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Radiant Language  
and Entangled  
Listening in  
Svetlana Alexievich's  
*Chernobyl Prayer*

abstract Niall Martin mediates on the noisily entangled relations of listening, writing, and our perception of culture in the aftermath of nuclear events. Thinking through the material traces, containment, and waste of the Chernobyl disaster, Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997) opens up a reconceptualization of the Chernobyl

disaster as an event that alters the nature of testimony, challenging the LOST SONIC SOURCE of an event that is simultaneously in the past and yet to come. *Chernobyl Prayer's* more than human perspective explores the exclusion zone as a sonic space in which radiation becomes audible through the silence of other species. In this way, sound extends itself to that which is present as well as absent. This reading of *Chernobyl Prayer* rethinks our understanding of sound as species-specific and in doing so acknowledges the displaced position of the auditor.

Besides being an oral history of the 1987 Chernobyl disaster, Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997) constitutes an extended meditation on the implications of the explosion in the Soviet nuclear power plant for the practices of listening involved in writing oral history and a post-nuclear world more generally. Some

of those implications are evident in her interview with a returnee to the Chernobyl exclusion zone, who tells Alexievich:

A reporter came to interview me. I could see he was thirsty. I brought him a mug of water, but he took his own water out of a bag. Mineral water. He was embarrassed, started making excuses. Needless to say our interview went nowhere. I couldn't be open with him. I'm not a robot or a computer or a lump of metal! He thought he could sit there drinking his mineral water, being afraid even to touch my mug, and I was supposed to pour out my heart to him, let him into my soul. (232-233)

Listening in this context, it is clear, is an activity intimately entangled with questions of risk, fear, and trust. It is not simply an orientation to the sonic so much as an exposure to the sonic that has the potential to produce a physiological alteration within the listener.

In thus situating a post-nuclear listening practice within a suddenly palpable environment of risk, Alexievich's text invites us to reconceptualise the relationship between speech and writing. Rather than writing as lending permanence to something seen as ephemeral — the traditional model of oral history — after Chernobyl, writing as a listening practice becomes entangled within a wider problematic

of containment and waste. Thus, although the idea of exposure is literal in the example above, Alexievich's text also attends carefully to Chernobyl's more conceptual implications for oral history as a listening practice. For Alexievich, Chernobyl must be seen as "the beginning of a new history: it offers not only knowledge but also prescience, because it challenges our old ideas about ourselves and the world" (24). It is a new history because it inaugurates a new temporality. As one of her informants puts it, "Chernobyl is not over, it has only just started" (Alexievich 263). This is true in two senses: the radioactive material released in the explosion will last 200,000 years — there is no post-Chernobyl culture in this sense — and at the same time we are powerless to develop a culture that can accommodate that fact.

The violence arising from this conjunction of anthropogenic power and powerlessness is evident in the testimony of Chernobyl's victims, who find themselves ejected from the community of the normatively human precisely because there is no culture for dealing with the testimony of Chernobyl. The tone of this violence is set in the opening monologue when the widow of a fireman recalls how she was told by a nurse that she must no longer think of her husband as her husband but as "a highly contaminated radioactive object" (Alexievich 16). This imperative is repeated endlessly throughout the text: this is not your home, your orchard, your cow, your cat,

your table, your door — it is a highly contaminated radioactive object. The violence implicit in this demand extends to all those exposed to radiation who, as subjects of biopolitical observation, become in one way or another a problem of containment — of waste.

Susan Squier is helpful in conceptualizing the peculiar nature of this testimony as waste when she suggests that while “language helps structure our sense of possibilities,” it is the influence of “material conditions [that] shape and reshape what we can put into words” (57). To imagine the post-Chernobyl culture, as the testimony demands, effectively entails thinking how the material event of Chernobyl enters into the language in which its testimony is delivered. It entails thinking Chernobyl as an event which alters the nature of testimony and with it the relation of speech and inscription. Specifically, it challenges the model of writing as the material inscription of a ‘lost’ sonic source, in speaking of an event which is both in the past and yet still to come, and which thus refuses ideas of a linear futurity. *Chernobyl Prayer* encourages us to see speech and inscription as noisily entangled in the same material conditions of possibility.

Paul Hegarty, commenting on Henri Bergson’s description of sound as offering the prospect of sequence and of narrative, suggests that we might think of sound as the “privileged site of encounter between event and sense,” for “sound offers the prospect of sequence ... a narrative to which it belongs

or interrupts” (16). Yet, *Chernobyl Prayer* reveals this is only possible if we also privilege the perspective of a normatively human subject. That encounter takes a different form when the perspective of the normatively human is displaced and we adopt, for example, what Stacy Alaimo terms the perspective of the MORE THAN HUMAN (12). From this materialist perspective, inscription appears not as the loss of the sonic but as its persistence — its trace as waste.

It is this more than human perspective which resonates with the testimony in *Chernobyl Prayer*. The rhetoric of loss that informs the relation between the sonic and its inscription in oral history — insofar as it perpetuates the ideas of separation and containment addressed to the victims of Chernobyl — seems wholly inappropriate for thinking the relationship of sound and mark within their testimony. Or, to put it in Squier’s terms, the language spoken in *Chernobyl Prayer* testifies to a materiality which is in conflict with inherited ideas of the normative, which preclude any attempt to discover sense within its horror.

In fact, *Chernobyl Prayer*, in its depiction of the exclusion zone as a sonic space, itself provides some idea of what a more than human listening might comprise. Because radiation cannot be detected by a bodily sensory apparatus, it effectively inducts us into a world that we cannot know as humans. Radiation cannot be heard but is nevertheless audible in the silence of other species attuned to its presence. Hence,

anecdotes abound of HEARING the radiation in the sudden silence of other species — bees, wasps, birds, may-bugs — who announced the explosion long before the official news.

In effect, the zone produces an awareness of entangled listening as extended listening and of the inadequacy of a species-specific relation to sound. This is not simply a case of augmenting human senses with those of other species. Rather, it alters the nature of sound itself. The sonic event is no longer simply the site of the privileged encounter between event and sense but becomes an encounter with something that is both present and absent. However, in those silences we also hear our displacement from the position of auditor: as species we hear what our environment hears — and, in listening for silences in that environment, we hear our own displaced position as auditors within the Anthropocene.

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