
Requiems:
Liudmila Petrushevskaja's World of Death

TATYANA NOVIKOV
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-OMAHA

It is a truism that death is a constant certainty of human existence. In the 20th century, “the age of atrocity” (Langer) marked with revolutions, wars, totalitarian regimes, political violence, and terrorism, it has taken center stage in the human mind. Certainly, the chaos of modern history with its sudden, violent, irrational extinction of people in astounding numbers has become part of the personal and historical consciousness of this “century of death” (Eliot 10). Pondering the importance of death as a cultural construct, Gil Elliot recognizes how “the manner in which people die reflects more than any other fact the values of a society” (qtd. in Friedman 5). In a similar spirit, Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf argue that “life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed” (2). Alan Friedman cogently concludes that “cultures reveal themselves in how they react to death: how they ritualize it, tell its story, heal themselves” (5). Literature generated by various cultures often blatantly reflects the human condition, providing important insights into symbolic and fictive truths. It is logical that detectable differences, arising from varied approaches to probing contemporary imagination as it confronts evolving meanings of death can be observed in the use of death as an interpretive strategy in fictions produced by different generations of writers.

Traditionally used as the narrative climax or closure, death scenes featured prominently in mainstream Soviet narratives concerned with war and revolution. Such works made dying a heroic affair, often treating death with pathos and admiration, portraying characters dying with dignity, courage and determination. Emphasizing their personal fortitude in the face of death, Soviet fiction produced a mythologized romantic hero who knew how to die, an idealized martyr to serve as a measure of oneself.¹ The Soviet fictional death thus acquired aesthetic and spiritual significance, culminating life conceived as a sacrifice for an ideal.

As might be expected, with a lack of adequate ideological support for a heroic posture in the face of death, post-Communist Russian literature is faced with a sudden demise of old attitudes to mortal closure. Negating old conventions about

dying as heroic transcendence, the recent Russian fiction transforms Soviet “noble and beautiful death” into modern “meaningless and sordid death,” abandoning the old myths to a new, forlorn vision of death. Death is represented as central in fictional texts by Vladimir Makanin, Viktor Astaf’ev, Iurii Mamleev, Chingiz Aitmatov, Valeria Narbikova, Nina Sadur, Liudmila Petrushevskaja, and other contemporary writers, whose works offer a depressing and uncompromising picture of life, reflecting a time of intensifying crisis in post-Communist Russia. The destruction of the Soviet society created widespread disorientation, the collapse of values, the impoverishment of life, and emptiness, while the loss of obsolete myths resulted in spiritual restlessness. In an environment suddenly depleted of meaning, human life came to be perceived as tenuous, hollowed out, so the individual is left wondering how to survive. The Russian fiction of the past decade significantly dramatizes this human dilemma in the midst of a disintegrating world. This new reality, an uncertain future beyond one’s power to control, precludes the discovery of meaning in chaos, creating the feeling of universal doom and an apocalyptic outlook shared by these works. Saturated by images of death, this fiction associates the demise of its characters with the national decay and the catastrophes that history has and continues to impose on the Russian nation.

Various authors take different approaches to using death as an interpretive tool. Astaf’ev in *The Sad Detective* and Makanin in *Escape Hatch* portray a nightmarish universe filled with violence and death, an apocalyptic picture of times that are out of joint. Astaf’ev’s catalog of gruesome deaths includes the hit-and-run of a woman with a child by a drunken car thief, a random murder of a pregnant woman, and many deaths of innocent children abandoned by their parents. Murders of defenseless people are scattered throughout Makanin’s novel. His powerful image of a mob trampling people to death becomes an allegory of tyranny, violence, and a hostile world ruled by force, as the embodiment of a destructive power. Death imagery is everywhere as a reminder of the approaching doomsday. The visions of Astaf’ev and Makanin are of complete degradation, confusion, and universal misery.

Documenting a complete disintegration of Russian society, Aitmatov’s *The Execution Block* uses the trope of death as an indication of humanity’s spiritual disorientation and an exclusive concentration of evil. The novel’s main character is crucified by a band of outcasts. A father accidentally kills his son and then murders a co-worker. These tragic events occur against the backdrop of the natural world, senselessly destroyed by unthinking and indifferent people. Aitmatov creates a panorama of a sick world in need of moral regeneration.

In many cases, variations in using the death motif appear to be gender-related. In Mamleev's story "An Individualist's Notebook," a male protagonist fantasizes about the death of his wife helping him to cope with his own fear of dying. The death of a woman here brings about spiritual cleansing and female martyrdom signals a healing process.

In contrast, female-authored works often transform women from powerless victims into powerful subjects, a change that is inevitably associated with violence. Frequently directed at males, violence and murder are depicted as a requirement for personal redemption and as justified as an imperative of survival. Sadur's play "The Red Paradise" and her cycle of stories "The Discerning" celebrate female violence as the source of freedom. Narbikova's *The Equilibrium of Diurnal and Nocturnal Stars* also features numerous graphic mutilations and murders of men by female avengers. Interestingly, both authors use magic and the supernatural as vehicles of female aggression and imagine a powerful female world outside of patriarchal constraint. The humiliation that contemporary Russian authors impose of their fictional dying characters excludes the option of tragic defiance and dignity in death.

Focusing on the imaginative strategies of representing mortal closure in the fiction of L. Petrushevskaiia, we can elucidate the author's philosophy on the death theme as expressed in her collection of stories, *Requiems*. While critics agree that "the issue of death occupies center stage" (Peterson 161) in Petrushevskaiia's storytelling, the aptly titled *Requiems* undertakes the most detailed and successful exploration of this theme and can be viewed as a primer for understanding the new image of death as part of existence in an age of cataclysms. Her volume exposes the readers to this new face of death: arbitrary, absurd, violent, random, unjustified, and unavoidably part of the somber, dismal, and irrational reality which the Russians face. This should not surprise us, however, if we remember that Petrushevskaiia inherited as her "material" the devastation brought about by decades of brutal tyranny and violence, the collapse of a political regime characterized by utopian vision, as well as a life that has become profoundly confused and void of significance. As exemplified throughout *Requiems*, such a heritage has shattered the sense of continuity of life, making a sudden, ugly, absurd, and irrational end a part of collective destiny. As Nadya Peterson notes, "one of the basic motives ruling the behavior of Petrushevskaiia's characters is a fear of complete annihilation, with personal death foreshadowing the death of the family and, eventually, leading to the disappearance of an entire genetic line" (159). In the process, the concept of the rightness and necessity of death's part in the cycle of life has been invalidated. Petrushevskaiia's catalog of horror that is part of life in this "spiri-

tual wilderness” dismisses the possibility of a momentous dignified death, making this new death the protagonist of her human dramas.

Indeed, the reader finds little comfort in her accounts of numerous deaths that destroy both “heroic” and “normal” dying as the criterion of human experience. The author subverts established patterns of representation of death by Russian canonical works, such as Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Tolstoy’s narrative tells of the discovery of life in the face of death. As a result of his approaching death, Ivan Ilyich realizes the true meaning of life, which is, for Tolstoy, pity and love for others. This is the hero’s illumination and rebirth to life so that, just a few hours before his death, Ivan Ilyich begins to live. He conquers death by learning the lesson of love and there is no more pain or fear of death. In Solzhenitsyn’s world of labor camps, death is the inmates’ daily enemy. In the world that gives them a number instead of a name and is indifferent to their fate, all prisoners reflect the condition of “dying alive.” For Shukhov, the main protagonist, the camp means a direct confrontation with death and a constant effort to survive, to defeat the menace of an ugly, degrading death. Shukhov’s daily triumphs over death give him a sense of superiority over his horrible environment. He conquers death and protects his dignity by fighting the ruthless system on his own terms.

Petrushevskaiia’s works present few opportunities for idealizing the image of human beings. While discussing Albert Camus’ philosophy of death spelled out in his pre-war works, Lawrence Langer insightfully notes: “In an absurd world that blurs and often obliterates the hierarchy of spiritual values which normally guides men through the labyrinth of experience, the individual must return to a point of moral zero . . . before beginning the laborious reascent to a world of values” (129). Regarding Russia, one would agree that the cataclysms which destiny has thrust upon its people have degraded and belittled the image of humanity. Individual life has been devalued, human sensitivity benumbed, and the bonds of sentiment destroyed. In Petrushevskaiia’s mournful vision, such decay of the human image results from living in the midst of destruction, violence, and death, where the fear of catastrophe becomes a permanent condition of existence. One of the chief legacies of such intimate familiarity with death and calamities is suppression of pity and grief in the living and their cynical unconcern about other people dying. As we shall see, some of Petrushevskaiia’s characters even appear relieved at being freed from the particular attitude of respect for human life that characterizes civilized society.

As might be expected, indifference to human suffering and disrespect for human dignity forces one to return to a primitive, barbarian state. To quote Jules

Romains, "It has taken civilization centuries of patient fumbling to teach men that life, their own and that of others, is something sacred. It's been so much work thrown away" (qtd. in Bonadeo 123). Known for her "stark portrayal of life's underbelly" (Goscilo 2), Petrushevskaja also recognizes that in a world where human values are disintegrating, life is a relentless struggle, such that armor becomes indispensable, the norms of civilized behavior are suspended, and the savage emerges with his unleashed instincts. In the death-filled world of Petrushevskaja's *Requiems*, the individual person is less than nothing and can be hurt and abused with ease. Mikhailov observes, and I think justifiably, that some of her scenes frighten the reader much more than the descriptions of Stalin's labor camps (Mikhailov 96). This world belongs to the strong and ruthless; to endure, people must adapt, losing all human feeling, integrity, and moral self-respect. Calling into question official morality, Petrushevskaja reveals the cruel nature of modern society by writing about betrayal, violence (including female violence), cynicism, deception, disintegration of the traditional family, and fighting for belongings—all recognized by her characters as part of living. Tragically, her fictional world reveals the destruction of humanity's very essence and that is why "the apocalyptic element in much of her work is more chilling than the straightforward political and economic forebodings that are voiced by some" (Porter 63).

Death shows many faces in *Requiems*, employing the following vehicles: disease, murder, suicide, accident, death agonies as a result of an illness, and funerals. Too numerous to detail and ritualize in her texts, Petrushevskaja's fictional deaths often occur obliquely and are all the more shocking. Most of the victims die violently and prematurely (some of them not even twenty). Moreover, death is not merely a force that assaults her characters from the outside; it is often in them. From the first story in the volume, they are shown as stamped with the mark of death and longing for it.

Suicide is pervasive throughout *Requiems*. Central to many stories is a question whose dark outline is visible through their surface layer: whether it is better to live or die. As mentioned, Petrushevskaja's protagonists decide that question, coming down on the side of death. This is made explicit in the story "Yoko Ono," which begins with the description of the suicide of a seventeen-year old alcoholic mother. The importance given to this death by its privileged position in the book's opening pages is meaningful: this early prominence suggests that it is a key to the understanding of the book with its obsessive concentration on the act of dying. The narrative features two teenage sisters who, bereft of parental supervision, live with a thoughtless passion, lacking aim in life. The deadliest danger is clearly alcohol, and their mother's infrequent presence (in between her business trips) is

powerless to ward off the threat posed by drinking and dissolute style. Ira gets pregnant, gives birth at sixteen and is then joined by her child's father, a morally degenerate alcoholic whose arrival is a disaster leading to a complete disintegration of the family. Shocking indifference to moral values drives Ira's husband to an adulterous affair with her sister. After Zoria becomes pregnant, he "immediately left and returned to Moscow, hurt to the bottom of his soul (go to hell, all of you). Left forever, this husband of two, this father of two" (Petrushevskaja 14).² Zoria gives birth and abandons a baby whose multiple birth defects reveal the deadly consequences of alcoholism and degradation. In the morbid world of "Yoko Ono," it is not surprising that death holds a certain fascination for intoxicated and desperate Ira. In her final drunken delirium, Ira resorts to suicide; death is for her the solution to the problem of living.

Living under the shadow of death from the beginning, her young daughter is under the same curse as her relatives. Her grandmother Katia assumes the role of her protector but also dies, leaving the child once more alone. Like many of Petrushevskaja's characters, Katia is denied dignified passage from life to death. The author depicts not "beautiful death" with its heroic orientation but material mortality in Katia, who died "a strange death from some flu, in the course of several hours, in front of her granddaughter" (15). With her life structured by deaths of family members, the little orphan (who resembles Yoko Ono) is an embarrassment: physically frail, timid, passive, lethargic, and completely helpless despite her fifteen years. The stamp of death placed on her by her heredity threatens to make her another victim.

Perhaps nowhere in *Requiems* is the theme of death so prominent as in the story "Bacillus." Nicknamed Bacillus, its young heroine is marked for death from her first appearance: "Bacillus was on the needle, smoked, drank anything she found at other people's places—entire medicine cabinets, mixing everything; pills and tincture, shampoos and tooth pastes, concocted herb drinks—working for self-destruction. But this [death] would not come on its own as it had to many others in the System" (57). Making drug addiction the central issue here, Petrushevskaja creates a threatening universe, an environment that does not simply evoke death but is in fact death itself. Its presence is continual and pervasive: "during the past months, many of them were buried by their parents. Screw disappeared, simply left and that was it. A year later his mother called a few people, inviting them to come and observe the anniversary of his death. She probably found and buried him" (57). These young drug users have become less than human. With a sense of doom about their lives, they are "completely immoral in this immoral society, perfectly liberated, free of any values, allowing continuous, on-going suicides and

killings" (59). Murders as well as numerous gusts of cruelty, perversions, and violence reveal the ruinous effects of drugs. Illustrative is the macabre episode where a father took his baby out to the balcony "as a wager with himself," held him in outstretched arms and dropped him, since his arms were shaking. The constant presence of death (by suicide or overdose) generates a cynical disregard for life, a widespread and unsettling contempt that drives Petrushevskaja's characters to act like predatory beasts, lapsing lower than savage, into the mere brute. In another horrible episode, a man "from the world where they kill immediately with whatever is at hand, a man from the normal world" (63), sets five persons on fire when they are spending the night in a vacant cabin. The clinical precision of Petrushevskaja's description of the arson is designed to spare no feelings: the naked reality of atrocity and death dominates the scene.

In the prime of her youth, Bacillus represents a kind of death in life. Her erratic behavior exhausts the springs of compassion in the people of the System, who are also completely emptied. Bacillus is denied "friendly communication, a family circle, quiet and death among her own" (61). Never is death so triumphant as when its victims actively seek it. The heroine's death wish, shaped by her rejection by the System, grows out of agony in life. Her suicide seems logical and inevitable as she "stepped out of some window in someone's entryway and died of grief, hitting the pavement" (64). The story depicts the process of self-destruction in those who live in the orbit of death, accepting suicide as the only human response to an unendurable life.

Petrushevskaja returns to the theme of suicide in "The Lady with Dogs," an obvious allusion to Chekhov's "The Lady with a Lap Dog," a lyrical tale of romantic love. Because the lives of Chekhov's heroes are hopelessly complicated, this love is not sufficient to make the story optimistic, but it prevents it from seeming quite tragic. A parody of this story's idealism, Petrushevskaja's variation of Chekhov's theme is more tragic and grotesque. Her story shows the destruction of love by banality, vulgarity, and betrayal and demonstrates how the pain of individual consciousness resolves into the soul's homesickness for death. Announcing death with all possible calm from the start, the story reshapes the lives culminated by death, so that it seems predetermined: "She is already dead, and he is already dead. Their grotesque romance is over and what's curious—it was over long before their deaths" (91). The lady with dogs falls into complete collapse after her husband divorces her. The condition which nearly all Petrushevskaja's characters share is loneliness. The loneliness of the lady with dogs is desperate and seemingly hopeless: "So she walked on, living people virtually dashing aside from her, so

much did she herself resemble a tattered and torn animal" (92). Rejected by everyone, she seems more dead than alive.

Petrushevskaiia's heroine repudiates life and welcomes death as liberation from the terrorizing experience of abandonment and total isolation. At her lowest ebb, she contemplates suicide. Yet, assailed by a death wish, the lady with dogs reaches out to other people. This is a cry for help: "she called two or three women, married and busy, late at night, to say that she was about to hang herself and the door was unlocked. Let them come and take her out of the noose" (94). The description of the woman's body during her suicide attempt is offered in the words of Petrushevskaiia's narrator whose indifference diminishes the experience, stripping it of dignity: "But the orderly intercepted the suicidal woman, deftly caught her. The vertebrae were not broken in her fragile swan neck and she did not shit in her underpants, and did not bite her tongue—no such disgraceful things happened to her" (94). The verbal defilement of her body offers the ultimate reduction of the heroine to an odious object of passive estranged observation.

After her failed suicide attempt, everyone regards her as if she were already dead and, in the private hell of her degradation, the lady with dogs lives quietly to the end. Not surprisingly, she faces her death alone: "No one knows, however, how she really died, in what bed she expired. It seems she died of cancer and suffered. It had to finish somehow, this ugly life" (94-95). The narrator's most casual reference to death and suffering is echoed in the psychic numbing of everyone else who knew the deceased: "However, as they say, not a single dog had pity on her. Everyone only sighed, responding to distant rumors" (95). Here and elsewhere, a common reference to death is its indifferent consideration as an event in another's life.

Suicide becomes central in the story "The Flu," where the hero, left by his wife after a violent argument, is suffering from a bad flu and even more so from emotional pain and depression. The wife who comes to collect her clothes shows nothing but supreme indifference and, callous to human suffering, seems to get a sadistic pleasure in ignoring and humiliating him. Her hostile attitude feeds the husband's desperation and helps precipitate his suicide. The wife would not respond to his last appeal for compassion as she saw her husband standing on the window sill and "abruptly, demonstratively, turned away and continued packing" (114). When he leaps to his death from the seventh floor, the wife "did not rush downstairs right away, but went down only after the ambulance had already taken him away. She says she was packing all the time" (114). Abandoned in his dying as he was in living, the victim chose death over a soulless and dehumanized life.

The theme of suicide is crucial to the story "The Guest," where the author takes the narrative position of an indifferent observer, a single woman who entertains a

gentleman caller at her place. The reader can never obtain a fully objective portrait of Tolia, the guest, but only an interpretation tempered by the insight of an outsider. An essentially lethargic, depressed person who feels trapped in a lonely existence, Tolia is consistently described as "extremely boring." While we never discover what is at the root of Tolia's depression, it is obviously very deep, manifesting itself in a dull resentment of nearly everything around him. Tolia admits that "he has lost the thread of life and does not care about anything anymore" (128); but as he confesses his unfitness for life, the narrator admits that his words "somehow go past" her (130), and she fails to see his desperation. The story abruptly concludes with the announcement of Tolia's suicide. Because the narrator has difficulty understanding Tolia and explaining his death, the shocked readers are left with an inevitable lacuna in their response to it. Only retroactively can we guess that death offered escape from Tolia's futile existence, that he acted out of despair, unable to transcend suffering.

Petrushevskaiia's suicides also include Maia's in "Maia from the Maya Tribe," Sasha's from "Life Is Theater," and Seriozha's from "Seriozha." All these characters desperately seek death in times of crisis and find in it a welcome rest from the pain and disillusionment of life. Maia's life-denying impulse is caused by her husband's infidelity and their subsequent divorce. Life frightens her and death continues to lure her even after a failed suicide attempt. She finally succeeds and suicide delivers Maia from the burden of a life made unbearable by betrayal and loneliness. We are told that "it all came to an end when Maia simply jumped out of the window ... landed in the bushes and then spent three months paralyzed in the hospital, dying in full consciousness" (44). Rather than mourn, her friends contemplate the effect of maternal dying on Maia's daughter, criticizing Maia for "throwing everything under a guy's feet, and what is a guy in our case? He leaves, and the children stay forever, and so the women think and cry, each about her own life" (45). In including other female voices, Petrushevskaiia amplifies the problem, presenting suffering and loneliness as the lot of every woman.

The two other stories provide life accounts of Sasha, a theater producer, and a translator Seriozha. Told by detached female narrators, the glimpses of the characters' past are brief and fragmentary, furnishing selected information rather than insight into their mindset. "Life Is Theater" narrates a happy period of Sasha's life followed by a decline of her career and a deterioration of her marriage. Far more important than what the story reveals about Sasha is what it doesn't: how she actually feels and what drives her to thoughts of suicide. Although the narrator provides no motivation for Sasha's suicidal despair, the heroine is obviously as unhappy as it is possible for anyone to be and "had to respond. She could not con-

tinue to live meekly” (25). And while the closing words reveal an important omission, the narrator suspects that Sasha’s suicide means the end of her torment, her nightmare, her continuous suffering: “something, probably, wouldn’t let Sasha treat her life so easily. Something did not prevent her from suffering, from crying. Something forced her to answer once and for all, to put an end to everything” (25). The narrator’s superficial view of Seriozha contrasts with his wife’s observations that point to his severely depressed state. Unhappy and frustrated, Seriozha is obviously contemplating suicide, eventually reaching the decision that his life has been meaningless and the only way out is to die. Predictably, his suicide receives no explanation by the narrator who is as shocked as all the victim’s friends. Replete with suicides, Petrushevskaiia’s stories feature protagonists who do not have the courage to transcend misery and despair, nor the guts to defy death, but the urge to call for death and spare themselves more suffering. Their suicides are only a useful means of escape.

Other of Petrushevskaiia’s characters confront sudden violent deaths, where neither will, nor accident, nor natural illness plays a role in their ultimate fate. Centered on murder, some of her stories invade the imagination with horror, depicting a wolfish existence as the main villain. There is no doubt that the extremes of violence are represented by murderous mothers. A series of violent deaths, “Zina’s Choice” is a study of the twisted brutality which marks human relations in Petrushevskaiia’s sordid universe. We are forced to witness Zina, a monster in human form and a mother of three methodically murder her infant son to insure the survival of herself and her two daughters: “That was Zina’s choice: two girls, Valia and Tamara, and her baby boy whom she, as they used to say in their small town, ‘sent away.’ That is ... sent to the kingdom in a very simple way by taking him at night out into the cold” (25). Making life itself worthless, survival exacts an exorbitant price. What is dead in Zina and her daughters are their souls, since the boy’s murder has lent them the indifference of wild creatures. Proximity to Zina is proximity to death and adult Tamara’s abandonment of her own daughter during the war shows that she has inherited from Zina her most striking characteristic: her deathliness. The reader is told that Tamara “took the boy along, leaving the unwanted girl with her mother, the same Zina who had already killed one youngster” (26). The story reflects on the horrors of the death’s inheritance that hangs over the entire family. The ailing old Zina is driven away from her home by her sister and rejected by her two daughters, who still cannot shake off the grip of death that holds them both and returns to haunt them. Petrushevskaiia allows Zina no redeeming features and it is tempting to regard her death as the punishment she receives for her crime.

In Tamara's household, abusive behavior is a common occurrence. Unable to love because of the hatred that lives within her, Tamara brutalizes her invalid husband. Never letting him forget that the mute threat of death hovers in the background of his existence, she warns her husband that he will not live beyond his next birthday. It is indeed significant that the prophecy is fulfilled exactly on that day. Their children's reaction to this suspicious death shows the power exerted over them by their heredity as the offspring of the morally degenerate Tamara, who most probably has given their father "a spoonful of something." They are stupefied, without any feelings and scarcely react any more. Such hypnosis of the will and emotions makes them less than human. It is death that reigns triumphant at the end of the story as the author points out to the reader the debasing effect of unnatural familiarity with death: "And the dead keep visiting, that frozen baby who had touched her young heart, freezing it with horror as he was lying in his little coffin" (30-31). The story's concluding section illuminates the darkest bequest of this ruthless reality: "There was no choice, says Tamara to herself. . . . And so she chose the girls. And I will starve to death if I give everything away to you. Hunger, hunger, there was no choice and there still isn't" (31).

"Medea" is a story whose title is a metaphorical reference to the sorceress from Greek mythology who killed her two children when their father Jason left her. Loss of a daughter who dies from knife wounds inflicted by her mother is the driving force behind the tragedy of a taxi driver from Petrushevskaiia's pathologically morbid narrative. While the immediate cause of his wife's homicidal outburst is psychosis, it also represents the woman's deep-seated anger, hatred of her husband, and resentment of her fate. A study of a broken marriage, "Medea" tells the story of a cheating husband whose life of sinful indulgences leads to his wife's emotional breakdowns. She sinks into a state of deep depression, but her self-absorbed husband never anticipates disaster. Increasingly, their home is becoming a disquieting place, filled with pain, sickness, and violence. Yet the husband is overcome with dangerous passivity and his wife's untreated mental illness shapes their daughter's fate: the wife kills the daughter reenacting Medea's revenge on Jason. Of all the frightening scenes in "Medea," the most disturbing is that in which the mother turns herself in after the murder: "She came to the police station voluntarily and brought a bloody knife and an ax saying, 'My daughter is dead'" (125-126). This death as a result of his transgression and criminal negligence in allowing his child to be killed takes a heavy toll on the father. His body holds up but his soul goes to pieces. Filled with hatred toward himself and the world, he is suffering inner death.

It should be added that, here and elsewhere, the norm is the oddly angled, base, and “dirty” death, which denies its full validation resulting, to a large degree, from the narrator’s flat, reportorial recounting. There is about these stories none of the elevation that accompanies a tragedy; there is about them no pathos, pity, or pain. While literary Soviet death is explained or else is self-explanatory, Petrushevskaiia’s fictional deaths are more rather than less mysterious because the narrator fails to tell her tale, never fully comprehending the tragic events. In particular, the round of murders in Zina’s family, like the murder of the taxi driver’s daughter, are treated brusquely, even crudely, and the shocks are all the greater because of the heinous nature of the crimes committed.

In Petrushevskaiia’s imaginative world, death is a given, both pervasive and arbitrary. As a study of human mortality, *Requiem*s enacts death obsessively and capriciously as if chance plays the most important role in human existence. Several stories depict confrontation with the sudden death of a spouse, such as the deaths from a stroke in “She Who Fell Down” and “I Love You.” Both stories express the author’s pessimistic view of marriage. The wives are shown as victims of demanding and self-obsessed husbands who need to be assured of their genius and to be restored by their wives’ constant attention. The death of the long-suffering wife in “She Who Fell Down” happens after her husband leaves her for another woman. Interestingly, the narrator, whose story, as usual, fails to encompass the death she recounts, expresses no scorn for the husband: “By leaving his wife, the husband had no way of affecting the course of events. He was walking away like a rope-walker, the faster the safer” (32). He responds to his wife’s death with total lack of feeling, hurrying disgustedly from her deathbed to seek new pleasure. The sudden death of the heroine from “I Love You” occurs after years of neglect and brutalization by her cheating husband, a self-pitying mean-spirited bully. Like the heroine from “She Who Fell Down,” this victim dies from continued abuse, pain, and lack of love.

The Soviet paradigm of dying is called into question in each case: overtly selfish surviving spouses are indifferent, failing to see their own responsibility in bringing about their wives’ death. Children do not properly grieve; notably, in “I Love You,” the children show anger and antipathy toward their paralyzed mother shortly before her death. Additionally, by circumlocution and narrative deflection, the narrator denies significance to these deaths, shifting the focus from drama’s central actors to survivors’ adaptation strategies. Paradoxically, none of Petrushevskaiia’s characters live with the awareness of death or are conscious of death as a personal limitation. They only fear what they see as death in others. One of the basic responses to death, therefore, is the commonplace evasion of

death. When circumstances force them, they respond with fear, but as soon as they can, they forget.

Many of Petrushevskaja's characters suffer from mysterious, unavoidable fate, such as Niura, the heroine of "Niura the Beautiful," whose husband's dream of happiness with another woman is inextricably linked in his own mind to his wife's death: "After all, these dreams do not go to waste, but have a way of eventually coming true. That's what happened to poor Niura" (154). The prophecy of this dream is fulfilled in a car accident that claims Niura's life, asserting the inexorable power of fate. The narrator begins with Niura's funeral, recounting a life that is over and done with: "When alive, Niura never looked as pretty as she did lying in the coffin" (151). Even though Niura's untimely death touches her, the narrator expresses no regret or affectionate pity for Niura, finding the death of this woman fitting, almost glorious: "the unwanted, trashy and useless woman, scandalous and crying, died suffering, while the quiet woman waiting patiently with a baby in her arms is alive and the wedding is coming up" (153). Like the cynical, bitter account of Niura's failed marriage and dying, the narrator's description of the funeral rites is depleted of meaning, offering little consolation. Death, in effect, consigns its victims to oblivion.

"The Elegy" is a moving yet ultimately life-denying account of a rare Petrushevskaja event—a happy marriage, and a commentary on the fragility of life and happiness. A fall from the roof leads to Pavel's death, putting an end to his idyllic marriage. Presenting Pavel's death as an accident of an absurd universe rather than a meaningful culmination of human action, the story reaffirms the power of death, and its grip on Petrushevskaja's characters seems tighter than ever.

The same powerful force of death seems to be at work in the story "Mysticism." Its central character, Rita, is a confident young woman, constantly busy with a myriad of projects. But her optimism, which presumes the possibility of living life happily and well, is powerless to avert the fate that hangs heavily over Rita. An inhabitant of a ruthless and unpredictable universe, she is another luckless victim of blind and inscrutable destiny. One winter night, Rita is squeezed to death when a snowplow presses her against the side of a building. In a world where death chooses all, distinctions disappear and nothing matters in the sense that ultimately mortality limits human aspirations.

Although never perceived as a personal jeopardy, death for Petrushevskaja's characters is always very near. It is literally present, its physical assault on the body a constant reminder of the futility of evading death. It would seem that death is presented as a harsh reality, while life, as harsh as death, is shown as ruled by death; life, therefore, can be viewed as dying while living.

In identifying the “previously taboo topics” treated in Petrushevskaiia’s writing, Tatiana Belova mentions her “naturalistic descriptions of death,” as well as her condensed and graphic accounts of illness and the physiology of suffering (96). Indeed, we cannot help but notice that Petrushevskaiia goes beyond reducing life to death: she often reduces death to bestiality. What is emergent in *Requiem* is the morbid persistence with which she portrays dead bodies or the animal-like manner of dying; in so doing the author degrades death. This degradation engulfs many characters. In “She Who Fell Down,” we read: “suddenly the wife crashed down on the hallway floor, wheezed and died” (32). Similarly, the wife from “I Love You” is degraded in death: “she tumbled down in front of everyone, started to wheeze and, taken to the hospital, wheezed for three more days” (85). The description of Niura’s accident likewise dehumanizes the victim: “By the way, after the accident, when Niura was taken to the hospital with a smashed back (a drunk driver hit the back of the car where Niura was riding with her dog), Niura died and the dog . . . survived” (153). The simple but graphic account of her suffering and dying at the hospital also serves to humble and belittle this experience: “Seven days of torture after the surgery, complete immobility, tears, pain—Niura endured all this and died, thin as a child” (151-152).

Other stories throw further light on the author’s peculiar perception of death and dying. In a highly grotesque episode, the old man from “A Short Story of Oblivion” is found stuck behind the toilet after he suffers a stroke. With morbidity Petrushevskaiia traces the effects of the illness, filling the scene with diminishing comments and anatomical details: “As it turned out, the old man lay all day and all night face down on the bathroom floor. He had suffered a stroke and was now mumbling something. To make a long story short, he was buried soon after the events in question, a month later. He could have recovered, though. After all, when they removed him from the bathroom, he was still alive. But he could not move his arms and legs” (76). Importantly, the old man is abandoned in his dying by his family who, in a Soviet depiction, would have gathered, born witness and sought guidance. His funeral is mentioned briefly and with cynicism. The man is gone and the readers experience neither the dying nor the mourning: “Death is an important thing. They would always let you attend a funeral. We are talking about specific time limits here. It is not hard to serve a dead person—one minute and they shoved the old man in the ground” (77). His degradation in death denies traditional climax, focusing attention on survivors, rather than the victim.

Similar humiliation in death dominates the story “Chopin and Mendelson” in which an old woman-pianist drops dead next to her paralyzed husband’s bed. In an attempt to reach the telephone, the husband somehow slides down from his

bed and dies on top of his dead wife two days later. The story obviously subverts a familiar plot of Russian fairy tales, with their traditional optimistic ending of couples living happily ever after and dying on the same day. Petrushevskaiia can be seen to be parodying this particular practice. Related by the narrator with the emphasis on the grotesque nature of the couple's deaths, the story conveys the perspective of the oblivious and cynical next door neighbor. At the same time, the abrupt deaths intensify the neighbor's (and the narrator's) latent apprehension that dying is an unmanageable event. But since death has not been made a personal threat it can soon be forgotten.

Perhaps, the most striking feature of *Requiem*s is that some of the narratives omit death altogether and characters (even major ones) suddenly vanish rather than enact the dying process. The lack of warning or preparation reverses the usual order of events and death is once again presented as anticlimactic, profound, and widespread. For example, in "Find Me, Sleep," we are abruptly told about the main character: "Some time later, there was an obituary in a newspaper with Mikhail's picture, telling of his sudden death" (271). Some deaths are announced before, or instead of, dying, fracturing the fabric of the living. In "Chateau," Seriozha's and Nina's impending deaths are announced before they actually occur, calling into question the possibility of survival in Petrushevskaiia's ruthless and arbitrary universe: "he was to die the following night, she—half a year later" (234). In some sense, in Petrushevskaiia's fictional world "man dying" is a more convincing portrait of the human image than "man living."

Sudden disappearance is emphasized in another story whose title is borrowed from Lermontov's classic "Death of a Poet," a passionate outburst of grief and anger on Pushkin's death. One detects irony in Petrushevskaiia's use of this title. Her "Death of a Poet" features a boorish, aggressive, immoral, and spiritually limited young man who considers himself a great Russian poet, but lives out a parody of Pushkin's life, a portrayal that subverts Lermontov's elevated image of the poet-prophet. The final irony concerns the hero's sudden disappearance from the story. In a striking reversal of Lermontov's spirited rhetoric, Petrushevskaiia introduces the main character's death indirectly, through the reactions of others, and his death receives no explanation. In the story with the obviously ironic title "Oh, Happiness," Bob's impending death of leukemia is announced to the reader two years in advance when he is at a party with his girlfriend and everyone is admiring the beautiful happy couple. Clearly, then, Petrushevskaiia's dark and ominous world admits no goal, consistency, or peace: instability and the constant aura of death appear to be its basic ingredients. A dynamic agent, death manipulates her characters and psychological explanations often seem inadequate to justify the destiny

that pursues them. The personal ordeals of Petrushevskaiia's characters mirror the general torment humans suffer in a devalued and arbitrary universe. *Requiems*, where death shows its immense power and gets the last word against life, reads like a powerful symbol of a death-stricken culture.

Overall, Petrushevskaiia's treatment of death is instrumental to understanding the implications of living in the world characterized by apocalyptic vision, sickness, and decay. Death encapsulates *Requiems*, the book whose title meaningfully expresses its message: mourning for humanity. This is atypical mourning, however, since the author, rather than grieving for the dead, illuminates the darkness that shrouds the intolerable universe to recognize how past calamities and misery press on the consciousness of the present and burden its content. Decades of violence and suffering have destroyed more than bodies, resulting in great spiritual and moral losses which compromise Russia's future. Before speaking of a revival of the human image, one must elucidate its defaced form. While Petrushevskaiia's writing is firmly grounded in contemporary Russian reality, her strength lies in the way she makes this general statement about the human condition and shows consequences, rather than the horror that caused this disfigurement. Drawing on the resources of her art, Petrushevskaiia makes death the substance as well as the subject of her recent volume to dramatize that problem for her contemporaries. ✽

Notes

¹ See, for example, Dmitry Furmanov's *Chapaev* (1923), Aleksandr Serafimovich's *The Iron Flood* (1924), Yury Libedinsky's *A Week* (1922), Ivan Kataev's *The Poet* (1929), Aleksandr Fadeev's *The Rout* (1927) and *The Young Guard* (1945), Vsevolod Ivanov's *Armored Train No. 14-69* (1922), Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1932-34), Emmanuil Kazakevich's *Spring on the Order* (1949), Grigory Baklanov's *South of the Main Strike* (1958), *An Inch of Ground* (1959), and *There Is No Shame for the Dead* (1961), Yury Bondarev's *The Battalions Ask for Fire* (1957) and *The Last Volleys* (1959), Konstantin Simonov's *Days and Nights* (1943-44), and Viktor Nekrasov's *In the Trenches of Stalingrad* (1946).

² All translations of the original Russian text are mine.

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