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THE STAR WORMWOOD
Notes in remembrance of a bitter anniversary

Pripyat is the only city in the world whose age is so easy to calculate: 1970 (founded) until 1986 (demise). Of all cities that have perished, Pripyat existed for the shortest period, only sixteen years. No longer a child, but not yet a young adult either. Instead, it was a teenager not yet come of age with the right to have an identity card. Rather than getting an ID card, they issued it a death certificate. Cause of death: Radiation sickness.

No other place had a life that passed as fast as lightning. And its destruction continues—in particular through human hands. Not only the forest is consuming Pripyat.

A passing remark: how many years did Sodom and Gomorrah exist? In one's wildest imagination it was certainly not less than Pripyat. Sixteen years could not have sufficed to enrage the beloved God to such a degree. So Sodom and Gomorrah are clearly inferior to Pripyat as regards the short flaring up of their existence.

In the case of Pripyat we even know the exact end date: April 27, 1986. No, not the 26th, but the 27th—the day of the evacuation, not the accident. The fact that it has a fixed end date raises Pripyat to the level of Pompeii, whose demise could also be dated precisely—the August 24, 79.

The phantom of Pompeii appeared quite suddenly, when we—traipsing through broken glass and pieces of rotting wood—set foot in Café Pripyat, once the hottest place in town. The café was situated on a hill above the landing dock at the river. From here you could observe the public beach and the arrival of the dazzling white Kiev hydrofoils. There was a large stained-glass window on the wall facing away from the river. OUR GUIDE said that according to local legend the artist had made a different window, which had invoked the disaster in the first place. It was a work entitled *The Last Day of Pompeii*. So he had cursed the city. Such a person should never have been commissioned to design a window in Pripyat. OUR GUIDE laughed as he told us this story.

The Last Day of Pompeii would hardly have fit into those times of socialist realism as a monumental, decorative theme, not even as replica of Briullov. What club, what cultural center, what sanatorium would have had use for such catastrophism? What executive committee would have commissioned such an unoptimistic picture, the ejection of volcanic lava and the anger of the heavens?

At best one could imagine that the spurious work came to see the light of day in a weak moment of the artist. A glass window for its own sake? To capture fleeting apocalyptic visions? Art that does not belong to the people? Art for art's sake? In any case it was a serious mistake to invite that latent decadent to Pripyat. People like him bring their horrible karma with them everywhere, thereby influencing the previously happy course of events.

How to find him today? How to make him responsible for everything that happened in his wake?

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What does the stained-glass window show?

First I should note that almost half of it was destroyed. So it isn't a window anymore; just half of one consisting entirely of fragments. The other half grinds

underfoot if you aren't careful as you walk in. By the way: The Geiger counter that OUR GUIDE carried over his shoulder started ticking like crazy when we entered the café, thereby denoting serious contamination. We cautiously walked around the pile of glass shards. Just don't walk barefoot—or else you will be illuminated.

But back to the window. What remains gives an impression of exaggerated chromacity. If you wanted to express the colors of the window in physical categories, then as often as possible with the prefixes “infra” and “ultra.” The window is unusually active; it radiates. We frequently use the verb “radiates” with a direct object. Someone radiates something, such as happiness or energy. Or radioactivity. The stained-glass window in Café Pripyat on the River Pripyat in the city of Pripyat simply radiates.

Its sun is of many colors. Like the rest of the world it is striped. The stripes are dark red, light yellow, dark blue, light blue, green. The summer in all its splendor, in fullest bloom, in abundance—the songs of the forests, the stillness of the lakes, reeds, pines, buzzing bees in the raspberry bushes, becoming one with nature, the sweet swelling of life.

Later, on the bus, OUR GUIDE showed us an agitprop film about the nuclear power plant that was shot the summer before the catastrophe. “And in particular ...,” the choleric gentleman with an engineer's rank wearing a white smock and eyeglasses almost did a flip out of sheer enthusiasm. “And in particular, we are in perfect harmony with nature, we are the fruit of its fruits! If you'd like, go swim in the river, walk in the forest, hike around among the pine trees, collect a panful of mushrooms for dinner. Please, be my guest, it is all here; we are in the midst of nature.”

Only ten months later this vibrant, sleek person and his deluge of words would seem like cynical mockery. But in that moment ... the propaganda of success, the familiar victorious context in which the words “human” and “nature” are written all in caps. H and N. HUMANS AND NATURE, HUMAN NATURE, a festival of harmony, swimming in the river, gathering mushrooms, the peaceful atom,¹ fragrance of pine, dialectic materialism.

The residents of Pripyat represented the victory of scientific communism, its embodiment: clean, naïve, and fresh.

And you really think I should have written “bold” instead of “fresh”?

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The most unforgettable thing that day were of course the catfish in the channel near the nuclear power plant. As big as dolphins or sharks, and therein lies nature's irrefutable, cruel answer to humanity (now in a different context, in which the words “human” and “nature” are written normally).

Watching fish in water has always been one of my favorite pastimes. And that, although I have had very little opportunities to do so in my life. Once in Nuremberg and once in Regensburg. In Nuremberg I think I gained the insight that Europe is a land where fish can live well. I would never have realized that had I not ended up in Nuremberg in the summer of 1995. Had I not kept standing on bridges there and looking down, to the bottom, above which the fish were slowly gliding. And I only made it to Nuremberg because Walter Mossmann had invited us there.

¹ OUR GUIDE told us about huge letters on the roof of a building in Pripyat that read: “The atom should be a worker, not a soldier!”

It isn't just by chance that I thought of him now, not just out of gratitude. But rather because a few months earlier he too had observed the catfish in the channel near the nuclear power plant. In his report he wrote of "meter-long animals with huge, flat skulls and wide mouths. And on the right and left, long flexible barbels that look like the long curled moustaches of the Zaporozhian Cossacks."

For those who didn't get it: This is a rather caustic joke—catfish with Cossack moustaches in a radioactive channel, immobile and buried in the mud, the cold blood of Ukraine, its fatty, fishy heart.

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Europe? A land where fish can live well?

As far as these catfish are concerned, I do have great doubts.

First of all, I don't know if they really are living all that well. Long, yes: No one goes fishing or clubbing them. Everyone is afraid of the definitive overdose. What is the life expectancy of the *Silurus glanis*, the common (and not radioactive) wels catfish? Evidently almost a hundred years. It is the longest living fish in our rivers and lakes. The only fish that lives longer than the catfish is the mossy carp, and that is only in the novels by Aldous Huxley.

The uncommon catfish (*Radioactivus contaminus*), however, the Pripjat catfish, will live forever. And as their body size in year 25 after the disaster shows, they will also grow forever. Until they turn into immortal Monster-Leviathans, that is. But with all this are they really doing all that well?

Second, I don't know if this is really about Europe. Europe manifests itself in our country only to disappear again very quickly. It doesn't have clear contours, just like communism in the early Marx-Engels poetry. It is ungraspable; it consists entirely of fog, misunderstandings, and rumors.

In April 1986, in any case, Europe was not at all topical. There was the USSR and the West, and of course also China. What kind of Europe? Central Europe? Eastern Europe? If "East," could one even speak of "Europe" at all? The real Europe can't be East. From geography lessons we knew that objectively speaking, only the European regions of Russia and some bordering republics existed. The city of Pripjat lay somewhere in the middle of these European regions. But certainly not in Europe.

What would have happened if Sweden hadn't kept on about the accident so tenaciously? Nothing at all, it seems, except for the usual silence of the usual mega-crime. The statistics on cancer instances have been declared classified anyway, Sweden notwithstanding. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary in the Soviet Union.

And still, it is a good thing the opposition of systems existed. Good thing Sweden caused a ruckus and drew attention to the risk for Poland. Good thing Poland gradually stopped being a friend and oriented itself more and more towards the West. This time it turned away from the radioactive cloud—holding its breath and turning up its nose in disgust. Good thing Poland got frightened and adopted Sweden's outrage.

But France never stopped being a friend and denied everything. No danger, said France, everything is still a green light. Good thing there was no European Union then. Or else it would have made yet another one of its absolutely shamefully undecided decisions (please excuse the oxymoron)—as it did during the war in Georgia. Just don't annoy the Russians, that's the main thing.

Good thing Germany had gone through what it had in the 1970s, when hundreds of thousands, even millions gathered to protest nuclear power, led by some poets with guitars and noisemakers. Good thing the German Greens had already had a special party convention in Hanover on May 17. May 17 is the day I wrote the following lines:

The blood changes. Gone the color of the chestnut tree.
We hurry to live after all's been undone.
Therein might lie the solution—this to see
As the final blossoming. The only. One.

No one understood what they are about. But Walter Mossmann, who certainly would have understood, did not yet know of their existence. "... and I tried back then," he wrote, "to imagine a landscape contaminated to such a degree, the bright forests, the waters, the fields, the villages—radioactive. But I couldn't. It is impossible to envisage it."

A dozen years later I answered him: "What were our initial reactions? Understanding them means understanding what it means to fear the wind, the rain, the green grass, the light." And I also wrote about the "presence of another death—not tangible, not visible, a 'growing death,'² a death lacking all form (and according to Hegel also lacking content), so that all resistance no longer made any sense."

But the state authorities demanded this resistance. From the very beginning they mercilessly sent squadrons of crazy rescuers into the zone—just like they do in war, forcing masses of non-uniformed, unarmed men from the "just liberated territories" to engage in an *offensive*. The authorities ordered the resistance and hastened its end. Although no one anticipated it. It seemed that the world would come to an end before such a wonderful, epochal empire ceased to exist.

The resistance was: deactivation. Washing away the dirt in the Exclusion Zone. Whatever could not be washed away was buried.³ And what could not be buried was simply left.

But there was also another kind of resistance that consisted of marauding. As if the people had decided to deal with the radioactive contamination by spreading it around, that is, by taking possession of foreign things. As if whatever you took out of someone else's house would immediately lose its lethal radiation.

Pripyat is therefore not only an abandoned city, but also a plundered one, a take-out city. That's the reason for its special attraction. Not a city anymore, but a body raped again and again by ever newer hordes of rescuers and lovers.

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In his notes, Walter Mossmann calls Pripyat an "unparalleled installation." I too sometimes found that I could not help thinking it was more a matter of fragments of a deliberately created and methodically developed exhibition in a contemporary art-and-ecology zone, except that the curators also overdid it for months, as a result of which the dosimeters went crazy, also for months. And not just them;

² Why not "death in installments"?

³ The street to Pripyat goes through the villages of Zalesye, which means "beyond the forest," and Kopachi, from *kopatyi*, or "to dig." The last-named village was in fact buried. So the name turned out to be prophetic.

some time later, Walter Mossmann admitted that “the whole city of Pripjat is an installation with so many interpretive levels that it makes my head spin.” I’ve taken up the spinning of his head and tried to list at least the main interpretive levels—I wanted to formulate the question as to the semiotics of Pripjat. Even I came up with more than two levels. Here are the first five:

Ecological.
Political.
Social.
Lyrical.
Mythological.

In connection with the last named, it was the friend of humanity and enemy of the gods who appears, superhuman and almost-god: the Titan.

* * *

Prometheus, and not just any old Zabaoth or Jehovah, fashioned humans out of clay. What word immediately comes into our associative consciousness when we hear his name? Correct—“fire”! But it should have been “clay,” albeit the red variety. It is only possible to grasp the significance of the fire that was stolen from the gods for the sake of humankind if the “clay” factor is taken into account. That is, the circumstance that Prometheus had to continue worrying about his clay creations. Such worry can burn with urgency. Clay turns hard and strong only if it is fired. We cannot escape the fire. All the less if the fire is raging in a nuclear reactor.

Prometheus is the Romantics’ favorite. As if they had conspired, one after another they sang his praises, praises of the self-sacrificing revolt against the traditional order of things. It is not surprising that Taras Shevchenko, in his particularly concrete-political poem “The Caucasus,” first had to dissociate himself from the one who had been chained to a rock for 30,000 years (what a term of imprisonment that is!). The eagle fits as well, hardly one that is double-headed, but still the absolute imperial consumer of the liver.

Also in the era of socialist realism Prometheus remained the favorite, especially of late-Soviet electrical power. As a kind of patron saint of newer and newer power plants and the accompanying residential settlements. As if he had invented the slogan of electrifying the entire country.

Pripjat had to become a center of his cult. The next strike conjured as a result by the envious and greedy gods hit the reactor.

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Second, of course the star, the star Wormwood. Verses 10 and 11 from chapter 8 of the Revelation of John were widely cited here, already in the summer of 1986, that is, hardly a month after the disaster. Wormwood is a rare, somehow meaningless name, if it really has to do with a star—even if it refers to a comet or meteorite. Why should a cosmic body bear the name of an herb? The name gains its significance only in connection with the place of the catastrophe.

Wormwood signifies the double A: apocalypse and absinthe. Both are special extracts: of secret knowledge and of bitterness. If geographic names were translated, then people around the world would have spoken not of Chernobyl, but of the technogenic accident in Absinthe.

Of course there is also a third “A,” as in angel (the third angel in Revelation who sounded the trumpet). Isn’t that the one we can recognize among all the other

figures on the aforementioned stained-glass window in the café? Yet another Pompeian greeting by the artist? Even if it is disguised as a flying girl (the breasts!), and even if its wings are invisible, it *is* playing the trumpet, the most important and characteristic sign. Angels cannot have any female sex traits, especially not any external ones, since angels have no gender. But angels can disguise themselves as girls. Long hair and the absence of any male sex traits, even the internal ones, make that possible. The angel on the glass window might be one of those. Its author didn't know that, but he did suspect something. And suspicions are often stronger than knowledge.

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We drove along Lenin Prospekt into the City of the Electric Sun and got off the bus at the square in front of the “Energetik” Palace of Culture—at the intersection of Lenin Prospekt and Kurchatov Prospekt. Actually, throughout all of these sentences there should be the epithet “the former”—at least six, or even seven times. Formerness is the primary and most significant characteristic of Pripyat. It forces you to switch on memory, to the limit. Memory has to work for everything else, since everything else no longer exists in Pripyat.

In my childhood and youth I often dreamed of Yucatán and its abandoned jungle cities. It is probably unfair to compare Pripyat with them since they are too beautiful. But this is about how nature reclaims what belongs to it, how it returns. It is about the sometimes impenetrable undergrowth, about the former farms, trees on roofs and in stairwells, about deer and wild boars that suddenly cross the Avenue of Friendship of the whatever Peoples (formerly; today Friendship of the Creatures), about extraterrestrial, hypertrophic mushrooms filled to the brim with x-rays. Nature has returned and has reclaimed what was lost a hundred times over. The unsympathetic, incorruptible triumph of nature over the system bears witness to the unnaturalness of this very system, to the fact that the site where Kurchatov and Lenin intersect crosses the bounds of the order of things and is dreadfully dangerous.

Hit worst of all was the amusement park, whose Ferris wheel should best no longer be approached. As OUR GUIDE told us, there were only four more days until opening day. It was supposed to open on May 1. Everything was ready, the carousels were well-oiled; the only thing missing was the hand signal by the director, the fanfare of the orchestra. They just had to cut the red ribbon and let the masses in. The residents of Pripyat had been counting the days, together with their children: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five more days until it opened!

That was just about how long till Communism. As shown by the growing prosperity, the Kiev cakes, which people drove all the way from Kiev to Pripyat to buy. While I stepped over broken glass and other crunching debris, I noticed the countless gas ovens and refrigerators in the Raduga (“rainbow”) store. Here it has been realized, this *highest*, truly highest, this Moscow supply category.

Color number one in the city of Pripyat should be this color of the ovens, refrigerators, and washing machines—ideal white, the sum of the rainbow, symbol of stainlessness and purity, the manifestation of absolute cleanliness and sterility; the color of smocks, wings, April gardens, and fast boats on hydrofoils that are just as white, which dock regularly in the city.

And if we imagine the angels dressed, then white is the color of their special clothing.

As I rambled through the former “Energetik” Palace of Culture, I had to think of the third myth, which is also the phantom of this city. Its name is

HARMONIOUS HUMAN, the prototype that was fashioned by Prometheus, clay product number one, untiring and conscientious laborer, brilliant dancer with perfect pitch and velvet voice, world champion in chess and swimming, as well as acrobatics, numismatics, and gymnastics. On the crumbling, flaking mural in the foyer, the WORKERS, ENGINEERS, and SCIENTISTS—in a novel trinity—united themselves with model PEASANTS and circled happily in dance. The echo of the Soviet pop singers Leontjev, Antonov, Rotaru with her song “Lavender,” and others could still be heard in the concert hall.

Later, in the club’s workshop, which was full of portraits of Politburo members, I tried to remember their names. In the army we had to learn them by heart, just in case, so we could distinguish the faces of all these do-gooders. But how can Voronov and Kapitonov be distinguished? And Ustinov from Tikhonov? And Gromyko from Kunayev? And—even more complicated—how can we see Vorotnikov in Solomentsev? How can the ideal be distinguished from the ideal? And the positive from the positive? The perfected from the harmonious? The good from the better?

The city of Pripyat died because it was not able to answer these questions. The HARMONIOUS HUMAN could not stand its own progress and choked on its happiness.

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P.S. I also remember this from the stories of OUR GUIDE: Around New Year’s 1986, the huge municipal New Year’s tree set up in front of the “Energetik” Palace of Culture fell down twice. Virtually none of the city’s residents paid any attention to this omen.

Translated from the German by Allison Brown