

Hoping against Hope? On Transformation in Liudmila Petrushevskaja's Fairy Tales

Izabela Zdun
McGill University
Montréal, Canada

Abstract

Jack Zipes mourns the disregard for what he, after Ernst Bloch, refers to as the utopian purpose of the folktale: its capacity for fostering human autonomy and proposing means to alter the world. Building on Bloch's concept, Zipes contends that what has been missing is seeing life as a process that can be altered and the difficult realities of the present actively faced, not escaped. He asserts that contemporary fairy tales succeed at reviving the utopian function when they are self-reflective and experimental, that is, when they question the forms and themes that the folktale and the fairy tale have developed [Zipes 1983: 170-193]. They succeed also when they nurture the urge for individual and social transformation. This paper examines two fairy tales of a renowned contemporary Russian author Liudmila Petrushevskaja from this perspective. Although veiled in her customary grim vision, which includes existential uncertainty and sociopolitical instability, Petrushevskaja's fairy tales project an impulse for individual and social change. The paper outlines how the author envisions individual and social transformation in today's world.

The wonder tale is a remnant of miracles past
in which the storyteller himself does not believe,
but for whose reign he nevertheless longs.
[Siniavskii 2007: 73]

Known predominantly as a prolific prosaist and playwright who has ignited fervent controversy throughout her career, Liudmila Petrushevskaja is considered one of the most prominent contemporary Russian writers. Petrushevskaja is chiefly recognized as a writer of *chernukha*, hyper-naturalist prose that emphasizes "[e]veryday cruelty and crime, tortures and humiliations of recruits in the army, the horror of prisons and other penitentiaries, the ordinary life of homeless derelicts and prostitutes, coupled with the interest [...] in the corporeal aspects of the everyday, especially sexuality" [Lipovetsky 2011: 179]. The gloom of her fiction and drama pertains to the disturbingly dark themes she explores, which include suicide, alcoholism, child abuse, broken marriages, one-night stands, unwanted pregnancies, homelessness, abject poverty, and physical and psychological violence [Goscilo 1996: 18]. As they deal with the dark side of humanity and sociopolitical life, it is unsurprising that Petrushevskaja's works were considered too bleak for publication in the Soviet Union. (1)

Petrushevskaja is also the author of hundreds of fairy tales, which, although numerous, comprise a largely unacknowledged segment of her *oeuvre*. While tapping into the Russian and Western tradition of this genre, Petrushevskaja's fairy tales are not exactly fairy tales in the traditional sense of the term. They employ the characteristic structural and stylistic components of the folktale, including stable plot trajectory and stock characters, motifs, formulaic beginnings and endings, and at the same time—imbued with authorial creativeness—they revise genre attributes and conventions. (2) Crucially, Petrushevskaja's fairy tales break with the utter hopelessness conjured by the portrayals of spiritual and material poverty so characteristic of her prose and drama. Although loss may be the dominant theme in her fairy tales—and in this they hardly differ from her customary writing—it is followed by a path toward recovery. The hope for recovery, inherent in the folktale tradition, is what differentiates her fairy tales from her other works.

In the fairy-tale context, recovery may be associated with a maturation process through which one figuratively transforms and so enters a new stage of existence. (3) Arguably, the most lasting transformations occur when the characters become active participants in their own lives, when they make choices resulting in their growth. Such transformations also reverberate most with the readers who themselves appraise the process of maturation of the heroes. In Petrushevskaja's fairy tales, transformation comprises a symbolic death and rebirth founded on exercising individual and social agency. This paper explores the motif of transformation in Petrushevskaja's two tales, “С Новым годом, преступник!” [“Happy New Year, Law-Breaker!”] [2010] and “Сказка зеркал” [“The Mirrors' Fairy Tale”] [2005], as particularly apt examples of addressing and illustrating the urge for individual and social change in today's world. The questions this paper poses are the following: How does Petrushevskaja envisage hope for transformation in 21st-century Russia, in an ever more cynical and disenchanted world? Is this individual and social transformation attainable?

Jack Zipes's studies of the utopian function [1983; 1988; 1991; 1994; 2002], like Ernst Bloch's before him [1918-1923; 1938-1947], offer valuable insight on the significance of individual and social renewal—and, as such, are helpful in understanding Petrushevskaja's narratives, specifically the possibilities of individual and social transformation. Although it is not possible to provide a comprehensive answer to the question of the folktale's function and exactly what the folktale offers its audience, Zipes insists on one enduring characteristic of the genre: its predisposition toward projecting transformational hopes for individual and social change [Zipes 2002: 154]. For, as Zipes maintains, it is specifically the folktale that “projected the wish and possibility for human autonomy and eros and proposed means to alter the world” [Zipes 1994: 142]. Zipes notes that folktales “fostered a sense of belonging and the hope that miracles involving some kind of magical transformation were possible to bring about a better world” [Zipes 1991: x, xii]. In his analyses, he gestures toward Bloch's notion of literature's utopian function, which has its roots in oral tales. In *The Spirit of Utopia* [1923], Bloch signals that the time has come for human beings to take life into their own hands

and shape their destiny. It is through the utopian function of literature that human beings learn and analyze themselves and their goals. The utopian kernel is determined by what Bloch calls "anticipatory illumination," or an image closely linked with the possibility of rearranging social relations, which engenders a "home we have all once sensed but never experienced or known" [Bloch 1988: xxxii]. Such images of "home" illuminate, or motivate, the ways into the future.

Building on Bloch's concept, Zipes contends that generating wonder, that is, awakening regard for the miraculous condition of life, has been largely undermined in fairy tales over the course of the centuries. (4) More specifically, what has been overlooked is seeing life through fairy-tale wonder as a process that can be changed and the difficult realities of the present faced, not escaped. What is important today to writers and readers alike is thus to rediscover that utopian essence. It comprises the "original impulse of hope for better living conditions as it was formed in the oral tradition" [Zipes 1988: 29]. It also empowers people and nurtures their hope to hold a cracked mirror up to ossified reality, as it suggests ways to transform their life and the world [Zipes 1994: 154, 159]. Zipes concludes that fairy tales, including contemporary fairy tales, revive the utopian function and retain their revolutionary power when they are self-reflective and experimental, that is, when they question the forms and themes that the folktale and the fairy tale have developed. They succeed also—and that is what interests us here most—when they seek and explore the possibilities for a better self and a better world, and when they do so through "the immediacy of the common people's perspective" [Zipes 2002: 156].

It might be surprising for Petrushevskaja's readers to see her likened to Marxist scholars such as Bloch, since her fiction at large emerges as a grotesque and mocking discreditation of the aftermath of the Soviet ideology. In addition, her works are also not marked by straightforwardly political implications. Petrushevskaja's position is not revolutionary per se, either, in that it does not call for radical overthrows of the government, yet her fairy tales may be read as manifestos. Although Petrushevskaja has never taken the route of direct political engagement, some of her works contemplate better scenarios, which, along the lines of Bloch, we are capable of realizing with our own powers. The emphasis on "our own powers" is especially relevant in this analysis, as it views the driving force of change in the collective, in common people, who are at the heart of both Bloch's and Petrushevskaja's writing. The common people for Bloch, as a Marxist, are the lower-middle class, youth and marginal groups whom he considered pivotal for bringing about socialism [Zipes 2002: 157]. In Petrushevskaja's fairy tales, they are fellow post-Soviet city dwellers, the elderly poor, people deprived of their families and belongings during the 1917 Revolution and the World War II years, as well as those who suffered during the turmoil of the 1990s. Bloch's writing is informed by a critique of capitalism and a resulting alienation as daily life became more structured, work more rationalized, and institutions more bureaucratic. Petrushevskaja's fairy tales are written in the hyper-capitalist era and offer a critical commentary on the ossified reality of contemporary humanity: spiritual emptiness, the ever-growing desire for

immediate gratification, intellectual passivity, and preference for the Internet and television as a pastime. Petrushevskaja's common people, her Everyman, are at the same time psychologically and socially entangled individuals of today's world: looking for the meaning of life, while being affected by its superficiality and consumerism. Her heroes and heroines are often also solitary, rejected, and unfairly treated individuals. In this regard, these characters resemble the fairy-tale hero in that they are the underdogs, or good-for-nothing heroes, to borrow Meletinsky's term [Meletinsky 1975: 236, 242]. (5)

Admittedly, given the dark side of human nature they often reflect, the picture of many of Petrushevskaja's common people as potential heralds of revolution is not a promising one. Yet, in this tapestry of ordinary people, as it were, there are characters in her fairy tales who release self-agency by gaining control over their own lives and who are propelled to action by discontent with current sociopolitical conditions and human relations. They are capable of confronting their lot and facing adversity. Importantly, they actively participate in individual and social transformation without the aid of magical helpers, be they supernatural beings or talking animals.

What is crucial—as we will demonstrate below—is that the possibility of individual and social transformation in Petrushevskaja's fairy tales hinges on the strengthening of interpersonal relations. Petrushevskaja's approach to togetherness echoes Bloch's and Zipes's position: "Meaning cannot be achieved by a human being alone. The dependence on other beings must be acknowledged if the individual is to raise himself up and to stride forward in an upright posture toward home, which, as we know, is the beginning of history, a realm without alienating conditions" [Zipes 2002: 167]. At the same time, Petrushevskaja's insistence on meaningful togetherness has a less political dimension and approaches instead the idea of universal brotherhood, a concept particularly important in 19th-century Russian literature and explored by such writers as Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. The call for brotherhood has its roots in the old religious idea of *sobornost'* [the spirit of communality] but Petrushevskaja deemphasizes the religious aspect of atonement and universal guilt and responsibility (carrying one another's burdens) and stresses instead the attempts to create interpersonal bonds in the midst of post-theological life, in the here and now. (6) When Petrushevskaja's heroes and heroines manage to forge meaningful interpersonal bonds, these bonds are not so much a source of moral value for them as they constitute spiritual support and help alleviate their quotidian existence. Petrushevskaja's evocations of togetherness thus constitute a kind of secularized spirituality, or spirituality beyond religion, wherein a fellow human being (re)gains humanistic, more profound value in an unjust, impersonal, and alienating world.

The tale "С Новым годом, преступник!" ["Happy New Year, Law-Breaker!"] is a good case in point to explore both sociopolitical and spiritual awakening through meaningful togetherness. It is one of the most explicitly political tales in Petrushevskaja's repertoire, given not only its sociopolitical background but also its outright identification of those who subvert the status quo

and fight for human rights. The story is set on New Year's Eve and begins with a reference to *Anna Karenina*. Alluding to the famous opening sentence of Tolstoy's novel about the ordinariness of all happy families, Petrushevskaja's family is, as the narrator claims and as we will verify, not ordinary: "Однако, как было сказано в классической литературе, эта одинаковая обыденность свойственна только счастливым семьям. А мы приступаем к рассказу о семье не такой, как у всех" [As was said in the classics, this ordinariness is characteristic only of happy families. But we begin to tell the story of an extraordinary family] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 501]. (7) At first glance, though, it does not seem like Petrushevskaja's family is unordinary. It is a fragmented family typical of her prose or drama that resembles many others in contemporary Russia. Varvara is left by the father of her three young children with whom she did not have much in common, especially after he fell in love with another woman: "И надо сказать, что вообще-то разговоров у Варвары и Олега почти не завязывалось – так, всё по делу, кому в магазин и что купить и кто с детьми сегодня гуляет" [It must be said that there were almost no conversations between Varvara and Oleg – only about business, who should go to the store and what to buy, and who is going out with the children today] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 503]. Varvara is nevertheless fearless and capable of enduring life's burdens. Her kindness draws a number of people into her life. One of her admirers is Ivan, a shy and rather silent man who bears resemblance to the common Russian tale hero Ivanushka the Fool, whose low consciousness hides a lofty essence, to use Meletinsky's term [Meletinsky 1975: 236, 242]. As Varvara is on her way to buy mayonnaise for her unfinished herring salad, a dish so common it further evokes the ordinariness of all Russian families, Ivan calls to tell her he has been arrested.

The story moves to the police station where Varvara—who now takes up the role of the princess delivering a youth in distress—meets Ivan's family: his parents and his younger sister. The scene she witnesses as she arrives depicts Veronika, Ivan's sister, loudly declaring her disgruntlement over her brother's detainment:

Какое имеете – вы – право – арестовывать – людей – тридцать первого числа? Потому что право на митинги и собрания записаны в тридцать первой статье нашей Конституции? Только поэтому? Несанкционированный митинг – тут какой-то бред! Как можно не разрешать встречу! Митинг – это по-английски просто встреча! Друзей на улице! На улице каждый может встретиться и говорить!

[What – right – do you – have – to arrest – people – on the thirty-first of December? Because the right for meetings and gatherings is written in the thirty-first article of our Constitution? Is that the only reason? Unauthorized meeting – this is some kind of nonsense! How can a meeting be forbidden! Meeting in English simply means a meeting! To meet friends on the street! On the street, everyone can meet up and talk!] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 505]. (8)

Veronika, as the narrator suggests, resembles Valeriia Novodvorskaia, who was a Soviet and post-Soviet dissident and political activist: “Вероника была довольно крупная девочка в очках и, когда она так приветливо улыбалась, то неуловимо напоминала Валерию Новодворскую. Как говорится, сквозь мягкие черты юности проглядывало её твёрдое будущее” [Veronika was a rather large girl with glasses, and when she smiled so cordially she imperceptibly resembled Valeriia Novodvorskaia. As they say, her solid future peeked through the soft features of her youth] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 505]. Ivan’s parents display equal courage and civic engagement. While his father manages to speak with the chief of the police station to have his son released, Ivan’s mother demonstrates her diplomacy and good heartedness as she offers the police officer homemade food. As the whole company enjoys a modest New Year’s Eve supper at the police station, we learn further details about the reasons for the mass arrests, which eerily resemble the actual sociopolitical situation in Russia. More and more participants in the “unauthorized meeting” are brought to the police station; some of them are wounded and assaulted: “Народу в отделение набилось много. Судя по тихим разговорам, там стояли уже опытные бойцы, многие прошли через аресты и мордобитие” [There were many people packed in the police station. Judging by the quiet conversations, there were already experienced fighters among them, many having gone through arrests and beatings] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 509]. The measures against dissidents have changed, but not substantially. While Novodvorskaia was arrested, imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital, and falsely diagnosed with schizophrenia, in today’s Russia “dissidents” are arrested and jailed for illegal rallies and protests. (9)

Ivan’s father eventually manages to have his son released. As Varvara, Ivan, and Varvara’s children are returning (to what will be their) home, they see other protesters and remark on the fraternity between them:

Причём шли они как-то порознь, не компаниями – создавалось такое впечатление, что в этом потоке брели преимущественно одиночки и что они справили Новый год где хотели – не сами по себе, по норам, а на людях, там они братались, наливали из припасенных бутылок соседям, все вместе и всласть кричали своё “ура”, причём стоя в самом центре Москвы, в сердце России, у кремлёвских стен, под вой курантов, плечом к плечу, в восторге!

[They were walking kind of separately, not in companies – you got the impression that predominantly loners wandered in this current and that they celebrated the New Year where they wanted – not on their own, in dens, but with people, where they fraternized, poured from the stocked up bottles to their neighbors, all together and to their hearts’ content they shouted “hurray,” standing in the very center of Moscow, in the heart of Russia, by the Kremlin walls, bells chiming, shoulder to shoulder, in joy!] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 510].

This scene is especially evocative and conjures a sense of solidarity in the participants' shared civic cause. As such, it has a simple yet potent message: people must join together for a common social and political objective. Collectively, individuals can change their circumstances, including sociopolitical structures, thus acting on and for the sake of their freedom. Petrushevskaja's emphasis on communal bonds reverberates with Zipes's, and Bloch's before him, revolutionary spirit and his advocacy of releasing "the resilient latent qualities of humankind manifested in the struggle for a better world" so as to become makers of our own history [Zipes 2002: 146]. More specifically, this scene evokes Bloch's concept of anticipatory illumination, that is, a hint of happiness that maps out possible ways to attain happiness in the future. The sense of fraternity in a common goal, especially as it is juxtaposed with authoritarianism and repression, is read as a moment of happiness, which captures this tale's utopian essence. Finally, in line with the latter, this tale may also be compared to what Jean-Paul Sartre once called *littérature engagée* [committed literature], or literature critically involved in the historical and political situation of the day that aims to change the world not merely by disclosing but by inspiring action. Thus, importantly, literature that reveals the urge for change.

Petrushevskaja's depiction of the dissidents as loners in the opening sentence of the same quote is equally evocative. The image of dissidents as "predominantly loners," walking for the same purpose but "kind of separately" exposes featureless collectivism—a body of lonely individuals. This image implies skepticism about attaining the Blochian home and communicates that individuals revolting against oppression should not only be tools in the process. They need not be alienated and depersonalized as to lose their interior existence, and so be deprived of depth. Petrushevskaja's suggestion is simple and yet potent again: meaningful social existence is inseparable from an individual's spiritual dimension. The latter comprises for Petrushevskaja a spiritual strengthening that occurs in relatedness to and in solidarity with a fellow human being and acquires a universal value in today's secular world.

The answer to alienation and depersonalization is poignantly expressed in this tale through the depiction of forging bonds at a micro-stratum—at the family level. Petrushevskaja's contemporary family continues the search for home as a safe harbor, in a very mundane setting at that. Varvara realizes she loves Ivan, whose devotion she had overlooked. She communicates this in the final paragraph when she sees Ivan sleeping on the floor in her bedroom and covers him with a blanket. The Blochian home in this tale can be understood literally: as a realm without alienating conditions and marking the beginning of history, as Varvara and Ivan begin a new history founded on love and communion. In this regard, Petrushevskaja's portrayal of home leaves out the sociopolitical loftiness revered by Bloch and acquires instead another kind of magnitude: closer to the human being and possible to be achieved in everyday life. The need for social togetherness thus parallels the need for attaining happiness on a smaller, more intimate, scale.

The gesture toward *Anna Karenina* at the beginning of the tale is not incidental and becomes more comprehensible at the end. Petrushevskaja's interest is in fact not unlike Tolstoy's in that it lies in spiritual searching through the portrayals of family (un)happiness as well as a broader human connection. In Petrushevskaja's reversal of the classic, however, it is family unhappiness turning into happiness. Given the meaningful bonds they manage to forge, Petrushevskaja's family can indeed, as the narrator claims, be considered unordinary in today's world. What we observe is an ordinary—unhappy—family turning into an extraordinary—happy—family thanks to experiencing meaningful togetherness. We may interpret this movement as a shift from disintegration to re-integration. Apart from political allusions, the sense of disintegration in this tale is further expressed through the depiction of contemporary New Year's Eve dinners, which are shared by disengaged, fragmented families, and where the extraordinariness of the Yuletide is no longer sensed or appreciated. This time of the year has now become associated with self-interested consumerism and ever-growing search for amusement. In contrast, the deeper meaning of the Yuletide is accentuated in this tale in *extraordinary* circumstances—during the modest New Year's Eve dinner shared at the police station but in the atmosphere of empathy and compassion—thereby evoking the sense of re-integration, wherein spiritual emptiness is filled in by authentic togetherness. Meaningful togetherness, the ability to experience union with others, is therefore understood as the missing home for unhappy families and societies alike.

The invocation of the New Year's Eve is thus not incidental either, as it heightens the symbolism of transformation, felt especially at this time of the year. (10) On this night, after all, everything is possible. New Year's Eve is considered a powerful, liminal time of the year when antisocial behavior rules. The gatherings on the streets might be deemed antisocial behavior in the current Russian political context. The night at the police station also leads to a fundamental change in Varvara, to her self-discovery. She passes through this period, living one life up to New Year's Eve and beginning a new life on New Year's Day. This transformation is reflected in her emerging love for Ivan. It can be concluded that Petrushevskaja's tale communicates the possibility of individual and sociopolitical transformation. At the same time, the empowerment that her characters gain exposes to the reader what is missing in today's world in terms of human relations and social and political norms. The ensuing contrast betrays Petrushevskaja's protest against this reality.

The tale “Сказка зеркал” [“The Mirrors' Fairy Tale”] also takes place around the time of Christmas and explores the motif of transformation. It is a tale of becoming aware of oppression, defining it as a shared experience, and opposing it by way of self-sacrifice for one another and for humanity at large. The title of the tale is evocative, and the tale itself centers on the eponymous mirrors. Of all magical objects, it is the enchanted mirror that has a special status in the folktale. As Christine Mains observes, magic mirrors reflect both the surface appearance and the inner soul of the person looking into them [Mains 2005: 528-530]. Mirrors symbolize truth and insight and often provide a glance at worlds different from

our own. Mirrors in Petrushevskaja's tale reflect precisely these two traits, albeit in a Petrushevskian, questioning fashion.

Petrushevskaja introduces us to a fairy-tale world, where once upon a time, there was a shop window with a variety of mirrors, for example: Psiche [Cheval Glass], the oldest of mirrors in the window case, Krivovotoe zerkalo [Crooked Mirror], and Diadia Svist [Uncle Whistler]. Using their mirror attributes, they reflect landscapes and passers-by immersed in their everyday lives. Distressed about becoming forgotten and perishing, they compete to reflect the most beautiful images and are malevolent to each other. They are especially cruel toward the smallest mirror in the window case, an example of Petrushevskaja's rejected and unfairly treated characters. Because of his exceptional and arcane ability to reflect not just surface appearance, as the other mirrors in the window case do, but also what is concealed, the other mirrors scornfully call him Genii [Genius]. He is said to know about secret agents, murders, and conspiracies. Genii enigmatically pronounces that he is able to stop "something imminent" and that he would subsequently perish as a result.

The imminent destructive force in the tale is called Odinochestvo [Solitude], which—passing as opaque darkness—conjures associations of oppression. Odinochestvo's intended victim is Ryzhaia Kroshka [Carrot-Top Poppet], the red-haired granddaughter of the shopkeeper and beloved object of reflection for all the mirrors. Genii calls the destructive force's attention to the girl (thereby upsetting the other mirrors, who fear her and, by extension, their own demise) with the single-minded goal of forcing it to look into his reflective surface: "Вот она! Смотрите! Вот! Тут! - хрипел Гений" [There she is! Look! Here! Here! - Genii wheezed] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 374]. When Odinochestvo finally looks into the mirror, it sees its own reflection, which puts an end to its pursuit of the girl. Genii's courageous deed of reversing the image of the destructive force thus leads to suspension of its sinister acts. Consequently, as a result of his sacrifice, Genii breaks into pieces.

The destructive force carries different meanings in this tale. First of all, it is marked by political overtones (Genii's knowledge of secret agents, murders, and conspiracies). But it can also be interpreted literally, as solitude, and—more broadly—as death. The fear of solitude in this tale indeed overlaps with and is understood as the fear of death. The mirrors are obsessed with the thought of their demise and being forgotten, which is why they compete to reflect the most beautiful images, albeit mere surface appearances. Allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by the destructive force makes the mirrors withdraw from one another, thus isolating them. Conversely, Genii is able to see in depth, is already solitary, and is not afraid of death or any other form of oppression. His capacity to reflect back to itself a denizen of the otherworld, death itself, evokes one's coming face to face with death (or, in a parallel understanding, solitude), realizing and accepting it. His deed may also speak to people's inherent need to overcome isolation through oneness with others.

There is a suggestive moment in this tale. Although Genii breaks into pieces, he does not cease to exist. Rather, he transforms into a new life. At the end of the

tale, Genii's last shard falls into a new mirror mold that is eventually used in a children's clinic:

Его непонятно почему купил один суровый старик, по профессии главный врач, и повесил в раздевалке своей детской поликлиники. Там оно отражает бегущих детей и солидных подростков, а также младенцев [...] И когда-нибудь туда обязательно придёт одна рыжая молоденькая дама с младенчиком...

[Strangely enough, one stern old man, chief physician by profession, bought it and hung it up in the locker room of his children's clinic. There it reflects running children and solid adolescents, as well as babies [...] And one day one red-haired young lady with a baby will certainly come here...] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 377].

It appears that although the small mirror is broken, his potential to demystify the negative does not perish; neither does, in a broader understanding, the courage to oppose all forms of oppression. In other words, losing wholeness, breaking into fragments, and sacrificing oneself, foregrounds the (re)birth of a keener awareness as the prerequisite for countering oppression by destructive social elements. Transformed, the mirror is poised to be used by the next generation, which points to the hope of rebirth.

Genii's rebirth is further highlighted through the invocation of Christmas: "Зеркало знало, что эта встреча произойдёт зимой, на Рождество [...] И зеркало радостно засияет" [The mirror knew that this meeting would take place in winter, at Christmas [...] And the mirror would shine with joy] [Petrushevskaja 2014: 377]. Genii's deed as well as the reference to Christmas inevitably bring to mind the image of Christ; as in Christian belief, and in line with messianic prophecies, Christ was born to atone for the sins of humanity. Without a doubt, apart from comprising this tale's utopian kernel, Genii's sacrificial deed in the name of the common good as well as his faith in reflecting the beautiful in the future are suggestive of a religious parable. His beautiful act, however, is juxtaposed with the cruel world, the world of indifference and self-obsession. By contrasting Genii—a selfless, Christlike figure—with these harsh realities, Petrushevskaja propels her readers to appraise the value and the plausibility of success of this sacrificial act, especially as set against the humanity's condition in the present.

Petrushevskaja's stance may be further explained through another perspective. As in the preceding tale, we observe her challenging approach to the classics. This tale echoes Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," especially its first part (about the mirror and its pieces), which Petrushevskaja inverts. Unraveling this intertextual link between the two tales provides further insight in understanding her stance. In Andersen's tale, an evil force creates a magic mirror that distorts the appearance of everything it reflects, magnifying the evil and the ugly. As the evil force, along with its pupils, lifts the mirror toward

heaven to ridicule God, it falls and shatters into pieces. The splinters of the distorting mirror morally corrupt people, freezing their hearts and making them see only the evil and the ugly. The path to salvation in Andersen's tale is indicated through altruism and love, which are presented as having the ability to defeat evil and are interpreted as the extension of the divine power. The fact that there is no other mention of the evil mirror suggests a promise of eternal happiness. Indeed, concluding with a passage from the Bible, what Andersen proposes for his protagonists (and readers) is to seek refuge and salvation in God if they want to secure a spot in heaven. (11) Years later, in the post-religious world, Petrushevskaja revises this scheme.

Petrushevskaja's tale begins *in medias res* in terms of Andersen's prototype. Envious and malevolent to one another, the mirrors in her tale do not become, but have already been corrupted before the tale begins. Apart from Diadia Svist, who realizes what has happened and explains what Genii has accomplished, the other mirrors do not understand his act; nor are they willing to acknowledge his heroism. The other mirrors are aware of the existence of the destructive force, but do not have the courage to oppose it. Their cowardice foregrounds the ignoble side of human nature and its acceptance of oppression. The silence on their part, their civic disengagement in the face of the oppressive force, indeed resembles the silence of the Russian people in the face of authoritarian repression, as postulated by human rights activists such as Valeriia Novodvorskaia. Another difference between the two tales is that it is not the evil distorting mirror that shatters into pieces but the good mirror Genii, who summons the courage to reverse the imminent threat to the girl and, by extension, to the dire condition of posterity. This approach thus again brings to mind Petrushevskaja's movement from disintegration to re-integration, but as opposed to Andersen's paradigm, it is stripped of certainties, divine and otherwise.

The question arises, is Genii's sacrifice fruitful, then? Does it transform the cruel conditions and beautify the fellow mirrors' souls? Although Genii manages to defeat the evil force, he is at the same time depicted as the only one capable of realizing it. Preoccupied with the persistent thought of death that they muffle by focusing on reflecting surface appearances, most of the other mirrors still do not recognize his heroic feat. In other words, there is no lesson learned and no transformation in them. Except perhaps for the readers of the tale whom Petrushevskaja intended to provoke, the other mirrors' lives continue unchanged. This fact counterbalances the plausibility of any lasting victory. The revision of the classic on the part of Petrushevskaja thus suggests that altruism and sacrifice may not fully prevail over malice, suffering or misery; as a result, any absolute and definitive transformation may be unattainable. We may make the same conclusion regarding Petrushevskaja's other tale, where any permanent sociopolitical success is debatable, especially if it involves individuals alienated from one another and from their own being. Skeptical about Andersen's unspoiled belief in the absolutes, Petrushevskaja is cautious in projecting idealized scenarios that may give rise to false hopes. Thus, although her stance does not preclude hope for individual or social transformation, this hope is nonetheless debated. Imbued

with unresolved tensions, Petrushevskaja's open-ended tales reflect the longing for an ideal, but also a sober awareness of the fact that the path toward it is difficult and potentially impossible, despite our resistance and protest against negative forces in our lives. Yet, we might add, in line with the utopian function attributed to the folktale, ideals do not exist to be realized but to direct us, to harbor unfulfilled wishes and project possibilities for their fulfillment.

The importance of Petrushevskaja's stance, then, is not in eradicating the destructive force, which would give an illusion of the possibility of effacing death, solitude, or other forms of oppression, but rather in underscoring the very movement toward collective action against it through the act of compassion, selflessness, and sacrifice. If only temporarily, the world then becomes purged of evil. Despite the ingrained negative tendencies of our fellow human beings and society, and even if the characters' attempts at non-conformity and autonomy are, for the reader, illusory or implausible, the triumph of Petrushevskaja's heroes is nevertheless possible. It lies in their not complying with these tendencies, in defending themselves against them, and attempting to alter them for themselves and for others. It is precisely the moment, however fleeting, of self-empowerment and acquiring the will to face life head on that offers an alternative and invokes a "ray of light in the kingdom of darkness" [Goscilo 2015: 175]. (12) These rays illuminate harsh and distressing conditions and, doing so, encourage individual and social transformation through giving oneself and continuing to oppose oppression. Unsurprisingly, it is here—in the search for spiritual voices for her ordinary people and stressing their potential—that Petrushevskaja opts for the fairy-tale genre, so as to awaken an attitude of hope for, or faith in, better scenarios, without which life is a bleak business indeed.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank my peer reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

2 This paper's intention is not to analyze the self-reflective and experimental side of Petrushevskaja's fairy tales, that is, the questioning stance toward the forms and themes that the folktale, and in particular the fairy tale, have developed. Its purpose, then, is not to characterize her narratives in terms of genre studies, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

3 Transformation in the fairy-tale context is first and foremost associated with physical, and magical, shape shifting, e.g., pumpkins turning into golden carriages or frogs into princesses. Although Petrushevskaja's fairy tales feature shape shifting, this paper does not focus on this aspect of the genre.

4 In the 20th century, the utopian impulse has been subjected to production as a commodity. To take one example, the fairy tale was "Disneyized" in the Western world, that is, "subjected to saccharine sexist and illusionary stereotypes of the Disney culture industry" [Zipes 1991: xxvii]. As a result, the power of commercialization has distracted readers (or viewers) from social problems in

their respective societies, unlike traditional tales, which focus on these issues. The fairy tale has been increasingly used “to produce a sense of happy end and ideological consent and to mute its subversive potential for the benefit of those social groups controlling power in the public sphere” [Zipes 1991: xxiv]. Most importantly, as Zipes maintains throughout his analyses, fairy tales have been routinely intended to provide escape from the difficult realities of the present, and thus have been largely associated with entertainment.

5 Eleazar Meletinsky refers to two basic types of hero in the fairy tale: the Prince Ivan type (noble birth, good looks, and feats) and the Ivanushka the Fool type (the “low” or good-for-nothing hero). The latter occupies an inferior position and is scorned by others. However, “his low appearance hides his lofty essence” because he is the one who is concerned with others, ready to help the poor and treats animals kindly [Meletinsky 1975: 236, 242].

6 The quest for universal brotherhood is famously depicted in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Demons* or Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. For an insightful study of brotherhood in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, see Anna Berman [2015].

7 All translations are mine.

8 It is noteworthy that the word *miting* (митинг) is understood in Russian as a mass meeting or as a rally, not as a casual meeting between friends.

9 Valeriia Novodvorskaia (1950-2014) was a prominent oppositionist in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, assailing the Soviet power and then Russian government's authoritarian tendencies. Petrushevskaja's family members were also persecuted. Her grandfather, Nikolai Iakovlev, was a renowned linguist whose professional interest in Marrism, the theory of the class-based origin of language, resulted in his downfall. After Stalin declared the theory untenable and unscientific, Iakovlev was fired from his job and suffered from a serious mental illness.

10 A Christmas story is distinguished by the following elements: the story is set around the time of Christmas and contains miracles, moral lessons, spiritual transformations, and happy endings. It concludes with a miraculous change of the world or of the hero. In terms of literature, Charles Dickens's Christmas Carol is a well-known example of a Christmas story that offers hope. Tat'iana Kozina argues that the revival of the Christmas theme in contemporary Russian literature occurred after the Soviet period. This fact contributed to the appeal to Christian traditions and the revival of the Orthodox cycle. The reason for the renaissance of the Christmas story thus lies in the renewed appeal of religion [Kozina 2012: 295]. Drawing on Kozina's analysis, I read Petrushevskaja's return to the Christmas story (and, by extension, to hope) as marked by secular, post-religious, rather than strictly religious implications. That is, I see the genre of the Christmas story as a way for Petrushevskaja to indicate the possibility of earthly transformations (individual and collective) rather than to return to any absolute divinity or ideal(ized) and mythic past. Its secular vector is reflected, for example, in the revolutionary social potential Petrushevskaja's characters either have or seek ways of fostering.

11 Salvation in the context of Andersen is interpreted along the lines of the Christian faith (Andersen was a staunch believer), to denote deliverance from sin brought about by faith in Christ. As Zipes remarks, “Andersen offers a pseudo-criticism of real social conditions to guarantee that children of all classes will mind their manners and preserve the status quo—all to the advantage of those who control the dominant discourse” [Zipes 1983: 99]. And elsewhere: “Andersen pondered these questions [on injustice and domination] and presented them in many of his tales, but he rarely suggested alternatives or rebellion. Rather he placed safety before idealism and chose moral compromise over moral outrage, individual comfort and achievement over collective struggle and united goals [...] Both the happy and sad endings of his narratives infer that there is an absolute or a divine harmonious power, and that unity of the ego is possible under such power” [Zipes 1999: 109-110]. Humaneness—humanity’s noble side reflected in kindness or altruism—is important for both authors. However, the role played by humaneness sets them apart. For Andersen, it presupposes self-abasement and is a foundation for or a means of possible divine deliverance. Whereas for Petrushevskaja, a secular humanist, humaneness is not a means to achieve divine deliverance but an end in itself and constitutes humanity’s sole lifeline in the present. For further details on Petrushevskaja’s dialogue with Hans Christian Andersen, see Izabela Zdun [2018].

12 Referring to Nikolai Dobroliubov’s essay, “A Ray of Light in the Kingdom of Darkness” [1860], which offers a bitter account of Russian life, Goscilo argues that Petrushevskaja’s novella *Time: Night*, a “bleak tale of lacerated psyches,” does not envision any ray of light [Goscilo 2015: 175].

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