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The Gulag of Polish Poets. Shame and Guilt in Poetry Born from Traumatic Experiences

Drawing on several poetic texts written in Soviet labour camps, this paper aims to identify and investigate the functions and determinants of moral emotions, with reference to the so-called evaluative self-conscious emotions (shame and guilt) and to the differences between them in terms of cognitive evaluation and regulation strategies. More specifically, the article deals with the role of these emotions on the cognitive processing of the traumatic event in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

From Komi to Kolyma

The trauma of World War II, deportations to concentration camps and the Gulag has been the subject of a wealth of testimonial literature, including a vast number of documents, autobiographies, and memoirs by Polish survivors (see Świetlikowski 1997; Tołczyk 2009; Sariusz-Skąpska 2012; Kopka 2019; Knyt 2022; Ciborowska 2024). Writers and poets who experienced firsthand deportation to various forced labour camps throughout the USSR felt compelled to write, and the form best suited to the difficult conditions of the camps was undoubtedly poetry. From testimonies, we know that poetry was a widely practiced medium and enjoyed the greatest popularity among exiles. In fact, while the most famous literary works on the concentra-

tion camp universe in prose were mostly composed some-time later, it was mainly compositions in verse that were written in the camps, as poetry served various functions and, first and foremost, responded to the prisoners' need not to succumb to spiritual annihilation (Jaworska 2022: 73). It is no coincidence that, as Danish American psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk states, 'While trauma keeps us dumbfounded, the path out of it is paved with words, carefully assembled, piece by piece, until the whole story can be revealed' (Van Der Kolk 2014: 276). This statement is particularly apt in the case of the Poles deported to the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941, who included poets, prose writers, scholars, journalists, and publicists. Writing alone or in a group became not only necessary in order to bear

witness to the hell of the Gulag, but it was also a way to resist and survive the pain and trauma of imprisonment, to save one's individuality from being levelled and annihilated. Although their creative drive was stifled by unfavourable circumstances (malnutrition, disease, and lack of resources), we know from testimonies that for those deported to labour camps, writing was an excellent remedy for escaping their terrible reality. Polish writer Jerzy Stempowski learned from a German witness who spent eleven years in the Gulag that in the most crowded Soviet camps piles of manuscripts were hidden and ended up in the archives (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 6-7; see also Morawiec 2011, 2023). Today we know that in prisons and labour camps, the need for words was no less distressing than the hunger for bread (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 6). According to Janusz Kowalewski, prisoners in Zamarstyniv were sometimes willing to trade their bread and sugar rations for writing paper, smuggled-in newspapers, and scraps of books. In the absence of paper, oral creativity certainly played an important role, but birch bark could always be used, or sometimes even the wall of the cell or hut could become a medium on which to record one's words. For example, in the

prison in Lukiškės Square in Vilnius, the poet Józef Bujnowski (1910-2001) wrote a poem entitled 'Polonez' [Polonaise] on the wall. He remembered it by heart and was only able to write it down when he arrived in Persia with Władysław Anders' army (see Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 7; Jaworska 2019).

The first poem by poet Ludwika Biesiadowska (1911-1989) was also composed in a Vilnius prison. She later wrote her testimony about the long journey that took her from the Lithuanian capital to Siberia in a freight car. The most eloquent example is the case of the poet Lech Piwowar (1909-1940) who was arrested by the NKVD and began to write down his experiences as early as October 20, 1939, while traveling in a wagon. In Starobil's'k, he continued to write in neat, uniform handwriting on cigarette papers. He folded these papers, bearing the Russian inscription 'Краснофлотец — Курительная бумага — Союзкультторг' [Red Navy Sailor – Smoking Paper – Soiuzkul'ttorg], into a small, pink-covered book, which he managed to save despite numerous searches. In a crowded camp, in the wet snow at sunset, he read the poem 'Ojczyzna która zewsząd idzie' [The Homeland that Comes from Everywhere] standing up, at a time

when they were still far from understanding what was happening to them (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 8).

A new creative period began after the Sikorski-Maiskii agreement and the so-called 'amnesty,' following the opening of the Polish Embassy in Kuibyshev in the Novosibirsk Oblast and the Polish Army headquarters in Buzuluk in the Orenburg Oblast. From all over the Soviet Union, tens of thousands of former Gulag prisoners, who would later become soldiers, flocked to the vicinity of Totskoe and Tatishchevo (see Gross 1983: 15-24). Józef Czapski (1896-1993) recalls how Władysław Broniewski (1897-1962) obsessively recited his last verses 'Zamieć' [Snowstorm] and 'Ujdi' [Go Away]. Teodor Parnicki recited a series of poems by Juliusz Słowacki, Julian Tuwim, Jan Lechoń, Aleksandr Blok, Andrei Belyi, and even Józef Wittlin's translation of Homer, arousing great enthusiasm among his comrades. The formation of the Polish army in the USSR led to the creation of the first songs and the publication of a series of military magazines, such as *Wracamy do kraju* [We Return to Our Country], *Niech żyje nasza Armia* [Long Live Our Army!], *Marsz Polaków* [Poles' March], and *My Legiony* [We are the Legions]. The camp

magazine, handwritten and richly illustrated, *W marszu* [On the March], was published in eighteen copies. Handwritten periodicals were also distributed: *Żołnierz w polu* [The Soldier on the Battlefield], *Dojdziemy* [We Shall Arrive], *Ochotniczka* [The Volunteer], *Wznies się, orle małe!* [Rise Up, Little Eagle!], *Łącznik* [Connector], *Łazik* [The Command Car], *Ulan nadwożański* [The Uhlan on the Volga], *Rys* [Lynx], and *Sitwa* [Clique]. In December 1941, the magazine *Orzeł Biały* [White Eagle] began to be published by the Polish Embassy in Kuibyshev, thanks to which poems by Antoni Słonimski, Stefan Baliński, Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, Władysław Broniewski, Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna, and many others were disseminated. The works of Felix Konarski ('Myśmy w obronie wolności' [We Defend Our Freedom]), later sung by marching units, as well as those of Czesław Dobek ('Jesteśmy znowu wojskiem' [We Are an Army Again]) and Witold Szyfer ('Żelazny marsz' [The Iron March]) were created. Ludwika Biesiadowska wrote 'Hymn Ochotniczek' [The Volunteers' Anthem] and other texts that were composed in Buzuluk. In Totskoe, Maksymilian Baranowski (1913-2008) wrote entertaining and

patriotic poems to lift spirits, while others composed the musical accompaniment (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 9-10; see also Folejewski 1951, 222).

Poetry was written primarily at the request of the public, and it flourished and enjoyed the fervent support of Józef Czapski, then head of military propaganda. In Iangi-Iul, against the backdrop of the Tian Shan mountains and the distant Pamir range, writer and publicist Herminia Naglerowa (1890-1957) gave lectures on the poetry of the new Polish emigration. Among the military, Słonimski's poem *Alarm* [The Air-Raid Warning] enjoyed the greatest popularity: in the capital of the Komi Republic, during a Polish ceremonial gathering, it was even recited in Russian translation (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 10).

After Russia, Iran experienced another literary explosion of above-average quality. Polish poetry increased in Iraq and Palestine, where publishing houses worked through the night, preparing volumes of verse, even though printing presses with Latin characters were difficult to find. Baghdad then became a paradise for poet-soldiers, whose main press organ was *Kurier Polski* [The Polish Courier] (Gross 1983; Beaupré-Staniewicz et al. 1987). However, the publi-

cation of texts was affected by British censorship. One example was the order to leave a blank space where Jerzy Bazarewski's poem 'Droga na Północ' [The Road to the North] was to appear, which was only allowed to be published a year later. Józef Czapski's memoirs on Starobil'sk, for example, did not receive immediate approval for publication (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 14).

The Need to Write

The traumatic experience in the Soviet Gulag awakened in many the need to write and recount what they had experienced. Many of the Poles who arrived with General Anders' 2nd Army Corps on Persian soil wrote books about their experiences in the Soviet Union (see Gross 1983; Jaworska 2019). The poet and former prisoner Jan Olechowski (1917-1956) criticized the works of his fellow sufferers for their egocentric lamentations and self-martyrdom (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 19). Some intellectuals and writers who had remained silent began to write again: for example, the former exiles Paweł Hertz, Tadeusz Pieper, Anatol Stern, and others. Even those who remained in the West gave voice to their Siberian experiences, thus providing a model not only for émigré litera-

ture, but also serving as a counterpart to the literature of the Nazi concentration camps, since, according to Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, the Soviet and Nazi camps were 'totalitarian twins.' Or, as Shalamov stated in his story *Zhitie inzhenera Kipreeva* [The Life of Engineer Kipreev], Kolyma is defined as 'Освенцим без печей' [Auschwitz without ovens] (Shalamov 2004: 153).

This literature constitutes one of the most important branches of Polish writing in exile, suffice it to think of the great prose of Herling-Grudziński and Józef Czapski, authors of 'wicked books' that educated several generations of dissidents in Poland (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 19-20). For a long time, most of the poems produced in the labour camps were almost documentary in nature. Jerzy Świąch defines this poetry as 'wiersze świadektwa' [testimonial poems] (Świąch 1997: 271). In this regard, Nina Taylor-Terlecka observed:

A significant part of Gulag poetry is considered documentary, utilitarian literature: with the passage of time, it has had no influence. Abstracting from its artistic value, it was necessary, even indispensable, created with consciously practical purposes at

the request of society [...] it testifies how even in the depths of despair, poetry allows one to live and survive (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 18).¹

Beyond its aesthetic value, poetry was written out of necessity and was considered indispensable, even if for consciously utilitarian purposes. It was an inevitable conditioned reflex, an irreplaceable mental hygiene procedure for overcoming trauma. Therefore, it is largely a phenomenon on the borderline between psychology and sociology. Nevertheless, even the sparsest poetry takes on a collective, universalistic dimension. Undoubtedly, it was a priority for prisoners to communicate their thoughts and feelings, to ensure that what was written was easy to memorize and share, and this perhaps explains the choice of traditional metrical measures and the renunciation of innovative formal research.² Sometimes religious models are even adapted to the theme of the Gulag, such as the form of the psalm. Examples include

¹ Here and where not indicated, the translation is mine (AFDC).

² Regarding the characteristics of Soviet concentration camp poetry, see Pieralli 2013: 235, but also the studies by Gullotta 2012, Gullotta 2021, and Sucharski 2018.

'Modlitwa w drodze na zesłanie' [Prayer on the Way to Exile] by Halina Terlecka, 'Suplikacje' [Supplications] by Beata Oberyńska, and 'Modlitwa' [Prayer] by Janusz Wedow.

As these are poetic texts produced largely during a period of extreme hardship, they are more direct and spontaneous, allowing us to explore emotions such as shame, guilt, pride, and so-called self-consciousness (Lewis 2000), i.e., emotions in which self-reflection and self-evaluation are fundamental. They have moral effects in that they give rise to immediate feedback on the moral or social acceptability of behaviour and its effects. The idea that morality fails in extreme situations is a complex theme that runs through philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Evidence suggests that critical situations do not necessarily nullify morality, but often transform it, forcing people to redefine the boundaries between good and evil in order to survive. The silence that surrounded the experiences of the Soviet Gulag system for decades, combined with the deep sense of shame felt by many survivors, is a complex phenomenon rooted in trauma, fear, and the very nature of Stalinist repression.

Shame and Guilt

Many former prisoners suffered from a deep sense of guilt for having survived while millions of others died of starvation, cold, and forced labour. 'Survivor's guilt,' or paralyzing guilt, can arise for two reasons: a) because of living in a privileged situation at the expense of others or in comparison with others who appear to be more damaged (Kubany 1994); b) 'for actions or inactions that have increased the sense of threat to one's survival,' i.e., the perception of not having done enough to prevent the catastrophe and its consequences (Parson 1986). The tendency to feel guilty because of a traumatic event can be considered an externalization of feelings of fear and is rooted in feelings of helplessness and loss of control at the time of the catastrophe (Hendin et al. 1984). Clinical psychologist and psychotraumatologist Yael Danieli, defines guilt as 'an unconscious attempt to deny or "cancel out" powerlessness' (see Prot 2009: 83). This need applies to both survivors and their children. Guilt also functions as loyalty to the family or to the homeland. Aleksander Wat wrote in 'Wierzby w Ałma-Acie' [The Weeping Willow Trees in Almaty], 'Jeśli was zapomnę / Jeśli

cię zapomnę miasto rodzinne /
 [...] / Jeśli cię zapomnę, walcząca
 Warszawo / w krwi spieniona
 Warszawo' [If I forget you / If I
 forget you, my hometown / [...] /
 If I forget you, fighting Warsaw /
 Warsaw foaming with blood],
 Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 56-57). For
 deportees, guilt is a complex
 emotion that expresses assess-
 ments in relation to the self-
 model, with reference to a past
 state (similar to nostalgia and
 regret). Like all complex emo-
 tions, it is based on a fundamen-
 tal emotion, which, in the case
 of guilt, is sadness. Even the
 theme of struggle is sometimes
 intertwined with nostalgia
 (Bellelli et al. 2009: 146). As
 proof of this, we quote a few
 lines from the poem 'Co mi tam
 troski' [I don't care] by
 Władysław Broniewski, pub-
 lished in the collection *Bagnet
 na broń* [The Gun Bayonet]
 (Broniewski 1943), which brings
 together poems written between
 1939 and 1943:

Byleby w garści karabin,
 taki co w boju nie chybi –
 Co mi tam śniegi Syberii,
 co mi tam piaski Libii!

Co mi tam obóz, więzie-
 nie, głód, poniewierka,
 szkorbut –

radość żołnierską ładuję,
 jak chleb i naboje, do tor-
 by.

Na nic mi wszelkie nagro-
 dy, na nic mi wieńce sła-
 wy,
 potrzebne mi mocne buty,
 żeby w nich dojść do War-
 szawy.
 (Broniewski 1943: 21)

As long as I have a rifle in
 my hand, one that will not
 miss in battle,
 I don't care about the
 snows of Siberia, I don't
 care about the sands of
 Libya!

I don't care about the
 camp, the prison, the hun-
 ger, the poverty, the scur-
 vy:
 I put a soldier's joy in my
 bag like bread and bullets!

I don't care about hon-
 ours, I don't care about
 crowns of glory,
 I need sturdy shoes to
 walk all the way to War-
 saw.

The poem is closely linked to
 Polish history and Broniewski's
 biography. On January 24, 1940,
 the poet was arrested in Lviv. He
 spent eighteen months in vari-

ous Soviet prisons. Most of the Poles released during that period thanks to the Sikorski-Maiskii agreement joined the forces assembled under the command of General Władysław Anders, which would soon be sent to the front. The optimistic tone of the poem mentioned above stems from the hopes that Poles placed in the creation of Anders' army. They hoped for a fast victory, a return to their homeland, and its liberation from the German occupiers. The poem describes a state of euphoria, in anticipation of an improvement in their fate and that of their loved ones. As the title suggests, all worries cease to matter. Tirtaic themes are present, and the lyrical 'I' strives to inspire the struggle. He emphasizes his love for his homeland and hopes that his compatriots share it. He gradually regains his faith in victory and proudly observes the army, composed of soldiers previously held in prisons and labour camps. The opportunity to join the fight is the greatest joy for the lyrical 'I.' He shows no fear but infects others with optimism and energy for action. Faced with the possibility of regaining freedom, all worldly concerns cease to matter. The soldier in the poem has only one goal: to reach Warsaw. The poet uses metonymy, and the capital

becomes a symbol for all of Poland. The soldier's boots and rifle symbolize the determination and strength of the Polish people. The lyrical subject pays no attention to anything else. He ignores difficulties and expects neither fame nor rewards. He may be one of many anonymous soldiers, as long as he achieves his goal. The good of his homeland motivates him to continue traveling the world. He has survived a long journey, captivity, hunger, and disease, so his experiences have left deep wounds, but the lyrical 'I' describes them in simple, military terms.

Those deported to the camps are humiliated people who feel they have been unjustly wronged and believe that others are to blame for the damage done to them. This experience should also provoke anger directed at others, an externalization of guilt (Lewis 1971; Scheff 1987) and strong feelings of revenge. This feeling emerges in the poem 'Homo sapiens,' in which Broniewski predicted, in the name of the fundamental principles of the French Revolution (1789-1799), who would drop the bombs when he became one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse who would ride across the earth. On Berlin, for its war crimes, on those who incited other peoples against each other to build for-

tunes in wars, as well as on those guilty of the Katyn massacre.

Niechaj rycerze zmar-
twychwstaną
I świecąc każdy piersi ra-
na,
Świadectwo dadzą krwi
męczeńskiej,
Tej krwi niewinnej, z ręki
kata
Przelanej w obca ziemię
czerstwa,
Ze zgrozą, lecz milczeniem
świata
Za wolność, równość i bra-
terstwo.
(Broniewski 1945: 31)

May the knights rise from
the dead
And, each chest shining
with a wound,
Bear witness to the blood
of the martyr,
That innocent blood, from
the hand of the execution-
er
Shed in foreign lands,
With horror, but with the
silence of the world
For liberty, equality, and
fraternity.

The extreme, negative, and gen-
eralized experiences of the self
that accompany them are un-
bearable, and shame easily turns
into humiliation (Bellelli et al.

2009: 145). When this happens,
an attribution shift occurs,
whereby responsibility is abrupt-
ly externalized, thus triggering
anger (Lewis 1971). Shame is
strongly associated with anger in
its most destructive forms
(Tangney 1995), of which it can
be considered a mediator. In the
poem 'Synkowi' [To My Son] by
the poet Jerzy Woszczyński
(1907-1976), the vengeful tone,
while not predominant, is asso-
ciated with a messianic message,
a vision of rebirth:

A jeśli nie powróci... Wte-
dy ty, z kolei
Gdy urośniesz, zrozu-
miesz, skupisz wszystkie
siły
I uderzysz i zniszczysz. A
potem zasiejesz
Nowe ziarna wolności na
starych mogiłach
(Woszczyński 1944: 21)

And if he doesn't come
back... Then you, in turn,
When you grow up, you
will understand, you will
focus all your strength
And you will strike and
destroy. And then you will
sow
New seeds of freedom on
the old graves.

Scheff (1990, 1994) and
Retzinger (1991) have shown that

shame triggers feelings of anger, which are followed by destructive retaliatory behaviour. Responses of anger and resentment are followed by expressions of blame and vindictiveness, which reinforce shame. Many prisoners in prisons or labour camps were often unclear about the reason for their conviction. As theatre and radio director Waław Radulski (1904-1983) wrote to literary critic Tymon Terlecki (1905-2000), former camp prisoners focused on their own wrongs (see Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 14). Anger, for example, in its primary form, basically arises from a situation in which goals are blocked and the resulting frustration. Oatley and Johnson Laird (1987) consider anger to be an emotion that arises in unexpected, unpleasant situations that hinder the achievement of goals, caused by other people and which may be perceived as unfair. Anger can also fulfil moral functions when it prompts redress. It can be considered, in a sense, as a 'guardian of morality,' in the same way as other emotions that, according to Izard (1977), constitute the 'hostility triad:' disgust and contempt. In Jerzy Woszczyń's poem 'Sprzymierzeńcom' [To the Allies], the desire for revenge is a clear sentiment: only the sol-

dier's anger can repay the wrongs suffered.

Aby wyrównać ofiary,
Tułaczkę, krzywdy i ból,
Nie starczy twojego złota,
Ni lasów twoich, ni pól.

Jedynej rekompensaty
Żąda żołnierski gniew:
Złotem się płaci za złoto,
A krew się daje za krew.
(Bielatowicz 1944: 341;
Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 66)

To compensate for the
sacrifices,
the exile, the wrongs and
the pain,
your gold will not suffice,
nor your forests nor your
fields.

The only compensation
The soldier's anger demands:
Gold is paid for gold,
and blood is given for
blood.

Shame is a complex emotion that expresses self-evaluations in relation to others, and it is the basic emotion to which fear is linked. The reference to sadness and fear, respectively, involves a fundamental difference. For Oatley and Johnson-Laird (1987), sadness is linked to the attachment system; fear, on the

other hand, is associated with separation (social isolation), a threat from a predator or a dominant conspecific, or physical danger. In the lyric 'Pieśni' [The Songs] by Artur Międzyrzecki (1922-1996), a state of profound anguish emerges. Hopelessness, fear, and the awareness of a tragic fate led to a loss of rational control: uncontrollable impulses arise from illogical actions dictated by a deep state of sadness.

Żmudna jest droga do siebie,
gdy szlak się gubi w ciemności,
Gdy płaczą uschnięte kwiaty,
gdy wyje noc urągliwie,
Kiedy nie można ogarnąć,
kiedy nie można uprościć
Zmierzchów przeklętych
rozpaczą i zwyciężonych porywem.
(Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 155)

The journey back to one-self is arduous when the trail is lost in the darkness,
When withered flowers cry,
when the night howls mockingly,
When one cannot comprehend,
when one cannot simplify
Twilights cursed by despair
and conquered by impulse.

Janoff-Bulman and Wortman (1977) demonstrated that the more people believed they could have acted differently to prevent the accident, the more they blamed themselves for what had happened, and that the more time passed since the traumatic event, the more they tended to project the blame onto environmental factors. They are distinguished between two types of self-blame: characterological and behavioural. Characterological self-blame focuses on the individual's character: they use the present tense to describe themselves in the present and tend to give an overall, general assessment of themselves. The behavioural form, on the other hand, is linked to the perception of control and focuses on one's specific behaviour, on those actions and omissions that caused the event, which is why the individual often repeats to themselves 'if I had done' etc. Those with characterological self-accusatory traits tend to feel global guilt, while those with behavioural self-accusation feel guilty because of the specific experience. This cognitive strategy reflects survivors' efforts to make sense of their victimhood, to understand 'why it happened' and 'why to them,' to find the deeper meaning that the event has for their lives and for the lives

of all those involved (Bellelli et al. 2009: 150). Those who had some influence on their own liberation are marked by guilt. A certain sense of 'guilt' shines through in Janusz Wedow's (1921-1982)³ poem 'Pożegnanie obozu' [Farewell to the Camp], where the poet's happiness at being liberated from the labour camp cannot be complete, not only because the memory of that experience cannot be erased, but also because others behind him will remain in that place to perish and perhaps never see freedom:

Dzisiaj żegnam ten obóz z
pogodnym uśmiechem,
te druty, które wolność
odcięły od roku...
Czy nic też nie zostało tu-
taj po mnie echem,
czy nic nie wstrzyma krót-
ko mych pospiesznych
kroków?

³ He was deported to Russia and served in places such as Gryazovets and, later, in the Middle East: in Palestine, Syria, Damascus, and on the Suez Canal. He served as an officer in the 2nd Army Corps. After the war, he settled in Southampton, New York. Poet, head of the program production department of the Polish broadcaster Radio Free Europe. He is the author of a series of poetry anthologies: *W drodze do ojczyzny: wiersze wybrane* (Tel-Aviv 1942); *Wracające żagle: wiersze* (Rome 1944); *Czterolistna koniczyna* (London 1957).

O, nie! zostały w drutach
krwawe chwil Golgoty
ciągnące się swym pa-
smem na smutku gdzieś
krańce,
zostały groby bólu i zgłisz-
cza tęsknoty
i cichych łez ukryte przed
ludźmi różańce...

Lecz wszystko to upadło
jak jesienne liście,
gdy z brzękiem wreszcie
pękły niewoli obręcze
i dzisiaj już w moim sercu
nie ma nienawiści,
bo dzisiaj w chmurze źre-
nic załśniły mi tęcze!
(Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 144)

Today I bid farewell to this
camp with a serene smile,
these barbed wires that
have cut off freedom for a
year...
Is there nothing left here
that echoes behind me,
nothing that will briefly
halt my hurried steps?

Oh, no! Bloody moments
of Golgotha remain in the
barbed wire,
stretching their threads
across the borders of sad-
ness,
remaining tombs of pain
and ruins of desire

and rosaries of silent tears
hidden from the people...

But all this has fallen like
autumn leaves,
when the circles of slavery
finally broke with a noise,
and today there is no ha-
tred in my heart,
because today rainbows
have shone in the clouds
of my eyes!

The sense of guilt that arises from powerlessness in the face of evil is present in the poem 'Suplikacje' [Supplications] by Beata Obertyńska (1898-1980), placed at the end of the poetic appendix to the second edition of her memoirs *W domu niewoli* [In the House of Slavery]. It is an appeal to God, and it is in God that hope is placed for escape from those inhuman conditions and earthly hell. For this reason, *Suplikacje* echoes the language of the Holy Scriptures (especially Psalms 22 and 130), just as her memoirs *W domu niewoli* owe their title to a passage from the Bible (Exodus 20:1-14) (see Jaworska 2022: 87; Jaworska 2013: 207-18; Sucharski 2006).

[...]
My grzeszni,
my zmęczeni,
my obszarom wydani,

my zamarłej przestrzeni
na żer żywcem rzuceni,
my wyjęci spod prawa, z
człowieczeństwa wyrzuci,
my deptani jak trawa, za-
ganiani i szczuci -
my nędzarze zawszeni,
my, co głód nas ogłupia,
my rzesza bezimienna
do dna krzywdą otruta,
my brudni, my obdarci,
my aż śmieszni chwilami,
my pocieszni,
my grzeszni,
[...]

(Obertyńska 1972: 69; Tay-
lor-Terlecka 2001: 53-54)

[...]
We sinners,
we exhausted ones,
we condemned to desolate
lands,
we thrown into a dead
space,
we removed from the law,
emptied of humanity,
we trampled like grass,
pulled and incited,
we flea-ridden beggars,
we stupefied by hunger,
we nameless crowd,
poisoned by injustice,
we dirty, we ragged,
we sometimes even ridicu-
lous,
we comforters,
we sinners
[...]

In this poem, the author abandons literary artifice to address God directly, asking for comfort, forgiveness, strength, or guidance. Guilt overlaps with sin: ‘my grzeszni’ [we sinners]. Unlike guilt, which remains personal, sin is universal – it is not I who am guilty, but the community. For the poet – as a deeply religious person – life in the camp was a manifestation of moral decay, a sin, proof of the depravity of the *häftlings*. As researcher Olga Orzeł Wargskog argues, ‘moral purity in [such] texts is linked to bodily purity; texts that strive to clearly define the boundaries of dignity are distinguished by the presence of self-censorship, which eliminates from the narrative what is vile, purely physiological’ (Orzeł Wargskog 2011: 32). In fact, Obertyńska’s verses are much more restrained than her memoirs *W domu niewoli*, in which she expresses with all her emotional involvement and without filters the years of humiliation, hunger, and degradation she suffered and witnessed (Sucharski 2006; Jaworska 2022: 80; Jaworska 2013: 207). The journey undertaken by the poet is a journey to the underworld.

Between Nature and Anti-Nature

The image of Siberia as a boundless, frozen, lifeless hell has been present in Polish literature since the deportations of 1831 (see Trojanowiczowa 1993: 96; Jaworska 2022: 83; Kaczyńska 1991). In his *Lecture XXIII* of the second course on Slavic Literature at the Collège de France, on May 6, 1842, Adam Mickiewicz, reflecting on the fact that the number of Poles deported to the Far East of Russia and Siberia was increasing every day, states that the name Siberia, which had entered Polish literature since the time of Tadeusz Kościuszko, had now become a symbolic place of the constant Tsarist threat hanging over the Poles (see De Carlo 2022: 85).⁴ And again, the poet observes:

This Siberia, which Russian writers make no mention of – although there are some odes to the glory of Russian victories in this land – that Siberia, so remote and totally foreign, now enters the realm of Polish poetry. Siberia is a political hell: it

⁴ In the same lecture, Mickiewicz recognizes within the ‘literature of exile’ a genre that he defines as ‘Polish-Siberian literature’ ([literatura polsko-sybirską], Mickiewicz 1865: 240-41; see also Marinelli 2022: 66-67).

fulfils the same role in poetry as medieval hell, so well described by Dante. All books of contemporary Polish literature mention Siberia; there are excellent descriptions of the torments of the Poles; we even have a work by Słowacki, whose subject unfolds entirely in Siberia (Mickiewicz 1842: 167-68).

For Obertyńska, Siberia is hell on earth, a place of suffering where evil reigns supreme, and those who enter it – as Justyna Chłap-Nowakowa (Chłap-Nowakowa 2004: 82) points out – are victims of human injustice, but not of eternal damnation (Jaworska 2022: 83). The surrounding landscape is terrifying, not only because death reigns there, but also because of the awareness that it is an instrument of violence. According to Nina Taylor-Terlecka, for the deportees, all of nature, ‘primordial and deaf,’ ‘contradicted traditional values. It was rather anti-nature or nature in reverse’ (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 15). Polish critic Wojciech Ligęza argues that in Obertyńska’s work, the northern landscape is complicit in the crime being committed (see Ligęza 1990: 157). For the poet, the Taiga appears as a rotting corpse in a swamp, an abyss where even God has forgotten man. The rivers on which the

prisoners are transported on barges take on gloomy and threatening tones, as in the opening lines of ‘Pechora’ [Pechora]:

Ssie nas północ powoli z tą
rzeką,
Jak bezkarna tu zbrodnia
rozległa,
Przelewając podstępnie
dalekość
W zaumarłe, bezimienne
piekło.
(Obertyńska 1972: 63; Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 48)

The north slowly sucks us
down with this river,
like a vast crime unpun-
ished here,
stealthily pouring the dis-
tance
into a dead, nameless hell.

The Pechora River is depicted as a snake, and its waters, symbolizing death, lead to the realm of evil (see Jaworska 2022: 83). Like the poet, for the writer, journalist, and prisoner of the Soviet labour camps of Kolyma, Anatol Krakowiecki (1901-1950), the taiga is a deadly landscape that chains the body, suffocates the heart, and torments the mind to the point of madness. The snow-covered Siberia of the poet-soldier Bolesław Redzisz is also steeped in death, where bodies

and graves appear in the snowy infinity.

Od iluż wieków, jak długie
warkocze,
plecione z męki, kajdan i
żałoby,
W wielkie bezkresne,
śniegowe roztocze
Idą kibitki i ludzie i groby?
[...]
W miejsca, gdzie sobie
śmierć wybrała leże,
I gdzie wiatr tylko smutny
snuje żale
Padają ciała, jak święte
szkaplerze
I krew szkarłatna, jak
wielkie korale.
(Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 131)

For how many centuries,
like long braids,
woven from torment,
chains, and mourning,
Into the immense, endless
snowy expanses,
Do kibitkas and people
and graves go?
[...]
To the places where death
has chosen its lair,
And where only the sad
wind weaves its sorrows,
Bodies fall like holy scapu-
lars,
And scarlet blood like
great beads.

Although the Siberian landscape is associated with death, and every abyss leads to an ever-deeper abyss, like Dante's underworld, as in Redzisz's poem 'Obłąd' [Madness] 'U stóp przepaści są otchłanie. / Runę w nią głową. Niech się stanie! / Niech na me myśli śmierć położy' ('At the foot of the abyss there are abysses. / I will fall headlong into it. Let it be done! / Let death fall upon my thoughts') (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 133). At that depth, however, the Polish exiles experienced a kind of epiphany. Krakowiecki was captivated by the song of the larks and the dazzling beauty of the Kolyma's flora. Surrounded by imposing mountains, the poet Alexander Wat (1900-1967) felt immersed in the secrets of colour, while an incredible symphony of violets and almond blossoms resounded accompanied by a rushing green stream. Even Obertyńska, despite all the elements of this landscape being tinged with death (the river is alien, frozen, colourless, joyless, the whole world a hostile abyss), was deeply struck by the beauty of the distant, almost abstract Ural Mountains. Józef Czapski was struck by the light colours of the Karakum Desert, the turquoise of the sky, and the sight of a man on a donkey against the backdrop of the lemon and lilac-

coloured landscape (Taylor-Terlecka 2001: 17-18). In his Paris lectures, Mickiewicz spoke of the fundamental importance of the Siberian experience in moral and religious renewal and the need for soul-searching. He emphasized that the literature of exile constitutes a mass, collective, highly democratic, almost popular, universal, and pan-Slavic testimony, ultimately anonymous, because it speaks on behalf of all the fallen and missing.

Shame and Stigma

This paralyzing trauma made it extremely painful to recall the past, often experienced as a 'dehumanizing' experience that transformed the person into an object. Despite being victims, many survivors felt shame for the humiliations they suffered or for the moral compromises necessary to survive in extreme conditions (the 'struggle for life' that led to selfish behaviour). Furthermore, in the post-war period, former prisoners often suffered discrimination and social marginalization, being branded as 'enemies of the people' or untrustworthy individuals. The silence of the Gulag, therefore, was the result of a combination of deep psychological trauma, the need to protect

oneself from a distrustful society, and the shame induced by a system that sought to destroy human dignity.

Those who had not experienced the Gulag viewed the returnees with mixed emotions, often failing to recognize them as their loved ones. As early as 1919, the young Osip Mandelstam confessed to his future wife that two things were most important to him: death and recognition (Žejmo 2018: 49). Years later, Nadezhda Mandelstam recalled, 'И снаружи, и за колючей оградой все мы потеряли память' [Both outside and behind the barbed wire fence, we all lost our memory] (Mandel'shtam 1972: 22). Meanwhile, on both sides of the barbed wire, this loss of memory progressed in different ways, causing misunderstandings, breakdowns in communication, and a mutual inability to recognize each other. The victim returned from the camp a different person. The bitter irony of the whole situation lay in the fact that both the family and the returnees felt alienated now by their long-awaited reunion (Žejmo 2018: 49-50). Considering that family life is based on a deep understanding of the individual identities of each member of the community, and that this mutual recognition continues over the years, it is

obvious that the failure to recognize a person belonging to a family casts a deep shadow over all those who do not recognize them or are not recognized. This lack of recognition triggers mutual fear and guilt. This leads to an internal fracture within the community, breaking the bonds of solidarity and trust. In the personal narrative of the unrecognized person, the loss of identity reveals the degree of transformation of a person subjected to the destructive power of the state (see Weiner 2014).

The system of terror drew millions of citizens into its machinery, both as silent witnesses and active participants. In a society where all aspects of human life were subject to ideological pressure, people 'learned to speak softly' (Figs 2007: XXIX). Those who returned to their families after years in the Gulag found it difficult to feel reintegrated. Numerous studies in the literature assess the psychological consequences of various types of man-made trauma (e.g. war, deportation, genocide, etc.). Different types of traumatic events seem to have different impacts on mental health (Norris et al. 1996). Reactions to such events can include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder (MDD), alcohol abuse, anxiety and soma-

tization disorders, behavioural problems, performance disorders, and psychological reactivity. However, although fear and horror are the dominant emotions associated with PTSD, they are not the only ones (Bellelli et al. 2009: 154). For example, Power and Dalglish (2004) have highlighted the presence of other emotions in PTSD, such as guilt and shame, whose symptoms seem to express not so much the destruction of external security (as in the case of fear) as the fragmentation of an internal sense of security.

Moral emotions play a fundamental role in the assessment and treatment of people who have experienced trauma. A traumatic event is defined as an extremely violent factor, beyond the limits of normal human experience, concerning direct experience, witnessing, or facing events that involve a real or feared threat of death or serious harm to oneself or others (Bellelli et al. 2009: 147). Polish writer Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's reflection on morality in extreme situations, particularly in the context of the Soviet Gulag described in *Inny świat* [A World Apart], is central and complex. The Polish writer does not argue that it is a case of a simple absence of morality but describes how Soviet totalitari-

anism and the struggle for survival actively destroy the very possibility of moral choice, reducing man to the state of a beast. In the camp, traditional moral categories (good/evil, honest/dishonest) lose their meaning in the face of extreme hunger and the need to survive. 'Morality' is replaced by physical 'necessity.' For Herling-Grudziński, the extreme situation does not eliminate morality in an absolute sense but subjects it to such pressure that its application becomes almost impossible, leading the individual to an eth-

ical collapse, which is the true goal of totalitarianism.

The research presented in this article was conducted within the framework of the PRIN 2022 PNRR project "Literature of Socialist Trauma: Mapping and Researching the Lost Page of European Literature (LOST)", ID: P2022Z45X8, CUP: B53D23029360001, Principal Investigator: Andrea Gullotta (University of Palermo). The project was funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research (MIUR) under the 2022 PRIN PNRR Call for Proposals, Directorial Decree No. 1409 of September 14, 2022.

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