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Trauma and Self in the Soviet Context: Remarks on Gulag Writings

The present paper is a first reflection on the ideal approaches to study the corpus of *lagernaia memuaristika*. The author proposes the novel concept of ‘Soviet repression literature’ as a new key concept to study the whole corpus of literature related to Soviet repression under a genre perspective. In this context, the author stretches the peculiarities of Gulag memoirs in relation to the corpus of Soviet repression literature, and underlines how trauma studies and autobiographical studies might help assessing the corpus.

Leona Toker’s book *Return from the Archipelago* (Toker 2000) remains an isolated example of literary criticism on Gulag literature as a whole, regardless single articles and short essays (e.g. Martini 2002) that commonly speak of a body of text called ‘Gulag literature’, without mentioning of what it is comprised of, and what criteria are used for the selection of the texts. Other scholars have analysed single Gulag literature works, never considering them as part of a corpus that can be studied in a genre perspective¹.

In my previous publications (Gullotta 2011a, 2011b and 2011c), I have mentioned the necessity of

¹ It is important to underline how, in recent times, a few scholars are starting considering the literary works related to the Gulag in a broader perspective, as happened in the paper presented by Anne Hartmann at the conference “Geschichte(n) des Gulag - Realität und Fiktion” (Heidelberg, 20-22 March 2012) and by Sarah J. Young at the conference “Punishment as a Crime? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Prison Experience in Russian Culture” (Uppsala, 15-17 August 2012).

studying Gulag literature in a genre perspective, and the need to widen the horizon to other aspects and works, switching from the concept of *lagernaia literatura* (Gulag literature) to that of *literatura sovetskoi repressii* (Soviet repression literature). I believe that many literary works have been influenced in various ways by Soviet repression (e.g. works by authors subjected to repression, works that are centred on repressive situations like arrests, tortures, psychological violence, works by former Gulag inmates etc.), and I believe that these works share common stylistic and structural features. Soviet repression has directly affected the history of Russian literature, not only in terms of historical contingencies, but also in terms of narrative and poetic forms, reflecting on a literary corpus which encompasses not only Gulag literature.

I dedicated the last years of my activity to the study of this line of research. I share Leona Toker’s convic-

tion in the need to analyse the works related to the Gulag as artistic works; moreover, I am convinced that Tok'er's book, which I consider a reference for my work, is simply unable to cover all areas of analysis of such a vast literary corpus. My research is not yet completed and I am aware of the need to consider the question in a wider publication. However, at this stage I believe it is fundamental to explain the reasons of my conviction and my preliminary conclusions, in order to avoid the risk of speaking of an 'unidentified object'. In this first definition, I will rely on Jean Marie Schaeffer's considerations on genre as outlined in his *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?*

Soviet Repression Literature as a Genre

Schaeffer's essay is mainly aimed at discovering the 'skeleton' that is hidden behind the names of literary genres, revealing the mechanisms that create literary genres and thus arriving at the heart of the very genre question. His idea, shared by other genre theorists, is that it is impossible to apply taxonomic categories to the literary works and that, overall, the 'movement' needed to define a genre is from the texts to the genre, rather than from the genre to the text: "A genre theory [...] cannot dissect literature in reciprocally exclusive classes of texts, each of which has its own essence and therefore its

own internal nature that develops autonomously [...] in relation to a totality called 'literature' or 'poetry' – a totality that would be something like a super-organism, the different genres being the organs of it" (Schaeffer 1992: 57)². Schaeffer further defines five levels of the communicative act that underlies the literary text, namely the levels of enunciation, of destination, of function, semantic and syntactic, and explains the importance of each level in the genesis of the genre names.

Following Schaeffer's indications in a constructive way, i.e. using his ideas of the five levels in order to see how they are fundamental in considering a literary corpus, I define the genre of Soviet repression literature as the group of texts that:

- are written by authors directly or indirectly affected by Soviet repression (level of enunciation);
- have a transitive destination towards a real and undetermined reader (level of destination);
- can have an aesthetic, a moral or a combined function (level of function);
- share the 'aboutness' (Schaeffer 1992: 97) of Soviet repression (semantic level);
- can be stylistically influenced by Soviet repression (syntactic level)³.

² The quotations from Schaeffer's essay have been translated by me, since I did not have at my disposal the English version of the text.

³ Soviet repression had, in my view, a direct influence on the style of many Soviet repression

Soviet repression literature is a genre shaped by peculiar historical conditions, whose “historical existence” (Schaeffer 1992: 117) is probably “exhausted”, as Mauro Martini stated (Martini 2002: 48-49). This is due to the fact that, as Tzvetan Todorov argues in his *Les genres du discours*, “the literary genres communicate with the society in which they exist” (Todorov 1993: 51)⁴. As happened with Schaeffer’s considerations, here I use Todorov’s idea not passively. Todorov’s sentence is included in a passage dedicated to the ‘institutionalization’ of the genres. Soviet repression literature has never been ‘institutionalized’. Nevertheless, thanks to its peculiar historical context, it is a genre that has always communicated with Soviet society or, better, with those sectors of Soviet society that were ready for communication on such matters (samizdat readers, former prisoners, etc.) and with some sectors of the Western societies where some of these works were published (the circles of the Russian emigration before World War II, the European intellectuals after 1945, etc.).

In my view, the genre of Soviet repression literature is composed by a

literature works. Examples of this influence can be found, for instance, in the typical difficulty in ornamenting the texts in Gulag poetry, in the extensive use of ‘realia’ related to Soviet repression in literary texts (*lagernyi zhargon*, bureaucratic terms, etc.), in the recurring use of passive constructions, etc. For the connection between literary form and trauma in Soviet repression literature, see below.

⁴ My translation.

few sub-genres, e.g. Gulag memoirs (*lagernaia memuaristika*), Gulag poetry (*lagernaia poeziia*), Soviet repression fiction (*khudozhestvennaia proza o sovetskoj repressii*), etc. What I aim to show in the present article is the importance of the connection between self writing and trauma for the analysis of Soviet repression literature. Since its literary corpus is far too extended to be analysed in one single article, I will take into consideration one sub-genre, that of *lagernaia memuaristika*, as it appears as the most suitable to the purpose of the present article.

Lagernaia Memuaristika as a Sub-Genre

The sub-genre of *lagernaia memuaristika* is deeply rooted in the long tradition of memoir writing in Russian literature. The importance of self writing in Russian literature has long been underlined, its first critical contributions dating back to the Formalists and Mikhail Bakhtin (Criveller 2011). The critical discourse on memoirs has been powerfully fuelled by Lidiia Ginzburg’s analysis of Saint-Simon’s memoirs (Ginzburg 1971, 1977) and Andrei Tartakovskii’s study on the practice of memoir writing in the XIX and at the beginning of the XX centuries (Tartakovskii 1991). Finally, it had a notable boom soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following the

increasing success of memoir writing (both at a creative and commercial level) in Russia after *perestroika*, Russian critics have dedicated many important works to the theme of memoir writing. This increasing interest reached its peak when a round table with many memoir writers and a few critics was organized by the journal «Voprosy literatury». Its title was *Memoirs at the Change of an Epoch*, and its proceedings were later published by the journal.

The long wave of the Russian debate has recently hit Western scholars, as testified by the collection of essays edited by Beth Holmgren *The Russian Memoir* and by Irina Paperno's *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams*. In the introduction to the book she edited, Holmgren stresses the history of Russian memoir writing, proposing what in her opinion is the specificity of the Russian memoir in relationship to the universally accepted concept of memoirs, that can be summarized in their definition as texts that “personalize history and historicize the personal” (Whitlock 2006: 20). At the end of a thorough survey of the critical context of the studies on the Russian memoir, she writes: “The memoir thus presents a remarkably fluid and affective genre, coincident with and sometimes indiscernible from fiction, autobiography, biography, history, and gossip; and capacious enough to combine fictional enhancements with nonfictional authority, confession with ob-

servation, personal license with verifiable facts, subversive rumors with celebrity worship. Yet - to intone a recurring feature - the memoir necessarily presumes to record its subject's different public performances on ‘real’ stages: among family and intimates; in various social and political milieus; in the ‘real’ space and time of history. For the term of reading, the narrator-subject assumes enormous authority as the reader's descriptive and evaluative guide to these depicted worlds. Unbound by scholarly structures and privileged with firsthand knowledge, the memoirist wields interpretive power more overtly, freely and intimately than either historian or biographer” (Holmgren 2007: xv).

The last sentence of the quoted passage is very important when speaking about Gulag memoirs. Marked by specific historical conditions, ignited by the need to demonstrate to the world the existence of a reality that was hidden by Soviet authorities, composed by both professional and non professional writers, Gulag memoirs constitute a literary corpus⁵ that has few equals in the history of world literature and that, to date, seems to have been studied more under the ‘gender’ perspective than any other.

⁵ The definition of the literary corpus deserves a wider study. For the needs of this article, it is important to clarify that I have been working on a body of work comprised of almost 100 texts written by former camp prisoners. It is, obviously, a preliminary study of the corpus, which could be enlarged in the future.

In fact, the difference between the studies dedicated to the *zhenskaia lagernaia memuaristika* (e.g. Adamova-Sliozberg 1993, Mandel'shtam 1999, Olitskaia 1971) and those devoted to other Gulag memoirs is strikingly noticeable. Many are the works dedicated to Gulag memoirs written by women, a case sometimes influenced by the particular nature of the book in which they were published. Such is the case of Natasha Kolchevska's essay *A Difficult Journey: Evgeniia Ginzburg and Women's Writing of Camp Memoirs*, that was published in the collection of essays edited by Rosalind Marsh and dedicated to women's writing in Russia, or the case of the essays by Emilia Magnanini, all published in the journal «DEP», dedicated to the study of 'Deportate, esuli e profughe' [Deported, exiled and refugee women]. In other cases, the attention of the author has been drawn by singular texts: such is the case of another article by Kolchevska, dedicated this time only to Evgeniia Ginzburg's *Krutoi Marshrut* (Ginzburg 1967) and Helena Goscilo's essay on Elena Bonner's *Dochki-materi* (Bonner 1994), both published in the above mentioned book *The Russian Memoir*. It is interesting to notice that some critical works have confronted the problem by taking into account different texts, as happened with Marja Rytönen's *Women's Histories: Autobiographical Texts by Contemporary Russian Women* (that deals more generally

with women's writing and confronts specifically the question of women's Gulag memoirs) and with Benjamin M. Sutcliffe's *Documenting Women's Voices in Perestroika GULAG Narratives*. A middle way is represented by Beth Holmgren's book *Women's Works in Stalin's Time. On Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam*, which proposes both a closer and a wider look at the question.

All these works have convincingly showed the peculiarity of the memoirs on Gulag written by women, such as the "motherly attitude" analysed by Magnanini (Magnanini 2005: 51) or the "personal and societal" character of these works highlighted by Sutcliffe (whose analysis of the influence of women's writing on the commonplaces of camp literature is particularly convincing). Their analyses, usually implemented through a structuralist approach, do not face the genre question, even when they study a wide corpus of texts.

Irina Shcherbakova's essay *Remembering the Gulag. Memoirs and Oral Testimonies by Former Inmates* takes into consideration the entire corpus of Gulag memoirs, regardless of the gender question. Shcherbakova traces the history of Gulag memoirs, from the memoirs written before World War II by former inmates of Gulag who escaped to the West (e.g. Mal'sagov 1926, Bezsonov 1928, Solonevich 1936), to the memoirs composed in later years. Alongside her accurate historical

overview, Shcherbakova proposes an analysis on a few aspects linked to Gulag memoirs (authors, themes, moment of composition) and to the issue of representation (one of the paragraphs of her article is entitled *What is remembered and how*). Her most important contribution seems to be the idea that the corpus of Gulag memoirs represents a 'hypertext', although Shcherbakova does not delve deep into this stimulating idea, that could open interesting perspectives also under the point of view of a genre study. In her opinion, "The women's memoirs are distinguished, as a rule, by more emotional content, more scrupulous description of camp life, greater importance given to family histories, and description of human relations. The women (especially in later memoirs) are franker in their description of the use of force (in particular during investigation), sexual problems, etc." (Shcherbakova 2003: 196).

Another scholar who studied Gulag memoirs is Dariusz Tolczyk, who dealt with some textual problems related to these narratives. In an article dedicated (once again) to Evgeniia Ginzburg's *Krutoi Marshrut*, surely the most studied of all Gulag memoirs, Tolczyk stresses the trouble of the 'double assault' to which Gulag memoirists are subjected; a physical assault, and "a special ideological assault": "Both Nazism and Soviet Communism (at least in its Leninist and Stalinist phases) consisted of organized attempts to turn utopian

rhetoric into life. Thus, the concentration camps created by these regimes in order to isolate, exploit, and (especially in the Nazi case) exterminate selected categories of people can be described in terms of 'theaters of life' (and death), in which victims were expected to enact in their real lives the roles projected onto them by this utopian rhetoric. "A person's consciousness", as Todorov puts it succinctly, "is [always] an internalization of the discourse of others; the 'I' is formed by the 'they'." [9] In the ideal world of totalitarianism, the only 'they' who form the 'I' (identity) of every inhabitant of this world are supposed to be the Party leaders" (Tolczyk 2005). "Understanding the specific nature of the moral assault of the Gulag - Tolczyk further states - is crucial in order to appreciate the special character of Evgeniia Ginzburg's testimony to her eighteen years spent in Stalin's prisons, camps, and confined settlement" (*ibidem*). This special character, in Tolczyk's view, is given by the question of language in relation to the 'moral assault': "Whereas most testimonies to moral resistance in the Gulag underscore the reliance of the victims on moral languages that anchored their identities before their imprisonment, Ginzburg testifies to resisting this assault despite discovering in prison that the moral language that anchored her identity before her imprisonment was, in fact, vacuous" (*ibidem*). On this basis, Tolczyk analyses thoroughly Ginzburg's memoirs, tracing the

origin of how the need of using the 'language of literature' as a new 'code' to tell her story was fundamental in the author's personal experience. In another essay, Tolczyk analyses the memoirs by Gustaw Herling and Tadeusz Borowski under the common theme of the 'Hunger of Imagination' (Tolczyk 2001).

The only work that takes into consideration the idea of a genre study for the corpus of Gulag memoirs is, again, Leona Toker's *Return from the Archipelago*. In the third chapter, entitled *Gulag Memoirs as a Genre*, Toker proposes a consistent and compelling analysis of the corpus, implementing a structuralist approach based on the study of common morphological aspects which in her view are: "(1) tension between the *ethical* drive and an *aesthetic* impulse, closely associated with the bi-functionality of Gulag narratives as acts of witness-bearing and as works of art, (2) interconnection of *individual* and *communal* concerns, (3) inclusion of specific topoi as morphological variables, and (4) a modal scheme that can be described in terms of *Lent*" (Toker 2000: 74). Toker dedicates the main part of her analysis to the nine topoi that "connect the selection of material with recurrent structural features", adding also that "Of the nine topoi listed below, an individual narrative usually displays no less than seven" (Toker 2000: 82).

Of all the above mentioned works, Toker's is the most comprehensive analysis of the corpus of Gulag mem-

oirs. Alas, the forcedly short space dedicated to the question (28 pages in total) does not allow for a close examination that the topic would need in order to be definitively assessed. Adding my opinion to the debate on Gulag memoirs, I can propose my preliminary definition of Gulag memoirs as a sub-genre, adhering to the definition I gave above of Soviet repression literature, based on Schaeffer's essay. I define the sub-genre of Gulag memoirs as a group of texts that:

- are written by authors directly affected by Soviet repression (level of enunciation);
- have a transitive destination towards a real and undetermined reader (level of destination);
- have a combined (both aesthetic and moral) function (level of function);
- share the 'aboutness' of the experience of the Gulag (semantic level)
- are stylistically influenced by Soviet repression (syntactic level).

This definition is clearly similar to the definition of Soviet repression literature, with which it shares the same features at the level of destination (the addressee of the text is always a real and undetermined reader, albeit Gulag memoirs, being texts written by witnesses, seem to have a more 'concrete' reader). However, there are a few differences, namely: (1) the author is always directly affected by Soviet repression, i.e. it is always

someone who has been arrested and secluded in a camp, unlike other authors of Soviet repression literature who were never arrested (e.g. Vasili Grossman, Lidiia Chukovskaia, Anna Akhmatova etc.); (2) the level of function is mandatory in its combined aspect. Here once again I follow Leona Toker, where she writes that Gulag memoirs “are bi-functional; can be legitimately read as testimony *and* as literary works” (Toker 2000: 124); (3) if Soviet repression literature texts share the ‘aboutness’ of Soviet repression (e.g. arrests, the Great Terror, the Holodomor, etc.), Gulag memoirs share mainly that of camp experience; (4) while the Soviet repression literature works may be stylistically influenced by Soviet repression, Gulag memoirs surely are: see, for instance, the topos that Leona Toker calls “The Room 101” (Toker 2000: 89).

I believe that the analysis on the corpus of *lagernaia memuaristika*, could be done with the help of different theoretical approaches. However, the critical works that analyse the relationship between self writing and trauma (e.g. Chiantaretto 1999, 2003, 2004, Felman and Laub 1992, Henke 1998, Tellier 1998, La Capra 2001 etc.) are in my view particularly thought-provoking, as they delve deep into what in my opinion are two fundamental aspects of Soviet repression literature, i.e. trauma and self.

Trauma and Self as Perspective Points to Analyse Gulag Writings: Preliminary Remarks on Gulag Memoirs

The existence of a common and interdisciplinary critical framework related to the question of trauma, self and literature, is proven by the presence of shared questions in studies that deal with different narratives, the most important of which is that of representing the trauma in words (“The narrative of trauma carries with it the impossibility of representation or else itself becomes a history the writer cannot entirely possess since neither writer nor reader can comprehend the horror of the event, or the full meaning of its narrative form”, Cook 2001).

In his 2000 book, Michael Rothberg coined the term of ‘traumatic realism’ in relation to the artistic representation of the Holocaust. Through the analysis of a wide spectrum of texts (literary works, philosophical accounts, films, comics, etc.), Rothberg utilizes trauma as a key to confront the topic of the representation of the extreme. In the introduction to his book, Rothberg outlines two attitudes towards the representation of the Holocaust, which he calls ‘realist’ (“an epistemological claim that the Holocaust is knowable and a representational claim that this knowledge can be translated into a familiar mimetic universe”; Rothberg 2000: 4) and ‘anti-realist’ (“a claim that the Holo-

caust is not knowable or would be knowable only under radically new regimes of knowledge and that it cannot be captured into traditional representational schemata"; Rothberg 2000: 4). Further on, he explains the choice of the term 'traumatic realism': "At the centre of this book stands the concept of traumatic realism, a concept I derive from Holocaust testimonial writing [...]. By focusing attention on the intersection of the everyday and the extreme in the experience and writing of Holocaust survivors, traumatic realism provides an aesthetic and cognitive solution to the conflicting demands inherent in representing and understanding genocide. Traumatic realism mediates between the realist and anti-realist positions in Holocaust studies and marks the necessity of considering how the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of genocide intersect and coexist" (Rothberg 2000: 9).

A similar question is raised in Leona Toker's introduction to her *Return from the Archipelago*: "... since the atrocities of the twentieth century are vastly different from whatever has been represented in the literature of the previous ages, the literature of the Gulag, like the literature of the Holocaust, often highlights the asymmetry of traditional cultural schemata and unprecedented new realities" (Toker 2000: 9). Toker's analysis of Gulag literature works delves deep into the problem of representation, overall

hinting at trauma rather than utilizing it for her hermeneutic discourse. Other considerations are significant enough to further support my ideas on the importance of trauma and self in the analysis of Gulag memoirs.

In the above mentioned definition of Gulag memoirs, Leona Toker takes into consideration the problem of selection in connection with structural narrative features. The list of nine topoi that she highlights is composed, respectively, by: (1) Arrest, (2) Dignity, (3) Stages, (4) Escape, (5) Moments of Reprieve, (6) Room 101, (7) Chance, (8) The Zone and the Larger Zone and (9) End of Term Fatigue. I would divide these topoi into two main categories, which I would call 'dynamic' (1, 3, 4, 9) and 'static' (2, 5, 6, 7, 8), meaning for 'dynamic' those that are linked to the *fabula* and 'static' those that are linked to representation strategies. Considering only the dynamic topoi, it is evident, as Toker and other scholars underline, that the selection of the biographical material by the author is usually restricted to the time passed under repression, from the arrest to the release from the camp. Gulag memoirists usually ignore the rest of their lives, or provide information about their lives in a few sentences. This can be seen, in my opinion, as an effect of trauma.

Usually, one of the most debated issues of autobiographical studies is that of selection of material for self-representation. The author who writes about his/her life selects

certain episodes, accordingly to the type of image that he/she wants to give the reader about him/herself (D'Intino 1998: 126). Authors of Gulag memoirs tend to limit their selection to the repressive moments. The rest of their lives seems uninteresting in their eyes. While certainly fed by the testimonial function, this choice can surely be linked to the traumatic effect the repressive experience has on their 'I'.

Gulag memoirists usually recount their shock, surprise and desperation about the absurdity of their situation after the arrest. From common Soviet citizens, they are thrown into another world, where they are obliged to forget every point of reference they had in their life before the arrest. The prison, the interrogation, the sentence, the transferral to the camp, the arrival in the camp, the forced labour and so on: step by step, they enter into a new life, that has nothing in common with the one they had lived before. This process is marked by a series of traumas (humiliation, torture, starving, etc.), to which each of the memoirists respond in a different way. What is common in all of them is that the release from the Gulag means the exit from that life. This happens in the 'concrete' part of their lives: while in 'real' life they leave geographically the places where they had been living for years, internally they never 'exit' from camp life. Once outside, pen and paper in hand, Gulag memoirists usually decide to ignore the

rest of their life, marked by happy or 'normal' moments, and concentrate only on their 'other life', marked by trauma, sufferance and death.

While this surely represents an attempt to restore legitimacy and dignity to their sufferings, thus offering a 'second version' of their lives in the camps, I see a connection with the need to 'expel' internal trauma externally in order to heal from the wound created by that negative experience (see Gilmore 2001: 885). "Life writing about trauma moves personal experience onto the historical stage, it provides a way to reconceive the relation between private and public, and it produces a counter-discourse to the historical muting or erasure of the kinds of violence that have been regarded as violating dominant cultural norms and narratives. [...] Among those who study the phenomenon, the consensus position holds that [...] trauma must be spoken of in order to heal the survivor and the community" (*ibidem*). This quotation, other than subtly pointing at another main question that I am unable to analyse in this article – that of the moment of composition –, can be seen as an additional key to the confrontation of the problem of selection. The Gulag memoirist not only needs to testify what happened in order to create the 'counter-discourse' (which, in the specific, is the 'real history' to be set against the 'ideological history' prompted by the Party); he/she also needs to heal from the trauma he/she lived from

the moment of the arrest to the moment of release or immediately after. In my view, these are the two reasons (the 'counter-discourse' and the healing process) why Gulag memoirists usually limit their selection to their life under repression.

Going back to the seminal question of representation, trauma is fundamental for an aspect that regards not only Gulag memoirs but, overall, many Soviet repression literature texts. As Shcherbakova puts it, "Of great interest is the question of time and space in these memoirs. They are not all equal in their depiction of living reality. Thus, description of an investigation which went on for weeks or even months sometimes occupied a larger place in the memory of a former prisoner than long years he spent in a camp. The former experience probably put very much great strain on the person's spiritual strength, the shock he suffered was more severe, while the months and even years spent in the camp just merged together" (Shcherbakova 2003: 200). This excerpt, which Shcherbakova refers mainly to space and time, can be explained totally through the prism of trauma, as the Russian scholar writes in the second part of the excerpt. In my opinion, the intensity of the trauma influences some texts: this is particularly evident in Lev Konson's minimal tales (which are composed of a few sentences that refer to a traumatic situation, e.g. Konson 1983: 11. This is related to one of the main questions

in trauma studies, i.e. the difficulty in articulating the trauma) or in Varlam Shalamov's writings (I am referring mainly to the author's choice of writing tales rather than novels in connection with the devastating effect that the recollection of traumas had on Shalamov during the writing process, see Irina Sirotinskaia's introduction to the Italian edition of the *Kolymskie rasskazy*, Sirotinskaia 1999: ix)⁶.

Irina Paperno, talking about the memoirs published in Russia after the *glasnost*, states: "In traditional understanding, memoirs, like other autobiographical texts, are retrospective narratives of individual life. What distinguishes memoirs from autobiographies (scholars maintain) is their emphasis on the negotiation between the self and community. Memoirs define themselves as accounts of lives embedded in a social matrix. [...] The memoir, written retrospectively, makes an explicit effort to connect the 'I then' and the 'I now'. [...] In this way, both the diaries and memoirs help the writer and his or her reader to attain knowledge of the self and knowledge of the (culturally specific) temporality. Diary and memoir are two different templates for tracking the self in time, for mediating between the past, the present, and the future. Both allow the self to be linked to the evolving historical time" (Paperno 2009: xiii). It

⁶Particularly interesting are Alfred Gall's essays on laconism in Gulag literature. See, for instance, Gall 2007.

seems to me that this can be applied only partly to *lagernaia memuaristika*, since it is propelled and fed by another, utter need, i.e. to link the self to 'another' historical time, the 'hidden' history of the soviet camps, that was not officially recounted. Moreover, Gulag memoirs seem to be close to the idea of 'active autobiographies' as explained by Paul John Eakin: "I am concerned [...] with autobiographies that feature the active, conscious construction of the point of intersection between the individual's life and the larger movement of history of which it is a part. I shall argue that in these cases, autobiography not only records an imaginative coming-to-terms with history, it functions itself as the instrument of this negotiation" (Eakin 1992: 144).

Rooted in the tradition of Russian memoirs, marked by a peculiar historical context and by unique extratextual conditions, this set of 'active autobiographies' and, overall, of texts related to Soviet repression needs to be reconsidered in a wider perspective. The amount of issues related to trauma and self representation in relationship to stylistic features and narrative strategies testifies for the need of a new theoretical approach to the corpus. If developed, such an approach can serve for literary corpuses born in similar historical contexts as, for instance, those born in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Such a perspective can bring to unexpected results. My hope is that this quest will be

taken into consideration by the international academic community.

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