Representing (Oneself Through) Others: Authorial Agency in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*

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Svetlana Aleksievich is a contemporary Belarusian writer and journalist. Born in 1948 in Ivano-Frankivsk in the Western part of Ukraine to a Belarusian father and a Ukrainian mother, Aleksievich is most proficient in Russian and writes in that language. She has a background in journalism, having graduated from the Faculty of Journalism at the State University of Minsk and worked for a number of newspapers, such as *Selskaia Gazeta* and the literary magazine *Neman*. An outspoken critic of Aleksandr Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin, Aleksievich is widely regarded as a 'dissident' writer. In 1993, following the publication of her third book, *Boys in Zinc* (*Tsinkovye mal'chiki* 1991), she was taken to court accused of having distorted and falsified statements made by her interviewees – a trial which in the West is considered to have been politically motivated and illegitimate. In 2000, she left Belarus for political reasons and spent eleven years living abroad, in France, Italy,

Germany and Sweden, before returning to Belarus in 2011. She received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015.

Aleksievich is the author of six books, five of which form a part of her large-scale literary project *Voices of Utopia* (*Golosa utopii*).[1] Her first two books describe the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. *The Unwomanly Face of War* (*U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* 1985) focuses on women who participated in battle, and *Last Witnesses: Unchildlike Stories* (*Poslednie svideteli: kniga nedetskikh rasskazov* 1985) depicts children's experiences of that same conflict. Aleksievich's third book, *Boys in Zinc* (*Tsinkovye mal'chiki* 1991), is compiled of testimonies by Soviet soldiers who fought in the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-89). *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (*Chernobyl'skaia molitva: khronika budushchego* 1997) is devoted to the nuclear disaster at the Chernobyl power plant in 1986. Concluding the *Golosa utopii*, *Second-Hand Time* (*Vremia sekond-khend* 2013) describes the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Basing her books on interviews with historical eye-witnesses, Aleksievich is widely seen as a writer who 'gives a voice' to the people who experienced some of the most violent and historically significant events of the 20th century. Aleksievich's ambition to 'let the witness speak' is evident both in public statements made by her and in the structural emphasis on the multi-voiced nature of the material presented in her books. In *Chernobyl Prayer*, a multitude of witnesses talk in the first person about their personal experience of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Cited in in the first person and with their names clearly stated – akin to individual signatures – the witnesses are elevated to the status of authors. In combination with the multi-voiced structure of the book, this suggests at first sight a strong commitment to a plurality of views and perspectives on the Chernobyl disaster and on Soviet reality.

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1 On the book covers of the 2016 publication of Aleksievich's collected works, *Golosa utopii* is presented as "five books in which "the little man" himself tells about his fate" ("пять книг, в которых «маленький человек» сам рассказывает о своей судьбе") (unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian are mine). In speeches and interviews, Aleksievich often refers to her "five books", excluding from *Golosa utopii* her fourth published work *Enchanted with Death* (*Zacharovannye smert'iu* 1994), which can be considered a draft to *Second-Hand Time* (*Vremia Sekond-Khend* 2013). See for instance her Nobel Lecture.

However, as I argue, the ambition to act as a spokeswoman for a multitude of historical witnesses conflicts with another aim of Aleksievich, namely to express her own distinct view on the Chernobyl accident and on the Soviet system in *Chernobyl Prayer*. Through the subtle arrangement of individual monologues and the narrators' collective insistence on particular topics, the distinct biases of a single author emerges. The totality of the text is shaped by a fundamentally anti-Soviet outlook, which, as I show, determines the implicit value of the witnesses' judgements and makes them more or less reliable in the eyes of a postulated reader. Thus, Aleksievich's implicit insistence on the witnesses' independence as textual subjects conflicts with her aim to depict the Chernobyl disaster according to her own way of seeing it. Through the collective insistence of their testimonies and their varying degree of reliability, the witnesses are turned from empowered subjects into objects serving as vehicles by which Aleksievich's expresses her distinct views.

I take my point of departure in the historical and literary context of Aleksievich's work by discussing her writing in relation to that of the Belarusian author Ales Adamovich (1927-1994). Following Slavic language scholar Daniel Bush (2017), I argue that the use of oral history in Adamovich's and Aleksievich's writing is prompted by a sense of lost ownership of historical experience, producing a binary structure in which oral testimonies given by 'ordinary people' provide an image of reality which is more 'authentic' than the mythical images disseminated by state authorities. In the following section, I show the ways in which the witnesses in *Chernobyl Prayer* are apparently empowered as textual subjects, able to speak 'for themselves'. Next, I argue that, contrary to the implied independence of the narrators, the ideological coherence of their statements displays a distinct set of underlying values and assumptions, attributable to a single consciousness. Here, I use the concept of the implied author, an agency that, in Rimmon-Kenan's words, '"speaks" only metaphorically, through all the different narrators of the text' (Rimmon-Kenan 88). Finally, I demonstrate how the implied author's ethical outlook determines the reliability of the narrators and the value of their judgements, which in turn undermines their status as 'independent' authors.

"The Witness Must Speak": Aleksievich and Soviet War Writing

In 2015 when Svetlana Aleksievich was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the committee citation read: "For her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time" (Danius 2015). It is interesting to note that the committee stipulates the multi-voiced (polyphonic) nature of Aleksievich's work as one of her principal literary achievements. Basing her books on tape-recorded interviews with historical eyewitnesses, Aleksievich is widely seen as a writer who 'gives a voice' to other people. Indeed, it is one of Aleksievich's explicit aims to give the witnesses of some of the most calamitous events in Soviet history an opportunity to tell their stories. In her Nobel lecture, she states:

> My teacher, Ales Adamovich, whose name I mention today with gratitude, felt that writing prose about the nightmares of the 20th century was sacrilege. Nothing may be invented. You must give the truth as it is. A "super-literature" is required. The witness must speak (Aleksievich 2015).

Aleksievich's reference to Adamovich as her 'teacher' is highly relevant. She has been influenced by Adamovich's writing in a decisive way, in particular by his co-authored books *The Book of the Blockade* (*Blokadnaia kniga* 1981, written together with Danil Granin) and *Out of the Fire* (*Ia iz ognennoi derevni* 1977, written with Ianka Bryl' and Vladimir Kalesnik) which examine the experiences of the Soviet population during the Nazi German invasion that begun in 1942. Sivakova sees these two works as canonical for what she conceptualises as "New Documentary Literature" ("новая документальная литература") (Sivakova 76). Defined by their use of oral history and by the montage of monologues, works in this genre tend to be centered around a single historical event. *The Book of the Blockade* is compiled of testimonies by Leningraders who lived through the siege and *Out of the Fire* describes the experiences of the rural population during the German invasion, whereas *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Last Witnesses* focus on women who participated in battle and the experiences of displaced children.

As Daniel Bush has argued, Adamovich's and Aleksievich's writing emerged directly from a tradition of 'unofficial' realism in Soviet writing about the Second World War, which included such writers as Viktor

Nekrasov (1911-1987), Vasil Bykau (1924-2003), Iurii Bondarev (1924), Viktor Astaf'ev (1924-2001), and Bulat Okudzhava (1924-1997). Defining themselves in opposition to the 'official' depictions of the war promulgated by the state, these writers were united by one central idea: "that there was a "truth" about soldiers" experiences that was under constant threat of mythologization" (Bush 217). In other words, there was a sense that the war had been appropriated by Soviet state-controlled media and was being used as a propaganda symbol. Most importantly, this is what underpins the imperative of the writers of New Documentary Prose to 'let the witness speak'. In a preface to *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Adamovich metaphorically refers to depictions of the war in state-controlled media as the "bronze plaque of history" and rhetorically suggests that it is in response to the official dissemination of myths that works such as Aleksievich's are being written:

> Is it not because of our inner feeling, which, perhaps, is a feeling shared by the people – a feeling of protest against the fact that the suffering of millions of souls has been covered by, or rather buried under, the cold, dead bronze plaque of history – is it not because of this feeling that literary such works as this are being written?[2]

The first edition of *The Unwomanly Face of War* includes a conversation between the author and a censor in which Aleksievich employs a logic similar to that of Adamovich in his preface. The aesthetic principles of Soviet propaganda are explicitly contrasted with her own aesthetics. The censor accuses her of "primitive naturalism" ("примитивный натурализм"), for "degrading and debunking the women-heroes" ("унижаете ... развенчиваете ... женщину-героиню") who are "holy" ("святые"), to which the author replies that what she is attempting to show is the "truth" ("правда"). In this way, the two aesthetic systems are presented as a set of binary oppositions, where "grand ideas" ("великие идеи") are set off against "the ordinary person" ("маленький человек"), "instances of heroism" ("героические примеры") against "dirt" ("грязь"), "grand history" ("большая история")

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2 "Не в ответ ли на внутреннее чувство наше, а может быть, и народное – на протест против того, что пережитое и перестраданное миллионами душ будет заслонено бронзовой плитой истории, холодной, мертвой, а точнее, похоронено под плитой – не в ответ ли на это чувство и возникают такие произведения?" (Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, 49).

against the "little history" ("маленькая история") (Aleksievich, *Unwomanly Face of War*, 27, 29, 31).

Explicitly defined against the 'official' discourse, then, *The Unwomanly Face of War* insists on its own authenticity and claims the right to talk about historical events, re-appropriating them in the process. The privilege to speak of the event – be it the Second World War or the war in Afghanistan – which always belonged to the official Soviet discourse, is apparently reclaimed by people who experienced the event first-hand. Sergei Oushakine compares *The Final Witnesses* to prose written by American Vietnam war veterans, pointing out that the fragmentation that characterises these works serves to highlight the immediate and disintegrated perception of war, a sensitivity that belongs exclusively to people who experienced it first-hand. Thereby, according to Oushakine, it functions as a means by which veterans attempt to "reclaim power […] over language and the depiction of war, which has been monopolised by official discourse" ("вернуть себе […] власть над языком и сюжетным оформлением войны, монополизированными официальным дискурсом") (Oushakine 2). Similarly, Angela Brintlinger observes that Aleksievich translates this sense of narrative empowerment into structural devices in her works. The titles of chapters and sections in *The Unwomanly Face of War* which consists of quotations from interviews with a witness, seem to "[elevate] the women's voices to a position of power and authority and [imply] that the women themselves are in control of the book's contents" (Brintlinger 201).

Thus, the use of oral history in Aleksievich's work stems from the ambition to challenge the 'untrue' mythologized depictions of the Second World War promulgated by the Soviet authorities. Thereby, Aleksievich aims to re-appropriate, on behalf of the interviewed witnesses, the right to speak of their own experiences. In the next section, I show how this is directly manifested in *Chernobyl Prayer* and the witnesses apparently empowered as textual subjects.

Chernobyl Prayer

Chernobyl Prayer is Aleksievich's fifth book and the second one that does not depict war.[3] Despite the change in thematic focus, however, Aleksievich's style of writing remains essentially unchanged since the war-writing period, which can be considered formative for *Chernobyl Prayer* and *Vremia sekond-khend* (Bush 215). *Chernobyl Prayer* was first published in 1997, eleven years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred in April 1986. Aleksievich has reported that she spent ten years researching and writing the book, conducting around five-hundred interviews, one-hundred and seven of which were used in the final version (Aleksievich interviewed by A. Lučić). Except for the witness-statements, the book contains an authorial preface presented as a "Self-interview" ("Интервью автора с самой собой"), a section with "historical information" situated at the beginning of the book ("Историческая справка") and a short section subtitled "In Place of an Epilogue" ("Вместо эпилога") located at the end. One of Aleksievich's more intricately structured works, *Chernobyl Prayer* is composed of three chapters: "Land of the Dead" ("Земля мёртвых"), "The Crown of Creation" ("Венец творения"), and "Admiring Disaster" ("Восхищение печалью"). Each chapter is formed by a succession of subtitled monologues ("Монолог") in which the speakers are identified by name. These are followed by a "choir" ("Хор") where the speakers are collectively named in the beginning and no statement attributed to a particular individual. Framing the three chapters are two more extensive monologues with the same title, "A Lone Human Voice" ("Одинокий человеческий голос").

The monologues comprise the greater part of the book. At the end of them the cited witness is named and it is clarified in what capacity he or she was interviewed. For instance: *"Liudmila Ignatenko, wife of Vasilii Ignatenko, deceased fireman"* (Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 23); *"Marat Filippovich Kokhanov, former chief engineer of the Institute of Atom Energy, Belarus Academy of Sciences"* (203).[4] The author recedes into the

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3 Aleksievich's fourth published work *Enchanted With Death* deals with the wave of suicides in the post-Soviet space following Perestroika.

4 *"(Людмила Игнатенко, жена погибшего пожарника Василия Игнатенко)"* (Aleksievich, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: Khronika budushchego*, 21); *"(Марат Филиппович Коханов, бывший главный инженер Института ядерной энергетики Академии наук Беларуси)"* (209). All English

background, limiting herself to bracketed remarks, reminiscent of stage-directions: "(She falls silent.)" (7); "(She cries.)" (9).[5] The witness is thus granted a maximum of space. Aleksievich's 'presence' is felt only in the bracketed remarks, in the italicized indication of the witnesses' names, in the empty space between sections, in the authorial preface, and in the monologue and chapter titles, all of which are evidently products of the writing and structuring performed by her. The monologues themselves, on the other hand, as they imitate the texture of a verbally given witness-statement, are written and presented by Aleksievich in such way as to obscure any indications of her own authorial intervention. As they appear in the book, the monologues have the character of fragmentation, spontaneity and temporal and thematic digressions that are associated with face-to-face conversations. The conversational character of the monologues is further reinforced by the frequent use of ellipsis, exclamation marks, rhetorical questions, slang, cursing, fragmented sentences and omitted pronouns. In this way the monologues appear to be given 'directly', with only a very low degree of external editing. A monologue narrated by the witness Nikolai Fomich Kalugin begins thus:

> I want to testify…
>
> It happened ten years ago, and every day it's still happening to me now. Right now… It's always with me.
>
> We lived in Pripyat. That same town the whole world knows about now. I'm not a writer, but I am a witness. Here's how it was… From the very beginning…
>
> You're living your life… An ordinary fellow. A little man. Just like everyone else around you – going to work, coming home from work. On an average salary. Once a year, you go on holiday.
>
> You've got a wife, children. A normal person! And then, just like that, you've turned into a Chernobyl person. A curiosity! (44) [6]

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citations from *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: Khronika budushchego* are taken from Anna Gunin and Arch Trait's translation from 2016.

5 "(Молчит.)" (12); "(Плачет.)" (14).

6 "Я хочу засвидетельствовать…

> Это было тогда, десять лет назад и каждый день происходит со мной сейчас. Теперь… Это всегда со мной.

The witnesses being named and their words seemingly unaltered, they are not presented merely as narrators (constructed intra-textual voices) but as authors (extra-textual agents producing the text). *Chernobyl Prayer* thus asserts itself as the product of a multitude of authors, with the implied claim to represent a multiplicity of views and perspectives. This implicit claim is consistent with public statements made by Aleksievich, who often emphasises the importance of a plurality of 'truths' in her works. Continuing her Nobel Lecture, she states:

> It always troubled me that the truth doesn't fit into one heart, into one mind, that truth is somehow splintered. There's a lot of it, it is varied, and it is strewn about the world. Dostoevsky thought that humanity knows much, much more about itself than it has recorded in literature (Aleksievich 2015).

Similarly, in an interview given in 2016, Aleksievich compares her own work to that of Dostoevsky, perhaps alluding to Mikhail Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky's novels as "polyphonic", that is, as novels reflecting a plurality of "independent" truths: "It is like in Dostoevsky – everyone shouts out their own truth. I am not a judge. I simply collect time. Time is varied".[7] Thus, aiming to reflect a plurality of perspectives in her writing and to let the witness speak, Aleksievich reduces her own voice to a minimum in the completed monologues, which she presents as essentially unaltered witness-statement. Citing her interviewees in the first person and naming them, she postulates the interviewees as the authors of the monologues, thereby insisting on their independence as textual subjects who 'speak for themselves'. However, this literary strategy conflicts with another aim of Aleksievich – to express her own distinct view on the Chernobyl accident and on the Soviet system in

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Мы жили в городе Припять. В самом этом городе, который знает сейчас весь мир. Я не писатель. Но я свидетель. Вот как это было... С самого начала...
Ты живёшь... Обыкновенный человек. Маленький. Такой, как все вокруг – идёшь на работу и приходишь с работы. Получаешь среднюю зарплату. Раз в год ездишь в отпуск. У тебя – жена. Дети. Нормальный человек! И в один день ты внезапно превращаешься в чернобыльского человека. В диковинку!' (Aleksievich, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: Khronika budushchego*, 51)

7 "Это как у Достоевского – каждый кричит свою правду. И я не судья. Я просто собираю время. Оно разное" (Aleksievich, 2016c).

Chernobyl Prayer. Through the collective insistence of their testimonies and their varying degree of 'reliability', the witnesses are turned from empowered subjects into objects serving as vehicles by which Aleksievich's expresses her own distinct views.

The Implied Author

Although presented as a work produced by a multitude of authors, in its thematic focus *Chernobyl Prayer* reflects the views and biases of a single consciousness. The witnesses' cumulative insistence on certain topics displays a coherence that is difficult to attribute to a plurality of independent authors. Instead, the intentional agency in *Chernobyl Prayer* can be conceptualized as an implied author speaking *through* the witnesses. Wayne Booth's notions of the implied author and unreliable narrator are useful here, as they provide a terminology in which the witnesses' reliability and authority as narrators can be measured against the set of underlying values and assumptions that emerges in *Chernobyl Prayer*. As Rimmon-Kenan has stated, the implied author "speaks" only metaphorically, through all the different narrators of the text; s(he) "instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices" (Rimmon-Kenan 88).

While there is no evidence that Aleksievich has altered the wording of the monologues, the persistence of certain themes suggests that coherent criteria for inclusion in the book were applied during the selection process. Therefore, the implied author emerges in the interplay of themes and concerns which are inherent in the interviews and deliberately used by Aleksievich to create a specific interpretation of the Chernobyl accident. The nuclear disaster is treated as a symbol for the failure of Soviet technological progress and colonization of nature, which ultimately leads to the understanding of the disaster as a symbol for the failure of the communist utopian endeavour in general. The notion of the technological superiority of the USSR over capitalist countries played an important part in Soviet ideology; hence the political importance of the space race and technological progress in general. Alla Bolotova states that

> the USSR's struggle against nature was carried out, as it were, as a continuation of the fight against the capitalist world and of the class

> struggle, and was meant to further the development of a new type of man
> and society (Bolotova 2).[8]

Among Aleksievich's witnesses we find plenty of former devotees to these Soviet ideas. For instance, the witness Sergei Vasil'evich Sobolev makes the following statement: "The whole Soviet world broke free of the earth, flew into space with Gagarin. All of us!" (Alexievich 176).[9] Of course, the accident seriously undermined this ideology, which, as we learn from the statements of several witnesses, was replaced by a sense of disillusionment, in Soviet technology as well as in the Soviet utopian ideas in general. Throughout the book, the failure of Soviet utopian visions of technological progress is continuously emphasised. The previously prevalent perception of nuclear power as a safe source of energy is ironically juxtaposed with the horrifying images of the Chernobyl landscape and with the witnesses' frequent references to the apocalypse. Called up as a clean-up worker, the witness Arkadii Filin recalls these fragments from Soviet newspapers: "our nuclear power plants are completely safe, you could build one right in the Red Square" (99).[10] Having arrived in the polluted area he makes the following reflection: "Out there, you were thrown into this dreamlike world where the End of the world met the Stone age" (100).[11] A similar message is conveyed through the somewhat heavy-handed irony of the title of the second chapter, "The Crown of Creation", which is followed by a monologue in which a mother talks about the serious injuries her daughter sustained as a result of the accident:

> Her medical record said: 'Girl born with complex multitude pathologies:
> anal aplasia, vaginal aplasia, and left renal aplasia. That's what they call

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8 *"Борьба СССР с природой осуществлялась как бы в продолжение борьбы с капиталистическим миром и классовой борьбы и должна была способствовать формированию нового типа человека и общества"*.

9 *"Вместе с Гагариным весь советский мир полетел в космос, оторвался от земли… Все мы!"* (Aleksievich, 176)

10 *"наши атомные станции абсолютно безопасны, можно строить на Красной площади"* (176).

11 *"Там ты сразу попадал в фантастический мир, где соединились конец света и каменный век"* (108).

> it in scientific language, but in plain word [sic]: she has no private parts,
> no bum, and just the one kidney (94).[12]

The description of their everyday reality is tragic and absurd: "Where else in the world can you find a child who needs to have their urine pressed out every half hour by hand?" (96).[13] Doctors refuse to admit the causal link between the accident and the child's birth defect, and someone secretly advises the mother to seek help abroad, that is, in a Western, capitalist country (96). This, then, it is implied, is the result, the 'crown of creation' of the technological ambitions of the Soviet Union and the idea to subdue nature to man.

In this regard the depiction of the Chernobyl disaster in *Chernobyl Prayer* is consistent with wider tendencies in Glasnost-era documentaries following the collapse of official Soviet hagiography. Whereas before Glasnost, notions such as the "Conquering of Siberia" had been a part of a 'State Epos' and treated as heroic tales of the New man's struggle against nature in the name of the Revolution, then, during the Glasnost era, documentary filmmakers were keen to expose the catastrophic ecological consequences of technological projects undertaken by the state, with all the ideological implications such depictions entailed (for instance *Bester* [1987], *Computer Games* [*Komp'iuternye igry*, 1987] and *The Mirage* [*Mirazh*, 1987]) (Mouratov 10). This meant a radical change of the aesthetics and ideological assumptions of the documentary medium itself. If documentaries had formerly been an important in the construction of a collective Soviet consciousness, a medium used by the state to "produce and consume "facts"" that would contribute and attest to the realization of the [Five-Year Plan]", the decline of official censorship in the 1980s and 90s utterly redefined Soviet documentary and it was now possible to use the medium to critique the state (Papazian 6). In this vein, in *Chernobyl Prayer*, the understanding of the disaster as being symbolical of the failings of Soviet utopian visions is part of a wider emphasis which amounts to a harsh

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12 "В медицинской карточке записано: «девочка, рождённая с множественной комплексной патологией: аплазия ануса, аплазия влагалища, аплазия левой почки»... Так это звучит на научном языке, а на обыкновенном: ни писи, ни попки, одна почка..." (101)

13 "Где ещё в мире есть ребёнок, которому каждые полчаса надо выдавливать мочу руками?" (103).

criticism of the Soviet system in general. It is hard if not impossible to find a single monologue in which the narrator does *not* say something that highlights the inhuman treatment by the Soviet state of its own citizens. *Chernobyl Prayer* presents us with a fierce indictment of the whole Soviet system, not unlike Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (*Arkhipelag Gulag*, 1973). For the implied author it is a moral imperative to make the crimes committed by the Soviet authorities known to the public. The most common case of structural maltreatment of individuals mentioned in the book may be the failure of the authorities to provide the clean-up workers with protective equipment: "We needed proper protective clothing, special goggles, a face mask. We had none of that" (Alexievich, 149).[14]

Another common complaint concerns the meagre compensation given to the clean-up workers. Having returned home from the polluted zone, they receive little or none financial aid from the authorities: "Afterwards, they were discharged from the army with a certificate of commendation and a hundred-rouble bonus. They disappeared into the vast expanses of the Soviet homeland" (173).[15] Also a large number of narrators mention the spreading of misinformation and the efforts of the state to hide the danger in remaining in the polluted zone from the public: "On television, Gorbachev was being reassuring: 'Emergency measures have been taken…' I believed him…" (202).[16] Apart from this, a vast number of instances of various kinds of structural abuse are presented throughout the text. This defines the implied author's (arguably simplified) ethical judgement on the Soviet state as a totalitarian system that showed nothing but disregard for its own citizens. As we shall see, this outlook implicitly determines the value of the narrators' judgements which in turn undermines their status as 'independent' authors.

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14 "Нужен был хороший защитный костюм, специальные очки, маска. У нас ни первого, ни второго, ни третьего" (154).

15 "А потом их увольняли из армии, давали грамоту и премию – сто рублей. И они исчезали на бескрайних просторах нашей родины" (178).

16 "По телевизору Горбачёв успокаивал: «Приняты неотложные меры»… Я верил…" (208).

(Un)reliable Narrators

The concept of a narrator's unreliability can be defined as a discrepancy between the implied author's ethical norms and those of the narrator. Since Booth introduced the notion in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) it has been widely used and subsequently elaborated in studies of narratives. Rimmon-Kenan provides this excellent definition:

> A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect (Rimmon-Kenan 100).

For the implicit meaning inherent in the unreliable narrator's discourse to be successfully communicated, then, the reader must recognise the narrator's discourse as highly subjective or even distorted. As Booth comments: "The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting" (Booth 304). Fundamentally, a narrator is considered reliable if "he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (that is to say, the implied author's norms), [and] *unreliable* when he does not" (Booth 158). Additionally, Rimmon-Kenan lists a number of "signs of unreliability" and identifies "the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme" as the most common (Rimmon-Kenan 100).

In *Chernobyl Prayer* the narrators' varying degree of reliability serves to either repudiate or render valid the political views that they express. Their assumed values being measured against the ideological position of the implied author, the witnesses are subordinate to an overall design which insists on a particular worldview. I will show this by comparing the monologues of two speakers who express typically 'pro-Soviet' and 'anti-Soviet' views, respectively. The first speaker is Genadii Grushevoi, a former university professor and now member of parliament, who narrates "Monologue on Cartesian philosophy and on eating a radioactive sandwich with someone as not to be ashamed" (Alexievich 143).[17] The name of the second speaker is not stated; he narrates 'Monologue of a

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17 "Монолог о картезианской философии и о том, как ешь вместе с другим человеком заражённый бутерброд, чтобы не было стыдно" (148).

defender of Soviet Power' (248).[18] Whereas the latter speaker identifies himself as belonging to the "ordinary people" ["простые люди"], the former can be considered a representative of what is typically labelled as the Soviet 'liberal' intelligentsia, that is, a social stratum of highly educated people whose political views are defined in opposition to Soviet values prevalent during the period of Stagnation under Brezhnev (255). This speaker's monologue is marked by the erudition and eloquence of the intellectual and tells the story of how the Chernobyl accident motivated him politically and eventually turned him from an academic into a politician. The story begins with recollections testifying to the repressive intellectual climate before Gorbachev, when the speaker was discouraged from writing his doctoral dissertation on anything but Marxist-Leninist philosophy: "All in all, they had no time for Cartesian thought" (143).[19] Thus, through its title, with the reference to a then forbidden topic – "Monologue on Cartesian philosophy" – the monologue establishes itself as a space of free speech and the speaker is at liberty to criticize the totalitarian regime.

From its initial discussion of the repression during the Stagnation, the narrative proceeds to a description of Perestroika – for Grushevoi a time of longed-for collective rebirth and liberation: "We had waited so long for this moment" (143).[20] Grushevoi then talks about the journeys he made after the accident to the areas around the reactor in order to observe and to make people understand the danger in remaining there. Later, he and his wife make a more conscious and organised effort to help the children in the polluted areas. There is also an episode telling of a protest rally held in Minsk, three years after the disaster, which Grushevoi was involved in organising: "People marched on in tears, everybody holding hands. They were crying because they were overcoming their fear" (151).[21] People who Grushevoi, with an unwittingly condescending turn of phrase, calls "ordinary people" spontaneously join the rally and can finally speak freely and sincerely:

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18 "Монолог защитника советской власти" (254).

19 "тут не до картезинских размышлений" (148).

20 "Время, которое мы долго ждали" (148).

21 "Люди шли и плакали, все держались за руки. Плакали потому, что они побеждали свой страх" (156).

"People came to the hastily erected platform and spoke without notes, ordinary people from the area around Chernobyl" (151).[22] After the accident, the monologue suggests, collective sentiments of indignation and longing for justice were more powerful than the fear of state authorities, and in this sense, the Grushevoi believes, the accident liberated "us", the people (153).

The second witness, the "defender of Soviet power" who in Aleksievich's rendering defines himself as one of the "ordinary people", is anonymous. As opposed to some other monologues where the names are abbreviated or simply absent, this is the only monologue in the book where it is emphatically noted that the interviewee chose not to state his name: *"Declined to give his name"* (250).[23] We know that the speaker is male and we can tentatively infer his age. He mentions the death of an old lady who was a "Stakhanov shock-worker at one time" (249).[24] This seems to suggest an elderly man, old enough to have recollections of the time when a now dying old lady was a *"стахановка"*. The setting is very likely to be rural: the death of an "old lady" concerns both him and people around him, which suggests a tightly knit community. The 'defender's' has none of the eloquence of the intellectual – his language is unpolished and extremely crude: "Hey! Fuck off! Hey! […] Fuck! […] Fuck!" (248-50).[25] As opposed to Grushevoi, the "defender" does not tell a story. Instead his monologue consists of an articulation of opinions in relation to the accident, the Soviet system and its collapse. The only narrative element is the death of the old lady, which spans just a few sentences. We are told that she was lying dead in her house for two days, under the icons; that there was no money to buy a coffin; that "we" organised a protest meeting and demanded that the chairman of the *kolkhoz* pay for the funeral arrangements.

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

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22 "К наспех обустроенной трибуне сами подходили и без всяких бумажек говорили простые люди, которые приехали из чернобыльских мест" (156).
23 *"Фамилию не назвал"* (255).
24 "Стахановка когда-то, звеньевая" (254).
25 "Э-э-э... вашу мать...Э-э-э! [...] Б...ь! [...] Б...ь!" (254)

which for him was a hybrid between a kindergarten and a prison, for the "defender", the disaster meant the end of a great empire, which had benefitted "ordinary people".

Grushevoi says:

> a) Chernobyl liberated us. We learned to be free' (153).[26]

> b) 'A hybrid between a prison and a kindergarten, that's what socialism is, Soviet socialism' (154).[27]

The 'defender' says:

> a) 'If Chernobyl hadn't exploded, our great power would never have collapsed' (249).[28]

> b) 'I'm for the communists! They were for us, for ordinary people' (249).[29]

In slightly simplified terms, then, we can say that Grushevoi promotes clearly anti-Soviet views whereas the "defender" promotes pro-Soviet views. What renders their respective opinions either valid or invalid is their varying degree of reliability as narrators. We are made to trust Grushevoi and distrust the "defender", as the former's opinions accord with those of the implied author while the views of the latter do not. In other words, what Grushevoi says is confirmed by the totality of the text, which depicts the Soviet system in an unequivocally negative light; what the "defender" says is repudiated by that same overall design. Inversely, both narrators contribute to creating this totality. Grushevoi contributes positively: his statements provide a seemingly authoritative commentary which tells us how things are. The "defender" contributes negatively: his commentary is suspect and shows us how things are *not*. Herein consists the irony of his monologue. By the time the reader encounters the anonymous speaker and his conviction that "the communists were for ordinary people", the reader has already been reminded on numerous occasions of the callousness of the Soviet regime which, according to the dominant view propagated in the book, completely disregarded the well-being of "ordinary people".

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26 *"Чернобыль освобождал нас... Учились быть свободными..."* (158)

27 *"Смесь тюрьмы и детского сада – вот что такое социализм. Советский социализм"* (160).

28 *"Не взорвался бы Чернобыль, держава бы не рухнула"* (255).

29 *"я – за коммунистов! 'Они были за нас, за простых людей"* (255).

This irony is intensified when the anonymous speaker suggests that Aleksievich is inherently biased, saying: "Why aren't you recording this? What I'm saying. You only record what benefits you" (250).[30] Here, the author manipulatively gestures toward her own impartiality. Contrary to what the speaker thinks, she *is* "recording this', "accurately" representing his views even if they conflict with her own. At the same time, however, the author undermines the anonymous speaker's views by presenting them as the rant of an "old communist" whose opinions, clearly, cannot be taken seriously. While Grushevoi's monologue is eloquent and devoid of colloquialisms, the crudeness and aggression of the second speaker signal his lack of education and by extension his missing objectivity. This together with his obvious paranoia are further indications of his unreliability and mark him as one of the "brainwashed": "Gorby acted out their plans, the CIA's plans… They blew up Chernobyl … I read it in the papers…" (249).[31]

In line with Rimmon-Kenan's idea that "signs of *un*reliability are perhaps easier to specify, and reliability can then be negatively defined by their absence" (Rimmon-Kenan 100), the reliability of Grushevoi's discourse can in part be defined negatively, in that it lacks all the signs of unreliability that mark the monologue of the "defender". However, there are also *positive* indications of reliability that make him one the most authoritative speakers in the entire book. With its fourteen pages his monologue is one of the longest, signalling that what he has to say is important, as it is allocated plenty of space. Despite his personal involvement in the disaster, he appears to be one of the most detached narrators. He extrapolates the relevance of his own experiences and observations, raising universal questions about the Soviet system and Soviet identity. His tone is calm and controlled, as opposed to many other narrators in the book. Lindbladh has described the witnesses' ambivalence toward narration in *Chernobyl Prayer* as a conflict between "the imperative to tell" and "the impossibility of telling": on the one hand, the witness has an inner compulsion to tell about her experience, on the

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30 *"Почему вы это не записываете? Мои слова. А записываете только то, что вам выгодно"* (255).

31 *"Горби действовал по их планам, по планам цэрэу… Они Чернобыль взорвали… Я в газетах читал…"* (255).

other hand, "no amount of telling ever seems to do justice to this inner compulsion" (Lindbladh 44). This ambivalence is evident throughout the book as plenty of witnesses do not know how to express themselves or find it difficult to continue speaking: "What I'm telling you, it's not coming out right… The words are all wrong…" (Alexievich 21); "But should I… *(She trails off mid-sentence. I can see she is reluctant to go on)*" (113).[32] In this context Grushevoi stands out as he is one of few narrators for whom narration is not problematic. This makes the communication of his monologue very explicit; he is telling us how things are, and there is very little that has to be inferred. At the same time, his tone is often tentative, careful not to jump to simplistic conclusions. His erudition, moreover – the frequent name-dropping of writers and philosophers, the fact that we know he is a former university professor, and now a member of parliament – gives him additional authority, as does his morally outstanding selfless concern for the well-being of others, helping children who suffered from radiation exposure. Thus, one of the most reliable speakers in *Chernobyl Prayer*, Grushevoi contributes to confirming the validity of the value judgements established by the overall design of the book. By contrast, the anonymous speaker, essentialised in the monologue title as a "defender of Soviet power" and the only 'non-repentant' Soviet communist of the entire book, is effectively undermined by the signs of unreliability characterising his discourse, as well as by the discrepancy between his values and those of the implied author.

The structural emphasis on the multi-voiced nature of the material presented in *Chernobyl Prayer* suggests at first sight a strong commitment to a plurality of views and perspectives on the Chernobyl disaster and on Soviet reality. Cited in in the first person and with their names clearly stated – akin to individual signatures – the witnesses are elevated to the status of authors. Yet through the subtle arrangement of individual monologues and the narrators' collective insistence on particular topics, the distinct biases of a single author emerges. The totality of the text is thus shaped by a fundamentally anti-Soviet outlook which determines the implicit value of the witnesses' own judgements

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32 "Все не те слова вам говорю… Не такие…" (26); ['А мне… *(Обрывает фразу. Вижу, что говорить не хочет)*'] (119).

and makes them more or less reliable in the eyes of a reader. The converging views and assumptions of individual monologues contribute to the sense of an emerging collective voice with its attendant notions of authenticity and authority, suggesting an empirical (rather than merely subjective) validity in both individual monologues and the overall book. The impression is deepened by the presentation of the monologues as unmediated texts, despite clear indications that Aleksievich has shaped the witness statements for the overall purpose of her book at the stage of initial interview and at the stage of the subsequent editing process. The ideological coherence of the different monologues is further evidence that Aleksievich presents the reader with a specific interpretation of the accident based on a particular worldview and ideological assumptions. Although the very structure of *Chernobyl Prayer* insists on the validity of the single voice, presenting each of them in a 'monologue', Aleksievich integrates these supposedly independent voices into an artistic design in which the collective subsumes the individual.

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