A Postcolonial Prayer: Trauma, Heterotopic Spaces, and the Deconstruction of Soviet Discourse in Svjatlana Aleksievič's *Černobyl'skaja Molitva*

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1. The voice of memory

Svetlana (in Russian) /Svjatlana (in Belarusian) Aleksievič[1] is undoubtedly one of the most prominent figures in the international field of post-Soviet literature and beyond. Her cycle *Voices from Utopia* (*Golosa Utopii*), which encompasses her entire oeuvre, is an example of hybrid literature combining documentary with fiction. The central theme of the cycle is the narration of the traumas of the Soviet (and post-Soviet) era and the representation of *Homo Sovieticus* through individual voices. The first volume, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (*U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, 1984), examines the role of Soviet women in the Second World War and their marginalisation in the official Soviet narrative of the conflict. The second volume, *Last Witnesses* (*Poslednie svideteli*, 1985), is also dedicated to the Second World War, while the third, *Zinky Boys* (*Cinkovye mal'ciki*, 1990), deals with the Soviet war in Afghanistan. The final two volumes of the series do not focus on the

[1] In this article, any further reference to Aleksievič's first name will follow the Belarusian variant, Svjatlana.

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topic of war: *Černobyl' Prayer. A Chronicle of the Future* (*Černobyl'skaja molitva. Chronika buduščego*, 1997)[2] explores the consequences of the 1986 nuclear disaster, while *Secondhand Time* (*Vremja second chėnd*, 2013) focuses on the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR. *Enchanted by the Death* (*Začarovannye smert'ju*, 1993), which deals with suicide, is not typically included in the cycle as it was subsequently revised and partially incorporated into *Secondhand Time*. The works were created through a distinctive writing method, beginning with an extensive preparatory phase comprising numerous oral interviews conducted by Aleksievič with witnesses, followed by the author's selection, editing, and montage of the different texts.

Growing international recognition of her work has also been accompanied by attention to her efforts as a dissident intellectual and her political activism against the regimes of Lukašėnka in Belarus, Putin in Russia, and recently, her role in the Coordination Council of Svjatlana Cichanoŭskaja, the leader of the Belarusian democratic movement in 2020.

Although her success came well before she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015, critical attention increased afterwards, even in the absence of new literary works. Evidence of this can be found in the two monographic volumes dedicated to her by *Canadian Slavonic Papers* (Coleman 2017) and the German journal *Osteuropa* (Tippner et al. 2018). It would be overly simplistic to state that this interest was exclusively due to the Nobel Prize. Instead, the awarding of the prize itself and the growing attention to Aleksievič's work should be seen, at least in part, as a consequence of the acquired centrality of memory of the Soviet past and communism in the field of memory studies (Blacker & Etkind 2013) and European identity. In 2013, Assmann observed the persistence of a divided memory between East and West in Europe, at the same time as Russia has undergone "a

[2] It should be noted that the various English editions use different titles. In this article, any further reference to the title and the title chapter will follow the translation by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait (Alexievich 2016) and the scientific transliteration.

transformation by reasserting imperial greatness based on a memory projected into a new past" (Assmann 2013, 34). In this regard, Rothberg argued that

> only a nonorganic conception of the subjects of memory and historical responsibility can account for the multiple legacies that crisscross a Europe simultaneously postcolonial, postsocialist, post-National Socialist, and postmigrant (Rothberg 2013, 83).

Svjatlana Aleksievič is credited with giving voice to post-Soviet traumatic memory; not only giving meaning to the past but also attempting to decipher the present. Moreover, her deconstruction of the Soviet myth of the "great Victory" not only addresses a central issue in the memory wars that have shaped identity transformation and nation-building processes in the post-Soviet context (Torbakov 2011), but has also acquired renewed urgency today, as the Russian and Belarusian regimes invoke this myth of greatness and heroism (see Posokhin 2019; Bekus 2023), particularly in the context of Russia's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. As Noordenbos has observed, there is a process of weaponisation of memory that is no longer merely metaphorical but tangible reality:

> Today, the banner or its replicas insert Russian soldiers into a heroic memory script that anticipates their (supposedly) imminent victory and exonerates their destruction of Ukrainian lives, framing Russia's unprovoked aggression as a 'reenactment' of World War II heroism (Noordenbos 2022, 1300).

2. Critical reception

The complex interplay between fiction and documentary writing is an evident characteristic of Aleksievič's work. On the one hand, her creative method is based on oral interviews with witnesses and the value of the authentic voices that populate her works (see Marchesini 2017; Lindbladh 2017, 284-285; Sorvari 2022).

On the other hand, Aleksievič's prose exhibits literary characteristics in its composition and structure, situating it within the domain of literary fiction. This hybrid nature has made it difficult to categorise her work (Roesen 2018), which has been defined in several ways: "collective testimony" (Marchesini 2017, who applies the concept coined by Suchich to Aleksievič), "novel of voices" or "history of emotion" (used by Aleksievič herself) (see Sorvari 2022, 103); "a sort of collective autofiction" (Roesen 2018, 104), and "documentary novel" (Stępniak 2019, 162).
Aleksievič has also been accused of 'manipulating' oral testimonies due to discrepancies in the accounts of the same witness in different literary works or editions (Pinkham 2016; Suchich 2021). However, selecting and editing the accounts (as Marchesini notes, "voices speak to the reader through the author" 2017, 316) and placing them within a narrative structure built on editing and montage renders her authorial presence discernible in the text. This endows the author with extraordinary responsibility, requiring her to act as a guarantor of the trust placed in her by the witnesses and the reader's trust in the authenticity of her voices (Roesen 2018, 108).
From the perspective of the trauma narrative, Lindbladh emphasises the necessity to consider Aleksievič's work in relation to the "ambivalence about the act of representing the traumatic past" (Lindbladh 2017, 283, 286) and not on the dichotomy between fact and fiction. Lindbladh claims that this ambivalence, defined by Dori Laub in terms of the witness's "impossibility of telling" and "imperative to tell" (Laub 1992, 78-80), is a pervasive element in the various internally focused, performative monologues that inform the structure of *Voices from Utopia*. The monologues are characterised by extensive use of

> exclamation marks, question marks, ellipses, meta-comments regarding the impossibility of representing the traumatic experiences from the past, constantly addressing the Other, but altogether reflecting the hesitant state of mind in relation to the act of testifying (Lindbladh 2017, 288).

The absence of an external perspective, in the form of dialogues or substantial interventions by the author, engenders an implicit ethical involvement by the implicit reader, who becomes, “in turn, a witness to these testimonies” (302).

In addition to searching out manipulations, critics have questioned how editing affects the work, both in terms of literary technique and the authenticity of the content (Roesen 2018, 106). Furthermore, critics have questioned why the author presented the voices as “performed by first-hand witnesses” (Lindbladh 2017, 283). In this regard, the frequent revisions to already published texts are a distinctive aspect of Aleksievič’s oeuvre, characterised by a dialogical quality even in its open-ended, never-ending form (Oushakine 2016).

The relationship between fiction and non-fiction has also prompted critics to examine a range of literary models that emerged from the Soviet tradition of documentary literature above all (Colombo 2017). The Belarusian writer Ales’ Adamovič, an author of documentary prose in the 1970s, is regarded as the author’s mentor by critics and Aleksievič herself (Brintlinger 2017; Lindbladh 2017; Weller 2018). From a perspective of genre, Il’ja Kukulin acknowledges that the origins of Aleksievič’s work (and of similar experiments in the re-actualisation of the genre in contemporary Russian literature) can be traced back to the aesthetics of montage, which emerged in the 1920s. In the 1960s, the montage re-emerged to represent uncensored or partially censored literature, focusing on private, real-life experiences excluded from dominant Soviet narratives (Kukulin 2015, 314, 332-334).

Another crucial element of Aleksievič’s work that is subject to critical analysis is the gender perspective (see Vicroy 2021; Britlinger 2017). Aleksievič’s key concept of “voice” represents individual subjectivity in its unique presence in time and space (Sorvari 2022, 106), and her work is populated mainly by women’s voices. Indeed, female voices are “the primary prisms used to communicate traumatic events” (Marchesini 2017, 315). In her analysis, from a gender, trauma, and memory perspective, Sorvari situates *Secondhand Time* within the framework of “literary representations of cultural memory written by women regarding lived experiences of displacement, and dealing with the painful and traumatic memories

of Soviet history through polyphonic narratives" (2022, 2). As Sorvari states, these representations

> contest prevailing narratives of cultural memory, identity and belonging and aim to produce new knowledge, which emerges from the fringes and borders of the historical narratives of greatness in the memory politics of Putin's Russia (17).

The experience of dislocation and the contesting power of Aleksievič's polyphonic memory highlight the perspective of postcolonial studies applied to the post-Soviet context.[3] In 2016, Oushakine defined her as the "first major postcolonial author of post-Communism" (12):

> With her cycle, Svetlana Alexievich has established herself as the first major postcolonial author of post-Communism: the daughter of a Ukrainian and Belarusian who uses the Russian language – the only language in which she is completely fluent – to collect and present, from her own subaltern perspective, subaltern accounts of the traumas inflicted by empire. Shaped by the language of the empire, she fractures and fragments it from within, testifying to the fragility of its power (Oushakine 2016, 12).

Similarly, Puleri identifies the writer as an emblematic case in the intersection of the postcolonial paradigm and post-Soviet studies:

> Notwithstanding the historians' enduring reluctance to endorse the methodological hybridization between postcolonialism and post-communism, Aleksievich's experience reveals once again the presence of multiple points of intersection between the two "post-": postcolonial linguistic and cultural hybrids, textual and identity deterritorialization, conflictual binary discourses re-emerge in a different form – but,

[3] For a reconstruction of the lengthy debate on the intersection between postcolonial and post-Soviet studies, see Puleri (2021).

> at the same time, akin to classical colonialism – in the cultural contexts of the new countries that have arisen from the ashes of Communism (2020, 23).

Reference to Aleksievič's work is situated within an in-depth analysis of the theoretical debate on post-Soviet Russophone literature that considers the evolution of this literature in terms of global decentralisation and attempts to free contemporary forms of writing in the Russian language from a Russocentric national (or imperial) perspective. In this interpretative paradigm shift, Aleksievič's work is a noteworthy example of the in-between space of post-Soviet Russophonia in all its diversity, as evidenced by its evolution over time (1-40).

This article analyses *Černobyl' Prayer* in the context of Puleri's and Oushakine's reflections on the postcolonial approach. It puts forth the argument that, if *Voices from Utopia* is a paradigmatic example of post-Soviet postcolonial literature, in *Černobyl' Prayer,* the traumatic Soviet experience is concretely and symbolically condensed into a single place of displacement: the space of Černobyl'.[4] The reference to prayer in the title and throughout the text can also be seen through the lens of postcolonial theory: it represents a textual space of individual grief and condensed collective identity, a space of sharing in response to Soviet colonial discourse.

3. The Soviet and Post-Soviet "Culture of War"

Černobyl' Prayer is comprised of three distinct chapters – *Zemlja mërtvych* (*Land of the Dead*), *Venec tvorenija* (*The Crown of Creation*), *Voschiščenie pečal'ju* (*Admiring Disaster*) – each of which is further divided into a series of monologues and choirs. This relatively complex structure is enclosed by two different framing

[4] In the article, the Ukrainian toponym (Černobyl') is used to refer to the site of the nuclear catastrophe, whereas the Russian toponym (Černobyl') is employed exclusively when the title of Aleksievič's work is mentioned.

texts, both entitled *Odinokij čelovečeskij golos* (*A lone human voice*) as well as a further text that serves as the conclusion, *Vmesto ėpiloga* (*In place of an epilogue*). An additional text, situated before the initial chapter (within the limits of the frame) and entitled *Interv'ju avtora s samoj soboj o propuščennoj istorii i o tom, počemu Černobyl' stavit pod somnenie našu kartinu mira* (*The author interviews herself on missing history and why Černobyl' calls our view of the world into question*) (henceforth *Interview*), is a distinctive element in *Černobyl' Prayer*: it exhibits meta-reflexive qualities that elucidate the author's perspective on her own work and Čornobyl'. In this text, Aleksievič underscores the interconnection between the "cosmic" nuclear catastrophe on the one hand and the "social" catastrophe of the dissolution of the USSR on the other:

> Сошлось две катастрофы: социальная – на наших глазах уходит под воду огромный социалистический материк, и космическая – Чернобыль. Два глобальных взрыва (2013, 38).[5]

The dual meaning of Čornobyl', well documented (see Plokhy 2018, 316; Hundorova 2019, 63), is used here to challenge the dominant Soviet myth of World War II (see Brunstedt 2021, 6-11). This concept was a significant component of Soviet colonial identity discourse during the latter period of the Soviet Union, particularly in relation to the three Soviet Slavic republics (Fedor et al. 2017, 8). In *Černobyl' Prayer*, the collapse of Soviet identity (the "social disaster") accompanying the "cosmic" catastrophe of Čornobyl' is frequently depicted as the downfall of the myth of the "great Victory" – a heroic model rooted in war, which now appears inadequate and illusory:

[5] "Two disasters coincided: a social one, as the Soviet Union collapsed before our eyes, the giant Socialist continent sinking into the sea; and a cosmic one – Chernobyl. Two global eruptions" (Alexievich 2016, 32).

> Всю жизнь мы воевали или готовились к войне, столько о ней знаем – и вдруг! Образ врага изменился. У нас появился другой враг. Враги… Убивала скошенная трава. Пойманная рыба, пойманная дичь. Яблоко… Мир вокруг нас, раньше податливый и дружелюбный, теперь внушал страх (Aleksievič 2013, 34-35).[6]

The nuclear disaster challenges the heroic paradigm, which is revealed to be a mechanism for domination and a means of concealing reality. This process of unmasking is a recurring motif in the text and exemplifies the specific dialogue between the author's voice (expressed in this case in *Interview*) and the other voices in the text:

> Нужно место действия, чтобы 'проявить мужество и героизм'. И водрузить знамя. Замполит читал заметки в газетах о 'высокой сознательности и четкой организованности', о том, что через несколько дней после катастрофы над четвертым реактором уже развевался красный флаг. Полыхал. Через несколько месяцев его сожрала высокая радиация. Флаг снова подняли. Потом новый… А старый рвали себе на память, запихивали куски под бушлат возле сердца. Потом везли домой… Показывали с гордостью детям… Хранили… Героическое безумие! Но я тоже такой… (Aleksievič 2013, 110-111).[7]

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[6] "All our lives we had been at war or preparing for war; we were so knowledgeable about it – and then suddenly this! The image of the adversary had changed. We'd acquired a new enemy. Or rather enemies. Now we could be killed by cut grass, a caught fish or game bird. By an apple. The world around us, once pliant and friendly, now instilled fear" (Alexievich 2016, 28).

[7] "We need a stage for our 'displays of courage and heroism'. Somewhere to hoist the flag. The political officer read us news items on the 'high level of political awareness and efficient organization', on how, within a few days of the accident, the red flag was flying over Reactor No. 4. There it proudly fluttered, until a few months later it was ravaged by

Voices more aligned with the Soviet myth also appear, but this does not detract from the deconstruction of the heroic paradigm; on the contrary, it reinforces awareness of its presence, unmasking its claim to reality and exclusivity. It is also important to note that the critique of the myth of victory specifically concerns the Belarusians in their identity as a "partisan republic", which constitutes the core of their Soviet identity:

> The partisan myth – that the entire republic had united under the banner of Soviet statehood to fight the German occupation – became the basis of collective identity for postwar Belarusian society; this process was achieved, at least in part, by the elimination of any discussion of local collaboration with the Germans, the non-Soviet Belarusian independence movement, or local resistance to partisan activity. Built on a hero myth of loyalty and thoroughly Russified, Belarus gained a reputation as the "most Soviet of the Soviet republics" – inter alia, this meant that it had lost its memory (Lewis 2013, 200).

The term "partisan" is used several times in *Černobyl' Prayer* testimonies. Those defined as such are the soldiers encamped near the nuclear power plant, as well as those responsible for guarding the Černobyl' exclusion zone (the zone with the highest levels of radioactive contamination, where access and habitation were restricted):

> Призвали на службу… А служба такая: не пропускать в выселенные деревни местных жителей. Стояли заслонами вблизи дорог, строили землянки, наблюдательные вышки. Звали нас почему-то 'партизанами'. Мирная жизнь.

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the tremendous radiation. So they raised a new flag. And another. The old one was kept as a souvenir. They ripped it into shreds and shoved it under their jackets next to their hearts. Then they took the rags back home, showed them off proudly to their children. They preserved them. Heroic lunacy! But I was just the same, no better" (Alexievich 2016, 103).

> А мы стоим… Одеты по-военному. Крестьяне не понимали, почему, например, нельзя забрать со своего двора ведро, кувшин, пилу или топор. Собрать урожай. Как им объяснить? (Aleksievič 2013, 84).[8]

The individuals fleeing Soviet military forces and subjected to forced relocation most closely resembled partisans: “Солдаты нас не пускали. Омоновцы. Так мы ночью… Лесными тропками. Партизанскими” (Aleksievič 2013, 58).[9] If “[t]he partisans’ heroics were the proof in the pudding of Soviet Belarusian identity” (Lewis 2017, 377), that paradigm had been subverted, and the hegemonic discourse contested. The deconstruction is achieved not only by exposing the illusory nature of a heroic and war paradigm incapable of dealing with the Čornobyl’ disaster, but also by reversing the perspective: if in the Soviet myth, the “great Victory” was based on the agency of the collective – “it was the political body which both suffered and retaliated, and finally claimed victory” – and the individual dimension of the trauma (Lewis 2017, 379), the victim’s perspective, was denied, in *Černobyl’ Prayer* it becomes instead the very center of the narration. Nevertheless, the dismantling of the heroic narrative of the Soviet victory does not lead to a denial of the heroism of those who worked at Čornobyl’. As Aleksievič notes, their heroism is fundamentally different (and parallels with the war are refuted again):

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[8] “I got called up for service. And our duty was not letting the local people back into evacuated villages. We stood in lines near the roads, we built dugouts and look-out towers. For some reason, the locals called us ‘partisans’. This was peacetime, but there we stood, decked out in our army gear. The peasants couldn’t understand why they weren’t allowed, say, to fetch a bucket from their yard, a jug, a saw, an axe. Or get the crops in. How could you explain it?” (Alexievich 2016, 76).

[9] “We came back together. The soldiers and riot police wouldn’t let us in, so we came by night. Took the forest footpaths. The partisan paths” (Alexievich 2016, 52).

> Они – герои. Герои новой истории. Их сравнивают с героями Сталинградской битвы или сражения под Ватерлоо, но они спасали нечто большее, чем родное отечество, они спасали саму жизнь. Время жизни. Живое время" (Aleksievič 2013, 36).[10]

4. An unfinished interview, a text in progress

As previously stated, *Interview* addresses the Soviet myth of victory. However, the textual variations in the several editions reveal an evolution of the deconstruction of this myth. The open character of the entire cycle of *Voices from Utopia* has already been discussed. As Ouskhakine notes:

> This "polyphony" of experience and remembrance, or (to evoke another Bakhtinian term) the inherent "unfinalizability" of the dialogic exchange that Alexievich generates between testimonies, also affected the biographies of the books themselves. Their method of composition invited frequent revisions and additions, and almost every book was altered after first publication (2016, 10).

Černobyl' Prayer is no exception. The first edition appeared in 1997, preceded by a partial periodical publication and followed by other editions, with significant variations over the years.[11] In *Interview*, the changes between the first and later

[10] "They were heroes. Heroes of the new history. Sometimes compared to the heroes at the Battle of Stalingrad or the Battle of Waterloo, but they were saving something greater than their homeland. They were saving life itself. Life's continuity" (Alexievich 2016, 29).

[11] This open and, at the same time, philologically intricate condition is also reflected variously in the translated editions (see Karpusheva 2017; Zink 2018). Due to space limitations, this article will not provide an exhaustive analysis of the textual differences between the various editions of *Černobyl' Prayer*. Instead, it will focus on a few examples related to the deconstruction of the Soviet myth of victory and, in the final paragraph, the form of the prayer.

editions (including the title) are so substantial that it would be more accurate to consider it a new text rather than a revised one. In the first edition, the reference to the myth of Soviet victory is merely indirect: “Наша история – это история страдания. Страдание – наш культ. Наше убежище. Мы загипнотизированы им” (Aleksievič 1997, 27).[12] However, in later editions, *Interview* deals with the issue openly and thoroughly, clearly defining the Soviet discourse as a “culture of war”:

> Искали шпионов и диверсантов, ходили слухи, что авария – запланированная акция западных спецслужб, чтобы подорвать лагерь социализма. Надо быть бдительными. Эта картина войны… Эта культура войны рухнула у меня на глазах (Aleksievič 2013, 35).[13]

Interview shifts perspective, moving from the “history of suffering” in the first edition to the “culture of war”. Although the theme was already present in *Unwomanly Face of War*, over time, it became a central topic in interviews and public speeches, especially in the context of the post-Soviet era and the emergence of discourse on Soviet nostalgia in the Belarusian and Russian regimes. In the Nobel Lecture, Aleksievič similarly argues:

> I lived in a country where dying was taught to us from childhood. We were taught death. We were told that human beings exist in order to give everything they have, to burn out, to sacrifice themselves. We were taught to love people with weapons. Had I grown up in a different country, I couldn’t have traveled this path. Evil is cruel,

[12] “Our history is a history of suffering. Suffering is our cult. Our refuge. We are hypnotised by it”. If not specified otherwise, translations are by the article’s author.

[13] “They were looking for spies and saboteurs. The accident was rumoured to be a Western intelligence operation designed to undermine the Socialist order. We needed to stay vigilant. It was a picture of war. This culture of war crumbled before my eyes” (Alexievich 2016, 29).

> you have to be inoculated against it. We grew up among executioners and victims (2015).

In comparable terms, Aleksievič is referring to repression in Belarus' following the protests against Lukašėnka's falsification of results during the presidential elections in 2020 and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In an interview with the Ukrainian international TV channel Freedom on 27 December 2022, Aleksievič observed:

> Я поняла, что мы – люди войны. Это вся наша культура. Говорят о великой русской культуре, но главное в этой 'великой русской культуре' – это культура войны. Я помню своё поколение, даже поколение моей внучки, которой сейчас 17 лет… Их учат убивать и умирать. Другого нет. Это главный наш опыт.
> […] Потому что вся наша культура не основана на любви (Ajmurzaev 2022).[14]

5. Čornobyl' as a heterotopia

In its semantic stratification, the space of Čornobyl' can be defined a heterotopia. The concept of heterotopia, used by Michel Foucault in his essay *Des spaces autres* (1984), identifies real but different and other places that have the power to contain within an infinite number of juxtaposed other incompatible spaces. The use of heterotopic space has been broadly addressed in a postcolonial perspective (see Villet 2018; Wygoda 2021; Burrows 2008) and in the context of post-Soviet literatures. Chernetsky applies it to postmodern writing and uses it less to

[14] "I realised that we are people of war. That is our whole culture. They talk about the great Russian culture, but the main thing in this 'great Russian culture' is the culture of war. I remember my generation, even the generation of my granddaughter, who is now 17 years old... They are taught to kill and to die. There is no other way. That is the main experience we have. [...] Because our whole culture is not based on love".

indicate places (“what the text describe”) and more what texts can be (the condition of a text where “multiple textual regimes come into contact to create a new symbiotic identity”), “a chronotope of coexistence that is simultaneously affirmed and ironically subverted” (Chernetsky 2007, 90). In his analysis, Puleri employs the concept of heterotopia to explore the marginal narratives of Ukrainian Russophone writer Aleksej Nikitin. Nikitin, as Puleri notes, “constructs his texts as literary heterotopias to deterritorialise the post-Soviet experience” (2020, 138).
The association of Chernobyl with heterotopia is not new. Stone (2013) explored this concept through the lens of dark tourism. In *Černobyl’ Prayer*, this theme is also present (*In place of an epilogue*), but a central role is reserved for the rupture of time. Foucault emphasises how heterotopia also presupposes heterochrony:

> Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time (Foucault 1986, 26).

Čornobyl’ can be considered a tangible manifestation of the rupture in the flow of time. It is an apocalyptic temporality where beginning and end coincide, where time itself collapses, as Aleksievič emphasises in *Interview*: “Когда мы говорим о прошлом или о будущем, то вкладываем в эти слова свои представления о времени, но Чернобыль – это прежде всего катастрофа времени” (Aleksievič 2013, 30).[15]
Another example of time-related heterotopia can be observed in the cemetery. As Foucault notes, it is “a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance” (Foucault

[15] “When we talk about the past or the future, we read our ideas about time into those words; but Chernobyl is, above all, a catastrophe of time” (Alexievich 2016, 24).

1986, 26). In *Černobyl' Prayer*, the post-apocalyptic world of Čornobyl' is depicted as an inverted cemetery, where the living, too, experience the loss of their former lives and bear witness to the disappearance and dissolution of the bodies of their loved ones. As Marchesini notes, there is often an "'inversion of the perspective', bodies are objectified, whereas objects are personified and acquire human-like traits" (2017, 320). Consequently, individuals who succumb to radiation-related illnesses, such as firefighter Ignatenko, are defined as "reactors" while objects are buried as if they were people: "Платья, сапоги, стулья, гармошки, швейные машинки... Закапывали в ямы, которые называли 'братскими могилами'" (Aleksievič 2013, 92).[16] The dehumanisation of the afflicted and the deceased evokes the Soviet model of heroism, as heroes are akin to state-owned objects:

> Всем говорили одно и то же, что отдать вам тела ваших мужей, ваших сыновей мы не можем, они очень радиоактивные и будут похоронены на московском кладбище особым способом. В запаянных цинковых гробах, под бетонными плитками. И вы должны этот документ подписать. Нужно ваше согласие. Если кто-то возмущался, хотел увезти гроб на родину, его убеждали, что они, мол, герои и теперь семье уже не принадлежат. Они уже государственные люди… Принадлежат государству (Aleksievič 2013, 24).[17]

Due to radiation, these bodies are to be isolated and hidden, both alive and dead.

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[16] "Dresses, boots, chairs, accordions, sewing machines. Buried it all in pits, which we called 'communal graves'" (Alexievich 2016, 87).

[17] "They told everyone the same thing: that they couldn't give us the bodies of our husbands and sons, they were highly radioactive and would be buried by some special method in a Moscow cemetery. In sealed zinc coffins, under slabs of concrete. And we had to sign some paperwork, they needed our consent. They drummed it into anyone who was unhappy and wanted to take the coffin back home that the dead were now heroes and no longer belonged to their families. They were public property, belonged to the state" (Alexievich 2016,18-19).

In the second text entitled *A Lone Human Voice*, Valentina Timofeevna Apanasevič, the wife of a Černobyl' liquidator, recalls:

> Я сама читала, что могилы чернобыльских пожарников, умерших в московских госпиталях и похороненных под Москвой в Митино, люди обходят стороной, своих мертвых возле них не кладут. Мертвые боятся, не говоря о живых (Aleksievič 2013, 297).[18]

Nevertheless, these bodies are the extreme product of the "culture of war" that demands self-sacrifice. The deconstruction of the Soviet heroic discourse observed in *Černobyl' Prayer* is also reflected in the body's dissolution. The heroes of Černobyl' do not exemplify the abstract, normocentric model of the Soviet body. Instead, they are bodies devastated by radioactive contamination, bearing the indelible marks of sacrifice and violence. These individuals have become emblematic of a society "that has staked everything on the collective, on the typical and a utopian ideal of humanity and has cared little for the individual, which it has often sacrificed without hesitation" (Imposti 2014, 13). This perspective is further illuminated through the account of Vasilij Ignatenko's wife, in the initial text entitled *A Lone Human Voice*:

> Одели в парадную форму, фуражку на грудь положили. Обувь не подобрали, потому что ноги распухли. Бомбы вместо ног. Парадную форму тоже разрезали, натянуть не могли, не было уже целого тела. Все – кровавая рана (Aleksievič 2013, 23).[19]

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[18] "I had read myself that people gave a wide berth to the graves of the Chernobyl firemen who had died in Moscow hospitals and been buried nearby in Mitino. Local people wouldn't bury their own dead alongside them. The dead afraid of the dead … to say nothing of the living" (Alexievich 2016, 291).

[19] "They put him in his dress uniform, with the service cap on his chest. They didn't pick any shoes out because his feet were too swollen. He had balloons for legs. They had to

The portrayal of deformed and mutilated corpses is a recurring theme in the work. Although these descriptions are presented as individual testimonies within *Černobyl' Prayer*, they ultimately represent the collective trauma of Čornobyl', encompassing both the "cosmic" and the "social" dimensions. The conjunction of these two meanings is underscored by the resonance amongst the various monologues, created by the montage and the compositional structure, and reinforced by the author's subsequent modifications.

However, it would be a mistake to restrict the concept of heterotopia to the depiction of the physical space of Čornobyl' alone. In light of the textual interpretations of heterotopia made by Chernetsky (2007) and Puleri (2020), *Černobyl' Prayer* itself represents a heterotopia. Aleksevič's endeavour to depict the Soviet trauma through a polyphonic multitude of voices can be regarded as a heterotopic space of multifaceted memory, wherein the Soviet traumatic experience is reconstructed.

6. A prayer to write back

In the context of the cycle *Voices from Utopia*, *Černobyl' Prayer* is the only work that refers to a specific textual typology in its title. The explanation for the title can be found in the second text *A lone human voice*: "Мы будем ждать с ним вместе. Я буду читать свою чернобыльскую молитву… Он – смотреть на мир детскими глазами…" (Aleksievič 2013, 298).[20] These are the last words of Valentina Apanasevič. Nevertheless, the multitude of references (which are frequently generic) is a pervasive presence that permeates the entire text, thereby reinforcing the connections between the various voices:

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slit the dress uniform too, they couldn't pull it on his mess of a body. All just one gory wound" (Alexievich 2016, 18).

[20] "We will wait for him together. I will say my Chernobyl prayer, and he will look at the world with the eyes of a child …" (Alexievich 2016, 292).

> Снег. Ветер. Погода лютая. Священник служит панихиду. Читает молитву. С непокрытой головой. […]
> О чем я молюсь? Спросите меня: о чем я молюсь? Я не в церкви молюсь. Дома… Утром или вечером. Когда все спят. Я хочу любить. Я люблю! Я молюсь за свою любовь (Aleksievič 2013, 183, 119).[21]

Karpusheva identifies the traditional Slavic death lament as the *Černobyl' Prayer*'s reference model for expressing trauma, noting that

> like death laments that offer verbal means to overcome cosmic, epistemological, and ideological ruptures in the regular flow of life, Aleksievich's narrative aspires to bridge the ideological, epistemological, and cosmic ruptures Chornobyl' brought about (2017, 262).

Notwithstanding Karpusheva's emphasis on the distinction between prayer and lament concerning the addressee (who, in the case of lament, is not the deity but the community), this distinction may be relatively peripheral in the context of *Černobyl' Prayer*. What primarily engages Aleksievič is the performative, both individual and choral, dimension of prayer, combined with the expression of mourning in lament. The dialogue between the different voices in the text is further consolidated into a collective dimension (a "Čornobyl' prayer", indeed) by the reference to prayer, further reinforced by the narrative structure (the soldiers' choir, the folk choir, the children's choir), but also arises from the performative and dialogical orientation of the text towards the other, which, as Lindbladh (2017) suggests, stimulates the ethical responsibility of the implied reader.

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[21] "Snow, strong winds, atrocious weather. The priest was conducting the funeral service, reciting the prayer, bareheaded" (Alexievich 2016, 179). "What do I pray for? If you were to ask me what I pray for … I say my prayers at home, not in church. In the morning or evening, when everyone is asleep. I want to feel love. I do feel love! And I pray for that love" (113).

The appearance of the expression “Чернобыльская молитва” (“Chernobyl prayer”) in the second *A Lone Human Voice* provides additional interpretative value to the two texts and a response to the construction of a dimension of identity based on sacrifice. Both texts describe a love shaped by care. They are characterised by a representation of emotional and bodily proximity of two women who care for their dying husbands despite the high radiation levels to which their bodies have been exposed. The first text, the account of Ljudimila Ignatenko, begins with the following words: “Я не знаю, о чем рассказывать… О смерти или о любви?” (Aleksievič 2013, 11).[22]

The construction of an “us” based on a non-domination model that prioritises care for the other can be seen as a form of proximity that responds to the production of social distance and the othering mechanisms of power. This response is significantly informed by the perspective of women (the two lone human voices are both female). The same proximity is also evident in Aleksievič’s method of interviewing, in which she provides support and assistance to witnesses to help them find their voice (see Vicroy 2021).

As in other cases, there is intertextual resonance between one voice and the other to create a dense network of transversal nodes of meaning. In *Monolog o tom, čto tol’ko vo zle čelovek izoščren, no on prost i dostupen v nechitrych slovach ljubvi* (*Monologue on how man is crafty only in evil, but simple and open in his words of love*), where the witness is a hermit living in the dead zone, the words of the two lonely human voices seem to resonate:

> Молюсь я просто… Читаю про себя… Господи, возвах меня! Услыши! Только во зле человек изощрен. Но как он прост и доступен в нехитрых словах любви.
>
> […]

[22] “I don’t know what to tell you about. Death or love?” (Alexievich 2016, 6).

> Слово абсолютно соответствует тому, что в душе, только в молитве, в молитвенной мысли. Я физически это ощущаю. Господи, возвах меня! Услыши!
> И человек тоже… (Aleksievič 2013, 80).[23]

An examination of Interview reveals that the reference to prayer, which historically reflects the phenomenon of religious revival linked to the collapse of ideology in the 1980s, is made explicit in subsequent editions from 2006 onwards:

> Рядом с Чернобылем все начинали философствовать. Становились философами. Храмы опять заполнились людьми… Верующими и недавними атеистами… Искали ответов, которые не могли дать физика и математика. Трехмерный мир раздвинулся, и я не встречала смельчаков, которые бы снова могли поклясться на библии материализма (Aleksievič 2013, 32-33).[24]

Prayer thus plays a dual role in contesting the discourse of power and in uniting the polyphony of voices in the search for a new collective dimension that is both universal and situated in the post-Soviet space. Once again, the cosmic meaning of Čornobyl' merges with the social to shape the perspective of the post-Soviet condition. This 'situated we' is also given greater emphasis in the text added to *Interview* starting with the 2006 edition:

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[23] "My prayer is simple. I say it silently. 'Lord, I cry unto me! Give ear!' Man is crafty only in evil, but he's so simple and open in his plain words of love […] The word genuinely attunes to what's in our soul only in prayer, and in prayerful thoughts. I can feel it physically. 'Lord, I cry unto me! Give ear!' And man too" (Alexievich 2016, 75).

[24] "Everybody near Chernobyl began to philosophize. They became philosophers. The churches filled up again with people – with believers and former atheists. They were searching for answers that could not be found in physics or mathematics. The three-dimensional world came apart, and I have not since met anyone brave enough to swear again on the bible of materialism" (Alexievich 2016, 26).

> Имя моей маленькой, затерянной в Европе страны, о которой мир раньше почти ничего не слышал, зазвучало на всех языках, она превратилась в дьявольскую чернобыльскую лабораторию, а мы, белорусы, стали чернобыльским народом (Aleksievič 2013, 31).[25]

If, as Lewis (2013, 200) observed, the Belorussian Soviet identity, founded upon the partisan myth, rendered Belorussian SSR the most Soviet of Soviet republics, Aleksievič instead – who had been writing *Černobyl' Prayer* since the 1990s – situates the new Belarusian post-Čornobyl' identity at the core of the post-Soviet condition characterised by dislocation and deterritorialization.

Indeed, in recent decades, contemporary Belarusian identity and culture have very often been associated with a state of "in-betweenness, hybridity and even transculturation" (Posokhin 2021, 253), as well as with the concept of *pogranič'e* (borderland) (Bobkov 2005; see also Oushakine 2017; Ghilarducci 2022), a peculiar condition rooted in the country's historical, cultural and linguistic development, but at the same time somewhat prototypical of the post-Soviet postcolonial condition. Similarly, the definition of Belarusians as the people of Čornobyl' ("Černobyl'skij narod") in *Černobyl' Prayer* also refers to the social meaning of the disaster, to the collapse of Soviet imperial modernity and its myths, which contributes to the generation of the heterotopic space of Čornobyl', an in-between space that ultimately also embodies, in condensed form, the indelible traces of the Soviet colonial experience and its overcoming.

In *Interview*, the intensification of the first-person plural in the narrative starting from the 2006 edition occurs in parallel with that of the first person, which emphasizes, on the one hand, the author's role as a witness ("– Я – свидетель

[25] "The name of my small country, lost in some corner of Europe, which until then the world had heard almost nothing about, now blared out in every language. Our land became a diabolical Chernobyl laboratory, and we Belarusians became the people of Chernobyl" (Alexievich 2016, 25).

Чернобыля..."; Aleksievič 2013)[26] and, on the other, the challenge and awareness of her own responsibility as a writer: "Через год после катастрофы меня кто-то спросил: 'Все пишут. А вы живете здесь и не пишете. Почему?'" (Aleksievič 2013, 31).[27]

7. Conclusion

The specificity of *Černobyl' Prayer* within the cycle *Voices from Utopia* lies in the peculiar condensation in the space (and time) of Čornobyl' of the trauma of the Soviet experience and the deconstruction of the Soviet identity discourse embodied in the myth of victory, but also in the post-Soviet Belarusian identity. Čornobyl' itself can be defined as a contagious and uncontrollable heterotopia, which is situated in the former periphery of the USSR, but, at the same time, it also invisibly traverses spaces and crosses boundaries, both physically and metaphorically. As a result of this condensation, the postcolonial discourse in *Černobyl' Prayer* is particularly evident and is amplified by textual changes made after the first edition.

In conclusion, the text can be considered a heterotopic space, constituted by a polyphonic montage of different voices, through which the fragmented memory of the Soviet experience is reconstructed and the traumatic past worked through (LaCapra 2001, 86-91). The reference to prayer in the title and its recurrence throughout the text serves to give voice to individual grief, but to create a space for sharing. This can be seen as a response to the Soviet colonial discourse.

[26] "I am a witness to Chernobyl" (Alexievich 2016, 24).

[27] "A year after the disaster, someone asked me, 'Everybody is writing. But you live here and write nothing. Why?'" (Alexievich 2016, 24).

Černobyl' Prayer is thus a prayer that rises from the margins: from the apocalyptic space of Čornobyl', from the former Belarusian periphery of the Soviet empire, and also from the gendered marginalisation of women, to create a new dimension of coexistence. The reference to prayer also helps to join together a multiple "we" at the narrative level: it is a reference to all humanity and the trauma of the Soviet experience, and it is also the "we" situated in the Belarusian post-Soviet situation. In the end, Aleksievič's ethical and political responsibility to write back arises from this identity perspective.

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