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LEONA TOKER
(HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM)
ORCID 0000-0002-4107-233X

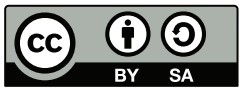
INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL TRAUMA IN VARLAM SHALAMOV'S NARRATIVES[1]

ABSTRACT
Gulag-survivor narratives tend to combine individual and communal concerns, which are sometimes artistically amalgamated. The relationship between them can be further understood with the help of trauma studies, though the application of the concept of trauma to Gulag literature is not unproblematic. This paper focusses on signs of trauma in Shalamov's stories "The Seizure", "On Tick", and "The First Tooth", the latter showing how individual trauma blends with collective/cultural trauma associated with the loss of confidence in communal identity. These are versions of the cultural trauma of Russian intelligentsia, stemming from enforced departures from its humanistic ideals.

KEYWORDS: Shalamov, traumatogenic experience, "The Seizure", "On Tick", "The First Tooth"

Narratives of Gulag survivors usually combine individual and communal concerns – this is their genre feature. Part of their textual space is devoted to the personal experience and part to the tribulations of the authors' collective at different common points (see Toker 2000: 76–82). In its last section the present article is devoted to a case, a fairly representative one, I believe, where the two concerns are artistically amalgamated. Issues clustering around the concept of trauma may shed some light on the nature of this amalgamation.

[1] The research presented in this article was conducted within the framework of the PRIN 2022 PNRR project "Literature of Socialist Trauma: Mapping and Researching the Lost Page of European Literature (LOST)", ID: P2022Z45X8, CUP: B53D23029360001, Principal Investigator: Andrea Gullotta (University of Palermo). The project was funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research (MIUR) under the 2022 PRIN PNRR Call for Proposals, Directorial Decree No. 1409 of September 14, 2022.



Discussion of Gulag literature with the help of trauma studies is not unproblematic and, until recently, has not been widely practiced.[2] One of the reasons for this is, no doubt, the troubled history of psychiatry in the Soviet Union, especially memories of the incarceration of dissidents, such as Petro Grigorenko and Vladimir Bukovskii, in psychiatric institutions. Another reason is the problematic status of specifically psychoanalytic discourse. Psychoanalytically oriented scholars discuss the trauma of survival, as well as survivor's guilt,[3] yet their individual examples, however poignant, may seem ephemeral in the face of the prolonged everyday torments inflicted on millions of slave laborers. As a character in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* explains, the trauma of Stalinist repressions goes beyond the tragedy of individual choices:

> Children write essays in school about the unhappy, tragic, doomed and I-don't-know-what-else life of Anna Karenina. But was Anna really unhappy? She chose passion and she paid for her passion – that's happiness! She was a free, proud human being. But what if during peacetime a lot of greatcoats and peaked caps burst into the house where you were born and live, and order the whole family to leave house and town in twenty-four hours, with only what your feeble hands can carry?... A ribbon in her hair, your daughter sits down at the piano for the last time to play Mozart. But she bursts into tears and runs away... Where can people read about us? (Solzhenitstn 1969: 479 [Part II, ch. 34]).

Mainly, however, the problem with trauma discourse in the Gulag context is of an ethical nature: discussing testimony to traumatogenic events holds a priority over discussions of their long-term psychological effects. This is also partly true of the Holocaust experience, but the traumatogenic part of the latter has been largely encapsulated since the summer of 1945, whereas the Gulag persisted, in new ways and on a less massive scale, in post-Stalinist decades as well, up to the late 1980s; it persists to these days, in new shapes.

By now, however, time may have come to discuss Gulag literature with the help of trauma studies, both because of the inner dynamics of literary scholarship and because of the still acute need to continue talking about Gulag testimonies, preferably in new ways, especially in view of the new pragmatism with which the current Russian regime and a large part of its public opinion privilege the great industrial and military achievements of the Soviet past while paying perfunctory lip service to the human sacrifices made in the process (see Khapaeva 2007: 77–81).[4] This tendency

[2] There are some recent exceptions, such as Kline (2017), Gullotta (2021), Thun-Hohenstein (2021).

[3] Cathy Caruth, for instance, asks: "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" She sees "the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life," that is, "between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival," as "both incompatible and absolutely inextricable" (Caruth 1996: 7).

[4] See also Alexander Etkind's account (Etkind 2009: 363–371) of what he calls the "sacrificial interpretation of the Gulag." As Etkind notes (Etkind 2009: 366), in Russian the same word, *zhertva*, stands both for "victim" and for "sacrifice."

started, in part, as a kind of obeisance paid to the continuity of the old Soviet elite in power positions: as Sergei Averintsev has noted, the perestroika decades basically effected a compromise between the Soviet elite and the oppositional part of society – "we get rid of totalitarian ideology and leave the former leaders at their posts, as a payment for this peaceful and bloodless liberation" (Averintsev 2004: 31); by now, almost 40 years after the beginning of perestroika, the social contexts of this tendency have changed for even worse. A segment of the twenty-first century Russian public opinion has opted for the triumphalist view of Soviet history and even longs for a certain image of the Stalinist regime (see Mendelson, Gerber 2005). It does not suffice to counter such phenomena by saying that achievements would have been greater without turning millions of people into a slave-labor force, which seemed so inexhaustible that one could get away with hasty planning (see Khlevnyuk 2003: 64); nor does it suffice to say that the achievements would have been greater without killing or repressing people who could have served the country much better in the arts and the crafts, in technology, in agricultural know-how, or just in normal cultural life, than at manual canal-digging or tree-felling. There is a continuing ethical imperative to keep the traumatogenic events in collective memory by, among other things, recognizing the force of the trauma in individual life-stories.[5]

The three sections of this article deal with three aspects of trauma-representation in the narratives of Varlam Shalamov, perhaps the greatest artist in the Gulag corpus and one who has already become a canonical Russian writer. First, his autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives lend themselves to interpretation in terms of post-traumatic patterns of behavior. Second, his narratives present traumatogenic events as well as the psychological and behavioral consequences of prolonged traumatogenic experience that has affected the states of the survivor's body and soul. Third, in a kind of synthesis of the first two features, trauma is not only his theme: it characterizes not only the content of his stories but also their form. Some of the formal features of Shalamov's narratives lend themselves to being explained as signs of his own persistent trauma, which may be worked through by the writing or may, on the contrary, be renewed by the reliving of the experience during the composition. In some of his stories (my example is "My First Tooth") Shalamov represents individual traumatogenic experience as a matter of collective cultural trauma.

[5] It is telling, for instance, how little some of the survivors interviewed in Gheith and Jolluck's oral-history project (Gheith, Jolluck 2011) can say about their past – a well-known symptom of traumatic repression.

I

Shalamov was aware of his traumatized condition. His body bore marks of frostbite; his fingers had reduced sensitivity; Ménièr's disease, foreshadowed by recurrent rhinitis in childhood, was exacerbated in the late 1950s; and towards the beginning of the 1970s other troubling symptoms, loss of hearing, progressive blindness, touches of mental confusion pointed to a reawakening of the gene that may have carried Huntington's disease (see Esipov 2012: 328; Goloviznin 2017). Yet it was the wound to the soul that he confessed in a 1964 letter to Frida Vigdorova: "The traumas of the soul are irreparable. The frostbites of the soul are irreversible" (Shalamov 2004: 723; my translation).

The first massive onset of his Ménièr's disease took place on November 19, 1957. One can never know whether it was triggered by contemporary events: that year there was a temporary refreezing of the Thaw that had started slowly after Stalin's death in 1953 and gained momentum after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in 1956. The journal *Moskva*, for which Shalamov worked, had come under a cloud. The publication of his first collection of poems, recently submitted to the publishing house "Sovetskii pisatel'", had been delayed (in the wake, he thought, of the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian mutiny in 1956 but also owing to a hostile internal review; see Esipov 2018). Such circumstances could have sufficed for opening old wounds.

Two of Shalamov's stories represent the traumatized condition of a former Gulag prisoner. The first one is "The Seizure," based on Shalamov's 1957 experience.[6] The unnamed protagonist narrator, seemingly an autobiographical one, has a fit of "sweet nausea" in the street, faints, and is carried to a hospital, where his consciousness remains blurred for a time. In this state of vagueness he recollects a similar fit of nausea and fainting in a Northern camp, when he came to in the cabin of the winch operator, who was rubbing his face and hands with prickly snow, against frostbite. This second time he is glad that he finds himself in an urban hospital rather than in the North; the ominous nature of this particular hospital, a neurology institute, does not trouble him. The story has a double frame: the outer frame is the account of the seizure, starting with the sense that "[t]he wall rocked" (Shalamov 2018: 445) and ending with the glad sense of not being in the camp; the inner frame is the evocation of camp experience.

The motif of the memory starts soon after hospitalization:

[6] Donald Rayfield translates the title of the story as "A Heart Attack"; which unduly disambiguates the patient's condition. Another case of problematic disambiguation pertains to the half-conscious protagonist's experience of being examined in the hospital: "I was alone with someone as gigantic as Gulliver" (Shalamov 2018: 445). It would have been preferable to follow the syntax of the original: "I was one on one with someone gigantic, like Gulliver" – here two images are superimposed on each other: Gulliver as small as an insect examined by a giant Brobdingnagian, and Gulliver as a captive in the land of the Lilliputians, himself a giant but bound fast to the ground.

> My head ached and the slightest movement made me dizzy. I couldn't think. I could only remember, and the frightening images from the distant past began to appear as black-and-white figures, like frames from a silent film. The sweet nausea, like anesthesia under ether, wasn't going away. Now I'd solved the mystery of that familiar feeling. I remembered the first time that a day off work was announced, many years ago, in the north, after six months without a break (Shalamov 2018: 445–446).

This outer frame closes when the protagonist finds himself cared for not by the winch operator in the North but by a Moscow doctor; he answers the doctor's questions with difficulty, and wants to be left alone. The last sentence of the story is "I was not afraid of memories", as if denying the traumatic character of his recollections. In fact, some recollections have been played out, like a black-and-white movie, on the hospital wall, the reprise of the image of a rocking wall in the street at the onset of the seizure.

However, the content of the recollections within the inner frame of the story is more like a delirium, or a nightmare sequence, than an actual memory of a specific event – the kind of bad-dream sequence in which a strenuous physical task that the subject has to accomplish turns Sisyphean, with every attempt ending in failure: the prisoners want to rest on the day off but are sent out to fetch logs for firewood; the protagonist makes a long detour, involving a hard climb, to old wood piles, hoping to get a lighter log, only to find that all the logs there are heavy; further on he finds a more promising pile, but the ends of the logs are trapped and he cannot pull them out; he climbs to the top of the pile and manages to get a passable log from under the snow; but even that log is too heavy for him; he tries to drag it by his makeshift scarf and it keeps hurting his legs or slipping away. There are probably few people who have not had a structurally analogous nightmare sequence of efforts and failures, but in the case of the protagonist it is clearly based on traumatogenic events of his Gulag past. The story blurs the borderlines between a dream and a memory, between consciousness and swoon, and between factography and fictionalization: it is dated 1960, that is, three years after Shalamov's fainting in a Moscow street – hence, if read as totally factographic, it would mean, improbably, his remembering earlier memories, that is, recollecting how three years before the time of composition he remembered a day in his Gulag past.[7] More likely, therefore, the "I" of the story is not so much autobiographical as generic: it is a sample account of trauma, of the resurgence of the pain of the past triggered by an organic sensation in the present. To some extent it is also the experience of what Freud called the "working through" of the trauma,[8] especially in view of the last sentence: "I was not afraid of memories". That sentence, however, is also autodescriptive: like the first stories of each of Shalamov's story-cycles, "The Seizure", the first story of the cycle

[7] On the other hand, one has to admit, this could also be interpreted as a case of what Henri Bergson (Bergson 1929: 93, 102) discussed as spontaneous memory, "as capricious in reproducing as it is faithful in preserving" past events.

[8] On "working through" as opposed to "acting out" in Shalamov, see Gullotta (2021).

"The Artist of the Spade", sets the scene for a literary processing of painful memories. This processing may have therapeutic aspects, but its power is associated with a courage to re-live traumatogenic events.

The other story that deals with the traumatized survivor is "The Academician", in the cycle "The Left Bank". This is a third-person narrative, whose protagonist, Golubev (one of Shalamov's avatars – cf. Apanovich 2002), works as a journalist (one might want to associate him with the journal *Moskva*) and is sent to interview a successful member of the Academy of Sciences. The scientist's well-being, by Soviet standards, is a subsidiary theme of the story, and it gains explanation from the quotation of the scientist's Stalin-period invective against cybernetics[9] which he now, in 1957, extolls. The interview is not a conversation; it is, actually, a matter of taking down the scientist's monologue; and the scientist is displeased that Golubev does not practice stenography.[10] The scientist is clearly a gifted person with a good memory, and he recollects Golubev's name from talented journalistic writing in the early 1930s, but Golubev replies, "No, … I'm a different Golubev. I know the one you have in mind. He died in 1938" (Shalamov 2018: 273) – the denial is, of course, figurative rather than literal. At the end of the story, the scientist waits patiently as Golubev has a difficulty putting on his coat. The story ends in an explanatory one-sentence paragraph: "Golubev's shoulder joints had been torn away under interrogation in 1938".[11] Retroactively, torture under investigation explains Golubev's heart condition, hardness of hearing, and his sense of not being the same person as before. He knows that his brain, as part of his body, has also been affected, whether by prisons or, implicitly, camps – though he used to know French, he has trouble recognizing a proverb used by his interlocutor:

> the unfamiliar words crawled over his weary, withered brain. The [gibberish] phrase crawled slowly, as if on all fours, down the dark alleys of his brain, stopping to gather strength until it crawled into a patch of light, and Golubev understood, with pain and fear, what it meant in Russian (Shalamov 2018: 271; translation amended).

The recalcitrance of a depleted Gulag prisoner's brain is evoked in Shalamov's stories of Kolyma, in particular in "Condensed Milk". The story "Sententia" records the ecstasy of a dried-up brain beginning to revive and bring back long-forgotten words. Interestingly, it is by such traumatic damage to the survivor's brain that Primo

[9] This feature of the story may invite comparison with Nabokov's 1932 short story "The Reunion", dealing with the meeting of two brothers, one a poor émigré in Berlin and the other a visiting Soviet high official, who has likewise published a party-line article of the kind that used to pave the way to repressions of targeted groups or classes (see Toker 2022).

[10] At the beginning of the story it is mentioned that eventually the scientists demanded numerous changes in the text of the interview because it was given before the launch of the Sputnik on October 4, 1957, but would come out after that event. The timing of the interview, prior to October 4, places it at the time shortly before Shalamov's seizure, after which he had to give up his work as a freelance journalist.

[11] Shalamov usually began writing his stories with the first and the last sentences.

Levi explains what he sees as weakness in Shalamov's texts (I see the same phenomena not as flaws but as meaningfully complex features):

> Paradoxically, the weakness of these stories (their confusion, stylistic uncertainty, imprecision, the deliberate omissions and those due to negligence) strengthens their documentary value. They seem to say: "Here, read and see what the Lager reduced me to" (Levi 2015, II: 463).[12]

The eponymous first story of Shalamov's cycle "The Revival of the Larch", which is metaliterary like other opening texts of his cycles, tells about a withered twig of a larch sent to the widow of a prisoner from Kolyma. The twig revives in a vase in her apartment (evidently, to wither again after this temporary reinvigoration). The story is symbolic of a temporary revival of the camp-veteran writer's ability to live and work upon release, before inevitable decline.

Shalamov was known to discontinue most of his friendships in the 1970s: this must have been partly due to his declining health, his deafness and eventually blindness, as well as his growing discontent with dissident circles, which were unable – and perhaps did not even try – to camouflage the dangers to which he was again being exposed: a traumatized person tends to see through the front of social systems to their dark undersides. Some of Shalamov's stories, especially later ones, deal with the protagonist's wishing to meet people whom he had known in the camps, followed by their parting forever. Sociologist Kai Erikson, who had studied people's responses to mass disasters, notes that it is not so much that calamity strengthens the bonds linking people together but that their "shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship" (Erikson 1995: 190). This may partly explain the theme of the partings after the desired reunions in Shalamov's stories – especially if a companion of the hard old days says or does something that diverges from the shared perspective. A complex of the protagonist's motivations is suggested, with knots left not unraveled, in the early story, the 1956 "The Used-Book Dealer" (Shalamov 1994: 257–274; "The Secondhand Book Dealer", Shalamov 2018: 411–426), where the autobiographical first-person protagonist narrator seems to distance himself from a Kolyma associate not so much because of the latter's erstwhile service in the NKVD (the man had fallen victim of the purge within the NKVD) but because of his current conduct, especially, it seems, by his struggles to get reinstated in the party. The 1970–1971 story "Yakov Ovseyevich Zavodnik" (Shalamov 2018: 447–459), in the cycle "The Glove, or, Kolyma Stories II", tells about a person for whom the protagonist-narrator had deep respect in the camps, and with whom he meets years after release; the account of their reunion ends with Zavodnik spouting a true-believer banality about not knowing why a fellow-prisoner was not rehabilitated: "The Government has its reasons. You and I may be

[12] On the place of this review by Primo Levi in the Italian responses to Shalamov, see Sinatti. One of the problems in Levi's underappreciation of Shalamov was his reading the faulty and selective Italian translation available in 1976.

clear-cut cases, but Yarotsky's is probably quite different". The story ends with a pregnant statement "I never visited Yakov Ovseyevich Zavodnik again, though I remain his friend" (Shalamov 2018: 459; translation amended). Zavodnik has swerved away from the veterans' shared culture (which consisted, among other things, of extrapolating the subject's own innocence to fellow prisoners, instead of regarding the others as guilty and himself as an error of justice); hence his attractiveness for the narrator is cancelled, though not the amicable attitude based on the respect of the past. Since the ties are those of "a shared set of perspectives" (Erikson 1995) and of respect rather than of affection, after having been drawn to one another, the traumatized victims of the same calamities tend to drift apart. To some extent, the fissure in the veterans' full mutual understanding and attitudinal concurrence is also a traumatogenic event, though not as intense as the blows received in the camps.

II

For purge victims, *traumatogenic events* are, of course, being torn away from one's family, one's community, and from everything that constituted one's happiness and self-esteem; then come exposure to the tyranny of arbitrary power of prison and camp authorities, the violence of criminal convicts, starvation rations (further reduced when the depleted bodies are no longer able to meet the production quotas), interminable hours of work, insufficient defense against Northern frosts, as well as individual acts of betrayal or brutality. In Shalamov's stories, such traumatogenic events are, for instance, the camp commander's breaking of the makeshift pots in which the prisoners try to cook some supplementary food in the barracks, or the criminals hitting the protagonist-narrator on the head to steal the bread and butter that he has purchased for the proceeds of a parcel from home. These "story plots" recur in Shalamov's story cycles. In the past, I was tempted to see their repetition as Gospel-like (Toker 1989); they accrued other meanings for me later: I see them now also as a kind of self-verification, in lieu of the "evidence of two". Without abandoning these interpretations, I now also see the recurrence of the same story-plots as evidence of traumatic repetition, even though in some stories the experience in question seems to be relived and in others it is only briefly mentioned, like something already dealt with and known.

Traumatogenic experience also includes individual feats of survival, since in camp conditions survival is either random or conditioned on the non-survival of the others: one can hold a softer job in an office only because there are plenty of others for the office to administer – plenty of others who are worked to death in gold-mines, uranium factories, or tree-felling; or one can be an orderly in a camp hospital but only if there are plenty of others for the hospital to try to heal – plenty of others whose bodies are ruined by overwork, industrial accidents, cold, and starvation.

In Shalamov's stories traumatogenic events are narrated directly, but the traumatic sequences that follow are represented mainly by way of implication. The insistently recurrent motif of his narratives is the emotional depletion of the prisoners, the absence of energy that stunts their emotions. As shown, in particular, in his stories "Condensed Milk" and "Sententia", this is mainly the physical consequence of prolonged undernourishment, chronic starvation. In "Sententia", the prisoner who has reached the condition of what in Auschwitz was known as "a Muselmann" and in Soviet camps as *dokhodiaga*, a goner, gets an easier job and a slightly improved diet; as a result, various emotions begin to return to him, along with his memory. However, a different situation, one more directly indicative of trauma, is implied in the story "Na predstavku" ("On Tick"),[13] perhaps the most astonishing and the most widely discussed of Shalamov's stories.

This relatively short narrative, the second in the story-cycle "Kolyma Tales", starts with the heavily ironic allusion to Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades" and seems to be devoted to the topos of the gambling addiction.[14] It represents a card game in the barracks of criminal prisoners. The first-person protagonist narrator, clearly one of those sentenced under the "political" article 58, is watching the game. He is there in the criminals' barracks because he earns a bowl of soup from the criminals by chopping and sawing firewood for them. We learn, among other things, that in the criminal subculture, as elsewhere, card debts are sacred, but, in contrast to traditional features of the gambler's honor, it is not a shame to cheat at cards – this is part of the story's motif of the tension between cultural norms and their perversion among the criminals. In classical literature stories of gambling usually end badly for the loser, and this is what even a moderately competent reader expects. At the climax of the story, indeed, there is a murder, but the victim of the card-game losses is not one of the players but a by-stander. Stabbed to death is the narrator's partner in wood-sawing, the political prisoner Garkunov, "a former textile engineer" (Shalamov 1994: 8). He is killed because he does not wish to part with his sweater, a piece of clothing from home, which the loser demands of him in order to pay his card debt. The matter-of-fact killing of the intellectual who resists being undressed and despoiled is shocking to the reader, a kind of second-degree trauma. Surprisingly, it does not seem to be a trauma for the protagonist-narrator. While the reader expects the narrator, another *intelligent*, to be outraged, terrified, or at least determined never to enter the criminals' barracks again, his only comment is "Now I had to find another partner to cut wood with" (Shalamov 1994: 10). This punchline is one more trauma for the reader.

"On Tick" is, of course, not a cautionary tale about the dangers of associating with criminal convicts or of possessing anything beyond regulation-issue camp

[13] This is John Glad's translation of the title (Shalamov 1994: 5); Rayfield translates it as "On the Slate" (Shalamov 2018: 4).

[14] For interesting comments on this story, see, in particular, Apanovich (2017: 438); Mikhailik (2018: 62–63); Schmid (2021: 91); Volkova (1998: 83).

clothes. The blow that it deals the reader is the shock of realization what camp has done to the intellectual protagonist-narrator. That the protagonist is not surprised by Garkunov's murder means that he must have witnessed other events like it. Yet his lack of outrage, or grief, or any other emotion is not, as it would have been in "Sententia", a consequence of physical depletion alone: he still has enough strength for seeking extra food by wood-sawing. His reaction, or rather lack of it, is part of a traumatic sequence: his emotional life has been stunted by traumatogenic events in the past. The reader is left with the sense that in order to have reached this kind of inner condition the protagonist must have gone through things that are beyond one's untaught imagination. Indeed, many of the stories that follow give multiple examples of such indelible experience. On the other hand, the absence of emotional comment on the murder can also be read as a sign that the event is traumatic for the protagonist-narrator, a new trauma, despite everything that he has seen and lived through before. We do not have to choose between these two interpretations: both of them can be operative at the same time.

The issue of the *artistic expression* of the author's trauma is problematic because each symptom can be treated either as an involuntary expression or, in a writer like Varlam Shalamov, as an intentional device. Shalamov himself bore scabs to the end of his days: osteomyelitic toes, frost-bitten fingers that had a difficulty with writing implements, gaps in memory that left – or were deliberately replicated by – gaps, repetitions, and contradictions in his writing, the return of tormenting memories during health crises. Ménière's disease and worse were like reopening of the wounds, similar to the reopening of the scurvy sores years after the release from the camps – the emblematic case of Evgeniia Ginzburg's husband Anton Walter. Yet different features of Shalamov's writing may have a double status: as symptoms of the author's trauma and as deliberate artistic representations of trauma, individual or collective. In fact, details of some of his narratives subtly reinterpret individual trauma as a collective cultural one. In the next section I show how this works in the 1964 story "The First Tooth".

III

"The First Tooth" is set at the end of the 1920s and pertains to Shalamov's first spell in the camps, 1929–1932. On the way towards a Northern camp, the protagonist sees how a convoy officer, here named Shcherbakov, hits the sectarian Zayats who refuses to hold his place in the ranks (since even such a concession to regulations is, for Zayats, a matter of collaboration with Satan):

> Shcherbakov struck Zayats in the face with his fist. Zayats spat into the snow.
>
> All at once I felt a burning sensation in my chest, and I realized that the meaning of my whole life was about to be decided. If I didn't do something – what exactly I didn't know – it would

> mean that my arrival with this group of convicts was in vain, that twenty years of my life have been pointless.
> The burning flush of shame over my cowardliness fled from my cheeks, I felt them cool down and my body lighten.
> I stepped out of the line and said in a trembling voice:
> "Don't dare hit a human being."
> Shcherbakov looked me over in sheer amazement.
> "Get back in line." (Shalamov 1994: 384; translation modified)

That night the protagonist (who in this part of the story is the first-person narrator) is pulled out of the hut, held naked in the frost, and beaten. He loses a tooth, his first. Not a single other prisoner defends him, no one attempts to hide him, no one comforts him or tries to support him afterwards. Next morning the sectarian Zayats is standing quietly in the ranks.

The lesson is learned. At the end of the journey, when a camp boss asks the prisoners the formal question whether there are any complaints of the convoy, the protagonist answers that there are "no complaints about the guards" (Shalamov 1994: 387).

The point of the story is not just about terror methods of discipline and about an early traumatogenic experience. The protagonist's motivation for his act of resistance is represented not so much as sympathy with the abused Zayats, and not so much as a wish to protect him, but as a duty to his own self – unless I do something, it is in vain that I have come here with this transport, in vain that I have lived my twenty years. His duty here is a duty to the romantic ideals of generations of Russian revolutionaries of the tsarist times, on whose lore he has been educated.[15] When a year later he meets Zayats in a village near the camp, the sectarian repulses him:

> I saw Peter Zayats on the street. He was an orderly in the village. The young black-haired black-browed giant had disappeared. Instead he was a limping, gray-haired old man coughing up blood. He didn't even recognize me, and when I took him by the arm and addressed him by name, he jerked back and went on his way. I could see from his eyes that Zayats was thinking his own thoughts, thoughts that I could not guess at. My appearance was either unnecessary or offensive to the master of such thoughts, who was conversing with less earthly personages (Shalamov 1994: 387; translation amended).

We may read the sectarian's conduct as a rejection of protagonist's psychological egoism, or as his need to be at peace with himself, his need to retain self-respect. The sectarian's refusal to stand in the ranks was his personal protest, his private martyrdom. Having seen that this stance endangers another prisoner, Zayats discontinued his resistance, apparently in an uneasy compromise with his conscience. Yet he does not forgive the protagonist for this. Under the circumstances, the protagonist's attempted heroic resistance turns out to be not just futile but harmful.

[15] This aspect of the story is discussed in Toker (2019: 155–159).

A large proportion of Shalamov's stories collocate at least two events, the main one and one that may or may not have taken place at the same period in the author's experience. In a directly autobiographical narrative, the reader would be expected to accept the collocation of the two events as following the sequence of actual experiences. Yet in stories that are demonstratively (or even just possibly) fictionalized,[16] the reader is invited to treat the separate events as actual but to ask of them the kind of questions that one asks of fiction, such as questions about the meaning of the collocations, about symbolism, about the extent of representativeness. The other event in "The First Tooth" is what happens on the same transport in a previous interim station, when the huge consignment of prisoners is made to spend the night in the cellar of a police station, a former monastery church, in the town of Solikamsk. Traumatogenic events are sudden, unexpected. The profanation of the monastery building by the atheistic regime is not unexpected and hence not traumatic, even though Shalamov was a priest's son. What is sudden and unexpected is the conduct of a criminal convict Gusev in whose proximity the protagonist finds himself. The two of them are among the first to enter the cellar, and the first thing that the criminal does is to rush to a window and break the pane. The protagonist is surprised by this vandalism, especially because it is very cold. Yet he soon understands the wisdom of the act: the cellar is filled chock-full of prisoners, and so it is only close to the broken window that one can breathe.[17] The gap in the broken pane anticipates the gap in the protagonist's mouth when he is hit by Shcherbakov and loses a tooth, which, in its turn, may be read as standing for a gap in the order of things, fracturing one's world-picture. Elias Canetti believed that the orderly line of teeth in one's mouth may have been the primeval man's first emblem of order (Canetti 1981: 207–208). In "The First Tooth" order is traumatically disrupted, with the recurring motif of the gap, including the gap in the ranks left when the protagonist steps forward to protest, suggesting irreversible damage.

The gap is not merely in the legality of the functioning of a Soviet penal institution; it is a fracture in the protagonist's world view. Coming from traditionally humanistic, self-sacrificial, and rebellious Russian intelligentsia, he is the kind of person who would believe that jail-time is a mandatory qualification for the membership of that stratum – indeed, the first sentence of the story (in my translation from Shalamov 1998: 571) is "The prison transport was the one I had dreamt about during the long years of my boyhood." Growing up on the traditions of liberal intelligentsia, he also believed in the solidarity and mutual help of the prisoners (as Shalamov represents this in his stories about the Butyrki prison) and their resistance to the arbitrary rule of the jailors. He finds an echo of these values in an inscription on the cellar wall: "Comrades! We were in this grave three days and thought we would die, but we survived. Comrades, be strong!" (Shalamov 1994: 382). This is a classical

[16] See Cohn (1999: 109–132) on overt signposts of fictionality.

[17] Gusev's act is actually a form of "secondary adjustment" (Goffman 1961: 188–193) that is, creating survival loopholes by knowingly breaking rules (see *ibidem*: 160).

carceral topos,[18] as is, for that matter, the protagonist's defense of Zayats. As mentioned above, the story makes it clear that the latter act of resistance stems not merely from the concern about the sectarian and his human rights but mainly from the protagonist's need for self-esteem. Yet it is an overdetermined act: one of its motivations is the agenda of preserving the protagonist's membership in his idealized virtual community. A major constituent of the protagonist's trauma is not just the physical abuse that he endures at the hands of the convoy commander Shcherbakov but also, and perhaps mainly, the fact that fellow prisoners do not attempt to shield him at night, when he is pulled out from among the sleeping bodies for punishment – on the contrary, one of his common-criminal neighbors helps the convoy guards to identify him. This event is traumatogenic in the cultural sense. The Dostoevskian principle of solidarity among prisoners turns out to be null and void in the world of Soviet camps, and this realization, along with the resulting change in the protagonist's conduct on arrival to the destination (he no longer protests), may be a greater blow to this young intellectual than the violence of the guards. It is, ironically, with his mouth disfigured by the blow that he says to the camp commander that he has no complaints of the convoy guards. Indeed, his most painful complaint would be against the cancellation of the prisoners' solidarity.[19]

The resultant trauma is of the cultural nature not only because it overturns what the protagonist considered the norm of his socio-cultural community but also because it signifies a threat of the disintegration of that virtual community, whether of liberal intelligentsia or just of prisoners as a collective – a disintegration not only because of the government's clampdown on the opposition but because of the loss of confidence in traditional principles.[20] As Jeffrey C. Alexander has noted, "[f]or traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises... Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" (Alexander 2004: 10). Indeed, as the protagonist of "The First Tooth" finds himself in an environment dominated but not totally constituted by criminal convicts, he first maintains his endangered sense of representing idealistic intelligentsia, but then it is this sense, along with his body, that receives a blow. This is an individual trauma, but the narrative features of the story raise it to the status of a serial occurrence, thereby implicitly shaping the trauma as collective and cultural.

One of the narrative features that turn the story of an individual trauma into a representation of a collective cultural trauma is the structure of this short narrative, its handling of the point of view. The story does not end with the protagonist's arrival to the camp of his destination. There is a coda, in which a narrative twist takes place: the first-person protagonist, whom we have been reading as fairly autobiographical,

[18] On "carceral topoi" (pertaining to prisons rather than concentration camps), see Fludernik (2019: 1–59).

[19] Shalamov himself eventually found out that the people arrested with him in 1929 did not adhere to the principle of czarist-time revolutionaries not to disclose any information to the interrogators.

[20] See Lundblad-Janjić (2021) on Shalamov's probing of the ethics of intelligentsia in the Gulag.

suddenly turns out to be a third-person character, named Sazonov. In this narrative spasm, it is now Sazonov who has been telling this story to the authorial first-person narrator, and consulting with him not about the right course of conduct but about an optimal literary ending: should he, perhaps, end the story on the note of meeting the depleted moribund Zayats in the camps, or on that of gaining a position of prominence in the camp office and turning the tables of Shcherbakov yet, significantly, not holding a grudge against him. Thus the story of sudden traumatic fractures turns out to be both the story of an "I," a first-person focalizer, and a story of another, a "he," the frame narrator's fellow – "*intelligent*". The physical, moral, and cultural trauma is now felt to be beyond the experience of a single subject; its scope is expanded – it is presented as a serial event, especially since the frame narrator, that is, the first-person narrator of the coda, shows a full and non-judgmental understanding of Sazonov's trials and criticizes only his artistic choice between endings. There is no good ending, the two of them decide, and so the initial ending, with "no complaints of the convoy", is accepted as artistically optimal. That ending is, indeed, less anecdotal and more representative of the ways of camp education. One may be reminded of Primo Levi asking about the reasons of one of the absurd Nazi prohibitions and getting the answer, "Hier ist kein warum" (Levi 1990: 35).

The other narrative feature that expands the scope of the story's theme is that none of the two narrators of "My First Tooth" is individualized. We learn nothing about the biographies or personal traits the protagonist-narrator (Sazonov) in what turns out to be an inset story, or of the anonymous "I", the focal consciousness of the story's half-frame, the coda that deals with codas. We only see that they are both members of the intelligentsia; as educated people, they are entrusted with administrative jobs in the camps – this was still possible in the early 1930s. The absence of individualized character portrayal in their cases is in tune with the sample convention (see Toker 2017): the characters' experience is represented as an example of regularities, as a serial crime against those condemned to imprisonment in the camps, a typical event, or at least a typifying one that could only take place in that specific institution. The sample convention goes a long way towards neutralizing the "as if" convention (see Iser 1993: 4–21) of fictional narratives and thereby allows such narratives to double as historical testimony. It also signifies the broadening of the experience of trauma from an individual case to a collective cultural development: something of great value in the Russian humanistic tradition was being lost in a society held under control by labor camps. The combination of the individual and communal concerns that characterizes Gulag-survivor narratives (as well as most of the narratives of Holocaust survivors) is here not a matter of devoting one portion of the narrative to the personal and another portion to the typical or the cultural and collective. Nor is it a matter of combining events with generalizations. Rather, it is the kind of artistic probing of a specific event, through narrative structure, style, and strategic choice of details that endows an individual case with a communal significance, turning this event into evidence of a stage in cultural history and into a comment on its direction.

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