

ON SOLZHENITSYN¹

• Alexander Schmemmann •

“His truth exposes the lie of Soviet literature, but because he is totally a part of it, he converts the ‘Soviet’ into Russian. Having brought forth a national writer, Soviet literature ends, but it also acquires in itself the principle for its rebirth as Russian literature.”

1.

That Solzhenitsyn represents a phenomenon of major importance is, I think, no longer disputable. For this very reason it is all the more imperative to ask what is, in fact, the nature of this importance. More than once during the past decades the world has been excited and agitated by events which could not be patly fitted into the conventional pattern of Soviet reality. Certainly everyone will recall the arguments, the emotions, and the hopes evoked in the fifties by Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone*, the subsequent shock of *Doctor Zhivago*, the emotional wave generated by the poetry of Evtushenko and Voznesenskii, and more recently still—the trial of Siniavskii and Daniel'. Is Solzhenitsyn—beginning with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—a phenomenon of the same order? One more brave

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voice breaking through the deafening silence of Soviet conformism? To identify him as such, however, would not yet determine his place in and significance for Russian literature, nor, for that matter, would it acknowledge that he is a phenomenon of any literary significance at all. One would hardly include Chernyshevskii's *What Is To Be Done?*, for example, in the "golden fund" of Russian literature, even though no one would deny that the work played a tremendous part in Russian social history.

That Solzhenitsyn is a hero, a martyr, and a victim, that his works are "documents" of staggering importance—all this is indisputable and accepted by everyone, including the Swedish Academy. But the question remains: what is his place and significance in Russian literature? Do we experience trepidation, joy and elation when we read Solzhenitsyn because his themes are so agonizing for us? Or is it because something very significant, very profound has occurred in Russian literature when he appeared?

These questions are important not only from a purely literary point of view; indeed, the very fate of Russia has been, in an ultimate and profound sense, inseparable from the fate of Russian literature. If this is partly true for all nations, it is entirely true for Russia. Russian culture either failed or was unable to amass a "golden store" of anything other than her literature; all that was best and eternal in her she expressed and embodied in her saints and in her writers.

Saints, however, cannot be contained by a "cultural" frame of reference. If, in the expression of St. Paul, there are "celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies" (1 Cor 15:40), then Russian saints are the creators of the "celestial body" of Russia in which all that which is *merely* culture, and therefore mortal, is consumed and transfigured; the "perishable" is "sown" and is only called to be raised in imperishability (1 Cor 15:42). Russia's writers and her great literature, however, are the creators of the "terrestrial body" of Russia—that image, calling, and content by which, despite all her "terrible sins" (Khomiakov), Russia is absolved and made worthy of pure love and loyalty. What occurs in Russian literature occurs not only *in* Russia but *with* Russia. That is why it is so important to determine the literary significance of Solzhenitsyn, not only in relation to the "Soviet scene," but in relation to Russian literature as a whole.

2.

I am certain that the primary significance of Solzhenitsyn lies beyond the fact that he is a courageous voice of protest and of searching: he is, above all, an infinitely important and genuinely fateful event in Russian literature. With his appearance something *new* happened to Russian literature, a new literary era began, even if he should remain an isolated case. No one else, not even Pasternak with his *Doctor Zhivago*—despite all his significance—could compare in this respect. Why? This is the first question, the answer to which will determine all subsequent evaluations of Solzhenitsyn.

I mentioned Pasternak. He alone can be placed alongside Solzhenitsyn if the criterion is the “repercussions” they evoked. But the creativity of Pasternak, including *Doctor Zhivago*, culminated rather than initiated a defined period of Russian literary history. Spiritually, psychologically, and literarily, Pasternak belonged in the already waning, twilight atmosphere of the “Silver Age.” The terrible experience of the Soviet years, of course, deepened his consciousness, placed new themes before him and compelled him to look into areas he had not known when he poured forth the “shower of light” of his early poetry. But even these new themes he posited and developed in the spiritual perspective of the Silver Age. *Doctor Zhivago* is still an echo—after the tragic events of the twenties and thirties of Blok’s “The Twelve.” It is an attempt to respond to the tortured, seductive affirmation which overwhelmed Blok himself in the last line of his famous poem: “. . . at the fore is Jesus Christ.”

Akhmatova, too, concluded and crowned the Silver Age. Perhaps she even purified it from within and atoned for all that which was partially frivolous and irresponsible and made the age precisely “silver,” and not “golden”; all that was burned and purged, redeemed and forgiven in “A Poem Without a Hero” and *Requiem*. Such a conclusion was essential and in itself highly significant, and only those who themselves breathed the air of those years could have given it to us. But the conclusion, the epilogue, even if it is included in the subsequent chapter of literary history by virtue of the continuity of culture, cannot itself become a new chapter or even a new “beginning.”

Such a “beginning” may have glimmered among the writers who worked in that period of time which ended with the final enthronement of Stalin and the official imposition of “socialist realism.” Something, it seemed sure, was beginning or could have

begun then, but it was abruptly crushed not only by force, not only by murder and suicide, but also by the spiritual ambiguity so apparent in the literature of those years. The ambiguity consisted of the fact that literature had continued to live in some measure by the romance of the revolution which had earlier seduced both Blok and Esenin, and had destroyed both. Chaos and blood was still seen by many as that “primeval chaos” from which, they believed, something would be born, would grow and would blossom.

This same ambiguity was in “The Twelve,” except that Blok himself was the one who first understood, by virtue of his integrity, that the music of the revolution—which he himself had called men to hear—really did not exist, and that everything he had sought to proclaim as the prophetic dawn of a new age was really only narrow fanaticism, and nothing more. But those who despite everything continued for two more decades to listen for that “music” could not help but reach a dead end, even had that end not been the torture chambers of Stalin or his decree to sing the glories of Five-Year Plans, tractors, and the *Dneprostroi*. This false “beginning” could not have been the way for continuing the tradition of genuine Russian literature. In its place there came the conventionalized and orthodox “Soviet” literature.

3.

Only in the light of what has been said does it seem possible to understand why the creativity of Solzhenitsyn is really a new phenomenon, changing at its very source the spirit of Russian literature.

First of all, Solzhenitsyn does not belong, either spiritually or biographically, among the representatives or imitators of the Silver Age. He is neither a grandson of Vladimir Solov’ev, a son of Blok nor a brother to Pasternak. Furthermore, the Revolution, as an abrupt break in the fate of man and nation, was outside his personal experience. Finally, he is not an “internal émigré” in the sense that the older generation of writers became despite everything; they had known pre-revolutionary Russia and could not help becoming spiritual “exiles” in Soviet Russia. By flesh and blood Solzhenitsyn *belongs* to that Russia which now alone exists—not pre-revolutionary or revolutionary Russia, but precisely Soviet Russia. And the uniqueness of Solzhenitsyn the writer is that while he belongs

completely to that Soviet reality, he is just as fully and completely *free* of it.

Solzhenitsyn's "freedom" demands explanation. The older generation of writers—Akhmatova, Mandel'shtam, and Pasternak—always remained free "within," however enslaved from without. The enslavement of culture occurred at a time when their experience of freedom had made a full personal enslavement impossible. At the same time, many Soviet men passed through the experience M. M. Koriakov called the "liberation of the soul" in the course of the long Soviet half-century. But this liberation was usually an escape from Soviet reality, either physical or spiritual and entire categories could be made of these escapes: emigration to the West, escape into ancient Russian art, into history, into the past or into the future

Solzhenitsyn's freedom—or rather his uniqueness—is that none of these categories of escape is applicable to him. He did not "depart" anywhere, he demanded no "compensation" from foreign cultures, he romanticized neither the past nor the future, he did not seek to breathe any other air. The Soviet world is so organically and wholly his world, his reality, that it is possible to say he is free not *from* Soviet reality, but *within* Soviet reality. And this creates a very special relationship between him and that world. On a creative level, it makes him uniquely capable of *revealing* that world from within, or creatively *explaining* it, and finally of *overcoming* it.

All this is so because the "liberation" of Solzhenitsyn occurred not on a personal, intimate plane, but on what cannot be termed other than a "national" plane—through the triune experience of *war, imprisonment, and return to life*.

Solzhenitsyn's generation was too young to be scarred by the Revolution or even by the nightmare of the Stalinist 30s. Its first crisis, its first moral awakening was World War II, which gave it the experience of suffering, fervor, friendship, and patriotism, and allowed a free "reflection" on the theretofore habitual, almost organic fear before the ubiquitous regime. The war made this generation look anew on its former life and to want change. This was the first "liberation."

After the war came the second trial, the terrible betrayal by the regime which decided to enslave again those freed by war, and threw into prison all those who had survived the trenches and the German camps. And finally came the third trial, the return from prisons and from labor camps to life, to the world which had ceased to belong to them: "In the summer of 1953 I was returning from a

hot, dusty desert,” writes Solzhenitsyn in the beginning of “Matrena’s Home,” “simply back to Russia. There was nobody waiting for me, no one to welcome me, because I’d been delayed on the way home . . . by some ten years”

The storm of the war, that ten-year “delay,” the return to a life from which they had become estranged, the painfully clear awareness of truth, the conscience forged in suffering on which they could weigh everything anew, freely; all this, again, was the experience of an entire generation. But Solzhenitsyn the writer expressed and embodied it with remarkable depth, recreating it from within and illuminating it with the light of that moral truth, without which there can be talented writers, but no great writer and no major literature.

4.

All this makes Solzhenitsyn the first *national* writer of the Soviet period of Russian literature, and in this lies his fundamental newness. By “national” I do not mean to imply some specific interrelation between the writer and “national” themes, but rather the acceptance of that spiritual responsibility for his people, his age and his world, that a great writer accepts freely, as something natural and self-evident. This responsibility does not mean the writer is somehow shackled to “current events”; it is not what Sartre christened with that specious and essentially meaningless term “littérature engagée.” On the contrary, only inasmuch as he is spiritually free of “current events” and true to that “image of eternity” which, as Solzhenitsyn himself said, is implanted in every man, can the writer discharge his responsibility properly, for the responsibility is precisely an inner referral of art to some higher judgment, to something which surpasses all “issues,” to that “image of eternity” which alone can put all things in their proper place “in time” and therefore alone can reveal the truth about them.

Before Solzhenitsyn there was no national writer in this sense in Soviet literature. There were some who in the name of their individual creativity and spiritual survival declined this responsibility and *escaped* into another “world” of their choice. There were also those who betrayed the responsibility by accommodation, silence, or lies. Solzhenitsyn went nowhere, and by a conscious, irreversible, spiritual, and creative choice accepted his entire responsibility. With

his gifts he obviously could have become a major *Soviet* writer, but he became instead, I am sure, a *great* Russian writer. He became one precisely because he accepted the “Soviet” as the inalienable fate of his art, as the chalice which he could not leave unemptied, as that experience which art is obliged to embody, reveal, and illumine with the light of truth.

Let this appear in paradox: Solzhenitsyn actually fulfills in his works the “order” that the regime hypocritically and falsely gave to art; but he carries it out neither hypocritically nor falsely. He does not oppose that order with some other theory of art, he does not shout about the artist’s freedom to write about whatever he pleases, he does not defend “art for art’s sake,” he does not debate the writer’s obligation to become “involved in his age” and in the life of his people, and so on. Rather, it is as if he accepts all the “orders” completely and seriously, but precisely by this seriousness and freedom reveals their lies and their triteness. Precisely because he is *part* of Soviet literature and not outside it, he can bring it out into the open air through his creativity, and the “Soviet” period ends. His truth exposes the lie of Soviet literature, but because he is totally a part of it, he converts the “Soviet” into Russian. Having brought forth a national writer, Soviet literature ends, but it also acquires in itself the principle for its rebirth as Russian literature.

5.

All this brings us back to the question with which we began these musings, the question of the literary merit of Solzhenitsyn’s art. One refined connoisseur of Russian literature wrote me recently that Solzhenitsyn is a “major event, but a bad writer. . . .” What does this mean? Conceding my lack of competence as a literary scholar, I will still make bold to assert that there exist no absolute scientific criteria for the categorization of writers as “good” and “bad.” After all, it is still being said of Dostoevsky that though he is a “brilliant thinker,” he is a “bad writer.” On the Olympian heights of literary expertise, in the small circles where a constant muted rumble betrays mighty passions, is it not true that one occasionally hears affirmations of the sort that “Bunin and Nabokov write better than Tolstoy,” or that X or Y is “better than Blok”? And the critic *par excellence*, Sainte-Beuve, failed to “recognize” Baudelaire, while André Gide failed to recognize Marcel Proust. In short, the ordinary reader may perhaps

be forgiven for not taking too seriously the contradictory verdicts of specialists.

It could be argued that a “good writer” is one whose art has been integrated by some mysterious “reception” into the “golden fund” of a given literature, where it remains forever as an inalienable part. The critic, specialist and literary historian indisputably can and must assist in this reception, but equally indisputably, they are not gifted with infallibility. Therefore my assertion, as neither a critic nor a specialist, that Solzhenitsyn is not only “good” but a major writer, is, of necessity, subjective. Who is right, the specialist who wrote me or I, only the future can show. I cannot prove I am right. All I can do is to present in defense of my assertion a few suggestions and observations, however incomplete and fragmented.

First of all, *language*. Solzhenitsyn’s language is “Soviet,” which is most probably one of the reasons he is not appreciated as a writer by certain purists. But for me, the miracle of Solzhenitsyn is that this Soviet language, which more than anything else had expressed and embodied the fall not only of literature, but of Russia herself, which was corrupted and corroded by the unctuous Soviet deceit, intrusiveness, and lies, and the alteration and subversion of all meanings; that this language became in Solzhenitsyn for the first time so clearly and so completely the language of *truth*. If we were to use a religious image, we could say that Solzhenitsyn *exorcized* the language, driving out of it the “seven evil spirits.” He did this not as a sort of conscious linguistic experiment, but by virtue of that same inner responsibility of which we spoke before.

Solzhenitsyn’s criterion of language is Tolstoyan—the criterion of truth, not “literature.” He is not enticed or tempted, like many of his contemporaries, to take junkets into archaisms or linguistic innovation. Alien to him is that obsession with language and its “problems” which is so characteristic of our time and in which, I deeply believe, it is far more accurate to see signs not of health, but symptoms of a profound illness in art. If the language of Solzhenitsyn is “worse” than the language of Bunin or Nabokov, it is because such is the living language of Russia—but then in the final analysis this comparison is meaningless, because Solzhenitsyn could not have created in any other language. Russian literature cannot artificially return to the glorious language which died with Bunin without severing its organic tie to Russia and her language, and it is as fruitless to mourn this as it is to join Remizov in mourning the loss to Russian literature of the language of the archpriest Avvakum

after Peter the Great. Solzhenitsyn *transformed* the “Soviet” language into his own, into the language of his art and his creative truth. This is his linguistic achievement, and I am sure “specialists” will carefully study it in the future, because, in the final analysis, it is precisely this achievement that makes possible the continued life of Russian literature, and returns to her the tools that had seemed hopelessly rusted.

Solzhenitsyn’s *world*. It is hardly necessary to repeat here the familiar truism that the mark of a good writer is his ability to create his *own* world; a living and real world, “convincing” not because it resembles the world we perceive—it may or may not resemble it—but because of its inner truth and vitality; because even though it was created and imagined by the author, it lives its *own* life, independent ultimately even of the author himself. It is precisely the fullness of its *own* life that sets major literature apart from a “document” or from “mere literature,” however brilliant, ingenious, or profound these may be. There are writers—Nabokov, for example—who despite an almost limitless, near-miraculous literary gift are still incapable of creating such a world. In his most recent work, *Ada*, Nabokov, to escape the boredom and restraints that he finds so oppressive in this world, leads us at last to another world, one apparently wholly imaginary: an “anti-terra.” And yet no new “non-Nabokovian” world arises which is free of his limitless creative dictatorship. As everywhere and always in his art, behind every line, behind every movement stands Nabokov, his brilliant mind, his acute insight and his ironical smile. Never, not for one second does he set his heroes free; he knows three hundred pages in advance precisely what is to happen to them; their exact possibilities and limitations are transparent to his all-knowing, all-understanding, and almighty mind. A Nabokovian Adam could not even long for a forbidden fruit. Everything is foreseen, guessed, prepared, and orchestrated to the end; everything is noted, noticed, seen, named and presented as never before—but nothing is created, nothing is living or eternal, like the worlds created by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and—I am not afraid to add—Solzhenitsyn.

Slipping into Iakonov’s office behind the prisoner Gerasimovich, we do not know until the last second—as, probably, Solzhenitsyn himself did not know—whether Gerasimovich would find in himself the strength to reject with that “resounding squeak” the offer of freedom, of his wife, of life. Nor do we know, following the arrested Volodin into prison, whether the “liberation of the soul”

that has begun within him will be completed. We do not know, because the works of Solzhenitsyn, however “historical,” “autobiographical” or even “ideological,” are the result, above all, of a mysterious *transformation* of these elements into a spiritual reality; a transformation which is, ultimately, the essence of art. What makes a writer a creator, or where his imagination and his world spring from, can long be argued (V. V. Weidlé speaks to this in his *The Dilemma of the Arts*). But it can scarcely be denied that there *is* a Solzhenitsyn world (and not merely a gripping “documentary”), just as there is a Tolstoyan world and a Dostoevskian world.

I would not say that everything in Solzhenitsyn’s world is “embodied” in equal measure or with equal clarity. Future critics will doubtlessly show that he was an uneven writer, sometimes soaring and sometimes drifting, but I do not think they will be able to deny the reality of his world. And if Russia—as something whole, as an experience and a continuity, as an object of philosophic speculation and not merely of academic study—exists above all in her literary “incarnations,” then to the Russias of Pushkin, of Gogol, of Tolstoy, and of Chekhov, we must now add the Russia of Solzhenitsyn.

Solzhenitsyn’s *heroes*. I will limit myself here to an assertion based on one bold comparison: Tolstoy’s Napoleon and Solzhenitsyn’s Stalin. The Napoleon of *War and Peace*, for all the minute, painstaking detail of his image, remains a caricature drawn by Tolstoy to illustrate his rather incomprehensible and unconvincing “philosophy of history.” The “philosophy” needed an example, a proof, and Tolstoy accordingly drew an image of Napoleon with the traits the theory required. When reading passages on Napoleon (or on the Liturgy in *Resurrection* or on the theater), one is always sorry that Tolstoy wrote them, for they are in such tortured dissonance with Tolstoy’s own profound criterion of “truth”—not “realistic” or “descriptive,” but inner and spiritual truth.

Solzhenitsyn’s Stalin, on the other hand, is not a caricature. He may not be the whole Stalin—certainly the whole truth about him is not made known here—yet he is *true* and we owe this truth to more than Solzhenitsyn’s integrity; we owe it to his “creative conscience.” Yes, everything is “invented,” but nothing is artificially concocted or added on.

Tolstoy’s Napoleon is entirely “appearances”—a projection totally of Tolstoy’s *idea* of Napoleon—and because of this, despite the abundance of detail (the fleshy back, the heavy thighs), he does

not come to life as does the lowliest “invented” soldier on that same terrible Borodino plain. Solzhenitsyn’s Stalin is drawn entirely from within. Yes, he *is* “invented”—as are the night, the cell, the lethargy, the conversation with Abakumov, the writing, the anguish, the fear and hatred. But they are invented with creative conscience, for which I cannot find a better term. This creative conscience is the force which transforms invention into life, into the life *we* live during those several unforgettable hours in Stalin’s cell, where we not only learn something *about* Stalin (“documentation”), but mysteriously come to know Stalin himself (art). The same is true for Solzhenitsyn’s other heroes, both “positive” and “negative.” And perhaps the main point is that these familiar categories do not apply to Solzhenitsyn’s heroes; that this writer, who more than any writer in the history of literature has the right to a “settling of moral accounts,” to the separation of everything into “positive” and “negative,” “black” and “white” categories, precisely does not use this right, but rather creates and crafts his own world on totally different principles. This brings me to the concluding, and for me the most important part of these fragmentary thoughts about Solzhenitsyn.

6.

I would not have dared to write about Solzhenitsyn at all, not being a literary critic, had I not been so astonished by what I can only call the Christian inspiration of his writing. For me the most important, the most joyful news in the “miracle” of Solzhenitsyn was that the first national writer of the Soviet period of Russian literature was at the same time a Christian writer. I would like to conclude with a few words on this, even though it is very complex.

Let me emphasize at the outset that when I say “Christian writer” I do not have in mind whether Solzhenitsyn is a “believer” or a “non-believer”—whether he accepts or rejects Christian dogma, ecclesiastical ritual, or the Church herself—nor do I mean specific “religious problematics,” which I do not consider central to Solzhenitsyn. I humbly assert that the official declaration by an author that he is a “believer” or a “non-believer” cannot be considered a trustworthy test to qualify his work as essentially Christian or non-Christian. There have been writers who pro-

claimed themselves believers and even wrote profusely about religion and “religious problems,” who nonetheless could not and should not be considered Christian writers. And there have been writers who proclaimed themselves non-believers, though their entire artistic output could and should have been recognized as Christian. Thus the late G. P. Fedotov called Pushkin’s *The Captain’s Daughter* “the most Christian work in Russian literature,” which is especially noteworthy because the “God-seeking” of so many Russian writers, the long “infatuation with God” in our literature began not with Pushkin, but after him. To Rozanov and to others, Pushkin appeared rather insipid from this point of view, insufficiently “religiously problematic.” I am convinced, however, that Fedotov was quite right, and that Russian literature was Christian to the extent that it remained essentially faithful to Pushkin; that far from everything in its celebrated “infatuation with God,” especially during the Silver Age, was of Christian origin or inspiration. But what do I mean when I speak of Solzhenitsyn or of his art as Christian?

When I speak of a “Christian writer” and of Solzhenitsyn in particular, I have in mind a deep and all-embracing, although possibly unconscious perception of the world, man, and life, which, historically, was born and grew from biblical and Christian revelation, and only from it. Human culture as a whole may have had other sources, but only Christianity, only the revelation of the Old and New Testaments contains that perception of the world which, incorporated into human culture, revealed in it the potential, and indeed the reality of a Christian culture. I shall call this perception, for lack of a better term, the *triune intuition of creation, fall, and redemption*. I am convinced that it is precisely this intuition that lies at the bottom of Solzhenitsyn’s art, and that renders his art Christian. I will try briefly to explain my thought.

The intuition of *creation*. The Christian vision is rooted in a perception and acceptance of the original goodness of the world and life; of their fullness with that joyful and positive sanction of his creation by God which resounds in the very first chapter of the Bible: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold *it was very good*” (Gn 1:31). Therefore to view the world as meaningless and absurd, to adopt an ontological pessimism, to reject life and to surrender to Manichean dualism in any of its shades, inevitably places one outside of Christianity. No matter how real the ugliness, suffering, and evil in the world, no matter how fallen it is—and

Christianity firmly maintains that it “lies in evil”—fundamentally, originally the world is light and not dark, meaningful and not meaningless, good and not bad. This “cosmic” source of the Christian perception may be obscured or distorted, but as long as it exists as even a remote “point of reference” in art, that art remains Christian.

Solzhenitsyn’s writings are almost entirely about ugliness, suffering, and evil. His world truly “lies in evil;” not in an abstract, metaphysical sense, but in a very real one: the nightmare reality of the labor camp, the Mavrino *sharashka*, and the cancer ward. Yet nowhere, never, not once (and let the reader check my assertion) do we find or even sense in all his works that ontological *blasphemy* about the world, man, and life, the poisonous whisper of which can be heard so clearly in so much of “contemporary art.” I could cite examples of this, but specific instances, of course, are not proof. The proof, rather, is in the overall tonality of the art, in its inner “music,” which eludes formal analysis alone. And in Solzhenitsyn this music, though seemingly spun so entirely from the cries of suffering, mystically admits and reveals that very *praise* which constitutes the ultimate depth of the biblical vision of the world. For through all the writing of Solzhenitsyn there shines that “morning of creation” into which Kostoglotov steps, and about which he rejoices upon quitting the cancer ward:

This was the morning of Creation! The world was being created anew for this alone, to be given back to Oleg: Go! Live!

. . . And radiating happiness in his face, smiling at no one, just at the sky and the trees, filled with that early springtime, early-morning joy that floods the old and the sick, Oleg walked along familiar lanes. . . .

Who could act rationally on the first morning of Creation? Discarding all his plans, Oleg conceived a zany idea, to go immediately to the Old City to see the apricot tree in bloom in the early morning

The intuition of *fall*. While it is obvious that evil and suffering are central in Solzhenitsyn’s writing, it is essential to note that they stem from the Christian intuition and experience of the “mystery of evil.” Nowhere, indeed, does Christianity differ as markedly from non-Christian religions, philosophies, or ideologies, as in its intuition of evil. All other religions and philosophies are directed essentially toward *explaining* and thereby *neutralizing* evil,

since explaining it renders it somehow legitimate and, consequently, justified; a *phenomenon bene fondatum*. Christianity alone, notwithstanding the assertions of self-confident scholastics throughout all the ages, does not explain away evil; yet Christianity alone reveals it. This, indeed, is the whole point, that for Christianity evil is not a kind of independently formed “essence,” not “evil in itself,” as it appears to those, some of them Christians, who expose “dark forces.” But evil is at the same time not merely a negation, an absence of good as affirmed by rationalists of all kinds in their utopian optimism.

For Christianity, evil is first and always a *fall*. Only that which is raised on high can fall, and the higher, the more brilliant, and the more precious it is, the stronger the horror, grief, and suffering. Evil is this fall from on high and the horror, grief, and suffering it evokes. Horror at how unnecessary the fall, how contrary to the nature of the fallen; the grief and suffering because that which was originally “very good” is irreparably broken. Therefore no matter what the reasons for the fall, no matter how “legitimate” and “justified” it appears, it can have no explanation, no justification, and no excuse. There can only be horror, grief, and suffering. But to experience and to recognize evil as fall and to be horrified by it is precisely to *reveal evil as evil*, for this means to experience evil as the terrible presence, reality, and efficacy of that which has no “essence,” and yet exists. Evil is not reduced to a cause, a reason, or a deficiency which, once “explained,” would be justified and fitted into the rational order. The horror is precisely that it does exist, and cannot be disregarded, dismissed, or neutralized by any “explanations.”

This is precisely what evil means in Solzhenitsyn. It is always real, unique, and concrete, rather than a manifestation of some universal Evil Essence suspended in the atmosphere, and because of this it is always horrible, grievous, and irreparable. The Mavrino *sharashka* and the cancer ward are images not of the world, but of the *fallen* world, which by its very fall bears testimony to freedom, health, and life. Reading Nerzhin’s conversation with his wife before their final separation (“only then he noticed that the wedding band from which she never parted was not on her finger . . .”), we know with our whole being that no explanation will help, just as we need no explanation when on Good Friday we hear once again: “he began to be sorrowful and very troubled” (Mt 26:37).

Evil in Solzhenitsyn is real because it is always *personal*. It is not found in impersonal “systems” or “structures,” it is always found in and caused by man. Even in the *sharashka* and in the cancer ward evil does not appear as some elemental force and fate to which man is absolutely subjugated and for which he is in no way responsible, and to which, after it is “explained” and “accepted,” it remains only to stoically resign oneself. Above all and always, evil is *men* who have opted and continue to opt for evil, men who have truly chosen to serve evil. And therefore evil is always a fall, and always a choice. The horror of Kafka’s *The Trial* is that there is no escape from the anonymous, faceless, and absurd evil; the horror of Mavrim, however, is precisely the opposite: men—living, concrete, “personal” men—torture other men; even more, the horror is that they could, if they so chose, *not* torture. This is the Christian intuition of Evil. Christ was not crucified by impersonal *moira* or by “dark forces,” but by men who had the choice not to crucify him, and yet freely condemned him rather than Barabbas to death. Evil in Solzhenitsyn always remains on a *moral*, and therefore *personal* plane; it is always related to the conscience which is in every man. It is not a failing, an absence of something, a blindness or a lack of responsibility; it is man’s betrayal of his humanity; it is his *fall*.

And finally, the intuition of *redemption*. This intuition is not, of course, a humanistic optimism, a faith in “progress,” a “bright tomorrow” or a “triumph of reason.” All this is alien to the Christian gospel of rebirth and salvation, as it is alien to Solzhenitsyn. Yet in his works, as in Christianity, there is an indestructible faith in the possibility of *regeneration* for man, a refusal to “write off” anyone or anything forever. All is possible, he seems to say, if only man finds his conscience, as did the debased and self-centered State Counselor Second Rank Innokentii Volodin or the inmates of the *sharashka*, who found their conscience in their “immortal zek souls.” What moved Volodin that festal Christmas eve, what induced him to phone a warning to the condemned doctor? And what made several zeks prefer the hopelessness of hard labor to the relative comfort of Mavrino? In Solzhenitsyn’s art there are answers to these questions, and they come, in the final analysis, from the conscience of Solzhenitsyn himself.

Conscience invisibly rules, triumphs over and illumines the horror, ugliness and evil of the “fallen” world. As on the Cross, defeat is transformed into victory: at the end, Volodin gazes down “from those heights of struggle and suffering to which he had been

lifted. . . ,” and the last words about those in the *sharashka* are “. . . there was peace in their souls.” And if it is so, nothing is closed, condemned or damned. Everything is open, everything remains possible.

7.

Much more could and should be said about all this. What has been said may sound somewhat schematic, and Solzhenitsyn is a phenomenon of far too great significance to be reduced to a diagram. His creative path, besides, has not yet ended. Writing these lines which may be unworthy of him I have only one justification: “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34). Solzhenitsyn is a joy, and joy always begs to be shared.

A final point. Ours is the time of the obvious collapse of Christian culture. This collapse is related, first of all, to the decomposition of that *triune intuition* from which that culture grew and in which it lived. Around us ardent efforts are being made to find new soil, new roots for culture and art, and it is clear that both the ardor and the efforts are filled with an irrational hatred for the Christian roots of culture, for its *triune intuition*. This is the time of an apostate culture! And even more frightening is that one fails to see hardly any resistance left on the Christian side. Some Christians are ready to withdraw to the catacombs, and to renounce any responsibility for culture. Others are ready, even zealous, to cross over into the opposite camp, certain that Christianity itself calls them to this—writers about the “death of God” or about the Christian justification for “secular society” are most often, alas, themselves Christians. Either to leave culture to the Devil, who “from the beginning was a liar” about the world, man, and life, or to benignly see him as an “angel of light”; such is the nightmarish dilemma in which we find ourselves.

But then, in this dark night, in a country which more than half a century ago officially renounced its Christian name and calling, there arises a lone man who through his art reveals the lie and the sin of that dilemma and liberates us from it. A writer. A Russian writer. A Christian writer. For this liberation, for this witness, and for its coming from Russia, making Russia herself again and again ours; for preserving “unspoiled, undisturbed, and undistorted the image of

eternity with which each person is born,” our joyful gratitude to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.²—*Translated by Serge Schmemmann.* □

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²[*The following note was published by the editors of the volume from which this essay is taken, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials.—ed.*] In the summer of 1972 an interesting response by Solzhenitsyn to the above essay became known in the West. It was contained in a letter to the editors of *Vestnik RSKhD*, the Paris-based journal in which the article had appeared. The major part of the letter deals with the moral support which Father Schmemann gave to Solzhenitsyn’s “Lenten Letter” in a sermon broadcast over Radio Liberty. (Solzhenitsyn had been criticized for his views by several clerics of the Moscow Patriarchate.) Solzhenitsyn expresses his appreciation and adds: “. . . his article about me in [*Vestnik RSKhD*] no. 98 was also very valuable to me. It explained me to myself and explained Pushkin, as well as the reason why I have always felt such close affinity with him in tone and in my perception of the world. It also formulated important traits of Christianity which I could not have formulated myself . . .” (*Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, 9 August 1972).

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

¹This essay first appeared in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, ed. John B. Dunlop, Richard Haugh, and Alexis Klimoff (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1975). Reprinted by kind permission of Mrs. Julianna Schmemmann.

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. □

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