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What We Learn From Comparison: Some Epistemological Remarks

Abstract: This article deals with the comparisons between testimonies and theoretical works on Nazi and Soviet camps carried on within literary studies. Going beyond the debates about potentially antagonistic memories of those two regimes, the comparison contributes to decompartmentalizing research, infusing it with new dynamics and methods as well as the adoption of a renewed approach to the construction of knowledge. Indeed, by conducting textual comparisons rather than basing their research on the study of facts, the researchers in the field of literary studies were able to question narrative strategies and the positions of certain works within their host cultures. Debates on the generic aspects of literary testimonies have thus helped shift the focus from the specificity of the experiences they described to their status and form. The article then compares the two bodies of texts from the point of view of their possible use as historical sources, and analyzes a few examples of narrative strategies.

Keywords: Holocaust, nazi camps, Gulag, testimony, comparatism

Comparisons between the Nazi and Soviet systems have resulted in the production of an extensive body of works over the years.[1] While advances in social history have helped overcome this historiographical comparative debate, there is still a lingering divide in memory studies, as they sometimes reflect antagonistic memories of these two regimes.[2] Russia's invasion of Ukraine has once more changed the state of affairs. The instrumentalization of the memory of the Second World War by Russian propaganda prompted us to revisit our perspective on the complex history of the intersections between Nazism and Communism. While this process is currently ongoing, previous research from historians highlighted that the forms of violence perpetrated within both regimes could be found in overlapping

[1] See, among other sources: H. Rousso (ed.), *Stalinism and Nazism: History and Memory Compared*, trans. P. Rogers, R.J. Golsan, introd. by R.J. Golsan, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 2004; I. Kershaw, M. Lewin (eds.), *Stalinism and Nazism. Dictatorships in Comparison*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge 1977; J. Kotek, P. Rigoulot, *Le siècle des camps: emprisonnement, détention, extermination, cent ans de mal absolu*, Lattès, Paris 2000.

[2] On this topic, see for example D. Bechter, H. Rousso, "Illiberal policies regarding the past", *Memories at Stake*, Summer–Fall 2019, no. 9, pp. 69–121.

and related spaces.[3] This contributed to decompartmentalizing research, infusing it with new dynamics and methods and the adoption of a renewed approach to the construction of knowledge. Before these historiographical advances even occurred, literary studies, which were not governed by the same constraints as historians', had already adopted a form of comparatism. By conducting comparisons of texts, rather than basing their research on the study of facts, has allowed academics of the literary world to question narrative strategies and the positions of certain works within their host cultures.[4] Debates on the generic aspects of literary testimonies have thus helped shift the focus from the specificity of the experiences they described to the status and form of these texts.[5]

It is interesting to note that the first to compare Nazism and Stalinism were survivors themselves. The magisterial testimony of Margarete Buber-Neumann, who had experienced both camp systems, raised many questions about the similarities and differences between the gulags and the Nazi Läger.[6] Its reception was far from unanimous, particularly in Communist circles from which many Nazi resisters had come. The discovery of the Soviet camps divided communities of former Nazi camp deportees. Charlotte Delbo identified with great lucidity the unease felt by Communist resistance fighters: "When the truth about the Soviet Union finally came out, many refused to believe it: it meant losing their faith, their purpose in life, sometimes even the reason why they had taken such great risks and had been deported."[7] Some, like Pierre Daix, denied their existence, or, like Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, asserted that the Soviet penal system was "indisputably the most desirable in the whole world."[8] Other former deportees, including Germaine Tillion and David Rousset, sought to document concentration camp regimes around the world, particularly in the USSR, to fight against

[3] See T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Basic Books, New York 2010; O. Bartov, E.D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2013.

[4] In France, it was Alain Parrau's pioneering work that paved the way in this direction: *Écrire les camps*, Berlin–Paris 1995.

[5] On these debates in France, see in particular, Ch. Lacoste, F. Detue (eds.), "Témoigner en literature", *Europe*, février 1, 2016, no. 1041–1042, pp. 3–235; as well as P. Mesnard (ed.), "La Littérature testimoniale, ses enjeux génériques", *Poétiques contemporaines* 2017, especially the "Introduction", pp. 7–31.

[6] M. Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, Dodd, Mead & Co., New York 1949.

[7] Ch. Delbo, *Days and Memory*, trans. R. Lamont, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1990, p. 120. „Quand la vérité sur l'Union soviétique a éclaté dans toute sa violence, beaucoup ont refusé d'y croire : c'était perdre leur foi, leur raison de vivre, parfois la raison pour laquelle ils avaient pris de si grands risques et avaient été déportés." Ch. Delbo, *La Mémoire et les jours*, Berg international, Paris 1985, p. 136.

[8] „Indiscutablement le plus souhaitable dans le monde entire." D. Rousset, G. Rosenthal, T. Bernard, *Pour la vérité sur les camps concentrationnaires (Un procès antistalinien à Paris)*, Ramsay, Paris 1990, p. 194.

them.[9] There were also intermediate positions, such as Primo Levi's. In November 1976, he appended his book *If This is a Man* with his answers to questions high school students had asked him during visits where he shared his testimony. One of them was: "Why don't you talk about the Russian camps?" This indicates that, by this time, comparison between both systems had become the prevalent perspective when it came to understanding testimonies. In his response, Levi insisted on the differences between the two systems and presented a watered-down vision of the Gulag. Two months earlier, he had published a negative review of the first Italian edition of Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Stories* in "La Stampa", which had dampened its reception.

> [...] men like Shalamov still deserve our respect, but their stature is inferior to that of their counterparts who fought Hitler's terror [...]. Their political maturity strikes us as thin and crude: the label of "political prisoners" is attached to them more or less at random, with the dual aim of sowing terror and recruiting free labor, and they wear it with Russian resignation (Tyutchev's "infinite patience") but without pride.[10]

As for Delbo, she found the situation of Soviet prisoners was even more devastating than the Nazi camp deportees'; at least, they still had the opportunity to hope for Germany's defeat:

> What hope gives them the strength to fight to survive until a liberation whose date recedes in time? Who will pull them out? Who will bring down barbed wire and watchtowers? When, and under what circumstances, will the concentration camp regime be abolished, a disgrace associated only with Nazism? No one will fight a war for them [...].[11]

There is no lack of comparisons among Soviet witnesses either. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn devoted several passages of *Gulag Archipelago* to a comparison of the two systems, concluding that the Soviet system surpassed the Nazi in cruelty;

[9] Within the framework of the International Commission against the Concentration Regime created by David Rousset in 1950.

[10] "[...] uomini quali Salamov meritano comunque il nostro rispetto, ma la loro statura è inferiore a quella dei loro corrispettivi che hanno combattuto il terrore hitleriano [...]. La loro maturazione politica ci appare scarsa e greggia: l'etichetta di 'prigionieri politici' viene loro affibbiata più o meno a caso, al duplice scopo di seminare terrore e di reclutare mano d'opera gratuita, e loro la portano con rassegnazione russa (la 'pazienza infinita' di Tjutčev) ma senza fierezza." P. Levi, *"Dai Lager di Stalin", La Stampa. Collana Tuttolibri*, September 25, 1976.

[11] « Quel espoir leur donne la force de lutter pour survivre jusqu'à une libération dont la date recule dans le temps ? Qui les tirera de là ? Qui fera tomber barbelés et miradors ? Quand, grâce à quelles circonstances, sera aboli le régime concentrationnaire, cette honte qu'on associait qu'au seul nazisme ? Personne ne fera une guerre pour eux […]." Ch. Delbo, *La Memoire et les jours*, p. 138.

Shalamov evoked the "Kolymian Auschwitz."[12] As for Julius Margolin, he would return to this question again and again throughout his life, and even committed a short essay to it: "Is it possible to compare Hitler's camps with Soviet ones?"[13] In the USSR, the comparison between both systems, however impossible to hear for the authorities, was implicitly accepted by large circles. Vasily Grossman made it one of the main themes of his novel *Life and Fate*, which earned him a visit from the KGB, who confiscated the book in February 1962.

The aim here is not, however, to analyze the comparatism in the writings of surviving writers, but rather to outline possible avenues for productive comparisons between these two bodies of texts, and to identify how such comparisons can contribute to our understanding of both the phenomenon of the camps and its literary restitution.

Camp literature as a historical source: the "historiographical operation"[14]

When it comes to the circumstances in which they emerged, these two bodies of work deeply differ. The literary accounts of the Nazi camps that forged the testimonial "canon" in Western Europe[15] were written by survivors who benefitted from complete freedom of expression. These texts sometimes went unnoticed

[12] V. Shalamov, *Собрание сочинений в 6 томах*, Terra-Terra, Moskva 2013, vol. 4, pp. 286, 500.

[13] J. Margolin, „Можно ли сравнивать гитлеровские лагеря с советскими?", *MAOZ* 1950.

[14] Term of Michel de Certeau, see *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley, Columbia University Press, New York 1992, p. 86. It is explained for the first time in his contribution to the trilogy *Faire de l'histoire. Nouveaux problèmes, nouvelles approches, nouveaux objets*, vol. 1: *Nouveaux problèmes*, éds. P. Nora, J. Le Goff, Gallimard, Paris 1974. It was then used by Paul Ricœur in *Memory, History, Forgetting* to designate "the historian's representation of the past." P. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004, p. 44.

[15] The body of works, poetic or documentary, written during the events in the ghettos or hiding places is excluded from these considerations (Y. Katzenelson, *The Song of the Massacred Jewish People*, trans. J. Hirschman, Regent Press, Berkeley 2001; S. Kassow, *Who Will Write our Story? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2007); as well as dramatic works created and sometimes performed in the camps, such as *Le Verfübar aux enfers*, Germaine Tillon's operetta (published as *Une opérette à Ravensbrück*, La Martinière, Paris 2005) or *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung* by Viktor Ullmann and Peter Kien (*Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung*, Hrsg. H. Brauel, Schott Music, Mainz 2015), for purposes other than testimonial; as well as testimonies of the Sonderkommando: Z. Gradowski, *The Last Consolation Vanished: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*, eds. A.I. Davidson, P. Mesnard, trans. R. Monet, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2022.

when they were first published and may have been informed by their author's personal constraints, such as Robert Antelme's communist commitment or the dominance of the Resistance canon. However, they were not censored and did not endanger the lives of their authors.[16] Soviet survivors of the Gulag, for their part, wrote in a context where the memory of repression was silenced or even banned. Their works circulated as *samizdat* before being published abroad, sometimes incomplete or mutilated; the clandestine distribution of their testimonies involved the threat of re-arrest.[17] When it comes to the construction of knowledge about the respective concentration camp systems, this resulted in these writings playing fundamentally different roles.

The first literary accounts of the Nazi camps were contemporaneous to the work and activities of jurists and historians, as at the same time, documents and oral testimonies were collected. In contrast, in the USSR, documents about the Gulag remained secret and there were no trials or proceedings against those responsible. As a result, the introduction and discovery of the Gulags, how they were operated and evolved was exclusively literary. It was only in the early 1990s that historians gained access to the immense wealth of documentation left behind by the repressive institutions. On their end, leading historians of the Holocaust long dismissed literary testimonies, which they deemed problematic as sources given their subjective nature and the emotional response they could elicit. They elected to rely solely on documents instead. Raul Hilberg restricted his approach to the sole use of German sources. „The destruction of the Jews was a German deed. It was implemented in German offices, in a German culture. I was convinced from the very beginning of my work that without an insight into the action of the perpetrators, one could not grasp this history in its full dimensions. The perpetrator had the overview. He alone was the key."[18] Over time, literary testimony came to be recognized as a source to complement documents. Saul Friedländer, who finalized his monumental work *Nazi Germany and the Jews* in 2007, the year of Hilberg's death, included writings by Primo Levi, Marek Edelman, Ruth Klüger and others.[19] The recognition of testimonies as a historical source is part of a historiographical shift towards a social and cultural history of

[16] This was not the case Soviet survivors of the Holocaust.

[17] In the USSR, the only text to see the light of day in the official publishing space was Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, published by "Novy Mir" in 1962. Varlam Shalamov's texts were published abroad, without regard to the order the author intended, and they were sometimes edited out. However, a number of texts produced outside the USSR were an exception to this rule, including Julius Margolin's masterpiece *Journey to the Land of the Ze-Ka*, as well as a vast corpus of testimonies produced by Polish survivors.

[18] R. Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago 1996, p. 61.

[19] S. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. 1939–1945: The Years of Extermination*, HarperCollins, New York 2007, p. XV.

extermination, which cannot be written without giving due consideration to the perspective of the victims.

Holocaust writers were not trying to replace historians. If certain testimonies function as attestations, it is more to serve the ontological purpose of fighting against the erasure of the victims' memory that the Nazis intended, or to counter denials of the Holocaust. In the USSR, the State itself was negationist. In response to the oblivion, it was trying to impose, witnesses to the Gulag sought to calculate the number of victims, extrapolating from their own cases and or hearsay. This led to highly exaggerated figures: for example, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn estimated the Gulag population was around twenty million in the late 1930s, and Julius Margolin, ten or fifteen million in the early 1940s. As witnesses stepped into the realm of historians, a genuine "war of figures" ensued, before the opening of the archives gave access to the documents and settled the score.[20]

While historians of the Holocaust and the Nazi camps were slow to turn to eyewitness accounts, those were the primary source for historians of Stalinist repressions.[21] Of course, as Nicolas Werth pointed out, figures were contentious among historians and formed "part of the fundamental debate between the 'totalitarian' school and the 'revisionist' school', which then structured the entire field of studies on the USSR."[22] The absence of a historiography on the Gulag camps prompted a number of witnesses to engage in works embracing the totality of the concentration camp, viewed as an undertaking. *Gulag Archipelago*, for instance, is at the same time a history of the Gulag in the broadest sense, starting with the first camps created by Lenin, a satire and a collection of eyewitness accounts. Jacques Rossi, in his *Gulag Handbook*, also attempted a holistic approach by compiling an encyclopedic dictionary. This type of endeavor is unheard of in Nazi camp literature. While some witnesses may have worked as historians upon producing their testimonial and literary writing, it was not to be in their stead but rather to relay and document their experience and sources regarding a specific camp. This is the case of Hans Günther Adler and his major study of the ghetto Theresienstadt.[23] As for Otto Dov Kulka, his work sought to establish a broader history of the Jews under the Nazi regime, but did not focus on the extermination phase.[24]

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[20] See N. Werth, "Le Goulag au prisme des archives" [in:] *Le Goulag en héritage. Pour une anthropologie de la trace*, éds. E. Anstett, L. Jurgenson, Petra, Paris 2009, pp. 19–44.

[21] For the comparison between historical and literary approaches see Luba Jurgenson and Nicolas Werth, *Le Goulag. Témoignages et archives*, Laffont, Paris 2017.

[22] N. Werth, op. cit., p. 23. See also N. Werth, "De la soviétologie en général et des archives russes en particulier", *Le Débat* 1993, no. 77, pp. 127–144; "Totalitarisme ou révisionnisme. L'histoire soviétique – une histoire en chantier", *Communisme* 1996, no. 47–48, pp. 57–70.

[23] H.G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941–1945. Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft*, mit einem Nachwort von J. Adler, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2005.

[24] O.D. Kulka, E. Jäckel, *Die Juden in den geheimen NS-Stimmungsberichten 1939–1945*, Droste Verlag, Düsseldorf 2004.

Paul Ricœur, in the section on the epistemology of history in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, followed in Michel de Certeau's footsteps[25] and established a distinction between three phases through which historical knowledge is constructed: the "documentary phase" that "starts with statements from eyewitnesses to the constitution of archives, which takes as its epistemological program the establishment of documentary evidence"; the "explanation/understanding phase relates to the multiple uses of the connective element 'because' in response to the 'why?': why did things happen a certain way and not the other?" Finally, the "representative phase" consists in "putting into literary or written form a discourse delivered to readers of history."[26] Although these three phases should not be considered as separate from each other, and may even occur simultaneously,[27] this "triadic structure" presupposes, even in its broadest sense, the existence of a judicial space dedicated to the establishment of documentary evidence. In other words, this entails that, before raising the "why", the "how" and even the "what" would have been acknowledged by an authoritative body and would have left an institutionalized trace. However, in the case of Soviet Gulag witnesses, there was no testifying moment. The creation of documentary evidence about the Nazi camps was made possible by the Allied victory and a radical change in regime. This was not the case in the Soviet Union.

The history of the Gulag camps was thus deprived of one of its essential stages, namely of the eyewitness testimonies and the resulting constitution of archives. These testimonies were made outside the institutions. Gathering statements about crimes allows to restore the social bond broken by regimes of terror. In the case of Gulag witnesses, the "dialogical relation" this collection aims to foster can only emerge within the text itself. Instead of a courtroom, where this essential exchange and self-designation by witnesses could have taken place, the only outlet available to reconstruct events and testify to an account's reliability or trustworthiness were the narrative frameworks established by literary tradition. Therefore, the onus was placed on the literary work to serve as a device to open a symbolic space allowing for judgment to take place.

Due to these divergent chronologies in the construction of the respective historiographies, there is a notable difference in epistemological landscapes. While from the 1980s onwards in the West, the question of Nazi camps, and more specifically the genocide of the Jews, acquired paradigmatic value and led to an epistemological break, the same cannot be said of Gulag camps, which remained the "poor cousin" of what Imre Kertész called "the Holocaust as a culture."[28] Further-

[25] M. de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'Histoire*, Gallimard, Paris 2002.

[26] P. Ricœur, op. cit., p. 136.

[27] Ibidem, p. 146.

[28] I. Kertész, *The Holocaust as Culture*, trans. T. Cooper, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2011.

more, for many Westerners, it was often viewed as a specifically Russian, Oriental problem – in short: this perspective was tinged with exoticism.[29]

Modernity

Yet, a common thread is running through both bodies of work: despite their declared desire "not to make literature"[30] or to use literature as a weapon,[31] the writers who based their work on their camp experiences had a strong relationship to literary modernity, and sometimes sought to renew literature. Even if upon setting aside works that present themselves as fiction, such as Anna Langfus' and Piotr Rawicz', and Solzhenitsyn's and Demidov's novels and short stories, these testimonial texts belong to a literary space that developed in the wake of European modernism. Before their deportation, some of these writers were members of avant-garde groups, such as Tadeusz Borowski and Nikolai Zabolotsky. Robert Antelme, Charlotte Delbo, Imré Kertesz, Varlam Chalamov and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński rubbed shoulders with literary and artistic groups that were laboratories of modernity; Simon Laks belonged to a group of composers from the Paris School, sponsored by Maurice Ravel and Szymanowski, among others. Before joining the Resistance, Jean Cayrol published poems marked by his reading of the Surrealists. Others, like Primo Levi, Georgy Demidov or Yevgenya Ginzburg, owed their literary vocation to their camp experience, or, like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, found there an inspiration to renew their aesthetics. It is impossible to analyze the particularities of each author's writing and their place in literary history within the scope of this article, but we can trace common trends in both corpuses.

The question of the possibility of reconstructing their experience raised by the majority of deportees is akin to the fundamental question writers have about the relationship between literature and reality, and the autonomy of the literary text in relation to the world. At the same time modernists were attempting to create new languages, their endeavors found echoes in the camps. While the language used in the camps could not convey this experience outside of it, witnesses reflected on how to best "translate" their experience in the language of the readers. Aware that words from ordinary life could not reflect their own experience,[32] survivors of both camp systems sought strategies to "re-semantize" and relied on

[29] Some witnesses, notably Polish, contributed to this exoticizing of the Gulag by their insistence on the Asian features of those in charge.

[30] A. Parrau, op. cit., pp. 293, 321 et al.

[31] F. Bott, "Entretien avec Charlotte Delbo", *Le Monde des Livres*, 20 juin 1975, p. 15.

[32] See Delbo about thirst: "This word has also split in two. *Thirst* has turned back into a word for commonplace use. But if I dream on the thirst I suffered in Birkenau, I once again see the person I was, haggard, halfway crazed, near to collapse." ("Le mot aussi s'est dédoublé. Soif est redevenu un mot de l'usage courant. Par contre, si je rêve de la soif dont j'ai souffert

poetic devices. These bypasses highlight both the failure of language to communicate a certain degree of suffering, and the tremendous weight of words within contexts of violence. Words in the camp seemed loaded with deeper meaning compared to ordinary words, like heavy metal compared to light metal: they condensed meaning to such an extent that they may speak to the life and death of individuals. This extreme density turned words into the last degree of significance that language could support – beyond that, there was only silence, and it is no coincidence that silence was given a paradigmatic role in camp literature, especially when it comes to the Holocaust.[33] A similar reflection about words can already be found regarding combatants in the First World War. For example, Giuseppe Ungaretti commented about his poem, *Soldati*: "When I was faced with war, I was also faced with a language that I had to renew [...]. I needed a language that was essential, essential to an extreme point, reducing itself to words and thus giving words an enormous value."[34] This search for an essential language that dances on the edge of silence while renewing the literary approach to reality can be found in both bodies of works.

Writers also sought to find their place in the literary construction of modernity through intertextual dialogues. Kertesz refered to Franz Kafka and Albert Camus,[35] Primo Levi engaged a dialog with Italo Calvino,[36] Varlam Chalamov claimed to descend from the Futurists and Symbolists, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn from the Russian prose of the 1920s. These references varied depending on the period the texts were written, the cultural horizon of their author and the particularities of each culture, but beyond these specificities, on each occasion, they produced an intertextual fabric that anchored the testimony in the complex history of literary referentiality. Survivors of the Gulag may have felt they were reincarnations of assassinated or silenced representatives of the Silver Age, as they pursued the modernist experiments underground. Survivors of the Nazi camps inscribed their experience of absurdity in the posterity of existentialism. Irrespective of the type of modernist reference, it marked these texts with an underpinning, a substructure, inviting to dig further, a sort of archaeological concern,

à Birkenau, je revois celle que j'étais, hagarde, perdant la raison, titubante […]." C. Delbo, *Days and Memory*, op. cit., p. 4. *La Mémoire et les jours*, op. cit., p. 14.

[33] See L. Jurgenson, "La question du silence dans les discours critiques sur les représentations de la Shoah", *Çédille: Revista de Estudios Franceses*, nov. 2015, vol. 5, pp. 117–135.

[34] „Quando mi sono trovato di fronte alla guerra – spiegò Ungaretti – io mi sono trovato anche di fronte a un linguaggio che dovevo per forza di cose rinnovare […]. Avevo bisogno di un linguaggio che fosse essenziale, essenziale a un punto estremo, riducendosi al vocabolo e quindi dando al vocabolo un valore enorme." G. Sica, documentary film *Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vita d'un uomo (1888–1970)*, Rai 1970.

[35] See C. Royer, *Imre Kertész: "L'histoire de mes morts"*, Actes Sud, Arles 2017, especially the first chapter: "Albert Camus, maître de la situation", pp. 123–128.

[36] See L. Jurgenson, "The Periodic Table: Encryptions and decipherings", trans. J. Gay, *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* 2014, no. 119, pp. 93–111, https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/1507, accessed 19 August 2024.

something that was even set as a stage by Yuri Dombrovsky in his novels about the Great Stalinist Terror.[37]

As the corpus of testimonies grew and circulated, dialogues emerged between different texts written by witnesses, or between witnesses and engulfed victims. In *Cherry-Brandy*, Chalamov imagined the death of Ossip Mandelstam in a transit camp in Vladivostok, through which he had himself gone through. Herling-Grudziński in turn wrote an account of Shalamov's death and made a reference to *Cherry-Brandy*.[38] Simon Laks' *Diary Written in Broad Daylight* was written in reference to Herling-Grudziński's *The Journal Written by Night*.[39] Primo Levi polemicized with Paul Celan on the subject of "obscure writing"[40], and debates between Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov on how to describe the camps were the subject of a vast literature.[41] Celan, for his part, read and translated Mandelstam. Mandelstam himself announced his future death in his poem *The Unknown Soldier*, in which he wrote he saw himself in an „aerial grave", among the other dead of the Great War. He belonged to this decimated generation, which was also that of the great modernist experiments of the time.[42]

And so we come full circle. While it is impossible to retrace all the „archaeological" trails that comparatism offers here, we can mention one that goes back to a common source – Stéphane Mallarmé. One of Ungaretti's major references was Mallarmé. Gérard Wajcman established an archaeological link between Claude Lanzman's *Shoah* and Malevich's *Black Square*, a black window through which one could see the twentieth century. At the same time, Shalamov's whiteness of the Kolyma snows may be traced back to Malevich's *White Square*. In turn, Malevich's "objectless world" drew on Mallarmé's whiteness.[43] Western thinking on language, on the future of literature and that of the human being is permeated by references to Mallarmé. Following Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault also made a reference to Mallarmé when he wrote his theory of the disappearance of the subject in language:

> From Igitur onwards, Mallarmé's experience [...] clearly shows how the autonomous play of language takes up residence precisely where man has just disappeared. Since

[37] Y. Dombrovsky, *The Keeper of Antiquities*, trans. M. Glenny, Longman, London– Harlow 1969; *The Faculty of Useless Knowledge*, trans. A. Myers, Harvill Press, London 1997. Dombrovsky, who spent several years in the camps, only shows their antechamber in his novels: relegation and imprisonment, choosing silence or indirect representations of the concentration camp universe.

[38] G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą 1980–1983*, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1996, pp. 220–227.

[39] S. Laks, *Dziennik pisany w biały dzień*, Oficyna Poetów i Malarzy, London 1981.

[40] P. Levi, *Dello scrivere oscuro. Opere complete*, vol. 2, Einaudi, Torino 1990, p. 638.

[41] See F. Heffermehl, I. Karlsohn (eds.), *The Gulag in Writings of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov: Memory, History, Testimony*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2021.

[42] The Acmeist movement, to which Mandelstam belonged, was born in 1912.

[43] G. Wajcman, *L'Objet du siècle*, Verdier, Lagrasse 2020; G. Conio, "Du dernier poème au dernier tableau" [in:] *L'Art contre les masses. Esthétiques et idéologies de la modernité*, l'Age d'Homme, Paris 2003, pp. 43–65.

> then, it can be said that literature is the place where man continues to disappear in favor of language. Where "it speaks", man no longer exists.[44]

The idea of the disappearance of man, like that of the death of the author, can be juxtaposed to the legacy of the camps. The modernist rupture, whose genesis was sought by critics and philosophers in the works of Mallarmé and his predecessors, is reflected in the other radical rupture that the Shoah brought to European culture. Giorgio Agamben summarized this rapprochement (based on his reading of Levi) through a link between the silence of the *Muselmann* of Auschwitz (a prisoner at the end of his rope, on the verge of death) and Foucault's theory of enunciation.[45]

If structuralism and post-structuralism have been criticized for derealizing the world,[46] it is paradoxically through this derealization that the history of the Nazi camps was anchored in European culture as an inalienable part of its intrinsic opacity. At the same time, there were no comparable critical space in the USSR to think about the Gulag camps. Witnesses to the Gulags had no access to the complex conceptual apparatus that had been forged in the West about the Nazi camps and had to construct their own frameworks of thought. Solzhenitsyn, for example, viewed the history of the camps through the prism of the Christian idea of redemption and the idea that suffering elevates the human soul. Shalamov, on the other hand, saw the camp as an entirely negative school of life. He identified himself as the heir of the modernists and Russian formalists who, long before the structuralists, formulated the question of the autonomy of the literary text. Upon reactivating this layer of literary history, he would unwittingly join certain intuitions of Foucault in his critique of humanism.

Comparative perspectives

Comparatism can therefore prove useful in studying the relationships between narrative strategies of witness authors and literary modernity. It thus contributes to the construction of a literary history in which testimony about the camps would be included in its own right. It can also help nuance certain common conceptions of the Holocaust by comparing them with similar realities of the Gulag.

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[44] "À partir d'Igitur, l'expérience de Mallarmé […] montre bien comment le jeu propre, autonome du langage vient se loger là précisément où l'homme vient de disparaître. Depuis, on peut dire que la littérature est le lieu où l'homme ne cesse de disparaître au profit du langage. Où 'ça parle', l'homme n'existe plus." M. Foucault, "L'homme est-il mort?" [in:] *Dits et Écrits*, vol. 1: *1954–1975*, Quarto Gallimard, Paris 2001, pp. 571–572.

[45] G. Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L'Archivio e il Testimone*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1998.

[46] See A. Prstojevic, *La Conquête du vide. Une histoire de l'anti-référence dans la littérature et les sciences humaines 1945–2000*, Hermann, Paris 2022.

This is the case of the previously mentioned *Muselmann*, that Levi assimilated to an "integral witness" reduced to silence.[47] The corresponding figure in the Gulag camps is the *dokhodyaga*. Whereas in the Nazi camps, the *Muselmann* disappears in the gas chamber – which is precisely why Agamben traces back to this figure the Foucauldian idea of man's disappearance in a flaw in language – in the Soviet camps, the *dokhodiaga* can come back to life under certain circumstances. Indeed, the same person can experience this state several times during their detention. Shalamov, who had that experience, described in great detail in *Kolyma Stories* the different phases of degradation the body goes through to reach the borderline state between life and death, and to climb out of that state. Margolin, Ginzburg and many others recounted their experiences of half-death. This is why testimonies of Gulag inmates did not result in the same certain mystical conception around the *Muselmann's* special knowledge. These testimonies have shown that the returnee has nothing to say about the passage through death, because in the state they were in, the subjects were absent from themselves. However, the powerlessness of language was in itself an experience that never ceased to haunt its witnesses. And this is precisely what makes these two bodies of work comparable and invites us to examine the itineraries of writing and thought that bring them together.

The similarities between the *Muselmann* and the *dokhodyaga* point to a broader avenue of comparison. Indeed, the generic term "concentration camp experience" covers an infinite amount of stories and situations: labor camps, concentration camps and killing centers on the German side; the Gulags of the 1930s, those of the 1950s, the Gulags of Kazakhstan and those of Kolyma on the Soviet side. It also encompasses the many profiles of the various inmates in these camps and finally, different moments in the existence of each witness. The variety of experiences is such that classifying them is almost an impossible task. It would, however, be possible to draw up a list (admittedly, not exhaustive) of motifs that correspond to each. A number of them are food-related; for example, stealing rations, talking about cooking or exchanging recipes.[48] Other common motifs can be found in the loss of a personal object, piece of clothes or shoes, the death of a comrade, an execution, the degradation of the body and dehumanization. Among the motifs specific to Nazi camps, one can mention selection, which cannot be found in the same form in Soviet camps, although at certain times in some camps, inmates who did not meet the standard were shot as enemies of the people. One of the recurring motifs in Gulag stories relates to the specific practice of certain intellectuals who offered their service to thugs as story tellers, in a simplified form, of adventure novels they remembered. This motif is absent from the accounts of Nazi camp survivors. In testimonies about the Nazi camps

[47] See P.B. Nouraud, *Figurer l'autre. Essai sur la figure du "musulman" dans les camps de concentration nazis*, Kimé, Paris 2013.

[48] See documentary films by Anne Georget, *Les Recettes de Mina, Terezin 1944*, Planète 2007 and *Festins imaginaires*, Planète 2015.

published in the Soviet Union, we find the motif of vengeance and reparation, borrowed from the official discourse, whereas virtually all freely written texts, on the contrary, raise the question of the impossible return, as the witness is part of a community of deceased, that they feel entrusted to represent and deliver the testimony for. The very survival finds meaning in this delegation and undertaking of telling the story in the name of the dead. Whereas, in the case of witnesses to the Holocaust, writing stopped the intended erasure programmed by the Nazis, for the Gulag, this erasure did in fact occur. Testimonies written during the Soviet era were written to the attention of what their authors felt at the time was a hypothetical future generation – in an undetermined future where the Soviet regime would no longer exist.[49]

Some motifs, such as metaphors of hell, can be found equally in accounts of writers and witnesses who had no literary project. Others are specific to the latter, such as the theme of childhood or that of a happy youth suddenly turned upside down by deportation (this motif is rare among Soviet witnesses, happy childhood being one of the clichés of propaganda). Narratives from writers have motifs are deployed, embedded and evolving throughout their poetic and literary work. In stark contrast, the manner in which texts from witnesses with no literary ambition include these motifs can give the impression they are being drawn from a common reservoir and repeated from story to story.[50]

The recurrence of motifs would gain from a "morphological" study in the same way Vladimir Propp wrote about the marvelous tale. Whether they follow one another in chronological order – "arrival", "initiation", "work", "dehumanization", "hell", "liberation" – or are distributed throughout the work according to a different logic (as in Chalamov's *Kolyma Stories*, organized as a poem, or Tadeusz Borowski's *The World of Stone*, or Delbo's trilogy), they form the archetypal pattern of camp situations. As in a fairy tale, there are aggressors, quest objects, donors and magical helpers, without whom survival is impossible. Like a nightmarish tale, these narratives are "unbelievable". From this point on, these motifs converge in the metatextual purpose discussed above, the question of "how to tell?" „[...] Horror has its own language, and a man's voice will always be too weak to convey it"[51], Anna Langfus said.

[49] However, the threat of erasure also plays a considerable role for the authors of testimonies about the Nazi camps. See M. Decout, *Faire trace. Les Ecritures de la Shoah*, Corti, Paris 2022.

[50] It's not always easy to distinguish „literary testimony" from a text that has no artistic purpose. Peter Kuon, who had focused on the latter in a corpus of accounts by Mauthausen survivors, rehabilitated their interest against the advice of Hannah Arendt, who found them strikingly monotonous, and argued in favor of their study, insofar as they constitute the immense mass of testimonies compared to the canonical texts born from the pens of great writers. See P. Kuon, *L'écriture des revenants. Lectures de témoignages de la déportation politique*, Kimé, Paris 2013, p. 11 et sq.

[51] "[...] l'horreur a son propre langage et la voix d'un homme sera toujours trop faible pour la render." A. Langfus, "Il ne suffit pas d'être sincère pour être vrai", Revue d'histoire de *la Shoah, septembre–décembre* 2002, no. 176, p. 116.

Conclusion

One of the challenges comparatism helps with responding to its blind spots. Comparing the bodies of work on Nazi camps and on Soviet camps is tantamount to seeing how one might illuminate the other. Some elements that, at first glance, would seem specific to one or the other can in fact be found in both. So far, these have not benefited from the same conceptual illumination and been sufficiently thought through. For example, Primo Levi's concept of the "gray area" to designate the areas of contact between the camp authorities and the victims would be highly productive in describing not only the Gulag, but Soviet society as a whole. On the other hand, Raul Hilberg's triad of "Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders", which tends to be universalized in reflections on violence, may not be truly universal, as it may prove difficult to apply it to the Soviet Gulags, precisely because of the omnipresence of a gray area blurring the boundaries. Furthermore, while the link between the Nazi camps in the East and German imperialism has been extensively analyzed, the colonial dimension of the Gulag camps is still largely unexplored and deserves to be developed further.

There are also realities which, while omnipresent in the Gulags, are less visible in accounts of the Holocaust. Among these, for obvious reasons, is the question of landscape: many Soviet camps were located in the midst of wilderness, perceived by the inmates as an ally or an enemy, and sometimes also a victim of industrial projects. Landscape fragments are rare in testimonies of Nazi camps, but they do exist, and their study opens up the possibility of renewing the history of the gaze. In this case, the comparative method allows us not only to readjust or deconstruct existing knowledge, but also to seek what has not yet been seen or thought about.

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