

Introduction: Autobiography of Socialist Trauma

Introduction to the special cluster Autobiography of Socialist Trauma - Part 1

In his essay 'My life, several of my lives' Varlam Shalamov writes:

Стиху надо было отдать судьбу и собственную кровь. Надо писать о своем и по-своему. (Shalamov 2013: 307)¹

Other than providing an extraordinarily precise insight into Shalamov's own relationship with his writing, this sentence serves as a monumental slogan for the literature generated by traumatic conditions. Shalamov, a budding poet in his youth, had gone through the 'meat grinder': arrested in 1929, he spent a total of 18 years in the Soviet concentration camps, from the Western camps in the Visherá region, to the years spent in atrocious conditions in the Eastern Kolýma, an experience that would eventually define him as a writer and shape his relationship with the word, as explained in the quoted sentence and in several

other essays, written by Shalamov to describe his poetics and make sense of his creative process. His direct experience of repression influenced his literary output not only under a thematic point of view, but also for what concerns his style: both his poems and especially his prose texts were directly impacted by trauma. As preliminary research has shown, his use of repetitions, silences/omissions and switching of tenses – as well as many other stylistic features – can be linked to some of the most typical problems encountered by patients who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Gullotta 2021). However, Shalamov was not aware of this condition: his essays devoted to his writing process seem to be the attempt of a writer to understand his writing process in view of the sudden re-emergence of traumatic flashbacks and the physical reactions Shalamov had:

Каждый рассказ, каждая фраза его предварительно прокричана в пустой комнате – я всегда гово-

¹ 'I had to give my destiny and my own blood to poetry. You must write about yourself and in your own way'. Translations in this article are my own – A.G.

рю сам с собой, когда пишу. Кричу, угрожаю, плачу. И слез мне не остановить. Только после, кончая рассказ или часть рассказа, я утираю слезы. (Shalamov 1998: 382)²

In addition to this specific aspect – which is shared by other traumatised authors, see for instance the switching of tenses in Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (Roggia 2018) – the writings of authors who spent a term in the Gulag were influenced by the peculiar nature of Soviet repressions. While (apart from exceptions) the victims of the Holocaust, the Apartheid or other traumatic historical events were repressed because of their belonging to ethnic or political groups opposed to or repressed by state power, the victims of Soviet repression were hit because of their belonging to categories which were identified as enemies by the state regardless of their actions but were unclear to the victims: if we exclude the relatively rare cases of people

who were actively fighting against the Revolution and/or the Soviet power (White army officers, Socialist revolutionaries, Trotskyists in their fight against Stalinists in the early stages of the fight for power between the two leaders – indeed, Shalamov was one of them), people were arrested without any clear reason. Railway workers, scholars of Eastern cultures, engineers, foreigners etc. were repressed for reasons unbeknownst to them: while the path of dehumanisation they would undergo was overall similar to that of people repressed in other historical contexts, victims of Soviet repression usually would not have the possibility to rely on their identity (Jewishness, blackness, belonging to political movements and so on) to face the extreme conditions in which they were forced to live.³ Detached from their environment and relations, humiliated and often tortured or subjected to violence, sent to remote areas

² 'Each tale, each of its sentence is initially shouted out in an empty room – when I write, I always talk to myself. I shout, I threaten, I cry. And I can't stop the tears. Only later, when the tale or part of it is written, I wipe my tears away'.

³ There are, of course, exceptions, such as the representatives of political factions opposed to the Bolsheviks like the Socialist revolutionaries – see, in this regard, Olitskaia 1971 – or the members of national communities, such as the Ukrainian women who organised a series of counter-practices of survival based on their national cultural background, as studied by Oksana Kis (Kis 2022).

where they would need to readapt to a completely new reality made of abuses and violences, the victims of Soviet repression would often need to readapt to life, a new life where all their references were annihilated and where they would often live under the rule of *homo homini lupus*, and were therefore often forced to reconstruct their own self in view of the context. When, during detention or after surviving the camps, they tried to describe what happened to them in their memoirs, tales, poems etc., they would need to address a series of common challenges, such as that of negotiating their personal stories (and therefore the image they wanted to keep of themselves in their writing) with the unspeakable (or speakable) experiences they had lived. The very nature of Soviet repression was decisive in shaping their texts: recreating a self on paper after it was destroyed by the authorities and their representatives for no clear reason was a typical trait of all the writings of repressed people. This created a variety of outputs with shared narrative, stylistic and aesthetic choices, which characterise the writing of trauma in the Soviet context. This is why, when considering the shared features of a large number of text which form the vast

corpus of literary texts composed by authors who underwent repression in the Soviet Union, we can speak of a specific 'autobiography of Soviet trauma'.

While it is not possible in this introduction to explain in detail the peculiarities of the 'autobiography of Soviet trauma', it is relevant to underline that such dynamics were at play not only in the Soviet Union. As described by many researches (see for instance Pucci 2020), during or after WWII the countries who eventually formed the so-called Soviet bloc (both those who were included in the Warsaw Pact, and those who aligned to the Non-Aligned Movement) either sent their officials to the USSR to shape their repressive organs, or were formed *in situ* by Soviet officials after the end of the war. This led to the creation of similar repressive systems in the Socialist countries which were based on the Soviet model. While obviously each country with time developed their own repressive systems and had different degrees of intensity of repression, the ideological matrix which informed state repression and some concrete repressive practices were the same in all the socialist countries, from Tito's Yugoslavia to Ceausescu's Romania and so on.

The project *Literature of Socialist Trauma: Mapping and Researching the Lost Page of European Literature* aims to study the literary texts generated by these repressive contexts in the Socialist countries. The aim is to understand whether there is a hidden, transnational and multilingual literary genre in European national literatures based on shared features in literary texts composed in repressive contexts but written in different languages in the former Socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. A first set of outputs has highlighted promising lines of research, such as the stylistic and compositional similarity identified between oral poems composed in Yugoslavian and Soviet camps by Hungarian, Russian and Serbian authors (Papp 2024, Dušanić 2024). This special cluster, and the second part which will be published in the 2025 issue, follows up on the first outputs and focuses specifically on issues related to life writing, trying to tackle them from particular angles: Simone Guagnelli's article proposes an innovative philological study of Ol'ga Adamova-Sliozberg's *Put'* [Path] which aims to understand if behind what seem to be delib-

erate authorial choices – as seen in the text's variants – can be indeed identified as aspects related to representational issues of trauma. Natalia Lebedyntseva chooses to work on another terrain, that of the repressed body, analysed in the numerous hypostases proposed by Vasil' Stus in his poetry of trauma. Rosanna Morabito works on Dragoslav Mihailović's memoirs of Goli Otok through the prism of trauma studies, and in particular through Van der Kolk's groundbreaking work on the representation of trauma. This way, these authors – and those whose work will be published in the following issue – move the first steps towards the study of the 'autobiography of Socialist trauma' in European literature.

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