

The Quest for Narrative Identity: A Textual Analysis of Petrushevskaja's 'The Wall' and 'The Storyteller'

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ACCORDING TO PAUL RICOEUR, the narrative form is crucial for a proper understanding of human identity. Basing his standpoint on Aristotle's theory about plot, Ricoeur underlines Aristotle's conviction about the intimate relationship between plot and character: 'characters, we will say, are themselves plot' (Ricoeur 1992, 143). Ricoeur goes one step further than Aristotle and applies his analysis of literary plot to a theory of human identity. His suggestion is that, in the same way as the character in a narrative, our identity as human beings is fundamentally dependent on the chain of events that occur in our lives. In other words: the events and actions that we experience in our lives are as crucial for an understanding of ourselves as is the understanding of character through the plot in fiction. In precisely the same way as the plot undergoes a permanent change in a narrative, the identity of a human being will constantly change as time passes. Just as the events, once they have occurred in a narrative, become an integral part of the story's plot, the events that occur in a person's real life become an integral part of that person's story, of his or her identity.

This article presents an analysis of two stories challenging a 'traditional' narrative — i.e. a narrative that unfolds in a temporal succession, told from the point of view of a main character. In my textual analyses of two of Liudmila Petrushevskaja's so-called

'histories' (*истории*) — 'The Wall' (Стена) and 'The Storyteller' (Рассказчица) — an *inverted* kind of narrative is presented, that is, a narrative told not from the main character's perspective but from the perspective of the character's surroundings, a fact that will appear to undermine the temporal succession in the two texts.¹

One of the most unique and breath-taking aspects of Petrushevskaja's narration is her ability to create a weird and wonderful literary world in which the private thoughts and inner feelings of the characters are reduced to a minimum, sometimes even totally removed, leaving the reader with a strange, often incongruous image of the plot and characters depicted in the story.² I will concentrate on one of the most original aspects of Petrushevskaja's writing, connected to this aspect, namely a narrative deriving from the perspective of a collective. This play with the traditional form of narration appears to highlight the intimate correlation between narrative and identity, and I suggest that Petrushevskaja is deliberately forcing the reader to examine his or her own moral evaluations in relation to the story and its characters.

The anti-narrative discourse

Later studies have shown that the originality of Petrushevskaja's texts consists not so much in her topical descriptions of the dark everyday life in Soviet society, as in her specific use of language, more precisely a language with its roots in an oral tradition. Karla Hielscher (1996, 50) writes: The novelty and power in the prose of Petrushevskaja lies not so much in her thematics, as in her peculiar narratives, which are diverted and conventionalised from various

¹ Both texts were published in the collection of short stories, *Immortal Love* (*Бессмертная любовь* 1988). 'The Storyteller' was first published in the Russian journal *Avrora* 7 (1972).

² Helena Gosciolo claims that this loss of an inner world in Petrushevskaja's writing should be interpreted as the writer playing with the romantic genre: Where a nineteenth-century writer would avoid specifying the visible physical data of the body as an improper object of literary representation, Petrushevskaja treats the invisible, emotional aspect of human experience as the unmentionable' (Gosciolo 1993, 153). Sally Dalton-Brown asserts that Petrushevskaja is playing with the romantic genre and thus has created a kind of 'anti-genre' (Dalton-Brown 2000).

forms of oral communication — chatter, rumours and gossip'. This anchoring in an oral tradition is, in its turn, one of the main reasons why Petrushevskaja's work is often described as a special kind of *skaz*.³ However, while *skaz* is a term that mainly refers to the narrator's speech, his or her use of everyday language and jargon, I would claim that the specific aspect of Petrushevskaja's narrator is found on a much deeper level. Instead of explaining her unusual language use with reference to a play with voices on the narrative level, I suggest that the unique aspects of her narration are found in the composition of the story as such, that is, her way of creating a kind of *inverted* narration in which the reader is forced to mistrust the fictional world presented in the story, doubting the story's ethical value-ground and raising questions such as: Who is the narrator? Is the story told really true? Why should I accept this version of the chain of events?

To some extent critics have commented on Petrushevskaja's specific manner of breaking with the fundamental 'laws' of narration. Josephine Woll explains the claustrophobic atmosphere in Petrushevskaja's prose with reference to a distortion of the temporal dimension: The constricted, claustrophobic atmosphere of Petrushevskaya's fictional loci is enhanced by her destruction of conventional temporal barriers. Time is disjointed; action is achronological' (Woll 1993,125). Woll also points to the fact that important events in Petrushevskaja's stories are often mentioned in passing, while meaningless details are placed in the centre.⁴ This kind of distorted plot has also been observed by Sally Dalton-Brown (2000, 174) who writes: 'the teller herself is often confused about how to

³ Elena Nevzgliadova has defined Petrushevskaja's writing as 'a peculiar kind of *skaz* with special traits of a non-literary narrator. It represents a combination of two different styles. Official-business and ordinary conversational styles form the language of oral expression, which is full of incorrect phrases' (Nevzgliadova 1988, 259). In a survey of modern Russian writers, N. N. Shneidman describes Petrushevskaja's authorship in terms of a special kind of *skaz* mainly relying on Nevzgliadova's article mentioned above (Shneidman 1995).

⁴ Woll mentions 'Elegy', a story in which Pavel's death is mentioned just in passing, as an example of this.

structure the 'history into a 'tale' that will be meaningful to the listener'.⁵

The opposition between the individual and the collective

In addition to the focus on language and form, there is yet another trait of Petrushevskaja's prose that has been observed by critics, namely a recurrent opposition between the individual and the collective. The main explanation of this dichotomy has been that Petrushevskaja's prose reflects a culture and a society where the group has been given priority over the individual. Adele Barker maintains that Petrushevskaja focuses on the individual's separation anxiety from the collective and writes: 'In story after story Petrushevskaya's characters look to the group for support, for companionship, and for a sense of identity. Inevitably they are rejected' (Barker 1989, 444). Barker's thesis is that Petrushevskaja depicts the post-war generation's identity crisis, a crisis caused by the obvious gap between an ideology that glorifies the collective and a reality in which individuals had no trust in other people. During this era, the former belief in the ideology of the collective was erased, and people of a whole generation were left without any possibilities to find an identity, neither in relation to the group, nor in relation to themselves as a single person.⁶ This pessimistic view of the individual in relation to the group is shared by Lesley Milne (2000, 269), who writes: 'The typical Petrushevskian work could have been described as one where the characters live in intense isolation within an urban collective which, despite cramped living conditions, offers no support systems'. Goscilo has recognized this opposition in terms of a symbolic repression of the individual in Petrushevskaja's work: The multiple couplings in Petrushevskaja's fiction ironically underscore

⁵ Another example of this is Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, who refers to Petrushevskaja's short story *The New Robinsons* (Новые Робинзоны) in terms of an 'anti-history', a term motivated by the subversion of linear progression and plot development (Vladiv-Glover 1998, 234).

⁶ Barker writes: 'The sense of "lichnost" among the post-war generation in Petrushevskaja's works is linked symbiotically to acceptance by the group despite the fact that the *kollektive* no longer worthy of emulation' (Barker 1989,447).

the iterability and replaceability of bodies in a culture that has invested heavily in the valorization of the group over the (expendable) individual' (Goscilo 1993,151).

The Collective Perspective of Narration

Petrushevskaja's prose is to a great extent occupied with this problematic relationship between the individual and the collective. What is even more striking, however, is that this theme is also articulated on the level of narration, i.e. the way in which Petrushevskaja *narrates* her stories points to the fact that the individual is repressed by a collective. The representation of the collective on a narrative level has been suggested by other critics. In her summarized analysis of *The Storyteller*', Barker (1989, 444) writes:

The story is told from the point of view of one of the members of the work brigade. Hence at the beginning the reader is made to feel that Galia is unreasonable and insensitive, the one who forces herself upon everybody. As the story unfolds, the reverse seems to be the case. The story, as it turns out, is less about Galia than about the narrator and the *kollektiv*.

Barker's main goal, however, is to point out the individual's separation anxiety with respect to the collective on the thematic level of the story. This ambition is clearly expressed in Barker's comments on the stories 'Nets and Traps' (Сети и ловушки) and 'Clarissa's History' (История Клариссы):

Traditionally in Russian thought one's sense of self or *lichnost'* was always strongly tied into, indeed dependent on, one's relationship with the *kollektiv*. Petrushevskaja pushes this long-acknowledged truth to the extreme and suggests that her heroine's strong identification with a unit larger than herself becomes a substitute for her own lack of an inner core. Her identity as a member of a unit becomes a screen behind which remains only the shell of a person (Barker 1989, 446).

According to Barker, 'Clarissa's History' exemplifies the emptiness of an individual who is not accepted by the collective. While Barker

that Clarissa *actually* lacks an inner core, that this is the *theme* of the story, I claim that Clarissa's emptiness is an effect of the perspective of narration, i.e. a *collective* perspective of narration that has no access to Clarissa's inner life and feelings. Instead of referring the identity crisis to a thematic level of Petrushevskaja's prose, as Barker does, I suggest that the reader witnesses an identity crisis on the narrative level of the story, a crisis which is caused by a narration with its origin in the collective perspective of narration, something I will return to later in my analysis of *The Wall*'.

However, the localization of a collective on the level of narration has been carried out by Hielscher, who refers to 'a collective narrator' (*ein kollektives Erzählsubjekt*) in Petrushevskaja's early writing. Hielscher (1996, 51) writes:

The distinctiveness of her style consists in the fact that she, in her best texts, completely imperceptible, uses a medium of complex narrators, so that the public opinion, rumours and other people's gossip, is integrated in the text. In this way, the plot [*die Fabel*, J.L.], the narrated event and the speech-act are fused, impossible to separate.⁷

Dalton-Brown has also suggested that the collective is represented on the level of narration in some of Petrushevskaja's writing and refers to a frequent contradiction between two voices in Petrushevskaja's texts, one private and the other public:

What she [Petrushevskaja, J.L.] focuses on repeatedly is the problem of being heard, basing this problem round the presence of two voices in the text, one private and one public. This is no version of Bakhtinian polyphony, but rather a construct based upon the idea of contradiction or binary opposition, in terms of which the character's life can be 'spoken' in two remarkably different ways, one private and one public (Dalton-Brown 2000,13f).

⁷ Hielscher exemplifies this special kind of narration by referring to the cycle *Rekviemy*, but she does not confirm this statement in a textual analysis. According to my definition, these stories are not told from a collective narrative perspective. [My translation from German to English, J.L.]

In the following I will show how the collective perspective is manifested in *The Wall* and *The Storyteller*.⁸ *The Storyteller* is one of the best-known texts from Petrushevskaja's early period of writing during Perestroika, and critics have paid a great deal of attention to this particular story. *The Wall*, however, is a text that, to my knowledge, has not been the object of any comments at all from critics, a remarkable circumstance that I will come back to later.

"The Wall"

The Wall is about the transformation of a rumour among a group of people, and the whole story can, in fact, be read as an illustration of gossip and its unreliability as a source of knowledge. Taking into consideration that this is a text in which the collective perspective is articulated, not only on the narrative level but also on a meta-narrative level, this story must be considered crucial for an understanding of the collective perspective of narration. Even in Dalton-Brown's monograph (2000), in which we find analyses of a broad selection of her work, *The Wall* is not mentioned at all.

A discourse of contradictions

The Wall is about a girl named Ania, who was called 'the Wall' by her schoolmates, because they found it difficult to get in contact with her. The history has its origin in the rumour that was created about Ania, when the boys at her school chose her as the most perfect girl in school. These concrete circumstances are not mentioned until later in the story, but the scenario is suggested already in

⁸ The collective perspective of narration is often suggested in Petrushevskaja's writing, but only very few of her stories can be considered a full realization of this perspective. The collective voice is most commonly used as a stylistic device in the narration, which implies that the individual perspective is nevertheless present. Sometimes, however, the entire narrative must be interpreted as a consequence of the collective narrative perspective, which means that the content and plot are shaped and influenced by this narrative method. The voice of the collective is most clearly heard in her collection of early prose-writing, *Immortal Love*, where we can find a few stories written entirely from the perspective of the collective: *The Wall*, *The Storyteller*, *Tviania*, *Elegy* and *'A Clap of Thunder'*.

the first sentences of the text, when the narrator comments on the nature of the spreading of rumours in general terms:

People always make extreme, extraordinarily exaggerated demands on (1) *anyone who is said to embody perfection*. You could say that people boil over with indignation against (2) *a person who is perfect*, boil over with indignation and won't for a minute believe in (3) *the exaggerated claims*, and go searching and searching for the dark spots on the sun [my translation and italics, J.L.].

Человек предъявляет огромные, чрезвычайно повышенные требования к тому, о чем он слышит, что (1) *это называют совершенством*. Можно сказать, что человек просто кипит негодованием к тому, (2) *кто является совершенством*, кипит негодованием, не доверяет ни капли (3) *повышенным оценкам* и ищет, ищет темные пятна на солнце (Petrushevskaja 1996,133).

The high level of abstraction used in this passage can partly explain the difficulties of comprehending what is actually said in it. The narrator uses the word 'people' without referring to a specific person and 'person' without telling the reader a name and, without any further exemplification, refers to general occurrences such as 'exaggerated demands' and 'exaggerated claims'. Apart from the abstract level of expression, which contributes to undermining the concrete meaning of the utterance, there is yet another reason why the reader has difficulties in understanding the meaning of the passage above. These difficulties can be explained by the almost invisible change of meaning and modality that takes place in the two sentences. What actually happens is that the object of the sentence (marked in italics) is undergoing a gradual change. First it is said to be a *rumour* ('anyone who is said to embody perfection'), then it is referred to as a *truth* ('a person who is perfect'), and finally the object in the sentence is mentioned as something that is *not true*, i.e. a statement that is *false* ('the exaggerated claims').

A gradual change of a statement's epistemological status (rumour, true statement, false statement) craves an utterance in which the narrator admits a state of change, either in the world or in the narrator's own perception of the world. However, instead of describing this temporal change, the narrator treats the various objects as if they were synonymous, and as if no change had taken

place considering this rumour. This impression is enforced by connecting the two sentences cited above with the utterance 'you could say', which indicates that the narrator, instead of introducing a new and different statement, is trying to give a further description of what he or she has stated earlier.

Instead of admitting the fact that change in the world has actually occurred, it is as if the narrator does not want to see, or maybe is not able to perceive, this change over time. In this way, the concealed change of state leads to a discourse of contradictions, and in one single breath the rumour is stated to be both a true and a false statement. Why, then, is the narrator neglecting the fact that the stated objects are not synonymous? Why does he or she try to intimate that no change has taken place at all?

I would assert that this discourse of contradiction indicates the fact that the text is narrated from a collective perspective. A unique perspective of narration relates a succession of events in constant change: 'Once upon a time there was a happy girl named Ania. One day when she went out in the woods, Ania met a wolf...'. After having met with the wolf, Ania is probably not as happy any more, something that points to a change of circumstances in the story. Presumably, the two sentences above describe a course of events that has actually been ongoing for a certain period of time (in this case the spreading of a rumour and its various phases). In a collective perspective, however, this alteration in time is confronted with epistemological difficulties, simply because a collective perspective is general, timeless, and universal as it expresses a *common* opinion, i.e. an opinion shared by *many people at the same time*. You could argue that this perspective has no proper *method* of describing a chain of events that succeeds in time. Due to the given perspective, a continuous change over time falls beyond the story's framework and ends up in a discourse of contradiction and paradox, stylistic means that are typical of Petrushevskaja's prose in general.⁹

⁹ Another example of contradiction is found in the first lines of the history 'Mania', which is also narrated from a collective perspective. In the first part of the sentence, the narrator states that Mania's disadvantageous appearance is compensated by her curly hair, but further on in the same sentence the narrator concludes that curly hair is a problem, not least in Mania's case since it simply does not suit her.

The narrator's references to a general opinion

The stylistic device of contradiction and paradox indicates the presence of a collective perspective, a perspective that is unable to include a state of change over time. In addition to this device, the collective perspective is also made visible in terms of the narrator's frequent references to a general opinion about the story's character, Ania. This means that, instead of retelling the actual events that occur in Ania's life, the narrator relies on rumours about Ania, what people in Ania's surroundings think of her and her life. In this way, the reader never experiences direct contact with Ania and her point of view, but has to be content with indirect knowledge about her, i.e. what people in her surroundings think about her, the few things they know about her private life:

In Ania's case, at all events, *everyone said* that she was a total nonentity; there was nothing to her, you could see straight through her. In fact, *people said*, she was like a brick wall, you could see straight through her... (Petrashevskaya 1995,146, [my italics, J.L.]).¹⁰

Во всяком случае, по поводу девушки Ани *окружающие ее говорили*, что она абсолютно пустое место, что сквозь нее можно пройти, не остановившись, не задев ни за что, что она облако пара. Наконец, *говорили также*, что сквозь нее можно пройти как сквозь стену, ни на чем не задержавшись... (Petrushevskaja 1996,133).

In this passage there is also a contradiction that should be noticed. At first, Ania is described as a vacuum, as a cloud, but then she is described as a wall, a wall that, paradoxically, you can see straight through. According to the narrator, Ania, lives a meaningless life, and she herself is as empty as her life. In spite of the meaninglessness of Ania's life, the narrator has noticed that there is one quality that makes it possible to say at least something substantial about Ania, namely her friendship with Tamara. But it soon becomes obvious that this friendship is just another example of the

¹⁰ The English translation differs from the Russian original, in which the metaphor of the wall is combined with the paradoxical statement 'walk straight through' instead of 'see straight through'.

superficiality of Ania's life, and according to the people surrounding them, the two girls keep company in a ceremonial and shallow way:

The only noteworthy aspect of Ania's life, the only feature that provides at least some indication of her character, is her attachment to Tamara, a girl with whom Ania has absolutely nothing in common, apart from the fact that they always sat side by side in the same corner during lectures. Their friendship — decorous, ceremonious — was striking precisely because it was so obviously a matter of form alone; it had all the outer form of friendship - sitting side by side, going together to the canteen and so on — without the inner content (Petrushevskaya 1995,147).

Единственная черта, за которую можно было уцепиться, чтобы хоть как-то охарактеризовать ее, это была неожиданная привязанность к одной девушке, Тамаре, с которой Аню как будто ничего не связывало, кроме того, что они всегда сидели в одном и том же углу на лекциях, всегда рядом. Их дружба — чинная, церемонная — вызывала удивление, поскольку всем было видно, что тут существует одна лишь форма, безо всякого внутреннего содержания, одна лишь форма дружбы — сидение рядом, совместное хождение в столовую и т. д. Внутреннего же содержания, обычного содержания дружбы, как-то — доверительности, общих вкусов и интересов, долгих разговоров — тут не было абсолютно (Petrushevskaya 1996,134).

However, the friendship between the two girls surprises Ania's schoolmates. They find it shallow, but at the same time it seems to be a lasting relationship that survives various strains:

And yet, despite the rather skeptical and knowing attitude that others took towards it, the friendship carried on in its formal and ceremonious way, weathering the course even when subjected to the test of experience, and surviving unchanged... (Petrushevskaya 1995,147).

Однако, несмотря на несколько скептический и понимающий взгляд остальных на эту дружбу, эта дружба продолжала существовать во всем своем церемонном, внешнем виде и даже, будучи подвергнутой испытанию, выдержала все и попрежнему продолжала существовать, не изменяясь...(Petrushevskaya 1996,135).

The narrator also mentions, in passing, that Ania has a boyfriend, that she is expecting a baby and has a well-paid job. It would be interesting to acquire more information about these important events in Ania's life, but the reader has to be content with the narrator's version of Ania, namely that she is an empty creature, not worthy of her role as a main character.

Suspicion instead of suspension of disbelief

An adequate reaction from the reader of 'The Wall' is to question the degree of *truth* in these narratives — is Ania really as empty as the narrator claims? — a reaction which is, of course, inadequate considering the fact that we are dealing with a *fictional* and not *documentary* story. Nevertheless, this questioning of the epistemological status of the narrative voice reveals a suspicion created by the text, which could be interpreted as the readers' unwillingness to devote him or herself to the *suspension of disbelief*, one of the fundamental aspects of the epistemology of fiction. The first question is: Can I, as a reader, trust the version of Ania's life provided by her surroundings? Is her life as empty as the narrator claims? The second question is: Why does the narrator choose to tell a story about a girl whose life is as meaningless as Ania's? A re-reading shows that the whole story can be read as an illustration of the first cryptic lines of the story. Against this background, the origin of the story can be derived from Ania's schoolmates' urge to ruin the rumour about her perfection. The most probable narrator, or narrators, represent Ania's schoolmates, i.e. the girls at school who had to accept the boys' statement about Ania's perfection. Just as these first lines indicate, the aim of the story could be to find 'the dark spots on the sun', and hereby transform the rumour into a statement which is not true, but false.

The first question — Is Ania and her life as empty as the narrator claims? - is partly answered by the response to the second question: No, Ania's life is not as shallow as the narrator claims. This is probably just a method to undermine Ania's good reputation. However, there is yet another aspect that can be added to the reader's mistrust of Ania's emptiness, and this is related to the actual *perspective* of the story: What possibilities of insight does the story's

narrator have access to? The fact that this is a story that is told, not from Ania's point of view but from the point of view of her surroundings, ought to limit the perspective of the narrator. As a matter of fact, it is impossible for the reader to know for certain what actually occurs in Ania's life, and instead of partaking in what actually happens in her life, the reader is given access to the events in the story only *indirectly*, through the eyes of the collective.

While a narration from an individual point of view is characterized by a varying degree of insight into the character's private and inner life, the collective perspective is located *outside* the character and is only capable of seeing Ania's public actions. When it comes to her private life and inner thoughts, the collective has to make do with the half-truths and rumours created around her person. This limited perspective is expressly stated in the story, and the narrator occasionally comments on this limited insight:

We should, however, bear in mind that during this period of her life Anya was seen by others only externally, only in her material being. It is quite possible that whole cataclysms were taking place in Anya's soul at the time; that, far from sleeping, her soul was in turmoil (Petra-shevskaya 1995, 149).

Однако здесь надо учесть, что этот период жизни Ани тоже был виден окружающим лишь внешне, лишь материально. Возможно, что в душе у Ани иногда происходили какие-то катаклизмы, свои бури, возможно, что душа ее не дремала (Petrushevskaja 1996,136).

And yet no one could be quite certain how this process occurred, for it took place over a long period of time, throughout those long, difficult years of her life in which Anya would from time to time disappear into obscurity, only to re-emerge into people's field of vision — always the same, unchanging, friendly, predictable, and yet ever more distinct and well-defined (Petrushevskaya 1995,151).

Причем никто не смог бы с уверенностью сказать, как это произошло, потому что все это происходило на протяжении многих трудных лет жизни, в течение которых Аня то пропадала в неизвестности, то снова появлялась в поле зрения — все одна и та же, неизменная, приветливая и однообразная, но все более отчетливая и определенная (Petrushevskaja 1996,137).

But no one knew anything about the way Anya lived during this period of her life; and a few years on various changes came about: a new apartment was found, and Anya was promoted to a well-paid post (Petrushevskaya 1995,154).

Тем не менее никто ничего не знал о том, как Аня жила в этот период, а через несколько лет произошли перемены: появилась новая квартира, и одновременно Аню перевели на высокооплачиваемую должность (Petrushevskaja 1996, 139).

Earlier, in connection with the question evolving around Clarissa's identity in 'Clarissa's History', I suggested that Clarissa's identity is not actually empty, but that the emptiness of her personality could be explained as a consequence of the collective's limited perspective of narration. My suggestion regarding Ania's life is the same. The strictly limited perspective of the story affects the readers' attention, and instead of focusing on Ania's life and the alleged emptiness of her person, our interest is directed towards the representational level of the story, i.e. the narrator's probable lack of insight into her life. Her life *seems* to be empty and shallow, seen from the restricted viewpoint of the collective. This means that the alleged emptiness of her life on the thematical level of the story, becomes a natural consequence of the limited perspective of those around her, interpreted on the level of narration. The origin of this emptiness is, in other words, to be found on the *representational* level of the story; it is not a result of Ania's *actual* personality, but a consequence of the collective perspective of narration.

The insufficiency of the collective becomes palpable when the narrator wants to say something about Ania's private life. One example of this is when outsiders want to convince the reader that Ania's and Tamara's friendship is shallow. The narrator claims that, in view of the fact that nobody in Ania's surroundings *has ever seen* Tamara revealing a secret to Ania, their friendship must be considered shallow: 'No one had ever seen Tamara confiding in Ania, entrusting her secrets to her' (Petrushevskaya 1995, 147). Considering the very nature of a secret, i.e. that it should be hidden from others, this statement instead reveals the limitations of the collective's perspective. It is understandable that nobody has seen the girls revealing secrets to each other, because this is something undertaken

in private, and not in a public room where other people can watch and listen.

The story's meta-level

Instead of constituting a reliable fact about the girls' friendship, the statement above rather reveals the insufficiency of the narrator's perspective. It is located *outside* the characters in the story and is thereby reduced to what eyewitnesses have perceived of Ania — to the few glimpses they can obtain from her private life. Considering the fact that the collective perspective is exclusively located in a public room, the truth about who Ania actually is and what her friendship with Tamara is really *Дке* is kept a secret from both the reader and the collective. You could say that the private and personal sphere of Ania is concealed behind a wall. In the light of this metaphor, it is tempting to make a two-fold interpretation of the story's title. Firstly, 'The Wall' can be read with reference to the schoolmates' nickname for Ania. According to this interpretation, Ania really is a meaningless creature who does not deserve to be at the centre of a story. Secondly, this title can be interpreted with reference to the representational level of the story. This interpretation assumes that the story is told from a collective perspective of narration, and due to this perspective it is likely that the title refers to the wall between the private sphere of Ania's life and the public perspective of narration.

The most probable reason that previous literary critics have overlooked this story is that the Petrushevskian construction of a collective perspective of narration has not been revealed until now. Without the code — the manifestation of a collective perspective of narration — this story seems to be totally meaningless, not worthy of an analysis. When the story is read as the product of a collective perspective, an intricate substructure is revealed, and the sceptical reader can reach the conclusion that the emptiness of Ania's character is not real but a consequence of the collective's limited perspective. If we look at the story from this angle, the structure is perfect and must be considered one of Petrushevskaja's most brilliant stories.

'The Storyteller'

'The Storyteller' is a story about Galia, a poor girl whose mother dies of cancer and whose father abused her in childhood. In contrast to Ania, Galia has a problem maintaining her integrity among other people, and by the cruel logic of nature she is bullied by her colleagues at work. However, this tragic content is not the most troubling aspect of the story but, again, it is the *way* in which Galia's life is presented to the reader that must be focused upon. In her analysis of 'The Storyteller', Dalton-Brown claims that Petrushevskaja has created a kind of 'anti-narrative':

The text, predicated on the idea of a 'story', a narrative presence which marries reader and text in the communality of the rite of reading, turns out to be an anti-story, not about Galia's life, but about how her colleagues want nothing to do with it (Dalton-Brown 2000, 39).

Like 'The Wall', this is a story that must be interpreted mainly with reference to the narrator, and not to the character described on the level of plot in the story. The meta-level is therefore present in this story as well, and the *tide* can refer to both Galia, who, according to her colleagues, is a storyteller, and to the narrator of this particular story, i.e. Galia's colleagues.

In contrast to 'The Wall', the meta-level of this story has been recognized by critics before me. This can be explained by the fact that the collective is made more visible in this story. Firstly, it is obvious that the collective is represented by Galia's colleagues, a concrete personification of the collective voice not present in 'The Wall'. Secondly, the title of this story immediately draws the reader's attention to the narrator of the story and thereby invites an interpretation on the meta-level. However, the story has not been object for an extensive textual analysis, which I will present here.

The hypothetical discourse of argumentation

As stated in relation to 'The Wall', a story written from the point of view of the collective does not depict the characters' lives *directly*, but *indirectly*. This means that the story is filtered through the common opinion of the character held by the surroundings. In 'The Wall',

this indirect way of reporting became obvious because the collective's outside perspective had no access to Ania's private life, apart from vague rumours and the few glimpses of Ania's actions witnessed by others. Ania's *real* life was concealed behind a wall. In *The Storyteller*, this indirect representation of the character's life is expressed in a somewhat different way. As opposed to the narrator in *The Wall*, this narrator has access to a great deal of information about Galia. Galia has revealed the story of her life to those around her, and while the narrating collective in *The Wall* was exposed because of their lack of insight into the character's life, this narrator is the object of mistrust for other reasons. The main problem in this story is not the lack of knowledge — the wall between the private and public spheres — but the lack of a narration that represents the events in Galia's life in a temporal succession.¹¹ Instead of relating Galia's life as a succession of events, the collective presents her life by means of a timeless discourse, which has much in common with the discourse of argumentation. The first lines of the story read:

You *could* get her to tell you anything and everything about herself if you only cared to ask her. She [sets] no store at all by the sorts of things that other people hide or, on the contrary, tell you with great bitterness and self-pity or with muted sorrow. She [gives] the impression that she [doesn't] even understand why concealment might sometimes be necessary, why there are certain things you tell only your nearest and dearest — and even then regret telling afterwards. *She'd even* embark on the story of her life to a colleague on the bus *who'd* asked idly 'how's life?' just for the sake of passing the time (Petrushevskaya 1995, 3, [my italics, JX.]).¹²

Ее *можно* заставить рассказать о себе все что угодно, если только кто захочет этого. Она совершенно не дорожит тем, что другие скрывают или, наоборот, рассказывают с горечью, с жалостью к

¹¹ The lack of temporality was also present in 'The Wall'. Here, the collective's inability to cope with a chain of events was expressed by means of the discourse of contradiction, a result of the collective's *general* perspective that is unable to depict a *particular* event taking place in a specific time and space.

¹² In this quote I have changed a few things in the English translation. Instead of using the past tense, as in Sally Laird's translation; 'set', 'gave' and 'didn't', I prefer the present tense 'sets', 'gives' and 'doesn't'. This is a more accurate translation of the original text in Russian, which contributes to strengthening the non-temporal aspect of this story.

себе, со сдержанной печалью. Она даже, кажется, не понимает зачем это может ей понадобиться и почему такие вещи можно рассказывать только близким людям да к тому же потом жалеть об этом. Она *может* рассказать о себе даже в автобусе какой-нибудь сослуживице, которая от нечего делать *начнет* спрашивать, как жизнь. (Petrashevskaja 1996,73).

'The Storyteller' is structured into two parts. The first part progresses in terms of an argumentation in which the collective substantiates the theses about Galia's lack of integrity. This part is mainly retold on a hypothetical level, which means that the events are not realized on a temporal level of narration. Instead, the hypothetical discourse in the Russian text deHvers frequent occurrences of auxiliary of mood (может) and a verb in the future tense (a perfective aspect in the present tense), symptomatic of causal clauses (*если* ее спрашивать, она *расскажет*). The second part of the story presents something that looks like a chain of events, but since the important and relevant events in Galia's life — her wedding for example — are left outside this narration, this must be considered a rudimentary narration, mostly uninteresting to the reader.¹³

In the first part of the story, the reader learns that Galia's father is unfaithful, that her mother has to accept this because she is so fat and that Galia's father vents his bad conscience on Galia. Instead of receiving this information in the shape of a narrative, the reader has to access the information by means of the irresponsible discourse of an argumentative collective. In order to convince the reader about Galia's lack of integrity, the narrator refers to all the intimate details

¹³ In this analysis, I will not make any further comments on the second half of the text taking its start from the seventh page (in total the story covers fourteen pages in the English translation). The second part begins with the sentence: Then Galia disappeared for a long time from the office... ' (Petrushevskaya 1995, 9). However, it is clear that the collective perspective is dominant also in this part of the story. The wedding, for instance, is told from the perspective of the collective. Instead of narrating Galia's wedding *as it takes place*, the important event is mediated to the reader by a collective referring to the time *before* and *after* the wedding. Before the wedding everybody at work tries to come up with a reason not to attend, but in the end they all go to the wedding. The next Monday after the wedding, the colleagues are gathered again, and it is only now that the reader gets any information about what happened at the wedding: '*...the next day* they all set off to the wedding in a Volga Sedan and *on Monday morning* had endless funny tales to tell about the wedding. About how Galia...' (Petrushevskaya 1995,15, [my italics, J.L.]).

that Galia has once told her colleagues. This means that the events in Galia's life, probably told in confidence, are presented as a kind of proof of how much she is prepared to reveal from her private life. In the next sentence the reader is given an illustrative example of what Galia *would* answer, *if* someone on the bus *did* ask her how she was:

She'd reply quite cheerfully that things were pretty bad at the moment. Mum had been put in hospital, *she'd say*, and her father had had to get time off work to look after her. "What, is your mother's condition that bad?" Yes, her condition was moderately serious, *she'd reply*, but if her father had got leave it must mean the end was near. "What do you mean, the end?" Well, the usual thing. "So what does your mother have?" Cancer, *she'd say*, in a perfectly normal tone of voice. "Has she had it long?" the colleague *would ask*, so absorbed in the story she'd lost all sense of where she was. 'Eight years', our storyteller *would answer*, and carry on answering all the questions that followed one after the other... (Petrushevskaya 1995, 3, [my italics, J.L.]).

Она с легкостью *ответит*, что все пока плохо. Что Маму положили в больницу, отец взял отпуск, чтобы за ней ухаживать. «Что, такое тяжелое у мамы положение?» Она *ответит*, что положение средней тяжести, но если отец взял отпуск, значит, скоро всему конец. «Как так конец?» Ну, как, обыкновенно. «А у мамы что?» Ну как, *ответит* она как ни в чем не бывало. «И давно?» — спрашивает сослуживица, заинтересованная до такой степени, что она даже теряет всякое ощущение места. «Восемь лет», — отвечает рассказчица и продолжает отвечать дальше на вопросы, которые следуют один за другим... (Petrushevskaya 1996,73).

Even if this passage represents a dialogue between Galia and one of her colleagues, this dialogue does not actually *take place* in a chain of events but is expressed as an example of Galia's deficient integrity. In this way, Galia's life is described by means of a *hypothetical* discourse, in which the reader gets information, not about what Galia *actually* says but what she *would probably* say, *if* anyone *did* ask her.

In spite of the dominance of a hypothetical discourse in the first part of the story, there are some examples of a traditional chain of events. The climax of this shift is reached when the narrator uses the past perfective *got out* (сошла). This discourse of narrative, where the event is represented as a *real* occurrence in time and space

is, however, immediately interrupted by the hypothetical modality marked by a verb in the present perfective:

The girl who had just *got out* was twenty years old, tall, extremely tall in fact, but sufficiently plump that she didn't look out of proportion. All the same, people were apt all of a sudden to notice that she had enormously long calves. And *if* they happened to remark on the fact, *she'd* just glance down, lift up her leg and *say* with total simplicity that during the last year she'd grown a good three inches and was quite sure now that she'd be just like her Mum. *If* anyone inquired further, *she'd say* that her mother was pretty fat, especially in the tummy... (Petrushevskaya 1995, 4, [my italics, J.L.]).

Той, которая *сошла*, двадцать лет, она высокая, очень высокая, но достаточно полная и поэтому соразмерная. Несмотря на это, *некоторые* вдруг замечают, что у нее огромные икры. *Ей можно сказать* об этом, она *оглянется*, задрав ногу, и вполне простодушно *скажет*, что за последний год она выросла в объеме на семь сантиметров и теперь уже не сомневается, что вырастет такой же, как мама. *Если ее дальше спрашивать*, она *расскажет*, что мама у нее полная женщина... (Petrushevskaja 1996, 74).

The vinous circle

The logic of this story about Galia is clear and painful. In early childhood, Galia's father violated her integrity. This pattern is later repeated by her colleagues at work, who listen to her tragic story without showing any kind of empathy, but only in order to slander her afterwards. What is really interesting in this story is that this vicious circle is repeated yet another time, namely on the level of representation. A traditional narrative would present Galia's life through a chain of events that had occurred in it. Hans-Christian Andersen, for example, depicts the ugly duckling's hardships among the collective of ducklings through the perspective of the ugly duckling. It is the *ugly* duckling, and not the little yellow ducklings (the norm), that constitutes the centre of this story, and the reader is presented with a chain of events depicting the cygnet's progress from an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan. This traditional narrative would have given Galia a chance to rehabilitate her poor position among a collective. Even if, like the ugly duckling, she was

considered on the level of plot to be an outsider, not able to fit within the general norm, she would, like in Hans-Christian Andersen's story, become the centre on the level of narration.

The narrator in *The Storyteller*, however, has no interest in describing Galia's unique life story, but relies on the norm of the collective. As opposed to the ugly duckling, Galia is never given the opportunity of finding her individuality in the future. Instead, the hypothetical discourse is used in order to highlight what is predictable and uninteresting in Galia's nature. It is as if the collective wants to say: it is pointless to follow the events, one by one, as they take place in Galia's life, since you can tell in advance how she is going to behave (*if y ou* asked her, she *would answer..?*).

Conclusion

As mentioned before, the temporal succession in a narrative evokes a dynamic understanding of identity, where possibility, chance and uncertainty are intimately connected to inevitability, fate and certainty. This theoretical point of departure guarantees a worldview in which human beings are expected to affect the future, at the same time as they must accept that events from the past have become an inevitable part of their life-stories. Against this theoretical background, it becomes clear that the narrative identity presents a dynamic structure, presupposing that the human being is 1) capable of affecting his or her own fate and 2) forced to accept the event as it has occurred. Ricoeur describes this dynamic aspect of the narrative in the following way: Thus chance is transmuted into fate. And the identity of the character can be understood only in terms of this dialectic' (Ricoeur 1992,147).

The deficient images of Ania and Galia as people, their lack of a narrative identity, can be explained by the fact that these characters are denied the possibility of developing in a chain of events. Instead, the two characters' identities are restricted to the concept offered by the collective. Instead of Ania and Galia being depicted through a chain of events, the reader learns in what ways they differ from the group. This means that their personalities are described, not according to a narrative identity, but as the result of a *comparison* within the

given norm system, where *similarity* contra *difference* in relation to the norm is noticed. Ania, in contrast to the collective, is a girl with integrity, someone who seems to take responsibility for her actions, and in contrast to the collective she keeps the secrets about Tamara to herself. Galia, on the contrary, has problems upholding her integrity towards the group, and in terms of the norm she tells her colleagues too much about herself.

In Ricoeur's terminology the static aspect of Ania's and Galia's identity would be described as their *idem* (Latin for 'identical'). Neither of them are described according to their *ipse* (Latin for 'self'). Ricoeur defines the respective identity forms as follows:

Identity in the sense of *idem* unfolds an entire hierarchy of significations [...]. In this hierarchy, permanence in time constitutes the highest order, to which will be opposed that which differs, in the sense of changing or variable. Our thesis throughout will be that identify in the sense of *ipse* implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality (Ricoeur 1992,2).

The lack of a temporal dimension in Petrushevskaja's two *histories* is crucial for an understanding of the relationship between narrative and identity. The *idem* identity, which takes shape in the stories, constitutes a black-and-white picture according to which both Ania and Galia differ from the norm. This binary method of representation deprives the characters of their unique lifeline, and in terms of the static norm of the collective, individual traits in their character appear as abnormal digressions. In this way, the Petrushevskian play with narrative has to be considered, not only as a play with genres and the expectations of the reader (see Gosciö 1993 and Dalton-Brown 2000), but also as an aesthetic act with ethical consequences, forcing the reader to oppose the existing norm of a collective and to develop compassion for the rejected individual depicted in the text.

The reading implicated in Petrushevskaja's texts, forcing the reader to *mistrust* the narrative perspective, thus counteracts a *suspension of disbelief*. This assumption is also reinforced in my interview with Petrushevskaja (Lindbladh 1999), in which I asked her what she wants to achieve with this kind of writing from the perspective of a collective. Petrushevskaja answered that her goal is to actually

provoke the reader to create an independent view of the world, not influenced by other people's worldviews, prejudices or by the collective memory dominating a certain cultural sphere. In other words, Petrushevskaja wants to challenge the reader's courage to stand up for his or her beliefs:

The voice of rumour, the voice of gossip, the voice of the crowd, the voice of banality, the voice that belongs to the sober people that no longer have any beliefs — a voice with which the author can enter into polemic, evoke as a spirit, so that *this voice* presents the story instead of the author. In this way, the author is able to play with his/her reader, so that you, as a reader, want to rebel (Interview with Petrushevskaja, Lindbladh 1999, [my translation, J.L.]).

Голос молвы, голос сплетни, голос толпы, голос банальности, голос трезвого, в ничто не верующего народа, тот голос с которым, возможно, автор вступает в полемику, вызывая его как духа — чтобы он передал сюжет, а не сам автор. Автор тем самым играет с читателем в игру, чтобы у Вас, как читателя, возникло чувство противоборства.

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