

Reading Chernobyl: Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction, Literature

Stuart Lindsay

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Abstract

This thesis explores the psychological trauma of the survivors of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which occurred on April 26, 1986. I argue for the emergence from the disaster of three Chernobyl traumas, each of which will be analysed individually – one per chapter. In reading these three traumas of Chernobyl, the thesis draws upon and situates itself at the interface between two primary theoretical perspectives: Freudian psychoanalysis and the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida. The first Chernobyl trauma is engendered by the panicked local response to the consequences of the explosion at Chernobyl Reactor Four by the power plant's staff, the fire fighters whose job it was to extinguish the initial blaze caused by the blast, the inhabitants of nearby towns and villages, and the soldiers involved in the region's evacuation and radiation decontamination. Most of these people died from radiation poisoning in the days, weeks, months or years after the disaster's occurrence. The first chapter explores the usefulness and limits of Freudian psychoanalytic readings of local survivors' testimonies of the disaster, examining in relation to the Chernobyl event Freud's practice of locating the authentic primal scene or originary traumatic witnessing experience in his subjects' pasts, as exemplified by his Wolf Man analysis, detailed in his psychoanalytic study 'On the History of an Infantile Neurosis' (1918). The testimonies read through this Freudian psychoanalytic lens are constituted by Igor Kostin's personal account of the disaster's aftermath, detailed in his book *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter* (2006), and by Svetlana Alexievich's interviews with Chernobyl disaster survivors in her book *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (2006).

The second chapter argues that Freudian psychoanalysis only provides a provisional, ultimately fictional origin of Chernobyl trauma. Situating itself in relation to trauma studies, this thesis, progressing from its first to its second chapter, charts the geographical and

temporal shift between these first and second traumas, from trauma-as-sudden-event to trauma-as-gradual-process. In the weeks following the initial Chernobyl explosion, which released into the atmosphere a radioactive cloud that blew in a north-westerly direction across Northern Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Sweden, symptoms of radiation poisoning slowly emerged in the populations of the abovementioned countries. To analyse the psychological impact of confronting this gradual, international unfolding of trauma – the second trauma of Chernobyl – the second chapter of this thesis explores the critique of the global attempt to archive, elegise and ultimately understand the Chernobyl disaster in Mario Petrucci's elegies, compiled in his poetry collection *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl* (2006), the horror film *Chernobyl Diaries* (2012, dir. Bradley Parker), and Adam Roberts' Science Fiction novel, *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2009). Analysing the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida in these texts – his notions of archive fever, impossible mourning and ethical mourning – this chapter argues that the attempt to interiorise, memorialise and mourn the survivors of the Chernobyl disaster is narcissistic, hubristic and violent in the extreme. It then proposes that Derrida's notion of ethical mourning, outlined most clearly in his lecture 'Mnemosyne' (1984), enables us to situate our emotional sympathy for survivors – who, following Derrida's lecture, are maintained as permanently exterior and inaccessible to us – in our very inability or failure to comprehend or locate the origin of their Chernobyl traumas. The third and final chapter analyses the third trauma of Chernobyl: the psychological and physiological effects of the disaster on second-generation inhabitants living near the Exclusion Zone erected around the evacuated, cordoned-off and still-radioactive Chernobyl region. These second-generation experiences of living near a sealed-away source of intense radiation are reconstructed in literature and videogaming: in Darragh McKeon's novel *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (2014), Hamid Ismailov's novel *The Dead Lake* (2014) and the videogame *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007), developed by the company GSC

Game World. The analysis of these texts is informed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's psychoanalytic theory of the intergenerational phantom: the muteness of a generation's history which returns to haunt the succeeding generations. This chapter will explore the psychological effects upon second-generation Chernobyl survivors, which result from these survivors' incorporation or unconscious interiorisation of their parents' psychologically repressed traumatic Chernobyl experiences, by analysing reconstructions of this process in the abovementioned texts. These parental experiences, echoing the Exclusion Zone as a denied physical space, have been interred in inaccessible psychic crypts.

By way of conclusion, the thesis then offers an alternative theory of reading survivors' Chernobyl trauma. Survivors' restaging of their Chernobyl witnessing experiences as jokes enables them to cathartically, temporarily abreact their trauma through the laughter that these jokes engender.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all critical and other sources (literary and electronic) have been specifically and properly acknowledged, as and when they occur in the body of my text.

Signed:

Stuart Lindsay

Date:

29/09/2014

Introduction: The Three Traumas of Chernobyl

At 01:23am on April 26, 1986, Reactor Number Four of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine exploded, causing the worst nuclear accident in history. The short-term casualties in the weeks subsequent to this disaster that released a massive cloud of radioactive fallout into the air included many of the plant's staff, the fire fighters whose job it was to extinguish the blaze in the wake of the explosion, and the army of "liquidators": mostly soldiers and other volunteer reservists from across the USSR who were sent by the Soviet government to Chernobyl and the surrounding towns and villages to evacuate their populations and, via decontamination measures, prevent the radioactivity from spreading further. Most of the people in these emergency response teams died from radiation poisoning in the days, weeks and months following the Reactor Four explosion.

The event was only recognised as an international disaster two days after the occurrence of the explosion, when operators of the Forsmark nuclear power station in Sweden detected unusually high levels of radioactivity in the local atmosphere. Initially believing the source of the radiation to be at Forsmark, the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority traced the radiation cloud's origin back to Ukraine; it was only when they decided to file an official alert to the International Atomic Energy Agency that the USSR admitted there had been an accident at Chernobyl. The explosion's effects were not restricted to the local Chernobyl region, then. In the weeks following the blast, the radioactive cloud, blown in a north-westerly direction through Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Sweden, was primarily responsible for the long-term afflictions of thyroid cancer, leukaemia, cataracts, cardiovascular disease and psychological distress that were later suffered in those

countries.¹ In the years in which these afflictions developed, international public opinion concerning the Chernobyl disaster and nuclear power in general was characterised by a widespread sense of confusion and paranoia.

If the sudden, shocking occurrence of local Chernobyl catastrophe and liquidator deaths can be considered the first trauma of Chernobyl, then the gradual, global awareness of the vast radioactive emission, the inability to fully comprehend its lethality following these later international infections, which led to a significant number of protracted deaths in the aforementioned countries, and these tragic losses themselves, constitute the second trauma of Chernobyl. Situating itself in relation to trauma studies, this thesis, progressing from its first to its second chapter, will chart the geographical and temporal shift between these first and second traumas: from trauma-as-sudden-event to trauma-as-gradual-process. There is also a third trauma of Chernobyl, to be explored in the third chapter: the emergent psychological disturbances present in the second generation of Chernobyl survivors living in and around what has become known as the Exclusion Zone, the evacuated and cordoned-off area of land surrounding the deactivated power plant.

In reading these three traumas of Chernobyl, this thesis draws upon and situates itself at the interface between two primary theoretical perspectives: Freudian psychoanalysis and the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida.

In order to lay out the theoretical work useful to this thesis we must turn to Sigmund Freud's Wolf Man case study, arguably the most famous analysis of his career. Sergei Pankejeff, a wealthy Russian aristocrat from Odessa, in Russia, came to Vienna in 1910 to seek treatment from Freud for depression. The pseudonym "Wolf Man," used by Freud in his psychoanalytic study 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis' (1918) to refer to and

¹ For more information on the long-term health effects of the Chernobyl disaster, see 'Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident: An Overview', April 2006, http://www.who.int/ionizing_radiation/chernobyl/background/en/ (accessed 14 July 2014).

protect the true identity of Pankejeff, is derived from a dream that the latter had as a young child. He recalled this dream in a psychoanalytic session with Freud:

I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying in bed. (My bed stood with its foot towards the window; in front of the window there was a row of old walnut trees. I know it was winter when I had the dream, and night-time.) Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheep-dogs, for they had big tails like foxes and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they pay attention to something. In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up. My nurse hurried to my bed, to see what had happened to me. It took quite a long while before I was convinced that it had only been a dream; I had had such a clear and life-like picture of the window opening and the wolves sitting on the tree. At last I grew quieter, felt as though I had escaped from some danger, and went to sleep again.²

This dream, Freud claims, was the symptom of an earlier, psychologically traumatising scene, which Freud refers to as the primal scene. The Wolf Man case study theorised that an infant Pankejeff witnessed his parents' copulation *a tergo*. For Freud, the formation of this primal scene crucially hinges upon the ocular aspect of witnessing. On the subject of the infant Pankejeff's witnessing of his copulating parents, Freud writes that his patient 'was able to see his mother's genitals as well as his father's organ'.³ What this recollection supposedly signifies is a scene in which Pankejeff's mother was anally penetrated by his father, which the infant Pankejeff unconsciously interpreted as a personal experience of anal penetration. Freud posits this early sight as the cause of the afflictions his patient suffered from throughout adult life, namely depression, psychosomatic abdominal cramps, and sporadic losses of appetite. Pankejeff's witnessed primal scene – 'the child's real or imagined

² Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII*, translated and edited by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), p.29

³ Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', p.37

perception of the parents' sexual relationship'⁴ – functions for Freud as the origination of the trauma, from which his patient's numerous symptoms and neuroses are derived. Pankejeff's primal scene supposedly engender his wolf dream and fear of wolves (especially of an illustration of a wolf crouching on its hind legs in a children's picture book that his elder sister forced him to look at when they were younger); these wolf images visually echo the image of his parents' coitus *a tergo*, of his father hunched over his mother during the act of anal sex in the primal scene. Another of Pankejeff's neuroses, the alternating fear of and sadistic cruelty towards horses and insects, also reflects this witnessed scene of his parents' copulation, specifically the interpretation of simultaneously experienced pain and pleasure of being anally penetrated. In sum, this primal scene, Freud argues in 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', is the inaugurating moment of Pankejeff's trauma, resulting from the patient's witnessing, during infancy, of a sexual scene that is unconsciously perceived as one of violence. This interpretation, which was psychologically repressed and buried in the Wolf Man's unconscious, awaited discovery, Freud claims, in the latter's psychoanalytic study.

In the footnotes of 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', Freud questions the veracity of the infant Pankejeff's primal scene; did it really occur, or was it a fantasy concocted by the four-year-old Wolf Man's dream or imagination of the scene, influenced perhaps by extraneous events, such as that of animals copulating? This notion of deferred action or "afterwards-ness," which Freud refers to as *Nachträglichkeit*, is the process of assigning memories that may be inaccurate or entirely false to an earlier period of the subject's history, thereby positing the stage referred to as inauthentic. In the Wolf Man case study, Freud writes in the footnotes of 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis' that Pankejeff

⁴ Jean Laplanche, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Norton, 1973), p.335

understood it [the primal scene] at the time of the dream when he was four years old, not at the time of the observation. He received the impressions when he was one and a half; his understanding of them was deferred, but became possible at the time of the dream owing to his development, his sexual excitations, and his sexual researches.⁵

Pankejeff's primal scene, then, was interpretable or imagined only by the time he was four years old, since, at the age of one and a half, he had not gained the necessary understanding of sex to interpret the parental act that supposedly occurred then. In line with much trauma theory, this thesis argues that Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is useful to the study of Chernobyl trauma, since many of the nuclear disaster's survivors living in the towns and villages surrounding the power plant did not understand the true nature of the catastrophe until weeks, or in some cases months, after the reactor's explosion; for these individuals, no memory of the event was recorded during its occurrence, so any personal recollection of it from that period would not be possible. This was due to the Soviet media blackout contemporary to the nuclear disaster's immediate unfolding: an information and communication shutdown that was designed to minimise the spread of panic in the USSR. Survivors' understanding of what actually happened at Chernobyl was granted only when the full extent of the disaster was revealed to them belatedly by the international press.

Freud's impression of the Wolf Man's traumatic witnessing event yields contradictory hypotheses: either Pankejeff's primal scene actually occurred in his infancy, or he imagined it at a later date, via *Nachträglichkeit*, and retroactively installed it there unwittingly. In the first of these two mutually exclusive possibilities, the event is real, whereas in the second, it is fictional; in the former, the authentic scene is the origin of Pankejeff's psychological trauma, and in the latter, the false memory is. At the close of 'From

⁵ Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', pp.37-38

the History of an Infantile Neurosis', Freud remains unable to verify which outcome occurred. Archive fever, a notion developed and explored in Derrida's book *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (1998), is 'an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement'.⁶ Archive fever is produced within the Wolf Man case study as a result of Freud's desire to locate the elusive origin of Pankejeff's psychological trauma, and has a double effect on the archive: Freud's fruitless attempts to disclose the commencement of his patient's trauma that are compelled by its very unverifiability leads to the exhaustion, deferral and ultimately, the annihilation of the text. This process embodies a Freudian death drive that renders the will to archive at once necessary and impossible. Archive fever is particularly relevant to the Wolf Man case study: throughout his psychoanalytic career, Freud never satisfactorily convinced himself of Pankejeff's primal scene as either a real or imagined event of founding trauma. It is the disclosure and verification of the originating moment of the patient's trauma, Freud claims, upon which their mental recovery rests. The mystery of the origins of the Wolf Man's trauma remained unsolved after Freud's former's death in 1939; in the 1970s, Pankejeff, who was interviewed by the Austrian journalist Karin Obholzer, disputed Freud's claim that the psychoanalytic treatment had been successful, and remarked 'that it is difficult to play the role of a showpiece of psychoanalysis'.⁷ Pankejeff recalled: 'That was the theory, that Freud had cured me one hundred percent. [...] It's all false'.⁸ Furthermore, as Obholzer writes, Pankejeff saw Freud's interpretation of the dream as highly improbable. Pankejeff said: 'The whole thing is improbable because in Russia, children slept in the nanny's bedroom, not in their parents'.⁹ Archive fever also has particular relevance to

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.91

⁷ Karin Obholzer, *Wolfman: Conversations with Freud's Patient Sixty Years Later*, translated by Michael Shaw, (New York: Continuum, 1982), p.231

⁸ Obholzer, *Wolfman: Conversations with Freud's Patient Sixty Years Later*, p.113

⁹ Obholzer, *Wolfman: Conversations with Freud's Patient Sixty Years Later*, p.36

the testimonial recording of the Chernobyl disaster. As the first chapter of this thesis will indicate, the efforts to record or archive the event's eyewitness experiences, namely in Igor Kostin's photographs of the initial nuclear disaster site compiled in his book *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter* (2006) and Svetlana Alexievich's interviews with Chernobyl disaster survivors compiled in her book *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (2006), are continually thwarted by their inability to disclose the origins of the survivors' traumas definitively.

Another set of psychoanalytic theories must be explored before we can depart from this theoretical introduction: that of mourning and melancholia, introjection and incorporation, and impossible and ethical mourning. For Freud, the process of mourning is a normal stage in the grieving of a lost loved one. It is, Maria Torok argues in her essay 'The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse' (1968), a 'gradual, slow, laborious, mediated, [yet] effective'¹⁰ coping strategy designed to deal with and surmount this grief, and involves what she terms the "introjection" of the departed love object. Torok's notion of introjection is a reinforcement of Sándor Ferenczi's founding conceptualisation of the term, defined as a "casting inside" of fixations upon the lost love object, followed by its replacement with another love object and a consequent broadening of the ego. Torok and her co-writer, Nicholas Abraham, write in their essay 'Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection Versus Incorporation' (1972) that in the early infant stage:

the early satisfactions of the mouth, as yet filled with the maternal object [the suckled breast], are partially and gradually replaced by the novel satisfactions of a mouth now empty of that object but filled with words pertaining to the subject. The transition from the mouth filled with the breast to the mouth filled with words occurs by virtue

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok', in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xvii

of the intervening experiences of the empty mouth. Learning to fill the mouth with words is the initial model for introjection.¹¹

In a broader sense, Torok's theory charts the replacement of one love object with another, a process brought about by the absence or death of the original object. One can thus see how, upon the death of a loved one, the mourner introjects this person, detaches themselves from them libidinally, and moves on in order to forge new social relationships. However, when this normal and life-enhancing sequence is disturbed, usually by the mourner's misunderstanding or non-witnessing of the love object's death, melancholia occurs. Melancholia, most notably outlined in Freud's psychological study 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), is 'the refusal of loss, in which the lost love-object is "incorporated" in the ego in defiance of its death or disappearance'.¹² In melancholia, it is as if the love object still lives, not in reality, but in the mourner themselves, who refuses to let it go. Like mourning, melancholia is painful, but it is not in itself a forward-oriented process, a teleological series of steps. Rather, it is a fantasy, as Abraham and Torok argue. This internalising process that characterises the symptoms of melancholia – the emotional and sometimes physical withdrawal from the external world, a lack of empathy towards anyone bar the love object (who is obsessively over-identified with), and the repeated interruption of daily life by the love object's imagined presence, appearing in fantasy or daydream – differs somewhat from the specific fantasy of incorporation (though the former sometimes involves the latter). Incorporation, unlike melancholia, denotes the consumption – often imagined as a literal, oral consumption – of the lost love object that is *always* unconsciously denied as such. (Freud maintains that melancholia results from either conscious or unconscious losses, or losses that are a combination of both. In some cases of

¹¹ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, 'Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection Versus Incorporation', in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.127-128

¹² Maud Ellmann, 'Introduction: Bad Timing', in Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, translated by Shaun Whiteside, (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), viii

melancholia ‘the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost’; in others, ‘the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him’.)¹³ In incorporation, ‘So in order not to have to “swallow” a loss’ at all, Abraham and Torok write,

we fantasise swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some sort of Thing. Two interrelated procedures constitute the magic of incorporation: *demetaphorisation* (taking literally what is meant figuratively) and *objectivation* (pretending that the suffering is not an injury to the subject but instead a loss sustained by the love object). The magical “cure” by incorporation exempts the subject from the painful process of reorganisation. When, in the form of imaginary or real nourishment, we ingest the love object we miss, this means that *we refuse to mourn* and that we shun the consequences of mourning even though our psyche is fully bereaved. Incorporation is the refusal to reclaim as our own the part of ourselves that we placed in what we lost; incorporation is the refusal to acknowledge the full import of the loss, a loss that, if recognised as such, would effectively transform us. The fantasy of incorporation reveals a gap within the psyche; it points to something that is missing just where introjection should have occurred.¹⁴

In short, this gap, referred to in Abraham and Torok’s work as a crypt or mental grave, indicates an unacknowledged loss that, in its status as entirely unconscious knowledge, is denied as ever taking place.

The later work of Jacques Derrida, in which he outlines an ethical approach to the act of mourning through the turns of so-called “impossible mourning,” takes as its departure the Freudian distinctions between mourning and melancholia outlined previously, if only to problematise them. Derrida views Freud’s concept of mourning – the introjection of the lost love object in the manner described earlier – as a profoundly narcissistic and violent act. It is necessary at this point to clearly foreground the role of memory in this Freudian mourning process in order to reveal precisely what it is about mourning that Derrida sees as

¹³ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, p.203

¹⁴ Abraham and Torok, ‘Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection Versus Incorporation’, pp.126-127

problematic. In Abraham and Torok's theory of introjection, the infant introjects the breast, the maternal food substance, with words ('cries and sobs, delayed fullness, then as calling, ways of requesting presence, as language');¹⁵ 'The passage from food to language in the mouth presupposes the successful replacement of the object's presence with the self's cognizance of its absence'.¹⁶ In other words, the infant is aware of the absence of the breast in a primal memory of sorts, which is articulated after their transition into language. Memory of the lost object is equally central in adult mourning, as Tammy Clewell claims, outlining Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' in her article 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss' (2004). 'The work of mourning', she writes,

entails a kind of hyperremembering, a process of obsessive recollection during which the survivor resuscitates the existence of the lost other in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence. This magical restoration of the lost object enables the mourner to assess the value of the relationship and comprehend what he or she has lost in losing the other. But prolonging the existence of the lost object at the centre of grief work (*Trauerarbeit*) does not persist indefinitely, for Freud claimed that the mourner, by comparing the memories of the other with actual reality, comes to an objective determination that the lost object no longer exists. With a very specific task to perform, the Freudian grief work seeks, then, to convert loving remembrances into a futureless memory. Mourning comes to a decisive and "spontaneous end," according to Freud, when the survivor has detached his or her emotional tie to the lost object and reattached the free libido to a new object, thus accepting consolation in the form of a substitute for what has been lost.¹⁷

In most cases, then, both mourning and melancholia engender memories of the lost object in the mourner, but for different reasons: in melancholia the creation of imagined images forms the refusal of loss and the inability to move on, and in normal mourning, the determination, acceptance, and surmounting of loss is predicated on this very same obsessive production of

¹⁵ Abraham and Torok, 'Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection Versus Incorporation', p.127

¹⁶ Abraham and Torok, 'Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection Versus Incorporation', p.128

¹⁷ Tammy Clewell, 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss', in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, (Vol. 54, Issue 1, Winter 2004), p.44

memory. When the memories of the lost love object are compared to the love object's non-existence in reality, the mourner is able to comprehend, step back from and thus put to rest their personal relationship with the love object that was also lost, enabling mourning to come to an end. For Derrida, however, this comparison between the mourner and the lost love object can never be legitimate; the departed always exceed the memory or imagination of the mourner, and amount to more than just the sum total of the recalled personal relationships that mourners held with them. In mourning, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas write in their editors' introduction to Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* (2001): 'the very notion of interiorisation is limited in its assumption of a topology with limits between inside and out, what is ours and what is the other'.¹⁸ Mourning is thus impossible without violence, since the required interiorisation of the lost other across the perceived division between our mental inside and outside always fractures, wounds, injures and traumatises them. This violence occurs because the lost other is reduced to narcissistic memories of the mourner's relationship with them by the recollection deployed in the mourning process, which necessarily estranges the other from their own actual, once-living identity.

Derrida's solution to this problem is an ethics of mourning implicit in his sense of impossible mourning. Ethical or impossible mourning presupposes the fundamental violence of normal mourning occurring in the manner that has just been outlined. In order to sidestep this narcissistic violence, we must resist the act of interiorisation, and hold a respectful, distanced relationship with the other: one which encompasses the disappeared, ex-lovers, the deceased, and victims of trauma. Here, mourning must fail; the gift of Mnemosyne – 'the mother of all muses, as Socrates recalls in the *Theaetetus*' – which 'is like the wax in which all that we wish to guard in our memory is engraved in relief so that it may leave a mark, like

¹⁸ Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass, 'Editors' Introduction: To Reckon With the Dead: Jacques Derrida's Politics of Mourning', in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.11

that of rings, bands or seals',¹⁹ must not be received. Mnemosyne's gift, Derrida says in his lecture 'Mnemosyne', given on March 26, 1984 to commemorate the death of his Belgian-born philosopher friend, Paul de Man, which occurred approximately a month before, is the power of memory: the ability to tell a story, recall our memorised or interiorised knowledge of the dead, 'speak of them, and do them justice, as long as their image (*eidolon*) remains legible'.²⁰ In order to resist interiorising the dead and keep them outside of us, Derrida says,

We can only live this experience [of mourning] in the form of an aporia: the aporia of mourning and *prosopopaea*, where the possible remains impossible. Where *success fails*. And where faithful interiorisation bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us), at once living and dead. It makes the other a part of us, between us – and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve for him and bear him *in us*, like an unborn child, like a future. And inversely, the *failure succeeds*: an aborted interiorisation is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us.²¹

This thesis focuses on the following others: the dead and traumatised survivors of the Chernobyl disaster. In *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida writes:

the place of a survivor is unlocatable. If such a place were ever located, it would remain untenable, unbearable, I would almost say deadly. And if it appeared tenable, the speech to be held or the word to be kept there would remain impossible. Such speech or such a word is thus also untenable-impossible.²²

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Mnemosyne', in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.3

²⁰ Derrida, 'Mnemosyne', p.3

²¹ Derrida, 'Mnemosyne', p.35

²² Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p.170

Here, Derrida reverses the violence between commemorator and survivor to maintain, in a respectful manner, the latter's inaccessible, uninteriorisable position. Following Derrida's formulation in 'Mnemosyne', it is not the survivor who cannot bear our speech on or recollection of them, but the reverse: we cannot tolerate a sustained confrontation with the survivor situated in trauma, and their interiorisation in us through our words and memories is untenable. Such approximations are impossible or untenable because they cannot ever faithfully represent the survivor's painful, traumatic experience of disaster. Here, the very non-fixity of the survivor's identity, shaped by their traumatic experience, enacts violence upon the interiorising mourner. To avoid incurring this violence, Derrida urges us to view the other (the disappeared, deceased or traumatised) as an Absolute Other, which is a term coined by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to designate the other's absolute alterity: one who is ungraspable and perhaps even unapproachable, who cannot be fixed in understanding with language or the gaze. To acknowledge the absolute alterity of the other respectfully and through a necessary attitude of responsibility, Derrida claims that we should not speak of them as if we understood them, but rather listen to them, even in their absence, without ever demanding or expecting an answer that would grant us an understanding of them.

Taken as a whole, the argument of this thesis charts the shift away from psychoanalysis's attempts to disclose the origins of Chernobyl disaster survivors' traumas and melancholia – an inherently violent act that engenders archive fever and primal scenes that cannot be verified as absolute, historical facts. This departure from psychoanalysis is also a movement towards a deconstructive approach to reading the nuclear catastrophe: the text's acknowledgement and restaging of its own inability to disclose the origins of Chernobyl disaster survivors' traumas or to come to terms with their insurmountable personal losses.

The next section of this introduction will outline the effects of reading Chernobyl – both the disaster and the site in its aftermath – through the investigative, desiring method of

psychoanalysis. Following this, the introduction will proceed to raise further, textual problems caused by the drive to read the nuclear disaster. Finally, it will provide an overview of the three Chernobyl traumas consecutively, explaining the ways in which each of them will be analysed: one per chapter.

Chernobyl: A World Without Us

What does it mean to come after something – after, say, Jacques Derrida or the Chernobyl disaster? Nicholas Royle, in his book *After Derrida* (1995), writes that deconstructive readings of texts after Derrida's

are 'in the manner of', 'in agreement with', 'in honour of' and even 'in imitation of Derrida's work. *But at the same time* there are differences. These differences could be phrased in terms of an essential paradox in the notion of exposition. Reading is inaugural and every exposition, however accurate or faithful, necessarily differs from that which it expounds.²³

More generally, reading a text or event produces, in the exposition that follows, a copy or supplement to the original. This reading introduces discrepancies between itself and the original, which may never be reconciled by further supplementation. To read the Chernobyl disaster is to create a double of the event, to propagate a subsequent, textual version of it. To read it is also to come after it in a different sense: in 'the sense of "going in search of."²⁴ Readers have come after or gone in search of the ultimate meaning of Derrida's work, namely what he *really* meant to convey through his writing; a similar pursuit of the truth of the Chernobyl disaster – what really happened there or what is really there now – has created

²³ Nicholas Royle, *After Derrida*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.4

²⁴ Royle, *After Derrida*, p.4

supplementary readings of the event, which come before its eternally delayed final meaning.

The supplement is always belated, and by virtue of this, always fictional. The trauma-inaugurating event – a true, naturally-unfolding history as far as psychoanalysis is concerned by and large – can only be posited in its entirety after it has concluded in real-time. The expositied traumatic history such as the Chernobyl disaster, then, is an inauthentic event assembled via *Nachträglichkeit*: a fictional past insofar as it was not recorded “live” – when the trauma originated and first developed observable symptoms or effects – but retrospectively. This holds true not only for the Chernobyl disaster, but for all catastrophic events.

Upon entering *Ruin Lust* (2014), Tate Britain’s exhibition on artists’ fascination with ruins, visitors were greeted with *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1832), a painting by John Martin. For Pliny the Younger, who observed the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD from across the Gulf of Naples at Misenum, the event is a traumatic memory. Recalling the event to the historian Tacitus in what is perhaps the first eyewitness account of disaster and record of survivor trauma, he writes, quoting Virgil’s *Aeneid*: ““The mind shudders to remember...but here is the tale””.²⁵ He proceeds to recollect his experience after the eruption at length:

Now came the dust, though still thinly. I look back: a dense cloud looms behind us, following us like a flood poured across the land. “Let us turn aside while we can still see, lest we be knocked over in the street and crushed by the crowd of our companions.” We had scarcely sat down when a darkness came that was not like a moonless or cloudy night, but more like the black of closed and unlighted rooms. You could hear women lamenting, children crying, men shouting. Some were calling for parents, others for children or spouses; they could only recognise them by their voices. Some bemoaned their own lot, other that of their near and dear. There were some so afraid of death that they prayed for death. Many raised their hands to the gods, and even more believed that there were no gods any longer and that this was

²⁵ Pliny the Younger, *The Letters of Pliny the Younger*, Book 6 Letter 20, translated by Betty Radice, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p.170

one last unending night for the world. Nor were we without people who magnified real dangers with fictitious horrors. Some announced that one or another part of Misenum had collapsed or burned; lies, but they found believers. It grew lighter, though that seemed not a return of day, but a sign that the fire was approaching. The fire itself actually stopped some distance away, but darkness and ashes came again, a great weight of them. We stood up and shook the ash off again and again, otherwise we would have been covered with it and crushed by the weight. I might boast that no groan escaped me in such perils, no cowardly word, but that I believed that I was perishing with the world, and the world with me, which was a great consolation for death.²⁶

The dust and volcanic ash in the traumatic scene is the primary source of the victims' fear. It prevents these eyewitnesses from recognising their relatives by sight, and causes them to misconstrue certain destructive effects of the eruption. However, as Pliny's mind shudders to recollect the event, his testimony also assumes the status of a fiction. In an instance of *Nachträglichkeit*, the memory of the event, not merely the event itself, is traumatic, and this traumatic act of remembering surely affects the veracity of the recollected tale. This notion of testimony as fiction will be further explored in the introduction to the third chapter of this thesis through Derrida's *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (1996).

There is a tendency for visitors to the Exclusion Zone to reconstruct textually the site and the event of Chernobyl as fantasies, demonstrating not only the ways in which, through archive fever, analysis repeatedly overlooks the ultimate truth of the disaster, but also how this ideal meaning is intentionally ignored by investigation. This Derridean opening of the future itself, in which a traumatic event's meaning coincides not with itself, but with the fantasies of its readers, will now be explored. In his book *Living in the End Times* (2010), Slavoj Žižek examines Alan Wiesman's book *The World Without Us* (2007), which 'offers a vision of what would happen if humanity (and only humanity) were suddenly to disappear from the earth – natural diversity would bloom again, with nature gradually colonising human

²⁶ Pliny the Younger *The Letters of Pliny the Younger*, Book 6 Letter 20, p.172

artefacts'.²⁷ The fantasy of the world without us, Žižek claims, is of the reduction of humans 'reduced to a pure disembodied gaze observing our own absence'.²⁸ One of the most significant worlds without us is that of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. For Žižek,

The irony is that the most obvious example [of a world without us] is the catastrophe at Chernobyl: flourishing nature has taken over the disintegrating debris of the nearby city of Pripyat.²⁹

An additional irony to Žižek's – that the most famous case of a world without humans is a world that humans created – is that we are obsessed with witnessing a world from which we are absent. More than twenty years after the disaster, the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone continues to be one of the world's most-visited tourist destinations. It grips our imagination and compels us to envision, on the one hand, in the absence of a disclosable history of the disaster, what might have taken place there, and on the other – and this is perhaps what sets Chernobyl apart from other disused sites haunted by past traumas, such as the Nazi concentration camps – *what could be*. The framing of Chernobyl by the global media as a mysterious site abandoned and untouched by humans thereafter makes it easy for us to fantasise the events taking place within it.³⁰ In his analysis of Gérard Wajcman's essay 'The Animals that Treat Us Badly' (2009), in which the animals in a safari park ignore the tourist-filled jeep driving through it, Žižek writes:

²⁷ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, (London: Verso, 2010), p.80

²⁸ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p.80

²⁹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p.80

³⁰ This framing by the global media of Chernobyl as deserted and the nearby city of Pripyat as a ghost town is a myth merely designed to entice us into booking a trip to the region to (in the language of travel brochures) "discover" it for ourselves. In reality, many maintenance staff, builders and security personnel, who monitor and upkeep the safety of the Exclusion Zone, still work there.

The fact that the animals ignore the intruding tourists is crucial – it points towards a double movement of de-realisation that characterises utopian fantasies: the scene is presented as a fantasy (even if it “really happened,” as is the case here – what makes it into fantasy is the libidinal investment that determines its meaning).³¹

Could not the same be said of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone? In the tourist’s observation of an environment that has been abandoned by humans long ago and, in nature’s unimpeded reclamation of it, no longer registers our past impactful activity upon or within it, we are reduced to the status of phantoms, pleasurably cut off from the progress of the world. Following this theory of utopianism, what “really happened” at Chernobyl is determined by fantasy: the event is whatever we desire to read, think, and write about it.

The spectral observation of the Exclusion Zone as a site of fantasy is a common notion among visiting tourists, who often take photographs of its many ruined buildings and other structures. It is ‘a nondescript dump in Ukraine, the very real and irreversible remains of an extinct civilisation’³², according to Magali Arriola in her article ‘A Victim and a Viewer: Some Thoughts on Anticipated Ruins’ (2005). What is it about the actual Exclusion Zone that drives global tourism and textual reproductions of tourists’ experiences of it, in the service of a global, and, as I will outline in the next section of this introduction, particularly Western cultural imagination? Arriola writes:

Travellers and the guards who watch over it say that people’s reasons for visiting Pripjat range from a fascination aroused by deserted places and decaying industrial cities to the curiosity that the site of the catastrophe itself inspires, since, for many, it stands as a perfect preservation of the shell of daily life under the Soviet regime.³³

³¹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p.82

³² Magali Arriola, ‘A Victim and a Viewer: Some Thoughts on Anticipated Ruins’, *Afterall*, (Autumn/Winter, 2005), in *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Brian Dillon, (London and Boston: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2011), p.173

³³ Arriola, ‘A Victim and a Viewer: Some Thoughts on Anticipated Ruins’, p.173

Contradictorily, the Chernobyl disaster produced at once an unremarkable wasteland that evokes nothing more than the literal signified entity of a ruined Soviet time warp, and an inspiring landscape that functions as a take-off point for subsequent flights of fancy in the form of imagined places and themes beyond the obvious allegory of the USSR's collapse. Chernobyl, as this thesis will go on to suggest, is increasingly determined in a Western cultural mindset by its imaginative extensions, which take the form of photographs, literature, videogames, and other texts.

The Chernobyl Archive: A Canon from Translation

Another archive governs the study of Chernobyl on another, more fundamental level. Firstly, what groups the following texts together, which form the primary material for the study of Chernobyl for this thesis, is their materialisation in English. This archive of the Chernobyl disaster and its legacy, therefore, has been made available to my research through translation, primarily from Russian and Ukrainian. A second point, consequential to this fact, must now be raised: the Chernobyl archive of translated texts has also been situated in relation to the global community that English unites and to which it serves particular cultural imperatives, by textualising its social values and pleasures, thereby revealing the upkeep of a Western outlook and imagination of the rest of the world. Beyond what translation can achieve in providing non-Russian and Ukrainian readers with an understanding of local Chernobyl disaster survivor testimony and the traumatic experiences therein, the observation by the English-speaking world of Chernobyl therefore also operates as a selection. The translation of this testimony into English and into literary genres familiar and palatable to Western tastes, such as poetry, the short story, the novel and the universal, digital language of videogames, casts a shadowy, absent opposite. This reverse consists of the untranslated or unspeakable

testimonies to trauma that may not fit the desired or appropriate criteria for translation into literary genres and gaming desired by Western appetites. As a result, the Chernobyl survivor testimonies that remain in either their initial language or in non-verbalised traumatic repression are in danger of being left behind by this global canonisation configured for Western audiences, and, existing only at a local level, would likely remain beyond the reach of international trauma studies.

It is important to briefly state, in relation to Chernobyl, what these Western appetites consist of. The West, I claim throughout this thesis, desires a representation of the Chernobyl disaster that is much in line with pre-existing narratives common to other mass traumatic events, exemplified most strongly perhaps by the Jewish Holocaust, but, as I suggested earlier, which include the added potential for further, new, imagined catastrophes situated there. The selected texts covered throughout the course of this research portray Chernobyl as a politically and psychologically repressed “dead zone,” and as a relic or legacy of the bygone, failed politics of the Soviet Union hitherto undiscovered by the outside world. This textual reconstruction calls for a fictitious, exploitative, often commercialised and self-critical investigative violation of the disaster site.

The conclusion to this thesis attempts to push beyond the bipartite issue of the selective canonisation of Chernobyl texts and the violent, marketed adaptation of the traumatic event for Western audiences. By highlighting the ways in which Chernobyl disaster survivors’ culturally specific customs and languages – primarily Russian and Ukrainian – creep into the testimonies of the event that have been translated into English, my research proposes a way in which this local content can be incorporated into the archive. This is aimed not necessarily at a global understanding of survivors’ traumatic experiences, but at fostering new, culturally specific methods of trauma abreaction among local populations of Chernobyl disaster survivors.

In conclusion to this section, the thesis proceeds with the knowledge that there is (and will likely always be) translation work to be done. My research functions not only as an analysis of the rather limited number of texts on the Chernobyl disaster available to English readers, but also as a call for the continual translation of local experiences of the disaster and, increasingly, as survivors die and the event retreats from lived memory into our collective, inherited memory of history, its intergenerational, psychological aftermath. This call is also for a deeper, global understanding of the otherwise increasingly elided, culturally specific instances of the working through of Chernobyl trauma across post-communist Eastern Europe.

The First Trauma of Chernobyl: Witnessing the Chernobyl Disaster

Trauma arises from the time lag between experience and understanding; the psyche is permanently scarred when the event arises too soon, the sense too late.³⁴

The first chapter of this thesis will explore the ways in which the Chernobyl disaster engenders political and psychic “loose ends.” The Chernobyl power station, like the Soviet brand of communism it symbolised, suddenly malfunctioned, and had to be hastily abandoned. The abrupt evacuation of the Chernobyl region and the cultural retreat from Soviet communism were marked by psychological trauma on a national and personal basis. At the individual level, in accordance with Maud Ellmann’s above-quoted claim, the trauma of evacuees – who were among the first to be confronted with the excessive conditions of the Chernobyl disaster – resulted from their limited experience of the event; any resulting

³⁴ Maud Ellman, ‘Introduction: Bad Timing’, xi

understanding was cut short by the rapidity of the region's evacuation and the political repression surrounding it. The lives of the residents of the Chernobyl region were irrevocably disrupted: almost all of them were forced to leave their personal belongings behind, due to the items' radioactive contamination. Without realising it, most people would never return to their former homes; some thought that they would only be spending a week or two away on a holiday of sorts. On a national level, it was with great, widespread shock and shame that the nuclear disaster was received by the Soviet people. Prior to its occurrence, they assimilated the politicians' and State-owned newspapers' assurances that 'our [the USSR's] nuclear plants do not represent any risk. We could have built them at the Red Square. They are safer than our samovars³⁵,³⁶ Pripyat was officially named the "atomic city of the future". It is unsurprising, then, that the citizens of the USSR were unprepared for and humiliated by the fact that a future they were promised would never materialise, due to discrepancies between political rhetoric and the actual safety of Soviet nuclear power plants. A comprehensive study entitled *The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident*, which was carried out between July and August 2001 on behalf of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), reported that the disaster's survivors

had been subjected to a series of shocks: the accident itself; the discovery of its true extent and nature with Perestroika; resettlement; the effects of the break up of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent collapse of living standards and of much of the

³⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines a samovar as 'a tea-kettle which has its fire in a tube running through it, and which, with a few pieces of lighted charcoal dropped into the tube, maintains the water at boiling point with a minimum of evaporation'. The comparison here is with pressurised heavy water reactor power plants, in which heavy water (deuterium oxide D₂O) is used as the reactor's coolant and moderator. The heavy water coolant is kept under pressure, allowing it to be heated to higher temperatures without boiling, much as in a typical pressurized water reactor. The Chernobyl reactors were of this particular design. 'Pressurised Heavy Water Reactor (PHWR)', *Nuclear Street*, https://nuclearstreet.com/nuclear-power-plants/w/nuclear_power_plants/320.pressurized-heavy-water-reactor-phwr.aspx, (accessed October 27, 2014)

³⁶ 'Extract from a Soviet newspaper', in Igor Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, (New York: Umbrage Editions, 2006), p.10

welfare state. They had developed an overwhelming sense of helplessness and victimisation.³⁷

The archive of eyewitness accounts analysed in this chapter (incorporating Igor Kostin's photographs compiled in *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter* and other local survivors' testimonies compiled by Svetlana Alexievich in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*) constitutes the first of three Chernobyl traumas. The archive is unable to retrace the series of traumatic events that were withdrawn from prematurely, disallowing the reintroduction of the disaster's full historicisation and comprehension to take place. This chapter will analyse the hasty psychic vacation of the Chernobyl space that accompanied its rapid physical evacuation; as Alexievich's collected survivor testimonies make clear, many witnesses of the disaster and its aftermath simply do not remember these events – a classic symptom of psychological trauma. Other symptoms of this trauma caused by the disaster, Alexievich's interviews reveal, include flashbacks to the aspects of the event that were remembered, involuntary re-enactments of these memorised scenes, and nightmares derived from them. Such symptoms (identified by the American Psychological Association [APA] as post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]), manifest at once as an absence and disorder of memory. As Ruth Leys writes in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*:

the idea [behind PTSD] is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect or integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as* past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present.³⁸

³⁷ *The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident*, drafted by Patrick Gray, (UNDP, 2001), p.60

³⁸ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.2

The aim of Freudian psychoanalysis is twofold: to help the sufferer fill in the mnemic blanks of the experienced traumatic event, and to help them retrospectively construct the true chronological order of its constituent parts. In her book, **Leys** writes that many psychoanalysts have praised pioneering French psychologist Pierre Janet

for distinguishing between two kinds of memory – “traumatic memory,” which merely and unconsciously *repeats* the past, and narrative memory,” which *narrates the past as past* – and for validating the idea that the goal of therapy is to convert “traumatic memory” into “narrative memory” by getting the patient to recount his or her history.³⁹

This was, of course, the aim of Freud’s psychoanalytic sessions with Sergei Pankejeff. Freud constructed the Wolf Man case study by recording his patient’s autobiographical recollection of experienced, interrelated, childhood traumas, with the aim of ridding him of his depression and psychosomatic digestive disorders that were contemporary with the analysis. The recollection begins with Pankejeff’s childhood neuroses concerning his phobia and sadomasochistic torturing of animals, and his sudden, discontented, irritable, violent disposition. It then covers a period of deep piety in which he felt compelled to kiss all the holy pictures hanging in his room each night before bed, in which he also remembers uttering blasphemes such as “God-swine” or “God-shit,” before reversing backwards in time and arriving at the infamous, infant witnessing of his parents’ *coitus a tergo*. Freud’s sessions were designed to document these symptoms and the order in which they occurred, in order to encourage the patient to recognise the relocation of their traumatic past from its psychologically disruptive position in the lived present to its historically correct site, enabling

³⁹ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.105

them to gain mastery over its symptoms. Freud also proposed that the healing of the patient could be achieved by identifying the origin of their neuroses' origin. In his interview with Karen Obholzer, Pankejeff states Freud's outlook in relation to psychoanalytic treatment: "he believes that some childhood experience, a trauma, is the cause of an illness. And if one remembers this event, one gets one's health back. In five minutes."⁴⁰

In Freud's treatment of Pankejeff, as with many other psychoanalytic readings of a subject, a resistance against the asserted veracity, chronological order, and origin of the traumatic history emerges. As the theoretical introduction of this thesis explored, Freud's analysis of Pankejeff's primal scene oscillated between determining it as an actually-occurring event and a fantasy concocted in his patient's later childhood, which was perhaps derived from the latter's witnessing of animals copulating and referred back, via *Nachträglichkeit*, to the infant stage. The possibility of this fake origin of trauma threatens Freud's therapeutic efforts, which, in Pankejeff's summary, rest on the disclosure or recollection of a previously repressed, *real* experience. Pankejeff's inability to assert the chronological order of his neuroses' emergence accurately presents further obstacles on the path to his healing. Freud articulates these obstacles in his Wolf Man psychoanalytic study by asking the following questions:

What was the origin of the sudden change in the boy's character? What was the significance of his phobia and of his perversities [regarding animals]? How did he arrive at his obsessive piety? And how are all these phenomena interrelated? I will once more recall the fact that our therapeutic work was concerned with a subsequent and recent neurotic illness [Pankejeff's adult depression and digestive disorders], and that light could only be thrown upon these earlier problems when the course of analysis led away for a time from the present, and forced us to make a *détour* through the prehistoric period of childhood [the infant primal scene].⁴¹

⁴⁰ Obholzer, *Wolfman: Conversations with Freud's Patient Sixty Years Later*, p.30

⁴¹ Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', pp.17-18

Pankejeff's psychoanalysis acts as a sort of trial of Freud's entire practice, adamant as it is that the patient can be relieved of their psychological suffering by chronologically-ordering their neuroses, and identifying the trauma's origin in an authentic primal scene. With this configuration in mind, the first chapter of this thesis will explore, in relation to the psychoanalysis of recollected Chernobyl disaster survivor accounts, the usefulness and limits of Freudian psychoanalytic practice. In attempting to heal the Chernobyl disaster survivor by reasserting an authentic order to their recollected, witnessed events of the nuclear disaster, and tracing these backwards psychoanalytically to locate the exact origin of their traumatised behaviour, two problematising psychic mechanisms arise: the screen memory and *Nachträglichkeit*.

The screen memory prevents the unimpeded retrospective movement of psychoanalytic investigation by repressing or psychically blockading a memory or memories of an authentic traumatic event. The screen memory, as its name suggests, screens off this repression with other, obliquely relevant memories, a resistance which, Freud writes in a private letter to Wilhelm Fleiss (1899), later published as 'Screen Memories' (1950), 'tries to prevent any such preference [for the repressed mnemonic scene] from being shown. [...] in this respect the resistance gets its way; what is recorded is another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one'.⁴² Some of the survivor testimonies compiled in *Voices from Chernobyl* refer to the nuclear disaster as a war: a screen memory resulting from the lack of their true understanding of the event through either its deliberate obfuscation by the Soviet authorities, or its psychic repression or forgetting – a common mental reaction to experienced trauma. In both cases, the reconfiguration of invisible, bodiless radiation as a traditional enemy against which a war can conceivably be waged displaces the original, traumatic, true event of radioactive contamination and poisoning, preventing it from being

⁴² Sigmund Freud, 'Screen Memories', in *The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, Vol. III*, translated by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p.307

known to consciousness.

Where the screen memory constitutes a psychic resistance that cordons off traumatic moments of the past from memory, rendering them inaccessible to recollection, the second psychic resistance to the disclosure of a trauma, *Nachträglichkeit*, concerns the patient's memories formed after the trauma's origination or manifestation in symptoms. Through the *Nachträglichkeit* or "deferred action" of a patient's belated recollection of a childhood trauma, Leys explains,

Trauma was constituted by a relationship between two events or experiences – a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child's development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given traumatic meaning and hence repressed.⁴³

In relation to the Chernobyl disaster, *Nachträglichkeit* occurred when the initial explosion at the power plant and the subsequent, vast radioactive emission were psychologically repressed by eyewitnesses, integrated into their understanding only at a later date. These belated memories of the disaster were introduced (often long) after-the-fact of its occurrence; as mentioned earlier, its belated understanding was acquired not through the return of a memory formed contemporarily to the event, but through a delayed disclosure by an external body: the international media. The evacuated civilians were only notified of the disaster's true causes and effects by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) after the fall of Soviet communism in 1989.⁴⁴ For some survivors, this disclosure served as a trigger for the recollection of their own experiences of the disaster. Following Leys' description of

⁴³ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.20

⁴⁴ 'In 1986 the IAEA blamed the disaster on operator error; it shifted the blame to the plant's criminally flawed design only after the Soviet Union ceased to exist'. Keith Gessen, 'Translator's Preface', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), xiii

Nachträglichkeit, the identification of a traumatic event by belated disclosure, in the shape of either global, democratic news or personal eyewitness recollection in psychoanalytic sessions or interviews,⁴⁵ “calls into question the binary oppositions – inside versus outside, private versus public, fantasy versus reality, etc. – which largely govern contemporary understandings of trauma’.⁴⁶ One of the key binary oppositions undermined by *Nachträglichkeit*, I would add, is that between past and present. By retroactively rendering the Chernobyl disaster as traumatic through the assignation of belatedly-formed traumatic memories – which, for some survivors in Alexievich’s interviews, constitute its first recollection – the present is dragged into a past that only then gains its traumatic significance. Like the screen memory, *Nachträglichkeit* threatens the notion of a chronological sequence of events, and an authentic and dateable origin of trauma. In a similar situation to Freud in the Wolf Man case study, *Nachträglichkeit* causes numerous questions to flood the Chernobyl analyst: was the occurrence of the nuclear disaster inherently traumatic for and repressed by its contemporary witnesses, or did the event only become traumatic posthumously, as a memory retrieved or formed in later psychoanalytic recollection? Can we ever truly be confident that this recollection process retrieves accurate memories of the disaster, or are they informed by other, loosely related or extraneous events? Even if these memories are of authentic occurrences, can psychoanalysis assert the correct chronological order of the disaster’s memorised, component stages so as to trace back to and identify the one, for the survivor under analysis, from which the trauma originally emerged and that, when disclosed, supposedly “heals the subject in five minutes?”

In referring to and disordering one’s traumatic history in a way that tantalisingly hints at and frustratingly obscures trauma’s historical origins, memory invokes the screen memory

⁴⁵ Alexievich conducted her interviews with Chernobyl disaster survivors throughout the early to mid-1990s – approximately ten years after the initial reactor explosion.

⁴⁶ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.21

and *Nachträglichkeit* psychic measures. This chapter will explore the emergence of these two resistant processes in Chernobyl disaster eyewitness recollection: in the archives of Kostin's Chernobyl photographs and the survivor testimony recorded in Alexievich's interviews. It will propose that the psychoanalytic observation of the event these two texts draw upon enacts a form of archive fever when faced with the two defensive psychic processes that protect the subject from the painful realisation of trauma through the fictionalising and rearranging power of memory. (Psychoanalysis is invoked in Alexievich's interviews, which work in the same way as Freud's talking cure: the analysand is invited to talk about their neuroses, thus providing the analyst material with which to implicate their underlying causes. It also emerges in the development of Kostin's photographs of Chernobyl, which were taken shortly after the reactor's explosion; these graphic reproductions of the disaster site echo the difficulties with which psychologically traumatic events are recollected.) The archive fever incurred in these two texts constitutes a fruitless attempt, driven by the Freudian drive towards the investigation's ultimate death or destruction through their analytical techniques of recollection aimed at fixing the origin and chronological order of survivors' traumas incurred by their experiences of the Chernobyl disaster. The failure of the psychoanalytic methods deployed in the texts not only undermines the authenticity of their archival recollection of the event, but also the capacity of Freudian psychoanalysis as a reliable tool for the healing of mental trauma.

By way of introducing this notion of indefinite slippage, the chapter will assert the essential unrepresentability of Chernobyl's radiation. This radiation constitutes the Lacanian Real, the 'hard resistant kernel'⁴⁷ of reality that defies symbolisation and disrupts our coherent, consistent experience of reality. To be precise, the radiation is a Symbolic Real, a series of invisible chains of nuclear decay that restructure our reality, which, following Glyn

⁴⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11*, (London: Verso, 2002), p.11

Daly's definition of the Symbolic Real in *Žižek: A Primer* (2004), 'refers to the anonymous symbols and codes (scientific formulae, digitalisation, empty signifiers...) that function in an indifferent manner as the abstract "texture" onto which, or out of which, reality is constituted'.⁴⁸ The gradual radioactive disintegration of atoms – the building blocks out of which we and our reality are constructed – functions as an excessive, intolerable whole (neither a lack nor an absence in itself) 'that constitutes the very universal order of Being'.⁴⁹ It is radiation's exposure and attack upon this otherwise imperceptible, absolute ontology that engenders physical and psychological trauma among Chernobyl disaster survivors, and provides psychoanalytic readings of the event with the Lacanian *objet petit a* or unattainable object of desire to be attained as understanding through disclosure, thereby calling for psychoanalytic archiving and triggering this archive's self-destructive quest for the trauma's authentic origin and order that was obfuscated by the survivor's screen memory and *Nachträglichkeit* psychic mechanisms.

The Second Trauma of Chernobyl: Reading the Chernobyl Disaster Witness

If psychoanalysis cannot chronologically order nor disclose the origin of Chernobyl disaster survivors' trauma despite repeated efforts, how should the analyst approach the catastrophic event? If the therapeutic goal of psychoanalysis is unattainable, how should readers respond to the Chernobyl disaster's survivor testimony, if at all? Opposing the total abandonment of reading recollections of shocking events as related by their victims, whose memories

⁴⁸ Glyn Daly, *Žižek: A Primer*, 2004, <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-primer.htm>, (accessed October 26, 2014)

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, (London: Verso, 2000), p.160

sometimes screen off the implicated, traumatic history with other, belatedly-formed memories,⁵⁰ Jenny Edkins argues in her essay ‘Time, Personhood, Politics’ (2014)

for the attempt to construct monuments and memories of another sort, ones that do not incorporate the unforgettable, or [...] the traumatic, into the narratives of history and its linear temporalities, but which attempt to encircle the trauma, the unspeakable, the unforgettable, and mark its presence as such. We can *acknowledge* the void, the lack or excess at the heart of our symbolic universe [...] without attempting to name or gentrify it. Such an acknowledgement, a marking, is a way of remaining faithful.⁵¹

Instead of incorporating the trauma into a single, linear narrative of the event, which can be undermined by the multiple interpretations put forward by the victim’s traumatised psyche, interiorisation should be resisted, as Edkins suggests. The event’s obfuscation by topically related yet divergent screen memories, and its continual revision via a series of alternative, *Nachträglich* interpretations that sit parallel to one another should be preserved, instead of the simplified reading offered by Freudian psychoanalysis. To embrace these varying recollections that approximate or orbit an absent true account of the event is to tacitly acknowledge or bear witness to its untranslatability into testimony.

The second chapter of this thesis claims that, with respect to reading the Chernobyl disaster, psychoanalysis is redundant, and ought to cede to another, more fruitful, respectful form of reading: the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida. This shift is evident in the departure, which this chapter will chart in a series of primary texts, from the memorialising,

⁵⁰ While this thesis treats the screen memory and the memory formed by *Nachträglichkeit* as two distinct psychological processes, it acknowledges that there is a degree overlap between them. On the one hand, a screen memory can arise, in place of an authentic memory, to falsely record a traumatic event *as it occurs*. On the other hand, a screen memory can be formed through *Nachträglichkeit*, where the traumatic event, which was psychologically repressed during its occurrence, is screened off or displaced by a belatedly-formed memory that is retrospectively assigned to it.

⁵¹ Jenny Edkins, ‘Time, Personhood, Politics’, in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone, (London: Routledge, 2014), p.133

mourning, and ultimately, the interiorisation of Chernobyl disaster survivors' trauma and suffering. Such an interiorisation into the analyst's study is impossible, following Derrida's theory of impossible mourning, which was outlined in the theoretical introduction of this thesis, without violently fracturing survivors' identities and psychologically painful experiences. The analysed shift turns towards Derridean ethical mourning – also explained in the theoretical introduction – which calls for survivors and their experiences of the disaster to be placed eternally outside or beyond the scope of the reader's memorialisation or understanding. Each experience constitutes an inaccessible core of grief or, adapting Julia Kristeva's analysis of her patients' depression and trauma, a black hole of melancholia, which can only be revolved around and never directly confronted; 'Their sadness would be rather the most archaic expression of an unsymbolisable, unnameable narcissistic wound, so precious that no outside agent (subject or agent) can be used as referent'.⁵² One must acknowledge that 'interiorisation [of the survivor and their traumatic experience] is never completed and [...] remains in the end impossible'.⁵³ The primary texts explored in this chapter – Mario Petrucci's elegies compiled in his poetry collection *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl* (2007), the horror film *Chernobyl Diaries* (2012, dir. Bradley Parker), and Adam Roberts' Science Fiction novel, *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2009) – bear witness to the shift from impossible mourning to ethical mourning by reconstructing it. This shift marks a sea change that contributes, in a significant manner, to the evolution of trauma studies: from perceiving trauma-as-event to trauma-as-process. In other words, it is a conceptual departure from treating trauma as originating from a singular, initial occurrence that, when disclosed, can be contained or isolated, enabling healing to take place in the form of the successful mourning of loss on a global level. In this configuration, Chernobyl disaster readers from

⁵² Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Rondiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.13

⁵³ Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass, 'Editors' Introduction: To Reckon With the Dead: Jacques Derrida's Politics of Mourning', p.11

around the world – exemplified by the speakers of the *Heavy Water* elegies and the tourists visiting the Exclusion Zone in *Chernobyl Diaries* – respond to the catastrophe, its survivors, and its aftermath from a geographical and socioeconomic remove by claiming for the tragic event’s psychological impact upon them – an interiorisation of the trauma of the other narcissistically identified with and co-opted as their own. The primary texts analysed in this chapter reconstruct and thereby criticise this stance of privileged mourning, which, according to its staged practitioners – the speakers and protagonists of these texts – is imperative. Writing about the Holocaust in his book *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (1998), Dominick LaCapra asks: ‘do some events present moral and representational issues [...] for groups not directly involved in them?’⁵⁴ Traumatic memory, he continues, is

something one indulges in with bitter-sweet melancholy. It is the chocolate-covered madeleine of the psyche on which one overdoses. Memory in this phenomenological sense presumably gives access to direct experience, often vicarious experience, that may be sacralised or seen as auratic. Thus construed, memory involves fixation on the past that inhibits action in the present oriented to a more desirable future.⁵⁵

In order to sidestep this problematically sensory, obsessive mourning that never satisfactorily completes itself to engender a favourable future, this thesis embraces the concept of trauma-in-process. This process is witnessed in the eternal incompleteness of survivors’ mourning and the disallowing of the reader’s direct experience of survivors’ trauma, as the primary texts analysed in this chapter illustrate.

The first section of this chapter charts the ethical shift that takes place in Petrucci’s *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl* through three of the collection’s exemplary elegies: ‘Every Day I Found a New Man’, ‘Black Box’, and ‘Envoy’. This section will argue that

⁵⁴ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), p.1

⁵⁵ LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p.14

‘Every Day I Met a New Man’ commits an unethical interiorising of the subject, Lyudmilla Ignatenko, and her mourning of her fire fighter husband, Vasily, whose severe radiation poisoning, hospitalisation, and protracted death was effected by his tackling of the Reactor Four blaze. The elegy perpetrates the violent act of interiorisation by reconstructing Lyudmilla’s mourning process in first-person narration, decisively concluding it. In reality, this step-by-step grieving was cut short by the State intervention aimed at isolating Vasily: by preventing visitor access to his bio-chamber to limit the possible spread of his radioactive contamination, and, immediately after his death, by removing his corpse from the hospital and burying it hastily, without a proper funeral, in a Moscow graveyard with restricted access. This government interruption of Lyudmilla’s mourning engendered her melancholia, characterised as a pathological inability to let go of a love object that was not gradually, effectively separated from. This psychic disturbance is absent from Petrucci’s elegiac interpretation of Lyudmilla’s reaction to Vasily’s condition and eventual death.

The second elegy, ‘Black Box’, portrays the observation of an unnamed woman who witnessed the Chernobyl disaster when she was younger, by her curious boyfriend, who attempts to capture her traumatic experience by asking her questions and interpreting her responses, then writing them down. The elegy uses this premise to restage the narcissistic, violent attempts of interiorising the other, demonstrating the failure of these efforts to capture her pain authentically. In this elegy, interiorisation purposely fails, echoing Derrida’s ‘Mnemosyne’; the refusal of the gift of Mnemosyne – to know how to tell a story of the other – is acted out in the elegy, which thereby sustains the other’s alterity and separation from us.

The third elegy to be analysed in this section, entitled ‘Envoy’, reveals an impasse between impossible mourning and ethical mourning: on the one hand, the allure of interiorisation by reimagining the other’s trauma must be resisted, and on the other, the use of imagination and the human senses to sympathise with the other must be employed so as not

to entirely abandon them, as Sean Gaston argues in his book *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida* (2006). Providing an overview of this impasse, Gaston writes:

[Emmanuel] Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) that the relationship with the other that remains other cannot be reduced to a movement of sympathy merging us with him. Imaginative sympathy is a mode of synthesis that – despite its good intentions, despite its good conscience – colonises and domesticates the infinite alterity of the other.⁵⁶

Where Levinas claims for an unbridgeable gap between us and the other that ought to be acknowledged as such, Gaston, channelling the spirit of Derrida, who passed away on October 9, 2004, shortly before the former began writing *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, takes a different stance. He asks: ‘How does one avoid the memorialisation of Jacques Derrida? How does one write a narrative, or a story even, of the work of Jacques Derrida after 8-9 October 2004?’⁵⁷ Taking Derrida as his other, Gaston, unlike Levinas, does not outright refuse to indulge in the gift of Mnemosyne: the knowledge that determines how to tell a story of the other. Rather, Gaston’s portrayal of the gap is one that, though it cannot be fully bridged, entices us to move psychically towards the other, perhaps against our will. While he does not advocate the possibility of an interiorisation of the other, he does examine in his book, through his personal experience of the aftermath of Derrida’s death, an uncomfortable closeness to them. He writes on December 1, 2004:

Keith Crome from Manchester Metropolitan University has very kindly sent me a copy (a copy of a copy) of the film *Derrida* (2002) (Dick and Kofman). It arrived today. I would like to see it and am reluctant to see it. It is not so much that I am afraid of losing or contaminating the fleeting impressions I have of seeing and hearing

⁵⁶ Sean Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, (London: Continuum, 2006), p.97

⁵⁷ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.74

Jacques Derrida (15 March 1991, October 1992-February 1993), but an anxiety about getting too close to Derrida (but, already, it is a question of getting to close to Derrida, the film). [...] As if I could avoid getting to close to spectres.⁵⁸

We should not violently resist this close proximity we find ourselves in with the other, Gaston argues. ‘Derrida traces what he calls “the economy of pity” in his reading of [Jean Jacques] Rousseau. For Rousseau, *la pitié* is the most natural, most human feeling’.⁵⁹ The speaker in Petrucci’s ‘Envoy’, who functions as an interpretation or restaging of the collective voice of all the living and dead Chernobyl disaster eyewitnesses, invokes the economy of pity to direct our imaginative sympathy towards the catastrophe’s victims and survivors. Gaston’s quotation from Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) is relevant here: “Our senses...never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, [...] and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception” of the senses of another’.⁶⁰ Our imaginative sympathy for the Chernobyl disaster victims and survivors called upon in ‘Envoy’ ought to be derived from our senses of hearing and touch. The elegy urges its readers to listen to and feel the vibrations of the event’s trauma, thereby acknowledging our natural human feelings that form our connection to it. This practice strikes an ethical balance between Levinas’s theory that the other, in their infinite alterity, is inaccessible to the pastness of writing and can only be encountered in the liveness of being present, face-to-face with the other,⁶¹ and Freud’s practice of normal mourning, in which the pastness of the lost

⁵⁸ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, pp.74-75

⁵⁹ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.89

⁶⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D Raphael and A.L Macfie, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), pp.9-10, quoted in Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.89

⁶¹ Derrida, in a chapter in his book *Writing and Difference* (1967, English translation 1978) entitled ‘Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas’, challenges Levinas’ assertion that the only ethical conference with the Absolute Other is a face-to-face, verbal one, and suggests instead that ‘the writer absents himself better, that is, expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech’ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, (London: Routledge, 2001), p.127. Furthermore, words can be uttered in the other’s absence – a possibility, Derrida writes, that is imperative when they can no longer be with us: ‘I can speak *of it* only by speaking *to it*; and I *may* reach it only as I *must* reach it. But I must only *reach* it as the inaccessible, the invisible, intangible’

love object is transcended and thus surmounted by imagining and remembering them. The imagined listening to and touching of the Chernobyl disaster sufferer's pain does not condemn them to an inaccessible past, present or future as writing does (the 'Black Box' elegy, as stated earlier, reconstructs this impasse between maintaining the other's eternal absence and violently writing their forced, inauthentic presence; 'writing [...] is "without pity"',⁶² according to Rousseau). Instead, 'Envoy' at once avoids leaving the other at an infinite remove and violently inscribing them into presence via writing. Its sympathetic listening to or sensing the imagined presence of the Chernobyl disaster victims and survivors "opens us to a certain nonpresence within presence...the suffering of others is [only] lived by comparison, as our nonpresent past or future suffering." We remember, we anticipate and we feel pity for others only through an image that exceeds "sensible presence."⁶³ The nonpresence within our presence of the Chernobyl disaster sufferer, whose trauma is imagined as that of our own past or future trauma, is spectral. Located in the Derridean hauntological⁶⁴ order of being, namely as a ghost 'between all the "two's" one likes, such as between life and death',⁶⁵ 'between something and someone, anyone or anything',⁶⁶ and now and some other time or non-time, the sympathetically imagined Chernobyl disaster sufferer in 'Envoy' provides readers with the only true ethical position in regards to representing and thus maintaining in our presence a connection with the other. As all textual depictions of the

Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp.128-129. In other words, writing addressed to the other that has been removed by their death or trauma from our direct experience is as equally a respectful mode of being in relation to them.

⁶² Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.89

⁶³ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.89

⁶⁴ Hauntology, as Derrida develops it in his book *Spectres of Marx*, deals with the paradoxical state of the spectre, which is neither being nor non-being. Hauntology suggests that the present is indelibly tainted by the traces of the past: a "retro" or artificially aged culture and its artifacts emerge in the present, marking what Derrida calls "the end of history", in which the temporal link between past and present dissolves. The spectre in this configuration is not representative of the actual past but of an imagined one, or of a lost, alternate, imagined future stemming from an actual past that was abandoned. In this latter sense, one tends to think of the bright, optimistic Soviet futurist architecture of Pripyat, which, now empty and in ruins, haunts the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone as a future that will never be realised.

⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Routledge, 1994), xviii

⁶⁶ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p.6

Chernobyl disaster survivor explored in the thesis from this point onwards attest to, Levinas' realisation of an ultimate remove, a "we can never begin mourning" in which the survivor can feel harmfully isolated and ostracised from outsiders, may be no more respectful than the "we can always end mourning" implicit in Freud's theory of normal mourning.

In *Specters of Marx* (1993), Derrida asks 'How to distinguish between two disadjustments, between the disjuncture of the unjust and the one that opens up the infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other, that is to say, the place for justice?'⁶⁷ The horror film *Chernobyl Diaries*, analysed in the second section in this chapter, makes a distinction between these two outcomes. On the one hand, the film's protagonists, which consist of a group of American, Australian and European "extreme tourists," carry out impossible mourning during their visit to the Exclusion Zone: they attempt to prove the existence of survivors living in Pripyat in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster by exploring and photographing the ghost town. On the other hand, the film itself, via the cinematic horror technique of withholding the monster antagonist from view through the use of the staged environment and the darkness therein, maintains the survivors, who stealthily kill off the visitors one by one, as fundamentally inaccessible to the technology of archival reproduction that enforces unjust interiorisation. These two opposing outcomes are bound together inextricably in the film, however. When the tourists exploring Pripyat realise the danger that they are in, they try to escape from the Zone and its aggressive inhabitants. This attempt at hastily restoring separation merely intensifies the protagonists' disorientation within the Zone and the attacks that are carried out upon them. My analysis will use this filmic action to suggest that we cannot evacuate the Chernobyl region, either physically or psychologically, any more ethically than we have narcissistically penetrated it in an attempt to understand it, without incurring a confrontation with the Zone's survivors or re-settlers in their absolute

⁶⁷ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p.22

otherness. *Chernobyl Diaries* stages this otherness as a Žižekian Imaginary Real. ‘With the Imaginary Real we have precisely the (unsustainable) dimension of fantasmatic excess-negation’,⁶⁸ Glyn Daly writes in *Žižek: A Primer*. Žižek’s Imaginary Real describes the subject’s experience of the confronted, horrific object: ‘an unbearable encounter that cannot be resolved/domesticated in their symbolic universe and from which they desperately try to escape’.⁶⁹ In *Chernobyl Diaries*, the protagonists’ inevitable encounters with the partially obscured, unwelcoming Pripjat residents, from whom they desperately try to escape, are unbearable. The inhabitants present a violent rupture in the symbolic world: continually avoiding integration into our understanding of the reality of Chernobyl, yet presenting us with an unavoidable, absolute, traumatic limit in the form of a horrific sign of the disaster’s radioactive effects upon the human. The analogy with real-life encounters with actual Chernobyl survivors, the film suggests, is as follows: their traumatic experiences remain forever beyond our power of interiorising understanding, yet any attempt to circumvent these by forgetting or ignoring them is equally impossible.

The third and final section of this chapter turns to explore Adam Roberts’ Science Fiction novel *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2010). The novel, this section claims, ironically provides a definitive origin of the Chernobyl disaster in the form of a magic, cryptic word – an act it encourages us to be critical of. For Abraham and Torok in their reading of Freud’s psychoanalytic study of Sergei Pankejeff, the Wolf Man, magic, cryptic words

are manipulated by cryptonymy as dried flowers in a herbarium. Divested of metaphorical reach and the power to institute or defuse an extralinguistic event as action, cryptonyms create a collection of words, a verbarium, with no apparent aim to carry any form of knowledge or conviction.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Daly, *Žižek: A Primer*

⁶⁹ Daly, *Žižek: A Primer*

⁷⁰ Derrida, ‘Fors’, lviii

Pankejeff's magic words, Abraham and Torok argue in their book *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (1986), enabled him to indirectly and unconsciously refer at once to his founding, infant, witnessed trauma and the subsequent neuroses that were triggered by key events in his later childhood and adult life.⁷¹ However, just as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have argued in their book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) that a reduction from the complex, rhizomatic relations between the multitude of psychological personalities and conditions to a single cause (to the Oedipal "daddy-mommy-me" triangle, for example)⁷² cannot take place without grossly distorting them, the disclosure of the cause of the Chernobyl disaster as one word or culprit can only be a work of fiction.

Both this section and the previous section, which analyses *Chernobyl Diaries*, will take up the Derridean notion of testimony-as-fiction. The archive of testimony (of what

⁷¹ One such word, Abraham and Torok propose, is the Russian verb *tieret*, which means '(1) to rub; (2) to grind, to crunch; (3) to wound; (4) to polish'. Another 'word *natiert*, of the same root, did not disappoint us either. It exhibits a comparable semantic variety, going from (1) to rub down, rub; through (2) to rub, scrub, wax; to finally (3) to scrape or wound oneself'. For more on the relationship between these words and Pankejeff's trauma and neuroses, see Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*. This connection will also be explored further in the thesis proper.

⁷² Deleuze and Guattari see the triangular, Oedipal relations between father, mother and child as a model to which psychoanalysts dictatorially reduce their case histories and even their practice. In *Anti-Oedipus*, the authors cite a case history of Melanie Klein's, about a four-year-old patient of hers called Little Dick. Up to the occasion of his analysis, the child did not yet interpret his mother as an object *a* (a Lacanian unattainable object of desire) to be guarded against his libidinal wishes by his father, and he was generally disinterested in all those around him. When Klein in her treatment of the patient demonstrates his Oedipal relations between his father, mother and himself using toys ('I took a big train and put it beside a smaller one *and called them* "Daddy-train" and "Dick-train." Thereupon he picked up the train I called "Dick" and made it roll to the window and said "Station." *I explained*: 'The station is mummy; Dick is going into mummy'), Deleuze and Guattari have the following condemning addition to make to such analyses: 'Say that it's Oedipus, or you'll get a slap in the face. The psychoanalyst no longer says to the patient: "tell me about your desiring-machines, won't you?" Instead he screams: "Answer daddy-and-mommy when I speak to you!" Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (London: Continuum, 2004), p.49. Deleuze and Guattari, like Lacan before them, deploy this sort of hyperbole to convey their assertion that forcing the Oedipal triangle onto the patient's psychological problems is a violent, dominating act. Lacan himself says something similar in response to Klein's analysis of Little Dick: 'She slams the symbolism on him with complete brutality, does Melanie Klein, on little Dick! Straight away she starts off hitting him large-scale interpretations. She hits him a brutal verbalisation of the Oedipal myth, almost as revolting for us as for any reader – you are the little train, you want to fuck your mother' Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan, Book I, Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, edited by Jacques Alain-Miller, translated by John Forrester, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991) p.68.

happened at Chernobyl) that the two texts' protagonists provide is in the form of a narrative testimony: the digital photographs of the Zone taken by *Chernobyl Diaries'* extreme tourists and the recollection of the traumatic, first-hand memories of the Chernobyl disaster and its psychological repercussions by the fictional protagonist narrator of *Yellow Blue Tibia*, Konstantin Andreiovich Skvorecky. The narrative testimony in these two texts functions

as a testimony that is said to be serious and authentic, or as an archive, or as a document, or as a symptom – or as a work of literary fiction, indeed the work of a literary fiction that simulates all of the positions that we have just enumerated. For literature can say anything, accept anything, receive anything, suffer anything, and simulate everything; it can even feign a trap, the way modern armies know how to set false traps; these traps pass themselves off as real traps and trick the machines designed to detect simulations under even the most sophisticated camouflage.⁷³

Derrida remarks in his essay *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* that there must be an instant to open the possibility for testimony – ‘One must oneself be present, raise one’s hand, speak in the first person and in the present, and one must do this in order to testify to a present, to an indivisible moment’.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the problem with testimony, he claims, is that the indivisible instant of its delivery is at once unitary and divisible into after-effects. As soon as one begins delivering testimony, the instant is shattered; the telling of testimony extends beyond the moment it testifies to. Its

condition of possibility is destroyed by the testimony itself. Ocular, auditory, tactile, any sensory perception of the witness must be an experience. As such, a constituting synthesis entails time and thus does not limit itself to the instant. The moment one attests, bears witness, the instant one gives testimony, there must also be a temporal

⁷³ Jacques Derrida, ‘Demeure: Fiction and Testimony’, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.29

⁷⁴ Derrida, ‘Demeure’, p.33

sequence – sentences, for example – and above all, these sentences must promise their own repetition and thus their own quasi-technical reproducibility.⁷⁵

The reproductions of the witnessing of either the Chernobyl disaster or its physical or psychological aftermath – through the technology of digital photographs in *Chernobyl Diaries* and Skvorecky's relation of first-person narrative and dreams in *Yellow Blue Tibia* – designate the protagonists' original, live witnessing experience of Chernobyl, namely of photographing the disaster site in the former text's case, or confronting the initial disaster and one's recorded traumatic memories of it in the latter's. Though 'one need not wait for cameras, videos, typewriters, and computers'⁷⁶ – the utterance of the testimonial sentence will do – following Derrida,

it is perhaps here, with the [photographic and mnemonic] technological both as ideality and prosthetic iterability, that the possibility of fiction *and* lie, simulacrum *and* literature, that of the right to literature insinuates itself, as the very origin of truthful testimony, autobiography in good faith, sincere confession, as their essential compossibility.⁷⁷

The digital photographs of the Zone taken by *Chernobyl Diaries'* extreme tourists are at once ostensibly faithful signifiers of their personal witnessing instant and, as earlier stated in this introduction, a stored, re-viewable product of archive fever endlessly chasing the truth but never capturing it. In a similar vein, this final section of chapter two will analyse Skvorecky's reproductions of his traumatic memories of the Chernobyl disaster in *Yellow Blue Tibia*, specifically the ways in which these memories, though they determine him as a witness of the

⁷⁵ Derrida, 'Demeure', p.33

⁷⁶ Derrida, 'Demeure', p.42

⁷⁷ Derrida, 'Demeure', p.42

exact moment of the Reactor Four explosion in the story's depiction, unravel a fiction: the aforementioned magic, cryptic word that exposes the fictional cause or culprit of the disaster.

Instant and Incidence: The Fast and Slow Disaster of Chernobyl and its Third, Intergenerational Trauma

In the third and final chapter, the thesis turns to explore the different ways that the myriad responses to the Chernobyl disaster tap into one big, variegated Chernobyl trauma. The Exclusion Zone, I claim, identifies a new, global subject of trauma. In 'In Place of an Epilogue', in *Voices from Chernobyl*, Svetlana Alexievich writes: 'I used to travel among other people's suffering, but here [at Chernobyl] I am as much a witness as the others. My life is part of this event. I live here, with all of this'.⁷⁸ To be witness to or enter into the ongoing psychological trauma unfolding at Chernobyl is to claim membership of a *species*. She continues: 'For three years I rode around [the Exclusion Zone] and asked people: the workers at the nuclear plant, the scientists, the former Party bureaucrats, doctors, soldiers, helicopter pilots, refugees, re-settlers', she continues.⁷⁹ Alexievich reveals over the course of her interviews that many Russian refugees who were displaced by the post-communist, nationalist uprisings in Armenia, Georgia, Abkhazia, Tajikistan and Chechnya came to the Chernobyl Zone, viewing it as a safe haven from the political turmoil that exiled them from their homelands. Also, she discloses, re-settlers to the Zone returned there because family members living elsewhere refused to lodge them after the evacuation, due to their high levels of radioactive contamination.⁸⁰ Species, which cuts across barriers of nationality and politico-

⁷⁸ Svetlana Alexievich, 'In Place of an Epilogue', in Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, p.235

⁷⁹ Alexievich, 'In Place of an Epilogue', p.236

⁸⁰ Trauma, even that which results from accidents, often implicates perpetrators as well as victims. After the Chernobyl disaster, not only were individual family members of survivors instigators of exclusion, but high-placed figures within the Soviet authorities were too. This latter group censored information regarding the true extent of the catastrophe to the local population. We should be wary of converting these aggressors into

economic class, ‘may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of danger that is climate change’,⁸¹ where climate change refers to changes in political and, as this chapter will argue, ecological temperature.

The Chernobyl disaster, ‘while an accident in the sense that no one intentionally set it off, was also the deliberate product of a culture of cronyism, laziness, and a deep-seated indifference toward the general population’,⁸² Keith Gessen reminds us. Žižek observes that a similar culture

was going on in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 80s, so that when things exploded [politically] in the late 80s, it was already too late: the old ideological consensus had become thoroughly putrid and collapsed in on itself.⁸³

Politically speaking, from the completion of the first reactor’s construction in 1977 to the explosion of the fourth in 1986, the Chernobyl power plant underwent a slow disaster. After the Soviet authorities’ near two decades-long administrative malaise, it suddenly, literally exploded, due to its long-term neglect; ‘the Soviet system had taken a poorly-designed

victims of trauma akin to the sufferers of the actual blow, which might inadvertently obfuscate their wrongdoings. In relation to this, in *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys problematises Cathy Caruth’s reading of Freud’s essay *Moses and Monotheism* (1937) (which appears in Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996]), in which Freud theorises that the Israelites themselves were responsible for the murder of their leader or “father,” Moses. Also with respect to this straightforward transformation of the perpetrator of trauma into a victim, Leys criticises Caruth’s reading of Torquato Tasso’s Renaissance epic poem ‘Tancred and Clorinda’ (which also appears in *Unclaimed Experience*), in which the Christian Crusader Tancred mistakenly wounds his beloved Clorinda twice: initially and mortally in a battle, and a second time, when he stabs a tree in which her soul is imprisoned. ‘Just as Caruth [in *Unclaimed Experience*] converts the Israelites who murdered Moses into passive victims of an accidental “separation,” so she converts Tancred into the victim of trauma as well.’ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.294

⁸¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’ in *Critical Enquiry*, (Vol. 35, Issue 2, Winter 2009), p.217-218

⁸² Keith Gessen, ‘Translator’s Preface’, xi

⁸³ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p.96

reactor and then staffed it with a group of incompetents'.⁸⁴ The universal, traumatised human species previously mentioned is only officially realised in the transition of Chernobyl from a slow disaster to a fast disaster, when Reactor Four exploded. Until that moment, both technological failure and trauma, due to their creeping, insidious progress, went unnoticed as such. This rapid, traumatic emergence is followed by a turn towards another slow disaster: the gradual, ecological impact within and beyond the Exclusion Zone. As mentioned at the outset of this introduction, the long-term risks posed globally to humans by the radioactive cloud released by the reactor's explosion in the years that followed included thyroid cancer, leukaemia, cataracts, cardiovascular disease and psychological distress. A further, similar shifting in pace of the disaster's progress could occur, heralding a repetition of these sorts of symptoms in the global population. From the initial explosion to the year 2014, the current sarcophagus at Chernobyl, which was hastily constructed in 1986 and to this day entombs the exploded reactor, has been gradually deteriorating, due to the extremely high levels of radiation it holds back. The slow process of the sarcophagus's radioactive decay has called for a New Safe Confinement (NSC) to be constructed and placed over it, to prevent a similar yet greater disaster from taking place at Chernobyl; 'everyone knows that if the [current] Cover were to collapse, the consequences would be even more dire than they were in 1986'.⁸⁵ Here, Chernobyl could again progress from a slow disaster to a fast disaster, where the sustained deterioration of the sarcophagus could lead to a sudden, massive, renewed emergency. In either scenario, 'This threat to the very existence of humanity creates a new sense of "we" which truly encompasses all of humanity'⁸⁶, as Žižek writes of global warming generally.

In particular, the deceleration of the causes and effects of Chernobyl trauma calls for a

⁸⁴ Keith Gessen, 'Translator's Preface', xi

⁸⁵ *Ogonyok* magazine, (No. 17, April 1996), in 'Historical Notes', in Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, p.3

⁸⁶ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p.332

review of the traditional trauma-as-event model. My thesis will further critique this model, which is frequently aligned with a Eurocentric conception of the occurrence of trauma. It will continue to argue for the validity of the emergent trauma-as-process model, which provides a more constructive approach to the study of global, systemic manifestations of trauma. Stef Craps, in his essay 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age' (2014), outlines the need to move away from established notions of the arrival of trauma. He writes:

trauma theory continues to adhere to the traditional event-based model of trauma, according to which trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event. It follows that the traumatic impact of racism and other ongoing forms of oppression cannot be adequately addressed within the conceptual frameworks which trauma theory provides.⁸⁷

The continual traumatic impact of racism, sexism or the political and environmental corruption that resulted in the Chernobyl disaster is endemic and long-term. In societies studied for their national traumas, these forces elude the event-based model of trauma. The study of ongoing race-related conflicts and widespread misogyny present throughout developing and developed countries, for example, which is more or less contemporary with my claim for the criminally censorious policies of the Former Soviet Union on the construction and use of nuclear power plants, sits in stark contrast to the founding categorisation of trauma as an instantaneous or sudden shock. This origin of trauma studies is exemplified by case histories of railway disasters of the 1850s, and combat experienced in the First and Second World Wars.⁸⁸ These traumatic events were theorised from an exclusively Eurocentric or American-centric perspective by psychologists including Sigmund Freud and

⁸⁷ Stef Craps, 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age', in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, p.50

⁸⁸ For a detailed history of the origin of trauma studies, see Ruth Leys' introduction to her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*, pp.1-17

his pupils Karl Abraham and Sándor Ferenczi, who between them developed the concept of the war neuroses, in which soldiers returned from the front suffering from what at the time was termed shell-shock⁸⁹ exhibited symptoms derived from their personal experience of a traumatic event. These symptoms, the concept claimed, were characterised by the soldier's inability to depart psychologically and psychosomatically from their past experiences of combat. The war neuroses maintained the event as the central and unassailable cause of the returned soldier's behaviour, which consisted of repeatedly returning to combat experiences mentally through their compulsive, trance-like re-enactments, somnambulistic episodes, nightmares and flashbacks. These effects of the traumatic event were partially mitigated by certain psychic defences, such as amnesia, identity dissociation, or psychological and physical numbness. Other European followers of the event-based model, such as Freud's daughter Anna Freud, his biographer Ernest Jones, and the American psychoanalyst Abram Kardiner, also explained their respective patients' symptoms, such as those of children, through the event-based model. This model is further problematised when faced with entirely globalised traumas, such as those examined by contemporary trauma studies which were mentioned earlier, particularly when the trauma in question is suffered by those whose socio-cultural practices of dealing with it and domiciles fall outside the Eurocentric or American-centric influence, such as many of the Chernobyl disaster survivors. Michael Rothberg in his preface to the edited collection *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* entitled 'Beyond Tancred and Clorinda: Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects' (2014) comments that:

⁸⁹ The term "shell shock" has been reappraised and renamed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III* (1980). This later term is still used today to describe the aftereffects of shocking mental or physical experience such as that of war or domestic abuse. As an event-based conception, it still adheres to the notion that the trauma is incurred in the event itself. The aftermath is merely the lapsed period that is only traumatic insofar as it is the timeframe wherein the trauma emerges as a series of observable symptoms. It fails to account for the aftermath and precursor periods as inherently though often invisibly traumatic as well.

the site of the actual production of trauma theory – the Euro-American academy – has remained distant from many of the sites of trauma’s impact. Thus [...] we must continue to trouble the West/non-West binary that is at the root of Eurocentric thinking (and some forms of resistance to it): the distinctions between event-based, systematic, and structural trauma do not map onto any simple, geo-cultural map, but cut across all borders (even if their distribution is markedly uneven).⁹⁰

To propose ways of reconsidering trauma theory and relating it to the global sites of trauma’s impact beyond Europe and Eurocentric thinking, the following will be studied in the third chapter of the thesis: the Science Fiction novella by David Thorpe entitled *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect* (1988), two recent novels – Darragh McKeon’s *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (2014) and Hamid Ismailov’s *The Dead Lake* (2014) – and the videogame *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (prod. GSC Gameworld, 2007). These four texts reject the event-based model in favour of depicting radiation as a trauma that extends beyond the theoretical boundaries set by the Euro-American academy: beyond the borders of the body, generational borders, and the geo-cultural borders between the Former Soviet Union and the West.

The analysis of *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect* will revolve around notions of the corporeality of the body, namely the ways in which nuclear reactions, portrayed in the novella as beyond the understanding of humans and essentially unpredictable and uncontrollable, engender a new sense of bodily materiality when they inevitably turn catastrophic. Judith Butler in her book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993), distinguishes between concrete bodily form and the production of bodily matter, and explores the excess that is also generated by yet excluded from this binary. Specifically, she examines the regulated, sociological production of a phallogocentric, heteronormative

⁹⁰ Michael Rothberg, ‘Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda: Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects’, *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, xvii

sexuality, and an abjected, queer sexuality, which emerges as a disturbing excess from that same system of sexual construction. Adapting this theory to an analysis of Thorpe's novella, this first section of the third chapter will suggest that nuclear power plants, as systems of energy production, also generate an inevitable bi-product: nuclear waste. Eventual nuclear meltdown, which the novella's titular character Doc Chaos claims is an unavoidable result of improperly abjected nuclear waste, installs trauma at the level of bodily materiality, rendering it as abject radioactive detritus. The event of the Chernobyl disaster is depicted by the story not as the sole progenitor of physical trauma in the nuclear age, but as the culmination of a long series of scientific errors, ranging from previous nuclear accidents such as Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, USA, in 1979 and Windscale in Cumberland, Great Britain, in 1957. As the novella details, public concern surrounding nuclear power following these events was mollified by political reassurance that it was safe, and necessary to further rapid industrial and urban development. This preceding run-up of repressed anxiety extends to the trauma following the Chernobyl disaster, which takes place near the novella's conclusion. In line with Rothberg's theory and Butler's notion of bodies that matter, the traumatising radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl event cuts across and extends beyond bodily boundaries. In the novella's reconstruction of the aftermath, the radioactivity not only spreads across and infects the global population, but also requires first a fluid bodily form or sex – a repeated technological act invented by Doc Chaos of vacating consciousness from one radioactively decayed body and installing it into another (perhaps differently sexed) fresh body – and then a matter entirely beyond bodily form: consciousness merged with the subatomic world that has resulted from the catastrophic, global, radioactive decay of matter, 'the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies [do not] come to matter at all'.⁹¹ As the novella suggests, then, trauma in the form of radiation does not map itself onto

⁹¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.23

any simple, bodily, sexed map, but cuts across bodies, the binary divisions between sex, and those between form and matter.

Like *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect, All That is Solid Melts Into Air* and *The Dead Lake* conceive of trauma as assignable ‘not to one historically locatable event but to history itself, as one long catastrophe’,⁹² following Sam Durrant’s formulation of the trauma-as-process model. However, this model, the second section of this chapter will also argue, does not depart entirely from Eurocentric or American-centric conceptions of the instantaneous, overwhelming event and the subsequent returns of its traumatic, repressed content. According to Anaya Jahanara Kabir in her essay ‘Affect, Body Place: Trauma Theory in the World’ (2014):

The future of trauma theory cannot lie in a rejection of structures which make available a common currency for reckoning, accountability and reconciliation; wherever their roots may lie, they are part of global modernity thanks to the spread of European social structures and norms.⁹³

This section will read the two aforementioned novels through a Eurocentric structure of trauma that does not conform to the event-based model: the notion of a seemingly eventless, ongoing experience of disturbed life that is enshrined in the psychoanalytic theory of the phantom proposed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their psychoanalytic studies *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (1994) and *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (1986). In these two books they claim, drawing on a decidedly Freudian vocabulary of an event’s psychic repudiation and unconscious incorporation, a repressed domestic or family trauma occurring in the first generation haunts members of the second

⁹² Sam Durrant, ‘Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning’, in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, p.93

⁹³ Anaya Jahanara Kabir, ‘Affect, Body, Place: Trauma Theory in the World’ in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, p.67

generation as an encrypted, unnameable affliction which, silenced by parents, aunts, uncles or other elders, lies outside the children's conscious referential coordinates. It is in this sense, then, that this section calls the Chernobyl disaster an "eventless" trauma – one that has been removed, by first-generation-repression, from the second generation's very conception of their personal history. Both *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* and *The Dead Lake* depict parentally repressed, domestic, traumatic events that are their psychically incorporated by respective child protagonists. These events are encrypted by being displaced into the form of repeatedly recollected nuclear explosions: at Chernobyl in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, and the Kazakhstan Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site in *The Dead Lake*. In these two novels, the family secrets-turned-phantoms incorporated by the second generation, which is disguised as replayed nuclear detonations and other neuroses, do not haunt the child protagonist as a series of events in the form of sudden, traumatic disruptions of daily life, but as extended, omnipresent processes of trauma that encompass the ongoing painful re-experience of past explosions and fearful anticipation of future explosions.

Finally, this chapter will turn to an analysis of the first-person perspective videogame *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl*. The game presents the identities of those living in the Exclusion Zone as inscrutable, specifically the eponymous S.T.A.L.K.E.R and another individual codenamed "The Strelak." These namesakes, the outward manifestations upon visible surfaces of encrypted and therefore inaccessible identities, designate the absent Exclusion Zone inhabitants whom the player is tasked with tracking down somewhere in the Chernobyl region as absolutely other, thereby proposing an ethical relationship with actual Chernobyl disaster survivors. The game, set in the near future, in which a second nuclear disaster with unknown repercussions has taken place in the Exclusion Zone after an attempt at its repopulation, represents further encryptions: the Zone is littered with "artefacts"⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* is influenced by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's cult novel *Roadside Picnic* (1971), in which the

which cause various psychic disturbances when encountered – symptoms experienced by the player of an inscrutable event interior to the Zone itself. The player must venture to the heart of the new disaster site – again, the (now entombed) Reactor Four turbine hall – to disclose the cause of these cryptic effects. My analysis of the game will also look at the deconstruction or failure to convey meaning of its internal code. Errors in the unwitnessed interiority of coding that create unintended effects at the level of witnessed gameplay echo experienced symptoms of inaccessible traumas, represented here as absences or breakages in the chains of the production of meaning. Finally, the ethical relationship with Chernobyl inhabitants, I will claim the game suggests, revolves around speaking to the absent Absolute Other, originally theorised by Emmanuel Levinas and defined earlier in this introduction, without experiencing or even expecting a response.

Conclusion

The first-hand testimonies compiled in *Voices from Chernobyl*, the conclusion to my thesis will suggest, offer an alternative method of reading Chernobyl trauma. Some witnesses of the Chernobyl disaster and participants of the following evacuation and liquidation operations cathartically restage their traumatic memories of the event as experiences of fictional characters. These reconstructions, rendered through the medium of oral storytelling, echo the bawdy, authority-subverting aspects of carnival and laughter theorised by the Ukrainian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. The conclusion to the thesis argues for a culturally local articulation of experienced trauma that is distinct from but effected by the “talking cure”

aftermath of an unwitnessed alien visitation to a sparsely populated region of Canada has revealed strange, deadly artefacts with unfathomable uses. After the region in which the alien visitation supposedly took place is cordoned off by the international authorities, some daring people, known as Stalkers, venture into this newly-created “Zone” to collect and trade the artefacts, around which a black market economy subsequently emerges. The title of the game is also a reference to Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Stalker* (1979), a loose adaptation of the Strugatskys’ novel.

practice common to Eurocentric and American-centric models of trauma abreaction.

To summarise, chapters one, two and three of this thesis correspond to the first, second and third traumas of Chernobyl respectively, which were each outlined at the start of this introduction. Freudian psychoanalysis – the search within a patient’s memories for an authentic primal scene (the originary traumatic witnessing experience) in order to rid the patient of their neuroses and depressions which derive from it – is faced with three key obstacles when reading the Chernobyl disaster, the first chapter will argue: the traumatic disruption of the witnessing experience by the radiation as Symbolic Real, the erasure or overwriting of the witnessing experience by the screen memory, and the belated assignation (*Nachträglichkeit*) of latterly recovered memories and increased understanding of the disaster to the witnessing experience. The Freudian psychoanalytic archiving of the patient’s recollected past to disclose their primal scene and the three difficulties this process faces are exemplified by Kostin’s photographs of the Chernobyl disaster’s immediate aftermath reproduced in his book *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter* and Alexievich’s interviews with local survivors compiled in her book *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. As stated at the beginning of the introduction of this thesis, the first trauma of Chernobyl is constituted by the initial, local experience of the disaster, which is analysed by Freudian psychoanalysis. The second chapter analyses the second-hand responses to the disaster, showing how Derridean deconstruction is at work in Petrucci’s *Heavy Water* elegies, the *Chernobyl Diaries* film, and the novel *Yellow Blue Tibia*. It examines their self-aware or self-imposed inability to disclose and mourn the losses of local survivors’ trauma. This intentional textual failure, which maintains these survivors at an ethical exteriority as argued by Derrida’s notion of ethical mourning, is a staged trauma that aims to bear witness to the uninterpretable first-hand experiences of the Chernobyl disaster by reconstructing the uncrossable gap in understanding between the local survivors, whom these experiences

belong to, and second-hand readers of the event. This instructive, uncrossable gap, as reconstructed by these three texts, constitutes the second trauma of Chernobyl: the double movement of the archive, namely the impossible yet self-destructively inevitable drive to elegise, photograph or otherwise archive the local survivor-as-other. The third chapter turns to deal with the third trauma of Chernobyl: the intergenerational trauma experienced by second-generation survivors, namely those children who, unlike their parents, did not witness the disaster or the evacuation and liquidation of the Chernobyl region first-hand. They inherit their parents' trauma unconsciously when the latter are silent about it. An unspoken secret of one generation, through this psychic inheritance, becomes an unspeakable secret in the following generation. Abraham and Torok's theory of incorporation, outlined in the earlier theoretical introduction, is particularly useful in tracing the psychological and physiological symptoms of intergenerational Chernobyl trauma and its reconstruction in two novels: *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* and *The Dead Lake*. Finally, it will explore how *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* offers us an example of an ethical relationship with Chernobyl disaster survivors, who are rendered in the videogame as Absolute Others.

Chapter One: Chernobyl Trauma, Testimony, and Psychoanalysis

The locks of memory, it appears, have always already been severed. In the place of the transcendental ground of subjective memory, *Primal Scenes* substitutes a textual memory; in lieu of a human subject, a series of intertextual constructions.¹

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster is an immemorial event, having always already escaped the severed locks of memory. For its local survivors, whose own mnemonic retention of the event has been shattered by traumatic experience, primal scenes substitute the absent memory with textual reconstructions of other (possibly imagined) acts of witnessing. The survivor's memory of an authentic Chernobyl disaster, this chapter will argue, is repressed in part by the Soviet authorities' socio-political response to the event. In an interview with journalist Svetlana Alexievich, Yevgeni Brovkin, an instructor at Belarus's Gomel State University, recalls:

In the first days after the accident, all the books in the library about radiation, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even about X-rays, disappeared. Some people said it was an order from above, so that people wouldn't panic.²

Brovkin's testimony bears witness to the gagging of panic-causing information about radiation in the aftermath of the disaster, which served to politically deprive survivors of a conscious experience of its traumatic quality. Radioactivity, this trauma to which no information contemporary to the disaster's aftermath refers, is a silent gap or space in the survivor's memory of the event. Katya P., who witnessed the disaster as a child, recalls: 'I

¹ Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.12

² Yevgeni Brovkin, 'Monologue About a Moonlit Landscape', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), p.85

don't remember the fear, but I remember lots of weird things. [...] We were "evacuated". My father brought that word home from work. It was like in the [Great Patriotic] war books'.³ Katya P.'s absent memory of fear bears witness to the political repression of the disaster's trauma, and her formation of a series of substitute "weird" memories, such as the imaginative comparison between the evacuation of Pripjat and that of towns and villages during the Great Patriotic War, is a symptom of this repression. For Sigmund Freud's patients, specifically women suffering from neuroses gained, he theorised, by sexual traumas occurring in childhood, 'we find that impressions from the pre-sexual period which produced no effect on the child attain traumatic power at a later date as memories, when the girl or married woman has acquired an understanding of sexual life'.⁴ Just as sexual events emerge as traumas in consciousness only after the subject gains a knowledge of sexual life, the impression of the Chernobyl disaster attains conscious, traumatic power only after the witness belatedly acquires a knowledge of radiation. Unable to comprehend the impact of the nuclear disaster as it unfolds, Katya P.'s childhood memory of the event, like a neurotic dream symptomatic of a repressed trauma, merely 'points towards the origin, but its interpretation cannot reveal the origin'.⁵ In other words, her testimony of this period cannot disclose what happened at Chernobyl. Deprived of an understanding of radiation with which to disclose the disaster fully, then, her memory of Chernobyl is a primal scene, an interpretation of the event through pre-dating history and imagination that is passed off as authentic experience. Chernobyl, in relation to Lukacher's theory of the primal scene, 'comes to signify an ontologically undecidable intertextual event that is situated in the differential space between historical memory and imaginative construction, between archival verification and interpretive free

³ Katya P., 'Monologue About How We Can't Live Without Chekov and Tolstoy', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), pp.101-2

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. II*, translated and edited by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p.133

⁵ Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, p.26

play'.⁶ After information about radiation was restored by the authorities, 'people compared it [the Chernobyl disaster] to Hiroshima. But no one believed it. How can you believe in something incomprehensible? No matter how hard you try, it still doesn't make sense'.⁷ Here, Katya P.'s trauma, repressed during her witnessing of the disaster, becomes known to her. It emerges from the irreconcilability between her newly-gained knowledge of radiation and the memorised childhood scene from which it was absent. In recollection, she retains her inauthentic childhood memory of the disaster, unable to retrofit it with latent and ill-fitting understanding. 'Trauma', Maud Ellmann writes in the introduction to Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), 'arises from the time lag between experience and understanding; the psyche is permanently scarred when the event arises too soon, the sense too late'.⁸ Brovkin recalls:

If we'd beaten Chernobyl, people would talk about it and write about it more. Or if we'd understood Chernobyl. But we don't know how to capture any meaning from it. We're not capable of it. We can't place it in our human experience or our human time-frame.

So what's better, to remember or to forget?'⁹

In dealing with this desynchronicity between the event's occurrence and its understanding, Katya P. discards the latent understanding of radiation and retains her childhood memory of the disaster. What is better for her is to remember *and* forget, selectively. She remembers not a radioactive fire but 'an ordinary fire, being put out by ordinary firemen'¹⁰ at the exploded Chernobyl reactor. Although there is missing meaning from this memorised scene, there are

⁶ Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, p.24

⁷ Katya P.: 'Monologue About How We Can't Live Without Chekov and Tolstoy', p.103

⁸ Maud Ellmann, 'Introduction: Bad Timing', in Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, translated by Shaun Whiteside, (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p.xi

⁹ Brovkin, 'Monologue About a Moonlit Landscape', p.86

¹⁰ Katya P.: 'Monologue About How We Can't Live Without Chekov and Tolstoy', p.101

traces or cinders of it in the fire's aftermath and recollection. For Ned Lukacher in his introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Cinders* (1987), '*Cinders* is about the fire that is still burning at the origin of language, the not yet literal but more than figurative fire that can be felt in the cinders of a language'.¹¹ The once literal fire of Chernobyl, lost to the figurative testimonial expressions of predated history and imaginative interpretation, now exists as cinders eternally awaiting articulation, promising but not delivering expression of the disaster's authentic witnessing and complete understanding. As Lukacher writes:

Cinders are the quarks of language, neither proper nouns nor metaphors, the traces of neither ontotheology nor of the generalization of metaphor, naming neither truth nor its impossibility, but all the while keeping a space open into which the truth, or its impossibility, might come.¹²

The Chernobyl disaster engenders a radioactive, traumatic site in which authentic witnessing and complete understanding, like the fire that once burned there, has been extinguished. Testimony, however, bears witness to the cinders of forgotten or unremembered truth. By not disclosing truth or this impossibility of its disclosure, testimony keeps the space between absent memory and latent knowledge open. Katya P. gestures towards this absence of understanding and the ways in which it might be provisionally, personally reconstituted, recollecting:

My mother especially has felt confused. She teaches Russian literature, and she always taught me to live with books. But there are no books about this. She became

¹¹ Ned Lukacher, in Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p.2

¹² Lukacher, *Cinders*, p.1

confused. She doesn't know how to do without books. Without Chekov and Tolstoy. I want to remember, and also I don't want to.¹³

This encountered impasse between remembering and forgetting the disaster, where understanding is impossible because authentic memory has failed and latent knowledge cannot restore it, constitutes a new method of memory formation. On the one hand, intertextual memory in the form of literature, theatre and film contextualises the survivor's limited experience and on the other, interpretation of this limited experience in itself provides the provisional, personal understanding of the disaster in the absence of real truth. For Katya P., 'no book has helped me understand [Chernobyl]. And the theatre hasn't, and the movies haven't. I understand it without them though. By myself. We all live through it by ourselves, we don't know what else to do'.¹⁴ A soldier, one of many sent to Chernobyl to ensure the full evacuation of outlying towns and villages, recalls:

I've forgotten everything. I only remember that I went there, and after that I don't remember anything, I forgot all of it. I can't count money. My memory's not right. The doctors can't understand it. I go from hospital to hospital. But this sticks in my head: you're walking up to the house, thinking the house is empty, and you open the door and there's this cat. That, and those kids' notes.¹⁵

A primal scene is a patient's unverifiable (and oftentimes immemorial) traumatic witnessing experience supposedly disclosed by subsequent incidents. These later experiences, Freudian psychoanalysis wishes to claim, act as signifiers – however distorted they may be – of the primal event: the origin of the patient's neurotic or otherwise debilitating mental symptoms.

¹³ Katya P.: 'Monologue About How We Can't Live Without Chekov and Tolstoy', pp.100-101

¹⁴ Katya P.: 'Monologue About How We Can't Live Without Chekov and Tolstoy', p.100

¹⁵ 'Soldiers' Chorus', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), p.37

In the above soldier's testimony, one can infer the generalisation of the primal scene and its uptake by the psychoanalytic study of Chernobyl disaster eyewitnesses. This soldier's testimony of a traumatic memory and a loss of all other memories refer not to an earlier traumatic primal witnessing of parental copulation, as was supposedly the case with Sergei Pankejeff, Freud's Wolf Man. The primal scene can represent the witnessing instance or possibility of a wide assortment of real or imagined traumatic experiences, ranging from viewing shell shock-inducing scenes of military combat or post-war devastation to rotting food substances or piles of domestic waste. The soldier's remaining memory is, he believes, of him approaching an abandoned house during the eerily quiet aftermath of the Chernobyl region's evacuation (after which, as part of the area's radioactive "deactivation", former-inhabitants' pets had to be hunted down and shot dead, since their fur had absorbed high levels of radiation). Whether acted upon or not, the consequences of this order, given by the authorities overseeing the liquidation, provide content for the possibility of a primal scene. The soldier finds a cat within the house: 'I think', he recollects, it 'must be a clay cat. I come over, and it's a real cat. He ate all the flowers in the house. Geraniums. How'd he get in? Or did they leave him there?'¹⁶ Although traumatic memories cannot disclose the reality of an originally experienced event – whether or not the striking memorisation of a cat determines the fact that the soldier had shot cats prior to this remembered scene as instructed is unverifiable – such memories are not simply an entirely fictional supplement completely unrelated to unremembered experience. Rather, the primal scene enables the analyst to witness the reaction of the psyche to trauma. 'In constructing such events,' Lukacher writes, 'we do not flee from history into formalism. Quite the contrary, such constructions enable us to grasp something essential in historical experience'.¹⁷ For Lukacher, the primal scene is not simply a regression from history into fantasy. It does not verify nor disqualify truth, but

¹⁶ 'Soldiers' Chorus', p.36

¹⁷ Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, p.13

liberates instead a sort of subjective truthfulness: how one is affected by the perception of either real or imagined trauma, constituting ‘a step towards solving the crisis of interpretation that emerges when the question of the origin must be remembered but memory fails utterly, when all the evidence points towards an origin that nevertheless remains unverifiable’.¹⁸ In *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek writes that ‘a distinction needs to be made [...] between (factual) truth and truthfulness: what renders a report of a raped woman (or any other narrative of trauma) truthful is its very factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency’.¹⁹ Irrespective of its status as either fact or fiction, the event’s truthfulness is rendered through the recollection of traumatic experience, the very prohibition to factual truth. For Chernobyl disaster survivors, recollection of the disaster through the fiction of literature, film and imaginative interpretation is where the truthfulness of the primal scene is constituted. ‘The construction of such primal scenes’, writes Lukacher, ‘thus affords us a new strategy for recovering, through intertextual memory, the motive forces of historical change insofar as they enable us to trace the emergence of new discourses’.²⁰ This chapter analyses the emergence of new discourses on survivors’ recollection and memorialisation of Chernobyl through the primal scene’s formation in the photographs taken by Igor Kostin of the disaster’s initial occurrence and presented in his book *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter* (2006), and the disaster’s witness testimonies gathered and compiled by Svetlana Alexievich in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (2006).

Radioactivity and the Real in Igor Kostin’s Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter

The radiation from Chernobyl represented the intrusion of a radical contingency. It was as if the “normal” enchainment of cause and effect were for a moment suspended

¹⁸ Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, p.24

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, (London: Profile Books, 2008), p.3

²⁰ Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, p.14

– nobody knew what its exact consequences would be. The experts themselves admitted that any determination of the “threshold of danger” was arbitrary; public opinion oscillated between panicked anticipation of future catastrophes and acceptance that there was no cause for alarm. It is precisely this indifference to its mode of symbolization that locates the radiation in the dimension of the real.²¹



Igor Kostin, *Untitled*. 1986. Private Collection. *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, (New York: Corbis, Umbrage Editions, 2006), p.3. Print

²¹Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), p.36

The above photograph, depicting the remains of the Reactor Four turbine hall, is the only one of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant as it appeared on the morning of April 26 1986, a few hours after the explosion. The photographer, Igor Kostin, a reporter for the Soviet State-owned press agency Novosti, took multiple aerial photographs of the disaster's immediate aftermath. Due to the site's extreme radiation, all but this one came out blank. 'In Kiev, while developing it,' he says:

the film was covered with an opaque surface. Almost all the photographs are entirely black, as if the camera had been opened in full light and the film exposed. I did not understand it then, but it was due to the radioactivity.²²

Kostin's attempt at recollection through photography – a demonstration if not a depiction of radiation's perplexing threshold beyond which witnessing disappears – heralds a return of the Lacanian Real. In Kostin's photographs of Chernobyl, as in any other return of the Real, 'the real which returns has the status of an(other) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, an account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) reality*'.²³ Kostin circles the disaster site in his helicopter, taking photographs in an attempt to record the witnessed scene. Chernobyl's radioactivity, a traumatic force which renders the site in excess of photographic reproduction, denies recognition and integration of this scene into experienced reality. Here, the cause of trauma, through the unrecollectability of the scene that contains it, is 'the object cause [that] is always missed; all we can do is encircle it'.²⁴ However, Kostin's photographs describe a form of witnessing *beyond* recognition, of trauma that can't be witnessed or represented in a record of empirical

²² Igor Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, (New York: Corbis, Umbrage Editions, 2006), p.9

²³ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, (London: Verso, 2002), p.19

²⁴ Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, p.4

evidence. The sequence of events Kostin experiences constitutes Kelly Oliver's double meaning of witnessing, where 'eyewitness testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can't be seen, on the other – is the heart of subjectivity'.²⁵ Kostin's opaque photographs bear witness to the disaster's high level of radiation without recording it – by not recording it – echoing witness subjectivity wherein a traumatic event has not been memorised but leaves a telling, indecipherable, indelible mark upon consciousness in the form of a primal scene. In the attempted photographic reproduction of the Chernobyl disaster's immediate aftermath, as in the attempted psychoanalytic recollection of any other witnessed event of trauma, 'analysis appears on the scene to announce that there is knowledge that does not know itself, knowledge that is supported by the signifier as such'.²⁶ The unknown knowledge of radiation is announced by its disruption of photographic signification. In terms of psychic signification, the aim of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, assuming that the unconscious 'is not simply *that which must be read* but also, and perhaps primarily, *that which reads*',²⁷ is to interpret the unconscious disruption of the subject's consciousness. While the unconscious is itself inaccessible and therefore unreadable, Shoshana Felman writes that:

what *can* be read (and perhaps, what *should* be read) is not just meaning but the lack of meaning; that significance lies not just in consciousness but, specifically, in its disruption; that the signifier can be analysed in its effects without its signified being known; that the lack of meaning – the discontinuity in conscious understanding – can and should be interpreted as such, without necessarily being transformed into memory.²⁸

²⁵ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.16

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Encore 1972-1973*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 88

²⁷ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p.21

²⁸ Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, p.45

Being recollected, the events of disruption need not necessarily be transformed into conscious and meaningful memories, for this would (perhaps erroneously) identify them as symptoms of the subject's actual traumatic past. After his original psychoanalytic readings of his Wolf Man patient, Sergei Pankejeff, Sigmund Freud 'began to question the authenticity of the subject's memories, and [...] suspect[ed] that the therapeutic effect of these "recollected ideas" may have nothing to do with their historical reality'.²⁹ Freud's re-reading of the Wolf Man case study is an instance of *Nachträglichkeit* that echoes his patient's belated claim at four years old for the identification of the primal event occurring in infancy, from which the dream originated. This return to the archive, which is at the same time a return of archivisation in the sense of re-reading the archive, charts the crucial shift of a primal scene from its status as one definite, traceable event to its status as a series of intertextual instances of fantasy and of possible events, which are all beyond the reality of the subject's past. As a direct representation and verification of the disaster, the photographic archive of Chernobyl fails; it should cede to a similar interpretative archivization of events *beyond their graspable reality*, analogous to psychoanalytic reading only insofar as 'the analyst is called upon to interpret the excess in the patient's discourse – what the patient says *beyond* what he has been incited to say'.³⁰ In other words, what he believes, but cannot prove, actually happened. Instead, however, after developing the film, Kostin recalls: 'I ended up obtaining an acceptable photograph that I sent to Moscow, to the Novosti agency main office. It was not published. But by then I already knew I was going to return to Chernobyl to take more photographs'.³¹ Despite its technological failure and political repression, this process of photographic archivisation is repeated in an attempt to verify the historical event of the Chernobyl disaster. Similarly, Freud repeatedly revisits his pleasure principle theory to

²⁹ Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, p.52

³⁰ Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, p.21

³¹ Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.9

attempt its verification as an actual, psychological event; ‘the complete game’³² is one of Freud’s continual departure from and return to the theory, analogous to his grandson Ernst’s Fort-Da game of repeatedly throwing away and seeking a wooden spool, which Freud analysed in his psychological study ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1920). Alan Aycock writes on the subject of Freud’s theory of the pleasure principle: ‘Freud never completely proved its existence to his satisfaction, but he never discarded it entirely, reworking it continually throughout his life’.³³ Freud refuses to relinquish his hard work in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’. He takes steps to modify his theory using the same psychoanalytic practice with which he asserts ‘the complete observation, and the complete interpretation of the game’³⁴ of Ernst’s Fort-Da. Here, Freud sticks to his method, attempting to unite a number of observed scenes in writing³⁵ to prove the pleasure principle’s reality as a universal psychic event common to all mental development. In this totalising process or scene of interpretative writing, however, Jacques Derrida ‘suspects an incompleteness (in the object or in its description) [...] in that this is the scene of an interminably repeated supplementation, as if it never finished completing itself [...] there is something like an axiom of incompleteness in the structure of the scene of writing’.³⁶ The unchanging, unsatisfactory method engaged across the succession of Freud’s patients – to relate the development of their respective symptoms and histories to one theory – yields unsatisfactory proof of the pleasure principle’s actual

³² Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVIII*, translated and edited by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), p.15

³³ Alan Aycock, ‘Derrida/Fort-Da: Deconstructing Play’, in *Postmodern Culture*, (Vol. 3 No. 2, January 1993), p.6

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘To Speculate – On “Freud”’, in *The Post Card*, translated by Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.336

³⁵ Freud relates a number of his cases to the pleasure principle with varying degrees of success: from the behavioural analysis of protozoa, via ‘A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman’ (in which ‘the homosexual is not able to give up the object which provides her with pleasure’) to the examination of entire social institutions, such as the Church and the Army. In ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, Freud states that ‘We [psychologists who believe that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle] have arrived at these speculative assumptions in an attempt to describe and to account for the facts of daily observation in our field of study.’ See Freud: ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, p.7

³⁶ Derrida, ‘To Speculate – On “Freud”’, p.263

existence. In navigating and mapping his subjects' psychological terrain, Freud "steps for nothing" in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', [takes] one "step further" only to take it back in advance'.³⁷

Kostin's attempt to produce a complete, unified map of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone through interconnected instances of its photographic reproduction is derailed by the continually changing radioactive scene. One of his photographs depicts the liquidator³⁸ headquarters, where Igor Akimov, the coordinator, is receiving orders by telephone. On the wall behind him is a patchwork of enlarged photos – all taken by Kostin – which are used by the staff to prepare the liquidation missions. The photos are fragments of visual analysis forced together to create an apparently complete scene that can be used to master and safely navigate their subject. However, 'The radioactivity was not diffused in a homogenous way', recalls Kostin. 'It was like spots appearing on the surface of the Earth. At certain places, it measured 500 roentgens, and right next to it, only a few. A strong wind or a rain shower and it changed'.³⁹ Here, the dispersal of radioactive 'spots', analogous to the ever-shifting and divergent behavioural patterns of Freud's neurotic patients, continually elude fixity in a complete, unified scene. As a result, on the mapped-out roof of the Chernobyl power plant, the liquidators:

only had to stay for forty seconds. In that time they were to throw one or two shovels full of radioactive waste into the wide open hole of block number Four. [...] The siren

³⁷ Derrida, 'To Speculate – On "Freud"', p.336

³⁸ The liquidators: 'an army of biological robots. [...] It was up to these workers to "liquidate" the accident of the Chernobyl plant. Consequently, they were given the rather administrative and horrible name of "liquidators". In total, between 600,000 and 800,000 people were sent to the plant, including 500,000 soldiers and officer-reservists among them, taken from their homes throughout the USSR and brought to Chernobyl. The others were Ukrainian and Belorussian workers and peasants. The authorities needed their muscle as much as their courage'. See Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, pp.23-24

³⁹ Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.25

beeped. Eight soldiers came out running and headed toward the roof. Forty seconds later, the siren beeped again: they returned, still running.⁴⁰

In this Fort-Da of investigation, the liquidator, like the analyst, tracks the scene and takes a step forward; then its circumstances change and he must retreat lest he enter a dangerous space created by misinterpretation. Kostin, like Freud however, continues to step forwards. Always attached to the liquidators – soldiers, scientists and workers whose job it was to stop the spread of radioactivity at Chernobyl – he recalls:

We were at war against the radiation. Traditional warfare implies that you know where deadly bullets are coming from, and that you can hide behind a rock or in a trench. At Chernobyl, there was no trench, no tank to protect you. The enemy was everywhere, nothing stopped it. You were hit by thousands of bullets and you did not know who was firing on you. You did not know if you were injured, or where you had been hit, or at which point. So you continued going forward.⁴¹

Despite the impossibility of its mastery and the threat of death, the navigation and mapping of radiation must move forwards. Kostin's investigation is compelled by a mixture of patriotism and the death drive: 'The idea of remaining at home or, worse, taking the first plane and fleeing the radiation, did not cross my mind [...] The workers there [at Chernobyl] spoke the same language as I do. They were my people, my brothers. I was one of them. I stayed'.⁴² Paraphrasing Freud's essay, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Derrida writes that the death drive is the drive 'to return to the inorganic state. The evolution of life is but a detour of the inorganic aiming for itself, a race to the death. It exhausts the couriers, from post to post, as

⁴⁰ Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.71

⁴¹ Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.48

⁴² Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.10

well as the witnesses and the relays'.⁴³ The process of investigation through photographic archiving invokes the death drive; the persistent mapping of Chernobyl and the aiming of life's most direct route from one safe spot to the next within the minefield of radiation inevitably entails a deadly detour into radioactive death. 'In the first months of [...] 1987', Igor Kostin recalls, 'many liquidators were already dead'.⁴⁴ Here, the doubleness of Derrida's archive fever is at work. The ceaseless drive or journey towards disclosure of the complete scene inadvertently and repeatedly diverts down dead ends of enquiry, which disclose only ever-shifting fragments. The continuation of the quest to track down, disclose and render complete is derailed by this very endeavour. The archive, always compelled to push forwards, to strive for access to the impossible unified origin of meaning, necessarily leads itself towards its own frustration and ultimately, annihilation. In short, as the theoretical introduction to this thesis outlined, archive fever at once founds and renders impossible the will to archiving. Furthermore, without the death drive, Derrida writes, 'there would not in effect be any desire or any possibility for the archive'.⁴⁵ At Chernobyl, the subject remains determined to map the spread of radiation and avoid radioactive death, driven to ensure that it:

*...dies of its own death, that it follows its own, proper path toward death [...] This step must occur within it, from it to it, between it and itself. Therefore one must send away the non-proper, reappropriate oneself, make oneself come back until death. Send oneself the message of one's own death.*⁴⁶

The repeated excursions into Chernobyl, despite the danger this task presents, attempt to put off the non-proper, radioactive death; the liquidators must return to Chernobyl until they die

⁴³ Derrida, 'To Speculate – On "Freud"', p.355

⁴⁴ Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.122

⁴⁵ Derrida, 'To Speculate – On "Freud"', p.263

⁴⁶ Derrida, 'To Speculate – On "Freud"', p.355

of internal, natural death. This ideal goal, reached by successfully mapping safe routes within the Exclusion Zone, is achievable according to the State. They promise this eventuality, saying that internal, natural death will come; the protection and survival against radiation and its non-proper, external death will be guaranteed, proven: ‘Very few [liquidators] thought of deserting’, recalls Kostin. He says:

The military promised to double their wages, to triple them, to even multiply them by six if they worked very close to the plant. Their morning conversations were filled with talk of the cars and the houses that they would be able to buy. We made projects and spoke about the future.⁴⁷

According to the State, the liquidators will prevail, even though their work is hard. ‘Every day, we would receive the newspaper’, Arkady Filin, one of the liquidators, recalls. ‘I would read the headlines: “Chernobyl, place of accomplishment,” “The reactor is defeated,” “Life goes on.” The political assistant of our unit organised meetings and said to us that we must win. But vanquish who? The atom? Physics? The universe?’⁴⁸ This rhetorical commitment to survival, despite its real cost, is analogised by the operation of the Freudian pleasure principle and its deferral to that of the reality principle, in which, Freud writes:

Under the influence of the ego’s instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle. This latter principle does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of displeasure as a step on this long road to pleasure.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.25

⁴⁸ Arkady Filin, ‘Monologue About a Man Whose Tooth Hurt When He Saw Christ Fall’ in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.91

⁴⁹ Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, p.10

The analogy can be described between the following two operations: the super-egoic State and its liquidator ego accepting the postponement of immediate pleasure – victory over the reactor – for the temporary deferral of this success to the arduous, dangerous, radioactive path which will supposedly and ultimately lead to victory, and Freud’s acceptance of the delay of satisfactorily proving once and for all the pleasure principle as a universal psychic event. He substitutes the immediate attainment of this goal with the “realistic” analytical and theoretical detours which will ultimately reward his patience. The liquidators are ill-equipped to deal with the radiation they encounter, and Kostin recalls that ‘the first masks they gave us [...] were very poorly made. After wearing one for two hours, our mouths would get covered with ulcers because of the heat and the bad air circulation’.⁵⁰ On a different level, Freud is ill-prepared for the journey ahead, unsure of what difficulties he will encounter to enforce the pleasure principle’s survival as a legitimate theory: ‘What follows’, he writes, embarking on his theoretical journey to prove the pleasure principle, ‘is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection’.⁵¹ Tracing the pleasure principle back to its earliest moment of evolution, Freud adds:

For a long time, perhaps, living substance was thus being constantly created afresh and easily dying, till decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to diverge even more widely from its original course of life and to make even more complicated detours before reaching its aim of death.⁵²

⁵⁰ Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.24

⁵¹ Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, p.24

⁵² Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, pp.38-39

Where the life substance was constantly dying and being reborn anew, early psychoanalytic theory and its practice was continually rejected, abandoned and replaced by fresh hypotheses⁵³ until external circumstances arose in the form of Freud's desire to rework one theory, the pleasure principle, through complicated revision so that it "survives" practice; at the outset of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', he writes, his theory of the pleasure principle will face constant reinvention: 'the least rigid hypothesis, it seems to me, will be the best'.⁵⁴ The Chernobyl liquidator is forced by external circumstances in the form of the State to make ever more complicated detours through the Exclusion Zone before arriving at their own proper death. Sergei Sobolev, deputy head of the Executive Committee of the Shield of Chernobyl Association, recalls that:

Colonel Yaroshuk [...] walked through the Zone and marked the points of maximum radiation – they exploited him in the fullest sense of the term, like he was a robot. And he understood this, but he went, he walked from the reactor itself and then out through all the sectors around the radius of radioactivity. On foot. With a dosimeter in hand. He'd feel a "spot" and then walk around its borders, so he could put it on his map accurately.⁵⁵

Survivor testimony marks a shift from singularity to multiplicity, from one witness to many, from the State's desire for one communal analytic result, recollection and articulation of the Chernobyl disaster as history – analogous to Freud's desire for the pleasure principle to be understood as a universal psychic event – towards the realisation of many subjective recollections, which expose a range of compliant and antagonistic responses to the

⁵³ Freud's seduction theory, of 1896, for example 'was buried without a name in 1897, less than two years after it appeared'. In a letter to Wilhelm Fleiss, dated 21 September 1897, he writes "I no longer believe in my neurotica". Also, in his *History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*, he conceded that the theory "broke down under the weight of its own improbability." See Triplett Hall, 'The Misnomer of Freud's "Seduction Theory"', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (vol. 65, no. 4, October 2004), p.648

⁵⁴ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p.7

⁵⁵ Sergei Sobolev, 'Monologue About Lies and Truths', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.131

authoritative, official methods and results of accounting for the disaster. Here, the event of the disaster shifts from history to memory, where memory undermines both history and itself; on the one hand it exposes history's heavy censorship and unsatisfactory "closure" of the event, and on the other the problematic results of its own recollection: the ways in which it memorialises the disaster yet leaves it incomplete, unfinished, always a work-in-progress. 'We currently seem to be witnessing a shift from history to memory', writes Stefan Gunther, 'from representational determinacy to protean construction-in process. It could be argued that this shift represents a turn from the emphasis on the importance of remembering accurately to a reflection on the very processes that define and constitute the act of remembering itself'.⁵⁶ Following Gunther, the second section of this chapter will explore the diverse survivor recollections of the Chernobyl disaster compiled by journalist Svetlana Alexievich in *Voices of Chernobyl: the Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. It will analyse their contestation of the event as State-authored history and their self-referential psychological and sociological workings.

Screen Memories and Nachträglichkeit in Svetlana Alexievich's Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster

Sergei Pankejeff's depression and neuroses, as outlined in the theoretical introduction to this thesis, are originated by a traumatic event that cannot be chronologically placed nor ontologically verified. Sealed off in an inaccessible time capsule that is buried somewhere in Pankejeff's actual or imagined past, the origin of his depression and neuroses acts as an unlocatable and thus undated event. In the absence of a definite answer regarding the source of his patient's trauma, Freud, returning to the Wolf Man case study, 'questions whether the

⁵⁶ Stefan Gunther, 'The Holocaust as the Still Point of the World in W.G Sebald's *The Emigrants*', in *W.G Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*, edited by Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p.280

primal scene, the observation of parental coitus [and the originating moment, Freud previously thought, of Pankejeff's trauma] ever had any reality as an *event*. It might rather be a phantasy concocted from the observation of animals copulating, then referred back to the parents'.⁵⁷ Unsure of its authenticity, Freud:

then felt obliged to re-trace the story, offering another and much less evidential kind of origin, to tell another version of the plot, and then to finally leave one juxtaposed to the other, indeed one superimposed on the other as a kind of palimpsest, a layered text which offers differing versions of the same story.⁵⁸

In a psychoanalytic session, Pankejeff recalls that as a child, 'Horses [...] gave him an uncanny feeling. If a horse was beaten he began to scream, and he was once obliged to leave a circus on that account. On other occasions he himself enjoyed beating horses'.⁵⁹ Freud asks in the case study 'Whether these sorts of contradictory attitudes towards animals were really in operation simultaneously, or whether they did not more probably replace one another, but if so in what order and when – to all these questions his memory could offer no decisive reply'.⁶⁰ Freud is unable to determine the fixed reality of Pankejeff's trauma, since a single chronology of its neurotic symptoms cannot be recollected. What the case study discloses instead of a final truth, as Brooks writes, is a multitude of possible stories: in the above example, of Pankejeff being frightened of and at a later time enjoying horses being beaten, of vice versa, and of him being simultaneously frightened of and enjoying horses being beaten.

The radiation caused by the Chernobyl disaster, itself a trauma-inaugurating event,

⁵⁷ Peter Brooks, 'Fictions of the Wolf Man: Freud and Narrative Understanding', in *Diacritics*, (Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 1979), p.77

⁵⁸ Brooks: 'Fictions of the Wolf Man: Freud and Narrative Understanding', p.78

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII*, translated and edited by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), p.16

⁶⁰ Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', p.16

remains inaccessible to complete understanding due to a similar impasse: during the liquidation operation, no scientifically accurate readings of the radiation levels in the Exclusion Zone were made available to the liquidators, since granting them access to these results (which showed roentgen readings far in excess of the maximum safe dosage) would likely lower the liquidators' morale or cause them to abandon their duties. Instead, only a series of contradictory, inaccurate readings were available in the Zone. In Svetlana Alexievich's interviews with surviving liquidators, the interviewees recollected how much radiation they thought they received in the Zone, and the counter-claims to these levels that were made by other personnel or the Soviet authorities. 'I talked to some scientists', a liquidator recalls. 'One told me, "I could lick your helicopter with my tongue and nothing would happen to me."' Another said, "You're flying without protection? You don't want to live too long? Big mistake! Cover yourselves!"'⁶¹ He also remembers: 'On my medical card they wrote that I got 21 roentgen, but I'm not sure that's right'. In the Exclusion Zone,

there's a man there with a dosimeter, 10-15 kilometres away from the power station, he measures the background radiation. These measurements would then be multiplied by the number of hours that we flew each day. But I would go from there to the reactor, and some days there'd be 80 roentgen, some days 120.⁶²

Like the mutually exclusive interpretations of Pankejeff's trauma, readings of radiation levels in the Exclusion Zone are embroiled in eternal self-conflicts. Just as Pankejeff's trauma cannot originate from both a real and imagined primal scene, a liquidator cannot have gotten twenty-one roentgen and, say, one hundred and twenty roentgen in the same instance. Like Pankejeff, the totality of the accounts of the radiation levels continue 'to be frozen in a

⁶¹ 'Soldier's Chorus', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.39

⁶² 'Soldier's Chorus', pp. 38-9

double and contradictory hypnosis: compelled to testify for and against the reality of an alleged misdeed'.⁶³ Freud wants to ascertain whether Pankejeff's primal scene was real or not so that, if it actually did happen, he could definitively prove and thereby steer parents away from the real possibility of a misdeed: the enabling of debilitating neuroses of children that might occur if they somehow witnesses their parents' sexual activity. As we have seen, however, Pankejeff's primal scene, and thus its status as a trauma-originating event, remains unverifiable, even if parents would still do well to keep out of sight of their children during lovemaking.

In comparison, the discrepancies in the radiation levels of the Exclusion Zone emerge from the intentional absence or political suppression of a true reading. In this way, the possible reality of the Zone as a dangerous, debilitating site, in contrast to the infant sight of parental copulation, is intentionally obscured rather than naturally inaccessible. Although we cannot verify the reality of Pankejeff's primal scene, we now possess the scientific facts of Chernobyl: 'I'd worked as an engineer for twenty years, I was well-acquainted with the laws of physics. I knew that everything living should leave that place, if only for a while', Marat Kokhanov, the former chief engineer of the Institute for Nuclear Energy of the Belarussian Academy of Sciences, says. He recalls:

On my first trip to the Zone I measured a background radiation level in the forest five to six times higher than on the roads or fields. But high doses were everywhere. The tractors were running, the farmers were digging on their plots. In a few villages we measured the thyroid activity for adults and children. It was one hundred, sometimes two and three hundred times the allowable dosage. There was a woman in our group, a radiologist. She became hysterical when she saw that a group of children were sitting in a sandbox and playing. We checked breast milk – it was radioactive. We went into the stores – as in a lot of village stores, they had the clothes and the food right next to each other: suits and dresses, and nearby salami and margarine. They're

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, 'Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok', in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), lviii

lying there in the open, and they're not even covered with cellophane. We take the salami, we take an egg – we make a roentgen image – this isn't food, it's a radioactive byproduct.

We see a woman on a bench near her house, breastfeeding her child – her milk has cesium in it – she's the Chernobyl Madonna.

We asked our supervisors, What do we do? How should we be? They said: "Take your measurements. Watch television." On television Gorbachev was calming the people: "We've taken immediate measures." I believed it. [...] We were used to believing. I'm from the postwar generation. I grew up with this belief, this faith. Where did it come from? We'd won that terrible war [the Great Patriotic War]. The whole world was grateful to us then.

So here's the answer to your question. Why did we keep silent knowing what we knew? Why didn't we go out into the square and yell the truth? We compiled our reports, we put together explanatory notes. But we kept quiet and carried out our orders without a murmur because of Party discipline.⁶⁴

Here, the misdeed of not informing the affected people of the true levels of radiation which greatly exceed the allowable dosage is overlaid by another story: a reassuring narrative orchestrated by the Party in which heroes comparable to those who fought in the Great Patriotic War are saving the people from nuclear disaster. In a return to Brooks's image of Freud's multiple interpretations of the Wolf Man case study, this superimposing of one text upon another is a palimpsest in the sense that the overlaid text scrapes away the underlying one so that, instead of offering multiple readings of the event, one version is made available (the word palimpsest derives from the Latin *palimpsēstus*, meaning "scraped clean and used again"). This erasing, heroic narrative is exposed by the following survivor testimony of an event that occurred shortly after the liquidation of the Chernobyl region began, but before the evacuation order was issued:

People from the Party would come to the villages and the factories to speak with the populace, but not one of them could say what deactivation was, what the coefficient was for the leakage of radionuclides into the food supply. They didn't say anything

⁶⁴ Marat Kokhanov, 'Monologue About Taking Measurements', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.39

⁶⁴ 'Soldier's Chorus', pp.162-163

about alpha- or beta- or gamma-rays, about radiobiology, ionizing radiation, not to mention about isotopes. For them, these were things from another world. They gave talks about the heroism of the Soviet people, told stories about military bravery, about the machinations of Western spy agencies.⁶⁵

This account bears witness to the repression of information pertaining to the Zone's radioactivity; the Party officials do not know about (or are not allowed to mention) the various types of radioactive decay. Instead, stories about military heroism and "the enemy" invoke an illusion of war.

The repressed content that refers to radiation bears a striking resemblance to Freud's theory of the repressed in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', which has 'no other endeavour than to break through the pressure weighing down on it and force its way either to consciousness or to a discharge through some real action';⁶⁶ it is by the repressive power of the ego, which keeps unconscious, destructive drives at bay, Freud adds, that the repressed event remains unknown. The political repression of information regarding radiation with rhetoric forms a screen memory: a protective psychic layer that, when placed within the Chernobyl region inhabitant, prevents them from discovering the traumatic, excessive truth of the disaster, which was founded by Kokhanov's earlier dosimetric measurements. A psychological version of Freud's theory of protozoic barriers of single-cell organisms erected against excessive external stimuli, the screen memory conventionally prevents a previously experienced or witnessed trauma from violently erupting from its repressed, unconscious state into conscious awareness. In a private letter to Wilhelm Fleiss (1899), later published as 'Screen Memories' (1950), Freud identifies the screen memory as the result of a psychic resistance towards the formation of an authentic memory of an original, traumatic event. Due to the repression of authentic memory during the witnessing act,

⁶⁵ 'People's Chorus', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, pp.144-145

⁶⁶ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p.19

What is recorded in the memory is not the relevant experience itself – in this respect the resistance gets its way; what is recorded is another psychological element closely associated with the objectionable one [...] And since the elements of the experience which aroused objection were precisely the important ones, the substituted memory will necessarily lack those important elements and will in consequence most probably strike us as trivial.⁶⁷

The screen memory at Chernobyl, of heroism and war, which fills the local, lay population's absence of memories of the region's radiation, is externally, sociologically imposed upon them by the State-as-superego. Instead of a witnessed scene of trauma being replaced, as in Freud's theory, the screen memory here covers an original absence of witnessing; the inhabitants of the region not involved with the liquidation, or who were not part of the plant's staff, did not initially know anything was radioactive.

This absence of memory, which is concealed through the substitute, screen memory, marks a designated return to a previous, fictional state of memory. The notions of heroism associated with the Great Patriotic War are culturally resonant for the Chernobyl survivor, even for those who were born after the war's historical occurrence. These notions form a memoir-like fiction, 'a product of wishful distortion,' equivalent in meaning to Madelon Sprengnether's definition of the screen memory, 'based on adult needs or desires [to avoid pain]'.⁶⁸ The establishment of the anachronistic past in the Chernobyl present essentially fictionalises the experience of the disaster. 'What happened can never be recalled verbatim', Sprengnether writes. 'By inventing details of scene and dialogue, creating composite characters, and compressing and rearranging events, the memoir writer necessarily

⁶⁷ Freud, Sigmund, 'Screen Memories', in *The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, Vol. III*, translated by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p.307

⁶⁸ Madelon Sprengnether, 'Freud as Memoirist: a reading of 'Screen Memories'', in *American Imago*, (Vol. 69, No. 2, Summer 2012), p.219

“fictionalizes” his or her experience’.⁶⁹ Amongst the eerily quiet streets of Pripjat after the evacuation, one liquidator recalls that ‘there are still posters: “Our goal is the happiness of all mankind.” “The world proletariat will triumph.” “The ideas of Lenin are immortal.” You go back to the past’.⁷⁰ To function as a successful protective psychic layer, the screen memory must be deprived of traumatic content. The above testimony bears witness to the overwriting of reality with images and slogans referring to the wartime past. Here, the Chernobyl present is not shaped by the actual, historical event of the Great Patriotic War, but by the fiction that refers to the war through the temporally ubiquitous, patriotic slogans printed on propaganda posters. These printed words are deprived of any actual, experienced wartime trauma, and are instead based on wishful distortions of the war, inspiring courage and promising a pleasurable, permanent, ideal timelessness.⁷¹ Even those who did not participate in the Great Patriotic War feel compelled to obey the reality principle these words embody, in which the immediate advent of the ideal state, the State of complete, revolutionary victory, is deferred by the promise of its long-term arrival. ‘I’d never been to war’, a second liquidator recalls, but I got a familiar feeling. I remembered it from somewhere. From where? I connected it to death, for some reason’.⁷² Here, the reality principle of wartime Soviet propaganda forms a universal experiential substance, dislocated from history and replanted at Chernobyl by memory, which any witness can associate with the nuclear disaster so as to screen off its traumatic nature. For those who do remember the war from first-hand experience, military blockades designed to keep evacuees out of the radioactive Exclusion Zone assume a former

⁶⁹ Sprengnether, ‘Freud as Memoirist: a reading of ‘Screen Memories’’, p.231

⁷⁰ ‘Soldier’s Chorus’, pp.35-36

⁷¹ During the Great Patriotic War, hundreds of propaganda posters bearing similar sentiments were produced by order of the Soviet government. ‘Under Brezhnev the cult of the “Great Patriotic War” was promoted as a means of propping up the fading founding myth of the “Great October Revolution” and the waning interest in Lenin. Gradually, the “Great Patriotic War” acquired a new stereotyped image and this engineered vision of the war was passed to the Soviet people as their compulsory “collective memory.”’ See Roman Serbyn, ‘The Myth of the “Great Patriotic War”’, in *The Ukrainian Weekly*, (No. 19, Vol. lxxviii, May 2000). Throughout the Brezhnev and Gorbachev years, whenever mass commitment to a cause was required, propaganda posters reminiscent of those produced during the Great Patriotic War were printed, stirring up this collective memory.

⁷² ‘Soldier’s Chorus’, p.34

significance. Some residents ‘sneak into their villages through a military blockade’, recalls Anatoly Shimanskiy, a journalist reporting from the zone. ‘Through snowy forests, through camps, at night. They get chased, caught by helicopters, cars. “It’s like when the Germans were here,” the old-timers say’.⁷³ This mnemonic return to the Great Patriotic War, which is not a return to the exact conditions of the event but to a memory of them, is, like an organism following the pleasure principle, a return to ‘an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads’.⁷⁴ This movement is also a race towards the destination of death, Derrida would remind us. The above testimonies bear witness to the palimpsestic “scraping away” and overwriting of the radioactive reality of the Chernobyl present by recollections of the Great Patriotic War. It is through the circuitous, timeless image of revolution enshrined in the recollected propaganda posters where ideas, actions and words become eternal, where the end leads to the beginning, where the dead become immortal, and thus, as Derrida writes, where ‘the end of the living, its aim and term, is the return to the inorganic state’.⁷⁵

‘Much has changed in the world since these interviews were completed in 1996’⁷⁶, Keith Gessen writes in his Translator’s Preface to Alexievich’s *Voices from Chernobyl*. Since the fall of Soviet communism in 1989, reports on the true levels of radioactivity in the Exclusion Zone such as Marat Kokhanov’s, which were repressed by “Party discipline”, had less to stand in the way of their routes to publication. In Belarus,

⁷³ Anatoly Shimanskiy, ‘Monologue About Writing Chernobyl’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.126

⁷⁴ Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, p.38

⁷⁵ Derrida, ‘To Speculate: On Freud’, p.355

⁷⁶ Keith Gessen, ‘Translator’s Preface’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, xii

Aleksandr Lukashenka is now Europe's most brazen dictator, confidently heading for a fourth presidential term after repeatedly "disappearing" opposing politicians. Though usually deaf to European protests, Lukashenka did in August 2005 grant amnesty to Yuri Bandazhevsky, imprisoned in 1999 after publicising research that indicated that the effects of the Chernobyl accident were more serious than previously understood, especially in children.⁷⁷

For Freud, the belated return of repressed trauma by the deferred act of memory is a return not of the traumatic event itself, but of traumatic memory, a *Nachträglichkeit* or "afterwards-ness" of trauma. As Friedrich-Wilhelm Eickhoff writes, '*Nachträglichkeit* provides the memory, not the event, with traumatic significance'.⁷⁸ What is undecidable, for Freud, is the moment when an event, in memory, takes on its traumatic significance. In a lengthy footnote to the Wolf Man case study in 'The History of an Infantile Neurosis', he writes:

We must not forget the actual situation which lies behind the abbreviated description given in the text: the patient under analysis, at an age of over twenty-five years, was putting the impressions and impulses of his fourth year into words which he would never have found at that time. If we fail to notice this, it may easily seem comic and incredible that a child of four should be capable of such technical judgements and learned notions. This is simply another instance of *deferred action*. At the age of one and a half the child receives an impression to which he is unable to react accordingly; he is only able to understand it and to be moved by it when the impression is revived in him at age four; and only twenty years later, during the analysis, is he able to grasp with his conscious mental processes what was going on in him. The patient justifiably disregards the three periods of time, and puts his present ego into the situation which is long past.⁷⁹

This compression of time between the event's occurrence and its various revisionist recollections puzzles Freud; at what point in Pankejeff's past, he questions, did the analysed trauma emerge? If not in the immemorial infant period – where he believes the traumatic

⁷⁷ Keith Gessen, 'Translator's Preface', xii

⁷⁸ Friedrich-Wilhelm Eickhoff, 'On *Nachträglichkeit*: The Modernity of an Old Concept', in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, (Vol. 87, No. 6, December 2006), p.1453

⁷⁹ Freud, 'On The History of an Infantile Neurosis', p.45

event took place but was repressed due to Pankejeff's insufficient mental development – then in which subsequent recollection? Like Freud himself, Pankejeff at age twenty-four becomes an analyst or narrator, 'engaged in a complex process of investigating, constructing, and revising the trajectories'⁸⁰ of his history. Like the screen memory, a cover story in which the repressed, traumatic past is artfully concealed through latent invention, each successive act of *Nachträglich* recollection, in which the author possesses a more advanced level of interpretation and articulation, writes memory as fiction.

Where the screen memory fictionalises the experience of the Chernobyl disaster by overwriting it with memories deprived of traumatic content, *Nachträglich* memories fictionalise it by reconstituting the absence within memory with latent memory – recordings of the event that are not contemporary to it. Anna Badaeva, an evacuee from the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone who re-settled there after the collapse of Soviet communism, recalls that the world into which information about radiation has been reintroduced is 'a new world. Everything's different. Is that the radiation's fault, or what?'⁸¹ Although information about radiation can be reintroduced to Badaeva's past and present experiences of reality, it cannot disclose the past as traumatic because it fails to locate the emergence of this trauma as an event in the historical past. Following Eickhoff, trauma emerges in the present reintroduction of memory, not the past event the memory refers to, which has the effect of updating the non-traumatic experience of a so-called safe Chernobyl landscape as unsafe, which had, since the disaster, always been contaminated by the radiation that was politically repressed during Soviet times. Referring to the belatedly published, reliable reports, which are no longer subject to this political repression, Badaeva recalls: 'They scare us! The apples are hanging in the garden, the leaves are on the trees, the potatoes are in the fields. I don't think there was

⁸⁰ Sprengnether, 'Freud as Memoirist: a reading of 'Screen Memories'', p.235

⁸¹ Anna Badaeva, 'Monologue About What Radiation Looks Like', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.52

any Chernobyl, they made it up. They tricked people'.⁸² 'There were berries in the forest, and mushrooms. But now that's all gone. They don't let you eat the mushrooms or the berries. I always thought that what was boiling in your pot would never change, but it's not like that'.⁸³ The memory revision that new information engenders does not disclose a stable, actual past from which trauma emerges historically but a continually shifting fiction which provokes trauma only in this past's constant recollection. 'That in remembering,' Eickhoff writes, 'the past is depicted from the understanding of the present instead of being kept and simply discovered in the memory. Therefore, it will subsequently only become what it will always have been in the future'.⁸⁴ For Anna Badaeva, however, Chernobyl may never become in memory what it always was in history; there is, as in all *Nachträglich* recollections, a compression of time between the emergence of radiation at Chernobyl and her awareness of it, but she cannot project her ego into the past as Pankejeff did during his psychoanalytic sessions with Freud, a movement that was discussed earlier in this section. Instead, she refuses to believe the *Nachträglich* supplement of the belatedly published reports; the presence of radiation thus remains unintegrated with her memory of the past – a fiction in the sense that the radioactive contamination of gardens, fields and forests did not occur.

It is arguable, then, that the sudden emergence of radiation at Chernobyl may not be the origin of Chernobyl trauma since we cannot save it from being but a memory, subject as it is to the constant development or degradation of the mind, the advent of new information, and revised recollection.⁸⁵ Symptoms of Chernobyl trauma could be engendered by an imagined or alternative event that takes place prior to the disaster or elsewhere, beyond the

⁸² Badaeva, 'Monologue About What Radiation Looks Like', p.52

⁸³ Badaeva, 'Monologue About What Radiation Looks Like', p.54

⁸⁴ Friedrich-Wilhelm Eickhoff, 'On *Nachträglichkeit*: The Modernity of an Old Concept', p.1456

⁸⁵ Soldiers called up to liquidate Chernobyl were initially concerned by the working conditions they would face, 'because no one could remember anything about radiation aside from some passages from their tenth grade physics textbook.' This child's level of understanding was updated once the soldiers were briefed, learning that 'once a soldier has taken 50 roentgen, he must leave the field; how to build a shelter; how to put on a gas mask; facts about the radius of the explosion'. See 'People's Chorus', p.142

Exclusion Zone. The origin of trauma, like a primal scene, exists in ontological flux between singular reality and manifold fiction, the historical event and the multiple moments of its interpretation or imagination. ‘What the primal scene establishes’, Ned Lukacher writes, ‘is that at the origin one discovers not a single event that transpires in one temporal sequence but a constellation of events that transpire in several discrete temporal sequences’.⁸⁶ In the Wolf Man case study, to further explore its contradictions examined earlier in this section, ‘the issue seems to be whether the Wolf Man’s main nightmare [of the wolves in the tree] and his subsequent neurosis produced their own fictitious origin, or whether the nightmare and the neurosis indeed resulted from a prior and real event’.⁸⁷ The reversible temporal sequence of actual event to trauma or trauma to retrospectively imagined event discloses mutually exclusive explanations for how the neuroses originated and later manifested their symptoms: Pankejeff’s dream of wolves either posits fictional origins of trauma misremembered as real, or refers to one or many possible events that the dreamt wolves symptomatically symbolise. If the origin is imagined, the dream discredits as symptoms of a single traumatic event (among other things) his forced, repeated witnessing and being scared in childhood of an image of a wolf that ‘was standing upright, striding out with one foot’, represented in a particular picture-book. ‘His elder sister, who was very much his superior, used to tease him by holding up this particular picture in front of him on some excuse or other, so that he was terrified and began to scream’.⁸⁸ Traumatic significance may be assigned to this childhood image retrospectively by the adult Pankejeff after recalling the occasion of his dream. Conversely, if the trauma did result from a real event, his neuroses may be symptoms of interrelated, traumatic, yet still unverifiable events that also occurred in his past: his supposed witnessing of the crouched floor-polishing housekeeper, Grusha, his earlier attempted sexual

⁸⁶ Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, p.36

⁸⁷ Derrida, ‘Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’, p.liv

⁸⁸ Freud, *On The History of an Infantile Neurosis*, pp.29-30

seduction by his sister, or his infant witnessing of his parents' coitus *a tergo*. 'Would she [Pankejeff's sister] have touched him in a way that the child could have called "polish" as one also says "polish" a wooden floor?'⁸⁹ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok ask in *The Wolf Man's Secret Word: A Cryptonomy*. Is this action in some way related to the scene of parental copulation, which was described in the theoretical introduction to this thesis? All the readings of the Wolf Man case study, after their careful consideration of the evidence, oscillate between determining the unverifiable events of traumatic origination and the manifestation of symptoms as reality on the one hand, and as fantasy on the other. Whether it is real or imagined, the event of Pankejeff's infant witnessing of his parents' coitus *a tergo* only gains its traumatic significance by deferral upon 'the transformation of the memory into a trauma at age 4, a striking example of *Nachträglichkeit*'.⁹⁰ In other words, there is nothing inherently traumatic about Pankejeff's experience of the primal event; it is the memory of it which is traumatic, experienced as a trauma at age four, but only disclosed as such during Freud's analysis twenty years later. The disclosure of trauma and its possible cause only occurs during continual analysis of the case study in an always incomplete and interminable scene of writing. The past, instead of being always already complete, in need only of disclosure, is constituted and reconstituted by analysis, forming, for Derrida, 'repositories of a meaning which was never present, whose signified presence is always reconstituted by deferral, *Nachträglichkeit*, belatedly, supplementarily: for the *Nachträglichkeit* also means supplementary'.⁹¹ Pankejeff's past is never complete: it is belatedly and continually reconstituted in the footnotes of Freud's adaptive reading and postscripts by subsequent theorists. 'Derrida says pointedly,' as Eickoff reminds us, that 'the postscript generates the

⁸⁹ Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*, p.18

⁹⁰ Brooks, 'Fictions of the Wolf Man: Freud and Narrative Understanding', p.179

⁹¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, (London: Routledge, 1978), pp.211-212

past-present⁹² (and therefore, the fiction-truth) of the scene of writing. Freud refuses to relinquish his theory that the origin of Pankejeff's trauma is the real or imagined scene of his parents' coitus *a tergo*, maintaining its validity as source through addendums to his analysis. As stated in the theoretical introduction to this thesis, after positing the primal scene through his patient's dream analysis, it occurs to Freud that the decisive event of parental copulation may be fictional: retrospectively constructed as the origin of trauma by the forces of imaginary production. This theoretical revision occurs after Freud's belated discovery of Pankejeff's memory of witnessing copulating animals as a child; through *Nachträglichkeit* the latter retrospectively misremembers the act taking place between his parents, the scene supposedly witnessed in infancy.

In a similar form of postscripting of the Chernobyl disaster, Anatoly Shimanskiy keeps 'a separate notebook [about events that happen in the Exclusion Zone]. I write down conversations, rumours, anecdotes. It's the most interesting thing, and it's outside of time. What remains of ancient Greece? The myths of ancient Greece.' 'The Chernobyl explosion gave us the mythology of Chernobyl'⁹³, he continues. As mythology, the Chernobyl disaster, like Pankejeff's catastrophe, is at once event and non-event, occurring, on the one hand, in the inaccessible past, and on the other, in imagination. It is unverifiable, committing itself neither to pastness nor fiction. Its origin is retrospectively and continually constituted by an ahistorical and therefore hypothetical archive. Shimanskiy's notebook refers to disastrous events as ones which cannot be accurately dated, disproved or authenticated. Myth, like memory, compresses the time between the inaccessible, unverifiable past event and its ever-present, *Nachträglichkeit* recollection and imaginative reinterpretation. Like the reinterpretation of the events of ancient Greek myth, the Chernobyl disaster, like Pankejeff's

⁹² Eickhoff, 'On *Nachträglichkeit*: The Modernity of an Old Concept', p.1464

⁹³ Anatoly Shimanskiy, 'Monologue About Writing Chernobyl', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.123

trauma, 'is neither a sequence flowing from a reconstructed originary event nor a progression positing a fictional event for its own coherence', but instead 'resolves the following dilemma: how to live without having to say yes or no to reality or fiction while continuing to refer to both'.⁹⁴ To live with the trauma of radiation, the Chernobyl survivor must recollect it in a memorised account, but not through photographic or psychoanalytic means, which always fail to posit their results as actual, historical events (the photograph or map only provides a snapshot of the constantly changing Chernobyl environment, the psychoanalytic session of the constantly changing environment of memory). Jan Ceuppens is the author of an essay entitled 'Transcripts: An Ethics of Representation in *The Emigrants*', which is a novel by German novelist W.G Sebald that recounts the life stories of four fictional emigrants from the German past. This past consists of the First and Second World Wars and the Holocaust, historical events which occurred before Sebald himself was born. In her essay, Ceuppens writes that:

somehow we will always be missing something, something that disrupts or contradicts any reading. We are put in a situation where we have to choose between two readings, which are equally probable (or improbable), but which are nevertheless mutually exclusive. And that is where the text becomes readable, which is to say, unreadable: it thwarts understanding. With every new reading of a text, a new unreadability will be produced.⁹⁵

Where Sebald generationally missed the events he describes in his novel, the Chernobyl survivor, who was unaware of the catastrophic events as they occurred, recollects them *in absentia*, belatedly, in the *Nachträglichkeit* of testimony. Sebald opts for a return to the actual

⁹⁴ Derrida, 'Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok', lviii

⁹⁵ Jan Ceuppens, 'Transcripts: The Ethics of Representation in *The Emigrants*', in *W.G Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*, edited by Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p.262

German past through its fictionalisation, positing an account of real events through the *Nachträglichkeit* of the novel genre. Here, the text bears witness to the existence of unreadable, actual German trauma. The belated presence of readable trauma fiction, which can only ever be about traumatic unreadability, represents or bears witness to history that objective, empirical analysis cannot disclose, even if it feverishly attempts to do so;⁹⁶ *The Emigrants* contains many black and white, purposely untitled and unannotated photographs which are thus unable to shed any light upon the period they depict. Similarly, Anna Badaeva, the Chernobyl re-settler who said that the Chernobyl disaster did not occur due to the imperceptibility of radiation, reconsiders her reading, recalling towards the end of her testimony how she knew that the event really did take place:

But here's what did happen. My grandfather kept bees, five nests of them. They didn't come out for two days, not a single one. They just stayed in their nests. They were waiting. My grandfather didn't know about the explosion, he was running all over the yard: what's this? What's going on? Something's happened to nature. And their system, as our neighbour told us, he's a teacher, it's better than ours, better tuned, because they heard it right away. The radio wasn't saying anything, and the papers weren't either. But the bees knew.⁹⁷

Here, Badaeva switches from the mutually exclusive reading of the Chernobyl disaster as non-occurrence to that of its occurrence, where the unreadable imperceptibility of radiation becomes readable only through the “sub-factual”, behavioural interpretation of nature – for her, a *Nachträglich* reading of animal testimony that is supplementary to the earlier

⁹⁶ Actually, memorialisation of the Holocaust avoids the archive fever of attempting to restage the traumatic past for reconciliatory purposes. According to trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra, ‘one should be both respectfully attentive to the voices of victims and wary of certain extreme, negative reactions to acting out problems’, an awareness enshrined in Holocaust museums like Yad Vashem and the Jewish Museum in Berlin. In his introduction to *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), LaCapra warns against a ‘sacrificially redemptive or salvational’ (p.13) mode of Holocaust representation.

⁹⁷ Badaeva, ‘Monologue About What Radiation Looks Like’, p.53

disavowal of the disclosure of radiation. Anatoly Shimanskiy recollects one of his anecdotes, which also concerns the truthful witnessing of the disaster by nature:

The ants crawling along the tree branch. There's military equipment everywhere. Soldiers, cries, curses, swearing, helicopters rattling. But they're crawling.

I was coming back from the Zone and, of all the things I saw that day, the only one that remained clear in my memory was the image of those ants. We'd stopped in the forest and I stood smoking next to a birch. I stood very close, leaning on it. Right in front of my face the ants were crawling on the branch, not paying us any mind. We'll be gone, and they won't notice. And me? I've never looked at them so closely before.⁹⁸

For Shimanskiy, the ants, oblivious to the sensory bombardment of other indistinguishable, chaotic scenes at the site of trauma, constitute a *Nachträglichkeit* reading of trauma fiction. Shimanskiy looks closely at the ants, which, unlike Badaeva's grandfather's bees, show no aberrant behaviour that might be a response to radiation. He stands in front of the gaze of the animal, which Derrida defines as 'a gaze that is vacant to the extent of being bottomless, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret'.⁹⁹ The gaze of the animal, as a testimony to trauma, is fictional, unverifiable in and of itself, derived perhaps solely from human interpretation. In this interpreted – one might say imagined – sense, animals at Chernobyl are traumatised subjects, whose experience of the disaster is similar to the unconscious human experience of politically repressed radiation. Like these human survivors, who, during the period of the political repression of radiation, were deprived of the power of language and understanding with which to describe and assimilate radioactivity into their experience of reality, Chernobyl animals are without consciousness of trauma. In his essay

⁹⁸ Shimanskiy, 'Monologue About Writing Chernobyl', p.123

⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)', translated by David Wills, *Critical Enquiry*, (Vol.28, No.2, Winter 2002), p.381

‘The Animal That I Therefore Am (More to Follow)’ (1999), Derrida articulates his embarrassment of seeing his cat, a naked animal, seeing him naked after he has taken a shower. ‘The property unique to animals and what in the formal analysis distinguishes them from man’, he writes, ‘is their being naked without knowing it. Not being naked therefore, not having knowledge of their nudity, in short without consciousness of good and evil’.¹⁰⁰ Just as the Chernobyl animal is naked without knowing it, it is also traumatised without knowing it, or if, in knowing it, cannot say so in a way that satisfies human understanding. The gaze of the traumatised Chernobyl animal is ‘the gaze of a seer, visionary, or extra-lucid, blind person’.¹⁰¹ It can see trauma that is beyond the perception of and incommunicable within the category of the animal. Because this knowledge cannot be assimilated as understanding nor counted as evidence in the case for the verification of the event as traumatic, the Chernobyl witness realises in the *Nachträglichkeit* of reading or inventing traumatised animal subjectivity that a memory of an event of trauma, which may or may not be real, is all that can be possessed. Where Derrida asks provocatively ‘whether animals can suffer’,¹⁰² a question without a knowable answer, Shimanskiy considers the subjectivity of the ants he discovered at the Exclusion Zone: they were there before he arrived and will still be there after he has left. This human memory of animal trauma, an inaccessible past in reality, is formed through the *Nachträglichkeit* of imaginative interpretation. It enables the survivor to determine a way of living with and therapeutically responding to the symptoms of Chernobyl trauma without ever knowing their authenticity or origin. For Derrida, to heal by bearing witness and giving form to animal trauma through *Nachträglichkeit*, ‘to follow and to be after’ the animal, ‘begins by wondering what *to respond* means, and whether an animal ever replies in its own name’.¹⁰³ Sergei Gurin, a cameraman who recorded films of the

¹⁰⁰ Derrida, ‘The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)’, p.373

¹⁰¹ Derrida, ‘The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)’, p.372

¹⁰² Derrida, ‘The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)’, p.396

¹⁰³ Derrida, ‘The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)’, p.379

Chernobyl Exclusion Zone after the evacuation, showed his work to schoolchildren. He remembers:

This boy, stammering and blushing, you could tell he was one of the quiet ones, asked: “Why couldn’t anyone help the animals?” This was already a person from the future. I couldn’t answer that question. Our art is about the suffering and loves of people, but not of everything living. Only humans. We don’t descend to their level: animals, plants, that other world. And with Chernobyl man just waved his hand at everything.¹⁰⁴

For Gurin, the act of interpreting unacknowledged, unspoken animal trauma, of promising to help the animals, occurs by way of responding through the animal’s own testimony – for ‘man is a promising animal’, Derrida writes, ‘an animal that is permitted to make promises’.¹⁰⁵ These promises articulate a response that, though it is imaginary and offers no concrete solutions to help the animals, reworks the anthropocentric understanding of Chernobyl trauma, expanding its definition to include animal sufferers. As a promising animal, Gurin, through his filmic language of animals, engenders, like the psychoanalytic treatment of the Wolf Man, Sergei Pankejeff, ‘the therapeutic effect of “recollected ideas” [which] may have nothing to do with their historical reality’.¹⁰⁶ ‘I want to make a film called “Hostages,” about animals’, Gurin recalls. He continues, saying:

A strange thing happened to me. I became closer to animals. And trees, and birds. They’re closer to me than they were, the distance between us has narrowed. I go to the Zone now, all these years, I see a wild boar jumping out of an abandoned human house, and then an elk. That’s what I shoot. I want to make a film, to see everything through the eyes of an animal. “What are you shooting?” people say to me. “Look

¹⁰⁴ Sergei Gurin, ‘Monologue About War Movies’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.113

¹⁰⁵ Derrida, ‘The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)’, p.372

¹⁰⁶ Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, p.52

around you. There's a war on in Chechnya." But Saint Francis preached to the birds. He spoke to them as equals. What if these birds spoke to him in their bird language, and it wasn't he who condescended to them?¹⁰⁷

Gurin's promise to animals is to reproduce the language of the animal, to reply in the name of the animal, not to condescend but to respond to the animal in a way he imagines it to understand. This attempt at an understood response, he imagines, takes the form of the gaze of the animal abandoned by humans, culturally repressed through the anthropocentric understanding of the disaster's traumatic impact. Where the radioactive effects of the disaster upon the liquidators and original inhabitants of the Chernobyl region were politically repressed or downplayed by the Soviet authorities, these same radioactive effects on the local wildlife were largely forgotten about or perceived as trivial by reporters, commentators and survivors. The repression of animal and human traumas are analogous, perhaps: referring to animals, Gurin says, 'We don't have any way of giving them the necessary information [about Chernobyl]. It's also a philosophical dilemma. A perestroika of our feelings is happening here'.¹⁰⁸ This perestroika or restructuring of thought turns towards the imaginative interpretation of "sub-fact", at times the only readable source available.

Where Gurin desires to reproduce Chernobyl from an animal's perspective – an invented account of the disaster's impact that he imagines animals can understand – Anatoly Shimanskiy recalls information about Chernobyl based not on provable factual but unprovable sub-factual details that instead require interpretation through human imagination. He remembers some advice a woman working at a hotel told him: "People don't believe the papers, television, or radio—they look for information in the behaviour of the bosses, that's more reliable."¹⁰⁹ Here, it is not information but imagination that is reliable; animal sources

¹⁰⁷ Gurin, 'Monologue About War Movies', p.114

¹⁰⁸ Gurin, 'Monologue About War Movies', p.114

¹⁰⁹ Shimanskiy, 'Monologue About Writing Chernobyl', p.125

cannot intend information and human ones intend, if anything, only misinformation.¹¹⁰ However, these sources yield alternative meaning through their reading as non-events, behavioural patterns which, like those of Pankejeff, may not refer to actual events but act only as symptoms of unverifiable or imaginary ones. In other words, the imagination of Chernobyl's effects upon humans and animals, in the absence of historical, knowable causes, finds information about the disaster required to therapeutically reconstitute its traumatic absence of understanding or occurrence.

Shimanskiy's notebook records the following anonymous survivor's testimony: "I went back to the village after a year [of evacuation]. The dogs have gone wild. I found our Rex, called him. He won't come. Did he not recognize me? Or does he not want to? He's angry at us."¹¹¹ Here, it is assumed that the dogs in the Exclusion Zone have gone wild due to their abandonment by their former owners; they do not or choose not to respond because they are angry with them. This fictional testimony of dogs, which assumes the answer to its own question of a dog's disobedience, renders its subjects' behavioural responses to trauma as passive performance, a problematic position where its writer creatively influences the reading so that it might lose its convincing reliability. In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead writes that:

Trauma fiction problematises its own formal properties, at the level of reference (what relation does the narrative bear to reality?), subjectivity (can the traumatised subject still say 'I' in a way that has meaning?) and story (does the character control the

¹¹⁰ Even after information about radiation was restored by the State, it was not done in a homogenous, complete way. Half truths about radiation existed before objective scientific studies into the Chernobyl disaster's full radioactive extent were permitted. 'They [the State] suddenly started having these segments on television,' says one survivor, 'like: an old lady milks her cow, pours the milk into a can, the reporter comes over with a military dosimeter, measures it. And the commentator says, See everything's fine, and the reactor is just ten kilometres away. [...] It was all a lie. The military dosimeters then in use by our armed forces were designed to measure the radioactive background, not individual products'. See 'People's Chorus', p.143

¹¹¹ Shimanskiy, 'Monologue About Writing Chernobyl', p.126

‘plot’, or is he or she controlled by it?). Trauma fiction often demands of the reader a suspension of disbelief and novelists frequently draw on the supernatural.¹¹²

In writing Chernobyl, Shimanskiy’s notebook depicts an imaginary, supernatural world where, contrary to reality, dogs possess a readable subjectivity by a creative process beyond their control; it is a world in which ‘Foxes and wolves go into the villages and play with the children’, and where:

The Chernobylites are giving birth to children who have an unknown yellow fluid instead of blood. There are scientists who insist that monkeys became intelligent because they lived near radiation. Children born in three or four generations will be Einsteins.¹¹³

The artfulness of man’s imagination, speech and writing allow him to exhort his superiority over the animal, which is expanded here to include both animals and human animals; both are deprived of speech, understanding and control over their own radioactive destinies. Here, man, the promising animal who speaks and writes on behalf of the animal, as Derrida might say, names the animals, that is to say, calls them by their names. The survivor who calls their dog, Rex, by his name and creates the dog’s disobedient response, at once owns him, saves him, and sends him away, condemns him to death; he survives as a memory, a memorial connected to the human as a dog to its master, and dies to become lost to recollection, a feral animal who cannot or will not return to the world of the living. ‘Every case of naming’, Derrida writes, ‘involves announcing a death to come in the surviving of a ghost, the longevity of a name that survives whoever carries that name. Whoever receives a name feels mortal or dying precisely because the name seeks to save him, to call him and thus assume

¹¹² Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp.83-84

¹¹³ Shimanskiy, ‘Monologue About Writing Chernobyl’, p.129

his survival'.¹¹⁴ It is this creative, ceremonial performance of naming the animals, originating, as Derrida writes, in Adam's naming of the animals in The Book of Genesis, wherein man asserts his dominance over them. Through language he brings them to life, tames them and sends them dancing towards their deaths. Man is '(following), I pursue, I track, overcome, and tame the animal'.¹¹⁵ Derrida writes of another mythological man who tamed animals: Bellerophon, a hero of Greek mythology who tamed the winged horse Pegasus. Bellerophon held Pegasus 'by the bit, a "golden bit given to him by Athene."' Holding him by the bit he makes him dance; he orders him to do some dance steps. I underline in passing to this allusion', continues Derrida, 'to the choreography of the animal in order to announce that, much later, we will encounter a certain animal danciness'.¹¹⁶ The Chernobyl survivor recorded in Shimanskiy's notebook is a verbal choreographer of dance steps: the conjured image of foxes and wolves playing with children in the villages around Chernobyl is an encounter with this animal danciness, a mythological narrative at once taming the Chernobyl animal and defining it as untameable, irrevocably changed and lost by the traumatic conditions of the disaster. To those animals that cannot speak of their disastrous transformation – the animals that go into the villages and the superhumans waiting to be born – the speaking, writing Chernobyl survivor is the master.

Another hero of Greek mythology, Orpheus, also exemplifies this mastery. Orpheus tamed the animals with narrative in the form of the music he played on his lyre. In the legend of Orpheus, Orpheus' musical skill draws the animals towards him, charming and coaxing them to dance, giving them a new lease of life. Similarly, the legend tells of his journey into the Underworld to retrieve his dead wife, Eurydice, from Hades. Granted his wish of her resurrection, Orpheus disobeys Hades' express command not to turn around and look at his

¹¹⁴ Derrida, 'The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)', p.389

¹¹⁵ Derrida, 'The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)', p.410

¹¹⁶ Derrida, 'The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)', p.410

wife on their journey back to the world of the living. Consequently, Eurydice is returned to the Underworld, to death and separation from her husband. Once again, the creator, a male gaze, calls forth its subject, calls it to life, and then sends it away again, destroys it. This performance of calling forth and sending away the subject, a game of Fort-Da with which to attempt its permanent life, enacts what Derrida might call *a foreshadowing of mourning*,¹¹⁷ a prediction of life's failure and the failure to resurrect it. For the animal at Chernobyl, 'being called, hearing oneself being named, receiving a name for the first time involves something like the knowledge of being mortal and even the feeling that one is dying. Already dead by virtue of being promised death: dying'.¹¹⁸ The third and final section of this chapter will introduce this performance of creatively predicting or providing the foreknowledge of death at Chernobyl, heralding mourning and melancholy through elegy.

"Rampaging permissively into other people's sadness": Prelude to Elegy

The human animal, laid out in the previous section of this chapter, is muted, tamed, and choreographed by the mourner's testimony. Vasily Ignatenko, a fire fighter who helped extinguish the initial blaze at Chernobyl and who died of radiation poisoning a few weeks later, is reconstituted after his death in the imagination of his wife, Lyudmilla. 'Sometimes it's as though I hear his voice', she recalls. 'Alive. Even photographs don't have the same effect on me as that voice. But he never calls out to me...not even in my dreams. I'm the one who calls to him'.¹¹⁹ Here, the mourner's recalling of the love object – a creative process of resurrecting it as interiorised life – serves to reaffirm the separation between the two that the latter's death has established. Lyudmilla's memories of her husband as alive, which re-

¹¹⁷ Derrida, 'The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)', p.389

¹¹⁸ Derrida, 'The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow)', p.389

¹¹⁹ Lyudmilla Ignatenko, 'Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.6

establish the fact of his actual death, outline a process of normal mourning wherein the subject introjects the lost love object by “casting inside” or memorialising his or her past relations with it so as to surmount the loss. During Vasily’s radioactive disintegration in the hospital ward into which he was taken after tackling the fire at Chernobyl, Lyudmilla memorialises the relationship she once had with him:

He’s sleeping, and I’m whispering, “I love you.” Walking in the hospital courtyard, “I love you.” Carrying his sanitary tray, “I love you.” I remembered how we used to live at home. He only fell asleep at night after he’d taken my hand. That was a habit of his – to hold my hand as he slept. All night. So in the hospital I take his hand and don’t let go. [...] I had no idea then how much I loved him! Him...just him.¹²⁰

In his book *Of Jews and Animals* (2010), Andrew Benjamin aligns animal being and disease with partiality and death, and human being with completeness and immortality. ‘Animal being’, he writes, ‘is finitude [...] The animal is without soul’. ‘Animals die’.¹²¹ Where the animal that dies of disease is cast out, the human is memorialised, interiorised by the mourner as a complete, infinite being. Lyudmilla’s introjection of Vasily, which takes the form of the speech act “I love you” and the memories of her relationship with him, attempt to restore him as a complete being, with a soul. Her recollection overlooks the process of his radioactive decay and extends itself to the timeless space before or beyond Chernobyl, to remember just him, without it. In memory, he is thus a human being, a permanent body capable of holding hands, thinking and loving, unchanged and undifferentiated by time, universal in being beyond it, an essential spirit of sorts. Disease, as Benjamin writes, ‘is an instance of particularity. It is, of course, aberrant in relation to the good of the whole (the

¹²⁰ Ignatenko, ‘Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice’, p.16

¹²¹ Andrew Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p.26

Universal). Hence; overcoming disease is overcoming aberrant particularity'.¹²² To overcome disease is to restore, if only illusorily, the sum total of what the human is: his body, his acts and thoughts of love. There is a conflict between Lyudmilla's imaginative restoration of her husband as a human being and the Soviet State's premature abandonment of his dying animal body. Lyudmilla's 'identification of the animal with thought – the animal as thinking thing' is countered by the State's reassertion of the animal as dying object, which 'has to be excised and forgotten, a doubled forgetting in which the animal both as content though equally as presence is forced from view'.¹²³ For the State, Lyudmilla's husband has been contaminated by radiation; his humanity has thus decayed and he must be contained, isolated. "You're young", the doctors say to Lyudmilla during her hospital visits. "Why are you doing this? That's not a person anymore, that's a nuclear reactor. You'll just burn together."¹²⁴ 'He wasn't in an ordinary room anymore, he was in a special bio-chamber, behind a transparent curtain', she recalls. 'No one was allowed inside'.¹²⁵ Here, the sufferer is denied human relations; like the Animals, he is allowed to exist, but *without relation*. According to Benjamin,

Animals are allowed. However, what is allowed – if allowing is understood as a space of relation – is a locus indifferent to *Dasein* [being there] and thus inessential to the being of being human. Animal are held within the *without relation*. This is the space therefore in which the preposition 'with' is not at work, except to identify the inessential'.¹²⁶

Vasily cannot be with anyone in the bio-chamber. He is objectified as a nuclear disaster, identified as an inessential animal being with no discernible human characteristics. This

¹²² Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals*, p.13

¹²³ Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals*, p.27

¹²⁴ Ignatenko, 'Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice', p.17

¹²⁵ Ignatenko, 'Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice', p.15

¹²⁶ Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals*, pp.41-42 (my italics and parentheses)

process of isolated death which takes place *without relation* to the human cannot be intervened by the State. Radioactive life, the authorities say, must be set aside and allowed to take its inevitable course towards death.

This act, while officially presented as a sacred, ritual sacrifice that has the goal of purifying the Soviet polity of radioactive contamination, in truth constitutes the mere killing of bare life: the destruction of life not as sacrifice but for its own sake, with impunity. This latter theory, to be explored in relation to the Chernobyl liquidation in the third chapter of this thesis, is outlined in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995). The remainder of this current chapter will explore the mechanisms by which the Soviet authorities obscure the killing of bare life with the official image of heroic sacrifice. Historically, the sacrifice of the animal inaugurates many aspects of human civilisation. For Derrida and Benjamin, the symbolic act of the animal's sacrifice – naming the animals as Adam does, organising them into the ark as Noah does, or literally sacrificing them as Abel does – founds the relations of authentic community. As Benjamin writes:

the human death, especially insofar as it is understood as 'dying', is linked to authenticity, while for the animal the link is to a form of sacrifice and this to the provision of that authenticity, a promiser which moves from the animal to the human. There is a necessary reciprocity, however. To the extent that the animal's death provides the grounds of authenticity the animal is systematically excluded. The animal cannot have therefore an authentic death. It can only die within sacrifice.¹²⁷

The Chernobyl animal's death, in its secreted manner, is inauthentic. However, its provision to community is equally so: its sacrifice fakes not founds a renewed authenticity of communism in the wake of the nuclear disaster. For Arkady Filin, a liquidator, State tradition of repressing the radioactive effects of the disaster to assert social normality continues when:

¹²⁷ Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals*, p.53

Our political officer read notices in the paper about our “high political consciousness and meticulous organisation,” about the fact that just four days after the catastrophe the red flag was already flying over the fourth reactor. It blazed forth. In a month the radiation had devoured it. So they put up another flag. And in another month they put up another one. I tried to imagine how the soldiers felt going up on the roof to replace that flag. These were suicide missions. What would you call this? Soviet paganism? Live sacrifice? But the thing is, if they’d given me the flag then, and told me to climb up there, I would have. Why? I can’t say. I wasn’t afraid to die, then.¹²⁸

To have high political consciousness and meticulous organisation at Chernobyl is to be a Chernobyl animal without consciousness, meticulously organised by State politics and press. Without question, the soldiers sacrifice themselves to the disaster’s radiation, continually asserting the return of normal social conditions despite the contrary reality; their sacrifice is marked by the red flags which repeatedly attempt symbolically to restore the community of Soviet communism, its control over the disaster, and enforce *a cessation of mourning*. In historical terms, the first mourning ends, Freud theorises, when the first murder – of the primal father – is restaged by ritual. In his essay *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud writes that primal man used to live in primitive hoards, where one elder male claimed sole possession and mating rights to all the females of the tribe; ‘All that we find there is a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up’.¹²⁹

Freud writes that:

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde. United, they succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually. [...] The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind’s earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a

¹²⁸ Filin, ‘Monologue About a Man Whose Tooth Hurt When He Saw Christ Fall’, p.91

¹²⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Totem and Taboo’, in *Totem and Taboo and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIII*, edited and translated by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p.141

commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of many things – of social organization, moral restrictions and of religion.¹³⁰

The first murdered man is consumed to inaugurate fraternal community and social organisation. If the totem marks the cessation of sole possession, incest and the subsequent crime of parricide, then the mourning of the primal father ends when his death is celebrated and commemorated by the totem feast, at which surrogate animals are ritually sacrificed and consumed. Freud continues:

The feelings of the sons found a natural and appropriate substitute for the father in the animal, but their compulsory treatment of it expressed more than the need of showing remorse. The surrogate for the father was perhaps used in the attempt to assuage the burning sense of guilt, and to bring about a kind of reconciliation with the father.¹³¹

Community, then, is maintained by the assertion of the initial act's completed mourning, authenticated by animal sacrifice which takes place at the totem. At the feast, the totem marks the burial site of the dead father. If in prehistory the murder and mourning of the primal father must be completed for there to be community, then at Chernobyl, as in man's earliest history, fraternity must be continually authenticated by the ritual of animal sacrifice. The soldiers' planting of red flags upon the fourth reactor attempt a kind of reconciliation of feelings caused by the initial disaster. This ritualised restaging of Chernobyl's radioactive containment marks its apparent defeat and totemic burial. However, radiation and mourning cannot be so easily laid to rest; despite the soldiers' sacrifice, authentic communism, like the red flags that symbolise it, still deteriorates.

During the deterioration of Vasily Ignatenko, his wife Lyudmilla resists the State's

¹³⁰ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', p.141-142

¹³¹ Freud: 'Totem and Taboo', p.145

demands for her to cease her mourning before it has been properly concluded, in a manner that is theorised in Maria Torok’s essay ‘The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse’ (1968). The doctors and nurses at the hospital inform Lyudmilla: ““You have to understand: This is not your husband anymore, not a beloved person, but a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning. You’re suicidal. Get ahold of yourself.””¹³² Since the introjecting work of mourning has not been concluded, Lyudmilla is still emotionally invested in the actual love object, having not fully memorialised it. She recalls responding to the doctors ‘like someone who’s lost her mind: “But I love him! I love him!”’¹³³ Here, Lyudmilla’s mourning is interrupted and derailed by State intervention, which leads to her melancholic refusal to relinquish her investment in the love object, a process that was outlined in the theoretical introduction to this thesis. On the one hand, Vasily is stored in the bio-chamber as scientific object and isolated for the study of radiation necessary for its “defeat” by the State, and on the other, he is a different sort of resource: a site of Lyudmilla’s imaginative conjuring and intra-egoistic transferral of his loved humanity, gathered through close proximity. Staying with her husband in the bio-chamber for uninterrupted twelve-hour periods, she recalls that ‘they [the doctors] photographed him. For science, they said. I’d have pushed them all out of there! I’d have yelled! And hit them! How dare they? It’s all mine –it’s my love– if only I’d been able to keep them out of there’.¹³⁴ A key symptom of the illness of mourning, identified by Freud in his essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), is ‘a loss of interest in the outside world’;¹³⁵ there is nothing of interest to Lyudmilla outside the bio-chamber, and anything that intrudes from outside interrupts her own sacrificial ritual. ‘It is by taking flight into the ego that love escapes ablation’,¹³⁶ as Maud Ellmann writes, paraphrasing Freud in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’. Through this

¹³² Ignatenko, ‘Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice’, p.16

¹³³ Ignatenko, ‘Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice’, p.16

¹³⁴ Ignatenko, ‘Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice’, p.17

¹³⁵ Ellmann, ‘Introduction: Bad Timing’, xxi

¹³⁶ Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, p.204

action, the subject has access to a painful yet replayable, creatively restageable memory of death. ‘Thus’, Ellmann continues, like the rituals of resurrecting the love-object, ‘death is the source of invention’.¹³⁷

The ritual of elegy is also a poetic invention of death. Through poetry, the elegist performs as the dead to mourn them, temporarily becoming them in an act of verbal choreography that recalls Derrida’s animal danciness. Indeed, the elegaic, insofar as it is a ceremony to remember and then forget the dead, has parallels with the totem feast held by man’s ancestors: the murdered primal father becomes an animal spirit represented by the totem, and through ceremonial possession of the sons it is conjured and afterwards cast away as an animal. The son becomes and performs as the animal. In his self-authored elegy collection *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl* (2007), Mario Petrucci writes as the living and dead Chernobyl subject, mourning their losses by rewriting their testimony in ‘the heightened language of poetry’,¹³⁸ a language and literature arguably not their own. He asks ‘how else to honour those who were unable to speak, who were rendered see-through by political, social or intellectual neglect, than to remember them – first and foremost – through and with the self?’¹³⁹ Here, Petrucci’s art oscillates between possession of and response to the survivor, analogous to Sergei Gurin’s filmic articulation of the animal’s Chernobyl trauma at once as imagined first-hand perspective and third-person acknowledgement. Problematically, the artist in both scenarios maintains no authentic connection to the Chernobyl subject. It is impossible to know, as Derrida might ask, if or how Chernobyl man and animal suffer. The former is rendered silent or invisible primarily by political repression and the latter by social or intellectual neglect as evinced by the initial widespread lack of Chernobyl animal testimony. The late twentieth and early twenty-first-century elegy, Melissa Zeiger reminds us

¹³⁷ Ellmann, ‘Introduction: Bad Timing’, xxiii

¹³⁸ Mario Petrucci, ‘“Three Hot Drops of Salmon Oil”: The Artist and the Self in the Aftermath of Chernobyl’, in *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, (Vol. 31, No.3, 2006), p.254

¹³⁹ Petrucci: ‘“Three Hot Drops of Salmon Oil”: The Artist and the Self in the Aftermath of Chernobyl’, p.258

in *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (2007), ‘remains an object of lofty poetic ambition to some poets’.¹⁴⁰ Despite negotiation with and innovation within the genre, the modern elegy, like its earlier incarnations, omits as much as it covers, and forgets as much as it remembers. Its continued adherence to pastoral conventions of people and place, ‘the rude forefathers of the hamlet’¹⁴¹ as Thomas Gray in ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ (1751) calls them, exclude peasant farmers, shepherds and other rural folk from the mourning process through its high, learned style, aesthetically reconfiguring and thus sacrificing them in the name of a presumably grander, more significant loss. Petrucci similarly and, perhaps, self-referentially, invokes the class-cultural and political debate that surrounds elegy. Reading Alexeivich’s *Voices from Chernobyl*, he says, ‘I was most certainly burned’ by its emotional impact. ‘But, with Seamus Heaney’s warning ‘not to rampage permissively into other people’s sadness’ ringing in my ears, I was reluctant to pick up my pen’.¹⁴² However, further into his reading, he ‘began to realise that, one way or another, we were all infected by Chernobyl. It was still active. Active in the air we use to speak about it, in the blood we use to think about it. I resolved, as far as I could, to listen’.¹⁴³ Pressed into elegy by empathy and poetic social conscience, the poet, sensitive to the world’s loss, naturally mourns, and he asks us, through his writing, to mourn with him. Here, Petrucci mourns the human loss of life at Chernobyl alongside lamenting the subsequent global environmental and social decay. ‘Indeed’, he continues, ‘writing *Heavy Water* often felt like taking dictation. Those men and women; their children whose words prise open your heart even as they shatter it: they were so insistent’.¹⁴⁴ The insistency of these words, although

¹⁴⁰ Mellissa F. Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality and the Changing Shapes of Elegy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p.1

¹⁴¹ Thomas Gray, ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’, in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, (New York: W Norton & Company, 2005), p.670

¹⁴² Petrucci, ‘“Three Hot Drops of Salmon Oil”: The Artist and the Self in the Aftermath of Chernobyl’, p.254

¹⁴³ Petrucci, ‘“Three Hot Drops of Salmon Oil”: The Artist and the Self in the Aftermath of Chernobyl’, p.254

¹⁴⁴ Petrucci, ‘“Three Hot Drops of Salmon Oil”: The Artist and the Self in the Aftermath of Chernobyl’, pp.254-255

disembodied and distanced as writing in *Voices from Chernobyl*, act as a kind of personal haunting for Petrucci, their interpreted demand that they be elegised emotionally strongarming him into a poet's illness of mourning. Demand, therefore, inheres as much in the poet's reading as in the read content; for Zeiger, the poet as Orphic culture hero – restaging important loss on behalf of society through art – articulates 'the conflict between the erotically charged impulses of the living to remain connected to the dead or aggressively disconnect themselves from them'.¹⁴⁵ This conflict within the poet between living and dead, remembering and forgetting, in short, to elegise or not to elegise, constitutes a personal trauma of sorts. To adapt Maud Ellmann's theory of trauma, Petrucci is compelled to write by his response to articulated suffering at Chernobyl, where elegy, an event, short-circuits modesty; his guilt in elegising – the sense – comes too late. Petrucci writes:

There was an intensity surrounding the film [*Heavy Water: a film for Chernobyl* – a reading of Petrucci's elegies in the filmic medium] during its production, partly because we needed to meet deadlines for Chernobyl's twentieth anniversary. It occurs to me too, that I was keen for my books [*Heavy Water* and *Half Life*] to be launched, together, on 26 April 2004, to mark the eighteenth anniversary. Strange how we need 'anniversaries' in order to think or feel about such events, to validate them. In the UK, suddenly, Chernobyl's media currency had been strong. It will be so again, one imagines, somewhat cynically, after fifty years. But these calendar years of consumption rarely spill over into any significant re-evaluation in a population largely disenfranchised from personal activism; rather, all that is probably achieved through anniversaries (of a difficult kind) is a sense of public resignation mixed with sympathy, or a notching-up of background anxiety levels.¹⁴⁶

Having rushed to release his work in time for Chernobyl's twentieth anniversary, Petrucci considers only retrospectively, after the event, its impact. He worries that he has cashed in on the aesthetic currency of Chernobyl's coverage in the media without inaugurating any real

¹⁴⁵ Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality and the Changing Shapes of Elegy*, p.2

¹⁴⁶ Petrucci, "'Three Hot Drops of Salmon Oil': The Artist and the Self in the Aftermath of Chernobyl", p.255

change in social thought or activity regarding the disaster. This inconclusiveness of mourning, which engenders negativity at once upon elegising and not elegising Chernobyl suffering, comes to signify the illness of mourning theorised by Maria Torok, as outlined earlier in this chapter section. ‘The illness of mourning’, she writes in her essay ‘The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse’:

does not result, as might appear, from the affliction caused by the objectal loss itself, but rather from the feeling of an irreparable crime: the crime of having been overcome with desire, of having been surprised by an overflow of libido at the least appropriate moment, when it would behoove us to be grieved in despair.¹⁴⁷

If we read Petrucci’s elegies not only as they appear – as anguished art responding to loss at Chernobyl – but as articulations of repressed guilt, they become expressions of a crime withdrawn from consciousness. Indeed, this illness of mourning, which Freud calls melancholia, is related, he writes in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, ‘to the loss of an object that is withdrawn from consciousness, unlike mourning, in which no aspect of the loss is unconscious’.¹⁴⁸ Like the Wolf Man’s alleged crime, a tale told to Freud through primal scenes that secondary characters – mainly women – are employed to support, the study of Petrucci through his elegies and other writings perhaps contributes to the privileged centrality of masculinity prevalent in elegy studies which Zeiger, among others, is critical of. ‘Scholars such as Celeste Schenck and Juliana Schiesari’, she writes, ‘have directed attention to elegy as a site of male bonding, power production, and authorial self-identification, and to the privileging of male melancholia and concomitant appropriation of mourning by a

¹⁴⁷ Torok, ‘The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse’, p.110

¹⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, translated by Shaun Whiteside, (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p.205

melancholic male poet and culture hero'.¹⁴⁹ In this configuration of elegy, the greatest loss is not that of the dead or the event of death, but the normal mental condition of the male elegist, which must be restored at all costs. It is telling, then, that elegy studies frequently centre around the image of the Freudian “working through” of trauma via associated ideas – which may be fictional but are nonetheless reflections of the damaged psyche – in an attempt to heal the subject. However, a study of Chernobyl trauma must necessarily be about Chernobyl, about the event and those caught up in it, not just the anguished, artistic response of the psychologically latent and geographically separate privileged male elegist. In reading a selection of the *Heavy Water* elegies to judge Petrucci’s self-accused crime of rampaging permissively into other people’s sadness, we must trace their alleged victims: the Chernobyl subjects he writes on behalf of. How do his elegies displace them? Is he, like Orpheus and other subsequent male poets, guilty of resurrecting the dead only to kill them again through his observation?

¹⁴⁹ Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality and the Changing Shapes of Elegy*, p.5

Chapter Two: Chernobyl Fiction: Reading Deconstruction

Given that it is not possible to liquidate the dead and decree definitely: “they are no more”, the bereaved become the dead for themselves and take their time to work through, gradually and step by step, the effects of the separation.¹

The dead liquidators of Chernobyl, erased through the process of radioactive decay, are no more. It is impossible, however, for witnesses sympathetic to this fact of painful death to affirm it, to experience it as real, without experiencing it personally. As personal experience, Chernobyl poetry, like memory, enables the poet to restage the liquidators’ deaths as himself, *dying*; he acts as if he dies – as if they die, Jacques Derrida might say, in him. In poetry, the dead subject ‘appears only as the one who has disappeared or passed away, as the one who, having passed away, leaves “in us” only images’.² The poet, re-enacting death in the imagery of his poetry, hopes to escape his own death by melancholia by performatively completing this movement of the dead’s passing away or leaving, this difficult step by step separation with them, this overcoming of grief that their death caused. Furthermore, it is the poet, it seems, who grieves hardest, is most sympathetic to others who have died. He sees himself, without having given the dead prior affection before their death, as closely affined to them emotionally. Poets, who are often susceptible to melancholia, perhaps ‘do not consider themselves wronged [by the dead] but afflicted with a fundamental flaw, a congenital deficiency’³ in emotional self-regulation, which heightens the poetic struggle between separation and sympathy. For Mario Petrucci, author of the elegies compiled in *Heavy Water*:

¹ Maria Torok, ‘The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse’, in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.111

² Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), p.159

³ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Rondiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.12

A Poem for Chernobyl (2007), ‘poems [...] are agents of difficulty as much as of peace’.⁴ In the difficult quest for peace, for separation with the dead through the heightened language of poetry, the dead are a malevolent force of sorts; they draw the poet and his readers towards them. If they are successful, they undermine the attempted separation process from grief. Conversely, as public servant and culture hero, the poet must save from the dead both himself and the readers sympathetic to his cause. In these internal, opposing movements, the Orphic allusions and gender politics of elegy as outlined by Melissa F. Zeiger once again combine and come to the fore. In *The Argonautica* (3 B.C) by Apollonius, the Argonauts sail past the island of Anthemoessa, home of the Sirens. The Sirens’ sweet songs bewitch passing sailors, causing them to drop anchor and come ashore; ‘often from many had they taken away their sweet return, consuming them with wasting desire’.⁵ In order to rescue the Argo’s crew from this fate, one of the Argonauts, Orpheus, ‘stringing in his hands his Bistonian lyre, rung forth the hasty snatch of a rippling melody so that their ears might be filled with the sound of his twanging; and the lyre overcame the maidens’ voice’.⁶ Before the other crew members are entranced by the sweetness of the Sirens’ songs – whose designs of ‘wasting desire’ are analogous to the melancholic inability to resist death and to die, through excess emotion, alongside the dead – Orpheus’ sweeter melody triumphs over it, drowns it out. He puts a distance or gap between the Argo and the Sirens. The myth has two analogies. Firstly, its representation of male survival through the musical destruction of female subjectivity recalls the elegiac practice of mourning through art – historically a male preserve – which signifies the love object only to confirm one’s separation from it. Secondly, it mirrors the psychological survival of the subject through the ego’s defence against instinctual forces of the id. By overpowering the Sirens’ song with his music, Orpheus performatively works

⁴ Mario Petrucci, ‘“Three Hot Drops of Salmon Oil”: The Artist and the Self in the Aftermath of Chernobyl’, in *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 2006, Vol. 31, No.3, p.255

⁵ Apollonius, *The Voyage of the Argo: The Argonautica*, translated by R.C Seaton, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, 1990), pp.355-7

⁶ Apollonius, *The Argonautica*, p.357

through the separation from them, sublimating the Argonauts' libidinal desires for the feminine to male-oriented socio-cultural norms enshrined in art. He thus opens the gulf between death-dealing woman and life-giving man so contentious in elegy studies.

Where Orpheus successfully defends against a collective disaster through music, Petrucci represents Chernobyl survivors' experiences of the nuclear disaster by poetically restaging what this chapter will read as their varyingly successful psychological responses to it. Lyudmilla Ignatenko's testimony of her husband Vasily's radioactive disintegration, analysed in the previous chapter, is reconstructed by Petrucci's elegy 'Every Day I Found a New Man'. Writing as Lyudmilla, Petrucci describes caring for Vasily in the hospital:

The black of his forearms and thighs
cracked like pastry. His eyelids swelled so tight with water
he could not see for skin. The lightest sheet peeled away
fat as flypaper, the slightest edge of thumbnail was to him
more vicious than any cut-throat – if I moved his head it
streaked hair down the pillow as though he were a used match,
if I pressed a knuckle in – our wedding flesh – the indent
remained like hot grey putty, he coughed bile, acid
froth and lungs, shreds of stomach and liver and still he
stayed – refused that first, that last, step onto the Jacob Ladder.⁷

Here, Lyudmilla's heartwrenching descriptions of her disintegrating husband are poetically heightened; he is called forth in simile as a used match and hot grey putty, and the Jacob Ladder conjures, as allegory, his refused death which thus sustains mourning. The ego, Anna

⁷ Mario Petrucci, 'Every Day I Found a New Man', in *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), p.60

Freud writes in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1936), ‘does not merely think, it acts’.⁸ Acting upon his subjects’ behalf, Petrucci not only restages but sometimes rewrites their responses to radioactive death. He defends Lyudmilla in poetry against the melancholia she suffered in reality, sublimating her painful, prolonged interpretation of Vasily to his bodily performance; in the elegy, emphasis is placed on the opposite force to that of her testimony: rather than the dying Vasily’s psychological impact upon Lyudmilla, it is his disintegrating body and her physical impact upon it – her edge of thumbnail or pressing knuckle – that takes centre stage. Her complex psychology is de-emphasised to make way for this poetic, performative body; it is a body that not only reacts but also acts, for here it is he, not she, who refuses his death. Here, her ego is restaged as utilising the external object of poetry ‘in dramatising its reversal of real situations’.⁹ ‘The denial of reality is also, of course, one of many motives underlying [...] games of impersonation’,¹⁰ Anna Freud continues. Without sublimation of Lyudmilla’s melancholic symptoms, her mourning would be, and was in reality, interminable, an illness. Poetic sublimation, mirroring psychic sublimation, denies this reality; it ‘pertains rather to the study of the normal [patient] than to that of neurosis’,¹¹ displacing Lyudmilla’s mourning ‘which propels itself as if it were an instinct’.¹² Through Petrucci’s act of poetic impersonation – an external force of intervention analogous to the action of the survivor’s ego – Lyudmilla achieves a more decisive victory over mourning than her actual testimony accounts for. In elegy, she declares this victory by claiming separation, saying ‘*Go. I love you. But Go*’.¹³ This is a conclusion of grief that in reality has not taken place.

⁸ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, translated by Cecil Baines, (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), p.89

⁹ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, p.89

¹⁰ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, p.89

¹¹ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, p.47

¹² Nicholas Rand, ‘Introduction: Renewals of Psychoanalysis’, in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.13

¹³ Petrucci, ‘Every Day I Found a New Man’, p.61

Petrucci's sublimation of anguished female expression to poetry seemingly deprives the testified experience of melancholy, or more accurately, Orpheus-like, constitutes a more beautiful, clearer copy that drowns out the original. Lyudmilla's original testimony is at times disordered and distorted; it retrospectively refers to her interminable, wordless wails, which are painful to read. 'I was like a dog, running after them [the nurses, to let her into Vasily's biochamber]. I'd stand at their doors for hours, begging and pleading'.¹⁴ These symptoms of unrestrained libidinal desire for reunification with the love object somehow bypassed the ego's observation – some testimonies preserve these symptoms of female trauma¹⁵ – whereas Petrucci's adaptation of events through poetic device, reining in interminability and obscurity, creates a sanitised interpretation of grief. His work, like that of Orpheus, is analogous to the ego as the seat of observation, and, through sublimation, 'gives us a clear and undistorted picture of the instinctual impulse concerned, of the quantity of the libido with which it is cathected and the aim which it pursues';¹⁶ its invention through simile and allegory prescribe an interpretable meaning to grief, and its climax and conflict resolution lays out a process of mourning, which, once complete, can be set aside. As the Argo stays its course and passes Anthemoessa, the poet and his readers can pass grief by. Julia Kristeva, expanding upon the Freudian sublimation of depression and melancholia in her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), writes:

Sublimation's dynamics, by summoning up primary processes and idealisation, weaves a *hypersign* around and with the depressive void. This is *allegory*, as lavishness of that which *no longer is*, but which regains for myself a higher meaning

¹⁴ Lyudmilla Ignatenko, 'Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2005), p.17

¹⁵ Mariya Volchok, a resident of one of the outlying villages of Chernobyl, recalls Anna Sushko, the village elder: 'When something hurts, she sings this song. There aren't any words, it's just her voice. She can't talk. When something hurts, she just sings: A-a-a. It makes you feel sad.' Mariya Volchok, 'Monologue About a Song Without Words', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.55

¹⁶ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, pp.6-7

because I am able to remake nothingness better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here and now and forever, for the sake of someone else.¹⁷

Petrucci's sublimation of melancholia through its poetic idealisation, creating an Orphic hypersign appearing superior to all other signs,¹⁸ diverts attention away from the actual melancholic vacuum of someone else, for the sake of this someone else, which would otherwise lure them in. Petrucci writes as Lyudmilla: 'When his [Vasily's] breath shut,/ when he began to cool – then – I called for family', a second denouement of coping that puts paid to interminable depression. After his death, 'I felt myself/ the wrong side of a door – a partition thin as plywood, thinner, as though/ you could hear everything that was going on inside. [...] Have you ever been the wrong side/ of that door, knowing all you needed was the key and you could walk straight in? That's how it was. We were that close'.¹⁹ Here, 'Every Day I Found a New Man' restages a defensive mechanism of the ego – the screen memory – attempting sublimation of the complex relationship between the actual speaker and the dead object by invoking an imaginative and ideal separation between them. As in psychoanalysis, 'the observer's attention is now diverted from associations to the resistance, i.e., from the content of the id to the activity of the ego';²⁰ the elegy attempts to shift focus from the activity of libidinal investment to its distraction, brought about by the intervening screen. However, every separation or repression of the object of inarticulable mourning indirectly invokes it. Language circulates the contained and barred experience, at once screening it off and obliquely referring to it. Elegy's 'allegorical hypersign', in relation to Sarah Kay's writings on Kristevan melancholy, 'in signalling the absence around it, acknowledges the

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, p.99

¹⁸ Sarah Kay, 'Allegory and Melancholy in Lucy Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Christine de Pizan', in *Provocation and Negotiation: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, edited by Gresche Ipsen, Timothy Mathews, and Dragana Obradovic, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p.137

¹⁹ Petrucci, 'Every Day I Found a New Man', p.61

²⁰ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, p.14

inexpressibility of the Thing that haunts all language. The absent thing is always the absent Thing'.²¹ The Thing Kay refers to here is the remainder of the Lacanian Real: the *objet petit a* or inaccessible object of desire that drives interpretation. Despite Vasily's separation from the living world, his absence is imaginatively sustained in language by the elegy's Orphic speaker as a haunting experience, an enticing yet hostile, unknowable Thing which tempts the id with gratification of libidinal desire. When the imagined screen door between Lyudmilla and her dead husband is erected, its properties that ultimately withhold access to him – its thinness, its absent means of entry, its penetration by sound alone – are the very ones which, at the same time, imply his continued presence. Vasily's haunting presence behind the door is necessarily a haunting of language itself; language compulsively sustains it as an experience of imagination by designating only its inaccessibility and unknowability, 'drawing attention to the constituent failure of all signs'²² to describe the ghost as such. Language is unable to exorcise Vasily's haunting presence; his identity has degenerated but not disappeared, leaving behind an absent presence, a black hole that is invisible yet *there*, that eludes the words assigned to it. Like the Thing, it is indescribable yet 'inscribed within us without memory, the buried accomplishment of our unspeakable anguishes'.²³ Survivor, poet, speaker and reader do not possess a conscious understanding of Vasily's ghost; there is no memory of it save for its peripheral, imagined effects, and it is this – and not Vasily's death – that truly anguishes us. Primeval man, 'being confronted with the intellectual mystery of death', Maud Ellmann writes in her introduction to Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), is the first to experience trauma as guilt, an emotion marked by the dead object's continued haunting of imagination. In Freud's essay, Ellmann continues, 'it was not death as such, he urges, but the ambivalence of the survivor, loving and hating the dead object, which drove our primal

²¹ Kay, 'Allegory and Melancholy in Lucy Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Christine de Pizan', p.137

²² Kay, 'Allegory and Melancholy in Lucy Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Christine de Pizan', p.137

²³ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p.14

ancestors to think'.²⁴ In the elegiac articulation of thought, the haunting of the speaker's memory by the dead engenders an anguished struggle in language between a series of ambivalent emotions. In elegy, the speaker painfully oscillates between forgetting and remembering the dead object, hatefully rejecting and lovingly rejoining it, and staying on one side of the imagined barrier and attempting to cross over to the other; all 'this at once locates my ill', as Kristeva writes, as 'being in the imagination. A dweller in truncated time, the depressed person is necessarily a dweller in the imaginary realm'.²⁵ Where in the imaginary realm of myth the Argonauts successfully remain in their boat, fighting off the libidinal temptation to drop anchor and head for the Sirens' shore, the poetically impersonated Lyudmilla living as the speaker in 'Every Day I Found a New Man' ultimately restages victory over remaining in love with the dead object, successfully breaking away from it. As is apparent in Lyudmilla's poetic impersonation, adaptation, foreshortening and distortion of traumatic experience is required for the depressed person to forget and thus overcome the dead object, complete mourning and free themselves from their guilty ambivalence which emerges from its abandonment.

In mourning, one seeks the satisfactory conclusion of the laborious process and thus a return to behavioural normality through the ego's necessary invention of psychic resistance, a secure border where more often than not painful 'associations which put the ego on its defence are simply dismissed', as Anna Freud writes. After the successful mourning of the dead object, she continues, 'all that the patient feels is a blank in consciousness. He becomes silent'.²⁶ However, in the truncated time of elegy – a foreshortening and intensification of mourning – the poetic and pleasurable indulgence of painful associations often overtakes the psychic necessity of their refusal, where the excluded object, emotionally enlarged by being

²⁴ Ellman, Maud, 'Introduction: Bad timing', in Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, translated by Shaun Whiteside, (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p.xiii

²⁵ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p.61

²⁶ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, p.37

elegiacally restaged, becomes ‘massive, weighty, doubtless traumatic because laden with too much sorrow or too much joy’, in Kristeva’s words. In defence against it, to continue her line of argument, ‘an overinflated, hyperbolic past fills all the dimensions of psychic continuity’.²⁷ In the Chernobyl elegy ‘Fence’, Petrucci writes as a disembodied representative of Soviet authority, inspecting a farm fence that separates land with radioactive topsoil from land where this topsoil has been removed. Here, the fence is enlarged in imagination, marking the intensified, unavoidable yet indescribable trauma of radiation, restageable only in its comparison to fictional images: ‘You must forget/ that soil is like skin./ Or interlocking scales/ on a dragon’.²⁸ In the elegy’s intentional omission of factual information about radiation, exaggeration fills understanding of protective measures with rhetoric: ‘Imagine a sheet/ of glass coming down/ from the sky. It’s easy,/ no? On this side/ you can breathe/ freely. [...] That side/ you must wear a mask/ and change the filter/ every four hours’.²⁹ Here, the imagined fence – massive, weighty, itself traumatic in its heightened description as blockade against radiation – cannot fail to be noticed, whereas in the actual delineation of irradiated and clean land as testified to by Chernobyl survivors, a simple fence as protective layer against trauma can easily be loosed from memory.³⁰ The elegy, unlike the ego, invokes trauma instead of defending against it; the poetic speaker allows him or herself to be attacked whereas the psychic self ensures their protection by forgetting. According to Kristeva, ‘instead of functioning as a “rewards system”, language, on the contrary, hyperactivates the

²⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p.60

²⁸ Mario Petrucci, ‘Fence’, in *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), p.27

²⁹ Petrucci, ‘Fence’, p.27

³⁰ ‘It’s impossible to live constantly in fear,’ Arkady Filin suggests, ‘a person can’t do it, so a little time goes by and normal human life resumes’. Arkady Filin, ‘Monologue About a Man Whose Tooth Was Hurting When He Saw Christ Fall’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, pp.89-90. After an amount of time, the disaster’s dangerous conditions fade from memory, an absence held as an illusory return to normality. This internalised illusion is temporary, quickly shattered by some outside action. Natalya Roslova, head of the Mogilev Women’s Committee for the Children of Chernobyl, recalls saying to some charity workers visiting the Zone: “‘Look how beautiful this land is!’ The sun is illuminating the forest and the fields, bidding us farewell. “Yes,” one of the Germans who speaks Russian answers, “it’s pretty, but it’s contaminated.” He has a dosimeter in his hand. And then I understand that the sunset is only for me. This is my land. I’m the one who lives here.’ Natalya Roslova, ‘Monologue About Why We Love Chernobyl’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.216

“anxiety-punishment” pair’.³¹ In ‘Fence’, the hyperactivation of trauma overpowers the ego’s function as nullifier; its articulation as excess triumphs over its absence in memory, invading the silence the staged ego might have secured there. The elegy acts as anxiety as well as punishment, exposing the ego’s reward of safety as suspect. It confronts radiation through restaging the protective measures of actual government instruction, foreshortening and overemphasising them: ‘This side of the fence/ is clean. That side/ dirty. Understand? [...] Dirty/ Clean – is all that matters/ here’.³² It bears witness to the indisputability and over-decisiveness of actual instruction, intent in warding off and dismissing from the site of memory the panic radiation might cause. ‘I understand, but I have to write up a protocol...’³³ recalls a commanding officer of soldiers responding to observed cases of radioactive contamination, including those of former Pripyat residents re-entering the city to smuggle out their contaminated belongings. ‘They don’t have the proper documents’, the officer recalls. ‘The back [of the truck] has a canvas cover. We lift it up, and I remember this clearly: twenty tea sets, a big dresser, an armchair, a television, rugs, bicycles. So I write up a protocol’.³⁴ He does not say if he confiscated these goods or not. In restaging this ego-like attempt at the protection of a secure border, ‘Fence’ imitates its ‘enquiry which proceeds like a monologue, without interruption, [and] is not altogether free from [the] danger’³⁵ of guilt. ‘One is too easily tempted’, Freud writes in his essay ‘The Future of an Illusion’ (1927), ‘into pushing aside thoughts which threaten to break into it, and in exchange one is left with a feeling of uncertainty which in the end one tries to keep down by over-decisiveness’.³⁶ Through intensified poetic rhetoric, the elegy articulates this uncertainty as radioactive contamination;

³¹ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p.60

³² Petrucci, ‘Fence’, p.27

³³ ‘Soldiers’ Chorus’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.47

³⁴ ‘Soldiers’ Chorus’, p.46

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Future of an Illusion’, in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXI*, translated and edited by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p.21

³⁶ Freud, ‘The Future of an Illusion’, p.21

radiation breaks through to the safe side of the excessive, imagined screen as an irrepressible effect of over-decisive disregard. By asking us to forget that irradiated soil is interconnected like skin or dragon scales and thus exceeds containment, 'Fence' imaginatively reconstructs the ellipsis in and of actual decisiveness, where, in its ineffective inconclusiveness, one is left with the protocol of writing uncertain of itself. In both reality and its elegiac reconstruction, uncertainty follows the act which attempts to ward it off; what appears to be confronted and sublimated by over-decisive instruction is instead repressed and returned automatically as experienced uncertainty. Were such a psychic defence against free association of the painful object or idea to succeed in reality, sublimation of radiation into straightforward clean and dirty oppositions would simply remove the instinctual impulses from their context, while retaining them in consciousness,³⁷ to paraphrase Anna Freud. Through sublimation, radiation would shed its negative complexities of contamination. However, in the repression of radiation through over-decisive testimony or elegy, the subject 'suffers secondarily through the consequences of the neurosis which repression has brought upon it', relieving 'it of the task of mastering its conflicts'.³⁸ Without mastery of its identity, the undetectable body of radiation remains unconscious; it is free to return to consciousness unannounced and haunt imagination. In 'Fence', the similes of skin or dragon scales act merely as approximations of otherwise indescribable radiation, imaginative indicators of its invisible presence; they do not signify the essence of radiation as such, only its unstoppable activity. The speaker is thus split between the consciously imagined nature of radioactive contamination and its inaccessible source, in short, between haunting as trauma and its withdrawn origin.

In 'The Breath', an elegy which reconstructs the Chernobyl liquidators' post-liquidation paranoia surrounding the possibility of their radioactive contamination, radiation

³⁷ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, p.37

³⁸ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, p.52

haunts the air as an imagined, possible contamination; it is a staged effect of withdrawal from consciousness of a definite, knowable one:

the odds are still on my side – aren't
they? with me, whose breath maybe
didn't slide in that day with its fizzing
speck of cargo, to bank in my lung
its bastard atom. So not me after
all? Not impossible. Is it. Or even
unlikely? That I didn't? Didn't take
that one wrong breath.³⁹

The speaker in 'The Breath' demonstrates that Chernobyl's available 'reality is too strong for him. He becomes a madman, who for the most part finds no one to help him on carrying through his delusion'.⁴⁰ The speaker's agonised questioning of whether they are contaminated or not indicates a lack of answers, so that neither dirty nor clean can be confirmed; once again the complexities of radioactive spread have been repressed by the State, leaving the survivor's imagination to oscillate between the two possibilities. To return to 'Fence', the question, 'You ask – What if my cow/ leans over the fence?' has no answer. 'Personally I say/ it depends which end. But/ we have no instructions for that'.⁴¹ 'In the case of poetry', as Petrucci writes, commenting on his elegising act, 'there is no doubt that language constantly falls short of experience – but miraculously so'.⁴²

Poetry, like survivor testimony before it, is unable to provide an authentic account of

³⁹ Mario Petrucci, 'The Breath', in *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), p.67

⁴⁰ Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXI*, p.81

⁴¹ Petrucci, 'Fence', p.27

⁴² Petrucci, "'Three Hot Drops of Salmon Oil": The Artist and the Self in the Aftermath of Chernobyl', p.255

interaction with radiation, of what will result from interaction; it can only fill the gaps in this understanding by imaginatively staging the subjective speculation of possibilities. As Orpheus' miraculous music reacts to the Sirens' song by playing over it, turning it into an abyssal sound that it fills simultaneously, 'writing' according to Maurice Blanchot, 'is a fearful spiritual weapon that negates the naive existence of what it names and must therefore do the same to itself'.⁴³ In the contest of sound, Orpheus' music, as a negator of the Sirens' song, its inverse opposite, runs the risk of being negated alongside it; one must imagine the Sirens' song after its negation, and Orpheus' music, the instigator of this negation, is arguably nothing but the opening of a gap in experience and memory. The artist, for Blanchot, 'transforms into forces of consolation the hopeless orders he receives; he saves with nothingness'.⁴⁴ Where Orpheus saves the Argonauts with nothingness, Petrucci transforms the hopeless order of radiation's disclosure and defence into the only consolation available – the knowledge that such an order is impossible to fulfil and thus should not be heeded. What moves the tale, be it epic or elegy, is not the inarticulable gap into which experience and memory have fallen into and perhaps filled, but the literary or poetic 'transformation demanded by the empty fullness of this space'.⁴⁵

L'écart: The Impossible Mourning of Chernobyl

In his preface to *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida* (2006), Sean Gaston writes that 'at the outset, from the start, at the origin, there are gaps in experience. Imagination fills the gaps'.⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida's notion of impossible mourning, which was explained in the theoretical introduction to this thesis, describes the narcissistic, violent process of

⁴³ Geoffrey Hartman, 'Preface', in Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and other Literary Essays*, translated by Lydia Davis, edited, with an afterword by P. Adams Sitney, (New York: Station Hill, 1981), ix

⁴⁴ Maurice Blanchot, 'From Dread to Language', in *The Gaze of Orpheus and other Literary Essays*, p.9

⁴⁵ Maurice Blanchot, 'Song of the Sirens', in *The Gaze of Orpheus and other Literary Essays*, p.112

⁴⁶ Sean Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, (London: Continuum, 2006), p.4

interiorising the other that has been separated from us by the gap constituted by the other's traumatic experience. The process of interiorisation, of identifying the other's trauma in order to mourn and surmount its painful impact upon us, necessarily involves imagination: we cannot truly comprehend the other's trauma, since it was insufficiently or inconsistently assimilated by the other at the outset, leaving gaps in witnessing memory. For Derrida, imagination unethically reconstitutes these gaps; interiorisation can only occur by reducing the complex aporia of the other's experience into communicable, sequential narrative – an invention of properties that were absent in the other's original reception of the event.

At the outset or origin of the Chernobyl disaster, as we have already seen, there are gaps in experience; the initial explosion of Reactor Four was like a supernova, producing a core of dark matter, of intense, inaccessible grief analogous to Kristeva's melancholic black sun. Petrucci, imaginatively reconstructing the shattering reality of loss caused by Chernobyl and echoing the survivor's ensuing trauma, seems to be saying: 'I am trying to address an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief [...] the impossible meaning of a life whose burden constantly seems unbearable, save for those moments when I pull myself together and face up to the disaster'.⁴⁷ To preface his elegies spoken in *Heavy Water: A Film for Chernobyl* (2007), Petrucci's speaker asks: 'Imagine you have just seen what no one else has ever seen, knowing that soon, everyone will see it. Or even that you saw only the face of a father or brother who saw it but has no words for it, except in their eyes'.⁴⁸ Here, to imagine Chernobyl, to face up to and fill the disastrous void with elegy, is to reproduce grief without means of consolation, without understanding, in short, to reproduce only the symptoms of trauma. Trauma, for Petrucci's speaker, is the event 'not fully perceived as it occurs',⁴⁹ the

⁴⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp.3-4

⁴⁸ *Heavy Water: A Film for Chernobyl*, directed by David Bickerstaff and produced by Phil Grabsky, (UK: Seventh Art productions, 2007)

⁴⁹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.18

dreamlike apparition ‘that one might see, that is, without knowing it’,⁵⁰ without having words for it. Trauma constitutes ‘the inescapable gaps that *cannot* be bridged, that *cannot* be filled’,⁵¹ where language falls short of experience, where experience cannot be described as such. How then, to convey these unfelt feelings? By listening to the gap, Gaston suggests. ‘There can be no meaning’, he says, ‘no signification without a *gap*, without a gap that *cannot* be bridged. But there can also be no meaning, no signification [...] without a gap that *cannot be put to work*’.⁵²

The elegy ‘Black Box’ describes the observation of an unnamed woman who witnessed the Chernobyl disaster when she was younger by her curious boyfriend, who attempts to capture her traumatic experience by asking her questions and interpreting her (for him, unsatisfactory) responses by writing them down. Petrucci puts the unworkable gap to work, at once listening to it, bearing witness to its unworkability, and restaging a failed, disrespectful attempt to appropriate a Chernobyl survivor’s traumatised and thus impossible testimony. Rather than distort another’s melancholic gap by rewriting it as bridged, ‘Black Box’ is a responsible response to testimony; ‘only a response that opens rather than closes the possibility of response is a responsible response’,⁵³ according to Kelly Oliver. The elegy restages but does not rewrite reality; it bears witness to the unworkable testimony of Katya P., who witnessed the Chernobyl disaster as a child and as an adult had a boyfriend who was fascinated by it. Her testimony is unworkable because it is riddled with uncloseable gaps; only in an irresponsible response are we ‘*always trying to close the gap*’.⁵⁴ Katya P.’s boyfriend irresponsibly responds to her experience of the disaster, trying to close its gaps by remembering what was never originally memorised, what will thus, in its reproduction,

⁵⁰ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History*, p.36

⁵¹ Gaston, ‘Écarts, Derrida and the Gap’, in *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, viii

⁵² Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.6

⁵³ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.108

⁵⁴ Gaston: ‘Écarts, Derrida and the Gap’, viii

become an exaggerated trauma fiction. In her unworkable testimony, Katya P. recalls the origins of this trauma fiction as follows:

He [her boyfriend] just wanted to see it and remember it, so he could draw it later on. And I started remembering how he used to ask me what colour the fire at the station was, and whether I'd seen cats and dogs that had been shot, were they lying on the street? Were people crying? Did I see how they died? After that ... I couldn't be with him anymore. I couldn't answer him.⁵⁵

After being interviewed by Svetlana Alexievich for *Voices from Chernobyl*, Katya P. says to her: 'I don't know if I'd want to meet with you again. I think you look at me the same way he did. Just observing me and remembering. Like there's an experiment going on. I can't rid myself of that feeling. I'll never rid myself of it'.⁵⁶ Katya P. bears witness to the unbridgeable gaps in her experience that make testimony inconclusive, inaccessible, impossible, by revealing her boyfriend's questions that cannot be answered and her subsequent sense of distrust that cannot be shaken. She herself makes the analogy between boyfriend and interviewer as intrusive trauma archivist and artist that Petrucci reconstructs in his elegy. Nevertheless, unlike the boyfriend, Alexievich and Petrucci observe the gap without foreclosing or exaggerating it, acknowledging reality rather than replacing it with a more arresting, fictional copy. Testifying to experience is painful; in itself, testimony reveals la béance or l'écart, which Alan Bass translates 'as "the gap," and one could also translate it as "gaping," as the gaping, opening wound.'⁵⁷ 'It is this gaping opening, "opening itself"', Gaston continues, the opening of oneself, of one's wounds, through testimony, which is a painful but necessary prerequisite of opening a responsible response. 'And while a

⁵⁵ Katya P., 'Monologue About How We Can't Live Without Chekov and Tolstoy', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, pp.104-5

⁵⁶ Katya P., 'Monologue About How We Can't Live Without Chekov and Tolstoy', p.105

⁵⁷ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.4

responsible response begins in acknowledging another person's reality, it also *performs* the dialogic constitution of reality itself'.⁵⁸

Petrucci acknowledges Katya P.'s impossible, painful reality – which she testifies to and thus opens – of being asked questions by her boyfriend that have no answer; he poetically reconstructs the couple's dialogue, writing in 'Black Box': 'He'd [the speaker's lover] inquire over dinner – jaw set in intense/ nonchalance he thought I couldn't decipher –/ *So. What colour did it burn? What colour/ precisely?*'⁵⁹ She 'noted the lustre in those coins of eyes/ as he made the base salute of a shirtsleeve dragged/ across lips, excused himself to the bathroom/ to lick the stub of his pencil, spend a breathless/ minute sprawling apocrypha in that journal/ jammed behind the cistern'.⁶⁰ Here, the lover, through his intense attempts to appropriate and, with those coins for eyes, cash in on the gap, is only present to write. He constitutes his existence by writing – a narcissistic, violent and moreover impossible mourning – by drawing out and internalising the speaker's mortality, by drawing out 'The Reactor', she says, 'in me after all'.⁶¹ 'Even before the death of the other', Derrida said in an interview in 1990, 'the inscription in me of her or his mortality constitutes me. I mourn therefore I am. I am – dead from the death of the other, my relation to myself is first of all plunged into mourning, a mourning that is moreover impossible'.⁶² Petrucci restages this violent, impossible mourning, impersonating Katya P. and describing the reactor as 'A searing/ rod of black so stuck in my crop/ it made me fall for someone like him [the speaker's lover]: grim receiver who'd/ piece together my pain and publish the results. Perhaps I hoped he'd draw it out – bloodied/ from between my ribs'.⁶³ 'For Jacques Derrida' Gaston writes, quoting from Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, 'mourning is inescapable, dangerous – and

⁵⁸ Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, p.108

⁵⁹ Mario Petrucci, 'Black Box', in *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), p.74

⁶⁰ Petrucci, 'Black Box', p.74

⁶¹ Petrucci, 'Black Box', p.74

⁶² Jacques Derrida, 'Istrice 2: Ick Bünn All Hier', in *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*, edited by Elizabeth Weber, translated by Peggy Kamuf, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.321

⁶³ Petrucci, 'Black Box', p.75

impossible. Mourning always *risks* a ‘narcissistic pathos’, a ‘reappropriation’ and cannibalistic consumption of the other’.⁶⁴ The lover appropriates and consumes the bloodied body of the traumatised Chernobyl survivor, eating away at the radioactive, impossible black rod – as if it were a meal served at a table – dangerous yet enticing. He has a hunger for it. The speaker continues: ‘I ran true. Told him what I had seen there. Seen/ with my mind – that freedom is not an absence/ of control. But he just leant closer as I blanched/ a perfectly good chicken in salt water then/ threw out the scum – three times. Those monitor/ eyes widened. *Salt gets it out*, I told them’.⁶⁵ Despite the analogy of her preparing her trauma for consumption, her lover cannot understand nor appropriate it. Being unlike salt, he cannot get it out, cannot extract it from her; the gap remains unarticulated, unfillable. It spreads uncontrollably, dangerously, like the ingestion of contaminated chicken, across the distance between her and him. However, the lover repeatedly departs from the table to write his own version of her traumatic experience. He takes time out and departs from the unbridgeable gap, goes behind her back to write something else, something apocryphal, fictional. ‘In French,’ Gaston reminds us, ‘the gap diverges, deviates; it is at once a noun (*écart*) and a verb (*écarter*). *Un écart*: a distance, a space, a gap, an interval, a difference, a deviation, a departure. *Faire un écart*: to swerve, to jump, to leap aside’.⁶⁶ This continual departure from and return to the site of impossible, unbridgeable testimony itself constitutes a gap between the speaker and the lover, between the former’s experience and the latter’s appropriation of it, between the inaccessible origin of trauma and its rewritten return. Where ‘Freud is fascinated with the pattern of suffering that characterises the lives of certain individuals, so that catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have already passed through them’,⁶⁷ ‘Black Box’ realises and restages the inconclusiveness of another’s testimony, never

⁶⁴ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.2

⁶⁵ Petrucci, ‘Black Box’, p.74

⁶⁶ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.6

⁶⁷ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.90

finished completing itself, always, for the witness, caught in a process of traumatic appropriation and intertextual mutilation, a series of returns that is a repeated rewriting. ‘By departing from the source text’, Anne Whitehead writes in her book *Trauma Fiction*, ‘intertextual fiction can suggest that the past is not necessarily always fated to repeat itself, but that alternative futures can be posited and played out. Intertextuality is thus, like trauma, in a curious and undecidable wavering between departure and return’.⁶⁸ To attempt to reproduce and complete testimony as a definitive, singular work is impossible, inappropriate and traumatic. In writing, as in mourning, there is no individual, identifiable subject present, and no monument to grief can be erected in the present to mark it. Gaston writes that:

There (are) only traces and these visible-invisible, past-present traces have fallen *outside* of consciousness, they have been ‘unwittingly’ left behind: ‘they are *always* witnesses in spite of themselves.’ They are witnesses that are never entirely *in* the archive, nor simply *outside* of the archive. They are witnesses *of* the archive that threaten the subject and monument alike, the subject as monument: *mal d’archive*, as Derrida calls it (archive fever).⁶⁹

In ‘Black Box’, Petrucci, impersonating Katya P., reconstructs her anxieties of being objectified, of becoming an experiment: ‘I was raw data. His something-for-nothing box’.⁷⁰ Here, the speaker is rendered not as an individual person but a multiplicitous resource, a deconstructed yet apparently recordable store of information unwittingly left behind by the disaster that witnessed it despite being only an object; the lover can keep coming back to it, free of charge, to collect and consume. However, his archive fever, this repeated inability to construct, once and for all, a fully monumentalised version of her story, eventually ceases. In imitation of Katya P.’s decision concerning her relationship with her boyfriend, the speaker

⁶⁸ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p.90

⁶⁹ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.26

⁷⁰ Petrucci, ‘Black Box’, p.74

says, referring to her lover, ‘I ditched him. Couldn’t see then that he was right’.⁷¹ He becomes an ex. If Derrida were to read this elegy, he might say, here: ‘this is what I call the ex-appropriation [the appropriation by the ex], the appropriation caught in a *double bind*: I must and I must not take the other into myself; mourning is an unfaithful fidelity if it succeeds in interiorising the other ideally in me, that is, in not respecting his or her infinite exteriority’.⁷² The lover’s unfaithful fidelity, of trying to accurately yet secretly reproduce the contents of her gap in his ideal words, impossibly, is punished with the relationship’s termination. Where the lover disrespects the gap, creating his own gap by departing from and returning to it in his attempts at its appropriation, Petrucci, reconstructing this scene of disrespect towards the gap, thus respects it, retaining Katya P.’s infinite exteriority. The gap, Gaston writes, has further meanings in accordance with this: ‘*Mettre, tenir, rester à l’écart*: to keep back, to hold back, to stay in the background, to remain on the margins’.⁷³ By listening to and performing Katya P.’s gaping testimony, her being subject to interrogation and objectification, Petrucci, writing from the sidelines, reinstates her subjectivity. He does this not by attempting to appropriate it as her boyfriend does, but by restaging its collapse into the gap, bearing witness to the moments before and after its destruction. This replayable, reversible memory of sorts, a second witnessing of the event by elegy, ‘enables the subject to reconstitute the experience of objectification in ways that allow her to reinsert subjectivity into a situation designed to destroy it’.⁷⁴ Also, her boyfriend tries to fill the gap of the Chernobyl disaster by asking her to recollect her experience and memory of it even though it is lacking, whereas Petrucci restages this failed provocation to rememorate, and the absences in recollection that follow. ‘It is the performance of testimony’, Kelly Oliver writes,

⁷¹ Petrucci, ‘Black Box’, p.75

⁷² Derrida, ‘Istrice 2: Ick Bünn All Hier’, p.321

⁷³ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.6

⁷⁴ Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, p.98

not merely what is said, that makes it effective in bringing to life a repetition of an event, not a repetition of the facts of the event, or the structure of the event, but the silences and blindness inherent in the event that, at bottom, also make eyewitness testimony impossible. In other words, what makes testimony powerful is its dramatisation of the impossibility of testifying to the event.⁷⁵

Elegy dramatises the impossibility of the event, of its testifying and mourning. It demonstrates that which was but which can never be, which can never be remembered or recorded save for its absence. Chernobyl, it seems, is all a gap. From the experience and lack of memorisation of its initial disastrous occurrence to its rememoration in eyewitness testimony and second-hand elegy, the event presents ‘an impossibility for bridge builders of the gap, who build bridges with traffic lights, armed checkpoints, and gaps that can be bridged and put to work’.⁷⁶ Testimony and elegy bear witness to the attempted containment of Chernobyl, the deconstructive force of radiation, and the screens and fences at which one is signalled to stop, where one is checked by psychic or political defensive forces.

Testimony and elegy ought to say, we must surely think, that the task of appropriation is impossible, that Chernobyl is absolutely other, absolutely exterior to us, separated by an utterly unbridgeable gap in the survivor’s experience and memory which ultimately resists explanation and consolation. All that results in one’s attempted bridging of the gap is archive fever: at best, contamination by guilt follows the prolonged attempts at the impossible, and at worst, one indulges in the other’s inappropriately interiorised, fragmented grief. But is the alternative – impossible mourning – really any better? In their introduction to Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning*, editors Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas lay out this conundrum. They write:

⁷⁵ Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, p.108

⁷⁶ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.28

interiorisation is never completed, and, because of this reorganisation of space, remains in the end impossible. According to Derrida, interiorisation cannot – must not – be denied; the other is indeed reduced to images “in us”. And yet the very notion of interiorisation is limited in its assumption of a topology with limits between inside and out, what is ours and what is the other.⁷⁷

In his final elegy, ‘Envoy’, Petrucci echoes this conundrum – of what is interior and what is exterior, of what is ours and what is the other, letting all the possibilities play out poetically. Referring to the impossibility and archive fever of elegising Chernobyl, it begins with the lines: ‘Take our words. Enrich them./ They are already active – but enrich them./ This is dangerous. May even be impossible./ They are dispersed through a great mass/ and you may need to quarry this vastness/ to elicit one bald grain’.⁷⁸ Restaging the indecision between interiorising and exteriorising the other, appropriating them or leaving them at a distance, he writes: ‘You may have to detach yourself./ Use robots and machines./ But at the end – after immense effort – you/ will forge from our cries a single silver rod./ You will put it on display behind a screen’.⁷⁹ The speaker’s suggestion implicates at once interiorisation and exteriorisation; the Chernobylites say that in order to transform them into images in us readers, we must maintain physical and emotional distance to their trauma as implied through the imagined use of automatons. They are at once in us, part of our memory as readers of poetry, but sanitised, at a remove behind a protective screen. ‘You will have to control and subdue it’, they say, implying maintenance of both physical and psychological defence, ‘contain it with great care. Many will not wish/ to have it near them. Or their children. You will/ protect yourselves with suits. Put your ear to it/ and hear it hum. It will make you

⁷⁷ Pascale Anne-Brault and Michael Nass, ‘Editors’ Introduction: To Reckon with the Dead: Jacques Derrida’s Politics of Mourning’, in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), p.11

⁷⁸ Mario Petrucci, ‘Envoy’, in *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, p.96

⁷⁹ Petrucci, ‘Envoy’, p.96

shudder'.⁸⁰ The externalised and internalised other meet, the former reverberating within the latter – a transferral, through sound waves, leaving a series of sensations in us. Here is a mourning that many will not wish, nor wish to pass on to their children. They must ask themselves, as Derrida asks us in *Memoires for Paul De Man* (1989):

where is the most unjust betrayal? Is the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity that of a possible mourning which would interiorise within us the image, idol or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us? Or is it that of the impossible mourning, which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in the tomb or the vault of some narcissism?⁸¹

On the one hand, we can choose not to have the Chernobyl dead in or near us; we can refuse them and so keep them at a remove, perhaps in the tomblike vault of a museum display case. On the other, however, we can choose to listen to the dead and ask: “how do they make us feel?” They make Petrucci write elegies, and his audience in ‘Envoy’ trembles at the thought of the disaster. Both these imaginative acts are derived not from trying to tell the story of the dead – this ‘is something you cannot write’⁸² – but from listening to and imagining the dead, which instead, ought to arouse emotions of pity within us. ‘As Derrida writes, according to Rousseau, ‘we neither can nor should feel the pain of others immediately and absolutely, for such an interiorisation or identification would be dangerous.’ The imagination ‘awakens’, ‘arouses and limits’ pity. It protects and preserves us from an excess of sympathy’.⁸³ To listen directly to Chernobyl survivors, to ask them how it was, would be dangerous; to listen secondarily with imagination, however, would be to bear witness to their pain through how we think it ought to impact upon us and how that thought, performed, emotionally affects us.

⁸⁰ Petrucci, ‘Envoy’, p.96

⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.6

⁸² Mario Petrucci, ‘This’, in *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, p.51

⁸³ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.89

For Petrucci, readers of 'Envoy' should shudder. This is signified where he writes 'Your scientists will marvel. Your politicians/ quake'.⁸⁴ 'In the end', Gaston writes, 'imaginative sympathy leaves us with only the imagination, which fills a gap while exposing a gaping opening that cannot be filled';⁸⁵ in 'Envoy', the gap of how to respond is filled and bears witness to the other, unclosable gap – the gap of the other who experienced Chernobyl, who testified and thus willingly left him or herself open to response. In ancient Greece, 'Aristotle had already argued that when feeling the pain of another who has suffered an undeserved evil, we rely on our *own* past memories or future expectations of enduring such a pain to feel pity'.⁸⁶ If Orpheus were an ethical mourner, he would not listen to the Sirens directly, for this would be too dangerous. But he would imaginatively remember them, subjectively filling the gap in memory left by his overriding music while exposing the distance he consequently put before them. He would thus interiorise them on the one hand and keep them at a remove on the other; ethical mourning is to do both, simultaneously.

The following section of this chapter will explore the horror film *Chernobyl Diaries* (2012). In particular, it will analyse the extreme tourist protagonists' journey into the Exclusion Zone and their attempted closure, through photography, of the gap in experience and memory left in the aftermath of the disaster. It is not the protagonists but the film, the following section will argue, that performs ethical mourning; they attempt to fill the gap whereas it exposes the notion that the gap cannot be filled. Where the protagonists rely only on their own experiences, photographs, and memories – in short, their archive – of Chernobyl to attempt understanding of the disaster, the film, observing this journey of attempted discovery, demonstrates that it is impossible. Chernobyl, the film suggests, is objectively unrepresentable; the real Chernobyl contains the Lacanian Real, and *Chernobyl Diaries*

⁸⁴ Petrucci, 'Envoy', p.96

⁸⁵ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.90

⁸⁶ Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, p.90

acknowledges this notion, restaging it with imaginative sympathy. The film bears witness to and keeps the inarticulable gap open, maintaining its fundamental inaccessibility.

The Archive of Chernobyl Diaries

Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever* provocatively enquires, ‘Is the psychic apparatus *better represented* or is it *affected differently* by all the technical mechanisms for archiving and for reproduction, for prostheses of so-called live memory, for simulacra of living things?’⁸⁷ The psychic apparatus at Chernobyl, by which we might mean the witness’s mental recording and faculties of recollection, is affected by the traumatic experience of the nuclear disaster; as we have already seen, it is only able to reproduce a fractured, incomplete memory of the event. ‘I remember it in flashes, all broken up,’⁸⁸ Lyudmilla recalls in her interview for Alexievich’s *Voices from Chernobyl*. Another interviewed survivor, Lena M., who was relocated to Kyrgyzstan after the disaster, maintained that people visiting Chernobyl do not understand it. ‘This fear that they have here in Chernobyl, I don’t know about it. It’s not part of my memory’.⁸⁹ Here, Lena M.’s fear has been repressed, a common psychic response to trauma in which the conscious understanding of a painful event has not been attained or retained at the time of its occurrence. Echoing adults suffering from neuroses incurred, as Sigmund Freud theorised, by childhood sexual traumas rendered immemorial through their occurrence prior to the subject’s understanding of sexual life, Chernobyl trauma’s immemorial nature is engendered by the survivor’s inability to understand radiation. Radioactivity at Chernobyl, at once psychologically excessive and politically repressed –

⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.15

⁸⁸ Lyudmilla Ignatenko, ‘A Solitary Human Voice’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.18

⁸⁹ Lena M., ‘Three Monologues About a Homeland’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.64

dwarfing conscious understanding but also censored in books at nearby public libraries, Soviet news media and over-decisive instruction – is, like a childhood sexual trauma, a silent gap or space in the survivor’s memory of the past. Derrida’s enquiry into the representation of the psychic apparatus, ‘which, in what is already a psychic *spacing*, cannot be reduced to memory as conscious reserve, nor to memory as remembrance, as act of recalling’⁹⁰ by a hypomnesic, technical archive, is echoed in the failed orthographic and photographic representations of Chernobyl, as has been argued in chapter one of this thesis. The codes and conventions of recording Chernobyl in photography and writing fail to convey the event of the disaster; no structuring technology foraying into this traumatic past can recollect it. The past disaster does not impress upon but violently punctures the memory archive, penetrating it with what this event really is – a gaping void – and provides nothing for it to show upon its return to the present. Where Igor Kostin’s photos return black, Lyudmila Polenkaya, a village teacher evacuated from the Zone, remembers:

In those first few days, there were mixed feelings. I remember two: fear and insult. Everything had happened and there was no information: the government was silent, the doctors were silent [...] Chernobyl opened an abyss, something beyond Kolyma, Auschwitz, the Holocaust. A person with an axe and a bow, or a person with a grenade launcher and gas chambers, can’t kill everyone. But with an atom...⁹¹

These abyssal gaps opened up in the archive by Chernobyl, be they in eyewitness interview or graphic depiction, signify at once radiation’s overwhelming, deconstructive presence and its absolute unrepresentability. The unadaptable past event of the disaster, as an event of psychic trauma and political repression, leaves in its wake a literal and psychological archaeology of immemorial ruins that entices the possibility of further archival explanation

⁹⁰ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p.92

⁹¹ Lyudmila Polenkaya, ‘Monologue About Expensive Salami’, in Alexievich, Svetlana, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.181

through exploration, ‘a movement of the promise and of the future no less than of recording the past’.⁹² For Derrida, the archive ‘is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow’,⁹³ for tomorrow the event of trauma will be remembered. However, remembering never comes; the archive yields only a series of failed investigations into the repressed past. Like witnesses to a traumatic and immemorial event who cannot consciously recollect it, archival investigations are ‘called upon to investigate apparently inaccessible sources of meaning’⁹⁴ at Chernobyl. For Nicholas Rand, ‘the investigation of sealed-off traumas, that is, of inaccessible mental “graves”, can take many forms’.⁹⁵ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s theory of the psychic grave or crypt is given somewhat literal expression at Chernobyl by the plant’s Sarcophagus, a giant concrete tomb housing the destroyed Reactor Four from which the explosion originated; it is a sealed-off, off-limits interior space designed to prevent further radioactive contamination of the outside. In *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (1994), Abraham and Torok contend that psychic ‘incorporation results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such’.⁹⁶ The architecturally incorporated reactor remnant functions as inaccessible material evidence of the disaster’s occurrence, analogous to the psychic repression of the event or the politically repressed evidence of its radioactive effects; the cause of the disaster, therefore, like the missing memories pertaining to it, cannot be recollected. However, when the archive’s technological recording of Chernobyl physically fails or is refused access to the site of disclosure, one ought to bear witness to the subsequent reproduction of the gap in memory. In Mario

⁹² Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p.29

⁹³ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p.36

⁹⁴ Nicholas Rand, ‘Introduction: Renewals of Psychoanalysis’, in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.6

⁹⁵ Rand, ‘Introduction: Renewals of Psychoanalysis’, p.19

⁹⁶ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.130

Petrucci's elegy 'Powder/Stone', which bears witness to, among other events, Igor Kostin's attempt to develop and publish his photographic findings of Chernobyl, we are told:

[...] See how the film
They bring is black – their pictures
all black. They tried to repaint our village
but whichever shade they chose came out
black. Their tapes are hiss. The radio
hiss. Their videos are white noise
without the noise. Hear how the phone
clicks into silence. Notice how there are
no orders.⁹⁷

The intertextual archive of Chernobyl employs technological recordings of “live” memory on audio and video tape that reproduce nothing and simulacra of things that were never there to bear witness to the Chernobyl survivor's absent memory.

The horror film *Chernobyl Diaries* (dir. Parker. Bradley, 2012) conceives of the investigation into Chernobyl by its tourist protagonists as fruitless, using the representational strategies of horror cinema's found-footage phenomenon to demonstrate the undisclosability of results. This investigation takes the form of extreme tourism, a sightseeing and technological recording of dangerous spaces of past traumatic violence for thrilling pleasure. Here, found-footage, in the form of the tourists' photographs and video recordings of the represented Chernobyl, substitutes the Derridean psychic apparatus of conscious memory for an archive of technical memory; archive fever, that tendency towards erasure and obliteration that, following Derrida, both simultaneously founds and renders impossible any attempt at

⁹⁷ Petrucci, Mario, 'Powder/Stone', in *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl*, lines 3-10, p.28

archivisation, enters the physical and psychic space where no conscious memory exists, and the film in the horror mode stages its failure to memorise this space. Found-footage, as it pertains to the film, articulates the capitalist impotence to liberate a global understanding of the post-communist world, demonstrating the former's economic subjugation of the latter and imagining the consequences that this act engenders. The fictional, supernatural violence as a function of *Chernobyl Diaries*' horror, in which tension is accrued through the partial or hallucinogenic appearance of fictional Chernobyl survivors in found-footage and spent through their assault on the tourist protagonists, identifies and textually responds to the actual, economic violence as a function of extreme tourism.

Both diegetically and non-diegetically, Chernobyl is referred to as a tourist "hotspot"; according to *Russia Today*, 'more than 10,000 tourists visit Chernobyl and its surroundings each year, and *Forbes Magazine* has called the dead zone one of the world's most exotic tourist destinations'.⁹⁸ Extreme tourism's increased financial investment in Chernobyl is an economic response to perceived global interest in the market for Chernobyl memory (evinced, some sources claim, by anniversaries and comparisons with similar crises elsewhere).⁹⁹ Through advertising, extreme tourism creates the promise of Chernobyl memory (in exchange for money) from its very absence; the designation of a mnemonic "dead zone" employs the illusory and infinitely repeatable experience of founding recollection. Like a stock exchange in which "abstraction" is not only in our financial speculators' misperception of reality, but [...] is "real" in the precise sense of determining the structure of the material social processes',¹⁰⁰ extreme tourism's speculation of absent but desired Chernobyl memory has real determining power in that it ensures the profitable conditions of Chernobyl's continued immemoriality. The extra features of the *Chernobyl Diaries* DVD

⁹⁸ 'Chernobyl Exclusion Zone Reopens for Extreme Tourism', *Russia Today*, (January 19, 2012), <http://rt.com/news/prime-time/chernobyl-exclusion-zone-tourism-219/> accessed 5 September 2013

⁹⁹ Kim Hartman, 'Chernobyl Extreme Tourism Thrives in Wake of Japan Disaster', *Digital Journal*, (19 March 2011), <http://digitaljournal.com/article/304831> accessed 5 September 2013

¹⁰⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, (London: Profile Books, 2008), pp.10-11

release contains a fictional infomercial entitled ‘Uri’s Extreme Tours’. Here, Uri, the film’s tour guide character, claims to ‘specialise in exciting trips in Ukraine and Russia, [...] to places no other company will take you’.¹⁰¹ His newest package, he announces, is a trip to Pripyat, the former home of the workers and families of Chernobyl. The commercialised space of Pripyat, sold in the infomercial as an abandoned, forgotten and sealed-off “ghost town,” is waiting to be unlocked through Uri’s unique brand of tourism; his extreme tour offers visitors an experience that no other company offers: the town’s ruined apartments, shops and other local amenities alluringly presented as resistant to physical access and memorisation are forced open for business, arranged into a series of exclusive sights, memorable moments and photographic opportunities. ‘Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism,’ as Slavoj Žižek writes. Where the violent intrusion and exploitation of space claims to serve popular demand, ‘violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions, but is purely objective, systemic, anonymous’;¹⁰² if Uri’s extreme tour exploits the traumatic Chernobyl past for profit, he cannot be held personally accountable since he is responding to the unbiased system of market forces and not his own personal interests. Following Derrida, we might say that fictional and real extreme tourism in and around Chernobyl creates a certain archive fever – that is, the need to capture and document the past – in the name of financial profit. This sort of systemic violence residing in the archive of Chernobyl and its investment in memory capital is critically assessed by a range of textual responses; where *Chernobyl Diaries*’ fictional Chernobyl survivors respond to the systemic violence of intrusive and exploitative tourism through an act of physical violence that sees them stalking and killing off the extreme tourists one by one, actual survivors’ oral responses to the investment of global capital in Chernobyl memory display their anxieties about its socio-cultural impact upon local life.

¹⁰¹ *Chernobyl Diaries*, dir. Parker, Bradley, (USA: FilmNation and StudioCanal, 2012)

¹⁰² Žižek, *Violence*, p.11

‘Can you help us?’ rhetorically asks Arkady Bogdankevich, a rural medical attendant to the Chernobyl survivors of a village on the outskirts of the exclusion zone. ‘No! Then why did you come here? To ask questions? To touch us? I refuse to trade on their tragedy. To philosophise. Leave us alone, please. We need to live here’.¹⁰³ Tourism penetrates the isolation of Chernobyl, exposing it to the archival creation of memory which attempts recollection of the disaster and its effects through an intrusive, objectifying tourist gaze upon the survivor which denies them their dignity. ‘What’re you writing there?’ another survivor, who wishes to remain anonymous, demands to know. ‘Who gave you permission? And taking pictures. Put that away. Put the camera away or I’ll break it’.¹⁰⁴ Echoing Žižek’s writing in his book *Violence*, the conflict between Chernobyl survivor and tourist:

distinguishes two opposite but complementary modes of excessive violence: the ‘ultra-objective’ or systemic violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism, which involve the ‘automatic’ creation of excluded and dispensable individuals from the homeless to the unemployed, and the ‘ultra-subjective’ violence of newly emerging ethnic and/or religious, in short racist, ‘fundamentalisms’.¹⁰⁵

The Chernobyl survivor’s outburst of verbal or physical subjective violence is a response to their automatic objectification and exploitation as a resource of Chernobyl memory they would prefer not to be known; again, in Žižek’s words, the survivors are forced into this violent defence against the objective violence of tourism, which constitutes ‘the direct reign of abstract universality which imposes its law mechanically and with utter disregard for the

¹⁰³ Arkady Bogdankevich, ‘A Scream’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.115

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous, ‘Monologue by a defender of the Soviet Government’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.201

¹⁰⁵ Žižek, *Violence*, p.12

concerned subject caught in its web'.¹⁰⁶ This conflict is reconfigured in *Chernobyl Diaries* as one in which Chernobyl survivors, as ultraviolent and unknown subjects, purposely situate themselves beyond the memory-recording apparatus of the archive and the social norms of conventional habitation and behaviour. In so doing, they articulate the death drive of archive fever; where the extreme tourists attempt technologically to archive, record and memorise the represented Chernobyl regardless of the danger and death its inhabitants present to them, the psychic apparatus is equally frustrated, obstructed and ultimately annihilated by the object of its investigation. This doubleness of archive fever is, as before, hinted at in the testimonies of actual Chernobyl survivors. 'They've written dozen of books' about Chernobyl, says Sergei Sobolev, Deputy Head of the Executive Committee of the Shield of Chernobyl Association. 'Fat volumes, with commentaries. But the event is still beyond any philosophical description'.¹⁰⁷ Here, the desire to archive and memorise the event is due to its immemoriality and imperceptibility; the extensive archive is exhausted, ended, without the subject being adequately explained.

In *Chernobyl Diaries*, the extreme tourists' journey takes them through what Georges Bataille might call a heterogeneous world; from the city of Kiev to the abandoned town of Pripyat, the tourists' presence and its archiving gaze is threatened and compromised by a myriad of social forms that cannot be reduced to homogenised understanding. 'The *heterogeneous* world', writes Georges Bataille, constitutes 'the numerous elements or social forms that *homogenous* society is powerless to assimilate: mobs, the warrior, aristocratic and impoverished classes, different types of violent individuals or at least those who refuse the rule'.¹⁰⁸ On a night out in Kiev, the female tourists – Amanda and Natalie – are confronted in

¹⁰⁶ Žižek, *Violence*, p.12

¹⁰⁷ Sergei Sobolev, 'Monologue About Lies and Truths', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.129

¹⁰⁸ Georges Bataille, 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, edited and with an introduction by Allan Stoekl, translated by Allan Stoekl, with Carl Lovitt and Donald Leslie Jr., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.142

the street by a group of local young men, who take an amorous and unwanted liking to them. When Chris, Natalie's boyfriend, and his older brother Paul – who are accompanying the women – happen upon the scene, violence threatens to erupt; a heated exchange in Ukrainian – which Paul but none of the other tourists can speak – ensues before the two groups go their separate ways. In a similar scene which takes place the next day during Uri's extreme tour, Uri's tour van is halted by two soldiers at one of the military checkpoints en route to Pripjat. After Uri gets out of his van and starts talking to one of them in Ukrainian, the other slowly circles it, ominously observing the tourists inside. "I don't know what they're saying," says Chris, attempting to interpret the body language of the soldier talking to Uri. "But this guy's saying no."¹⁰⁹ Due to the linguistic barriers in these two scenes, the threat of violence cannot be dispelled nor its origin assimilated; throughout the film it is a heterogeneous yet ultimately hostile response to the intrusive presence of tourism. 'The very term *heterogeneous*', writes Bataille, 'indicates that it concerns elements that are impossible to assimilate; this impossibility, which has a fundamental impact on assimilation, likewise has an impact on scientific assimilation'.¹¹⁰ Throughout their journey through the heterogeneous Ukraine, the tourists' sustained archival investigation and its painful yet persistent encounters with threatening barriers, blockages and disavowals of meaning foreshadow the actual violence to come; in a repetition of previous warning signs, the soldiers deny Uri's tour van access to Pripjat, but the military checkpoint is circumvented via an alternative, secret route, and when the tourists and their guide finally reach Pripjat, they and their scientific tools of technological assimilation become the targets of physical violence. Derrida writes that 'one associates the archive, as naturally one is tempted to do, with repetition, and repetition with the past. But it is the future that is at stake here, and the archive is an irreducible experience

¹⁰⁹ *Chernobyl Diaries*, 2012

¹¹⁰ Bataille, 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', pp.140-141

of the future’;¹¹¹ attempted archiving as represented by *Chernobyl Diaries* – the inability to disclose meaning and its very denial of this failure – is an experience of the subjective violence yet to come. In the film, the represented archive repeatedly ignores its illegitimate investigation into Chernobyl, reconstructing at once the seemingly infinite interest in the market for Chernobyl memory and its rejection by local populations. En route to Pripjat, Uri explains, first in Ukrainian and then in English, that at Chernobyl, ‘nature has reclaimed her rightful home’.¹¹² Where archiving in the form of tourism intrudes upon and translates ruined, reclaimed space into pleasurable spectacle through photographic opportunity, seclusion and solitude is shattered through its very recording. During the on-foot exploration of Pripjat, Paul breaks the stillness by proclaiming ‘silence. Nature really has taken over’;¹¹³ *Chernobyl Diaries* bears witness to extreme tourism’s simultaneous, contradictory preservation and puncturing of the exclusion zone’s undisturbed isolation, where, as Derrida writes, the commercial ‘conditions of archiving implicate all the tensions, contradictions, or aporias we are trying to formulate here’.¹¹⁴

The tourists’ ill-fated journey into Pripjat to find Chernobyl memory through its archiving recalls Abraham and Torok’s psychological *aporia* presented through their theory of the crypt; for the protagonists of *Chernobyl Diaries*, as for patients of mourning, ‘everything unfolds as though a mysterious compass led them to the tomb wherein the repressed problem lies’.¹¹⁵ What lies behind extreme tourism’s desire to archive the politically repressed Soviet past is analogous to the patient’s desire to memorise their psychologically repressed traumatic losses; in both cases, ‘actual events are treated as if they had never occurred’.¹¹⁶ On the one hand, the various aporistic mechanisms encountered by

¹¹¹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p.68

¹¹² *Chernobyl Diaries*, 2012

¹¹³ *Chernobyl Diaries*, 2012

¹¹⁴ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p.29

¹¹⁵ Abraham and Torok: *The Shell and The Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, p.118

¹¹⁶ Rand, ‘Introduction: Renewals of Psychoanalysis’, p.19

investigation repress meaning and on the other, investigation represses the meaning of these mechanisms; in the film and the reality it reconstructs, tourism's intrusion of the politically repressed and physically blocked exclusion zone constitutes not only 'the forced entry of a penetrating, digging force, but [also] the violated sepulchre [that] *itself* was never "legal".'¹¹⁷ By ignoring the warning signs that would otherwise break off their journey, the tourists discredit the notion that what is there at its end cannot be disclosed.

At Pripyat, Uri's van is sabotaged and rendered immobile when the tour group is out sightseeing on foot. That night, the group spend the night in the van, and Uri and Chris go outside to investigate movement and noises in the darkness. Uri is dragged off by undisclosed assailants and Chris returns to the van with a badly wounded leg. In both scenes, the perspective framing of the film purposely obscures the cause of violent events, occurring as they do either off-camera or in darkness. The following morning, Amanda, Paul and Michael – another extreme tourist – attempt to find out who or what caused the damage and injury sustained. Paul assures that his younger brother Chris was attacked by dogs, to which Amanda replies doubtfully: "dogs didn't do that [...] he [Uri] said there was something else. What was he talking about?"¹¹⁸ As the trio investigate the dark, sealed-off, tomb-like buildings for Uri's body, the film's perspective framing, mimicking the first-person perspective mode of their frantic search by utilising camera techniques associated with the found-footage horror phenomenon (whip pans, extreme close ups, eye level shots and so forth), continues to withhold the cause of violent events from the visual archive; although the tourists find Uri's dead and mutilated body, the 'what' or 'who' responsible for it remains undisclosed. Amanda, the last of the three tourists to leave the room into which Uri's corpse has been dragged, catches glimpses of shadowy figures. In a prolonged moment of dread that

¹¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok', in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xxxiv

¹¹⁸ *Chernobyl Diaries*, 2012

precedes a jump scare, she tentatively reaches for a pistol that Uri was carrying; upon grabbing it, the shadowy figures start screaming, and Amanda runs out of the room before she is (or we are) able to fully see them. The representation of repeated archiving confronts only the phantomatic residue of Chernobyl, a catastrophic event rendered immemorial by the timeless void of witness trauma. ‘In *Hamlet*,’ Maud Ellmann writes, ‘the murder of the father occurs in the prehistory of the play, unwitnessed and unverifiable’; ‘the event of the nuclear disaster, which similarly never ‘takes place or time’ in memory ‘is re-enacted time and again’¹¹⁹. Where ‘the image of the phantom’, as Abraham and Torok argue, ‘points to an occasion of torment’ and ‘a memory [...] buried *without legal burial place*’¹²⁰ like Old Hamlet’s murder, the phantomatic presence of *Chernobyl Diaries*’ fictional survivors is a hallucinatory after-effect of the unwitnessed and unverifiable Chernobyl past. Actual Chernobyl memory fails, an event evinced by the witness testimony of Lyudmilla Ignatenko and Lena M. who remember not ‘an accident, a catastrophe [...] But [...] a war’;¹²¹ ‘we were at war against the radiation’,¹²² Igor Kostin recollects. Similarly, the result of repeated attempts by extreme tourism to translate the immemorial past into authentic present-day memory and experience, *Chernobyl Diaries* suggests, is fiction. In the film and the reality it represents, the archive stands only for fiction: *that which cannot be seen* takes the shape of *that which was never there*; the unseen or unremembered disaster is re-imagined as violent combat with an unseen enemy. For Derrida, the archive as ‘a translation maintains above all *its own fiction*, it maintains the true fiction that translation is possible. It *is* this fiction, both hopeful and frightening, promising communication where none by definition should be possible’.¹²³ In *Chernobyl Diaries*, the hopeful and frightening attempt at translation of Chernobyl by the tourists’ digital cameras maintains the film’s own fiction: the

¹¹⁹ Ellmann, ‘Introduction: Bad Timing’, p.xiv

¹²⁰ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, p.141

¹²¹ Sobolev, ‘Monologue About Lies and Truths’, p.135

¹²² Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, (New York: Corbis, Umbrage Editions, 2006), p.48

¹²³ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, pp.106-107

fiction of the film's survivors symptomatic of translation itself. The morning after the night Uri is killed and Paul injured by unknown attackers, Amanda looks over her photographs of Chernobyl, stored on her digital camera. In one image of an abandoned apartment, a partially visible figure stands at a window, archived but up to this point not acknowledged, captured but not confronted.



Chernobyl Diaries, 2012

The partial figure is placed not by the tourists' sight but their technology, viewable only on the camera's digital screen using its zoom function; here, it is by technology that fiction, in the absence of fact, is founded. Echoing the untranslatable opacity of Igor Kostin's photographic witness memory of the Chernobyl disaster, the figure emerges from the black canvass of failed disclosure; it is the staged symptom of the cryptic apartment aperture that signifies inaccessible interiority, a scene analogous to the anguished appearance of Old Hamlet's ghost upon the ramparts of Elsinore. The ghost says to Prince Hamlet that he is 'Doom'd for a certain time to walk the night, [...] Till the foul crimes done in my days of

nature / Are burnt and purg'd away'¹²⁴ but cannot tell the secrets of his prison-house, the trauma that 'Would harrow up thy soul; freeze thy young blood; / Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres'.¹²⁵ Prince Hamlet is forever out of joint with Denmark's inaccessible history and forced to identify with its endocryptic object that he may or may not hallucinate; the archive of *Chernobyl Diaries*, similarly, founds unverifiable memory in the phantom's partial photographic reproduction where unmediated experience of the represented Chernobyl past fails.

In the film, the image of the survivor bears witness to the product placement of extreme tourism wherein the emplacement of fiction at Chernobyl that is not in reality there entertains the illusion of authentic Chernobyl memory, an archive of advertisement that 'is out of place at the very least, if inoffensive, evidently misconstrued'.¹²⁶ Anatoly Shimanskiy, a journalist, recalls that in order to maintain commercial interest in Chernobyl, 'the papers and magazines compete to see who can write the most frightening article. People who weren't there love to be frightened. Everyone read about mushrooms the size of human heads, but no one actually found them'.¹²⁷ This investment in Chernobyl horror and fantasy is a symptom of the inaccessible, actual Chernobyl past. *Chernobyl Diaries* deterritorialises the production of desire for Chernobyl memory; each article, analogous to what Michel Foucault in the preface to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* calls 'the poor technicians of desire – psychoanalysts and semiologists of every sign and symptom', would reduce the multiplicity of desire for Chernobyl memory 'to the twofold law of structure and lack',¹²⁸ where writing signifies something at Chernobyl which turns out not to be there. Where the

¹²⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, edited with a commentary by T.J.B Spencer, introduced by Alan Sinfield, (London: Penguin, 2005), act I scene V, lines 10, 12-13

¹²⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, act I scene V, lines 16-17

¹²⁶ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p.108

¹²⁷ Anatoly Shimanskiy, 'Monologue About Writing Chernobyl', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), p.124

¹²⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Preface' in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, (London: Continuum, 2004), p.xiv

subject of the article is disclosed in its completeness, offered to memory and then disproven, *Chernobyl Diaries*' survivor-subject is always a partial object, connected to continuous deterritorialised flows of desire 'that are by nature fragmented and fragmentary';¹²⁹ the film at first presents the singularity of the desired memory's site through its apparent appearance in the photograph, but then shatters this already questionable totality through the following flow of film in which partial images of the survivor stalk the eye. Subverting the egoistic deduction and reduction of trauma to a single primal scene that is easily explainable in psychoanalysis by the Oedipal 'daddy-mommy-me'¹³⁰ triangulation, *Chernobyl Diaries* knows it cannot represent authentic Chernobyl experience and so represents Chernobyl experience as it authentically is: a disastrous explosion of archived images that 'have a sufficient charge in and of themselves to blow up all of Oedipus and totally demolish its ridiculous claim to represent the unconscious, to triangulate the unconscious, to encompass the entire production of desire';¹³¹ the one experience, archived as a totality, always produces structure and lack, but the many as an incomplete yet continuous flow of desire or memory conversely avoid the disclosure of disprovable results. The extreme tourists' journey through the heterogeneous world of *Chernobyl Diaries*' is a literary desiring-machine in the horror mode; its dark, disorientating, labyrinthine passages, inaccessible rooms and silent refusals of complete disclosure blow up psychoanalysis into schizoid parts:

produced as asymmetrical sections, paths that suddenly come to an end, hermetically sealed boxes, noncommunicating vessels, watertight compartments, in which there are gaps even between things that are contiguous, gaps that are affirmations, pieces of a puzzle belonging not to any one puzzle but to many¹³².

¹²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.6

¹³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.58

¹³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.48

¹³² Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.46

While psychoanalysis, at least as it was articulated by Melanie Klein, ‘was responsible for the marvellous discovery of partial objects, that world of explosions, rotations, vibrations’,¹³³ it cannot rid itself of the notion that they are part of one traumatic event and can therefore be reassembled, totalised. *Chernobyl Diaries*’ extreme tourists also cannot abandon this way of thinking.



Chernobyl Diaries, 2012

During their second night stranded in Pripyat, the tourists see the lone figure of a little girl, standing in the middle of the road with her back turned to them. Paul slowly approaches her, illuminating her with his torch; he says “hello?”, first in English and then in Ukrainian, to which she does not respond. In the tense moment of investigation and non-disclosure of identity, silence is at once a gap and a flow of deterritorialised events that are disparate and unrelated yet sequential. Paul gets closer to the figure of the little girl, not knowing how she will react to his approach. Before the solution to this puzzle is realised, the scene’s tension is broken; another figure, shrouded in darkness at the bottom of a staircase, grabs an

¹³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.47

unsuspecting Natalie from beyond the frame, dragging her out of sight. It is tempting to assume, as the tourists do, that the figure of the child was a decoy that allowed the other figure to snatch one of the tourists from the group; that the events throughout the film – from the sabotaging of Uri’s van and the wounding of Chris to the partial appearance of the Chernobyl child – originate from a single desire: the prevention of the tourists’ departure. In each scene, the tourists’ thoughts run along the lines of: “I know what has happened is part of a larger, single event, even if I have no proof of this”; they are analogous to the psychoanalytic claim that each neurosis the subject possesses is part of a single origin of trauma, where ‘schizophrenic partial objects are related to a whole, either to an original whole that has existed earlier in a primary phase, or to a whole that will eventually appear in a final depressive stage (the complete Object)’.¹³⁴ But this way of thinking is never vindicated. The fragmented testimonies of actual Chernobyl survivors cannot place the disastrous event in memory, ‘in our human experience or our human time-frame’;¹³⁵ the entire origin of the disaster cannot be disclosed. Rather, the survivor concludes: “I know Chernobyl happened, but I have no memory of this.” Where analytic reading discloses only fragments symptomatic of endocryptic content, *Chernobyl Diaries* represents partial events through its intentionally limited perspective framing, externalising it and endowing us all with a found-footage subjectivity. Unable to see or unite all the events that take place, the film ‘continually detaches them, continually works them loose and carries them off in every direction’¹³⁶ through its distracted, disoriented journey. Towards the end of the film, the remaining tourists, Amanda and Chris – who have not yet been killed by the Chernobyl survivors – are blinded by their prolonged exposure to radiation. The pair stumble along dark corridors in their attempt to escape from Pripjat, but instead they head deeper into it,

¹³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.48

¹³⁵ Brovkin: ‘Monologue About a Moonlit Landscape’, p.85

¹³⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.43

eventually arriving at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Here, radiation strips the subject of its ego, enacting profound ego-loss. It detaches the senses of perception from each other, breaking down their biological unity which makes up the human ‘in order to perceive what is nonhuman in man, his will and his forces, his transformations and mutations’.¹³⁷ The radioactive disintegration of the body and the textual disintegration of investigation thus transform desire into schizo components; the archive of *Chernobyl Diaries*, in its fragmentation of one Chernobyl experience into many, bears witness to the actual failure of projects that the disaster left behind: the political and psychological rehabilitation of its survivors shattered by trauma, and the global capitalism that attempts to reshape, restage and territorialise for profit its archaeological remains. Through Amanda and Chris’s journey, the film stages the confrontation between the two differing versions of archive fever: on the one hand, the attempt to further these projects, to memorise, memorialise and capitalise on the disaster by revisiting and recording it, and on the other, the destruction or disintegration of the recording archive at archivisation, driven to its own death. This unresolvable tension within archive fever is represented by the film’s use of the found-footage phenomenon, where the archive’s impossible task to capture truth – a task that it cannot complete nor escape and recover from – is reconfigured as a horror encounter with Chernobyl from the perspective of the extreme tourist characters and their technological recording devices in which nothing survives. Chernobyl today, as ‘the very stone that earlier had sought to limit storms is nothing more than a milestone marking the immensity of an unlimitable catastrophe’,¹³⁸ an obelisk that designates an excessive flow beyond comprehension and consumption. As Amanda and Paul’s extreme tour through Pripjat ends unending, its contract of memory cut short by their mortality and outliving them, their final moments of radioactive disintegration and stumbling archivisation portray a ‘feeling of explosion and a vertiginous weightlessness [which]

¹³⁷ Seem, ‘Introduction’, xxii

¹³⁸ Georges Bataille, ‘The Obelisk’, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, p.217

surround an imperious and heavy obelisk'.¹³⁹ Their walk is that of the schizophrenic's, which Deleuze and Guattari famously announce 'is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst's couch'.¹⁴⁰ In their final moments, blinded by the radiation which realises all epiphany as impossible, the tourists represent the ultimate anti-Oedipus, an archive of the failure to realise.

Chernobyl Cryptonomy and the Soviet Science Fiction Writer as Detective in Adam Roberts' Yellow Blue Tibia

Like the Wolf Man, that figure of trauma and repression first treated and addressed by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytic study 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', Chernobyl survivors suffered a sudden impact of enduring violence in the form of an explosion that lacked a definite, clearly witnessed origin or order of events. It engendered collective trauma which still demands the impossible act of disclosure in psychoanalytic readings of eyewitness memory and testimony, a task adapted in the entertainment outlets of Chernobyl fiction. The Chernobyl explosion's occurrence, repressed psychologically in eyewitness accounts and politically by contemporary Soviet authorities, yet presents an unimaginably colossal yet unknown process of radioactive degradation. This disaster, a primal scene, is denied as a trauma while manifesting traumatic symptoms upon its people, landscapes and literature. As before, it is possible to witness in the Chernobyl subject both the analysand and analyst displaced by the disaster; the quantity of radiation dwarfs any conscious conception of time, creating an unimaginable future, an unreachable narrative end, which Anatoly Shimanskiy describes as 'some completely unseen thing [which] can enter and then destroy the whole world'; the nuclear disaster is an all-consuming black hole where

¹³⁹ Bataille, 'The Obelisk', p.217

¹⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.2

‘...my consciousness couldn’t go. I couldn’t even understand anymore: what is time? Where am I?’¹⁴¹ This disorienting lack of any reliable information concerning the Chernobyl disaster denies access to its originary causes, withholding narrative origins. Shimanskiy recalls the State response to the disaster:

Stalin’s old vocabulary has sprung up again: ‘agents of the Western secret services,’ ‘the cursed enemies of socialism,’ ‘an undermining of the indestructible union of the Soviet peoples.’ Everyone talks about the spies and provocateurs here, and no one talks about iodine protection. Any unofficial information is considered foreign ideology.¹⁴²

Spies, detectives, stories and languages of the past, secret codes and their translation; all these features of a text form the basis of an attempt to disclose the content and location of a primal scene. Through the fictional search for an originary explanation of the Chernobyl disaster in Adam Roberts’ novel, *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2010), the decrypting of words, texts, and the translation of scientific theory into plot and character, and Russian speech into English challenge the archive’s feverish attempts to prove that traumatic ‘experiences which have played an important pathogenic part, and all their subsidiary concomitants, are accurately retained in the patient’s memory even when they seem to be forgotten – when he is unable to call them to mind’.¹⁴³ Archivisation, then, it claims, is also impossible. In an act of ethical mourning, which keeps the other at an infinitely inaccessible remove from analysis, the novel examines the existence of a fundamentally inauthentic primal scene, a fictionalised Chernobyl kernel necessitated by the disaster’s traumatic excess. Restaging at Chernobyl

¹⁴¹ Anatoly Shimanskiy, ‘Monologue about Writing Chernobyl’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.123

¹⁴² Shimanskiy, ‘Monologue about Writing Chernobyl’, p.124.

¹⁴³ Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. II*, translated and edited by James Strachey, with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p.112

problems arising from the Wolf Man's psychoanalytic reading, it replays and bears witness in fiction to the traumatic symptoms caused by the undisclosable originary traumatic event; for it, as with all ethical mourning, the impossibility of the disaster cannot pass without comment. Thus, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, following what is suggested of Freud's Wolf Man analysis in Jacques Derrida's essay, 'Fors', fictionally reconstructs the impossibility of the Chernobyl disaster's disclosure by imagining alternative possibilities of its occurrence, keeping open and bearing witness to the imperceptible non-event or event horizon of reality which witnessing can only describe as '...what took place without taking place, without ever having been present, "of what has never been"'. In the alternative event in and of fiction, 'there is a memory left of what has never been'.¹⁴⁴ *Yellow Blue Tibia*'s fictional memory of a fictional event, then, tasked as it is with imagining disclosure of Chernobyl's radioactive Real, displaces 'the whole question of origins, to suggest what Peter Brooks might call another kind of referentiality, in that all tales may lead back not so much to events as to other tales, to man as a structure of the fictions he tells about himself'.¹⁴⁵

The following section explores the role of the Soviet Science Fiction writer, his literary construction of a fictional Chernobyl origin and its traumatic effects, and his role as both psychoanalytic analysand and analyst or detective. As writing, Brooks claims, leads back to another fiction and not an event, Freud famously returns to the Wolf Man case study to question the truth of his subject's primal scene as a psychoanalytically verifiable occurrence; the origins of the Chernobyl disaster in *Yellow Blue Tibia*, mirroring this, emerge from the traumatised imagination of the Soviet Science Fiction writer. As Brooks says:

¹⁴⁴ Derrida, Jacques, 'Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok' in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xxxiii

¹⁴⁵ Peter Brooks, 'Fictions of the Wolf Man: Freud and Narrative Understanding', *Diacritics*, (Vol. 9 No. 1, Spring 1979), p.78

...Freud will with the case-history of the Wolf Man have discovered “detection” and its narrative to be extraordinarily more complex and problematic, like the plots of Modernist fiction, and indeed inextricably bound up with the fictional.¹⁴⁶

The novel’s narrator, Konstantin Andreiovich Skvorecky, is one of five Russian Soviet Science Fiction writers called together at a hidden dacha by Josef Stalin in 1946, just after the Great Patriotic War. The writers are tasked with creating a convincing alien threat: a story of imminent disaster that would unite the Soviet peoples. If Sergei Pankejeff’s repressed history of neurosis and trauma is examined through Abraham and Torok’s disclosure of his magic word, *tieret*, then Stalin requires the Soviet Science Fiction writers to construct a history out of words that justify his plans for the advancement of a global communism through the destruction of its enemies. The meaning of *tieret*, at once to “scrape”, “scratch”, “rub” and “wound” becomes, for Abraham and Torok, ‘the rich orderly polysema of an unspeakable (hidden, crypted) word [that] had to be lurking behind a regular – in spite of a certain amount of play – series of *cryptonyms*’.¹⁴⁷ Stalin’s justification of warfare with the various ‘cursed enemies of socialism’ must unite the fragmented scenes of conflict that follow under its single reason for engagement. Its meaning lies behind what he calls ‘the universal communist struggle’, and within “‘the nature of Marxism itself,’” according to Ivan ‘Jan’ Frenkel, one of the writers Stalin enlists. For Frenkel:

“...in the very fabric of dialectical materialism...life *consists* of conflict, of enemies all about us who cannot be appeased and who must be destroyed. After war comes – not peace, but more war. And we are gifted here! Gifted by historical necessity!

¹⁴⁶ Peter Brooks, ‘Fictions of the Wolf Man: Freud and Narrative Understanding’, p.74

¹⁴⁷ Jody Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida’s Ghost Writing*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), p.18

Gifted by the news that we shall be the ones to shape this new war. This next war! It will be ours! War and *war!*”¹⁴⁸

Here, the dialectical materialism of socialist conflict reconfigures the psychoanalytic search for a magic word engendering and animating all the scenes of the subject’s psychic life; the enactment of various traumatic scenes as explained, for example, by *tieret*, – a word with multiple meanings – becomes a Soviet Science Fiction narrative able to unite all worldly differences in the global struggle for communism. The Wolf Man’s magic word, for Abraham and Torok at least, discloses ‘the association of the wolf with sexual pleasure obtained by rubbing’¹⁴⁹ within even the scenes of the subject’s historically unverified past. The Soviet Science Fiction writers, however, invent the words that explain global experiences of the artificially induced state of war necessary to perpetuate communism, and the problems of creating universally satisfactory evidence of a credible alien threat pose themselves early on in the project:

We wrote detailed accounts of alien atrocities. We had them villainously blowing up a city – New York, as a first choice...Then we had second thoughts, for such a stunt, we reasoned, would be hard to fake; and if the Red Army were actually to bombard New York into dusts and shards then we would have been the authors of mass death. So then we toyed with the idea of aliens attacking Siberia; some remote and inaccessible place where the story could not be easily falsified. But Asterinov voiced the obvious objection. “Our brief is to unite humanity against this monstrous alien foe!” he said. “Why should humanity care if these aliens blow up a few trees in Siberia?” [...] “Somewhere else,” I suggested. “Ukraine, maybe. Latvia perhaps. Let’s decide that later.”

“The Ukraine has been almost depopulated,” agreed Frenkel. “What with the famine and then the war. Let us have the aliens blow up some portion of the Ukraine. That would be the best option.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Adam Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, (London: Gollancz, 2010), p.12

¹⁴⁹ Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, p.18

¹⁵⁰ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, pp.14-15

The fictional origins of Chernobyl in the novel, as they unfold in accordance or opposition to the project, cannot reconstitute from the void any verifiable evidence as to the disaster's already-disappeared truth. Like the wounds of all Chernobyl fiction, *Yellow Blue Tibia* must opt for either one of two methods of reconstruction: it can either repress the knowledge of its subject's inaccessibility and then reproduce infinite forms of supplementarity in investigation, or bury this call to investigation in its supplement that denies Chernobyl trauma. In either case, Chernobyl literature and its authorship experience the fundamental absence of the disaster's origin that remains irretrievable from within its void of meaning; it is always only ever a question of how to supplement and then what to do with supplementarity. In *Yellow Blue Tibia*, the experienced trauma of the Soviet Science Fiction writer, arising from the fictional origins they create, is estranged from the very form that conjures it, writing, where the encountered truth of trauma and elucidation of emotion are buried within literature.

Traumatic memories of the Great Patriotic War are occasionally indicated in the Science Fiction authors' creative process of writing. While the experience of the external world is isolated in the intransitivity of fiction that in no way refers to it directly, the indication gestures towards a burial of traumatic memory in the content of the project. Deciding what form the alien aggressors will take, Nikolai Nikolaivitch, one of the writers, suggests that "corpses can be scary,"... "Not – living corpses," he added, and I [Skvorecky] realised he was not making a suggestion, but was instead wrapped in the coils of memory. "Dead ones."¹⁵¹ Here, the literature of Soviet Science Fiction acts as a vessel for the return of the repressed past. Just as the project unwittingly agitates its writers' memories of the war, so too does it reveal the inaccessibility of the Chernobyl origin in its content, a supplementary

¹⁵¹ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.18

fiction for the reader or analyst that never was and for the characters is yet to come.

Skvorecky suggests writing into the story:

“Radiation aliens. Sentient emanations of poisonous radiation.” The others contemplated this.

“A little insubstantial, perhaps?” offered Nikolai Nikolaivitch. “To be really scary, I mean?”

“But they would have machines. As we have tanks and planes, they would have robots and killing machines; but inside – they would be only waveforms of poisonous radiation [...] We decided that their weaponry would be atomic – very up-to-the-minute, this, for the mid-1940’s. You must remember that there had been no official notification of the American atom bomb attack on Japan; our version of atomics was that of science fiction from the 1930’s. But [the dacha guard commander] comrade Malenkov personally approved this part of our design. We could imagine why; that such a threat would justify the Soviet Union in the accelerated development of its own atomic weaponry.”¹⁵²

By substituting investigation of the inaccessible origin of Chernobyl for invention of its fictional supplement, the novel reveals the existence of the remainder through repression. Two forms of fictionally staged repression and its disruption ensue: of the project by Josef Stalin when the writers are told by his guards that he no longer requires it, and of the invented Chernobyl origin these writers create; *Yellow Blue Tibia* represses this knowledge through encryption of its own Science Fiction story-within-a-story. In both cases of Roberts’ novel’s fictionally staged repression, then, repression reveals the remainder of repressed memory, the excess that was not remembered, or, in the novel’s depiction of the Stalinist era, *unremembered*. Indeed, State coercion to forget acts as a form of memory erasure, akin to Abraham and Torok’s ‘mental landscapes of submerged family secrets and traumatic tombs

¹⁵² Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.19

in which, for example, actual events are treated as if they had never occurred'.¹⁵³ In the novel, Comrade Malenkov says to the writers:

“You are to forget everything you have done here,” [...] “Everything. Comrades, understand me: it is a matter of supreme importance to the Soviet Union that you tell nobody of your time here. You did not write these elaborate stories. You did not discuss this matter. You never met Stalin. This sojourn never happened. Do you understand?”¹⁵⁴

The second volume of the novel is set in 1985, shortly before the Chernobyl disaster. Doctor James Tilly Coyne, an American nuclear physicist visiting Moscow, says to Skvorecky that nuclear power stations make him feel “‘worried. *Vulnerable*...If I were an invading alien force – well, I would be looking down upon a spread of fantastically powerful bombs, that my enemy had thoughtfully arranged right in the heart of his territory, just waiting for me to trigger them.’”¹⁵⁵ The writing of such an extraterrestrial threat attempts to unify a globally fragmented communism, but under an erroneous premise. Man’s supposedly increasing knowledge of the atom – observable in the proliferation of his nuclear power plants – cannot credibly unite him; nuclear power and its weaponisation is a weakness and not a strength against invasion. Instead of providing a clear plan of defence and counterattack, it reveals only the misguided attempts throughout history to harness the atom. In the novel, the Chernobyl power plant, like the aliens that supposedly desire to destroy it, embodies not the solidarity between communists in the Soviet Union and the rest of the world, nor the collective, cumulative knowledge and use of the atom, but the absence of such factors; the atomic power of Chernobyl differs from that posited by the Soviet Union’s Science Fiction of the 1930s or the unofficial rumours of American atomic weaponry used on

¹⁵³ Rand, ‘Introduction: Renewals of Psychoanalysis’, p.19

¹⁵⁴ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, pp.24-25

¹⁵⁵ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.86

Japan during the Second World War. Throughout the history that *Yellow Blue Tibia* reconstructs, the atom always signifies something in excess of understanding. As Skvorecky and a companion of his, a nuclear physicist named Saltykov, search Reactor Four of the Chernobyl power plant for signs of alien sabotage, he remarks that:

There was something uncanny about being the sole human being in so enormous an enclosed space. ‘It’s like a film set’, I said to myself. There was a continuous noise that was more hiss than hum, and a pervasive if hard to identify sense of pulse, or sentience, as if the entire reactor were alive. This was not so comforting a thought. I tried to put such thoughts out of my head.¹⁵⁶

Here, Skvorecky perceives the unseen and unsettling presence of the atom in the empty space of the Chernobyl Reactor that appears to contain it. The reactor, like a Derridean crypt, can stage what “take[s] place” [...] only by *producing* concealment – that is, the (crypt) *effect* of interiority’,¹⁵⁷ accomplished by ‘constructing a system of partitions, with their inner and outer surfaces’.¹⁵⁸ What takes place inside the reactor, either the process of power generation by nuclear fission or the alien attempt to sabotage it, is produced by its concealment in architecture; the ‘gigantic concrete column that supported the distant roof [...] wrapped around with a spiral staircase like the snake around Asclepius’s staff’, and the reactor ‘core [...] cooled by water injected through it’,¹⁵⁹ are crypt walls producing the effect of interiority. Pumped into the core, Saltykov explains, is water as steam at a temperature of three hundred degrees, generating the hissing noise that Skvorecky interprets as an indication of the reactor’s sentience. Saltykov says that “these things run themselves [...] the best thing to do is leave them alone. The last thing you want is some foolish operator tinkering with the

¹⁵⁶ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.185

¹⁵⁷ Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida’s Ghost Writing*, p.27

¹⁵⁸ Derrida, ‘Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’, xiv

¹⁵⁹ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.182

controls.”¹⁶⁰ The functioning of the reactor, then, acts as absent knowledge, contained yet inaccessible within the crypt, in the architecture of the reactor itself; the explanation, investigation and observation of its function discloses not the planned destruction of ‘some portion of the Ukraine’ by the radiation aliens as described in the repressed Science Fiction project nor the destruction of Chernobyl through the tinkering of its controls, only the absent understanding of these possible events through their encryption in the reactor’s interiority. As Skvorecky looks into one of the spent fuel pools, he notices ‘a black case, no bigger than a suitcase. The bomb, of course’. He observes that

It was three quarters of the way down the wall, suspended on a single cable. I squatted down, and gave the line a tentative tug. It did not feel too heavy. The thought crossed my mind that this might not be the bomb after all, but rather an ordinary piece of power-station machinery. I pulled again with the notion of retrieving whatever-it-was and finding out. In retrospect this was foolish of me, for of course the line could have been booby-trapped, but that chance did not occur to me. Given all that I know now, from my privileged perspective, looking down upon a completely different mode of existence, and with all the benefits of hindsight – of what we know about Chernobyl, and the precariousness of the cage that contained its nuclear dragon – it is hard to justify such a cavalier attitude.¹⁶¹

The ‘what we know about Chernobyl’, the disclosure of ‘what takes place’ within its cases, cages and crypts, is hidden in a completely different mode of existence, accessible only from a privileged perspective. In ‘Fors’, Derrida designates the inaccessible contents of interiority as ‘...a certain “beyond place”, “non-place” or “no-place” which, he tellingly describes as “the *other* place”’.¹⁶² Unable to gain access to this place, the Chernobyl investigator cannot disclose the origins of the disaster; investigation into or tinkering with the power-plant’s functionality cannot distinguish between the normal and abnormal behaviour of the atom, nor

¹⁶⁰ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.179

¹⁶¹ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.186

¹⁶² Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida’s Ghost Writing*, p.27

set the rules under which it operates.

Chernobyl symbolises at once the inner corruption of power and its outward appearance of stability within the Soviet Union; nuclear and political power are analogous in the novel. Power, as Doctor Coyne remarks, is ““a word with many meanings. I visit Soviet *power stations.*””¹⁶³ The suitcase-like container holds a cluster of standard Soviet-army issue RGD-5 grenades, placed in the spent fuel pool by Skvorecky’s old writer friend Ivan Frenkel, now a KGB officer determined to act out in reality what he and the other writers had created in fiction so as to unite the peoples of the world in a communist struggle against the perceived alien threat. When one of the grenades is detonated by comrade Trofim, Frenkel’s bodyguard, Skvorecky recalls:

I heard just the start of a roar; no more than a split second before it vanished entirely from my sensorium, or else before my sensorium vanished entirely. The material solidity of the space we were in was deconstructed and reconstructed as light, clear and bright and warm...A process of replacing every single one of the carbon atoms in my body with photons; and a reverberating pulse that swarmed upon the net of my nerves...Out of perfect whiteness and the perfection of the light a single point of sensual connection began to coalesce; one unsullied, soprano musical note, a musical note as pure as mathematics, like an angel singing, a spirit-entity heralding my arrival in a new place.¹⁶⁴

To experience first-hand the instant of the explosion in Reactor Four, to access the precise, singular origins of the Chernobyl disaster and the new, other place in the crypt as described by Derrida’s ‘Fors’, one must be atomically deconstructed. As luck would have it, Skvorecky survives the explosion by being blown into the pool, and wakes up in a Kiev hospital. Between these two corporeal states of physically and psychically solid identity, Skvorecky, in a dream set at the dacha where he and the other writers were instructed by Josef Stalin to

¹⁶³ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.84

¹⁶⁴ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, pp.200-201

work on the Science Fiction project, encounters the floating letters ‘SF’. He views these cryptic letters from the reverse and in Cyrillic as opposed to Latin characters. They thus read as this:

Ф С

They are translated as FS and then as a fragment split between two words, Josef Stalin:

иосиФ Сталин

[JoseF Stalin]

Jody Castricano asserts in her monograph, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing*, ‘the term cryptomimesis draws attention to a writing predicated upon encryption: the play of revelation and concealment lodged within *parts* of individual

words'.¹⁶⁵ Here, as with the Wolf Man's posterior view of his copulating parents or family servant scrubbing the floor – actions signified by the Russian word *tieret* – the translation of language and the perspective of its enshrined scene encrypts content; the dreaming state of existence within the opened radioactive crypt is an altered, Foucauldian one in which 'meaning never coincides with an event; and from this evolves a logic of signification, a grammar of the first person, and a metaphysics of consciousness'.¹⁶⁶ Here, Skvorecky meets Josef Stalin – or one of the radiation aliens in a robot suit that looks like Josef Stalin – who then discloses the reality and nature of his kind:

“Many people believe that aliens lurk in the shadows, hide away. That they only emerge at night, like vampires.” [...] “No! No! Aliens come from the stars, not from the darkness between the stars. We come precisely *out of the light*. It is simply our brilliance that is harmful to you. That's all. And who has been more harmful than I?”¹⁶⁷

It is only in the blinding flash of radioactive light inaccessible to conventional reading where Stalin's tyrannous, extraterrestrial existence in the novel becomes known. Protected from sight by the encrypting shell of man-made machines, radiation in the novel thus demands an alteration of the metaphysical and psychic existence of the witness so as to convert sight out of its absence; like Abraham and Torok's theory of readability, radiation and Skvorecky's dreaming state:

does not define the act of reading but attempts to create avenues for reading where previously there were none. More radically, it demonstrates that interpretation is

¹⁶⁵ Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing*, p.6

¹⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Theatrum Philosophicum', in *Language, Counter Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, edited by Donald Bouchard, (London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.175

¹⁶⁷ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.211

possible even in the face of obvious obstruction. Such a theory is primarily concerned with converting obstructions into guides to understanding.¹⁶⁸

As *tieret*, ‘without betraying anybody, allowed the Wolf Man to achieve real or sublimated sexual gratification’, the dreaming state, the state that dreams, enables its subject ‘to live without having to say yes or no to reality or fiction while continuing to refer to both’.¹⁶⁹ For Derrida, the Marxist state is itself a sublimated secret that maintains the paradox of its existence and non-existence, where ‘one must assume the inheritance of Marxism, assume its most ‘living’ part, which is to say, paradoxically, that which continues to put back on the drawing board the question of life, spirit, or the spectral, of life-death beyond the opposition between life and death’.¹⁷⁰ As Ivan Frenkel reminds the recuperated Skvorecky, “‘We have stopped imagining Communism, and so it is decaying all around us.’” He asks “‘what is Communism, but a dream of a whole people? If an individual dreams utopia, he is just a dreamer. But once an entire people dream it, it becomes a reality.’”¹⁷¹ Marxist struggle, like the identification of the traumatic events that disrupt it, their terrestrial or extraterrestrial causes and the magic word, Josef Stalin which unites them, must be allowed to function as a floating or phantasmic signifier that crosses the divide between the subject’s unconscious and conscious topology, between fantasy or actual encounter in dreams and consciously experienced reality. ‘Fantasy and perception, insofar as they are memory traces,’ as Abraham and Torok say, ‘form an indissoluble unit’;¹⁷² the unit leaves a mnemonic trace called forth by its conscious reimagining. For Frenkel, ‘the only thing that can save us is a world capable of

¹⁶⁸ Derrida, ‘Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’, lii

¹⁶⁹ Derrida, ‘Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’, lviii

¹⁷⁰ Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, (London: Routledge, 1994), p.54

¹⁷¹ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.275

¹⁷² Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, p.92

collectively willing those aliens into our observation'¹⁷³ – a world of unconsciously experienced or imagined trauma rendered conscious through global communism's imaginative revolution.

The fictionalized origins to traumas of the Soviet Union are amalgamated and maintained against betrayal of both their truth and their falsehood, their material and immaterial nature, by the sublimated magic word and the action of its signified concept, Josef Stalin. Regardless as to the feasibility of exhuming magic words of actual individual Chernobyl survivors through the cryptomimetic reading of their dreams, the disclosure of a universal cause of the disaster through a single magic word is, in reality, a distinct impossibility. The irretrievable origin of the Chernobyl disaster, like other Soviet traumas, engenders a multiplicity of traumatic experiences shared by its survivors. Unlike the fictional possibility that Stalin is the origin of Chernobyl trauma, the lived experiences of the disaster once again cannot be attributed to a single source. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in their essay entitled '1914: One or Several Wolves' (2004), hold Freud accountable for misreading his Wolf Man case study. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that Freud's misreading occurs in his monistic interpretation of the Wolf Man's unconscious, a site, the essay's authors claim, that is fundamentally heterotopic. For Freud, they say:

there will always be a reduction to the One: the little scars, the little holes, become subdivisions of the great scar or supreme hole named castration; the wolves become substitutions for a single Father who turns up everywhere, or wherever they put him.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*, p.275

¹⁷⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'One or Many Wolves', in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, (London: Continuum, 2004), p.35

The scar, or Abraham and Torok's magic word that later signifies it, is a reduction of the many to the one: the single, omniscient, omnipresent father. If General Stalin is the instigator of destruction, death, the single source of the Soviet Union's traumatic history, then Freud, like a similarly militaristic figure, commands and marshals the Wolf Man's past, orders and parades its ranks, and extricates its losses. Deleuze and Guattari oppose the psychoanalytic conception of the traumatised unconscious as a site of convergence, akin to a root or source from which a tree or series of symptoms grow. Instead, they propose the conception of schizoanalysis, of the unconscious as a rhizome, a multitude of extended roots and shoots. 'The rhizome', they say, 'operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots'.¹⁷⁵

Psychoanalysis cannot change its method in this regard: it bases its own dictatorial power upon a dictatorial conception of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis's margin of manoeuvrability is therefore very limited. In both psychoanalysis and its object, there is always a general, always a leader (General Freud). Schizoanalysis, on the other hand, treats the unconscious as an acentred system, in otherwords, as a machinic network of finite automata (a rhizome), and thus arrives at an entirely different state of the unconscious.¹⁷⁶

In reality, the rhizomatic, acentred nature and traumatic knowledge of radiation's effects cannot be traced back to a single source. Cryptomimetic readings of individual Chernobyl survivors may or may not locate the functioning words or actions of their trauma, but the disclosure of a community's shared origin in a magic word or thing is an impossible act. If Deleuze and Guattari perceive Freudian psychoanalytic practice as unfit to justify its claim for a singular cause of trauma or neurosis, then globally unified communism as *Yellow Blue Tibia* depicts it struggles to collectively recall or represent an individual reality where radiation aliens were responsible for the Chernobyl explosion.

¹⁷⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'One or Many Wolves', in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.23

¹⁷⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 'Introduction: Rhizome' p.19

Rhizomatic traumas, multiple shifting perspectives, access routes, a grammar of the first person and a metaphysics of consciousness; the following chapter will explore how Chernobyl is expanded as a setting to realise new rhizomes of trauma, imagined by second hand eyewitnesses of the zone through a series of visual and virtual perspectives, narrative modes and genres. This second-hand eyewitnessing, a term by which we might refer to witnesses only belatedly present at Chernobyl, in its aftermath, having not been there at the origin, includes the first person videogame *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007), and the novels *The Dead Lake* (2014) by Hamid Ismailov and *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (2014) by Darragh McKeon.

Chapter Three: The Long Chernobyl: The Preamble and Intergenerational Aftermath of Trauma

The Two Catastrophes of the Human: Communism...

One of the most significant catastrophes of the twentieth century has been the collapse of the Soviet Union. Supposedly caused by a series of sudden, violent shifts (in economic and ideological organisation, scientific development and urban expansion), Soviet communism's dissolution – a traumatic event in its own right – left deep psychological scars upon populations across the USSR. The Chernobyl disaster, seen by many within the Soviet Union as a crisis point or death knell of the regime, is an earlier casualty of some of these same massive traumas (the power plant's hasty construction to meet rising energy needs was chronically underfunded, and thus the complex was dangerously obsolete upon initialisation). The fatal financial and technological blows upon Chernobyl and Soviet communism themselves stem from more protracted causes, however. For some critics of the USSR, the Chernobyl disaster was an inevitable result not only of the Union's rapid overinvestment in nuclear energy to supply its developing member countries, but also of long-term political corruption and moral degeneration, which permitted this precarious industrialisation. Reports on the running of the out-of-date Chernobyl power plant bear witness both to its dangerous operation beyond its recommended capacity to place its output on a level par with other, more modern nuclear stations, and the political demands to meet energy supply targets at all costs. In his recent article 'Tourism, Construction and the Ongoing Crisis at Chernobyl' (2014), Alexander Nazaryan summarises the narrative of the Chernobyl disaster as follows:

Very briefly: a shoddy Soviet reactor, moderated by graphite instead of water; a turbine generator coastdown test that senselessly called for the disabling of all emergency systems; the reactor's fall into an "iodine valley" and the consequent poisoning of the reactor by xenon-135; the incompetence and impatience of the plant's managers, especially of Anatoly Dyatlov, a supervising engineer who stubbornly drove the test forward and would later serve prison time for his role in the night's events; the indefensible lifting of all but six of the 211 control rods; the reactor going prompt supercritical; the inability to fully reinsert the control rods, leading to steam explosions and graphite fires; a biblical pillar of radioactive flame surging into the sky.¹

This ill-advised coastdown test, performed in aid of increasing Chernobyl's output to serve a growing demand for electricity, is reconstructed in David Thorpe's illustrated novella *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect* (1988). In it, Aleksandr Akimov, a nuclear technician in charge of the test, assures himself of the reactor's excellent quality:

This was a serious experiment. The men were excited. Forefront of science. Boldly going. The Pripyat station is a pioneer and must remain so. It is going to be the biggest in the world. It has on-load refuelling systems. It is highly efficient. Above all it can produce just what Russia wants in the cold war against the imperialists. The situation is harmless now. The plant is just ticking over. This power under our control. It is the power that fuels the sun. It is the building blocks of reality. And it is under my control. I've got an erection. I wonder if Anatoliy has. If I succeed in this little experiment perhaps I will be promoted. I might join the Academy of Sciences or become Minister of Energy and Electrification. I might eventually receive the Order of Lenin. Nothing can go wrong. This is a safe plant.²

Akimov's misplaced confidence in the plant's safety and its ability to outperform the energy production of the West runs in tandem with a more personal hubris: his desire for career advancement and boasts of sexual potency. He has been having an affair with a married woman, Petra. He gambles the excitement of their relationship against its public discovery,

¹ Alexander Nazaryan, 'Tourism, Construction, and an Ongoing Nuclear Crisis at Chernobyl', *Newsweek* (April 17, 2014), <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/04/25/tourism-construction-and-ongoing-nuclear-crisis-chernobyl-248163.html> accessed 4 May 2014

² David Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, (London: Hooligan Press, 1988), p.71

and this parallels the risk-reward of carrying out the test. At the controls of the reactor while the test is in progress, he remarks to himself:

I love to feel this power in my hands. A nuclear power station is the ultimate woman. That's what I sometimes think. When she goes critical I think of her as having multiple repeat orgasms. Petra. God what a bitch she can be when she's on heat. Should I really drop her? Can't we just be more careful? It is my job to keep her purring away. And she behaves beautifully. I know her inside out. She is safe now. And if I touch her there she will become excited. And if I touch her there she will calm down. So I touch her there. I just need to see how much the temperature will increase. I pull the boron control rods out there. Then I stick these up in her here.³

As Akimov's conflation of the sexual and the technological in this extract reveals, Chernobyl is a catastrophe of the human, caused by the actions of self-interested individuals egotistically weighing technical limits against personal gain. However, as was the case in reality, pressure is also put on the plant's energy production capabilities by the political system at large. Before the test begins, Akimov is told by the plant's director "If you fail now in our express task, we will have to wait another year before we can repeat the experiment. [...] And if that happens, then Moscow will be very displeased."⁴ The novella couples the Soviet bureaucracy's criminal impatience for results with the lead technicians' oversight of the plant's technical limits, reconstructing the implication that both groups, in their different ways, are guilty of causing the accident.

When the disaster occurs, it is at once a physical blow and a blow to political confidence. In Darragh McKeon's novel *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (2014), the Chairman of the Council of Ministers informs staff at a Moscow hospital via communiqué that an accident has occurred at Chernobyl:

³ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.72

⁴ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.67

“For your information, there has been a fire reported in Reactor 4 of the Ukrainian nuclear-power plant Chernobyl. The incident is under control but we have reports that the damage may be significant. However, I can reassure you that this incident will not stop the advance of nuclear energy.”

The last line is startling: it sits far outside the usual linguistic format of official communiqués. They are defending nuclear energy, as if anyone had questioned it, as if they were in the midst of a debate. Statements always come as unambiguous information. The Politburo communicates with orders or blank generalities [...] *They're saying it to reassure themselves.* Something catastrophic must have occurred.⁵

This unexpected defence of nuclear energy exposes a Žižekian Event,⁶ ‘a traumatic intrusion of something New which remains unacceptable for the predominant view’.⁷ Due to the Party’s relentless propagandising of nuclear power as “the peaceful Soviet atom,” nobody in the Soviet Union thought to question the proliferation of nuclear power stations or assurances of their safety; the very idea that something could go catastrophically wrong with them was denied outright by all but a few.⁸ The novel suggests that this baseless optimism and routine vagueness results from long-term political decay, which dismisses legitimate concerns as “alarmist, Western agitation,” inadvertently enabling the catastrophic failure of Chernobyl and in many ways by extension, Soviet communism. A socially subterranean, rhizomatic trauma in its own right, the spread of this slow political and moral degeneration is obfuscated

⁵ Darragh McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, (London: Viking, 2014), p.66

⁶ From this point onwards, the capitalised word “Event” refers to Žižek’s theory of the New, which explodes into our everyday experience of reality and is disavowed by us.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit*, (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p.78

⁸ Vasily Nesterenko, the former director of the Institute for Nuclear Energy at the Belarussian Academy of Sciences, was one of the few. He is arguably the inspiration for the fictional character Grigory Ivanovich Brovkin, a surgeon who works at the Moscow hospital in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*. Like his fictional counterpart, Nesterenko ‘was in Moscow on business ‘On that day, April 26. That’s where I learned about the accident’, he recalls. “‘Western voices’ [of Soviets concerned about the safety of Soviet nuclear power plants] were being shut out. There were a thousand taboos, Party and military secrets. And in addition everyone was raised to think that the peaceful Soviet atom was as safe as peat or coal.’ Vasily Nesterenko, ‘Monologue About The Facts’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), p.207

not only by the Soviet system's own rhetoric – 'a conspiracy of ignorance and obedience'⁹ – but also the traditional, Western events-based model of trauma, which is equally blind to the enduring, traumatic conditions that long predate a resulting, sudden instance of disastrous occurrence. Michael Rothberg argues in his preface to *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (2014) that:

The slow violence of climate change [both ecological and political] does not only require a shift in temporal perception away from the shattering event of classically conceived trauma; it also requires a recalibrated understanding of humanist history and subjectivity that displaces (without entirely eliminating) the positions of victim and perpetrator.¹⁰

The Soviet subjects' overarching exposure to systemic propaganda and obscurantist pseudo-legalese displaces or restructures what constitutes a victim or perpetrator of trauma, following this new theory of slow violence. The authorities' political action blurs (without erasing) the clear definitions of victim and perpetrator; Chernobyl, Vasily Nesterenko reports 'is already history – the history of a crime'.¹¹ This crime, of obfuscating the actual extent of the disaster – always already in motion as an extension of the existing climate of political repression – has, in a way, no true perpetrators, only Party members maintaining the corrupt status quo. Vladimir Ivanov, the former First Secretary of the Stavgorod Regional Party Committee, says: 'I'm a product of my time. I'm not a criminal'.¹² He continues:

⁹ Nesterenko, 'Monologue About The Facts', p.209

¹⁰ Michael Rothberg, 'Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda – Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects', in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, (London: Routledge, 2014), xvi

¹¹ Nesterenko, 'Monologue About The Facts', p.211

¹² Vladimir Ivanov, 'Monologue About Political Strategy', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.200

the papers write that the Communists fooled the people, hid the truth from them. But we had to. We got telegrams from the Central Committee, from the Regional Committee, they told us: You must prevent a panic. And it's true, a panic is a frightening thing.¹³

Ivanov was ordered by his superiors to mollify any public concerns surrounding the disaster, preventing the frightening Event of mass panic by submitting to the old Soviet system: the slow violence of forced positivity and propaganda. He remembers: 'We were all part of that system. We believed! We believed in the high ideals, in victory! We'll defeat Chernobyl! We read about the heroic battle to put down the reactor that had gotten out from under man's control'.¹⁴ Regarding his motivation of the liquidators, he recalls shouting:

"Brothers! If I run away, and you run away, what will people think of us? They'll say the Communists are deserters." If I couldn't convince them with words, with emotions, I did it in other ways. "Are you a patriot or not? If not, then put your Party card on the table. Throw it down!"¹⁵

While the anonymity granted by the Soviet system does not excuse these individual acts of partisan blackmail and coercion, 'The problem [of widespread political corruption] was so huge, and concerns so many people, it was hard to know where to start. There was also no one to blame, nobody whom you could point at for being the culprit',¹⁶ as Robert van Voren writes in his book *On Dissidents and Madness: From the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev to the "Soviet Union" of Vladimir Putin* (2009). For Sam Durrant, writing in his essay 'Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning' (2014), 'Rather than imagining a

¹³ Ivanov, 'Monologue About Political Strategy', p.196

¹⁴ Ivanov, 'Monologue About Political Strategy', pp.197

¹⁵ Ivanov, 'Monologue About Political Strategy', p.199

¹⁶ Robert van Voren, *On Dissidents and Madness: From the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev to the "Soviet Union" of Vladimir Putin*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p.223

traumatised collective psyche, trauma studies is on surer ground when it theorises the state's role in the process of subjectification'.¹⁷ Following Durrant, the study of trauma at Chernobyl ought to unearth the traumatic repercussions of widespread Soviet political corruption, which has a tendency to dwarf and thus obscure individual outbursts like Ivanov's, in order to implicate the State as a whole, highlighting 'the importance of understanding trauma as an inevitable part of our ideological construction as subjects, our subjection to the state and the myriad forces of modernity'.¹⁸ Ivanov's political subjectification of the liquidator as patriot or deserter is echoed in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*. The novel represents the power plant's staff and emergency response teams claimed by the Chernobyl disaster as "bare life" – the *Homo sacer* theorised by Giorgio Agamben¹⁹ – who are casually thrown at the radiation willingly believing the Soviet heroic rhetoric of victory over the escaped atom. A regiment of soldiers mobilised as liquidators are reduced to mere bodies or automatons, stripped of their humanity, as they prepare to enter the power plant to seal off the destroyed reactor:

Rubber facemasks have been delivered and Grigory orders everyone to wear them. They put them on and all traces of personality are erased: everyone now moves and walks with a sinister sameness, an inhuman mien. Hair becomes important for identification purposes. Vygovski recognizes people by remembering their hair; blond or black, crew-cut or curly. Voices filter through the masks as if disembodied.²⁰

¹⁷ Sam Durrant, 'Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning', in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, p.92

¹⁸ Durrant, 'Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning', p.93

¹⁹ In Agamben's theory, the *Homo sacer* or sacred man is a figure of Roman law: an individual who is banned from civil society, deprived of all rights, and can be killed by anyone with impunity, but not sacrificed in religious ritual. Agamben updates the *Homo sacer* figure to describe the twentieth-century reduction of subjects by State power to "bare life", considered as mere bodies to the exclusion of basic human rights (humanitarian aid, legal representation, free speech etc.). His argument, outlined in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) reads the extermination of the Jews in Nazi concentration camps as a twentieth-century example of the destruction of the *Homo sacer*, before applying the concentration camp as a paradigm to later political bodies.

²⁰ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.81

The body of the *Homo sacer* – its hair colour, in this extract – is its only form of identity and individuality. Here, the role of mere bodies is to protect public life against radiation via containment and liquidation measures – a making live of this public and letting die of liquidators,²¹ to use Michel Foucault’s theorisation of the biopolitical in his March 1976 lecture at the Collège de France, ‘Society Must Be Defended’. The soldiers’ trauma, outwardly observable as an inhuman mien, is a symptom of being ideologically marshalled by the State into bare life. In both the novel’s reconstruction of Chernobyl’s “deactivation” and the actual cleanup, the traumatised soldier as *Homo sacer* is at once totally enthralled by the State’s narrative myth and dissociated from reality, ‘so socially identified with’ the heroic world and ‘completely numb to [experience]’.²² ‘And in those times [of trauma resulting from catastrophe] the Russian shows how great he is. How unique’, one of the soldiers interviewed for *Voices from Chernobyl* recalls. ‘We forget the bad parts and remember that’.²³ This patriotic ethos is reconstructed in McKeon’s novel, albeit in a tone that is open to interpretation, one we might read as ironic. At the end of the first day of liquidation, Grigory, sitting under a statue of Prometheus in Pripyat, says the following to a soldier, who sits down beside him, offering a cigarette: “‘I’m a surgeon. I never expected to live through a day like this.’” The soldier responds with: “‘You remember, my friend, what comrade Lenin told us: “Every cook has to learn how to govern the state.”””²⁴ Here, the traumatic experience of the disaster’s aftermath is thinly-disguised by Soviet political rhetoric. Lenin’s words fail to lift the pair’s spirits, and the anxious atmosphere continues as we are told: ‘They finished their

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, translated by David Macey, (London: Penguin, 2004), p.247. While the liquidators were not intentionally sacrificed to the radiation at Chernobyl, their deaths were not actively prevented, since reliable information regarding the site’s radioactive conditions and adequate protective clothing were not provided. It is in this sense that the State let the liquidators die.

²² Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2000), p.35

²³ ‘Soldier’s Chorus’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.44

²⁴ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.135

cigarettes in silence'.²⁵

The novel depicts, we will now see, that the Soviet subject as bare life has already been established long before the occurrence of the nuclear disaster. This is courtesy of the monotonous, repetitive procession of everyday, propagandised Soviet life,²⁶ which is experienced at all levels of Soviet society. Every Saturday, Grigory, a surgeon at the Moscow hospital, has to endure an

interminable meeting. The sound of paper being shuffled. Monotone speeches. Grigory sits in a hospital committee room at the weekly gathering of department heads. They each have assigned chairs, all wearing the same suit they had worn the previous Saturday, and the one before that, and the one before that. He sits and listens and has no idea of the time. These meetings can take hours, speaker after speaker; the same statements being uttered; the same political posturing.²⁷

In this excerpt, the arrangement and appearances of bodies are unchanging as are the modulation of voices and the topic of speeches. Like the body of the liquidator at Chernobyl, medicine in the hospital serves political purposes before those of trauma relief. Speakers' presentations reveal

Balance sheets taking precedence over patients, buying inferior equipment because it looks good, even if it brought with it tangible medical problems, the total subjugation of all their medical decisions to the whims and protocols of directives from the Secretariat.²⁸

²⁵ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.135

²⁶ The Russian word *Byt*, 'meaning, roughly, the dull, routine hopeless dreariness which inheres in the physical reality of one's everyday life' articulates the Soviet conditions of slow trauma. For further discussion on the manifestations and effects of *Byt* in Soviet culture, see Yvonne Howell, *Apocalyptic Realism: The Science Fiction of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Russian and East European Studies in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Culture Vol. 1*, (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 1994), p.18

²⁷ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.65

²⁸ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.66

The novel repeats this disclosure of the State's domineering intervention in all humanitarian or scientific affairs in its representation of the Chernobyl explosion, which is a disavowed political trauma of the New: the frame-changing idea that something unacceptable or inconceivable has occurred. As the reactor overheats and explodes in the novel,

The operators pick themselves up, dazed. There is a task, a function. What to do? Surely there's a button, a series of codes, a procedure, always a procedure. Miraculously, they find the operating manual, damp but useable. They locate the section, Ears numb from the piercing alarm. Eyes streaming. A section. Scanning through pages. A title: 'Operational Procedures in the Event of Reactor Meltdown'. A block of black ink, two pages, five pages, eight pages. All the text has been wiped out, paragraphs hidden behind thick black lines. An event such as this cannot be tolerated, cannot be conceived, such a thing can never be planned for, as surely it can never happen. The system will not fail, cannot fail, the system is the glorious motherland.²⁹

The power plant, as in Thorpe's novella, metaphorically represents something else. Here, it is the Soviet political system, which, like the plant, cannot tolerate the pressure of a meltdown – it too fails. Had it not been for the censorship of the emergency operational procedures section of the plant's operating manual – a method of directly controlling opinions about nuclear power – the Chernobyl disaster might have been limited or prevented. Chernobyl was always already doomed, however, as instructions on procedural responses to the event of reactor meltdown, like the voices warning against the carrying out of dangerous tests at the plant or its absence of safety regulations, were silenced from the beginning. 'The same holds for Soviet Communism', as Žižek reminds us: 'it is clearly insufficient to say that, in the years of Brezhnev, communism 'stagnated', it 'exhausted its potentials, no longer fitting new times'; what its miserable end demonstrates is that it was a historical deadlock *from its very*

²⁹ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.61

beginning'.³⁰ This is the theory of long, slow trauma, a mapping of trauma, 'not to one historically locatable event but to history itself, as one long catastrophe'.³¹ Indeed, the checks and balances on political power, which, if in place, would have laid down clear guidelines defining acceptable safety regulations and output limits of nuclear power plants, were present at the very beginning of communism, in *The Communist Manifesto*. These limits on the intervention of politics in all affairs were discarded by the adoptive Soviets from the outset. Soviet communism failed as soon as it aborted its task of dismantling 'the carrying on of industries for the account of private individuals, [...] the wage system, [and prevented the conversion of] the state into a more superintendence of production'.³² What Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* term the 'requirements of Truth; not the interests of the proletariat, but the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general'³³ appear to exist only after the Chernobyl disaster, after the dissolution of Soviet communism. Those who returned to their evacuated villages against the authorities' orders, where nature reclaimed her rightful home in the absence of human society, say: 'we have the best kind of Communism here – we live like brothers and sisters'.³⁴ One states:

I have two bags of salt. Who needs the government? Plenty of logs – there's a whole forest around us. The house is warm. The lamp is burning. It's nice! I have a goat, a kid, three pigs, fourteen chickens. Land – as much as I want; grass – as much as I want. There's water in the well. And freedom! We're happy. This isn't a collective farm anymore, it's a commune. We need to buy another horse. And then we won't need anyone at all.³⁵

³⁰ Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit*, p.108

³¹ Durrant, 'Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning', p.93

³² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works Vol. I*, translated by Moore, Samuel, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p.33

³³ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p.30

³⁴ 'Monologue By Those Who Returned', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.77

³⁵ 'Monologue By Those Who Returned', pp.74-75

Following the shift from collective farming or Stakhanovism to communal self-rule free from the centralism of land, livestock and wage distribution, the villagers live, in spite of the radiation, in a dream utopia beyond the influence of government. The dream appears real, while it lasts. However, each villager, which ‘belongs to no class, has no reality’, figuratively ‘exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy’.³⁶ The existence of this ideal or true communism is short lived, as the reality of radiation shatters it and begins to affect both the villagers’ physical and mental health; ‘It’s not just the land that’s contaminated, but our minds. And for many years, too’,³⁷ a letter written by a Chernobyl evacuee reads. Actual life in the zone becomes impossible: ‘the chickens had black cockscombs, not red ones, because of the radiation. And you couldn’t make cheese. We lived a month without cheese and cottage cheese. The milk didn’t go sour – it curdled into powder. Because of the radiation’.³⁸ True, post-Soviet communism, then, like the authenticity of its Soviet counterpart, never properly existed; it was also a fantasy that never really began. Where Soviet communism was doomed from the beginning by political and moral degeneration, the villagers’ post-Soviet brand of communism fell foul of the radioactive conditions carried over from its prehistory. The slow, traumatising of irradiated nature within the Exclusion Zone can thus be conceived, paradoxically, as both victim and perpetrator of radioactive death, irreversibly poisoned by and poisoner of mankind. With this in mind, the next section will closely analyse Thorpe’s illustrated novella, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, specifically the subjectivising of nature by science into a productive worker body that breaks free from human control and wreaks its revenge upon us.

³⁶ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p.30

³⁷ Lyudmila Polenkaya , ‘Monologue About Expensive Salami’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.183

³⁸ ‘Monologue by Those Who Returned’, p.70

...*And Nature*

In the times before we possessed an understanding of the Earth's geological forces, as Žižek reminds us in the feature-length documentary *Examined Life* (dir: Astra Taylor, 2008), we obfuscated our powerlessness against natural disasters by inventing various reasons to explain their origins. When something traumatic happened in nature, such as a tornado or tsunami, we were compelled to assign meaning to it in order to sidestep the realisation that there was nothing we could do to prevent it. For example, interpreting a natural catastrophe as divine punishment makes it easier to comprehend in the aftermath (in which a plan of action is formulated and then collectively followed: the Gods were angry and therefore we must appease them, etc.). Here, the catastrophe is 'not just some terrifying blind force – it has a meaning'.³⁹ A variant of this theory of ecology as ideology is practiced in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, where the catastrophe is rationalised not due to our inability to understand it, but due to our disavowal of it. The confrontation of its true, scientific cause would force us to completely reconsider our methods of energy production, something that the Soviet Union, by then heavily dependent on nuclear power, was unprepared to do. Rather, for the Party authorities to sustain the belief that nuclear power remained a viable, safe source of energy on behalf of the USSR's populace, Viktor Brioukhanov and Nikolai Fomin, respectively the Chernobyl power plant's manager and its chief engineer, were singled out as culprits of the catastrophe. Each was stripped of his Party membership and sentenced to ten years of labour camp internment. Igor Kostin writes in his book *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*: at 'their closed trial, lasting a few weeks in Chernobyl and ending in July 1987 [...] Brioukhanov was reminded that, at the time of activation of reactor Number Four, he had neglected certain indispensable checks'.⁴⁰ This interpretation of the disaster as a punishment for individuals' neglect becomes a cover-story for the systemic disregard of the plant's

³⁹ Slavoj Žižek in *Examined Life*, directed by Astra Taylor, (USA: Zeitgeist Films, 2008)

⁴⁰ Igor Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, (New York: Umbrage Editions, 2006), p.101

crucial safety regulations. These measures exist for good reasons, since nuclear reactions, in their essential, uninterrupted nature, are incredibly destructive; these colossal, unimaginable events naturally occur all the time in realms beyond our everyday experience: in the sun and, occasionally, in naturally-formed uranium deposits on Earth. At Chernobyl, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* suggests, these regulations were indeed collectively ignored. Vladimir Andreiovich Vygovskiy, the chief advisor to the Ministry of Fuel and Energy, informs Grigory about America's Three Mile Island incident while they are present at the Chernobyl liquidation coordination meeting at the Party Headquarters in Pripyat. Vygovskiy says that the Three Mile Island plant

had an accident. Seven years ago, this was. Not a catastrophe, but a big problem, a serious incident. But the Americans learned from it. After the accident they put in place a safety system, one that would anticipate problems instead of just fixing things when they were already broken. I read of these changes, I studied their developments. I said to myself we need to do something like that here. I brought my proposals to the committee, but before I could present them formally, there were conversations in corridors, I was pulled into doorways. There was much talk about me, they said. They might decide to downgrade me, they said. Not outright threats – you know the way – just talk. So I did the smart thing, I withdrew my recommendations. I reworded my critique. I did as the entire nation has done. I stayed silent. I backed away. Because I did this, they made me chief advisor to the ministry.⁴¹

This multitude of dissuading voices that Vygovskiy encounters, which causes him to retract his proposed revisions of nuclear power plants' safety protocols, implicates not individual leaders but the Soviet authorities at large in discounting the possible dangers of nuclear power in favour of national unity; 'we are all guilty'⁴² of this mentality, Grigory replies to his comrade, echoing the sentiments of Thorpe's novella *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect* regarding the subject, which were analysed in the preceding section. In reality, the Chernobyl

⁴¹ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.79

⁴² McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.79

supervisors refused to learn from even their own earlier mistakes: on 29 September 1982, a fuel channel blockage in the plant's Reactor One caused a partial meltdown when the operator accidentally closed the flow control valve. No safety measures were subsequently devised to counteract future operator errors of this sort, and the incident was kept from the public's attention. One of the causes of the 1986 disaster, Alexander Shlyakhter and Richard Wilson claim in their article 'Chernobyl: the Inevitable Results of Secrecy' (1992) was a 'failure to study "precursors" of the accident (partial meltdown at the Leningrad nuclear power plant in October 1975 [and at the] Chernobyl Unit I accident in September 1982)'.⁴³ The closed trial of Brioukhanov and Fomin after the 1986 disaster, 'where Soviet technology was cleared of any wrongdoing',⁴⁴ declared that the Event was an avoidable result of the omissions of a few – a sustainable blow to the Soviet system – thereby obfuscating the reality that Shlyakhter and Wilson expose: 'the complete failure of the Soviet system to manage modern technology in a safe manner'.⁴⁵ Exonerating the system after the disaster, the trial blindly declares Soviet communism's 'attempts to contain/control this excess of madness [of nuclear power], to renormalize it, to re-inscribe it into the normal flow of things'⁴⁶ successful.

Thorpe's novella, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, situates this dangerous short-sightedness at the global level, detailing humanity's overall complacency in its scientific adaptation of nuclear power. The novella is, its subtitle reads, 'the autobiography of Doctor Unknown Chaos, a Record of some Notable Events in the years between 1950 and 1986 with Further Consequences'.⁴⁷ This autobiography of the nuclear as New, a history of disavowed dangers which explode into our reality, is mirrored by the autobiography of the titular individual, Doc Chaos. The novella's premise is that the life of this person is the human

⁴³ Alexander Shlyakhter and Richard Wilson, 'Chernobyl: the Inevitable Results of Secrecy' in *Public Understanding of Science*, (Issue 1 Vol. 3, July 1992), p.252

⁴⁴ Igor Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.98

⁴⁵ Shlyakhter and Wilson, 'Chernobyl: the Inevitable Results of Secrecy', p.253

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit*, pp.78-79

⁴⁷ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.3

embodiment of the introduction and catastrophic progress of the nuclear age; both nuclear power and Doc Chaos, as this section will argue, serve human needs which are at once necessary as everyday essentials and excessive. The juxtaposition of daily twentieth century life and extreme, destructive requirement is depicted by the novella in society's harnessing of nuclear power, a raw natural process contained within and directed from a nuclear reactor.

Doc Chaos narrates:

A little while after my sixth birthday something happened. On October 17, 1956, the country celebrated the dawn of a progressive new era. There was much international trumpet-blowing about it on the radio and in the magazines and newspapers. Her Majesty, the Queen of Normalism, Elizabeth II, switched power from the Calder Hall, Magnox nuclear reactor onto the national grid. For the first time in history, people were cooking their egg and bacon on energy derived from the same source as that which powered the sun itself.⁴⁸

Here, the ceremonial, documented uptake of nuclear power for modern living is juxtaposed with an assessment of its true nature: it is an artificially generated energy, a manufactured double of excessive, unimaginable natural resources. This comparison hints at the precariousness of our actions here, and, as at Chernobyl, the slightest transgression of certain limits, whether by human error or other, less immediate causes, can result in chaos. Doc Chaos himself mirrors this configuration, since he too is an unnatural phenomenon. In his infancy he is contained in artificial casing, and his emergence from it is accompanied by his propensity for unexpected violent outbursts. He claims: 'I am a Post-Natural Phenomenon'.⁴⁹ As a prematurely born British baby in 1950, he is sustained by medical intervention provided by the newly-set up National Health Service, 'cocooned [...] inside a techno-mother, the opposite of moist and dark and squidgy, walled with plastic and steel, fed by chemicals,

⁴⁸ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.14

⁴⁹ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.61

oxygen and electricity'.⁵⁰ He continues to live unnaturally, a symbol of the human defiance of nature akin to the technological reproduction of nuclear power: 'I was a sickly child', he narrates. He recalls:

By strict Darwinian practice, I should not have survived. I would never have been allowed to live according to the laws of natural selection. I was coaxed through a whole litany of diseases: influenza, chickenpox, chronic bronchitis, excema, asthma (complicated by the bronchial infections), tonsillitis, appendicitis, pneumonia, pneumoconiosis, mumps, glandular fever and whooping cough. Apart from this, I suffered from cerebral palsy, a condition I was born with, which meant that I had only a modicum of control over various muscles and had to wear enormous braces over my legs, which certainly made it harder to fall over and, because of their weight, encouraged the development of stamina and endurance.⁵¹

When he starts school, this strange-looking yet highly intelligent child is an introduction of the New, hated by and ambivalent towards his classmates, whom he terms "normals". 'My contemporaries knew there was something odd, deficient and special about me so I would be bullied and picked on mercilessly',⁵² he narrates. Furthermore, he recalls:

From an early age I was segregated at school upon the arbitrary basis of biological features, some of which were only latent. Boys isolated in such a way are encouraged to be cruel. My difference from themselves was something they could not tolerate. "Moron! Moron! Moron!" I learnt early on the narrow, piggish-minded basis of their normalism and rejected it there and then. "Moron! Moron! Moron!" My reaction was merciless. They did not expect a cripple to fight back. To use his leg iron as a weapon.⁵³

⁵⁰ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.8

⁵¹ Thorpe: *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.9

⁵² Thorpe: *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.12

⁵³ Thorpe: *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.12

This intolerable Event of the New to normality, which explodes upon provocation into sudden violence through unexpected means, mirrors a contemporary crisis of confidence in nuclear power: the Windscale nuclear incident of 1957.⁵⁴ For Chaos:

When the truth about the events at Windscale Number One plutonium-production reactor on 8-12 October 1957 eventually emerged almost twenty years later, I had already changed my mind about nuclear power, so I was no longer surprised by what had happened. It seemed perfectly to be expected. It is normal. But it is the sort of normality that Normalism hates to admit exists.⁵⁵

As with the closed trial at Chernobyl, the unpredictable Newness of nuclear power which emerges as humanity gets to grips with it does not deter its further scientific adaptation. After the Windscale Reactor One accident, Chaos's father reassures his son, saying 'as nuclear power was a new technology there were bound to be mistakes early on'.⁵⁶ Here, the New is subsumed into the new: normalism hubristically attempts to accommodate the first dangerous anomalies of the developing technology of nuclear power by interpreting the Windscale accident as merely a minor, acceptable setback. Seeing this Event for what it really is, Chaos argues that the threat of nuclear disaster *is* the state of (disavowed) normality, which restages forces it cannot fully control. He illustrates this premise, saying: 'In fact what happened at Windscale was a series of blind stumblings that might just as well have been made by a drunk trying to drive a car without its lights on. I.e., it was totally normal'.⁵⁷

Normalism's disavowal of imminent nuclear chaos involves an abjection of its waste

⁵⁴ The reactor core of Unit One at the Windscale nuclear power plant, in Cumberland, caught fire and burned for three days, releasing a radioactive cloud into the surrounding countryside that spread across the U.K and mainland Europe. No one was evacuated from the nearby area, but the irradiated milk of dairy farms had to be disposed of, to prevent contamination of the local food chain. For a full overview of the Windscale Event, see Lorna Arnold, *Windscale 1957: Anatomy of a Nuclear Accident*, (London: Macmillan, 1995).

⁵⁵ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.15

⁵⁶ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.15

⁵⁷ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.15

or excess bi-product, the unusable error in the trial that Windscale and other early reactors represent. For Julia Kristeva, abjection, ‘the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses’.⁵⁸ Chaos recalls the following event, occurring shortly after the Windscale accident:

I remember going for a walk round one of my favourite haunts, down by the stream near Bluebell Wood, when my nostrils were more than mildly offended by the rancid smell I associated with old school milk bottles left lying in the playground. Examining the stream I found that the land was flowing not with milk and honey, but just with the former, and that what’s more it had gone off and the stench was appalling.⁵⁹

The smell of irradiated, soured milk draws the young Chaos towards the site of Windscale’s abjection, which is also the site of confusion: he ‘had a vision of a nuclear power plant being used to make milk instead of cows (being used to make milk), and of something going wrong and the milk coming out poisoned so they had to throw it away’.⁶⁰ Following Kristeva, meaning collapses in repugnance of ‘A “something” [...] about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination’.⁶¹ The act of discarding this milk incurs what Kristeva terms the improper or unclean: ‘Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung’, she writes, ‘is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk [...] I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach’.⁶² In Kristeva’s psychoanalysis, this ‘milk cream, [which] separates me from the mother and

⁵⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.2

⁵⁹ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.15

⁶⁰ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.15

⁶¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p.2

⁶² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, pp.2-3

father who proffer it',⁶³ echoes the discarded milk at Windscale, which acts as a catalyst for the separation of Chaos from the world of adults and their mistakes. Regarding the accident, he asks: 'Why else would this happen? They shouldn't let stupid people work the machines [...] I would do better'.⁶⁴ Chaos rises to his challenge, becoming a brilliant neurosurgeon in adolescence – one who has in his pursuit of knowledge and perfection completely disregarded the limits of ethics. He becomes an amoral force of pure science, wishing to be 'Neat and orderly. Precise and scrupulous. Without room for error and absolutely foolproof'.⁶⁵ On the subject of his reclusive high school years, he recalls the following: 'I began to study medicine, after having mastered neurology. I knew my experiments bothered my tutors so I performed them in private'.⁶⁶ In adulthood, after being awarded a PhD by Oxford University 'for some piddling piece of research so trivial I can't remember what it was',⁶⁷ he trials the act of brain transplantation between two homeless men, Eric and Malcolm, both of whom he picked up outside a doss house in Wigan. Eric's 'brain did survive' the transplantation procedure, 'Although it was sadly unable to activate the body of Malcolm [...] mainly because the spinal cord was improperly connected'.⁶⁸ After the operation, Chaos reports: 'It could still recognise me, it could speak. I won't repeat the foul language it uttered for fear of besmirching his noble reputation. It could blink and even lick its lips'.⁶⁹ An abject body that is between Eric and Malcolm, neither fully one nor the other, "'I" is expelled. The border [between the two identities] has become an object'.⁷⁰ This failed experiment is followed by a series of further abjections, of Chaos's "noble" science, by the

⁶³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p.3

⁶⁴ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.15

⁶⁵ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.22

⁶⁶ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.22

⁶⁷ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.29

⁶⁸ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.24

⁶⁹ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.24

⁷⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, pp.3-4

BMA, when they hear of his horrific experiment. At his subsequent trial before the board of the BMA, he is informed of the charges and punishments brought against him:

“Doctor, you stand accused of gross malpractice, illegal medical research, endangering patients’ lives, neglecting your duties in favour of your private obsessions, assault, attempted manslaughter, kidnapping, stealing corpses from the morgue, bribing officials, namely coroners, and of breaching just about every clause of the BMA Code of Practice. [...] You seem to be a perversion, lacking in any sense of honour, and like all perverts seek to taint others with your own disease. You are hereby expelled from this Association, disbarred from practice for the rest of your natural – or unnatural – life, and you will shortly be hearing from the police in connection with your other crimes.”⁷¹

Through his malpractice, Chaos exposes the abject or outside of ethical science – not only what it refuses to tolerate but also what it tolerates and disavows, hides within itself. ‘In this sense, then,’ to quote Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, ‘the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation’.⁷² As Chaos sees it, science internalises an unethical aspect, contradicting itself and constructing ‘the excluded and illegible domain that haunts the former domain as the spectre of its own impossibility’.⁷³ This impossibility, Chaos announces at his trial before the board, is readily apparent:

“Your morality preaches the benefits of science. But its results are choked cities, sick oceans and forests, death and the suffering of millions of creatures, human and non-human. Be warned, arrogant sightless rulers of this imminent hell, by your hypocritical judgement of my futuristic researches into adapting the human being to the environmental needs of a drastically altered future, altered by your very selves,

⁷¹ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.37

⁷² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.3

⁷³ Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, xi

your own terrible fate is hereby cast and that future is irrevocably mine!

For I am the true face of your morality. I have discarded your dishonesty and hypocrisy. I pretend nothing. And so, I am the face of the future. I am Pure Science made flesh. If you condemn me, you are condemning yourselves. Like they say, if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."⁷⁴

Science, though it upholds an authorised code of ethical practice, has a detrimental and irreversible ecological effect on the planet. Nuclear power plants have polluted the cities, oceans and forests, heralding the imminent yet disavowed environmental hell that Chaos warns of. After being disqualified by the BMA, he realises that 'From this point on, an alternative identity began to become apparent to me. One that would bring my point home much better, and one with which I might, one day, merge. Therefore, I started to rewrite my own past'.⁷⁵

In a chapter entitled 'Empire State (Pseudo-Autobiography 2)', Chaos narrates a lengthy timeline of the proliferation, technical advancement and failures of nuclear power plants in first-person, from the point of the reactions. It is revealed that by 1973,

17 countries hooked into the world with 167 reactors (holiday homes for lucky me) churning away at 61,000 MWe [Mega Watt electrical], piling up that nuclear waste. But it wasn't enough. More! I wanted more! The world's most useless commodity – but not to me. Cooling ponds throughout the world filling up with burning deadly waste, nobody knows what to do with it. Anal culture of England says give it to us, we love shit here, the worse the better. [...] March '75: Brown's Ferry plant in deepest Alabama (my largest mansion so far). A technician's candle and a draught of air cause a fire that eventually spreads into the reactor causing \$80m worth of damage, 18 months out of commission and the kind of interior decor I love! Sept. '77: At Hunterstone B plant they forgot about the makeshift pipe they'd rigged in the cooling system. Upon depressurisation it causes £14m worth of damage and a several month shutdown. March '78: At Rancho Seco near Sacramento, California, a technician drops a lightbulb on a control panel. The panel shorts. Readings go haywire bouncing from one end of the dial to the other. The computer responds to these wrong readings. The reactor core shoots up and down in temperature and pressure, Steam generators

⁷⁴ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.37

⁷⁵ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.39

dry up. Others feed water instead of steam into the turbines. Valves open and shut at random. Sounds like my sort of paradise. The bulb only cost 25 cents. Bargain.⁷⁶

Here, Doc Chaos is the discursive embodiment of the pure nuclear reaction, a force that always gravitates towards chaos. The destructive realisation of nuclear power within the plants, which echoes the violent transgression of moral science by Doc Chaos's brain transplantation experiment, 'emerges within the system as incoherence, disruption, a threat to its own systemacity'.⁷⁷ This disruption of the systems of nuclear technology and ethical medical practice result from man's scientific overexploitation of nature. The Events of nuclear emergency and brain transplantation, though they must be abjected, are inextricable, the novella reveals, and play a necessary role in the scientific progress towards the irradiated, apocalyptic future, defined by Doc Chaos as 'lust for control over the uncontrollable, as long as you remain'.⁷⁸ In order to remain, he informs us, the human race, that his experimented-upon bodies are the ones that matter. The terrible future is indeed irrevocably his, since 'the whole point of brain transplantation is to assume a completely new body – for whatever reason; age, self-abuse, disease, or, in my own case, to avoid detection by my enemies'.⁷⁹ The survival of consciousness via the continual switching out of bodies as they burn out is necessary to survive in the disease-rife age of the drastically altered future, which is heralded by the occurrence of as-yet imminent global ecological catastrophe. This age echoes Butler's "unlivable" and uninhabitable zones of social life,⁸⁰ which are here biological in nature. This catastrophic future, whether it is radioactive or polluted in some other way, forms 'a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation', which fails 'to qualify as the fully human'. Furthermore, it 'might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that

⁷⁶ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, pp.63-64

⁷⁷ Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, p.39

⁷⁸ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.79

⁷⁹ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, pp.24-25

⁸⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, p.3

matter, ways of living that count as “life”.⁸¹ What really matters here, then, is not bodies at all, since all biological life will degrade beyond usability, but matter itself – life which is beyond the body. After performing the perfected brain transplantation operation on himself, Chaos remarks:

it becomes possible, with training, using bio-feedback techniques mapped to advanced visualisation meditation, to manipulate one’s energy field.

After the fourth transplantation, and extensive sessions involving the manipulation of brain wavelength using electrodes attached to computers programmed with my own ideal brain encephalograph patterns, I developed an uncanny control over my host body, and also over my own energy field. For example, I was able consciously to control my autonomic nervous system and extend my sensory field up to a meter beyond skin level.⁸²

This extension of consciousness beyond the physical confines of the body provides Chaos with the key to life in the “unlivable” future, which grants access to a radical re-articulation of the human. ‘Not only do bodies indicate a world beyond themselves,’ Butler writes in her book’s preface, ‘but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies “are”.’⁸³ As Chaos escapes his own bodily boundary, or at least that of his current host body, he exclaims:

I became convinced I was onto something! Enlightenment experiences flooded my mind, I would lose all sensation of location. Place and differentiation became fuzzed. Everything was energy. And I saw, in a vision, at the basis of it, the root, if you like, the handle on which consciousness is pinned: dna. In other words, sex.

Sex had been up till now the sole means of transmitting consciousness from one body to another, using the medium of dna. There was something in dna that allowed it the privileged function of being able to host immanent consciousness. But now I had found a way around that. All I had to do was loosen a bit of my

⁸¹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, p.16

⁸² Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.41

⁸³ Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, ix

consciousness, manufacture a piece of dna with the properties I required, and match the two together.⁸⁴

What bodies “are” – consciousness pinned to dna – can be transmitted not just between bodies, but spread across all matter. Chaos’s newfound science enables him to see that:

Mankind is not the centre of the universe nor can one-dimensional logic hope to describe the wonder of the repeating patterns of the fractal-infested, morphologically resonating, quantum leaping, multi-dimensional energy fields that we perceive as material and spiritual reality.⁸⁵

This discovery at once mirrors and subverts Sandor Ferenczi’s plan for psychoanalysis. In his *Clinical Diary*, as Ruth Leys informs us in *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ferenczi

imagined using psychoanalysis to end the “chains of acts of cruelty”, which perpetuate ruthlessness and self-assertion, thereby creating a world based on harmony and trust. “Is progress possible to a point where *selfish* (passionate) tendencies are entirely renounced?” he asked, and answered: “Only if the centres of self ceased to exist as such, and, if separate individuals (atoms, etc.) were to come to the ‘conviction’ that it is better *not* to exist as separate beings. Unification of the universe at an ideal point.”⁸⁶

Chaos’s experience of the universe beyond human perception, which consists of decentred, universalised matter spread across repeating patterns of energy fields, differs from Ferenczi’s vision of psychoanalysis benefiting mankind. Where Ferenczi’s decentred, selfless self renounces passion alongside psychological and material individuality ‘to propose the ethical

⁸⁴ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, pp.41-42

⁸⁵ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.49

⁸⁶ Sandor Ferenczi, *Clinical Diary*, p.153, in Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.175

priority of the “not-I” or feeling of universality represented by the child or wounded adult’s capacity for selfless immersion in the other’,⁸⁷ Chaos’s universality is a passionate, purely selfish destructiveness:

I come to destroy because I have the secret of birth. I come to destroy because I adore lust. Don’t panic I am a doctor. I am Pure Science incarnate, made flesh. I am curiosity, empiricism and naked lust without respect for anything but self-interest. I love knowledge with no respect for consequences. I’ll infect everyone equally.⁸⁸

For Chaos, the unification of the universe at an ideal point, which infects everyone equally, is the Chernobyl disaster, the origin of the global ecologically catastrophic future. After meeting, falling in love with and marrying another scientist, Jo, who, like himself, has perfected the science of brain transplantation and matter transfer, Chaos narrates: ‘I had already planned the best honeymoon for him/her a scientist and lover ever could, a night that would truly go down in the world’s history. The date was 25 April 1986’.⁸⁹ Through manipulation of their energy fields to engage with the universalised matter, the couple kick-start the Chernobyl Reactor Four meltdown:

This, Jo, is pure love. We are surrounded by steam. The hissing of its escape is like a pit of vipers. The pipes begin to rupture. A hydrogen bubble forms as steam meets zirconium and immediately explodes. Concrete rains everywhere. The explosions rip into the hall above. We are climaxing together. It is beautiful. It is frightening.

A 200 tonne crane smashes down onto the core. The light ripples and shimmers, coruscates brilliantly with the explosions and the blue light of the radioactivity in the escaping, vaporising water. We are in control. I rule. I command. I am powerless. I am victimised. I glitter with variety. Some of me lasts only microseconds as I change and run up and down the nucleic ladder. I glitter with the anti-Christmas tinsel of lanthanum-140, ruthenium-103, caesium-137, iodine-131,

⁸⁷ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.175

⁸⁸ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.49

⁸⁹ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.68

tellurium-132, strontium-89, strontium-90, and yttrium-91, such poetic names. Elsewhere I leave behind uranium-235, -238, -237, plutonium-239, -240, -241 and -242. The alchemical philosopher's stone has been achieved. I am yellow with gold and uranium oxide.⁹⁰

Chaos and Jo extend rather than end the “chains of cruelty” or radioactive decay. The ideal point of universal unification, which leads to the increase in global background radiation caused by the disaster that affects populations around the world, is an explosive, traumatic transformation of atomic matter – a selfish immersion, contrary to Ferenczi's selfless psychoanalysis, in the other, in us. Seeing the dangerous radioactive remainder released by the Chernobyl explosion as the offspring produced by his atomic union with Jo, Chaos remarks:

At first, in the surrounding Ukraine countryside showers of our children fall. They are instructed upon contact with humans to go straight for the thyroid gland! [...] Many more must make that sacrifice before the transformation of the human race is complete. *Mutatis mutandis!*⁹¹

Mutatis mutandis – changing only that which needs to be changed via radioactive contamination and mutation – at once prepares and punishes us for the catastrophic, “unlivable” future that we have allowed for ourselves. ‘Ordinary people were punished, and for what?’ Chaos asks. ‘For believing lies, fairy tales, for failing to use the future properly. For settling for less than being able to make decisions about how their lives are supplied. For letting me build my homes, have my way. For bearing witness to my supreme omnipotence’.⁹² For Chaos, the radioactive bodily disintegration of the world's population is

⁹⁰ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, pp.74-75

⁹¹ Dave Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.75

⁹² Dave Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.78

not really a destruction of life but an ascension, not a disabling but ‘an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all’.⁹³ At the end of the novella, bodies, through their degeneration, come to matter only as alternate matter: the matter, instead, of the universal energy field that Chaos and Jo have merged with. Although the corporeal matter of human bodies degenerate in ‘The successive waves of deaths [that] occurred up to years or decades afterwards’,⁹⁴ ‘Radioactivity is a superior form of matter to human life matter because it modifies it’, Chaos claims. ‘It is the next stage on the evolutionary scale. It is absolutely destructive. Or, to put it another way, absolutely creative’.⁹⁵

Phantoms of the Landscape in All That is Solid Melts Into Air and The Dead Lake

The traumatic decaying of nature into one disavowed universality is also depicted in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*. As well as reconstructing the authorities’ frantic attempts to deal with the nuclear disaster, the novel portrays the Event’s impact on one Ukrainian family, who live on a farm on the outskirts of Pripjat. This focuses on the story of the teenaged Artyom and his search for his father, a fire fighter who helped to tackle the blaze at Reactor Four, in the wake of the disaster. In the aftermath of the explosion, when Artyom’s father departs to attend to the burning reactor, the rest of the family is evacuated to Minsk, Belarus. Later, after hearing about casualties suffered by the emergency response teams sent to Chernobyl and fearing his father may be among them, Artyom searches the junkyard on the outskirts of the city for the rubbish collector, Maksim Vissarionovich. This man knows which hospital

⁹³ Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, p.23

⁹⁴ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.78

⁹⁵ Thorpe, *Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect*, p.75

the Chernobyl fire fighters were sent to, and thus becomes essential to Artyom's search. The junkyard is an intolerable site of decay, a universalisation of abject matter:

Gulls dropped down from the sky and skimmed over a vast synthetic territory, a seascape that was entirely comprised of things discarded. Bulbous plastic bags, strings of electrical cable and soggy cardboard boxes were congealed into a single, amorphous mass.⁹⁶

The State harnesses the process of decay to abject its waste, to cleanse itself of the improper or unclean and thus go on living. 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out', it might say. 'I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*'.⁹⁷ The novel's reconstruction of this mass abjection of matter in the junkyard, in which 'Bulldozers surfed the waves of slosh, surging uncertainly against the semi-solid waste [...] and backed up against a concrete wall and spat out [...] chewed-up contents',⁹⁸ also occurs at the individual, bodily level. After getting a lift in one of the vehicles across the site,

Artyom opened the cab door and the air slithered into his nostrils, leaving a filmy residue against the back of his throat. He had never smelled anything like it. He clasped his hand to his nose and breathed only into the cupped space of his palm.⁹⁹

Despite the necessity of this continual renewal for social and biological survival, the abjected domestic waste is disavowed. Personally confronting its existence is a new experience for Artyom; as with all abject material, rubbish is imprisoned in 'a deep well of memory that is

⁹⁶ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.262

⁹⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p.3

⁹⁸ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.262

⁹⁹ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.263

unapproachable and intimate’,¹⁰⁰ and recollected only in its literal return to the repulsed senses. Rubbish, without being confronted in this way, is unthinkable. For Artyom, the junkyard ‘was not a place he could ever have imagined, a place so man-made’.¹⁰¹ This disavowal of the abject mirrors earlier events in the novel, which were discussed in the previous sections of this chapter: the authorities’ exclusion from the social body of abject material, namely the claims of the undermanagement or mismanagement of nuclear power. Here, to quote Kristeva, ‘It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’,¹⁰² such as Vygovskiy’s revisionist proposals that disturb the Soviet hierarchy and the limits to what one can advocate. However, the unclean, unhealthy body returns with a vengeance: it is incurred in the authorities’ frantic efforts to normalise the catastrophe, to stabilise the situation and thereby prevent widespread panic. Artyom’s father, poisoned by the radiation when helping to extinguish the fire at Reactor Four, must be abjected and disavowed, imprisoned within a series of silent barriers: a hospital. ‘Reabsorbed into the trajectory of the Idea [of developing nuclear technology]’, to further quote Kristeva, ‘what can defilement become if not the negative side of consciousness – that is, lack of communication and speech?’ The abject, radioactive, decaying body of Artyom’s father is situated beyond ‘a border of discourse – a silence’.¹⁰³ Both actual testimonies of fire fighters’ loved ones and their fictional reconstruction in McKeon’s novel highlight this shifting of contaminated liquidators’ bodies to behind figurative and literal walls of silence: ‘The doctors kept telling them they’d been poisoned by gas. No one said anything about radiation. And the town [of Pripjat] was inundated right away with military vehicles, they closed off all the roads’,¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p.6

¹⁰¹ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, pp.263-264

¹⁰² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p.4

¹⁰³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p.30

¹⁰⁴ Lyudmilla Ignatenko, ‘A Solitary Human Voice’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.7

Lyudmilla Ignatenko, the wife of liquidator Vasily, recalls in interview. In *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, Artyom and his sister Sofya, accompanied by their mother and Maksim to the hospital that their father is being held in, notice that ‘There was nobody else there. The place was wrapped in silence. The only sounds were the echoes of footsteps that rang through the corridors. It was disconcerting to see a public building so empty’.¹⁰⁵ A series of physical and verbal barricades confront the group, which must be negotiated: ‘At the front door of the hospital they used the last gold tooth to bribe their way into the building’,¹⁰⁶ a set of which Maxim gave to the family for such a situation. He departs after he ‘slipped some money into Artyom’s mother’s hand’¹⁰⁷ for her and her children’s financial security. Following this,

In the corridor on the third floor the attendant introduced them to the nurse. She took Artyom’s mother aside and spoke to her quietly. As their conversation continued, Artyom watched his mother edge away from her, palms raised, as if she had just walked into the cage of a wild animal.¹⁰⁸

For Artyom and Sofya, this verbal obstacle outside the room their father is being held in proves harder to navigate than the earlier physical one. At a remove from the situation, both physically and in terms of their limited understanding of their father’s condition. Artyom ‘heard the woman say, “His skull is compromised.”’

Sofya heard it too.
Artyom asked Sofya, “Compromised from what?”
Sofya wouldn’t reply.

¹⁰⁵ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.264

¹⁰⁶ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.264

¹⁰⁷ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.265

¹⁰⁸ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.265

“Compromise”. Isn’t that something you do when you can’t agree? How can a skull be compromised?¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, ‘They walked into the room, and everything was much better than Artyom expected it to be. His father was sitting on the bed, playing cards with men they knew: some of their neighbours – Yuri Polovinkin, Gennady Karbalevich, Eduard Demenev’.¹¹⁰ This is the only visit to their father that Artyom and Sofya are allowed, since

Artyom didn’t get to see his father when the tumours metastasised, not within his body, but instead crawling to its surface, till they clasped his face, trailing his features like poison ivy. He didn’t get to see him when he was producing a stool thirty times a day, comprised mainly of blood and mucus. When his skin started cracking on his arms and legs. When every evening his sheet would be covered in blood and Artyom’s mother would give the soldiers’ directions as to how to move him, and make sure her husband had fresh bedding for the night.¹¹¹

For Artyom and Sofya, their father’s radioactive decay is a “phantom” scene, ‘Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects’.¹¹² The word “compromised” is a broken symbol for Artyom in that its meaning is impenetrable to him, unable as it is to describe the event. It entombs his father in a mnemonic crypt, an imaginative incorporation of the similarly impenetrable sealed walls of the room. The unwitnessed event within these walls is thereby encrypted, phantomised. Ultimately ‘The idea of the phantom’, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok theorise in *The Shell and the Kernel* ‘concerns itself with the unwitting reception of

¹⁰⁹ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.265

¹¹⁰ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.265

¹¹¹ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.275

¹¹² Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.130

someone else's secret'.¹¹³ The siblings receive their father's secret dying, an event hidden by both the hospital and their mother, who:

couldn't lie and couldn't face her children, so she stayed there beside him, unable to touch him because it would bring too much pain. Her children brought the soup to the attendant at the reception desk, who would deliver it to a table at the entrance to the ward. They never asked to see their father. He belonged to their mother now.¹¹⁴

When witnessing the junkyard before journeying to the hospital to see his father, the novel reveals:

Artyom would return frequently to this moment, in the following weeks, when he watched sickness engulf his father, when blood seeped out through the pores of his father's skin, when he began to realise that he could never understand or predict the pathways that someone's life could take.¹¹⁵

The imperative of trash, a displacement of history into memory, of Artyom's father's radioactive disintegration into Artyom's recollection of decaying domestic waste, is an effect of the phantom in which the past, via *Nachträglichkeit*, constitutes imagined meaning in the absence of empirical evidence in the present. Deprived of its reality, his father's radioactive disintegration, displaced into phantomhood, haunts Artyom's experience and imagination of the (un)natural world. On the one hand it returns in the junkyard, a literal yet excessive scene, and on the other, fantastical stories about mythical worlds told to him by his father. 'In one that they returned to often, the living and the dead were connected by bridges made from

¹¹³ Nicolas Rand, Editor's Note to 'Secrets and Posterity: The Theory of the Transgenerational Phantom', in Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.168

¹¹⁴ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.276

¹¹⁵ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.264

Kalyna wood. They crossed easily from one side to the other, doing this so readily that after some time they could no longer distinguish between the two realms'.¹¹⁶ After his father's death, Artyom returns to this story himself, alone:

Particles skimming through the air. Underneath what he sees and smells and hears. Snowflakes concealing their star-tipped patterns. Animals curled up under the ground seeing out the winter, their hearts beating with only the faintest of rhythms. His father is here: a shadow dancing, merged into the life around him. Inhabiting the cells of these things, just as radiation, displaced atoms, inhabited his own living cells, changing him.¹¹⁷

In this mythical realm of the dead, it is the fantasy and not the reality of nature that exists. Artyom's father appears as a phantom of nature, displaced from perceivable reality into an alternate, imagined dimension: the world of the story. The story imaginarily restructuring his being is a haunted return of his unwitnessed atomic restructuring. 'It is a fact that the "phantom," whatever its form, is nothing but the invention of the living', Abraham and Torok write. It is merely 'the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of the love object's life'.¹¹⁸ The phantom, then, is not that of the father or his traumatic past. Rather, the phantom is Artyom's – someone who did not witness Chernobyl or its effects firsthand. It is his experience of his dying father's concealment, of its subjective non-existence – 'a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious – for good reason. It passes – in a way yet to be determined – from the parent's unconscious into the child's'.¹¹⁹ I claim that in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* and the other novel to be analysed in this section, Hamid Ismailov's *The Dead Lake*, this transformation of the parent's repression into their child's crypt and phantom occurs by way of physical tremors. Artyom's memory of his father's tale

¹¹⁶ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.276

¹¹⁷ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, pp.276-277

¹¹⁸ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.171

¹¹⁹ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.173

is induced as he ‘waits for the air to return to stillness, leaves vibrating from the thudding hooves’¹²⁰ of the herded cattle of his native village.

In *The Dead Lake*, the atomic weapons tests at the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site (SNTS) in Kazakhstan are carried out not far from Kara-Shagan, the way station of the East Kazakhstan Railway on the Great Steppe. For Yerzhan, the novel’s young protagonist who, like Artyom, does not understand either nuclear reactions or their effects, ‘the joy of the steppe, the joy of music and the joy of childhood always coexisted [...] with the anticipation of that inescapable, terrible, abominable thing that came as a rumbling and a trembling, and then a swirling, sweeping tornado from the Zone’,¹²¹ the mountainous region surrounding the test site. Here, the unwitnessed event of a nuclear explosion is implicated by the physical tremors it carries across the landscape. Ismailov’s novel charts Yerzhan’s development from childhood to adolescence against the history of two man-made traumas: the continuing test nuclear explosions and a past, repressed domestic trauma of sexual abuse that occurred in the preceding generation, of his mother by his father. These traumas replay or haunt Yerzhan as physical, bodily tremors, and effect within him their psychological symptoms, which this section will now explore using Abraham and Torok’s theory of the phantom.

For Žižek, nature is non-existent. In a footnote in his book *Living in the End Times*, he writes:

With the recent devastating earthquakes in the interior of China, the notion of the Anthropocene [today’s industrial period in which humans have acquired the status of a geological force] has acquired a new actuality: there are good reasons to suppose that the main cause of the earthquakes, or at least of their unexpected strength, was the construction of the gigantic Three Gorges dams nearby, which resulted in the creation of artificial lakes; the additional pressure on the surface seems to influence the balance of the underground cracks and thus contribute to the earthquake.

¹²⁰ McKeon, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.276

¹²¹ Hamid Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, (London: Peirene Press, 2014), p.46

Something as elementary as an earthquake should thus also be included in the scope of phenomena influenced by human activity.¹²²

In *The Dead Lake*, Yerzhan's uncle, aptly named Uncle Shaken, works as a watchman in the Zone. One day, he takes the children of the nearby school, including Yerzhan, on a trip to the test site:

Towards evening Uncle Shaken took the children to the Dead Lake. 'Don't drink the water and do not touch it,' he told them. It was a beautiful lake that had formed after the explosion of an atomic bomb. A fairy-tale lake, right there in the middle of the flat, level steppe, a stretch of emerald-green water, reflecting the rare stray cloud. No movement, no waves, no ripples, no trembling – a bottle-green, glassy surface with only cautious reflections of the boys' and girls' faces as they peeped at its bottom by the shore.¹²³

Following Žižek, the novel's quasi-mythical lake, with its unnatural stillness and colour, is man-made. It is a remainder, a crater resulting from the impact of one of the nuclear detonations. The quakes caused by this Anthropocene of test explosions haunt Yerzhan in the form of neuroses: internalised, intergenerational echoes of the event of his mother's unspoken sexual trauma. During the school trip, he experiences a quake upon confronting a phantom of the preceding generation:

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

¹²² Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), p.331

¹²³ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.65

immediately joined in with her father's laughter. Only Yerzhan looked at him horrified. A strange tremble seized him from inside.¹²⁴

This internal tremor, triggered by the disguised figure of Uncle Shaken in hazmat gear, is a displaced, *Nachträglichkeit* experience of his mother's sexual trauma, which also took place in the Zone: 'no one, except perhaps God, knew how Yerzhan's mother, Kanyshat, became pregnant with him and by whom'.¹²⁵ The novel elaborates on this secret event, made secret, secreted in a crypt:

All that Yerzhan knew – from what Granny Ulbarsyn told him – was that at the age of sixteen Kanyshat had run off into the steppe after her silk scarf, which had blown off. The steppe wind lured her on, further and deeper, as if teasing her, on and on towards the sunset. And what happened after that was so fantastic that Yerzhan couldn't make any sense of it. The sun was already sinking when suddenly it soared back up into the sky, glowing brightly. A tremor ran through the earth from the horizon. A whistling wind sprang up out of nowhere, then faded away for an instant, only to reverse its direction with a mighty rush so sudden that the dust of the steppe swirled up to the heavens in a black, hurtling tornado. And when Kanyshat, more dead than alive, discovered that she was at the bottom of a gully, there standing over her scratched and bloody body was a creature who looked like an alien from another planet, wearing a space suit.¹²⁶

Kanyshat's rape possesses all the features of her son's neurosis: the tremor, the hurtling tornado and the extraterrestrial-like phantom figure in the hazmat suit, all wrapped in silence; 'Since that day Kanyshat hadn't spoken a word'.¹²⁷ For Yerzhan, the man-made quakes and the encounter with Shaken – a father disguised first as an alien and then as an uncle – return the traumatic, unconscious intergenerational secret of his conception, an originating man-made trauma of repressed sexual violence. As Nicholas Rand writes:

¹²⁴ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.65

¹²⁵ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.16

¹²⁶ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, pp.16-17

¹²⁷ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.17

Abraham and Torok's work enables us to understand how the falsification, ignorance, or disregard for the past – whether institutionalised by a totalitarian state (as in former East Germany) or practised by parents and grandparents – is the breeding ground of the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of individuals, families, the community, and possibly even entire nations.¹²⁸

Kanyshat's silence inaugurates the phantom which besets the entire community of Karashagan, handing it down from one generation to the next. Maria Yassa writes in 'Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok – The Inner Crypt' that:

The existence of the phantom in a parent creates a psychically mute zone, unexpectedly inaccessible and incomprehensible to the small child, who, failing to understand the sudden psychic absence of the parent, attempts to metabolise and is therefore compelled to incorporate this mute aspect of the parent, at the price of creating a mute psychic zone in the child.¹²⁹

Incorporation, as Abraham and Torok theorise it, 'results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such'.¹³⁰ Kanyshat's loss of virginity and consequent psychic mute zone, detectable by her mutism, haunts the following generation via another zone: the topographical Zone surrounding the test site where the traumatic, repressed origin was conceived. Yerzhan incorporates the parental silence in the form of this topographical Zone, which consequently becomes a psychic mute zone of his own: 'Not much troubled Yerzhan in those days. There were of course the explosions in the Zone, which the boy never

¹²⁸ Nicolas Rand, Editor's Note to 'Secrets and Posterity: The Theory of the Transgenerational Phantom', in Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.169

¹²⁹ Maria Yassa, 'Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok – The Inner Crypt', *Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review* (Vol.25, No.2, 2002), p.84

¹³⁰ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.130

called by their proper name out of visceral fear'.¹³¹ Kanyshat's repressed loss is inaccessible to Yerzhan. He cannot acknowledge this incorporated traumatic loss, which is displaced from consciousness by the unnameable tremors that nevertheless, as traumatic sensations rather than words, hint at its – and his – origin. Thus, 'the truth can be rediscovered', to paraphrase Lacan in 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', 'in the traces that are inevitably preserved by the distortions necessitated by the linking of the adulterated chapter to the chapters surrounding it'.¹³² Yerzhan and Aisulu are half-brother and sister – Aisulu's mother is Baichichek, Shaken's wife. The young siblings are ignorant of their true, familial relationship, which, in its state as unknown knowledge, preserves the adulterous, silenced episode of the previous generation in secret. This unconscious knowledge is dangerous. If Yerzhan and Aisulu's relationship as sweethearts were to develop into marriage, it could spell incestuous doom for the community of Kara-Shagan. While their relationship unwittingly receives their parents' secret in the form of a phantom, it already exists in Yerzhan's very conception, as mentioned earlier. To return to Lacan, the secret 'has already been written down elsewhere. Namely [...] in monuments: this is my body'.¹³³ On his way, perhaps, towards incest, the phantom haunts Yerzhan at a visible level, at the level of his body. At the end of the school trip to the test site, 'the bus driver called Uncle Shaken to help him with a punctured tire. Yerzhan was left in charge of the class'.¹³⁴ Next,

He briefly took Aisulu's hand. Then he let go of it and pulled off his T-shirt and trousers and walked calmly into the forbidden water. For a moment he splashed about in it and then, to the admiring and terrified twittering of Aisulu and the others, he

¹³¹ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.50

¹³² Jacques Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' in *Écrits: A Selection*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p.53

¹³³ Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', p.53

¹³⁴ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.66

walked out of the water, shook himself off as if nothing had happened and dressed again in his canvas trousers and Chinese T-shirt.¹³⁵

Yerzhan's daring dip in the forbidden lake impresses Aisulu, strengthening their growing relationship. For Yerzhan and Aisulu, Shaken's forbidding of the lake ('don't drink the water and do not touch it')¹³⁶ at once prohibits and preserves the unspoken, unconscious threat of incest. Yerzhan's transgression of his father's law unleashes a supernatural effect of the phantom: the water prevents his physical growth. This prevention, an effect that is phantomatic because it is inexplicable and unnameable, creates a difference in physical height between the couple over the following year:

And *it* happened when Yerzhan was twelve years old and Aisulu was eleven. It was in the fifth class at school, after the long winter holidays. First the girls and then the boys in their class started to outgrow Yerzhan. But, after all, he was a year older than them, and he had always been taller and stronger. At first the difference wasn't very noticeable: so what if Serik or Berik had stretched out a bit, that didn't make them any brighter! But when Aisulu, his little mite Sulu, his slim-winged swallow Sulu, started overtaking Yerzhan, he sensed that something was wrong. The same fear that had always begun with a trembling in his knees and frozen as a heavy ache in his stomach seemed to have risen higher now, right up to his throat – and got stuck there, preventing his body from growing.¹³⁷

Yerzhan's stunted growth becomes a crypt that 'hides as it holds'¹³⁸ the phantom, to paraphrase Derrida in *Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok*, his foreword to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (1986). The condition is a supernaturally induced psychosomatic affliction, whereby a mental trauma or melancholic

¹³⁵ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.66

¹³⁶ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.65

¹³⁷ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.71

¹³⁸ Derrida, Jacques, 'Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok' in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xiv

loss manifests itself within or upon the body. For Abraham and Torok, not only can parents' secrets be entombed within their child's crypt as a phantom, but a phantom can also haunt a subject when their love object's loss is refused or goes unmourned. This latter possibility is demonstrated by one of Torok's clinical examples: 'The person suffering from an ulcer (necrosis) is bearing a love-object who, unable to digest the loss of his beloved subject, must die. The person bearing the necrosis has had to swallow both the loss and the unspeakable circumstances that led to it'.¹³⁹ Here, the phantom is not the lost object but the object's loss of the subject, which is incorporated and translated into the subject's physical ailments or deficiencies. Yerzhan's psychosomatic affliction, a swallowing both of his lost Aisulu and the historical circumstances of this loss (the cryptic inheritance of his parents' repressed past in the form of internalised tremors, test nuclear explosions and the dead lake associated as symptoms of this phantom origin), is unspeakable. One day, when Yerzhan and Aisulu are teenagers,

after school boys and girls set off back home in pairs. Yerzhan walked in front of the donkey, not glancing round at sad, silent Aisulu. He so badly wanted her assurances that no matter what was wrong and no matter what happened to him, she would still love no one but him and marry no one but him, as she had promised in their childhood. On the other hand, he realised that she was almost half a head taller than him, and if *it* carried on...He couldn't think beyond that.¹⁴⁰

While it is not possible for Yerzhan to think of losing Aisulu, it is possible, through his incorporation of her, for her to think of losing him. In this inexpressibility of possible future loss, much like Abraham and Torok's theory of melancholic, actual loss, Yerzhan's 'illnesses (of mourning and psychosomatic growth stunt) are to be translated: [...] "The Lover will

¹³⁹ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.163

¹⁴⁰ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.73

recover the Beloved”’,¹⁴¹ his wishful fantasy might read. It is not a literally dead Aisulu, via the psychosomatic illness, who is in mourning here. Rather, as an emotionally dead love object, sad and silent, she is incorporated from the memories of her childhood promise, the lover who will recover the beloved. Yerzhan employs a ‘fantasy of empathy with “the lost object who is bereft of me”’,¹⁴² in which Aisulu suffers the loss of him. In longing for him in this fantasy, she attempts to break the phantom’s curse upon his body: ‘How could Yerzhan know that she cried at night [...] tucked up in bed with her head under the sheets, that she was dreaming of qualifying as a doctor and finding a cure that would stretch out her Yerzhan’.¹⁴³ Medical intervention is not the focus of Yerzhan’s concerns here, since the attempts of healers to cure him of his affliction have all failed. He denounces these individuals as ‘Fools, fools, fools: one took him to a quack medicine woman, another quartered him alive with horses, and as for the one who was educated – he couldn’t do anything either, even with an X-ray and a reactor!’¹⁴⁴ What is of importance is not Aisulu’s fantasy of healing Yerzhan, but Yerzhan’s fantasy of Aisulu’s dreaming of this goal. This fantasy, unlike those incorporations of Abraham and Torok’s endocryptic patients, is not taboo, since Aisulu, Yerzhan’s love object, is not dead, but can be returned to him: in opposition to Abraham and Torok’s theory of endocryptic patients in the eighth chapter of *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ‘Self-to-Self Affliction: Notes of a Conversion on “Psychosomatics” (, Yerzhan *can* ‘fantasise (indirect though this activity may be) about the object’s tears, laments, self reproach, etc.’.¹⁴⁵ How could Yerzhan know of his lost love object’s lamentations, tucked out of sight in a different hut to his at Kara-Shagan, if not by imagining it? The novel does not clarify if Aisulu’s grief is an actual event or, as one might otherwise read it, a fantasy incorporated by Yerzhan, who is unable to face his romantic loss of Aisulu

¹⁴¹ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.162

¹⁴² Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.162

¹⁴³ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.90

¹⁴⁴ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.79

¹⁴⁵ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.162

directly. He confronts and attempts to close the gap in height and emotional distance between them in other traces, which we can glean from Lacan, however: ‘in the legends which, in a historicised form, bear my history’.¹⁴⁶

The tale that Granny Ulbarsyn tells Yerzhan about the mythical hero, Gesar, sticks in his mind:

The bold Gesar did not enjoy his happiness and peace for long. A terrible demon, the cannibal Lubsan, attacked his country from the north. But Lubsan’s wife, Tumen Djergalan, fell in love with Gesar and revealed her husband’s secret to him. Gesar used the secret and killed Lubsan. Tumen Djergalan didn’t waste any time and gave Gesar a draught of forgetfulness to drink in order to bind him to her forever. Gesar drank the draught, forgot about his beloved Urmai-sulu and stayed with Tumen Djeralan.

Meanwhile, in the steppe kingdom, a rebellion arose and Kara-Choton forced Urmai-Sulu to marry him. But Tengri did not desert Gesar and freed him of the enchantment on the very shore of the Dead Lake, where Gesar saw the reflection of his own magical steed. He returned on this steed home to the steppe kingdom and killed Kara-Choton, freeing his Urmai-Sulu.¹⁴⁷

This legend bears Yerzhan’s history insofar as it enables him to identify the usurper who has taken his Aisulu: Yerzhan’s other uncle, Kepek. Yerzhan no longer goes to school with Aisulu on the donkey because he is ashamed of his affliction; Kepek accompanies her in his stead, which Yerzhan reads jealously. When Kepek returns Aisulu from school one day, Yerzhan notices that ‘she sat in front of him instead of behind, so that his arms were around her youthful body as he was holding the reins’.¹⁴⁸ ‘Yerzhan didn’t greet them. And at night he burnt, not in an imaginary blaze but in the genuine infernal fever of his own boyish hell’.¹⁴⁹ Thus, ‘he of course knew who the Kara-Choton in his life was – Kepek’.¹⁵⁰ Reading Granny

¹⁴⁶ Lacan, ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’, p.53

¹⁴⁷ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, pp.90-91

¹⁴⁸ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.74

¹⁴⁹ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.75

¹⁵⁰ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.91

Ulbarsyn's tale enables him to speculate on possible real events and bodily sensations which have until this point remained unspoken; he 'was convinced that this story [...] was about him. He had to solve the mystery that had sunk its claws into his body and soul'.¹⁵¹ The tale refers not only to the liquid "draught" of the Dead Lake which Yerzhan has absorbed and made him lose or "forget" Aisulu and the subsequent "rebellion" against him by Kepek, but also 'the terrible demon Lubsan' which attacked the steppe kingdom from the north, which happens to be the direction of the test site from Kara-Shagan. Obsessing over the tale, 'Yerzhan rarely slept at night now, and it wasn't as if he caught up during the day – no, sleep simply wouldn't come to his eyes. He tossed and turned from one side to the other, caught in the same circle of burdensome thoughts that were impossible either to control or to accept'.¹⁵² Tossing and turning in the liminal space between sleep and wakefulness, Yerzhan's psychic mute Zone, with the interpretative aid of the tale, crosses sides, from unconsciousness to consciousness, identifying itself at once as the origin of his trauma and the trauma of his origin. It appears to him of its own volition in the following outburst:

"The Zone! The Zone! That's the terrible demon Lubsan." He suddenly sat up straight in bed. The Zone had taken him captive, the Zone had given him the draught of forgetfulness to drink, and until he reached the Dead Lake – the same Dead Lake in which he had once bathed – he would never be freed from this enchantment. Didn't the story say that there, by the Dead Lake, Tengri would free him of the enchantment and show him his own reflection and the reflection of the magical steed on which he had galloped throughout his childhood?¹⁵³

Granny Ulbarsyn's tale symbolises at once a topographical space (the Zone! the site of the originating trauma's occurrence!) and draws up a suspect list of the trauma's possible perpetrators or co-symbols: Grandad Daulet? But his wife was Granny Ulbarsyn. She

¹⁵¹ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.91

¹⁵² Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.90

¹⁵³ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, pp. 91-92

couldn't possibly be in love with Yerzhan. And Petko didn't fit either, because he didn't have any wife at all. Uncle Shaken? Could Baichichek be Tumen Djergalan?'¹⁵⁴

For Derrida, the phantom – portrayed in *The Dead Lake* by the terrible demon Lubsan – is identified as such by the word “*Fors*”, the title of his foreword to Abraham and Torok’s *Cryptonomy*. *Fors* (derivative of the Latin *Foris*, meaning “outside, outdoors”¹⁵⁵ and, as a plural of “for”, ‘designates the inner heart, “the tribunal of conscience”, subjective interiority’¹⁵⁶; *Fors* ‘thus may mean both exteriority and interiority at the very same time’,¹⁵⁷ Zoltán Dragon suggests, ‘an impossible place in the possible space, invisible in the visible’.¹⁵⁸ *Fors* for Yerzhan means the Zone, the outdoor space that is at the same time inside him, incorporated as an impossible, invisible event with no conscious referent – his mother’s rape, his traumatic conception; the Zone, as a crypt, marks ‘a definite place in the topography. [But] it is neither the dynamic unconscious nor the ego of introjections. Rather, it is an enclave between the two, a kind of artificial unconscious, lodged in the very midst of the ego’.¹⁵⁹ Here we must not only embrace Derrida’s theory of the phantom encrypted in physical place, but also in psychic space, as in Abraham’s theory outlined in his ‘Notes on the Phantom’. The phantom also has a “linguistic turn”, obscuring itself within co-symbols, one of which must be selected and spoken. ‘For Abraham, an analyst is given only symbols, not meanings: data that lack a missing part that “can be determined” [...] The aim of analysis is to restore the symbol’s unity [between psychic space and physical place, between trauma and its site of occurrence, between victim and perpetrator], thus overcoming the separation, and

¹⁵⁴ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.91

¹⁵⁵ Barbara Johnson’s note in Jacques Derrida, ‘Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok,’ translated by Barbara Johnson, in Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*, p.ix

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, pp. xi-xii

¹⁵⁷ Zoltán Dragon, ‘Derrida’s Specter, Abraham’s Phantom: Psychoanalysis as the Uncanny Kernel of Deconstruction’, in *The AnaChronisT*, (vol. 11, 2005), p.259

¹⁵⁸ Zoltán, ‘Derrida’s Specter, Abraham’s Phantom: Psychoanalysis as the Uncanny Kernel of Deconstruction’, p.261

¹⁵⁹ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.159

making it possible for the patient to heal through speaking.¹⁶⁰ Yerzhan's aim, simultaneously as analyst and as analysand, is to venture into the Zone, a silent space that reflects the silence of the phantom, in order to name the symbol's missing part: the co-symbol that is the perpetrator of the intergenerational trauma. In doing so, he will exorcise this phantom from his body, heal his body from its growth affliction, and reverse the separation with his Aisulu it caused:

Perhaps his unspeaking mother, Kanyshat, held the key to the mystery that controlled his life and body. Perhaps he shouldn't search for any Dead Lake. Perhaps he should free his mother from her enchantment? Perhaps if words could leave her mouth, then the spell would fall away from his puny body? And the steed of his childhood would gallop once again to rescue his Aisulu.¹⁶¹

Questioning whether he should search for a dead lake in the landscape or break his mother's silence, Yerzhan reveals how the phantom hides in both topographical and linguistic uncertainty. In which geographical and verbal formation does it hide? The phantom's crypt 'must be guarded in order to go unnoticed and thus undisturbed'.¹⁶² The phantom 'produces false traces in order to ward off any attempt at the disclosure of the crypt'. Granny Ulbarsyn's tale produces these false traces; it can be read as a 'faulty map' of the crypt filled with fictional names leading to the false incrimination of family members. The Zone also leads Yerzhan by diversion and misdirection. One day, Yerzhan enters the Zone on horseback; it

¹⁶⁰ Zoltán, 'Derrida's Specter, Abraham's Phantom: Psychoanalysis as the Uncanny Kernel of Deconstruction', p.258

¹⁶¹ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.93

¹⁶² Zoltán, 'Derrida's Specter, Abraham's Phantom: Psychoanalysis as the Uncanny Kernel of Deconstruction', p.258

was 'so quiet it set his ears ringing [...] like his mother's eternal silence'.¹⁶³ On his way to the Dead Lake, he sees

a solitary dog or fox or wolf. The galloping horse drew closer. A wolf. Yerzhan didn't slow Aigyr [his horse]. He pulled out Grandad's shotgun from under the saddle girth at full speed and, without bothering to aim, just to frighten the creature, fired into the air with one barrel. The wolf flew off in the same direction as Aigyr and Yerzhan. And once again Yerzhan found himself in pursuit of a wolf, like so many years ago with Aisulu on the donkey.¹⁶⁴

The previous event this scene recalls is one in which Yerzhan and Aisulu encounter a wolf while riding the donkey on their way to music lessons at Petko's trailer. These two encounters reflect an even earlier memory of Yerzhan's: hunting a fox on the steppe when he was a young boy, accompanied by Petko, Uncle Shaken and their dog, Kapyt. The movement of the three pursued creatures preserves the scenes' resemblance to each other: in each case the pursued turns and runs off in the same direction as the pursuer as if to (mis)lead them, and in each the beast vanishes as if it were an illusion. In the latest encounter,

Fervent Aigyr strove even harder, forcing on the incessant movement of his hooves. Then all of a sudden the wolf disappeared into the ground.

What was it? A mirage that had sprung from the boy's overheated and inflamed imagination? Salt, glittering in the bright Autumn sun? A stretch of stagnant water, lying here since the summer? The shore of the Dead Lake?¹⁶⁵

Here, the phantom haunting Yerzhan manifests itself at once as a false symbol and co-symbol in the forms of a fake topographical feature (a lake that is either a mirage or man-made) and a

¹⁶³ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.93

¹⁶⁴ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.96

¹⁶⁵ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.96

misidentified or fictional “character” respectively. For Yerzhan, as for Freud during his study of the Wolf Man, the wolf acts as a phantasmic incrimination of the wrong perpetrator: the wolf image initially frames the Wolf Man’s sister and then his parents’ maid Grusha, obscuring his father’s *coitus a tergo* with his mother as the supposedly real cause of his trauma; in *The Dead Lake* the wolf spectre deceptively casts Uncle Kepek as Yerzhan’s originator in a fake repetition of the primal scene, protecting the true father, Shaken, from accusation, just as a phantom ought to:

Suddenly he [Yerzhan] saw what he had been afraid of seeing all his life. Down below among the sand and stones of the dried-up riverbed Aisulu lay stretched out, with Kara-Choton – the loathsome Kepek – leaning down towards her over and over again. Yerzhan reined in the horse and dismounted and grabbed Grandad’s shotgun with both hands [...]

He took aim and fired the remaining cartridge.

The fear that had lurked within him all his life suddenly stirred, brushing past his stomach, flying up to his throat and bursting out in a frenetic, childish scream. Kepek collapsed onto Aisulu like a limp sack. Yerzhan dashed forward, watching with utter horror as a strip of gauze, as bright red with his uncle’s blood as a streak of sunset, fell out of Kepek’s hands on to Aisulu’s white leg, which was left only half-banded.

Aisulu had broken her leg looking for Yerzhan.¹⁶⁶

The silence of this scene is literally deathly, as Yerzhan, neither speaking to the phantom nor spoken to by it – both the Zone symbol and its co-symbol, Kepek, are silent – identifies the wrong man in a misread harmless scene. ‘What appears, thus, is a mere display created in order to hide something more effectively. In other words, the phantom does not return *to the form of uncanny apparitions*, but returns *to form uncanny apparitions*’.¹⁶⁷ The scene before Yerzhan is not a return of the phantom’s traumatic inauguration – a repetition of the mother’s rape by the father using the half-sister – but its return as a fake trace that obscures the

¹⁶⁶ Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.99

¹⁶⁷ Dragon, ‘Derrida’s Specter, Abraham’s Phantom: Psychoanalysis as the Uncanny Kernel of Deconstruction’, p.266

knowledge of its true origin, ‘i.e. one comes to know of the *presence of an unknown knowledge but not the knowledge itself*’.¹⁶⁸

In the theory of the phantom, there seems to be a shift from the phantom speaking to its being spoken to. For Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, the ghost should be asked to speak. In his analysis of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, he quotes Horatio’s command to Old Hamlet’s ghost in Act I Scene I: ‘What art thou, that usurp’st this time of night,/ Together with that fair and warlike form/ In which the majesty of buried Denmark/ Did sometimes march? By heaven I charge thee, speak!’¹⁶⁹ When our command for the ghost’s speech produces the ghost’s non-response and disappearance (‘See, it stalks away!’),¹⁷⁰ Derrida suggests that we ‘should learn not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself’.¹⁷¹ Since Yerzhan does not or cannot speak to the phantom at its fake scene in the Zone, he gives up searching for the Dead Lake and returns to his silent mother to talk to her, to attempt to give her back speech:

Immediately the fear lurking in Yerzhan’s ankles moved upwards along its usual path to his stomach, paused there as a cold, heavy weight and then slowly crept on up to his throat, and, after choking him for a moment, reached his lips, emerging as something that was neither a whisper, nor a wheeze, nor a convulsion: Is he [Shaken] my father?’ A faint rumbling ran across the floor, the room started trembling and his mother carried on sitting on the windowsill in the way that she had been sitting, doing nothing for the first time in her life, merely gazing out of the window towards yet another train or yet another explosion.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Dragon, ‘Derrida’s Specter, Abraham’s Phantom: Psychoanalysis as the Uncanny Kernel of Deconstruction’, p.267

¹⁶⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, edited with a commentary by T.J.B Spencer, introduction by Alan Sinfield, (London: Penguin, 2005), act I scene I, lines 45-48

¹⁷⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, act I scene I, line 50

¹⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, (London: Routledge, 1994), p.221

¹⁷² Ismailov, *The Dead Lake*, p.117

In his mother's unlifted silence, Yerzhan speaks only to himself, to his phantom, other identity: the other in himself. The name of his true father, Shaken – the true co-symbol of his trauma – is announced, as if by the phantom on his behalf, alongside the usual phantom pain associated with the haunting. The pain travels through him, through his ankles, stomach, throat and lips, emerging as if in alien enunciation, in a nameless, unidentifiable other voice (not a whisper, wheeze or convulsion). This voice is the phantom, the announcement of its own exorcism, which 'works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography',¹⁷³ by Abraham and Torok's definition. This exorcism as emergence occurs precisely because 'to exorcise it one must *express it in words*';¹⁷⁴ following Derrida, the specter only speaks or passes through the spectator, the one who carries the painful secret.

Yerzhan is able to release himself from the phantom (if only after a tragic murderous detour and other unfortunate events: Aisulu passes away from the Zone's radioactivity and Yerzhan never resumes physical growth). Freud's Wolf Man, however, is not so lucky. The analyst in this case is unable to determine the culpability of the father as originator of the traumatic sexual "crime" – or even if it took place at all. Other survivors of a phantomised intergenerational trauma – second generation survivors of the Chernobyl disaster – are doomed to a similar fate like first generation survivors, as *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* demonstrates; while the explosion definitely occurred in their history or pre-history, the specific location and symptoms of its traumatic origin remains inaccessible to analytic disclosure. Artyom's father, in contrast to Yerzhan's, remains a hidden source of trauma; although he was always identified as Artyom's father, his past deed and its consequence – putting out the blaze at Reactor Four and receiving an eventually fatal dose of radiation therein – remains unknown to and thus incorporated by Artyom, encrypted as it is by the inaccessible hospital ward. In short, the phantom remains within the subject, so long as it

¹⁷³ Abraham and Torok: *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.173

¹⁷⁴ Abraham and Torok: *The Shell and the Kernel*, p.188

remains unknown to the subject. The final section of this chapter will analyse the videogame *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl*, offering a concluding summary of all the theory explored in the thesis: the inaccessibility of the Chernobyl primal scene, its misremembering, which produces other, invented scenes, the impossibility of mourning the nuclear disaster, and how ethical reading should respond to this inconsolable loss.

Calls of Chernobyl, Duties of Play: Cryptic Code and the Language of Trauma in

S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl



Earthbound, 1995

At the end of *Earthbound*, the 1995 videogame for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, the player fights Giygas, an enemy that takes the form of twisting colours and noises and cannot be made sense of. The game's developer, Shigesato Itoi, revealed in an interview

that Giygas was inspired by a childhood trauma: at a cinema, an eight-year-old Itoi accidentally walked into the wrong screen, briefly seeing part of what he thought was a rape scene from the 1957 adult film, *The Military Policeman and the Dismembered Beauty*. Recollecting this event in the interview, Itoi said that ‘when the guy grabbed her breast really hard, it got distorted into this ball shape. It all hit me really hard. It was a direct attack to my brain’.¹⁷⁵ The traumatising scene Itoi describes, however, does not actually take place in the film; what he witnessed is in fact a scene of consensual sex. He admitted his memory of it ‘is fuzzy at best’.¹⁷⁶ The Freudian primal scene, where an individual suffers neuroses as a result of misinterpreting a witnessed sex act due to not yet having gained a knowledge of sexual life, is restaged in the videogame medium by Itoi’s Giygas. Re-reading his famous Wolf Man case study, Sigmund Freud questions whether his patient’s primal scene, the observation of parental coitus, ever had any reality as an event; it might rather be a phantasy concocted from the observation of animals copulating, misremembered in *Nachträglichkeit* as his parents. The similarly violent impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, for some of its traumatised eyewitnesses, lacks a true, disclosable origin. Here, it is radioactive contamination following the explosion rather than a sexual act that provides the experience prior to an understanding of it. Igor Kostin, the first photographer to capture Chernobyl on film, writes: ‘We were at war against the radiation. [...] The enemy was everywhere, nothing stopped it. You were hit by thousands of bullets and you did not know who was firing on you. You did not know if you were injured, or where you had been hit, or at which point’.¹⁷⁷ Sergei Sobolev, deputy head of the Executive Committee of the Shield of Chernobyl Association, thinks of his dead comrades as ‘heroes, not victims, of a war that supposedly never happened. They call it an accident, a catastrophe. But it was a war. The Chernobyl monuments look like war

¹⁷⁵ ‘Gigyas’, *Earthbound Wiki* (12 May, 2014), <http://earthbound.wikia.com/wiki/Gigyas> accessed 16 June 2014

¹⁷⁶ ‘Gigyas’, *Earthbound Wiki*

¹⁷⁷ Kostin, *Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter*, p.45

monuments'.¹⁷⁸ Where no understanding of nuclear catastrophe is available, then, war against radiation, an inauthentic event, is not a fictional supplement to the absence of true memory but the absence of true memory itself; the memorial, symbolic reproductions reflect a misremembered primal scene. As Jacques Derrida says, writing actually founds memory. It is not, as it deceptively appears, simply a supplement to it. Freudian psychology, in prescribing its patients the completable mourning of a fundamentally incomplete or unverified mnemonic scene, enacts a supreme violence upon both the living and the dead. The living's therapy is impossible because their failed memory is ignored, and the dead are abandoned because the mourning of their misunderstood deaths is cut short. In light of this psychology's failure, Derrida, in *The Work of Mourning*, proposes that the law of mourning 'would have to fail in order to succeed. In order to succeed, it would have to *fail*, to fail *well*'.¹⁷⁹ To fail well is to enact impossible mourning. In the practice of impossible mourning some secret that would restore the loss to the traumatic memory and furnish its truthful finality is allowed to escape. For Itoi, *Gigas* is a videogame acknowledgement of an already inauthentic primal scene. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, a videogame set within Chernobyl's post-disaster Exclusion Zone, reconstructs the failure of memory, meaning and conclusion engendered by trauma; this gesture is an abstraction of absence, of impossible mourning. The game casts the player in the role of a nameless protagonist, known only as 'The Marked One', whose task, among others, is to venture into the heart of post-disaster Chernobyl and discover the source of a mysterious signal that has been detected there.

¹⁷⁸ Sergei Sobolev, 'Monologue About Lies and Truths', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), p.135

¹⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Nass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.144



S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl, (producer: Sergiy Grygorovych, GSC Gameworld, 2007)



S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl, 2007

The game begins this gesture of impossible mourning by presenting two cryptic secrets: ‘Kill the Strelak’, and ‘S.T.A.L.K.E.R’. As signifiers that have no restorable signifieds, these messages intentionally resist interpretation to obscure a meaning that never was, restaging the way in which an absence of understanding at Chernobyl engenders a misremembered trauma in later recollection. The reference to an inaccessible, impossible totality that ‘Kill the Strelak’ and ‘S.T.A.L.K.E.R’ make occurs within, or more accurately, upon a crypt. Crypts, to use Maurice Blanchot’s definition, are empty ‘pockets, cavernous spaces where words become things, where the inside is out and thus inaccessible to any cryptoanalysis’.¹⁸⁰ Lacking an inside, the buried meaning of true origins, the words the game introduces become things, indecipherable marks of the outside displayed on the protagonist’s PDA or forearm. The only staged secret here is the secret that there is no secret. As Blanchot suggests in *The Writing of the Disaster*, the cryptic word is ‘the key word that opens and does not open. At that juncture something gets away safely, something which frees loss and refutes the gift of it. “I can only save an inner self by placing it on me, separate from myself, outside”’.¹⁸¹ This refuted gift of loss is freed from the finality of mourning demanded by analysis; in placing words upon the outside, rendering them as things or cryptic surfaces, the game imposes no limit on the possible meanings of ‘Kill the Strelak’ or ‘S.T.A.L.K.E.R’. Also, the question as to who these two titles refer to remains unanswered. Commemorating the death of Sarah Kofman in his essay ‘.’, Jacques Derrida asks ‘What is the gift of a title? [...] such a gift would be somewhat indecent: it would imply the violent selection of a perspective, and abusive interpretive framing or narcissistic reappropriation, a conspicuous signature’.¹⁸² It is arguable that the open question of S.T.A.L.K.E.R, a title rendered similarly unspeakable or uninterpretable through punctuation, is countered by the subtitle attached to

¹⁸⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, translated by Ann Smock, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p.136

¹⁸¹ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.136

¹⁸² Derrida, ‘.’ in *The Work of Mourning*, p.168

it: *Shadow of Chernobyl*. Indeed, critics of the videogame have condemned its historical revisionism, claiming that it transforms the nuclear disaster into virtual entertainment through the generic conventions of Gothic and post-apocalyptic Sci-fi, and frames this action in the first-person perspective popularised by earlier videogames such as *Doom*. For one critic of videogaming, as Fred Botting reminds us in ‘Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines and Black Holes’, games are ‘a degenerate spectacle awash in the flood of information images, internalising current and archaic phantasms of pleasure, violence and control through simple narratives, crude moralizing filters and forms of self-identification’.¹⁸³ However, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl*, programmed by second-generation Chernobyl survivors and mapped through photography and satellite telemetry of the actual Exclusion Zone, abandons in its pursuit of impossible mourning the gaming master narrative of direct control, violence, and the production of narcissistic identificatory messages, meanings, characters and pleasure. The game’s digital technology, like the archives of other games and eighteenth-century Gothic romances before them, creates fictional landscapes through graphic reproductions of ruinous art and architecture: counterfeit scenes in which exploration is enacted. However, where the videogame *Doom* elicits pleasure from the linear exploration of threatening rooms sequenced by levels – like chapters in a Gothic romance – *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*’s open world map pertains to a rhizome with little discernible structure, mostly detached from the authority of the Gothic landscape’s pleasure-yielding archival organisation and straightforward interaction; in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*, there is no red key that opens a red door, and no keyword can unlock ultimate meaning. Rather, pleasure is purposefully and eternally delayed. Frustration is the game’s simulation of absent progress, a gesture of impossible mourning in which satisfactory accomplishment, like completable mourning, is an illusion. In *Doom*, catharsis is yielded through the explosive violence of hi-tech Sci-fi weaponry, ‘linking

¹⁸³ Fred Botting, ‘Consumption, Machines and Black Holes’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, edited by Jerrold Hogle, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.280

instinctual energies with powerful machines’,¹⁸⁴ as Botting writes. *Doom*, he reminds us, ‘was redesigned to train U.S Marines in the art of “one-shot kills” and described by a military expert as a “how-to manual for killing without conscience”. Morality is replaced by murderous efficiency, reason by reaction time, knowledge by technique’.¹⁸⁵ In *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*, however, the quality of the player’s weapons, exposed to the polluted environmental elements, degrade over time, reducing accuracy, range, and reload times, while the radioactivity of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is restaged as a series of perspective-shattering traumatic effects which impede the player’s virtual view: blackouts, hallucinations and other psychological disturbances.



S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl, 2007

Where *Doom*'s first-person perspective grants the player transparent access to a virtual world of immediately gratifying violence and power, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*'s virtual restaging of a war against radiation purposefully fails to satisfy the player; recalling Derrida's imperative in his

¹⁸⁴ Botting, 'Consumption, Machines and Black Holes', p.279

¹⁸⁵ Botting, 'Consumption, Machines and Black Holes', p.293

‘Mnemosyne’ lecture, it fails well. The game, tasking its player to survive an unwinnable war against an invisible and omnipresent force, bears witness to survivor testimony of the futile war against radiation, a misremembered Chernobyl trauma. Here, the survivor’s misremembering of trauma becomes the game’s trauma of misremembering, where the incomprehensibility of the nuclear disaster is virtually restaged within a simulation of the war fiction that encrypts it; the non-understandable event of radioactivity, excluded from conscious memory or understanding, appears in the game as effects outside interiority, in the outside itself: player control over combat is impeded by momentary absences of environmental light or sound, and orientation is dislocated by anomalous teleportations and vortexes of wind. The Chernobyl disaster is, to use Blanchot’s definition of the word disaster, ‘unknown; it is the unknown name for that in thought itself which dissuades us from thinking it’.¹⁸⁶ In exploring the simulated environment of the exclusion zone, the player is ‘Alone and thus exposed to the thought of the disaster which disrupts solitude and overflows every variety of thought, as the intense, silent and disastrous affirmation of the outside’.¹⁸⁷

This deflection of the inside onto the outside is at work in not just the game’s represented effects, but also its representational medium: programming code. One reviewer, playing through the game a second time, noticed a glitch, where friendly, computer-controlled allies started shooting at his character for no apparent reason. ‘I wasn’t sure if it was a bug or if I’d unwittingly done something in the game to make them turn against me,’ he writes, ‘but the overall effect of making me paranoid, even in the safest of areas, somehow seemed to suit the tone’.¹⁸⁸ This is the result of a well-known glitch in the game, caused by an improperly written piece of code activated when the player makes gameplay choices in a certain order. Here, the broken code is the disaster of representing the disaster, where the

¹⁸⁶ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.5

¹⁸⁷ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.5

¹⁸⁸ Jim Rossignol, ‘Cursed Earth’ in *PC Gamer* (Issue 179, October 2007), p.110

game's inaccessible, inexplicable and corrupted inside is deflected onto the outside, where indecipherable words become things when code loses its functionality. Like a mental trauma that has no language to describe it or memory to store it, the corruption in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*'s digital fabric creates unintentional effects at the level of gameplay experience in the manner of a misremembered primal scene. This sequence of unintentional effects mimics the way in which a primal scene arises out of the very failure of language and memory as opposed to merely supplementing such an absence. In the writing of the disaster, something always goes askew, intentionally or otherwise, and often in the moments where meaning seems most assured, where it appears the writer, reader or gamer is in a haven of predictability. Blanchot suggests that the writing of the disaster is writing 'in the thrall of the impossible real, that share of the disaster wherein every reality, safe and sound, sinks'.¹⁸⁹

The game's multiple endings undermine any definitive explanation of the events that have taken place over the course of gameplay; the player's in-game choices reflected in the outcome they determine suggest only their absent alternatives.

¹⁸⁹ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.38



“I don’t know if I was right or wrong – I guess I’ll never know. But I made it. And I guess I should be thankful for that” - *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl*, 2007

Like a Prince Hamlet thankful to have survived his tragedy, his futile ‘words, words, words’ reproduced in the above caption question which out of the two decisions was morally right: to fulfil or abandon his murderous task to kill the Strelak. These concluding words speak to an Absolute Other: the collective, anonymous Chernobyl dead that includes both fictional in-game and actual losses. ‘This expression evokes Emmanuel Levinas and his conviction that speech alone sustains the relation of a subject to the Other’.¹⁹⁰ Blanchot attributes speech to the Absolute Other as ‘not any particular communication, but speech itself as an offering, the offering of language in response to the infinite obligation which the presence of another person is’.¹⁹¹ The question of what is moral, then, is answered not by what one says, but by the act of speech itself. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*’s speech without discourse, written words without meaning, maps without directions and gameplay without transparent perspective or

¹⁹⁰ Ann Smock, ‘Translator’s Remarks’, in Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, xi

¹⁹¹ Smock, ‘Translator’s Remarks’, xi

interaction mark a shift in videogaming from the sidestepping of trauma caused by conflict and survival toward its simulation and impossible mourning. If in *Doom* there is purposefully too little morality, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, there is purposefully too much; where the former short-circuits the theme of trauma to train soldiers in killing without conscience, the latter overloads it to suggest that traumatised subjects can never fully recover.

The following conclusion to this thesis will argue that the trauma of the Chernobyl eyewitness is actively conceived of as irrecoverable rather than naturally manifesting as such, partly due to certain overused methods of reading. A global, namely Eurocentric or American-centric theory that favours the emergence of trauma in the life of the sufferer as inaccessible, in which the sufferer is necessarily displaced and alienated from any understanding of its origin, however provisional, will now be countered. While failing at meaning-making might seem the best method for readers of facing and respecting the Absolute Other, the flip-side or underbelly of this proposal perhaps unintentionally drowns out the latter's own acts in the surrounding global condemnation of their trauma to inaccessibility. Thus, traumatised subjects, likewise immersed in this theory, can feel alienated not just from us but also from themselves: from the experience and memory of trauma that links them to the world. In opposition to this, the following conclusion proposes an alternative reading of Chernobyl trauma, one which renders it interpretable in the form of fictional, mythic narratives articulated in a festive tradition common to the Slav peasant cultures of Russia and Ukraine: carnival.

Conclusion: Pushed Out By Laughter: Alternative Abreactions of Chernobyl Trauma

Robert van Voren recalls a humorous anecdote in *On Dissidents and Madness* (2009), his book about his role in overturning the political abuse of psychiatry in the former Soviet Union. The story concerns Western psychiatrists' attempted education in Western psychiatric practice of Russian and Ukrainian nurses used to the old ways in which psychiatry was carried out under Soviet communism. Van Voren writes:

we organised a special network meeting on psychiatric nursing. About forty nurses from more than ten countries met at a conference centre in the forest somewhere in the Netherlands, where in addition to lectures, role-plays were used as an educational tool. A group of British participants had worked out the role-plays and with the help of simultaneous translation English-Russian, they tried to copy reality as much as possible. They had prepared several versions: how it should not be done, with a dominant psychiatrist who immediately took the lead and decided everything by himself; how it usually went, by contributions by all but with a psychiatrist who still dominated the meeting; and last, but not least, what should be the optimal situation. The first-role play was enacted and ended in enthusiastic applause by the audience. A chief nurse from a provincial psychiatric hospital got up and full of passion, she grabbed the microphone and started speaking. Fantastic! She had never seen something so powerful, so good. If she could ever convince her director to put this to practice in his hospital, she would be delighted. It was almost too painful to tell her the truth that this was exactly how it should **not** be done! For her this was already almost a *fata morgana*, an unreachable goal.¹

How psychiatry should and should not be done continues to be a hotly debated issue in trauma studies. In van Voren's account, the transition from the communist practice of a domineering psychiatrist unquestioningly obeyed by nurses to a Western, more democratic configuration of active participation in the procedure by all involved is impossible. This impasse regarding the input ratio between instructor and student or psychiatrist and trauma

¹ Robert van Voren, *On Dissidents and Madness: From the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev to the "Soviet Union" of Vladimir Putin*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p.205

victim perpetually crops up in trauma theory and therapy practice. On the one hand, Mikkel Borch-Jacobson writes in his article 'Neurotica: Freud and the Seduction Theory' (1996): 'Good hypnotists have always known that initially suggestibility is nothing but the sheer acceptance of the hypnotic contract: the subject must accept the hypnotic game, failing which the game cannot begin'.² In opposition to this submission in which the hypnotee becomes a willingly instructed actor of the hypnotist's suggestions in the abreaction of the former's traumatic memories, the American psychiatrist Judith Herman theorised that 'the victim must be helped to speak the horrifying truth of her past'.³ Also, in the literary study of trauma, a schism persists between the Western interpreter's representation of a non-Western subject's trauma and the alternative, native conceptions of this trauma's original emergence in lived experience by the subject herself. Regarding the reading and representation of non-Western trauma by Western literary trauma scholars, Stef Craps writes in his essay 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age' (2014):

the founding texts of the field (Including [Cathy] Caruth's own work⁴) largely fail to live up to this cross-cultural ethical engagement. They fail on at least three counts: they marginalise or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures; they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity; and they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma.⁵

² Mikkel Borch-Jacobson, 'Neurotica: Freud and the Seduction Theory', *October*, (Vol. 76, Spring 1996), p.33

³ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.109

⁴ Cathy Caruth's book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and the preceding edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) were considered by trauma theorists as foundational contributions to trauma studies in the 1990s. In the twenty-first century, however, these works have been problematised as too Ameri-Eurocentric, because they largely overlook the alternative conceptualisations of trauma and therapy elsewhere in the world. For a further critique of Caruth's works, see chapter eight of Ruth Leys' *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 'The Pathos of the Literal: Trauma and the Crisis of Representation'.

⁵ Stef Craps, 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age', in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, (London: Routledge, 2014), p.46

The Western theorisation of trauma, still often seen as the foundational, empirically proven master to the non-Western, wayward apprentice, persists in trauma studies in the form of a template that constructively lays down a few universal, unshakeable, theoretical guidelines. This schema echoes van Voren's account of the British psychiatrists' prevention of the former-Soviets' deviation from the Western model beyond certain defined limits. Let us expand upon this parallel and ask: how did van Voren, a Dutch human rights campaigner working in the Former Soviet Union, balance the sometimes antagonistic opposition between Western expertise and success in treating cases of trauma and local, sometimes recidivist methods practiced by the former-Soviets? How did he and his team of Western psychiatrists manage their own input ratio with that of the Russian and Ukrainian nurses who, without effective guidance, would relapse into their old abusive ways, without silencing them entirely? In his book, he recalls that:

Stimulating one's own initiative, developing a plan or a model, also meant that you radically risked reinventing the wheel all over again. In fact, it was the other way around: it was important that people [in the Former Soviet Union] themselves invented the wheel, that they themselves discovered the best approach. We provided the information, contacts, and showed how it worked in other countries; but for the rest, we were supposed to stay in the background. This also meant that mistakes were made, but however unpleasant that might be, these mistakes were an important part of the learning process. A mistake is only a mistake when you don't learn from it.⁶

The ideal method, van Voren found, was not to reinvent the wheel or jettison the founding work of trauma theory and practice when helping the Russians and Ukrainians revise the psychiatry in their countries, but to let them work out (or, perhaps, more cynically, find out) what methods work best. In van Voren's account Western practice remains exemplary, and a

⁶ Robert van Voren, *On Dissidents and Madness: From the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev to the "Soviet Union" of Vladimir Putin*, p.231

framework of this practice is created through the provision of Western information and contacts via the Dutch special network meeting, which the former-Soviets can then build within through their own volition. As I have already just suggested, this history reflects the current drive in trauma studies to bridge the gap between Western and non-Western interpretations of trauma, which my conclusion will use as a basis to propose a constructive compromise between scholars' theorisation of Chernobyl trauma and its representation by the Chernobylites themselves. I claim, as other trauma theorists do, that some of the subject's inalienable psychic mechanisms discovered by Freud and corroborated by his subsequent practitioners are, as this suggests, always active and universal in the experience of trauma. Ananya Jahanara Kabir, in her article 'Affect, Body, Place: Trauma Theory in the World' (2014), argues for this case on a fundamental level, claiming that

the unconscious can hardly be done away with within attempted nativist re-appropriations of trauma theory. This continued dependence on Freudian vocabulary is evident in an inability to move away from that vocabulary even when attempting a severance: the most radical we can get is to call for recognition of 'critical melancholia', or melancholia as a positive force – rather than abandon the word altogether. Far more productive, then, is to develop a non-Eurocentric trauma theory that can revivify existing paradigms for explicating the work of trauma, by returning to consideration an interconnected emphasis on body, affect and place.⁷

The ego's protection against or adaptation into socially acceptable forms of destructive unconscious drives or repressed trauma, as Anna Freud theorised in her book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1936), remain in play for both Kabir and van Voren.⁸ The same

⁷ Ananya Jahanara Kabir, 'Affect, Body, Place: Trauma Theory in the World', in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, pp.72-73

⁸ In his thirty-odd year campaign to expose and end the political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union and then in former-Soviet countries, van Voren co-founded the International Association on the Political Use of Psychiatry in 1980 (of which he became chief executive in 1986) and its successor, the Global Initiative on Psychiatry, in 2005. At once a human rights activist and psychiatrist, then, his area of research in trauma studies focuses on psychiatry and its political abuse. His PhD, awarded in 2010 at Kaunas Vytautas Magnus

goes for the theory of melancholia – the disruption of mourning loss by persisting libidinal desire and secondary narcissism: the ego’s withdrawal from the external world and exclusive focus on the lost, introjected love object. As the conclusion to this thesis will argue, the Chernobyl disaster survivors’ repressed trauma and melancholia are frequently reworked through Svetlana Alexievich’s interviews compiled in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (2006) as positive forces articulated by the survivors themselves, echoing Herman’s theory that the analyst merely lays the groundwork for the subject to speak the horrifying truth of their traumatic experiences in their own words. For this conclusion, then, we may need to leave to one side the overexposed, Western conception of trauma as an aporistic, inaccessible psychic force that belatedly marks the victim only in the forms of its abstraction and uninterpretability, as theorised earlier in the analysis of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* in chapter three. In a return to the model of the rhizome developed in chapters two and three of this thesis, the resurgence of Chernobyl disaster eyewitnesses’ culturally subterranean, hitherto repressed formulations of their own traumatic experiences will now be analysed. Zinaida Kovalenko, an elderly re-settler to the Exclusion Zone, testifies to her traumatic experience of the Chernobyl disaster in an interview for *Voices from Chernobyl*. She then says to Alexievich: ‘Oh Lyubochka, do you understand what I’m telling you, my sorrow? You’ll carry it to people, maybe I won’t be here anymore. I’ll be in the ground, under the roots...’⁹ Memories of the eyewitness’s traumatic experiences sink along with their body, dissociated by Soviet or Western psychiatric models from the so-called roots or source of their trauma, which supposedly surfaces to “official”, empirical analysis. Absent or denied as trauma’s official origination in favour of authoritative explanations, these memories are carried off, propagated like Deleuzian rhizomes by the analyst, at the eyewitness’s request.

University, in Lithuania, was entitled *Cold War in Psychiatry*. For a full profile of the author, see <http://robertvanvoren.com/index.php>

⁹ Zinaida Kovalenko, ‘Monologue About What Can Be Talked About with the Living and the Dead’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), p.31

Like botanical rhizomes, each of which can be cut off from the underground stem and propagated to grow a new plant, each testimonial strand that is separated from the authorised origin may give rise to a variant or double of this origin's results. What we will then have is an alternative take on the history of trauma and the disaster. In what form does this isolated, rhizomatic testimony to trauma or sorrow that has not yet arisen and hence reached understanding take? The social world of Chernobyl, with its testimonial, linguistic polyphony¹⁰ of scientists, former Party bureaucrats, doctors, soldiers, helicopter pilots, refugees and re-settlers from all over the Soviet Union, 'is bisected into a novelistic side and a poetic side, into a culture of laughter and a culture of seriousness, a dialogical culture of the people and a monological 'official' culture'.¹¹ In her interviews, Alexievich unearths the split between the official, serious culture of the Soviet authorities who attempt to produce a comprehensive history or grand narrative of the nuclear disaster to assert the peoples' recovery and the unofficial, spontaneous, timeless laughter frequently conveyed by bawdy *chastushka*.¹² The latter, these sudden outbursts of humour in the form of ribald speech acts akin to the Rabelaisian *ploshchadnoe slovo* or Medieval carnival "public-square word", are 'always in the background, ready to break out, yet always [...] driven back or suppressed'.¹³

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion on Soviet polyphony, see Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), translated by Rodney Livingstone, (London: Merlin, 1971). The term polyphony, as Lukács and the earlier Mikhail Bakhtin conceived it, must be outlined here. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács writes: 'A novelist, as Bakhtin says [much like the analyst or reader of Chernobyl trauma, I would add], must have a very keen ear for other people's words [...] he cannot afford to cut himself off from low, vulgar, debased language; why nothing linguistic is alien to him, from the language of the barrack room to the language of, say, academic conferences.' (p.90) Furthermore, on the historical origins of polyphony: 'Originally Bakhtin attributed the discovery of this discursive polyphony to Dostoevsky. Later he came to think that it was inherent in the novel as a literary form, and he traced it back historically to the comic and satiric writing of the Classical period that parodied and travestied state-approved solemnities of tragedy and epic, and to the carnival tradition in popular culture that sustained an unofficial resistance to the monologic discourses of Medieval Christendom.' (p.90)

¹¹ Ken Hirschkop, 'Bakhtin in the Sober Light of Day (An Introduction to the Second Edition), in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, edited by Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p.20

¹² A *chastushka* is a Russian or Ukrainian folk song with a high tempo, simple rhyming couplets and humorous, satiric or lewd lyrics. The closest Western equivalent would be doggerel; both *chastushki* and doggerel are derided by high culture for being lowbrow and insensitive.

¹³ Ken Hirschkop, 'Bakhtin in the Sober Light of Day (An Introduction to the Second Edition), pp.20-21

Soldiers sing their *chastushki* for Alexievich's interviews: 'Even one thousand gamma rays/ Can't keep the Russian cock from having its days'.¹⁴ What has been culturally repressed by the Soviet authorities is not only the dangerous radiation levels but also the disorderly poetics of soldiers-turned liquidators, 'the language of the barracks room' as Georg Lukács might call it. Due to the intense scrutiny the Zone received by the global press in the Chernobyl disaster's aftermath, the authorities, wanting to maintain their illusion of calm control over the situation within their entire ranks to the outside world, attempted to hold the liquidators accountable to a level of respectable conduct representative of Soviet heroism. The outbursts into ribald *chastushka*, in a Bakhtinian sense, constitute an anarchic carnival of sorts – a cathartic, alternative articulation of Chernobyl trauma in opposition to official, polite culture. *Chastushki*, 'instead of "gravitating" to a "system," [...] exist as "live" events'.¹⁵ The soldiers' laughter, though recorded as a "live" event occurring in interview, is not universalised, as we will see. One says to her: 'I have my own memories. My official post there was commander of the guard units. Something like the director of the apocalypse. [Laughs.] Yes. Write it down just like that'.¹⁶ The soldier's request to write his testimony down exactly as it arose, not just as autobiographical fact but also as fantastic, laughter-inducing fiction, demonstrates a desire to record carnival. This very notion constitutes a problematic acquiescence of local expression to modern Western therapeutic methods, of folk culture¹⁷ to the interview as talking cure, with its strict hierarchical roles of analyst and

¹⁴ Soldiers' Chorus, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.47

¹⁵ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.9

¹⁶ Soldiers' Chorus, p.46

¹⁷ A central feature of Russian and Ukrainian folk culture consisted of the competitive yet communal back-and-forth singing of *chastushki* and telling of tall tales. Just as following the Chernobyl disaster, after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution the then-recently established Soviet government attempted to gentrify this culture, cleansing it of its lewd content and transforming it into a promotional vehicle for the Communist Party's vision of ideal community. For a more in-depth analysis of this hegemonic struggle between these official and unofficial cultures, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivisation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). While Fitzpatrick's work focuses primarily on ethnic Russian peasant resistance, it claims for similar modes of everyday sedition across the U.S.S.R via the bawdy, festival humour of carnival. These Union-wide residual pockets of carnival were eventually tamed by the 1930s

analysand. Why does the reception of the soldiers' humorous testimony undermine its designation as carnival? Mikhail Bakhtin writes in his book *Rabelais and his World* (1941, 1965)¹⁸: 'Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it [...] While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it'.¹⁹ However, Alexievich does not participate in the liquidators' disruptive laughter, and thus is instead an audience to it. One of the liquidators, Arkady Filin, asks her:

Want to hear a joke? This prisoner escapes from jail, and runs to the thirty-kilometre Zone at Chernobyl. They catch him, bring him to the dosimeters. He's "glowing" so much, they can't possibly put him back in prison, can't take him to hospital, can't put him around people. Why aren't you laughing? [*Laughs.*]²⁰

Both Alexievich's recording and not laughing at Filin's joke undermines carnival's universal inclusivity, respectively transforming the carnival moment of testifying into literary carnivalesque and what Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson term in *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (1990) reduced laughter. 'What distinguishes carnival from literary genres per se', they write, 'is its lack of a readership or audience; everyone participates in it. If there are viewers who do not participate, there can be no true carnival; instead, we have performance'.²¹ Nevertheless, this reduced, recorded laughter, which is bawdy, satirical and flies against authority and adversity, still possesses therapeutic power for Chernobyl

to the extent that carnival was permitted by Stalinism in the form of official holidays, such as International Labour Day (May Day), echoing Bakhtin's theory that the European Medieval Church sanctioned carnival festival, leading to it becoming a pressure valve for the universal people's disruptive energy in order to preserve an overall, authorised social order.

¹⁸ An explanation is required to avoid confusion for the inclusion of two dates here. Bakhtin submitted and defended his doctoral thesis at the Gorky Institute of World Literature on Rabelais in the winter of 1941; due to what some of the examiners termed the work's provocative and "anti-Marxist" nature, it was only published in book form in 1965.

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.7

²⁰ Arkady Filin, 'Monologue About A Man Whose Tooth Was Hurting When He Saw Christ Fall', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, pp.91-92

²¹ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, p.459

survivors, helping the liquidators deal with the inevitable odds presented by their radioactive contamination. Aleksandr Kudryagin, one of the liquidators sent to the roof of Reactor Four, recalls:

We had lead underwear, we wore it over our pants. Write that. We had good jokes too. Here's one: An American robot is on the roof for five minutes, then it breaks down. The Japanese robot is on the roof for five minutes, and then – it breaks down.²² The Russian robot is up there for two hours! Then a command comes in over the loudspeaker: "Private Ivanov! In two hours you're welcome to come down and have a cigarette break." Ha-ha! [*Laughs.*]²³

How might this humour constitute therapy? In it, and also 'In Rabelais and the folklore he imbibed, value is diverted from any specific time frame, real history is not registered, and space becomes thoroughly fantastic. [...] Language is limited to cheerful obscenity and epithets'.²⁴ In Kudryagin's joke, authentic, historical time is momentarily suspended in fantasy time (it is not true that liquidators were forced to work on the reactor roof for four hours; the time was closer to forty seconds – still enough for a lethal dose, however). Carnival, many theorists argue, is not a permanent inversion or overthrow of official power. While this carnival lasts, it shrinks testimony to encompass only fiction and laughter. Any criticism of the authorities and their orders for liquidators is absent from memory, since references to the actual, memorised past, of colleagues purposely misled by these orders into mortally dangerous conditions, are pushed out by the joke loudspeaker command and figure of Private Ivanov, the epithetic Russian robot. Following Morson and Emerson's argument,

²² Both the Americans and Japanese sent the Soviets remote-controlled diggers, to help clear away the radioactive debris from the reactor roof. Unfortunately, the radiation interfered with their systems, causing them to break down. Then, the government used "biological or green robots", a rather euphemistic term for the Soviet manpower sent to the roof to clear it manually.

²³ Aleksandr Kudryagin, 'Monologue about Freedom and the Dream of an Ordinary Death', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.187

²⁴ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, pp.440-441

the comic world of this joke, which ridicules a fictionalised liquidator and task, is, in opposition to historicisation, ‘without memory. In the comic world, there is “nothing for memory and tradition to do. One ridicules in order to forget.”’²⁵ Although traumatic experience of the disaster may return to memory, humour temporarily clears a space in memory to enable this therapeutic, interim forgetting of Chernobyl trauma to occur.

As we have already seen, there is a dissonance between this local engagement in therapy and Western or simply outsider perspectives of it. But is it really essential for the analyst to join in with the Chernobyl survivor’s laughter for the sake of making it carnival? Is it only this involvement, arguably still an approval or authorisation that confers upon the analyst the role of authority, which grants the practice authenticity? It seems not necessarily, just as it is not essential to discard the pre-existing methods of Western psychoanalytic practice in analysis. In her ‘In Place of an Epilogue’, which concludes *Voices from Chernobyl*, Alexievich writes: ‘the Zone – it’s a separate world, a world within the rest of the world – and it’s more powerful than anything literature has to say’.²⁶ She continues, reflecting:

I often thought that the simple fact, the mechanical fact, is no closer to the truth than a vague feeling, rumour, vision. Why repeat the facts – they cover up our feelings. The development of these feelings, the spilling of these feelings past the facts, is what fascinates me. I try to find them, collect them, protect them.²⁷

The power of reduced laughter spills or rhizomatically shoots off from audience participation in the act or literary repetition. Alexievich’s analytical forms of location, collection and

²⁵ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, p.442, quoting Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.23

²⁶ Svetlana Alexievich, ‘In Place of an Epilogue’, in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.236

²⁷ Svetlana Alexievich, ‘In Place of an Epilogue’, p.236

protection vaguely trace the development of analysands' rhizomatic, therapeutic feelings. 'Reduced laughter', Morson and Emerson write, is denied any direct expression, which is to say 'it does not ring out', but traces of it remain in the structure of an image or a discourse and can be detected in it'.²⁸ The Western detection of Chernobyl trauma and therapy through interview, functioning as a talking cure in which the survivor is asked and thereby helped to abreact their traumatic experiences and memories, takes precedence over immediate individualisation and medicalisation of trauma. Here, Western analysis acts as theoretical framework for the Russian and Ukrainian linguistic tradition of the laughter coping strategy.

The linguistic tradition of carnival, which does not automatically mean cultural or calendar carnival, was practiced long before the event of Chernobyl eyewitness testimony, the nuclear catastrophe itself, or even the power plant's construction. The catharsis of carnival arose in Russian and Ukrainian culture in response to and alongside the previous, long-term traumas of the history of communism. 'What seems to be valuable about carnival', Clair Wills writes in her essay 'Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts' (1990), 'is its awareness of the discontinuity of history, or history as crisis'.²⁹ Not rooted in one period, expressions of carnival grow beneath history, continually surfacing at moments of historical disruption or trauma, such as the social upheavals caused by the development of Soviet communism.³⁰ Carnival, Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1973), 'knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of *conclusive conclusion*'. Rather, it

²⁸ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, p.463

²⁹ Clair Wills, 'Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts', in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, p.88

³⁰ An example of this social disruption is the ethnic tensions between Ukrainians and Russians in Kiev in the 1930s. Many ethnic Russians came to Kiev during the rapid expansion of the city's manufacturing industry, to fill labourer positions in the newly built factories. The communist house committees of Kiev apartments ordered that tenants' properties be subdivided to house the new Russian immigrant population, much to local residents' anger. Professional residences like doctors' surgeries were particularly affected by this legislation. For a parable of this history, see Mikhail Bulgakov's novella, *The Heart of a Dog* (London: Vintage Classics, 2009). Bulgakov, once part of the bourgeois intellectual establishment, disguised the novella's criticism of this event using fantasy overtones to avoid being blacklisted by the Soviet authorities, and shifted its setting from Kiev to Moscow. In the work, an eminent Moscow surgeon, Philip Philipovich, transplants the testicles and pituitary gland of a recently deceased man into a stray dog, which he had brought home earlier. The dog grows into a man, which the house committee shortly thereafter deem a citizen and issue identity documents to. They also order Philipovich to accommodate this character in the former's own lodgings.

determines: ‘all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again’.³¹ Indeed, Alexandr Revalskiy, a historian of Chernobyl, recalls that the materialisation of laughter in the nuclear disaster’s aftermath echoes its emergence in an earlier period of communist history. He says: ‘When I was eighteen, or maybe a little earlier’,

when I began to read samizdat and discovered Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, I suddenly understood that my entire childhood, the childhood of my street, even though I grew up in a family that was part of the intelligentsia (my grandfather was a minister, my father a professor at the university at St. Petersburg), all of it was shot through with the language of the camps. For us teenagers it was perfectly natural to call our fathers *pakhan*, our mothers *makhan*. “For every uptight asshole there’s a dick with a screwdriver” – I learned that saying when I was nine years old. I didn’t know a single civilised word. Even our games, our sayings, our riddles were from the camps. [...] I think that this prison consciousness was inevitably going to collide with the larger culture – with civilisation, with the particle accelerator. [...] The Russian always needs to believe in something: in the railroad, in the frog [as does Bazarov in Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*], in Byzantium, in the atom. And now, in the market.³²

The carnival mindset of assigning epithets to fictionalise ordinary people³³ and referring lewd, timeless platitudes to history’s inevitable authority figures reaches not only the past, but also the future; a playful, childlike language of the camps extends at once backwards into the world of ancient cities and other, later, Soviet constructions, and forwards into scientific and economic progress. ‘Chernobyl is a portal to infinity’, says Victor Latun, a photographer of the Exclusion Zone:

I remember discussions about the fate of Russian culture, its pull towards the tragic. You can’t understand anything without the shadow of death. And only on the basis of

³¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.165

³² Aleksandr Revalskiy, ‘Monologue about Answers’, pp. 171-172 (Alexievich’s parentheses)

³³ *Pakhan* is a title in the Russian mafia equivalent to godfather.

Russian culture could you begin to make sense of the catastrophe. Only Russian culture was prepared for it.³⁴

The pull of Russian and Ukrainian culture towards death, either as tragedy or, as this conclusion has argued, as comedy, acts as a sense-making processing of collective traumatic experience throughout the lifespan of communism: the Gulags, the prisoners' construction of the railways across Siberia, the catastrophe of the atom at Chernobyl, and the economic difficulties consequent to joining global capitalism. Testimony, as a fictionalising, carnivalising, cathartic transformation of the repressed event of trauma, 'is no less "real" on that account', according to Ruth Leys in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2001). Carnival, like 'PTSD is a way of "making up" a certain type of person that individuals can conceive themselves as being',³⁵ not, as Ian Hacking observes, to 'become eligible for insurance-reimbursed therapy, or compensation, or [...] plead diminished responsibility in courts of law',³⁶ but to create fictional "narrative memory," involving the ability to be consciously aware of and verbally narrate events that have happened to the individual via 'verbal-semantic-linguistic representation'.³⁷ Testimony or biography is fiction, as Jacques Derrida writes in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (2000), at the limits of literature, beyond restraint and death; in Filin's joke of the prisoner irradiated and thereby freed at Chernobyl or Latun's of Ivan the liquidator up on the exploded reactor roof for what in reality is an unsurvivable amount of time, 'biographical or autobiographical truthfulness of a witness [...] speaks of himself and claims to be recounting not only his life but his death, his quasi-resurrection, a

³⁴ Victor Latun, 'Monologue About Freedom and the Dream of an Ordinary Death', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.191

³⁵ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.6

³⁶ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.6

³⁷ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.7

sort of Passion'.³⁸ The renewal of the human spirit after traumatic disaster offered by testimonial, biographical survival, in which one recalls and laughs at the expense of a fictional other, are catalysed by Alexievich's interviews. Leaving aside the possible veracity of the Chernobyl disaster survivor's testimony and certainly the possibility of their permanent recovery, their will to speak, laugh and spiritually or psychically resurrect, is opened by Western invitation. Carnival or reduced laughter, the testimonial response to this invitation, 'can now be heard as a minor and displaced echo, indeed, a modest translation'.³⁹ The local restaging of traumatic experiences as jokes is transcribed into literature, into *Voices from Chernobyl*: Carnival is translated into carnivalesque, the eyewitness's fictionalised recollection into testimony. 'What post-structuralist discourses speak of as a "play of signifiers"', Graham Pechey writes in his essay 'Not the Novel: Bakhtin, Poetry, Truth, God' (1990), 'is just that: a *play*, a drama of signification at the heart of all meaning. This metaphor of "play," of a "playing out" or staging, is never far off in Bakhtin's account of the varieties of meaning-making'.⁴⁰ Chernobyl too is never far off, a testimonial playing out or staging of meaning-making and a *renewal in the face of decay*. The continual return to Chernobyl occurs in the form of eternal, renewing ritual. Next year, in 2015, a New Safe Confinement (N.S.C) is due to be placed over the current Chernobyl sarcophagus, which was hastily built in 1986 under the immediate pressures of the sudden nuclear crisis to cover the destroyed reactor and, since then, has been corroded by the radioactivity of this ruined structure it still entombs. The more carefully planned and constructed N.S.C, its architects predict, will last for one hundred years before it befalls a similar fate. Since the radiation at Chernobyl will take millions of years to dissipate, the eternal renewal against decay and nuclear disaster may benefit from the coping mechanism of ironic laughter. Global nuclear apocalypse has not yet

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Demeure: Fiction and Testimony', translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.16

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Demeure: Fiction and Testimony', p.15

⁴⁰ Graham Pechey, 'Not the Novel: Bakhtin, Poetry, Truth, God', in in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, p.70

occurred, yet everything hangs in the balance; the consequences of a future explosion at Chernobyl would be a lot direr than the disaster of 1986. Perhaps this threat will keep us going, and ironic laughter and its literary forms will steady our cause. ‘Chernobyl is a theme worthy of Dostoevsky, an attempt to justify mankind’,⁴¹ Revalskiy comments. And as Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*,

*nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world...the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future [...] But this is, after all, also the purifying sense of ambivalent laughter.*⁴²

⁴¹ Aleksandr Revalskiy, ‘Monologue about Answers’, p.172

⁴² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.166

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