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More than a Cat. Reflections on Shalamov's and Solzhenitsyn's Writings through  
the Perspective of Trauma Studies

In an article written for the third issue of *Shalamovskii sbornik* in 2002, Elena Mikhailik proposed an analysis of the differences between Varlam Shalamov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's writings, taking inspiration from the way in which Shalamov had critiqued the author of "Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha" ("One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich"). Shalamov contested the scarce reliability of some details given by Solzhenitsyn regarding the living conditions within the labor camp in which Shukhov and his fellow prisoners spend their term.<sup>1</sup> Mikhailik's core claim is that there is a consistent difference in the way the two writers approached their writing in regard to their readers. Other scholars have made similar observations, including Leona Toker, who in the present volume presents an article devoted to the "lightening effect" in the work of both writers.<sup>2</sup> The critical literature on both authors is comprised of a high number of critical and academic works, many of which compare their stylistic features. It is indeed not a novel observation that the works of Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov are very different. These authors, as do all other Gulag literature authors—or, better, as do all authors—had different ideas, worldviews, and stylistic preferences. The

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<sup>1</sup> Elena Mikhailik, "Kot, begushchii mezhdu Solzhenitsynym i Shalamovym" [The Cat Who Ran Between Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov], in *Shalamovskii sbornik 3*, ed. V. V. Esipov (Vologda: 2002), 101-114.

<sup>2</sup> Leona Toker, "The Issue of 'Lightening' and the Problem of Target Audience in Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov", cf. *infra*.

present article seeks to provide a new perspective on the differences between Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov by analyzing some of their stylistic features through the field of trauma studies.

The umbrella term ‘trauma studies’ hides a conspicuous number of scholarly research that tackles several aspects related to trauma. Many works in the field—which is transdisciplinary, taking into account approaches from clinical as well as cultural, social, and literary studies—notably take into consideration the effect of trauma on the individual and/or on some communities, focusing also on questions such as the representation of trauma in various forms (interviews, memoirs, fiction, etc.). Out of this plethora of studies, I will limit myself to the use of some key concepts developed in the field—some of which are drawn also from clinical studies of trauma, in particular on issues of representation in patients suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—in order to analyse the implications that the trauma suffered by Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn might have had on their representations of traumatic events. In doing so, I will rely on theories developed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, who see a direct correlation between the medical symptoms suffered by a person because of a trauma and the way this person represents the events that caused the trauma.

Such an approach has to date received little consideration from scholars working on Gulag literature, who, when talking of trauma, have not related it to the field of trauma studies, with the exception of Alfred Gall’s quotes from LaCapra in his description of Lev Konson’s and Leo Lipski’s laconism as an effect of trauma and of Sarah J. Young’s article on repetition in Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*.<sup>3</sup> The latter is the most in-depth study on the

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<sup>3</sup> See Alfred Gall, “Disconcerting concision. Laconism as principle of text organization. Leo Lipski (Dzień i noc) and Lev Konson (Kratkie povesti)”, in *(Hi-)Stories of the Gulag. Fiction*

correlation between trauma and representation in the field of Gulag studies published to date; my paper will distinguish itself from Young's outstanding contribution in many ways. First, I will not limit my analysis to Shalamov, but will also propose a comparison with Solzhenitsyn's work; second, I will make use of clinical studies in the attempt to identify the existence of a correlation between PTSD symptoms and literary form; third, I will outline a series of further implications of such an approach on other works pertaining the Gulag and/or Soviet repression.

In many ways, this article is the ideal continuation of a piece of research I have published in 2012, which posed the question of how trauma studies can help to analyse Gulag literature in more generic terms.<sup>4</sup> In the present article, I will put to the test one of the hypotheses proposed in that publication—i.e. that the intensity of trauma lived by an author may have an impact on their style—by devoting my attention to Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn's works. In doing so, I will refrain from starting a “competition of trauma” between the two; I will rather try to identify in their texts instances which may initially help to trace the impact of trauma on their creative process, and then show how trauma has (or has not) surfaced in their writing, influencing their literary form. I will therefore take a different stance from Young's, who argues that the repetitions in Shalamov's writing, although related to trauma, are a conscious literary device aimed at drawing the readers into the events and thus make them into witnesses. The present article will instead argue that some of these devices are influenced by PTSD symptoms and may not be seen simply as stylistic choices.

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*and Reality*, eds. F. Fischer von Weikersthal and K. Thaidigsmann (Heidelberg: 2016), 205-218 and Sarah J. Young, “Recalling the Dead: Repetition, Identity, and the Witness in Varlam Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy*”, *Slavic Review* 70, 2 (2011): 353-372.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Gullotta, “Trauma and Self in the Soviet Context: Remarks on Gulag Writings”, *Avtobiografiya. Journal on Life Writing and the Representation of the Self in Russian Culture*, 1 (2012): 73-87.

However, it is necessary to clarify that this article does not want to posit that Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn's works are only a product of trauma: the writer's agency is not under discussion. Similarly, this article does not aim to propose the idea that all the literature deriving from the experience in the camps can be seen through this prism. While Gulag literature is a literature of trauma—a literature generated by traumatic conditions, which deals with trauma and is often inspired by the recalling of trauma—it is still literature, and not a reaction to a clinical symptom. In other words, this article does not posit that trauma studies should replace literary studies, nor does it intend to dispose of the many valid approaches and critical studies devoted to Gulag literature to date, but rather suggest that, alongside the analysis of narratological, philosophical, ethical, aesthetical and socio-cultural aspects of these texts and of each author's specific peculiarities, trauma studies can suggest additional interpretations that may contribute to a deeper understanding of Gulag literature texts.

### *Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn's Writings of Trauma*

Varlam Shalamov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn differed in many ways, and their differences—aesthetic, philosophical, personal—were among the reasons for their personal clashes, as recounted by both authors. There is one difference, though, that to date has not been put into sharp relief—a difference that appears in the first contact between the two, the letter Shalamov wrote to Solzhenitsyn in November 1962 after reading “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich”, which Mikhailik analyses in her article:

This is a very intelligent, very talented tale. It is a camp from the point of view of a camp ‘hard worker’, who has professional skills, who knows how to ‘earn’, a hard

worker, not a Tsezar' Markovich<sup>5</sup> or a *kavtorang*.<sup>6</sup> He is not an 'adrift'<sup>7</sup> intellectual, but a peasant experienced by a great hardship, who has withstood this hardship and now speaks about the past with humour.

Everything in the tale is accurate. It is a 'light' camp, not quite a real one. The real camp is also shown in the tale, and it is shown very well: this terrible camp—Shukhov's Izhma—breaks through in the tale like white steam through the cracks of a cold barrack. ... In the labor camp where Shukhov is, he has a spoon, but a spoon in a real camp is a useless tool. Both the soup and the *kasha* are of such consistency that you can drink them from the rim; a cat walks around the hospital—that is also inaccurate for a real camp, where the cat would have been eaten long ago. You managed to show this dirty, terrible past, and to show it very strongly, through these flashes of Shukhov's memory, his memories of Izhma. The school of Izhma is the

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<sup>5</sup> Shalamov here refers to one of the characters of "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich", a repressed film director.

<sup>6</sup> A reference to another character of the *povest'*, the navy commander (*kapitan vtorogo ranga*, or *kavtorang*) Buinovskii.

<sup>7</sup> In the slang of the Gulag, the verb 'доплыть' (literally 'swim/sail to somewhere', or 'swim/sail as far as somewhere') meant to arrive at the most extreme stage of physical exhaustion. See Zhak Rossi, *Spravochnik po Gulagu* [The Gulag Handbook] (Moscow: 1991), vol. 1, 104.

school where Shukhov learned how to live, accidentally surviving. All this in the tale screams in a full voice, for my ear, at least.<sup>8</sup>

Повесть эта очень умна, очень талантлива. Это—лагерь с точки зрения лагерного “работяги”, который знает мастерство, умеет «заработать», работяги, не Цезаря Марковича и не кавторанга. Это—не “доплывающий” интеллигент, а испытанный великой пробой крестьянин, выдержавший эту пробу и рассказывающий теперь с юмором о прошлом.

В повести всё достоверно. Это лагерь «легкий», не совсем настоящий.

Настоящий лагерь в повести тоже показан, и показан очень хорошо: этот страшный лагерь—Ижма Шухова—пробивается в повести, как белый пар сквозь щели холодного барака. ... В каторжном лагере, где сидит Шухов, у него есть ложка, ложка для настоящего лагеря—лишний инструмент. И суп, и каша такой консистенции, что можно выпить через борт, около санчасти ходит кот—тоже невероятно для настоящего лагеря,—кота давно бы съели. Это грозное, страшное былое Вам удалось показать, и показать очень сильно, сквозь эти вспышки памяти Шухова, воспоминания об Ижме. Школа Ижмы—это и есть та школа, где и выучился Шухов, случайно оставшийся в живых. Все это в повести кричит полным голосом, для моего уха, по крайней мере.

Shalamov indeed devoted most of his letter to the appreciation of the way the author of “Ivan Denisovich” depicted many aspects of life in the Gulag—yet the author of the

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<sup>8</sup> Varlam Shalamov, *Vospominaniia, zapisnye knizhki, perepiska, sledstvennye dela* (Moscow: 2004), 642-643. All translations from Russian are mine, apart from where otherwise stated.

*Kolyma Tales* argued that some details of Solzhenitsyn's work were not veridical. But while Mikhailik and Toker focus their attention on Solzhenitsyn's authorial decision to propose to the eyes of the reader a lighter labor camp than the ones described in *Kolyma Tales*, I believe it may be worth adding another point of view to their insightful ideas.

In my view, Shalamov's remarks were fuelled by an objective fact, i.e. that the two had radically different experiences of trauma—hence his remarks on Izhma, which recalled a type of experience similar to that lived by Shalamov. In fact, Solzhenitsyn spent a total of eight years in the camps, three of which in a *sharashka*, i.e. one of the laboratories in which repressed scientists would work on industrial and military projects and received better food rations and overall a better treatment than other prisoners in Soviet camps and prisons.<sup>9</sup> In his autobiographical texts on the experience of the Gulag (i.e. the parts of *Arhipelag Gulag* [The Gulag Archipelago] in which he directly recounts his own life in the camp, and the hints to his camp experience in *Bodalsia telenok s dubom* [The Oak and the Calf]), while traumatic events such as beatings, hunger, and humiliation are indeed recounted vividly, they do not seem as devastating as those recounted by Shalamov in his memoirs, who spent almost 20 years in the Soviet prisons and camps, most of which in the Kolyma, some of the harshest camps in the history of the Gulag. As stated above, to focus on the differences in their experience of trauma does not obviously mean to start a competition between the two, but rather to testify that, judging by the writers' own ego-documents, the intensity of the trauma—and the scar it left—seems to have been different for both, stronger for Shalamov than for Solzhenitsyn. I argue that this disparity had a direct effect on their writings, specifically on the literary form adopted in their writings of trauma—a term I use to refer specifically to texts (regardless of their literary genre) written about one's own specific traumatic events, be them

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<sup>9</sup> Rossi, *Spravochnik po Gulagu*, vol. 2, 453.

suffered or witnessed. In order to understand how the intensity of trauma influenced Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn, it is worth taking into consideration their actual creative processes when writing about their own trauma, as described by both authors.

Solzhenitsyn's description of the genesis of "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" is as follows:

In 1950, during a long winter day in a camp, I was dragging a stretcher with a fellow inmate and thought: how could one describe our entire life in the camp? Essentially, it is enough to describe one whole day in detail, in the smallest details, and even the day of the simplest hard worker; thus, our whole life will be reflected. And it would not even be necessary to insist on any horrors, no need to describe some special day, but a usual one, a day of which years are comprised. I thought so, and this plan remained in my mind. For nine years I did not touch it and only in 1959, nine years later, I sat down and wrote. ... I did not write it for long at all, only forty days, less than one and a half months.<sup>10</sup>

Я в 50-м году, в какой-то долгий лагерный зимний день таскал носилки с напарником и подумал: как описать всю нашу лагерную жизнь? По сути,

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<sup>10</sup> Solzhenitsyn described the origin of "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" in an interview with Barry Holland for the BBC in 1982. The full text of the interview can be consulted at the link: <http://solzhenitsyn.world/radiointerviu-k-20-letiiu-vykhoda-odnogo-dnia-ivana-denisovicha/radiointerviu-k-20letiiu-vykhoda-odnogo-dnia-ivana.html>. The quoted sentence is also found in Liudmila Saraskina, *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn* (Moscow: 2008), 461.

достаточно описать один всего день в подробностях, в мельчайших подробностях, притом день самого простого работяги, и тут отразится вся наша жизнь. И даже не надо нагнетать каких-то ужасов, не надо, чтоб это был какой-то особенный день, а—рядовой, вот тот самый день, из которого складываются годы. Задумал я так, и этот замысел остался у меня в уме, девять лет я к нему не прикасался и только в 1959, через девять лет, сел и написал. ... Писал я его недолго совсем, всего дней сорок, меньше полутора месяцев.

Mikhailik uses this interview as a starting point to analyze the narrative strategies Solzhenitsyn utilizes to depict a “softer” camp while hinting throughout the text at the existence of harsher camps. This depiction shows us a “climax” effect in Solzhenitsyn’s creative process. The author declares to have had an inspiration while in the camp which accompanied him for nine years until he could “sit and write” his *povest’* for about 40 days—Solzhenitsyn kept this idea in his mind for a long time and then developed it into a text over the course of a month and a half. This image is radically different from the one rendered by Shalamov about the process of writing the *Kolymskie rasskazy* (Kolyma Tales), as recounted by the writer in his essay *O proze* (On Prose): “Every tale, every sentence is earlier screamed in an empty room. I always speak to myself when I write. I scream, I threaten, I cry. And I cannot stop crying...”<sup>11</sup> This dramatic image of a man in pain is described in more detail by Irina Sirotinskaia:

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<sup>11</sup> “Каждый рассказ, каждая фраза его предварительно прокричана в пустой комнате—я всегда говорю сам с собой, когда пишу. Кричу, угрожаю, плачу. И слез мне не остановить...” Varlam Shalamov, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* [Collected Works in Six Volumes] (Moscow: 2013), vol. 6, 495.

I heard from his voice, and later read, almost all his tales, especially those written in 1966 and later. ... He often would tell me how dear it was to him the opportunity to “disburden his mind”, down to the bottom. We also had arguments. I reproached him for what I considered to be a prolonged exposition, an excessive philosophizing. It should go into the subtext, as I said in an essay.

It seemed to me that this was due to his unsatisfied thirst to speak out. Therefore, everything ended up being included in the tale, even what should have gone in an essay, in memoirs, in letters. The words flew under the pressure of unspoken thoughts and feelings. “All my tales are shouted...” he wrote to me in 1971. So it was.

At the time of birth, precisely this high emotional intensity did not allow him to control the flow. And then he rarely returned to the tale. ...

And I used to tell him that he should have edited his works a little, to finish something, to correct something after the tale was written down. He would be very upset, and as a reply to me he somehow wrote an entire essay, defending the “free manifestation of the writer’s soul” as a creative method.

Почти все его рассказы, особенно написанные в 1966 и позднее, я слышала от него, а потом читала. ... Не раз говорил он мне, как дорога ему возможность «высказаться» до дна. Были у нас и споры. Я упрекала его в порой затянутой, на мой взгляд, экспозиции, в излишнем философствовании. Это должно уйти в подтекст, говорила я, в эссе.

Мне казалось, что это от неутоленной жажды высказаться. Оттого, что в рассказ шло все—и то, что должно идти в эссе, в мемуары, в письма. Слова вылетали

под напором невысказанных мыслей, чувств. “Все мои рассказы прокричаны...”—писал он мне в 1971 году. Так это и было.

В момент рождения именно высокий эмоциональный накал не давал возможности контролировать поток. А потом он редко возвращался к записанному рассказу. ...

А я ему говорила, что надо немного редактировать себя—кое-что отделать, поправить после того, как рассказ записан. Он очень огорчился, и в ответ мне написал как-то целое эссе, отстаивая «свободное проявление души писателя» как творческий метод.<sup>12</sup>

Here Sirotinskaia quotes directly from Shalamov’s essay *About My Prose*:

Each of my tales is a slap in the face of Stalinism and, like every slap in the face, it obeys laws of purely muscular nature... In the tale, completeness does not always correspond to the author’s intentions. The most successful of my tales were written in clean copy. To be fair, rewritten from the draft once. All my best tales were written this way. There are no finishing touches in them, but they do have completeness...

All the past, everything is as if it is crowded in my brain, and it’s enough to open some lever in the brain, take a pen, and the tale is written.

My tales represent a successful and conscious fight against what is called the genre of the tale... The slap must be sharp, resonant... Each of my tales is absolute accuracy. It is the accuracy of a document... For an artist, for an author, the most important thing is the opportunity to disburden one’s mind, to give a free brain to that stream. The

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<sup>12</sup> Varlam Shalamov, *Neskol’ko moikh zhiznei: Proza, poeziia, esse* (Moscow: 1996), 450.

author himself is a witness, gives the final formula, the verdict, through each of his own words, through each change of his soul. And the author is not really free to confirm or reject it through any feeling or literary judgment, but to disburden his mind in his own way. If the tale is taken to an end, such a judgment appears.

Каждый мой рассказ—пощечина сталинизму и, как всякая пощечина, имеет законы чисто мускульного характера... В рассказе отделанность не всегда отвечает намерению автора—наиболее удачные рассказы написаны набело, вернее, переписаны с черновика один раз. Так писались все лучшие мои рассказы. В них нет отделки, а законченность есть...

Все, что раньше,—все как бы толпится в мозгу, и достаточно открыть какой-то рычаг в мозгу—взять перо—и рассказ написан.

Рассказы мои представляют успешную и сознательную борьбу с тем, что называется жанром рассказа... Пощечина должна быть короткой, звонкой... Каждый мой рассказ—это абсолютная достоверность. Это достоверность документа... Для художника, для автора самое главное—это возможность высказаться—дать свободный мозг тому потоку. Сам автор—свидетель, любым своим словом, любым своим поворотом души он дает окончательную формулу, приговор. И автор волен не то что подтвердить или отвергнуть каким-то чувством или литературным суждением, но высказаться самому по-своему. Если рассказ доведен до конца, такое суждение появляется.<sup>13</sup>

Judging from the authors' own words, which find confirmation in Sirotinskaia's account, it seems fair to say that, while writing his tales, Shalamov experienced what are

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

described as typical symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder by the British National Health Service: “Re-experiencing is the most typical symptom of PTSD. This is when a person involuntarily and vividly relives the traumatic event in the form of: flashbacks; nightmares; repetitive and distressing images or sensations; physical sensations, such as pain, sweating, feeling sick or trembling”.<sup>14</sup> In cultural terms, this is what Primo Levi called the “trauma to recall the trauma”. A survivor of a devastating event himself, a witness, and a writer, Levi devoted many of his reflections to the recalling of trauma and to its overwhelming effects on individuals’ lives, as well as on the very act of testimony. In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi wrote about the “memories of extreme experiences”, about which he stated the following:

All or almost all the factors that can obliterate or deform the mnemonic record are at work: the memory of a trauma suffered or inflicted is itself traumatic, because recalling it is painful or at least disturbing. A person who has been wounded tends to block out the memory <of the trauma> so as not to renew the pain.

In questo caso sono all’opera tutti o quasi i fattori che possono obliterare o deformare la registrazione mnemonica: il ricordo di un trauma, patito o inflitto, è esso stesso traumatico, perché richiamarlo duole o almeno disturba: chi è stato ferito tende a rimuovere il ricordo per non rinnovare il dolore.<sup>15</sup>

The creative process described by Shalamov and Sirovinskaja appears very close to the sudden emerging of trauma at an unconscious level, or the “imposing of trauma” as

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/symptoms/> (Last accessed 10/10/2020).

<sup>15</sup> Primo Levi, *Opere* (Torino: 1997), vol. 2, 1007. English translation: Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: 2017), 14.

recalled by Cathy Caruth, a scholar who has devoted many works to trauma and to its impact on culture, specifically on literature.<sup>16</sup> In the introduction to one of her most important works, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, which focuses specifically on the issue of the impact of trauma on the representation of traumatic events, she tackled one important aspect related to trauma, i.e. the effect of trauma on the mind and on the experience of time:

The originary meaning of trauma itself <is> the Greek *trauma*, or ‘wound’, originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body. In its later usage, and most centrally in Freud’s text the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.<sup>17</sup>

Repetitiveness is one of the key concepts in Caruth’s theory of trauma, and the trauma’s “imposing” itself and thus becoming available to consciousness through repetitive actions and nightmares seems relevant to the difference between Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn, particularly regarding what they stated in the passages quoted above about their creative

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<sup>16</sup> Other than *Unclaimed Experience*, see also Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud* (Baltimore: 1991) and Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: 1996), 3-4.

processes. While Solzhenitsyn could store in his mind an idea for a *povest'* set in a labour camp for nine years and work on it for 40 days in a row, Shalamov seemed to get traumatic flashbacks which he would then try to put on paper in the form of a tale. And although, according to his own words, Shalamov evoked these flashbacks in order to use them for his tales, the writer seemed to have no control over them.

All this is pushed out of the brain by itself, just as the push of the heart muscle. All this is formed inside by itself, and every obstacle causes pain. Then the headache subsides, but at that point you will not be able to write anything. The spring has dried up.

Из мозга все это выталкивается само—на манер толчка сердечной мышцы, — все это формируется внутри само, а всякое препятствие—причиняет боль. Потом головная боль стихает, но ты уже ничего не запишешь—родник иссяк.<sup>18</sup>

These eruptions of inspiration, together with the author's inability to modify the text at a later stage, seem to recall the studies of Dominick LaCapra, who took a more clinical approach to trauma to tackle the question of its representation:

Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel. Working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract, a re-enactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Shalamov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 497.

<sup>19</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: 2000), 42.

If we analyze the authors' creative processes in the light of LaCapra's words, the intensity of the traumatic flashbacks as recounted by both Shalamov and Sirovinskaia seem to be very distant from what Solzhenitsyn appears to have felt during his creative process as recounted in his 1982 interview, where no traces of dissociation seem to be visible. I will return to the concept of working through and acting out trauma later in the text; however, for the sake of argument, it is important to underline that clinical analyses of trauma seem to offer other insights that not only sustain LaCapra's claims, but expand them on the ground of the different intensity of trauma and its effect on the individual. In a text based on their research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but mainly aimed at improving the knowledge of the general public to trauma, Sword and Zimbardo state:

A traumatic experience that involves most or all of the senses—sight, hearing, smell, physical pain—as well as emotions, speech and thought, is stored in multiple regions throughout your brain ... And just as you can suffer from a little to a lot of depression or anxiety, you can suffer from minimal to extreme degrees of PTSD. If a traumatic event is extreme, it becomes a long-lived deeply embedded memory as opposed to a short-term memory like what you had for lunch last Tuesday. A person who suffers from minimal PTSD will probably get better over time without therapy. For instance if they were in a fender bender, they will get their car fixed so they don't think about the accident every time they see the car. In time they will be able to drive by the accident site without constantly thinking of the 'what ifs': What if I had left home five minutes earlier? What if I had taken a different route to work? But if you have been brutally physically assaulted and raped, no amount of time will ever completely erase the trauma if you don't get help. You start adjusting your thoughts and routines

around these dark memories and the emotions they evoke. And these adjustments cost you dearly.<sup>20</sup>

The study of the impact of trauma on Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn can be used to analyze the authors' styles by looking to the categories of "acting out" and "working through" established by LaCapra who, in another passage of his book, explains in more detail the difference between these two stages which might occur when dealing with trauma:

In post-traumatic acting out ... one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in melancholic feedback loop. In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. ... Working through is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma, one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one back then while realizing that one is living here and now with opening to the future.<sup>21</sup>

If we accept Solzhenitsyn's and Shalamov's words on their creative process as truth, I argue that, because of the different intensity of trauma suffered, Shalamov's creative process of writing trauma is based on "acting out trauma", while that of Solzhenitsyn is based on

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<sup>20</sup> Rosemary K. M. Sword and Philip Zimbardo, "Your Brain on Trauma", *Psychology Today*. Online resource. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/the-time-cure/201211/your-brain-trauma> [Accessed May 23 2018]. Sword and Zimbardo are authors, together with Richard M. Sword, of the monograph *The Time Cure: Overcoming PTSD with the New Psychology of Time Perspective Therapy* (San Francisco: 2012).

<sup>21</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 21.

“working through trauma”. This is testified by the use of tenses in the authors’ works. Two descriptions of traumas witnessed by the two authors and recounted in their fictional prose help to identify the issue.

In the *Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn describes his witnessing of a *vlasovets*<sup>22</sup> undergoing torture:

In East Prussia, a trio of captured Vlasov men was being marched along the roadside a few steps away from me. At that moment a T-34 tank thundered down the highway. Suddenly one of the captives twisted around and dived underneath the tank. The tank veered, but the edge of its track crushed him nevertheless. The broken man lay writhing, bloody foam coming from his mouth. And one could certainly understand him! He preferred a soldier’s death to being hanged in a dungeon.

...

I recall with shame an incident I observed during the liquidation—in other words, the plundering—of the Bobruisk encirclement, when I was walking along the highway among wrecked and overturned German automobiles, and a wealth of booty lay scattered everywhere. German cart horses wandered aimlessly in and out of a shallow depression where wagons and automobiles that had gotten stuck were buried in the mud, and bonfires of booty were smoking away. Then I heard a cry for help: “Mr. Captain! Mr. Captain!” A prisoner on foot in German britches was crying out to me in

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<sup>22</sup> The *vlasovtsy* were the soldiers who fought with the Russian Liberation Army under the command of the general Andrei Vlasov, siding with Nazi Germany against the USSR. They were all repressed. See Kirill Aleksandrov, *Armiiia generala Vlasova 1944-45* [The Army of General Vlasov] (Moscow: 2006).

pure Russian. He was naked from the waist up, and his face, chest, shoulders, and back were all bloody, while a sergeant *osobist*, a Security man, seated on a horse, drove him forward with a whip, pushing him with his horse. He kept lashing that naked back up and down with the whip, without letting him turn around, without letting him ask for help. He drove him along, beating and beating him, raising new crimson welts on his skin.

And this was not one of the Punic Wars, nor a war between the Greeks and the Persians! Any officer, possessing any authority, in any army on earth ought to have stopped that senseless torture. In any army on earth, yes, but in ours? Given our fierce and uncompromising method of dividing mankind? (If you are not with us, if you are not our own, etc., then you deserve nothing but contempt and annihilation.) So I was afraid to defend the Vlasov man against the *osobist*. I said nothing and I did nothing. I passed him by as if I could not hear him ... so that I myself would not be infected by that universally recognized plague. (What if the Vlasov man was indeed some kind of supervillain? Or maybe the *osobist* would think something was wrong with me? And then?) Or, putting it more simply for anyone who knows anything about the situation in the Soviet Army at that time: would that *osobist* have paid any attention to an army captain? So the *osobist* continued to lash the defenseless man brutally and drive him along like a beast.

This picture will remain etched in my mind forever. This, after all, is almost a symbol of the Archipelago. It ought to be on the jacket of this book.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney, vol. 1 (New York: 1973), 255-257.

В Восточной Пруссии в нескольких шагах от меня провели по обочине тройку пленных власовцев, а по шоссе как раз грохотала Т-тридцать четверка. Вдруг один из пленных вывернулся, прыгнул и ласточкой шлепнулся под танк. Танк увильнул, но все же раздавил его краем гусеницы. Раздавленный еще извивался, красная пена шла на губы. И можно было его понять! Солдатскую смерть он предпочитал повешению в застенке.

...

Я со стыдом вспоминаю, как при освоении (то есть, разграбе) бобруйского котла я шел по шоссе среди разбитых и поваленных немецких автомашин, рассыпанной трофейной роскоши,—и из низинки, где погрязли утопленные повозки и машины, потерянно бродили немецкие битюги и дымились костры из трофеев же, услышал вопль о помощи: “Господин капитан! Господин капитан!”

Это чисто по-русски кричал мне о защите пеший в немецких брюках, выше пояса нагой, уже весь окровавленный—на лице, груди, плечах, спине,—а сержант-особист, сидя на лошади, погонял его перед собою кнутом и наседанием лошади. Он полосовал его по голому телу кнутом, не давая оборачиваться, не давая звать на помощь, гнал его и бил, вызывая из кожи новые красные ссадины.

Это была не пуническая, не греко-персидская война! Всякий, имеющий власть, офицер любой армии на земле должен был остановить бессудное истязание.

Любой—да, а—нашей?... При лютости и абсолютности нашего разделения человечества? (Если не с нами, не наш и т. Д.—то достоин только презрения и уничтожения.) Так вот, я СТРУСИЛ защищать власовца перед особистом, я

НИЧЕГО НЕ СКАЗАЛ И НЕ СДЕЛАЛ, Я ПРОШЕЛ МИМО, КАК БЫ НЕ СЛЫША—чтоб эта признанная всеми чума не перекинулась на меня (а вдруг этот власовец какой-нибудь сверхзлодей?... а вдруг особист обо мне подумает..? а вдруг..?) Да проще того, кто знает обстановку тогда в армии—стал ли бы еще этот особист слушать армейского капитана?

И со зверским лицом особист продолжал стегать и гнать беззащитного человека как скотину.

Эта картина навсегда передо мною осталась. Это ведь—почти символ Архипелага, его на обложку книги можно помещать.<sup>24</sup>

In this passage, in which Solzhenitsyn describes a traumatic experience, the author uses the tenses in a linear way. He describes an event in the past and, while doing so, remains all the time in the past, identifying it clearly as an event that is not happening in the present. The boundaries between past and present are clear: the only times Solzhenitsyn uses the present tense occur when he speaks to his reader in the continuous form of dialogue/confession he adopts throughout the book. And it is striking that he uses the word “вспоминаю” (“I recall”)—yet another sign of his awareness of the fact that he is writing in the present about a moment in the past.

Shalamov’s use of tenses is more complex. While in many tales he shows command of the tenses, in some others they are blurred, especially in tales that insist on traumatic events, like the tale *Inzhener Kiselev* [Engineer Kiselev], part of the cycle *Artist Iopaty* (Artist

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<sup>24</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Arhipelag Gulag, 1918-1956* [The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956] (Paris: 1973), vol. 1, 260-262.

of the Spade). At the start of the tale, Shalamov seems to have command of the tenses. He recalls a character he met in the past, and uses the tenses accordingly:

I could not understand the soul of the engineer Kiselev. He was a young, thirty-year-old engineer, an energetic worker who had just graduated and come to the Far North to work out a compulsory three-year practical training. He was one of the few bosses who would read Pushkin, Lermontov, Nekrasov, or at least this is what his library card would say. And most importantly, he was not a party member, therefore he came to the Far North not to check that something would be in accordance with the orders from above. Never having met prisoners before on his life path, Kiselev outscored all other perpetrators in evilness.

Beating personally the prisoners, Kiselev would set an example to his young officers, brigadiers and guards. After work Kiselev could not calm down. He would walk from one barrack to another looking for a person to humiliate, hit, beat unmercifully. There were two hundred people at Kiselev's disposal. A dark, sadistic thirst for murder lived in Kiselev's soul and, in the autocracy and lawlessness of the Far North, it found a way out, a way to develop, to grow. ... Many prisoners had on their faces the iron of the soles and heels of Kiselev's boots.

Я не понял души инженера Киселева. Молодой, тридцатилетний инженер, энергичный работник, только что кончивший институт и приехавший на Дальний Север отрабатывать обязательную трехлетнюю практику. Один из немногих начальников, читавший Пушкина, Лермонтова, Некрасова—так его библиотечная карточка рассказывала. И самое главное—беспартийный, стало быть, приехавший на Дальний Север не затем, чтобы что-то проверять, в

соответствии с приказами свыше. Никогда не встречавший ранее арестантов на своем жизненном пути, Киселев перещеголял всех палачей в своем палачестве.

Самолично избивая заключенных, Киселев подавал пример своим десятникам, бригадирам, конвою. После работы Киселев не мог успокоиться—ходил из барака в барак, выискивая человека, которого он мог бы безнаказанно оскорбить, ударить, избить. Таких было двести человек в распоряжении Киселева. Темная садистическая жажда убийства жила в душе Киселева и в самовластии и бесправии Дальнего Севера нашла выход, развитие, рост. ... Немало заключенных видели у своего лица железки на подошвах и каблуках киселевских сапог.<sup>25</sup>

After introducing Kiselev and describing generally his violent deeds, Shalamov gets to the very heart of the tale by introducing a specific violent event he had witnessed. It is at this point, when it appears that seems like the narration becomes personal—judging by the text, it seems that Shalamov knew the prisoner he hid by the name Zel'fugarov—that the narration switches to the present tense.

Who lies today under the boots of Kiselev? Who is sitting on the snow? It's Zel'fugarov. He is my neighbor from the top of the compartment of the wagon of the train going straight to hell, an eighteen-year-old boy of weak build and worn muscles, prematurely worn out. Zel'fugarov's face is flooded with blood, and I recognize my neighbour only thanks to his black bushy eyebrows—Zel'fugarov is a Turk, a counterfeiter.

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<sup>25</sup> Varlam Shalamov, *Kolymskie Rasskazy: Izbrannye proizvedeniia* [The Kolyma Tales: Selected Works] (St Petersburg: 2013), 348-349.

Сегодня кто лежит под сапогами Киселева, кто сидит на снегу? Зельфугаров. Это мой сосед сверху по вагонному купе поезда, идущего прямым ходом в ад,— восемнадцатилетний мальчик слабого сложения с изношенными мускулами, преждевременно изношенными. Лицо Зельфугарова залито кровью, и только по черным кустистым бровям узнаю я своего соседа: Зельфугаров—турок, фальшивомонетчик.<sup>26</sup>

Shalamov then returns to the past tense, describing Zel'fugarov's activities as a counterfeiter, but uses the present when referring to the scenes in the barrack where he was living with him:

“We used to make good money, you would not distinguish them from the real ones”, would whisper Zel'fugarov in the barrack, excited by his memories, in a warmed tent, where a plywood frame is placed inside the tarpaulin—such inventions do exist. His father and mother and two of Zel'fugarov's uncles were executed, but the boy was still alive—by the way, he would soon die from the boots and fists of engineer Kiselev.

—Мы делали деньги хорошие—ничем не отличить от настоящих,— взволнованный воспоминаниями, шептал Зельфугаров в бараке—в утепленной палатке, где внутри брезента ставится фанерный каркас—изобретения и такие бывают. Расстреляны отец и мать, два дяди Зельфугарова, а мальчик остался жив—впрочем, он скоро умрет, порукой тому сапоги и кулаки инженера Киселева.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

And when Shalamov returns to the description of the traumatic event, the narration returns fixedly to the present tense:

I lean over Zel'fugarov, and he spits out his broken teeth into the snow. His face swells up before my eyes.

Я наклоняюсь над Зельфугаровым, и тот выплевывает прямо на снег перебитые свои зубы. Лицо его опухает на глазах.<sup>28</sup>

Many of the *Kolyma Tales* contain this 'blurred' use of tenses,<sup>29</sup> which seems to be not only connected to what LaCapra describes, but also to a type of dissociation related to post-traumatic stress disorder. Homes et al. (2005) describe two types of symptoms related to PTSD dissociation: symptoms of "distress" (called "first person symptoms": alienation, absence, de-personalization) and symptoms of "compartmentalization" ("third person symptoms": dissociative amnesia, traumatic flashbacks, lack of control of emotions and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, the end of the tale *In the Admission Room (V priemnom pokoe)* where, after using the past tense throughout the tale, Shalamov switches to the present tense within the space of one sentence and then keeps the narration in the present tense until the end: "Раньше Шицель работала при больнице, но анкета увела ее на прииск и на смерть. Клавдия Ивановна идет досматривать постановку лагерной культбригады, а фельдшер ложится спать" ("In the past, Shitsel' had worked at the hospital, but her records sent her to the mines and to death. Klavdiia Ivanovna goes to see the end of the show by the camp's Culture Brigade, and the paramedic goes to sleep"). See: Varlam Shalamov, *Levyi Bereg: Rasskazy* [The Left Bank: Tales] (Moscow: 1989), 265-268.

movements).<sup>30</sup> The symptoms of compartmentalization seem to be the ones that are at the core of the creative process of the *Kolyma Tales* as recounted by Shalamov and Sirotinskaia and as confirmed by the analysis of the use of tenses in some of the *Kolyma Tales*: if we accept that they are born from the sudden resurgence of a traumatic flashback that caused a lack of control over emotions, we could hypothesize that Shalamov could have reacted to these symptoms by trying to inscribe the resurfaced trauma into the form of a tale, during which he would re-live the trauma, an event which then might have resulted in both the blurring of tenses and the limited length of the tales—i.e. the extent to which his traumatized mind could bear the intensity of the trauma. In another passage of the book and later in time, LaCapra hinted at the fact that the two stages of “working through” and “acting out” could be complementary, and if we accept that, we may argue that many of the *Kolyma tales* seem to be Shalamov’s attempt to “work through” the trauma through acting out::

With respect to traumatic losses, acting out may be a necessary condition of working through, at least for victims. Possession by the past may never be fully overcome or transcended, and working through may at the best enable some distance or critical perspective that is acquired with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all.<sup>31</sup>

This difficulty clearly depends on the intensity of trauma, on the effect of reliving it, which might explain also Shalamov’s inability to edit his tales.

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<sup>30</sup> Emily A. Holmes et al., “Are there two qualitatively distinct forms of dissociation? A review and some clinical implications”, *Clinical Psychology Review* 25 (2005), 1–23.

<sup>31</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 70.

The use of tenses can be further analyzed in non-fictional autobiographical texts written by the two authors. It is striking that, when writing autobiographical texts about non-traumatic events, Shalamov uses tenses in a linear way. The first two chapters of his *Vospominaniia* (Memoirs), devoted to his childhood and to his life experiences in Moscow in the 1920s-1930s, are written in past tense. When Shalamov starts recounting his life in the Kolyma, the tenses start to blur: the deeper Shalamov gets into his memories of trauma, the more the tense switches from present to past, as shown in this short passage:

A naive man, I was holding a pouch in my hands. A young criminal snatched it from my hands and ran. I ran after him too, but could not make a jump to grab my prey. The boy jumped into the barrack, I followed him and was immediately deafened by the blow of a log on the head and thrown out into the street from the barrack. I remember this blow because I still had some human feelings in me: revenge, fury. Then all this was knocked out, lost.

I also remember how I crawl behind a tank truck carrying sunflower oil, and I cannot break a cistern with a crowbar—I do not have enough strength, and I throw the crowbar. But the experienced criminal's hand grabs the scrap, hits the cistern, and the oil flows into the snow, which we catch in the snow, swallowing directly with the snow. ... I feel that I'm losing weight, I'm losing weight, I'm just drying every day—there's not enough food, I'm hungry all the time.

Наивный человек, я держал кисет в руках. Мальчик-блатарь вырвал у меня из рук и побежал. Я побежал за ним тоже, не мог сделать прыжка, чтобы схватить свою добычу. Мальчик вскочил в барак, я за ним и тут же был оглушен ударом полена по голове—и выброшен на улицу из барака. Вот этот удар вспомнился

потому, что во мне были еще какие-то человеческие чувства—месть, ярость.

Потом все это было выбито, утрачено.

Помню я также, как ползу за грузовиком-цистерной, в которой подсолнечное масло, и не могу пробить ломом цистерну—сил не хватает, и я бросаю лом. Но опытная рука блатаря подхватывает лом, бьет цистерну, и на снег течет масло, которое мы ловим в снегу, глотая прямо со снегом. ... Я чувствую, что я худею, худею, прямо сохну день ото дня—пищи не хватает, все время хочется есть.<sup>32</sup>

The situation seems to be different for Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn did not go through the “traumatic creative processes” experienced by Shalamov—or, at least, he never spoke or wrote about it, which would be particularly unusual considering the amount of space he devoted to his own writing process during his lifetime. Almost all of Solzhenitsyn’s fictional writings of trauma have the same characteristic: *V krughe pervom* (In The First Circle) and *Rakovyi korpus* (Cancer Ward), as well as the parts devoted to traumas Solzhenitsyn suffered himself or witnessed, all keep to a conventional usage of tenses.<sup>33</sup> There is only one exception, and it is *Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha* (One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich), in which tenses switch constantly from past to present.<sup>34</sup> If we accept Young’s theory on the narrative devices employed by Shalamov, we may suggest that, in a similar way, Solzhenitsyn may have chosen this stylistic device with the aim of bringing the reader closer

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<sup>32</sup> Shalamov, *Vospominaniia*, 164.

<sup>33</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *V krughe pervom: roman* [In The First Circle: A Novel] (Paris: 1969); Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Rakovyi korpus: povest’ v dvukh chastiakh* [Cancer Ward: A Tale in Two Parts] (Paris: 1968).

<sup>34</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha* [One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich] (London: 1962).

to the events by positioning them in the present. However, if we accept the theory of trauma here discussed, we may hypothesize that the *Ivan Denisovich* referred to a stronger experience of trauma than his other writings of trauma (the experience in Ekibastuz might have caused a harsher trauma than those in Marfino and in the cancer ward in Tashkent), and that the blurring of tenses might have occurred at a subconscious level during the phase of “acting out”. It is worth noting that Luba Jurgenson enlists “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich” as a book relating to the “series 1”, i.e. a book more directly related to the act of witnessing the experience lived by the author in the camps rather than a piece of reflection on it, as in the books of the “series 2”.<sup>35</sup>

The same is evident in Solzhenitsyn’s non-fictional writings on his experiences of trauma. The traumatic events witnessed or suffered and recounted in the *Gulag Archipelago*—such as the sleeplessness endured during his trial<sup>36</sup>—are all in the past tense. The same applies to all the times Solzhenitsyn mentions or hints at his life in the camp in *Bodalsia telenok s dubom* (The Oak and the Calf): this occurs 133 times, and each time the events are recounted with a clear distinction between the past (when the events occurred) and the present (when events are recounted). There is only one instance in which the tenses are blurred, when Solzhenitsyn, after storing in his brain the literary works he composed orally during detention, is faced with the news that he has only three weeks to live because of the cancer he suffered from, an instance that Solzhenitsyn describes as “a dreadful moment”.

This was a dreadful moment in my life: to die on the threshold of freedom, to see all I had written, all that gave meaning to my life thus far, about to perish with me. The

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<sup>35</sup> Luba Jurgenson, *L’expérience concentrationnaire, est-elle indicible?* (Paris: 2003), 21-22.

<sup>36</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Arkipelag Gulag*, 142-152 (The Gulag Archipelago: t. 1, 133-143).

peculiarities of the Soviet postal censorship made it impossible for me to cry out for help: Come quickly, take what I have written, save it!

Это был страшный момент моей жизни: смерть на пороге освобождения и гибель всего написанного, всего смысла прожитого до тех пор. По особенностям советской цензуры никому вовне я не мог крикнуть, позвать: приезжайте, возьмите, спасите моё написанное!<sup>37</sup>

With the exception of the passage quoted above and *Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn uses tenses in a linear fashion. This seems to suggest that, according to LaCapra's theory, his works are a "linear working through trauma" that allowed him to "enable some distance or critical perspective" to the point that he could not only write about his personal traumas, but also "carry" those of other people. In a way, he was the instrument of a collective working through of the trauma of the Gulag.

### *Conclusion*

The analysis provided here is not entirely sufficient to prove the correlation between the intensity of trauma and literary form—only a broader, more in-depth study on the whole literary corpus may do so. Still, it does shed some light on the topic. It shows how theories derived from trauma studies concerning the relationship between trauma and representation—as well as those concerning the effect trauma has on the individual when it resurfaces and the different effects of trauma based on its intensity—can be of great use to the analysis of Gulag

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<sup>37</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Bodalsia telenok s dubom* (Paris: 1975), 8. English translation (by Harry Willets): Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf* (London: 1980), 3.

literature, as well as to studies of Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn. However, from this article it seems fair to state that, as far as their writings of trauma are concerned, the latter seemed to have had a less traumatic experience in the camps, which, according to the theories here quoted on the effect of PTSD on representation, may be the reason why Solzhenitsyn could write lengthy works inspired by the Gulag and Shalamov could not—again, only a broader study could clarify that. Solzhenitsyn’s traumatic experiences seemed to have been properly worked through, although a question mark remains about *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and the passage quoted from *The Oak and the Calf*. Shalamov, on the contrary, seems to have been heavily traumatized. Following theories on PTSD, one could see how the creative process at play for the *Kolyma Tales* was influenced by trauma—as if Shalamov, haunted by the repetitive appearance of traumatic flashbacks, wrote tales to permit the performative “acting out” of his traumas. Read on the background of some of the theories related to the representation of trauma in people suffering from PTSD, Shalamov’s own recollections about his creative process seem to support this hypothesis.

Trauma studies therefore can provide a whole new perspective on two identifiable differences between the authors: the length of their writings of trauma, and the use of tenses. Shalamov has written extensively on his creative process and on his choice of literary form, but he was not aware of modern theories of trauma. The analysis of the impact of trauma on his writing process can, therefore, complement Shalamov’s *autocritical* notes, and put them into a wider, more nuanced perspective. His use of repetitions, as well as his use of alter egos, may be analysed making use of the studies on the dissociation caused in people suffering from PTSD by the repetitive occurrence of traumatic flashbacks. In a 2017 article, Sabine Schönfeld and Anke Ehlers underline that “intrusive memories of trauma in PTSD appear to lack time perspective, that is, by being experienced as rather present as in the past (“nowness”) ... The “nowness” of trauma memories might point to a lack of time perspective

or “autonoetic awareness” in the PTSD group”.<sup>38</sup> Further studies may try to ascertain if this lack of autonoetic awareness can be connected to the use of alter-egos in Shalamov and other authors. This is just one of many issues that may be further analysed through the lens of trauma studies.

More broadly, such an approach could pave the way to an innovative way of understanding Gulag literature: it could hint at the fact that, when literary works are inspired by heavily traumatic events, their length and form can derive from the intensity of the trauma. In *Vishera*, Shalamov was able to create a “working through” text about a less traumatic experience in the Gulag, and then to write longer tales among his *Kolyma Tales*—usually concerning other people instead of first-hand experience, or about less intensive experiences of trauma.<sup>39</sup> But it is also striking to note that other heavily traumatized authors have left shorter literary texts, often made up of fragmented memories, while works written by less traumatized authors were often longer, as is the case with the works of Andrei Siniavskii and Solzhenitsyn.

Shalamov’s use of tenses in some of the *Kolyma Tales*, characterized by this constant switching between the past and the present in a way that recalls LaCapra’s description of acting out trauma (“In acting out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly

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<sup>38</sup> Sabine Schönfeld, Anke Ehlers, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Autobiographical Memories in Everyday Life”, *Clinical Psychological Science*, 5/2 (2017): 325-340 (326; 335).

<sup>39</sup> Varlam Shalamov, *Vyshera. Antiroman* [Vishera: An Antinovel] (Moscow: 1989); Varlam Shalamov, *Chetvertaia Vologda* [The Fourth Vologda] (Vologda: 1994).

returns as the repressed”<sup>40</sup>)—hints at another key feature of Shalamov’s writings of trauma. His tales start often *in medias res*, just as Shalamov finds himself when, describing an event in the past, he consistently “falls into” the present. The distinctive beginnings of the tales might therefore be inscribed within the theory of trauma as yet another feature of his “acting out”. Moreover, the writer’s difficulty in returning to texts once they were written, i.e. his vindication concerning the “free manifestation of the writer’s soul” as a creative method, as in the passage quoted above—might indeed conceal an ordeal against trauma, the difficulty to return to a trauma that, in Leigh Gilmore’s words, had been “expelled” after being put on paper.<sup>41</sup>

A similar situation can be found in another heavily traumatised author, Lev Feigeleovich Konson, who spent 9 years in some of the toughest camps of the Gulag system between 1943 and 1952. Lev Konson, author of *Kratkie povesti* (Short Tales),<sup>42</sup> composed a series of short stories sometimes comprised of a single sentence. Although, as noted by Gall, Konson refused the role of literary author (“в литературе не разбираюсь”, “I am not familiar with literature”)<sup>43</sup> and clearly stated that he did not want to remember the past (“С прошлым покончено, его просто не было. Я вспоминать о нем не хочу и думать о нем не собираюсь”, “The past is over, it just didn’t exist. I don’t want to remember and I won’t think about it”)<sup>44</sup>, he nevertheless composed texts about his traumatic experience. These texts

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<sup>40</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 70.

<sup>41</sup> Leigh Gilmore, “Trauma and Life Writing”, in Margareta Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (London: 2001), 885-887.

<sup>42</sup> Lev Konson, *Kratkie povesti* [Short Tales] (Paris: 1983).

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 87. The English translation is taken from Gall’s article (p. 213).

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 148. The English translation is taken from Gall’s article (p. 214).

are sometimes just fragments, snapshots of a moment of trauma. And just as was the case in Shalamov's *Koyma Tales*, in Konson's writings of trauma the tenses are blurred:

A funny case. They made fun of Uncle Pasha. The neighbour took a pipe from him to have a smoke. He smoked and died. The guys dragged the deceased into the medical unit, but Uncle Pasha bustles about, he wants to pick up the pipe.

“He has my pipe, give my pipe back. Let me find it. Give my pipe back.”

The guys pushed away uncle Pasha, but he climbs up to the deceased.

The whole barrack laughed. What an eccentric.

Забавный случай. Насмешил дядя Паша. Сосед взял у него трубку покурить.

Покурил и умер. Ребята потащили покойника в санчасть, а дядя Паша суетится, все трубку хочет забрать.

—У него моя трубка, отдайте трубку. Дайте я найду. Трубку мою отдайте.

Ребята дядю Пашу отталкивают, а он все к покойнику лезет.

Весь барак смеялся. Вот чудак.<sup>45</sup>

A similar tendency can be noted in Gulag poetry, especially in those poems written after liberation that recall a trauma, such as Andrei Aldan-Semenov's *Ia edu na Kolymu* (I Am Going to Kolyma),<sup>46</sup> where the narration switches from past to present tense (“— Я здесь

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<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 24. The translation is mine.

<sup>46</sup> Andrei Aldan-Semenov, *Ia edu na Kolymu* [I Am Going to Kolyma], in *Poeziia uznikov Gulaga* [Poetry of Gulag Prisoners], ed. S. Vilenskii (Moscow: 2005), 521.

в двадцатом партизанил, – / Сосед задумчиво сказал. ... И словно с голоса чужого / Сосед болтает невпопад”, “ ‘I was a partisan here in the Twenties’ / The neighbor said thoughtfully ... And as if speaking with the voice of another one / The neighbor babbles out of nowhere”). However, it must be said that overall different rules apply to poetry, where rote learning and mnemonics play a major role in facing trauma, as explained by Mikhail Gronas.<sup>47</sup>

Trauma studies can therefore help to address some of the wider issues of Gulag literature, and to provide a perspective that sheds new light on other existing approaches on the same theme such as, for instance, Leona Toker’s studies on referentiality and reliability in Shalamov’s writing, or Luba Jurgenson’s theories on the writing process in Gulag literature. If, as Jurgenson states, the “series 1” in Gulag literature are books that bear mainly a witnessing function and the “series 2” is comprised of reflective works, then the relationship between the “series 0” (a pre-text, an oral record of events which then serves as draft), the “series 1” and the “series 2” might be reconsidered in a new light.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Mikhail Gronas, “Why Did Free Verse Catch on in the West, but Not in Russia? On the Social Uses of Memorized Poetry”, *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 33 (2010): 166-213. He further developed his ideas in the monograph *Cognitive Poetics and Cultural Memory: Russian Literary Mnemonics* (New York: 2011). The quoted article was translated in Russian in the journal *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* (issue 114, 2012) and was followed by a series of articles by other authors who debated the issue of the importance of mnemonization in Russian culture.

<sup>48</sup> See Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago. Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Bloomington: 2000), 141-142; Jurgenson, 21-22.

The differences between Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn are obviously not limited to trauma. However, it seems safe to state that their different experience of trauma had a deep impact on their writings, as well as on their worldviews. When combined with other approaches, trauma studies can help us improve our understanding of Gulag literature, as well as of other extratextual facts. When Shalamov read *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*, the most prominent memories he had of life in the camp concerned his own experience in the Kolyma, where a cat could never have been wandering around the camp without being killed and eaten. It was the first of many clashes. It was more than a cat that divided the two: it was chiefly their experience of trauma.

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