

# Literary Testimonies and Fictional Experiences: Gulag Literature Between Fact and Fiction

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the role of Gulag literature in connection to testimony, literature and historical documentation. Drawing on the thoughts of Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt, the article examines the difficulty of witnesses being believed in the absence of evidence. In particular, the article focuses on the vulnerability of the Gulag authors, due to the ongoing Soviet repression at the time of their writing. It examines the interplay between the repression and the literature that exposed it. The article contends that the fictionalization of Gulag literature enabled the authors to go further in challenging Soviet repression. Focusing on the fictional accounts written by Varlam Shalamov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, it argues that the fictionalized Gulag literature makes the experience of the camp universe possible to imagine for those outside, allowing readers to believe in an experience that otherwise seems incredible.

**Keywords:** testimonial literature, Gulag literature, Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, Varlam Shalamov.

Most testimonial literature concerns a reality that already belongs to what has been: a genocide that is already past or concentration camps that no longer exist. This, however, is not the case for the earlier Gulag memoirs, which describe an ongoing reality. While witness literature in general is taken on trust, the Gulag survivors were often challenged, with their testimonies sometimes sparking smear campaigns. For a long time, memoirs were almost the only documentation we had about the Gulag-system, due to the secrecy surrounding it. Their testimonies, and the slander they caused, bear witness to the vulnerability of testifying to a reality that, on the one hand, was at the time not yet publicly accepted and, on the other, refers to a system of repression that was still ongoing and effective.

While Holocaust survivors testified about an experience that could be verified through evidence and documentation, the Gulag memoirs, for a long time, bore witness to a universe of concentration camps to which there was little proof, and even less possible verification. Lack of a public narrative acknowledging their stories made it all the more difficult for the readers at large to receive and believe them. This, according to Hannah Arendt, is one of the features of totalitarianism: it seeks to withdraw the possibilities of verification, to erase all public records, and eliminate all data that could be used as evidence. What has really happened? What is true or what is real? Such questions are reduced to a matter of different subjective opinions or points of view.<sup>1</sup> Arendt goes on to further argue that the extreme totalitarian atrocities function as a means of protecting the system, because even when survivors try to express their experiences, “normal men” are unable to believe them; the events are too remote from the normal world.<sup>2</sup>

The vulnerability of the witness in the absence of proof is reflected on by both Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. While Lyotard discusses the impossibility to prove an experience one cannot survive, Derrida stresses that the impossibility of proof defines what it means to bear witness.<sup>3</sup> Witnessing, writes Derrida, is the other of proving; it is that of which I cannot display proof.<sup>4</sup> When a truth becomes ascertained or assured, the testimony becomes a report: it no longer bears witness. If, following Derrida, testimony is that of which there can be no verification, where proof is unavailable, then the post-war Gulag testimonies are testimonies par excellence. Even though numerous memoirs were published before the war, they only received little international attention.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the Gulag survivors who returned to the West in the years after World War II often perceived themselves as the first to speak out about a reality, of which there was hardly any pre-existing knowledge. Their recollections seemed to be the stories of a universe unheard, unseen and almost unbelievable.

In 1962, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was, practically, the first publication to turn the Gulag into a theme for publication within the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> More literature on the Gulag quickly followed. However, in order for it to be deemed acceptable by the authorities, the literature had better chances if it claimed to be fiction and presented a “milder” case of the Gulag experience.

<sup>1</sup> Arendt 1976: 437.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt 1976: 437.

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard 1988: 16.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida 2000: 188.

<sup>5</sup> See Toker 2000: 33. Some of the earliest memoirs were published already in the 1920s, including Boris Cederholm's *Au pays du nep et de la tchéka. Dans les prisons de l'U.R.S.S* (1928), Raymond Duguet's *Un bagne en Russie rouge. Solovki, l'île de la faim, des supplices, de la mort* (1927) and Mrs. Stan. Harding's *The Underworld of State* (1925).

<sup>6</sup> Solzhenitsyn 1963.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, Giorgio Agamben proposes a phenomenology of witnessing, through a discussion of testimonies written by Holocaust survivors.<sup>7</sup> The context of Gulag memoirs poses different challenges than those of Holocaust survivors, calling for a new understanding of what bearing witness means. Even though their writings signify a resistance to Soviet repression, this mode of resistance must also be understood as formed by the same repression. The aim of this article is to examine witness literature in the context of Gulag literature with a focus on two different corpora: (1) Gulag memoirs published by repatriated foreigners in the West in the years after World War II and (2) Gulag fiction written within the Soviet Union by Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn in the 60s and 70s. The writing of Gulag literature, both memoirs and fictionalized accounts, takes part in a struggle against Soviet repression, a repression that limited and partly silenced those who spoke out against it. The writers of the post-war Gulag memoirs had to navigate between revealing the atrocities of the camps and shielding those still subjected to them. As a consequence, they withheld certain information, such as names, dates and places—exactly the kind of information that could have furnished their claims with proof. On the other hand, Solzhenitsyn's Gulag fiction was written under conditions of Soviet repression. Thus, he had to navigate between censorship and self-censorship, presenting parts of the Gulag to the public while omitting other parts. While Solzhenitsyn "lightened" his stories, Varlam Shalamov did not compromise in the same way, and, as a consequence, his *Kolyma Tales* remained until 1987 unpublished within the USSR.<sup>8</sup> However, copies circulated underground and were well read, thus contributing to an elaboration of a literary representation of the Gulag. Both Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov show by example what it means to bear witness to a system of repression to which the writers were themselves subject. What their writings reveal is how they were constrained by the repression to which they objected while their writings served as a site of resistance.

Testimonial literature holds a place between tribunal testimony, historical testimony and literary testimony. With regard to Gulag literature, the interplay between the texts and the reality they describe is of special importance, because they were responsible for both re-instituting the public narrative over the years and changing the reality they described. This article contends that there is an interplay between the institutionalized public narrative and the testimonies dissenting from it: the testimony, when successful, changes the public narrative, but in order to be credible, it needs to be sufficiently aligned with it. On the one hand, if the testimony is too estranged from the public narrative, if we have no framework in which to comprehend it, no references and nowhere to place it, it becomes incredible (i.e. it lacks credibility). On the

<sup>7</sup> Agamben 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Shalamov 2018a.

other, if the testimony is ascertained and confirmed by the public narrative then it becomes redundant; there is little point of testifying to something, again and again, about what is already obviously known.

This article argues that fictionalized accounts can enable the author to go further in challenging the institutionalized public narrative, and to be truer in the descriptions of a repression that is still effective. This is especially the case with Gulag literature, and in particular the works written by Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov. Both wrote fictionalized accounts of the Gulag, where the narratives, while claiming to be fiction, represent an authentic experience. Both authors make claim to a certain kind of truth of the camp, though truth not in the sense of a correspondence to the actual experience of one particular individual, but in the sense of “this is what it was like in the camps”.<sup>9</sup>

The term “Gulag” is an acronym for *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, or Main Administration of Camps. Although the term was only used in its strict administrative meaning between 1931 and 1934, the acronym was still employed, even in official documents, until the 50s. With Solzhenitsyn’s publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*, the word “Gulag” came to be used in an even broader sense, encompassing the entire period of Soviet repression from December 1917 until the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> In the last decades, it has come to signify both the administration of the camps and the whole system of Soviet slave labour.<sup>11</sup> Most Gulag literature describes the experiences of Gulag camps in the period from the Great Purges of the 30s until the amnesties following Stalin’s death in 1953. Most of the political prisoners were released during the amnesties 1954–1960. Therefore, many former prisoners, and especially the foreign prisoners who were repatriated after the amnesties, regarded the system of mass incarceration as belonging to the past. However, until the fall of Soviet Union, criminal prisoners were still imprisoned in large numbers, together with a smaller number of political prisoners.<sup>12</sup>

Gulag literature has always constituted an important historical documentation about Soviet repression, especially after World War II, on account of the lack of other sources.<sup>13</sup> Even after the archives were opened in the 1990s, Gulag narratives by survivors remained significant. Indeed, the fictionalized accounts written by Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov still inform our present-day understanding of the Gulag. The most recent comprehensive study of the Gulag in the English language, Anne Applebaum’s *Gulag: A History*, draws extensively on memoirs and fictionalized Gulag literature, even though the book was published in 2003, after the archives had long been available. The book’s largest section, “Life and Work in the Camps” is almost entirely based

<sup>9</sup> Toker 2000: 123.

<sup>10</sup> Vettenniemi 2001: 10.

<sup>11</sup> Applebaum 2003: 3.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Solzhenitsyn 1976: 484–505.

<sup>13</sup> Bacon 1996: 162.

on Gulag literature.<sup>14</sup> In particular, Applebaum uses the fictionalized accounts written by Shalamov as historical sources. She argues that his fictional works are reliable because “his stories are based upon real events.”<sup>15</sup> Her use of fictional works shows the immense influence that both the factographic and fictionalized accounts of survivors have had on the understanding of the Gulag. Even though her use of fiction might be justified with respect to veracity, her approach remains somewhat enigmatic. It raises an important question about the relation between historical truth and literary truth, between factual accuracy and fictional presentation, especially if we read the memoirs in light of the context of their writing.

The first section of this article discusses how the phenomenological understanding of bearing witness presented by Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida can be developed in light of the Gulag memoirs. It contends that the fact that Soviet repression was still ongoing makes the conditions for bearing witness radically different for the Gulag survivors. In particular, it points to a set of contrasting difficulties for the repatriated foreigners in the West, during the years after World War II, as well as for those writing within the Soviet Union during the 60s and 70s. The former group of writers faced the problem of bearing witness without recourse to either evidence or pre-existing narratives that they were aware of, while later writers wrote from within a system of repression that censored and silenced them. The second section of the text will investigate the first group of writers. It will be argued that one of their main achievements was how they created what they deemed a first narrative, a first representation, which, indeed, contributed to making the other witnesses more credible. The third section examines how a literary and poetic representation of the Gulag became established through the fictionalized Gulag narratives written by Varlam Shalamov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The fourth section surveys the context of their writings, contending that they were conditioned and defined by the repression against which the authors were writing, while at the same time, redefining and revealing that repression. Finally, the last section discusses the historical use of Gulag literature, and what these literary examples reveal about the relation between historical truth and literary truth.

### 1. *Towards a Phenomenology of Witnessing*

Agamben outlines a phenomenology of witnessing centered around the impossibility of bearing witness. The true witnesses did not live to tell their tale, and the survivors are thus pseudo-witnesses. In this sense the witness bears witness to a lacuna, to something s/he did not experience, to the experience

<sup>14</sup> Applebaum 2003: 127–370.

<sup>15</sup> Applebaum 2003: 11.

of the other, of those who did not return. Derrida, on the other hand, points to the impossibility of bearing witness in the other's stead. No one can bear witness for the other, Derrida writes, and no one should.<sup>16</sup> It is impossible to speak in the other's stead, since bearing witness signifies a commitment to something to which one has been present. In this section, I examine how the discussions of bearing witness for the other, as presented by Agamben and Derrida, can be developed in light of the Gulag memoirs.

Agamben distinguishes between two terms for witness in Latin: the first, *testis*, signifies the one who is a third party, for example in a trial between two opposing sides. The second, *superstes*, signifies a survivor, someone who has experienced an event and therefore can be said to have been witness to it. The witnesses to the camps are witnesses in the second sense.<sup>17</sup> The survivors are not the true witnesses, Agamben writes, because the survivors are an anomalous minority; the true witnesses did not return, or they returned unwilling to speak. Primo Levi describes an impossibility of witnessing because those who experienced the real atrocities of Auschwitz did not return to tell their tale, or they returned too submerged to be able to tell it: "the one who cannot bear witness is the true witness, the absolute witness".<sup>18</sup> The same paradox is found in Elie Wiesel's writing: "Those who have not lived through the experience will never know; those who have will never tell, not really, not completely [...]. The past belongs to the dead".<sup>19</sup> The testimony thus takes place between the pseudo-witnessing of the survivors and the silence of the true witnesses.<sup>20</sup> The survivors are proxy to the true witnesses. As pseudo-witnesses, "they bear witness to a missing testimony".<sup>21</sup> The true witnesses have nothing to say, they have no memories to be transmitted, no story, neither face nor thought.<sup>22</sup> Those who bear witness in their name bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness. The testimonies themselves, Agamben argues, contain at their core an essential lacuna because "the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to".<sup>23</sup> The witness is always a pseudo-witness, a witness that bears witness in the other's stead.

While Agamben asserts that there is no other witnessing than pseudo-witnessing, in order to bear witness for the other, Derrida asserts that this is what must not be done. In Paul Celan's poem "No one bears witness for the witness" Derrida finds a meta-witnessing, a poem that bears witness to witnessing.<sup>24</sup> You

<sup>16</sup> Derrida 2000: 199.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben 1999: 17.

<sup>18</sup> Agamben 1999: 150.

<sup>19</sup> Wiesel 1975: 314.

<sup>20</sup> Agamben 1999: 120.

<sup>21</sup> Agamben 1999: 34.

<sup>22</sup> Agamben 1999: 34; Levi 1986: 90.

<sup>23</sup> Agamben 1999: 13.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida 2000: 184; Celan 1967: 68; Celan 1971: 240.

cannot, Derrida writes, bear witness for the other in any sense of the term; not as his representative, not in front of him. For Derrida, to bear witness is inherently linked to committing yourself to telling the truth about something to which you were present: and you cannot bear witness in the other's place because you cannot testify to an experience to which you were not present.

What does "I bear witness" mean? What do I mean when I say "I bear witness" (for one only bears witness in the first person)? I mean not "I prove," but "I swear that I have seen, I have heard, I have touched, I have felt, I have been *present*." That is the irreducibly *perceptible* dimension of presence and past presence, of what can be meant by "being present" and especially "having been present," and of what that means in bearing witness.<sup>25</sup>

Even though the thing to which one bears witness is no longer present at the moment of the testimony, the testimony is an assurance of something that once was present to someone. When he bears witness, it is present to him as something re-represented, as something present in his memory: "The witness marks or declares that something is or has been present to him."<sup>26</sup> The witness *promises* to say or to manifest something to the addressee, i.e., a truth or a sense that has been in some way presented to him as a unique and irreplaceable witness.<sup>27</sup> Only the one who has had the experience can bear witness; he is singular in his testimony and his singularity is impossible to extract from it.

The question of bearing witness for the other is at the heart of many Gulag memoirs. Indeed, it is often stated as the reason for writing, and dedications are often explicit in bearing witness for "those who died and still die there" or "those still at sea."<sup>28</sup> In émigré memoirs it is often described as a duty, as for example in the work of the Polish survivor Witold Olszewski, "Be damned, those of you [who] leave here and remain silent,"<sup>29</sup> or in the case of Hilda Tautvaiša: "I hold it my duty to testify and tell people about persons, women and children, for the most part, who have suffered unjust privations, who fell victim to misfortunes and a terrible fate."<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, many Gulag memoirs tend to downplay individual experiences and write about collective conditions, to speak not of an individual faith but of the collective.<sup>31</sup> Many memoirs contain compilations of stories of not only other prisoners, but all those the survivor met in the camp. The attempt to speak for the others is further expressed in some of the titles, such

<sup>25</sup> Derrida 2000: 188–189.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida 2000: 190.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida 2000: 194.

<sup>28</sup> See Dolgun 1975; see Sucharski 2019: 92.

<sup>29</sup> Olszewski 1947: 5.

<sup>30</sup> Tautvaiša 1961: 14.

<sup>31</sup> Toker 2000: 46.

as Nicholas Prychodko's *One of the Fifteen Million* and Witold Olszewski's *We're Building a Canal*.<sup>32</sup>

However, the question of bearing witness for the other assumes a different meaning with regard to Gulag survivors because of the context of their writing. Most memoirs describe the experiences of the Gulag camps under Stalin, especially during the years from the great purges of the 30s until the mass releases during the thaw in the 50s. The "other" for whom one writes also includes prisoners still living in the camp system. Many writers were well aware of the fact that the secret police also read the memoirs, using them to hinder further escapes or to harass those still living there, and so they often withheld the names, places and details that could endanger them.<sup>33</sup> Margarete Buber-Neumann and Gustav Herling, for example, withheld the names of their fellow prisoners.<sup>34</sup> The aim of their testimonies is thus two-fold: on the one hand, the writers wanted to plead to a western public to react to the atrocities, on the other they wanted to shield those left behind.

Gulag fiction written during the 60s and 70s is also marked by the Soviet repression that the authors struggled against: when, after 1961, they could be published in the Soviet Union it was if and only if they complied with the publicly sanctioned narrative. However, by complying with it, they also sanctioned part of the repression. The fact that they presented their works as fiction made it possible for them to reveal more details about the camps than the factographic memoirs could have done. Furthermore, their fictionalizations also recast the question of bearing witness for the other: it is no longer the individual experience of particular others that the writers attempt to represent but the typical experience, an experience true for the many without being attributed to any one particular referenced individual. Thus, Gulag literature from both corpuses shows what it means to write against a system of repression that is still ongoing. While the Western post-war memoirs elucidate the difficulties in making a narrative credible at the same time that information, which could endanger those still subject to repression, was withheld, Gulag fiction reveals how authors writing within the system of repression had to navigate between official censorship and self-censorship. The next section examines the problems faced by the Western post-war memoirs, while subsequent sections discuss the fictionalization and context of Shalamov's and Solzhenitsyn's writings.

## 2. *To Believe the Unbelievable*

After the war, in the late forties and early fifties, Gulag memoirs started to receive large international attention. The memoirs published outside of the

<sup>32</sup> Prychodko 1952; Olszewski 1947.

<sup>33</sup> Toker 2000: 76.

<sup>34</sup> See Herling 1951; Buber-Neumann 1949: xii.



Soviet Union during the Cold War were often challenged. As Todorov writes, whereas Nazi crimes “are amongst the best-documented facts in the history of the twentieth century,” for a long time Gulag memoirs lacked other forms of documentation that could serve as support for the claims raised.<sup>35</sup> A lack of sources to verify the accounts in the memoirs was not only a problem for historians; it also turned the writers into targets for slander and smears. Those survivors who published their memoirs in the West after World War II were often unaware of each other’s work, and they perceived themselves as the first messengers. Leona Toker describes them with a paraphrase of the messenger in Job: “and I only am escaped alone to tell thee”.<sup>36</sup>

Their testimonies were also “testimonies” in the tribunal or juridical sense, and a number of the writers appeared as witnesses in the Kravchenko trial. In 1946, after defecting, the Soviet dissident Victor Kravchenko published the book *I Choose Freedom*.<sup>37</sup> As a former high-level functionary within the Soviet system, Kravchenko shares his observations of the use of forced labour as well as the famine in Ukraine. On publication, he faced fierce criticism in the Communist Press, including a smear campaign against him in the Communist newspaper *Les Lettres françaises*. He sued them for libel, and the trial, which took place in 1949, turned into a trial about the Soviet camp system. In defense of Kravchenko, survivors of the Soviet camp testified. Among the most famous witnesses was Margarete Buber-Neumann, whose experiences of both the Gulag and the Nazi camps made her one of the most credible witnesses.<sup>38</sup> Following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, in the winter of 1940, she had been handed over by the G.P.U to SS soldiers at the river Bug.<sup>39</sup> Another witness who also testified in the trials was the Austrian scientist Alex Weissberg. He had been accused of having recruited Nazi terrorists in a plan both to assassinate Stalin and to blast industrial plants in Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> Like Buber-Neumann, he was among the prisoners handed over to Germany following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. He crossed the river Bug in the winter of 1940 and was handed over by the G.P.U. to the Gestapo.<sup>41</sup> After the war, he wrote about his prison experiences in his memoir, *Conspiracy of Silence*, published in 1952. There, he already anticipated the denigration his testimony would spark:

I know that I shall be fiercely assailed by those who have made it their business to defend the system of totalitarian lies. I know that like all others who have come forward in the past I shall be ruthlessly slandered. I cannot prevent

<sup>35</sup> Todorov 2000: 118.

<sup>36</sup> Toker 2000: 45.

<sup>37</sup> Kravchenko 1947.

<sup>38</sup> Todorov 2000: 107.

<sup>39</sup> Buber-Neumann 1949: 166.

<sup>40</sup> Koestler 1952: vii.

<sup>41</sup> Weissberg 1952: 497.

that and there is no legal means of proving that what I say is true. The G.P.U. dismisses its victims without paper or documentary records. But History gives one weapon to truth which it denies to the lie. Lies have many versions, truth only one. Several hundred people left the Soviet Union when I did. Some of them will have lost their lives, or be in prison again, but others will probably have survived and be in freedom. I have no idea where they are now, but one day they too will come forward. What they say will agree with what I say, and that material agreement will confirm the truth of what I have said here.<sup>42</sup>

Just as he had anticipated, Weissberg was fiercely assailed. This eventuality was also the case with others. For example, Buber-Neumann was accused of having been an SS informer in Ravensbrück, an accusation repudiated by former inmates.<sup>43</sup> Both Weissberg, Buber-Neumann and many other survivors describe a desire to speak the truth, to tell how it really was. However, one fear that recurs throughout Gulag memoirs is the fear of not being believed and/or of being slandered. This fear is one of the reasons why many of the repatriated survivors in the West chose never to speak about their experiences of the Soviet camp system, let alone write about them. For example, the Danish doctor, Alexander Thomsen, describes how the other inmates in Vorkuta dissuaded him from speaking about the camps if ever he was repatriated: “My friends were almost all of the opinion that I would never come home again. And if, in spite of it all, I would, one of them asserted, then it was best not to tell anything about what I had seen and experienced. Another friend was instead of the opinion that I could calmly tell everything, for nobody would believe it anyway.”<sup>44</sup>

Hannah Arendt describes how the normality of the “normal world” was for a long time the “most efficient protection against disclosure of totalitarian mass crimes”.<sup>45</sup> Paraphrasing David Rousset, she writes: “[n]ormal men don’t know that everything is possible,”<sup>46</sup> they refuse to believe in the monstrous, even when the facts are presented to them. Arendt points to this as one of the reasons why totalitarian regimes are able to go so far and get away with so much. A great part of the outside world, as well as the general population of the totalitarian country, “indulges also in wishful thinking and shirks reality in the face of real insanity”.<sup>47</sup> The inclination to disregard the facts and to choose not to believe in the monstrous is promoted and enhanced by the totalitarian government, which controls the facts, thereby making reliable record-taking impossible. For this reason, it is impossible to fully know the facts of totalitarian reality. The available reports only give a “glimpse into the abyss”.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Weissberg 1952: 14.

<sup>43</sup> Todorov 2000: 107.

<sup>44</sup> Thomsen 1960: 284.

<sup>45</sup> Arendt 1976: 436.

<sup>46</sup> Arendt 1976: 436.

<sup>47</sup> Arendt 1976: 437.

<sup>48</sup> Arendt 1976: 437.

Derrida's analysis of the witness in "A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text': Poetics and Politics of Witnessing" is riveted to the paradoxical relation between testifying and bearing witness, on the one hand, and proof on the other: testimony is that of which there cannot be proof, writes Derrida, because if there were such proof, then testimony would no longer be necessary.<sup>49</sup> When bearing witness is confirmed, that is, when it is backed up by a demonstrable truth, then the witness no longer functions as a witness; rather, a report is given. The testimony as such runs the risk of losing both its value and its sense as a testimony. Derrida describes one of the paradoxes of the testimony in the following way: as soon as the testimony is corroborated and is ascertained as fact, then no longer is its status as testimony assured.<sup>50</sup> When someone bears witness, he does not provide proof, and the experience of the witness, is, in principle, that which cannot be proven.

Derrida's text must be situated within the context of Holocaust revisionism, writes Irina Sandomirskaja: at the time of his formulating his thoughts on witnessing, Holocaust revisionism made claims to invalidate the testimony as a historical source: "It denied the truth of testimonies by Holocaust survivors and, on the basis of this, the truth of the Holocaust as a historical fact".<sup>51</sup> Derrida thus intervenes at a moment when the witness was being challenged; he offers a defense of the act of witnessing regardless of official documents and public records. Even though the problem of Holocaust revisionism has receded, and even if it is now considered a political denial rather than a form of historical research, Derrida's discussion remains important, since its defense of testimony explores what it means to bear witness in the absence of proof. Furthermore, the defense of the witness, who speaks of an experience beyond possible verification, is even more significant regarding Gulag witnesses in the postwar period, owing to the insufficiency of available official records.

Testimony cannot demonstrate, writes Derrida; it does not argue, and it can never manifest something present: "Here, 'you have to believe me' means 'believe me because I tell you to, because I ask it of you,' or, equally well, 'I promise you to speak the truth and to be faithful to my promise, and I commit myself to being faithful.'" <sup>52</sup> When something is proven or demonstrated, it no longer requires belief, i.e. I do not *believe* the demonstration, rather I am convinced by it and its truth is displayed to me. The appeal to be believed is thus at the very center of bearing witness: the testimony is a pledge, and a request to be believed, to be believed in spite of the lack of evidence, in spite of the fact that nothing can be proven. "You have to believe me" is a condition, it

<sup>49</sup> Derrida 2000: 188.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida 2000: 182.

<sup>51</sup> Sandomirskaja 2011: 247.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida 2000: 189.

is an unspoken plea in all testimony, and this appeal is so much more urgent because of the absence of proof or certainty.<sup>53</sup>

Testimony is built upon the oath, Derrida writes, upon the possibility of the witness who says: "I swear to speak the truth".<sup>54</sup> This promise always entails the possibility of committing an act of perjury, of lying, which puts the onus of witnessing on the listener, the receiver of the testimony. The witness' addressee is the witness of the witness, the one who must, but cannot, bear witness for the witness. It is in principle impossible for the addressee to verify what the witness says, in the sense of seeing what he has seen; the witness to the witness thus has an immediate non-access to the subject of the testimony.<sup>55</sup>

The act of witnessing implies an act of faith; we are called upon to believe what is not verified, what is almost impossible to imagine and what is hardly possible to express. In this sense, the analysis presented by Derrida is perhaps even more relevant for the Gulag survivors. However, his discussion stops short of the conditions for this faith: in the wake of evidence, what can make a testimony more or less credible? How can we believe in some testimonies even though they lack evidence, and seem incredible, while others appear too remote from reality? This article argues that the credibility of testimonies is conditioned by the pre-existing narratives within which they are inscribed. Even if the historical revisionists were right in that there were no eyewitnesses of the inside of the gas chambers in the Nazi camps, the very existence of the Nazi camps as such was well-documented. Gulag survivors on the other hand, did not have recourse to a pre-existing narrative of the existence of the Gulag camps: the earlier memoirs establish a first narrative into which we can place further narratives and collaborate with evidence.<sup>56</sup> One of the most important functions of testimonial literature might be its making the experience of the camps possible to imagine, possible to tell and thus acting as a starting point for the very search for evidence. In one of the most influential post-war collections of memoirs, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, published anonymously, with a preface written by T.S. Eliot in 1946, the introduction describes the lack of literature, of poetry about the Soviet camp universe as one of the reasons why in the West it was almost impossible to imagine:

The moon, indeed, is nearer to our ways of thought: our own reveries and the reveries of our poets have brought her within our orbit; luminous, familiar,

<sup>53</sup> Derrida 2000: 189.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida 2000: 194.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida 2000: 189.

<sup>56</sup> In the early 1930s, the use of forced labor in prestigious infrastructure projects was officially praised in books such as *The White Sea Canal* (1934). The collective work, written by a group of 34 Soviet writers, led by Maxim Gorky, praises the achievements made by prisoners in the building of the White Sea Baltic Canal. Furthermore, it stresses the benefits of forced labor in "reforging" counter-revolutionaries. However, such books were suppressed in the mid 30s. See Gorky, Auerbach & Firin 1935.

predictable, almost akin: a part to us of memory and experience, and accessible to our imagination. No poet, no literature, no effort of imagination, could so compass, or fit to minds shaped like ours, this Soviet East. Here, then, where what is unimaginable elsewhere may be the stuff of everyday—a far cry from Soviet Europe, and farther still from our own knowledge of it and of such centres of Soviet civilization as Moscow or Kiev—lies almost entirely the background to this book.<sup>57</sup>

Owing to both a lack of experience and imagination, what is written first seems unlikely or even contradictory. However, this very fact only testifies to the urgency that these stories must be heard and believed:

For this reason, as for some others, much that is to be set down must at first sight appear startlingly unlike much else which has been already learnt of the Soviet Union; and which has received publicity. By its unlikeness, and again at first sight, it may seem even to contradict it. This is not so. It is that in each case each set of facts deals with one aspect only of a whole so vast as to set a girdle half-way round the earth.<sup>58</sup>

One of the most important achievements of the post-war memoirs is that they render the experience of the camps imaginable. They created a narrative of the camps onto which other stories could later be inscribed. The universe that the post-war Gulag literature opened up is one barely possible to express for those existing within it. To translate this experience to something comprehensible to an outside world is a work that goes beyond any single testimony. It is a task that requires the capability not only to narrate the story of an experience but also to represent the shared reality within which it took place.

Independently of the post-war testimonies in the West, translation of Gulag experience into literary expression and poetic rendering was later developed and established through the writings of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov in the 1960s and 70s. More than any other writers, they have formed, and continue to form the basis for our contemporary understanding of the experience of the Gulag, one that is necessary if we are to begin to search for evidence and if we are to be able to believe the survivors' accounts.

### *3. Representation and Fictionalization*

Post-war Gulag memoirs were factographic; they claimed to describe the actual experience of the writers. The memoirs make an appeal to the reader to believe in their claims, even in the absence of proof. They vouch for what

<sup>57</sup> Anon (Mrs. Zajdlerova) 1946: 13.

<sup>58</sup> Anon (Mrs. Zajdlerova) 1946: 13–14.

is true, by way of an experience of, or a reporting of experiences about, what actually happened. However, the most influential Soviet Gulag literature from the period after the thaw, does not make this claim but makes another kind of claim: to write fiction but to present a narrative that represents the truth of the experience of the camps. The most prominent works of this kind are those of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov.

Leona Toker describes how the writer of Gulag memoirs engages in a factographic pact with the reader. This factographic pact can both be enhanced and weakened, depending on the amount of referential material available. Factographic literature includes materials that belong to three domains: the public, the private and the privileged access. The material belonging to the public domain situates the action in a concrete time and place, specifying events that happened to particular persons, and can therefore be verified.<sup>59</sup> The more the writer includes this kind of material, the more he challenges denials, and invites the reader to confirm his materials. An author can enhance his own credibility in the other two domains as well, even if information, whether private or requiring privileged access, cannot be properly verified.<sup>60</sup> As described above, post-war writers would often withhold the names of fellow prisoners left behind in the camps, as well as not disclosing escape routes and methods for communication.<sup>61</sup> In the fictional work *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn provides greater detail than many cautious memoirs.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, Gulag fiction ends up being more factual, while the witness testimonies of Gulag experiences appear more fictionalized, especially if they change or withhold fellow-sufferers' names.

Solzhenitsyn uses the fictionalized account to include as much referential material as possible, placing emphasis on particular details. He uses public-domain materials in order to invite verification as well as to give credibility to what is otherwise impossible to verify.<sup>63</sup> In this sense, Toker argues that Solzhenitsyn invites the reader to a *metafictional* pact: a pact that draws attention to the relation between the extratextual reality and the narrative text.<sup>64</sup>

Shalamov, on the other hand, Toker asserts, accomplish "a type of referentiality that is voided of the singulative component".<sup>65</sup> In his works, the detail is "representative" instead of being tied to what is particular. In this way, Shalamov's fiction can double as testimony, since it focuses on the semi-fictional, with an emphasis on regularities, instead of individual particulars.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Toker 2000: 134.

<sup>60</sup> Toker 2000: 134.

<sup>61</sup> Toker 2000: 76.

<sup>62</sup> Toker 2000: 124; Solzhenitsyn 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Toker 2000: 103.

<sup>64</sup> Toker 2000: 188.

<sup>65</sup> Toker 2000: 141.

<sup>66</sup> Toker 2000: 150.

Even though the characters do not refer to actual persons, they appear to be typical or paradigmatic. Therefore, while such details of experience can be literally true for a great number, it does not necessarily mirror what one single person actually experienced.<sup>67</sup>

While, for Derrida, bearing witness essentially signifies having been present, it does not matter to either Shalamov or Solzhenitsyn if the narrator was present at certain specific events, since so many others were. In Derrida's discussion, the witness attests to the presence of something that has been present to him, but that is no longer present, and he appeals to the addressee to literally take his word for it.<sup>68</sup>

“I bear witness”—that means: “I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus, perceptible), and although you do not have access to it, not the same access, you, my addressees, *you have to believe me*, because I am committed to telling you the truth, I am already committed to it, I tell you that I am telling you the truth. Believe me. You have to believe me.”<sup>69</sup>

The witness, according to Derrida, requests the addressee of the testimony to believe him or her, to believe that he or she is telling the truth. For Derrida, truth is understood as the fact that this or that thing actually happened, and that the witness was there to experience it. For Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov on the other hand, the aim of their narratives is not to make us believe that they were there, but to make us believe the pledge that “this is what it is like” in a remote world with millions of prisoners, many of whom would never return. The aim of Shalamov's stories, as he states in his essay “On Prose,” is to give answers to what happened to all those who disappeared, to testify to a fate that is a lacuna, long hidden and yet true for many:

The need for documents of this type is extremely urgent. After all, in every family, and in the village and the city, among the intelligentsia, the workers and the peasants alike, there were people, or relatives, or acquaintances, who perished while imprisoned. The Russian reader—and not only the Russian reader—is waiting for an answer from us.<sup>70</sup>

Both Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov gave the very experience of the Gulag a literary expression that made it accessible to a larger public, both within the Soviet Union and the West. Toker argues that, even though the Gulag is now well known, the stories of writers such as Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn

<sup>67</sup> Toker 2000: 142.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida 2000: 199.

<sup>69</sup> Derrida 2000: 189.

<sup>70</sup> Shalamov 2015: 116.

are still relevant, because they provide not only a representation of the Gulag camps but also an argument against the repression; they show the meaning of the Gulag camps in terms of human experience. They disclose the human suffering and the cost in terms of human lives that the camps signified, and they continue to remind us of this cost. In that sense, their arguments play an important role in light of recent attempts to rationalize the Gulag system because of its proposed economic benefits, or its achievements in terms of infrastructure and industrialization.<sup>71</sup>

This article argues that they are also still relevant for another reason: they show what it means to write against a form of repression that is still effective and ongoing. Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov both wrote against the Soviet repression, they did so, though, in two different ways. Whereas Solzhentisyn “lightened” his stories in order to publish them within the Soviet Union,<sup>72</sup> Shalamov made no such compromise, the consequence of which was that *Kolyma Tales* remained unpublished in the Soviet Union until 1987.<sup>73</sup> Instead, Shalamov’s texts circulated in Samizdat within the Soviet Union and were smuggled abroad where they were published in the original and in translations during the 60s and the 70s. By having to navigate between censorship and self-censorship, both authors show, by example, not only the living experience of the Gulag, but also the cost of writing from within a system of repression.

#### 4. *To Write Against Repression*

Even if Gulag fiction can double as testimony because it can be said to represent how it really was, this fiction still needs to be read in light of the repression from which the works were written. In order to be published within the Soviet Union, even the dissidents needed to assent to a certain level of Soviet repression, and in order to challenge the public narrative, they needed (to a certain degree) to align themselves to it. In this section, I survey the changes in the context of reception over time, and how these changes both enabled and disabled certain forms of narratives. Furthermore, this section examines how the reception and the possibility to publish Gulag literature itself changed over time, and how the use of fictionalization was an important way of writing against Soviet repression.

One important moment for the publication and reception of Gulag memoirs was Khrushchev’s secret speech, held in 1956 at the 20<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress, which was famous for his denunciations of Stalin’s crimes. The speech signifies the beginning of “the thaw,” marking an opening toward a new public narrative: one that admitted that crimes had been committed

<sup>71</sup> Toker 2017: 138.

<sup>72</sup> Toker 2000: 190.

<sup>73</sup> Toker 2017: 131.



and that some “true communists” had been wrongfully convicted. At the Twenty Second Congress, the criticism of Stalinism became official. Following this new opening, in 1962 Solzhenitsyn published *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in the journal *Novyi Mir*. The publication of Solzhenitsyn’s novella seemed to signal that a political prisoner’s camp experience was now becoming a recognized literary theme. It meant the public sanctioning of the theme, resulting in a flood of manuscripts being sent to editorial offices.<sup>74</sup> After Solzhenitsyn’s novella, and up to 1966, a number of manuscripts were published—though even more were rejected. The Gulag literature published during the period of the thaw was often fictional, and thus not recognized as factographic. Indeed, the stories were more easily published in the Soviet Union if they claimed to be artistic: “In the absence of institutionalized freedom of public memory, the bi-functionality of the literary works that doubled as works of historical testimony was a helpful though not a sufficient condition of their appearance in print.”<sup>75</sup> Even as works of fiction, they were nonetheless read as testimonies of “what it was like in the camps”.<sup>76</sup>

Solzhenitsyn describes the period of the thaw as a period where the “gates of the abyss would briefly, grudgingly, part so that two or three birds of truth would fly out before they slammed shut, and would stay so for a long time to come”:

So many of my predecessors had not been able to finish writing, or to preserve what they had written, or to crawl or scramble to safety—but I had this good fortune: to thrust the first handful of truth through the open jaws of the iron gates before they slammed shut again. Like matter enveloped by antimatter, it exploded instantaneously!<sup>77</sup>

However, the explosion did not last long, and the gates of the abyss were soon to close again. After 1966, Gulag memoirs were no longer allowed to be published, until the late 80s. Furthermore, the testimonies that were published in the years between 1962 and 1966 needed to be aligned with the ideology of the thaw. The thaw allowed for a denouncement of Stalin’s crimes, but not for a critique of Soviet repression in general.<sup>78</sup> In these narratives, the hero is a true communist, one who has always been loyal to the party, but was slandered and denounced, and then was caught up within the Stalinist camp system. This hero still believes that one day the truth will out, and justice will be done. He sees himself as an innocent prisoner, in opposition to his fellow inmates, convicted of “real crimes”. One of the most typical examples of a

<sup>74</sup> Toker 2000: 49.

<sup>75</sup> Toker 2000: 123.

<sup>76</sup> Toker 2000: 123.

<sup>77</sup> Solzhenitsyn 1976: 471.

<sup>78</sup> Toker 2000: 49.

narrative that was soon to become redundant because of its loyalism is, according to Toker, Boris Dyakov's *Tales of Past Experiences*.<sup>79</sup> The memoirs and novels written in this style became obsolete after the thaw, because of their concurrence with the same system to which they voiced dissent.<sup>80</sup> This kind of Gulag literature thus shows how the official historical narrative, e.g. that of the infallibility of the Communist Party, can be challenged and changed, through literary testimony, though only within certain limits.

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is an especially interesting case in this regard, for it signifies a compromise on the part of the author. Solzhenitsyn had to restrict the narrative in order to make it acceptable for publication during the thaw. Although Solzhenitsyn attempts to write the truth of what "life is like in the camps," he places the camp experience in a more favorable light than it was in most places, knowing that the relative optimism of the story does not represent the truth of camp life.<sup>81</sup> Even though *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is marked by the restrictions of the thaw, it has since become a landmark in the literary representation of the Gulag, and maybe more than any other work, it has influenced the narrative of the Gulag.

In the mid-60s, manuscripts that were no longer accepted for publication began to circulate underground, in the self-publication system known as the Samizdat. In the later sixties, the seventies and the early eighties, an increasing number of forbidden Soviet texts started to be published abroad. These texts belonged to two genres: (i) the Tamizdat for banned works written by those still living within the USSR and (ii) a "third wave" emigration literature, written by those who had left the country.<sup>82</sup>

Both the Gulag literature which was officially sanctioned and the works which were circulated in either Samizdat or Tamizdat took part in creating a new discourse, in relation to which new stories could be interpreted. When Solzhenitsyn wrote the *Cancer Ward*, he could count on the reader knowing certain things about the camps, because of how the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, had formed collective memory. The different publications, both forbidden and accepted, thus shaped public knowledge, while they were themselves partly formed by the repression they were struggling against.

However, with a few exceptions, the Gulag literature forming this new discourse focused on the lives of prisoners in the camps before the thaw. Even though Solzhenitsyn is well aware that the camp system continued to exist in the 60s and 70s, he himself had never experienced post-Stalin camps and he does not represent them in his fictional works.<sup>83</sup> One of the most famous testimonies

<sup>79</sup> Toker 2000: 49; Dyakov 1966.

<sup>80</sup> Toker 2000: 52.

<sup>81</sup> Toker 2000: 190.

<sup>82</sup> Toker 2000: 59.

<sup>83</sup> See Solzhenitsyn 1976: 494.

of the post-Stalin camps was Marchenko's *My Testimony*, from 1967.<sup>84</sup> It only circulated within the underground publication system, Samizdat, and was eventually published abroad; this resulted in Marchenko receiving a new prison term.

One of the most important events in Tamizdat was the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* in 1973, a "literary investigation" of the Gulag-system based on his own and 270 survivors' testimonies.<sup>85</sup> It was smuggled abroad but published by the YMCA Press in Paris only after the KGB had obtained a copy that was hidden in the USSR.<sup>86</sup> After its publication, witnesses who came forth were met with less resistance, since *The Gulag Archipelago* signified an institutionalizing of a public narrative about the Gulag.<sup>87</sup>

By the end of the eighties, Gulag memoirs started to be published again in the Soviet press,<sup>88</sup> and by 1988 there was a resurgence of camp literature: "All the major journals, and most of the minor ones, printed materials pertaining to the Gulag; even scientific journals devoted sections to scientists who had been jailed."<sup>89</sup> The boom in memoirs in the 80s was followed in the 90s by the opening-up of the archives and a surge in archival research on the Gulag.

Gulag memoirs have taken part in establishing and re-writing a historical experience: the narratives are dependent on their historical context, yet they also rewrite this same context. Although the Gulag literature of the thaw era promoted the transformation of the Gulag system, it also sanctioned parts of the system: the protest against the repression within the repression could only deviate from the institutionalized narrative; it could not denounce the regime altogether. Furthermore, the fact that some of the writers present their works as fiction was itself a strategy to evade censorship, and to make it possible to stretch what was possible to tell. The fictionalization is thus not a sign of unreality, but, on the contrary, attests to the presence of the repression and the urgency of the stories. This interplay between political repression and literary dissent also shows how complicated the notion of truth and authenticity becomes when the truth needs to be adjusted and authenticity is forced to speak through half-silences.

### 5. *In Between History and Literature*

The use of fictionalization makes the question of truth with respect to Gulag literature especially difficult, and it also distinguishes it from other testimonial literature. In what sense is it the truth? What is the relation between

<sup>84</sup> Marchenko 1969.

<sup>85</sup> Solzhenitsyn 1973; Solzhenitsyn 1975; Solzhenitsyn 1976.

<sup>86</sup> Toker 2000: 60.

<sup>87</sup> Toker 2000: 60.

<sup>88</sup> Toker 2000: 66.

<sup>89</sup> Toker 2000: 67.

a literary and historical truth: if even the fictionalized Gulag accounts make appeals to our capacity to believe—that is, our belief that they are true—what is it then that we are told to believe? What is it we should have faith in—in the literary imaginary or in the larger, historical implications entailed by it? In this section, I will discuss the special position that Gulag literature occupies between historical testimony and literary investigation.

One of the most influential historians of the Gulag since the 1960s, Robert Conquest, makes extensive use of memoirs in his classical account of *The Great Terror*.<sup>90</sup> He argues that memoirs might be the most reliable historical sources regarding the terror. Furthermore, Conquest contends that even the rumors and the hearsay can be more reliable sources of information than the official documents. In particular, he points out how some of the most accurate sources, such as Victor Kravchenko and Walter Krivitsky, were for a long time slandered and denigrated in campaigns orchestrated by the Soviet authorities.<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, one of the fiercest critics of the use of memoirs and rumours as sources is J. Arch Getty. In his *Origins of the Great Purges* (1985), Getty relies exclusively on official documents and denounces memoirs as “history-by-anecdote”: “For no other period or topic have historians been so eager to write and accept history-by-anecdote.”<sup>92</sup> In Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* he sees the “the most brilliant example of a genre based on rumour, hearsay, and personal impression.”<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, he accuses historians of building analytical generalizations on “secondhand bits of overheard corridor gossip”.<sup>94</sup> Thirdly, rumours such as “My friend met Bukharin’s wife in a camp and she said...,” have, according to Getty, been taken for primary sources.<sup>95</sup> With particular attention to Conquest, Getty argues that the unexplored sources of archival and press material make it unnecessary to rely on such unreliable material as memoirs.<sup>96</sup>

Whereas Conquest advocates the use of memoirs as long as they are checked and verified against other sources, Getty warns against the verification of rumor by rumor. He describes this kind of research as a game of Chinese whispers where “unverified particulars” make rumors appear as sources, where once a story is repeated a sufficient number of times, it appears as if it were confirmed.<sup>97</sup> As Getty points out, for no other period or topic have memoirs taken on such importance as they have with the Gulag.

The historian Carlo Ginzburg discusses skepticism towards single witnesses in relation to the historical revisionists’ rejection of eyewitnesses. He notes

<sup>90</sup> Conquest 1971.

<sup>91</sup> Conquest 1971: 754–755.

<sup>92</sup> Getty 1994: 5.

<sup>93</sup> Getty 1994: 219.

<sup>94</sup> Getty 1994: 5.

<sup>95</sup> Getty 1994: 5.

<sup>96</sup> Getty 1994: 5.

<sup>97</sup> Getty 1994: 5.

that their skepticism is rooted in the Latin and Jewish legal traditions. In legal literature and trials during the Middle Ages, “one witness, no witness” was a recurring maxim. However, according to Ginzburg, law and history seems to have “different epistemological foundations,” and what we demand of a legal testimony cannot be applied to historical research.<sup>98</sup> With regard to historical research the skepticism towards single witnesses is unwarranted and grounded in a division between historical inquiry based on evidence, on the one hand, and historical narratives, on the other. Ginzburg argues that narratives based on only one witness can be seen as experimental cases that challenge that very division, since, if the single testimony changes our understanding, it will also change how we interpret evidence.<sup>99</sup>

The problem of witnessing is often phrased in terms of a problem of credibility, especially when an author has been exposed as guilty of intentional or unintentional falsifications. But, as Gulag literature demonstrates, bearing witness is just as impossible if the trust is lost on the receiving side: strongly as many survivors express a wish to speak the truth, they also express a fear of not being heard or not being believed. This fear hindered some of the survivors’ telling their stories and contributed to the silencing of experiences and historical forgetfulness.

Derrida stresses the fact that perjury does not threaten testimony or its claim to truth; on the contrary, a false testimony further attests to the truth it betrays by betraying it, just as perjury also presupposes the claim to truth by failing it. Furthermore, the possibility of betrayal is inherent in all testimony. A betrayal does not need to be intentional: a witness can make mistakes in good faith, the memory can waver, or the perception can be weak or mislead. That is part of the finitude of testimony. This vulnerability and this finitude are both what limits testimony and what makes room for it: without it there would be no place for bearing witness. No lie and no perjury can overcome the testimonies’ original appeal to belief; in profaning it, they can only confirm its invincibility.<sup>100</sup> In the case of Gulag memoirs, skepticism regarding the witnesses did not safeguard historical research from misrepresentations. On the contrary, their reception reveal how testimony is only effective in the absence of excessive skepticism. Furthermore, they demonstrate how a representation of typical experiences can be truer than factually accurate descriptions. This is especially the case with the Gulag fiction presented by Shalamov in the *Kolyma Tales*. In his essay “On Prose,” Shalamov explains that in *Kolyma Tales* he searches for a new kind of prose, something that is neither literature nor memoir: “But in place of the memoir *Kolyma Tales* offers a new prose, the prose of real life, which at the same time is reality transformed, a document transformed.”<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Ginzburg 1992: 168.

<sup>99</sup> Ginzburg 1992: 179.

<sup>100</sup> Derrida 2000: 195.

<sup>101</sup> Shalamov 2015: 121.

Even though the stories in the *Kobyma Tales* are works of fiction, truth-value is nonetheless claimed, the truth of real life: “The author hopes that in the 33 tales of the collection no one will doubt that this is the truth of real life.”<sup>102</sup>

In the short text, “Trampling the Snow,” Shalamov describes how prisoners trample down the snow in order to prepare a path for sleighs and tractors.<sup>103</sup> One prisoner treads first, followed by a row of five or six others, all of whom follow his “narrow and uncertain track”.<sup>104</sup> In a row “shoulder to shoulder,”<sup>105</sup> they walk beside the track, though not upon it, until a certain spot is reached, at which point they turn and walk from whence they came, trampling down the virgin snow, “a place where man’s foot has never trodden”.<sup>106</sup> Thus, the road is open, for more people, and, finally, when the snow has been sufficiently trampled, for sleighs and tractors to pass. If they had walked after one another in each other’s footsteps, then they would have created a path, but only one that would have just about been walkable. It is the first man who opens up the road, his task demands the most strength, and when he cannot continue then one of the others must take his place: “Every one of them, even the smallest, even the weakest, must tread on a little virgin snow—not in someone else’s footsteps. The people on the tractors and horses, however, will be not writers but readers.”<sup>107</sup> The first ones to tell their tales opened up the road for others to follow, and for each one who narrates the camps, the road becomes easier to tread, until it is open for the tractors and horses, that is, for the readers to follow into the camp system.

The prisoner who opens the road resembles the first witnesses, the first one to open a new narrative and to establish a new realm of poetic and literary representation. The other prisoners, who follow him, cannot only follow in his footsteps, they cannot only repeat what he has said, but they must contribute with their experiences, further establishing and developing the expressions of camp experience. Only together can they create a path, and only if they strengthen each other’s narratives, can they make the camps credible for those outside. Thus, with his stories, not only does Shalamov want to make the Gulag system accessible for those outside, but he wants to make it possible for other prisoners to tell of their experiences. Shalamov writes that he wants to open the camp universe, in the same way that Saint-Exupéry opened the skies to man through his narratives; once this “world apart” has opened “people will come from every corner of life who will be able to tell about what they know and what they have lived through, not just what they have seen and heard.”<sup>108</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Shalamov 2015: 123.

<sup>103</sup> Shalamov 2018b: 3.

<sup>104</sup> Shalamov 2018b: 3.

<sup>105</sup> Shalamov 2018b: 3.

<sup>106</sup> Shalamov 2018b: 3.

<sup>107</sup> Shalamov 2018b: 3.

<sup>108</sup> Shalamov 2015: 119.

Gulag literature in general, and Shalamov's stories in particular, make the unimaginable imaginable, and herein lies their important poetic and literary value: not only do they provide us with facts, but, more importantly, these facts could not be humanly understood without the narrative structuring their meaning. These new accounts, in turn, make it possible to re-narrate and facilitate new narratives. The survivors thus bear witness to an experience that, prior to their testimonies, we could not have imagined; they bear witness to a reality we could not reach, facts we are unable to check and conditions barely possible to express in language. Like the first steps in Shalamov's snow, they trod with an immense effort into a new domain of life and of meaning.

Gulag fiction can be seen as a way to stretch what is possible to narrate and to imagine, and thus to pave the way for other survivors to narrate and express their experiences. Furthermore, Gulag literature demonstrates the interdependence between reception and narration, between the writer's trust in the reader and the reader's trust in the writer. Moreover, their reception manifests the witnesses' dependence on each other: only if enough survivors support one another can they construct a road reliable enough for the readers. The corpus of Gulag literature has achieved such a road for certain experiences, and narratives such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Kolyma Tales* have come to form an informal discourse of the Gulag experience. However, this discourse has mainly been centered around political prisoners in the labor camps of Stalin years, whereas other experiences of the Gulag are still waiting for fuller recognitions—for example, those of different minorities, deported to the “other Gulag,” to remote settlements and colonies, or those of political prisoners in the camps under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. Even if some memoirs have been written by those survivors, and even if they have marked a number of national discourses in Eastern Europe, their stories have yet to see their own establishment in an international context, before we will read them as typical or representative, before we can imagine them as revealing a certain kind of truth of the Gulag experience.<sup>109</sup> Herein lies both the problem and the promise of understanding typical experiences as revealing a literary truth: they will always represent some experiences, while omitting others, thus leaving room for new narratives and new truths, waiting to be told, received and believed.

### Conclusion

Most phenomenological investigations of witness literature explore the writing of Holocaust survivors. Yet Gulag literature sheds new light on our understanding of what it means to bear witness, since it demonstrates by example what it means to bear witness against a repression that is still ongoing and effective.

<sup>109</sup> See for example Eneken Laane's discussion of the role of Estonian Gulag narratives in the formation of an Estonian memory culture of Soviet repression (Laanes 2019: 51–70), and Tadeusz Sucharski's examination of Polish Gulag literature (Sucharski 2019: 88–105).

Gulag memoirs written by repatriated foreigners in the West in the years after World War II testify to what it means to bear witness without recourse to either evidence or a pre-existing narrative. The smears they provoked manifest the vulnerability of the first witnesses, those who try to establish a new narrative, and seek to tell about atrocities in a reality that is hitherto unheard of, that appears incredible and unimaginable.

Gulag fiction written by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov further established a literary and poetic representation of the Gulag, both in the West and in the USSR. Their works also manifest what it means to bear witness from within a repression that sanctions some narratives and silences others. By presenting their works as fiction, they could further stretch the sanctioned limits of disclosure. The immense influence of their writings reveals how literature can function as a case against repression, but also how they were restricted by boundaries that are less visible now than they were then. When we read them now, we must also read them, especially Solzhenitsyn's early works, in light of their choices between censorship and self-censorship, because only then can we see what might be one of their greatest achievements: how they gradually enlarged the subject of the poetic and literary presentation of the Gulag, and thus expanded the realms of credible tales and believable experiences.

This article argues that it is between the institutionalized, or publicly well-known, and the personal narrative that testimonial literature holds its place: it is a private narrative that deviates from, challenges and threatens the institutionalized, public one. Such testimony can only be believed if it does not deviate too much from the public narrative. At the same time, it only counts as a testimony in the proper sense if it is not fully aligned with the public narrative. Gulag literature operates within this tension; for a long time, it challenged the public narrative of the Soviet camp system. Furthermore, it institutionalized a new, informal discourse, with which new narratives could align or from which they could deviate, one that primarily focused on some camp experiences while omitting others.

This article contends that testimonial literature takes part in the creation of a historical narrative that is continually written and rewritten. Through its ambiguity, the testimonial literature from the Gulag elucidates how historical truth can be understood in terms of a struggle between a silencing repression and a tradition of narratives that, step by step, enlarges the realm of what can be said, received and understood. In doing this, they form both an argument and constitute an act of resistance to the repression whose reality they reveal and whose history they rewrite.

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