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'The Chernobyl hibakusha': Dark poetry, the ineffable and abject realities

Abstract:

Chernobyl occupies a complex space in the Western cultural imagination, complicated by science fiction fantasies, crime thrillers, military-style video games, haunting photo installations, and a recent HBO drama series focusing on the nuclear disaster. While the devastation of the reactor is often regarded as a 'dark metonym for the fate of the Soviet Union' (Milne 2017: 95), the nuclear crisis is also at the centre of increasing anxieties about the 'fate of future generations, species extinction and the damage done to the environment' (93). Indeed, the enormity of Chernobyl, like Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima, is often regarded as beyond representation. By examining a range of poems produced by Chernobylites or derived from witness testimonies, we argue that in confronting the unthinkable, poetry is uniquely able to convey the inexpressible and abject horror of nuclear destruction. Further, in considering the potential for commodification in writing about sites of tragedy, we define poetry about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster as an example of 'dark poetry' – that is, poetry exploring or attempting to imagine or reanimate examples of dark tourism. We specifically explore this example of dark poetry to contend that while it often lobbies for nuclear international cooperation, it can also be read as exploitative and romanticising the macabre spectacle of nuclear explosion.

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A 'Chernobylised space'

Chernobyl occupies a complex space in the Western cultural imagination, complicated by science fiction fantasies, crime thrillers, military-style video games, haunting photo installations, and a recent HBO drama series focusing on the nuclear disaster. While the devastation of the reactor is often regarded as a 'dark metonym for the fate of the Soviet Union' (Milne 2017: 95), the nuclear crisis is also at the centre of increasing anxieties about the 'fate of future generations, species extinction and the damage done to the environment' (93). In such a context 'the writing of the future' assumes an ethical burden, one tasked with envisioning an experience beyond the apocalypse while grappling with the implications of a contemporary atomic reality. Drew Milne contends depictions of the nuclear 'remain circumspect and partial' and are 'scarcely plausible when reduced to the terms of human experience' (2017: 90). Indeed, the enormity of Chernobyl, like Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima, is often regarded as beyond representation; as one liquidator observes: 'the Zone is a separate world … literature stepped back in the face of reality' (Alexievich 1997: 132). By examining a range of poems produced by Chernobylites or derived from witness testimonies, we examine the way in which these poems confront the unthinkable. We argue that poetry, of all genres, is uniquely able to respond to the inexpressible and abject horror of nuclear destruction. Edward A Dougherty suggests that hibakusha poets seeking to convey the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki understood the limits of language and the impossibilities of complete or total representation: 'Writing about the scale of the event creates anxiety about the writer's ability to convey the experience because of the complexities of both the experience and its emotional impact' (2011: 3). We assert that as poetry 'evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience' (Nemerov 2001), it is the most appropriate genre to distil overwhelming tragedy into potent evocations of lived reality, while also creating space for ambiguity and uncertainty.

In *Voices from Chernobyl* (Alexievich 1997), journalist Anatoly Shimanskiy describes the futility of attempts to capture the nuclear disaster, a horror that seems to resist language, truth, and representation, while presenting an unearthly vision of catastrophe:

> "Write about it? I think it's senseless. You can't explain it, you can't understand it. We'll still try to imagine something that looks like our own lives now. I've tried and it doesn't work. The Chernobyl explosion gave us the mythology of Chernobyl. The papers and magazines compete to see who can write the most frightening article. People who weren't there love to be frightened. Everyone read about the mushrooms the size of human heads, but no one actually found them. So instead of writing, you should record. Document. Show me a fantasy novel about Chernobyl – there isn't one! Because reality is more fantastic." (Shimanskiy qtd in Alexievich 1997: 127)

Indeed, the Chernobyl disaster, while defined by an inescapable materiality – the explosion of a nuclear reactor at a power station in Pripyat, Ukraine on 26 April 1986 – is also marked by its ineffability. As Jeff Goatcher and Viv Brunsden observe, although the Chernobyl catastrophe 'was a dramatic event, and the consequent evacuation of Pripyat a locally traumatic one, there are no precise temporal or spatial boundaries to the extent of the disaster' (2011: 117). The precarity of the Zone of Exclusion remains uncertain, as does the ongoing danger posed by the concrete sarcophagus covering the damaged reactor, while 'causal links to specific illnesses are unclear, un-provable and attenuated by poverty and material struggle amongst many of the people most affected' (Goatcher & Brunsden 2011: 117). As a result, 'the extent and nature of the hazards are not fully understood by science, nor do they seem to be precisely fixed or stable' (117), thereby producing a series of ambiguities that evade 'the senses and descriptive language', as events remain 'un-grasped, but … nonetheless experienced' (117). Perhaps because of such opacity, Chernobyl, trapped within an uncanny space that is both concrete and abstract, has produced a rich library of texts across genres that grapple with the unimaginable, including poetry, prose fiction, essays, journalistic writing, memoirs and literary criticism. Further, as Tamara Hundorova notes, it has become 'one of the most beloved topics of popular culture, which is confirmed by a multiplicity of secondary school works, childhood recollections, patriotic–spiritual confessions, songs, and jokes dedicated to the accident' (2019: 9). In line with other apocalyptic crises – the Holocaust, the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 9/11 – Chernobyl adopts a cultural memory associated with global catastrophe, and thus also a literature obsessed with capturing that which seems most beyond the capacities of representation.

The plethora of textual artefacts now emerging from and inspired by Chernobyl is in stark contrast to the censorship that occurred both in the immediate aftermath of the reactor explosion, and in the years that followed. Inna Sukhenko outlines how

> reporting any information dealing with the accident was prohibited; journalists and literary scholars, writers, and poets were only allowed to repeat the official – governmental – point of view… There was a complete factual blackout on the actual event. (Sukhenko 2019: 177)

The suppression of information meant that the residents of Pripyat and its surrounding areas were unaware of what had occurred at the power station for at least two days; as a result, locals thus continued their daily routines uninterrupted while exposed to devastating levels of radioactive fallout:

> Within those two days, being unaware of the consequences of the explosion at the nuclear power station, the local people walked around the city, worked in the gardens, got ready for the coming May Day parade and paid no special attention to the fire engines' and ambulances' sirens because the local media informed them that the situation was under total control, and there was no need for panic. And the people

> believed them – while the radioactive power slowly covered their heads and shoulders, their houses and balconies, their clothes, trees, flowers and wells. (Sukhenko 2019: 176)

The censoring of Chernobyl narratives aligns with the ineffectual processes of the post-disaster clean-up, during which the contaminated earth was literally turned in upon itself. Ivan Nikolaevich Zhykov, for example, a liquidator tasked with removing 'the diseased top layer of soil' (Zhykov qtd in Alexievich 1997: 161) and loading 'the whole green mass of it' (161) into waste burial sites in and around the Zone of Exclusion writes about 'work[ing] for madmen' (161) – and details how 'I saved myself by writing long letters home and keeping a diary' (163). It is an activity which attracts the attentions of the supervising political department: 'He kept asking me what I was writing, where was I keeping it?… "My dissertation." He laughs. "All right, that's what I'll tell the colonel. But you should hide that stuff"' (163). As witness testimonies and fictions eventually began to circulate throughout Western media, depictions of Chernobyl helped shape a social spectacle of 'nuclear phobia'. These in part echoed the fear of the 'death taint' associated with Japanese atomic bomb survivors – now also linked to Chernobylites – as well as exoticised the irradiated zone by way of a surreal and nightmarish imaginary. The effect, as Hundorova contends, is the transformation of the nuclear accident into 'cultural (artistic) constructions' through which it becomes 'not only real, but also virtual phenomena' via its symbolic work as catastrophe (2019: 31). Indeed, through the incessant reproduction of aestheticised images of nuclear explosion in the media, computer games (such as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Counter-Strike Chernobyl*) and film, 'fantasies of Armageddon' develop, fuelling the morbid voyeurism of dark tourism, and eroding the 'real world' through intensified replications of virtuality (Hundorova 2019: 31). Viktor Latun notes the senseless performance of artifice in an environment already defined by its dreamlike otherness:

> Newspaper crews came to us, took photos. They'd have these invented scenes: they'd want to photograph the window of an abandoned house, and they'd put a violin in front of it; then they'd call the photo "Chernobyl Symphony". But you didn't have to make anything up there. (Alexievich 1997: 196)

As Hundorova argues, such contrivances present a vision of 'atomic non-reality' (2019: 31), an illusory Chernobyl 'represented in a stylistic and discursive manner' (31), and contingent on the repetition of key narrative tropes and scripts. These works, as Latun implies, frequently emerge from non-Ukrainian or non-Chernobylite sources, revealing the ways in which trauma is so often appropriated to fulfil the criteria of what Susan Sontag describes as an 'imagination of disaster' (1961: 209). Arguably, however, such texts also enable some access to the inexpressible, constructing a language – via exaggerated or simplified images and symbols – that provide instances of comprehension. Focusing on the poems of 'Chernobyl hibakusha' (Alexievich 1997: 108), understood as works written or inspired by witnesses to the nuclear explosion and its aftermath, this paper posits that poetry offers a

unique vehicle through which to express the ineffable and abject realities of atomic horror. Unlike visual or journalistic media, which draw upon designated aesthetic formulae, poetry is a liminal genre, relying upon a concentration of language and expression in order to depict complex ideas, emotions, and events. Mario Petrucci argues that while 'in the case of poetry, there is no doubt that language constantly falls short of experience' (2006: 255), it does so 'miraculously' (255) because the heightened nature of poetry 'can provide a penetrating experience in its own right. Not merely a substitute experience, not even a parallel one; but a journey towards transformation' (255). As contemporary Ukrainian poet, Oksana Pakhlovska suggests in her poem 'Dance on the cliffs' ('Tanetz nad provalliam'), which evokes and critiques the threat posed by nuclear science and technology, it is the poet who articulates that which exceeds or overwhelms:

> "Now somewhere even a computer is an orchestra conductor… Everything shimmers. There is too much of everything. Only the sky is once again silent at dawn. And we – poets of the atomic age – are the last troubadours on earth." (Pakhlovska qtd in Rubchak 1991: 299)

Yet poetry is not immune from the commodifying effects of representation. While its precision of expression, and its concision, is able to most successfully articulate what we describe as the ineffable-abject – the tension between the indescribable and the hauntingly visceral or graphic – it also creates a profound sense of mystery that supports phenomena such as thanatourism. Philip Stone suggests that while dark tourism promotes a visitor economy which has 'to some extent, domesticated death and exposes a cultural institution that mediates between the ordinary Self and the significant Other death' (2013: 308), it also provides a critical 'lens through which contemporary life and death may be witnessed' (311). No longer simply history, Chernobyl is an event transformed into a product that can be easily accessed by mass and literary culture. Refigured as a commodity, the real and the unreal begin to slide uncomfortably into one another. In considering the potential for commodification in writing about sites of tragedy, this paper argues that poetry about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster is an example of dark poetry – that is, 'poetry that attempts to imagine, explore or reanimate' a dark event or examples of dark tourism (Atherton 2020). We specifically explore this example of dark poetry to argue that while it often lobbies for nuclear international cooperation, it can also be read as exploitative and romanticising the macabre spectacle of nuclear explosion.

'It was so pretty': Dark poetry as an expression of dark tourism

The term dark tourism was coined in the 1990s by scholars Malcolm Foley and J John Lennon in an article analysing the pilgrimage of tourists to the sites associated with President John F Kennedy's assassination. In introducing the term, they highlight ethical issues and concerns about host and visitor consumption and exploitation of the dark event:

> Dark tourism is the term adopted by the authors for these phenomena which encompass the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites. These visitors may have been motivated to undertake a visit by a desire to experience the reality behind the media images and/or by a personal association with inhumanity. The phenomena raise ethical issues over the status and nature of objects, the extent of their interpretation, the appropriate political and managerial response and the nature of the experience as perceived by visitors, victims (and their relatives) and local residents. The possibilities for exploitation of a "dark" event and the period within which issues of taste prevail over economic considerations are complex and culturally specific, both for host and visitor communities. (Foley & Lennon 1996: 198)

However, as Rudi Hartmann et al (2018) highlight, the term dark tourism is part of a much larger area of scholarship that includes Chris Rojek's earlier conversation about 'black spots' (270) and precedes Anthony Seaton's term 'thanatourism' (270). Where Foley and Lennon contend dark tourism is an expression of the postmodern condition, relying on the 'centrality of media and technology' (1996: 199), Seaton suggests that historical examples of thanatopsis (defined as 'contemplation of death') demonstrate that people have been visiting sites associated with death and trauma since the Middle Ages (1996: 240). Indeed, Seaton defines thanatourism far more generically than dark tourism, describing it as:

> travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death, which may, to a varying degree be activated by the person-specific features of those whose deaths are its focal objects. (Seaton 1996: 240)

Poetry has its most obvious links to thanatourism in its use of elegy and its appeal to the sublime. However, as Sagar Singh notes:

> When Thomas Gray wrote the poem, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", he was not attracted to the graves for the sake of vicariously experiencing a "dark" moment, but to praise the dead and forgotten rural people. (Singh 2019: 43)

In this way, elegy traditionally aims to honour the deceased, rather than revel in death's obliqueness. Importantly, Singh argues, an appeal to dark tourism does not always have to be interpreted as pejorative, stating 'a lot of "dark tourism" explains the emotion of love for heritage, "personal" and cultural' (2019: 44). Therefore, visiting a person's grave and writing about the experience for publication is not always exploitative or unethical. It can be an expression of love or peace; a heartfelt tribute.

Poetry also links to concepts of dark tourism in its exploration of the sublime's focus on transportation, witness, and existential anxiety. While there is little research on the connection of the sublime to dark tourism, glancing references have been made by scholars such as Seaton (1996), Bowman and Pezzullo (2009), and Goatcher and Brunsden (2011). Annaclaudia Martini and Dorina Maria Buda provide a more thorough response, positing that 'the sublime can be, in many ways, connected to dark tourism research, as they both share a focus on the fascination people have with dark and decaying places' (2018: 9). Certainly, poetry that explores sites of dark tourism – dark poetry – can be read as functioning in a similar way to Seaton's discussion of de Quincey's 1827 essay, 'On murder considered as one of the fine arts'. It explores the idea that 'an act or event which might be deplorable or repugnant from a moral point of view could have considerable attraction as a spectator experience' (Seaton 1996: 234). In the same way, dark poetry finds a readership, in spite (or in some cases because) of its appeal to the abject and immoral acts implicit in dark sites.

The aspects of underlying horror and the transportive elements of terror are important in the sublime's connection to dark tourism. While the theory of the sublime is first attributed to Longinus in the first century AD, his focus on beauty was famously challenged by philosopher Edmund Burke in 1759. In his treatise, 'A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful', Burke unites terror and the sublime: 'whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say whatever is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime' (1759: 34). However, while Longinus and Burke differ on the point of the origin of the sublime, they both agree the sublime transports the individual from the rational into a state of incomprehensible feeling. This is significant because, as Carolyn Korsmeyer argues, 'a supremely uncomfortable and aversive emotion is transmogrified into powerful and transportive aesthetic insight' (2008: 367). Therefore, beyond the initial incomprehensible and existential feelings associated with dark tourist sites lies the capacity for powerful insight. It is this transmogrification that is often explored in dark poetry when it lobbies for change, particularly in the context of concerns relating to the environment (especially nuclearisation), state violence, and persecution.

In their discussion of dark tourism, Foley and Lennon explicitly state that 'the contemporary context for dark tourism is that of post-modernism' (1996: 199) and thus the postmodern sublime becomes pertinent, especially for its focus on witness and the anxiety of the dispossession of the language. As Jennifer Wawrzinek argues, 'the postmodern sublime foregrounds an ethical framework that depends on the uses to which the sublime can be put, rather than what the sublime is' (2008: 48). This becomes even more relevant in practice: as Goatcher and Brunsden posit in relation to the 'unrepresentability' of Chernobyl's tourist photographs:

> such creative representation suggests that they can be read as attempts to capture a sense of "unrepresentable" anxiety created by what has been called a

> "disenfranchisement of the senses". This can be seen as an instance of the post-modern sublime, an enduring status of anxiety. (Goatcher & Brunsden 2011: 115)

Sites of nuclear tragedy are particularly attuned to a sense of unrepresentable anxiety as they connect with apocalyptic concepts in a nuclear, post-atomic world. In this way, engaging with these sites is part of the experience of the nuclear sublime.

Frances Ferguson first used the term nuclear sublime in her article in *Diacritics* in 1984. She identifies a clause in a State Farm insurance policy, which states it will not cover loss 'involving a nuclear incident' (Ferguson 1984: 4). Ferguson uses this example to argue nuclear peril cannot be insured against in the same way as other disasters, due to its utter annihilation of the world and all life forms (4). In extending the argument, she asserts the insurance policy statement is ultimately unsuccessful in discussing nuclear destruction, because of its ultimate sublimity one cannot 'think the unthinkable' (5). While this oxymoron may be accurate, Peter Schwenger makes the important point that while there may not be a response to nuclear threat, 'making a response possible' (1986: 48) is key, and it is through the example of the literature of nuclear holocaust that this can be achieved. This is because it

> shows that the same imagination which presents to us unendurable possibilities may also help us to endure – not to endure a holocaust but our anticipations of one, our fears and even our hopes. Diffuse as these may be, inchoate denizens of our unconscious, they are nevertheless real. (Schwenger 1986: 48)

The same case can be made for dark poetry. In '"Monster in the sky": Hibakusha poetry and the nuclear sublime' (Miller & Atherton 2017), we analyse dark poetry written by Japanese atomic bomb survivors as examples of the nuclear sublime. In these poems, poets find a way of responding imaginatively to nuclear threat and simultaneously lobbying for nuclear disarmament. In this way the nuclear sublime is also connected to the ethical considerations and responsibilities as identified by Wawrzinek:

> In the twentieth century the events of the Holocaust, and the nuclear explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, provide what has seemed to many the horrific culmination of Western attempts to transcend the sensible world. In the face of the suffering associated with these events, sublime transcendence and the subject it endorses are made questionable by a moral and ethical framework that demands a degree of responsibility to the natural world and the others who live there. (Wawrzinek 2008: 50)

Indeed, while tourists have always been drawn to what Tamara Hardingham-Gill describes as Chernobyl's 'macabre spectacle of the deserted, decaying city around the power station' (2019), since HBO's 2019 historical miniseries, *Chernobyl*, there has been a thirty-five per cent rise in bookings to tour the Zone of Exclusion. While *Chernobyl* was largely filmed in

Lithuania, and there has been 'atomic tourism' to view these locations, the compulsion to travel to Chernobyl indicates that it is the dark site tourists are keenest to explore. Certainly, the surreal 'deathscape' of the Zone of Exclusion and the morbid fascination of largely Western audiences with the sarcophagus-entombed reactor and irradiated township of Pripyat has proven to be lucrative, with dark poetry on the Chernobyl disaster contributing to a sense of mystery that feeds a desire for an aestheticised encounter with the 'spaces of death or calamity that have perturbed' (Stone 2013: 307). Indeed, the titivations of dark tourism tend to sustain some dark poetry, which romanticises nuclear disaster and fetishises the nuclear spectacle of the dark site, undercutting its solemnity. However, dark poetry that effectively lobbies for change presents starker images and appeals to more ethical responsibilities. An example is Inge Aicher-Scholl's poem titled, 'They failed', published anonymously and translated by Allison Brown in *German History in Documents and Images.* It is introduced with the following epigraph:

> A long-feared nuclear disaster became a reality with the meltdown of a reactor in Chernobyl, Ukraine. The environmental movement spoke to the terrible consequences of the accident in the following poem, which accuses politicians of having failed to provide security and calls for renewed activism. (Aicher-Scholl 1986: 3)

Even without introduction, it is clear from the direct address and unadorned language that the poet aims to remind readers of the need to prevent further tragedies like Chernobyl:

> Today there are 350 nuclear reactors in operation in about 30 countries.
> Two have failed terribly.
> One in Harrisburg, one in Chernobyl.
>
> Now even more people will die from cancer.
> The genes of many people have since then
> been pathologically changed, without their knowing.
> There will be even more hardship cases and cripples.
> The toxins will remain in the food chain.
> We are enriching ourselves. (Aicher-Scholl 1986: 2)

Aicher-Scholl demonstrates the enduring effects of nuclear disaster by using an appeal to science and instilling a sense of fear that the threat is still prevalent: DNA is compromised, the food chain is contaminated, and more will die from cancer. It ends with the rousing call to action where the reader is addressed in the first-person plural pronoun 'we', making them involved and included. The poet argues that doing nothing or forgetting is tantamount to being responsible for future nuclear disasters:

> The world is becoming more and more our own prison.
> The prison of nuclear progress.

> If we do not do anything against it today
> they will thank us tomorrow
> for our silence and for being "reasonable".
> Each of us has to think about what he can do.
> Each of us at his own place.
> This time we won't forget. (Aicher-Scholl 1986: 3)

'Do the graves make a murmur?': On abject realities

In *Deracination*, Walter Davis argues that Japanese hibakusha are 'the expressive figura of death incarnate' (2001: 107). Survivors are compelled not only to 'live death' (107), but also to repeatedly exorcise its taint, through catharsis or expulsion, in a perpetual regurgitation of the violence of atomic devastation. Importantly the destruction wrought by the explosion of the Chernobyl reactor arguably occurred in more ambiguous terms than the detonation of the A-bomb: secretive and censored, the radioactive fallout that poisoned Pripyat and the surrounding villages and townships was invisible, an elusive, creeping threat: 'No one could understand anything, that was the scariest thing… The sun is out, and the birds are flying, and the swallows, it starts raining – but he's dead' (Alexievich 1997: 111). Combined with official insistence that the damage from the power station had been contained, and ongoing misinformation about the extent of the disaster, Chernobyl is figured in obscure and intangible terms. Sarah Phillips notes that the first radio broadcast 'alerting citizens to the accident did not come until thirty-five hours after the explosion' (2004: 161), and only appeared in the newspaper three days later on 29 April, camouflaged in the weather section of *Vecherni Kiev (Evening Kiev)*:

> "An accident occurred at the Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station; one of the atomic reactors was damaged. Measures have been undertaken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Aid is being given to those affected. A government commission has been set up." (*Evening Kiev* qtd in Phillips 2004: 161)

Efforts to moderate the seriousness of the reactor explosion resulted not only in a refusal to immediately evacuate Pripyat but also a failure to inform the residents of Kiev – only 115 kilometres from Chernobyl – of the disaster and the implications for their health (Phillips 2004: 161). The annual May Day celebrations and parade thus took place in the city centre regardless of the fact that it exposed (unknowing) participants to highly dangerous levels of radiation:

> On May 1, 1986 tens of thousands of Kiev's citizens, including thousands upon thousands of children, marched unwarned and entirely unprotected through an

> environment saturated with radioactive poisons to celebrate the glories of the Communist reign. (2004: 161)

The official number of deaths relating to the accident ranges between thirty-one and fifty-four (Brown 2019: 3), mostly representing the first-responders who fought to extinguish the reactor fire, while organisations such as the UN Chernobyl Forum and Greenpeace estimate the actual figure to be around 200,000, as well as predicting an additional 93,000 future cancer-related deaths (3). One witness notes how widespread censorship was enforced to prevent citizens from understanding the implications of the explosion: 'In the first days after the accident, all the books at the library about radiation, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even about X-rays, disappeared' (Alexievich 1997: 89). As discussed, the aftermath of Chernobyl is shifting and uncertain, framed in relation to widespread ignorance, contradiction, and fear: 'what is this radiation? You can't hear it and you can't see it…' (121). Significantly, the abstract nature of the threat posed by the explosion helped support a government narrative of containment, an insidious means of political 'harm minimisation' that disguises the real horrors of the catastrophe: 'If only the radiation were red, then these people would know what they are living in' (Edwards 1987: 634).

As a result of the 'unreality' propagated by the Soviet government, Chernobylite poetry often expresses anger about deception, and the subsequent erasure of many victims from 'official' historical record. For example, Pripyat-born Lyubov Sirota, who was evacuated after the disaster, responds with fury to the transformation of citizens into the commodities and statistics of government bureaucrats (whom she frequently likens to 'babbl[ing] crows'), and the refusal to recognise the thousands who died because of the 'reckless deeds' of '"competent" functionaries' (2003). In 'They did not register us', Sirota emphasises the denial of deaths relating to radiation sickness; 'not linked to the accident', the estimated hundreds of thousands of victims are vaporised from authorised accounts, silenced without ceremony or recognition: 'No processions laid wreaths, / no brass bands melted with grief' (2003). Further, Sirota exposes the anxiety surrounding those who carry the Chernobyl taint, which paradoxically positions sufferers as hypochondriacs manifesting illness from radiophobia (Alexievich 1997: 120) as well as lepers who might contaminate the healthy, and whose toxicity is both genetic and generational (198). As Sirota (2003) writes: 'They wrote us off as / lingering stress, / cunning genetic disorders'. Significantly, however, the poem rages against the impetus to disappear, a resistance to being expunged that evokes a tenacious if not complex image of haunting; an insistence on being heard that speaks to the experiences of the individual, the loss of a collective, and a vision of futurity:

> They wrote us off.
> They keep trying to write off
> our ailing truths
> with their sanctimonious lies.
> But nothing will silence us!

Even after death,
from our graves
we will appeal to your Conscience
not to transform the Earth
into a sarcophagus! (Sirota 2003)

As Julia Kristeva contends in *Powers of Horror* (1982), abjection is defined not only by that which is material – the corpse, the expulsions of the body – but also by the 'breaking down of a world that has erased its borders' (4). It is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order… The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite … a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles' (Kristeva 1982: 4). The juxtaposition of Soviet dishonesty – ostensibly to avoid panic – and the exhortations of poets such as Sirota reveal a tension which complicates a clear delineation of inside and outside, self and other. Moreover, it figures Soviet power in abject terms, as the 'traitor, the liar, the criminal' (Kristeva 1982: 7) whose machinations, once revealed, expose the 'fragility of the law' (7) and how easily the system might become disordered and unstable. Indeed, as a symbol of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chernobyl is entwined in metaphors of abjection, loss, and chaos. It is a nightmarish vision of uncertainty, an elision of boundaries which blurs clear points of separation and, in line with concerns about the toxic bodies of Chernobyl hibakusha, presents in Sirota's poetry as a potent confusion of insides and outsides. 'They did not register us' (Sirota 2003), for instance, envisions the 'mass departure' of Chernobyl victims as a 'burning lump of truth / in duplicity's throat', while in 'Radiophobia' the merging of bodies and poisons is depicted as a form of acclimatisation: 'How marvellously the children have absorbed / radiation, once believed so hazardous!... / (It's adults who suffer radiophobia – / for kids is it still adaptation?)' (Sirota 2003). Significantly, the subject of Sirota's poems also occupies a liminal positionality, a zombie-like presence in which survivors are the living dead, existing in a suffocating, in-between space that is both physical and otherworldly. In 'Burden':

How amazing
in my thirtieth year
not to live
but instead
stumble along –
all bygone years
both happy and deadly,
heavy, wet, like logs,
crowd in the soul
as if in a tomb! (Sirota 2003)

The dislocation of inside and outside frequently presents as a series of slippages between abstract and concrete imagery in Chernobylite poetry, shifting seamlessly from the grounded to the dreamlike both within and between stanzas. In 'At the crossing', Sirota juxtaposes the

metaphysical and the quotidian to contemplate the existential implications of Chernobyl: 'death / brandishes a hasty spade', for example, while a flourishing crop of chokecherries, 'with white flowers / like gamma fluorescence', signifies some form of retribution, 'a plot by mysterious powers', that might be either bureaucratic or divine (2003). An apocalyptic image of 'the burnt out Earth', in which the sky 'is boiling with crows', functions as a marker of a nightmarish vision that is both hallucination and reality, framing Chernobyl and its ongoing reverberations as an eerie dreamscape in which the seen and the unseen clash within the same space (Sirota 2003). A similar strategy occurs in Ukrainian poet Natalka Bilotserkivets' 1987 long poem 'May', in which the narrator slips in between states of sleep and wakefulness, describing how 'we spent that terrifying spring'. The refrain, the sound of helicopters 'with the cement and the boron carbide', triggers a traumatic series of memories about the horror of the nuclear disaster, presented as a sequence of contrasts between the atrocity of the 'reactor's burning heart' and the contemporary moment of 'simple things that don't scream' (Bilotserkivets 1987). The surreal transitions between a sharp consciousness, which offers a critique of 'scientific speculators' and 'bureaucrats safe in their offices', and an unconscious illusory, complete with an unnerving reference to the 'pulsating seductive call' of 'salamanders free as wild horses', is deliberately unsettling (Bilotsekivets 1987). Indeed, given the nature of the nuclear disaster, which resulted in the invasion of bodies by an unseen force that turned the self inside-out, it makes sense that Chernobylite poetry would adopt an aesthetic in which the real and the unreal collide in disturbing and ambiguous ways. Sarah Phillips notes:

> In light of the elusiveness of radiation to the sense, interpretations of the event of Chernobyl were developed to render it more material, concrete, and, therefore, more intelligible. Symbolisation processes are part of an attempt to reveal the unknown, the invisible, or the hidden… The accident and its implications for Ukraine (and the world) are too enormous to be understood in anything other than a polysemous fashion. (Phillips 2004: 162)

Interestingly, it is arguably poetry by non-Chernobylite writers that engages with a vision of the abject in its most confronting forms, particularly in terms of the horror of bodies damaged by radiation. While Sirota and Bilotserkivets evoke an imagery that is stark yet infused with a fantastical sense of the otherworldly, by drawing upon witness testimony as a form of intertextuality or homage, poets such as Mario Petrucci are able to convey the material injury done to physical selves in order to expose the atrocity of atomic violence. In *Heavy Water* (2004), a tribute collection of poems derived from the first-hand accounts of Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl*, Petrucci utilises the graphic descriptions of survivors in order to eschew the abstract and the lyrical and maintain the connection of Chernobyl to an object reality. The drive to concretise the atomic experience is also an insistence of Hiroshima *hibakusha* Sadako Kurihara, a leader in Japan for nuclear disarmament and prolific poet whose collection *Black Eggs* was the first book of atomic-bomb literature published in Japan (Treat 1995: 162). In the introduction, Kurihara emphasises the need to 'give form' to the

experience of the atom bomb, to 'turn it into ideas, and universalise it' (1994: xiii); otherwise, she argues, 'Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the experience of terror and darkness will hang in the air like mushroom clouds, will not put down roots, will weather away' (17). Kurihara's insistence on using language that somehow locks down the horror of the 'atomic landscape' (17) is not a rejection of ideas about the ineffability of the bomb, but rather a determination to ensure it does not become an abstract idea, lost in the uncertain spaces of history. Chernobylites also comment on the fear of forgetting, a compulsion that once more speaks to the illusory nature of official government records of the event, as well as the 'imperceptible' nature of Chernobyl itself: 'I want to bear witness: my daughter died from Chernobyl. And they want us to forget about it' (Alexievich 1997: 36).

The result in Petrucci's *Heavy Water* is a series of poems that focus on specific physical details, on aspects of the devastation that might be regarded as quantifiable, or even objective. In 'Ukritye', for example, Petrucci describes the work of 'storks', liquidators forced onto the roof of the reactor to clear radioactive graphite, work so dangerous 'even the robots refuse':

> Soles grow too hot for blood. Still they shovel
> the graphite that is erasing marrow, spine, balls –
>
> that kick-starts their DNA to black and purple liquid life.
> Then the soldiers. Nervous as children. They re-make it –
>
> erect slabs with the wide stare of the innocent, crosshatch
> the wreck roughly with steel, fill in with that grey
>
> crayon of State Concrete. In soiled beds, in the dreams
> of their mothers, they liquefy. (Petrucci 2004: 17)

The decomposition of living bodies – as zombie-like corpses – evokes what Kristeva terms the 'horror within', the terror of the 'body's inside' that is contained only by the most fragile of borders (1982: 53). In line with Davis' description of hibakusha as symbols of 'death incarnate' (2001: 107), the notion of atomic survivors as the living dead – even of giving birth to death – is a blurring of borderlines that makes literal Kristeva's conceptualisation of 'death infecting life' (Kristeva 1982: 5). For Kristeva, the corpse is the 'utmost of abjection' (4), for the self depends upon the rejection of waste – 'urine, blood, sperm, excrement' (53) – in order to maintain stability, coherence and subjectivity:

> These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so

> that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere,* cadaver. (Kristeva 1982: 3)

Yet that which is 'permanently thrust aside in order to live' (Kristeva 1982: 3) signifies that which the body eventually must become: 'If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. I is expelled' (3). The injuries suffered by Chernobyl's first responders vividly demonstrate such disintegration in the most literal way, as their bodies rapidly transform into that which ought to be contained or expelled. Petrucci's rendering of the testimony of Ludmila Ignatenko, whose husband Vasya, a firefighter, is numbered among the 'official' fifty-four dead, conveys the nightmare of dissolution: 'he coughed bile, acid / froth and lung, shreds of stomach and liver and still he / stayed… / Those reptile eggs of eyelids, turned always towards me' (2004: 60-61). The collapse of self is horrifically conflated with the preparation of food: chicken is boiled 'until the bones sagged' (60), apples are 'pared / and pulped, everything minced and sieved' (60) until 'every trace / of rind or pip removed, no husk shell or pod' (60) remains. Vasya is similarly reduced to a series of boundary-crossing parts, 'the black of his forearms and thighs / cracked like pastry' (60), eyes so swollen with 'water / he could not see for skin' (60), until, in an actualisation of Kristevan abjection, the 'I' dissolves into little more than contaminated waste: '*His bones are more active than the Core.* / *Understand? That is no longer your husband*' (60). Yet in the poem 'This', Petrucci acknowledges the impossibility of conveying the enormity of a disaster such as Chernobyl, which pushes back against the limitations of language even in the context of (ostensibly) objective physical reality:

> is something you cannot write.
> That when the lymph nodes are removed
>
> the nose shunts sideways – bloats
> to three times its normal size. How
>
> eyes brim with an unfamiliar light
> as though a stranger were using them
>
> to see the world for the first time.
> This is not something you can write. (Petrucci 2004: 51)

Conclusion

The abandoned town of Pripyat, two kilometres from the horrors of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, has become an increasingly popular site for dark tourism, visitors lured by a surreal atomic narrative of trauma, threat, and loss. Despite the unfathomable nature of

nuclear disaster, poets have managed to write about its effects while simultaneously calling attention to the impossibility of translating suffering into words. This is achieved, in part, via what Daniela Tan identifies as 'a lexical level [where] expressions of inchoateness and amorphousness serve the depiction of things that are hard to verbalise' (2014). In this way, hibakusha poets acknowledge the ineffability of such an experience as Chernobyl and yet, simultaneously, point to the importance of attempting to do so through poetic techniques such as repetition, fragmentation, disjuncture, and an appeal to the abject.

Broadly, dark poetry is poetry written about sites of dark tourism. In writing about these nuclear disasters, the poet confronts the anxiety of existentialism in the nuclear sublime and simultaneously resists the romanticisation of suffering and fetishisation of nuclear spectacle. As Sirota writes in 'To Pripyat':

> We've stood over our ashes;
> now what do we take on our long journey?
> The secret fear that wherever we go
> we are superfluous?
>
> …
>
> …We are doomed to be left behind by the flock
> in the harshest of winters…
> You, fly away!
> But when you fly off
> don't forget us, grounded in the field!
> And no matter to what joyful faraway lands
> your happy wings bear you,
> may our charred wings
> protect you from carelessness. (Sirota 2003)

While writers are thwarted by the argument that tragedy is 'unspeakable', if no-one attempts to write about these tragic events, then the horrors of nuclear disaster are silenced and forgotten.

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