



'Recollections of Things to Come'¹
The testimony of the vestige in *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* by Svetlana Alexievich

'Los recuerdos del porvenir'
El testimonio del residuo en Voces de Chernóbil. Crónica del futuro de Svetlana Alexiévich

Daniuska González González

(Universidad de Playa Ancha Valparaíso)

[daniuska.gonzalez@upla.cl]

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Abstract

Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future (2016 [1997]) by Svetlana Alexievich, is a book that is not easy to insert into a literary genre since it encompasses testimony, journalism and narrative (with a consequent fictional quality about it). This is the reason why the term 'fictional testimony' has been chosen here to decipher how the Chernobyl catastrophe has been constructed from the residual essence of the word to which it testifies and of two dimensions that establish the vestige: the museum and photography. Works by authors such as Georges Didi-Huberman, Giorgio Agamben, Ricardo Forster, Elizabeth Jelin and Andreas Huyssen, among others, are used here as a theoretical framework that helps to reflect on this book, the most well-known by the 2015 Nobel literature laureate.

Resumen

Voces de Chernóbil. Crónica del futuro (2015[2005]) de Svetlana Alexiévich resulta difícil de encasillar en un género, ya que encabalga el testimonio, el periodismo y la narrativa (con su consecuente impronta ficcional), de ahí que para este artículo se escogiera el término "testimonio ficcional" para leer a través de este cómo se construye la catástrofe de Chernóbil a partir de la condición residual en la palabra que testimonia y en dos espacios que fijan

1 Título de la novela de la escritora mexicana Elena Garro publicada en 1963.

el resto: el museo y la fotografía. Textos de autores como Georges Didi-Huberman, Giorgio Agamben, Ricardo Forster, Elizabeth Jelin y Andreas Huyssen, entre otros, se utilizarán como soportes teóricos que ayudarán en la reflexión sobre este libro, el más reconocido, de la Premio Nobel de Literatura 2015.

Keywords

Svetlana Alexievich; Chernobyl; catastrophe; vestige; twenty-first century

Palabras clave

Svetlana Alexiévich; Chernóbil; catástrofe; resto; siglo XXI

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‘I love my Motherland.
I love my Motherland very much!
Though there is some willow rust in it.’
Sergey Yesenin

1. *Land of the Dead*². Introduction

An abandoned sewing machine fills the foreground of the photograph, in another a chessboard, with its toppled pieces, can be glimpsed and in yet another, there is a large piano in the midst of an amphitheatre in ruins. In all the photographs of ‘Chernobyl +25’ (2013) the dust and debris prevent any attempt at visualising life. Their author, the Spaniard Antonio Benítez, based his approach on the remnants left in the wake of the catastrophe.

Like a kaleidoscope, while reviewing the previous images, I pondered on whether these might be used to accommodate the voices recorded by the journalist and writer Svetlana Alexievich³, some strident, others little more than a whisper and the least critical notwithstanding the time that has elapsed. Voices that bear witness, voices that narrate *in spite of all*. ‘I don’t know what to tell you about’ (Alexievich, 2016, p. 6), pronounced in a low voice that, as the memories return, gains strength, ‘Sometimes it’s like I’m hearing his voice ... Like he’s alive ... Even the photos don’t get at me the way his voice does’ (p. 7).

Can the word be understood as just another vestige in the aftermath of a catastrophe? On the basis of this question—together with others that will be addressed below—Alexievich constructs a mosaic of traumatic testimonies in *Chernobyl Prayer*, with the intention of giving shape or (some)

² The title of Part One of *Chernobyl Prayer*.

³ Despite being awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, there is scant Spanish literature on her oeuvre, namely: “Sobre Svetlana Alexiévich. Antes de todo, la memoria (O de cómo una periodista rusa (¿ucraniana?) atrapa lo que no se quiere decir y es imposible de olvidar)”, Memo Ánjel (2015); “Svetlana Alexiévich. Voces de Chernóbil. Crónica del futuro. La guerra no tiene rostro de mujer”, Sergio Emilio Prieto-Miranda (2016); “El Mal como problema político: el ‘paradigma Dostoievski’ y el nacimiento de la distopía”, Daniel Del Percio (2016); and “Desde los anhelos del corazón: Svetlana Alexiévich”, Miguel E. Ramírez Leiva (2016).

meaning to one of the most disconcerting events in the history of mankind, a phenomenon ‘of turbulence, chaos and catastrophe, that any flow—indeed, any linear process—when it is speeded up is inflected in a curious way, a way that produces catastrophe’ (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 101): i.e. the explosion of Reactor 4 of the nuclear power station in the Ukrainian city of Chernobyl on 26 April 1986.

In his book *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (2012), essential for understanding the meaning of the shreds resulting from an action of political violence such as the Nazi concentration camps, specifically Auschwitz, Georges Didi-Huberman notes that *something*, however insignificant, endures after a process of destruction and precisely that something ‘bears witness to a disappearance, while simultaneously resisting it, since it becomes the opportunity of its possible remembrance’ (p. 167). Departing from this idea as a hypothesis, the intention here is to approach the testimonial/literary reconstruction of the accident, which Alexievich achieved by uniting voices that, being themselves vestiges, give shape to others⁴, some in museums and others such as photographs, but without losing sight of the fact that, together, they are interpreting some ‘social expressions [that might be] on their surface enigmatical’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 5) in a broader dimension, in this case due to the cloak of secrecy drawn over the cataclysm.

Alexievich’s book⁵ has the same structure as a Greek tragedy. After ‘Some historical background’, the prologue is entitled, ‘A lone human voice’, the testimony of the wife of one of the firemen arriving at the nuclear power station in the early hours of the morning of 16 April, plus ‘The author interviews herself on missing history and why Chernobyl calls our view of the world into question’, sections that offer the reader an initial explanation of the following testimonies, like episodes—i.e. the conflict is presented in the same way as in a Greek tragedy. Entitled *Land of the Dead*, Part One comprises 10 monologues, ending with *The Soldiers’ Choir*, recognising the *parode* in the former, that preliminary song of the choir. This is repeated in Part Two, *The Crown of Creation*, featuring another series of monologues, this time ending

4 Although the words ‘remnant’, ‘trace’, ‘remains’ and ‘vestige’ theoretically have a different meaning, they will be employed indistinctly here.

5 Translated by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait.

with *The Folk Choir*. On the other hand, the authoress extends Part Three, *Admiring Disaster*, following *The Children's Choir*, with the exode 'A lone human voice', another wife's account, this time of one of the 'liquidators', and 'In place of an epilogue', in which the accent is placed on the conversion of Chernobyl into a tourist attraction: 'Visit the atomic Mecca. Affordable prices' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 294).

2. '... something more remote than Kolyma, Auschwitz and the Holocaust'⁶: theoretical explanations of testimony, catastrophe and the vestige

Coinciding with Geertz, who understands culture as 'one of those webs', whose analysis is 'therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (1973, p. 13), in this paper the crosslinks between testimony and fiction will be interpreted in order to create a third hybrid space that, without the rigid restraints of theory, does not try evade it: the fictional testimony⁷, that which deploys a convenient factitious dialogue, combining true and fictional elements, following the tenets of literature and journalism⁸.

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- 6** The title of one of the monologues of Part Three, *Admiring Disaster*, of *Chernobyl Prayer*, pp. 222-225.
- 7** After an exhaustive search it was possible to unearth a paper that would seem to refer to the concept of fictional testimony, i.e. "*Morirás lejos*: Reconstrucción de un testimonio ficcional" (2003) by the Mexican researcher Carmen Dolores Carrillo Juárez (<http://148.206.79.158/handle/11191/1689>) However, it is only mentioned in the title, for in the body copy testimony and the novel are mentioned separately. Therefore, it is believed that approaching *Chernobyl Prayer* from the conceptualisation of fictional testimony makes a contribution to the literature.
- 8** It has been acknowledged that the concept of fictional testimony would be enriched by perspectives deriving from other disciplines such as history, for example. Nonetheless, so as not to weaken the central threads of this paper, mention will only be made here to that which coincides with the psychoanalytic perspective defended by Felman and Laub. For the North American historian Dominick LaCapra (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 2000), what Western culture has inherited is not the catastrophic event, but the testimony of the trauma of those who survived it, repeating their words over and over again, as if they were on a psychoanalytic couch.

In light of Alexievich's proposal, it is not enough to employ a theoretical approach to testimony in contemporaneity⁹—that is, with respect to its possible meanders and its commitment to literature and journalism from the fringes, basically concerning memory, one of the genre's central themes at present—since it is also essential to discover something extra that defines a '*paradigma de intervención novedoso*'¹⁰ (Peris Blanes, 2008, p. 14), a place of *another* enunciation, '*producto nuevo, de carácter textual, cuyo sentido se configura de acuerdo al momento y circunstancias en que se produce*'¹¹ (Piña, 1999, p. 1). In sum, the idea is to consider *Chernobyl Prayer* from the perspective of fictional testimony.

In this connection, the format offers two approaches. In the first, testimony beyond the mere actions of an individual (or group) relating to an event involving him (or them) and whose account is elaborated from his traumatic experience, which Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub demonstrated in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992): Western society inherits the trauma of the victims, rather than that of the catastrophe *per se*. While in the second, a crossover dynamics is deployed in the testimony between objectivities (what happened, verifiable and quantifiable to a certain extent) and sensations and recollections that have become appended to those experiences. In the words of Albert Chillón, it would be a textual container that inserts '*ingredientes de contenido –temas y motivos, semblanzas y descripciones, símbolos y detalles– [...] Y, además, [se] construy[e] una trama argumental –y una argumentación de fondo–*'¹² (2017, p. 96).

9 In line with Fernando Reati's and Mario Villani's suggestion that '*el testimonio es un género híbrido, intermedio entre la ficción y la historia, o, por decirlo de otro modo, entre la subjetividad y la verdad. Aunque parezca una contradicción de términos, tal vez debiéramos hablar de "verdad subjetiva" porque se trata de la subjetividad de un individuo de carne y hueso que alude a una verdad histórica desde su posición privilegiada de testigo directo* [testimony is a hybrid genre, between fiction and history or, in other words, between subjectivity and truth. Although these terms may seem to be contradictory, perhaps we should speak of 'subjective truth' because it is the subjectivity of a flesh-and-blood individual who refers to an historical truth from his privileged position as an eyewitness]' (2011, p. 26). [Our translation.]

10 '[...] novel paradigm of intervention' [our translation].

11 '[...] a new product, of a textual character, whose meaning is shaped in accordance with the moment and circumstances in which it is produced' [our translation].

12 '[...] ingredients of content—topics and motives, semblances and descriptions—[...]. And, furthermore, a plot—an underlying argument—is created' [our translation].

The incursion into fiction does not only enrich this combination, but also adds other values including, first and foremost, the literary work of the person who organises/compiles, not as a task of correcting idioms and language forms or fleshing out content, but in the sense of open, powerful intervention, where it is possible to trace the style, namely, the hallmark of a writer, rather than that of an editor or compiler. Secondly, the intricacies of the authoress' voice as just another character: 'What I'm concerned with is what I would call the "missing history", the invisible imprint of our stay on earth and in time' (2016, p. 24), Alexievich remarks, inserting herself in an artefact, in this case a book. Thirdly, the creation of characters who, by giving them voice, combine chronological narrative with their own licence when telling their stories, their 'partial truths', as studied by James Clifford (1986), because whole truths are impossible given the obligation of the writer (the journalist Alexievich) 'to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent' (p. 15). Lastly, the use of resources inherent to fiction, such as the multiple narrative paths of the characters, from those who offer a picture of the initial moments of the catastrophe itself to those who conclude their accounts on a hopeful note: 'We will wait for him together. I will say my Chernobyl prayer, and he will look at the world with the eyes of a child ... ' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 292).

In 'Historia del testimonio chileno. De las estrategias de denuncia a las políticas de memoria (1985-1999)', for Jaume Peris Blanes the testimony genre is '*el objeto de una importante redefinición del campo cultural y literario latinoamericano [este último en el caso que analiza], que pasaría a incluirlo como el espacio de una nueva literatura posible*'¹³ (2008, p. 20). In this opening up to 'a new possible literature', emphasis is placed on the narrative resources—without, of course, going so far as the 'non-fiction novel' proposed by Truman Capote, such as *In Cold Blood* (1966)—which interweave these voices recalling the nuclear disaster, like a language deployed with the intention of tautening the testimony with a climax similar to that of a novel, and even more: some stories resemble episodes that alternate true facts with fiction.

13 '[...] the object of an important redefinition of the Latin American cultural and literary field [the latter in the case at hand], which would involve including it as the space of a new possible literature' [our translation].

As the characters begin to take shape through their voices, the authoress intervenes with constructions whose tone stresses the literary element. This can be a phrase in the manner of a sentence, but which introduces a polished twist that Roland Barthes, in his *Criticism and Truth* (1987 [1966]), regarded as constituent to literary writing: language as a problem; for instance, '[...] in the morning I wake up [...] Where is he? [...] A tiny bird I can't identify runs along the windowsill, trilling like a little bell and waking me up. I've never heard a sound, a voice like it' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 281). This is why it is stressed that the fictional appears primarily in the literary construct that the journalist employs, which allows her to interweave her book's three main threads—memory, death and catastrophe—with their residual consequences. For she stitches them together by means of rhetorical mediation, converting them into lines of argument. The testimonies are concatenated through her intervention and it from here where the richest vein uniting testimony with fiction emerges.

However, returning to the vestige—the central theme of this paper—although it is based on photographic representation, according to Didi-Huberman's idea in *Images in Spite of All*, notwithstanding the catastrophe and its magnitude, there will always be a vestige revealing what has occurred and producing 'the breach in conceived history, the grain of the event' (2008, p. 104). Departing from this idea, it is possible to read the event, not completely (which anyway is of no interest), since a miniscule piece is sufficient to flesh it out or, at least, approach it, which the author, coinciding with Hannah Arendt, calls 'instants of truth' (p. 31). Regarding the four photographs of the anonymous *Sonderkommando* sustaining his theory, he notes, '[these] don't tell "all the truth" [...]: they are tiny extractions from such a complex reality [...]. But they are for us—for our eyes today—truth itself [...]: what remains, visually of Auschwitz' (p. 38).

Besides the visual element, useful for comprehending, for example, Benítez's 'Chernobyl +25' photographic series, the intention is to establish Alexievich's prose on the basis of that trace that has endured *in spite of all*: of death, of the powers that be and their silence, of the memory lapses Passing the pages, the reader will have the feeling that it is a work crafted from testimonies of the vestige, of something that remained notwithstanding the effacement, as if the characters were clinging to a remnant or recollection that had endured, like 'the colour of the fire at the atomic power station' (Alexievich,

2016, p. 118) or the bodies of the animals massacred in the streets: 'cats and dogs being shot, how they were lying in the streets' (p. 118).

There is a moment of dialogue with Didi-Huberman in Ricardo Forster's *Crítica y sospecha. Los claroscuros de la cultura moderna* (2003), which underlines the still open and culturally entrenched essence of episodes such as that of Auschwitz. The reason why it has prevailed in the Western imaginary lies in the multiple residual traces left by '*las fuerzas destructivas de lo humano*'¹⁴ (p. 259), with which it is possible to recreate the event. To this end, he proposes the term 'chiaroscuro', which reveals the vestige as a chiaroscuro on the event, which would allow for '*indagar por su particularidad como un modo de encontrar, si ello es posible, sus correspondencias, sus cruces, [observar] ciertos proyectos [...] que siguen habitando la escena de nuestra época*'¹⁵ (p. 250).

It is only natural to weld the vestige to the memory that is established as a testimony. It should not be forgotten that for authors like Marc Augé (1998), Elizabeth Jelin (2002), Leonor Arfuch (2002), Paul Ricoeur (2004) and Elsa Blair (2008), among others, memory is read through the narrative that it produces, an artefact that is elaborated, since the act of remembrance *per se* does not achieve this. If the subjects do indeed delve into the past, and this is an integral part of Alexievich's book, then the testimonies account for the vestiges that can only be understood as splinters of an event that is illustrated in the future. This choir of voices fraught with pain and uncertainty makes sense as an approach to a traumatic yesterday in order to explain and understand tomorrow, hence the subtitle of the book, *A Chronicle of the Future*, and also the use of the title of the novel by Elena Garro: the past is remembered in terms of the future.

Therefore, memory that attempts to settle the conflict with the past—to my mind, the testimony falters when it wallows in the past time and again, without looking pro-actively to the future—to understand it in terms of a future that continues as a question mark, but insists on presenting itself as a page on which past and future history can be rewritten.

In this connection, a passage from *Los trabajos de la memoria* conjectures on the above:

14 '[...] the destructive forces of mankind [our translation].

15 '[...] inquiring into its particularity as a way of discovering, if possible, its correlations, its crossovers, [to observe] certain projects [...] that continue to occupy the stage in our time' [our translation].

Estamos hablando de procesos de significación y resignificación subjetivos, donde los sujetos de la acción se mueven y orientan (o se desorientan y se pierden) entre ‘futuros pasados’ (Koselleck, 1993), ‘futuros perdidos’ (Huysen, 2000) y ‘pasados que no pasan’ (Connan y Rousso, 1994) en un presente que se tiene que acercar y alejar simultáneamente de esos pasados recogidos en los espacios de experiencia y de los futuros incorporados en horizontes de expectativas. Esos sentidos se construyen y cambian su relación y en diálogo con otros, que pueden compartir y confrontar las experiencias y expectativas de cada uno, individual y grupalmente. Nuevos procesos históricos, nuevas coyunturas y escenarios sociales y políticos, además, no pueden dejar de producir modificaciones en los marcos interpretativos para la comprensión de la experiencia pasada y para construir expectativas futuras¹⁶ (Jelin, 2002, p. 13).

When applying this passage to *Chernobyl Prayer*, the fictional testimony reflects a ‘process of signifying and resignifying’ involving an intimate or public recollection of the Chernobyl catastrophe narrated by ‘orientated or disorientated’ and lost subjects, the latter also because they have lost their way (the area was evacuated and the inhabitants were forced to move elsewhere). Mobility, orientation, or the lack of it, and loss create a vortex in which a ‘past future’ converges (which would refer to the use of a nuclear energy technology that had become obsolete in the discourses of technological modernity: the future was never so past), a ‘lost future’, in direct relation to the preceding argument, and a ‘past that does not pass’

16 ‘We are referring to subjective processes of signifying and resignifying in which the subjects of an action move and orient themselves (of become disorientated and lost) between “future pasts” (Koselleck, 1993), “lost futures” (Huysen, 2000) and “pasts that do not pass” (Connan and Rousso, 1994), in a present that has to approach and distance itself simultaneously from those pasts contained in spaces of experience and futures incorporated in horizons of expectations. Those meanings are constructed and change their relationship in dialogue with others, who can share and confront the experiences and expectations of each one, individually and as a group. New historical processes, new social and political situations and scenarios which, furthermore, never cease to produce modifications in interpretative frameworks to understand past experience and to construct future expectations’ [our translation].

(as with Auschwitz, Chernobyl continues to burn intensely in the imaginary of Western horror, *it has remained incrustated* in it). Therefore, the elaboration of a memory will always be an ongoing process, as with the ‘cultural memory’ that it establishes (Huysen, 2000, p. 36).

Resorting to Jelin, each new historical, political or domestic process, for example, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union into republics, sometimes leads to a complete memory block in testimony, insofar as ‘*catástrofes pueden implicar una ruptura entre la memoria individual y las prácticas públicas y colectivas*’¹⁷ (2002, p. 34). Telling the story of Chernobyl and its place in the technological schemes of the Soviet Union, before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the so-called ‘socialist camp’, versus doing so on the basis of the disaster. The ‘interpretive frameworks’ for understanding and creating ‘future expectations’ surely crumble. Furthermore, paraphrasing Fernando Reati (2006), the story is told to others, ‘strangers’, to discover a meaning that can be translated by both the rapporteur and the group to which he belongs.

3. *The Crown of Creation*¹⁸. Words that are/that testify to vestiges

As has been argued above, the testimonies in *Chernobyl Prayer* are about the vestige, offered by those constituting it, the remnants of voices and of heroic or futile gestures. What is told possesses that essence and, unlike the incapacity to speak from within Auschwitz on which Primo Levi (2003) and Giorgio Agamben (1998 and 2000) insisted, the witnesses are superfluous and responsible for sealing the unspeakable to transform it into something that can be told, as well as expressing what they had experienced, irrespective of whether they do this through uncertainties, fabrications, ‘partial truths’ or confused questions. In point of fact, most of those telling

¹⁷ ‘[...] catastrophes can involve a rupture between individual memory and public and collective practices [our translation].’

¹⁸ The title of Part Two of *Chernobyl Prayer*.

their story admit to being incapable of understanding what occurred¹⁹ and discussing it in public.

'I want to testify. [...] 'I'll tell you just my own story' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 44), Nikolai Fomich Kalugin tells Alexievich in 'Monologue on a whole life written on a door'. His account consists in stitching together vestiges that survived the catastrophe, in ordering them as a way of understanding everything that it represented: the door of his house, a relic on which the body of his father was placed after he had died, a piece of wood covered in notches representing his own growth, which he decided to recover from the family's apartment two years later, 'On night. On a motorbike [...]. The police were chasing after me. "Stop or we'll fire! Stop or we'll fire!"' (p. 45); his daughter's cat: 'They announced on the radio: "you can't bring any cats with you." Right, let's put the cat in the suitcase!' (p. 44); or the body of the girl: 'They'd spring up and then fade away. The size of an old five-kopeck piece. But nothing was hurting' (p. 45). The door, the cat and the girl's body afflicted by radiation weave an account of the past with a future annulled by the consequences of the former: the girl dies and her father insists on perpetuating her through the word: 'You record it at least. My daughter's name was Katya. My little Katya. She was seven years old when she died' (p. 46).

Barely four pages make it possible to approach an idea of Jelin's as to how the subject builds his identity, which she expressed in the following terms: '*el núcleo de cualquier identidad individual o grupal está ligado a un sentido de permanencia (de ser uno mismo, de mismidad) a lo largo del tiempo y del espacio. Poder recordar y rememorar algo del propio pasado es lo que sostiene la identidad* (Gillis, 1994)²⁰ (2002, p. 25). Kalugin self-determines himself by evoking the door that he pilfered despite the official recriminations, the whispering of his

19 For instance, in *The People's Choir*, in which 17 voices are briefly heard together: 'People are always comparing it to the war. War, though, you can understand. My father told me about the war, and I've read books about it. But this? All that is left of our village is three graveyards: one has people lying in it, the old graveyard; the second has all the cats and dogs we left behind, which were shot; the third has our homes' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 182). Unlike *The Soldiers' Choir* and *The Children's Choir*, it will not be examined here since it does not make any substantial contribution to this study.

20 '[...] the nucleus of any individual or group identity is linked to a sense of permanence (of being one's self, of sameness) over time and in space. Identity is sustained by the capacity to remember and recall something of the past itself (Gillis, 1994)' [our translation].

dying daughter who asks him, ‘Daddy, I want to live, I’m only little’ (Alexievich, 2016, p. 45) or the coffin in which her body was placed: ‘It was so tiny, like the box for a large doll’ (p. 46). Thanks to these remnants, the subject has the power to ‘recall and remember’—defectively or distorting the facts—and that operation ‘sustains’ his ‘identity’.

The Soldiers’ Choir with which Part One is brought to a close deserves special attention. Unlike *The Children’s Choir*, which will be addressed further on, it deals with horror and despair. All the voices belong to one of the centres of power, i.e. the army, specifically those of the members of one of the first regiments to arrive at the nuclear power station and who, moreover, inspected the adjacent land. However, what is relevant is that from a hegemonic place each testimony that they offer is based on the vestige and, on this point, they coincide with the ordinary people whose experience of Chernobyl was characterised by imperviousness and the lack of answers.

These characters were links in a chain of command that enforced compliance and silence—‘Then, of course, they got us to sign some form. A non-disclosure agreement’ (Alexievich, 2016, p. 91)—for which reason when ‘One guy, [...], was protesting [...]. They threatened him with a court martial. The commander told him in front of the whole unit: “You’ll go to prison or face a firing squad”’ (p. 76). However, like Pushkinian short stories²¹, these testimonies are constructed by stapling together the remnants: ‘You’d go into a house and there would be pictures hanging [...]. There were documents lying around: Young Communist League membership cards, people’s IDs, certificates of merit’ (p. 77); ‘Notes scrawled in children’s handwriting on pages torn from exercise books: [...] “Don’t kill our Zhulka. She’s a good dog”’ (p. 78); ‘Broken jars’ (p. 86); ‘Pigs that had gone wild were running about the empty villages’ (p. 88); and ‘From up above, you could see everything. The ruined reactor, the mounds of building debris. And a gigantic number of tiny human figures’ (p. 93).

These narrated remains diverge from the official discourse; the soldiers searching the area inch by inch drew their own conclusions—‘the documents were destroyed because they were radioactive. Or maybe they were destroyed so that nobody would ever know the truth?’ (Alexievich, 2016, p. 89)—and a long

21 Without becoming ‘novels in verse’ like those of Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), it is possible to perceive how poetry permeates a horror story and this is doubtless present in the literary intervention of Alexievich.

time afterwards form a fruitful narratology of memory. As Clifford recognises, ‘a complex technique of revelation and secrecy governs the communication (reinvention) of “First-Time” knowledge, lore about the society’s crucial struggles for survival’ (1986, p. 7).

As Chernobyl was reduced to ruins, it takes on a phantasmal character, something that is disconcerting and makes the loss felt (Freud, 1978). When reading this polyphonic section it is possible to perceive that it is only through these numerous, fragmented vestiges that these men voice their experiences, using their words to look back and shape a memory of the trauma.

Referring to Auschwitz as the epitome of destruction in the last century, Forster notes,

*Intentar recortar lo específico de Auschwitz no significa aislarlo de aquellas otras formas de la destructividad que han venido asolando la vida humana; se trata, por el contrario, de indagar por su particularidad como un modo de encontrar, si ello es posible, sus correspondencias, sus cruces, lo que a partir del exterminio nazi se vuelve un ejemplo mayúsculo de ciertos proyectos [...] que siguen habitando la escena de nuestra época*²² (2003, p. 250).

This passage reveals a compelling reason: in cases such as Auschwitz and Chernobyl the certainties have been corroded by secrecy and the records destroyed by fire and by the full capacity of the powers that be to erase any trace of their destructive excesses. Where should the ‘particularity’ to which Forster refers, so essential for addressing ‘*ciertos proyectos [...] que siguen habitando la escena de nuestra época*’²³ be sought? It is here that Didi-Huberman’s idea based on four blurred photographs taken by the *Sonderkommando* in front of the

22 ‘To try to cut out the specific character of Auschwitz does not mean isolating in from those other forms of destructiveness that have plagued human life; on the contrary, it is a question of inquiring into its particularity as a way of discovering, if possible, its correlations, its crossovers, which on the basis of the Nazi extermination becomes an egregious example of certain projects [...] that continue to occupy the stage in our time’ [our translation].

23 ‘[...] certain projects [...] that continue to occupy the stage in our time’ [our translation].

cremation pits of Auschwitz in August 1944 interlaces with Alexievich's when she transcribes/novelises the voices of the characters who recount the catastrophe of Chernobyl, an operation that will always point to the 'partial truth', regarding both the witnesses and the dominant discourses. Amid the *nuda vida* (Agamben, 1998, 2000 and 2003), there is no other option but to resort to the vestige, without dwelling on its state of conservation or on the incompleteness that it implies, to read in it the document of the future, the chronicle of this.

As Piña suggests, '*[N]o estamos frente a la historia que se ha disuelto, sino frente a retazos que sobreviven o acuden a la memoria y que el relato estructura y significa desde la actualidad*'²⁴ (1999, p. 2). To observe from this vantage point how fragmented orality appropriates pieces of the event to construct a broken account from experiences and residual remembrances. 'I don't know what to tell you about. Death or about love? Or is it the same thing? Which should I tell you about? ...' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 6), the voice of Liudmila Ignatenko, the wife of one of the firemen who arrived at the nuclear power station a few minutes after the disaster, stutters and is indecisive, mainly due to the secrecy imposed by the Soviet establishment²⁵. This episode takes a literary approach to understanding the silences and to her faltering and tentative words. For Agamben, to have '*alguna forma de articulación, [...] [permite] construir un gozne [que] asegura la comunicación entre lo que parecía incapaz de entrar en comunicación, [y] da consistencia a la "sustancia" [...] del sujeto*'²⁶ (2000, p. 136). The testimony of this hesitant, recently married woman allows what seemed to lack substance to be expressed: the body subject to nuclear radiation, the body a vestige of the catastrophe.

If in the Nazi concentration camps the witness of the gas chamber, the mainstay of the horror, was suppressed and, therefore, there lacked a voice that testified from within, in Chernobyl the survivors have been metaphorised

24 'We are not dealing with history that has dissipated, but with scraps that have survived or that come to mind to which the account gives structure and meaning at present' [our translation].

25 At some moment in the story, the voice sounds hysterical to give enunciative body to the unknown: "Why do you have to hide my husband? What is he—a murderer? A criminal? A convict? Who is it we're burying?" [...] And then we were bundled into busses' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 19).

26 '[...] some form of articulation, [...] [allows for] constructing a hinge [that] ensures communication between whoever seems incapable of establishing communication, [and] lends consistency to the "substance" [...] of the subject' [our translation].

as an immense tongue that translates multiple and contrasting accounts of the event: '[...] his mess of a body. All just one gory wound. [...] He was choking on his own innards. I'd put a bandage on my hand and slip it into his mouth, scoop it all out ... You can't describe it! There are no words!' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 18). Despite the pain and her insistence on the impossibility of talking about it, the witness finds a way of describing that shattered body and by doing so connects another piece of what has begun to circulate as part of the memory of Chernobyl, invoking here Augé (1998) when he claims that an account of a recollection is necessary—*imperative*—for constructing a memory narrative.

The voices²⁷ in *The Children's Choir* display a denser residual essence, for they are filtered by what they had heard from the adults. To the rewriting of Alexievich must be added, for example, the words of the fathers or grandfathers, while the storytelling of the children wavers between innocence and perplexity in what might be understood as the last link in the testimony. It is also a choir that portrays the most significant vestige of the catastrophe, as noted above: the decomposed, ailing and diminished bodies. At the same time, however, the function of this ensemble of stories, the majority enriched with a poetical tone, is equivalent to the composition of a song of hope over and above the past and current disaster: the children block the pessimist gaze of the adults and rid it of the apocalyptic connotations rife in the book. For them, it is essential to live, everything boils down to that.

I went to Austria for treatment. There are people there who can hang a picture like that up at home—a boy with a trunk, or flippers instead of hands—and look at it every day, in order not to forget about people in misfortune. But when you live here, it's not a fantasy or art, it's real life. My life ... If I had the choice, I'd rather hang something pretty in my room. A beautiful landscape, where everything is normal, the trees, the birds. Ordinary. Cheerful ... I want to think about pretty things (Alexievich, 2016, p. 276).

27 As with *The Soldiers' Choir*, Alexievich identifies the witnesses at the beginning of the section, before allowing their stories to flow indistinctly, hence the impossibility of individualising them.

This voice of resistance, an inherited physical vestige—‘The doctors didn’t allow it. [...] but my mum ran away from the clinic and hid with Grandma’ (Alexievich, 2016, p. 275)—testifies by combining the possibility of curing a sick body (that healing trip to Austria) with the visual enjoyment of an art that represents simple moments in life: ‘A beautiful landscape’ with trees and birds, ‘ordinary’. That corporality ravaged by disease, a sharp reminder that this ‘degeneration, [with] the body tissues [...] hard’ (Sontag, 1977, p. 13) is countered by the hope of survival, and it is from here that the children’s story is constructed, fragments among other fragments that underpin the yearning for a future in which a healthy body ceases to be a mere promise. This desire to survive in spite of the catastrophe can only be recounted by this small, weak witness, since only he can posit it after the horror suffered (Felman and Laub, 1992).

Another testimony that dovetails with the former uses a playful element to soften the horrendous nature of the disaster. The eldest son of a liquidator talks about his dashed career prospects, ‘I am not going to enrol at a technical college, which is what my mother would like. The one where my dad studied’ (Alexievich, 2016, p. 279), but assuming this state of affairs because of the responsibility that he feels for his mother: ‘My mother and I have been left on our own’ (p. 279). Therefore, his future has not been shattered, *it exists*, surviving in spite of all, and from that commitment he discovers his younger brother: ‘He likes playing Chernobyl. He builds air-raid shelters and pours sand on the reactor ... or else he dresses up as a bogeyman and runs around trying to scare everyone by saying, “Ooh! I am Radiation! Ooh! I am Radiation! He wasn’t born when it happened’ (p. 279).

Innocence and survival together. The event has become a children’s game, losing its intrinsically overwhelming character. By applying it to a micro space such as this it is possible to glimpse what Huyssen suggested regarding the denotation of a traumatic event, in this case the Holocaust, through representations conceived/consumed by mass culture and its conversion into an amusement such as that which Alexievich describes.

Referring to Hiroshima and Chernobyl, Jean Baudrillard expressed that ‘any chain reaction at all, viral or radioactive, has catastrophic potential’ (1993, p. 101). The place of the ‘energetic disruption’ has been coded as a radioactive object that is terrifying, as if it might stick to the skin and continue contaminating 31 years on. Chernobyl conjures up disaster and death and in this game, a

hideous thing, a sort of Baba Yaga, the witch of the Russian imaginary, is deployed in a banal domain, without a grandiose meaning, as with the tours of a desolate Pripjat and the surrounding villages offered by the Kiev tourism office.

4. *Admiring disaster*²⁸. *Theatricality vacui*: the museum and the photograph

Authors such as Levi, Arendt, Agamben and Huyssen have said as much: the Holocaust brought an end to the hopeful and humanist epithets of the discourses of Western reason and, paradoxically, after a tortuous cultural path, led to memory being converted into just another consumer product, for which museums with their thematic, temporary or permanent exhibitions have been a cornerstone.

The testimony of Sergei Vasilievich Sobolev ('Monologue about longing for a role and a narrative') fits a vestige within that constituting his voice: that of the museum setting. He was in charge of the Chernobyl National Museum, which opened in 1992²⁹ and on which he remarks, 'I get the feeling this is not a museum so much as a funeral director's office' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 172).

As Huyssen reflects, 'the museum serves both as a burial chamber of the past—with all that entails in terms of decay, erosion, forgetting—and as a site of possible resurrections [...] in the eyes of the beholder' (1995, p. 15). Indeed, on the basis of this quote it is possible to observe that Sobolev employs a discursive artifice when speaking of the exhibits in the museum's collections and how these will show the catastrophe to what he calls the 'perplexed generation', in clear reference to the following sentence: 'A lost generation returns from the war' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 179). There is not a shadow of doubt that the creation of the museum will fix memory, one that is difficult to encrust physically due to the radioactivity that will prevail for years and to sharp observation, which in one way or another will open 'spaces for

²⁸ The title of Part Three of *Chernobyl Prayer*.

²⁹ As part of the banalisation of the catastrophic event, suitably analysed by Baudrillard and Huyssen, the museum currently offers a virtual tour on its website: <http://chornobylmuseum.kiev.ua/uk/main/>

reflection and counter-hegemonic memory'³⁰ (Huysen, 1995, p. 15), the latter being doubtless beneficial.

The voice of Sobolev is conflictive, for 'Those people are no longer with us. There are only documents in our museums' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 174). Moreover, it shows the impossibility of testifying in the sense closest to Agamben, Levi and Michael Lazzara (2007): the wife of a person who had died from radiation exposure left his medals and certificates of merit on Sobolev's desk. However, in one of the museum's showcases, these objects 'will be displayed' (p. 172), anachronistic and hazardous for the present but invaluable for the catastrophic past.

There is tension between the ephemeral and the permanent and between the past where the catastrophe and ruins reside and the present that feeds off these (unscrupulously, one might add), sustaining Huysen's claim that 'one might even see the museum as our own *memento mori*' (1995, p. 16). If a narratology of memory does indeed exist in these objects, this does not mean that they shed their controversial quality. The spectator approaches the radioactive element and feels, if only for an instant, what the contaminated might feel. To place himself dangerously in that other place as a way of rationalising the catastrophe or perhaps, as Huysen notes with discomfort, 'the [...] celebration of surface versus depth' (p. 16).

Sobolev is so attached to this theoretical idea that he mentions his decision to include a jar of Chernobyl's soil among the museum's exhibits, recognising the risk: 'We can't let the radiation monitoring technicians in here' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 175). But, furthermore, in a sentence that encrypts the banal as a prism through which to contemplate the catastrophe, he claims, 'But everything here must be authentic. No replicas!' (p. 175), as if the consequences of radioactivity could be contained in a jar in order that the public might appreciate them as a museum exhibit. In sum, there is a 'mise-en-scène [where] the much discussed liquidation of the sense of history and the death of the subject [took place], [...] [which] has deprived the museum of its specific aura of temporality' (Huysen, 1995, p. 16). The radioactive object has become

30 Especially since it was an event occurring in the Soviet Union over which a veil of silence was drawn: 'Many statistics have still not been revealed. Some are so outrageous that they are being kept secret' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 3).

a relic and positioned itself as a vestige of a tragedy with a dual meaning: as part of a museum collection and as meaning that is acquired through testimony, otherwise nothing would be known about it.

The details are described and gain importance—and morbidity (to see soil from Chernobyl!). While Sobolev reveals the process of musealisation with its period of incubation, he constructs a mesh on which to superimpose apprehensions, dilemmas and a number of stories heard from third parties, i.e. hearsay. For which reason his testimony is replete with subjectivity and contains possible fictional elements, adding a new twist to fictional testimony. Therefore, what is seen is a relic on exhibition and a relic of words is read. For Jelin,

*la existencia de archivos y centros de documentación, y aun el conocimiento y la información sobre el pasado, sus huellas en distintos tipos de soportes reconocidos, no garantizan su evocación. En la medida en que son activadas por el sujeto, en que son motorizadas en acciones orientadas a dar sentido al pasado, interpretándolo y trayéndolo al escenario del drama presente, esas evocaciones cobran centralidad en el proceso de interacción social*³¹ (2002, p. 23).

Using this passage to consider the object which, because it is to be found in a museum, reinforces its nature as an artefact, also involves pondering on its inability to evoke the event completely. Only when the spectator's gaze comes to rest on it and, by extension, 'gives meaning to the past' and 'interprets' it by introducing it in the present, can he *re-produce* what occurred as many times as he deems fit and give it a significance 'in the social interaction process', fictional testimony in Alexievich case.

The creation of this museum also places the spotlight on the desire to *show* the catastrophe at any cost. It is not now a document of barbarism (Benjamin) but a selfie of barbarism, a snapshot of superficiality, without

31 '[...] the existence of archives and information centres, and even knowledge and information on the past, their imprint on the different types of known media, do not guarantee their evocation. Inasmuch as they are activated by the subject, as they are driven in actions aimed at giving meaning to the past, by interpreting and bringing it to the stage of the present drama those evocations gain centrality in the social interaction process' [our translation].

any retouching, an emergency whose origin has provoked the desire to relate without pauses, sometimes awkwardly and without weighing up the consequences.

However, the aforementioned quote from Jelin does not only make it possible to penetrate the museum artefact, such as that jar of soil treated with reverence and fear, but also another object that is rescued in *Chernobyl Prayer*: the photograph.

Returning to Didi-Huberman, a theorist central to this paper, now with that lucid and exquisite text entitled *Écorces* (2011. *Bark* [2017]), what is interesting is to assemble the photographic image as a possibility of freedom—in the sense of creation—that underpins the pieces of the catastrophe. The photograph of the little bird landing on the other side of the barbed wire in Auschwitz while he is walking offers an escape from the horror: each punctum of his camera reverts the terribleness of the circumstances to the time showing what has lingered as a vestige.

From this perspective it is possible to examine the testimony of the lathe operator Viktor Latun, who was sent to Chernobyl and found himself lost in a desolate landscape, the same that Benítez depicted in 'Chernobyl +25' 27 years afterwards. This was the reason why he resorted to images because 'words were not enough ...' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 237). His 'Monologue on the need to add something to everyday life in order to understand it' combines reality with descriptions that seem to correlate more with a tale than anything else: atmospheres, characters and climax, everything, borrowing Agamben's idea, with '*un lenguaje oscuro y mutilado como lo es el del que está a punto de morir*'³² (2000, p. 37): the language of dread of the survivor. His creates on the basis of the photograph, but not any old one: he focuses the remnant on a testimony that is also visualised as his 'partial truth'.

It is necessary to resort yet again to Didi-Huberman to understand, in the most profound sense, the implications of bearing witness to a catastrophe through the vestige. This has been fragmented, its capacity to restore itself now fully lost, thus becoming a form of interpretation through its multiple fragments: 'we have, thanks to these images, a representation in spite of all, which, henceforth, imposes itself as the representation par excellence, the necessary

32 '[...] a dark and mutilated language like that of he who is about to die' [our translation].

representation of what was a moment in August 1944 in the crematorium V in Auschwitz' (2008, p. 38).

How to represent Chernobyl, the devastation, the incomprehensible accident—even more incomprehensible bearing in mind the lengths to which the Soviet authorities went to conceal it, their lack of transparency becoming another 'partial truth'—if not with the traces that have lingered, that miniscule imprint that still endures? As with the museum object, that dangerous jar of soil, the photograph becomes a sign that represents the vestige and deploys it as a 'montage of time' (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 30). It also becomes a question mark on a continuous past that has seized the present, both becoming overexposed as 'recollections of things to come' (Garro), without the former concluding so that the latter can elapse without being retained, and thus, in this hybrid space of time the Benjaminian auratic essence, that 'peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of distance [...] to *bring things close to themselves*' (Benjamin, 1931, p. 20), can settle on those artefacts. In short, the objects return to the spectator with a different halo, authentic and more artistic and, therefore, closer.

The photographs structure a short account of the catastrophe, as Chillón claimed with respect to the factitious element in testimony, the subject '*identifica y elige un puñado de motivos –acciones, fragmentos de habla, vivencias– entre los incontables que el acontecer genera. Y, acto seguido, los cose por medio de tramas –argumentativas y argumentales– que les confieren sentido: origen y fin, motivo y finalidad, contexto y transcurso*'³³ (2017, p. 96). Thus, it can unite that other time during the initial moments after the explosion, the arrival of the liquidators or the long lines of vehicles evacuating the city's inhabitants, forming an instantaneous hagiography of the horror, of what occurred at lighting speed without any explanation. Now it is the event as a laceration, as an accident contained in vestiges: 'the globe of the earth in a school yard, crushed by a tractor; blackened washing which had been hanging for several years on a balcony to dry [...]. Neglected mass graves from the war, the grass on them as

33 '[...] identifies and chooses a few motives–actions, fragments of speech, experiences—from among the countless that events generate. And, thereupon, it stitches them together with—argumentative and nuanced—plots that give them meaning: beginning and end, motive and purpose, context and thread' [our translation].

tall as the plaster soldiers, birds nesting on their plaster rifles. [...]. People had gone, leaving only their photographs living on in their homes, as if they were their souls' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 236).

Photographs based on remains: a globe, clothing, dolls, mass graves, statues stained with pigeon droppings—in turn, faecal remains on top of other vestiges. But, moreover, the onlooker who focuses on them takes note of others, the photographs abandoned by families, residual images on top of others that are constitutively already as such. In this way, photography serves a dual function in the desolate landscape of Chernobyl: the physical ruins, which can be felt in the photographer's tour of the area, 'Someone has left this place behind forever. What did that mean? We are the first people to have experienced that "forever"' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 236). In addition to the emotional ruins, that which is welded to the incomprehensible, 'thus clearing the ground before which all intimacies serve the illumination of detail' (Benjamin, 1931, p. 21): 'We are adepts of metaphysics. We live not on the ground but in the realm of dreams, of talk, of words' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 237).

To end with, a note on the specific contribution of this testimony among so many voices from Chernobyl. The authoress' intention to include it using photography opens up a broad visual, sensorial map, as if drawn with a brush, which is lost when it is solely based on words. The latter is not being underestimated, it only stresses that image produces those defining 'moments of truth' for Arendt and Didi-Huberman, more graphic and, therefore more powerful and closer. As with the account of the photographer himself based on his traumatic experience: 'That's my story. Now I have told it. Why did I take up photography? Because words were not enough ... ' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 237).

5. 'A lone human voice'³⁴. Conclusions

The image of the desolate amphitheatre in Pripjat, with the piano in the foreground, a photograph belonging to Benítez's series on Chernobyl, contains part of the essence of this paper: the vestige as a possible language in the aftermath of a catastrophe, which 'resists, survives the destruction' (Didi-

³⁴ The title of the final section of *Chernobyl Prayer*.

Huberman, 2008). The other central part lies in the fictional testimony that Alexievich constructs in her book, a powerful choir of mediated voices that she threads between the real event and the literary work. The critical approach to this testimonial format could be included in a broader, transdisciplinary discussion of this textual form as a vehicle for revitalising the contemporary registers of memory, its fractures and its cries, the trauma that the victim converts into an account and that, only from there, can he reminisce and expect some kind of explanation, and the literary forms of outlining a tragedy.

The testimony on a devastating event, with the intention of fleshing it out with interwoven fictional elements, is a complex task. The trauma imposes images welded to the incompleteness of meaning, the partiality of the witness and the vestige and also to what is used to rework reality, sometimes encountering tones approaching the fictional, with the aim of multiplying possible meanings of the event. Accordingly, *Chernobyl Prayer* becomes a hybrid between testimony and fiction, a web of fragments of what occurred and of the novelised by recollection and by the person who notes in down, i.e. Alexievich. By understanding this mixture and the richness that it produces, readers will be able to approach the memory of Chernobyl, a black hole in the discourses of silence on catastrophic events caused by the recklessness of man.

Understanding, as with Geertz, that 'the theoretical framework in terms of which such an interpretation is made must be capable of continuing to yield defensible interpretations as new social phenomena swim into view' (1973, 26-27), the aim of this paper has been to offer a reading that, based on a theoretical corpus in dialogue with a mainly socio-critical analysis, dwells on the essence of the vestige, first through the word that has endured *in spite of all*, which, therefore, is also residual, constructing a story combining real experience and the imaginary; and, following this, with two elements that establish the permanence of the vestige, its persistent constancy: the museum and the photograph.

The testimony on the Chernobyl National Museum is worth mentioning in these conclusions because its creation seemed to reflect 'the globalization of memory' (2000, p. 24) about which Huyssen wrote. The museum director's testimony evinces the resignifying of the traditional function of the museum—he calls it 'my real pet project' (Alexievich, 2016, p. 172)—as a great archive

of invaluable objects, to introduce risk and a hyperbolized and banal exhibit, with which he makes the work lose 'its ability to guarantee cultural stability over time' (Huysen, 2000, p. 34).

To sum up, testimony through photography involves the possibility of becoming familiar with the nuclear disaster by employing another language akin to the literary kind, above all through the fixity that the image provides. For Didi-Huberman, this is a sort of ultimate document, for it 'works hand in glove with image and memory and therefore possesses their notable *epidemic power*' (2008, p. 23).

'I haven't told you everything [...]. There are secrets [...] People say their prayers in private. To themselves' (2016, p. 292), a witness tells Alexievich. The authoress' proposal weaves real experiences with fiction, which is formulated as a 'partial truth' and also that which has been silenced, which she achieves with voices combined in *parodos* or choirs, the ellipses interrupting the sentences, the images of a photographer, now a rapporteur, and the radioactive objects precisely organized in the showcases which Sobolev describes. Everything comes together like a vast page of chronicles for reading the *future*, namely from the present, anticipating the repetition of catastrophes and accidents similar to those of Chernobyl and Hiroshima. Thus, there is no greater certainty than these 'recollections of things to come' (Garro) in book form, which have already occurred but continue to predict the uncertainty of the future.

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