

Andrea Gullotta

Introduction: Socialist Trauma and the Self

Introduction to the second part of the special issue on the autobiography of Socialist Trauma.

By focusing on authors of Macedonian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Slovenian and Udmurt literature, the second part of the special issue on the autobiography of Socialist Trauma widens the horizon on the phenomenon of the representation of the self in the literary works generated by authors who were victims of state repression in Socialist countries. The narratives and poems created by the authors studied in the articles published in both issues share two key aspects: first, they are written by people whose self has been crushed by the authorities of countries governed by Socialist principles, meaning that these individuals were convicted not for having committed any particular crime, but for reasons related to their belonging to social class, political factions, religion, or for their proximity with 'enemies of the people.' Unlike victims of genocides, they did not necessarily share common values or identify themselves with a specific community: still, they all went through the pro-

cess of destruction of the before-the-arrest self, as brightly described by Iulii Margolin:

Переступив порог милиции на Логишинской улице, я, не зная того, переступил черту, которая разделяла два мира. Но уже через несколько минут я понял, что случилось нечто невероятное.

Я никогда в своей жизни не сидел в тюрьме. В момент ареста мне было тридцать девять лет. Я был отцом семейства, человеком материально и внутренне независимым, привыкшим к уважению окружающих, безусловно лояльным гражданином. Я никого не обидел, не преступил закона и был твердо убежден в своем праве на внимание и защиту со стороны учреждений каждого государства, кроме гитлеровского. В общем я оставался до-

вольно наивным европейским интеллигентом даже после девятимесячных попыток вырваться из липкой советской паутины, и я все еще чувствовал себя душой и сердцем гражданином прекрасной Европы с ее Парижем, Флоренцией и лазурными далями Средиземного моря.

За порогом дома на Логшинской я сразу перестал быть человеком. Этот переход совершился без всякой подготовки, так резко, точно я провалился среди бела дня в глубокую яму (Margolin 1977: 156-57).¹

¹ 'Stepping into the police station on Logishinskaya Street, I unknowingly crossed the line dividing two worlds. However, already within minutes, I realized that something incredible had happened.

I had never been in prison in my life. I was thirty-nine years old at the time of my arrest. I was a father, a man of material and intellectual independence, accustomed to the respect of others, an unconditionally loyal citizen. I had never offended anyone, never broken the law, and was firmly convinced of my right to have the attention and protection of the institutions of every state, except Hitler's. In short, I remained a rather naive European intellectual even after nine months of trying to escape the sticky Soviet spiderweb, and I still felt, heart and soul, a citizen of that

Second, all these authors were heavily traumatised by extreme violence – a violence which saw its motivation in the dehumanisation of the victims on behalf of the perpetrators and which had the typical effect of leaving the individuals broken, fragile, entangled in a difficult – at times impossible – negotiation between a variety of selves.

In this context, literature comes as a reaction to 'socialist trauma.' It can be the stronghold where the violated self establishes a connection with the before-the-arrest self and its complex system of values, literary references and beliefs, as is the case with both Radu Gyr – whose poetry is analysed by Giovanni Magliocco – and the Polish poets studied by Andrea F. De Carlo. Still, trauma leaves its scars on their poems in the form of both images of blood and violence, and feelings of guilt and shame. Scars that are not visible in Kuzebai Gerd's poems: however, Eva Toulouze's

beautiful Europe, with its Paris, Florence, and the azure expanses of the Mediterranean.

Once I stepped into the building on Logishinskaya Street, I immediately ceased to be a human being. This transition happened without any preparation, so abruptly, as if I had fallen into a deep hole in broad daylight'. [The translation is mine, A.G.]

article reconstructs how his literary biography led to his persecution and how his works became themselves body of evidence.

Literature is also the way to work through trauma, as is the case of Aleksandar Aleksiev's work, here analysed by Irina Talevska, whose article tries to go beyond the pages of Aleksiev's text in order to see traces of a collective working-through in Macedonian society. A similar process happens in the text by another author who spent his term in Goli Otok, Igor Torkar, whose *Dying by Instalments* is at the centre of the article by Maria Bidovec, who delves deep into one of many texts on Goli Otok published after Tito's death by Slovenian authors. Torkar's work shares some of the features of autofiction as described by Serge Doubrovsky (Doubrovsky 1977: 10). However, it does contain elements of originality, in particular, the instances where the author, through a pseudonym, intervenes into the text and provides contextual information that helps framing the story retold in *Dying by Instalments*. Such instances show the complexity of some of the dynamics at play when the representation of the self is also a representation of trauma.

Relying on a wide critical framework of studies on trauma, Ekaterina Gurtovaya focuses on the memoirs written by Nina Bardina, an author who, unlike most women memoirists of the Gulag, depicts her own experience of sexual abuse in a straightforward way. The depiction of the sexual violence suffered by Bardina from Lavrentii Beria, the head of NKVD, is impressively detailed and shows Bardina's clear representation of her own naivety. However, Gurtovaya identifies some of the ways in which a traumatised self may surface, sometimes unexpectedly – Bardina's depiction of a love story with an inmate in the camp shows her difficulty in representing her emotion and identifying her feelings. Scarred by these experiences, detached from her before-the-arrest self, unable to express her emotions and to communicate with her mother – another heavily traumatised individual – Bardina finds herself unable to live in society after being freed from the camp and asks to return to the Gulag, an image that stands out as a monument to the complexity of the study of the self in works generated by authors of 'socialist trauma literature'. These articles, together with those published in the first part of this special issues and the

other outputs of the project *Literature of Socialist Trauma (LOST): Mapping and Researching the Lost Page of European Literature* show how, regardless of the hardships of finding a common framework capable of studying such a wide corpus in a coherent way, the literature of Socialist trauma is indeed a page

of European literature that deserves further attention.

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