

RECREATION OF CHERNOBYL TRAUMA IN SVETLANA  
ALEKSIYEVICH'S *CHERNOBYL'SKAYA MOLITVA*

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A Thesis  
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the Faculty of the Graduate School  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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by  
DORIS SCRIBNER  
Dr. Nicole Monnier, Thesis Supervisor  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

RECREATION OF CHERNOBYL TRAUMA IN SVETLANA ALEKSIYEVICH'S

*CHERNOBYL 'SKAYA MOLITVA*

presented by Doris Scribner,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts in Russian and Slavonic Studies,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Timothy Langen

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Professor Nicole Monnier

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Professor Anatole Mori

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## Preface

Придет время – я верю в это, – когда чернобыльская эпопея предстанет перед нами во всей ее трагической полноте, во всем многоголосье, в благодарных жизнеописаниях подлинных героев и презрительных характеристиках преступников, допустивших аварию и ее тяжкие последствия всех... Думаю, что для создания такой эпопеи понадобятся новые подходы, новые литературные формы, отличные, скажем, от «Войны и мира» или «Тихого Дона». Какими они будут? Не знаю.

Юрий Щербак, *Chernobyl': dokumental'noe povestvovanie*, 1991

The time will come, I firmly believe, when the Chernobyl epic... will appear before us in all its tragic fullness, in all its polyphony, in the grateful biographies of the real heroes and the scornful characterizations of the criminals who allowed the accident and its grievous consequences... I think that the creation of such an epic will require new approaches, new literary forms, different, let us say, from *War and Peace* or *Quiet Flows the Don*. What will those approaches and forms be? I do not know.<sup>1</sup>

Iurii Shcherbak, *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story*, 1989

Svetlana Aleksiyevich is a contemporary Belarusian author and journalist whose works straddle the divide between Soviet and post-Soviet time and space. Both the content of her works and her methodologies reflect the struggles of the author and her subjects to come to terms with life in a new world while hers and their identities and worldviews are still affected by the Soviet “Big Utopian” ideology.

I first became interested in Svetlana Aleksiyevich when simultaneously reading *Poslednie svideteli: sto nedetskikh kolybel'nikh* [*Last Witnesses: 100 Unchildish Lullabies*] and *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* [*Chernobyl Prayer*].<sup>2</sup> Although both are written in documentary prose and Aleksiyevich used similar methods for collecting her raw materials (tape recorded interviews with witnesses), *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* uses the material in a far more sophisticated manner than Aleksiyevich's other works. While constructed eyewitness narratives, or monologues, are at

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<sup>1</sup> Russian language quotes are from the 1991 edition of *Chernobyl': dokumental'noe povestvovanie*; translations are from the Ian Press's 1989 English translation *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story*. An excellent electronic version is also available: <http://www.x-libri.ru/elib/sherb000/00000001.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Initially published in 1985 as *Poslednie svideteli: kniga nedetskikh rasskazov*.

the heart of all of Aleksiyevich's works, the individual narratives of *Poslednie svideteli* are seemingly randomly arranged within the text, whereas the eyewitness narratives of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* are combined into "choirs" and chapters with descriptive titles and accompanied by statistics into a highly crafted work complete with an epilogue. Curious as to why Aleksiyevich would choose one form over another, I looked at comments attributed to Aleksiyevich in articles, book jackets and her official website. She states: "I've been searching for a genre that would be most adequate to my vision of the world to convey how my ear hears and my eyes see life" and "I've been searching for a literary method that would allow the closest approximation to real life".<sup>3</sup> These statements indicate a deliberate search for a literary form. Two questions which I will attempt to answer are what Aleksiyevich gains by the use of particular aesthetic (extra-content) forms she chooses, and, closely related to this, how the aesthetic manipulation of the content of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* makes the work seem more like "reality".

Aleksiyevich has written five other books that explore Soviet/post-Soviet content. (See the attached Annotated Bibliography.) I chose *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* as the focus of my work because it encompasses the majority of the varied "structures" seen in Aleksiyevich's other books; it can be seen as the evolutionary culmination of Aleksiyevich's works so far. Moreover, since there has been little literary analysis of Aleksiyevich's works, it seems this lack can best be met by acquainting others with Aleksiyevich's writing style as seen in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*.

Another issue that will be addressed is genre. Aleksiyevich emphasizes she is operating in the documentary prose genre, and as the genre question is often broached in interviews, book prefaces and biographies, the genre question cannot be ignored. Specifically, this paper will attempt to answer the question: What does the documentary prose genre (as a type of manipulation of aesthetic form) afford Aleksiyevich's works? I have discovered from research

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<sup>3</sup> "Я долго искала жанр, который бы отвечал тому, как я вижу мир. Тому, как устроен мой глаз, мое ухо..." and "Я долго искала себя, хотелось найти что-то такое, чтобы приблизило к реальности" ([http://alexievich.info/biogr\\_RU.html](http://alexievich.info/biogr_RU.html)). Translation from <http://alexievich.info/index.html>.



that the word “tension” is often used in connection with documentary prose theory: tension between the document and aesthetics, tension between reliability and aesthetics and tension between reality as verifiable truth and the expression of that reality. Viewing *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* as a document of tension through the lens of documentary prose is helpful to understanding how the aesthetic arrangement “better portrays reality”. Yet the subgenre of traumatic reality literature genre is also helpful in understanding how Aleksiyevich develops a literature of tensions to more accurately reflect *how she sees the world* (and particularly the inner hidden worlds of individuals within a large collective space). I would suggest that Aleksiyevich’s use of the documentary prose genre links her firmly to a Soviet tradition, while her border crossing into traumatic reality literature is a reflection of Aleksiyevich as a post-Soviet writer.

The theoretical texts that have most influenced this paper are Leona Toker’s “Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose—From the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies” and Michael Rothberg’s *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. My ideas of public domain, private domain, domain of privileged access, seepage and library of topoi come from Toker. Ideas about traumatic realism and mapping of the concentrationary universe come from Michael Rothberg. I use the phrase mapping of traumatic space to refer to Aleksiyevich’s development of a bifurcated structure within her monologues in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*.

From a technical standpoint, Aleksiyevich obsessively revises her books and often describes her struggles with her project in revision prefaces. Of the two Russian versions of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, I will be using the latter 2006 version published by *Vremya* in Moscow. Its highly stylized “Self-Interview” (written in lieu of a preface) seems to best showcase the tension of a Soviet/post Soviet author. When referring to Aleksiyevich’s other books, I will give the dates of the revision in parentheses when necessary. Otherwise, for general comments regarding individual books, I will refer to the book’s name only.

I work from the Russian language version of texts, but use the English in the text for the sake of non-Russian readers, with the original Russian either in text or footnote depending upon

length of translation. As far as possible, I have tried to use available English translations of Russian texts, giving credit after the translation. In general, it was difficult to find English versions of text which matched the particular revision I was using; for instance, Gessen's English language translation of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* appears to be a truncated version of the 1996 edition. Therefore, translations are mine except when indicated otherwise. I liberally refer to Aleksiyevich's dual language official website launched in 1996, *Voices from the Big Utopia* (<http://alexievich.info/indexEN.html>).<sup>4</sup> When quoting from the Russian version, I use the translation from the website's English pages. This thorough website contains in-depth biography, publishing and film history, prizes won, and links to articles about Aleksiyevich's works. Where possible, I have tried to confirm quotes and information in the website from at least one outside source. I have been surprised by the striking similarity between the language and information in the website and that in "outside" biographies, book reviews, articles and interviews by both post-Soviet bloc and Western journalists. Every "road" seems to lead back to Aleksiyevich's website. I have at times included links to Belarusian and Russian websites in footnotes as well as alternate spellings of Belarusian authors' names to aid the reader interested in more information.

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<sup>4</sup> "*Golosa strany utopii.*" It appears Aleksiyevich's earlier website was closed.

## Chapter I. Introduction to Svetlana Aleksiyevich and *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*

Я долго искала себя, хотелось найти что-то такое, чтобы приблизило к реальности, мучила, гипнотизировала, увлекала, была любопытна именно реальность. Схватить подлинность - вот, что хотелось. И этот жанр - жанр человеческих голосов, исповедей, свидетельств и документов человеческой души мгновенно был мной присвоен. Да, я именно так вижу и слышу мир: через голоса, через детали быта и бытия. Так устроено мое зрение и ухо. И все, что во мне было, тут же оказалось нужным, потому что требовалось одновременно быть: писателем, журналистом, социологом, психоаналитиком, проповедником...

Светлана Алексиевич, *Golosa strany utopii*, 2007

I've been searching for a literary method that would allow the closest possible approximation to real life. Reality has always attracted me like a magnet, it tortured and hypnotized me, I wanted to capture it on paper. So I immediately appropriated this genre of actual human voices and confessions, witness evidences and documents. This is how I hear and see the world - as a chorus of individual voices and a collage of everyday details. This is how my eye and ear function. In this way all my mental and emotional potential is realized to the full. In this way I can be simultaneously a writer, reporter, sociologist, psychologist and preacher.

Svetlana Aleksiyevich, *Voices from the Big Utopia*, 2007

### Introduction

Tension is intrinsic to Svetlana Aleksiyevich's autobiography, worldview and literary works. Aleksiyevich is conscious of the constant tension between her Soviet and post-Soviet identity and her Belarus and global perspectives and their effects on her artistic approach. This affected her decision to spend time overseas to gain a fresh perspective on the world of Soviet and post-Soviet catastrophe, the main subject of her documentary prose works. Her writings reflect a consciousness of the minute and individual within the collective. Working simultaneously in the traditions of artist and activist-journalist, Aleksiyevich strives to give voice to the inner world of trauma survivors, particularly those who lived through 20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet catastrophes. As a journalist, Aleksiyevich attempts to report the truth and thus demythologize Soviet and post-Soviet citizens' ways of thinking, especially about war and the collective. As an artist, she is concerned with developing new literary approaches to better reflect the realities of

the time period in which she lived and lives, a reality that is skewed by memory and often by Soviet ideology. In working from the artist dissident tradition which attempts to be the conscience of the nation through innovative literary forms, Aleksiyevich is following in the footsteps of the mostly male Belarus dissident tradition represented by Ales' Adamovich and Vasil Bykaw.<sup>1</sup> Yet, she also portrays a womanly reality that attempts to fill out the “missed history” of female tears, sorrow and heroics. Her further innovation to their approach is in her investigation of the individual on the background of Soviet events to determine how he understood and received himself and the surrounding world.<sup>2</sup>

### **Aleksiyevich's biography<sup>3</sup>**

Aleksiyevich's biography demonstrates her physical and intellectual movement from a closed rural Belarusian scene to the world scene, although the roots of her cosmopolitan worldview can be seen in her childhood upbringing and journalistic experiences. Born on May 31, 1948, to a military family in the Ukraine, Aleksiyevich spent the majority of her childhood and adult years in Belarus. After discharge from the army, her father moved his family to Brest, where both parents were schoolteachers. Having graduated from the University of Minsk, Aleksiyevich taught school while working for a local Brest newspaper. She gradually received more prestigious journalism positions, working first for the “Selskaya Gazeta” newspaper in

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<sup>1</sup> Alternate spellings in English of Bykau's name are Bykav, Bykaw, Bykow; in Russia he is known as Василий Быков.

<sup>2</sup> Two of Aleksiyevich's quotes reflecting this idea follow: “Жили люди в то время, они полюбили идею, или их влюбили в эту идею, или их обманули этой идеей. Как они жили, любили, умирали, как их убивали, во что они верили, в чем разочаровывались, с чем ушли з жизни. [People lived in the time [when] they either loved the idea, or they were loved into that idea, or they were deceived by the idea. How they lived, loved, died, how they were killed, what they believed in, what they were disappointed about, what they walked out of this life with]” (Igrinova, 199). “Что человек думал, понимал и запоминал во время события? Во что верил или не верил, какие у него были иллюзии, надежды, страхи? Что понял о себе и о мире... [What people thought, understood and remembered during the event. What they believed in or mistrusted, what illusions, hopes and fears they experienced. What they understand of themselves and the world]” (*Voices from Big Utopia*, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For more information about Belarussian writers, see “Kto est' kto v Belaruse [Who's Who in Belarus?]”, *Institut prav cheloveka*, 10 Nov. 2007 (<http://www.hrights.ru/text/belorus/who/Chapter5.htm>).

Minsk and then in the non-fiction section of the Russian language literary magazine “Neman”, which specialized in foreign literature.

Her newspaper and magazine work prepared Aleksiyevich for her future as a documentary prose writer: Aleksiyevich sharpened her skills in the fiction genre of short story and the non-fiction of essay and reportage. After Aleksiyevich’s documentary prose works thrust her onto the international scene, she developed close contacts with the European literary and philosophical community; in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century she lived in Europe for at least two years when life in Belarus under Lukashenko’s government became uncomfortable for the outspoken author. She has been a member of the Belarus PEN center since its inception in 1989.<sup>4</sup> Her global identity was strengthened in 2006 with the reestablishment of a solid web presence in English and Russian.

#### **Aleksiyevich’s publishing history**

Aleksiyevich’s publishing history reflects the move towards openness in Soviet and post-Soviet publishing. In 1983 the Belarusian Central Committee refused to allow the publication of her first two books, *Я уехал из деревни* [*I Left the Village*], about forced evacuations from Soviet villages, and *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* [*The Unwomanly Face of War*], which speaks of women soldiers’ experiences during WWII. In 1985, two of Aleksiyevich’s books were published in the Soviet Union: *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* was published in Russian, Chinese and Bulgarian and *Poslednie svideteli: kniga nedetskikh rasskazov* [*Last Witnesses: A Book of Non-Childish Lullabies*] (narratives composed of childhood memories of ordinary adults who were ages 3 to 14 when the WWII front moved into Belarus) was initially published in Belarusian and Russian. This established a publishing pattern for Aleksiyevich—initial publication simultaneously in a few languages and then, over a period of approximately five years, releasing the book in several

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<sup>4</sup> “ПЕН-центр – объединение профессиональных литераторов, созданное в целях расширения интеллектуального сотрудничества представителей творческих профессий, участия в международном литературном сотрудничестве, развития белорусской культуры, воспитания в общественном сознании высоких гуманистических идеалов” ([http://www.pen-centre.com/rus/pen\\_about.html](http://www.pen-centre.com/rus/pen_about.html)).

languages. In 1991, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* [*Zinky Boys*] (about Soviet soldiers' experiences during and after the Afghan war) was published.<sup>5</sup> Aleksiyevich's *Zacharovannye smert'iu* [*Enchanted by Death*], published in 1993, explores the increase in suicides after the fall of the Soviet Union. In 1997, approximately a decade after the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor, Aleksiyevich published *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* in Russian. After completing *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, Aleksiyevich began writing the still unfinished *Chudnyy olen' vechnoy okhoti* [*The Wondrous Deer of the Eternal Hunt*], a fiction novel which explores difficult love relationships between Gulag survivors and women outside of the Gulag experience.<sup>6</sup> Portions of this novel were published in English in 2003 by Glas Publishers as part of the anthology *Nine Foremost Russian Writers. U voiny ne zhenskoe litso, Tsinkovye mal'chiki* and *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* have been adapted for film documentaries and stage plays in Russian and other European cities; these productions brought both public controversy and acclaim.<sup>7</sup>

Aleksiyevich's publishing history also reads like a chart of the changing times and her struggle to evaluate these times, understand her role as a journalist and grapple with her definition of truth. A cursory perusal of the publishing list above shows that all are set in the context of twentieth century catastrophic man-made events intimately connected with Soviet history and often include a background of death or extreme loss. The reader more closely acquainted with Aleksiyevich's writings knows that each book focuses on the inner world of individuals and reflects an interaction between the catastrophic event and the individual. This is consistent with Aleksiyevich's stated goal: to publish seven books which would comprise what she calls *The Chronicles of Big Utopia*, the purpose of which is to highlight the individual voice lost in and deformed by the big Soviet project. Additionally, Aleksiyevich's publishing history reflects her

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<sup>5</sup> Some sources show a first publishing date of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* as 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Aleksiyevich's work on this novel was interrupted at least twice so she could revise her earlier former books (Igrunova, 189).

<sup>7</sup> From Voice of the Utopia website and web search for film advertisements. Although it has been difficult to ascertain the exact number, Aleksiyevich claims 21 film documentaries and three plays based on her works (*Golosa strany utopii*).

interaction with her own created works as seen by her tendency to significantly revise her books. Aleksiyevich has revised *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* once and *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* twice. Although Aleksiyevich states that she revised her earlier works, in part, to restore material deleted by the Soviet censors, her revisions also indicate a need to justify herself before an occasionally antagonistic public, to mark how memory and distance from an event skew the witness's viewpoint, and to document her own motivations and interactions with the vestiges of the Soviet myth, which she finds subconsciously restricts her journalistic judgments (Igrunova 189). She states in the preface to her 2006 revision of *У войны не женское лицо* under the date "2003":

Больше всего меня заинтересовал в моих архивах блокнот, где я записывала те эпизоды, которые вычеркнула цензура. А также – мои разговоры с цензором. Там же я нашла страницы, которые выбросила сама. Моя самоцензура, мой собственный запрет. И мое объяснение – почему я это выбросила? Многие из того и другого уже восстановлено в книге, но эти несколько страниц хочу дать отдельно – это уже тоже документ. Мой путь... (16).

Most of all in my archive I was interested in the tablet in which I recorded the episodes that the censors deleted and also my conversations with the censors. I found pages there that I myself had eliminated. My self-censoring, my own taboo. And my explanation as to why I left them out? Much of the former and the latter have already been restored in my book, but I would like to list them separately – this is also a document. My path...

While this statement highlights the struggle between Aleksiyevich's Soviet upbringing and her journalistic desire for the truth, it also shows how Aleksiyevich sees her authorial development as a secondary subject of her literary investigation. As a writer in the post-Soviet period revising a work she wrote under stricter censorship in 1985, Aleksiyevich realizes she has more political freedom to push the boundaries of openness, but wonders to what extent her self-limitations are imposed by taboos formed by her upbringing. In her revision to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, she questions, "I was convinced, once, that truth had to be followed through to the end. [...] Now I'm no longer sure. [...] Perhaps we have reached a point of no return" ("The Play of War"

153,154).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, although her revisions document changes in her witnesses' stories and the wide range of public reaction to her writings, equally important, they document Aleksiyevich's changing perspectives and her struggle to come to grips with the responsibilities in documenting "reality".<sup>9</sup>

### Reception

In sharp contrast to the ambivalence of fellow Soviet and post-Soviet readers, the European intellectual and artistic community has responded enthusiastically to Aleksiyevich's prose and has recognized Aleksiyevich as a key figure in the fight for justice and free speech. In 1996 the Swedish PEN Centre awarded Aleksiyevich the Kurt Tucholsky Prize for her "controversial writings on feminism, Russian troops in Afghanistan and Chernobyl disaster" (*Wounded Nations* 155). In that same year, her article "The Play of War", an abridged English version of her introduction to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (1996), was published in the October 1996 issue of the London-based not-for-profit's *Index on Censorship*. Although one of several contributors, Aleksiyevich's name was prominently highlighted on the magazine's cover. In 1998 she was awarded Germany's Best Political Book of the Year. Similarly Aleksiyevich was recognized in her home country and abroad for her creativity when she received Russia's Triumph Prize and the Booker Prize. Meanwhile, stipends from European benefactors in the spheres of literature and philosophy have enabled her to quietly pursue her writing career. In 2002, a grant from the

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<sup>8</sup> "Когда-то я была убеждена, что в правде надо идти до конца. [...] Сегодня, сейчас, – я колеблюсь", adding later, "Не находимся ли мы у роковой черты? Дальше – саморазрушение (*Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (1996), 13). Translation from "The Play of War".

<sup>9</sup> Both *U voini ne zhenskoe litso* and *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* revisions highlight witnesses changing their stories after the fact. A particularly striking example is found in *U voini ne zhenskoe litso* (2006) and described in Aleksiyevich's article "Uchit'sia pravde u dokumentov". A woman represented in the 1985 version writes Aleksiyevich later returns Aleksiyevich's original written transcript of her taped interview with entire sections crossed out and proffers a more acceptable version, stating, "Все это я рассказала вам, как дочке, чтобы вы поняли, как нам девчонкам, трудно пришлось на войне...Но писать в книге и рассказывать молодежи надо другое... [I told all this to you as if to a daughter so you might understand how difficult it was for us girls in the war...But [ ] need to write in a book and tell youth something different" ("Uchits'ia...", 15).



Parlement de écrivains, an endowment instituted with the assistance of the architect-philosopher Paul Virilio and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, allowed her to live temporarily in France.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

### **Aleksiyevich's Literary Precedents: Approach and Ideology**

While Aleksiyevich's writings attract readers because of their boldness in tackling controversial topics, they also elicit interest because of their experimentation with literary form. The press, other writers, and Aleksiyevich's official website hail her as the creator of a new literary approach. Evidence of her search for a literary form is abundant in the texts of her books, articles she has written and articles written about her. Still, the roots of Aleksiyevich's new form lie in that of fellow Belarus writer, Ales' Adamovich. Adamovich (1927-1994), a Belarus writer of historical fiction, film and documentary prose, is well-known for his WWII documentaries, *Блокадная книга* [*The Blockade Book*] (about the Leningrad Blockade) and *Ya iz ognennoi derevni* [*Out of the Fire*] (a documentary tragedy about the destruction of Belarus villages by WWII Nazi forces). Aleksiyevich points to Adamovich as her mentor, while he openly and frequently promoted Aleksiyevich, her genre search and her connection to his "lineage". Adamovich wrote the glowing preface to her first book and has referred to Aleksiyevich several times in scholarly works. In the "Hidden War" chapter of his *My – shestidesyatniki* [*We are Men of the Sixties*], which describes the foundational principles of the Belarus dissidents' pacifism and the ramifications of embracing a non-pacifist ideology, Adamovich discusses Aleksiyevich's documentary prose as a "book of voices [книга голосов]" which has an ability to reveal a different face of war than the one presented by society as usual (421). Later, in his article, "Problems in the New Way of Thinking" published on the heels of the Cold War as part of the Russian - American publication *Breakthrough/Proriv: Emerging New Thinking: Soviet and*

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<sup>10</sup> Virilio's interest in Aleksiyevich stems from his concept of Accident Philosophy, which speaks of the certainty of an increase in world accidents as a result of technological progress.

<sup>11</sup> As an interesting sideline, note Svetlana's biography on Fondation Cartier's webpage: [http://www.onoci.net/virilio/pages\\_uk/artistes/biographie.php?id=4&th=2](http://www.onoci.net/virilio/pages_uk/artistes/biographie.php?id=4&th=2) (June 5, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Newspaper articles and interviews have Aleksiyevich living in France and Italy to the present time; she spends her time writing, interviewing for new books and developing film projects.

*Western scholars issue a challenge to build a world beyond war*, Adamovich ties Aleksiyevich's lineage into that of Russian writers of realistic novels:

A young girl who had no standing in literary circles a few years ago, has become today one of the best writers in the past forty years. It is Svetlana Aleksiyevich who wrote *The Face of War Is Not Feminine* and *The Last Witnesses*. She is skillful not figuratively, but literally. She likes to use a tape recorder, not a microphone. Following the leads of writers of the older generation, she went out to listen to life, to record it, and an old truth was reconfirmed: There is wisdom in life! You have to just listen and grasp this wisdom. Document the facts as they occur on tape and on play-back catch the nuance of voices, truth, and psychological state of the times, now passed (129-130).

Aleksiyevich, in turn, attributes her "living voice" approach to Adamovich:<sup>13</sup>

Долго искала... Какими словами можно передать то, что я слышу? Искала жанр, который бы отвечал тому, как вижу мир, как устроен мой глаз, мое ухо. Однажды попала в руки книга "Я - из огненной деревни" А. Адамовича, Я. Брыля, В. Колесника. Такое потрясение испытала лишь однажды, читая Достоевского. А тут - необычная форма: роман собран из голосов самой жизни. из того, что я слышала в детстве, из того, что сейчас звучит на улице, дома, в кафе, в троллейбусе. Так! Круг замкнулся. Я нашла то, что искала. Предчувствовала. Алес Адамович стал моим учителем... (*U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*).<sup>14</sup>

I searched for so long... What words could explain what I heard? I searched for a genre which could reflect how I see the world--how my eyes, my ears, are tuned.

One day I came upon the book *I'm from the Fiery Village* by Adamovich, Bril' and Kolesnik. I'd only experienced such an inner shaking through reading Dostoevsky. And here was an unusual form: a novel formed from that same life, from that which I heard in my childhood, from that which today resounds in the streets, at home, in the café, on the trolleybus. So! The circle was closed. I found that, which I was searching for. I felt it.

Ales' Adamovich became my teacher.

It is apparent from the above quotes that Adamovich's and Aleksiyevich's literary goals and approaches were similar and that both authors consider Aleksiyevich heir to Adamovich's literary tradition. Two important parts of this literary tradition are a search for a genre name and an emphasis on the individual within the collective. Adamovich, aware that he was operating in an underdeveloped subgenre which had therefore not yet "grown into its name," suggests the following names for his subgenre in his preface to Aleksiyevich's *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*

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<sup>13</sup> In *Out of the Fire* Adamovich calls his work a "a documentary tragedy, evoking the memory and *living voices* of the people who were burnt, killed together with their families and their whole villages" (*Out of the Fire* 7). (*Italics mine.*)

<sup>14</sup> From the electronic version of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, 15 October 2007 (<http://www.lib.ru/NEWPROZA/ALEKSIEWICH/zhensk.txt>).

(1985): “collective novel”, “novel-oratorio”, “novel-evidence”, “people talking about themselves” and “epic chorus”(52).<sup>15</sup> Adamovich underlines what he calls the “polyphonic nature” of the genre, the borrowing of narrative structure and voice from the novel, the mixture of voices as in a musical composition, the use of documents as evidence and the epic nature of the subject matter juxtaposed against the simplicity of its presentation (52).<sup>16</sup> Adamovich’s epic, collective novel is ultimately about people talking about their individual lives rather than about the Soviet collective; it is collective only because it collects individual stories into an anthology. His focus subverts Soviet realist literature which strips characters of their individual personalities to advance the cause of the societal collective. In his preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (1985), Adamovich stresses that Aleksiyevich’s writing emphasizes the focus on the individual. In this way her first published documentary prose novel is legitimated by Adamovich’s already established position. Furthermore, Adamovich (like Aleksiyevich) insists that tape-recording conversations from real life is an excellent (and possibly the best) way to uncover psychological reality:

At first I remember being astonished (later I accepted it as normal), by the overwhelming truth revealed about man and his soul through this process. They were contained in stories told by ordinary, often illiterate women, others in letters or diaries. It was as if this material had been written by Dostoevsky. In many cases as if the person were quoting or retelling some unknown work of Dostoyevsky, or of Tolstoy! (“Problems...” 130).<sup>17</sup>

Adamovich insists that real truth, or real homespun wisdom, is found in the collective oral histories of average people. A victim of the Leningrad Siege cannot die because her children are watching. One daughter begs the children, "Turn away! Let Mommy die!" (130). Adamovich asks, “Where can one go to find a measure of this compassion, or find a similar measure of this

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<sup>15</sup> Similar labels have been applied to Aleksiyevich’s genre. (See chapter II).

<sup>16</sup> Adamovich adds to this description, “Многоголосое самоисследование жизни, когда объект и субъект повествования как два зеркала, которые друг в друге отражаются, повторяясь многократно...” (52).

<sup>17</sup> In this same article, Adamovich emphasizes Dostoevsky’s value as a compassionate truth-teller: “This closeness to death intensified in Dostoyevsky a feeling of catastrophe for the world as a whole. He sensed that this catastrophe would occur unless people started to turn from self-involvement to look for truth outside of themselves and to kindness for their fellow man” (130).

truth - only among the best material that has ever been written. It was previously only contained in the classics” (130). The above quotes suggest Aleksiyevich’s approach models the effects of the psychological novel to better reflect “reality” through literature. Adamovich also clearly reiterates the dissonance between the “collective novel” and Soviet idea of collectivity. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century collective novel, as suggested by Adamovich, individual voices, which are represented as sounds made by the soul, are heard and valued for their *variations*. Adamovich firmly links Aleksiyevich and himself into an anti-Soviet dissident tradition through their ability to consider and present reality in a new way, which is legitimated by its commonalities with traditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century masters of the Russian tradition.

Aleksiyevich has strong ideological ties to the Belarus dissident tradition through Vasily Bykaw, who, with Adamovich, was co-founder of the Belarus PEN Center.<sup>18</sup> The Belarus dissident literary tradition exists to promote Belarus culture and humanitarian ideology as it does to create new literary forms. Because both Soviet party line and dissident traditions link ideology with literary form, both the content and form of Belarus dissident writers’ works are summarily resisted before the fall of the USSR by the Soviet authorities and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union by Alexander Lukashenko’s regime. Vasily Bykaw (1924-2003) was Adamovich’s close friend, personally and professionally. After Adamovich’s death in 1994, Bykaw became one of Aleksiyevich’s greatest defenders in the often public attacks against her. Because the press often refers to Aleksiyevich as having taken Bykaw’s place as the Belarus writer or the conscience of Belarus, it is worthwhile to look into Bykaw’s interactions with Adamovich more closely, to his position in Belarus society and ultimately to the need to link Aleksiyevich with the conscience of Belarus.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Belarussian dissidents are as commonly known by the name “war writers”.

<sup>19</sup> “Светлана Алексиевич - писатель, с именем которого после смерти Василия Быкова ассоциируется белорусская литература, притом что в самой Белоруссии ее книги лет десять не издаются [Svetlana Aleksiyevich, the writer whose name with which Belarusian literature is connected after Vasily Bykaw’s death. Moreover, her books have not been published in Belarus itself for ten years]” (Literaturnye premii mira).

Bykaw, called alternately the “Belarusian Solzhenitsyn” and “conscience of Belarus”, wrote in fiction and non-fiction genres—novel, essay, short story, play and literary criticism (Gimpelvich 4, 210). In his early years as a writer, Bykaw was best known for his historical fiction based on WWII, of which *Sotnikau* [*Sotnikov*] and *Voucaja zhraja* [*Wolfpack*] are representative. In later years with the easing political climate, he wrote more openly about the Civil War and early years of the Soviet Union, often highlighting themes of betrayal, morality and the deforming tendency of Soviet ideology. Bykaw is presented as the Belarusian intellectual who remained closely connected to his village roots. Like Solzhenitsyn, he presented Christianity and village life positively, often linking them to right moral choices by placing a hero and anti-hero in similar situations to view the consequences of wrong and right moral choices. (Deforming tendencies of Soviet ideology in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* will be looked at more closely in chapter II.)

Although Bykaw and Adamovich operated in different subgenres (or genres, depending upon the argument), they are similar in their tendency to write prose based on “true” personal experience (whether their own or based on others’ testimony), their insistence on truth first and foremost, and the necessity of language to carry truth content. Bykaw and Adamovich tended to describe their historical subjects such that present day readers might learn from the mistakes of history. Bykaw’s and Adamovich’s insistence on truth applies both to their literary craft and to their political responsibilities: aside from their literary texts, the media and conferences were their speaking platforms. Often working in tandem, both developed a reputation for speaking out against the established party line in both politics and literature: the Soviet political ideology proclaimed the superiority of collective ideology and a whitewashed version of atrocities, while Soviet literary ideology promoted the superiority of the Russian language and the writer’s role as reinforcer of the correct ideology. Although fluent in Russian, Bykaw wrote almost exclusively in Belarusian on principle, while Adamovich taught Belarusian on a university level. Both insisted upon a return to a national Belarusian literary culture based on Belarusian language to reinforce

the perception of Belarus's identity as independent from Russia and from past Soviet influence. They insisted on promoting the Belarusian language because of their belief that language, when used innovatively, plays an important role in relating truth. Bykaw, in particular, placed a higher value on relating truth to his readers than he did on literary innovation.

Bykaw actively defends Aleksiyevich and her books while strongly emphasizing their truth value and equating this with the traditional role of writer as "conscience" of the nation. In the January 26, 1994 issue of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Bykaw draws a line pitting Aleksiyevich (and indirectly himself) against those holding to "imperialistic politics" in Belarus. His comments carry more weight in light of the journalist Aleksandr Gritsanov's article which questions why the more talented artists are emigrating from Belarus. Gritsanov caustically remarks:

Николай Гумилев – «не наш», Алексей Толстой – «наш»; Александр Солженицын – «не наш», Владимир Высоцкий – «почти полностью не наш», Сергей Михалков – «наш»; Владимир Мулявин – был «ну-очень-наш», Василь Быков и Светлана Алексиевич – «не наши».<sup>20</sup>

Nikolai Gumilyov—"not ours", Aleksei Tolstoi – "ours"; Aleksander Solzhenitsyn – "not ours", Vladimir Vysotskiy – "almost totally not ours", Sergei Mikhailkov – "ours"; Vladimir Mulyavin – was "well-very much ours", Vasil Bykaw and Svetlana Aleksiyevich – "not ours".

By appealing to Gumilyov and Solzhenitsyn, who paid dearly for their insistence on the truth and creativity, Gritsanov aligns Bykaw and Aleksiyevich with the persecuted artist tradition.<sup>21</sup> In 1996, according to Gimpelevich, Lukashenko forbade the media to have contact with Bykaw; in 1998 Bykaw moved to Finland at the invitation of the International PEN society (Gimpelevich 8). Bykaw lived his last years in exile in the Czech Republic, writing and longing to return to Belarus (Gimpelevich 9). A strong critic of Lukashenko, Aleksiyevich follows Bykaw's footsteps by accusing Lukashenko of returning Belarus to Soviet control and censorship. Likewise, she has lived outside of Belarus since 2003, commenting that she no longer had the peace necessary to

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<sup>20</sup> Taken from Gritsanov, <http://www.belgazeta.by/20030203.4/010080070>.

<sup>21</sup> As further evidence that other Russian-speakers and outsiders have seen Aleksiyevich in that light, Glas Publishers, on the book jacket to *Nine Foremost Russian Women Writers*, calls Aleksiyevich a Belarusian dissident.

create in Russia (Igrunova 199). Her status as heir apparent to the title “conscience of Belarus” is legitimated by Bykaw’s acknowledgement of her as having suffered for her unwillingness to compromise the truth.

### **A Glimpse into the Human Soul: Tip-Toeing into Trauma**

By following in Bykaw’s and Adamovich’s footsteps, Aleksiyevich inherits a politico-ideological status as an independent gutsy thinker who resists the status quo and writes in new ways in order to motivate change by speaking the truth. Like Bykaw and Adamovich, she strips war of its gloried veneer and delves into the psychology of her heroes. Unlike them, she arranges trauma aesthetically into a literary traumatic space (which will be discussed in length in the next chapter). For now, I would like to propose that the foundations of her focus on the traumatic can be seen in the dissenters’ focus on the individual and the psychological. Those particular precursors to Aleksiyevich’s arrangement of traumatic content are, first, the dissidents’ movement from a collective focus (in this case the good of the Soviet collective) to an emphasis on the individual that presupposes an interest on the effects of events on the individual; the event is seen as a traumatic impetus. Second, the dissidents’ increased interest in the psychological impact of trauma goes beyond other historians’ prior interest in mere physical trauma; their focus on trauma is a challenge to the psychology of Soviet heroism.

Before examining the above points more closely, it is helpful to look at the anatomy of trauma and its perception in Soviet history. Traumatic injury always has an external cause and a definite point of impact. Even if the definite place and time of impact cannot be pinpointed, the presence of disordered normal processes, as seen in physical or emotional stress or behaviors, is enough to determine that a traumatic event did take place. In her interviews, Aleksiyevich looks for the presence of a traumatic impetus through evidence of wounds (or stress) and attempts to highlight the nature of the stress through physical markers in her text. (These markers will be looked at more closely in chapter III.)

Although traditional 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography is event-centered, Adamovich was less interested in events about the war *per se* than about the people affected by the war. His stated authorial purpose was to “supplement the story of the Leningrad blockade with the testimony of ordinary people about how they lived, to record the living voices of participants, their stories about themselves, their families and their comrades” (*Blockade* 11).<sup>22</sup> His observations about the difficulty of convincing his witnesses to focus on their individual experiences and the “agonizing effects” of his heroes’ revisiting the past is echoed by Aleksiyevich, often in her prefaces but at times as part of a running commentary within the main bodies of text (23).<sup>23</sup> In *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*, Aleksiyevich discusses her search for the traumatized person: “Facts were no longer sufficient. I was forced to look past the facts to understand what had occurred. The effects of the shakiness were evident on the faces. And I searched for that shaken person... He spoke in new texts” (40).<sup>24</sup> Adamovich and Aleksiyevich share a deliberate search for the troublesome core in which event reality and psychological reality touch in an effort to penetrate the essence of the “real truth”.

For most of today’s readers and reality show consumers, this approach may not seem unusual, but during the time Adamovich was writing, it would have been anti-Soviet heresy. In her 2000 article “The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia,” Catherine Merridale claims that the ideas of shell-shock in Soviet Russia “menaced a cherished national myth about heroism,” adding that “The myth, and it is almost universally believed, is that almost all Russians, whatever their age, got through the war without suffering mental trauma” (41, 48). Merridale argues that the archival evidence confirmed by interviews with Russian

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<sup>22</sup> As an aside, Adamovich adds to his authorial purpose: “And to give the survivors the opportunity to meet one another through pages of this book” (13). Aleksiyevich’s witnesses at times indicate they feel less alone telling their story and knowing that others shared their experiences.

<sup>23</sup> I took the liberty of Americanizing “agonising”, the spelling in the 1982 English version of *The Blockade Book*.

<sup>24</sup> “Фактов уже не хватало, тянуло заглянуть за факт, войти в смысл происходящего. Налицо имелся эффект потрясения. И я искала этого потрясенного человека... Он говорил новые тексты...”



psychiatrists proves the existence of trauma as seen by fear, hypertension and suicides. Merridale insists that without an understanding of the Soviet view towards mental trauma and shock, “Post-communist Russian society, and especially its responses to violence and alienation, cannot be understood...” (40). I would like to propose that Aleksiyevich’s focus on traumatic content in documentary literature subverts treasured societal myths about heroism and redefines the hero of 20<sup>th</sup> century catastrophes.

### **Aleksiyevich’s objectives: writing the hidden, traumatic history**

Like other Belarus dissident writers, Aleksiyevich’s general objective in writing her *Chronicle of the Big Utopia* (which applies as well to *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*) is to write the *hidden history* behind Soviet catastrophes. This is not unusual; throughout the twentieth century, authors wrote to highlight parts of history that had been physically omitted from the Soviet consciousness. Certain topics were not discussed by the media, educational system or in society. The official ideology against which Aleksiyevich’s mentors struggled and against which she still struggles, highlighted the collective and adamantly resisted the individual; it portrayed Soviet wars, people and achievements as decidedly clean and heroic and did not allow for variations from stock presentations of citizens.<sup>25</sup> Therefore the Belarus dissident tradition, and often the documentary prose tradition, wrote to deliberately shatter the idea of an unblemished Soviet history. In *The Blockade Book*, published in 1982, Adamovich develops his “collective novel” by representing a variety of witnesses’ stories. Aleksiyevich takes the hidden history further than her mentors in her focus on the female perspective interspersed generously into her literary works, which may not be surprising considering her gender. The exclusively female witnesses in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* tell their distinctively feminine experiences in a war which made no allowances for femininity; for example, feminine hygiene issues on the battlefield and the

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<sup>25</sup> Aleksiyevich continues to use her speaking engagements and her website to document what she sees as control from Lukashenko’s government. For instance her latest addition to her website is an April 2007 (newspaper) article stating her books, among others, have been banned from the Belarusian educational system.

antagonism demobilized female soldiers often faced from prospective spouses or in-laws who discovered the women had killed on the battlefield.<sup>26</sup> Although its focus is Afghan soldiers, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* gives much space to the mother's perspective: the bitterness at the condition in which their sons' corpses were returned to them and their anguish at the personality and behavioral changes in their sons after the war, among others. Chapter III of this study will show the preeminence of the womanly perspective in two narrative sections of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* devoted to women relating their loved ones' deaths of radiation poisoning.

Beyond the female perspective and obvious missing "event history", Aleksiyevich's hidden history traffics in feelings, the soul and psychological wounds. Admittedly, both Adamovich and Aleksiyevich are more interested in the effects of historical events on the individual than on the details of the historical events. However, judging by descriptions of Aleksiyevich's *Chronicles of the Utopia* project, the inner psychological tensions are of greatest importance for Aleksiyevich. One of the more logical reasons for this is that Adamovich had less political freedom to write than Aleksiyevich does. While the *evidence* of trauma can be seen in Adamovich's and Bykaw's writings, for them, trauma is background used to indicate towards the deforming power of Soviet ideology, the heroism of the Russian people during the German occupation, or the need to make the right moral choice. For Aleksiyevich psychological inner history is *the story* and the focus of her examinations as seen by the genre names she has attempted to give to it and her attempts to find the "shaken person". Her description of the genre of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* as a "history of feelings" underscores the implicit value of the soldiers' individual lives in comparison with the grand *event* (in the eyes of the Soviet ideology myth carriers): the war (11).<sup>27</sup> Even the casual reader finds pain on every page of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*. In her preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (1985) Aleksiyevich describes the process of interviewing "hundreds of women who fought

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<sup>26</sup> There is a tension between the idea of the war as "holy" and the women who fought in it as "unclean" because they went against their female nature. The women (who were fulfilling their patriotic duty as encouraged by the State) find that the men are the war heroes, while the women are viewed with suspicion.

<sup>27</sup> At the same time, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* has often been referred to as an anti-war novel.

on the front: “...For four tormenting years I walked burnt kilometers of strangers’ pain and memory”(57).<sup>28</sup> In *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*, she equates the hidden, or omitted history with the “the untraceable footprints of our existence on earth and in time” (37-38).<sup>29</sup> The above indicate a deliberate search for and interest in history that focuses on pain or trauma.

Interconnected with the question of the missing history is the issue of indescribability. A common motif in the works that comprise Aleksiyevich’s *Chronicle* is the witness’s inability to describe his experience, often because the experience is so far removed from the normal experience that the listener has no existing framework for understanding. As shall be seen in the next chapter, indescribability is a trademark of narratives that traffic in extreme or traumatic events. In Aleksiyevich’s latter works, the extremeness is in part connected with the fall of Communism as an ideology and the dissolution of the USSR. In *Zacharovannye smert’iu*, a Civil War veteran commits suicide because of his extreme ideological isolation; his suicide note states, “I was a soldier. I killed more than once. I killed as I believed, for the sake of the future. I never thought I would have to defend the past. I cover it with my old heart...” (239).<sup>30</sup> The loss of ideological foundation takes on greater importance in *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* as, in addition to the ideological loss, witnesses lose their health, homes and livelihood. Aleksiyevich says, “Two catastrophes coincided with one another: a social—the Soviet Union fell apart before our very eyes, the gigantic socialist continent went underwater—and the cosmic—Chernobyl. Two global explosions” (48).<sup>31,32</sup> Aleksiyevich links two equally distasteful colossal institutions built by man in his arrogance, and ironically both destruct simultaneously.

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<sup>28</sup> “...Четыре мучительные года я иду обожженными километрами чужой боли и памяти.”

<sup>29</sup> Full quote: “Я же занимаюсь тем, что назвала бы пропущенной историей, *бесследными следами нашего пребывания на земле и во времени*. Пишу и собираю повседневность чувств, мыслей, слов. Пытаюсь застичь быт души. [I am employed with that which I would call the omitted history, *the untraceable footprints of our existence on earth and in time*. I write and collect everyday feelings, thoughts and words. I am trying to get to the essence of the soul].”

<sup>30</sup> “...Я был солдатом, я не раз убивал. Я убивал, как я верил, ради будущего. Никогда не думал, что мне придется защищать прошлое. Я закрываю его своим старым сердцем...”

<sup>31</sup> Aleksiyevich explores the traumatic effects of the USSR’s dissolution on the individual in *Зачарованные смертью*.

For Aleksiyevich, Chernobyl is doubly indescribable because it is an environmental disaster narrative without direct comparison. As the first of its kind, there is no model in place from past experience sufficient to help the victims make sense of their world. No one knew from experience how severe the consequences would be on the country, particularly on its geography and on the peoples' physiognomies and psyches. In writing the first of its kind post-radiation catastrophe, Aleksiyevich's goal is to capture the type of confusion and various coping methods specific to the Chernobyl victims.

Beyond attempts to create snapshots for the reader about events and experiences, Aleksiyevich makes a bold over-arching statement. Like Adamovich and the Belarusian dissidents before her, she attempts to promote a global ideology, which includes a concern for the survival of the human race, in opposition to the idea of protecting Soviet ideology and the well-being of the "Soviet class" first and foremost. In "Problems with a New Way of Thinking", Adamovich discusses the need for literature to influence thinking. He states, "Life exists due to the fact that nobody, as yet, has pushed the nuclear button. We live in a world where such a disastrous global calamity like Chernobyl is just a warning of the holocaust that menaces all of us, every moment of our lives. One cannot simply stand still and let it happen" (132). For Adamovich and Aleksiyevich, progress and technology have brought the world to a point where the stakes are global. In *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, Aleksiyevich links the Chernobyl catastrophe with a Soviet ideology that deforms the human soul and ultimately divorces humanity from the humane.<sup>33</sup> The antidote is a global ideology with a focus on humanity.

In *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, Aleksiyevich has broad objectives to cover. Her methodology must be highly sensory, yet grounded in documented evidence to prove the experiences were not fabricated. It must prove that the Chernobyl stories are repeatable and representative experiences

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<sup>32</sup> "Сошлись две катастрофы: социальная - на наших глазах развалился Советский Союз, ушел под воду гигантский социалистический материк, икосмическая - Чернобыль. Два глобальных взрыва."

<sup>33</sup> In this case, "Chernobyl disaster" is used in its expanded sense to include the explosion, the cover-up and their consequences.

rather than isolated ones. To address the issue of indescribability, she needs a literary method that partially simulates the Chernobyl victim's experience for the reader. This method must be provoking enough to convince the reader to re-evaluate his assumptions and adopt a humanitarian global worldview. The next three chapters will look at how Aleksiyevich fulfills the above by creating a new post-Chernobyl world, which semantically and structurally reflects the tension experienced by inhabitants of this new world. Chapter II discusses theory and terminology necessary to understand the analysis of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* presented in chapter III. In particular, chapter II considers tension and documental verifiability in documentary prose, newer Soviet documentary prose theory that directly addresses Adamovich's and Aleksiyevich's works, and theory of traumatic reality. Traumatic reality will touch on the enclosed "concentrationary" universe and discuss development of traumatic space as a literary device. Chapter III is an in-depth analysis of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* with a particular view to how structure and development of traumatic space (as a literary device) reflect for the reader the witnesses' world of tension. Chapter IV will attempt to develop conclusions based on questions stated in the preface.

## Chapter II. Documentary Prose and Traumatic Reality

Aleksiyevich intentionally writes in documentary prose. It has been seen that she experimented with various genres, eventually choosing a methodology close to Adamovich's.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Aleksiyevich's writing also has much in common with traumatic reality, which fits into literature of testimonial. While Aleksiyevich does not use the phrase "traumatic reality" when speaking of her works, the subject of her investigations are individuals who experienced 20<sup>th</sup> century catastrophes, and her works have much in common with traumatic realism. For this reason, it makes sense to consider both documentary prose and traumatic prose theory when evaluating how Aleksiyevich's aesthetic arrangement of material in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* describes the Chernobyl victim's reality. This chapter will lay the foundation for an analysis of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* in chapter three by discussing the following concepts from the areas of documentary prose and traumatic reality, which include:

- 1) The proposition that documentary prose texts thrive on the tension between aesthetic arrangement and verifiability of the documents' "facts";
- 2) Concepts of public domain, private domain and privileged access domain texts in relation to documentary prose texts and the author's challenges (and benefits) in working with these different domains;
- 3) Mapping of traumatic space within the literary text to reflect the inherent tension between the extreme and everyday in a victim's traumatic world.

### Reception

Both the press and literary critics tend to use the phrase "documentary prose" when speaking of Aleksiyevich's works. Some merely state that she works in the documentary prose genre; others, including Aleksiyevich's official website, refer to her as the *creator* of a new

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<sup>1</sup> "Пробовала себя, свой голос в разных жанрах - рассказы, публицистика, репортажи [she tried her voice in various genres, such as the short story, essay, and reportage]". Translation from *Voices from Big Utopia*.

documentary prose method.<sup>2</sup> A recent article in *Rossiyskaya gazeta* [*Russian Newspaper*] connects Aleksiyevich's name with an "entire genre of modern documentary prose literature".<sup>3</sup> In her interview with Aleksiyevich, Irina Rishina calls the "genre" of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* "Narratives in documentary monologic-confessions, monologic memoirs and monologic-reflections" (4).<sup>4</sup> E. Danilova refers to the "genre" as "полифонический роман-исповедь [polyphonic novel-confession]", referring to its multiplicity of witnesses.<sup>5</sup> Adamovich credits Aleksiyevich with developing his genre further.<sup>6</sup> In "Pravdy ne mozhet byt' slishkom mnogo," the critic Igor Sukhikh places Aleksiyevich's *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli* along with Adamovich's "*Blokadnaya kniga*" and "*Ya iz ognennoi derevni*" into a group of only four works called "collective testimony," which he considers a category of documentary prose.<sup>7,8</sup> Perhaps most striking in the above quotes is the tendency to emphasize the innovation in Aleksiyevich's writing by the creation of new descriptive labels. Aleksiyevich reinforces this tendency by describing her writing approach as a "history of feelings," a "genre" of "actual human voices and confessions" and a genre of "living voices".<sup>9</sup> The above phrases imply the subjective and literature of testimonials rather than "objective" historical research.

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<sup>2</sup> "Создатель уникального документально-художественного метода, основанного на творчески сконцентрированных беседах с реальными людьми."

<sup>3</sup> "...белорусской писательницы Светланы Алексиевич, пишущей на русском языке и преимущественно живущей сейчас в Европе, связан целый жанр современной художественно-документальной литературы» [...the name of the Belarussian writer (indicating female writer) who is writing in the Russian language and who mainly lives now in Europe, is connected with an entire genre of modern documentary prose literature]."

<sup>4</sup> "повествование в документальных монологах-исповедях, монологах-воспоминаниях, монологах-размышлениях"

<sup>5</sup> "Она открыла свой жанр – полифонический роман-исповедь, когда из маленьких историй складывается большая история" (*Ogonyok*).

<sup>6</sup> See Adamovich's preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (1985), (49-54).

<sup>7</sup> The only two of Aleksiyevich's works which had been published at the article's writing.

<sup>8</sup> Note this is the same terminology Adamovich uses when referring to his genre in the preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*.

<sup>9</sup> Voices of the Big Utopia ([http://alexievich.info/biogr\\_EN.html](http://alexievich.info/biogr_EN.html)) 1/27/2007.

### **Problems with Reality in Genre: Reliability versus Narratability**

Documentary prose in its simplest definition is the aesthetic arrangement of factographic documents into a new whole. It assumes in its name that, in contrast to fiction literature, it is based on documented evidence from the real space and time, however broadly interpreted that documented evidence might be. It is less a history in documents than an aesthetic arrangement of documents. The phrase “documentary prose” itself contains an inherent tension between the factual reliability of documents and the word “prose” which refers to the construction of a narrative from the facts. Therefore, critical issues for works of documentary prose or other works of testimonial nature are factual reliability and its narratability. Prose is constructed from pieces of information. The more constructed it is, the greater the realization that it is arranged and the greater the tendency to doubt the veracity of its underlying documents.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, even the most comprehensive “objective” historical work is subject to some factual manipulation, at the very least, concerning which facts should be included or excluded in the narrative. At some point, an author must choose what to sacrifice for his purposes and, even at that, he may still be accused of an inaccurate or an incomplete portrayal of his subject. This has ramifications for Aleksiyevich’s documentary prose: her challenge is how to join individual stories into an integral whole in absence of a plot driven narrative. On the other hand, the challenges of reliability and narratability can strengthen the effectiveness of documentary prose and traumatic reality projects. For now, we want to look at how these elements work in documentary prose.

#### **Documentary Prose: an Overview and Theories of Tension**

Part of the difficulty in discussing documentary prose literature is that it is a large and still evolving body of literature (due in part to the different aesthetic forms the prose can take) interacting with time periods and corresponding censorship issues. When one considers documentary prose in the Russian tradition, Gulag literature is the first body of literature that

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<sup>10</sup> The scholar Lydii Ginzburg, author of *О психологической прозе* [*On Psychological Prose*], notes a progressive “increase in aesthetic structuring” from letters and diaries to memoirs and autobiographies with novels and short stories having the most forced structure (9).



comes to mind. Soviet Russian documentary prose, rudely speaking, developed out of the need to reshape Gulag experience within a literary medium for a non-Gulag audience during a time period when it was not physically safe to be honest. The most familiar names in Gulag documentary prose literature are Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlaam Shalamov. Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelago Gulag: Opit khodozhestvennovo issledovaniya* [*Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*] for which he received the Nobel Prize in 1970 was written in secret over a period of 10 years (1958 to 1973) and appeared in *samizdat* within Russia. It was first officially published overseas in 1973 and finally published in the Soviet Union in 1989. Its subtitle describes both an experiment in progress and an attempt to marry the literary and the investigative. Using the big metaphors of Gulag as a separate island country and prison industry, Solzhenitsyn uses as raw material his own life story, others' life stories, memoirs, hearsay, numerous statistics, hypothetical accounts and his commentaries of "moral outrage" to create a four-volume indictment of the Soviet system. Varlaam Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazi* [*Kolyma Tales*] is comprised of short stories based on Shalamov's seventeen years in the Kolyma labor camps. The stories' full impact, according to Terras, comes from their collective presentation. Shalamov called his approach both "новая проза [new prose]" and "выстраданная проза [prose born of suffering]" and explains it as "That which is suffered out through one's own blood exits onto the paper like a document of the soul, transformed and sanctified by the fire of talent" (Shalamov 13).<sup>11</sup> *Arkhipelago Gulag* and *Kolymskie rasskazi*, although based on personal experiences in the Gulag, represent two very different aesthetic approaches. Each individual story of *Колымские рассказы* is restrained with a tight plot developed around the individual story of few characters, while *Arkhipelago Gulag* is voluminous and often unconstrained. While taking into consideration individual histories, *Arkhipelago Gulag* is organized around the broad view of

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<sup>11</sup> "Выстраданное собственной кровью выходит на бумагу как документ души, преображенное и освещенное огнем таланта."

a newly described Gulag world.<sup>12</sup> Both works were written in secret and published underground; they are representative of a large group of documentary prose works whose authors were faced with serious repercussions for exposing a side of the truth the government considered unacceptable. After the USSR's dissolution in 1991, the publishing of documentary prose narratives flourished.

In many ways Aleksiyevich's work straddles both Shalamov's and Solzhenitsyn's approaches. Like Solzhenitsyn, she applies the macro framework through metaphor to shape her individual stories and guide the reader's interpretation. Like Shalamov, the bulk of her documentary prose works are comprised of individual stories. As shall be seen in the next chapter, *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* is comprised of multiple individual stories, which are given a strong focus through a macro framework.

Considering Aleksiyevich works from a documentary prose model, the loosening of censorship boundaries pertaining to content and broadness of the genre gives her latitude to create new forms by mixing perspectives. Aleksiyevich's use of narratives provides for a microhistorical viewpoint of individual lives. Addition of authorial essay and statistics, similar to Solzhenitsyn's literary experiment, can set the micro perspective into a global viewpoint. Mixing of elements and perspectives will be further examined in the following chapter to show how Aleksiyevich builds and maintains tension within her text. Loosening of censorship boundaries can cause difficulties. One of the challenges for modern authors is self-limitation: the comparatively lax governmental limitations to content and form allows the author to potentially push the limits of good taste too far, and, as others have commented, reword the victim.<sup>13</sup> In her article "The Play of War," Aleksiyevich questions whether her descriptions from the Afghan War were too graphic:

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<sup>12</sup> Ginzburg compares fiction's movement from idea to personality to create a second reality, while documentary literature moves from details to a generalized conclusion and produces reader with a "dual cognition" of real life and its aesthetic portrayal (*On Psychological Prose* 8).

<sup>13</sup> For an in-depth discussion of limitations and rewording the victim, see *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (25-54).

I was convinced, once, that truth had to be followed through to the end. Faced with writing that an Italian landmine the size of a toy can turn a human being into half a bucketful of flesh, I hesitated; but I decided to follow it through. Because, I thought, the simpler and more mundane the killing, the more important human life should be in art. Now I'm no longer sure... (154-5).

Aleksievich was disturbed to find that vivid descriptions of death did not change public opinion about war. Instead, the public became numb to images of murder and death (155). Later, when writing *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, she attempts to prevent this effect on the reader, which she describes as “банальность ужаса [the banality of horror]” (37).

Aleksiyevich's writing spans twenty years of momentous change for her nation and for her as a writer. The dissolution of the USSR ushers in an influx of ideas, more political freedom and potential for disillusionment; meanwhile, Aleksiyevich has more exposure to the West and even lives overseas for a time. It seems from the above quote and interviews with the press that Aleksiyevich originally assumed that if writers were free to publish “the truth” and if people could hear it, then the people would reject war and inhumanity. A past creativity that was required to slip subversive material past the censors is now required to target a more desensitized reader, on the one hand, or the reader who adamantly insists her son was an Afghan war hero, on the other. The reader analyzing Aleksiyevich's writings has the added challenge of remember that Aleksiyevich's writing spans twenty years of quickly changing ideas which directly affect her worldview, her approach to writing and the tolerance level of her target audience. Aleksiyevich is navigating rapidly changing waters in her documentary prose “experiments”.

If the first difficulty with documentary prose is its evolution as a genre, a second difficulty lies in the often hazy reliability of the raw material from which the prose is created. Documentary evidence can run the gamut from verifiable statistics about verifiable events (with varying levels of reliability in connection with statistic collections) to participant impressions of events, often filtered through time and memory before being written down in memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies. A reader approaching a documentary-based writing expects to discover what he

would consider historically accurate. Often his expectations are justified. Documentary prose works have been used as historical sources, particularly when the author is writing about a situation in which there are few survivors. Terras notes the importance of *Kolymskie rasskazi* to the historian Robert Conquest's research on Kolyma (Terras 401). Alekseyevich's works can often be found in bibliographies as background for women and war. For instance, *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* has been used by David Marples as historical evidence for his investigations into Chernobyl, and *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* is a major resource for questions related to Soviet women in WWII ("Chernobyl: a Reassessment" 26). Terras does recognize the dual nature of Shalamov's work: "*Kolymskie rasskazi* are intended both as fiction and historical testimony, and it is truly difficult to separate aesthetic evaluation from historical appraisal in them." This would lead one to ask, if the factual is important, then what does the aesthetic arrangement do for the documentary prose narrative, or how does it make it preferable in certain cases to traditional factographic narrative. Part of the answer, according to some theorists, is in the creation of tensions.

Both Ginzburg and Leona Toker, a literary critic working in the fields of documentary prose and Gulag literature, discuss how the aesthetic arrangement of documentary prose texts plays an essential role in creating positive tension within the text. One point of tension is between the aesthetic and sociological functions of a text. In "Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose—From the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies" Toker, who bases her ideas about documentary prose on those of Shalamov and the structuralist theorist Jan Mukarovsky, speaks of documentary prose as "multi-function objects" whose varying functions depend upon reader reception and time (187).<sup>14</sup> The literary text can be viewed simultaneously as sociological and aesthetic, or one of the two emphases may dominate depending upon the reader's interest at the time (216-217). As time passes, a literary work whose sociological value has become passé can

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<sup>14</sup> For a complete discussion of multifunction objects, see Mukarovsky's *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*.

still be valued for its aesthetic qualities, or vice versa. Ginzburg comments that Rousseau's *Confessions* retains its relevance for today's readers because of its human interest (6). It is impossible to read *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* without being aware of the struggle between the aesthetic and sociological values of this book. It "looks like" a work of art but speaks a sociologic message. The individual stories and the big story compete for the reader's attention. Still, while years later the global message may lose its relevance, the individual stories might retain a vital poignancy. Similarly, in the event of another future nuclear disaster, the relevance of the sociologic aspect of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* might outweigh the aesthetic. In this sense, the multi-function aspect of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* potentially positions it for timelessness.

A second positive point of tension, as alluded to earlier, is between the verifiable facts and the aesthetic reconstruction of those facts. According to Ginzburg, because aesthetic arrangements of necessity involve a high element of choice—which facts to include and which to exclude—along with a manipulation of facts to facilitate cohesiveness and narratability, reliability is sacrificed for aesthetics, creating *a positive tension* between the veracity and aesthetics: "Documentary prose, however, thrives on the open correlation of and struggle between these two principles" (*On Psychological Prose* 6). Although, as shall be seen in chapter III, there is an inherent factographic tension in the content of the eyewitness narratives, Alekseyevich maximizes the potential for tension through the aesthetic arrangements of structure and literary devices.

In "Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose—From the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies," Toker discusses factual verifiability and three types of texts often found in documentary prose—public domain, private domain and domain of privileged access—which contribute to this tension. (*Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, as shall be seen later is comprised of all three.) Public domain texts are verifiable texts which the public can easily access; they include memoirs, printed and published materials, names and descriptions of actual places and people and statistics. Public domain information carries weight with the average reader and ties the event to a time and space. Although private and privileged access domain potentially carry less weight in

terms of verifiability than public domain material does, they provide information that otherwise would not be accessible to the public. Private domain belongs to the author's inner world of thoughts and emotions. A pact between the reader and author is required for the reader to trust the veracity of private domain material: the author is telling the truth as far as he understands or remembers it, and the reader chooses to trust him. Private interviews and unwitnessed survivor reports fall into the privileged access domain. The author gives the reader access to that which the author has been told or learned in privacy; the reader chooses to believe the author is telling the truth. A potential challenge for documentary prose authors is the large amount of unverifiable materials belonging to private and privileged access domains, which require confirmation by other historical sources. This is even more challenging in a clandestine world like the Gulag, which in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century was essentially hidden from the public, although now there is a large body of Gulag material to serve as a library of topoi. Therefore, at the time of his writing, Solzhenitsyn made up for the lack of topoi by piling on of evidence, his scattering of names and places, descriptions of monastery walls used as prisons, among other evidences, most of which were later confirmed by investigators. *Kolymskie rasskazi* presents a multitude of stories which do not contradict one another; taken together they serve as a witness to the veracity of individual characters and events in *Kolymskie rasskazi*. The vast body of Gulag literature itself has become a background of plausibility against which to compare individual Gulag documentary prose narratives. On the one hand, evidence and detail is necessary for verifiability; on the other hand, Toker warns that readers might become suspicious of detailed reconstruction of dialogue years after the fact. Toker warns of the dangers of "minuteness of detail", which is connected to the second drawback to minuteness of detail: the lack of focus in oral testimony (198). The testimony of some witnesses can "meander"; furthermore, what is interesting to the witness might not fit the author's needs. Alekseyevich avoids these pitfalls by anchoring her private and privileged access domain materials in physical tape recorded evidence and by removing the extraneous from individual narratives to keep the focus narrow.

Documentary prose is beneficial to Aleksiyevich because of the greater freedom it gives her to manipulate documents to present her viewpoint. Although in the documentary prose genre, the testimony of an individual cannot be a composite of a number of people, the genre provides Aleksiyevich with the flexibility to change names and minor details and to delete others to highlight that which is pertinent to the story. On the one hand, documentary prose can be approached by the reader as nonfiction, or fact-based literature. On the other hand, it can be seen as crafted literature. Aleksiyevich has been known to take advantage of this second interpretation. During a 1994 lawsuit alleging Aleksiyevich had defamed the character of her witnesses by manipulating their testimonies in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (1991), the defense attempted to prove that documentary prose should not be judged by the same rules as reportage. The defense insisted that published excerpts cannot be considered interviews as much as aesthetic works, and, that, although the author is responsible to report facts reliably, the documentary prose genre allows the author the right to selectiveness in content and choice of his particular moral viewpoint in constructing the narrative (*Цинковые...* (1996), 306-11).

### **Tension in Traumatic Reality Narratives**

Documentary prose theory is helpful in navigating the tensions between the verifiable and the aesthetics as well as providing a way for the author to create historical documents out of experience. Yet, I believe that one way in which Aleksiyevich's writings, and in particular *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, could be considered "modern", as *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* calls it, is in its highlighting of traumatic content through what Michael Rothberg would call the traumatic reality narrative. Traumatic reality narratives were born from Holocaust narratives. Trauma narratives can be seen as out of the ordinary events that force people into unusual circumstances that either deform them or in some way challenge them to develop new coping mechanisms. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is memorable for cataclysmic occurrences with its two world wars, bloody civil wars, a history of concentration camps and environmental disasters brought on by technology. It is a century full of unusual circumstances and, whereas there may have been other centuries as

cataclysmic, certainly the public's access to information in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would increase the sense of tumultuousness. In their introduction to *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, Miller and Tougaw recognize the special place of Holocaust narratives as a model from which other extreme narratives are composed: "the Holocaust has produced a discourse—a set of terms and debates about the nature of trauma, testimony, witness, and community—that has affected other domains of meditation on the forms the representation of extreme human suffering seems to engender and require" (4). This discourse has proven helpful to understand the dynamics of literary structures Aleksiyevich uses to represent the Chernobyl victims' suffering.

In *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Michael Rothberg discusses traumatic realist literature as a realist project challenged by the need to attempt to represent and find meaning after the Holocaust. This project begins with the concept of the concentrationary universe, or a world of concentration camps, which is expanded semantically to represent a place "beyond the bounds of normality where 'everything is possible' and where the universe's inhabitants are isolated "by an experience impossible to communicate" (115). At the same time, the concentrationary universe continues to exert its influence on the camp survivors, often the narratives' authors, after their "liberation" from the camps. They find the trauma cannot be undone; the post-traumatic world is not equivalent to its pre-traumatic state. Traumatic reality specifically concerns the effects of the literary work on the reader; in Rothberg's words, it is "the disorientation that accompanies the reader's arrival in a universe that violates all expectations" (Miller 6). Of particular importance to this work is the concept of the mapping out of a traumatic literary world. Rothberg uses Ruth Kluger's memoir of her life as a child in German concentration camp to illustrate "mapping of concentrationary universe" (129-130). In her concentrationary universe, opposing concepts which represent the mundane and the extraordinary are held in close proximity and space within the text; this traumatic space represents a recurring



point of violence (129, 21).<sup>15</sup> While, according to Rothberg, other authors might attempt to resolve the tension, Kluger leaves the text bifurcated and unresolved: "...extremity and everydayness coexist and abut each other, but without resolving into a new unity. [...] They are at once held together and kept forever apart..." (129-130).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in this literary space, "knowledge of the extreme occurs simultaneously with public recognition of the post-traumatic social context" (56). To this end, the traumatic realist text both educates the reader in new rules and demands a response from him.

The next chapter will demonstrate how narratives in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* map out a traumatic space in which an aspect of the Chernobyl disaster is held "close to" the post-Chernobyl result. Extreme experiences become a part of the everyday life. Within the witnesses' narratives, the traumatic results of the clash on the victim's psyche are depicted in one sentence or within a space between two sentences "held together and kept forever apart". *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* locates the traumatic edge within the text that corresponds to the traumatic issue within the witness's memory. On a larger scale, as a traumatic world, Chernobyl is compared to another space historically, geographically and chronologically. We see the same division of space into pre and post-trauma in eyewitness narratives, which Aleksiyevich transposes onto a macro level in her authorial essay. She isolates the traumatic Chernobyl world from the usual to reflect the witnesses' isolatory experiences; she frames their world as a concentrationary universe, which is intrinsically a world of tensions. Pre-traumatic reality and post-traumatic reality are positioned together yet always separate to create a new Chernobyl reality. Therefore, the analysis of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* will also show how the text manipulates tension on the levels of the word, eyewitness narrative, sections of narratives and between sections.

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<sup>15</sup> Rothberg's term is mapping of concentrationary space. I apply his ideas to *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* to Aleksiyevich's bifurcated construct within the monologue narrative and call it mapping of traumatic space, since I apply it more specifically to pinpoint the traumatic issue.

<sup>16</sup> Ginzburg comments that documentary literature produces a dual and incongruent cognition between a real life experience the reader is familiar with and a separate, second aesthetic representation (8).

### Chapter III. Aleksiyevich's Literary Approach: Trauma and Narrative Structure in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*

Фактов уже не хватало, тянуло заглянуть за факт, войти в смысл происходящего. Налицо имелся эффект потрясения. И я искала этого потрясенного человека... Он говорил новые тексты...

Facts were no longer sufficient. I was forced to look past the facts to understand what had occurred. The effects of the shakeness were evident on the faces. And I searched for that shaken person... He spoke in new texts.

Svetlana Aleksiyevich, *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, 2006

Any book on Chernobyl might elicit interest for its content. After all, the “extreme” sells.

Yet, it is common for readers to notice the aesthetics of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* and particularly their effects on the reader. The reviewer Julian Evans states:

Alexievich's book, which should be a melancholy experience, is both more and less than that. Her technique is a powerful mixture of eloquence and wordlessness, describing incompetence, heroism and grief: from the monologues of her interviewees *she creates a history that the reader, at whatever distance from the events, can actually touch*. ... (Julian Evans, The Telegraph). (*Italics mine.*)

The book is described as a powerful, “touchable” history. *The Complete Review* chided

Aleksiyevich for the book's lack of statistics, background information and conclusions about

Chernobyl, but still found the book highly stirring: “Moving and powerful, *Voices from*

*Chernobyl* still feels inadequate. But then maybe any book about Chernobyl would”.<sup>1</sup>

*Chernobyl'skaya molitva* is particularly gripping because of the reflection of the “shaken effect”,

indicating trauma, within narratives and the way trauma is kept fresh for the reader's experience

through the narratives' interaction with one another. The arrangement of facts is of integral

importance in showcasing the trauma. Aleksiyevich's works are crafted from cohesive narratives

which, although meant to be read in conjunction with the remainder of the narratives, can be read

separately and still fully engage the reader's attention. Aleksiyevich creates this cohesive

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Complete Review*.

narrative (referred to in the book as a “monologue”) from tape-recorded interviews. The monologues are infused with literary devices and combined into eleven narrative blocks; together this arrangement, with its emphasis on the effect of the event in the witness’s life, produces a possibly greater emotional experience for the reader than a retelling of events from a more “objective” perspective might. Aleksiyevich’s narrative approach is multi-functional: The monologues set up conflicting concepts, ideas or situations from the witnesses’ experiences. The clash of two conflicting elements, like geological plates rubbing against one another on a fault line, is reflected in the text by clearly identifiable sentences. These “fault line” sentences mimic the shaken effect described by Aleksiyevich, “And I searched for that shaken person... He spoke in new texts”(40).<sup>2</sup> On a broader level, the individual narratives and collective narratives interact with one another to tell the variegated traumatic story of a Chernobyl person in a Chernobyl world, while the titled narrative structures interact one with another to maintain tension by manipulating the perspective from which the problem is viewed to keep the reader from becoming too accustomed to the horror. Ultimately, the fiber and the structure of *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* is fraught with tension, an integral element of both documentary prose and traumatic reality narratives. This chapter will provide an analysis of the book’s structural and literary devices through an overview of the structure of *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*, an analysis of its building block narrative (the monologue), a section by section analysis, and a discussion of how the above elements work together to create and maintain traumatic space.

### **Structural outline**

Structurally, *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* is comprised of eight sections arranged as mirror structures. (See Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “И я искала этого потрясенного человека... Он говорил новые тексты...”

<sup>3</sup> Aleksiyevich refers to narrative types, “voice in choir”, “solitary human voice” and “monologue”; the section numbers and placement of narrative types to sections are mine based on definitions Aleksiyevich gives in her works and in secondary articles.

**Table 1. Section Titles and Narrative Types**

Section	Title	Narrative Type
1	“Историческая справка [Historical Notes]”	Event
2	“Одинокий человеческий голос [Solitary Human Voice]”	Solitary Human Voice
3	“Интервью автора с самой собой о пропущенной истории и о том, почему Чернобыль ставит под сомнение нашу картину мира [An Interview between the author and herself about why Chernobyl casts doubt on our picture of the world]”	Authorial essay
4	Глава первая [Chapter One]	Voice in choir
	Земля мертвых [Land of the Dead]	Monologues
	Солдатский хор [Soldier’s Choir]	Mini-monologues
5	Глава вторая [Chapter Two]	Voice in choir
	Венец творения [Crown of Creation]	Monologues
	Народный хор [People’s Choir]	Mini-monologues
6	Глава третья [Chapter Three]	Voice in choir
	Восхищение печалью [Exultation through Sorrow]	Monologues
	Детский хор [Children’s Choir]	Voice in choir
7	“Одинокий человеческий голос [Solitary Human Voice]”	Solitary human voice
8	“Вместе эпилога [Instead of an Epilogue]”	Event

Each of the eight main sections above falls into one of four types: public domain event-oriented, solitary human voice, choir of human voice, and authorial essay.<sup>4</sup> The short first and last sections, “Историческая справка [Historical Notes]” and “Вместе эпилога [Instead of an Epilogue],” contain event-oriented information from public domain sources; these are the only public domain texts in the book and comprise less than 1% of the total volume of the book. The second and second last sections, both of which are titled “Одинокий человеческий голос [Solitary Human Voice],” are experiential and personal in-depth interviews from the privileged access domain; this is the only section comprised of a single person’s narrative. In both “Solitary Human Voice” sections, a first responder’s wife relates her husband’s painful death from

<sup>4</sup> I have chosen to retain Aleksiyevich’s words “solitary human voice” and “choir of human voices”.

radiation exposure. The third section, “Интервью автора с самой собой о пропущенной истории и о том, почему Чернобыль ставит под сомнение нашу картину мира [An Interview between the author and herself about why Chernobyl casts doubt on our picture of the world]” is an interpretive authorial essay; the author lays out her project and the framework for the Chernobyl world metaphor, develops her overall ideology, and semantically highlights the tension of the Chernobyl world.<sup>5</sup> The core, chapters one through three, is comprised of a multiplicity of narratives from privileged access domain in Aleksiyevich’s trademark narrative format, a choir of voices.<sup>6</sup> Chapters one through three are created from approximately 100 “monologues” under the headings, “Земля мертвых [Land of the Dead]”, “Венец творения [Crown of Creation]” and “Восхищение печалью [Exultation through Sorrow]”. Each “monologue” collection is followed by a chorus--“солдатский [soldier’s],” “народный [people’s],” and “детский [children’s],” respectively. The witnesses’ narratives serve as evidence for Aleksiyevich’s argument in “Self-Interview” and flesh out the framework for her overarching metaphor of the Chernobyl world. The majority of these sections are constructed from one or more monologues.

### **The Building Blocks of *Chernobyl’skaya molitva***

*Chernobyl’skaya molitva* has a complicated structure. Aleksiyevich’s task was to transform hours of audio material into a cohesive convincing narrative. She collected information for ten years, spending hours in some witnesses’ homes. Aleksiyevich reports that she used material from only one-fifth of her 500 interviews.<sup>7</sup> After transcribing the interviews, Aleksiyevich rewrites them into self-contained monologic narratives from which the “non-event” sections are

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<sup>5</sup> I will refer to this as “Self-Interview” from now on.

<sup>6</sup> I would suggest the remainder of the sections, although no less important than the “core,” provide the appropriate frame for the voice in choir sections.

<sup>7</sup> “I was collecting material to the very last. Out of 500 or more interviews 107 were included in the final version; that is, approximately one in five. That is basically what happens with my other books as well—I select one out of five interviews, and that one makes it into the published book. For each person I record four tapes or more, making 100-150 printed pages, depending on the voice timbre and the pace of the oral story, and then only about ten pages remain” (Lucic, Center For Book Culture.Org).

comprised.<sup>8</sup> Within *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, the monologues take different forms—extended play individual monologue, short focused monologue, authorial monologue and monologue as voice in choir. Alekseyevich rarely retains third person descriptions of body movements, references to objects in the rooms or interactions with other people in the room, usually doing so to emphasize the speaker's heightened emotional state (for example, a witness walking away from Alekseyevich towards the window in mid-conversation). The monologues are characterized by a first person perspective, marked absence of information extraneous to the focus, and logical, often symmetrical structure. More tightly crafted narratives with a narrower focus are used in the collective testimony of chapters one through three; lengthier more meandering narratives comprise the two “Solitary Human Voice” sections framing chapters one through three. (The authorial monologue has a different structure and will be discussed separately.)

An example of a symmetrical monologue is the relatively short “Монолог о целой жизни, написанный на дверях [Monologue of an Entire Life Recorded on Doors]”, which is developed around a door and the interviewee, Nikolai Kalugin's, need to give witness to Chernobyl. A simple thematic outline of this monologue follows:

- 1) “Я хочу засвидетельствовать [I want to testify]”
- 2) The first days of Chernobyl and evacuation
- 3) Description of the door
- 4) His daughter's illness and death
- 5) “Я хочу засвидетельствовать [I want to testify]” expanded

The first paragraph consists of one sentence with ellipses: “I want to testify...”; the last paragraph closes the thought about Kalugin's testimony: his daughter's death was caused by Chernobyl.<sup>9</sup> The first half of the text describes the family, where they lived and their initial

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<sup>8</sup> Non-event in the sense that they are hidden history, not event history. See discussion in chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> “Я хочу засвидетельствовать -- моя дочь умерла от Чернобыля. А от нас хотят, чтобы мы молчали. Наукой, мол, еще не доказано, нет банка данных. Надо ждать сотни лет. Но моя

responses to the Chernobyl explosion; the second half describes the daughter's illness and death. A зазубриная дверь [etched door], is positioned physically at the center of the narrative (within paragraph eight of fourteen paragraphs) as a dividing line between the days before the daughter's diagnosis and after. The door bears in itself the milestones of Kalugin's family: the children's heights at various ages were marked on it, and his father was laid out on it before burial.<sup>10</sup> Because it serves as a memorial for the family, Kalugin takes the door with him when his family is evacuated. His daughter is laid out on it after her death. The narrative is tightly focused around a particular aspect of Kalugin's testimony; there are no extraneous details to distract from the focus.

“Монолог без названия – крик [Monologue without a title—a scream],” less obviously symmetrical, is written under the name of Arkadiy Pavlovich Bogdankevich, a rural “feldsher”. Portions of its opening sentence “Люди добрые... Не трогайте нас! Отстаньте! ... Вы поговорили и поехали, а нам тут жить... [Dear people... Don't bother us! Leave us alone!... You come here, talk and leave; and we have to live here...]” are repeated in its closing sentence (165-6). Hinged between these statements are a list of children's medical cards—name, date of birth, amount of radiation—followed by three brief stories, two of children with maladies atypical children and one of a woman at her child's deathbed. The last paragraphs state:

Я не хочу торговать их несчастьем. Философствовать. Для этого мне надо отойти в сторону. А я не могу... Я каждый день слышу, что они говорят... Как жалуются и плачут... Люди добрые... Хотите знать правду? Сядите возле меня и записывайте... Так никто же такую книгу читать не станет...

Лучше не трогайте нас... Нам тут жить..." (165-6).

I don't want to profit by their sorrow. Or philosophize. For that I would need to distance myself and I can't do that... Every day I hear what they say... How they complain and cry. Dear people, do you want to know the truth? Sit next to me and write... But then no one would read your book...

Better not to bother us... We have to live here...

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человеческая жизнь... Она же меньше... Я не дожусь. Запишите... Хотя бы вы запишите: дочку звали Катя... Катюшенька... Умерла в семь лет..."

<sup>10</sup> Laying the deceased family member out on a door at home for visitors to pay last respects is a local burial tradition.

This narrative is constructed from the tension between the experiences of people who live helplessly among the pain and the desires of others, including the author, however well meaning, who desire to know about Chernobyl. The narrative climaxes with the statement: “I don’t want to profit by their sorrow. Or philosophize.”<sup>11</sup> Although this narrative has no clear emotional breaking point like the first monologue does, it is infused with emotion characterized by anger as seen in the challenging questions— “Вы так напишете? [Will you write this?]”—and equally challenging exclamatory statements, “Так и передайте начальству в столице. Баракло! [Tell that to the bosses in the capital. Trash!]”. The opening and ending pleas to be left in peace and the scream in the title both underline and frame the witness’s frustration.

A narrative similar to that to which Aleksiyevich gives the title “monologue” is the untitled narrative grouped together into one of three choirs of chapters one through three. To eliminate confusion, this paper will refer to monologues found in choirs as mini monologues. Mini monologues retain all the characteristics of monologues with two exceptions: they are untitled, unsigned, and usually much shorter than the regular monologues, which allows for an even narrower focus.<sup>12</sup> One “choir member” recalls a television newscast in which dosimeters measure food products as within normal range (within 10 kilometers from the reactor), proving the West’s accusations about a nuclear accident are unfounded. The focus of this mini-monologue is found in its concluding sentence: “The number of lies with which Chernobyl is connected in our minds, was comparable only to that of 1941... During Stalin’s time... (240).<sup>13</sup> A longer mini-monologue is organized around verbs of direction which open the paragraphs:

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<sup>11</sup> “Я не хочу торговать их несчастьем. Философствовать.”

<sup>12</sup> As a rough comparison (based on calculation of volume of text in pages), the fifteen mini-monologues in chapter two comprise approximately 4% of the book’s volume, while the eight monologues from chapter two comprise approximately 30%. Choir members are listed at the beginning of each choir not necessarily in order of speaking. One issue is that Aleksiyevich lists seventeen people in her choir, but only fifteen mini-monologues are listed.

<sup>13</sup> “Такое количество лжи, с которым связан в нашем сознании Чернобыль, было разве только в сорок первом... При Сталина...” (Translation modified from Gessen’s in *Voices of Chernobyl*, 148).



- 1) Мы двигались к станции... [We moved towards the station...]
- 2) А навстречу нам шли [And walking towards us were...]
- 3) Ехали... [Traveling...]
- 4) Поехал [I went.]
- 5) Возвратились домой [We returned home].
- 6) Дальше допишите сами... Я не хочу дальше говорить... [Write the remainder yourself. I don't want to talk further] (108,109).

The first paragraph consists of one sentence “We moved towards the station...”. The second and third paragraphs describe first impressions followed by description of strange black spots on fruits and vegetables, yet otherwise the harvest seemed especially plentiful. Heavy-laden apple tree branches touch the ground. The fourth paragraph, chronologically occurring before the rest, describes the witness’s motivation for going to the zone: to test his masculinity and heroism. Paragraph five explains that the witness’s son dies from a brain tumor after constantly wearing the beret from his dad’s Chernobyl uniform. Paragraph five stands in sharp contrast to the heroism of the previous paragraph and mimics the seeming fruitfulness yet deformation of the fruit; all is not as it seems in Chernobyl land. The last paragraph consists of those two sentences above; both include the word “дальше [further]” which contains the sense of direction. It allows for unity, in this case the author is allowed to carry the motion by writing; the witness drops out of the conversation. The last sentence creates a literary space between which the extremes of the motivation in paragraph four and the fatal results of paragraph five meet, hold in time and freeze. The soldier tests his heroism, is a hero in the eyes of his son, and his son dies because of it. Full of emotion, those last two sentences reflect raw pain.

Aleksiyevich refers to the solitary human voice, which is an extended play individual monologue, as both a narrative type and a section title. It is significant to discuss here because she indicates the extended play individual monologue functions differently than the other monologues. In her preface to *Zacharovannye smert'iu*, Aleksiyevich states: “Я различаю

голоса... Не хор, как это было раньше, а одинокий человеческий голос... Они все звучат по-разному... У каждого – своя тайна... [I differentiate among the voices... Not a choir, as it was done before, but a solitary human voice... They all resound differently... Each has its own mystery]” (223). *Zacharovannye smert'iu* is comprised almost entirely of extended-play individual monologue. In the later published *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, however, Alekseyevich relegates this type of monologue to two sections of the book with the titles “Solitary Human Voice”. The solitary human voice building block is much longer than the monologue and contains digressions, which often echo the witnesses’ memories moving between the idyllic pre-Chernobyl past and the more recent horrific past caused by Chernobyl events. Both “Solitary Human Voice” sections use Alekseyevich’s trademark repetitive opening paragraph sentences; each narrative is structurally organized around a definite focus which is binary, irresolvable and also the hallmark of traumatic realism.

The first “Solitary Human Voice” narrative, signed by Ludmilla Ignatenko, has a symmetrical structure developed around a primary focus with secondary repeating themes and punctuated with emotional breaks in the voice. The narrative begins with “—I don’t know what to talk about... About death or about love? Or are they one and the same... About what?” and ends with a similar statement, “But I told you of love... How I loved...” (13, 36).<sup>14</sup> Ludmilla’s husband, a fireman who was badly burned while containing the Chernobyl fire, is in the hospital in critical condition after having received four times the fatal radiation dose. Two worldviews clash towards the physical center of the narrative when Ludmilla describes how an unidentified person, in an effort to convince her to consider her health before her husband’s need for contact, insists: “You must not forget: that is not your husband or your loved one, but a radioactive object with a high concentration of contamination”.<sup>15</sup> Ludmilla’s immediate and opposing response—“I

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<sup>14</sup> “—Я не знаю, о чем рассказывать... О смерти или о любви? Или это одно и то же... О чем?” and ends with a similar statement, “Но я вам рассказала о любви... Как я любила...”

<sup>15</sup> “Вы должны не забывать: перед вами уже не муж, не любимый человек, а радиоактивный объект с высокой плотностью заражения.”

love him”—is amplified through a five-fold repetition within the four sentences following the above quote. This opposition recurs throughout the text as well-meaning doctors and families attempt to physically separate Ludmilla from her husband while her love drives her to extremes as she begs to be allowed to stay with him: “Like a dog, I ran after them. I stood at the door for hours. I asked and begged.” (27).<sup>16</sup> Two particularly significant themes which tie into the radioactive object versus beloved husband conflict are interwoven into the text in regular intervals: the story of Ludmilla and Vasilii’s unborn daughter (who later dies of cirrhosis four hours after her birth) and a graphic description of Vasilii’s horrifying fourteen-day death. This text has several emotional breaking points. The strongest, highlighted by ellipses and the narrator’s interjections is Ludmilla’s breakdown when she admits that, by her insistence on being with her husband in his time of need, she was responsible for her daughter’s death.

...*(Бессвязно)*. Я ее убила... Я... Она... Спасла... Моя девочка меня спасла, она приняла весь радиоудар на себя, стала как бы приемником этого удара. Такая маленькая. Крохотулечка. *(Задыхаясь)*. Она меня уберегла... Но я любила их двоих... Разве... Разве можно убить любовью? Такой любовью!! Почему это рядом? Любовь и смерть. Всегда они вместе. Кто мне объяснит? Кто подскажет? Ползаю у могилы на коленках... *(Надолго затихает)*. (33)

...*(Disconnectedly)*. I killed her... I... She... Saved... My little girl saved me. She took the entire brunt of the radiation upon herself and became a lightning rod for its force. So small. Tinylike. *(She gasps for breath.)* She saved me... But I loved them both... Really... Really can you kill by love? Such a love!! Why is it nearby? Love and death. They are always together. Who will explain to me? Who will explain (this) to me? I crawl around the grave on my knees... *(Is quiet for a long time)*.

The emotional height of the text appears to be the irreconcilability of Ludmilla’s love for both which ends in death. On the one hand, she could not reject her husband. On the other hand, she did not protect her child. On the one hand, she was responsible for her daughter’s death; on the other hand, her daughter saved her life. Unresolvable, the traumatic space reflects unanswered questions and unhealed wounds. Ludmilla’s only response is to walk around their joint grave on her knees. This solitary human voice narrative ties into one of Aleksiyevich’s favored themes

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<sup>16</sup> “Я -- как собачка, бегала за ними... Стояла часами под дверью. Просила-умоляла.”

throughout her entire *Chronicles of the Big Utopia* project: the mystery of pain and unhappiness in love and the strength of love despite death.

The latter “Solitary Human Voice,” signed by Valentina Apanasevich, although full of comments about Valentina’s and her husband’s unusually great and passionate love, is built around a mystery: no matter how physically revolting and monster-like her husband becomes to others, she loves to be with him physically, to touch him and to care for him. He is afraid to have others see him, but even towards the end of his life when his body is literally falling apart, he calls to her to make love. This “Solitary Human Voice” is constructed around the theme of happiness. The first sentence of the introductory paragraph begins with “Я недавно была такая счастливая. Почему? Забыла... [Not long ago I was so happy. Why? I’ve forgotten...]”; a variation on it is repeated three times—“Ах, какая я была счастливая! Какая счастливая... [— Oh, how happy I was! How happy...]” (364). Valentina’s happiness is always connected with “him”: she is happy when they first meet, happy when dating, happy when he returns home from Chernobyl despite the swollen lymph nodes, happy when they return home from the hospital with syringes and medical apparatus needed to care for him and exceedingly happy to hear his voice: “Я онемела от счастья... [I was dumb with joy]” (375). Memories of their happiness together “before Chernobyl” are intertwined with detailed descriptions of his one-year illness and the extreme pain of separation. This narrative, too, has breaking points which occur particularly when Valentina speaks of her inability to function while physically and emotionally separated from her husband.

The four monologue and mini-monologue examples above are characterized by logical organization and a strong focus and mapping of traumatic space. Organization and focus are aided by semantic constructs (such as, recurring phrases and verbs of direction positioned in the beginning of paragraphs) and through the image (for instance, the door which not only carries the family’s joys and sorrows but also functions within the text as a dividing line between pre- and post-Chernobyl time frames). Each monologue’s narrow focus allows for compressed emotion:

the beret which at first seems a mere sideline to underscore the son's hero adoration of his father gains a new significance to the narrative as a carrier of death. The reader quickly learns one ground rule to interpreting monologues in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*: every detail in the monologue is important. The major function of the monologue (and mini-monologue) is the development of a literary traumatic space which consists of two irreconcilable elements, such as the father's heroism and the son's death caused by the father's "heroism", and a "fault line" to represent either the clash of these irreconcilable elements or a backlash within the witness's soul as a result of the inability to resolve the two.<sup>17</sup> The "fault line" can be expressed as a breaking voice (with the assistance of ellipses), as in "Запишите...Хотя бы вы запишите: дочку звали Катя... Катюшенька...Умерла в семь лет... [Write... If you could at least write: my daughter's name was Katya... Kat'yshenka...She died at age 7]" (65). It can be expressed through silence (a refusal or unwillingness to talk) or anger. Additionally, it can be expressed through restrained delivery of what can best be described as a punch line in which the most important information is held to the last.

Like the monologues, the two solitary human voice building blocks are also characterized by logical organization assisted by use of recurring opening sentences and mapping of traumatic space. Although each voice has a strong focus, the narratives are not as compressed as the monologue and mini-monologue. Aleksiyevich allows her witness to reminisce, which the shorter monologues cannot afford space-wise; in the solitary human voice narrative, how the witness strings together memories is as important as what she remembers. After repeated strings of movement between memories, Ludmilla admits, "This is how I live... I live simultaneously in a real and unreal world. I don't know where its better for me" (36).<sup>18</sup> The solitary human voice narratives allow the reader to vicariously experience the swarming movement between the real

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<sup>17</sup> In this work, the term "literary traumatic space" refers to the short compacted part of the mini monologue or monologue which contains bifurcation built around a fault line. Therefore the monologue itself is not literary traumatic space, but is comprised of one or more such bifurcated structures which map out the nature of the witness's specific traumatic world.

<sup>18</sup> Так я и живу... Живу одновременно в реальном и нереальном мире. Не знаю, где мне лучше...

and the unreal; the swarming is a by-product of the witness's traumatic world. (This will be discussed in more detail later.)

## SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

### **“Historical Notes”: Leitmotifs and Scale Introduced in Public Domain Text**

“Historical Notes” is event-oriented and short; it comprises only 1% of the book. It is constructed from nine excerpts from encyclopedic and internet sources juxtaposed one against each other without additional commentary from Aleksiyevich.<sup>19,20</sup> The excerpts are rich in statistics to show the event background for this experiential narrative and to introduce the leitmotifs which are a distinguishing characteristic of each of the eight main sections. For the uninitiated reader, “Historical Notes” provides information about when the explosion happened (*exactly* April 26, 1986 at 1:23:58), where (which reactor, which country and which border), amount of radionuclides were released into the air and how quickly they spread throughout the rest of the world. The leitmotifs are often introduced through the statistics—percentage of land contaminated (23%), villages buried and evacuated (often in comparison with WWII casualty statistics), increases in pathology, death rates (23.5% increase within 10 years) and time-space factors, as in, “Меньше недели понадобилось, чтобы Чернобыль стал проблемой всего мира....[It took less than a week for Chernobyl to become the entire world's problem]”(9,10).<sup>21,22</sup> A 1996 excerpt from *Ogonyok* describes defects in the construction of Reactor No. 4 warning the reader of the danger of another explosion, “The sarcophagus is a dead man who breathes. He breathes death. How long does he have yet?” (9-10).<sup>23</sup> The last two (internet) excerpts are journalist reports of the lawsuit against six responsible for the reactor's construction and the planned construction of a more powerful reactor, “The Ark”, at the site of Reactor No. 4 (11,12).

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<sup>19</sup> The revised version is expanded to include excerpts from electronic newspapers.

<sup>20</sup> Although it does include commentary from the newspaper journalists.

<sup>21</sup> “23% ее территории заражено радионуклидами с плотностью больше за 1 Ки/км по цезию -137”

<sup>22</sup> “В годы Великой Отечественной войны немецкие фашисты уничтожили на белорусской земле 619 деревень вместе с их жителями. После Чернобыля страна потеряла 485 деревень и поселков: 70 из них уже навечно захоронены в земле.”

<sup>23</sup> “Саркофаг - покойник, который дышит. Дышит смертью. На сколько его еще хватит?”

In an extremely small amount of space, “Historical Notes” covers the highlights of the explosion’s background, gives a summary of its physical, economical, national and global consequences, touches on questions of governmental blame in the explosion and cover-up and the still existing (and planned construction of) future nuclear danger.

Because the Chernobyl story is a relatively new story in comparison to WWII, Gulag and Holocaust, there is minimal literature to serve as a library of topoi about Chernobyl. This causes a problem for Aleksiyevich because the majority of her documents belongs to the private domain and domain of privileged access, bringing the veracity of their contents into question. Private domain is validated by its plausibility, which presumes a body of information against which to judge veracity. Therefore Aleksiyevich needs to create a library of topoi within *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* to anchor her monologue narratives in the realm of plausibility. As public domain information about the event, “Historical Notes” lays the groundwork for reader reception of the micro-historical narratives which make up the main body of *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*.<sup>F24</sup>F Because many details of the narratives can be rooted in one or more of the excerpts of the “Historical Notes”, they are at least historically plausible.

#### **“Solitary Human Voice”: Emotional, traumatic content**

“Solitary Human Voice” is an experience-oriented, emotional text from the privileged access domain. The two sections titled “Solitary Human Voice” in *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* together comprise over 10% of the book’s volume. One is positioned after “Historical Notes” and the other immediately before the epilogue. Because of their physical position within the book, the two “Solitary Human Voices” are the reader’s first introduction to the hidden history and serve as a final reminder of the deep trauma experienced by the witness. The “Solitary Human Voices” frame chapters one through three, providing a more emotional context for the monologues. Each “Solitary Human Voice” is “signed” with the witness’s name—“Ludmilla Ignatenko, wife of deceased fireman Vasilii Ignatenko” and “Valentina Timofeevna Apanasevich, wife of first

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<sup>24</sup> Aleksiyevich is careful to say that she still has the original taped interviews.

responder”.<sup>25</sup> The “Solitary Human Voices” further develop the leitmotifs introduced in “Historical Notes”, giving greater emotional value and introduce the reader to a typical Chernobyl narrative (in more expansive form than the chapters’ monologues), which is structured into a pre-Chernobyl versus present Chernobyl world context. Besides leitmotifs, the most prominent literary devices used in the “Solitary Human Voices” are the ellipses and parenthetical narrator’s comments used to reflect “fault line”.

Each “Solitary Human Voice” follows a structurally chronological plan from the reactor explosion to the present. Both “Solitary Human Voices” have the following elements in common:

1. An opening sentence
2. The situation surrounding the husband’s call to action
3. Progression of the husband’s illness
4. Immediately after death
5. Living in lostness afterwards

Intertwined with the above are themes relating to: aloneness and the inability of others to understand this experience, interactions with medical personnel, the authority’s deceit, parents’ reactions, and watching friends die while waiting one’s turn. Although this arrangement is basically what one would expect to see in a death narrative, the Solitary Human Voice narratives add digressions in time which would indicate that relating the death is not the main purpose of the narrative. The following table shows movement back and forth between present and past time (with accompanying themes) for the first seven paragraphs of the first Solitary Human Voice:

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<sup>25</sup> “Людмила Игнатенко, жена погибшего пожарника Василия Игнатенко and Валентина Тимофеевна Апанасевич, жена ликвидатора”



**Table 2. Solitary Human Voice Themes and Time**

<b>Pg#</b>	<b>Opening quote</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Time</b>
1	Я не знаю о чем рассказывать...[I don't know what to talk about...]	Confusion. Death and love.	Present
2	Мы не давно поженились [We had recently married]	Background information.	Past
3	Самого взрыва я не видела. Только пламя. [I didn't see the explosion, just the flames.]	Descriptions of flames. No warning to wear special clothing.	Chernobyl past
4	Четыре часа... Пять часов... Шесть часов... [Four o'clock... Five o'clock... Six o'clock...]	Passion for firefighting	Chernobyl past; distant past
5	Иногда будто слышу его голос...[Sometimes I think I hear his voice...]	Absence of spouse	Present
6	Семь часов [Seven o'clock]	At the hospital. Confusion. Ignorance.	Chernobyl past
7	В десять часов утра умер оператор Шишенок [At 10 o'clock in the morning the operator Shishenok died]	Ignorance.	Chernobyl past

(“Solitary Human Voice” 13-14)

The first six paragraphs discuss the time period from the call to the reactor fire and Vasily's initial hospitalization in Pripriyat. The opening sentence relates the previously discussed themes of love and death. The second and third paragraphs discuss general information about the couple, Vasily's call to the fire, Ludmilla and Vasily's impressions of the explosion and details about the reactor roof. The fourth and six paragraphs mark the chiming of the hours Ludmilla is waiting for Vasily to return home from the fire, but the fourth is a pretext to allude to his passion for firefighting, which eventually leads to his death. Paragraph five digresses into the present as Ludmilla imagines hearing his voice. Paragraph six describes the scene at the Pripriyat hospital, and paragraph seven those who died that first night, both stressing the gap between their absence of knowledge then compared to now as seen by “But no one knew that...” and “But we didn't know yet...”(14, 15).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> “Но никто это не знал...” and “Но мы еще не знали...”

The second “Solitary Human Voice” also relates the illness chronologically, but digresses more freely into memory and present from the narrative’s beginning. This is particularly evident in the following outline which shows movement in time between paragraphs four and nine:

Paragraph 4: Он уехал в Чернобыль в мой день рождения... [He left for Chernobyl on my birthday...]

Paragraph 5: Ах, какая я была счастливая! Вернулся... [Oh, how happy I was! He returned...]

Paragraph 6: Я помню море... [I remember the sea...]

Paragraph 7: В другой раз задумаюсь и ищу себе разные утешения: [At other times I think and look for various ways of comfort for myself:]

Paragraph 8: Он не хотел идти к врачу: [He didn’t want to go to the doctor:] (364-367)

Paragraph four discusses how Mikhail left for Chernobyl, five describes his return and eight and nine his diagnosis and treatment—radical surgery to remove his thyroid and vocal chords.

Paragraphs six and seven represent digressions into the past and present. Paragraph six shifts topics to discuss their first vacation to the sea and falling in love; paragraph seven discusses Valentina’s present efforts to find comfort by seeking answers in books about death and where her husband might be now.

Without rearranging chronology, the reader can easily thread together the story of Vasily’s or Misha’s deaths by eliminating paragraphs that refer to the pre-Chernobyl past (before the explosion) or the present. The inclusion of these seemingly extraneous paragraphs indicates that “Solitary Human Voice” sections are concerned with the wives’ relationship to past memories and life in the present as much as with the stories of the husbands’ deaths. Pre-Chernobyl memories are sweet, happy memories; the present is couched in terms of the spouse’s absence and an accompanying confusion. Therefore, the present time for the wives can best be described as a swarm of memories—the present realization of emptiness and longing for the spouse clashing with memories of the spouse, imagining his touch or voice. “Chernobyl” begins for the

wives not when the explosion happened as much as when the realization of their husbands' illnesses and its fatal consequences hit. It begins with the ordeal which is always rooted in memories about the husband; because it recurs in the wives' memories, the ordeal is non-ending. Therefore, "The Solitary Human Voice" narrative reflects the present state of the witness's mind as she recalls the story and as her mind follows trails into different layers of the past. In this sense, time is of vital importance to the "Solitary Human Voice" narratives.

Aside from the chronological arrangement of the narratives, the thematic schemes of "Solitary Human Voice" expand on themes introduced in "Historical Notes". The thematic schemes allow for verifiability of the privileged domain materials (through development of a library of topoi); they give the work unity and schematically develop a general picture of the Chernobyl world to provide context for the shorter monologues. Possibly foreseeing the argument of unverifiability, Alekseyevich ties the evidence of "Solitary Human Voice" into verifiable facts listed in "Historical Notes". Secondly the degree of technical detail is a defense against the argument of unverifiability. For instance, the descriptions of flames in paragraph three of "Solitary Human Voice" and the appearance of the reactor roof after the explosion as described by Vasily can be either refuted or verified by scientists as can technical details, such as, "The soot was because of the burning bitumen; the station's roof was covered with bitumen. They walked, he recalled later, as if on tar. They'd beat the fire down, and it would crawl and rise again (13).<sup>27</sup> Not only can they be refuted, but the quality of observations seems possible only if the witness was actually on the roof.

On yet another level, the details in "Solitary Human Voice" lay a foundation for a library of themes which are later reinforced by testimony from a multitude of monologues. The reader learns from Ludmilla that firemen were literally walking across the roof. This detail ties into the statistic from "Historical Notes" that 800,000 soldiers were sent into the area after the explosion

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<sup>27</sup> "Копоть оттого, что битум горел, крыша станции была залита битумом. Ходили, потом вспоминал, как по смоле. Сбивали огонь, а он полз. Поднимался."

in addition to the immediate firemen sent in (10). Ludmilla describes the unusually common presence of soldiers on city streets in special breathing masks, adding that Pripriyat's residents carried out their normal daily functions duties without protective clothing. Ludmilla's husband leaves for the reactor fire in his everyday shirt, "They were not warned; they were called out as if to a usual fire (10).<sup>28</sup> The lack of protective gear for the Pripriyat civilians and firemen gives witness to the incompetence and/or deceit of the authorities, a topic previously introduced in "Historical Notes" in an internet newspaper relating the indictment and consequent judicial processes against excerpt about the lawsuit against six highly placed officials accused in the Chernobyl incident (10-12). The excerpt indicates that the lawsuit was deliberately organized in the contaminated city against the chosen "стрелочников [fall guys]" to both "prove" justice had been served and yet guarantee the absence of western journalists (11).

Finally, themes from "Solitary Human Voice" establish context for the regular monologues and mini-monologues. Although shorter monologues are cohesive and self-standing, their details are often unclear without the context of other narratives. For instance, when monologues in chapters one through three refer to "being on roofs" or "soldiers walking on streets", the reader has a pre-programmed framework from "Solitary Human Voice" to provide context for understanding details. He considers the possibility the soldiers might have lacked protective gear and presumes the presence of a general atmosphere of confusion.

A major function of "Solitary Human Voice" is to provide emotional value to the statistics about first responders' deaths introduced by "Historical Notes". "Historical Notes" states: "In Belarus alone there were 115493 people assigned to the first responder list. According to the Ministry of Health from 1990 to 2003, 8553 first responders died. That is two people per day..." (10).<sup>29</sup> Although the numbers are large, spacing out the statistics, for instance, over a ten year period, makes them seem less shocking. Modern readers have developed a relative insensitivity

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<sup>28</sup> "Их не предупредили, их вызвали на обыкновенный пожар..."

<sup>29</sup> "Только в Беларуси значатся в списках ликвидаторов 115493 человека. По данным Минздрава, с 1990 по 2003 год 8553 ликвидаторов умерли. По два человека в день..."

to casualty statistics after massive wars, the Holocaust and Gulag; compared to those statistics, the loss of two persons per day does not seem so shocking. Furthermore, even Holocaust and Gulag writers know that adding details about the atrocities increases the horror. Statistics are insufficient to describe Chernobyl's magnitude. Without access to eyewitness accounts, the reader will "miss out" on the "real" history. The stunningly detailed narratives of the first responders' deaths unpack "Historical Notes" statistic by providing an intimate view of the two first responders' deaths. Valentina says:

Говорят — Чернобыль, пишут — Чернобыль. Но никто не знает, что это... Все теперь у нас по-другому: рождаемся не такие, умираем не так. Не так, как все... Человек, которого я любила, любила так, что не могла бы любить больше, если бы я его сама родила, на моих глазах превращался... В чудовище... Удалили лимфоузлы, их нет и нарушилось кровообращение, и нос уже как-то сдвинулся, увеличился раза в три, и глаза уже какие-то другие — разошлись в разные стороны, в них незнакомый свет появился и выражение, как будто не он, а кто-то еще оттуда выглядывает. Потом один глаз совсем закрылся... А я чего боюсь? Мне бы только, чтобы он себя не увидел... (368)

They say "Chernobyl", write "Chernobyl". But no one knows what it is... Everything is different now among us; we are born differently and die differently. Not like everyone else... The person whom I loved, loved such that I thought I could not love him more than if I had given birth to him myself before my very eyes turned... into a monster... They extracted his lymph nodes, causing a disbalance to his circulation, and his nose somehow moved to the side, increased to three times the normal size. His eyes were somehow different. They shifted to opposite sides. An unfamiliar light and expression glowed in them, as if it wasn't he but as if someone else was looking out of there. Then one eye totally closed... And what was I afraid of? I was only afraid that he would see himself...

The statistics and the word "death" from "Historical Notes" are insufficient to describe the Chernobyl experience. This is partly because death in any context is a complicated experience, but also because the *post-Chernobyl experience of death and dying has changed*.

The post-Chernobyl experience of death and dying as seen in "Solitary Human Voice" includes grotesque physiognomic changes on the part of the spouse and the wives' resulting social isolation. Without "Solitary Human Voice", the only "image" the reader can attach to the word "death" is whatever conception he might have developed through what he has experienced or read in the past. Valentina's above description of her husband's physical transformation is, in

one sense, beyond the imagination. Of the possible changes a person might have imagined on hearing the word “radiation poisoning”, he doubtfully would have considered Valentina’s picture. Ludmilla’s descriptions of binding her hand in gauze to remove pieces of liver and lung from her husband’s mouth go far beyond the normal. The vivid physical descriptions in “Solitary Human Voice” are necessary to keep the death of a first responder from seeming “ordinary”; part of the emotional impact of “Solitary Human Voice” is due to the abnormality of the illnesses.

The emotional impact of “Solitary Human Voice” is developed as strongly through the idea of the everyday extraordinary and the simultaneous real and unreal. Valentina’s husband turns into a чудовище [monster], a word which normally belongs to the genre of fantastical fiction. This is Valentina’s reality: her husband has turned into a monster; he rocks and moans when he finally sees himself in a mirror, yet she loves him deeply (368). Valentina sees herself as belonging to a different time and place—“We are born differently and die differently”—yet simultaneously being required to relate to people from the old time and place: “We had been somewhere where no one else had been and saw that which others did not. I stayed quiet, but then one day I began telling strangers on the train about it. Why? It’s frightening alone” (364).<sup>30</sup> Valentina’s experience cuts her off from the collective and positions her in an unreal world. “Solitary Human Voice” is a death narrative, and therefore one might expect it to communicate a sense of unreality. Perhaps death is always unreal and only shocking when it is too normal; yet as unreal as the world is while the women are nursing their husbands, the husbands’ deaths does not relieve the wives from the real world of permanent unreality. After death they are left with memories of lost love and the question of how to live further. Neither wife could bear to remarry. Both live with their late husbands’ memories overcoming them at surprising moments. Their present does not consist of the present everyday. Just as the narratives’ structures swarm between memories and the needs of the present, so Ludmilla’s and Valentina’s “present” is a constant

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<sup>30</sup> “Мы где-то побывали, где еще никто не был, что-то такое видели, что никто не видел. Молчу-молчу, а однажды в поезде начала рассказывать незнакомым людям. Зачем? Одной страшно...”

mixture of the past swarming into the present. This lends a feeling of the surreal, as Ludmilla describes her simultaneously real and unreal world” (36). Neither can escape it; both are waiting in the time and space between the real and unreal.

“Solitary Human Voice” personalizes the Chernobyl experience. For the husbands the event of “Chernobyl” begins while they are fighting the fire; the wives experience Chernobyl through their husbands’ disintegration. For the wives, “Chernobyl” is distilled to the world of the husband (and to some extent children), is represented by their husbands’ physical disintegration, and continues into the present time, which is characterized by the husbands’ absence. Reality and unreality are at times reversed: reality is the husband who belongs to the past; unreality is the absence of the husband in present time. Reality is the child the wife loves and who belongs to the present. The new “normal” present is characterized simultaneously by reality and unreality.

#### **“Self-Interview”: the metaphor and dissimilar juxtapositions**

“Self-Interview,” which can be described as authorial essay in lieu of a preface, is characterized by metaphors and words combined into phrases in new specific formations to create new meaning. “Self-Interview” is monologic authorial voice described as an interview between the author and herself. Comprising approximately 7% of the book’s material, “Self-Interview” is one of the longest monologues in *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*, equal in size only to the first “Solitary Human Voice”. “Self-Interview” gives Aleksiyevich a platform to speak as a witness, which releases her from journalistic objectivity, and still allows her to state her authorial purpose. Many of “Self-Interview’s” concepts and terms can be found in the monologues. In “Self-Interview,” Aleksiyevich expands semantic zones through key words. For instance, she develops the word “Chernobyl” into a Chernobyl world metaphor and then highlights the tensions of this world through leitmotifs which include juxtapositions of dissimilar meanings. Finally, she reiterates its global ideological impact to make certain the reader does not miss her point.

In the straightforward sense of the word, Chernobyl is both a city and region in Ukraine near the Belarussian border. The nuclear power plant consisting of four reactors (a fifth which

was under construction at the time of Chernobyl Prayer's writing) was named after Chernobyl. After the explosion, "Chernobyl" began to be used as a metaphor for the "Chernobyl disaster"; the people who were exposed to radiation were called "Чернобыльские [Chernobylites]".<sup>31</sup> Aleksiyevich expands "Chernobyl" to stand for the mistakes that led to the explosion, the cover-up attempts and the authorities' inability (and at times unwillingness) to protect the people.

As used by Aleksiyevich in "Self-Interview," Chernobyl has multiple meanings: it is, among others, a "horrible catastrophe", "катастрофа времени [a catastrophe of time]," a "дом" [home]" and a "nation" (37-38).<sup>32</sup> As a horrible catastrophe and "the most frightening event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century," Chernobyl has transforming powers. It turns Belarus into "в дьявольскую чернобыльскую лабораторию [a devilish Chernobyl laboratory]" and Belarusians into "Чернобыльский народ [Chernobyl people]" and "черные ящики [black boxes]"(38).<sup>33</sup> It unleashes a new invisible and, relatively speaking, eternal enemy--the radionuclide. Given the long half-life of radionuclides, Chernobyl deforms the concept of time. As described by Aleksiyevich in "Self-Interview" and validated by the statistics of "Historical Notes", "Less than a week was needed in order that Chernobyl might become a problem for the entire world..." (9).<sup>34</sup> In stating that the people "обживали в новое пространство [inhabited a new space]", Aleksiyevich indicates the creation of a new Chernobyl space within, for the purposes of this book, mostly Belarusian land. She mimics the creation of this non-literal space by creating a

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<sup>31</sup> "— Чернобыль — уже метафора, символ. Но для всех разный. В Киеве или Минске — один Чернобыль, в самой зоне — другой. Где-то в Европе — третий. В самой зоне поражает равнодушие, с которым чаще всего говорят о нем. Для людей здесь — это обыкновенная жизнь. В мертвой деревне живет старик. Один. Спрашивают у него: "Вам не страшно?" А он: "Чего страшно?". [Chernobyl is already a metaphor, a symbol, but different for everyone. In Kiev or Minsk, there is one Chernobyl; in the zone itself, another. Somewhere in Europe, a third. . In the zone itself one is stunned by the equanimity with which people talk about it [Chernobyl]. For people here it is life as usual. An old man lives in the dead village...alone. People ask him, "Are you afraid?" And he (says), "Afraid of what?" (Aleksiyevich, "V poiskakh vechnovo cheloveka", 1998).

<sup>32</sup> "Самого главного события двадцатого века, несмотря на страшные войны и революции, которыми будет памятен этот век [The most important event of the twentieth century, despite frightening wars and revolutions which will be/are memorials/remembered in this century/for which this century is memorable]."

<sup>33</sup> Flight data recorders and cockpit recorders.

<sup>34</sup> "Меньше недель понадобилось, чтобы Чернобыль стал проблемой всего мира...".



world in her book. The new Chernobylized space's dimensions have changed: "Трехмерный мир раздвинулся [The three-dimensional world pulled apart]"; the new world requires new tools and new abilities in order to function in a different dimension (40). The normal five senses are insufficient for evaluating this new world, because in many ways everything seems the same, as one elderly villager insists, but then she adds, "...come to think of it, on almost every street someone has died." What remains is a vague underdeveloped "sense" of fear and death. Whether they live in Propriat, Kiev, or a small village in Belarus, the common bond of Chernobyl experience binds the "Chernobylites" together into a nation. Yet Chernobyl has a positive side. It is "a mystery", "a challenge" and "an unread sign", which serves as a catalyst to cause people to re-evaluate their worldviews (39).<sup>35</sup> Alekseyevich states in "Self-Interview" that her project is not about the Chernobyl events *per se*, but about the "world of Chernobyl" (37).

"Self-Interview" is characterized by an influx of new words and phrases into the Chernobylites' everyday lexicon in order to express new experiences and new ways of thinking. New words are created, and scientific words become a part of vocabulary. Graveyards for animals, necessary because of the government command to shoot all the animals within the zone, become known as biograves [биомогилники] (47). "Radionuclides" and "alopecia" which before belonged strictly to scientific and medical lexicon, become a part of everyday speech, even for children for whom, in one village, the lack of hair is the norm (177, 165). New experiences require new words, but what happens when the words do not yet exist? Alekseyevich states, "Words could not be found for new feelings, nor feelings for new words. We could not yet express ourselves, but gradually became immersed in an atmosphere of new thinking. This is how one can define our state of being" (40).<sup>36</sup> Even defining this state of being requires unusual word combinations to highlight its strangeness. Not only do new experiences require new words,

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<sup>35</sup> "Тайна", "вызов" and "непрочтенный знак".

<sup>36</sup> "Не находили слов для новых чувств и не находили чувств для новых слов, не умели еще выразиться, но постепенно погрузились в атмосферу нового думания—так можно определить то наше состояние."

so does a new way of thinking. As Chernobylites struggle to navigate life in two worlds—the world of known feelings with known words and the new post-Chernobyl world—they discover their old language to be insufficient. Aleksiyevich attempts to describe this tension by juxtaposing antonyms, for instance, “Знакомый незнакомый мир [familiar unfamiliar world]” describes a truth about this new world: the presence of tanks and soldiers looks like war, yet neither tanks nor guns are focused on an enemy; household pets are being shot (43). The loss of orientation is further described as, “We entered an opaque world in which evil is unexplainable, hidden and respects no laws” (44).<sup>37</sup> This description is about the world, but the focus is on “we” who must somehow see in opaqueness and learn to protect against a different kind of enemy. Aleksiyevich attempts to describe a world in which the context and rules have changed, but the people are still evolving in their ability to adjust to the world. Like a photographer, Aleksiyevich attempts to take snapshots of the acclimatization process but through language.

From the straightforward idea introduced in “Historical Notes” of the speed of Chernobyl’s radioactive discharge, Aleksiyevich develops through metaphors and juxtapositions the idea of the Chernobyl world as a place in which time and space extend their boundaries. “Historical Notes” states:

“По данным наблюдений, 29 апреля 1986 года высокий радиационный фон был зарегистрирован в Польше, Германии, Австрии, Румынии, 30 апреля -- в Швейцарии и Северной Италии, 1--2 мая -- во Франции, Бельгии, Нидерландах, Великобритании, северной Греции, 3 мая -- в Израиле, Кувейте, Турции...

Заброшенные на большую высоту газообразные и летучие вещества распространялись глобально: 2 мая они зарегистрированы в Японии, 4 мая -- в Китае, 5-го -- в Индии, 5 и 6 мая -- в США и Канаде.

Меньше недели понадобилось, чтобы Чернобыль стал проблемой всего мира...”

*Сб. "Последствия Чернобыльской аварии в Беларуси." Минск. Международный высший Сахаровский колледж по радиэкологии. 1992 г., с. 82. (9).*

On April 29, 1986, instruments recorded high levels of radiation in Poland, Germany, Austria, and Romania. On April 30, in Switzerland and northern Italy. On May 1 and 2, in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and northern Greece. On May 3, in Israel, Kuwait, and Turkey....Gaseous airborne particles traveled around the globe: on May 2

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<sup>37</sup> “Мы вошли в непрозрачный мир, где зло не дает никаких объяснений, не раскрывает себя и не знает законов.”

they were registered in Japan, on May 5 in India, on May 5 and 6 in the U.S. and Canada. It took less than a week for Chernobyl to become a problem for the entire world.

--*"The Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident in Belarus."* Minsk, Sakharov International College on Radioecology. (Gessen's translation, "Voices of Chernobyl", 2).

In "Self-Interview" Aleksiyevich takes this factual statistic and relates it to changes in resulting changes in worldview; perspectives of "far away" and "nearby" in connection with the terms свои [ours] и чужие [foreign/strange/not ours] change in relation to the ability of radioactive clouds to travel quickly. "Свои и чужие" in the past described what belongs to us and what does not; this radioactive problem can no longer be contained by borders or even rhetoric, as Moscow's attempts at rhetoric those first days after the explosion proved. "Порвалась связь времен...[Continuity of time was disrupted]"; according to "Self-Interview" and people living in that time and space were suddenly hurtled into a new Chernobyl time and space, yet their mindset and language belonged to the pre-Chernobyl world (39). The time perspective affects the ideas of past and future as seen by the themes of dwelling simultaneously in the prehistoric past and the fantastic future (examples of which are given later in Chapters one through three). Aleksiyevich's comment on her difficulty in ascertaining whether she is writing "a history of the past or of the future" exposes Chernobyl's effect on the author's perspective and, again, mixes the past with the future. When change is described best in terms of the past and the known past is no longer sufficient, borrowing from images of the future as read in scientific fiction stories are sometimes the best option.

In "Self-Interview" Aleksiyevich attempts to draw the outlines of a new world in which time, space, laws and language have changed. Most of her ideas come from the eyewitness narratives and could be considered a summary of others' ideas. For instance, Aleksiyevich's idea of Belarussians as "black boxes" is taken almost word for word from an excerpt in "People's Choir", a comment made by a guest from outside of Belarus to a Belarus resident. He comments, "We think that we live like everyone else... We go places, work... fall in love... No! We are

recording information for the future...” (243-4).<sup>38</sup> A philologist comments that it is as if those who live on this contaminated land were material for scientific investigation living in an international laboratory that others might write academic papers (173). Aleksiyevich says that their world turned into a devilish laboratory. I would like to suggest that she interlinks the explosive statements made by people and produces a summary that goes beyond what each would have said individually.

### **Chapters One through Three**

Chapters one through three make up approximately 84% of the book and fit into the fourth narrative category, “choir of human voices” or “voice in a choir”. Each chapter is created by arranging monologues one against another *with no additional text* except for chapter and monologue titles.<sup>39</sup> Each chapter consists of a group of monologues under a metaphoric title and a choir of mini monologues arranged as follows:

- 1) Chapter One: “Land of the Dead” and “Soldier’s Choir”
- 2) Chapter Two: “Crown of Creation” and “People’s Choir”
- 3) Chapter Three: “Exultation through Sorrow” and “Children’s Choir”

Because, for the most part, pre-existing context has been removed from the narratives, the section titles and placement of narratives within a particular chapter or chorus create new contexts for the narrative. Monologues from different chapters have similar themes; some from chapters two and three could have as easily been positioned in chapter one and vice versa. Their positioning under particular section titles causes the reader to interpret them differently than if they would have been in a different section. Furthermore, the combination of titles, “Land of the Dead”, “Crown of Creation ” and “Exultation through Sorrow,” supported by evidence from the monologue contents fleshes out the *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* metaphor. Evidence from the chapter

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<sup>38</sup> “Мы думаем, что живем, как все... Ходим, работаем... Влюбляемся... Нет! Мы записываем информацию для будущего...”

<sup>39</sup> I assume she has not added extra text to the narratives but cannot prove it as I do not have the other texts nearby.

monologues support “Self-Interview’s” essay as each of the “Self-Interview” themes and many of its turned phrases and metaphors can be found in the chapter narratives. Themes and metaphors from the chapter narratives reinforce the elements of the Chernobyl world metaphor by creating a record of trauma experienced by the witnesses. Considering that nations are defined by a common language, culture and history, in one respect chapters one through three can be seen as recording the history of the new Chernobyl nation.

### **Creating Context through Titles**

The monologues receive context through their placement in one of three collections with metaphoric titles “Land of the Dead,” “Crown of Creation” and “Exultation through Sorrow”. The metaphoric titles contain inherent negative, positive and bittersweet connotations and form a contextual background for the individual monologue. The metaphor “Land of the Dead” speaks of desolation. “Земля [land]” has a positive connotation generally associated with life. Land is the womb for the seed; flora and fauna derive their sustenance from the soil; people build their homes and civilizations on it. “Land” that should produce or sustain life is given a negative connotation by the addition of the genitive plural “мертвых [dead]”, describing a picture of a land full of dead objects or people. Instead of sustaining life, land becomes a receptacle for and, in some instances, a propagator of death. The section title draws the reader’s attention to monologues with reference to land and deadness. Chapter one serves as a launching point for narratives with common land and death themes: evacuating villages, burying villages, razing forests and exterminating animals, among others. The monologues in “Land of the Dead” are related from the point of view of those being acted upon, for instance, those required to evacuate their villages, and show their consequent pain. The monologues are constructed from the vantage point of loss; for many, “Chernobyl” is reduced to the day they lost their home, hamster or other precious people or objects. Acts in “Land of the Dead” are usually carried out by soldiers who express their stories in mini monologues of “Soldier’s Choir”. For the soldier, the traumatic issue might be his struggle to evaluate his deeds—was it heroic or a part of an ugly system—or his struggle to

live with the consequences of working in the zone, whether that might be loss of health, the need to live on disability, or loss of respect from civilians for receiving compensation pay for service in the zone. Often the ironic difference between Afghanistan and Chernobyl is mentioned: a soldier's exposure to Chernobyl puts him and his family in the danger zone long after his return from the zone and at times even after his death.

In contrast to "Land of the Dead", "Crown of Creation" seems to have a positive connotation. "Crown of Creation" typically refers to man, as in the Genesis creation account, when God creates man on the sixth day and gives him dominion over all the land and living creatures. "Crown" is metaphoric of apex; man is the height of the creative process. The initially positive connotation of "Crown of Creation" is deformed by the content of its monologues. The reader, expecting positive descriptions of man, finds descriptions of destruction and loss similar to those in "Land of the Dead".

This shattered expectation is even more violent when reading the first eyewitness narrative, "Монолог о старых пророчествах [Monologue about Old Prophecies]" (124-128). The title is from a prophecy about a time when the land will be fruitful, but people will not be able to partake of the land.<sup>40</sup> In this monologue, the mother of a four-year-old girl born with rare, life threatening birth defects of the urinary and reproductive system, describes her struggles to find medical assistance for her child, who is too young to understand that other children do not need to have their urine literally squeezed out of them every thirty minutes. In order to refute the suggestion that the child's pathologies are congenital defects caused by the parents' sin, the mother fights authorities for documentation showing the connection with small doses of ionized radiation. The mother insists, "Какой же она инвалид детства? Она – инвалид Чернобыля

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<sup>40</sup> "Много лет назад моя бабушка читала в Библии, что наступит на земле время, когда всего будет в изобилии, все будет цвести и плодоносить, в реках станет полно рыбы, а в лесах зверя, но воспользоваться этим человек не сможет. Он не сможет и породить себе подобного, продлить бессмертие [Many years ago my grandmother read in the Bible that there would come to the land a time of abundance. Everything would flower and be fruitful; the rivers would be full of fish, the forest with beasts, but man would not be able to partake of it. He would not be able to propagate himself in order to continue immortality ]" (125).

[What invalid from childhood? She is a Chernobyl invalid]" (127). The mother's statement attributes the cause of the girl's "unfruitfulness" to "Chernobyl".

"Monologue about Old Prophecies" is the first of a series of monologues which attempt to link destruction to man and his race for progress. Man's vanity caused the Chernobyl explosion, and man's vanity refused to be honest to protect the people. Later, in "Exultation through Sorrow", Aleksandr Reval'skiy connects Chernobyl with socialism:

Ну и, конечно, мы были воспитаны в особом советском язычестве: человек— властелин, венец творения. И его право делать с миром все, что он захочет. Мичуринская формула: "Мы не можем ждать милостей от природы, взять их у нее — наша задача" (274-275).

And, of course, we were raised in a special Soviet paganism which said that man is the dominator, the crown of creation. He has a right to do with the world as he wishes. Michurin's formula states, "We cannot wait for mercy from nature: it is our task to take it (from her)".

Man, typically the beautiful crown of creation displayed by a sovereign God, is deformed by Soviet paganism (a religion in its own right) into a power-wielding destructive force. The crown, originally to display beauty, is displaced by total dictatorship; nature has become an object of man's rapacious thirst for dominion and progress. As an ironic subtext, insects prove to be more adept than man in sensing danger and higher in the totem pole of life. Man cannot ascertain with his five senses the presence of radiation. The wiser bees, earthworms and June bugs hid from the radiation, as Aleksiyevich comments in her Self-Interview. This is confirmed by Irina Rishina's 1996 interview with Aleksiyevich in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, in which Aleksiyevich asks if man has the right to destroy plants and animals, restoring the lost idea of man's responsibility towards nature and lambasting a user mentality towards it (3).

The accompanying chorus to "Crown of Creation", "People's Choir", is mostly comprised of monologues by people of varying professions—three wives of first responders, six medical workers, mothers of ill children and two evacuees, among others—describing their experiences in the zone. A midwife of thirty years describes how fear has replaced joy in the birthing room. Recurring themes familiar from the first chapter are the war atmosphere, the removal of a layer of

dirt so soldiers might lay asphalt, children dying of leukemia, and hypocrisy and/or ineffectual methods of authorities.

“Exultation through Sorrow” has a mixed “bittersweet” connotation. “Sorrow” is in the instrumental case and becomes the mode to achieving exultation, yet the stress is on the victory of having achieved this state of exultation. One pervasive theme is illumination, or an ability to view life in general and Chernobyl, in particular, without Soviet eyeglasses. Some Chernobylites have grown wiser through their suffering. They recognize that they are individual with responsibilities to care for themselves and their family instead of relying on the collective:

И вдруг новое, непривычное чувство, что у каждого из нас есть своя жизнь, до этого она как бы не нужна была. А тут люди стали задумываться: что они едят, чем кормят детей (265).

And suddenly a new unusual sense that each of us has his own life; before then (Chernobyl), it was as if it wasn't needed. And suddenly people began to consider what they ate and fed their children.

Narratives in chapter three admit personal guilt, often tying it into a belief in Soviet ideology and leaving no or little room for self-justification.<sup>41</sup> The witnesses themselves refute the idea that an act is made righteous because the perpetrator is rhetorically righteous. In “Монолог о том, что в жизни страшное происходит тихо и естественно [Monologue About How the Frightening in Life Occurs Quietly and Naturally],” Zoya Bruk, a biologist and inspector for the protection of natural resources, signed documents allowing the building of stock barn on supposedly “clean” land, although she knew the grain for the stock technically would be coming from irradiated land. She admits, “They say, ‘Holy people, criminal authorities...I’ll tell you later what I think about it... About the people and about myself...’” (267).<sup>42</sup> Aleksandr Reval’sky states, “Чернобыль—

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<sup>41</sup> Another witness says “Что-то я еще боялась забыть? Приметное... А! Вспомнила. Чернобыль... И вдруг новое, непривычное чувство, что у каждого из нас есть своя жизнь, до этого она как бы не нужна была. А тут люди стали задумываться: что они едят, чем кормят детей. Что опасно для здоровья, а что нет? Переезжать в другое место или не переезжать? Каждому надо было принять решение. А привыкли жить-- как? Всей деревней, общиной. Заводом, колхозом. Мы были советские люди. .”

<sup>42</sup> “Вот говорят: святой народ, преступное правительство... Я потом вам скажу, что об этом думаю... О народе нашем и о себе...”



это катастрофа русской ментальности [Chernobyl is a catastrophe of Russian mentality]”, rooting the Chernobyl problem into a socio-cultural sphere (271).

The exultation in this chapter, though, is best described by a type of mental rebirth of a physicist after his diagnosis of cancer. The physicist, Valentin Borisovich, states that the history of the atom and the fascination with it are symptomatic of his youth and time (287). Initially afraid of death, the physicist begins to appreciate nature’s colors and fragrances. He is the ultimate pacifist. Reinforcing Aleksiyevich’s nature-pacifist ideology, he believes he has no right to step on a flower or even an ant on the sidewalk. In a sense he has been reborn into a humanitarian human race.<sup>43</sup> His redemption is depicted by a scene in which nature in the form of an insect steps onto a sidewalk, symbolic of man’s world of technology and progress, and the “new post-Chernobyl man” makes a decision to bypass human brute power to protect nature because he recognizes its value.

The companion choir to “Exultation through Sorrow,” “Children’s Choir,” is signed with children’s names and ages and is comprised of monologues of children who either witnessed the Chernobyl explosion or who experienced its results, often through illness caused by radiation exposure. Most of the children are either waiting to die, have friends and parents who have died, or witness others going to funerals. The children’s memories are described through striking details, often in terms of colors, for instance, they notice strange yellow and green puddles after the rain and that “mother often dresses in black” because of the number of funerals (352).

One can view the titles as having religious overtones, although there is no indication that Aleksiyevich is promoting a traditional Russian Orthodox resolution to the Chernobyl problem. The chapter titles allude to apocalypse and redemption, both religious concepts. Chapter one

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<sup>43</sup> Seepage between works (as described by Toker) is seen in the quotes of one of Aleksiyevich’s witnesses in *Tsinkovye mal’chiki*, who flatly states, “Человеческого в человеке грамм и капля-- вот что я понял на войне.” <http://www.lib.ru/NEWPROZA/ALEKSIEWICH/aleksiewich.txt>

describes apocalypse or a total destruction of the land to bring it back to its beginning state (3).<sup>44</sup> In some ways, this is like the world at the beginning of creation; it was empty and without form.<sup>45</sup> The zone lost its form, having been reduced to flat land in places; it was deathly still, having lost its inhabitants. Formerly friendly pets reverted to wild. Chapter two points to man as the perverted crown of creation and at fault for perverting land that was, in relative comparison, a paradise. Chapter two hints of guilt affixed, but not of guilt admitted. Chapter Three is realization after Apocalypse. When still writing *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, Aleksiyevich describes her working plan of chapter three to Rishina as follows: “In the third chapter people remember how the technological version of the end of the world came to them, that Apocalypse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [They remember] how human nature revealed itself in that situation, how the law of evil and good operated and how the Soviet mentality operated” (Rishkina, 1).<sup>46</sup> The third chapter takes on a redemptive purpose in the published work, although not every witness avails himself of the opportunity. It appears to be a reminder of the choice in the Garden of Eden, an option to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or an option to refuse the temptation. If one would accept this reading, then chapter three returns man to his beginnings, in which he must choose, in Aleksiyevich’s opinion, between war and pacifism (and by default between pacifism and responsibility).<sup>47</sup>

### **Developing Traumatic Space through Monologues**

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the monologues in this section are self-contained, tightly constructed and developed around a point of bifurcation to represent the traumatic space of the particular witness who is speaking. Published individually, each

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<sup>44</sup> Aleksiyevich’s comments about her planned focus of chapter one: “Как быстро стираются там человеческие следы. Как быстро природа забывает человека, хочет его забыть, возвращается в ничто, возвращается в начало” (Rishkina 3).

<sup>45</sup> “А земля же была безвидна и пуста, и тьма над бездною” (Genesis 1.2).

<sup>46</sup> “А в третьей главе люди вспоминают, какими из застала эта технологическая версия светопредставления, этот Апокалипсис XX века. Как человеческая природа проявляла себя в этой ситуации, как действовали законы зла, добра, как действовал советский менталитет.”

<sup>47</sup> One of Aleksiyevich’s arguments is that the Belarusian people really do not want freedom, or they would have voted against Lukashenko.

monologue would have a strong impact based on dichotomy and would feel complete; yet, despite their self-contained nature, the monologues are interconnected on one level through recurring themes (such as those already discussed in “Historical Notes”) containing juxtapositions similar to those mentioned in “Self-Interview”. A picture of a fantastic future invading the present is described by one witness, “There you suddenly found yourself in a fantastical world in which the end of times and Stone Age met. Everything inside me was sharpened... Laid bare... We lived in the forest. In tents. Twenty kilometers from the reactor. ‘Partisan-like’.”(132).<sup>48</sup> The words “sharpened” and “laid bare” represent a knife blade edge holding the two opposing time concepts (from the future and the Stone Age) together. The point of meeting is inside the witness. For this witness, the mental effort necessary to hold these ideas together leads to a heightened inner sensitivity. The sensitivity to incongruence is reflected in the word “partisan”, usually associated in Soviet history with clandestine activities of civilian efforts during WWI and WWII to fight against foreign occupiers. Although the partisan is historically a heroic figure, “partisan” can have a negative meaning, especially when transposed against other soldiers’ descriptions of non-heroic activities. On another layer, the war concept contrasts with the idea of a peaceful atom mentioned repeatedly by witnesses, who said they were taught that the peaceful atoms were not like war atoms. The presence of soldiers sent to defend the nation against peaceful atoms represents a clash of Soviet ideology with present reality.

One feature of the first three chapters as indicated by “voice in choir” is the number of short monologues (approximately 100); “voice in choir” is interaction of monologues to create a composite picture of, in this case, a Chernobyl person. Sukhikh describes “voice in choir”: “Each person appears for a short period of time. Here the appearance is not as important, but the voice, which joins together in a general choir. It [the voice] is woven into a collective story and creates

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<sup>48</sup> “Там ты сразу попадад в фантастический мир, где соединились конец света и каменный век. А мне все еще обострено... Обнажено... Жили в лесу. В палатках. В двадцати километрах от реактора. ‘Партазанили’.”

directly, without individual indirectness, a generalized portrait and character” (38).<sup>49</sup> The purpose of voice in choir is not the entire story of each individual, but a gesturing towards an overall portrait while still retaining the idea of variations (similar to a collage of snapshots). Voice in choir emphasizes general motifs with variations on themes as in a symphony. If each monologue contains at least one fault line, then chapters one through three develops a multi-faceted record of the different types of trauma experienced by people as a result of the Chernobyl explosion. Because of the facets of trauma explored, the reader develops an ever-broadening picture of what trauma can be like and how it is individual for each person. For some, Chernobyl is indelibly interconnected with the breakdown of socialism; for others, such as refugees from Tajikistan, the Chernobyl zone is a haven from war’s horrors. Because of the abbreviated nature of the mini monologue, in particular, its delivery in the choirs is similar to that of a standup comic act with one punch line following another. Because the content is traumatic, the effect on the reader is overwhelming and possibly more like freeze frames of violence in a documentary film played one after another without relief. The reader has little time to recover between barrages of focused trauma; this recreates the witnesses’ world for the reader to experience and reinforces emotionally the history of the metaphorically titled sections.

While certain themes are more noticeable in certain chapters, placement of monologues into separate chapters is not neatly determined by themes. Many of the monologues would fit just as easily in a different chapter, which suggests that the choir and chapter titles affect the reader’s interpretation of monologue content. For instance “Монолог о лунном пейзаже [Monologue about a Lunar Landscape” shares the following themes with monologues in chapter one:

- 1) Memory – Compare the closing sentence from “Monologue of a Lunar Landscape” — “I suddenly began to have my doubts about which is better: to understand or to forget?” — with the title, “Монолог о том, зачем люди вспоминает [Monologue About Why

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<sup>49</sup> “Каждый (человек) появляется лишь ненадолго; здесь важен, пожалуй, не их облик, а их голос, который входит в общий хор, вплетается в коллективный рассказ и создает —напрямую, без индивидуального опосредования—обобщенный портрет и образ.”

People Remember]” from chapter one (128, 52).<sup>50</sup> Both discuss the pain which memory causes and the use of memory or forgetfulness as a protective device.

- 2) Hypocrisy and double standard — The witness, Evgeniy Brovkin, describes foreign journalists in full protective clothing; their interpreters are local girls in summer dresses and sandals (129). This double standard is related in all three chapters.
- 3) Sense of fantastic — The Belarussian landscape reminds Brovkin of pictures of the moon’s surface. White ground, implying burial of contaminated field overlaid with dolomite sand, provides a horizon unbroken by trees. He states: “Я разлюбил читать фантастику...[I no longer liked to read fiction]”, a standard reaction to the fantastic quality of “Chernobyl” (130).

Arkady Filin’s monologue from chapter two, “Monologue of a witness who had a toothache when he saw Christ fall and begin to cry out,” describes activities typical of the first responders’ and soldiers’ monologues of chapter one: burying land underground, non-heroic activities, elements of the fantastic (131-138).<sup>51</sup> It seems it should belong in the first chapter which ends with “Soldiers’ Chorus”; its position in the second chapter forces the reader to view the events through the lens of man’s arrogance in assuming he has the right to dominate nature without the responsibility of protecting it. The seepage between chapters lends a more natural quality to the story and reinforces the veracity of the facts.<sup>52</sup> Forcing monologues into a strict division without seepage might indicate the narratives were fabricated because the artificial fits well into a contained world. Some seepage, or loose ends, suggests the author is drawing conclusions from

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<sup>50</sup> “Я вдруг стал сомневаться, что лучше: помнить или забыть.”

<sup>51</sup> “Монолог свидетеля, у которого болел зуб, когда он видел, как упал Христос и начал кричать”

<sup>52</sup> Toker refers “mutual interdependence” between texts and to “seepage between individual works of documentary prose and their intertextual and extratextual backgrounds” as necessary in documentary prose. I apply this idea to overlap between monologues of *Чернобыльская молитва*. See Toker, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose”, 1997.

facts. Furthermore the constant repetition and variations on themes send a constant message to the reader that “these things happened and they happened often” (Toker 14).<sup>53</sup>

### “Вместо Эпилога [Instead of an Epilogue]”

Like “Historical Notes”, “Instead of an Epilogue” is comprised totally from the sphere of public domain. This section highlights the idea of “банальность ужаса [the banality of horror]”; the horrifying story of Chernobyl has become merely another extreme pleasure kick. “Instead of an Epilogue” is an excerpt from Belarusian newspapers discussing the Bureau of Kiev’s planned tourist excursions to Chernobyl. The tourists would visit the abandoned residential and public buildings in the city of Pripriyat, and then travel to reactor No. 4 and the memorial to Chernobyl heroes. Sarcasm is found in the comments that the radiation did not wipe out the Communist slogans on the walls: “Slogans from Communism are preserved here; even radiation wouldn’t take them”.<sup>54</sup> “The excursion concludes with an [opportunity to be] photographed at the wall in memory of the fallen heroes of Chernobyl, so you will feel yourself a participant in history” highlights the commercialization of tragedy.<sup>55</sup> New phrases — “ядерный туризм [atomic tourism]”, “ядренная мекка [atomic mecca]” and “любители экстремального туризма [lovers of extreme tourism]”— are comprised of incongruent concepts. The atom which caused such destruction to Belarus, as shown by the main volume of the book, is ironically presented in the epilogue as a peaceful atom and a tourist destination. Yet, excursions to the reactor might be compared to people who read (or write) books such as *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* for the sheer pleasure of extreme experience.

### Putting It All Together: Alekseyevich’s Creation and Maintenance of Traumatic Space

Tension in *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* occurs on multiple levels and involves content, aesthetic arrangement, and interactions between and among the books’ sections. The subject

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<sup>53</sup> “Practically, the only possible answer to such questions is that “such things happened” and probably more than once and to more than one person.” Toker, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose”, 1997.

<sup>54</sup> “Здесь еще сохранились лозунги коммунистических времен - их и радиация не берет.”

<sup>55</sup> “Завершается экскурсия фотографированием на память у стелы в память погибших героев Чернобыля, чтобы вы почувствовали себя причастными к истории.”

matter itself—Chernobyl explosion—is inherently negative and potentially traumatic in the sense that the explosion could and did cause physical and mental injury. Recurring negative content throughout the book includes: first impressions after Chernobyl explosion; loss of home, land and loved ones; illness and death; radioactively contaminated land; comparisons to war and presence of soldiers; and government corruption and ineffectiveness. Content is then manipulated on two levels to highlight the tension of the Chernobyl world. First, content is redefined through semantic constructions (metaphors and unusual phrases); words the reader is accustomed to using are given unfamiliar meanings often containing incongruence. Second, the content is aesthetically arranged into literary traumatic space, which as mentioned earlier, involves irreconcilable binaries; two pieces of contradictory information are held in close proximity without reconciling them. Physical objects in this binary arrangement often simultaneously represent both the extraordinary and everyday. On another level, the recurring themes introduced in “Historical Notes” undergo a development in the book from section to section and acquire other layers of meaning which is only possible, it is suggested, in another world; in this case, the Chernobyl world which straddles the Soviet and post-Soviet mindset. As the reader moves from the beginning of the story to the end of the book he is viewing the Chernobyl disaster from different perspectives and gradually developing a picture of its breadth and depth; the depth is defined, for the most part, by the impact of the witnesses’ experiences on their psyches. Alekseyevich’s method is about reshaping trauma for readers to experience while deliberately preventing him from thinking he fully understands the experience.

Considering Alekseyevich published *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* eleven years after the Chernobyl explosion, one of her challenges is how to arrange content in a fresh manner. In the absence of plot driven unity or chronological documentary of event, Alekseyevich chooses an arrangement of content into recurring themes which, similar to organization of movements into a symphony, provide for a much needed unity among sections. In his article “Pravda ne mozhet byt’ mnogo... [There cannot be too much truth]” published in 1989, Sukhikh discusses how

“traditional documentary prose”, similar to fiction literature, builds a typical portrait of a hero on the background of time but still based on a documental foundation whereas “in the collective testimony genre, no one figure stands out more than others” (38).<sup>56</sup> Because the organization of collective testimony genre, into which, in my opinion, *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* would fit, is not strictly chronological as much as it is collaged, direction of information flow could be problematic. In *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, information flow is directed through development of themes. Theme development is an interactive process between the reader and the book and is connected with how the reader is trained through the reading process to understand the developing Chernobyl world. This occurs in part through thematic development as the themes are introduced in one chapter and developed throughout the end of the book into a fully colored, fleshed out Chernobyl world. Concurrently, recurring themes assist in developing a library of topoi for Chernobyl prose as a means of internal validity due to the potential issues with the amount of private and privileged access domain material cited in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*. (The development of particular leitmotifs from section to section will be addressed later in this chapter.)

The word (as content on a rudimentary level), signifies meaning to the reader; this study presumes that the reader has attached to words certain meanings from his own life context, whether based on his own experience or a vicarious experience.<sup>57</sup> If Alekseyevich is trying to indicate that concepts and experiences are dramatically different in the Chernobyl context, and if she is attempting to portray that which she believes is indescribable in normal terms but is limited to known words which would elicit “old” meanings and images in the reader’s mind, then two ways to recreate new meanings using recognizable vocabulary are through use of metaphors and

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<sup>56</sup> “...строится так, как обычно строится большинство жизнеописания персонажа, последовательного рассказа о его судьбе. Главная задача таких книг—типический портрет на фоне времени только создается он, в отличие от литературы вымысла, на абсолютно реальной, документальной основе...” (“Pravda...” 38).

<sup>57</sup> This study will not involve itself with structuralist versus formalist approaches to words and meanings; it is sufficient to say that people do attach meaning to words.



phrases which include juxtapositions of dissimilar concepts. These devices are found most often in “Self-Interview”; the new conceptual phrases are backed up by analogous examples of “things not fitting” from the non-authorial witnesses’ monologues.

One type of metaphor used in this work, as exemplified in “Зона... Отдельный мир [The zone is a separate world]”, is the metaphor which takes a known identifiable place—as in Aleksiyevich’s comment, “Моя первая поездка в зону...[My first trip into the zone]”—and describes it in terms of a second figurative phrase (50, 42). The zone is not a separate universe physically, but *like* one conceptually. Curiously, the metaphor “another world” for most people exists only in their imaginations and alludes to literature of the fantastic. A second more complicated type of metaphor used in *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* sets two phrases in context to make them appear as equivalent in meaning; together they describe an unknown third. “За одну ночь мы переместились в другое место истории. Совершили прыжок в новую реальность [In one night we moved to a different place in history. (We) made a leap into a new reality]”(39). Together the two phrases point to an intangible space-time state in which this unknown “we” have found themselves, which is far removed spatially from the original state. This second type of metaphor is particularly useful to an author attempting to describe that for which there is no equivalent known to man. (A third type of metaphor in *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* is the previously discussed two large metaphors of “Chernobyl world” and “Chernobyl prayer” developed through the section titles and “Self-Interview’s” arguments.)

A second way of semantically manipulating content is through physically juxtaposing concepts which normally do not fit together. In *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* the use of oxymorons creates an internal dissonance within a phrase. For instance, “Знакомый незнакомый мир [the familiar unfamiliar world]” reflects the resonance between familiar and unfamiliar; the two worlds are transposed one upon another yet do not fuse smoothly into one (43). “Мы прикоснулись к неведомому [we touched the unseen]” indicates the creation of a new set of laws outside of the normal physical world the reader is used to; it gives the effect of having

entered the fantastic, which is one of Aleksiyevich's global assertions: the reality of Chernobyl is more fantastic than science fiction (39). Aleksiyevich's metaphoric language and dissimilar constructs is "proven" by examples given by the witnesses' monologues.

Although the stylized language above belongs to Aleksiyevich's "Self-Interview", her phrases seem to be grounded in the illustrations found in chapters one through three giving the sense that her conclusions are drawn from interviewees' testimonies. Soldiers' statements that they buried land is incongruous; normally people or animals are buried in the ground. In Chernobyl, not only land, but huts, villages and forests are buried. These lend a futuristic picture of desolation after apocalypse, as in "Lunar Landscape", in which Brovkin describes the Chernobyl land in terms of a lunar landscape and dryly states that he lost his taste for science fiction (128). Incongruence is represented by soldiers in gas masks and special clothing entering the zone equipped with guns and spades; but, instead of killing human enemies with the guns or protecting the helpless, which is the normal activity for soldiers, the soldiers shoot the friendly animals—cows, horses, dogs and cats—and bury them in "biograves" (47). Household pets run at the sound of a human voice. The normal rhythm of life is upset by the abnormal, which quickly becomes re-established as the norm.

Narratives about how people live in evacuated villages *today* contain references to a pre-technological past, all the more ironic because the disaster is caused by technology. Those who remain in the villages despite governmental orders to evacuate revert to a life without electricity, foraging food and cutting wheat with a scythe. A hunter comments: "Empty villages. Only stoves remain. Khatyns! An old man and woman living like in a fairytale... They're not afraid. Another would go out of his mind! They burn old stumps at night. The wolves fear fire." (142).<sup>58,59</sup> This statement alludes to both the villages in Khatyn emptied by the Nazi occupiers

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<sup>58</sup> "Пустые деревни... Одни печи стоят. Хатыни! Живут дед с бабой. Как в сказке... Им не страшно. А другой бы сошел с ума! Ночью старые пни жгут. Волки огня боятся."

<sup>59</sup> Khatyn—a Belarussian village massacred by Nazi occupiers during WWII and then burned to the ground.

and to a more distant past before people lived in human packs. The reference to Khatyn lends a violent nuance to the statement while the only “world” to which Brovkin can compare this present world is the world of fairy tales.

Brovkin describes the fantastic transposed on the everyday in juxtaposition with the ethical discomfort of working in protective clothing while surprised villagers watch: “We turned over trash heaps and gardens. The village women watched and crossed themselves. We wore gloves, respirators, protective suits... The sun was burning... We appeared on their gardens like devils. Like extra-terrestrials.” (132).<sup>60</sup> Soldiers are expected to protect the weak. This passage exposes a tension between Brovkin’s natural view of himself and how he perceives the locals see him—as a devil from outer space burying their livelihoods for no *visible* reason. Because other monologues relate the difficulty villagers have with understanding radiation, Brovkin is placed in an uncomfortable position not of his own making with no way to justify himself. A subtext leads to the underlying idea of participating in an unethical act: the soldiers are protected from the radiation to which the villagers are exposed.

These examples indicate “things not fitting” as depicted by an inability on the part of the witness to describe concepts and events without comparisons to other time periods and without using comparative devices. “Straight language” is insufficient. Furthermore the need to reference the fantastic is curious. Even the science fiction author Iurii Shcherbak noted in *Chernobyl’: dokumental’noe povestvovanie* that, after Chernobyl, he could not bring himself to write science fiction (9). Fantasy literature is exciting because it deals with the unknown and unexpected. In fantasy literature, the reader sails uncharted territories without knowing what types of dragons or invisible sea enemies might inhabit that space. Because the rulebook has yet to be written, it is impossible to prepare for the unexpected physically or emotionally. The surprise element causes

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<sup>60</sup> “Перекапывали мусорные свалки, огороды. Женщины в деревнях смотрели и крестились. Мы в перчатках, респираторах, маскхалатах...Жарит солнце... Появляемся на из огородах, как черти. Инопланетяне какие-то.”

an exciting tension and thrusts the reader into the literary world of the unknown which is never comfortable; in this way, on the word and phrase level, content is magnified by the metaphor and oxymoron in order to thrust the reader into the world of the unknown.

On the level of eyewitness monologues, content is manipulated aesthetically into traumatic space, which is characterized by irreconcilable conflict. Conflicting elements are positioned together, often in the same or in adjacent sentences. Because the monologues are a product of the witnesses' perceptions of events, the clashing elements represent unresolved psychological tension. Creation of literary traumatic space in Chernobyl'skaya molitva is a product of both contradictory content—it is impossible to create traumatic space in the absence of conflict—and the arrangement of this content into irreconcilable binary oppositions. The aesthetic arrangement is essential, in part because the order in which information is released to the reader brings in an element of surprise.

Compare the difference between the following three passages based on a mini-monologue from “Children’s Choir” in its entirety. The first two are my reworking of the original monologue to show the effects of conflicting content and aesthetic arrangement. Part of the conflicting content has been removed from the first narrative. The second contains conflicting content, but physical space has been put between the potential components of traumatic space—the girl’s love for her father and the cause of her death. Ellipses and paragraph divisions have been removed from both passages. The third passage is Aleksiyevich’s original monologue.

I.                    Мне — двенадцать лет. Врачи сказали: я заболела, потому что я родилась после того как мой папа работал в Чернобыле. Я все время дома, я — инвалид. В нашем доме почтальон приносит пенсию мне и дедушке. Девочки в классе, когда узнали, что у меня рак крови, боялись со мной сидеть. Дотронуться. Почему меня боятся?

I am twelve years old. The doctors said that I became ill because I was born after my dad had worked in Chernobyl. I [stay] at home all the time; I’m an invalid. In our home, the postman brings a pension to me and my grandfather. When the girls in my class knew I had cancer of the blood, they were afraid to sit with me, to touch me. Why are they afraid of me?

II. Я люблю папу. Мне — двенадцать лет. Врачи сказали: я заболела, потому что я родилась после того как мой папа работал в Чернобыле. Я все время дома, я — инвалид. В нашем доме почтальон приносит пенсию мне и дедушке. Девочки в классе, когда узнали, что у меня рак крови, боялись со мной сидеть. Дотронуться. Я смотрела на свои руки, на свой портфель и тетрадки. Ничего не поменялось. Почему меня боятся?

I love my dad. I am twelve years old. The doctors said that I became ill because I was born after my dad had worked in Chernobyl. I [stay] at home all the time; I'm an invalid. In our home, the postman brings a pension to me and my grandfather. When the girls in my class knew I had cancer of the blood, they were afraid to sit with me, to touch me. I looked at my hands, at my schoolbag. Nothing had changed. Why are they afraid of me?

Compare the above to:

III. Мне — двенадцать лет...  
Я все время дома, я — инвалид. В нашем доме почтальон приносит пенсию мне и дедушке. Девочки в классе, когда узнали, что у меня рак крови, боялись со мной сидеть. Дотронуться.. А я смотрела на свои руки... На свой портфель и тетрадки... Ничего не поменялось. Почему меня боятся?

Врачи сказали: я заболела, потому что мой папа работал в Чернобыле. А я после этого родилась.

А я люблю папу... (359)

I am twelve years old

I [stay] at home all the time; I'm an invalid. In our home, the postman brings a pension to me and my grandfather. When the girls in my class knew I had cancer of the blood, they were afraid to sit with me, to touch me. I looked at my hands, at my schoolbag. Nothing had changed. Why are they afraid of me?

The doctors said that I became ill because my dad had worked in Chernobyl. And I was born after that.

But I love my dad.

The tension in paragraph III is caused by the cause of the girl's illness and the close juxtaposition of the statement of her love for her father. Emotion is added through the ellipses and the contradictory conjunction "a". The shortness of this narrative makes a strong argument for its having been crafted by Aleksiyevich. Although it is conceivable that Aleksiyevich is giving a word-for-word rendition of the girl's narrative, it is difficult to believe it is a complete rendition. Regardless, suspending the narrative after "But I love my dad..." leaves it unresolved. It is trauma that "hangs in space".

Traumatic effect is created through controlled release of information so that the reader does not have access to the information in time to prepare himself emotionally. The first and second paragraphs prepare the reader for traumatic content by putting the girl's age and the reason for her illness first—her father served in “Chernobyl”. At this point, the reader has read enough monologues to know that children of those who served in Chernobyl often develop abnormal pathologies: he could have anticipated the child's illness. Therefore by adjusting the delivery of information, the third paragraph surprises the reader with the leukemia's probable cause and, most important, spotlights the tension on the girl's love for her father and his “fault” as the “carrier” of the illness. The literary arrangement probably mimics the family's experience although on a less intense level. Undoubtedly the parents were faced with their daughter's illness before the diagnosis and causal connection to the father's service in Chernobyl was mentioned by the physicians. The reader learns the details in a more natural chronology: he experiences the surprise in the same order the family does.

The incongruence of a child experiencing an elderly person's lifestyle before having experienced a real childhood increases the emotional impact of the monologue.<sup>61</sup> She receives a pension “like grandpa does”; her illness and experiences separate her from her classmates. The isolation of the Chernobylites is a subtext seen repeatedly in the monologues, including “Solitary Human Voices”; it confirms the treatise of Chernobyl as an exclusive world. Even in such a short monologue, allusions to trauma and tension occur on multiple levels. Therefore on the level of the monologue, tension is magnified through the development of traumatic space, while, secondarily, the monologues highlight incongruent content. Simultaneously, they reinforce recurring themes reflected in other monologues. The above monologue reinforces themes of the innocent child, the presence of an invisible enemy against whom it is impossible to defend oneself, the doctors'

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<sup>61</sup> In an interview with Irina Riskhina before *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* was published, Alekseyevich describes her intent in the children's choir, “Дети говорят о смерти. О тех вопросах, о которых в конце жизни задумываются, они говорят в самом ее начале [Children speak of death. They speak in the beginning of their lives about questions which [people] consider at the end of life]” (1).

cloaked accusations, the subtle shifting of blame to a higher authority and the ultimate isolation of a Chernobyl sufferer.

Although content is manipulated on level of phrase and monologue to magnify tension, on another level, the recurring themes, or leitmotifs (representing content), which are introduced in “Historical Notes” undergo a development in the book from section to section. Like echoes, leitmotifs indicate at a root or source meaning and, as mentioned above, provide for cohesiveness by allowing the author to hint at relationships between monologues and the larger narrative sections. Beyond cohesiveness, Aleksiyevich develops leitmotifs from a few flat phrases in “Historical Notes” to a rich broad and round imagery (even a history) by the end of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*. As the reader walks through this Chernobyl experience, his understanding of the Chernobyl world changes. On a reduced level, it mimics the witness’s experiences. The dissonance within the reader, or the shock between what he thought he understood before reading *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* and the greater though uncomfortable understanding he has at the work’s end, is part of the aesthetic effect of tension in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*.

Leitmotifs can be divided into three different types depending upon the type of content they reflect: time motifs, thematic content, and incongruence, with overlap between the three categories. Time motifs are divided into life before Chernobyl and after Chernobyl. Reference is made to “дочернобыльский человек и чернобыльский [the pre-Chernobyl and post-Chernobyl person]”, the ancient past (“like 100 years ago”) and references to the fantastic. (References to the ancient past and to the fantastic have already been discussed.) Examples of thematic content includes: first impressions after the Chernobyl explosion, presence of soldiers, descriptions of work people performed, death, comparisons to war, villages, huts, animals, radiation, lies, love and Soviet Communism. As the narrative progresses, the reader develops a fuller understanding of the part each of the above themes plays in the overall narrative and how they are interrelated. Leitmotifs containing incongruence fit into the following categories: the interviewee’s inability to

describe his own experience while insisting the author relate it anyway and use of time words which indicate a sense of the future and past invading the present.

While it would be logical for a person to mark time by a significant milestone, especially if that tragedy significantly changed his life, Alekseyevich highlights the dichotomy within the monologues and “Self-Interview” by making “after Chernobyl” a place and time. The first “Solitary Human Voice” introduces the idea of before and after Chernobyl and develops a chronology, or a typical structure, for a Chernobyl narrative. I would like to suggest the following elements:

- 1) Where the witness was when “Chernobyl” entered his consciousness and his initial reactions;
- 2) Vivid, detailed impressions of “Chernobyl” often containing incongruence;
- 3) The presence of irreconcilable issues;
- 4) The difficulties of post-Chernobyl life.

All the above elements can be seen in the analysis of “Solitary Human Voice” early in this chapter. The dichotomy is solidified through Ludmilla’s comments about pre-Chernobyl life. The day before the accident, she and her husband had a picture taken with another couple, the husband of whom died in the same hospital as Vasily. She comments, “The last day of that life... Pre-Chernobyl... How happy we were!” (28-29).<sup>62</sup> The context indicates she still has the photograph. For Ludmilla, the pre-Chernobyl world is affixed in a physical object, the photograph.

Monologue narratives tie into part or all of the elements of the Chernobyl narrative, depending upon the monologue size. Natalya Roslova begins at the beginning, “What do I remember of the first days? How was it? Still [I] need to begin from there...” (342).<sup>63</sup> The monologues in “Land of the Dead”, in particular, describe the changes in the land—absence of bees and odd-colored rain—in connection with Chernobyl. Children have a tendency to affix

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<sup>62</sup> “Последний день нашей той жизни... Дочернобыльской... Такие мы счастливые!”

<sup>63</sup> “Что я помню с первых дней? Как это было? Все-таки надо оттуда...”



details to significant events. Other monologue witnesses use the words, “до Чернобыля, дочернобыльский [pre-Chernobyl]”. Irina Kiselyov, a journalist, describes the dichotomous Chernobyl person:

Вспоминаю первые впечатления, первые слухи... Перехожу из одного времени в другое, из одного состояния в другое... Отсюда — туда... Как пишущий человек, я задумывалась над этими переходами, они меня интересовали. Во мне словно бы два человека — дочернобыльский и чернобыльский. Но вот это "до" сейчас трудно восстановить с полной достоверностью. Мое зрение поменялось...

I remember the first impressions and the first rumors... I move from one time to another and from one state to another... From there to here... As a writing person, I consider these transitions; they interest me. There were literally two people in me—a pre-Chernobyl and a Chernobyl. But now I have difficulty recollecting the “before” with full authenticity. My vision has changed... (325).

Kiselyov’s statement is a striking description of the blurring of lines between time and space for pre-Chernobyl and Chernobyl person. She moves between one time and another, equating time with a physical state of being. The movement between pre-Chernobyl and Chernobyl is reminiscent of the movement between reality and unreality in “Solitary Human Voice” narratives. It appears that the Chernobyl reality is characterized by fluid time and space boundaries.

In “Self-Interview,” Aleksiyevich is the first monologue “witness” to introduce the idea of Chernobyl as a different world; furthermore, she repositions the “before and after Chernobyl” elements introduced by “Solitary Human Voice” into space. She introduces the activities of people in the new space as, “They were employed with new human non human activities” (45).<sup>64</sup> As mentioned above, activities, such as the burial of contaminated land and produce and the forced evacuation of elderly who do not understand an invisible enemy, are described by zone residents and soldiers as unworldly and therefore emotionally painful. A hunter required to destroy friendly animals admits he could not tell his son where he had been, “To this day he thinks that his dad protected someone; that he manned a fighting post!”(144).<sup>65</sup> Aleksiyevich states, “Man on Chernobyl land is to be pitied,” and questions, “What was the benefit of the

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<sup>64</sup> “Они занимались новыми человекским нечеловеческим делом.”

<sup>65</sup> “Он до сих пор думает, что папа там кого-то защищал. Стоял на боевом посту!”

Chernobyl experience? Did it turn us towards that silent and secret world of others'?" (46, 47).<sup>66</sup> Chernobyl is a place Aleksiyevich speaks of the influx of time words –“Time themes constantly are present in their stories; they were saying ‘for the first time,’ ‘never again,’ ‘always’”— and then she guides the reader to look for such words and time themes (46).<sup>67</sup> She joins the past and the future in “Время укусило свой хвост, начало и конец соединились [Time bit its tail; the beginning and end were joined]” (45). This happens through Chernobyl when the end of the world seems to look as one might expect it to be in its prehistoric beginning. Perhaps the most striking statement for its simplicity is, “I saw how the pre-Chernobyl person turned into the Chernobyl person”(46).<sup>68</sup> It can be seen that leitmotifs of activity are categorized as “nonhuman human activity” and monologue descriptions of human activities in the present time simultaneously reflect the past and the future.

The leitmotifs develop from section to section and play with the reader’s expectations. Following the themes of first responders and death from section to section, we find they develop from a surface view into a round nuanced concept. For instance, the only information the reader knows about first responders from “Historical Notes” is: 800 young soldiers were sent in, some as first responders; their average age was 33; 115493 were sent from Belarus, and 8553 died between 1990 and 2003. The numbers sound horrifying enough, but reading gruesome details of their bodies’ disintegration in “Solitary Human Voices” gives the reader a new picture to associate with the phrase “first responder’s death”. This new picture replaces whatever assumptions the reader might have had before reading *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* . Details about the lack of protective clothing given to these men and the uncaring manner of authorities towards the wives counterposed against the medals of heroism their husbands received provides more

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<sup>66</sup> “На чернобыльской земле жалко человека”; “Что дал чернобыльский опыт? Повернул ли он нас к этому молчаливому и таинственному миру других.”

<sup>67</sup> “В их рассказах постоянно присутствовала тема времени, они говорили ‘впервые,’ ‘никогда больше,’ ‘навсегда’.”

<sup>68</sup> “Я видела, как дочернобыльский человек превращался в чернобыльского человека.”

information about their deaths and ties the narratives to the lawsuit and crimes mentioned in “Historical Notes”.

By mentioning other first responders’ deaths, both “Solitary Human Voice” narratives prove that unusual death has become a usual occurrence. Furthermore, part of the first responder experience is the emotional (and sometimes physical) devastation experienced by the widows; both widows gave birth to children with congenital defects. After reading “Historical Notes” and “Solitary Human Voice”, the reader has a picture of a widespread catastrophic event with deep physical, psychological and emotional ramifications, at least as pertaining to the death of first responders and their widows’ attempts to function in the new world.

“Self-Interview” takes the first responder theme to a philosophical level. In “Solitary Human Voice”, both Ludmilla and Valentina refer to their husbands receiving medals of honor. Valentina’s husband, even in an advanced state of physical degeneration, does not regret going into “Chernobyl”. Aleksiyevich openly discusses the speculation in society about whether the first responders were heroes or suicidal:

Я слышала мнение, что поведение пожарников, тушивших в первую ночь пожар на атомной станции, и ликвидаторов напоминает самоубийство. Коллективное самоубийство. Ликвидаторы часто работали без защитной спецодежды, беспрекословно отправлялись туда, где "умирали" роботы, от них скрывали правду о полученных высоких дозах, и они с этим мирились, а потом еще радовались полученным правительственным грамотами и медалям, которые им вручали перед смертью... А многим так и не успевали вручить... Так кто они все-таки герои или самоубийцы? Жертвы советских идей и воспитания? Почему-то со временем забывается, что они спасли свою страну. Спасли Европу. Только на секунду представить себе картину, если бы взорвались остальные три реактора... (44).

I heard the opinion that the actions of firemen and first responders who had put out the fire on the atomic reactor that first night resembled suicide. Collective suicide. First responders, often working without protective clothing, wordlessly went to that place in which robots “died”. Others hid from them the truth of the high radiation dosage, and they went quietly along with it. Then later they became the glad recipients of honors and medals granted to them by the government administration before death. And a number of them didn’t receive them in time. So, what were they: heroic or suicidal? Victims of the Soviet ideals and upbringing? Why is it that, in the passing of time, people forget that they saved our country, saved Europe. Imagine for one second what would have happened if the other three reactors would have erupted...

Aleksiyevich raises the issues of medals and motivation which is later reiterated by soldiers in chapters one through three.

Soldiers and first responders struggle with the same issue of heroism. A poignant example is the one given earlier in this chapter of the soldier who went to Chernobyl to test his heroism. His son later died of brain cancer, the monologue suggests, from wearing his father's uniform cap brought back from the zone. Arkady Filin, who went to the zone when his wife left him, refuses the title of hero:

Я вас предупреждал... Ничего героического для писательского пера. Были мысли, что вроде бы не военное время, почему я должен рисковать, когда кто-то будет спать с моей женой. Почему опять я, а не он? Честно говоря, не видел я там героев. Сумасшедших видел, которым наплевать на собственную жизнь (132).

I warned you... Nothing heroic for the author's pen. There were thoughts that since its not wartime, why should I risk my life when someone else will be sleeping with my wife. Why I again, and not he? Truthfully, I didn't see any heroes there. I saw crazy ones who could care less about their own lives.

A minority are proud of their actions as soldiers, although even though they recognize the danger to their bodies and, in some instances, the pride is later infused with doubt:

Ехать — не ехать? Лететь — не лететь? Я — коммунист, как я мог не лететь? Двое штурманов отказались, что, мол, жены молодые у них, детей еще нет, их пристыдили. Карьера кончилась! Был еще мужской суд. Суд чести! Это, понимаете, азарт — он не смог, а я пойду. Теперь я думаю иначе... После девяти операций и двух инфарктов... Теперь я никого не сужу, я их понимаю. Молодые ребята. Но сам все равно бы полетел... Это точно. Он — не смог, а я — пойду. Мужское! (122)

To go or not to go? To fly or not to fly? I'm a Communist, how could I not go? Two navigators refused to go, saying their wives were young and they didn't have children yet. They were shamed ....Their careers were over! And as well there's the male justice. A court of honor! You understand, it's a game of risk. He couldn't go, but I'll go. Now I think otherwise. After nine operations and two infarcts... Now I judge no one; I understand them. Young guys. But I still would have gone...It's the truth. He couldn't go; but I'll go. It's a male thing.

The witness's insistence he would have gone is colored by his perceived responsibility as a man and as a Communist. One soldier insists that the heroism was real but should not have been

necessary, adding, “They hurled us there like sand on the reactor. Like bags of sand” (111-112).<sup>69</sup>

Inclusion of monologues by first responders' wives provide an opposing argument. A woman whose husband died of leukemia says, “If I would have known, I would have bolted the doors on ten locks!” (245).<sup>70</sup>

Through the development of traumatic space, “Soldier’s Choir” highlights the trauma experienced by the soldiers. For instance, soldiers recall washerwomen whose arms were covered with sores from washing the soldiers’ clothing; they wonder if the women are still alive (112-113). Overall, narratives by those who are proud of their service are outnumbered by those who are not, and even the pride is given a doubtful nuance by the presence of other information. The tone of the book casts doubts on any Soviet citizen's judgment, asserting that the Soviet ideology deformed the individual's ability to reason. The first responders and their families are seen as traumatized in part by their inability to respond otherwise because of their upbringing.<sup>71</sup>

The leitmotif of death and illness is further developed from section to section to show how death and illness operate differently in the post-Chernobyl space. As mentioned earlier, the reader associates illness and death with certain images based on his past experiences; *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* re-educates the reader. “Historical Notes” notes the increase in illnesses and shortened life spans:

До Чернобыля... на 100 тысяч белорусских жителей было 82 случая онкологических заболеваний. Сегодня статистика следующая: на 100 тысяч – 6 тысяч больных. Увеличение почти в 74 раза.

Смертность за последние десять лет увеличилась на 23,5%. От старости умирает 1 человек из 14, в основном трудоспособные – 46-50 лет. В наиболее зараженных областях при медицинском осмотре установлено: из 10 человек – семь больных. Едешь по деревням, и тебя поражает территория разросшихся кладбищ... (10).

Before Chernobyl... there were 82 instances of oncologic illness for every 100 thousand Belarussians. Today the statistics are as follows: six thousand ill (oncologically) in 100 thousand persons. An almost 74 times increase.

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<sup>69</sup> “Швыряли нас туда, как песок на реактор... Как мешки с песком.”

<sup>70</sup> “Если бы я знала... Закрыла бы все двери, стала бы на пороге. Заперла бы на десять замков...”

<sup>71</sup> And yet, of course, Aleksiyevich chose which monologues to include. Second, her choice is slanted by her deliberate search for people who were traumatized by events.

The death rate in the past ten years has increased by 23.5%. One in fourteen persons dies of old age, and mostly at working age, 46 to 50 years. In the more highly contaminated regions medical examination has established that there are seven ill for every 10 persons. Driving from village to village you are stunned by the territories that have been taken over by cemeteries.

“Historical Notes” presents illness and death statistically; the “Solitary Human Voice” sections show the husbands’ degenerative processes as vivid, or “monstrous,” in Valentina’s words. Vasily’s body was covered with bleeding wounds, and his feet were grossly enlarged. Mikhail’s face was so deformed that he refused to let anyone see him, and one woman fainted at his funeral at the sight of him. “Solitary Human Voice” presents types of details unheard of even in a usual hospital situation so that, after reading “Solitary Human Voice,” the reader attaches vivid images to the term “radiation illness”.

Chapters one through three proffers a kaleidoscope of images to relate to the phrase “Chernobyl illness”. In the Chernobyl world, unusual illnesses are the norm. In one village almost every child has alopecia. In another, people fall from exhaustion, their legs giving out for no apparent reason. Extreme isolated examples are horrifying. As mentioned earlier, a young girl is born without lower external orifices; outwardly she appears to be a beautiful, normal girl (124-128). The mother’s dilemma—her daughter does not know this is not normal, and physicians are helpless. Another facet is added to the picture of Chernobyl illness as parents struggle with guilt after they unsuspectingly and secondarily expose their children to radiation and often death. Examples have already been given of a child who allegedly develops a brain tumor from wearing his father’s Chernobyl cap and the 12-year-old leukemic girl whose father served in Chernobyl. Added to the mix are a mother who weeps because she carried a child to full term against the physician’s recommendations (and was surprised when it was stillborn and missing two fingers) and the Communist official who refused to allow his newborn granddaughter to leave the area after the explosion (240, 318). Death, which should mark the end of a long life, becomes a normal part of everyday life for even young children who play at “radiation” with one another and

“death” with dolls because “...наши дети жить не будут. Они рождаются и умрут [...our children will not live. They are born and die]” (245).

As horrifying as the excerpts above are, they seem less so as part of the above list than they do within the text. To highlight the traumatic value and prevent the reader from shrugging off the content as just one more example of how the world is a harsh place, Aleksiyevich uses (among other devices) punctuation and stage comments. Ellipses and exclamation points mimic voices breaking. In the following example, Aleksiyevich uses both third person “stage comments” and ellipses to draw attention to the trauma in remembering *as if the witness was extracting the memory from another world*.

Я видел человека, на глазах у которого хоронили его дом... (*Встает и отходит к окну.*) Осталась свежевыкопанная могила... Большой прямоугольник. Похоронили колодец, его сад... (*Молчит.*) Мы — хоронили землю... Срезалаи, скатывали ее большими пластами... Я вас предупреждал... Ничего героического...

I saw a person whose house was buried before his eyes... (*Stands and walks to the window.*) A newly dug grave remained... A large rectangle. We buried his well, his garden... (*He is silent.*) We buried land.... Cut it and rolled it into large sheets... I warned you... Nothing heroic... (133).

His walking to the window suggests the witness is putting his back to the interviewer and withdrawing into his own world. The impact of the stage directions and ellipses can better be seen by removing them, as in the following text:

Я видел человека, на глазах у которого хоронили его дом. Осталась свежевыкопанная могила (похожа на) большой прямоугольник. Похоронили колодец и его сад. Мы хоронили землю.

I saw a person whose house was buried before his eyes. A newly dug grave remained (similar to) a large rectangle. We buried his well and his garden. We buried land (133).

In this instance, the witness’s emotional pain is revealed more through the witnesses’ physical removal of himself from the scene and his silence than through his words. Although this instance is not directly related to death, this example shows how punctuation and narrator interjection can serve emotional purposes.

### **Breadth, Depth and the Unexpected**

As the reader moves from the beginning of the story to the end of the book, he is viewing the disaster from different perspectives and developing a picture of both the disaster's breadth and depth. Depth is defined as the impact on the witnesses' psyches and reflects the plumbing into the psycho-sociological inner depths of trauma victims. "Historical Notes" can be seen in terms of the surface effect of the explosion in quantifiable terms. It shows the magnitude of the Chernobyl explosion in terms of breadth in a way that might be chartable on a map or seen in terms of the general population and concludes that the Chernobyl explosion affected a significantly large cross-section of land and population. "Historical Notes" can be seen as an overview of the problem or as a flat surface with markings.

In contrast, "Solitary Human Voice" can best be described by "intensity". It measures the depth of the effects of the reactor explosion psychologically on the wives as "read" through emotions in their voices. "Solitary Human Voice" is a mixture of facts, grueling detail and emotion and is emotionally dense due to interwoven themes which build a complicated trauma. Interrelated to this, there are multiple incidences of traumatic breaking points as seen by the use of ellipses and similar devices. "Solitary Human Voice" takes a core sampling of one leitmotif and shows the deep implications to that point, tying other leitmotifs into the first. An emotionally demanding text, it draws the reader into a mutual experience. Because this section is comprised of privileged access domain material, the reader feels privy to secrets, which causes him to buy into the story. Furthermore, both wives admit they have never told anyone else these details. Because the reader accepts the story as fresh and unrehearsed, the story seems to him more authentic.

Whereas "Solitary Human Voice" engages the emotions, "Self-Interview", although it uses emotional language, is geared to the reader's intellect. Like a lawyer, Alekseyevich makes her case before the jury and cues the reader to listen to the main body of evidence as will be presented by the eyewitnesses' monologues and choirs in chapters one through three. When the monologues repeat themes and fill in the blank spaces in the stories with highly charged content



arranged to display trauma, both the reader's intellect and emotions are fully engaged. Furthermore, while "Solitary Human Voice" mostly describes first responders' deaths, the monologues present a variety of themes connected with contaminated land, pathology and oncology, evacuated villages, effects on nature, among others, and show these themes through the eyes of a large cross-section of the population—soldiers, children, pensioners, villagers, refugees from Tajikistan, government officials, journalists and scientists — all with varying attitudes towards the Chernobyl event.

Chapters one through three can be best expressed as a collage comprised of micro-histories of varying degrees of intensity and detail. Some are relatively short, extremely focused and deep. Some touch on a wider number of themes, yet are focused and deep. All portray trauma through the fault line, punch line, or quietness. Having read "Self-Interview" on a framework of "Historical Notes" and "Solitary Human Voice", the reader perceives the monologues of chapters one through three (which are focused on traumatic space multiplied many times over) through the contextual lens of "Self-Interview". He knows to look for the ways in which a pre-Chernobyl person is transformed into a Chernobyl person. He knows to look for a new world. Now that he has access to pictures of deaths and a futuristic zone, he can read traumatic monologues in light of these. If that were not enough, then Aleksiyevich's titles give clear direction to the reader to look for death in chapter one, man in chapter two, and beauty among the ashes in the chapter three.

After reading the first "Solitary Human Voice," the reader could consider Ludmilla Ignantenko's narrative an isolated incidence. After reading the second "Solitary Human Voice," the reader realizes that this story could have been repeated 8551 more times, because 8553 liquidators died between 1993 and 2002. By the book's end, the reader realizes that every incident in the monologues and choirs could have been extrapolated deeper and wider. In reality there are 6000 people with oncologic diseases, thousands of children with genetic mutations and 13 out of every 14 die before old age. Possibly only 1 in 14 might not have such story.

By constantly manipulating the perspective from which “Chernobyl” is viewed, Aleksiyevich prevents the reader’s desensitization to Chernobyl’s horrors. The shift between perspectives adds an element of unexpectedness for which the reader is unprepared emotionally. Having expected, because of the title, to read prose, the reader is surprised by the contents of “Historical Notes”. Having become acclimatized to the magnitude of the Chernobyl problem based on his perusal of statistics in “Historical Notes”, the reader is unprepared to be drawn emotionally into Ludmilla Ignatenko’s intimate story of her love and her family’s losses. “Self-Interview” leads the reader to consider breadth of moral implications of Chernobyl problem, after which the reader finally reaches the main body of the book, which barrages the reader with a mosaic of snapshots into hundreds of individual lives. The shift back from the collaged monologues to the extended play and deeply intimate Solitary Human Voice seals the Chernobyl experience for the reader in an emotionally charged context. If each of these sections could be considered to represent different genres with different connected expectations, then the emotional energy expended by the reader in adjusting his perspective helps to maintain the book’s tension to the end.

Reading *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* is a participative endeavor on the part of the reader. The text forces the reader to attempt to join the puzzle pieces together, and, although many of the pieces do fit, a full resolution is not totally possible. In this way, the reader’s experience simulates Aleksiyevich’s search for the truth about Chernobyl. The truth exists, and part of that truth is that it is difficult to totally lay the blame on any one person. Furthermore, even those who, like the physicist whose redemption was portrayed in his new humane response to nature, reject a deforming ideology and learn to think for themselves still live daily with the consequences of Chernobyl—broken health, an absent family member and radiation-contaminated land. When Rishina asked Aleksiyevich about the possibility of learning from Chernobyl, Aleksiyevich responded, “I already said that, for comprehension, a different human experience is needed, a different internal instrument. There are none yet. And all experience of sufferings which we’ve

had in our history, does not help us here” (1).<sup>72</sup> Full resolution is difficult as well due to the number of layers to the text, which is a product of Aleksiyevich’s multiple documents. This would suggest that an invented world could tie up the loose ends easily whereas a text representing attempting to present a more “real” world might preserve some of the “messiness”, a topic which will be explored in the next chapter.

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<sup>72</sup> “Я уже говорила, что для омысления нужен другой человеческий опыт, другой внутренний инструмент. Их еще нет. И весь опыт страданий, который имеется в нашей истории, тут не помогает.”

## Chapter IV. Conclusion: A Document of Tensions

Самое трудное начинается тогда, когда этот хаос, ужас, надо сделать предметом искусства, свидетельством о времени и догадкой о человеке вообще.

The most difficult (part) begins: to make this chaos and horror an item of art, testimony of time and understandable about humanity in general.<sup>1</sup>

Aleksiyevich, “Mne kazhetsia, ...”, 1996.

In 1989, when Iurii Shcherbak was writing *Chernobyl: Chernobyl': dokumental'noe povestvovanie* [Chernobyl: A Documentary Narrative], an excellent and thorough investigation of the Chernobyl explosion, he foresaw another writing of the Chernobyl story which would encompass new approaches.<sup>2,3</sup> Shcherbak identifies three elements that have been used by others to describe *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*: its epic character, polyphony and value as a new literary approach, of which the third seems to be of greatest importance. He states:

Придет вермя – я верю в это, – когда чернобыльская эпопея предстанет перед нами во всей ее трагической полноте, во всем многоголосье, в благодарных жизнеописаниях подлинных героев и презрительных характеристиках преступников, допустивших аварию и ее тяжкие последствия всех.... Думаю, что для создания такой эпопеи понадобятся новые подходы, новые литературные формы, отличные, скажем, от «Войны и мира» или «Тихого Дона». Какими они будут? Не знаю. (*Chernobyl': dokumental'noe povestvovanie* 7).

The time will come, I firmly believe, when the Chernobyl epic (...) will appear before us in all its tragic fullness, in all its polyphony, in the grateful biographies of the real heroes and the scornful characterizations of the criminals who allowed the accident and its grievous consequences... I think that the creation of such an epic will require new approaches, new literary forms, different, let us say, from *War and Peace* or *Quiet Flows the Don*. What will those approaches and forms be? I do not know. (*Chernobyl: A Documentary Story* 3)

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<sup>1</sup> Rishina, 1

<sup>2</sup> Shcherbak wrote *Chernobyl': dokumental'noe povestvovanie* in 1989. I use the 1991 edition; translations are from the Ian Press's 1989 English translation *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story*.

<sup>3</sup> “Конечно, полное осмысление происшедшего (вспомним Великую Отечественную войну) - дело будущего, быть может далекого будущего. Ни один писатель или журналист, сколь бы сведущ он ни был, не в состоянии сегодня этого сделать.”

In fact, *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* can be seen as both an epic and a new approach; its new approach is its development of traumatic space within narratives. Used as tools, the epic and traumatic reality can enrich our understanding of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*. Viewing *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* through the lens of the epic clarifies the relationship between the work's title and Aleksiyevich's big project, while looking at certain characteristics of traumatic reality narratives helps understand how traumatic space works as a "better portrayal" of Chernobyl reality. I would like to suggest, however, that the tendency of book reviews, interviews and Aleksiyevich's website to describe *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* as polyphonic is misleading. Nevertheless the polyphonic does hint at Aleksiyevich's intent to frame her works as portraying multiple viewpoints, which contradicts her opposite tendency to insist upon her version of the truth. Therefore, *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* can also be seen as a view into the author's struggles to determine her own position regarding truth and truth-telling.

### **An Epic and a Lament**

As an epic about both the Chernobylite and the Chernobyl land, *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* laments the trouble which has fallen on this nation.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of this work, the epic will be considered a long narrative work with a central heroic figure or group of people. Events described in the epic dramatically affect the ordinary person's life and the nation's history. The epic is complicated, episodic and can be similar to a lament.<sup>5</sup> (In the case of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, we are concerned with epic content and not epic form.) At times mourning and at times praising the living and dead heroes, *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* describes an event which changes the course of the world history and also sounds a warning of possible full scale destruction. It approaches life and death issues on both a deeply personal level and on a wide scale. While there is hope of

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<sup>4</sup> Clearly *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* is not an epic in the classic sense; it does not have a form and epic quality is not its main quality. However, viewing the content from the epic does have merit considering Shcherbak's comment above with Adamovich's comment that his subgenre is "epic chorus".

<sup>5</sup> This definition of the epic is paraphrased from *The New Princeton Encyclopedia*, 362.

redemption for some characters, this Chernobyl “epic” does not end on a triumphant note. In fact, it does not really resolve; it is open-ended and leaves the reader with a choice.

In general Aleksiyevich’s approach to her *Chronicle of the Big Utopia* project involves highlighting horrifying individual accounts of suffering, thereby filling in the “missing history” and subverting the “glorious” positive Soviet epic with its emphasis on the State and collective. Aleksiyevich’s recognition of the vast discrepancy between the “glorious” public truth and the painfully private truth of witnesses is seen in her comments to her father, a history teacher, after he told her about his traumatic experiences on the battlefield: “Shaken, I asked him: ‘Father, why did you never tell us this in school during history lessons... I remember your lessons well: ‘The Great Fatherland War began, and (all) the great Soviet people...’” (Uchit’sia 15).<sup>6</sup> Aleksiyevich’s literary works about WWII make up for this discrepancy. In a sense, they weep for those whose sufferings were swallowed up in the glorious Soviet victory and were therefore ignored. Viewed this way, her entire *Chronicles* project can be seen in a lament; however the concept of mourning is exceptionally clear in *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*.

The work’s title, *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*, literally “Chernobyl Prayer” can be seen as a lament and a cry for justice, which ties the sacred Chernobyl history of chapters one through three into a whole. A prayer, whether spoken before man or God (even if whispered to oneself), always has an audience and demands a response, even if it is only acknowledgment that one has been heard. The title itself comes from the last “Solitary Human Voice” almost at the book’s end; Valentina says, “I will say my Chernobyl prayer” (378).<sup>7</sup> “Solitary Human Voice” is a private lament. Valentina laments the loss of her husband, the loss of her happiness and memorializes his suffering and pleas for justice. Valentina says:

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<sup>6</sup> “Потрясенная, спрашиваю у него: “Отец, а почему ты об этом не рассказывал нам в школе на уроках истории... Я хорошо помню твои уроки: «Началась Великая Отечественная война и весь великий советский народ...””

<sup>7</sup> “Я буду читать свою чернобыльскую молитву...” Literally, I will “read” my Chernobyl prayer. In Russian Orthodox religion, prayers are read from a prayer book. As an aside, the cover of 1997 *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* was formatted like an Orthodox prayer book.

How can I live further? I didn't (tell) you all... not to the end... I was happy... Out of my mind... There is a mystery... Maybe you don't need my name... Prayers are spoken in secret... To oneself... (*She is quiet.*) No, state my name! Remind God... I want to know... I want to know why we were made to suffer so? For what? (377, 378).<sup>8</sup>

Valentina's suffering is irreversible: her husband is absent, never to return. This fits with Aleksiyevich's insistence that full restoration after a traumatic tragedy is impossible; she says, "This is the question for those who think they will be saved after a catastrophe, if there is one to be" (15).<sup>9</sup> *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* would suggest there is no time frame as post-Chernobyl, only pre-Chernobyl and Chernobyl, because the Chernobyl event ushered in a new historical time. Individual histories such as Valentina's provide testimony of the impossibility of a return to a state of "happy innocence", which is reminiscent of life after "The Fall," which brought suffering and death into the world. While Valentina's lament is spoken on a personal level, together the mini laments of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* are arranged by Aleksiyevich into one collective prayer in the hopes that someone—God, man, or both—might respond.

Despite discussion of the individual episodic within the epic, the epic is large-scale. While the epic is an excellent tool to gain insights into *Chernobyl'skaya molitva's* macro perspective, elements of traumatic reality theory give insight into the fascinating internal tensions of the work's individual histories.

### **Traumatic Depiction of Microhistorical Reality**

Linear representation works well for understandable world systems, but portraying the irreconcilability of extreme situations requires a methodology beyond the merely informative. The methodology for the extreme creates a representational world that approximates but cannot equal the original extreme to persuade the reader to acknowledge the trauma and somehow respond. Linear representation assumes an event can be documented, narrated definitively with

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<sup>8</sup> "Как мне дальше жить? Я вам не все... Не до конца... Я была счастливая... До безумия... Есть тайны... Может, не надо моего имени... Молитвы читают в тайне... Про себя... (*Замолкает.*) Нет, назовите имя! Богу напомните... Я хочу знать... Я хочу понять, зачем нам даются такие страдания? За что?"

<sup>9</sup> "Это вопрос тем, кто думает спастись после катастрофы, если ей суждено быть."

words and divided conventionally into the past, present and future. If linear representation assumes life can be understood and therefore a contiguous narrative can be drawn from the events, then, in an extreme world, an adjustment needs to be made to the mold which represents this particular part of the reality. First, extreme historical events pose the question, “Why?”. While their implausible fantastic nature seems to require documentation to authenticate the event, an airtight construction of the literary world that represents extremity would undermine the implausibility (and, in any event, is impossible). Assuming, as mentioned earlier, that Aleksiyevich’s traumatic space includes structural bifurcation around a fault point which represents an irresolvable conflict, then, in this section, we will look at gaps of irreconcilability and the traumatic image in traumatic space, and the overall issue of inverted time in traumatic reality.

### **Gaps of Irreconcilability**

How does one manage literarily the dichotomous impulse of traumatic reality which attempts to recreate the senselessness of an event, yet answer the human need to make sense of tragedy? In *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* when the feldshcher Bogdankevich states: “I don’t want to profit by their sorrow. Or philosophize. For that I would need to distance myself and I can’t do that...,” he is proposing that an attempt to make sense of the event would require an objectivity that might equal betrayal (165,6).<sup>10</sup> One cannot simultaneously experience the event subjectively and understand objectively. Resolution, then, must happen on a different level than traumatic space; therefore, witnesses who philosophize do so in paragraphs other than those which highlight traumatic space and generally in the longer monologues. One reason *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* “works” is that Aleksiyevich is careful to keep her traumatic space subjective, highly pain-filled and free of resolution. The burden of resolution is placed upon the reader.

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<sup>10</sup> “Я не хочу торговать их несчастьем. Философствовать. Для этого мне надо отойти в сторону. А я не могу...”



As described in the last chapter, gaps in the traumatic space force the reader to engage his mental processes in an attempt to resolve the incongruence. Rothberg quotes the scholar Frederic Jameson to explain the role of the realism in retraining the reader:<sup>11</sup>

Realism and its specific narrative forms construct their new world by programming their readers; by training them in new habits and practices, which amount to whole new subject-positions in a new kind of space; producing new kinds of action, but by way of the production of new categories of the event and of experience, of temporality and of causality, which also preside over what will now come to thought of as reality. Indeed, such narratives must ultimately produce the very category of Reality itself, of reference and of the referent, of the real, of the “objective” or “external” world. (Signatures, 166) – Rothberg, 102.

The emphasis is on the creation for the reader of a new reality which did not exist for him before and on interaction between the reader and the literary work. The reader dialogues with the work to develop a new reality system. Without the reader’s attempts to reconcile incongruence in *Chernobyl’skaya molitva*, the picture of the world would be incomplete. The reader supplies the missing part by intellectual attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable, which mimics the emotional strain expended by the witness in the witness’s attempts to cope with his new world. Similarly, despite the reader’s attempts to resolve the incongruence, a gap always remains. He is doomed to failure. Yet, to allow reconciliation would be a misrepresentation of the traumatic world; therefore the reader’s experience in reading *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* plays a vital role in validating the witness’s experience.

#### **Return to the Global Viewpoint: Acknowledgement as Legitimizing Experience**

An extreme text is validated by reader recognition that a wrong has been committed. (Traumatic reality texts can be seen as an attempt to right the wrong.) Therefore, one goal of traumatic realism is to compel the readers “to acknowledge their relationship to the posttraumatic culture” (Rothberg 103). As mentioned earlier, the traumatic impetus permanently changes the victim’s world; because of the magnitude of catastrophes such as the Holocaust and Chernobyl, the reader’s world is permanently changed if he can accept it. No longer can one believe that

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<sup>11</sup> See the discussion in chapter III on leitmotifs and re-educating the reader.

technological progress and moral progress go hand in hand after technological progress is being used for immoral destruction, such as was the case with the Holocaust. Aleksiyevich takes it further by stating that the Chernobyl event is a greater tragedy than the Holocaust because of its permanent effects on the future. One has to consider how he should respond to what has happened and make a response about nuclear technology. While Aleksiyevich attempts in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* to draw macro conclusions, she does so through the section titles and “Self-Interview”. She avoids bold conclusions at all costs on the level of traumatic space; the literary traumatic space is by definition irreconcilable and therefore inconclusive. However, traumatic space does allow the reader to recognize a wrong was done resulting in trauma to innocent people, and hopefully in such a way that the reader will be sensitized to the particular issue in question.

### **Traumatic Image Gesturing to Absence**

Traumatic pain is viewed retrospectively, often connected with the witness’s recognition of absence. In “Solitary Human Voice”, Valentina comments that now she sees her husband’s horrible illness as a happy time: at least he was still nearby. After Misha’s death, Valentina’s world is marked by his absence and, consequently, the noted absence of happiness. Physical loss leaves a gap in her life, which is transmitted to the text as “unreality”. (The portrayal of absence is pertinent in conjunction with Rothberg’s discussion of traumatic detail and image in traumatic realism texts.) Aleksiyevich portrays the simultaneously real and unreal world by allowing her witnesses to “float” in and out of the present and by highlighting unresolved trauma, which insists “something is missing”. This missing piece might be ideology, a spouse, a child, a home or health, among others. Rothberg, posing the question “How can a language that must remain ordinary portray the extreme without banalizing it?” shows how Ruth Kluger uses the “traumatic detail,” a sock, to highlight self-estrangement, to bring together dichotic understandings of distance, the everyday and the extraordinary and to highlight absence (133). In this particular example, Kluger and her mother, separated from another camp by a barbed war, throw a pair of

socks over the fence to aid a Hungarian mother and daughter. However, the socks get stuck in the barbed wire, and the other family is removed from the area. The sock becomes a reminder of the absence of the family, a reminder of an extreme situation (their situations in the camps), and a reminder of the daily everyday need for warmth. The traumatic image is a way of gesturing to that which lies beyond direct reference; the image's pertinence to *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* is in its ability to speak when words fail.

Aleksiyeovich makes liberal use of traumatic detail in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*. A cap in the narrative about the boy who develops a brain tumor is simultaneously an everyday object, a sign of a boy's adoration of his father and a tool of destruction. It speaks of how a seemingly neutral object is transformed by its contact with "Chernobyl world" into an agent of death. A door, which carries memories of the families' hopes and dreams, becomes a crushing reminder of the daughter's death. In both cases, the cap and door highlight the absence of the pre-Chernobyl world with its understandable rules as well as the absence of a father's beloved child. Sometimes words trivialize, but if the author can paint a poignant picture through words of a dejected father and a cap with a space where the son was, that traumatic detail will hopefully continue to speak to the reader long after he has laid aside the book.

### **Inverted Time As a Product of Memory and Absence**

Because memory plays a critical role in traumatic narratives, the past continually invades the present. Aleksiyeovich's witnesses struggle with altered time and space realities.

*Chernobyl'skaya molitva* shows the Chernobyl world as belonging to another time frame. At times, the Chernobyl world is seen as separate spatially and temporally from the real world while it is simultaneously superimposed on the real world. Because so much of the Chernobyl witness's real world exists in his memory, his challenge (in real space and time) is to navigate today's world, which is simultaneously real and unreal, simultaneously extreme and yet has its everyday routine and needs.

In her literary world, Aleksiyevich represents time through paragraph markers, memory strings and division into the pre- and post-Chernobyl world. Theoretically, time-space alterations can be understood through Rothberg's application of time and space in traumatic realist texts to the memory string concepts (circular universe) often described by Aleksiyevich's witnesses. Rothberg describes the time-space alterations as "the invasion of modernism by trauma and (which) illustrates how progressive history's fundamental chronological articulation of 'before and after' runs aground at the site of murder" (21). I would suggest that the site of violence is anchored in the memory. Although it is harder to see in the shorter monologues of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, in "Solitary Human Voice", the site of violence is represented by circular (or non-ending) trauma because the mental act of remembering constantly recurs. Often paragraph markers show whether the person is "in" the past or the present. The effect appears stronger than reminiscing; it is as if a part of the past world for the witness inhabits his present in a way it never did "before Chernobyl". Because, according to Rothberg, people retrospectively divide their lives into before and after a crisis, traumatic narratives have everything to do with memory. Significantly, in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, Aleksiyevich portrays the main trauma as psychological, even when the root cause is partially physical. For instance, the story of the four-year-old girl born with no lower external orifices is portrayed through the mother's point of view, not through the perspective of the girl, who does not realize her situation is abnormal. I believe the above shows that the trauma Aleksiyevich portrays is not the trauma "at the moment of impact"; it is trauma that the witnesses are struggling with and still cannot find a way past to resolution.

### **A Polyphonic Work, or Merely Multiplicity of Voices?**

Having discussed *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* in light of the epic and traumatic reality, one can see the validity of Shcherbak's statement and why it might take some time after the Chernobyl accident for evaluation. Shcherbak also mentions "polyphony" in his statement, which one could take to mean either multiplicity of witnesses or Bakhtinian polyphony. Critics have

suggested Aleksiyevich's novels are polyphonic, which probably gestures to Bakhtin's discussions on Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel. According to the scholar Robert Clark, the polyphonic novel is "defined ... by the quality of the relationship between narrator and character, in that the former allows the latter right to the final word — the character's voice is never ultimately submerged by that of the narrator... The polyphonic novel has as its opposite the "monologic novel", in which the word of the narrator takes final authority.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, Aleksiyevich's methodology contains multiple voices, but through authorial choice of traumatized voices, a deliberate focusing of voices into a single point and addition of her strongly worded "Self-Interview," Aleksiyevich's opinion seems to overwhelm those of the other witnesses. In an interview with Rishina, Aleksiyevich describes her predilection for interviewing highly traumatized people:

Для такого рода книг надо, как правило, опросить несколько сотен человек, чтобы иметь, с одной стороны, высокую температуру боли, с другой — очень обширный горизонт событий и чувств, переживаний, нюансов, эмоций, слухов, намеков, догадок, оттенков. Из этого создается образ события и образ времени. Люди должны быть разных профессий, поколений, возрастов, чтобы событие проглядывало с разных сторон, с совершенно разных точек зрения (Rishina 1).

For this type of book, as a rule, one would need to survey a few hundred people in order to have, on one hand, a high temperature of pain, and on the other, a high wide horizon of events and feelings, experiences, nuances, emotions, rumors, hints, understandings, and shades. From these, an image of event and an image of time are created. The people must be from varying professions, generations and ages, so that the event might be seen from various sides with totally different points of view.

By excluding people who are not obviously traumatized, Aleksiyevich automatically eliminates a certain set of viewpoints, potentially one which might say that trauma is nonexistent. In "Pravda..." Sukhikh defines Aleksiyevich's collective testimony as having multiple voices with a strong focus, which he describes through Adamovich's quote: "A multitude of people-mirrors are most definitely needed. One needs to contrive to direct the ray from each of these mirrors *onto one point. Each onto one point.* And this point needs to be stretched into a line, penetrating

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<sup>12</sup> Clark, "The Polyphonic Novel".

like a laser ray into the soul, into the reader's consciousness"(38).<sup>13</sup> Whereas in Dostoevsky's polyphonic voice the individual speaks within a collective of voices and at times one to another; in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, the collective hero drowns out the individual voice. In *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*, individual voices do not interact with one another. They speak outwardly in confidentiality to the reader through the author. (Interaction one with another would destroy the authority of privileged access domain literature.) Furthermore, the majority of voices speak around the same point of crushed hopes yet without the emphasis on nature that pervades in Aleksiyevich's big message.

Finally, Aleksiyevich's authorial essay, the highly didactic persuasive "Self Interview," carries more weight than the remaining voices. It is not submerged in the other character voices as one would expect with a polyphonic novel. Julian Evans notes in her review, "The longing for better relations with nature runs through this extraordinary book."<sup>14</sup> This is Aleksiyevich's voice; the majority of her witnesses' ignore the issue. Yet, because of the overt structuring through titles and "Self-Interview," the characters' voices are submerged by Aleksiyevich's big message, which insists that man has become dehumanized through Soviet ideology and a race for progress to the point where he has destroyed his habitat and that of the weaker creatures.

### **A Tension of Truths and Scope : What the Work Reveals about the Author**

A fascinating dynamic of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* is its equal balance between its micro and macro perspectives. Neither seems more heavily weighted and yet both perspectives contend strongly for the reader's attention. The microhistorical builds a case for the global ideology, and the global ideology bases its argument on the need to protect individuals within the collective. The individual laments join together in a powerful collective epic lament. I would suggest the tension between the micro and macro perspectives is integral to Aleksiyevich's view of reality:

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<sup>13</sup> "Обязательно нужна множественность людей-зеркал, а луч каждого из этих зеркал надо ухитриться направить в одну точку. Все в одну точку. И эти точка вытягивается в линию, вонзающуюся, как луч лазера, в душу, в сознание читателя." (*Italics mine.*) (See Adamovich's preface to *U voini ne zhenskoe litso* (1985).

<sup>14</sup> Evans, Julian. "A Conspiracy of Ignorance and Obedience." *The Complete Review*.

the stories of individual people are extremely important, but so is the need to stress the long-term consequences of collective acts of people on world history.

This dichotomy in *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* can also be viewed as a tension between *the one* truth promoted by Aleksiyevich's macro view and the insistence of the numerous microhistorical narratives that, in the new world, not all questions can be answered. While this particular duality of *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* can be seen as an attempt to resolve the need of traumatic reality for understanding and while maintaining its insistence that understanding is impossible, I would suggest the duality is also a product of Aleksiyevich's ambivalence about the issue of truth. As insistent as Aleksiyevich is about gathering information from multiple witnesses to tell the complete historical truth in all its diversity, she also has an overwhelming need to mold her works into a platform for speaking her message of truth.

To a great extent, this is due to the influence of her mentors and her literary tradition. Aleksiyevich comes from a Russian and Belarusian tradition of the author as conscience for the nation; her mentors—Bykaw (called the “Belarusian Solzhenitsyn”) and Adamovich—took their roles as truth-teller seriously. In fact, Aleksiyevich's approach is similar to Solzhenitsyn's in her application of big metaphors and an overt structure to frame *Chernobyl'skaya molitva* to speak out for those who cannot. Yet, perhaps Aleksiyevich's ambivalence towards truth is related to her recognition of her multiple roles as “writer, reporter, sociologist, psychologist and preacher”.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, after her 1994 civil lawsuit related to charges of defaming witnesses in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, Aleksiyevich apologizes to the defendant: “As a person, I ask you forgiveness for having caused you pain. But as a writer, I cannot. I cannot, I do not have the right to ask forgiveness for my book, for the truth!”<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to reconcile this uncompromising statement with Aleksiyevich's comments that, in her literary approach, events must be seen from

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<sup>15</sup> “...писателем, журналистом, социологом, психоаналитиком, проповедником...” ( *Golosa strany utopii*). Translation: *Voices from the Big Utopia*, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> “— Как человек... Я попросила прощения за то, что причинила боль,... Но, как писатель... Я не могу, не имею права просить прощения за свою книгу. За правду!”

various viewpoints (Rishina 1).<sup>17</sup> She also comments that she sees the world “as a chorus of individual voices and a collage of everyday details”.<sup>18</sup> While her observer role might allow her to see and include varying narratives in her works, the desire to allow multiple viewpoints eventually comes into conflict with Aleksiyevich’s truth-telling writer role, which motivates her to focus her stories to support a pacifist, ecologic viewpoint.

Still, Aleksiyevich is aware that documents can be distorted and has a skeptical attitude towards documents; as she comments in “The Play of War”:

То, чем я занимаюсь уже двадцать лет, это документ в форме искусства. Но чем больше я с ним работаю, тем больше у меня сомнений. Единственный документ, документ, так сказать, в чистом виде, который не внушает мне недоверия, – это паспорт или трамвайный билет. Но что они могут рассказать через сто или двести лет (...) о нашем времени и о нас? Только о том, что у нас была плохая полиграфия... Все остальное, что нам известно под именем документа, – версия. Это чья-то правда, чья-то страсть, чьи-то предрассудки, чьи-то ложь, чья-то жизнь (*Tsinkovye* (1996) 8).

But I have spent the past 20 years trying to produce documentaries, albeit in a literary form. Now I no longer know what a documentary is. The only kind of ‘pure’ document which doesn’t raise doubts in my mind is a passport or a tram ticket. What will that tell people in 100 years time? Only that our typography was poor. Everything else is interpretation. Somebody’s truth, somebody’s passion, [somebody’s superstition] somebody’s lie, somebody’s life” (“Wounded Nation...” 155).

At some point, the “chaos” of the documentary evidence has to be arranged into an “artistic object”, and a perspective has to be chosen (Rishina 1). Aleksiyevich has, for the most part, succeeded in fulfilling her goals of more accurately representing reality *as she sees it*. She attempts to describe a hidden trauma in terms of inner psychological tensions such to prevent the reader from becoming numb to the horror; her development of traumatic space is brilliant. I still cannot read *Chernobyl’skaya molitva* through in its entirety; it still “shakes” me. While the strong message of “Self Interview” was initially effective, I find it more irritating with each re-read. It seems to assume the reader is too naive to come to his own conclusions, or maybe

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<sup>17</sup> “...с совершенно разных точек зрения.”

<sup>18</sup> “Да, я именно так вижу и слышу мир: через голоса, через детали быта и бытия. Так устроено мое зрение и ухо” ...” (*Golosa strany utopii*). Translation: *Voices from the Big Utopia*, 2007.



Aleksiyeovich felt the possibility of a repeat catastrophe too high to risk her reader missing her version of the truth.

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