

REFLECTIONS ON *THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO*¹

• Alexander Schmemmann •

“Thus from the very beginning the organic unity of ‘investigation’ and ‘literature’ was experienced by Solzhenitsyn as something given to him, as the inner law which was to determine his work, and which indeed governs the whole of it and not only *Gulag*.”

Part 1. The subtitle explained

“An experiment in literary investigation”—such is the unusual and puzzling subtitle given by Solzhenitsyn to *The Gulag Archipelago*. And because it is so strange, yet obviously not accidental, I am convinced that to decipher it constitutes a first step toward the understanding of the deeper—the spiritual, and not merely “political”—meaning of this uniquely important book.

But why consider it *strange*? Because normally, i.e., within the commonly accepted terminology, “literary investigation” should mean an investigation of things literary, an investigation concerning

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literature. Otherwise the term “investigation,” which belongs to the vocabulary of science and research, would make the adjective “literary”² sound awkward. For if, on the one hand, any investigation in written form is “literary,” at the same time, to be truly an investigation, i.e., truly “scientific” and “objective,” it must be free from *literature*, the latter term normally applying such “nonscientific” elements as fiction, imagination, aesthetic pursuits, etc. Thus the adjective “literary” in the subtitle of *Gulag* seems to be either superfluous or indeed *strange*. It is a term which in itself requires an “investigation.”

That *The Gulag Archipelago* is an investigation not of any “literature” but of a very concrete and precise reality is clearly affirmed by the author himself. “In this book,” he writes, “there are no fictitious persons, nor fictitious events. . . . It all took place just as it is here described.” But then the question remains: why does he call his investigation “literary,” thereby placing equal emphasis on its existence as “literature”? We can be assured that this apparent confusion and even contradiction is not accidental. Solzhenitsyn has accustomed us to see in him not only a writer extremely careful in the choice of his words but also a very subtle literary “strategist” for whom his literary work is inseparable from action and fight. Therefore if the subtitle of *Gulag* seems strange to us, it is certainly because Solzhenitsyn wants it to appear strange, to contain and to announce a *challenge* to the accepted categories and classifications. With this subtitle, Solzhenitsyn supplies us with the key to his book, a perspective in which *The Gulag Archipelago* is to be read and understood. Indeed, by bringing together, in the definition of his work, two terms which seem to be mutually exclusive, Solzhenitsyn on the one hand challenges the very “normalcy,” the validity of this supposed contradiction and, on the other hand, affirms that *for his purpose* “investigation” and “literature,” “science” and “art,” are of equal importance. In fact, they are to be brought together into an organic unity. Thus if the subtitle announces and defines the *method*, the justification and the ultimate significance of that method are to be found in the purpose of Solzhenitsyn’s “literary investigation.”

²Or “artistic,” as the Russian word *khudozhestvennoe* ought to have been translated.

1.2

The purpose may appear at first to be a simple one: to describe “the amazing country of Gulag,” to reveal how “it all took place.” And yet from the very beginning the author encounters a major difficulty which—and this is the whole point—is not accidental but belongs, so to speak, to the very essence of that country, is indeed the first mystery to be revealed and explained. For although “it crisscrossed and patterned that other country within which it was located, like a gigantic patchwork, cutting into its cities, hovering over its streets,” the Archipelago of prisons and camps remained “almost invisible, almost imperceptible,” so that to our descendants, if they discuss in some distant future “the bones of its inhabitants frozen in a lens of ice,” it will appear like the “improbable salamander” mentioned in the preface to *Gulag*.

Invisible, imperceptible, improbably. . . . But why should that be? Why, in spite of more than five decades of existence, in spite of millions of “inhabitants,” did that “amazing” country remain unknown and why is it likely to appear as “improbable” to future generations? This indeed is the first and truly essential question concerning this astonishing Archipelago, for unless it receives an answer, no truth about the Archipelago will be the *whole truth*, no investigation will have fulfilled its purpose.

The usual answer consists of an attempt to explain the imperceptibility of the Archipelago by the secrecy surrounding it for years, by the lack of information, of reliable evidence, etc. Not only is such an answer insufficient but it is itself an integral part of the mystery which must be penetrated if the *whole truth* is to be revealed. Indeed, during the last fifty years nothing generated more interest, more attention, more passion in the world than the Russian Revolution and the subsequent destinies of the Soviet Union. Thousands of scholars studied the *orbs sovieticum* from every imaginable angle; there existed special institutes which gathered all possible data and analyzed every facet of Soviet society and life. Alongside this scholarly *investigation* there developed, from the very beginning, a genuine fascination with the Soviet “experiment” among the Western artistic and literary elite, a fascination which resisted as a sinful temptation each successive disillusionment and which thrives even to this day. In other words, both *investigation* and *art* were employed in this passionate attempt to know, to understand, and to reveal Soviet reality. And if in spite of these attempts and of this

interest, both art and investigation failed to detect at the very heart of that reality the “gigantic patchwork” of the Archipelago; if, when faced with “data” and “evidence,” they kept explaining the “amazing country of Gulag” as a simple *accident de parcours* virtually irrelevant for the real understanding of the great experiment, if, in short, they failed precisely to see, to understand, and to reveal *reality*, then something somewhere must have been radically wrong with that *investigation* and with that *art*. This is not necessarily true of the “investigators,” who quite often tried their best, nor of individual writers and artists whose sincerity was evident; but something was very wrong with the *method* which shaped and determined their “investigation” and with the approach which determined their “vision.” It is only in the light of that abysmal failure which ultimately involves the very roots and foundations of our entire civilization, that the challenge and the affirmation contained in the subtitle of Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag* acquire their true significance.

1.3

First of all, what was and what is wrong with investigation? The answer which Solzhenitsyn’s subtitle implies and which is then admirably vindicated by the entire book is this: the problem lies in the congenital inability of investigation, as it is understood and practiced today, to communicate not merely the knowledge *about* reality but the knowledge *of* reality, to transform the various external data into experience and communion and thus into the knowledge of the *whole truth*. The tragedy here is that this inability is precisely a congenital one, stemming not from any accidental deficiency, but from the very nature of investigation, or, to put it more precisely, from the kind of knowledge that it seeks. To use Kantian terminology, this is always knowledge *about* the “phenomenon,” and never knowledge of the *Ding an sich*, i.e., of reality itself. This tragedy is that of our entire civilization, of its surrender to the tyranny of the so-called “scientific mind” which identifies the “knowledge about” as the only knowledge, which confuses the partial and extrinsic truths obtained through investigation with the whole truth, and which rejects as subjective, irrelevant, and useless all information that cannot be reduced to its abstract criteria. But then of what help is this knowledge, which consists in reducing the unknown to the known, the particular to the general, the unique to

the common, when it encounters a tragically unique, a truly unprecedented reality which, like that “amazing country of Gulag,” challenges and questions the very foundations of our scientific world view all its categories, thought forms, and terms of reference? One, moreover, which makes a *tabula rasa* of the neat theories supporting that world view, and, rather than expressing itself in acceptable and easily explainable “data,” stuns us by its silence more deafening than a million voices, an absence more eloquent than any presence, a darkness more blinding than a thousand suns?

Here “investigation” fails. It looks and does not see, it listens and does not hear, for by its very nature it is deprived of the eyes that could see, of the ears that might hear, of the power to take us beyond the truth of its “data”—to the *whole truth*. And the ultimate tragedy is that when such partial and fragmented “truths” are presented as the “whole truth,” they become untruths. If today millions of people remain convinced that a scientifically satisfactory and morally acceptable explanation of the Archipelago lies in its identification with the paranoiac and exceptional monstrosity called “Stalinism,” if the organic link between that “amazing country” and the Soviet system as such, its very spirit and ideology, remains for them “improbable,” it is primarily due to those distorting prisms which our civilization believes to be necessary and sufficient for seeing the truth.

1.4

What about *art*? What about *literature*, the other target of Solzhenitsyn’s challenge? What was its failure even more abysmal than that of straight “investigation”? Why, to quote Solzhenitsyn’s Nobel Lecture, did it perceive a “charming meadow” in a reality made of nothing but tears and blood, suffering and death? Here also it is impossible to explain this failure—the failure, indeed, of an entire civilization, of a “state of mind”—by mere naiveté, credulity, or occasional vicious dishonesty. The literature of our century has been truly possessed with honesty, sincerity, the destruction of all taboos, and the condemnation of all conformism, complacency, and hypocrisy. And if, in spite of this, the writer—just as the “investigator”—did not see or hear, then the roots of that strange blindness and deafness much be sought on a much deeper level.

Where? In his remarkable Nobel Lecture, written some years after *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn deals with this question, and the substance of his answer is this: literature failed to fulfill its essential task, which is truly to *re-create reality*, to reveal it as life and experience, and thus to communicate the whole truth about it, because it surrendered to and accepted the idea of art current in our world; a world, as Solzhenitsyn writes, that is not living by the “right” values and is not headed in the “right” direction. . . . What our civilization expects from art is almost the opposite of what it expects from “investigation.” Indeed, having identified science with objective knowledge of truth, it wants its art to be a triumph and an epiphany of the “subjective”; not to be a new (i.e., a deeper), a more creative, and a truer expression of reality, but to be the expression of a *new reality*, that of the artist’s “self,” of his unique “vision” and “approach,” and indeed of his sincerity, creativity, integrity—and yet always, in relation to the artist only, and not to reality. To be truly itself, truly art, literature must know no other law and no other criterion but itself. It is as if an entire literature partook of Marcel Proust’s enchanted *madeleine* and locked itself into an eerie world of self-centered and self-contained narcissism.

Paradoxical as it may seem, it is this very narcissism that led the literary and artistic avant-garde to the mysterious light rising from the East and, at the same time, made it totally blind to the sinister and bloody halo encircling that light. What these writers and artists were seeking was not truth about that new world, and not its reality, but a new mirror of and for themselves, a *frisson nouveau* for their art. For the inescapable fate of an art centered on itself is that it always must be and appear to be a *new art*; it thus easily surrenders to anything which claims to be new. It is the *new per se*, and not the truth, that it seeks and worships as an idol as long as something “newer” has not appeared over the horizon. The “new” here being not an escape from narcissism but indeed the very food nourishing it, making art itself into an idol for the civilization which has long ago identified novelty with truth. . . . Hence the seemingly unnatural, yet logical and even inescapable alliance between a supremely individualistic, supremely narcissistic art and the most radical, the most consistently anti-individualistic and anti-personal systems. Hence also the tragic inability of that art to comprehend the only real novelty of that system: the total rejection by it not of some particular ideas and principles, but of the human person itself.

The failure of *investigation*, the failure of *art* . . . Solzhenitsyn shows that they are but two expressions, two aspects of one and the same failure. In the last analysis, this is the failure of the very worldview shaping our modern civilization. What ultimately makes investigation fail is precisely its divorce from art, from the power to transform information into life, data into experience, truth into the *whole truth*. And what ultimately makes art fail is its rejection of investigation, and thus also of any obedience to truth and of a genuine encounter with reality. It is this double divorce, the source in our world of lies and of ineffable tragedies that Solzhenitsyn denounces and challenges in the subtitle of his *Gulag* and tries to overcome in his *literary investigation*.

1.5

This challenge is not for Solzhenitsyn the fruit of any theoretical or academic reflection about our modern world and the respective destinies in it of investigation and literature, science and art. It was while partaking of the full reality of the Archipelago, that Solzhenitsyn became aware of his vocation as a writer, experienced a genuine urge to write. This vocation, however, was rooted in, and in fact determined by, a question which presented itself with overwhelming, irresistible force: how was, how is, *all this* possible? How did it happen? The question came from the “investigator” in him but it was the writer in him who knew he had to answer it. Thus from the very beginning the organic unity of “investigation” and “literature” was experienced by Solzhenitsyn as something given to him, as the inner law which was to determine his work, and which indeed governs the whole of it and not only *Gulag*. For ultimately all his writings have but one theme, are focused on but one reality: that “amazing country,” its causes and antecedents, its growth and development, its horrible reality, its meaning for man and the whole world . . .

But then the last and most important question is: how was this organic unity of art and investigation achieved? What brought it about and made Solzhenitsyn into what he is—a truly unique witness, in our hopelessly fragmented world., of the *whole truth*. To this question the answer contained and revealed in every line ever written by Solzhenitsyn is clear. It is *conscience*. It is that mysterious power which alone enables man to discern the good and the evil, the

true and the false, the beautiful and the ugly. It is, as Solzhenitsyn calls it, the “old-fashioned trinity” of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, whose indestructible presence in man as *conscience* alone makes him fully and truly human. Transcending all human faculties, yet present in all of them, it is precisely conscience that unites them all into a *wholeness* where each finds its ultimate fulfillment and truly becomes itself.

In its demonic price our world not only rejects conscience from both investigation and art, but claims this rejection to be a “liberation,” a victory of true knowledge and true art. The unique significance of Solzhenitsyn’s challenge is that by making the “amazing country of Gulag” a touchstone, he reveals the truly tragic falseness of that claim. And by restoring conscience as the power which unites investigation and art, he returns to us the power to know and to possess the *whole truth*.

Part 2. Ideology

The Gulag Archipelago can be, and in fact has already been, approached from a great variety of “points of view”: the historical, the political, the “Kremlinological,” and the autobiographical, etc. No doubt this is inevitable and, to some degree, fully justified. This book is such an *event*, it already is making such an impact that the plurality of approaches and understandings is natural. I am afraid, however, that natural and inevitable as it may be, this pluralism may, in the last count, lead to a reduction of *The Gulag Archipelago*, and thus to a misunderstanding of its true meaning and impact.

The first reaction to Solzhenitsyn was that of almost unanimous acclaim and admiration. It was mainly an emotional unanimity. In a world almost totally deprived of heroes and greatness, made of mediocrity, compromise, and sheer cynicism, Solzhenitsyn appeared as a genuine hero, as a *martyr* in the deep and original meaning of this word: a *witness* to something great and high, pure and irreducible in man. Beyond being such a hero, Solzhenitsyn to many appeared also as an *ally*, fighting for the same cause, sharing *our* ideologies, *our* opinions, a most welcome reinforcement of our camp. Hero, ally, and—last but not least—a truly *newsworthy* personality, a source of mystery and suspense, and an attractive subject for comment by experts, interpreters, and even a subject for gossip.

This unanimity has proved to be short-lived. His expulsion to the West—with his family and his archives—diminished, if not altogether removed, the martyr's crown. "Solzhenitsyn Without Tears"—this title of William Safire's column in *The New York Times* was indeed a signal and a program. Then came Solzhenitsyn's *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* and shook up his status as *ally*. When looked at "without tears," is he not a reactionary, an anti-democrat, a religious fanatic, a nationalist, a Slavophile? Such were the terrible suspicions which since then preoccupied more and more those who only a few months before were among Solzhenitsyn's unconditional admirers.

If the unanimity of acclaim was emotional, its progressive breakdown must be termed *ideological*. On the one hand, one applies to Solzhenitsyn the clichés and stereotypes common to the Western approach to Russia. And, on the other hand, one reads and interprets him within the categories of the West's own ideologies and world-views.

The danger of all this, in my opinion, is that it may obscure and even deform the real message of the latest book, and probably of the entirety of Solzhenitsyn's work. If it would be nonsensical to expect everyone to agree unconditionally with everything Solzhenitsyn writes, and if a sound critique is a thousand times preferable to emotional and cheap praise, then such critique can be useful and adequate only if it is based on a serious effort, first of all, to understand what Solzhenitsyn himself means and says, to hear his "message" and not to read into his writings our own ideas and presuppositions.

"Reductionism" in approaching Solzhenitsyn is especially dangerous because the true message of *Gulag* seems to me to consist precisely in the denunciation of all *reductionism*, in revealing it as the real source of the evil which, in our contemporary world, has found its most frightening expression in the Archipelago of prisons and camps.

As I have pointed out, it is not by accident that Solzhenitsyn has subtitled his book *a literary investigation*. Not historical, not political, not ideological—but literary, and this means he has approached it as an artist. This implies that the subject matter of the book consists not merely of *facts*, most of which incidentally were known long before the publication of *Gulag*, but of a certain spiritual perspective in which the author sees and describes them, in their "re-creation" by Solzhenitsyn. What the author wants us to see and to experience with him is not the daily experience of prison life but

the reality which is behind it, which is its root and gives it its truly universal significance. And this reality consists indeed of a radical *reduction* of man, in the name of abstract ideas, i.e., of *ideology*. Thus it is not one ideology that Solzhenitsyn opposes to another which is considered to be wrong. It is not on the level of ideas and concepts that he constructs his indictment and his message. It is by depicting, as only an artist can, what happens to a man and to the world when man and life are *reduced* to ideology.

“Let the reader who expects this book to be a political exposé slam its covers shut right now.”³ So writes Solzhenitsyn, and yet what, if not a political exposé and a political denunciation, does a great majority of its readers and of its reviewers see in this book? What if not more ammunition for their own ideological batteries? But Solzhenitsyn goes on:

The imagination and the spiritual strength of Shakespeare’s evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no *ideology*. Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others’ eyes, so that he won’t hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors. This was how the agents of the Inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations.⁴

What his book reveals, in its truly unique way, is therefore not *facts*, which everyone can use as proofs and illustrations of his own ideology, but the evil of *ideologies* as such, of the “reductionism” implied in their very nature. And what it achieves, inasmuch as a book can achieve it, is, above all, a *liberation* from this ideological spell.

The title of one chapter is “First Cell, First Love,” and one wonders why this lyrical terminology? One reads the book and knows why. Because it is in this first cell that Solzhenitsyn’s own *liberation* began. It is as a slave that he entered prison; it is his

³*The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 168.

⁴*Ibid.*, 173–74.

freedom that he found there. He was the slave not only of one particular and wrong ideology, but, above all, of the *ideological* approach to life itself, and it is this approach, more than Marxism as such, that could have easily, according to his own confession, made him into a “bluecap,” a faithful servant of the prison industry. “I credited myself,” he writes, “with unselfish dedication. But meanwhile I had been thoroughly prepared to be an executioner. And if I had gotten into an NKVD school under Ezhov, maybe I would have matured just in time for Beria.”⁵ To be like the others, to *belong*, to accept once and for all that one belongs to the right camp serving—whatever the price—the right cause, such are the fruits of “ideological reductionism” and the real source and root of the Archipelago. And these fruits are not those of Communism or Marxism alone, they grow everywhere once “ideology” is permitted to dominate man and his life.

What then is *liberation*? Solzhenitsyn answers: a real encounter with *man* and a real encounter with the *world*. Man not as the object of ideological concepts and theories, but as a concrete living and unique being. The world not as an abstract universe, but, above all, as the gift of life itself.

Both encounters take place in the prison cell; hence the memory of it as “first love.” One must read the pages about the joy of this double encounter, the most important and beautiful ones written by a man in our tragic century. “And those three lifted heads, those three unshaven, crumpled pale faces, seemed to me so human, so dear, that I stood there, hugging my mattress, and smiled with happiness. And they smiled too”⁶ Encounter with man. And then—a new revelation of life:

Here one could see not a reflected, not a secondhand sun, but the real one! The really eternally living Sun itself! . . . its golden diffusion through the spring clouds . . . Oh, April sky! It did not matter that I was in prison. . . . And in the end I would become wiser here. I would come to understand many things here, Heaven! I would correct my mistakes yet, O Heaven, not for *them* but for you, Heaven!⁷

⁵Ibid., 168.

⁶Ibid., 185.

⁷Ibid., 211–12.

What these pages describe is truly a resurrection. The resurrection of a man who for the first time sees reality itself, and not its ideological “reduction.” And this is why *Gulag* concerns the *demons* of our whole world, of our entire civilization, and not only of a specifically Russian tragedy. So many people are convinced that “such things” belong to Russia but “will never happen here.” So many firmly believe that the cure to all evils—including the Russian ones—is contained in Western “absolutes”: democracy, separation of church and state, the standard of living, material growth. But in this perspective *Gulag* is a condemnation of the West, as well as of the East, of the so-called “free world” as well as that of Soviet terror and totalitarianism.

Denunciation, but also a message of hope. The *Gulag* is indeed a *spiritual* book, a book with a spiritual message. I do not say “religious” because in our modern terminology this would imply that Solzhenitsyn speaks of God, Church, dogma, ritual. He does not. But what is more important is that his book reveals and conveys a vision of the world which cannot be “reduced” to matter and economics, to impersonal “laws of nature” interpreted by impersonal ideologies for the sake of a miserable and impersonal happiness. From every moment of its time, from every point of its space it is always possible to draw a vertical line, to live by that which is above and not from below. It is the world of a spiritual being—man—and therefore God’s world. It is this world which, by its beauty and order, speaks of God, praises God, and is capable of true freedom.

In this sense *Gulag* is an act of faith. Its darkness is not absolute; its absurdity is not ontological. It is the uniqueness of Solzhenitsyn that, although he wrote and writes almost exclusively of darkness and sin, of crime and suffering, there always comes from his writings a mysterious light. This light has a content—a very ancient and eternal one: faith, love, hope. □

An Orthodox priest, theologian, and author, ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN (1921–1983) was dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York from 1952 until his death.