

Studies in Slavic Literature, Culture and Society

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Sally Dalton-Brown

**VOICES FROM
THE VOID**

The genres of Liudmila Petrushevskia

Sally Dalton-Brown



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record straight and 'give him his life back' (II, 149). In 'Ten' zhizni', the protagonist is facing a bleak future at the hands of three abductors intent on rape and murder, when 'suddenly everything lit up, as if a floodlight had been switched on' (II, 157) and she is rescued by an old man and a woman, presumably her long-dead parents, the author hints. In 'Fonarik', a girl is saved from walking into the path of an explosion by a phantom lantern which, wielded by the ghost of her grandmother Polia, shows her a safe way home. In 'Ruka', the ghost of a wife tells her husband the whereabouts of his mislaid party card (it is in her coffin) but punishes him for disobeying instructions not to look at her when he opens the coffin to reclaim his card: his hand withers (in this text it is hard not to suspect Petrushevskaiia's parody of carrying a particularly political edge).

The relationship between living and dead is by no means clear cut, however; in 'Sluchai v Sokol'nikakh' the situation is reversed, with the living aiding the dead. The ghost of a man appears to his wife, and succeeds in getting her, under a pretext, to dig his grave, whereupon he vanishes, returning in a dream to thank her for burying him. In 'Zhena' the dead wife, returning now as a cat, is extremely helpless and does not even know how to behave cleanly in her new incarnation.

There is evidence to suggest that, in Petrushevskaiia's writings, the dead have a certain ability to guide the living away not only from physical, but from moral danger; in 'Novyi raion' a man murders his wife and then begin to imagine that her dead finger is poking out of the water tap when he turns it on; his 'perfect crime' continues to haunt him. This is a horror story with all the usual gory clichés, and a further addition to Petrushevskaiia's corpus of texts on the theme of corrupted domestic security. In 'V malen'kom dome' ('In a Little House') the same image of a haunted house, this time with blood seeping through the floor, appears, and the musical theme is introduced, with the ghost's voice coming through a radio when the music and news close down for the night (between midnight and two, the 'witching' hours).

In 'Mest' ('Revenge'), the last of these *pesni* (placed at the end in both the original journal version and the *Sobranie sochinenii* section), the supernatural dimension is missing; perhaps as a result, the story is the most powerful in the collection. The fact that it has been included in this grouping may perhaps be an accident, or, rather, it may offer a better perspective on what Petrushevskaiia has in fact been trying to achieve with these strange tales of ghosts and violence. The tale of two friends whose relationship changes dramatically when one has a child is a chilling study of obsessive evil. This horror needs no supernatural dimension to render it more chilling.

As Raia attempts to kill her friend Zina's child with caustic soda for no other reason, one assumes, than sheer jealousy of Zina's fertility, the reader is tricked into believing she has succeeded. Only at the end of the tale does the reader, along with Raia, learn that the child is safe. Raia herself, in the meantime, commits suicide as a means of escaping the pain that has plagued her arms and hands ever since she attempted murder. Whether this is a form of natural justice at work, or Raia's own guilt, is left to the reader to decide. The provocative title, 'Revenge', suggests – for Zina does nothing apart from hiding her child – that there is a force beyond the human which can compensate injustice.

Tales of the fantastic

By introducing an element of the fantastic, or horror, into her songs, Petrushevskaiia undercuts her own concern with folk genres as possible repositories of both private and public truth. There are, however, other issues to be discussed, for the choice of the genre of the fantastic theoretically implies a certain philosophical approach on the part of the author, whose vision of the world expands to include a mystic dimension which counterparts that of the animal and spiritual worlds she depicts in her portraits of the human animal.

It will already have been noted that Petrushevskaiia has a certain interest in pagan ideas, her stories 'Po doroge boga Erosa', 'Bog Poseidon' and 'Medeia' suggesting that she sees humans as possibly cursed or blessed by the gods, as Pul'kheria is in the first story, and the child-killer wife of the taxi driver is in the second. In 'Bog Poseidon' whether the gods bless or curse is rather more ambiguous. However, it should also be noted that Petrushevskaiia, despite her private religious beliefs,¹⁵ uses an eclectic mixture of pagan and religious references, usually in contexts where they are unexpected. One looks in vain for a strong religious theme in her requiems; yet in other texts references to a realm of divinity occur in ambiguous combination. Pul'kheria in 'Po doroge boga Erosa', whilst she treads the path of Eros, is also referred to as under the direction of 'Gospod' Bog' (the Lord God) himself (I, 261). Petrushevskaiia uses references to paganism and to traditional religion without any particular emphasis, in her usual conversational manner.

Apart from her songs, Petrushevskaiia has already written nine tales of the fantastic, which appear in her *Sobranie sochinenii* under the general heading 'V sadakh drugikh vozmozhnostei' ('In the Gardens of Other Possibilities'). The image of the garden is significant, for Petrushevskaiia's texts are unequivocally urban, and the suggestion of

an alternative, pastoral existence, is a tantalising inducement to the reader familiar with Petrushevskaiia's use of cramped apartments as emblems of private hells. However, that being said, it is remarkable that the stories are somewhat lacking in nature description, and even in those two tales in which paradise is evoked, 'Bog Poseidon' and 'Dva tsarstva' ('Two Kingdoms'), it is shown to be a semi-urban phenomenon. In typically Petrushevskaiian ironic fashion, the general label given to this grouping of texts is unsubstantiated by the texts themselves, and the title remains an amusing and tantalisingly unrealised idea, a form of generic absence. In 'Bog Poseidon', for example, the narrator ignores nature for a rhapsodic depiction of the house into which the protagonist has transferred, with its marble hallway, its beautiful sheets, its furniture, its colours, etc.; a somewhat material vision of paradise. In 'Dva tsarstva', the paradise in which the protagonist finds herself is described as rather like Paris, again, hardly a pastoral retreat. Like her requiems, which are not masses for the peace of the departed, but rather attempts to discover whether there is any point in remembering the dead with dignity, or her songs, which are discordant horror stories, screams in the night, Petrushevskaiia's tales of the fantastic are not enacted in the gardens of possibility, but rather in the landscape of a more than probable experience, namely, that of death, for this theme as always permeates the texts.

The stories in the *Sobranie sochinenii* section 'V sadakh drugikh vozmozhnostei' form a different grouping to that of the original journal publication of the same name of 1993, which contained eight tales, six of which were later removed. 'Po doroge boga Erosa', 'Ditia' and 'Son i probuzhdenie' were inserted into the category of contemporary histories, 'Ia liubliu tebia' and 'Evreika Verochka' moved to the 'requiems' section, and 'Ten' zhizni' to that of 'songs'. To the remaining two, i.e., 'Bog Poseidon' and 'Dva tsarstva', Petrushevskaiia added seven more to complete the *Sobranie sochinenii* section.

Are these fantastic tales? Two of them fall into the category of the dystopia, offering images of a future Russia laid waste by some form of civil unrest in 'Novye Robinzony: khronika kontsa XX veka' ('The New Robinsons: A Chronicle of the End of the Twentieth century') and by an epidemic in 'Gigiena' ('Hygiene'), and should be discussed separately. Of the remaining seven tales, 'Novyi Gulliver' ('A New Gulliver'), a version of the Jonathan Swift text, is unremarkable (and unconvincing), although the suggestion that as the Lilliputians are to this modern-day Russian Gulliver, so might we be to some greater and unknown force, is an intriguing one. 'Novyi Faust' appears to be an experiment, as the subtitle of 'extract' suggests, and

is a rather poor attempt at a satire, portraying Faust as a dull pederast with the desire to become a 'great writer', while 'Luny' ('Moonfolk') is a ridiculous tale of aliens who invade the orifices of the inhabitants of a sanatorium, who discover eventually that a sufficient cargo of these Selenians enables them to fly. 'Chernoe pal'to' ('The Black Overcoat') is atmospheric rather than thematic, with its dreamlike description of a protagonist wandering a strangely deserted urban topography dressed in a black coat which keeps her from all harm, but which also ensures that she remains permanently in this land of limbo (a reference perhaps here to Gogol's famous tale about an overcoat?). The only way to escape, it seems, is through love, – the strong memory of those left behind in the land of the living whom one wishes to rejoin.

'Bog Poseidon', 'Dva tsarstva' and 'Chudo' ('The Miracle') are the better of these six texts. The first two are notable for the skilful way in which Petrushevskaiia creates a dreamlike atmosphere of wistful sentences and half-seen images. In each of these stories, the idea appears to be that although the land of gods, or the supernatural, is most pleasant, it is not, of course, real life, but an emotional limbo, a land without love. In the first story, this idea is represented by the actual death of the protagonist, Nina, and her son, who gives up her job in Moscow and exchanges her apartment there for a palatial residence by the sea, owned by a mysterious woman whose son, a most able fisherman, is called Poseidon's son (II, 86). Nina's and her son's death by drowning presumably indicates their being drawn further into the realm of Poseidon, whose house this clearly is. Petrushevskaiia offers a lovely image of a palace with sea-coloured motifs, the cool marble of the stairway and entrance and the grey cloth of the décor imparting a wonderfully marine tinge to the narrative, emphasised by details such as the bed sheets being like sea foam (II, 86). It is small wonder that Nina succumbs to the materialistic lure of such a place.

'Dva tsarstva' also offers a vision of an ostensibly better life, telling of Lina's fairytale rescue from a fatal illness by the mysterious foreigner Vasia who seems able to achieve anything, whisking her from intensive care in a Russian hospital to a dreamlike place of white-dressed, gentle, indolent folk. In the final lines of the text we are told that Lina is now acclimatised to living 'in the land of the dead' and has even forgotten about those she left behind in the land of the living, such as her son and mother (II, 113). Petrushevskaiia interweaves vague images of insubstantial light and beauty with more down-to-earth details; the clothes Lina asks for arrive as if in a dream, yet the image of luxury is a trifle spoiled by the mention that the abundant pile includes a pair of men's grey knickers. Such details

as these track Lina's path from reality towards that insubstantial new existence to which she finally accedes at the story's end.

The message appears to be that images of a beautiful, materially satisfactory life, such as offered by Lina's benefactor, or by Poseidon, do come with a price, that of the loss of love in Lina's case; to see love as salvation from such a place, as in 'Chernoe pal'to', emphasises the idea. No wonder that dead family members, as in Petrushevskaiia's supernatural *sluchai*, are so interested in the affairs of those they have left behind, for love calls them back from limbo, however pleasant ('Dva tsarstva') or horrifying ('Chernoe pal'to') it may be. Petrushevskaiia possibly uses the concept of the supernatural realm merely as an aspect of her theme of responsibility to others, the theme which underlies her particular concern with maternal duty; thus Lina's case is particularly significant, in that she chooses self-survival and self-comfort over the memory of her son and mother.

A final word on Petrushevskaiia's belief in whether the realm of the gods is to be believed in or not comes from her strange tale 'Chudo', in which she suggests that it is, in fact, immoral to rely on the belief in an external force to solve one's problems. This, of course, implies that such a force does exist, but since the author suggests the path of self-reliance and responsibility rather than of reliance on some form of mystical power, the question can be seen to be subsidiary in her work. The Christlike figure of Diadia Kornil, an alleged miracle-worker, is shown on the point of death, exhausted by the demands made upon him by those who seek his help. A mother, anguished over her wayward teenage son, comes to Kornil to find him dying from vodka and exhaustion, with no-one to comfort him during his last hours. Seeing such aloneness makes Nadia consider the fact that man should only rely on himself. She realises that she herself must find a solution to her problems, and also that maternal responsibility does not imply complete control; she cannot help her son, who must also resolve his own fate and whom she realises she does not particularly like (II, 135). She therefore refuses to give vodka (necessary for his miracle-working) to the dying Kornil, and in fact advises his mother to send this poor alcoholic to hospital. Once she has passed this moral test of refusing to exploit a dying man, she finds herself on the street, feeling a sense of relief, as if 'the most terrible thing in her life was behind her' (II, 135), and presumably now accepting life without any anguished belief that it can be mended by magic or miracle. The acceptance of reality, the turning from a belief in myth, that is, in Kornil's talent, is, Petrushevskaiia suggests, the way towards happiness, for Nadia is now free, self-reliant, 'neither weeping, nor thinking of the future, nor worrying about anything' (II, 135).

If there is an absence of help from miracles, from Christ, although the ghosts of departed relatives may provide an occasional helping hand, then man must look towards practical things, to what is real. The tangibility of the two dystopian texts 'Novye Robinzony' and 'Gigiena' contrast strongly with the seductive ephemerality of tales of limbo and the afterlife ('Bog Poseidon', 'Dva tsarstva'), and perhaps such tangibility has more to offer than merely an antidote to delusion. Edith Clowes, in her analysis of 'Novye Robinzony', has even argued that for Petrushevskaiia, the tangible fills the absence left by the lack of any philosophical framework.¹⁶

Certainly both dystopian texts are rooted in that kind of tactile, often repellent detail evident in Petrushevskaiia's best contemporary stories. 'Gigiena' is a particularly engrossing yet repulsive text. As the family of five huddle in their Moscow apartment, fearing infection by the fatal virus which is decimating the country, the details Petrushevskaiia concentrates on are those of hunger, disgusting sanitary conditions, fear, blood, death.

Dystopias, futures in which not utopia, but a state of primitive regression is attained (usually due to scientific hubris), are deeply ironic genres in which the idea of the authorial conquering of time, a stepping forward into another future, or even sideways, into an alternative yet similar reality, is contrasted with the chaos usually described. The idea of a 'vision' (that is, of future history), of imagination which can go no further than man's bodily needs, is a paradox well known to modern practitioners of this prose form. For once Petrushevskaiia uses the genre conventions in an orthodox manner, not working against them as she does in her subjective 'histories', her multi-voiced monologues, her voiceless songs, or her requiems for the living. Like *sluchai*, which contain an inherent flaw, being tales of unsubstantiated common wisdom, dystopias are both real and imaginary, their power deriving from their allegorical realism.

Petrushevskaiia introduces her familiar themes of violence, illness, death, and isolation, placing the image of the cat alongside her heroine to suggest another favoured theme, that of man as animal. The arrival of the stranger who warns of the virus about to sweep the city is the start of the swift breakdown of law and order; that very night the nearby bakery is broken into, the police trampled, a woman mugged and dragged away (presumably to be raped). The narrator deals with this anarchic scene emotionlessly, far more interested in the spoils that the son of this three-generational family brings home, his rucksack bulging with bread and rusks. The narrator's calm recounting of the loss of communications – neither the television nor the telephone work – follows with equal lack of concern, as does the suggestion that the cat should be fed as it will make a useful meal

later. Petrushevskaja brings together the image of the sentimentally perceived animal, the pet (which appeared in two of her requiems) and a tale of civilisation's end, of bestiality. The astonishingly swift 'progress' from civilisation to anarchy is not remarked upon, even when, three nights later, Nikolai returns, naked, with a bloody knife and a satchel filled with what he has scrounged, an image of primeval man that contrasts oddly with the Moscow apartment which still has electricity and water. The story can be compared to Vladimir Makanin's *Laz* (The Manhole), another dystopian tale in which the bare struggle for survival is not commented upon, for indeed there is little time to waste on such self indulgence when the days are filled with attempts to keep oneself fed and sheltered.

The narrative reaches its turning point, moving from 'unremarkable' anarchy to panic, when the daughter of the family is found kissing the cat on its mouth, smeared with the remains of the mouse it has just eaten. As mice are the carriers of this plague in this brief version of Camus' tale, the girl is locked in her bedroom, her mother begins to weep and tear her hair, and at last the story begins to take on an emotional flavour, now overlaid onto the bare recital of events. Petrushevskaja does not flinch from taking the reader down to the most basic level, describing the child, too young to care for herself properly, smeared with her own excrement. Can this become any worse? This 'fictional', in the double sense, for this is a dystopian text about an event which has not happened, story becomes even worse when it is assumed that the cat, with its bloody jaw, has been feeding off the child's corpse (II, 105). The narrator inserts a story about a cat walled up with a murdered woman, remaining alive by feeding off her 'meat' (II, 106).

The reader must then suffer the gruesome death of the sick child's father, probably from having been unable to contain his hunger (he eats outside on the infected street); he swells up, to the point where blood runs from his eyes. The reader, ingesting this tale of horror, may be forgiven for feeling that his own hunger for further details of this story has been satiated. However, it has a happy ending of sorts, for child and cat survive and are found by the stranger of the story's beginning, who altruistically travels the city, warning of the danger and stressing the importance of strict hygiene. The shining pink, fragile skin of the child's naked skull (the distinguishing trait of all those who have survived the illness), suggests a fragile and roseate birth. Hygiene, however, has had nothing to do with survival, for life is not to be sanitised; this is, perhaps, the author's underlying message in this brutal recital of disgusting bodily details.

Petrushevskaja's other dystopian work, 'Novye Robinzony', details a family's move from Moscow, in flight from some kind of

hostile situation, in order to start a new life in the country like the Swiss family Robinson, or like a group of Robinson Crusoes. As Clowes points out, the story is particular strongly grounded in the concrete detail of country life – dirt, digging, killing piglets, stockpiling old bits of wood, etc. Although death is a constant presence here, survival in practical terms, starting again from basics, is the focus of the text.¹⁷ Petrushevskaja presents a pastoral seen neither in terms of socialist realist idealism, nor in terms of a pagan paradise. Rather, civilization, in the form of the family, must begin all over again, once the inevitable destruction of Russia has occurred, and man has returned to his 'natural' animal state. In this text the use of the dystopia, here in its specific sub-genre (a sub-genre of a sub-genre of a sub-genre!), namely, that of the post-apocalyptic text, signifies a return to a new realism after the excesses of the past. As a dystopia, or anti-utopia, the text suggests that the time for belief in anything other than the harsh reality of existence is over, the end of the twentieth century meaning the end of myth – an idea conveyed, in typically paradoxical fashion, through a genre that is itself 'fantastic' or mythic.

Another genre aspect is introduced as well; this is a 'chronicle of the end of the twentieth century', that is, a full, chronological account, though this is not about communal history, but a private tale of a girl who, with her family, escapes some unnamed threat. This is no chronicle of the entire end of the century, but of one small group. The three members of this family (parents and daughter) find their neighbours' help and advice most useful as they struggle to grow enough food to survive, and, later, are joined in their refuge in the woods not only by the two orphans they have fostered, but also by one such neighbour, old Anis'ia. A small community indeed.

The tale, although it deals with famine, the struggle to survive (these 'Robinsons' lose their house and contents when other refugees move in), with abandoned children, and death (the village shepherdess hangs herself), is not as far removed from the children's tale of the Swiss family Robinson and their happy and bold deeds as it may seem. The eighteen-year-old narrator's enthusiasm for the pastoral life has not yet waned, no doubt fuelled by her father's pleasure at his comparative isolation and his delight in making do, in coping. The family, after all, has everything it needs; shelter, some food, an old woman 'for wisdom', and two orphaned children (luckily of different sexes) 'for the continuation of the human race' (II, 82).

But as well as the story of this 'family', the seed of the new community, this is also the story of Marfutka, a wizened old woman who survives on nothing except rotten potatoes. She does nothing, not even gathering firewood to warm herself or cook food, and her

neighbours, possibly with an eye on her kitchen garden and house, have ceased to offer any help (for after all, the old must give way to the strong, as Anna suggested in *Vremia noch*). Yet somehow she survives, unharmed even when the refugees commandeer the village and throw out the other old village woman, Anis'ia, and, as the narrator tells us, 'when we will be like Marfutka, we won't be touched' (II, 43). Who will survive longest and best? Theoretically the family, with its structure of mutual support. And yet Marfutka, in her isolation, possessing nothing anyone could want, may still be the survivor of the human race, a symbol of isolation, not of community.

Petrushevskaja has written no further texts of this particular type, the dystopia, since the publication of 'Novye Robinzony' in 1989. Of the genres she has used (contemporary stories or histories, monologues, requiems, songs/*sluchai*, fantastic tales/dystopias, poetry, *skazki*, and plays), her particular interest since 1993 has appeared to be primarily in histories, requiems, and fairytales. Before discussing the latter genre, however, brief mention must be made of Petrushevskaja's foray into poetry in her 1994 text *Karamzin*.

Prose poetry

To label this text 'poetry' is in fact somewhat misleading. In *Karamzin*, which bears the subtitle of 'a country diary', Petrushevskaja writes in long thin columns, often two down a page, generating strips of language without punctuation except for the odd capital letter, dash, colon, or question mark, but with no complete sentences, lines that at first glance look like free verse either contracting to a single word or extending to up to twelve words. There are sixty-three sections in this eccentric piece; one of them, (no. 32, 'At the Bazaar') is subtitled 'a trio' and consists of a dialogue (despite the title) between two women, one of whom speaks purely in capital letters; the use of capitals strikes one as particularly arbitrary; why should the words *tam* ('there') and *posle* ('after'), for example, be capitalised in sections 49 and 50?

On closer examination, it is not purely the form of the supposed diary entries that appears slightly perverse; the lines themselves demonstrate little attention to syntax or even to sense. One line from section 52 ('Hokusai') begins reasonably well: 'a damp deep ploughed field what to do' ('mokraia glubokaia pashnia chto pode-lat') – but the line continues by drawing out the word 'what' with the insertion of three extra vowels, so that 'chto' becomes 'chtoou'; then it becomes merely its first two letters, 'cht', repeated four times ('mokraia glubokaia pashnia chto podelat' chtoou cht cht cht cht').¹⁸

Some lines are mere recitations of verbs or nouns, as in the following example: 'kosmetika dukhi iubki bluzki pricheski kolgotki detki lial'ki'/'cosmetics perfumes skirts blouses hairdos tights children dummies', (section 20). In section 3 the word 'zauim' ('trans-sense language') appears; this reference to the futurist language of arbitrary usage and invented words may lead the reader to assume an intentional lack of meaning, and an authorial concentration upon pure form and sound. The fact that often a page bears two columns of language, which can occasionally be read with just as much profit sideways rather than down, reinforces this effect.

This is neither poetry nor prose, but random sounds, postmodernist pastiche, with words placed in the vacua created by pauses and staggered lines, placed in unlikely combinations and inserted into bizarre comments, descriptions, and episodes, words that, therefore, tend to lose the usual link between signifier and signified and turn into quite another language. This is a sort of babble, occasionally generating flashes of insight and charm,¹⁹ but ultimately merely confusing, as references to journeys, for example, jostle references to food, harvest, hunger, eating worms, dreams, history, drunkenness, illness, birds, religion, George Orwell, Pablo Picasso, and so forth without any particular reason. This is, most likely, an experiment, rather than a new mode of writing, for the author; but it can be argued that as a genre form, *Karamzin* does add to Petrushevskaja's ongoing quest for an answer to the question of how one tells a story. There is no story here at all, nor can one find much in the way of conventional 'telling'.

Beginning with her contemporary stories, in which public and private voices collide and conflict, continuing in her solipsistic monologues, her silent requiems, her wordless songs, Petrushevskaja finally arrives at poetic babble, language reduced to meaninglessness. The visual clue that this is poetry (i.e. the 'strips' of language) perhaps suggest that this is not text, but a form of art; as in a Japanese print, the words sketch emptiness; rather than containing meaning, they depict plenitude in fragmentary brushstrokes. *Karamzin* is a blurred mosaic, similar to the poetry of Lev Rubinshtein or, to a degree, of Dmitrii Prigov, a collection of images which deny personality (for there is no unifying narrative presence), but which nevertheless constitute a chronicle of sorts. This is no 'country diary' but a collection of incidents, several of which have no bearing on the country (the fact that the second section is labelled 'Avtovokzal', or 'Car Terminus', is a rather obvious pointer to this). However, as with much postmodernist writing, self-destruction takes its toll, for ultimately the piece succeeds only in implying that nothing can really be communicated. And as for *Karamzin* himself? This is surely an

in-joke, for the name of the great sentimental writer becomes no more than a collection of vowel sounds selected because they rhyme with the mild expletive 'blin' (meaning something like 'drat' or 'sugar') as in the phrase 'karamzin blin' which appears in section 9. Other cultural icons are treated with equal carelessness; Oblomov (the eponymous hero of Ivan Goncharov's novel), Che Guevara, Nikolai Gogol' and Ivan Kuzmin amongst others, for example appear in a fragmented domestic piece entitled, most bathetically, 'mama myla ramu' ('mama washed the windowframe'). Images of frames appear and vanish, as if to remind the reader that any thought or image in this pastiche is indeed unframed, explosive, liable to slip from significance into shapeless silence. Looking through this windowframe, one sees only a series of other distorted and uncontained images.

Notes

1. One of which, *Pesni XX veka*, appeared, confusingly, in the collection *Pesni XX veka* in 1989 in the section entitled 'Monologi' – another example of Petrushevskaja's tinkering with genre categorization.
2. 'Pesnia konchilas', 'Vybor Ziny', from *Dom devushek*, *Znamia* 11 (1996), p. 17.
3. 'Muzyka ada', from *Dom devushek*, Moscow, Vagrius, 1998, p. 84. Further references are taken from this edition.
4. The remaining three plays are *Opiat doadtsal piat*, *Muzhskaia zona* and *Chto dela!*
5. M. Stroeveva, 'Pesni XX veka', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 27 (1987): 8.
6. *Uroki muzyki* appears in the group 'Pesny v dvukh aktakh', and *Andante* in 'Raznye pesny dlia odnogo spektaklia' in Petrushevskaja's *Sobranie sochineni*, III, pp. 7–74 and pp. 245–8.
7. L. Petrushevskaja, 'Pesni vostochnykh slavian', *Novyi mir* 8 (1990), pp. 7–19, p. 7.
8. As Petrushevskaja stated in an interview I conducted on May 22, 1995.
9. E. Kanchukov, 'Pesni vostochnykh slavian; Moskovskie sluchai' (review), *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 7 (1991), pp. 29–30, discusses four of her requiems as well as these *Pesni*, arguing that Petrushevskaja is primarily interested in the idea of overcoming isolation – 'ee zanimaet ne chelovek sam po sebe, a kontakt cheloveka s zhizniu'/'she is not concerned with man himself, but with his contact with life' (p. 29). He also notes the connection between these tales and Kharm's absurdist *sluchai* (p. 30).
10. Nina Kolesnikoff has argued that these modern tales of horror rely on the traditional folk genre of the 'bylicka'. N. Kolesnikoff, 'The Generic Structure of Ljudmila Petrushevskaja's *Pesni vostochnykh slavian*', p. 228.
11. See R. Aizelwood, 'Towards an Interpretation of Kharm's Sluchai', in *Daniil Kharm and the Poetics of the Absurd*, ed. N. Cornwell, Macmillan – SSEES, Basingstoke – London, 1991, pp. 97–122, p. 98.
12. Nusia Milman comments briefly on the genre of urban folklore, pp. 64–7.
13. See N. Ivanova, 'Neopalimyi golubok: "Poshlost" kak esteticheskii fenomen', *Znamia*, 8 (1991), pp. 211–23 (see especially pp. 216–23), who comments on Petrushevskaja's deliberate choice of this 'vulgar' and oral genre of urban

- folklore, which she likens to the genre of the cruel romance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 219).
14. See Deming Brown's interpretation of this story, in which it is Zina who is seen as a murderer, D. Brown, *The Last Years of Soviet Russian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 151–6.
 15. See Sally Laird, *Voices*, p. 42.
 16. See Edith Clowes, in *Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology after Utopia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993 (a reworking of her 'Ideology and Utopia in Recent Soviet Literature', *Russian Review* vol. 51, no. 3 (1992), pp. 378–95), p. 200.
 17. Clowes, p. 204.
 18. *Karamzin: Derevenskii dnevniki*, *Novyi mir* 9 (1994), pp. 3–60, p. 49.
 19. For example, in the very first of the segments, a lyrical and nostalgic mode is created by a depiction of an empty and presumably autumnal landscape; the author tells the reader that she is the only spectator of this scene but, because she is there, chaos is kept back.