Chernobyl Gothic: From Horror to Terror and Disaster to Aftermath

> The greediness with which the tales of ghosts and goblins, or murders, earthquakes, fires, shipwrecks, and all the most terrible disasters attending human life, are devoured by every ear, must have been generally remarked – Anna Laetitia Aiken, 'On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror'.

A crucial feature of Gothic literature, from the emergence of Gothic romances in the late-eighteen century to today's Contemporary Gothic writing, is the pull on readers exerted by its literary terror and horror. In the Gothic, literary depictions of wild landscapes and the supernatural or divine-like power of nature play out for emotional effect the fragile, temporary, and ultimately insignificant nature of humanity. The experiencing of emotion, and of conflicting emotions in particular, is central in the act of reading Gothic literature. Laetitia Aiken explores this contradiction, musing in her essay 'On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror' (1773) on 'the apparent delight with which we dwell upon objects of pure terror, where our moral feelings are not in the least concerned, and no passion seems to be excited but the depressing one of fear, is a paradox of the heart'.[1] In other words, why would we be so fascinated by scenes in books filled with such violence as murder or shipwreck? Why would we take pleasure in disasters where people become victims, while disregarding our capacity for sympathy?

Edgar Allan Poe's short story of 1841, 'A Descent into the Maelstrom', details the recollection by an old man of his lucky escape from a ship that sank into a giant whirlpool off the coast of Norway during a storm. He narrates his story to a companion during a hike, shortly after the pair arrives at the cliff overlooking the body of water in which the boat sank,

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[1] Anna Laetitia Aiken, 'On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror', (1773), in *Gothic Documents, A Sourcebook, 1700-1820*, ed. by E.J Clery and Robert Miles (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.127-128.

describing the paradoxical emotions of fear and excitement he felt onboard during the unnaturally severe weather event:

> "Never shall I forget the sensations of awe, horror, and admiration with which I gazed about me. The boat appeared to be hanging, as if by magic, midway down, upon the interior surface of a funnel, vast in circumference, prestigious in depth, and whose perfectly smooth sides might have been mistaken for ebony [...]."[2]

On the one hand, the narrator is horrified and "confused" at the spectacle, but on the other, he gains a sense of wonder and curiosity upon witnessing the likely cause of his death. He recalls: "'After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a *wish* to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; [...].'" (Poe, p.110)

If one wishes to understand the legacy of fear produced by the literary Gothic, which is apparent in many Gothic renditions of natural and man-made disasters, it is necessary to explore the paradox of fear and excitement therein. In British literary criticism of the eighteenth-century explosion of Gothic romances in the United Kingdom, these two opposites of fear and excitement were termed horror and terror respectively. The British literary Gothic concept of horror emerged partly from the German literary Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement, which produced such works as Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller's tragic drama *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*) of 1792, and the novel *The Necromancer, or The Tale of the Black Forest* (1794), by Lawrence Flammenberg. However, reviewers and writers of British Gothic fiction around this time also located the origins of literary horror in Shakespearean drama, specifically in act I scene V of *Hamlet* (1603) in which the Prince

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[2] Edgar Allan Poe, 'A Descent into the Maelstrom', in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1935), p.112

confronts and converses with the ghost of his father, Old Hamlet. As English Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe writes in 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', published posthumously in 1826 as a prologue to her final novel, *Gaston de Blondeville* (1826):

> "Above every ideal being is the ghost of Hamlet, with all its attendant incidents if time and place. The dark watch upon the remote platform, the dreary aspect of the night, the every expression of the office on guard, "the air bites shrewdly; it is very cold;" the recollection of a star, an unknown world, are all circumstances which excite forlorn, melancholy, and solemn feelings, and dispose us to welcome, with trembling curiosity, the awful being that draws near; and to indulge in that strange mixture of horror, pity, and indignation, produced by the tale it reveals."[3]

These claims are Radcliffe's, but as part of the framing narrative of her novel they are spoken by one fictional gentleman to another, as the pair ride to Kenilworth on horseback. Reading from the scene in *Hamlet* referred to above, one can see in the play the emotions of melancholy, awe, and sorrow, facilitated by the gloomy landscape and weather, which are constituent of Gothic horror. On the famous scene upon the battlements of the castle Elsinore, the ghost says to Prince Hamlet:

> I am thy father's spirit,
>
> Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
>
> And for the day confined to fast in fires,
>
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
>
> Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
>
> To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
>
> I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
>
> Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

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[3] Ann Radcliffe, 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', (1826), in *Gothic Documents, A Sourcebook, 1700-1820*, p.166

Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,

Thy knotted and combined locks to part

And each particular hair to stand on end,

Like quills upon the fretful porpentine:

But this eternal blazon must not be

To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, O, list![4]

Gothic horror roots the sufferer to the spot in abject fear. As the Ghost's speech in *Hamlet* demonstrates, horror entails a freezing, chilling, and crushing of the spirit in a direct confrontation with the object of fear. David Punter contends that horror in the Gothic mode is allusive to trauma, both personal and social. Radcliffe, in her 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', makes the distinction between horror and terror clear where she writes:

> "Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakspeare [sic] nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke [in his 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*] by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?" (Radcliffe, p.168)

Horror, then, is conceived of as a negative force in Gothic fiction. In his treatise, Edmund Burke states that 'the ocean is an object of no small terror. Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime'.[5] He then explores the etymological relations in Greek, Latin, and French between these ideas of terror

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[4] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited with a commentary by T.J.B. Spencer (London: Penguin Shakespeare, 2005) Act I Scene V, Lines 9-22

[5] Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, (1757), in *Gothic Documents, A Sourcebook, 1700-1820*, p.114

and the sublime: these languages, he writes, 'frequently use the same word, to signify indifferently the modes of astonishment or admiration and those of terror' (Burke, p.114).

The critical legacy of horror and terror in Gothic fiction reverberates through the romances of the 1790s, evolving into an aesthetic style and literary mode through which (among other aims) the mass upheavals and traumas of the Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-First centuries can be articulated. The hubris and failure of technological invention is a common theme among the Gothic fictions of these three centuries, though each differs in how the uptake or recycling of the Gothic occurs, in ways which are beyond the scope of this article. Generally, however, Gothic's take on modernity is that it sees humanity's experiments and adventures with technology ruined by nature, or crushed under the weight of their own grandeur. One can see the interplay of horror and terror in Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelstrom', as the narrator recalls at once the domination of the scene over his faculties, being as he was '"much too flurried to think,"' (Poe, p.108) while '"involuntarily clos[ing] my eyes in horror [...] as if in a spasm"' (Poe, p.110), and the admiration and curiosity of the whirlpool. Where horror in Gothic renditions of disasters conveys a sense of mental and sensory shutdown in the face of overwhelming trauma, terror suggests a thrilling attempt to confront and understand the overwhelming force of nature. In the second half of my article, I will show how this dichotomy of the Gothic helps to narrativize literary responses to the 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, the worst of its kind. The shift from overwhelming trauma in eyewitness accounts of first-hand survivors of the event, to second-hand reconstructions of the disaster in Gothic and Sci-fi fiction mirrors a shift from horror to terror, providing an opening of communication and exploration of experience in the face of psychological and political repression.

Though certainly not in a Gothic mode or for entertainment, many actual survivor testimonies of the Chernobyl disaster convey the sense of traumatic horror capitalised on by

Gothic literature, replete with its psychological and somatic responses. The Gothic reflects contemporary psychological and social trauma; the following testimonies constitute the origin upon which later fiction is based or inspired. Yevgeniy Brovkin, an instructor at Gomel State University, in Belarus, who was interviewed by Svetlana Alexievich for her compilation of Chernobyl survivor testimony *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (2006), recalls: 'we don't know how to capture any meaning from it [the disaster]. We're not capable of it. We can't place it in our human experience or our human time frame'.[6] He also says that 'In the first days after the accident, all the books at the library about radiation, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even about X-rays, disappeared. Some people said it was an order from above, so that people wouldn't panic' (Brovkin, p.85). This psychological and political silencing of the event precludes its understanding and dwarfs the onlooker with a vast, yet abstract force: '"in several generations," "forever," nothing."'[7] The individual is displaced by this overwhelming scene, forced to identify instead with bizarre or seemingly trivial details. This demonstrates the process of psychological trauma, whereby the sufferer cannot recall the root cause but is haunted by its symptoms: personal, half-buried, broken, and imaginary symbols of the violent event.

Horror's power to fixate one on certain threatening images comes to the fore in Chernobyl survivor testimony, as the following accounts show. In light of 'definitions [that] were too abstract for us to understand [...] there were rumours: three-headed birds, chickens pecking foxes to death, bald hedgehogs' (Gurin, p.111). A Soviet soldier, one of many sent to the irradiated, evacuated Zone of Alienation after the disaster to help "deactivate" it of its radiation, recalls:

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[6] Yevgeni Brovkin, 'Monologue About a Moonlit Landscape', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, (New York: Picador, 2006), p.86
[7] Sergei Gurin, 'Monologue About War Movies', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.111

> I've forgotten everything. I only remember that I went there, and after that I don't remember anything. I forgot all of it. I can't count money. My memory's not right. The doctors can't understand it. I go from hospital to hospital. But this sticks in my head: you're walking up to the house, thinking the house is empty, and you open the door and there's this cat. That, and those kid's notes ["Don't kill our Zhulka. She's a good cat."[8]][9]

The aftermath of the disaster induces in eyewitnesses a fixation upon direct confrontations with horror. The site of this confrontation is either in the imagination, perhaps in the form of rumours, or in memory, as the above soldier's testimony demonstrates. Such encounters echo the pattern of characters' or readers' psychological reactions to literary horror in Gothic fiction. Both social and literary trauma entails a witnessing of horror: monstrosity, disgust, and scenes of violence or pity, with debilitating mental consequences.

However, in Gothic fiction and survivor testimony alike, this horror frequently mingles with terror in a complex interaction of emotion. Survivors were permitted to think and explore the catastrophe's philosophical dimensions by the quieter moments of its aftermath. One survivor, a mother of a child born after the disaster with congenital defects, recalls:

> [...] I give pregnant women the strangest looks. I don't look at them, I kind of glance at them real quick. I have all these mixed feelings: surprise and horror, jealousy and joy even this feeling of vengeance. One time I caught myself thinking that I look the same way at the neighbours' pregnant dog–at the bird in its nest...[10]

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[8] Although there was an evacuation of the human population of the region surrounding the Chernobyl Power Plant after the disaster, people were not allowed to take their pets with them, as their fur had absorbed too much radiation, and so they had to be left behind. The "liquidators" who were sent in after the evacuation were ordered to destroy these animals as part of the radiation cleanup.

[9] 'Soldiers' Chorus', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.37

[10] Larisa Z. 'Monologue About Old Prophecies', in Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, p.84

In the above testimony, the paradox of negative and positive emotion arises in the mother's encounter with pregnant women, a response which acts for this particular survivor as a painful reminder of her own trauma: giving birth to a child with multiple aplasias. However, the scene also functions as an imaginative, philosophical consideration of the nuclear disaster's effects: how will the radiation affect the development of the offspring of other animals?

Many testimonies of Chernobyl survivors grapple with the impact of radiation on the surrounding landscape in a manner that renders it arguably as sublime. The sublime, as Burke argues, is that which 'is fitted in any sort to excite ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime' (Burke, p.113). In addition, following Burke's treatise, the sublime resides in obscurity, which is to say that

> When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds [...]. (Burke, p114)

It is the suggestion of danger and evil creatures, aided by the obscurity of night, which characterises terror and the sublime, and renders them different to horror. Suggestions of obscurity, danger, and the sublime are raised in the imaginative depictions of the post-disaster Chernobyl landscape by those involved in the emergency response. Brovkin says:

> I remember coming back [to the Zone of Alienation] one time from a business trip. There was a moonlit landscape. On both sides of the road, to the very horizon, stretched these fields covered in white dolomite. The poisoned topsoil had been

removed and buried, and in its place they brought white dolomite sand. It was like not-earth. This vision tortured me for a long time and I tried to write a story. I imagined what would be here in a hundred years [...]. (Brovkin, p.85)

This depiction of a strange, ominous Chernobyl landscape, which dominates by stretching to the horizon, elicits for Brovkin a form of psychological trauma. The sublime is not merely generated by the presentation of terror in obscurity; it also acts further in this mysteriousness as a moment in which weighty philosophical concerns are exercised, often through fiction or the events of a prior history. One soldier involved in the deactivation recalls:

The other day I found a volume of Pushkin. "And the thought of death is sweet to my soul." I remembered that. Yes: "The thought of death." I am here alone. I think about death. I've come to like thinking [...] Man lives with death, but he doesn't understand what it is. (Soldiers' Chorus, pp.65-66)

Reading or writing fiction, then, can serve as a way of forming a personal understanding of the disaster and its wider implications, and of gaining reflective distance from trauma through which to philosophise. The recent array of Chernobyl documents and fictions, many of which mark an anniversary of the disaster's initial occurrence, further these methods and export them to a global audience. My article will conclude by exploring the contributions of a number of these texts in this regard.

The below two images are photographs taken by Urban Explorers – people who venture into cordoned-off and often dangerous sites of former human habitation – of the Zone of Alienation surrounding the Chernobyl power station. Pripyat, the town built to house the Chernobyl workers and their families, was once a showpiece of Soviet Communist living and a thriving community, complete with school, swimming pool, and fairground.

Figure 1

Figure 2

These first and second photographs, taken in 2012 and 2009 respectively, reveal the effects of time upon sites devoid of human habitation. The first depicts a vista over Pripyat, and the second a floor of gasmasks, as far as the eye can see. However, the viewer is not compelled to feel overwhelming effects of terror at these expanses. Rather, the photographs encourage a 'soft' introspection, a diversion from the harsh, immediate realities of the initial explosion and resulting human chaos. Like the testimony of the Chernobyl survivor observing pregnant people and animals, the affecting scenes represented by the photographs function as a point from which personal, philosophical, or imaginative thoughts may be elicited. What human events and dramas occurred in these spaces before the disaster? In what biological and psychological forms does life continue in its aftermath? In some of the photographs taken by Urban Explorers, such as the one reproduced below, the inclusion of pleasant trees – historically termed Picturesque and used in Eighteenth-century painting as a way to soften the imposition of ruins upon the human eye – helps to facilitate these quiet and introspective musings.

A second form of media, which is interactive, furthers this sense of Chernobyl exploration via sublime, picturesque, and philosophical experiences, and which is filled with conflicting horror and terror: video games.

A number of video games, including the popular *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) are set, or partially set, in Chernobyl. The most striking of these are the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* series of games, produced between 2007 and 2010. The name derives from the term Stalker, coined by Russian authors Arkady and Boris Strugatsky in their Soviet Science Fiction novel, *Roadside Picnic* (1972, trans. 1977). It depicts the aftermath of an unwitnessed yet supposed alien visitation necessitates a Zone of Isolation, much like the one erected around the irradiated Chernobyl region fourteen years after the novel's Russian publication. The aliens have left behind objects of incomprehensible power in the Zone, either intentionally or by accident. Artefact hunters, called Stalkers, venture into the mysterious and dangerous Zone in order to retrieve these highly-prized relics to sell them on the black market.

The language and narrative of this key Soviet Science Fiction text, as well as its theme of the commodification of a vast, unknown power, has strongly influenced the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* games. In the first title in the series, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*: *Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007), similar technological artefacts of unknown origin appear in the Chernobyl Zone of Alienation for the player to collect and use, providing a Science Fiction take on the nuclear disaster's aftermath. This literary impression, designed deliberately to distance the game from the historical occurrence of the Chernobyl crisis, is coupled with the temporal distance of the title's setting; *Shadow of Chernobyl* is set in an alternative 2006, in which a second explosion at Chernobyl has resulted in the emergence of cryptic forces and artefacts across the Zone that must be investigated.

In its construction of an interactive, post-disaster Chernobyl partially inspired by the content of Urban Explorers' photographs, the game feeds its players both experiences of terror and horror in a Gothic mode. On the one hand, it provides ominous, virtual landscapes that lie in the obscurity of rain, fog or shade, and on the other, imaginative, direct confrontations with its dangerous inhabitants, among which include bandits, mutants, and packs of wild dogs.

Figure 4

Figure 5

I am currently furthering my research into the relationship between the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*

games, the influences of Soviet Science Fiction and the Gothic, and the concept of a global,

virtual memory of the Chernobyl disaster.

While it might at first seem disrespectful to the victims of this tragedy to interpret their suffering through the lens of tourism, fiction and what functions in at least some capacity as entertainment, these texts further the diversion initiated by survivors' thoughts and feelings from severe, sustained trauma and horrific silence towards a framing of the disaster using Nineteenth and Twentieth-century Russian and Ukrainian literature, and their own imaginations, jokes, and games. My continuing research aims to explore the interfacing between survivors' memories of the event and their global, literary and technological interpretation or reconstruction by following generations.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Michael Kötter, *Autumn in Pripyat, October 2012* (2012), 'Chernobyl Exclusion Zone: Adrenaline & Radiation Urbex, A Good Day to Die Hard?', *Love These Pics*, (http://www.lovethesepics.com/2013/03/chernobyl-exclusion-zone-adrenaline-radiation-urbex-a-good-day-to-die-hard/), accessed 25.5.2016

Figure 2: Tim Seuss, *Iconic Gasmask Floor in the Chernobyl Zone of Exclusion* (2012), 'Chernobyl Exclusion Zone: Adrenaline & Radiation Urbex, A Good Day to Die Hard?', *Love These Pics*, (http://www.lovethesepics.com/2013/03/chernobyl-exclusion-zone-adrenaline-radiation-urbex-a-good-day-to-die-hard/), accessed 25.5.2016

Figure 3: Matt Shalvatis, *View from the Hotel Polissya, April 2012* (2012), 'Chernobyl Exclusion Zone: Adrenaline & Radiation Urbex, A Good Day to Die Hard?', *Love These Pics*, (http://www.lovethesepics.com/2013/03/chernobyl-exclusion-zone-adrenaline-radiation-urbex-a-good-day-to-die-hard/), accessed 25.5.2016

Figure 4: GSC Gameworld, Untitled Screenshot from *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl* (n.d), *ngohq.com*, (http://www.ngohq.com/attachments/screenshots/1615d1231124354-s-t-a-l-k-e-r-shadow-of-chernobyl-screenshots-s.t.a.l.k.e.r.-shadow-of-chernobyl-screenshot-4.jpg), accessed 26.5.2016

Figure 5: GSC Gameworld, Untitled Screenshot from *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl* (n.d), ovagames.com, (https://3.bp.blogspot.com/-suXqcH8Jf_8/Vxcon6QnQgI/AAAAAAAASqA/TYnBjlb-CT4eJxmxWPmXeS-Czu2vMY8cgCLcB/s1600/stalker-shadow-of-chernobyl-pc-screenshot-www.ovagames.com-2.jpg), accessed 26.5.2016

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