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The Theme of Poetry Recital in Concentration-Camp Literature: Shalamov, Semprún, and Other Witnesses

Abstract: A recurrent theme of narratives by concentration-camp survivors is reciting poetry. For intellectuals in the camps, reciting verses was an aid to survival, a loophole of mental freedom, available only when the prisoners were not being driven to depletion at "general works." Poetry also facilitated genuine human contact, helped the prisoners inscribe themselves into specific historical and cultural traditions, and re-mediated the verses that belonged to those traditions. The latter function of poetry recital was operative not only during the imprisonment but also during the composition of the narratives after the liberation: the memoirists not only found meanings in the cultural traditions on which their sense of identity depended but also helped to maintain these traditions for their own sake.

Keywords: concentration-camp memoirs, prison memoirs, functions of poetry recital, Evgenia Ginzburg, Semprún, Shalamov, "Athenian Nights"

In the summer of 1939, on a train to Vladivostok carrying 76 women prisoners in car number 7, the Russian-Ukrainian writer Zinaida Tulub recited her poetry to the people around her, then others sang songs, and the author of *Into the Whirlwind*, Evgenia Ginzburg, recited classical poetry – Alexander Griboyedov, Nikolay Nekrasov, Alexander Pushkin; another woman contributed Mikhail Lermontov's *Demon*. Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, in particular, took their and Ginzburg's own attention away from the tedious, hungry, and thirsty journey, transferred them to a different reality, and on one occasion, even tamed the convoy guards.[1] The

[1] E. Ginzburg, *Krutoi marshrut*, vol. 1, Possev, New York 1985, pp. 283–301. The first of the two volumes of Ginzburg's memoir *Krutoi marshrut* (literally "Steep Route"), rejected, despite warm recommendations, by the journal *Novy Mir*, was first published, in book form, by Mondadori in 1967; the second volume came out posthumously. I refer to the 1985 two-volume Russian edition. Vol. I was translated into English by Paul Stevenson and Manya Harari (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) and by Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1995). Vol. II came out as *Within the Whirlwind*, trans. Ian Boland (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981). For discussion of different aspects of the book,

same year, Ginzburg's namesake, and at the time likewise a true-believing communist, Evgenii Gnedin, spending two nights after torture undressed in a deliberately cooled punishment cell, saved his sanity by reciting, from his memory, Pushkin, Aleksandr Blok, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and Nikolai Gumilev's poems *The Discovery of America* and *The Sixth Sense*. He also composed poems in prison, not only as an expression of thought and feeling but also as a "most powerful means of autosuggestion" that would "dispel the darkness in the soul."[2] This paper discusses the treatments of the theme of poetry recital in Gulag literature and the literature of Nazi camps; it surveys not the highly numerous cases of this phenomenon but the shades of meaning and function that poetry held for the prisoners, ranging from the pragmatic to the disinterestedly philosophical. Close analysis of the poems referred to remains beyond the scope of this paper, but I do offer some conjectures about the reasons why these particular poems, rather than others, were chosen in real time and in retrospective testimonies. For instance, the reason for Gnedin's singling out Gumilev's *The Discovery of America* may have been not only the contrast between the poem's "Muse of Distant Journeys" and the prisoner's current confinement but also the complicated, shifting, and memory-challenging meter and rhyme scheme of that poem, implying a mixture of traditionalism with liberty and brave innovation.

Pragmatic uses of poetry: Pro et contra

In his prison memoir *Fear No Evil* Natan Sharansky presents a catalogue of inner "escapes" that helped him retain his firmness of purpose in solitary confinement. Memory is one such escape, one such "mental vacation"[3]; it compensates the prisoner for the sense deprivation and asserts his or her inner freedom. Reciting poetry would take the prisoner's mind away from current suffering, providing a loophole that the jailors could not close, and sometimes an assertion of freedom from the hegemonic discourse of a tyrannical regime. Accounts of composing and recollecting poetry in prison converge with the "freedom of the mind" topos that has accompanied carceral imagery since the Middle Ages.[4]

The current pedagogical resistance to asking schoolchildren to memorize poetry may be misplaced, by contrast to other forms of "learning by rote." True, the poetry that people learned by heart was all too often not part of the school

see O.M. Cooke, "Evgeniia Ginzburg's *Exegi Monumentum*", *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 2005, no. 39(1), pp. 109–117; idem (ed.), *"A Mind Purified by Suffering": Evgenia Ginzburg's "Whirlwind" Memoirs*, Academic Studies Press, Boston 2023.

[2] E. Gnedin, "Sebia ne poteriat'" [in:] *Zapiski ochevidtsa: Vospominaniya, dnevniki, pis'ma*, ed. M. Vostryshev, Sovremennink, Moscow 1990 [1988], p. 672.

[3] P. Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. R. Feldman, Abacus, London 1990 [1987], p. 21.

[4] M. Fludernik, *Metaphors of Confinement: The Prison in Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, p. 154.

curricula. Paradoxically, however, the often resisted subjection of the mind to a text studied in the traditional scene of instruction can pave the way to a liberation of the mind from the oppressive environment in the long run.

Another pragmatic use of poetry in prison and camp is associated with the mnemonic power of verse. In Kazakhstan labour camps Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn shaped his account of fighting in East Prussia as a poem with uniform lineation; this would help him remember the text which he had no way of writing down.

A third kind of pragmatic use is that of reciting poetry for the entertainment of others, with whatever benefits this might bring. In Gulag literature this is a fraught issue, beyond the confines of the present discussion.

Yet such pragmatic attitudes to poetry in prison and camps are not easy to isolate from the more profound experience of recitals. In a 1956 letter to Olga Ivinskaia, the "other woman" in Boris Pasternak's life, the Gulag veteran Varlam Shalamov recollected

> the walls of camp's icy punishment cell, where people, stripped to underwear, warmed themselves in each other's embrace, interweaving smarter than creepers into a dirty roll by the side of the extinguished iron stove, hopelessly but stubbornly, touching sharp ribs that had already lost their warmth, and recited "L[ieutenant] Sh[midt]." [...] It was not me who recited these poems; I listened.[5]

It is believed that when placed in solitary confinement in such an icy cell in the camp "Spokoinyi," Shalamov survived by walking to and fro, likewise reciting poetry in his mind. In the essay *The Poet from Within*, however, he denies having taken recourse to poetry in order to divert his attention from other matters. This may be an implicit response to Ginzburg and others, but it may also be a reminder that aesthetic experience, if we believe Immanuel Kant, is or should be totally disinterested. And yet, in the same essay, Shalamov allows for the possibility of having subconsciously used poetry this way: "I did not repeat poems by others or my own poems, whichever, in order to divert myself from the noise of the convicts' barracks, though it may be that subconsciously poems did play this diverting role in my life."[6] In his famous 1958 story *Cherry Brandy*, where Shalamov imagines the death of Mandelstam, of typhus or perhaps of dysentery in a transit camp (one might compare this with Jorge Semprún's accounts of Maurice Halbwachs's death in Buchenwald), he paints the wave of life invading the dying body as also a wave of inspiration and an ontological event: "he realized that he was now composing real poetry. What did it matter that it wasn't written

[5] V. Shalamov, *Novaia kniga: vospominania, zapisnye knizhki, perepiska, sledstvennye dela*, ed. I.P. Sirotinskaia, Eksmo, Moscow 2004, p. 583. Unless otherwise specified in bibliography, the translations from Russian and French are mine.

[6] V. Shalamov, "Poet iznutri: Sekrety stikhov ili stikhi stikhov" [in:] *Neskol'ko moikh zhiznei: Proza, poeziia, esse*, ed. I.P. Sikotinskaia, Respublika, Moscow 1996, p. 436.

down? Writing down and printing was just the vanity of vanities. The best was the unrecorded, what vanished after it was composed, what melted away without a trace; only the creative joy that he felt, and which could not be mistaken for anything else, proved that the poem had been created, that something [beautiful] had been created. Could he be mistaken?"[7] It may be that Boris Slutsky's 1956 poem *The Prose Writers*, which deals with the emotional need for poetry and with the pragmatics of poetry recital in the camps ("When Russian prose went to the camps / [...] you forgot your profession at once. Can prose console one in sorrow!") might not have been the same if it had been written before rather than after Shalamov's story.

Cultural self-inscription

One can rephrase the notion of the pragmatic use of reciting poetry, tacitly or out loud, in more elevated (though inescapably more clichéd) terms than Shalamov would allow: by providing an avenue of mental escape poetry helped the sufferers to transcend their predicament, abstract themselves from their bodies, and live the life of the spirit; and the life of the spirit helped to maintain the viability of the body.[8] But this is only part of the story. The other part is the prisoners' inscribing themselves in the poetic historiography of their country. Pasternak's 1926 poem *Lieutenant Schmidt*, mentioned in Shalamov's letter to Ivinskaia, deals with the 1905 sailor's mutiny in Sevastopol. The famous line of this poem "Каторга, какая благодать!" ("Hard Labour, what a blessing!") evokes the (frustrated) hope of the imprisoned rebels to be sentenced to hard labour rather than to death; it eventually acquires an ironic sound. This line appears in Ginzburg's memoir at the point when she learns her own verdict – not a death penalty but ten years of imprisonment[9]; it is quoted again, this time ironically, in the episode of her joy on being transferred from prison to the camps[10], which will prove to be more deadly than the harsh solitary confinement.[11]

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[7] V. Shalamov, *Kolyma Stories*, trans. D. Rayfield, New York Review of Books, New York 2018, p. 72.

[8] The latter idea, of the life of the spirit sustaining the viability of the body, recurs in Shalamov's work. For its treatment in Shalamov's *A Day Off* see: L. Toker, "A Tale Untold: Varlam Shalamov's *A Day Off*", *Studies in Short Fiction* 1991, no. 28(1), pp. 1–8.

[9] E. Ginzburg, op. cit., p. 284.

[10] Ibidem.

[11] The point about the deadliness of the camps in comparison with prisons is forcefully made in Shalamov's 1955 story *The Tatar Mullah and Clean Air* (V. Shalamov, *Kolyma Stories*, op. cit., pp. 99–105). On the difference between prison and labour camp for Russian intellectuals see J. Lundblad-Janjić, "Rethinking the Writer's Duty: Varlam Shalamov's Kolyma Tales and the Russian Intelligentsia in the Gulag", *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 2021, no. 19(1), pp. 77–80.

According to Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's *A World Apart*, another resource for a Gulag inmate's self-inscription into the history of the country was Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead*.[12] Solzhenitsyn, of course, mocks that book, noting that the physical conditions of hard-labour prisoners in tsarist times were considerably better than those of the prisoners of the Gulag.[13] And when Ginzburg recites Nekrasov's poem *Russian Women* on the train, as she comes to the account of the wives of Decembrists following their husbands to their remote hard-labour prisons, she hears the voice of Tania Stankovskaia, already afflicted by pellagra, from the upper bunks, "On foot, friends, would I march to Kolyma if only I knew that Kolya was there."[14] The repressions of the Tsarist times paled in comparison with the ordeal of Stalin's victims.

Nevertheless, the self-inscription into the history of persecutions afforded a meaning to the experience of the prisoners, many of whom had been totally loyal to the Soviet State and the party and were therefore tormented by the injustice and the apparent meaninglessness of their victimization. Pasternak's controversy-provoking poem *Lieutenant Schmidt*, referred to in Shalamov's letter, signifies a *tragic* self-inscription into history, since it represents the non-alignment between individual personality and the role that the individual is forced to play in history – this applies not only to the reluctantly heroic protagonist of the poem but also to those who pass a death verdict on him and his associates.[15]

A partial self-inscription in history can be felt behind Varlam Shalamov's poem *Avvakum in Pustozyorsk*, a monologue of the leader of old-believers burned at the stake in Pustozyorsk. The poem, where the speaker claims that his church is not in logs but in ribs, alternates amphibrachic dimeter with iambic lines and with an occasional trochaic disruption, replicating, as it were, the stumbling rhythm of the martyr's walk to towards his execution:

[12] For the discussion of the importance of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's fictionalized account of his hard-labour imprisonment for Herling-Grudziński's book see: Y. Klots, "From Avvakum to Dostoevsky: Varlam Shalamov and Russian Narratives of Political Imprisonment", *The Russian Review* 2016, no. 75(1), pp. 12–15. Yasha Klots notes, however, that Herling's fascination with Dostoevsky's book was rather an exception in Gulag literature.

[13] A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, vol. 2, trans. T.P. Whitney, Harper & Row, New York 1975, p. 200.

[14] E. Ginzburg, op. cit., p. 297.

[15] See D.L. Bykov, *Boris Pasternak*, Molodaia gvardiya, Moscow 2016, ch. 15, available on http://pasternak.niv.ru/pasternak/bio/bykov-pasternak-zhzl/glava-xv-1926-1927-lejtenant-shmidt.htm (accessed on 6.08.2024).

Не в брёвнах, а в рёбрах Церковь моя. В усмешке недоброй Лицо бытия.	The walls of my church are the ribs round my heart; it seems life and I are soon bound to part.
Сложеньем двуперстным Поднялся мой крест, Горя в Пустозерске, Блистая окрест.	My cross now rises, traced with two fingers In Pustozyorsk it blazes; its blaze will linger.
Я всюду прославлен, Везде заклеймён, Легендою давней В сердцах утверждён.[16]	I'm glorified everywhere, vilified, branded; I have already become the stuff of legend[17]

Yet that poem was written in 1955, after Shalamov's liberation from the camps and return from Kolyma; it is a retrospective reconstruction of the rhythm of walking towards an ordeal – not death by fire as in the case of Avvakum but long hours of life-force-sapping labour in goldmines.

The rhythm of walking, complete with stumbling, not of the prisoner's feet but of the prosodic feet in his memory, is evoked in the famous "Canto of Ulysses" chapter in Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*. Here, we return to the scene of instruction, which accrues multiple layers.[18] This canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy* was part of the memorialization program in Italian high schools, including Levi's Turin *liceo*. Memorized, often in protest, by children, it unfolds unexpected significances in Auschwitz. Levi recalls the Canto as he is walking to fetch the daily soup for his team.[19] He is walking through his own Inferno, the camp of Auschwitz, with the camp messenger, young Jean, the Pikolo, a *piepel*, who instructs him about a better route (a longer one, to prolong the walk) to the distribution point. Levi, reversing the Virgil-Dante mentorship, tries to convey Dante's canto to Jean, quoting it from the memory and translating it into some sort of French, mortified by the memory holes to which some of the feet and some of the whole lines have sunk, agonizing about them, apologizing, but also moving towards a new

[16] V. Shalamov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, Khudoshestvennaia literatura: Vagrius, Moscow 1998, p. 185.

[17] R. Chandler (trans.), "Varlam Shalamov, *Avvakum in Pustozyorsk*" [in:] *Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*, ed. R. Chandler, B. Dralyuk, I. Mashinski, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 2015, p. 393.

[18] Z. Jagendorf, "Primo Levi Goes for Soup and Remembers Dante", *Raritan* 1993, no. 12(4), p. 34.

[19] In *Conversation on Dante*, Osip Mandelstam pointed out that the prosody of Dante's *Commedia* evoked the rhythm of walking. Z. Jagendorf, op. cit., pp. 34–35.

understanding of the canto, towards "something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today."[20] The motif of reversal is of significance here: Dante's Ulysses does not remain contentedly in Ithaca after his long-delayed return from Troy but embarks on a new adventure to the end of the world, beyond the pillars of Hercules. Prisoners of Auschwitz have been likewise forced to explore experience beyond human limits, yet not as Ulysses but rather as his crew of sailors, forced, enticed, coerced into a pilgrimage without terminus. It is the perpetrators, the Nazi regime, the SS, who play the role of Ulysses, transgressing the borders of morality – no wonder that Ulysses speaks to Dante from a perpetual flame. Yet Primo does not engage in analysis. Nor does Levi the memoirist consult the book to insert the missing lines at the time of writing; he endeavours, rather, to relive the experience of the moment of grace, where the gift of poetry is matched by Pikolo's gift of listening to the recital.

Souls meeting

What is celebrated in Levi's chapter is, among other things, the help of poetry in creating the sense of human contact, whether emotional, intellectual, or spiritual – not just minds meeting but souls making contact, registering the overlap of experience, discovering or creating a kinship. In solitary confinement, Ginzburg felt as if the poet Aleksandr Blok visited only her; with Vladimir Mayakovsky she shared a "desire for only one poison: poems to drink and drink" – poetry is the pharmakon of Mayakovsky's 1915 poem *Backbone Flute*; and towards the end of her memoirs she recollects discovering an intellectual kinship with her son (Vasily Aksenov, the future writer), with whom she is reunited in Magadan after long years of separation: when one of them quotes a line of poetry, the other continues the quotation – they cherish the same poems.[21]

This aspect of poetry recital – its creation or celebration of shared experience – is further developed by Jorge Semprún, especially in *Literature or Life* (*L'Écriture ou la Vie*, 1994) and in the last (2001) of his Buchenwald novels, *Le mort qu'il faut* (*The Necessary Dead*). There, Semprún tells us how he and some of his fellow prisoners used to meet in the Little Camp latrines (the place safe from the visits of the SS) to recite poetry to each other, each contributing the treasures of his own memory, despite the massive assault of the setting on the olfactory and

[20] P. Levi, *If This Is a Man. The Truce*, trans. S. Woolf, Abacus, London 1987 [1958], p. 121.

[21] On Ginzburg's and her son's discovery of shared culture see also: K. Duda, "My Son, My Self: Reevaluating a Culture of Vulnerability" [in:] O.M. Cooke (ed.), *"A Mind Purified by Suffering"...*, op. cit., pp. 57–79; A. Komaromi,"Vasily Aksenov and Evgenia Ginzburg in Magadan: Re-Conceiving Soviet Authorship through the Gulag Experience" [in:] O.M. Cooke (ed.), op. cit., pp. 81–99.

visual senses: indeed, one of the amazing achievements of Semprún's narratives is the representation of the intellectual and emotional transcendence of disgust, as if in protest against, among other things, Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. The motif of sharing poetry culminates in the episode where the first-person protagonist-narrator (Gérard, to use Semprún's *nom de guerre* from his Resistance days) manages to break through to a young man in that invalid camp, one who has reached the stage of becoming what was called "a Muselmann," a stage of total depletion whose victims were believed to have become indifferent to life and death, believed also, falsely, to have been emptied of inner life – the latter impression is contested by the work of writers such as Shalamov and Semprún. At first, the young man, François, listens to Gérard but does not speak, until on one occasion he says two words "Parler fatigue"[22] – "it is tiring to talk." Eventually, thinking about the camp latrines, Gérard's starts reciting one of the so-called evangelical poems in prose by Arthur Rimbaud (another traveller, like Gumilev), about the pool of Bethesda: "Beth-Saida, the pool and its five galleries, was a source of annoyance. It had the atmosphere of a sinister washhouse, always damp and mouldy."[23] And yet it is by this sinister pool that Christ healed a paralytic. On hearing these lines François too seems to be awakened from his lethargy. Gérard continues: "Beggars squirmed within on steps that paled at the glimmer of storms flickering with the lightnings of hell" – and here, as in Primo Levi's "The Canto of Ulysses," his memory fails him; the rest of the prose poem is gone. But now it is François who continues the recital, as if having recovered his voice, his memory, his cultural identity: "You made jokes about their blind blue eyes, and about the white and blue linens that they wrapped around their stumps. O regimental laundry, O public bath."[24] Semprún tells us that François laughed through his tears and that henceforth conversation became possible.

Interestingly, the poem is slightly misquoted: in Rimbaud, it is the beggars who joke about their own blind eyes and their bandages; in the recital attributed to François, it is the second-person "you" who makes the jokes. In terms of mnemonic force, indeed, a poem in prose is not quite like metrically strict verse. It is not clear who is forgetting, François or the retrospective narrator. Semprún, it seems, did not hold the books that he was referring to on his desk while writing, but one is tempted to reinterpret this flaw of the memory as a meaningful change: "you" may be laughing at the blind blue eyes of the SS or at the rags of their victims, but a miracle may be not long in coming.

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[22] J. Semprún, *Le mort qu'il faut*, Gallimard, Paris 2001, p. 54.

[23] A. Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, trans. P. Schmidt, Harper Colophon, New York 1976 [1967], p. 136 (Paul Schmidt's translation): "Bethsaïda, la piscine des cinq galleries, était un point d'ennui. Il semblait que ce fût un sinistre lavoir, toujours accablé de la pluie et moisi." J. Semprún, op. cit., p. 55.

[24] "tu plaisantait sur leurs yeux bleus aveugles, sur les lignes blancs ou bleus dont s'entouraient leur moignons. Ô buanderie militaire, ô bain populaire…" J. Semprún, op. cit., p. 56.

Eventually, it is François, this dying *alter ego*, whose identity Gérard is told by his communist friends to assume in order to submerge and escape execution, though soon after François' death the switch of identities is judged unnecessary.

Le mort qu'il faut is structured on the pattern of recurrent switches and chiasmic connections. Gérard is believed to be endangered by an enquiry about him from Berlin, which turns out not to be hostile: it is his worried father who, overcoming his dislike of Franco's ambassador to Germany, has turned to him with the request to get news of his son. By contrast, the father of François, a notorious collaborator, refused to request clemency for his son, a member of the Resistance; rather than being a caring father, he played the role of Lucius Junius Brutus who condemned his two sons to death for wrong political allegiances. The chiasmic pattern is so neat, and motifs that turn François into Gérard's double so numerous that the book may tend to strike the reader as a *fictionalized* account of Buchenwald relationships,[25] despite the fact that it gives some of the personages their historical names, using them almost as verification landmarks. One may note that neat patterns and symbolism abound in the literature of concentration camps – the universe of the camps was so vast that meaning-generating coincidences could often be singled out among its records. One of the striking constituents of the meaning of poetry recital in the relationship of François and Gérard is the sense of the continuing inner life of the totally depleted François. The so-called "Muselmanns" (Muselmänner), whose counterpart in the Gulag were the so-called *dokhodiagi*, the goners, had expressionless faces, which caused the belief in the absence of inner life behind these masks. However, the doctors of the Warsaw ghetto, whose observations were eventually collected in a book called *Hunger Disease*, noted that chronic starvation caused a complicated syndrome, and that one of its symptoms was the patient's inability to express his or her feelings facially.[26] In other words, it was not that the goners did not have emotions, attitudes, and thoughts – they just could not translate them into facial expressions. It was fatiguing to talk, but memory was not erased; it was merely suppressed, de-energized. When François responds to Rimbaud's poems, this heightens his inner life, but it is not clear whether it reinforces or further depletes his body.

Shalamov sketches the inner life of the goner in the story "*Sententia*," the title-keyword of which is translated by John Glad as "Sententious" and by Donald Rayfield as "Maxim," losing the connotation of the prison "sentence."[27] This first-person narrative by an unnamed former prisoner tells about his recovery from the state analogous to that of an Auschwitz "Muselmann." In that near-death state,

[25] See also: M. Touret, "Jorge Semprun, le témoin inventif" [in:] *Le roman français au tournant du XXI^e siècle*, eds. M. Dambre, A. Mura-Brunel, B. Blanckeman, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 2004, p. 17; L. Razinsky, "*La mort qu'il faut*: Semprun and writing after death", *French Forum* 2019, no. 44(1), p. 183.

[26] M. Winick (ed.), *Hunger Disease*, trans. M. Osnos, Wiley, New York 1979, p. 19.

[27] See: V. Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, trans. J. Glad, Penguin Books, London 1994, p. 284; idem, *Kolyma Stories*, op. cit., p. 435.

all words, except those needed for the most practical camp updates, and all feelings, except anger, are forgotten, but the *dokhodiaga* has a kind of mystical experience of oneness with nature: "Not even a stone seemed dead to me, let alone the grass, the trees, the river"[28]; like Job at the nadir of suffering he is "in league with the stones of the field" (Job 5:23). When the protagonist of the story gets a lighter job, and can also gather berries or roots to supplement his diet, he begins to recover: various feelings begin to return to him, and at some point, the mystical experience of oneness with nature is replaced by a semiotic processing of human relationships. At a further stage of his recovery, words begin to return to him, starting with the foreign word "Sententia." He does not think about its literary and legal connotations: words return first as sounds rather than meanings. Shalamov's protagonist-narrator has moved away from the liminal area between life and death, to tell us about the mystical sense that is cancelled by words. Semprún seems to have sensed, and conveyed by the rhythms of his sentence, the current of such mystical life in the KZ "Muselmänner" who "are already elsewhere, floating in a sort of a cachexic nirvana, a cotton-wooly nothingness, where all value is abolished, and where only the vital inertia of instinct – the flickering life of a dead star, an exhausted soul and body – still makes them move."[29] Yet his François, who does not get to recover, is credited with a verbalized, or rather quoted, mystical insight. A long time after his death and Semprún's liberation, while translating *The Trojan Women* by Seneca the Younger into Spanish, Semprún suddenly understands the formerly incomprehensible words murmured by his friend, dying in the camp infirmary. Then he could only distinguish the Latin *nihil* – nothing: now he is sure that François was quoting Seneca's "Post mortem nihil est ipsaque mors nihil"[30] – "After death there is nothing and death itself is nothing," words uttered in the context of death freeing human beings from suffering. The recital creates a spiritual contact between people, as also between different historical times, and, here, between a dying François and a Roman Stoic, a philosophical playwright whose line is illuminated for the dying young Frenchman through his own experience.

How credible Semprún's representation of the night in the camp Revier may be remains an open question: the avowed fictionalization of the book's material casts a doubt over the author's understanding of the events: was it like this or did he want to believe that it was like this, turning the quotation upside down and endowing the statement about meaninglessness (*nihil*) with a humanist meaning. The story of François death enacts a known literary topos: the last words of the dying, promising an otherwise unavailable revelation. What supports my wish to regard this episode as truthful, if not of the fictionalized François, then of other intellectual victims of tyrannical regimes, is, among other things, a well-known

[28] V. Shalamov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 362.
[29] J. Semprún, op. cit., p. 42.
[30] Ibidem, p. 208.

phenomenon: one sometimes cannot shake off a line of poetry or of a song, or just an obsessive melody playing in one's mind as one goes about doing things, living, or maybe dying. What militates against this wish is the exceptional nature of François' dying memory: whatever forms the inner life of the goners used to take, words for things outside the camps were seldom part of it. Seldom, but not never, as is shown by Semprún's account of the almost dead Jew reciting the Kaddish again and again in the Little Camp, immediately after the liberation.

Semprún could read William Faulkner in Buchenwald or recite and listen to poetry because he worked as a clerk in Arbeitsstatistik: though he was constantly hungry, he did not get totally depleted by physical work. Inmates of prisons rather than camps can likewise keep the language, and poetry as its highest form. Poetry becomes unavailable when the physical condition of the prisoners has totally deteriorated on what is called "the general works" in the camps. In *The Poet from Within*, Shalamov writes that during his work in the gold mines and the ten years of oscillating between mine faces and hospitals, all verse, his own and by other poets, was "wiped out, knocked out, dried out, pressed out"[31] of his soul and body; poetry would only return with physical recovery.[32] It is suggestive that the chapter "The Canto of Ulysses" did not appear in the first 1946 De Silva edition of Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*: other matters had priority. The chapter was first included in the 1957 Einaudi edition of the book when the most urgent things about the camps had already been said. Moreover, Levi could recite Dante to Pikolo because at that time he was no longer on the general works but had an easier time in the chemical team, though still not totally exempt from physical labour in harsh conditions.

Remediation

A return to poetry is recounted in Shalamov's 1973 story *Athenian Nights*. Elena Mikhailik, herself a poet, reminds us that the expression "Athenian Nights," nearly forgotten in Soviet Russia after the Second World War, used to mean sensual overindulgence, unbridled reveling, orgies, carnivalesque gluttony of the satiated.[33] At the beginning of the story, Shalamov refers to the greatest human pleasures listed by Thomas More in *Utopia* – mainly homeostatic pleasures of eating, sex, urination and defecation. After explaining how the need for all the four was turned into torture in the camps, and then how a former goner regained the pleasure of their relative normality when chance allowed him to recover from depletion,

[31] V. Shalamov, "Poet iznutri…", op. cit., p. 436.

[32] Ibidem, p. 437.

[33] E. Mikhailik, *Nezakonnaia kometa. Varlam Shalamov: Opyt medlennogo chteniia*, NLO, Moscow 2018, p. 78.

Shalamov comments that More ignored one more sense, one more need, which arises when most of the others are more or less satisfied:

> There is a new feeling, a new need, which is more acute than the thought of food; it was totally forgotten by Thomas More in his crude classification of four feelings. The fifth feeling is a need for poetry.[34]

That fifth sense, harks back, as it were, to what Gumilev called "the sixth sense" – in the poem *The Sixth Sense* mentioned by Gnedin. At the time of writing the memoir, Gnedin was already a dissident rather than a true-believing apparatchik of the kind that, at the time of his arrest, would not admit remembering the work of the counter-revolutionary poet executed in 1921.

Mikhailik notes that Shalamov (one may add: like Semprún elsewhere) misremembers the corresponding passage in More's *Utopia*[35] – More also mentions the pleasure of music, which was more dominant among his time's English upper classes than poetry.[36] The details of prose works are more liable to the ravages of memory than poetry – even if the texts are poems in prose, such as *The Pool of Bethesda*.

In *Athenian Nights* Shalamov recollects how for some time like-minded friends would gather in the surgical bandaging room for which he was responsible (his work as a camp paramedic in the final years of his term allowed him to survive), to recite or read poems to each other for up to two evening hours. Each contributed the poems he remembered; each would transcribe what was brought along by others. At a certain point a free woman worker, a hospital patient, joined the group in the capacity of the audience, and soon afterwards a tyrannical boss put an end to these evenings of poetry, though owing to the connections of the woman listener, no one incurred any punishment. The aborted meetings entered the collective memory of the hospital under the label "Athenian nights".

As if to show the gluttony, the orgiastic abundance in the consumption of this pharmakon, "poems to drink and drink," during those nights, Shalamov lists the favourite poets of the participants. He contributed Fyodor Tyutchev, Evgeny Baratynsky, Pushkin, Lermontov, Nekrasov, Aleksey Tolstoy, Blok, Pasternak, Innokenty Annensky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Igor Severianin, Vasily Kamensky, Andrei Bely, Sergei Esenin, Nikolai Tikhonov, Vladislav Khodasevich, Ivan Bunin. Added by others were Apollon Grigoryev, Gumilev, Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Ilya Selvinsky, Samuil Marshak, Mayakovsky. Shalamov notes

[34] V. Shalamov, *Kolyma Stories*, p. 486.

[35] E. Mikhailik, op. cit., pp. 83–87.

[36] Ksenia Filimonova notes that many readers observe imprecisions in Shalamov's quotations: "having a very good memory, Shalamov did not check quotations." K. Filimonova, *Evoliutsia esteticheskikh vzgliadov Varlama Shalamova i russkii literaturnyi protsess 1950–1979-kh godov*, NLO, Moscow 2023, p. 175, note 3.

that some of the poems were the new fruits of the "samizdat" of the times: friends had sent to the scriptwriter Vladimir Petrovich Dobrovol'skii the early version of Akhmatova's *Poem without a Hero*. Dobrovol'skii was also the one to read, and let the others learn, Mayakovsky's 1916 love poem *To Lilechka, Instead of a Letter* and Pasternak's 1943 poem *Winter Approaches*, written soon after Tsvetaeva's suicide. Some recited the poems, others wrote them down. Shalamov notes that "[e]very literate paramedic, a fellow employee in hell, turns out to have a notebook where he writes down, in ink of any color he can get, other people's poetry, not quotations from Hegel or the Gospels but poetry."[37] This may be, among other things, an allusion to Nikolai Vdovushkin in Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Evan Denisovich*, a young paramedic who is seen writing something in his notebook, each line starting with a capital letter and leaving space on the side. Though most readers think that Vdovushkin is a poet, Shalamov creates a context in which this character may be read as one of the people who have the strength and the opportunity to write down recollected poetry by others.

Many of the names mentioned in "Athenian Nights" would, like the title expression itself, have been unfamiliar to the Soviet readers of 1973, when the story was composed. As Mikhailik notes, it is typical of Shalamov's style to combine totally accessible narration with references whose meaning was almost esoteric and required either an old-fashioned education on the reader's part or the reader's struggle to get the necessary knowledge and thus "recognize" the references and their significance.[38] In the latter case, the reader would be re-enacting the experience of the listeners to the poetry sessions – from being marginal to the closed circle of the reciters to becoming a competent part of their circle: in fact, this characterizes the experience of Shalamov's authorial audience in general.[39] One of the things that is accomplished in *Athenian Nights* is what in other connections Astrid Erll discusses as "remediation," that is recouping the forgotten, infusing the discarded back into the conversation or into the media (re-mediation), reopening a space for it in collective memory.[40] The reciters of poetry in the bandaging room do it for one another and for their listeners, remediating forgotten poets alongside the remembered ones. They do it for a growing audience: apart from the Komsomol girl, these evenings were occasionally attended by Dr. Mamuchashvili and by other personnel whom Shalamov does not name but she does in her reminiscences (taken down by Valery Esipov and published in 1997). Re-mediation is here a two-level phenomenon. It is addressed to the

[37] V. Shalamov, *Kolyma Stories*, op. cit., p. 486.

[38] E. Mikhailik, op. cit., pp. 80–84.

[39] See L. Toker, "The Issue of 'Softening' and the Problem of Addressivity in Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov" [in:] *The Gulag in Writings of Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov: Fact, Document, Fiction*, eds. F. Heffermehl, I. Karlsohn, Brill, Leiden 2021, pp. 271–288.

[40] A. Erll, "Homer, Turko, Little Harry: Cultural Memory and the Ethics of Premediation in James Joyce's *Ulysses*", *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 2019, no. 17(2), pp. 239–240.

listeners or participants in the conversation – the people in the bandaging room; yet it is also addressed to Shalamov's readers, especially virtual audiences at the time of composition: Shalamov the writer re-mediated the names that may have been obliterated in the so-called stagnation period, even though in his later years he tended to withhold his new work from circulation in the samizdat. In this he follows the tactics of Ilya Ehrenburg, a much more fortunate writer, one who won the lucky lottery ticket of avoiding arrest. Ehrenburg's memoir *People, Years, Life* sought to do precisely this – to remediate the suppressed or forgotten names so that the audience might ask "who?" and start looking. This is also likely to have been part of Shalamov's strategy in his writing his renegade letter to *Literaturnaia Gazeta* in 1972[41], mainly for the sake of being allowed to publish a thin collection of poems. In this open letter, which turned him into a fallen idol among non-conformist audiences, Shalamov writes that "the thematics of *Kolyma Tales* has been removed by life." The narrow and constantly dwindling circle of his intellectual cohorts could recollect that the same phrase was used by Bukharin at the 14th Congress of the Communist Party in 1926, and this came following his statement that he does not disown his former position (*ne otrekayus'*). For the much broader circle of readership, who would not recognize the allusion and its subversive meaning, the very reference to *Kolyma Tales* would be a teaser. This, indeed, was the first time when the title of Shalamov's main work was mentioned in the Soviet media; and so many among the broad audience might become aware of the existence of this work, might ask about it, might try to seek it out.

In *Athenian Nights*, from among the numerous poems that he recited, Varlam Shalamov singles out one for specific mention – Ivan Bunin's 1907 poem *Cain* – even though he values Bunin's prose above his poetry and even though he had got an extra camp term for, among other things, calling the émigré Bunin a Russian classic. This is a hermeneutic challenge – one is invited to reread and reinterpret this poem in terms of its relevance to Gulag experience. It seems that in 1973 Shalamov wished to re-mediate Bunin's name (it was after the perestroika, which Shalamov did not live to see, that this major writer, who had emigrated from Russia after the October Revolution, would be "returned" to the readers inside Russia). *Cain* was written within a year from Bunin's translation of George Byron's mystery play *Cain* into Russian, but, unlike Byron, he emphasizes not so much Cain's quest for knowledge and revolt against the autocratic God but the deranged Cain's building of cities, typologically prefiguring the tower of Babel, in his attempt not only to create the new but, in his pride, also to revenge himself on the Creator: "He hurries, he flings / He piles rock upon rock / He trembles, he is dying / but on the Creator will wreak revenge, revenge." After the Revolution Bunin would revise his symbolism – he would come see the Bolshevik power as fratricidal Cain. This must have been the "word-to-the-wise" subtext of

[41] See L. Toker, "Samizdat and the Problem of Authorial Control: The Case of Varlam Shalamov", *Poetics Today* 2008, no. 29(4), pp. 735–758.

Shalamov's reciting this particular poem in the late nineteen forties in the camp and mentioning it in his 1973 story. The huge industrial projects of the Stalinist era, massively using and abusing convict slave-labour, had, indeed, been like the arrogant Cain's piling stone upon stone in Baalbek for his temple to a false god.

Thus, reciting poetry to a circle of friends or of like-minded would not only function as an aid to survival, and not only foster meaningful human contact, and not merely help to inscribe the experience of the prisoners into the cultural tradition of their country – it would also *serve* this tradition by recouping, remediating, that of which it was in danger of being permanently stripped. For the intellectuals, this was an available way of resistance: it was an alternative to different forms of heroic self-sacrifice – surviving, one continues to preserve the treasures of poetry and thought and the values of the culture that transcended politics and resisted the blind service to the illusion of a bright future. In addition to the mysticism of creating the beautiful, the recital of poetry in the camps would reinforce the intellectuals' confidence in their identity but also bolster the cultural tradition that gave meaning to their identity, not just because it thus served them but for its own sake.

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