrazhensky's heated response illustrates the political threat of the unevolved or devolved citizen from the perspective of a politically educated bourgeoisie valorised by NEP. The Gothic aesthetics of this ideological conflict between War Communism's regression and NEP's progress are mobilised by Sharikov's cross-species evolution and resurgent criminal potential courtesy of Klim's implanted pituitary. This configuration reflects the coercive methods of social, political and military development in the Union that, following Lenin's death, characterised Stalin's ascendency within the Party (Breslauer 2021, p. 58). Klim's family name, Chugunkin, is a play on that of Stalin's. The Russian word for steel is stal. Chugun translates to the name of another metal: cast or crude iron.

Sharikov's identity takes on an unsettling, militaristic steeliness when he announces his engagement to a terrified salary typist, citizeness Basnetsova:

> Polygraph Polygraphovich appeared and entered [Preobrazhensky's flat] with an air of unusual dignity. In absolute silence he took off his cap and hung his coat on the hook. He looked completely different. He had on a second-hand leather tunic, worn leather breeches and long English riding-boots laced up to the knee. An incredible odour of cat immediately permeated the whole hall (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 114).

Sharikov's uniformed duties, 'in charge of the sub-department of the Moscow Cleansing Department responsible for eliminating vagrant quadrupeds (cats, etc.)' (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 115), sublimate his canine urge for killing cats into a State-sanctioned role. The elimination of quadrupeds other than cats suggests that Sharikov is also licenced to destroy stray dogs – the very animal species to which he once belonged. Sharikov's capacity for violence extends to the human through his political inclusion in the social sphere and gradual humanisation. Preobrazhensky tells Bormenthal that

> "Sharikov now only shows traces of canine behaviour and you must remember this – chasing after cats is the *least* objectionable thing he does! The whole horror of the situation is that he now has a *human* heart, not a dog's heart. And about the rottenest heart in all creation!" (Bulgakov 1925a, pp. 110–111)

Sharikov's development articulates a fear that NEP as a period of ideological uncertainty is vulnerable to the coercive consolidation of personal power that sees a return to the adolescent stage of War Communism. Preobrazhensky takes Basnetsova aside, into his personal study. She breaks down in tears and confesses the following: '[Sharikov] threatened me […] then he said he'd been a Red Army officer and he'd take me to live in a posh flat […] kept making passes at me […] says he's kind hearted really, he only hates cats […] He took my ring as a memento […]' (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 118). Sharikov lies to Basnetsova, claiming that his surgical scar is instead a war wound incurred at the front against [Alexander] Kolchak. Sharikov's guise as a Red Army officer injured in the Bolshevik struggle against Kolchak, the Supreme Leader of Russia under the White movement, positions his deception within the libidinal coordinates of the Civil War.

A Gothic aesthetics of fear and terror lie in the threats exposed by this period's attempts at economic, ideological, social and technological reform. *The Heart of a Dog* expresses anxieties about the fatal misdirections in socialist political strategy

under a class alliance between bourgeois intelligentsia and Soviet worker. Sharikov represents at once the failure of experimental science to adapt to NEP's Marxist dialectic and of NEP's ability to effectively subsume the excessive desires of the proletariat in a new social order. The only solution to prevent an authoritarian seizure of power is an equally dictatorial counter-revolution from above: Preobrazhensky successfully reverses the operation on Sharikov, retransplanting the canine pituitary into his brain, causing him to revert gradually to a dog. The final couple of chapters demonstrate a change in the tempo with which events take place. Stalin's aim was to increase the rate of industrialisation and militarisation in Russia to defend her against external threats from the West, which would culminate in the War Scare of 1927. *The Heart of a Dog*'s response to this quickening direction in 1925, suggesting that society ought to carefully consider the shifting means by which socialism was being unfolded, lies in the Professor's reflection on the frenzied pace of his scientific discovery:

> "In short the pituitary is a magic box which determines the individual image. Yes, individual […] "[…] from Granada to Seville […]" " shouted Philip Philipovich, his eyes rolling furiously, "but not the universal human image. It's the brain in miniature. And it's of no use to me at all – to hell with it." (Bulgakov 1925a, p. 109)

The novella's prose rhythm swings, articulating a measured yet wary Gothic tone when Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal perform the reverse-operation on Sharikov:

> Silence filled the flat, flooding into every corner. Twilight crept in, dark and sinister and gloomy. Afterwards the neighbours across the courtyard said that every light burned that evening in the windows of Preobrazhensky's consulting room and that they even saw the professor's white skullcap […] It is hard to be sure (Bulgakov 1925a, pp. 123–124).

Bulgakov's fate as a writer at the hands of a tightening State censorship has been outlined elsewhere.[3] I will pursue the ways in which the novella's Russian publication in 1987 parallels the testimonies of technical personnel reflecting on the causes and outcomes of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The artfulness

3 Andrey Kurkov, in an introduction to the 2009 edition of *The Heart of a Dog*, explores 'the strange relationship between Stalin and Bulgakov'. Though Bulgakov was of a bourgeois and therefore politically suspect background, with Stalin and the Soviet press publicly criticising his works, he was never arrested, imprisoned, exiled or executed. See Kurkov 2009, vii–ix.

of Bulgakov's work, 'his physician's gaze […] stern, yet a little misty' (Kurkov 2009, ix), provides a useful context through which to engage in a literary Trauma studies exploration of scientists' Chernobyl testimonies and in so doing create new understandings of them. Before departing from my analysis of *The Heart of a Dog*, however, one further cultural context relevant to this thesis must be grasped.

Though *The Heart of a Dog* articulates fears concerning scientific deregulation and political authoritarianism through NEP Gothic, more amiable aspects of the aesthetic lie in the comic uproar of Sharikov's physical antics, 'beginning with the destruction of a stuffed owl in the doctor's study and progressing from that moment to one misdemeanour after another' (Shaw 2010, pp. 122–123). These events culminate in a carnivalesque scenario in which Sharikov accidentally floods Preobrazhensky's apartment while chasing a cat.

For Jacqueline Howard, the early Gothic novel's heterogeneity, its incorporation of folk and fairy tales, Medieval romance, superstition, myth and Shakespearean drama, represents a series of 'competing, often contradictory discourses which give meaning to [the] social reality' of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century readers (Howard 1994, p. 3). The genre's moderation of tragedy with comedy and resistance to structural and thematic unity are key components of its dialogism. As an example of NEP Gothic, *The Heart of a Dog* sustains the heteroglossia of political and medical jargon, as well as everyday communicative practices such as Bormenthal's diary, Sharikov's verbal outbursts and Preobrazhensky's singing of lines from Guiseppe Verdi's famous 1870 opera, *Aida*. These literary fragments and humorous introjections prevent the story from maintaining serious political commentary. Though multi-voicedness was perhaps always part of the author's intention, this aesthetic and discursive claim is valorised by reading experiences contemporary to the novella's belated Russian-language publication. The re-emergence of its comic elements in the era of sociopolitical upheaval following Chernobyl reflects the polyphony of survivor accounts in which jokes and comic anecdotes about their experiences of the disaster modify their expressions of anger and pain. Comic irruptions within the otherwise serious content of survivor testimony also offer useful insights into the aesthetic, Gothic elements of literary Chernobyl trauma.

There is nothing essentially disruptive about Gothic, the novel genre or the eyewitness literature of Chernobyl. Rather,

> the meaning of a text will change as it is read in new contexts by always historically and socially situated readers who will always bring to it (shared) presuppositions about, among other things, the nature of literature, literary meaning, aesthetic value and so on, and may in

> turn find these presuppositions being modified in the process of their dialogic encounter with the text (Shepherd 2001, p. 144).

David Shepherd's account of the dynamic interactions between text and reader can unpack the Soviet public's understanding of a new dimension in the work. In the 1987 Russian-language publication of the novella and its ensuing film and stage adaptations, the locus of fear moved beyond the ideologically opposing camps of Preobrazhensky's private rooms and the housing committee. By this late stage of the Revolution, anxiety had engulfed the entire Soviet population; '[i]n the [then] present-day context the work's parameters expanded to include marginalization of society as a whole' (Sahni 2005, p. 212). This widespread ambivalence towards the assured victory of Soviet communism called not only for the 'surgical' cruelty of Bulgakov's satire through which such misplaced convictions could be dismantled but also for 'his infectious laughter, his lyricism and deep humanism' in the face of ideological collapse (Sahni 2005, p. 212).

Timothy Jones moderates Gothic's 'discursive, historical and political values […] and its ability to make "true" claims' with its invitation of a "more playful reading practice". "The distinction is one of use"', he qualifies (Jones 2015, p. 17). How then, does the Soviet reading public's exuberance towards *The Heart of a Dog* amid the collective social trauma of the *glasnost* era relate to Chernobyl eyewitness testimony?

Critics attribute Bulgakov's quotable prose, good sentiment and use of Gogolian carnivalesque (Milne 1990) to the story's enduring popularity in the USSR and in Postcommunist Russia. As Lesley Milne writes, Soviet publications of the *glasnost* era reappraised the NEP as a legitimate socioeconomic development that was abandoned disastrously. This new positive attitude to NEP, she claims, 'opens the way for a fresh assessment of NEP humour as exemplified in *The Heart of a Dog*, with its judicious scepticism and its astringently confident fantasy' (Milne 1990, p. 68). The narrative's deployment of humanistic sympathy and savage satire reflects a dialogism in which the Party's political reforms of *glasnost*, *perestroika* and its response to the Chernobyl disaster are subject to a public criticism ranging from genuine outrage to comic parody.

At one point during the aforementioned flooding escapade, Sharikov becomes trapped in Preobrazhensky's bathroom, appearing at its broken transom window: 'His eyes were tear-stained and there was a long scratch down his nose, red with fresh blood' (Bulgakov, 1925a, p. 83). The relationship between Preobrazhensky and Sharikov, though dysfunctional, is often analogous to that of father and teenage son. 'Their uneasy relationship is marked by a strong element of affection as much as exasperation' (Shaw,

2010, p. 132). Sharikov frequently refers to his creator as 'Dad', adding a sympathetic tone to the pair's dynamic. When Sharikov is locked inside the flooded bathroom, he asks pathetically, 'Will you beat me, Dad?' (Bulgakov, 1925a, p. 85). An exasperated Preobrazhensky adopts a parental tone when scolding his creation: 'Look here, Sharikov, […] I swear I have never seen a more impudent creature than you'. (Bulgakov, 1925a, p. 87). This strange though benign element of the relationship between two individuals of differing and often opposing political classes conveys the unifying effects of carnival. Its festive laughter can temporarily flatten as well as invert existing social hierarchies. During the novella's sudden comic irruptions, Preobrazhensky and Sharikov do not occupy a sanctioned position in NEP class relations, acting instead as members of one family. As Bakhtin writes, 'In carnival […] the new mode of man's relation to man is elaborated' (Bakhtin, in Pomorska 1984, x). 'The people's ambivalent laughter' he also reminds us, 'expresses the point of view of the whole world' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 12). Preobrazhensky's flat, as a social world-in-miniature, provides moments of unexpected humour precisely where one would most expect to see historical tensions, reflecting Jones's Gothic duality of serious social depth and surface entertainment. The comic scene of the flood arises in part due to the actual communal living situation during NEP in which the cadres of the new urban proletariat tenanted rooms in existing properties – a fact that provides much of the novella's class conflict between Preobrazhensky and the Moscow Housing Committee. Rather than exploding into outright hostility, domestic differences culminate in a moment of universal humour. When the apartment building's doorman, Fyodor, manages to open the locked door to the flooded bathroom in which Sharikov is trapped, he 'emerged, up to his ankles in water, and for some reason grinning' (Bulgakov, 1925a, p. 85). After repeatedly turning away patients due to the subsequent tidal wave of water that engulfs the flat, 'Bormenthal slammed the door, unable to contain himself any longer and burst into laughter' (Bulgakov, 1925a, p. 87).

Chernobyl testimony also contains novelistic notions of dialogism and polyphony. These accounts frequently assume carnivalesque and grotesque aesthetics that distance the survivor from their painful first-hand experiences and call into question the discrete literary categories of memory and history, and fiction and reality. The surface spectacle and excess of Gothic imagery flows through this Chernobyl literature to resist the dominant trauma paradigm of a fragmented or aporetic narrative structure. Anatoly Shimanskiy, a journalist documenting the lives of Chernobyl evacuees and liquidators interviewed in 2006, claims it is impossible '[t]o write about that now, when only ten years have gone by. Write about it? I think it's senseless' (Shimanskiy, 'Monologue About Writing Chernobyl', in *Voices from Chernobyl:*

The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 123). From the outset, this claim might indicate gaps in recollective memory central to Caruthian or mimetic models of trauma representation (Leys 2000). For Shimanskiy, however, this absence cedes to a literature in which traumatic experience is reclaimed through the imagination: 'The Chernobyl explosion gave us the mythology of Chernobyl', he states. 'Show me a fantasy novel about Chernobyl—there isn't one! Because reality is more fantastic' (Shimanskiy 2006, p. 124). Though Chernobyl testimony does not exert a consciously Gothic style, specific personal reflections on the disaster evince a Gothic aesthetics through their scenes of fantasy, horror and the grotesque. At the time of the Chernobyl site's evacuation and liquidation, Shimanskiy wrote down conversations, rumours and anecdotes in a notebook. These include images of 'pike in the lakes and rivers without heads or tails. Just bodies floating around'. This rumour predicts that '[s]omething similar is going to start happening to humans. The Belarussians will turn into humanoids' (Shimanskiy 2006, pp. 128–129). Another rumour foretells that

> [t]he Chernobylites are giving birth to children who have an unknown yellow fluid instead of blood. There are scientists who insist that monkeys became intelligent because they lived near radiation. Children born in three or four generations will be Einsteins. It's a cosmic experiment being performed on us […] (Shimanskiy 2006, p. 129)

Such alternative sites of memory should not be read as wild conspiracy theories or trauma fictions. Rather, the ethical challenge of these trauma constructions is to find an approach to the 'cultural diversity of historical representation' (Whitehead 2004, p. 81). In grasping a Chernobyl reality that is more fantastic than fiction, one should follow Michael Rothberg's notion of traumatic realism, which I argue is as applicable to these Chernobyl memories as it is to trauma literature:

> Rothberg argues that traumatic texts, including trauma fiction, search for a new mode of realism in order to express or articulate a new form of reality […] writers of trauma narratives push the realist project to its limits, not because they have given up on knowledge but in order to suggest that traumatic knowledge cannot fully be communicated or retrieved without distortion (Whitehead 2004, p. 84).

Shimanskiy suggests that 'instead of writing [fiction], you should record' (Shimanskiy 2006, p. 124). His documentation of multiple voices resists the singular definition of literary, testimonial and historical trauma, establishing

a form of traumatic realism in which memories of the disaster return through grotesque bodies that transform from human into posthuman animals.

The discursivity around animal hybridity during Chernobyl is echoed by similar fears expressed in *The Heart of a Dog*'s contemporary Russian language publication. Chernobyl testimony shares another theme with the novella: the life-affirming power of carnival. Some of Alexievich's interviewees sing *chastushki*, a type of Russian and Ukrainian folk song that has a high tempo, humorous, satiric or lewd lyrics and often consists of simple rhyming couplets. One such example is as follows: '*Even one thousand gamma rays/ Can't keep the Russian cock from having its days*' ('Soldiers' Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 47). Another runs: 'Next to the hill you're on your tractor, across the way there's the reactor. If the Swedes[4] hadn't've told, we'd be on the tractor getting old'. ('Monologue about a Single Bullet', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 97). These ribald songs poke fun at the Soviet authorities but do not raise genuine political rage. They provide channels of meaning that circumvent traditional trauma narratives and their painful expression. Instead of privileging the individual's authenticity through representational absence – the marker of the Western paradigmatic model of trauma delineation – *chastushki* play a key role in Alexievich's epic chorus, providing alternation with other narrative techniques such as Shimanskiy's diary entries. This textual breathing between lyrical or imaginative excess and the more measured voices in Alexievich's oral history project provide a sequential dialogism that reflects the diverse range of survivors' personal expressions of Chernobyl trauma. I will return to this issue at the end of the following chapter in greater depth to explore the role of humour and laughter in Chernobyl eyewitness testimony.

Part II. 'Preparing for the future': *Roadside Picnic* and the Cosmic Discursivity of Chernobyl

Anatoly Shimanskiy's notion that Chernobyl is a cosmic experiment being performed on its survivors, or perhaps on the world, recurs throughout Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* testimonies. The transcendence of the nuclear disaster from a visual to a subatomic realm, and from many

4 The mention of Swedes refers to the staff of the Forsmark nuclear power plant on the eastern coast of Sweden, whose monitoring equipment was first outside the USSR to detect the abnormally high radiation levels caused by Chernobyl. The Swedish authorities then alerted the world of a major nuclear incident within the Soviet Union, forcing its Politburo to acknowledge the event.

survivors' direct experiences towards imaginative engagement, inscribes Chernobyl trauma narratives with images of the alien and of alienation. A rumour recorded by Shimanskiy claims: '[s]everal people supposedly saw a strange light in the sky above the station on the night before the explosion. Someone even photographed it. On the film it out turned out to be the stream from an extraterrestrial object' (Shimanskiy, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 128). Away from the initial plant explosion, the Soviet authorities' removal of public access to scientific information undermined any rational understanding of Chernobyl. 'In the first days after the accident', recalls Yevgeniy Brovkin, an instructor at Gomel State University in Belarus, 'all the books at the [institution's] library about radiation, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even about X-rays, disappeared. Some people said it was an order from above, so that people wouldn't panic' (Brovkin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 85).

This aspect of Chernobyl trauma, in which scientific context was obfuscated by the withdrawn nature of the event and its governmental interference, reveals a subjective, cosmological frame of reference in eyewitness accounts of the disaster. It also illuminates the history of nuclear power, space exploration and Science Fiction in the USSR. Another Belarusian academic, Valentin Borisevich, remembers that when he was seventeen, after the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945, he 'loved science fiction, […] dreamt of travelling to other planets, and […] decided that nuclear energy would take us to the cosmos' (Borisevich, 'Monologue about Loving Physics', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 179). He continues:

> Why is there such an interest in science fiction? Man is trying to tear himself away from the earth. He is trying to master different categories of time, different planets, not just this one. The apocalypse—nuclear winter—has already all been described in Western literature, as if they were rehearsing it, preparing for the future (Borisevich, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 180).

Science Fiction supports the speculative, future-oriented discursivity necessary for understanding Chernobyl testimony and literature. Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's jointly authored novels express anxieties concerning the politicisation of science and humanity's inability to adapt to environmental and social changes on a cosmic scale. Though the authors reflected contemporary Soviet conditions of economic stagnation, political authoritarianism and

public cynicism towards ideological orthodoxy during Leonid Brezhnev's premiership, their fiction's global popularity, then as now, is reflected in the universality of its protagonists' experiences of cosmic dislocation.

In *Roadside Picnic*, the Strugatskys question how contemporary configurations of official power could hope to process an alien penetration of reality cognitively. Unlike scenarios more common to Western narrative concepts of SF, such as interstellar warfare or nuclear apocalypse, *Roadside Picnic*'s depiction of extraterrestrial events calls for profound philosophical and structural changes to society, which, the novel suggests, can be imagined by individuals but not implemented by institutions or nations. *Roadside Picnic* represents depressing, lived-in societies (Gomel 1995, p. 98), the folkish, earthy and technical languages of their disaffected inhabitants and the psychological effects of constrictive bureaucracy.

First though, one must assess the Strugatskys' post-Chernobyl significance in the popular Russian and global imagination. In *Roadside Picnic*, a series of hazardous zones[5] have cropped up around the world. The story is set in and around one of these regions: the fictional town of Harmont, in Canada. These zones were constituted by the unfathomable objects and environmental phenomena that appeared in the aftermath of an unwitnessed alien visitation. Following the isolation of the zone by the U.N., groups of scientists affiliated with the fictitious International Institute for Extraterrestrial Research and a loose network of independent scavengers, called stalkers,[6] have begun to infiltrate the dangerous area at great personal risk, to retrieve the alien artefacts for study and personal profit respectively.

Roadside Picnic was received favourably in its international publication, translated into multiple languages, raised to cult status by Andrei Tarkovsky's loose film adaptation, *Stalker* (1979) and assimilated into world culture through

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5 I differentiate the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone from *Roadside Picnic*'s zones and those of other fictions through capitalisation and non-capitalisation respectively. I use "zone" to refer to the latter, except when directly quoting from texts where it appears as "Zone." The word zone has an additional cultural context in Russian and Ukrainian, as *zona*: a slang term for prison which also refers to prison consciousness. This dual etymology of the zone, then, reflects psychological as well as physical entrapment.

6 In the original Russian-language edition of *Roadside Picnic*, the English word Stalker is pronounced "stulker" rather than "stawker" in Russian. Its source is one of literary allusion, originating not from the English dictionary but the Rudyard Kipling serialised school stories collected in *Stalky and Co.*, first published in 1899, about the wild exploits of English schoolboys and their disdain for their collegiate authorities. The streetwise characteristics and namesake of their ringleader, Stalky, were the Strugatskys' primary inspiration for the stalkers' cynical yet humanised attitudes in *Roadside Picnic*. See B. Strugatsky 2012, 196–197.

the proliferation of Chernobyl-centric media appropriations of the narrative to the point where the Strugatskys' zone and stalker mythologies have become near-synonymous with textual representations of nuclear disaster and contemporary urban decay. From the Chernobyl-set *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (2007–2009) computer game series to the subcultural practice of urban exploration – the antiauthoritarian act of entering and photographing the interiors of condemned, decrepit buildings – the surreal imagery, subversive tone and bleak yet humanist outlook of *Roadside Picnic* have been absorbed into the cultural narrative of Chernobyl. This predominantly Postcommunist framing often imbues its representations of the nuclear disaster with a Gothic aesthetics, installing notions of degeneration, haunting, monstrosity and undeath in its figurative reconstructions of the site.

Given *Roadside Picnic*'s significant impact upon post-Chernobyl discursivity, popular readings typically understand the novel retrospectively, aligning its depiction of a catastrophic event and subsequent scientific collapse with Chernobyl and the contemporary Soviet political fallout. To enrich the understanding of Chernobyl testimony's literary and cultural dimensions, however, one must resist this impulse to identify the Strugatskys' creative output as straightforwardly predictive apocalypse. The novel should be understood more broadly as a warning against the central planning of scientific and social forecasting and as an acceptance of the future's potential uncertainty. From the mid-1950s to the late 1980s, Soviet forecasting attempted to anticipate and guide the party through the economic, societal and technological obstacles of socialist development towards the realisation of a communist future. The emerging Scientific–Technical Revolution (STR) produced a '[g]oal oriented cybernetic control [that] linked the past, present, and future through feedback loops of free-flowing information […] through people as carriers and conductors of information in Soviet governmental discourses' (Rindzevičiūtė 2016, p. 58). Theoretical and ideological tensions arose between State directives and the probabilistic nature of forecasting, though not incompatibly so: '[e]xplorative forecasting was allowed within certain limits, as it was recognized that the government should be aware of "really existing" social trends in Soviet society, diverging from ideologically approved values' (Rindzevičiūtė 2016, p. 65).

The novels *Monday Starts on Saturday* (1965) and *The Snail on the Slope* (1972), also by the Strugatsky Brothers, incorporate elements of Russian fairy stories and folk tales satirising the ideological imperative to reflect the teleological planning of STR and political aesthetics of Marxist Socialist Realism in fiction (Stephan 1983, p. 4). *Roadside Picnic* employs its antirealist framing of cosmicism to similar effect. The novel explores expectations of scientific forecasting through the ways in which the International Institute

for Extraterrestrial Research might one day use the zones' artefacts to forge a future that is radically different from the present. In the book's short introductory section, a Harmont radio interview with local celebrity and Nobel Prize winner Doctor Valentine Pilman claims that 'many very important scientists have proposed that the discoveries made in the visitation Zones are capable of changing the entire course of our history'. (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 5. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear). The ensuing narrative sets up a clear distinction between the goals of international military-industrial complexes and the ambivalence of individuals caught up within them. In the story's central dialogue, which takes place in a public house between Valentine and Richard Noonan, a goods supplier for the Harmont branch of the Institute, the pair discuss the nature of human civilization in the aftermath of the visitation. For the former, 'humanity as a whole is too fixed a system' that cannot adapt to systemic changes in its environment (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, pp. 99–100. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear). However, at the organisational level, apparently, our species must be connected to the cosmos in flattering ways by cybernetic theories about the teleological flow of information enshrined in STR. For example, one theory proposes that the visitors intentionally planted their artefacts on Earth for human civilisation to study and use to make a giant technological leap towards contact.

As Rindzevičiūtė reiterates, 'the critical role of Soviet forecasting cannot be understood through a reductionist binary opposition between party control and resistance: even as a tool to implement party directives, forecasting had subversive effects' (Rindzevičiūtė 2016, p. 74). The Strugatskys do not mention STR directly. Nevertheless, the results of forecasting in *Roadside Picnic* resist the Institute's bureaucratic control and prediction of manageable outcomes. For Valentine, the ultimate result of the alien artefacts' study raises 'the possibility that in pulling all these chestnuts out of the fire, we may pull out something that will make life impossible not only for us, but for the entire planet'. (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 99. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear). The zone's unfathomable effects range from deaths and natural disasters seemingly unconnected to the zone in areas to which Harmonites who lived through the visitation have emigrated, to genetic mutations in people who have spent a certain amount of time in the zone and human skeletons that have been reanimated by flesh of a nonterrestrial origin. The novel does not categorise these seemingly supernatural phenomena as Gothic horrors, portraying them instead as breaches in our scientific understanding of the

relationship between past, present and future. ‘We can’t imagine anything scarier than a ghost’, Valentine says to Richard. ‘But the violation of the law of causality is much more terrifying than a stampede of ghosts. And all the monsters of Rubenstein, or is it Wallenstein?’ (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 109. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear).

In the face of fear and the widespread inapplicability of collective human understanding, individuals and small communities interpret the zone’s cosmology creatively. In contrast to the Institute xenologists’ anthropocentric theories about the visitation, Valentine’s personal analogy of events is of a forest or meadow whose horrified animal inhabitants experience the hazardous detritus left in the aftermath of a roadside picnic: ‘Gas and oil spilled on the grass. Old spark plugs and old filters left strewn around. Rags, burnt-out bulbs, and a monkey wrench left behind’. (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 102. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear). In the Soviet Science Fiction tradition from the mid-1960s onwards, *Roadside Picnic* blends the fairy tale images common throughout the Strugatsky’s other novels with scientific logic. Across their literature, according to Halina Stephan,

> magic interacts with science, rustic values clash with the goals of modern industrial society, and man’s individuality conflicts with the monolithic collective. Whether they present a totally fictional world with no familiar equivalent, or whether they are designed to satirize the present reality, such stories contrast the imaginativeness of the fairy tale and authenticity of rural life with the impersonal, indiscriminate forces of scientific progress (Stephan 1983, p. 1).

In *Roadside Picnic*, the stalker figure constitutes a grotesque folk hero of sorts. They are ‘individually vivid and likeable; the slimiest old stalker-profiteer has a revolting and endearing vitality’ (Le Guin 2012, vii). Much like Valentine’s parable, their terminology for the visitation’s aftereffects – witches’ jelly, happy ghosts, and the wish-granting golden ball – constructs the zone as a mythical, folkloric space. Though self-interested and unromantic (‘[t]he old stalker was a dirty, sullen man who crawled inch by inch through the Zone on his belly with mulish stubbornness, gathering his nest egg’ [From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 98. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear]), early stalker culture acts as a social mechanism to cope with forecasted uncertainty. The stalker’s survivability reflects Valentine’s edict that ‘despite all this, he [man] has survived and intends to survive in the future’ (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady

and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 103. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear).

The stalker's interpretative perspective engenders a testimonial narrative of individual survival and trauma. It reflects apprehensions around STR's vision of utopia and inability to forecast radical sociotechnological change. The zone is an environment of cognitive estrangement – an alienating literary device or 'novum' (Suvin 1979) that reframes readers' understanding of the possible. As such, '[t]he crisis brings to the surface the latent structures of their [the stalkers'] personality, humanity and identity' (Pike 1990, p. 91). Christopher Pike claims that '[o]nly the hero who bears a "natural" identity has the will to go on' (Pike 1990, p. 91). This 'natural' identity approaches the literary category of trauma fiction rather than the naturalistic features of Socialist Realism or orthodox, STR-inflected 'hard' Soviet Science Fiction. In three of its four chapters, *Roadside Picnic* follows the mundane life, grief and ethical transformation of its central protagonist: the former Institute lab assistant, Redrick 'Red' Schuhart. The Redrick sections of the novel provide an intimate, psychological portrayal of the character. After hearing that one of his friends at the Institute has died unexpectedly after backing into a zone phenomenon that looks like a spider's web, Red spirals into a fit of depression:

> I climbed over the fence and headed home. I was biting my lip. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. All I saw was emptiness and sadness. Kirill, my buddy, my only friend, how could it have happened? How will I get on without you? You painted vistas for me, about a new world, a changed world. And now what? Someone in far-off Russia will cry for you, but I can't. And it was all my fault. No one else but me, a good-for-nothing (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 45. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear).

The experience of traumatic loss lies in the perspective of the individual, as does the creative ability to envision social progress. The zone arises within the self as a subjective, even hallucinogenic echo of utopia, a personal revelation of the transformation of present social conditions into a potential future. While walking in downtown Harmont, Red experiences a sudden shift in perspective of his surroundings that he had previously only undergone in the zone:

> A million odors cascaded in on him at once—sharp, sweet, metallic, gentle, dangerous ones, as crude as cobblestones, as delicate and complex as watch mechanisms, as huge as a house and as tiny as a dust particle. The air became hard, it developed edges, surfaces, and corners,

> like space was filled with huge, stiff balloons, slippery pyramids, gigantic prickly crystals, and he had to push his way through it all, making his way in a dream through a junk store stuffed with ugly furniture […]. It lasted a second. He opened his eyes, and everything was gone. It hadn't been a different world—it was this world turning a new, unknown side to him. This side was revealed to him for a second and then disappeared, before he had time to figure it out (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 67. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear).

This brief, sensory contradiction, which slips away before Red can process it consciously, provides a glimpse of the irrepressible human desire for radical social change. Its alien symbols function as unconscious symptoms, taking Red 'beyond language […] beyond the uncertainties of reason'. They enable him to enter 'a realm of irrationality – a realm of guaranteed authenticity' (Moore 1997, p. 70). This unconscious cosmic signage bypasses the bureaucratic control and probabilistic forecasting of STR to liberate individually estranging experiences of the unknown future. At the end of the novel, Red's dialogue with the golden ball that allegedly grants wishes expresses his desperation, acknowledgement of his compromised morality and inexpressible desire for utopia. In seeking a cure for his daughter's mutagenic transformation, he sacrifices Arthur Burbridge, the son of another stalker, at one of the zone's deadly traps to clear a safe path to the wish granter. The protagonist's final expressions form an internal commentary wavering between inarticulate words and images of the unconscious resulting from the exploitative socioeconomic relations in which he is trapped:

> He sat there, covering his eyes with his hands, and he was trying—not to understand, not to think, but merely to see something of how things should be, but all he saw were the faces, faces, faces, and more faces […] and greenbacks, bottles, bundles of rags that were once people, and columns of figures. He knew that it all had to be destroyed, and he wanted to destroy it, but he guessed that if it all disappeared there would be nothing left but the flat, bare earth (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 145. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear).

Red's thoughts acknowledge the failure to imagine alternative social responses to the visitation. The detritus left in its aftermath reveals only dehumanisation and protracted social conflict ('If I'm happy, Burbridge isn't, if Burbridge's happy, Four-eyes isn't, if Throaty is happy, no one is, and if things are bad for

Throaty, he's the only one fool enough to think he'll manage somehow' [From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 144. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear]). Throughout this sequence, however, he remains open to the possibility of change. His communication with the alien device of the golden ball is pared down to an expression of sheer vulnerability in the face of the unknowable. He is willing to have civilization rewritten on the basis of virtues he cannot grasp, even as his reiteration of Arthur's final wish as 'HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND NO ONE WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED' (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 145. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear) recollects his sacrifice of a young man and potentially misplaced faith in his own innate morality. Red exclaims to the golden ball:

> But if you really are … all powerful … all-knowing … then you figure it out! Look into my heart. I know that everything you need is in there. It has to be. I never sold my soul to anyone! It's mine, it's human! You take from me what it is I want … it just can't be that I would want something bad (From *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, copyright © 2007, p. 145. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear)!

Human survivability through mass trauma and the reduction of the self to an ethical core in the face of systemic upheaval are also evidenced in *Voices from Chernobyl*. The Exclusion Zone provides Soviet subjects implicated in the regime's political crimes with unconscious ferment and psychological renewal. Alexievich records the testimonies of those who seek repentance or spiritual transformation at Chernobyl. One anonymous interviewee testifies:

> I was running away from the world. At first I hung around train stations, I liked it there, so many people and you're all by yourself. Then I came here [to the Zone]. Freedom is here. I've forgotten my own life. Don't ask me about it. I remember what I've read in books, and what other people have told me, but my own life I've forgotten. It was a long time ago. I did wrong. But there's no sin that God won't forgive if the penance is sincere ('Monologue about Repentance', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 65).

The nuclear disaster provides a refuge for social trauma and political disenchantment in the declining years of Soviet communism. A soldier-turned

liquidator recalls that, three years after his tour in the irradiated region: 'I turned in my Party Card. My little Red book. I became free in the Zone. Chernobyl blew my mind. It set me free' ('Soldiers' Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 36). Another was rumoured to have 'went AWOL because the other soldiers were beating the younger ones "to death". He saved himself—at Chernobyl'. (Shimanskiy, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 127). Nikolai Zharkov, a teacher, states:

> We're often silent. We don't yell and we don't complain. We're patient, as always. Because we don't have the words yet. We're afraid to talk about it. We don't know how. It's not an ordinary experience, and the questions it raises are not ordinary. The world has been split in two: there's us, the Chernobylites, and then there's you. Have you noticed? No one here points out that they're Russian or Belarussian or Ukrainian. We call ourselves Chernobylites. "We're from Chernobyl." "I'm a Chernobylite." As if this is a separate people. A new nation (Zharkov, 'Monologue about a New Nation', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 122).

The splitting of the world in two, like nuclear fission, determines new forms of community and individual alterity. Atomic, scientific and Science Fiction imagery in the testimony of *Voices from Chernobyl* conveys the Chernobylite's alienated identity. 'We're lonely' says another soldier who contributed to the site's deactivation. 'We're strangers here. They even bury us separately, not like they do other people. It's like we're aliens from outer space' ('Soldiers' Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, pp. 49–50).

Survivor separation from existing patterns of sociopolitical life and the birth of a new, post-Chernobyl identity convey inexpressible glimpses of a future just beyond sight. Eyewitnesses of the Chernobyl explosion's aftermath express their trauma through the production of testimonial literature. This testimony cannot capture the direct, historical experience of trauma. Where any sort of scientific or social forecasting fails, however, this chapter has shown that Chernobyl survivor testimony frequently elides the aporetic trauma paradigm. Rather, an imagistic discursivity that is Gothic or cosmic in aesthetics pervades this literature. In this chapter, I have analysed *The Heart of a Dog*'s Gothic's excess and transgression through fear and laughter, and *Roadside Picnic*'s narration of personal trauma in the wake of

incomprehensible cosmic and social change. I have chosen not to pursue the suggestion that genre writing produced in the USSR has somehow influenced the formulation of Chernobyl testimony. Rather, it is my claim that, to understand the literary dimensions of its trauma narratives, one must unpack the sociopolitical anxieties and possible solutions of the Revolution's past as represented in these two examples of Soviet Science Fiction.

Chapter 2

THE FIRST GENERATION OF CHERNOBYL TRAUMA AND GOTHIC: *VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL*

The Memory Debate at Chernobyl

The mimetic theory of memory, in which a traumatised individual has an unconsciously dissociated relation to their traumatogenic event, brings the Caruthian representation of trauma as an aporetic wound into contradistinction with antimimetic memory. This latter concept holds the subject as an autonomous individual able to recollect their trauma through self-directed representational strategies (Leys 2000). Ultimately, as Ruth Leys (2000) proposes, survivors' vivid imitation of traumatic scenes, whether real or imagined, consciously or under hypnotic trance, simultaneously fall under mimetic and antimimetic categories. In the case of Chernobyl, testimony reveals both the disaster's resistance to narrative assimilation and its deployment in alternative, literary reconstruction. The use of a Gothic or Science Fiction aesthetic to represent the fear and political repression of the disaster, I argue in this chapter, is a central structural feature of Chernobyl survivor testimony. As a precursor to the Postcommunist Gothic theorised by Adriana Raducanu, the traumatised bodies of Chernobyl – irradiated, political and animal – represent lingering wounds produced by the disaster in political, personal and aesthetic forms (Raducanu 2015, p. 124). They comprise the mimetic experiences and antimimetic testimonials of Chernobyl survivors – accounts of physical and psychological suffering rendered in a language of Gothic horror and excess.

For members of the liquidator units, a person's identity and worth was tied to the amount of radiation absorbed by the body. Instead of rotating crews into and out of the Zone through periodic shift work, the Soviet government retained staff in the region for months at a time. Decontaminants' anxieties

around high dosages expose baroque actions and reflections in their testimonies. Ivan Zykov, a chemical engineer, recalls:

> In the middle of our time there they finally gave us dosimeters. These little boxes, with a crystal inside. Some of the guys started figuring, they should take them over to the burial site in the morning and let them catch radiation all day, that way they'll get released sooner. Or maybe they'll pay them more. So you had guys attaching them to their boots, there was a loop there, so that they'd be closer to the ground. It was theatre of the absurd (Zykov, 'Monologue About the Shovel and the Atom', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 159).

The motivations compelling liquidators to remain in the Zone for extended, unsafe periods of time give their testimonies a tragicomic edge. Their actions were simultaneously fruitless and interminable. The continual overturning and removal of radioactive topsoil became a Sisyphean task for these perpetually present cadres. 'We'd take a layer of earth and come back in a week and start over again', recalls Zykov. 'But there was nothing left to take off—just some sand that had drifted in [...] But we kept digging, and digging [...]' (Zykov, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 157). This testimony combines a discursivity of elaborate Gothic burial with the debasement of individuals in the Gogolian literary tradition. 'Once a week someone who was digging really well would receive a certificate of merit before all the other men', Zykov continues. 'The Soviet Union's best grave digger. It was crazy' (Zykov, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 158). The combination of protracted funerary rite and madness posits the liquidator as a figure of radioactive living death. Zykov explains this abject identity, divorced from human subjectivity: 'In the morning you'd wake up, you need to shave, but you're afraid to look in the mirror and see your own face' (Zykov, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 157). In Gogol's fiction, Donald Fanger writes, 'grotesque presentation of human beings [...] is matched by the grotesque character of the incidents themselves' (Fanger 1967, p. 119), which 'tend to be mechanical, determined by circumstances of employment or social rank, or else by some personal tic or mania' (Fanger 1967, p. 117).

This chapter explores the formation of absurdism and the grotesque in liquidator testimony through three channels. Rhetorical and Gothic excess lies in liquidators' comparison of the disaster to the Soviet Great Patriotic

War (1941–1945), conflation of human and nonhuman animal bodies and use of the comic mode. Their testimonies demonstrate that Chernobyl trauma is representative of both raw, mimetic experience and the mediated, antimimetic narrative structure of trauma and Gothic fiction.

The Mimetic Experience and Antimimetic Gothic Aesthetics of Trauma

Igor Kostin, a photographer and reporter for the press agency Novosti, was the only individual to have taken aerial photographs of the exploded Chernobyl reactor from a helicopter at first light on 26 April 1986. All but one of his shots came out entirely black, due to the impression on his film of the extreme levels of radioactivity in the air around the damaged power plant. This is a site of failed recording due to environmental excess, a scene of trauma that bears witness to an unrepresentable force. Chernobyl trauma as a sort of Lacanian Real, unsignifiable and horrific, appears to align with Caruth's mimetic notion of the inexpressible traumatic wound. However, this is not the whole story. Though radiation is a part of reality at the subatomic level, playing no role in direct experience, the affectivity of fear breaches the surface of observable corporeality, betraying something deeply unsettling when the cause was not yet known. Without fully grasping what had happened in the early hours of the morning, Kostin's testimony captures his contact with the sinister void of meaning at the exploded Chernobyl reactor as the helicopter encircled it: 'Suddenly, there was no movement, no life underneath us–as if we were weightless. In front of us, a large hole, like an open grave' (Kostin 2006, p. 8). The Gothic aesthetic of the deadly abyss reveals the circularity of mimetic and antimimetic memory, gesturing towards a gap and failure of live (photographic) capture through belated recollection of a traumatic signifier in testimonial narrative. This paradoxical interfacing of the inexpressible mimetic experience and antimimetic Gothic aesthetics of trauma frames Chernobyl liquidator testimonies at once as aporetic paradigm and recollective coping strategy, supporting an understanding of how first responders represent their psychological absence from the scene of trauma and engage cathartically in imaginative techniques of memory rehabilitation.

Part I. Chernobyl: War of Wars

> We were told we had to win. Against whom? The atom? Physics? The Universe? Victory is not an event for us, but a process. Life is a struggle. An overcoming. That's why we have this love of floods and

> fires and other catastrophes. We need an opportunity to demonstrate our "courage and heroism" (Arkady Filin, Monologue About a Man Whose Tooth Was Hurting When He Saw Christ Fall', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 91).

At Chernobyl, Soviet political narratives drew the liquidators into an ideological as well as a physical battle against the unleashed atom. The perpetual pursuit of military victory against an invisible, immensurate enemy reveals how a collective experience of the nuclear disaster was framed by the ideals of Soviet heroism and masculinity. The traumatic aspects of this engagement as expressed in liquidators' testimonies are enshrined in a Gothic affect of extremity and otherness. The Zone was a 'fantastic world, where the Apocalypse met the Stone Age', Arkady Filin recalls. He reveals the extent to which liquidators were often perceived as hellish denizens and feared by residents of the region's outlying villages: 'The women in the villages watched us and crossed themselves. We had gloves, respirators, and surgical robes. We showed up in their yards like demons' (Filin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 88). This intrusion of modern science into preexisting religious custom typifies the enduring Gothic hybridity or 'forcing-together of conflicting forms [that] was then and remains symptomatic of deeply traumatic social, ideological and broadly psychological conflicts among different ways of seeing the world and self' (Hogle 2013, p. 72). The Gothic impulse to conflate the ancient and the modern, and the barbarous and the civilised, establishes discursive and aesthetic methods of articulating traumatic experience. Filin continues: 'I've thought a few times that someday they're going to start hunting the scientists the way they used to hunt the doctors and drown them in the Middle Ages' (Filin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 88).

Spectres of other violent histories haunt these liquidator testimonies. Stories of older village inhabitants and political propaganda memorialising the Great Patriotic War recontextualise liquidators' memories of their work. The ideological configuration of a conflict against the atom underscores this wartime prerogative of heroic sacrifice. A soldier mobilised into a liquidation crew cynically conflates 'the wonders of Soviet heroism' demonstrated during the War with the action of decontamination: 'covering the embrasure, throwing yourself in front of a machine gun. But that those orders should never have given, that there shouldn't have been any need, no one writes about that. They flung us there like sand onto the reactor' ('Soldiers' Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana,

copyright © 2006, pp. 42–43). The comparison of wartime sacrifice to the thousands of tonnes of sand dropped by helicopter onto the burning reactor in an effort to extinguish it exposes the mass disposability of human life in the emergency response to Chernobyl as in the Great Patriotic War. By showing how the liquidator is shifted ontologically between present and past, human and object, these testimonies expose collective social wounds, 'disrupting the identification of the subject with the state inherent in national mythology' (Durrant 2014, p. 96). Liquidators acknowledge and challenge the role of the ideological past in the unfolding history of their own experiences, navigating their sublation by historical Soviet identity to the dominant political narrative of patriotic wartime heroism.

Gothic antimimesis aids the testimonial interruption of this accepted memorialisation practice. The use of spectacular military conflict and victory to describe the life-threatening yet repetitive duty of liquidation produces an emotive language of heightened contrast, rendering noble political acts barbaric and reducing Soviet heroism to a state of bare life (Agamben 1998). Filin recalls the following ideological phenomenon at the destroyed reactor:

> Our political officer read notices in the paper about our "high political consciousness and meticulous organization," about the fact that just four days after the catastrophe the red flag was already flying over the fourth reactor. It blazed forth. In a month the radiation had devoured it. So they put up another flag. And in another month they put up another one. I tried to imagine how the soldiers felt going up on the roof to replace that flag. These were suicide missions. What would you call this? Soviet paganism? Live sacrifice? But the thing is, if they'd given me the flag then, and told me to climb up there, I would have. Why? I can't say. I wasn't afraid to die, then (Filin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 91).

Testimony imagines the experience of ritualistic sacrifice required for this wartime symbol of victory at an atomic Reichstag. Yet in Filin's interpretation of Soviet paganism or live sacrifice, the liquidator, by turns a disposable resource and one who sustains the sociopolitical order, can be viewed alternatively as Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* and René Girard's sacred man (1977): a simultaneous victim and hero of extreme Soviet power.

The belated effects of fatal radiation sickness objectify and suspend the liquidator in a temporal configuration of living death. One of the soldiers sent to the Zone states: 'I don't know how I'm going to die. My friend died. He got huge, fat, like a barrel. And my neighbor—he was also there, he

worked a crane. He got black, like coal, and shrunk, so that he was wearing kids' clothes' ('Soldiers' Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 49). 'When I made it back from [the Soviet war in] Afghanistan, I knew that I'd live' another says. 'Here [Chernobyl] it was the opposite: it'd kill you only after you got home' ('Soldiers' Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 41). The physical distortions caused by radiation convert the traditional Soviet hero into an object of alterity, while the body's protracted decay questions the ontological certainty of surviving a war. The liquidator becomes haunted by a death already incurred whose symptoms are yet to manifest. 'There are sicknesses that can't be cured. You just have to sit and watch them', (Ignatenko, 'Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 11), a nurse tells Lyudmilla Ignatenko, whose firefighter husband, Vasily, contracted severe radiation poisoning when putting out the initial blaze at the destroyed reactor. When visiting him in a specialist radiology hospital in Moscow, Ignatenko recalls:

> He started to change—every day I met a brand-new person. The burns started to come to the surface. In his mouth, on his tongue, his cheeks—at first there were little lesions, and then they grew. It came off in layers—as white film […] the color of his face […] his body […] blue […] red […] gray-brown […] The last two days in the hospital—I'd lift his arm, and meanwhile the bone is shaking, just sort of dangling, the body had gone away from it (Ignatenko, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 11).

The lurid colours and skeletal image of the body's radioactive decay are indicative of the Gothic's aesthetic focus on surface spectacle, ruin and death. In Chapter 1, I argued for the political repression of a native Soviet Gothic literary tradition and its defiant return as an aesthetic in NEP satire. While I am not arguing here that Chernobyl testimonies self-identify as Gothic, these personal accounts of traumatic witnessing are expressed frequently in a Gothic idiom of horror nonetheless. Reading the aesthetic as such enables one to grasp the emotional affect of this trauma to understand how literary devices such as image, metaphor and hyperbole enable expression of deeply painful, otherwise inarticulable experiences. Gothic becomes an effective way in which the nuclear disaster and its long-term effects are brought to individual consciousness, communicated and received publicly. Ignatenko's

understanding of the way in which radiation stripped away layers of her husband's flesh to continually expose new forms of personhood reveals through a Gothic representation of the body how the psychological impact of witnessing radioactive decay subverts perceptions of identity secured in a rigid sociopolitical order and creates new, imaginative forms of testimony.

The disruptive effects of trauma rendered visible by these accounts challenge the corporeal and historical sense of Soviet heroism derived from the dominant cultural narrative of the Great Patriotic War. At Vasiliy's funeral, Ignatenko recollects:

> They couldn't get a single pair of shoes to fit him. They buried him barefoot. Right before my eyes—in his formal wear—they put him in that cellophane bag of theirs and tied it up. And then they put that bag in a wooden coffin. And they tied the coffin with another bag. The plastic is transparent, but thick, like a tablecloth. And then they put all that into a zinc coffin. They squeezed it in. Only the cap didn't fit (Ignatenko, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 19).

This ceremonial internment of the formalised Soviet body is undermined by the transformative effects of its irradiation and the protective measures aimed at limiting contamination. Testimonies of Chernobyl victims by survivor eyewitnesses reveal the biosocially degenerative impact (Volkan 2006) of deeply engrained collective memories and social practices of martial sacrifice and triumph. 'As far back as I can remember' Sergei Gurin, a cameraman who filmed life in the aftermath of Chernobyl, says,

> my father wore military clothing, though he wasn't in the military. Thinking about money was bourgeois, thinking about your own life was unpatriotic. The normal state of life was hunger. They, our parents, lived through a great catastrophe, and we needed to live through it too. Otherwise we'd never become real people (Gurin, 'Monologue About War Movies', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 109).

From its emergence in the European upheavals of the French Revolution, the Gothic affronts humanist understandings of somatic and political harmony, personhood and historical, biological and social evolution. The Soviet self is enforced by collective and military survival of disaster. In Soviet Gothic cultural memory, the traumatic past haunts the present, threatening to re-emerge through the experiences and literature of subsequent generations.

These testimonial subjectivities of Gothic affect can be understood through the theory of postmemory. Memory scholar Marianne Hirsch, who coined the term, defines the concept of postmemory as a traumatic symptom of someone 'who constitutes him/herself by means of a series of identifications across temporal, spatial, and cultural divides' (Hirsch 2012, p. 129). The testimonies of Chernobyl liquidators that bear witness to physical degeneration, ontological collapse and the postmemorial politics of the Great Patriotic War reveal a Gothic aesthetic and temporal narrative structure characterised by 'fracture, overlay, and superimposition' (Hirsch 2012, p. 175).

The testimonial conception of an emergency reduction of humans to bare life and their hybrid, literary reconstruction across objectified, aesthetic, biological and historical categories is extended to nonhuman life in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. The discursive exchange of human and nonhuman animal forms in survivor testimony demonstrates a further creative and Gothic turn in the memory recollection of the survivor.

Part II. The Animal Remains at Chernobyl

> You're a normal person! And then one day you're turned into a Chernobyl person, an animal that everyone's interested in, and that no one knows anything about (Nikolai Kalugin, 'Monologue about a Whole Live Written Down on Doors', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 31).
>
> The animal, what a word! (Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 2008, p. 23).

Liquidator testimony up to this point in my study has framed the Chernobyl survivor as sacrifice or bare life objectified by Soviet ideology. In this sense, Chernobyl trauma resonates with existing theoretical perspectives in Critical Animal studies on the systemic violence experienced by nonhuman animals, which, when refused the category of sentience, are reduced to food, fodder and waste matter. This animal as abject intersects with the animal in the human, 'destabilising identities and assumptions' about the gap between human and non-human animals, rendering it uncanny (Heholt and Edmundson 2020, p. 6). The Gothic potential of actual animals, the animal in the human and the 'animal without' (Heholt and Edmundson 2020), arises in the testimony of the Chernobyl survivor. It is realised in the creative horror of a perceived world in which, due to radioactivity, the epistemological relations between the human, the animal and the environment have been completely altered.

Both human and nonhuman animals became disposable objects in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. Companion animals were abandoned in the evacuation and later killed to prevent the spread of radiation which had been absorbed by their fur. ‘We loaded a whole dump truck with them, even filled the top’, a Soviet soldier recalls. ‘We drive them over to our “cemetery.” To be honest it was just a deep hole in the ground’ (‘Three Monologues about a Single Bullet’, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 97). The industrialised killing and disposal of animal carcasses forms part of a multispecies ‘death zone’, which recognises both human and nonhuman exposure to Soviet biopower. Liquidator testimony recognises the alterity and continuity of cross-species Chernobyl victimhood that characterises Donna Haraway’s notion of kinship politics in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (2016). Sergei Gurin, the cameraman, discusses his changed perception of the boundary between himself and nonhuman animals following the post-disaster evacuation:

> A strange thing happened to me. I became closer to animals. And trees, and birds. They’re closer to me than they were, the distance between us has narrowed. I go to the Zone now, all these years, I see a wild boar jumping out of an abandoned human house, and then an elk. That’s what I shoot. I want to make a film, to see everything through the eyes of an animal. “What are you shooting?” people say to me. “Look around you. There’s a war on in Chechnya.” But Saint Francis preached to the birds. He spoke to them as equals. What if these birds spoke to him in their bird language, and it wasn’t he who condescended to them (Gurin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 114)?

Jacques Derrida’s account of the deconstructed barrier between animal fiction and human autobiography in his book *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) privileges the shared if uncanny performance and pursuit of the animal over exclusively human archival or legal proofs. Gurin turns his representational gaze away from the trauma of the Chechen War to embrace perspectival exchange with the animal, which is, as Derrida writes, a ‘question and request, of an audible or silent appeal that calls within us outside of us, from the most far away, before us after us, preceding and pursuing us in an unavoidable way, so unavoidable that it leaves the trace of so many symptoms and wounds’ (Derrida 2008, p. 113). This auditory, positional, temporal and inevitable relationship with the Chernobyl animal structures the Bio–Gothic aesthetics (Haber 2024) of the uncanniness of irradiated organisms in the

Zone. Chernobyl testimony multiplies rather than nullifies the differences between animals and plants, demonstrating the hybrid 'fragility and porosity' (Mallet in Derrida 2008, x) of the human as both a discursive and biological category. Gurin later learned that

> someone came up with a project for evacuating the animals along with the people. But how? How do you resettle them? Ok, maybe you could move the ones that were above the earth, but what about the ones that were *in* the earth—the bugs and worms? And the ones in the sky? How do you evacuate a pigeon or a sparrow? What do you do with them? We don't have any way of giving them the necessary information. It's also a philosophical dilemma. A perestroika of our feelings is happening here (Gurin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, pp. 113–114).

Gurin's invocation of an emotional and sensory restructuring in relation to animals imbricates political, environmental and biological bodies to fashion a multispecies network of ad hoc resistance. This multidirectional dilemma, which encompasses birds in the air and bugs in the soil, offers a challenge to the strictly horizontal plane of anthropocentric disaster trauma. Novel perspectives such as Gurin's provide narratives in which human survivors do not simply abandon nonhuman animals to their fate but enmesh a transcorporeal body with the damaged environment, 'where disruptions to the ecosystem return to disturb the so-called normal behaviour of the body' (Haber 2024, p. 1). Chernobyl testimonies that focus attention on the animal construct interstitial behavioural spaces in their ethical interrelation of human and nonhuman subjectivity. They articulate uncanny experiences of estranged nature and the material processes of radioactive disposal through Bio–Gothic aesthetics embedded in the Chernobyl liquidator's literary trauma. Liquidator Arkady Filin recalls that during the deactivation of Chernobyl, '[w]e buried earth in the earth. With the bugs, spiders, leeches. With that separate people. That world. That's my most powerful impression of that place—those bugs' (Filin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 92). '[A]ny living creature has a soul, even insects' ('Three Monologues about a Single Bullet', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 98), one of the soldiers adds. This memorial ritual imbricates the human animal within the substrate of insects and soil, reconfiguring it through Bio–Gothic corporeality. Its cross-species identification with macroinvertebrates' souls and their whole subterranean ecosystem as a contaminated world to be overturned serves to 'deconstruct the autonomous, wholistic human subject

by eroding the lines between humans and animals, body and environment, form and indeterminacy' (Haber 2024, p. 8).

The interfacing image of burying earth in earth recalls Derrida's complexified, multiplied, delineated and folded limit between human and nonhuman animals in *The Animal That I Therefore Am*, (Derrida, 2008, p. 29). Irradiated soil as a contact point between species reimagines damaged bodies as inherently of the earth. One Chernobyl eyewitness 'called animals "walking ashes" and people, "talking earth." The earth talked because we consume earth, that is, we are made from earth' ('Three Monologues about a Single Bullet', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 93). Filin also recalls having nocturnal visions of his liquidation activities:

> We buried the forest. We sawed the trees into meter-and-a-half pieces and packed them in cellophane and threw them into graves. I couldn't sleep at night. I'd close my eyes and see something black moving, turning over—as if it were alive—live tracts of land—with bugs, spiders, worms—I didn't know any of them, what they were called, just bugs, spiders, ants. And they were small and big, yellow and black, all different colors. One of the poets says somewhere that animals are a different people. I killed them by the ten, by the hundred, thousand, not even knowing what they were called. I destroyed their houses, their secrets. And buried them. Buried them' (Filin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 89).

In this particular strain of Bio–Gothic, plants and animals, alive and dead, real and imagined, merge with the irradiated soil. It diverges from Haber's notion of monster ecologies. Instead of monstrosity, these organisms exhibit identities that resound within the fields of Trauma and Critical Animal studies. The suffering of plants as well as human and nonhuman animals at Chernobyl suggests a rhizomatic network of interspecies trauma relations, a collision of Gothic surfaces and deconstructed bodies in line with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critical theory of the rhizome posited in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The rhizome as a philosophy is antihierarchical, working through conceptual offshoots stretching 'upward, downward, or laterally' (Adkins 2015, p. 23) to create a continually evolving, mobile heterogeneity. It is a transspecies assemblage akin to a *bios*, a 'moving target that evades rationalization and domestication' (Haber 2024, p. 7). The Chernobyl rhizome as a Deleuzian plateau is a Gothic surface, a dark movement of living land in which trees and nonhuman animals are interred like people. It bears witness

to the trauma of the *bios*, the shifting boundary between nature and culture, where the mass destruction of anonymous bodies that lies outside the value of the human is confronted through the perspective of our funerary rights. Anatoly Shimanskiy recorded the following conversation overheard from a market near Chernobyl: 'Graveyards for animals are called bio-cemeteries by scientists. These are modern-day temples. There lie thousands of dogs, cats, horses, that were shot. And not a single name'. (Shimanskiy, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 127). In this Gothic, anthropocentric framing, the political status of plants, animals and their environment, as grievable subjects (Butler 2009), the very possibility of what they are or are not, is open to question (Heholt and Edmundson 2020, p. 3).

The human survives in the mourning of what is left behind. In Chernobyl eyewitnesses' testimony, entombed plants and animals are condemned to remain. Yet the human animal's inclusion in this trauma rhizome suggests an uncanny ontological flux. Zinaida Kovalenko, a re-settler to the Zone, asks Svetlana Alexievich in an interview for *Voices from Chernobyl*: 'do you understand what I'm telling you, my sorrow? You'll carry it to people, maybe I won't be here anymore. I'll be in the ground. Under the roots […]' (Kovalenko, 'Monologue About What Can Be Talked About with the Living and the Dead', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 31). These testimonial responses to the nuclear disaster do not merely convey the destruction of anonymous animals and plants so that humans may survive and abandon the other. Gurin posits the inadequacy of conventional literary forms in portraying multispecies trauma and death: 'Our art is about the sufferings and loves of people, but not of everything living. Only humans. We don't descend to their level: animals, plants, that other world. And with Chernobyl man just waved his hand at everything' (Gurin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 113). Following Derrida's reading of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), 'man is a promising animal […] an animal permitted to make promises' (Derrida 2008, p. 3), to carry forth the trauma of the *bios*, this collectivity of death, past and future. This collapse in binary totalism, a secure definition between humans and the environment, between leaving and remaining, living and dead, forgetting and remembering, occurs in the slippage or trace of language: where the animal abandoned during evacuation, that remains at Chernobyl, gives way to animal remains at Chernobyl: leftovers and memorial fragments of all animal species, human and nonhuman alike.

This refocusing from animals to plants and soil constitutes a shift in contemporary Critical Animal studies. The discipline's sustained focus upon

animal species 'might seem to be something whose time has come and gone, as we have moved in academic discourse (predictably enough, it must be said) from "the animal" to plants, to objects, and so on' (Wolfe 2018, p. 534). As Donna Haraway claims, 'We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities' (Haraway 2016, p. 97). Just as compost undermines anthropocentric frames of time and geography (Turner, Sellbach and Broglio 2018), the rhizomatic embrace of the invertebrate animal at Chernobyl also points downwards, beneath our existing focus on human disaster victims. Though the lifespans of conventionally non-companion animals are profoundly out of synch with ours, the ants, worms, leeches and bugs that exist in or are closest to the ground highlight an ontological as well as theoretical direction for Critical Animal and Trauma studies' consideration. For Gothic and Trauma studies, this emphasis relocates the site of painful remembrance and of the victim who remembers. Kovalenko draws attention to the fertile position of traumatic memory in the shadowy graves beneath the earth, the realm of deceased subterranean organisms where humans share the fate of bugs. Here, below the arborescent roots that constitute an accepted network of existing social relations and trauma hierarchies between different races, religions, genders and species, all animal matter becomes fodder for the rhizome's nourishment and expansion of ethical culture.

The final section of this chapter carries the ethics of listening to and remembering the traumatic and Gothic dimensions of Chernobyl survivors' jokes and laughter – a further structural, aesthetic and emotional excess that transgresses the traditional literary trauma paradigm.

Part III. Jokes as Gothic Dialogues

> I don't remember any serious conversations, but I do remember jokes (Anatoly Shimanskiy, 'Monologue about Writing Chernobyl', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 127).

Robert van Voren recalls an anecdote in *On Dissidents and Madness* (2009), his book about the World Psychiatric Association's (WPA) drive to overturn the political abuse of psychiatry in the former Soviet Union. The story concerns West European WPA delegates' attempts to educate Russian and Ukrainian nurses, who were used to the old ways through which psychiatry was carried out under Soviet communism, in Euro-American-informed clinical practice. Van Voren writes:

> we organised a special network meeting on psychiatric nursing. About forty nurses from more than ten countries met at a conference centre in the forest somewhere in the Netherlands, where in addition to lectures, role-plays were used as an educational tool. A group of British participants had worked out the role-plays and with the help of simultaneous translation English-Russian, they tried to copy reality as much as possible. They had prepared several versions: how it should not be done, with a dominant psychiatrist who immediately took the lead and decided everything by himself; how it usually went, by contributions by all but with a psychiatrist who still dominated the meeting; and last, but not least, what should be the optimal situation. The first-role play was enacted and ended in enthusiastic applause by the audience. A chief nurse from a provincial psychiatric hospital got up and full of passion, she grabbed the microphone and started speaking. Fantastic! She had never seen something so powerful, so good. If she could ever convince her director to put this to practice in his hospital, she would be delighted. It was almost too painful to tell her the truth that this was exactly how it should **not** be done! For her this was already almost a fata morgana, an unreachable goal (Van Voren 2009, p. 205).

Here, van Voren finds himself caught between the Soviet clinical preference for group subservience to an authority figure and the corrective Eurocentric practice of psychiatry informed by the potentially 'reductive and individualistic' history of Western psychoanalysis (Pollard, 2008, p. 57). As Stef Craps reminds us,

> the founding texts of the field [of literary Trauma studies] largely fail to live up to this cross-cultural ethical engagement. They fail on at least three counts: they marginalise or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures; they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity; and they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma (Craps 2014, p. 46).

Literary innovation provides an effective response to this impasse. Rachel Pollard argues in her book *Dialogue and Desire, Mikhail Bakhtin and the Linguistic Turn in Psychotherapy* (2008) that Bakhtin's critical concepts of polyphony, heteroglossia and the chronotope provide a discursive 'multi-voicedness' to literary analysis. In his various studies, Bakhtin argues for the novel's unfinalised essentiality, cross-fertilised by many speech registers, times

and places. The evolution of the Gothic genre, in its aesthetic sublimation of historical trauma, fragmented narrative dialogism and antiauthoritarian transgression, also supplies ambivalent approaches to monolithic concepts. In what follows, I suggest that Bakhtinian carnival, with its cultural history of working through protracted social conflict within the Soviet Union, can be combined with the Gothic's comic and grotesque affect to reveal important literary dimensions of Chernobyl survivors' trauma representation.

Bakhtinian carnival cannot capture the long-term nature of Chernobyl trauma alone. Horner and Zlosnik state that 'the Bakhtinian critical model of carnival allows humour only an exceptional reign in temporal terms' (Horner and Zlosnik 2005, p. 13). Its temporary suspension and ultimate preservation of power relations in official culture is at odds with the endurance of Gothic time spanning the dawn of modernity to the present day. Fear pervades the modern condition, as John Clark reminds us, undermining the ideal of inevitable social progress through the terrors of revolution, empire-building, global warfare and the atomic age (Clark 1991, p. 18). Therefore, a theoretical framework that merely licences the comic in discrete moments limits analysis of testimonies in which humour presides over the profound, extended loss of Soviet identity in nuclear failure. Natalya Roslova, head of the Mogilev Women's Committee for the Children of Chernobyl, states:

> That great empire crumbled and fell apart. First, Afghanistan, then Chernobyl. When it fell apart, we found ourselves all alone. I'm afraid to say it, but we love Chernobyl. It's become the meaning of our lives. The meaning of our suffering. Like a war. The world found out about our existence after Chernobyl. It was our window to Europe. We're its victims, but also its priests (Roslova, 'Monologue About Why We Love Chernobyl' in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 215).

Chernobyl survivors have outlived the historical and political conditions, though not the painful memories, of their traumas. Following the collapse of the USSR, testimony allows for transformation of experience outside the confines of Soviet orthodoxy into a cultural dialogue of positive emotion as well as the traditional mode of suffering. I argue that the Gothic aesthetics of hyperdramatisation, self-reflexivity and hybridisation through juxtaposition of incongruous textual effects (Horner and Zlosnik 2005, p. 3) are present in the jokes and laughter of Chernobyl survivor testimonies. Therefore, the final section of this chapter will proceed by analysing the comedic elements of these texts through a combination of Bakhtin's centrifugal criticality and Gothic's dramatic affect.

The diverting or frivolous examples of Revivalist Gothic fiction, such as *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *The Heroine* (1813), cannot be contained within the serious aesthetic mechanisms of repression and haunting return. Horner and Zlosnik argue that 'in the Gothic comic turn – as in in the joke – terror is suspended and horror is held in abeyance' (Horner and Zlosnik 2005, p. 3). Just as this literature of fear is irreducible to the emotions of negative affect, the testimonial can resist portrayal of the subject exclusively as a victim of historical trauma. Some Chernobyl eyewitness accounts represent the Zone as a space of fantasy and humour instead:

> Yeah, ha. The fox sees how a gingerbread man is rolling through the forest. "Gingerbread man, where are you rolling to?" "I'm not a gingerbread man, I'm a hedgehog from Chernobyl." Ha-ha. Like they say, let's put the peaceful atom in every home! ('Three Monologues about a Single Bullet', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 99).

The folkloric, grotesque and comedic elements of this narrative moderate its testimonial response to the abuses of Soviet nuclear power. Though it seems that critical humour is licenced in a moment of Bakhtinian carnival, the Gothic's 'cross-generic dynamism' (Hogle and Smith 2009, p. 1) is evident in its historical exchange between fairytale and Gothic narratives (Hart 2020). The resurrection of its own testimonial form in new eras of trauma and engagement with readers through recognisable literary convention serve to transgress the joke as sanctioned moment. Self-reflexive humour across the Chernobyl eyewitness interviews challenges the testimonial's pastness and inherently serious tone. A soldier says to Alexievich: 'I have my own memories. My official post there was commander of the guard units. Something like the director of the apocalypse. (*Laughs.*) Yes. Write it down just like that' ('Soldiers' Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 46).

Such a request raises the ethical dilemma of how onlookers ought to bear witness to trauma. Besides this, the transformation of the traumatic past into excessive, comedic fiction highlights the distancing strategies of the Gothic text. The shift from memories of personal experience to an alternative fantasy vision of the apocalypse provides pleasure for the interviewee. This suspension of lived history in favour of dramatic storytelling also provides a literary canvas onto which the reader's unexpected laughter might safely be projected. There is always the possibility of an outbreak of contagious humour in the Gothic novel's readers, especially in the cruel denouements that rule over its characters' fates. 'This rather negative view of laughter', for Horner

and Zlosnik, 'takes us into the realm of black humour, where the affinity between laughter and death is exploited in dangerous ways' (Horner and Zlosnik 2005, p. 14). Another Chernobyl liquidator, Aleksandr Kudryagin, relates the following tale:

> We had lead underwear, we wore it over our pants. Write that. We had good jokes too. Here's one: An American robot is on the roof for five minutes, then it breaks down. The Japanese robot is on the roof for five minutes, and then – it breaks down. The Russian robot is up there for two hours! Then a command comes in over the loudspeaker: "Private Ivanov! In two hours you're welcome to come down and have a cigarette break." Ha-ha! (*Laughs.*) (Kudryagin, 'Monologue about Freedom and the Dream of an Ordinary Death', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 187).

Kudryagin's joke highlights the use of Soviet 'green' robots, military personnel whose job it was to clear the radioactive debris (a mix of building concrete and graphite from the reactor core) from the roof of the Reactor Four complex. The historical trauma of human expendability is diversified, however, where the recording of laughter as if to offer it to the reader as infectious enjoyment transgresses the received literary conventions of the trauma text. Deviating from the Caruthian model, in which the sufferer's indescribable pain impacts the onlooker emotionally and cognitively, the excess of dark comedy in Chernobyl testimony provides the option of laughing vicariously at the political abuse of the hypothetical survivor. The joke draws on the Gothic's exceeding of sacred horror that attempts to control or expel laughter (Botting 1996, p. 172) by fictionalising liquidator experience. Both Gothic and Bakhtinian carnival undermine the representation of lived trauma as a privileged literary mode in trauma fiction. In Rabelaisian folklore, 'value is diverted from any specific timeframe, real history is not registered, and space becomes thoroughly fantastic (Morson and Emerson 1990, pp. 440–441). Where history and memory are momentarily forgotten during carnival, however, the Gothic conveys an extended version of these social processes. Across the evolution of Gothic literature, the breaching of acceptable boundaries between good and evil, comedy and horror or terror, is both threatening and pleasurable (Horner and Zlosnik 2005, p. 2). The Gothic aesthetic in Chernobyl testimony sometimes views the entire event of disaster as farce, drawing humour as well as horror from the contradictions and hypocrisies of the Soviet political response. Irina Kiseleva, a journalist covering the Zone's decontamination, recalls:

> We met a small truck on the road. It was going so slowly, like it was driving to a funeral and there was a body in back. We stopped the car, I thought the driver was drunk, and there was a young guy at the wheel. "Are you all right?" I said. "Yes, I'm just carrying contaminated earth." In that heat! With all the dust! "Are you crazy? You still have to get married, raise kids! "Where else am I going to get fifty roubles for a single trip?" Fifty roubles back then could get you a nice suit. And people talked more about the roubles than the radiation. They got those tiny bonuses. Or tiny anyway compared with the value of a human life. It was funny and tragic at the same time (Kiseleva, 'Monologue About Instructions', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 205).

Such narratives reveal the hybridity and incongruous effects of the testimonial text: where the transportation of irradiated topsoil is imagined as a funeral procession, the distinctions between history and memory, life and death and tragedy and comedy collapse. The Gothic's affective impact intervenes in the traumatic event's factual nature, diversifying experienced trauma with emotional paradox. Another example of this transformation is provided in the testimony of Zoya Bruk, an environmental inspector of the Zone:

> This crazy woman appeared in town suddenly. She'd walk around the market saying, "I've seen the radiation. It's blue as blue, it spills over everything." People stopped buying milk and cottage cheese at the market. An old lady would be standing with her milk, no one's buying it. "Don't worry," she'd say, "I don't let my cow out into the field, I bring her her grass myself." If you drove out of town you'd see these scarecrows: a cow all wrapped in cellophane, and then an old farmer woman next to her, also wrapped in cellophane. You could cry, you could laugh (Bruk, 'Monologue About How the Frightening Things in Life Happen Quietly and Naturally', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 165).

The potential of the universal response ('[y]ou could cry, you could laugh') to post-disaster life continues to offer novel ways of reading Chernobyl trauma. Sorrow that crosses the divide into laughter, and between speaker and listener or reader, may reproduce in the comic mode the contentious transmissibility of trauma. However, as LaCapra suggests, the theoretical and cultural imperative of representing traumatic symptoms through literary conventions that direct the witnessing experience to specific emotional horizons can

curtail understandings of the expression and reception of trauma. He writes that 'better readings and more desirable tensions or modes of interaction in social life […] include the role of the carnivalesque, whereby impasses are somehow played out and existing norms or structures are periodically transgressed' (LaCapra 1994, p. 222). During the Shoah, for example, 'gallows humor was one way in which the oppressed in ghettos and camps were able to confront an impossible situation and not be totally crushed by it' (LaCapra 1994, p. 222). In the resurgence of wartime Stalinist authoritarianism that emerged in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, survivors' laughter acts as a coping mechanism for the impact of mass trauma. 'Girls! Don't cry', says a village resident who returned after the evacuation. 'We were always on the front lines. We were Stakhanovites. We lived through Stalin, through the war! If I didn't laugh and comfort myself, I'd have hanged myself long ago!' ('Monologues by Those Who Returned', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 70).

While LaCapra expresses an awareness of the difficulty that carnivalesque humour might present to a historical understanding of the Holocaust, 'sensitive rendering of victims' uses of jokes and laughter are valuable to the 'recapturing and making available broader, richly ambivalent, and potentially healing dimensions of the carnivalesque in history' (LaCapra 1994, p. 222). My contribution to this problem revolves around the dialogic interaction between survivor testimony and affective reader response. Arkady Filin, one of the liquidators, asks Alexievich:

> Want to hear a joke? This prisoner escapes from jail, and runs to the thirty-kilometre Zone at Chernobyl. They catch him, bring him to the dosimeters. He's "glowing" so much, they can't possibly put him back in prison, can't take him to hospital, can't put him around people. Why aren't you laughing? (*Laughs.*) (Filin, in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, pp. 91–92).

The interviewer's recording of survivor laughter and indication of their own silence introduces the issue of representing the humour of Chernobyl jokes. How, if at all, is the reader's laughter made possible in the literary reconstruction of the disaster?

Effective understandings of trauma's working through might require outside participation in survivors' literary manifestations of trauma beyond shocked silence. The performative, antimimetic element of the joke draws attention to itself as such. Most of the jokes in Chernobyl testimony begin with a request for an audience, marking a cleavage in serious testimony

and playful satire: 'Want to hear a joke? Guy comes home from the reactor. His wife asks the doctor, "What should I do with him?" "You should wash him, hug him, and put him out of commission"'. 'You want another joke? After Chernobyl you can eat anything you want, but you have to bury your shit in lead' ('Soldiers' Chorus', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, pp. 47–48). To view such comic interruptions in the overall mournfulness of testimony as manifestations of the temporary nature of Bakhtinian carnival limits their usefulness in understanding them as dialogic polyphony, however. The power of these jokes lies precisely in their satirical proximity to traumatic history. The different voices within each Chernobyl testimony, their shifting between serious and comedic tones, between real and fiction events,

> highlights the defining role of dialogue and differing points of view in literature's trajectory away from the 'monological' [and] includes the relationship between the characters' discourses and the author's discourse (if represented in the text) and between all discourses and other discourses outside the text (Kremmer 2015, p. 13).

The discursive exchange between the survivor as the author of their experiences, the characters and authority figures employed in their jokes and the reader demonstrates the heteroglossia of testimony; its comedic and serious content cannot be separated into discrete elements. Sergei Gurin discusses how he was convinced by his superiors to return to the Zone in the absence of replacement cameramen:

> One cameraman brings in a certificate saying he has an ulcer, another is on vacation. They [his bosses] call me in. "You have to go again." "But I just got back." "That's the thing, you were already there, so it doesn't matter to you. Besides, you already have kids. Whereas the other guys are still young." Ah, Christ, maybe I want to have five or six kids! But they start to pressure me, you know, soon we reevaluate the salaries, you'll have this much under your belt, you'll get a raise. It's a sad and funny story. I've already pretty much put it away in a corner of my mind (Gurin in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 111).

This conversation between the survivor and Soviet authority calls for the individual reader's discourse – a personal if socially mediated view of political power that qualifies Gurin's story as sad, funny or both. Tragicomic

dialogism in the Chernobyl testimonies and jokes discussed here reflect the fragmentation, self-reflexivity and dialectical impulse of the modern subject (Horner and Zlosnik 2005). For Bakhtin, this self is to be celebrated as '*happily* fragmented; only multiplicity and open-ended surplus could guarantee a vigorous and socially informed whole that was flexible, outward-looking and optimistic' (Emerson 1997, p. 110). On the other side of this life-affirming outlook on trauma, however, lies the 'Gothic hybrid mixture of the fantastic and the "real", the horrific and the comic' (Horner and Zlosnik 2005, p. 52).

The reader's approach to the interactivity between the dialogic forces and multiple voices of jokes and comedic stories in Chernobyl testimony highlights two important factors, ultimately. First, the inventive play between trauma and laughter transforms these painful memories of a historical event into a literature of affect, primarily through the aesthetics of Gothic. Gothic's hyperdramatisation of Soviet political power and its excessive psychological effects on real and imagined survivors bears witness satirically to the actual traumatic circumstances of the Chernobyl disaster. Second, the understanding of the social function of this literature as expression of, or coping with, trauma is supported by reader interpretation. For Bakhtin, language is an open and ongoing form of communication. It moves dialogically in and out of socio-ideological perspectives, literary genres and the present and past, and therefore requires an active listening ear that necessarily brings the reader's own cultural background, value judgements and interpretation to the text to generate meaning. It is up to the reader to mentally evaluate, sift, compare and settle the possibilities of testimony, to help determine the extent of its comedic value. In the Gothic, a tradition whose meaning has been historically contingent on the feedback loop of literary production and reader desire, heterogenous writing in the vein of dark comedy also opens the text to multiple interpretations, leaving the issue of how to respond to humour and other imaginative expressions of trauma in testimony as unfinished rather than closed down.

In Chapter 3, I discuss survivor communities' diasporic literary contributions to Chernobyl trauma and the historic legacy of the Soviet nuclear programme in the following two post-Soviet Gothic novels: Irene Zabytko's *The Sky Unwashed* and Hamid Ismailov's *The Dead Lake*. Through the psychoanalytic theory of cryptomimesis (Abraham and Torok 1986; Derrida 1986), I analyse the inheritance of unspeakable Soviet nuclear trauma across generations of survivors, and the symbols of parental and governmental power in which this repressed history is hermetically sealed. The political machinery erected in the aftermath of the Chernobyl explosion in *The Sky Unwashed* and around the underground Semipalatinsk facility in Soviet

Kazakhstan in *The Dead Lake* offer images of burial and inaccessible content. Following the scholarly convergence of cryptomimesis with the 'stylistic, formal, and thematic patterns and motifs' of Gothic writing (Castricano 2001, i), I explore how cryptomimetic and Gothic literary aesthetics function as psychic mechanisms of collective, unspeakable nuclear trauma.

Chapter 3

DIASPORA AND GOTHIC INHERITANCE OF THE SOVIET NUCLEAR LEGACY: *THE SKY UNWASHED* AND *THE DEAD LAKE*

Part I. The Mother's Law: Nuclear Crypts, Family Phantoms

A window just like this
is anywhere, my friend

Lyubov Sirota, *The Pripyat Syndrome: A Film Story* 2021, p. 18.

Lyubov Sirota, an ex-resident of Pripyat, composed a cycle of poems entitled *Burden* (1990) that deal not only with the traumatic legacy of Chernobyl but also that of the long-term separation from friends broken up by the evacuation. These poems articulate a traumatised diaspora of people, a shattered former community whose members return to one another as belated symptoms of compulsive reexperience. In the eponymous poem of her collection, 'Burden', the speaker exclaims:

I am not to fly!
Though the shallow edge
of heaven is over my porch.
Already the roads have tired me,
hobbled me so–
I can no longer soar!

Faces reflect in the heavens.
Faces of those
to whom I have said farewell.
Not one can be forgotten!
No oblivion!

Sirota, 'Burden', 1990 in Walker and Roffman 1992, p. 618

Her exhaustion and pareidolia capture the paradox of departure and return central to Caruthian notions traumatic memory. For Caruth and other mimetic theorists, this circularity offers an understanding of trauma as 'the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*' (Caruth 1996, p. 7); the survivor's physical distance from the traumatic event is not attended by a psychological liberation from its experience. Rather, its departure – from the space of consciousness as well as from space in geographical terms – preserves the event in a series of returns of the repressed (Caruth 1996, p. 17).

The repression of trauma can also be understood through the psychoanalytic theory of the crypt and the phantom, developed by Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok and Jacques Derrida. These psychic structures were first devised to psychoanalyse Sigmund Freud's famous 'Wolf Man' patient, Sergei Pankejeff, detailed initially in Freud's case study in *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* (1918).[1] As an expanded concept, however, crypt and phantom serve as an investigative tool for the heterotopic relations between the world and the psyche, 'the result', Nicholas Rand writes in his introduction to Abraham and Torok's volume, *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), 'of catastrophes whose fragmented remnants survive in the phenomena they engender; hence his [Abraham's] treatise on symbol is also a theory of disasters' (Rand 1994, p. 6). Rand states that:

> For Abraham and Torok, silence is an independent clinical and theoretical entity. Whether it characterises individuals, families, social groups or entire nations, silence and its varied forms—the untold or unsayable secret, the feeling unfelt, the pain denied, the unspeakable and concealed shame of families, the cover of political crimes, the collective disregard for painful historical realities—may disrupt our lives (Rand 1994, p. 21).

The two novels discussed in this chapter, *The Sky Unwashed* and *The Dead Lake*, constitute a turning 'inside out' of the heterotopic crypt and its symptomatic phantom silence, transforming psychoanalytic theories of the neurotic dysfunction of socio-mental life into a trauma literature in the Soviet Gothic style.

Dina Khapaeva asserts that 'The Soviet past is a history without memory', (Khapaeva 2009, pp. 359–360). The historical traumas resulting from Soviet

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1 For full details on Abraham and Torok's cryptomimetic reading of the Wolf Man case study, see *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (1986). Pankejeff's pseudonym is derived from his infant nightmare in which he saw five white wolves sitting in a tree outside his bedroom window.

political crimes, she argues, 'constitute an integral part of the history of three generations' (Khapaeva 2009, p. 361). Post-Soviet Gothic aesthetics in twenty-first century fiction provide an understanding of the sociopsychological mechanisms arising from this historical amnesia (Khapaeva 2009, p. 372). My chosen texts focus on the oppressive secrecy and traumatic impact of Soviet political power around atomic energy and weapons on multiple generations of affected civilians. I identify the two novels analysed in this chapter as Soviet rather than post-Soviet Gothic. Though they were written following the dissolution of communism in the USSR in 1991, their literary structures and aesthetics of haunting bear upon a Soviet narrative setting. I therefore use this category to distinguish these sorts of texts from post-Soviet Gothic ones that express horror and trauma in the combination of the regime's historical and diegetic aftermath.

Both cryptomimesis and the Gothic are concerned with transgenerational haunting, not only through the way in which the ghost gestures towards a traumatic or contested legacy, but also how this is often staged in an unintelligible or voiceless language. Inheritance as such is haunted by the testimony of another – the linguistic structures governing disclosure and that which is left unsaid or unsayable establish a Derridean politics of memory that teaches us how to learn to live with ghosts (Derrida 1995, xvii). The transgenerational, transtexual modulation of Gothic writing is authored by phantoms, that, if not always literally undead, constitute the metafictional incorporation of diffuse literary genres in the Gothic – letters, diary entries, poems and historical archives. The reader, both in and of the text, is thereby haunted by the reception of a textual legacy in self-conflict. 'To learn to live *with* ghosts', Castricano writes, 'is to rethink ourselves through the dead or, rather, through the return of the dead (in us) and thus through haunting' (Castricano 2001, p. 19). The Soviet Gothic novel, *The Sky Unwashed*, invokes the melodramatic and traumatic narrative power of Gothic intertextuality. The secretiveness and opacity inherent in its incorporated letters, peasant superstitions and repressed Soviet history determine its characters' cryptomimetic inheritance of political silence surrounding the Chernobyl disaster.

The plot of *The Sky Unwashed* presides over the run up to and aftermath of the disaster but leaves the event itself a mystery. This experience of absence creates a mnemic void in the heart of the story that invokes peasant superstitions and intergenerational memories of other Soviet traumas. In the prologue, Paraskevia, one of the *babysi* or old women of Starylis village in the Chernobyl region, reads the absence of returning storks to nest on her thatched roof in the early Spring of 1986 as an ill omen: '[s]he made the sign of the cross and expected something to happen' (From *The Sky Unwashed* by

Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 4. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.). This mirrors the accident's absent determination in another Soviet Gothic novel, written by Chernobyl evacuee Lyubov Sirota. In *The Pripyat Syndrome: A Film Story,* Alexey, a worker at the chemical department in Pripyat, reveals that many of his colleagues at the Chernobyl plant 'fores[aw] this tragedy back then. Even afterwards there was a lot more sensing and guessing than actual information'. (Sirota 2021, p. 62). After the disaster, he drives a coworker, Stepan, and his wife and daughter to Stepan's parents' house. As Stepan is saying his goodbyes to his family before the men return to Chernobyl, Alexey says: 'Suddenly his wife started weeping and screaming so violently that I felt a chill run through me'. Despite the fact that they do not disclose what they know about the reactor explosion, Stepan tells Alexey about his wife that '[h]er heart was telling her that something's wrong, understand?' Alexey comments that 'That heart-rending scream followed us for a long time. I can still hear it! I guess that's how women screamed during the war'. (Sirota 2021, pp. 62–63). Khapaeva argues that the post-Soviet Gothic novel of mental states articulates 'through the means of literature an emotional experience that lies beyond the boundaries of language' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 3) to represent traumatic returns of repressed historical trauma. The inheritance of disaster through foresight, historical trauma and voiceless manifestation engenders a Gothic aesthetics of dread and paranoia in the novels' depiction of intergenerational Chernobyl trauma.

The Sky Unwashed also deals with a mother's struggle to save her children from the catastrophe's long-term dangers. The novel focuses on female voices and motherhood, providing a counterbalance to the abundance of male liquidator testimonies of the exploded reactor and post-evacuation environment. Rand distinguishes the crypt and phantom as theories of trauma transference in the following way:

> The phantom represents the interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of silence. The concept of the crypt designates a secret psychic configuration arising from an individual's own life experiences; the idea of the phantom concerns itself with the unwitting reception of someone else's secret (Rand, in Abraham and Torok 1994, p. 168).

Family experiences of political silence around the Chernobyl disaster are enshrined in the encrypting architecture of the Soviet State. Marusia, another Starylis *babsi*, along with her daughter-in-law Zosia and grandchildren Katia and Tarasyk, are placed in a hospital basement in Kiev with other evacuees from the Chernobyl region. One day, Zosia defies the doctors' strict orders that prohibit the Chernobylites from going outside, for fear they will infect

other residents. On the way to the shops to buy provisions for her family and tickets from the train station to enable them to leave Kiev secretly, she comes across the city's annual May Day parade. This was held on 1 May 1986 in spite of the highly contaminated air, a danger unbeknownst to the majority of *Kyivlianka*.[2] In the procession, on a float carrying a floral copy of the Ukrainian SSR's Motherland or Iron Maiden Monument, Zosia sees

> a robust blond woman surrounded by her fourteen children. She had several medals pinned prominently on her huge chest. She stood as though at attention, never waving to the crowds. Her children stood silently by her, observing the people in mute contempt (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 112. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.).

This image of the heroic family enshrined arrogantly in the Soviet idolism of motherhood – 'the Iron Maiden held a sword and shield up to the sky, as though challenging God to a duel' (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 111. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.) – enshrines the nondisclosure of disaster through political performance. The family's silence and rigidity are symptomatic of the widespread denial of information and of a culture overly focused on monumentalising its past victories at the expense of tackling present traumas. The State's decision to go ahead with the May Day celebrations in spite of the radiological dangers posed by Chernobyl is represented by the vibrant attractions of the May Day celebration, such as marching bands, girls in colourful Ukrainian costumes, and ice cream vendors. This jovial veneer, in combination with the uncanny image of the family as living statues, conveys the wholesale psychic phenomenon of Soviet incorporation. As Abraham and Torok note, '*Incorporation results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such*'. In incorporation, they write, 'our refusal to mourn is prohibited from being given a language […] reduced to a radical denial of the loss, to pretending that we had absolutely nothing to lose' (Abraham and Torok 1972, p. 130).

The novel also focuses on the physical structure of the crypt as a site of political amnesia, a condition which identifies Chernobyl evacuation trauma through the manner in which repressive institutions mark painful

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2 Residents of Kiev.

stasis points on the refugee's journey and scenes of family breakup. In the Kiev hospital basement,

> [t]he windows were painted orange and locked securely shut. The basement stank of perspiration, baby diapers and foul odors from the hordes of unwashed and unhealthy people. By the fifth day, tempers flared and fights erupted because people were tired and frustrated and no one had bothered to examine them or soothe their ailments (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, pp. 98–99. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.).

The entombment of diseased Chernobyl survivors preserves the State secret of the disaster's severity. This portrayal of political repression corresponds to Derrida's poetics of the crypt, and to the aesthetics of Gothic horror through the tyranny of live burial. As Derrida contends, '[t]he inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but as dead' (Derrida 1986, xxi). The Soviet power to confine and forget about the evacuated Chernobylites reveals its sense of disgust, abjection and fear of radioactive contamination. The basement group's isolation exposes the authorities' paranoia concerning possible infection. Marusia

> knew how easy it would be to become infected by anyone in this place […] people were packed too close together. How could you avoid someone coughing on your neck or breathing on your food? She overheard people around her complaining about their stinging eyes, and sore throats, and headaches. Older people, men mostly, coughed their phlegm onto the floor, which was yet to be washed. Cigarette smoke hung heavily in the air, and they all had to leave their waste buckets that sat full and stinking for hours in the corridor before someone thought to collect them (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 101. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.).

The first responders to Chernobyl who suffered and later died from ARS fell into a deeper state of living death, lying inert on hospital beds behind plastic screens and hidden from public scrutiny in specialist radiological clinics. Zosia's husband Yurko, a firefighter who helped tackle the fire at Reactor Four, is abandoned on a separate floor in the same hospital as the rest of his family: 'Though the doctors had promised to send him to a better hospital in Moscow, in fact they had simply let him waste away in his starched bed, his skin

patched and crusty like dried brown leaves as his body neared death' (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 131. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.). This description echoes the Gothic aesthetics of the irradiated body as a coloured, decaying object in Lyudmilla Ignatenko's testimony. Yurko is a victim of political silence, to the extent that even some of the hospital staff do not know of his true condition. On a visit to see her husband, Zosia is asked by a nurse: '"You the wife?" […] She [the nurse] was new. Zosia had never seen her before. She probably wasn't even aware that Yurko was contaminated from the zone' (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 120. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.). Yurko's institutional encryption as a State secret compounds the repression of conversation among family members. Official nondisclosure surrounding the disaster, conflated with longstanding social restraint, has bred endemic non-communicativeness: 'The nurse kept clicking her tongue like the old women in Starylis did whenever they disapproved of something but were too guarded to give voice to their resentment' (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 121. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.). Zosia, disallowed a full understanding of her husband's illness and aware of the cooling of their married relations, glosses over her plans to leave Kiev with their children for the less contaminated city of Moscow: 'She tried to keep her voice low and calm. "Mama [her mother-in-law, Marusia] agrees this is the best thing. It's bad in Kyiv for the children. They'll get sick"' (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 121. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.). Her dialogues with Yurko are riddled with gaps of nonexpression. Due to his confinement, inability to speak at length and uncertain prognosis, 'she wasn't sure whether to tell him anything of her plan to leave that night. There didn't seem to be any reason to tell him anything' (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 120. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.). All she explains is that the children's illnesses are 'maybe not like what you have. But it's better if we leave Kyiv. Your mother will stay here with you. Then we'll all come back home to Starylis'. Then

> He pointed a finger at her. "You too?" "Yes! I always come back." He didn't answer her […] "Not me," Yurko whispered. "This time, I am leaving you." "Yes, you too," Zosia said. "You'll come back!" His throat gurgled a laugh. Liar, it mocked her (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 122. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.).

Unbeknownst to her daughter-in-law, Marusia dies after returning to Starylis following Yurko's death. Upon leaving Kiev for Moscow in 1989, Zosia and Katia compose a letter together with the aim of getting back in touch with Marusia and informing her of their plans to emigrate to Georgia. Zosia reads out the completed letter to her daughter, 'who listened as intently as though it were a story': '*I'm hoping that by some miracle you get this letter—our last before we leave Moscow. We've had a rough time, and Tarasyk is very sick, so we are going to a sanatorium in Georgia*' (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 259. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.). Zosia reads the next paragraph of the letter in silence, so as not to upset or worry Katia:

> *I contacted the hospital in Kyiv about Yurko. First, they told me he was transferred to Moscow. I searched everywhere and later was told that he's not alive. But there's no official record about his death. So, please tell me what really happened after we left you at the hospital and if he is still alive or not* (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 259. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.).

The iterability of Gothic writing, the manner in which its characters read textual fragments such as letters, poems and epigraphs, signs the contract with the dead 'in us'. Yurko and Marusia's unspeakable deaths are lodged via Zosia's citation and repetition in the unconscious crypt of her letter, a communication with the dead without reading it as such. Where the evacuees and firefighters of Chernobyl were encrypted at the sociopolitical level, this family exchange marks an inheritance of the secret dead, an inside marked by quotation. As Castricano reminds us, 'In Derrida's work, the word "crypt" should always be thought of as being put between quotation marks, which remind us of "teeth" and, therefore, of decomposition, assimilation, and especially, incorporation' (Castricano 2001, p. 34). This literary consumption of the dead results in transgenerational haunting, where Marusia's ghost as a crypt-effect of Gothic's mise en abyme takes up residence within Zosia's psyche. Abraham states that 'what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others' (Abraham 1975, p. 171). As the plane taking Zosia, Katia and Tarasyk to Tbilisi climbs into the sky, Zosia

> looked out of the tiny porthole window to catch a final glimpse of the diminishing fir trees shrouded in mist. "See, children," she said. "This is how God looks down on the world when He's in heaven." Zosia was

> surprised to her herself utter such an odd thing. She knew that no one heard her in the noisy cabin, and she realized it was what Marusia would have said (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, p. 262. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.).

Zosia's recognition of her statement as uncanny and lacking in audibility identifies the legacy of the phantom, which 'works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography' (Abraham 1975, p. 173). Atheist Zosia inherits her mother-in-law's voice and religious worldview, a possession of the subject by a return that occurs at the point of departure. The Derridean iterability of language 'must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee' (Derrida 1982, pp. 315–316). Zosia comes back (to the dead) after all; speech from beyond the grave doubly marks her as a departed subject. The communicability and silence of the voice, spoken aloud but unheard in the airplane, enacts a break or death in presence. Through emigration, Zosia survives her encounter with Chernobyl and its dead, yet their continued expression anticipates her own passing – 'the possibility of the death of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark' of the other's speech (Derrida 1982, p. 316). This undermining of unified selfhood that is central to Derridean deconstruction – for the word departure, Castricano reminds us, has its roots in the Latin *dispertire*, meaning to divide – reveals the Gothic nature of a language haunted by the speaker's encryption of the dead. The doubleness of Derrida's phrase 'departed is the subject' in 'Cartouches' (Derrida 1990, p. 190) applies to Zosia's experience at the conclusion of *The Sky Unwashed*. Her identity becomes a phantom structure, bound up in conversing and thereby living with the dead, a subjectivity 'necessarily marked by departure, by leave-taking, and by death' (Castricano 2001, p. 41).

The novel also reflects Abraham and Torok's view of the phantom's embodiment of entire national or united nation States. Rand states that 'a phantom can help account for the periodic return of political ideologies rendered shameful with the military defeat of their proponents' (Rand, in Abraham and Torok 1994, p. 169). Political shame also determines Zosia's incorporation of Marusia. Before her emigration to Georgia, Zosia agrees to give an interview with a British journalist in Moscow about her experience of Chernobyl:

> "Yes, Marusia—is it?" the journalist said. How very odd it felt to be called by her mother-in-law's old fashioned name. "Marusia, please tell

> me, what exactly happened to your husband?" Zosia hadn't given the Westerner her real identity. Before, back in the Brezhnev days, anyone could get arrested for even giving lost tourists directions to their hotel. Things had lightened up after Chornobyl, and Gorbachev was allowing a new openness—*glasnost*—after the world had criticized the Soviets for trying to hide the disaster. But Zosia did not trust this "openness" anymore [sic] than she did the lying, thieving bureaucrats who kept promising her they would locate her husband, or after slowly poisoning them, give her compensation money and a new home for herself and her children (From *The Sky Unwashed* by Zabytko, Irene, copyright © 2000, pp. 255–256. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.).

Zosia's assumption of Marusia's name in this exchange induces the return of the phantom in the midst of her ego, hidden in plain sight. Though she cannot register her absent mother-in-law as a traumatic loss, her name resonates within the uncanny. Zosia's adoption of Marusia's name is at once a practical defence against fears of resurgent political oppression and a psychic phenomenon triggered by her identification in the interview with the identity of the phantom. The phantom's intergenerational, 'radically heterogenous nature' (Abraham 1975, p. 174), represented by Marusia's unacknowledged death, eludes the subject's unconscious, having been 'pre-repressed' by parental or institutional denial, and lodges itself in a crypt in the individual's ego instead. This sociopsychic action allows for a compromise between mimetic and antimimetic Chernobyl traumatic memory in this example of Soviet Gothic fiction. Zosia is able to tell her story to the journalist, yet some portion of her testimony, namely the fate of her husband, always remains beyond the possibility of recollection. The Soviet oppressors' power remains at large. The phantom thus operates through a network of crypts that span interrelated psychic zones, across families and massive institutional structures such as the USSR. Abraham and Torok recognise the connection between the subject's possession by the phantom and the preoccupation of that individual by political terror: 'When people say "I," they might in fact be referring to something quite different from their own identity as recorded in their identification papers' (Torok 1975, p. 179). The citizen's social relations in the totalitarian State, then, are phantomised through their inheritance of institutional silence that persists even after the dissolution of the regime in question. *The Sky Unwashed* dramatises the incorporation of secrets at the domestic and international level through a Gothic poststructuralism of repetition in haunting iterability and political excess of fear, abjection and incarceration.

Part II. The Shaken Body: Somatic Trauma in *The Dead Lake*

In this section, I explore the psychosomatic effects of the phantom on the indigenous peoples of Kazakhstan in Hamid Ismailov's novel, *The Dead Lake*. Set on the Kazakhstani Steppes during the Soviet nuclear bomb tests at the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site (SNTS) contemporary to Chernobyl's timeline, the novel conflates political silence and personal trauma in a way that is crucial for understanding intergenerational haunting within the Soviet Gothic. It can also be considered as part of the Soviet literary diaspora in the sense that Ismailov, a Kazakh who moved to Uzbekistan as a young man, was forced to flee to the UK in 1994 due to his 'unacceptable democratic tendencies' ('Author', *The Dead Lake* 2014, p. 2).

In the novel, the effects of atomic weapons tests carried out at the SNTS are felt by the inhabitants of the nearby Kara-Shagan, a way station of the East Kazakhstan Railway on the Great Steppe. Yerzhan, the novel's young protagonist, has no knowledge of the nuclear explosions. For him, 'the joy of the steppe, the joy of music and the joy of childhood always coexisted […] with the anticipation of that inescapable, terrible, abominable thing that came as a rumbling and a trembling, and then a swirling, sweeping tornado from the Zone', the mountainous region surrounding the test site (Ismailov 2014, p. 46). Of the 468 explosions that were carried out between the facility's operation between 1949 and 1989, 343 of them occurred underground, terraforming and irradiating the surrounding landscape into a strange and dangerous geography (Kassenova 2009). A cryptic formation attends this history. The literally buried secrets of the Soviet Union constituted by the tests establish a silence within local consciousness. The unnatural landscape of artificial craters and lakes becomes a psychic tomb and mental topography embodying this silence and one which, following Rand, Abraham and Torok, is tied to the symptomlike genesis of Yerzhan's being. On his birth certificate, 'The column for "Father" […] had remained blank, except for a thin stroke of the pen, and the only entry, under "Mother", was for Kanyshat, Daulet's daughter, who also lived at the way station' (Ismailov 2014, p. 15). As an infant, Yerzhan is taken out onto the steppe on horseback by his grandfather, Daulet:

> They galloped as far as a gully with sparse hills scattered beyond it. "This is where we found you […]" the old man said. And there beyond the gully with the noisy spring river at its bottom, on the far side of the wooden suspension bridge, barbed wire extended right across the steppe. Grandad reined in his exhausted steed and waved towards the fence with his whip. "The Zone!" he exclaimed. And at that moment a

> fly started buzzing in the boy's ear, a gadfly, the kind that circled above their cows on lazy days – a gadfly that became the droning word: Zone […] And the word began buzzing around in the child's imagination (Ismailov 2014, p. 21).

The word Zone as a cryptonym for the mystery of Yerzhan's founding identity links to a repressed sexual trauma of the prior generation: his mother's rape by his uncle Shaken, who worked as a watchman in the Zone. The novel elaborates on this event, which takes the form of a mythical tale told to Yerzhan by his maternal grandmother:

> All that Yerzhan knew – from what Granny Ulbarsyn told him – was that at the age of sixteen Kanyshat had run off into the steppe after her silk scarf, which had blown off. The steppe wind lured her on, further and deeper, as if teasing her, on and on towards the sunset. And what happened after that was so fantastic that Yerzhan couldn't make any sense of it. The sun was already sinking when suddenly it soared back up into the sky, glowing brightly. A tremor ran through the earth from the horizon. A whistling wind sprang up out of nowhere, then faded away for an instant, only to reverse its direction with a mighty rush so sudden that the dust of the steppe swirled up to the heavens in a black, hurtling tornado. And when Kanyshat, more dead than alive, discovered that she was at the bottom of a gully, there standing over her scratched and bloody body was a creature who looked like an alien from another planet, wearing a space suit (Ismailov 2014, pp. 16–17).

Kanyshat's incomprehensible experience is displaced onto the landscape and becomes 'the thing "phantomized" during the preceding generation, "phantomized" because it was unspeakable in words, because it had to be wrapped in silence' (Abraham 1994, p. 189). We are told that 'Since that day, Kanyshat hadn't spoken a word' (Ismailov 2014, p. 17). The Zone as a cryptic symbol of Kanyshat's rape is transferred to the child, manifesting itself in her son's neuroses. One day, in the playground of Yerzhan's school, the pupils

> were handed gas masks and chased after each other like aliens. But sadly the fun didn't last long. Because suddenly a real alien in a big rubber suit broke into their group. And everyone froze. He made a beeline for Aisulu [Yerzhan's childhood sweetheart]. He grabbed her with his claw gloves. She screamed. And she screamed so loud that even through her gas mask and his gas mask Yerzhan could hear her cry for help. He ran towards her. But before he had reached them, the alien let go of Aisulu

> and lifted his helmet. It was Uncle Shaken, laughing out loud. Aisulu immediately joined in with her father's laughter. Only Yerzhan looked at him horrified. A strange tremble seized him from inside (Ismailov 2014, p. 65).

This scene returns the repressed history of Shaken's rape of Kanyshat by restaging its phantom in the social realm of the second generation. Traumatic symptoms of this violation – the internal tremor, the image of a hazmat-besuited father disguised first as an alien and then as an uncle – haunt Yerzhan. The phantom's imbrication in the Gothic melodrama of the heroine's screaming and laughter designates the site of obscured family relations. The Zone and its trembling effects, captured in the cryptonym of the surname Shaken, create a psychically mute zone in Yerzhan – an intergenerational symptom of Kanyshat's literal mutism. Though '[n]ot much troubled Yerzhan in those days […] [t]here were of course the explosions in the Zone, which the boy never called by their proper name out of visceral fear' (Ismailov 2014, p. 50). The Zone's function as Gothic affect derives from the interplay between 'horror and fairy tales within a largely psychological or psychoanalytical framework' that does not view the Gothic literary genre as merely constituent of earlier folkloric traditions (Farrar 2023, p. 430). A curse emerges from the Zone's supernatural properties and negative affect, a punishment for Yerzhan's unwitting transgression into incestual relations. He and Aisulu are half-brother and sister – Aisulu's mother, Baichichek, is Shaken's wife. The young siblings' familial relationship, a fact unbeknownst to the children, preserves in silence the adulterous trauma of the previous generation. One day, Shaken takes the schoolchildren on a field trip into the Zone, to the shores of the Dead Lake:

> Towards evening Uncle Shaken took the children to the Dead Lake. 'Don't drink the water and do not touch it,' he told them. It was a beautiful lake that had formed after the explosion of an atomic bomb. A fairy-tale lake, right there in the middle of the flat, level steppe, a stretch of emerald-green water, reflecting the rare stray cloud. No movement, no waves, no ripples, no trembling – a bottle-green, glassy surface with only cautious reflections of the boys' and girls' faces as they peeped at its bottom by the shore. Could there possibly be some fairy-tale fish or monster of the deep to be found in this static, dense water? (Ismailov 2014, p. 65).

The unnaturally still lake functions as a psychic mirror of Yerzhan's unacknowledgeable secret; 'he saw his long shadow reflected on the water's

surface' (Ismailov 2014, p. 66). The bus driver calling Uncle Shaken to help him with a punctured tire leaves Yerzhan in charge of the class, upon which the youth walks calmly into the forbidden water to impress Aisulu and his other classmates. Though this endeavour is successful, his transgression of the paternal law prohibiting bodily contact with the lake ('don't drink the water and do not touch it' [Ismailov 2014, p. 65]) unleashes the sins of the father upon him in the form of a psychosomatic phantom. The water halts his physical growth:

> And *it* happened when Yerzhan was twelve years old and Aisulu was eleven. It was in the fifth class at school, after the long winter holidays. First the girls and then the boys in their class started to outgrow Yerzhan. But, after all, he was a year older than them, and he had always been taller and stronger. At first the difference wasn't very noticeable: so what if Serik or Berik had stretched out a bit, that didn't make them any brighter! But when Aisulu, his little mite Sulu, his slim-winged swallow Sulu, started overtaking Yerzhan, he sensed that something was wrong. The same fear that had always begun with a trembling in his knees and frozen as a heavy ache in his stomach seemed to have risen higher now, right up to his throat – and got stuck there, preventing his body from growing (Ismailov 2014, p. 71)

Yerzhan's trembling syndrome advances up his body to reach the anatomical site of his vocal cords, constituting an impediment to his voicing of the phantomatic inheritance of Kanyshat's muteness. His condition cannot be reversed, because, as Abraham reminds us, to exorcise the phantom, '*one must express it in words*' (Abraham 1994, p. 188). The ailment that has settled upon Yerzhan's body is psychological rather than physical. The community fail to resume his growth through their various attempts: 'one [person] took him to a quack medicine woman, another quartered him alive with horses, and as for the one who was educated – he couldn't do anything either, even with an X-ray and a reactor!' (Ismailov 2014, p. 79). This excessive treatment by folkloric practice, methods of medieval torture and applications of nuclear technology overlooks the seemingly supernatural cause of Yerzhan's trauma. The failure of an X-ray and reactor in this abortive regimen suggests that the lake's radioactive properties alone are not responsible for triggering his affliction. The cause, therefore, lies more in alignment with the fairy story's narrative trope of evil enchantment.

Yerzhan's anxiety manifests through his concerns about the increasing height disparity between him and his peers and his emotional distance from the world. It also demonstrates the adolescent fear of sexual impotence.

His body shame keeps him from conducting his usual daily routine of accompanying Aisulu to school by donkey. In his stead, his uncle Kepek travels with her, which incites Yerzhan's jealousy. When Kepek returns Aisulu from school one day, Yerzhan notices that 'she sat in front of him instead of behind, so that his arms were around her youthful body as he was holding the reins'. 'Yerzhan didn't greet them. And at night he burnt, not in an imaginary blaze but in the genuine infernal fever of his own boyish hell' (Ismailov 2014, 74, p. 75).

Yerzhan resorts to mythological origin tracing to shed light on his traumatic history. He remembers the story about the rulers of the ancient Steppe Kingdom, told to him as an infant by his grandmother Sholpan, who adapted it into a version of his conception and birth:

> "Gesar came down to earth as a frightful, snotty-nosed little scamp like you! […] Only his uncle, Kara-Choton – the same kind of uncle as Kepek is to you – learnt that Gesar wasn't just an ordinary little boy, but heaven-born, and he started to bully his nephew in order to destroy him before he grew up. But [the god] Tengri[3] always saved Gesar from Kara-Choton's wicked tricks. When Gesar turned twelve, Tengri sent him the fleetest steed on earth, and Gesar won the famous horse race to marry the beautiful Urma-sulu and conquered the throne of the steppe kingdom. […] The bold Gesar did not enjoy his happiness and peace for long. A terrible demon, the cannibal Lubsan, attacked his country from the north. But Lubsan's wife, Tumen Djergalan, fell in love with Gesar and revealed her husband's secret to him. Gesar used the secret and killed Lubsan. Tumen Djergalan didn't waste any time and gave

3 Tengri is the central deity worshipped by the ruling class of the Central Asian Steppe peoples between the sixth and ninth centuries. Tengri grants these rulers their heavenly mandate in the form of a spirit known as the *kut*. See Yazar András Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: An Introduction to Early Hungarian History* (Yayıncı Central European University Press, 1999). In *The Dead Lake*, when Granny Ulbarsyn explains to the child Yerzhan what a *kut* is, '[h]e was surprised by the similarity of this word to the [Kazak] word for "backside" – *kyot*'. She says that the *kut* fell from Tengri's sacred tree in the ninth heaven into Kanyshat's stomach 'and in her womb it took the form of a little red worm […]' (Ismailov 2014, p. 18). During the imparting of this information, Ulbarsyn scratched Yerzhan's anus, 'which itched with little squirming worms'. After hearing the story about the little red worm, he asks: 'is it him you're scratching out of my backside?' (Ismailov pp. 17–18). The allosemes of *kut* and *kyot* identify the Kara-Shagan community's unconscious desire for the removal or exposure of phantom knowledge from Yerzhan's body concerning his origin.

> Gesar a draught of forgetfulness to drink in order to bind him to her forever. Gesar drank the draught, forgot about his beloved Urmai-sulu and stayed with Tumen Djeralan. Meanwhile, in the steppe kingdom, a rebellion arose and Kara-Choton forced Urmai-Sulu to marry him. But Tengri did not desert Gesar and freed him of the enchantment on the very shore of the Dead Lake, where Gesar saw the reflection of his own magical steed. He returned on this steed home to the steppe kingdom and killed Kara-Choton, freeing his Urmai-sulu…" (Ismailov 2014, pp. 18–19).

This legend bears Yerzhan's history insofar as it enables him to identify the usurper who has taken his Aisulu: Uncle Kepek. Thus, 'he of course knew who the Kara-Choton in his life was – Kepek' (Ismailov 2014, p. 91). Reading Granny Sholpan's tale enables him to speculate on possible real events and bodily sensations which have until this point remained unspoken; he 'was convinced that this story […] was about him. He had to solve the mystery that had sunk its claws into his body and soul' (Ismailov 2014, p. 91). For Abraham, 'myths are efficient ways of speaking by means of which some situation or other comes about and is maintained'. He elaborates: 'If they provide food for understanding, they do so much less by what they say than by what they do not say, by their blanks, their limitations, their disguises' (Abraham 1994, p. 94). Yerzhan configures the legend to interpret his situation, substituting its gaps and characters with his own family history. In his mind, the narrative refers to the absorbed liquid draught of the Dead Lake through which he lost Aisulu's love, the subsequent rebellion against him by Kepek, and 'the terrible demon Lubsan' who attacked the steppe kingdom from the north, which happens to be the direction of the test site from Kara-Shagan. Obsessing over the tale, 'Yerzhan rarely slept at night now, and it wasn't as if he caught up during the day – no, sleep simply wouldn't come to his eyes. He tossed and turned from one side to the other, caught in the same circle of burdensome thoughts that were impossible either to control or to accept' (Ismailov 2014, p. 90). As Yerzhan tosses and turns in the liminal space between sleep and wakefulness, his trauma, with the interpretative aid of the tale, crosses from unconsciousness to consciousness and identifies itself at once as the origin of his trauma and the trauma of his origin. It appears to him in the following outburst:

> "The Zone! The Zone! That's the terrible demon Lubsan." He suddenly sat up straight in bed. The Zone had taken him captive, the Zone had given him the draught of forgetfulness to drink, and until he reached the Dead Lake – the same Dead Lake in which he had once bathed – he

> would never be freed from this enchantment. Didn't the story say that there, by the Dead Lake, Tengri would free him of the enchantment and show him his own reflection and the reflection of the magical steed on which he had galloped throughout his childhood? (Ismailov 2014, pp. 91–92).

Granny Sholpan's tale identifies a mythical topography and draws up a suspect list of the trauma's possible perpetrators or co-symbols: 'Grandad Daulet? But his wife was Granny Ulbarsyn. She couldn't possibly be in love with Yerzhan. And Petko didn't fit either, because he didn't have any wife at all. Uncle Shaken? Could Baichichek be Tumen Djergalan?' (Ismailov 2014, p. 91).

For Derrida, the crypt – portrayed in *The Dead Lake* by the terrible demon Lubsan – is identified as such by the word 'Fors', which is the title of his foreword to Abraham and Torok's book, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy* (1986). *Fors* (derivative of the Latin *Foris*, meaning 'outside, outdoors' and, as a plural of 'for') 'designates the inner heart, "the tribunal of conscience", subjective interiority' (Johnson xi–xii, in Derrida 1986). Zoltán Dragon suggests that *Fors* 'thus may mean both exteriority and interiority at the very same time', 'an impossible place in the possible space, invisible in the visible' (Dragon 2005, 259, p. 261). For Yerzhan, the Zone is spatially problematic (Johnson xii), simultaneously outdoors and locked within the psyche, and an environment of nature nonetheless shaped by man-made forces. It is the result of an intergenerational trauma's incorporation, which Yerzhan inherits as a phantom because it was pre-repressed by Kara-Shagan's parental community. The Zone as a crypt, then, marks 'a definite place in the topography. It is neither the dynamic unconscious nor the ego of introjections. Rather, it is an enclave between the two, a kind of artificial unconscious, lodged in the very midst of the ego' (Abraham and Torok 1971, p. 159).

The phantom's linguistic turn obscures itself within co-symbols, one of which must be selected and spoken. 'For Abraham', Dragon writes,

> an analyst is given only symbols, not meanings: data that lack a missing part that "can be determined." The aim of analysis is to restore the symbol's unity [between psychic space and physical place, between trauma and its site of occurrence, between victim and perpetrator], thus overcoming the separation, and making it possible for the patient to heal through speaking (Dragon 2005, p. 258).

Yerzhan's quest, as both analyst and analysand, takes him into the silent, artificial space of the Zone so he can name the symbol's missing part: the

co-symbol that is the perpetrator of the intergenerational trauma. If successful, he will exorcise the silent phantom from his body, heal himself of his growth affliction and regain Aisulu.

> Perhaps his unspeaking mother, Kanyshat, held the key to the mystery that controlled his life and body. Perhaps he shouldn't search for any Dead Lake. Perhaps he should free his mother from her enchantment? Perhaps if words could leave her mouth, then the spell would fall away from his puny body? And the steed of his childhood would gallop once again to rescue his Aisulu (Ismailov 2014, p. 93).

Yerzhan is unsure if he should search the Zone's physical landscape or attempt to break his mother's silence. His indecision reveals how the phantom is obfuscated through topographical and linguistic uncertainty. In which geographical or verbal formation does it hide? The phantom's crypt 'must be guarded in order to go unnoticed and thus undisturbed', while the phantom 'produces fake traces in order to ward off any attempt at the disclosure of the crypt' (Dragon 2005, p. 264). Granny Sholpan's tale produces these fake traces; it can be read as a faulty map of the crypt, filled with fictional names that lead potentially to false incrimination. The Zone also leads Yerzhan by diversion and misdirection. He enters the Zone on horseback; it was 'so quiet it set his ears ringing […] like his mother's eternal silence' (Ismailov 2014, p. 93). On his way to the Dead Lake, he sees

> a solitary dog or fox or wolf. The galloping horse drew closer. A wolf. Yerzhan didn't slow Aigyr [his horse]. He pulled out Grandad's shotgun from under the saddle girth at full speed and, without bothering to aim, just to frighten the creature, fired into the air with one barrel. The wolf flew off in the same direction as Aigyr and Yerzhan. And once again Yerzhan found himself in pursuit of a wolf, like so many years ago with Aisulu on the donkey (Ismailov 2014, p. 96).

This series of events recalls a memory in which Yerzhan and Aisulu encountered a wolf while riding the donkey on their way to music lessons at Petko's trailer. These two encounters reflect an even earlier memory of Yerzhan's: hunting a fox on the Steppe when he was a young boy, accompanied by Petko, Uncle Shaken and their dog, Kapty. The similar movements of these discrete creatures preserve the scenes' resemblance to one other. In each instance the pursued vulpine turns and runs away from the pursuer as if to (mis)lead them, and in each the beast vanishes as if it were an illusion. In the latest encounter,

> Fervent Aigyr strove even harder, forcing on the incessant movement of his hooves. Then all of a sudden the wolf disappeared into the ground. What was it? A mirage that had sprung from the boy's overheated and inflamed imagination? Salt, glittering in the bright Autumn sun? A stretch of stagnant water, lying here since the summer? The shore of the Dead Lake? (Ismailov 2014, p. 96)

The phantom haunting Yerzhan manifests itself as a false co-symbol within fake crypt walls: traces of mirage-like geographical formations (with)holding a misidentified or imagined figure. For Yerzhan, as for Sigmund Freud in his case study of the Wolf Man, the wolf acts as a phantasmic incrimination of the wrongly accused: the wolf image initially frames the Wolf Man's sister and then his parents' maid Grusha as perpetrator, obscuring his father's *coitus a tergo* with his mother as the supposedly authentic cause of his traumatic neuroses. In *The Dead Lake*, the wolf spectre deceptively casts Uncle Kepek as Yerzhan's father in a fake repetition of the primal scene, protecting the true progenitor, Shaken, from accusation, just as a phantom ought to:

> And suddenly he [Yerzhan] saw what he had been afraid of seeing all his life. Down below among the sand and stones of the dried-up riverbed Aisulu lay stretched out, with Kara-Choton – the loathsome Kepek – leaning down towards her over and over again. Yerzhan reined in the horse and dismounted and grabbed Grandad's shotgun with both hands. […] He took aim and fired the remaining cartridge. The fear that had lurked within him all his life suddenly stirred, brushing past his stomach, flying up to his throat and bursting out in a frenetic, childish scream. Kepek collapsed onto Aisulu like a limp sack. Yerzhan dashed forward, watching with utter horror as a strip of gauze, as bright red with his uncle's blood as a streak of sunset, fell out of Kepek's hands on to Aisulu's white leg, which was left only half-bandaged. Aisulu had broken her leg looking for Yerzhan (Ismailov 2014, p. 99).

The silence of this scene is literally deathly – both the Zone symbol and its co-symbol, Kepek, are silent. Yerzhan identifies the wrong man in a harmless and misinterpreted scene. The somatic phantom cannot be spoken intelligibly; it manifests itself only as a wordless scream and therefore resists exorcism. As Dragon says regarding the phantom's elusiveness, 'What appears, thus, is a mere display created in order to hide something more effectively. In other words, the phantom does not return *in the form of uncanny apparitions*, but it returns *to form uncanny apparitions*' (Dragon 2005, p. 266). The scene unfolded before Yerzhan is not a return of the phantom's traumatic

inauguration – a repetition of the mother's rape by the father involving the substitute half-sister – but its return as a fake trace that obscures the knowledge of its true origin.

In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida explores the ethics of living and conversing with phantoms. For Derrida, the spectre represents not only the communism that, seemingly vanquished in 1991 with the collapse of the USSR, continues to haunt Europe. It also embodies the trauma and mourning of personal losses, the dialogue between the self and the absent other therein, and thus the self's conversation with itself: 'The specter is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects – an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see' (Derrida 1995, pp. 100–101). He suggests therefore that we 'should learn not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself' (Derrida 1995, p. 221).

Yerzhan's phantom cannot be voiced at its fake scene in the Zone. He gives up searching for the Dead Lake and returns to his silent mother to talk to her, to attempt to give back her power of speech:

> Immediately the fear lurking in Yerzhan's ankles moved upwards along its usual path to his stomach, paused there as a cold, heavy weight and then slowly crept on up to his throat, and, after choking him for a moment, reached his lips, emerging as something that was neither a whisper, nor a wheeze, nor a convulsion: Is he [Shaken] my father?' A faint rumbling ran across the floor, the room started trembling and his mother carried on sitting on the windowsill in the way that she had been sitting, doing nothing for the first time in her life, merely gazing out of the window towards yet another train or yet another explosion (Ismailov 2014, p. 117).

In his mother's unlifted silence, Yerzhan speaks only to himself – to his phantom identity, the other in himself. It appears, as if to confirm his biological father and true co-symbol of his trauma, Shaken, in the somatic trembling that travels through Yerzhan's ankles, stomach, throat and lips. It emerges in alien enunciation, a nameless, unidentifiable other voice rather than as recognisably human speech ('neither a whisper, nor a wheeze, nor a convulsion'). The landscape of the Zone, as a cryptic recess of Yerzhan's mind, reverberates within his social world. It invokes not only his own intergenerational phantom but also the larger spectre of Soviet-Kazakh nuclear trauma in which it is enmeshed. This collective, other voice, then, the multi-encrypted or networked phantom, announces its own exorcism in a manner that echoes Abraham's

notion of the spectre's enunciation through ventriloquism (Abraham 1994, p. 173). Where once it possessed the body through somatic symbols – as the frightening image of Shaken in his hazmat suit or Yerzhan's halted physical growth – its belated exorcism as emergence is situated at the boundaries of the body and between bodies, and of the social world in which they are involved. In this scheme, the spectre only speaks or passes through the spectator, the witness who takes no part in conscious articulation of traumatic memory yet in whom the painful secret has long resided.

The Dead Lake represents a fusion of Soviet Gothic affect and indigenous folk narrative. Carina Hart discusses the literary–cultural overlap of Gothic and folklore, in which one's influence on another 'is not unidirectional or historically limited' (Hart 2020, p. 1). Indeed, Ismailov's novel builds upon a divergent Gothic in which the West European traditions of fairytales – 'perilous journeys through labyrinthine castles, forbidding forests, and inaccessible mountains' (Hart 2020, p. 2) – are adapted to the Soviet nuclear age's haunted landscapes of explosion-terraformed mountains, supernaturally imbued, irradiated lakes and Khazhak culture. *The Dead Lake* updates this folk narrative form, reframing the mythology of the pre-communist, Steppe Kingdom through a Gothic psychology of fear, taboo desire, monstrosity and trauma. Like its British and German forebears in the late-eighteenth century, Ismailov's twenty-first century use of Gothic 'also help[s] shape the way folk narratives have been collected, written and presented' (Hart 2020, p. 2). His literary contribution represents a hybrid history of Soviet and pre-communist folk culture, intensifying the foreboding supernaturalism of the fairy story with the intense emotional darkness of the Gothic and refashioning the Khazhak tale of Gesar into a story of nuclear trauma.

Chapter 4

ETHICAL APPROACHES TO CHERNOBYL MEMORY: GLOBAL LITERARY PERSPECTIVES FROM *HEAVY WATER: A POEM FOR CHERNOBYL* AND *SPRINGTIME IN CHERNOBYL*

Part I. Necropolitics and Impossible Mourning in *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*

> Take our words. Enrich them.
> They are already active – but enrich them
>
> (Mario Petrucci 'Envoy', *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, 2004, p. 96).

Gothic death is an important study of the social mechanisms and literary representations of the dying, the dead and the institutional powers that govern their relationship to the State. This chapter marks the transition from testimony and trauma fiction by the diasporic Chernobyl survivor community to global literary perspectives that reframe the nuclear disaster and its victims through a set of recognisable, European Gothic conventions. Carol Margaret Davison examines the Gothic 'in relation to death, dying, mourning and memorialization – especially in its symbolic negotiations toward a new social contract between the living and the dead' (Davison 2020, p. 277). She reads Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019) – the necropower of slave economies that determine 'the production and management of dead bodies [...] in colonial geopolitical spaces' (Davison 2023, p. 257) – to analyse the British nineteenth century Gothic, with a specific focus on the post-Enlightenment anatomical sciences and the Victorian workhouse. For Davison, necropolitics in the Gothic seeks to understand the close cultural proximity between the living and the dead in an age of Graveyard Poetry, Elegy, Gothic melodrama and medical advancement, while exploring the sociopolitical management of the body marked for death by the legal machinery of the 1832 Anatomy Act

and 1834 New Poor Law. Davison shows how entrapment of the able-bodied poor in workhouses and transaction of unclaimed corpses for anatomical dissection and study expose the necropolitical power at the heart of the British government. In her analyses, this systemic abuse is reflected in the era's Gothic language and fiction.

The Gothicisation of Mbembe's necropolitics can also be adapted to read the Soviet State's treatment of Chernobyl victims and survivors. 'In keeping with the dictates of necropolitics and necropower', Davison argues, 'bodies are readily subjugated and managed – disposed of and commodified' in the exercise of political authoritarianism (Davison 2023, p. 268). The interdisciplinary field of thanatology studies, which combines sociological research and literary study, draws together testimonial accounts of real-life atrocities or collective social traumas suffused with necropoetics – a spectral imagery of the elegiac, the uncanny, the undead and the abject (Davison 2020, p. 277). After Chernobyl, eyewitnesses remarked how they were informed by hospital staff that their irradiated loved ones were not people but radioactive objects that no longer belonged to their families but to the State (Ignatenko 2006, p. 19). This enforcement of ownership and control over the dead raises a necropolitical 'Death Question', 'addressing death, dying, mourning, and memorialization […] that spans both sides of the grave' (Davison 2023, p. 260). The radioactivity of the deceased transforms them into a State object managed entirely by the Soviet government. For the funeral of Ignatenko's firefighter husband, Vasily, the morgue staff

> dressed him up in formal wear, with his service cap. They couldn't get shoes on him because his feet had swelled up. They had to cut up the formal wear too, because they couldn't get it on him, there wasn't a whole body to put it on. It was all—wounds (Ignatenko 2006, p. 19).

The descriptive presentation of the disfigured, irradiated body in ill-fitting burial garments exposes a Soviet necropolitics. Ignatenko asks her mother: '"Why are they hiding my husband? He's—what? A murderer? A criminal?" […] They covered him with earth in a minute "Faster! Faster!" The officer was yelling. They didn't even let me hug the coffin. And—onto the bus. Everything on the sly' (Ignatenko 2006, p. 20). This paranoid contract between the living and dead maps out a funerary spatialisation motivated by government fears concerning the spread of radiation and the knowledge pertaining to it at the expense of the natural mourning process.

In *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, Soviet necropolitics operate in concert with the necropoetics of the English Elegy. The elegy cycle's British-Italian author, Mario Petrucci, combines his experience as a poet and physicist to

suggest how ‘one way or another, we were all infected by Chernobyl’ (Petrucci 2006, p. 254). His creative fusion of ‘poetry and ecology/science/war’ establishes a Gothic collective selfhood capable of fragility and suffering but also of social transformation through empathy and knowledge. The poems posit Chernobyl as an anxious potential for the transmissibility of sorrow – ‘demonstrat[ing] the supremacy of negative imagination’ – or as opportunity to ‘meet [the disaster] with wisdom and growth’ (Petrucci 2006, p. 260). Petrucci’s poetics align with the Gothic’s necropower, a ‘politics between bodies – dead, living, uncanny, spectral, and living-dead’ (Davison 2023, p. 261). Indeed, the poet invokes the ‘physically corruptible body’ (Davison 2023, p. 261) of necropolitics, situating his elegiac approach to Chernobyl at ‘those places in the body politic where the skin is thinner, where knowledge can more successfully seep through – as the pulse does, at the wrist’ (Petrucci 2006, p. 255). For him, Chernobyl is active ‘in the blood we use to think about it’ (Petrucci 2006, p. 254). He compares this metaphorical body’s struggle to comprehend the disaster’s social trauma to the presence of Old Testament angels, whose ‘plumage came not in white, but in shades of grey […] angels – like poems – are agents of difficulty as much as of peace’ (Petrucci 2006, p. 255). Such difficulty is inherent in the poems’ challenge to overcome that most Gothic of obstacles: the post-Enlightenment attempt to successfully integrate the cultures of art and science in an expression of beauty. Like much of the Gothic tradition since *Frankenstein* (1818/1831), the *Heavy Water* poems self-reflexively grapple with necropolitical issues of the body damaged by radiation and psychological trauma through ‘post-Enlightenment sentiments of denial, dread, and desire’ (Davison 2023, p. 261). In the cycle’s second poem, ‘The Man Buried With Chernobyl’, the corpse is staged through the medical elegy’s scientific and spectral means: virtual technologies of digital recreation such as the CT and MRI scans used in the Visual Human Project (Kennedy 1997, p. 105, 106). From the surface of the irradiated earth and body, a technological vision exhumes and resurrects the identity of the poem’s subject: ‘You might even see him – if you look/hard with X-rays. You could slice him like an embryo […] feed/cooling-water down the long shaft in an umbilical cord/of transparency, as though the glass had come to life/ twisting around steel’ (Petrucci 2004, p. 15). The natal imagery deployed here refigures this return as a rebirth, the creation of an uncanny simulacrum of a human through radiation measurement and digital representation: ‘Then stack each concrete wafer/ to count it with Geigers: map his contours in roentgens,/ reconstruct him in glowing 3D. He might almost be/ recognisable to his wife. Perhaps he would stir – lift/ from his calcinated mould like a grit jelly’ (Petrucci 2004, p. 15). This technological phantom is constructed as an excess of Gothic surfaces, tangible in its multiplicity. It rises not into an afterlife

but into living-dead, digital production. The poem introduces a central theme of the *Heavy Water* cycle: the potential for global overidentification of Chernobyl trauma and victimhood through the proliferation of mourning technologies. Petrucci's elegies aim to respond to this issue by dramatising both the compulsion towards and impossibility of mourning.

Jacques Derrida's 'Mnemosyne' (1989) establishes his thesis on mourning. Derrida claims for the failure of successfully mourning a loved one's death, coining the term "impossible mourning," which he identifies as follows:

> We can only live this experience in the form of an aporia: the aporia of mourning and prosopopaia, where the possible remains impossible. Where *success fails*. And where faithful interiorisation bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us), at once living and dead. It makes the other a part of us, between us – and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve for him and bear him *in us*, like an unborn child, like a future. And inversely, the *failure succeeds*: an aborted interiorisation is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us (Derrida 1989, p. 35).

The other's suspension in the self as living dead defers memory and the elegiac desire to memorialise the dead as such. Impossible mourning informs the cultural production of elegies for the not-yet-dead, the elsewhere dead whose potential and potentially unknown deaths project beyond the bounds of faithful, successful mourning. Derrida's perpetual belatedness of successful memorialisation informs the modern medical elegy's necropoetics. *Heavy Water*'s still-living subjects enduring cancer or radiation poisoning are activated, to borrow Petrucci's term, by the poetic performance of the Chernobyl victim or survivor body. This rendition is an oscillation between death and life, between the speaker's interior and the outside, which sits beyond all intrusive attempts at mourning.

'Black Box' dramatises a female Chernobyl survivor's discomfort at being reduced to an object of fascination by an overcurious and exploitative male lover: 'I was raw data. His something-for-nothing box./ Caught him watching me as I slept – a cold/ forensic look. He favoured a bed with bones/ that clicked' (Petrucci 2004, p. 74). The poem combines the necropoetics of the skeletal body with the necropolitics of violent interiorisation, the forced attempt at memorialisation that proceeds 'only by exceeding, fracturing, wounding, injuring, traumatising' the loved one (Derrida 2001, p. 160). Radioactive infection is conflated with the Gothic's

visceral, female body brutalised by literary creation: 'The Reactor – in me after all. A searing/ rod of black so stuck in my crop it made me/ fall for someone like him: grim receiver who'd/ piece together my pain and publish the results./ Perhaps I hoped he'd draw it out – bloodied/ from between my ribs' (Petrucci 2004, p. 75).

This anti-elegiac turn marks the male saviour's failure to resurrect his female lost love through poetic endeavour. Melissa F. Zeiger's gendered study of the elegy, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (1997), identifies this twentieth-century departure from the genre's structural paradigm of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Orpheus's act of glancing back at his resurrected wife that condemns her to death a second time as the couple return from the Greek underworld historically sanctions 'the erotically charged impulses of the living to remain connected to the dead or aggressively disconnect themselves from them' (Zeiger 1997, p. 2). Zeiger traces the creative responses to this poetic legacy through analyses of AIDS and breast cancer elegies. She explores how the subjects of these contemporary elegies reconfigure the genre's traditional forms to identify an emancipatory politics of gender and sexuality (Zeiger 1997, p. 166). 'Black Box' short-circuits elegiac loss through its first-person account of the sufferer's own traumatic experience; she herself decides how the poem ends and inscribes the man's memorialising violence: 'I'd rather he'd shoved it/ home. Quelled this constant rising drone in my brain' (Petrucci 2004, p. 75). This elegy reveals the multisensory nature of pain and the role of the body in the speaker's poetic self-diagnosis. Blood, bones, rib and brain reject the consolatory loss of woman rendered beautiful through elegiac language in a grotesque drama inverting the male interiorisation of the female: 'I turned the tables. Fed counterfeit/ stories to him as if I'd let slip – kept a diary/ of the way his dessert spoon would hover mid-/ slurp – noted the lustre in those coins of eyes' (Petrucci 2004, p. 74). The poem displaces not only the melancholic hero of Elegy but also the emphasis on sight at the heart of Orpheus's fatal condemnation of his wife. The speaker's narrative substitution of the man's eyes with coins establishes his blindness and, following the Greek funereal rite of placing coins over the eyes of the deceased to provide Charon's tithe, sends him to a symbolic Underworld. Her brain, subjected to the 'constant rising drone' of mounting, irrepressible anxiety, is not the centralised site of creative endeavour but simply an organ responding to violence occurring elsewhere on the body. This sequence's 'corpseoreality', which involves 'experiencing one's body as irrevocably Other, quintessentially mortal, and beyond one's control' (Davison 2018, p. 109), acknowledges the self's loss of mastery over the symptomatic body in the necropolitical Gothic.

Non-melodic sound becomes the transmissible manifestation of traumatic stress. To compose the *Heavy Water* poems, Petrucci submerged himself in Svetlana Alexievich's edited testimony compilation, *Voices from Chernobyl*, without feeling the need to heighten its eyewitness accounts through poetic imagination. 'Writing *Heavy Water* felt like taking dictation' he writes. 'I resolved, as far as I could, to listen' (Petrucci 2006, pp. 254–255). The deemphasis of the poet's creative faculties in elegiac production is in respect for the Chernobyl victim's disempowerment through psychological trauma and political repression. In listening to the other, Petrucci's ear often highlights traumatic sound instead of the spoken word. Derrida's notion of mourning as an ongoing, unfinalisable process, as a work and a working, helps support Petrucci's ethical reading of Chernobyl trauma. For Derrida, mourning is a dual practice in which the bereaved is 'working at mourning as both their object and their resource, working *at mourning* as one would speak of a painter working *at a painting*, but also of a machine working *at such and such an energy level*' (Derrida 2001, p. 143). *Heavy Water*'s frequent attention to machinic noise over the human voice in Petrucci's work, exemplified by the 'rising drone' in 'Black Box', reflects this disembodied nature of mourning. The elegist's poetic presence gives way to an ear for the technological fragmentation of Chernobyl trauma. In 'Envoy', the speaker, a survivor or perhaps ghost of the disaster, says: 'you/ will forge from our cries a single silver rod […] Put your ear to it and hear it hum. It will make you shudder' (Petrucci 2004, p. 96). 'Powder / Stone' conveys the trauma of victims' abandonment during the initial stages of the nuclear emergency through sounds of corrupted or disused broadcasting equipment: 'Their tapes are hiss. The radio/ hiss. Their videos are white noise/ without the noise. Hear how the phone/ clicks into silence. Notice how there are/ no orders' (Petrucci 2004, p. 28). The subjects in these examples are necropolitically managed by technological deindividualisation and radioactive decay, disallowed the ability to face the prospect of physical death. Uncanny sound and its decomposition articulate a twentieth-century preservation of death in life, in which a purely mechanised funereal ritual extracts the trauma of the deceased: 'You may have/ to detach yourself. Use robots and machines./ But at the end – after immense effort – you/ will forge from our cries a single silver rod' (Petrucci 2004, p. 96).

This focus on putting an ear to Chernobyl trauma includes listening to the demands and effects of political silence. Petrucci translates the repressive mechanisms of the Soviet State in solidarity with its exploited victims, which calls for a performance of the ear of the other, a necropolitical aesthetics of a tyrannical regime and its victims. For Derrida, the wide-open ear thinks itself free, but 'admit[s] the State, not knowing that it has already come under the control of reactive and degenerate forces' (Derrida 1985, p. 35). The poems' self-reflexive assimilation of authority reflects Derrida's 'question

of the same ear, a borrowed ear, the one that you are lending me or that I lend in speaking' (Derrida 1985, p. 35). The poem 'Directive 1A' italicises government commands that structure its theme of mass burial:

> those men
> still warm from their beds
> with the smell of their women
> clinging to them – just like '37
>
> *bury them*
>
> the heads
> of cabbage pulsing
> thick veins
> the turnip and carrot
> the grain in its ears
> the slim flowered dress
> and wedding band
>
> *under white sand* (Petrucci 2004, p. 34).

The poem dramatises an all-encompassing demand for indiscriminate entombment by following each verse with part of an ongoing burial didactic and developing a necropoetic interplay of human biology and the surrounding environment. The anatomical attributes of the vegetables and their juxtaposition to the immediacy of the firefighters called from their beds in the early Saturday morning of April 26 reveal immanent and long-term infection of the ecosystem. This need to bury irradiated produce reflects the 'drawn-out temporal reach [of environmental pollution], which can penetrate the biological fabric of blood, tissue, and bones' (Davies 2018, p. 1540). The cabbages' pulsing thick veins and matured grain in ear signal the socioeconomic status of agricultural communities rendered precarious by industrial contamination. Rob Nixon's critical concept of slow violence in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), explores how chemical or nuclear exposure can be 'driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that—particularly in the bodies of the poor—remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated' (Nixon 2011, p. 6). The poem shows the impact of the extended Chernobyl emergency on a peasant community: 'that old woman sick/ in her cot who rose/ to meet the men in suits' (Petrucci 2004, p. 34), 'the peasant/ on all fours digging/ with a spoon' (Petrucci 2004, p. 35) and 'that milkmaid spitting rust' (Petrucci 2004, p. 35).

Through its lack of punctuation, the example plays with temporality through its pacing, expressing an antinomy of slow violence and rapid poetic rhythm:

> the forest the
> treetops the rivers and
> air the mountains the
> oceans the planets and
> spheres the seasons the
> cosmos the race to
> the moon
>
> *make a sarkophágos –*
>
> *bury them*
>
> *soon* (Petrucci 2004, p. 35)

'Directive 1A' dramatises the interface of the slow violence of biospheric contamination across vast spaces, and therefore long periods of time, with the return of another sort of violence: the direct and fast "make die" violence (Sparke 2014, in Davies 2018, p. 1539) of mass burial in a sarcophagus, *soon*. The poem at once offers the prolonged biological degradation of global life by letting it die through inaction and the Soviet emergency power to manage life quickly through live burial. This interplay of slow violence and sovereign authority merges their conventionally discrete paces. 'Slow violence', Thom Davies writes, 'can be read as a form of late-modern necropolitics, where communities are exposed to the power of death-in-life', 'a nondeliberate consequence of polluting industries that […] expose sub-altern populations (especially) to the experience of "death-worlds"' (Davies 2018, p. 1540). The shortness of the line lengths describing the doomed firefighters, whose radiation-related illnesses developed historically over weeks, months and years, condenses their protracted radioactive degeneration into sudden, necropolitical spectacle:

> the fireman in gumboots
> his heelprint in fuel
> lads ragged with rays
> carrying the flag
> straight into hell
> each figure that is
> a walking root
> dripping gas and
> speaking grit (Petrucci 2004, p. 34).

Such necropolitics of the authoritarian 'right to kill' echo the punishment-as-spectacle of public execution and processional exhibition of criminals that was common practice until the end of the eighteenth century (Foucault 1977, p. 8). The firemen's marching to the burning, hellish Chernobyl reactor demonstrates the exercise of institutional power and conflates the death-in-life of slow violence with the bureaucratisation of the condemned prisoner's imminent death. This convergence represents the flickering back to life of the gloomy festival of punishment (Foucault 1977, p. 8) in a twentieth-century guise, a Soviet Gothic alternative to the global neoliberalism of slow violence, which Nixon, Davies and other theorists argue 'does not originate from a single exclusionary sovereign power but [is] often dispersed and entangled in a complex assemblage of corporate power, state authority, local regulations, and capitalist accumulation' (Davies 2018, p. 1539). The slow violence in 'Directive 1A' is compressed in the expression of absolute Soviet authority over the protracted irradiation of human, vegetable, environmental and cosmological subjects. It interrupts, categorises and condemns (potentially) irradiated life, structuring a totalising violence as a sequence of abrupt injunctions in the poem that are separate from the other, longer passages of the text in which poetic pace increases across an ever-expanding geographic space.

Heavy Water engages with the necropolitical relations between excessive bodies and unchecked political power in its Gothicisation of Chernobyl trauma. In the poems, victims and survivors of nuclear radiation are exposed to the dehumanising, institutional gaze of Soviet necropower and rendered spectral or grotesque in a spectacle of living death. Their articulation of Soviet sovereignty through bureaucratic and technological management relies on a necropoetic adoption of Gothic power: the regime's paranoid and excessive condemnation of its Chernobyl-infected subjects to a technological death world of X-rays, Geiger counters, and radiological entombment.

Part II. Gothic Rhizomes of Radioactive Trauma in *Springtime in Chernobyl*

nana   i think i heard it

in a dream
a teeny voice in my ear

all scratchy
and silly   like our radio

that never worked (Mario Petrucci 'Nana', *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, 2004, p. 80).

In *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (2020), Susan Schuppli analyses Soviet filmmaker Vladimir Shevchenko's documentary *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks* (1986), which he shot on 35-mm film from a helicopter that flew over the Exclusion Zone three days after the Chernobyl explosion. Schuppli explains:

> When Shevchenko's 35mm footage was later developed, he noticed that a portion of the film was heavily pockmarked and carried extraneous static interference and noise. Thinking initially that the filmstock used had been defective, Shevchenko eventually realized that what he had captured on film was the image and sound of radioactivity itself. Upon projection, small flares of light momentarily ignite the surface of the film. Sparking and crackling, they conjure a pyrotechnics of ghostly defects that are the consequence of decaying radioactive particles moving through the exterior of Shevchenko's 35mm Konvas camera to activate the emulsive properties of the film (Schuppli 2020, pp. 61–62).

Radiation's lack of sight, sound, taste and smell determines its spectrality. It is absent save for its aftereffects upon the material of failed representation, a Gothic manifestation that is at once 'a no-thing and a general disturbance of subjective and system boundaries' (Botting and Spooner 2015, p. 2). Botting and Spooner tie the spectral history of media to a Gothic aesthetics of the surface: 'in the heady urban centres of Victorian Europe', they argue, 'spectrality [is] a primary if immaterial condition: negative, shadow, light, ink, acoustic trace' (Botting and Spooner 2015, p. 5). The aftereffects and afteraffects of radiation's capture on film are at once a spectral haunting and monstrous intrusion of the Lacanian Real. Overriding the temporal distance between media and spectator, the radioactive distortion of Shevchenko's footage

> displaces our initial confidence in its representational status as a fixed historical index, inaugurating, instead, a sense of dread that what we are witnessing on film is in fact the unholy representation of the real: an amorphous and evil contagion that continues to release its lethal discharges into the present and future yet to come (Schuppli 2020, p. 63).

Botting and Spooner note the co-contamination of the monstrous and spectral in emergent new medias from the nineteenth century to the present day: '[m]onstrosity […] an unreal, constructed figure [that] manifests movements or forces within and beyond all relations, exceeding both objectification

and domination'. Similarly, '[a] spectre is an immaterial figure possessed of all-too-real histories and effects, preceding and retro-activating systems of law and subjectivity with an inescapably heterogenous power' (Botting and Spooner 2015, p. 2). The ability of radiation to disturb technologically, physically and emotionally might endow it with negative affect. However, as Mario Petrucci's *Heavy Water* poems show, scenes of radioactive corruption offer us opportunities of personal transformation instead of shutting us down in horror. The little matryushka in 'Nana', after being told by her grandmother that radiation cannot be seen, smelt or touched, renders its distortive power palpable through the image of malfunctioning technology. Rather than understanding this media as the non-symbolic, Lacanian Real, her response provides one of many 'teeming "molecular movements"' of radiation's creative embodiment in Chernobyl fiction, 'rendering experience more complex, opening up new and vital possibilities' (Gross 2010, p. 200).

The spontaneous innovations proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizome philosophy are at the heart of many twenty-first century examples of Gothic literary trauma around the Chernobyl disaster. What initially appears as spectral or monstrous in a traditional Gothic register develops in ways that surprise the protagonists of these texts, encompassing the dizzying variety of ways in which, following Botting and Spooner, radioactivity as a monsterising and spectralising force animates emergent media phantasmagorically.

Emmanuel Lepage's graphic novel *Springtime in Chernobyl* expresses rhizomatic thought patterns and visuals in its Gothic approach to Chernobyl trauma. Its narrative is loosely based on the artist's own experiences in the Zone, charting the visit of his fictional counterpart to the Chernobyl region. With support from the locals, he and his fellow Breton artists in the fictional antinuclear Illustractivists group have set up a residency in the area, with the aim of creating a travel artbook bearing witness to the tragic aftermath of the disaster through which to raise funds for the Chernobyl Children International (CCI) humanitarian organisation (Figure 4.1).

Throughout the comic book, travel towards the Zone is indicated by vanishing-point perspective images of railway lines and roads, accompanied by the traditional aesthetics of Gothic weather. Storm clouds and heavy rain in black and white panels convey a mood of trepidation and suspense. Yet this linear path of association constrains understanding of Chernobyl to rigid emotional affect and political ideology: the conflation of the disaster as humanity's nuclear folly and the Zone as a symbolic space of wild desolation and Soviet political dissolution. The endless stretches of rail and road echo Deleuze and Guattari's critical concept of the arboretum as episteme, a hierarchical system of signification in which the centralised organisation

Figure 4.1 Emmanuel Lepage, comics panel 3, *Springtime in Chernobyl* (2019), p. 35.

of culture and memory drives meaning along preestablished paths in single file (Deleuze and Guattari 2003, p. 16). Indeed, the image of train carriages connected consecutively to one another on a fixed track in the graphic novel's opening scene, in which Emmanuel and his friend Gildas travel from Poland to Ukraine by rail, enshrines this drive of automatic psychological and aesthetic association. On a car journey into the Zone through a forest, Emmanuel remarks to himself:

> The driver from the agency in Kiev met us in Ivankiv, a village on the edge of the Exclusion Zone a few miles from our house. He picked us up in a Toyota Combi. He makes the drive daily. It's always raining. The weather is bleak. Just the way I pictured it in my head. The woods go by. Not a word between us. (Lepage 2019, pp. 50– 51).

The narrative undercuts its own overdetermined Gothic affect, however. It depicts Emmanuel reading various passages from six different testimonies in Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* during the train journey to Ukraine. This intermittent quotation, performed out of the order in which the testimonies appear in Alexievich's publication, is a manifestation of a more rhizomatic pattern of thought. In contrast to the roots, trunks and branches of the arbour system, rhizomes represent open forms communication in which

any point may be connected to any other, resulting in new, creative offshoots of meaning that are unique and momentary.

Springtime in Chernobyl displaces the literary traditions of Gothic and Apocalyptic fiction through its characters' ad hoc artistic experiments in letting the spectral and monstrous arise on its own terms. The ethics of representing Chernobyl trauma are implicit in this process. The text sees identification of the disaster's legacy through a Gothic lens as reductive and inappropriate. At a welcome party in the Illustractivists' residency on the edge of the Zone, Emmanuel meets Vassia, who was a liquidator. Recalling his childhood memory of the photos taken of the exploded reactor that were broadcast on French television and perception of the gasmask-wearing cleanup crew as having no faces, he thinks: 'I can't stop staring at Vassia. At last, I've put a face to Chernobyl. The tragedy takes flesh' (Lepage 2019, p. 41). Yet this flesh is merely an unchallenged return of the stultified memory of the dehumanised liquidators (Figure 4.2).

In one comics panel that shows Emmanuel in profile looking at Vassia, who is front facing, his gaze meeting that of the reader, Vassia is wearing civilian clothing. In the next panel, which maintains these poses, Vassia is wearing his liquidator's chemical hazmat suit and gasmask, a projection of Emmanuel's, and perhaps our own, imagination. In another scene at the party, Emmanuel draws a sketch of Tola, a music teacher at a local school, playing his bayan and singing a traditional Ukrainian folk song. Afterwards, Anya, the Illustractivists' interpreter, says to Emmanuel that Tola didn't like his portrait. Emmanuel replies: 'He was hurt. It was a clumsy drawing. Too much of a caricature' (Lepage 2019, p. 45). This critical reflection on slavic stereotypes extends to Soviet technology, a form of neocolonialism in which the nuclear power stations of the atomic Other are mismanaged, evil or outdated (Sukhenko and Ulanowicz 2020). Upon visiting Pripyat, Emmanuel remarks: 'We've been told so often that Soviet plants were behind the times

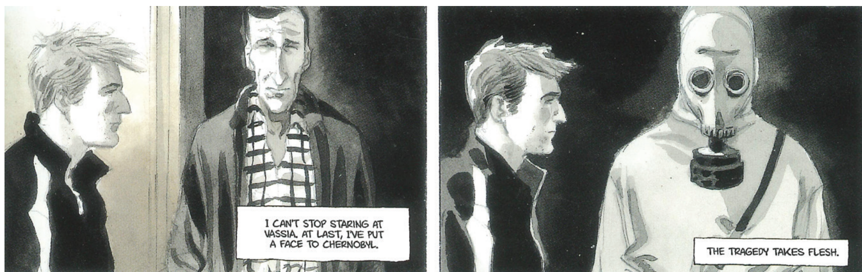

Figure 4.2 Emmanuel Lepage, comics panels 6–7, *Springtime in Chernobyl* (2019), p. 41.

[…]that unconsciously, I'd begun picturing archaic caricatures in my head' (Lepage 2019, p. 57).

The threat of radioactive contamination prevents Emmanuel from drawing his Chernobyl scenes effectively, continually interrupting his reproduction of the site as a Gothic ruin rendered in stark black charcoal. 'I wear rubber gloves while drawing. It's a different feeling. Less immediate, less embodied' (Lepage 2019, p. 59), he comments. Geiger counter readings indicate unsafe radiation accumulation, forcing him to abandon his sketches midway: 'How am I supposed to bring something to life, summon up technique when I feel threatened?' (Lepage 2019, p. 63). Aesthetic limitations also dog the Illustractivists' hasty tour of the Zone. Emmanuel's graphic renditions focus on the well-known sights of abandoned Pripyat – the May Day Ferris wheel and bumper cars, the Azure Swimming Pool and Hotel Polissya – reducing Chernobyl to a series of overfamiliar images inseparable from the many other artistic representations conveying the city as a ghost town and symbol of a benighted political regime. Emmanuel's narration accompanies this typical Gothic visual style in a similar vein: 'Unfinished portraits of forgotten Soviet dignitaries, piled in a storeroom. Pripyat lets off a light from a vanished empire […]a dying star' (Lepage 2019, p. 71). After the group see a child's doll in pieces, strewn across the contaminated soil, Emmanuel wonders if it was prestaged as a photo opportunity.

Springtime in Chernobyl questions this formulaic use of Gothic convention and psychological detachment between human subjectivity and the surrounding environment. Emmanuel asks himself: 'What have I come here looking for that I don't already know? […] What if I'd come to see if reality was anything like what I was imagining?' (Lepage 2019, pp. 81–82). Emmanuel recognises his engagement in interpretosis, Deleuze and Guattari's term for the interpreter's compulsion to force the artefact into the Procrustean bed of a preexisting system. As Gross notes, '[i]nterpretosis reduces the teeming, varied, "molecular" movements found in the work to simple "molar" oppositions—proletariat vs. bourgeois, mother vs. father, male vs. female, human vs. nonhuman, good vs. evil, and so forth' (Gross 2010, p. 200). This section of the graphic novel reflects the literary Gothic's tendency towards Manicheism. Emmanuel recollects that, as a teenager,

> locked away in my loneliness, I drew and drew […]creating apocalyptic worlds […]nuclear wars […]worlds of technological catastrophes […] radioactive clouds […]nature reclaiming the cities. I drew worlds without human beings. Worlds where humanity's carelessness and folly had led to its downfall (Lepage 2019, pp. 82–83).

The dualism of gender, nature, science and the monstrous that haunts Gothic, especially through the literary heritage of Mary Shelley's novels *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* (1826), is unfit to capture the radiological aspect of Chernobyl trauma. Emmanuel's inability to 'summon up technique' is structured by, but fails to represent, the invisible horror of radiation. His philosophical consideration regarding Chernobyl's undermining of his expectations marks his departure from interpretosis and embracing of a rhizomatic flow of artistic productivity. Gross reminds us that '[t]hought begins not with a preestablished method but with an encounter', and quotes Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*: '[s]omething in the world forces us to think' (Deleuze 1991, p. 23).

What forces us to think is how *Springtime in Chernobyl* represents the spectrality and monstrosity of radiation in non-binary ways. Just as its representation of Emmanuel's approach to reading Alexievich's testimony compilation is nonlinear and antihierarchical, establishing multiple entryways in the open system of literary Chernobyl trauma (Massumi 2003, xiv; Deleuze and Guattari 2003, p. 12), the structural opposition between human and radiation begins to collapse as the Illustractivists leave the Zone by car. An alternative spectrality emerges through the myriad moments of possible infection (Figure 4.3).

The group's paranoia is structured visually as a rhizome formation contesting the arborised image of the straight road leading the car out of the Zone. The captions, arranged in a semicircular array, if read clockwise, come out as follows: 'Did you wash the car?' 'What? I don't understand!'

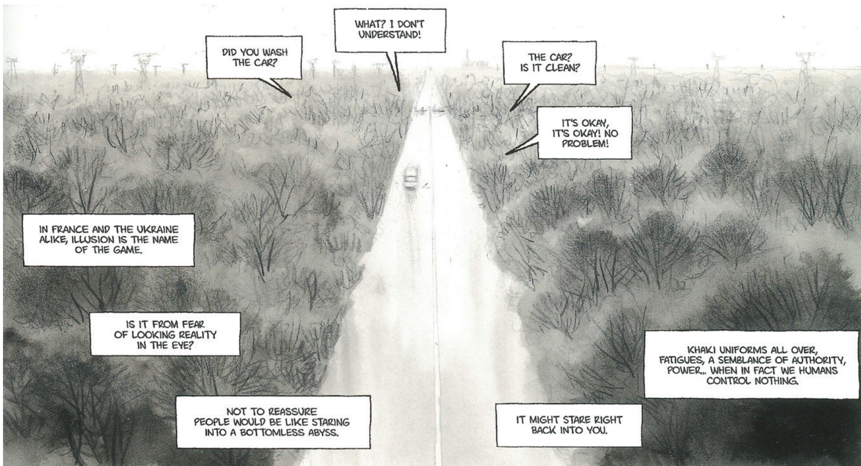

Figure 4.3 Emmanuel Lepage, comics panel 6, *Springtime in Chernobyl* (2019), p. 77.

'The car? Is it clean?' 'It's ok, it's ok! No problem' (Lepage 2019, p. 77). But one could read them in any order and attribute them to any number of characters in the car. The spectrality of radiation manifests in the Derridean "freeplay" of these signifiers, in that they do not refer to a fixed signified but defer continually to an unlocatable force in an 'indefinite referral of signifier to signified' (Derrida 1978, p. 25). Lepage embeds this cyclical process in the comics narratological format by arranging the captions in the rhizome structure visually, building out a spread of possibilities for readers' engagement. This multiple yet personal embodiment of the invisible threat of radiation – to which Emmanuel was distanced when trying to draw the Chernobyl N.P.P. haunted by radioactivity while wearing protective rubber gloves – corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the absence of psychological division between reader and text. 'For Guattari, aesthetics are viral in nature, being known "not through representation, but through affective contamination"'. Lepage's graphic novel, like Deleuze's notion of cinema, 'is not a purely visual, specular experience. It embraces the flux of corporeal sensation and sensory perception in the "machinic" connection of the embodied spectator with the body of the text' (Powell 2005, p. 4).

This becoming-radiation, like Emmanuel's becoming-testimony when reading the Alexievich compilation, also manifests in the Illustractivists' less formal artwork: a forest plantation of dental X-ray film slips encased in watertight white envelopes. Pascal, the group's photographer, comments how his experiment is a creative offshoot of the accidental discovery of this phenomenon: the opaque blackness of Igor Kostin's photographs of the destroyed Chernobyl reactor due to extremely high levels of radiation. Pascal's innovation crosses biological fieldwork with artistic creativity, the same multidisciplinary cross-contamination that inspired Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* books. Pascal's project sidesteps interpretation to participate in a discourse with the contaminated soil on the outskirts of the Zone, the monstrous earth that reveals itself only by projection of strange, rhizomatic patterns onto the flat surface of film: 'The X-rays revealed a dark, opaque underground crisscrossed by rays. The earth has spoken' (Lepage 2019, p. 116). Gross affirms Deleuze's conviction that we must give up our efforts of control to this external force, committed 'in not domesticating events to the mere confines of ourselves. Our passions, loves, and even our deaths do not merely come from within us, they come to us from without as well, with a sometimes horrifying impersonality' (Gross 2010, p. 207).

Emmanuel embraces this outlook as he journeys deep into the forest that encircles the Zone: 'I venture into the undergrowth to get closer to the houses and do more "dynamic" drawings. I twist and turn so as not

to brush a single leaf. I only touch the branches with my gloved fingertips' (Lepage 2019, p. 92). This dynamic movement in physical space and graphic reproduction echoes the deterritorialised flows of the Deleuzean nomad, the uprooted, mobile existence towards the periphery that enacts multiple changes in direction and creative lines of flight. Again, traditional Gothic aesthetics fail to account for the molecular expansion of radioactive trauma, as Emmanuel comes across a lush forest clearing that was, before the disaster, a highway. The graphic novel presents the smooth surface of the scene as a palimpsest: on one black and white page the artist sits on a deck chair in the middle of the trunk road while vehicles pass on either side, and on the next a version of the flourishing vegetation rendered in Emmanuel's oil pastels. He is surprised by his sudden expression in colour: 'I'd imagined drawing blackened woods, bare and twisted trees, uncanny and monstrous […]I had my black chalk, my dark inks, my charcoals […]but color forced my hand. […] The subtle thrum of color covers up the horrifying reality hiding right before my eyes' (Lepage 2019, pp. 114–115). Though the natural beauty of the irradiated forest confounds him, it nonetheless reveals new meaning to him in its negative play on the surface of representation. In a manifestation that echoes the radioactive imprints on Pascal's dental slides, Emmanuel's thick, heavy pastel work has left an impression on the adjacent page, revealing the spectral's transformative impact upon media. 'Maybe this "mirrored image"', Emmanuel muses, 'the unintended transfer of blue trees onto the facing page […]can come close to capturing the phantasmal aspect of Chernobyl' (Lepage 2019, pp. 116–117). Botting and Spooner read the surface interactions of phantasmagoria as both spectral and monstrous:

> As an apparatus for projection and as metaphor, phantasmagoria suggest the monstrous potential of media in terms of their spectral effect on consciousness. […] Such devices – literally and metaphorically – establish new relations between mind and world and furnish new modes of understanding at the same time as they apparently obfuscate or blur extant perspectives (Botting and Spooner 2015, pp. 3–4).

Emmanuel's phantasmagorical projection also embodies the monstrous in its echoing of what his colleague Pascal calls the 'nasty surprise' (Lepage 2019, p. 108) that Kostin received upon viewing his completely dark photographs of the destroyed reactor. Emmanuel reads a similarly corrupting presence of radiation on the double-spread page of his canvas, in which the transferred image on the second page appears more faded than the original on the first. 'An atomic explosion seems to be eating away at those trees', he narrates (Lepage 2019, p. 117) (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4 Emmanuel Lepage, double spread comics panel 4, 8, *Springtime in Chernobyl* (2019), pp. 114–115.

The attunement of Emmanuel's perspective to the dynamic movements of Deleuzean nomad art reveals the rhizomatic mobility of memory. Like the transfer of images from one page to another, it is a nomadic development that 'passes *between* things, *between* points (Deleuze and Guattari 2003, p. 505). The coproduction of Chernobyl trauma in scenes represented by both human artistic agency and unforeseen creative processes that exempt the human reflect Deleuze and Guattari's notion of short-term or antimemory, in which the individual cedes a part of their memory to the Other. This element constitutes a rhizomatic offshoot away from the self, a creative, becoming-nonhuman extension which, '[u]nlike the graphic arts, drawing or photography, unlike tracings, pertains to a map […] that is always detachable, connectable, reversable, modifiable' (Deleuze and Guattari 2003, p. 21). Emmanuel's centrefold, a crossing or becoming-state between self and other, between the human and the encroaching irradiation of nature, enacts the 'successful failures' of Derrida's impossible mourning in 'Mnemosyne'. This occurs through the finitude of memory, 'of memory as the memory of the other, which comes from the other and comes back to the other. It defies any totalization' (Derrida 1989, p. 29). The phantasmal memory of Chernobyl mapped out by radiation resists all human efforts at finalised tracing, resulting in the impossibility of a guarantee that any given piece of land is safe from radiation. All in the landscape of Chernobyl is spectral and monstrous, as Lepage's graphic novel makes clear: radioactive contamination by wind and rain can occur in a 'hotspot or "leopard-print" pattern' (Lepage 2019, p. 91). Memory takes off and frustrates the mourning effort, as evidenced by the paradox of Emmanuel's experience of the Zone and its obscured reality. Standing on Martinovichi Bridge, which spans the Pripyat River near the

border of the Zone of Alienation, Emmanuel wonders why the couples and families have chosen to come there to picnic and enjoy the view, and spend time together:

> What are they searching for, coming so close [to the Zone]? Do they long for a lost land, that's forever forbidden? Have they come on a pilgrimage? As one visits the dearly departed? As one commemorates a grave? Their presence here cannot be explained by the dazzling beauty of this spot alone (Lepage 2019, pp. 125–127).

Some hidden compulsion draws us to Chernobyl, a reason that can only be revealed obliquely, indirectly. It is an encounter that resides at once within and beyond us, a communication with radioactive alterity that is both beautiful and horrifying, an invitation to luxuriate and face the incomprehensible.

Springtime in Chernobyl explores the redundancy of a traditional Gothic aesthetics of darkness, haunting and excess. Its visual, psychological and ethical mobilisation of rhizomatic patterns of thought and embodied experience around Chernobyl function like Deleuze's understanding of films' affect, which 'seem[s] to operate elsewhere than the straightforward equations of social stereotypes and political "messages" that can be found in them' (Powell 2005, p. 1). Navigating through Western stereotypes of Soviet people, culture and technology and a conventional antinuclear political apparatus, Lepage's graphic novel engages in the creation of new assemblages of Gothic spectrality and monstrosity through the aesthetics, memory and politics of the surface, depicting beautiful, brightly coloured ruins of the Zone interpenetrated with invisible, deadly radiation.

Chapter 5

THE SECOND GENERATION OF CHERNOBYL TRAUMA AND GOTHIC: POST-SOVIET NUCLEAR NIGHTMAROLOGY IN *THE RUSSIAN WOODPECKER* AND THE *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* COMPUTER GAMES SERIES

Part I. The Nightmare of Post-Soviet Gothic in *The Russian Woodpecker*

Film is not literal, it speaks of emotions through images

(Fedor Alexandrovich 2015, in *The Russian Woodpecker*, 57:04).

Anna Powell's critical understanding of Deleuzean cinema identifies the medium as an affective phenomenon of mise-en-scène and movement. 'Film, like literature, painting, and philosophy itself', she writes, 'is a distinctively embodied thought process' (Powell 2005, p. 2). Resisting totalisation and definite, closed-off meaning, cinema and other visual art in the Gothic mode that deals with taboo subject matter, such as explicit sexual violence or contentious political opinion, offers no easy, interpretable answers, opting instead to involve its viewers directly in its transgressive flows of emotionally challenging content. As Powell explains, 'Deleuze's spectator does not exist as a separate entity, but is subsumed in the film event *as part of it*' (Powell 2005, p. 4).

The controversial biographical documentary, *The Russian Woodpecker*, connects its audience experientially to its subject's paranoid reception of post-Soviet social trauma. Ukrainian national and performance artist Fedor Alexandrovich was deeply affected physically and mentally by Chernobyl as a child. He claims that the disaster was triggered intentionally by the Soviet Minister of Communications, Vasily Shamshim, to prevent a Soviet government inspection of the nearby, nonfunctioning Over the Horizon

(OTH) radar array or Duga-3 that Shamshin allegedly commissioned at the cost of seven billion Roubles. For Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy, the film vitiates meaningful debate about Chernobyl (Plokhy 2019). Nevertheless, it also reveals the viral nature through which long-term Chernobyl trauma and Soviet secrecy effect dramatic productions of identity performance, irrespective of their influence on public opinion concerning the disaster's historical origins. The film enshrines Alexandrovich's excessive artistic overtures and political convictions through a Gothic aesthetics, a literary style that Dina Khapaeva links to post-Soviet selective amnesia. The cultural legacy of the Gulags and refusal of former communists to assimilate it into their understanding of Soviet history has produced an 'irreducible experience of inseparability between the *zona*, a Soviet concentration camp, and society' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 80). This burial of the carceral organisation of the State in mass Soviet consciousness forms an important amnesiac background to the development of literary nightmares, in which '[p]artial memory loss […] gives rise to uncertainty about one's own personality, the future, and the present' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 80). Indeed, as Plokhy states, the Soviet Union after Chernobyl could be seen as a country with both an unpredictable past as well as an unpredictable future (Plokhy, 2015, p. 314). Khapaeva proposes that this feeling of uncertainty about the past, present and future can be analysed through the moral and aesthetic transformations in post-Soviet Gothic fiction and the critical theory of Nightmarology (2013): the authorship and reader engagement of the nightmare that 'demonstrates how literary phantasms are capable of materializing in life' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 5).

Through minimal narrative intervention in Alexandrovich's Chernobyl conspiracy theory, *The Russian Woodpecker* exposes viewers to the collapse between the Soviet prison camp mentality and the subject's expression of the post-Soviet nightmare. Alexandrovich bears witness to this protracted trauma, stating that Independent Ukraine is 'full of ghosts […] threatening to come back to life' (Alexandrovich, in *The Russian Woodpecker*). 'We have to understand ghosts', he elaborates in an interview with *Film Stage* Magazine, 'and ghosts can only be understood and battled through dreams (Schindel 2015). His dramatic involvement of the audience's emotional agency in the fight against the return of Soviet-style authoritarianism and political silence through use of the word 'we' highlights the spectatorial affect theory of Deleuzian film assemblage. Nightmarology involves participants in the horror of powerlessness, in which the viewer or reader is forced to witness the dream but can do little to influence its forces. The reader 'is transformed into a test subject of the author's experiment. The action of the literary work […] forces the reader to experience a nightmare in a wakeful state' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 4). Alexandrovich's experimental and transgressive performances

in the Zone, to which the film refuses narrative distance through its lack of accompanying interview questions or a voice over, dramatise the conflict against Soviet ghosts through the Gothic aesthetics of the nightmare. 'I will reenact my dreams about this antenna [the Duga-3 array], about this metaphor' (Alexandrovich, in Schindel 2015), he claims. Though he frequently uses the term dream, his project reflects the nature of the nightmare as an experience of a disoriented and partially repressed sociopolitical state of being rather than the role of dreams in psychoanalysis.

In the excerpts of his surreal performance film 'Journey to the Dark Tower', shown within *The Russian Woodpecker*, Alexandrovich travels through the Zone, naked and wrapped in cellophane, while holding a burning torch in a symbolic bringing of light to the dark secrecy of Chernobyl and the Duga-3. Accompanying these scenes are discordant orchestral music and the ominous clicking sound of the Russian Woodpecker array, which could belong to the soundtrack of either film, thereby blurring the boundaries between each production. This structural indeterminacy and affective mise en scène – wide angle lenses that distort the expanse of the Zone landscape into convex shapes, dissonant audio and transgressive physical performances that flirt dangerously with radioactive contamination – reflect the technology-dependant pseudo-documentary form of the found footage horror genre. The viewer experiences these artistic sequences as embodied events instead of considered narratives. 'Camera shake, blurred focus and extreme close-ups' among other sensorial and sensational uses of audiovisual production and postproduction, 'have a direct effect on our mechanisms of perception before they reach a more advanced stage of cognitive processing' (Powell 2005, p. 5). This Deleuzean nightmare enshrined in Gothic aesthetics also reveals how new moral norms and social structures emerge from the supressed historical memory of Stalinism (Khapaeva 2009, p. 371). In one particularly theatrical scene, Alexandrovich, facing the camera, stands behind a glass window on which he has drawn a portrait of Shamshin in red marker. He then says the following: 'Film is not literal. It speaks of emotions through image. We have an antihero. I'm the hero, Shamshin is the antihero. And we have conflict, but he's dead. So I'm going to smash his face' (Alexandrovich, in *The Russian Woodpecker* 2015, 57:04–57:20). Alexandrovich enacts this assault metaphorically by throwing a telephone through the pane of glass in the direction towards the audience's perspective, shattering the representation of Shamshin. This embodied position forces viewers to face an aesthetics of violence. The visceral experience draws them into Alexandrovich's emotional drama of the anger generated by Soviet political silence, emphasising the moral conduct and conflictual relationships left in its wake. Alexandrovich muses: '[…] I'm going to his [Shamshim's] grave in Moscow. Should I piss

on his grave? No, I shouldn't do that. On the contrary, at his grave I should say that I am the only person who wants him alive' (Alexandrovich, in *The Russian Woodpecker* 2015, 57:20–57:32).

The portrayal of Alexandrovich's heroism in the documentary through his dishevelment and mad genius renders his identity Gothic like that of Charles Maturin's Melmoth in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), a figure who transcends time in disjointed, nightmarish excess. According to the film's director of photography, Artem Ryzhykov, Alexandrovich is like someone who comes from another world and doesn't fit with people of this day and age (Ryzhykov, in *The Russian Woodpecker* 2005, 05:04–05:30). His alien alterity and artistic gift for breaking political silence in unique ways render him excessive to contemporary notions of the human. His diatribes against Russian political interference in Ukrainian domestic affairs during the 2013–2014 Maidan Uprising captured on film are full of hyperbole:

> We have an enemy. That enemy is the Soviet Union and those who are striving to bring it back. And the Communist Party, which began with the 1930s genocide also ordered the Chernobyl genocide of 1986. […] Ukraine is just the first step in the rebirth of the Soviet Union. The second step is World War III. Thus, we stand here not for our country alone but for all humanity (Alexandrovich, in *The Russian Woodpecker* 2015, 1:14:57–1:17:22).

His explicit connection of the Ukrainian Famine to Chernobyl and World War III reflects Khapaeva's notion of the personal and temporal uncertainty symptomatic of long-term Soviet amnesia. In 'Journey to the Dark Tower' and in his political speeches, Alexandrovich appears more like an avenging angel than a human being, which echoes Petrucci's symbol of the angel as agent of difficulty as well as of peace. The attempt by the Ukrainian government's security forces to dismantle the Maidan protests at Kiev's Independence Square turned violent, sparking the Revolution of Dignity in the early months of 2014. The film's footage of Alexandrovich delivering his speech on a makeshift platform at this point in the conflict captures the Orthodox portraits and banners of Christ and the Holy Mother flanking him on stage and intersperses this coverage with drone shots of his ascent of the Duga-3 while choral music swells on the soundtrack. This emotionally affecting sequence of audiovisuals, emphasised by the camera perspective's distanced spatial relationship to Alexandrovich as he orates to the crowd and climbs the array while his wildly prophesised chain of catastrophic events plays on the voice track, places him outside humanity and beyond anthropocentric conceptions of historical time – an angel of universal truth leading a quest for

human liberation. This exaggerated identity and impactful action is framed by Gothic aesthetics. During the protests, Alexandrovich reflects to camera: 'We've spoken about Chernobyl as a sort of genocide and about the genocide of the 1930s. We are seeing the same schemes. Unfortunately, we're seeing the same plague. The undead Soviet ghoul is pushing us towards World War III' (Alexandrovich, in *The Russian Woodpecker* 2015, 1:10:38–1:11:00).

The film, though a joint venture between Ukrainian and American production teams, can nonetheless be considered an example of post-Soviet Gothic. It fuses literary reality – depictions of historical events such as Chernobyl or the Euromaidan – with the nightmare, which is the complete opposite of reality and created through what Khapaeva calls hypnotics: 'special expressive devices […] that are indispensable for depicting the nightmare and for its translation from text to life, and from life into literature' (Khapaeva 2013, pp. 3–4). The film leaves unanswered the question as to whether Alexandrovich projects a created nightmare onto the Soviet past to articulate its repressed historical trauma or if the selective amnesia and prison consciousness of Soviet history itself exposes the nightmare of post-Soviet Gothic society for us to experience. Alexandrovich is at once actor of and witness to this nightmare, caught in a continual feedback loop of creative and experiential affect. Such a Gordian knot is crucial to Nightmareology, as Khapaeva notes: 'All authors who write about nightmares have wondered about the boundary between nightmare and life and what the difference is—if there indeed is one—between reality and fiction' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 4). This is not to say that *The Russian Woodpecker* asks us to augment our historical understanding of the Chernobyl disaster with Alexandrovich's conspiracy theory nor simply read the film's participation in the nightmare's Gothic aesthetics as a sign of its uncritical acceptance of his position. Rather, it provides us with the opportunity to experience for ourselves the ways in which tackling selective historical amnesia is compounded by post-Soviet geopolitical tensions between the former member States of Russia and Ukraine. It exposes the phantoms of repressed political terror embedded in everyday post-Soviet experience and compels formations of excessive identity through the Gothic aesthetics of the nightmare. If film is not literal but speaks of emotions through images, as Alexandrovich claims, then *The Russian Woodpecker* acts as a literary barometer of anxieties, personal and public, an infectious Gothic response of uncertainty to the temporal gaps in Soviet history caused by collective political silence. The text contributes to post-Soviet Gothic in that it too 'addresses moral and aesthetic dilemmas and describes transformations of values, attitudes, customs, and social relations' (Khapaeva 2009, p. 371). One should not view the relationship between these affect-driven changes in literature and society and the actual contemporary shifts in historical and political post-Soviet events as

straightforwardly causal. Rather, our cultural experience of the nightmare is received through the film's Gothic sound, visuals and dramatic conspiratorial performances, a phantasmagoria that cannot be reduced to a purely literal understanding of reality.

Part II. Zone and *Zona*: The Gothic Morality of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* Computer Games

Of all the monstrous transmutations of new media, computer and videogames provide arguably the most prominent realisation of human–machine hybridity. Gaming's immersion of the player in virtual worlds, and its use of information and sensory feedback in structuring the interactivity between the person and the digital environment, have driven an affects-oriented and often Gothic-led aesthetics. The Gothic aesthetics of gaming sometimes exceed the medium's horror genre to encompass a more pervasive experience of the nightmare, a disorienting assemblage of human perspective and multiplicitous identity slippage into the post- or antihuman. Since the advent of advanced audio and video, Dina Khapaeva writes,

> it has become far easier to imitate the nightmare and multiply its presence in culture. From this time on, the horrors of flights and chases involving vampires and werewolves as main protagonists have proliferated to such an extent in films and video games that they are often commented upon by critics, who overlook the nightmare aspect of these products, assigning them to the obscure category of 'horror genre' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 221).

The First-Person Shooter (FPS) game, in which the player sees the game world as if embodied in the protagonist character's perspective, is especially well-positioned to deal with the nightmare through a Deleuzean manifold subjectivity. Convergence of relational systems in the FPS works at multiple levels: between cohabiting player and in-game character, between gamer-character and the interactive virtual environment and, finally, between the game itself and contemporary sociopolitical and historical conditions that shape its development and reception. Souvik Mukherjee (2012) shows how hybrid assemblages operate at the first and second levels of the FPS's plane of immanence – on the relation of the player to the technological interface of the world and to the world itself as digital construct:

> FPS games are characterized with a so-called HUD or 'heads-up display' where the player is supposed to view the world with his or her

> own eyes. In most cases, the player is also addressed as 'you' by non-player characters and the game's context. Players can see themselves holding weapons and performing various other functions with their in-game 'hands' while their real hands are using the joypad or the mouse (Mukherjee 2012, p. 220).

It is my contention that the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (2007–2009) FPS computer game series, in which players explore, survive and engage in armed conflict with nonplayer characters in the Chernobyl Zone of Alienation, employs the embodied Deleuzian manifold to locate and unsettle the player's identity in the Gothic aesthetics and society of the games' violent power struggles. Though *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s characters and scenarios are fictional, and its representations of the Chernobyl environment provide an alternative nightmare to that of the actual, physical Zone, these digital renditions of conflict and space are informed by the traumatic nuclear and post-Soviet legacy of Ukraine in which the games were created.

The games place in concert players' global perspectives with the post-Soviet manifestation of Chernobyl as Gothic aesthetic and social trauma. Robert Stone's conception of Chernobyl as a heterotopia – a real space 'where the boundaries of normalcy in society are transgressed' (Stone 2013, p. 80) – understands the conflation of actual history with international memory and the Soviet past with articulation of the nightmare. 'Ultimately, by examining Chernobyl as a heterotopia, [Stone's] study suggests the popularizing of Chernobyl through dark tourism means the politics of the past are interfaced with the present' (Stone 2013, p. 80). The first game in the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series, subtitled *Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007), overlays the historical occurrence of the nuclear disaster with a second reactor explosion that has introduced a host of dangerous cosmic phenomena to the Zone reminiscent of the Strugatskys' *Roadside Picnic* novel. Through the game's interactivity, the player experiences these anomalies firsthand. The objects, which have antigravitational and electrical properties and can be detected by their strange sounds and visual fluctuations in the environment and by the insistent beeping noise of the game interface's anomaly detector, can damage or outright kill the player character if approached carelessly. Such audiovisual anxieties mapped onto an immersive Chernobyl landscape extend to variants of the Zone's recognisable architectural features. Oleksandr Zabirko (2024) notes that the famous Duga-3 has two functions in the game, as a cultural memory of

> its role as an early-warning radar system developed for Cold War defence, but also as a sinister "brain scorcher," a psychotropic weapon capable of destroying people's psyches by provoking hallucinations,

> nightmares, and panic attacks. The two devices are not identical, the "brain scorcher" is smaller in size and does not take the form of the real array, but the resemblance of their metallic structures is by no means accidental (Zabirko 2024, p. 250).

This strange permutation of real-life and fictional nightmare is sustained through Cold War anxiety and the hypnotics of the nightmare's Gothic aesthetics. The reconfiguration of historical Soviet structures and landscapes through invented psychic symptoms and environmental distortions in player experience enables the game to sidestep the reduction of an overabundant cultural memory of a benighted Soviet past to traditional Gothic metaphors of haunting and excess. Rather, the nightmare's negative affect as established through the anomalies' physical and psychological disruption of player control, for Zabirko, 'privileges emotional turbulence over the rational reflections on history: rather than providing ideological or political conclusions, it triggers the melancholic mood of childhood memories or […] an unspecified feeling of "something engrossing and unpeaceable"'. (Zabirko 2024, p. 249).

This political and aesthetic ambiguity fronts the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series' relationship to Ukrainian nuclear and post-Soviet trauma. One of the games' defining features is their dynamic artificial intelligence, a program known as the A-Life system, and its connection to the series' in-game factional conflicts. A-Life governs the behaviour of the games' elements: weather patterns, nonplayer entities such as mutants and packs of wild dogs and the interrelations between the various factions in the Zone. Due to the medium's immersive nature, this simulated activity is both reactive to and independent of the player's own choices. Though bandits and monsters will attack on sight, in some instances, they can be avoided with caution. On certain occasions, the player may use the conflicts that occur dynamically between these various forces to their advantage, drawing enemy attention away from his or her own actions or tipping the odds in their favour by initiating a surprise attack against a weakened victor. This diverse heterotopia of player approach and inhabitant, 'where the norms of conduct are suspended either through a sense of crisis or through deviation of behaviour' (Stone 2013, p. 81), constructs both the Gothic aesthetics and Gothic morality of the nightmare.

Though they are not monsters in a literal sense – Khapaeva identifies the nonhuman vampires and werewolves of contemporary Russian fiction as symbols of the Gothic aesthetic and antihumanist ideal – the ideologically opposed groups in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* represent a cross section of post-Soviet Gothic society. These factions include bandits looking to profit from the Zone's spoil, corrupt Ukrainian security personnel open to bribery in exchange for unobstructed passage through border checkpoints, paramilitaries who see it

as their duty to ultimately destroy the Zone for the safety of humanity and a quasi-religious cult that believes in the wish-granting power of an alien monolith located in Chernobyl's Reactor Four Sarcophagus. This diverse factionalism is engaged in a mutually exclusive struggle for supremacy over the Zone. Its notion of zero-sum competition for ultimate control of the region reflects the conflicts of Ukrainian national narratives resulting from cultural and ethnic differences, ineffective economic reforms, high levels of corruption and authoritarianism and slow democratic development (Korostelina 2013, p. 269). Ukraine's ideological divisions cover a range of ethnic Ukrainian and Russian identity politics, pro- and anti-Soviet sentiments and post-Soviet memories of nuclear nationalism, in which Ukraine is perceived in Russian conspiracy culture as its

> chaotic alter ego that threatens it with socio-political contagion, nullifies such modest gains within the geopolitical imaginary, reminding one that the possibility of the return to a period of collapse is ever-present, as is the need for unremitting vigilance on the part of the citizenry (Livers 2020, p. 20).

Keith Livers' reading of Ukraine as Russia's regressive double requiring constant public alertness is echoed by the question throughout the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games concerning what to do with the Zone. The factions' differing visions of its radiological and ideological policing echo conservative Soviet fears around political chaos and implosion following Chernobyl that motivated the use of authoritarian power to identify and pacify the enemy. In the aftermath of the disaster, one of Anatoly Shimansky's notebook entries records,

> Stalin's old vocabulary has sprung up again: 'agents of the Western secret services,' 'the cursed enemies of socialism, 'an undermining of the indestructible union of the Soviet peoples.' Everyone talks about the spies and provocateurs sent here [the Zone], and no one talks about iodine protection. Any unofficial information is considered foreign ideology. (Shimanskiy 2006, p. 124).

This digital configuration of a Gothic society represents the nuclear disaster as an enduring Soviet legacy of paranoia, fracture and terror in the Postcommunist age.

The games' first-person perspective and interactivity facilitate player engagement with a technologically emergent, post-Soviet Gothic morality, as Zabirko (2024) has also argued. In the first two games in the series, *Shadow of*

Chernobyl and *Clear Sky* (2008), the player assumes the role of a stalker, a figure viewed by the Ukrainian military and Russian special forces in the Zone as an illegal person whom they reserve the right to kill if deemed necessary. This identifies stalkers as criminal individuals or elements of organised gangs and the Zone as their turf, reflecting the collision of the ingrained Soviet prison consciousness with the Postcommunist era, 'with the larger culture—with civilization, with the particle accelerator', as Chernobyl historian Aleksandr Revalskiy puts it (Revalskiy, 'Monologue About Answers', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 171). To progress the story, the games encourage the player to complete missions on behalf of one of the various factions and provide the option of betraying them for material gain, as each nonplayer character possesses their own lootable inventory. Making an allegiance with one faction has the corresponding effect of becoming the enemy of an ideologically opposed group. The interactive fluctuations of these in-game relationships enable the player to directly experience *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s post-Soviet Gothic morality, which Khapaeva describes as situational, 'an entirely deictic gesture [...] a concrete judgement decided upon under specific circumstances here and now, and which therefore does not need to be described in abstract and universal terms' (Khapaeva 2013, p. 222). This exercise of arbitrary power resulting from the disavowed memory of the camps establishes the Zone along the lines of a neo-feudalist space that involves the autocratic rule of force, domination of the Chernobyl region through modern military might and colonisation of valuable artefacts dispersed by the anomalies.

The resurgence of Medievalism reflected in the games has less to do with the actual historical culture of the Middle Ages than the manifestation of its Gothic aesthetics and morality in post-Soviet society. 'Gothic fragments penetrate the social fabric of post-Soviet society', Khapaeva notes. 'Gothic allusions can be glimpsed in its slogans and self-representations, in its emerging customs and aesthetics' (Khapaeva 2009, p. 382). Each faction has its own insignia, a military patch and emblem that, as on a coat of arms, represents the group's identity. These symbols conflate modern warfare with Medieval houses or clans and function alongside associated slogans or mission statements to define each faction's unique outlook on the Zone. Duty, the paramilitary organisation trying to protect humanity by sealing off and ultimately destroying the region and its dangerous, infected inhabitants, airs propaganda that reflects the Soviet government's militarised subjugation of Chernobyl's rampaging atom and restoration of social order: 'Deadly anomalies, dangerous mutants, anarchists and bandits [...] None of them will stop Duty on its triumphant march towards saving the planet!' ('Duty', *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Wiki*, https://stalker.fandom.com/wiki/Duty,

accessed 20 September 2024). The cult of the Chernobyl Monolith operates under similarly zealous auspices. An in-game sermon from one of its preachers runs as follows:

> We thank you, oh Monolith, for revealing the cunning plans of your enemies to us. May your light shine down on the souls of the brave soldiers who gave their lives in service to your will. Onward warriors of the Monolith, avenge your fallen brothers, blessed as they are in their eternal union with the Monolith. Bring death to those who spurned the holy power of the Monolith ('Monolith', *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Wiki*, https://stalker.fandom.com/wiki/Monolith, accessed 20 September 2024).

These two examples show how faction identity and member loyalty coalesce around exceptionalist forms of authoritarian power in the Zone. Nonplayer characters cannot change their affiliation status, and the player may wish to avoid shifting their allegiance from a neutral state early on in their game to avoid levels of antagonism and difficulty that can be unmanageable without consolidating an arsenal over time. 'Personal loyalty to the superior and respect for hierarchy constitute the main and the only uncontested law of Gothic society', Khapaeva writes. 'The more advanced the position the hero becomes in the course of events, the more his loyalty to his boss gives way to his personal power' (Khapaeva 2009, p. 380).

Though Khapaeva states that the clan in post-Soviet Russian society organises close relatives under a grand patriarch or mafia *pakhan*, the clan economy also 'represent[s] non-transparent groups uniting businessmen, politicians, state bureaucrats, mafia, and representatives of the police' (Khapaeva 2009, p. 384). Not all of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s extra-familial factions of corrupt military or religious hierarchy span this broad sociopolitical structure, however. Groups such as Freedom or the Ecologists view the Zone as a democratic space that offers the potential for scientific and social progress. They provide the player an alternative to authoritarian or self-interested relations and reflect the ways in which the extended Soviet response to Chernobyl was diverse. Liquidators operated under rigid chains of command as extensions of the armed forces on the one hand and broke away from collective ideological struggle against the disaster on the other. One survivor, recollecting the call-up for liquidators among the military brigades, states: 'I'm a soldier. If I'm ordered to do something, I need to do it' ('Soldiers' Chorus 2006, p. 38). Conversely, another soldier remembers: 'Three years later I turned in my Party card. My little Red book. I became free in the Zone. Chernobyl blew my mind. It set me free' ('Soldiers' Chorus 2006, p. 36).

The games' option of allying to factions of differing leadership styles[1] reflects a position of post-Soviet, Ukrainian cultural memory at the crossroads of identity politics. We are now closer through the Russian nightmare of real life to the fears expressed around Khapaeva's Gothic society than in the previous two decades of the twenty-first century, back when such political tendencies had not yet coalesced into a coherent system and appeared more as sporadic and embryonic dangers (Khapaeva 2009, p. 382). The Gothic morality of neofeudal power in the post-Soviet geopolitical space, then as now, constitutes an important critical tool in analysing the sociological shifts, pressures and anxieties in Ukraine since Chernobyl.

The games in the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* trilogy, by motivating the player's progression towards personal power independent of the factions' clan economies, suggest nonetheless that the individual's self-determination is almost completely inextricable from the clan head's desire for personal enrichment. In most of the possible endings for *Shadow of Chernobyl*, when the player approaches the alien monolith inside the exploded nuclear reactor's sarcophagus, a non-interactive movie clip plays in which the player's character wishes for something that is determined by the satisfaction of certain key conditions throughout the game. The monolith corrupts these wishes by twisting their fulfilment, however, suggesting that self-interest is ultimately self-destructive. If the player has accumulated more than 50,000 RU by the end of the game, their character wishes to be rich and is crushed beneath a pile of falling debris while under the illusion that the monolith is showering them with coins. If the player has killed both leaders of the Duty and Freedom factions, they wish to rule the world and are absorbed into the monolith itself. If the player has a cross-factional reputation between 'terrible' and 'excellent' and at least one of the above faction leaders survives, the character wishes for immortality and is transformed into a statue. The game's 'true' endings can only be achieved if the player follows a quest to reveal the existence of an advanced computer intelligence called the Common Consciousness, a system responsible for the creation of the second, anomalous Chernobyl Zone and the monolith itself. The player is then faced with the choice of either linking telepathically with the technology to prevent the Zone from expanding further or destroying it to seemingly clear the Zone of danger altogether.

Shadow of Chernobyl's multiple endings represent the possibilities and failures of development out of post-Soviet Gothic society and morality. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* offers players a critical commentary on the intense ideological fixation on

1 *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* does not allow players to join these groups directly – only to work alongside or for them.

the Zone by competing political narratives of democratic openness and authoritarian interventionism. It does so through an immersive prison camp consciousness and extrapolation of Chernobyl as a nightmare with few, if any routes of escape, helping to unpack the ongoing crucible of Ukrainian national identity that developed alongside the production of the games. Throughout the trilogy's release, concluding with *Call of Pripyat* in 2009, the growing post-Soviet Gothic affect and social impact of clan economy were reflected simultaneously in the fictional nightmare of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s neofeudal conflict around a second nuclear disaster and the real-life nightmare of contemporary social struggle between national narratives. Widespread accusations of voter fraud and intimidation during Victor Yanukovych's 2004 presidential campaign furthered diplomatic tensions between Ukraine, Russia and the European Union and disintegration of the post-Soviet civic sphere. Since then, Ukraine has seen further civil disobedience, government crackdown, revolution, territorial annexation and invasion by its neighbour, Russia. It remains to be seen how the recent release of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl* (2024), whose developer, GSC Gameworld, was forced to move from Kiev to Prague due to the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, reflects the deepening crisis of post-Soviet Gothic morality.

Chapter 6

CHERNOBYL AS HYPEROBJECT: *DOC CHAOS – THE CHERNOBYL EFFECT* AND *DICKY STAR AND THE GARDEN RULE*

Chernobyl as Hyperobject

By the time we envisioned apocalypse, it was already too late. We made contact with the hyperobject of radiation through nuclear disaster, but its chains of decay transcend all human conception of event. Timothy Morton defines the hyperobject as a viscous, temporally imperceptible mass that defies the metalinguistic attempt to describe it from its outside. Following carbon deposits in the Earth's crust during the nineteenth-century Age of Steam that totalised the planet under the Anthropocene, atomic power in the twentieth century accelerated the denaturation of Nature through dispersal of radioactive materials across the globe's surface in the time since the Manhattan Project and US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Morton 2013, p. 4). We are entirely subsumed in the hyperobject of radioactivity, and Nature, perceived from within this compromised perspective, collapses into Thingness. Uncanny spatialisations that disregard the quest for objective truth have spread rhizomatically across first-hand testimony and fiction alike, proliferating an aesthetics of Science Fiction, Gothic and the New Weird. Ian Fetters (2022) coins the term Nuclear Inhumanities to describe the weirding of the nuclear in literature to convey the

> hyperobject-like assemblage of nuclear materials, wastes, and contaminations distributed massively across time and space that exists at the extreme limits of our scientific understanding of the cosmos and cannot be contained by human capacities for representation (Fetters 2022, p. 119).

Morton's hyperobjects also include radioactivity. In its viscous contamination of life, it 'sticks' to beings that are subject to it. Its massive extension across continents determines its nonlocal quality, i.e. 'any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject' itself (Morton 2013, p. 1). The temporal undulations of radioactive fallout 'stretch our concepts of time […] while providing space for conceptualizing things that do not fit within the usual frameworks' (Edgeworth and Benjamin 2018, 163, in Nolan 2023, pp. 346–347).

Chernobyl fiction offers insight into systemic nuclear failure and prolonged global impact. As previous chapters have shown, post-disaster Pripyat and the Chernobyl N.P.P. have been variously located in the literary constructs of a 'not-earth' (Brovkin 2006, p. 85), a war against an invisible enemy, an unspeakable yet transmissible phantom trauma, an epistemologically violated body, a monstrous political nightmare and a neo-Medieval fantasy terror. It falls to this chapter to explore Chernobyl as a hyperobject in two British texts: Dave Thorpe's illustrated novella *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect* and Tony White's novella *Dicky Star and the Garden Rule*. The radioactive aesthetic or Chernobyl effect in the experience of the nuclear hyperobject is characterised by the two examples' transgressive assemblages of visual art, literature, corporeality, (trans)sexuality and gender to express the horror of unthinkable, global, radioactive infection. Through their hybrid Gothic-Romantic and Science Fiction literary styles, they realise radical new identities that have been unmade or remade by Chernobyl both psychologically and physiologically. These selfhoods are 'a chance formation of elementary particles, or […] nothing but the correlate of the activation of neurobiological phase-spaces' (Mackay 2012, pp. 3–4).

Before engaging in these two texts, however, it is necessary to introduce the hyperobject's emergence in the Gothic aesthetics of Chernobyl fiction. I will do so through analysis of a poem in Mario Petrucci's *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*.

Queer Love in the Time of Chernobyl

The degradative transcendence of the atomic posthuman has a second, pre-industrial predecessor in the form of the Black Death infectee. Unlike COVID-19, a virus of withdrawn agency which 'merely seeks to replicate as many times as it can through the infection of as many human bodies as possible' (Nolan 2023, p. 342), Medieval plague as hyperobject took on an aspect of divine punishment. As Eugene Thacker notes, pestilence as extension of sovereign power is a 'quasi-vitalised "thing"' or '"event" that is at once a divine emanation and […] a source of social and political chaos'

(Thacker 2012, p. 64, 66). Radiation is both imperceptible hyperobject and harbinger of contaminative cultural horror. The Chernobyl victim represents the threatened public sphere, what society finds intolerable yet unsayable. Families of evacuees from the Zone living in Kiev were reluctant to host their displaced relations due to fears of radioactive cross-infection, resulting in the creation of a Chernobyl ghetto in the city, nicknamed Little Pripyat.

The poem 'Goluboy' in Mario Petrucci's *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl* conflates the exploded reactor with a prevailing sense of Soviet homophobia. What Morton terms the hypocrisy brought about by hyperobjects – the inability to integrate them into our knowledge systems – is doubly marked here. Homosexuality in mainstream Soviet and post-Soviet culture, like the hyperobject, 'is not a function of […] knowledge' (Morton 2013, p. 2). When Ramzan Kadyrov, current Head of Chechnya, said that there were no gays in his Republic (2020), he was displaying precisely the withdrawn properties of the hyperobject. The literal translation of the Russian word Goluboy is 'light-blue', but it is also Russian slang for 'gay' (Petrucci 2004, p. 6). The poem imagines the prejudice levelled at a same-sex Chernobylite couple assimilated into the mounting fear of spreading radioactivity. It begins by staging a conventional encounter of homophobia in the aftermath of the disaster:

> Camera crews interview
> the other couples. Never us.
> Out in the square, the men
> swivel as we pass. Mumble
> *goluboy* – but with no laughter
> in it. They blame the radiation (Petrucci 2004, p. 44).

Hatred turns to horror as the hyperobject of radiation dawns on the Soviet consciousness. The hyperobject makes contact through the gradual realisation of the disaster's temporal and genetic extent, driving Gothic aesthetics in Speculative Realism and rendering queerness a hyperobject in itself – part of the immaterial fabric that envelops the new, disorienting post-Chernobyl reality:

> dogs and cats are running
> together. Boys are netting fish
> without fins. Newborns arrive
>
> with yellow blood. And now
> this. We have become to them
> all too plain. Together we lose

our hair. Lose our fingernails.
With each day our complexion
grows towards the moon. Me

and my Mal'vina. As death nears
it makes us twin. You know
– that reactor was worth it

Almost (Petrucci 2004, p. 44).

Queer love merges with the transformative ecologies of Nature and self. The marginalised couple decays in a process of undeath that the poem interpolates into congenital disorders and the mutation of fauna. Passed over by the camera crews in favour of heterosexual interviewees, they then become all too plain within the systemic abnormalities of radioactive change, part of 'the *invisible presence* of the hyperobject itself, which looms around us constantly' (Morton 2013, p. 76). What looms here is the noumenal content of the destroyed reactor, incorporating homosexuality into its Thingness by shining through it. It is said by one eyewitness that during the fire from the initial explosion, the smoke over the nuclear power plant was blue (Katya P., 'Monologue About Why We Can't Live Without Chekov and Tolstoy', in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Alexievich, Svetlana, copyright © 2006, p. 101). Goluboy as homophobic epithet, reference to the emergency's light blue radioactive vapours and juxtaposition with Malvina, the beautiful, blue haired marionette in Tolstoy's fairy tale, *The Golden Key* (1936), serve to enshrine Chernobyl, homosexuality and elegant performance in the hyperobject:

Now we can dance
down our street unmolested.
Now it is we who radiate

power. […]
And so we two

have this world to ourselves.
They dare not risk their boots
on us. Fear to their marrow

what might be exchanged
between us in an insult.
Or a glance (Petrucci 2004, pp. 44–45).

The freedom to express sexual orientation and queer desire arises in the comet tail that is the hyperobject's overwhelming of heteronormative social order. It manifests an energetic, libidinal power that is equivalent to the ambient plague of the Black Death. As Thacker puts it, the 'biological disaster' of pestilence 'courses through human beings themselves – within bodies, between bodies, and through the networks of global transit and exchange for bodies politic' (Thacker 2012, p. 62). The unfolding pathways of Chernobyl infection – the streets, roads, cities and nations of the USSR – are folded into the unnameable blasphemy of homosexuality that is anathema to conventional Soviet identity politics.[1] The homophobic slur of goluboy that earlier in the poem was reappropriated by the blueness of radioactive infection dissolves completely in the paralytic fear of what might result in any sort of contact with an irradiated gay couple. 'In the chronicles of the Black Death', as Thacker reads, plague is 'something that spreads in the air, in a person's breath, on their clothes and belongings, even in glances between people' (Thacker 2012, p. 64). The viscosity of the hyperobject carries with it an implosion of reason inflected with an irrational fear of homosexuals. The end of the Soviet world is caused not by Chernobyl nor the homosexuality which it renders visible, but the hyperobject's impact on Nature and social relations. 'Goluboy' expresses the inescapable violation of the reason upholding a civilization's structure and values, a concept-horror for the imperceptible Thing itself rather than its tangible effects. 'Hence, the purest horror', according to George J. Seig, 'is some *concept* which proves to be the most horrifying of all' (Seig 2012, p. 35). Thus, in the poem, the theoretical, existential fear of a force that becomes unnameable and disturbs the very co-ordinates of social life dramatises Morton's notion of the hypocritical failure of a descriptive metalanguage central to his concept of the hyperobject. It exemplifies a poetics in the changing human art and aesthetic experience that emerges in the era of hyperobjects, a geological time of cultural production that locates us in what he terms the Age of Asymmetry (Morton 2013, p. 2).

Part I. The Hyperobject Effect: *Doc Chaos* and the Trans-gressions of the Nuclear Inhumanities

There is perhaps no greater concept-horror than that of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Unlike the protracted and temporally obscured environmental impacts of climate change or radioactive decay, fear of nuclear

1 For studies on homophobia in the Soviet Union, see Dan Healy's *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (2017) and Uladzimir Valodzin's working paper, *Criminal Prosecution of Homosexuals in the Soviet Union (1946-1991): Numbers and Discourses* (2020).

annihilation in the latter stages of the Cold War presented an imminent horror affect. As possibility, the hyperprospect of megadeath pulled the global consciousness into a sort of temporal foreshortening (Morton 2013, p. 66), a continually deferred yet ever-present threat spread across the world. Here, concept-horror arose as a potent nonlocality in which apocalypse could emerge either at the hands of an opposing superpower or through an accident at a nearby nuclear power plant. In Dave Thorpe's illustrated novella, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, the nuclear hyperobject's Age of Asymmetry is expressed through the transgressive assemblages and aesthetics of comics art, genre literature and sex/textuality.

Doc Chaos exposes the withdrawn properties of the atomic hyperobject. 'Nuclear radioactivity', Fetters writes, 'is one of these real externalities, belonging to a hypernatural cosmos that we humans lack the capabilities to fully comprehend' (Fetters 2022, p. 119). Morton puts it another way: in Heidegger's tool-analysis in *Being and Time* (1927), when a tool is executing normally, it becomes invisible to us; we see it only when it malfunctions (Morton 2013, p. 14). Thorpe exposes this backdrop as horrific realisation of the hyperobject's immersive power over life through blurring the distinctions between bodies and technology. By writing in the shadow of the hyperobject, he renders a breathless and transgressive literary style that accelerates society into a '*flat ontology* in which there is hardly any difference between a person and a pincushion' (Morton 2013, p. 14). Doc Chaos, the novella's titular antihero, begins his retrospective narrative by recounting his birth:

> I discovered that I did not 'plop out'; instead I was from my mother's womb untimely ripped, premature. A male doctor sliced my mother's belly and forcibly yanked me. Blind and wild, into this world where nature was surrendering its marvellous territory to the invasion of technology. I was unprepared for this ejaculation; for days they cocooned my sickly body inside a techno-mother, the opposite of moist and dark and squidgy, walled with plastic and steel, fed by chemicals, oxygen and electricity. No human touch felt I, but synthetic substances sustained my growth and secured for me a fingernail's grip on the cliff-edge of life while I summoned strength to haul my slight flesh-bag onto the ledge that was the first step on the staircase of my brilliant career (Thorpe 1988, p. 5).

This abject body reflects Morton's notion of the self as an entity interpenetrated with other entities. As a sickly child, Doc Chaos was sustained by science and technology in the form of 'smiling men and women [who] would push metal probes into my orifices, shine lights at me, stick needles in me, feed me

coloured pills, put headphones on my head and strain my ears with shrieking bleeps or high-pitched whines' (Thorpe 1988, p. 10). The narrative around this person-pincushion hybrid collapses existing conceptions of Nature and society. His difficult birth and childhood bring the obscured texture of nuclear ontology to the forefront of attention:

> It was July, 1950. The same month, on the Cumbrian coast in north west England, only a few miles from where I was being nurtured, the first British nuclear pile at Windscale went active. […] My birth thus coincided with another great intervention into the territory of nature. Our destinies would forever be interwoven as inextricably as the English person's love for milk in tea, an exquisite and civilized combination (Thorpe 1988, p. 8).

The imbrication of atomic energy in Nature and British national identity serves to undermine the conventional threat of the nuclear plant as the potential cause of disaster. As Morton theorises, 'there is something about hyperobjects that is more deeply challenging than these "disasters"'. (Morton 2013, p. 16). The real danger of nuclear power is that it is already everywhere enmeshed invisibly in the rituals of everyday life, and the denial of a serious accident is a denial about causality, a weakness of misperceiving the overarching phenomenon as a mere happenstance that takes place against a stable scientific background. When Doc Chaos learns of the fire at the Windscale reactor his father assures him that 'as nuclear power was a new technology there were bound to be mistakes early on' (Thorpe 1988, p. 15). But Chaos then reflects:

> When the truth about the events at Windscale Number One plutonium-production reactor on 8-12 October 1957 eventually emerged almost twenty years later, I had already changed my mind about nuclear power, so I was no longer surprised by what had happened. It seemed perfectly to be expected. It is normal. But it is the normality that Normalism hates to admit exists (Thorpe 1988, p. 15).

Normalism's repression of systemic technological failure also reveals the corruption of the British nuclear State. The government demanded farmers discard the gallons upon gallons of milk from irradiated cows belatedly, and the economic incentives of production overrode this order. Capitalism, for Morton, 'is reactive rather than proactive' (Morton 2013, p. 21), focused on recovering or accepting losses in light of emergency as opposed to seeing the already-existing conditions of the hyperobject from which the alarm originates. Doc Chaos reveals that 'the government told the farmers to

throw away their milk – but too late; and how many took the compensation and ran? "Production was very high this year, sir, almost 50% up. So that'll be £5,000. Psst […]Wanna buy some cheap milk?"' (Thorpe 1988, p. 17) Though he did not like milk enough to drink it, he states that his younger sister who did, died of leukaemia seven years later. The radioactive hyperobject's temporal undulation in the form of its (deniable) long-term health impacts confound conventional understandings of crisis. The indeterminable nature of initial environmental or population infection withdraws this process from cognition, raising the question of whether international adoption of nuclear energy means 'the end of the world is already happening, or whether perhaps *it might have already taken place*' (Morton 2013, p. 16).

Doc Chaos's narrative proceeds in an experimental, transgressive fashion that focuses on the aesthetics of sex, technology and death in conveying the flat ontological convergence of human cruelty and the destructive capabilities of science. In a gesture of fidelity towards the hyperobject's grip on humanity, the story releases an 'appropriate level of shock and anxiety concerning a specific ecological trauma' (Morton 2013, pp. 8–9). In one chapter, the adolescent Doc Chaos masturbates over a double-page photo of a Minuteman missile in a copy of *Flight* magazine and collects clippings about crime figures, famines, natural disasters and pollution, 'as though he believes it reveals a deeper truth about human nature than civilised life strives to uphold' (Thorpe 1988, p. 43). Throughout his maturation, he develops a hatred of life and relish for its mutilation and destruction. As an adult, he abandons all notions of ethics and morality, embracing an antihumanist stance of 'Pure Science incarnate, made flesh. I am curiosity, empiricism and naked lust without anything but self-interest' (Thorpe 1988, p. 49). He invents a brain transplantation technique in which the subject is viewed as '*no more than a poor bare fucked neural aberration*' and '*a body* [that is] *a machine for playing with*' (Thorpe 1988, p. 31). In a trial run of the operation, the abject body of the brain donee, an alcoholic named Malcolm, 'with its erupting carbuncles, varicose veins, burnt-out liver, arthritis, malnutrition and all […] could still recognise me, it could speak. I won't repeat the foul language it uttered for fear of besmirching his noble reputation. It could blink and even lick its lips' (Thorpe 1988, p. 24).

This ironic glorification and Gothic excess of scientific achievement navigates the anthropocentric exceptionalism of consciousness and rational enquiry. Graham Harman identifies the double denial of our species' supremacy, in which humans seek vainly to elevate themselves above the web of life even as they claim an ontological stake within it:

> On the one hand, scientism insists that human consciousness is nothing special, and should be naturalized just like everything else. On the

> other hand, it also wants to preserve knowledge as a special kind of relation to the world quite different from the relations that raindrops and lizards have to the world [...]. For all their gloating over the fact that people are pieces of matter like everything else, they also want to claim that the very status of that utterance is somehow special (Harman 2011, in Morton 2013, p. 18).

Doc Chaos's transformation of people into objects engages with this double denial. He at once expresses the interconnectedness of human life to all other life and embodies the narcissistic fantasy of asserting its uniqueness. He theorises: '*On individual level, neuron widths at synaptic junctions are small enough for Brownian motion to have an effect. The spontaneity of some human behaviour may have roots in sub-atomic chaos*' (Thorpe 1988, p. 46). On the basis of this statement, 'neuroscience circumvents the supposedly irreducible ambit of self-consciousness' (Metzinger 2004, in Trafford 2012, p. 189). Conversely, Doc Chaos's monstrous grandiosity 'elevates the structure of human *thought* to the ontological pinnacle' (Harman 2011, in Morton 2013, p. 19) through a hybrid aesthetics of Gothic and Science Fiction. By reconfiguring well-known quotations from Shakespeare and the Shelleys, as exemplified in his claims '*scientists are the unacknowledged legislators of the modern world*', '*all the world's an operating theatre and I am the greatest surgeon*' and '*I do not shudder to think future ages might curse me as their pest*' (Thorpe 1988, p. 25, 30, 38), Doc Chaos maliciously self-identifies at once with the nonlocal and temporally dispersed scientific destruction of the human as a special category of being and with the monstrousness of Victor Frankenstein's egotism.

Gothic horror, narcissism and the 'literally *mind-bending*' (Mackay 2012, p. 22) form of Speculative Realism come together in the novella to form new, vicious and viscous relationships between objects structured by the neurological and subatomic hyperobjects of modernity. Doc Chaos furthers his brain transplantation research to enable his habitation of physically attractive bodies and facilitation of a romantic persona. This development serves to express human relations as a collision of superficial and transitory objects on the one hand and a Gothic aesthetics of narcissistic power, pleasure and heightened emotion on the other. According to his narration, when Doc Chaos's string of lovers discover his true identity, they are immersed in sensations of disgust or complete adoration and relate to him through masochistic appeals:

> When they found out about me, they'd run away in terror screaming "Doctor – you're inhuman – how can you even think about performing such monstrous experiments?" Or else they'd worship the very ground

> I trod on, pleading "Doctor – won't you tread on my fingers just once more, even if you crush them until they are a mangled pulp, just so I can kiss the place where you touched your divine corpus onto my impure vessel?" (Thorpe 1988, p. 54)

Chaos, for his part, treats these exchanges with a mixture of pragmatism and glee, transgressing the Hippocratic oath:

> Because I couldn't risk them giving me away, there was unfortunately usually no alternative but to kill them. To avoid their death having been in vain, and out of respect, I'd make sure I used their bodies in an experiment in limb or head transplant. Sometimes in cases of special reverence on my part I would transplant my own brain into their bodies (Thorpe 1988, p. 55).

When he meets an unnamed freelance writer specialising in exposing the plights of homelessness who has developed a guilt complex 'causing him pain behind his frontal lobes, that had been lodged there in the street battles of '68', Chaos splits his head open with a machete; '"*The cut worm forgives the plough*", gurgled I as I thought of the low level of my tissue vat' (Thorpe 1988, p. 30).

Medical ethics and protest politics are humiliated and brought low before Doc Chaos's scientific transaction of (ultimately imprisoning) human bodies. The novella also considers a more expansive, positive experience of the hyperobject than through violated, anonymous meat. Following the productive reorientations of H.P. Lovecraft's sublime hatred of life and adherence to homophobic, misogynistic and xenophobic cultural values, *Doc Chaos* shifts the malevolent uses of science and nuclear power into more liberatory configurations of horror, 'toward a vitalistic, activist, and wonderous celebration of otherness, manifested in a variety of ways, from ethics to erotics, and literature to philosophy' (MacCormack 2016, p. 200).

The ontological chaos thrown at us by the hyperobject undermines cultural Normalism and linear social development, an impact Doc Chaos conceives as a destruction of androcentric gender norms. As a teenager he says to his mother that 'The human body in mathematical terms represents a nonlinear system which, rather than yielding regular and repeatable behaviour can also display unstable, even chaotic solutions' (Thorpe 1988, p. 47). The hyperobject of theoretical physics 'should encourage you as a woman, since it marks the beginning of the end for patriarchal values in science' (Thorpe 1988, p. 49). Here, Doc Chaos embraces subatomic rather than merely biological identity,

which is congruent with the hyperobject's elementary and cosmic aspects; 'I extend outwards to the stars and inwards to quarks and charmed particles. I move fractically between the two worlds and all worlds in between' (Thorpe 1988, p. 29), he says. This expanded field of contact demonstrates a grander site of containment, configured in gendered terms:

> Linear equations, like Darwinism and Freudian theory, represent the phallogocentric thrustings of male scientists worried about the size of their pricks through the virginal veils of the unknown universe. Mankind is not the centre of the universe nor can one-dimensional logic hope to describe the wonder of the repeating patterns of the fractal-infested, morphologically resonating, quantum leaping, multidimensional energy fields that we perceive as material and spiritual reality (Thorpe 1988, p. 49).

The vitalism of physics that undergird our lived experience transcends sex-changing brain transplantation to reveal an expanded limit to gender identity. Sex and gender at an invisible rather than physical level decenters the human by transcending it. The hyperobject stretches selfhood to a cosmic absolute; 'there is no centre and we don't inhabit it [...] there is no edge! We can't jump out of the universe' (Morton 2013, p. 17). Though there is no exit strategy from the cosmos, Speculative Realism enables us to inhabit it more fully. Doc Chaos reorients himself as a posthuman force of physics, embracing and even embodying the catastrophic potential of nuclear power: 'From this point on an alternate identity began to become apparent to me. One that would bring my point home much better, and one with which I might, one day, merge' (Thorpe 1988, p. 39). He historicises the international activation of nuclear power plants and accidents in the first person, identifying with the malignant uselessness of its material production:

> [19]73: 17 countries hooked into the world with 167 reactors (holiday homes for lucky me) churning away at 61,000 MWe, piling up that nuclear waste. But it wasn't enough. More! I wanted more! The world's most useless commodity – but not to me. Cooling ponds throughout the world filling up with burning deadly waste, nobody knows what to do with it (Thorpe 1988, p. 63).

Normalism's denial of hazardous contact with the nuclear hyperobject culminates in Thorpe's reading of the Chernobyl N.P.P. In his version of events, Aleksandr Akimov, a shift supervisor of nuclear technicians at the site, is having an affair with a Pripyat woman, Petra, who is married to the

director of the power station. According to the novella, 'It is like that, in this town, an artificial fairly new town with a high proportion of young families, many of the wives not having full time jobs ascribed to them' (Thorpe 1988, p. 66). The narrative suggests:

> Having affairs combats boredom. He [Aleksandr] likes the thrill of the clandestine meetings, but he isn't stupid enough not to realise that it's a dangerous pastime and one that could potentially even lose him his job, especially given who her husband is. Perhaps he could just see her less from now on […] Yes that's what he should do. Besides, she is becoming a shade too assertive (Thorpe 1988, p. 66).

Patriarchal relations between the sexes encompass Aleksandr's internal commentary during the disastrous Reactor Four test that he oversees, in which he conflates control of the reactor's technology with domination of the female body through sexual intercourse:

> I love to feel this power in my hands. A nuclear power station is the ultimate woman. That's what I sometimes think. When she goes critical I think of her having multiple repeat orgasms. Petra. God what a bitch she can be when she's on heat. Should I really drop her? Can't we just be more careful? It is my job to keep her purring away. And she behaves beautifully (Thorpe 1988, p. 72).

Doc Chaos identifies instead with the scientific object as posthuman, unravelling the misogynistic metaphors of gender inequality attached to nuclear power. The queerness of the narrative's developing subatomic subjectivity subverts Normalism's desire for control. Doc Chaos meets and falls immediately in love with Jo, an individual whom he perceives as his sole equal, describing her face as 'moon-like: cratered […] caterpillar-like: hairy. It sported bloodshot eyes that were piercing and full of hate and superiority. It was beautiful in its uncompromising lack of anything conventionally called virtue' (Thorpe 1988, p. 56). Jo introduces herself to Doc Chaos:

> My name, once upon a time, was Martha. But I was never happy in the raiment of a woman. I felt like an alien sex fiend in a foreign body. So some years ago I performed an operation upon myself which gave me in addition to my present characteristics all (yes all) the properties of the male, However, this has resulted in an appearance unspeakably hideous in some people's eyes. (Thorpe 1988, p. 57).

At first, the novella provides an antihumanist and fetishised reading of Jo's hermaphrodite body along the lines of traditional Lovecraftian biology, such as that which appears in *The Dunwich Horror* (1928). Doc Chaos remarks: 'I loved Jo's biological irregularities – they gave her&himself character, and were to provide much source of variety in lovemaking' (Thorpe 1988, p. 57).

However, their relationship transcends corporeal notions of intersexed identity to dramatise the collapse of hypersubjects in the age of nuclear catastrophe and social modernity. Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer (2021) define hypersubjects as privileged individuals who have ushered in the era of hyperobjects. Hypersubjects are 'typically but not exclusively white, male, northern, well-nourished, modern in all senses of the term' (Morton and Boyer 2021, p. 14). Examples of hypersubjects in *Doc Chaos* include 'Her Majesty the Queen of Normalism, Elizabeth II, [who] switched power from the Calder Hall Magnox nuclear reactor onto the national grid' (Thorpe 1988, p. 14), and Soviet nuclear technocrats like Aleksandr Akimov. Hypersubjects 'wield reason and technology, whether cynically or sincerely, as instruments for getting things done. They command and control, they seek transcendence, they get very high on their own supply of domination' (Morton and Boyer 2021, p. 14). Doc Chaos and Jo reflect the hypersubject pushed to breaking point, of 'hyperobjects […] whispering in their ears that this being and time they have fashioned in their own image and for their own convenience is dying' (Morton and Boyer 2021, p. 14). During sexual intercourse, Doc Chaos and Jo switch bodies through brain transplantation surgery. In a postcoital conversation, Jo says to Doc Chaos: '"We have made dna", and "You are Doc Chaos […] You are Nature's Revenge"'. He responds with: '"Nonsense," I smiled, as I spliced a gene casually. "I am a Post-Natural Phenomenon"' (Thorpe 1988, p. 61). Such denaturing of Nature identifies the couple with the hyperobject as the repressed consequences of Normalism's social and material progress. Doc Chaos exclaims: 'We pit our lust against yours, o lust for order, lust for linearity, lust for boredom and tv, lust for cars and power, lust for death and pop, lust for romance and sound systems, lust for fashion and mortality' (Thorpe 1988, p. 61). They marry and Doc Chaos plans a honeymoon on 'a night that would truly go down in the world's history […] 25 April 1986' (Thorpe 1988, p. 68).

The couple's transgressive erotics embody the hyperobjectivity of genetic and atomic science that flings the hypersubject into chaos and darkness, from which new forms of subjectivity can begin to emerge. Thus, Doc Chaos and Jo represent a dark hypersubjectivity, wherein the benighted hypersubject finally collapses at the apocalyptic threshold of Chernobyl. Doc Chaos and Jo's transformative identity, as the embodiment of pure nuclear power and its catastrophic potential, reflects Morton and Boyer's identification of the

hypersubject's terminal phase: as 'transcendent', but in in 'an increasingly flickering, spectral way; his monophasic being is perpetually out of sync' (Morton and Boyer 2021, p. 15). In Chernobyl Reactor Four, which the novella reimagines as a bridal suite, Doc Chaos and Jo engage in this shimmering dispersal of hypersubjectivity to produce new, threatening forms of nuclear multiplicity: 'We had both been fertile. We both produced spawn. And by fission the spawn would grow. And grew. It was beautiful, it was frightening. We were in a state of flux' (Thorpe 1988, p. 69). This multiphasic transformation occurs in a scene of sublime terror, indicating not only the trauma of nuclear death but also the joyful creation of posthuman life:

> Our skin had long since disappeared. Our bodies had vapourised in the maelstrom of creation. What was left was something else which operated in a purer realm. We glittered with variety. We coruscated, glittering like guy fawkes fireworks, radiating the spectra of the rainbow. It was beautiful. It was frightening (Thorpe 1988, pp. 70–71).

Imminent nuclear disaster hints at the emergence of the hyposubject. In contrast to the hypersubject's pretensions to power and control, Morton and Boyer's hyposubject is pregnant with possibility. They are 'multiphasic and plural, not-yet, neither here nor there'. They 'play, they care, they adapt, they hurt, they laugh' and 'are necessarily feminist, antiracist, colorful, queer, ecological, transhuman and intrahuman'. And yet, most importantly, hyposubjects resist all attempts at summarisation (Morton and Boyer 2021, p. 15). On the cusp of the reactor's explosion, Doc Chaos and Jo embrace some but not all of the hyposubject's queer, transhuman, playful potential: 'Playing, dodging around the vertical columns in the blue light the pair of us became very excited. […] Our energy crackled and danced. Our energy sent the temperature rising, rising far beyond the limits of human experience' (Thorpe 1988, p. 69). Queer sex and intrahuman fusion relate to the object of nuclear technology directly, as opposed to Aleksandr's metaphorical conflation with heterosexual conquest. Doc Chaos narrates: 'S&he brought his/her rod in and out controlling my energy level, boring me (but I was the opposite of bored) and […] our bodies were fused together' (Thorpe 1988, p. 69). The couple's physical embodiment of nuclear fusion is depicted in Pete Mastin's accompanying illustration of an intersex, multi-armed being reminiscent of the Hindu God Shiva, the destroyer of worlds referred to by Robert Oppenheimer after the first atomic bomb test near Los Alamos. The illustration's analogy to Shiva as both creator and destroyer reflects the transcendent nature and pure agency of radiation: 'Radioactivity is a superior form of matter to human life matter because it modifies it', Doc Chaos claims. 'It is absolutely destructive. Or, to put it another way, absolutely creative'

(Thorpe 1988, p. 75). The couple's transformative, dark hypersubjectivity therefore complicates the hyposubject's emergence at Chernobyl, their subatomic procreation ignoring its subscendent refusal of absolute knowledge, language and power in the era of hyperobjects. Doc Chaos and Jo remain committed to the ecstatic power of collision between hypersubject and hyperobject, to the absolute destruction of the Anthropocene's technology and culture. As the reactor goes into meltdown, Doc Chaos exclaims:

> We are melting in the heat. We are almost completely disynthegrated. We are encouraging disassembly. Love has wreaked its ultimate destruction. Ah, the destructive power of love! Humans are right to fear it and yet are so fascinated by this emotion. They write endless love songs and buy the records, learning to sing along with the words, but they don't understand the emotion in the slightest (Thorpe 1988, p. 73).

Nonetheless, the queerness, play and pain of the couple's relationship (in short, its hyposubjective elements) create new forms of ecological posthumanism and hyposubjectivity in the aftermath of Chernobyl. Love, hatred, destruction and creation all come together in an instant of libidinal ecstasy, laying the groundwork for the adaptation of future generations as hyposubjects living in the era of the nuclear hyperobject. Doc Chaos describes the immediate aftermath of the Chernobyl explosion (Figure 6.1):

> At first, in the surrounding Ukraine countryside showers of our children fall. They are instructed upon contact with humans to go straight for the thyroid gland. Make for the thyroid gland! I recall the sacrifice made by my sister Jasmine. Many more must make that sacrifice before the transformation of the human race is complete (Thorpe 1988, p. 75).

The destructive power of love is conveyed through a Gothic aesthetics of mutation and ambivalent affect. In an illustration by comics artist Duncan Fegredo, the radiation released from the destroyed reactor and its airborne spread across Europe are represented by heart shapes, expressing the emotional paradox of love and fear required of the hyposubject as native of the irradiated Anthropocene. Learning to live in the extended aftermath of Chernobyl is learning to live with chaos, perhaps to bear witness to and even love in the ever-present possibility of radioactive infection and mutation. The hyposubject's emotional aesthetics of coping with life amidst the nuclear hyperobject are embodied by Doc Chaos's final words to Jo on their wedding night: 'my love, my love, how beautiful you were. Let me expose myself now to your radiation' (Thorpe 1988, p. 75).

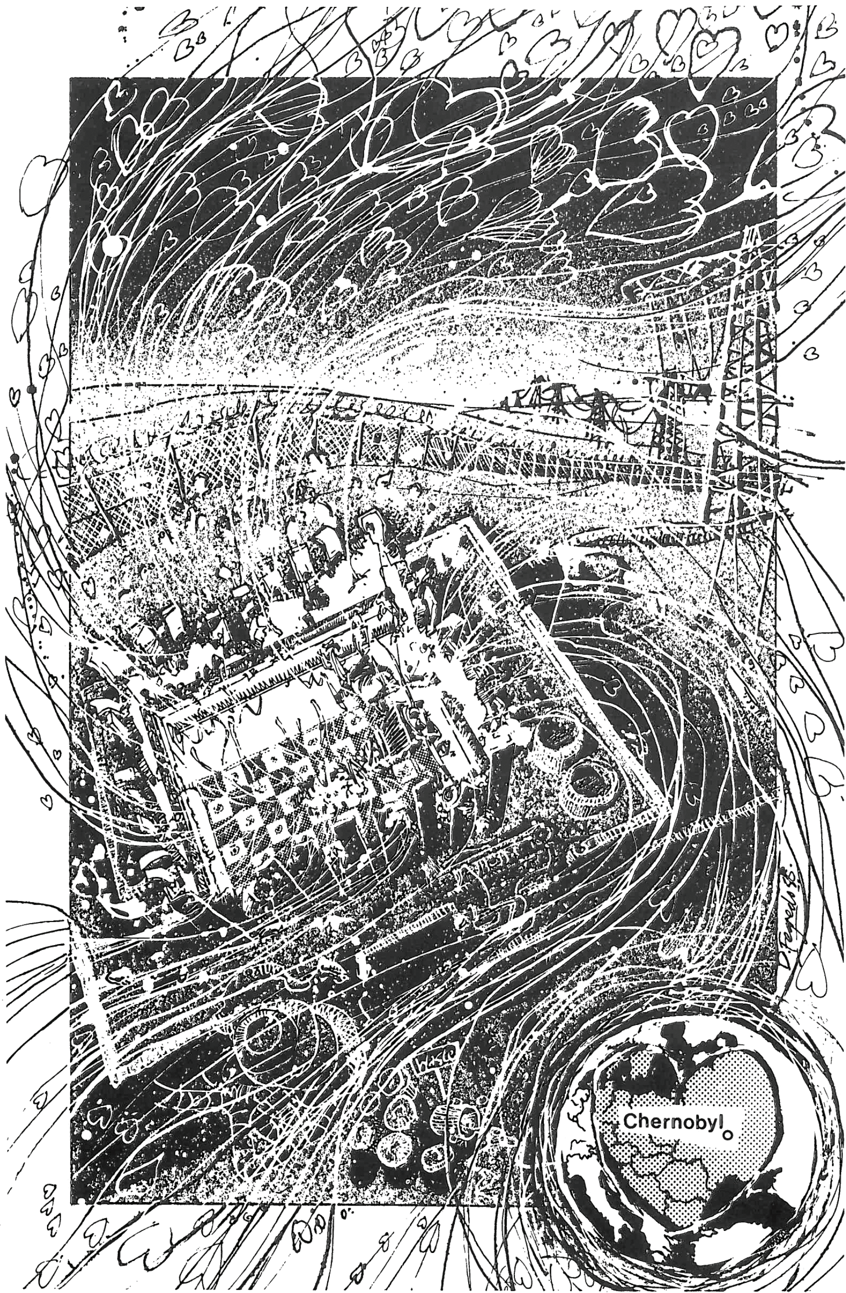

Figure 6.1 Duncan Fegredo, illustration to Chapter 30, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect* (1988), p. 74.

The Gothic History of Objects

The Gothic's antirealist and affective literary style is fundamentally object-oriented. Gothic materialism, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2023) writes, centres experiences of Gothic fiction's characters and readers around confrontations with objects. Gothic's objects deconstruct 'conventional distinctions between animate and inanimate' (Weinstock 2023, pp. 2–3), evoking sublime terror or horrific dread 'when things acquire uncanny intimacy […] when humans are numbered as things among other things' (Weinstock 2023, p. 13). The destructive appearance of the first Gothic object, *The Castle of Otranto*'s (1764) oversized Medieval helmet, kills, evokes fear and heralds a transition in property ownership. Its animate communication of Manfred's disinheritance is expressed in silence, in 'a power indifferent to language […] not via human allowance. Silent things must be able to speak, exert agency, propel narrative' (Cohen 2012, p. 6). When Manfred begins to pursue Isabella with the ultimate aim of extending his lineage, 'the moon, which was now up, and gleamed in at the opposite casement, presented to his sight the plumes of the fatal helmet, which rose to the height of the windows, waving backwards and forwards in a tempestuous manner' (Walpole 1998, p. 25). The helmet's articulation through Gothic emotion and aesthetics acknowledges 'that a politics inheres in our relations with objects' (Cohen 2012, p. 7). The sexual politics and political legacies of Property Romance depose tyrannical and patriarchal regimes to assert modern, eighteenth-century forms of social conduct and governance.

Later Gothic objects effect a wider dethroning of human agency, invoking a species-wide humiliation of Anthropocentric power. Hyperobjects like H.P. Lovecraft's Great Cthulhu, whom Weinstock reads as an avatar of climate change, or 'the roiling elemental substrate inhospitable to human life' (Weinstock 2023, p. 11) that is the Chernobyl fallout Zone, radically decentre human supremacy over the environment. Gothic and Weird fiction can express confusion and horror in a paranoid mode to 'found a politically and ecologically engaged ethics in which the human is not the world's sole meaning-maker' (Cohen 2012, p. 7). The previous section of the current chapter concluded by considering the affective and cognitive survival strategies in *Doc Chaos* of the nuclear hyposubject living in the radically deanthropocentrised aftermath of Chernobyl. I now turn to another Chernobyl fiction of horror and transgression, the novella *Dicky Star and the Garden Rule* (2012), to consider the aesthetic and psychological impact of the destroyed reactor core via Object-Oriented Ontology.

Part II. The Reactor and Object-Oriented Ontology in *Dicky Star and the Garden Rule*

> Silence covers "zone of death" (Martin Walker, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 30 April 1986, 1, in *Dicky Star and the Garden Rule* 2012, p. 18).

Graham Harman identifies all objects under Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) as withdrawn from each other. 'Against the assumptions of common sense', he writes, 'objects cannot make direct contact with each other, but require a third term or mediator for such contact to occur' (Harman 2018, p. 8). This intervening perception comes in the form of the sensual object, a non-hidden object available to experience. In Gothic fiction, sensual objects manifest as horrific revulsions of inarticulable trauma. *Otranto*'s giant suit of armour, Victor Frankenstein's firsthand witness of his hybrid corpse-creation or Lovecraft's Cthulhu hide their excessive power behind sensual, descriptive qualities. This paradox of mounting detail and imperviousness of the Gothic object to understanding accounts for the dramatic tension in the literary styles of Gothic and Weird writing. In *Otranto*, Jaquez and Deigo respectively hear and see part of the armour suit in the vaults of the castle ('we heard a violent motion and the rattling of armour, as if the giant was rising' [Walpole, p. 35]), and Lovecraft's narrators trail off into madness before giving a satisfactory account of the horrors they encounter. For Harman, 'no sensual profile of these things will ever exhaust [their] full reality, which withdraws into the dusk of a shadowy underworld' (Harman 2011b, p. 42). Without sensual qualities, real objects remain withheld from human consciousness.

As we have seen throughout my book, Chernobyl survivor testimonies and fictions surround the resistant kernel of the destroyed reactor core with a Gothic aesthetics of horror. The representation of material decay, the 'Gothic […] tangle of junk as "debris" – waste, ruins, remains, detritus' (Weinstock 2023, p. 11), cannot fully capture its radioactive essence.

Tony White's novella, *Dicky Star and the Garden Rule*, published to coincide with the photograph exhibition *Atomgrad: Nature Abhors a Vacuum* (2011) by Jane and Louise Wilson, is set in the UK city of Leeds in the days following the Chernobyl reactor explosion on 26 April 1986. In the story, Jeremy, a chronically depressed and unemployed artist, draws associations between a photograph of the destroyed reactor published in the *Guardian* newspaper and the narrative of a Fantasy novel by Michael Moorcock, *The Warhound and the World's Pain* (1981). The passage that interests him in particular concerns the narrative of von Bek, an eighteenth-century incarnation of a chivalric paladin known as the Eternal Champion, who, fleeing the bloodshed of post-Revolutionary France, rides on horseback into an enchanted forest

in which no animals lived and few birds sang. This apparent 'borderland between Heaven and Hell', from which 'some natural catastrophe had driven the animal kingdom away' (Moorcock 1995, 10–11, in White 2012, p. 18), revolves around a beautiful castle. Von Bek describes it as

> a thing of delicate stonework, of spires and ornamental battlements, all soft, pale browns, whites and yellows, and this castle seemed to me to be at the centre of the silence, casting its influence for miles around (Moorcock 1995, p. 11, in White 2012, p. 19).

For Jeremy, Moorcock's castle constitutes the sensual qualities of the Chernobyl reactor. The aesthetics of Gothic Romance inform the intermediary relationship between experience and the non-linguistic silence of the withheld real object:

> A beautiful castle? It would certainly be as secure as a fortress, although there was not much to strike the Western eye as ornamental. That concrete, Jeremy thought, might be mistaken for pale brown stonework; that chimney and its delicate exoskeleton might seem a spire! But it was definitely right at, 'the centre of the silence,' that was for sure (White 2012, p. 19).

Jeremy's interpretation of the reactor housing as a fantasy castle akin to Otranto presiding over a zone of silence and death highlights 'the centrality of human/nonhuman interaction to Gothic narrative' (Weinstock 2023, p. 2). Its architecture, ambience and approach structure sensations of dread and ontological uncertainty in protagonists and readers, 'as humans and nonhuman beings and objects swap places' (Weinstock 2023, p. 3). In both Moorcock's novel and the Chernobyl disaster, the forest's animals give way to the object's malevolent and inscrutable power. The castle is a silent and active agent, prompting von Bek to consider: 'How could a building demand calm, to the degree that not even a mosquito would disturb it' (Moorcock 1995, 11–12, in White 2019, p. 19).

In Jeffrey Weinstock's Thing Theory, books occupy a special role as embodied Things. Performative utterances of the literary Gothic's metalanguage, in the form of prophecies, curses or spells, have the power not only to determine the fate of characters, but also the affective state of readers. The found manuscript, or 'story within a story accessed and shared by a character with a reader' (Weinstock 2023, p. 117), functions as an infection or exchange of reality with fiction in which the text seems more alive than its reader. For Weinstock, the Gothic book 'is revealed both as a

reality manipulator that shifts understandings of the past and present and, in some cases, the rules that govern the universe, and as an *affect generator* that causes characters and readers to react in particular ways' (Weinstock 2023, p. 118). While von Bek is a protagonist affected by the imposing presence of the castle in *Warhound*, Jeremy is a character in *Dicky Star* and a reader of Moorcock's novel, dramatising the corrupting influence of books and their deleterious impact on already unstable minds. Jeremy's imagination, fuelled perhaps by too much recreational drug use, transforms *Warhound* from fiction into living reality, a fantasy Medieval past into a prophetic, actual present:

> Jeremy suddenly felt nauseous and unsteady on his feet as a kind of psychic vertigo washed through his body. Was *The Warhound and the World's Pain* a work of prophecy? It wasn't possible, surely! How could a book silently impose itself on the real world? (White 2012, p. 19).

Jeremy's experience of disorientation echoes von Bek's, reducing the former to a mere witness of the text's malevolent agency. *Warhound* as predictor of the Chernobyl Zone of death warps at least Jeremy's perception of reality as it generates a negative affect. As if in response to his question concerning the novel as a reality manipulating Thing and imagination that 'radiation burns make you look like Freddy Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movie' (White 2012, p. 17),

> […] it would seem that this was precisely what was happening, for as he turned the page to continue, a small rectangle of newsprint, a bookmark, fell out and fluttered to the floor. Jeremy reached down to pick it up and as he turned it over he was horrified and reassured in almost equal measure to see that familiar fedora and burnt-tissue grin (White 2012, p. 19).

The sensual qualities of Chernobyl trauma in the form of Gothic books and fragmentary symbols constitute an experience of ecological and political horror. Images circulated in popular culture orbit the inaccessible object that is the N.P.P.'s broken reactor core.

To further Harman's uptake of Heidegger's tool analysis, 'entities need not break in the literal sense of the term, as if due to failing bolts, wires or engines. For there is already a failure of sorts when I simply turn my attention towards entities', reflecting for example on the solid floor of one's home even in the absence of the earthquake that disrupts it (Harman 2011, pp. 38–39). Jeremy and his girlfriend Laura imagine a British equivalent of the Chernobyl disaster occurring at the Dungeness nuclear power stations and consider how

the State would incorporate nuclear emergency into the normal functioning of the UK's government and national consciousness. Secrecy and political repression would engender

> [v]iolence borne of expediency not rancour. Hadn't Hilda Murrell, the rose grower and anti-nuclear campaigner been murdered by persons unknown? And others too, sacrificed it would seem on the altar of, what? Banal privilege and vested interest? And no matter the official protestations, talk of bad apples or one-offs. The terrifying truth seemed to be that it was never just for the nonce, but a repeated pattern, a habit. Secret policies. Shoot to kill. And not just in Northern Ireland, although at least the Stalker enquiry would shortly, finally, be exposing one such scurvy sore on the British body politic (White 2019, pp. 13–14).

There is no tangible object that one could point to that directly exposes the withheld real object of nuclear failure. Instead, nostalgic culture functions as a displacement of emergency and State terror, blanketing the population in comfortable idyll: 'the initially persuasive prospect that some unspecified major accident at Dungeness would be proven not by State admission, but by media collusion in the production of a new myth about the area, a story of self-sacrifice based on the all-too-English activity of gardening, of all things!' (White 2012, p. 15) The couple dub this 'the garden rule' and invent a celebrity figurehead to front it: a television presenter or variety show archetype whom they name Dicky Star. As 'the nuclear gardener' (White 2012, p. 15), Dicky overrides public associations between gardening and antinuclear campaigning that coalesced around Murrell and of conspiracy theories concerning the government's involvement in her murder. Here, State sponsored cultural commodification acts as reality manipulator and affect generator to produce quaint yet absorbing objects that consume human attention, rendering the population passive and compliant. Their aim is to '[r]educe the importance of the power station in the public imagination [and] [m]ake the nuclear issue subservient to something a bit more *cuddly*', such as renaming Windscale as Sellafield or holding 'a traditional craft come domestic displacement activity like *baking*, or jam-making' (White 2012, pp. 14, 15).

The sensual topside to the withheld nuclear object has two aspects: the comfortably familiar and grotesquely estranging. *Dicky Star* produces the affect of horrific realisation: two sides of the same coin in which intermediary objects such as Dicky Star and Freddy Krueger are both sensual experiences of radiation. This duality is enshrined in the figure of Margaret Thatcher, who was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during the Chernobyl disaster's outset. On the one hand, the novella aligns

her with the gentile misdirection of the political class: 'I hate the way she talks' Jeremy says to Laura, 'The way she speaks so gently and so close to the microphone, to create that awful imitation of intimacy with all those hideous Tories' (White 2012, p. 42). On the other, however, Thatcher represents a Faustian appeal to people's basest instincts, which provides revelatory continuity with the prophetic nature of *Warhound*. To return to the Gothic's sensual experience of ecological and political horror, Jeremy reads a passage from Moorcock's novel to Laura, in which Lucifer talks to von Bek, of

> Free Will, of loyalty to one's own needs. Of the importance of controlling one's own destiny. Every one believed himself to be master of his fate. And they had only one yardstick, of course: material well-being. It is all that is possible when one discounts one's involvement in the rest of humanity (Moorcock 1995, p. 57 in White 2012, p. 43).

Relations between fictional and nonfictional objects – protagonist, reader, and Moorcock's Devil and the real-life Margaret Thatcher with their respective speeches – exert a metatextual thing-power over cognition inhered in 'unsettling sedimented understanding of the past, the present, and sometimes the universe' (Weinstock 2023, p. 116). White's novella includes as an epigram Thatcher's infamous 1987 'No such thing as society' interview, in which she similarly claims: 'There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves' (Margaret Thatcher, 23 September 1987, Interview for *Women's Own*, in White 2012, p. 5). Jeremy realises the predictive power of Moorcock's novel, which contextualises the epigram to serve the reader's participation in the horror affect of Gothic narrative: 'It's Lucifer talking to von Bek in *The Warhound and the World's Pain*', he explains to Laura,

> "but it could be about Thatcher. You could almost imagine her saying something like that […] And the really terrifying thing, Lor," Jeremy was ashen-faced, "is that people will believe her. But if they do they will be damned. She will have their souls. *That's* what she wants! Nothing less!" (White 2012, p. 43).

The engagement of Moorcock's fantasy narrative in White's production of an occulted history that reframes Gothic protagonists' and readers' experience of reality draws them into the possibility of a future political and ecological nightmare (Weinstock 2023, p. 116):

> I think […] that if you could crawl through the wreckage at Chernobyl, if you could drag yourself through the cracks and the graphite and the rubble and the radiation and the God-knows-what, if you were able to survive all of that somehow, and if you could get close enough to really see, to look right into the heart of the beast, if you could stare directly into the actual jaws of hell, that malevolent molten core, do you know what I think you'd see? […] You'd see Margaret Thatcher. I think she is after our souls. I think she really *is* the Devil. (White 2012, p. 43)

In Jeremy's identification of Thatcher as Satan in the hell of the destroyed Chernobyl reactor, *Dicky Star* reflects on the way in which Chernobyl awakens us to our relationship with objects, forcing us to confront not only disaster but also the greater implications of nuclear power and how it transforms our environmental relations entirely.

Object-Oriented Ontology extends Gothic's negative affect into our experience of the material and cultural world. For Jeremy, Thatcher is the sensual object that enables contact between the withheld objects of Chernobyl, Windscale and the secrecy of the Soviet and British governments: 'So I was trying to bring it all together', Jeremy rants, 'but then I realised that I didn't have to, because it's Thatcher! […] She is what unites all of this. So I've been painting her'. (White 2012, p. 42) But Thatcher herself then seems to withdraw into an entanglement of object relations, which individually appear to hold no real representative power:

> Laura looked from one single drawing to another, and on around the room, she could see that in each case there was literally almost nothing there. Just a page of newsprint and a splash of white paint, or a line or two of black crayon. And yet somehow, stepping back and seeing them all together, the absolute likeness was unmistakeable. Perhaps, Laura thought, this optical illusion was the product of some cumulative act of memory and cognition that allowed the image to be constructed from one drawing to another as with the flickering projection, frame by frame, of a film onto a cinema screen […] simply some inevitable effect of the familiarity of her image that created the illusion of continuity (White 2012, p. 45).

Thatcher shifts from a sensual to a real object through Jeremy's art project. The subject can only be rendered perceptible by observing the whole network of images, thereby producing the animated portrait central to Gothic horror since that of Manfred's grandfather in *Otranto.* The living painting calls into question the structure of active looker and passive subject.

'In place of autonomous human actors', Weinstock writes, 'the Gothic redefines human beings as Latourean actants within constantly shifting networks of relationships' (Weinstock 2023, p. 1). The actant, unlike the actor, implies no special motivation of human characteristics, and is merely part of a binary opposition with another object in Gothic narrative: the passive victim of the active, living-dead object. For Bruno Latour, the tangle of imbroglios 'that had no place now have the whole place to themselves. They are the ones that have to be represented; it is around them that the Parliament of Things gathers henceforth' (Latour 1993, 144, in Cohen 2012, p. 6). Entities buried in complexity and withheld from cognition such as the functioning of repressive State apparatus or the scientific process of radioactive decay must be represented in Gothic Object-Oriented Ontology by an array of sensual if inadequate experiential surfaces. The Parliament of Things represented by the multiple approximations of Thatcher produce an image effect, a mere hallucination or overproduction of the real Thing.

This dislocation of the human from effective representational or cognitive power, the unseating of the I from linguistic or perceptual control, also occurs through a series of imagined projections of silent, post-disaster Chernobyl. Upon hearing about the Chernobyl disaster, Laura imagines 'deserted school playgrounds: Soviet schools, drab and deserted in evacuated towns' and 'men roused from lover's bed or barrack […] Were they were able to feel the radiation as they stared into that great, broken shell?' (White 2012, p. 21). She wonders:

> How was it possible to even thank them? Some sort of global whip-round? This was not, she thought, the shot heard around the world. It was more like a clap of thunder that would just keep rumbling on; death toll ever rising. And as it did so, would the anniversary come to be marked like some atomic Armistice Day? Everyone stopping work for a minute's silence? Bowed heads around the world, from creek to kraal? (White 2012, pp. 24–25)

Relations with the Zone cannot be expressed directly, only – as time goes on – through an increasingly second-hand, imitative experience. White bears witness to the proliferation of fragmented visual representations of Chernobyl that, through silence, take on a life of their own. The Zone as unassailable object intersects yet outlives its testimonial and digitally immersive reconstruction as a site of interactive, reciprocal feedback of human experience, of something felt in communion with the environment and reflected back in a text. Despite our best efforts to comprehend and represent its traumatic magnitude, the nonreciprocal communication of the Chernobyl object compels us to witness

its inscrutable language of radioactive decay and death through the futile act of silent memorialisation. It objectifies us as awe-struck biological objects in its Parliament of Things. This is a Gothic relationship between objects, of the excessive power of the destroyed reactor core or irradiated Exclusion Zone and its production of negative aesthetics in art and literature. Chernobyl proliferates and evades Jeremy's representative memory, acting as indicator of the real object's withdrawn properties and its sensual horror affect in the frantic, Gothic intertextuality woven by White's novella:

> Something about this [zone of death headline in the *Guardian* newspaper] felt as familiar as last night's dream, but he couldn't figure out why it gave him such a heightened feeling of *deja vu*. Where had he heard about this 'zone of death' before? Was it at some long-ago-attended CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] talk about the neutron bomb, the device that was supposedly capable of killing all living things whilst leaving the buildings intact? Maybe it was something of that which had persisted, but then he suddenly remembered the image [in *The Warhound and the World's Pain*] of a beautiful woman who was being transported in a sedan chair through just such a lifeless zone by a legion of the dead […]*Christ*! (White 2012, p. 18).

Conclusion

DECELERATION FROM THE STRATOSPHERE, BACK TO CHERNOBYL; OR THE RETURN OF TRAUMATIC HISTORY

Chernobyl Now and Forevermore

> […] wherever it went, the plume, or the cloud as everyone called it, was also projecting forwards in time, from generation to generation in measurable blocks, each of which could be further multiplied by a factor of two. The thirty year half-life of caesium-137 felt almost manageable, but the one-thousand-six-hundred-and-twenty year half-life of radium-236, and the twenty-four-thousand year half-life of plutonium-239 were figures that made Laura's mind boggle (White 2012, p. 36).
>
> When we talk about the past or the future, we read our ideas about time into those words. But Chernobyl is, above all a catastrophe of time (Svetlana Alexievich 2016, 39, quoted in *Chernobyl VR Project*, 2016).

As a protracted event, Chernobyl exceeds conventional human understandings of time. The perpetual unfolding of long-term radioactive decay appears to displace modern conceptions of selfhood and our relationship to the environment; objects replace history and people while heightened affect in the presence of the silent nuclear Thing overrides the reflective tools of memory and witnessed experience. This book has charted the accelerating pace of literary aesthetics and theory – an increased, global proliferation of concept-horror and Gothic style subsuming primary testimony and its Soviet political context. But as with everything around Chernobyl, things have taken an unexpected turn.

On 24 February 2022, after amassing armed forces at its border with Ukraine throughout late 2021, Russia invaded its neighbour with the aim of reintegrating the two nations into a larger Russian-centric historical

consciousness. A nuclear dimension was added to the international anxiety around the invasion when Russia occupied the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and engaged in military strikes against the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant from March 29 to April 1 and on April 3, respectively.

Future Soviet Gothic studies will likely explore the theoretical and aesthetic standpoints of Postcommunist testimony and literary trauma that ranges from the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and ensuing border conflicts in eastern Ukraine up to the current period of invasion. To what extent, following the Chernobyl testimony and fiction before it, will this material produced under the social conditions of a politically expansionist and intransigent contemporary Russia reflect Gothic's fear, humour and generally emotive, affective style?

One must resist the tendency to automatically understand current events as Gothic spectacle, however. The Lviv Centre for Urban History of East Central Europe's ongoing documentation of photographs, social media posts and 'ego-documents' ('Documenting Experiences of War', 2024) such as oral testimonies, diaries, dreams and poetry aims to capture diverse and nuanced Ukrainian experiences of the war. This multimedia archive, curated by the Centre's Head of Educational Projects, Bohdan Shumylovych, combines the nonfiction of everyday lives of volunteers, Internally Displaced Persons, military personnel and emergency workers with imaginative and literary content. For Natalia Otrishchenko, a research fellow at the Centre, the project acts as part of Ukraine's entrance into the future, and by preserving the created sources' complexity is intended to avoid simplification of the war's narrative under a straightforward dualistic morality or established Trauma theory. During George Mason University's 'Russia's War on Ukraine in Historical Perspective' online speaker series (2022), Otrishchenko characterised the word "Trauma" as omnipresent in first-hand accounts describing, and misused by scholars theorising, the everydayness of the invasion's extreme violence and impact on daily life. She raised the question of how and who best to narrate this unfolding experience, asking what sort of analysis should be conducted on these sources and emphasising the need to maintain the visibility of Ukrainian voices and scholarship on archival collection and theoretical production (Otrishchenko, 1 November 2022 [25:50–48:11]).

The Centre's project as a conversational, collective engagement in thought draws upon presentational techniques similar to those of Svetlana Alexievich's novel chorus, *Voices from Chernobyl*. Both focus on the tangible and intangible elements of protracted humanitarian disaster in Ukraine.

Gothic, as I have argued throughout this monograph, arises in unexpected moments and expressional means to convey the complex impacts and representational limitations of witnessing social trauma. Its evolving

adaptability as a plastic, aesthetic substance continues to narrate extreme sociohistorical circumstances in highly diverse and theoretically engaging ways. Gothic theses on states of memory, subjectivity, ecology and the human and nonhuman body continue to proliferate in response to the growing international crises in political identity, the environment and capitalism. It remains to be seen what role, if any, Gothic as an affective style will play in conveying the recent and current history of Russia and Ukraine.

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