

How the great truth dawned

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/9/how-the-great-truth-dawned>

by Gary Saul Morson

On the Soviet virtue of cruelty.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's three-volume opus, *The Gulag Archipelago*, which some have called the most important masterpiece of the twentieth century, is subtitled: "An Experiment in Literary Investigation." Consider how odd that is. No Westerner would call such a work "literary," lest someone discount its documentary value. Literature is one thing, truth another, isn't that correct? But Solzhenitsyn insists that absolutely everything included is strictly factual, a claim validated when the Soviet Union fell and archives were opened. What, then, is literary about the book? It is worth noting that Russia's most recent winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, Svetlana Alexievich, also produced literary works that were purely factual. With these two writers we encounter something essential to the Russian tradition.

Russians revere literature more than anyone else in the world. When Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* was being serialized, Dostoevsky, in a review of its latest installment, opined that "at last the existence of the Russian people has been justified." It is hard to imagine Frenchmen or Englishmen, let alone Americans, even supposing that their existence required justification; but if they did, they would surely not point to a novel. Would we mention the iPhone? But to Russians Dostoevsky's comment appeared unremarkable.

We usually assume that literature exists to depict life, but Russians often speak as if life exists to provide material for literature. Russians, of course, excel in ballet, chess, theater, and mathematics. They invented the periodic table and non-Euclidian geometry. Nevertheless, for Russians literature is in a class by itself. The very phrase "Russian literature" carries a sacramental aura. The closest analogy may be the status of the Bible for ancient Hebrews when it was still possible to add books to it.

The “canon,” a term originally applied to authoritative Biblical books, still carries sacred significance for Russians, and even the Soviets did not challenge the status of nineteenth-century classics. Anyone who denigrates Russia’s greatest poet, Alexander Pushkin, is likely to be called, without irony, a blasphemer. We think of Stalin as a thug, but he read literary manuscripts and sometimes decided what should be published. His phone call to Mikhail Bulgakov, which allowed the politically suspect writer to keep working, achieved mythic status. The poet Osip Mandelstam observed that only in Russia is literature so important that one can be shot for a poem.

If Americans want the truth about a historical period, we turn to historians, not novelists, but in Russia it is novelists who are presumed to have a deeper understanding. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* contradicted existing evidence, but for over a century now it is his version that has been taken as correct. The reason is that great writers, like prophets, see into the essence of things. And so Solzhenitsyn undertook to reach a proper understanding of the Russian Revolution by writing a series of novels about it, *The Red Wheel*. He made extensive use of archives, as any historian would, and his representation of historical events never contradicts the documents. His fictional characters are often based on real people and are always historically plausible. From a Russian perspective, he expressed what even the best of historians could not: the truth. In his view, postmodern, relativist denial of truth betrayed the whole Russian literary tradition.

Solzhenitsyn claimed in his Nobel Prize speech: “Writers . . . can vanquish lies! In the struggle against lies, art has always won and always will. . . . Lies can stand up against much in the world but not against art. . . . *One word of truth outweighs the world* [according to the Russian proverb].” Proclaimed by a writer who survived seven years in the Gulag, such statements were not mere rhetoric, as they would be if uttered by an American writer—that is, if an American writer could do so with a straight face. They derive from a tradition in which great writers enjoy an almost mystical access to truth and bear the enormous responsibility of using their gift to discover and express it.

Nikolai Dobrolyubov, a disciple of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Russia's most influential nineteenth-century critic, justified interpreting "the phenomena of life on the basis of a literary production" by arguing that great writers are, consciously or not, the greatest sociologists.

We have no other way of knowing . . . what is beginning to permeate and predominate in the moral life of society but literature. . . . The author-artist, although not troubling to draw any general conclusions about the state of public thought and morality, is always able to grasp their most essential features. . . . As soon as it is recognized that an author-artist possesses talent, that is, the ability to feel and depict the phenomena with lifelike truth, this very recognition creates legitimate grounds for taking his productions as a basis for the discussion of . . . the epoch.

To be sure, a writer cannot begin with a thesis; he must rather use his writerly sensitivity to intuit what is going on, even if he cannot understand its implications. It is that sensitivity, and not any technical skill, that *makes* him a great writer. Though they hated the radical Dobrolyubov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy would surely have agreed.

In assuming the role of "Russian writer," Solzhenitsyn was therefore claiming a status less comparable to "American writer" than to "Hebrew prophet." One of his characters asks: "Hasn't it always been understood that a major writer in our country . . . is a sort of second government?" In Russia, Boris Pasternak explained, "a book is a squarish chunk of hot, smoking conscience—and nothing else!" As conscience, literature demanded loyalty transcending all others. It was one's identity, even one's nationality. When the writer Vladimir Korolenko, who was half-Ukrainian, was asked his nationality, he famously replied: "My homeland is Russian literature." In her 2015 Nobel Prize address, Alexievich echoed Korolenko by claiming three homelands: her mother's Ukraine, her father's Belarus, and—"Russia's great culture, without which I cannot imagine myself." By culture she meant, above all, literature.

In principle, the relation of literature to history, with the former having greater access to the truth, applied to all disciplines concerned with human affairs. Chernyshevsky explained:

In those countries where intellectual and social life has attained a high level of development, one can speak of a "division of labor" among the various branches of intellectual activity. Only one of those branches is known to us: literature. For that reason . . . literature plays a greater role in our intellectual life than French, German, and English literature play in the intellectual life of their respective countries, and it bears greater responsibility than the literature of any other nation. Russian literature . . . has the direct duty of taking an interest in the kind of subject matter that has elsewhere passed into the special competence of other fields of intellectual activity.

Chernyshevsky wrote when Russian achievements in numerous fields were just getting underway, but his view that literature must "take an interest" in all cultural areas explains why characters in Russian novels engage in long arguments about everything from the philosophy of language to the philosophy of history, as in Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, and from ethics and politics to theology and the implications of neurology, as in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*.

Thus for much the same reasons, the greatest works of Russian thought, aside from literature itself, typically take the form of literary criticism. Mikhail Bakhtin's remarkable contributions to philosophy, linguistics, psychology, folkloristics, and ethics occur in books on Dostoevsky, Rabelais, and the theory of the novel. To understand Russian theology and existential philosophy one needs to read Nicholas Berdyaev on Dostoevsky and Lev Shestov on Chekhov. Russian intellectual histories typically focus almost entirely on literary authors and critics, as none would do in England, where that would mean omitting Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith, and Charles Darwin.

Once in the West, Solzhenitsyn was understandably bewildered when Westerners were put off by his moral earnestness, which for him was essential to any significant author. They didn't like "how closely I identified with what I was portraying. In the West nowadays, the colder and more aloof the author, and the more a literary work departs from reality, transforming it into a game . . . the higher a work is esteemed."

He had sinned against both existing literary norms and “political decency.”

The very intellectuals who had once defended Solzhenitsyn condemned him when they discovered he did not share some of their views. They could not entertain the possibility that *they* had something to learn from a very different set of experiences. No, no, it was only *his* experience that was eccentric, while theirs reflected the way things really are! Foolishly, this survivor of Communist slave labor camps revealed himself “to be an enemy of socialism.” Solzhenitsyn recalls a Canadian TV commentator who “lectured me that I presumed to judge the experience of the world from the viewpoint of my own *limited* Soviet and prison-camp experience. Indeed, how true! Life and death, imprisonment and hunger, the cultivation of the soul despite the captivity of the body: how very limited that is compared to the bright world of political parties, yesterday’s numbers on the stock exchange, amusements without end, and exotic foreign travel!”

What most disturbed Solzhenitsyn was a “surprising uniformity of opinion” that life was about individual happiness—what else *could* it be about?—and that it was somehow impolite to refer without irony to “evil.” Still worse, Solzhenitsyn traced this trivializing of human existence to “the notion that man is the center of all that exists, and that there is no Higher Power above him. And these roots of irreligious humanism are common to the current Western world and to Communism, and that is what has led the Western intelligentsia to such strong and dogged sympathy for Communism.” After the Gulag, such ostensibly sophisticated sympathy seemed at best the most hopeless naïveté.

But wasn’t Solzhenitsyn himself once an atheist and a Communist? Indeed he was, and *The Gulag Archipelago* narrates how, bit by bit, he changed his view of life. The book is not only a history but also an autobiography, and because Solzhenitsyn’s experience was shared by so many others, *Gulag* offers itself as a *collective* autobiography. *I* was arrested this way; here are the ways others were arrested. *I* suffered *this* brutal interrogation; *others* underwent these other kinds of torture. As we examine the progress of souls in extreme conditions, a story—or rather a set of closely related stories—unfolds, and these

suspenseful narratives command considerable dramatic interest. One way the book works as literature is as a sort of encyclopedia of possible novels.

Stalin famously remarked: one death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic. Literature exists to make us imagine a million tragedies.

For all prisoners, the first discovery was of unprecedented evil, evil they could never have imagined and in as pure a form as possible. One way Solzhenitsyn conveys this evil is to compare it with earlier supposed embodiments of it, especially the tsarist regime, which, throughout the Western world, was regarded as the symbol of pure oppression. Solzhenitsyn reflects: From 1876 to 1904, a period when Russian terrorists killed many top officials, including Tsar Alexander II, the regime executed 486 people, or 17 per year. From 1905 to 1908—including the period of the revolution of 1905—executions “rocketed upwards” to 2,200, or 45 per month before coming to an abrupt halt. Although terrorists in those years killed more tsarist officials than that—were more sinning than sinned against—such brutality “astound[ed] Russian imaginations, calling forth tears from Tolstoy and indignation from Korolenko.” Of course, from 1917 to the death of Stalin in 1953, 2,200 was about the number of people killed on an average *day*.

Solzhenitsyn often cites the memoirs of the revolutionary R. V. Ivanov-Razumnik, who compared his imprisonment under tsars and Soviets. Under the tsars, interrogation never involved torture, while under the Soviets it was routine. The tsars never thought of arresting relatives of criminals: Lenin remained free and was accepted to higher education although his brother had been hanged for his role in a conspiracy to murder Tsar Alexander III. The Soviets built camps for “the wives of the accused,” and “member of the family of a traitor to the motherland” became a criminal category. In some periods, the children of these traitors were put in orphanages, where most died, while in others they were simply executed. The tsars never conducted arrests at random, but Stalin issued quotas for each district, and Lenin explicitly called for the arbitrary execution of innocent people, since killing the innocent, he explained, would create a terrorized, therefore submissive, population.

Solzhenitsyn's comment about "the tears of Tolstoy" exhibits the peculiar irony with which *Gulag* is narrated. Indeed, the book's closest literary relative is probably Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which is also a masterpiece of history as irony. But even Gibbon never produced passages as savage as this one:

If the intellectuals in the plays of Chekhov who spent all their time guessing what would happen in twenty, thirty, or forty years had been told that in forty years interrogation by torture would be practiced in Russia; that prisoners would have their skulls squeezed within iron rings; that a human being would be lowered into an acid bath; that they would be trussed up naked to be bitten by ants and bedbugs; that a ramrod heated over a primus stove would be thrust up their anal canal (the "secret brand"); that a man's genitals would be slowly crushed beneath the toe of a jackboot; and that, in the luckiest possible circumstances, prisoners would be tortured by being kept from sleeping for a week, by thirst, and by being beaten to a bloody pulp, not one of Chekhov's plays would have gotten to its end because all the heroes would have gone off to insane asylums.

What sort of people were these interrogators and those who directed them? What went through their minds? To understand evil one must probe the souls of evil-doers, and Russian history offered ample material. That question arises frequently in a literary genre Russians invented, the prison-camp novel, beginning with Dostoevsky's harrowing *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1860–1862). But even this experience seems positively balmy compared to Stalin's slave labor camps. The unprecedented Soviet experience prompted memoirists to ask how people could do these things, although the Nazi, Maoist, Khmer Rouge, and other totalitarian regimes that followed did so again.

Compared to Soviet interrogators, Solzhenitsyn observes, the villains of Shakespeare, Schiller, and Dickens seem "somewhat farcical and clumsy to our contemporary perception." The problem is, these villains recognize themselves as evil, and say to themselves, I cannot live unless I do evil. But that is not at all the way things are, Solzhenitsyn explains: "To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good,

or else that it's a well-considered act in conformity with natural law. . . . it is in the nature of a human being to seek a *justification* for his actions."

Why is it, Solzhenitsyn asks, that Macbeth, Iago, and other Shakespearean evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses, while Lenin and Stalin did in millions? The answer is that Macbeth and Iago "had no *ideology*." Ideology makes the killer and torturer an agent of good, "so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors." Ideology never achieved such power and scale before the twentieth century.

Anyone can succumb to ideology. All it takes is a sense of one's own moral superiority for being on the right side; a theory that purports to explain everything; and—this is crucial—a principled refusal to see things from the point of view of one's opponents or victims, lest one be tainted by their evil viewpoint.

If we remember that totalitarians and terrorists think of themselves as warriors for justice, we can appreciate how good people can join them. Lev Kopelev, the model for Solzhenitsyn's character Rubin, describes how, as a young man, he went to the countryside to help enforce the collectivization of agriculture. Bolshevik policy included the enforced starvation of several million peasants, and Kopelev describes how he was able to take morsels of food "from women and children with distended bellies, turning blue, still breathing but with vacant, lifeless eyes," in the ardent conviction that he was building socialism. Other memoirs of this period also describe how a loyal communist at last awoke to what he (or she) did. In this way, the Soviet experience inspired a rebirth of conversion literature, and Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag*, which details his own change from Bolshevik to Christian, is a prime example.

Each conversion memoir reports that change was immensely hard. For one thing, as Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon* (1941) correctly divined, the Party was one's purpose in life and constituted one's whole family. Challenging it was as unthinkable as simultaneously renouncing one's education and all one's friends and relatives. For another, one was taught that Marxist theory was a hard science, and so rejecting it was like denying evolution. This science had purportedly proven that human

sacrifice was as inevitable to saving humanity as surgical cutting is to an operation. To build communism for innumerable future generations of perfect people, the sacrifice of the relatively few, imperfect homunculi of the present was a small price to pay. For that matter, compared to the infinite future, every one alive would be a trivial number. In any case, as it was often phrased, the deaths were caused not by us but by History.

What is more, the people killed were class enemies, which meant that even if they had not committed counter-revolutionary crimes, they were *potential* criminals. Vasily Grossman, the first significant writer to report the Holocaust when he saw it unfolding on Nazi-occupied Soviet territory, was not unique in pointing out that the exact equivalent of the Nazi category of "race" was the Soviet category of "class." Social class, like race, was inherited, not chosen, and could not be changed. In the newspaper *Red Terror*, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the secret police, explained in 1918:

We are not fighting against single individuals. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a *class*. It is *not* necessary during the interrogation to look for evidence proving that the accused opposed the Soviets by word or action. The first question which you should ask him is what class does he belong to, what is his origin, his education and his profession. These are the questions which will determine the fate of the accused. Such is the sense and the essence of red terror.

Or, as one of Grossman's characters observes, "the concept of innocence is a holdover from the Middle Ages."

Solzhenitsyn reports how it was mere chance that *he* did not become supremely evil. When he was finishing his education, he and his classmates were offered the opportunity to do something nobler than physics, a job of great moral importance which also entailed social prestige and material reward: they could attend the nkvd training school. These students had been raised to regard the nkvd as a supremely moral organization. Realizing how close he came to becoming an interrogator himself, Solzhenitsyn reflects: "And just so we don't go around flaunting too proudly the white mantle of the just, let everyone ask himself: 'If my

life had turned out differently, might I myself not have become just such an executioner?' It is a dreadful question if one answers it honestly."

Solzhenitsyn turned down this coveted offer out of some inner intuition "not founded on rational argument. . . . It certainly didn't derive from the lectures on historical materialism we listened to: it was clear from them that the struggle against the internal enemy was a crucial battle front, and to share in it was an honorable task. . . . It was not our minds that resisted but something inside our breasts. People can shout at you from all sides: 'You must!' But inside your breast there is a sense of revulsion, repudiation. I don't want to. *It makes me feel sick*. Do what you want with me. I want no part of it." And yet, he reflects, some of us did join, and if enough pressure had been applied, perhaps all of us would have. In that case, "what would I have become?" The passage that follows is one of the book's most famous:

So let the reader who expects this book to be a political exposé slam its covers shut right now.

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? . . . From good to evil is one quaver, says the [Russian] proverb. And correspondingly, from evil to good.

The contrary view, held by ideologues and justice warriors generally, is that our group is good, and theirs is evil. "Evil people committing evil deeds": this is the sort of thinking behind notions like class conflict or the international Zionist conspiracy. It is the opposite of the idea that makes tolerance and democracy possible: the idea that there is legitimate difference of opinion and we must not act as if God or History had blessed our side as always right. If you think that way, there is no reason *not* to have a one-party state. The man who taught me Russian history, the late Firuz Kazemzadeh, used to say: remember, there are always as many swine on your side as on the other.

A heart is not good or evil once and for all. Sometimes a heart “is squeezed by exuberant evil[;] and sometimes it shifts to allow space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances . . . close to being a devil, at times to sainthood.” We are never closer to evil than when we think that the line between good and evil passes between groups and not through each human heart.

Let me return to the passage in which Solzhenitsyn imagines Chekhov’s characters learning about “the secret brand.” Beginning in mid-1937, *every* interrogated prisoner was subject to torture. Such Soviet practices raise a question that Solzhenitsyn, along with Grossman, Nadezhda Mandelstam, Varlam Shalamov, and other writers have sought to answer: *Why* engage in such practices? What purpose could they possibly serve?

And why make people confess to absurd crimes that the interrogators knew were fabrications? Apart from the few who confessed during show trials, none of these extracted confessions would ever be made public. Think of the manpower and the cost expended for no evident purpose. The question has puzzled many scholars.

Consider Solzhenitsyn’s chapter on how prisoners were transported to camps. Typically, they were loaded into cattle cars—unheated in winter, unventilated in summer—packed as densely as possible, meaning that sometimes there was so little space that some prisoners *hung* between others without their legs reaching the floor. They were barely fed—or fed on salt herring, and not given water. Some days they weren’t fed at all. Soon the prisoners “started to die off—and the guards hauled the corpses out from under their feet. (Not right away, true, only on the second day.) In this way a trip from Moscow to Petropavlovsk took *three weeks.*”

With his trademark irony, Solzhenitsyn repeats that none of this was done to torture the prisoners! What he means, we soon understand, is that such treatment was so routine it did not count as torture. Why treat people like this? If the point was to kill them, it was a lot easier to shoot them straight off, as, in fact, was done to millions. If the point was to

provide manpower for the slave labor camps, as Anne Applebaum has suggested, then why let so many laborers die en route?

To answer this question, one must first grasp Bolshevik ethics. So far as I know, it has no precedent in world history.

Bolshevik ethics explicitly began and ended with atheism. Only someone who rejected all religious or quasi-religious morals could be a Bolshevik because, as Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and other Bolshevik leaders insisted, the *only* standard of right and wrong was success for the Party. The bourgeoisie falsely claim we have no ethics, Lenin explained in a 1920 speech. But what we reject is any ethics based on God's commandments or anything resembling them, such as abstract principles, timeless values, universal human rights, or any tenet of philosophical idealism. For a true materialist, Lenin maintained, there can be no Kantian categorical imperative to regard others only as ends, not as means. By the same token, the materialist does not acknowledge the supposed sanctity of human life. All such notions, Lenin insisted, are "based on extra human and extra class concepts" and so are simply religion in disguise. "That is why we say that to us there is no such thing as a morality that stands outside human society; that is a fraud. To us morality is subordinated to the interests of the proletariat's class struggle," which means to the Party. Aron Solts, known as "the conscience of the Party," explained: "We . . . can say openly and frankly: yes, we hold in prison those who interfere with the establishment of our order, and we do not stop before other such actions because we do not believe in the existence of abstractly unethical actions."

Until recently, I supposed such statements meant that *if* it should be necessary to kill people, then it is permissible to do so. That is what the anarchist Peter Kropotkin had maintained, but the Bolsheviks rejected this formulation as sheer sentimentality. Kropotkin's way of thinking suggests that revolutionaries must meet a burden of proof to overcome the moral law against killing: no more killing than *necessary*. For the Bolsheviks, there was no such moral law. The *only* moral criterion was the interests of the Party, and so they trained followers to overcome their instinctive compassion. Reluctance to kill reflected an essentially religious (or "abstract humanist") belief in the sanctity of human life.

In short, all things equal, violent means were *preferable*. Mercy, kindness, compassion: these were all anti-Bolshevik emotions, and schoolchildren were taught to reject them. I know of no previous society where children were taught that compassion and mercy are vices.

Do unto class enemies what you would not want them to do unto you. That is why, starting in mid-1937, torture became mandatory. What objection could be raised? It was positively good to arrest the innocent. When Stalin assigned arrest quotas, local nkvd branches asked to arrest even more.

Kopelev accepted that hesitation to kill showed "intellectual squeamishness" and "stupid liberalism." In her memoir *Hope Against Hope*, Mandelstam reflects that "the word 'conscience' . . . had gone out of ordinary use—it was not current in newspapers, books or in the schools, since its function had been taken over . . . by 'class feeling.' 'Kindness' became something to be ashamed of, and its exponents were as extinct as the mammoth." *Positive* words now included "merciless" and "ruthless." A good Bolshevik spied on his friends, and children were taught to denounce their parents. A speaker at the Party Congress in 1925, held a year after Lenin's death, reminisced: "Lenin used to teach us that every Party member should be a Cheka agent—that is, he should watch and inform . . . if we suffer from one thing, it is that we do not do *enough* informing."

We sought an explanation for those prisoner cattle cars, but it should now be clear that it is not cruelty that requires explanation but the reverse. To ask the reason for cruelty is to ask the wrong question. People sometimes ask the reason for slavery, but since slavery was practiced everywhere for most of human history, the right question is the opposite one: why was slavery eventually abolished in many places? In the Bolshevik context, it is mercy and compassion that require explanation.

Is it any wonder that many Russians began to accept absolute standards of right and wrong? This was the great conversion. They discovered what Solzhenitsyn calls "conscience" (*sovest'*), by which he means the conviction that good and evil are one thing and effectiveness is quite another. Kopelev, Solzhenitsyn, and others describe the key event of

their life as the discovery that just as the universe contains causal laws it also contains moral laws. Bolshevik horror derived from the opposite view: that there is nothing inexplicable in materialist terms and that the only moral standard is political success.

In her celebrated memoir *Into the Whirlwind* (1967), Evgeniya Ginzburg describes how her nkvd interrogator tempted her to implicate another person who, he said, had already denounced her. "That's between him and his conscience," she demurred, thereby appealing to a moral standard independent of consequences. "What are you, a gospel Christian or something?," the interrogator replied. "Just honest," she said, an answer that provoked him to give her "a lecture on the Marxist-Leninist view of ethics. 'Honest' meant useful to the proletariat and to the state." As a good Leninist herself, she must agree. She has invoked standards that a Christian, but not a committed atheist, would accept.

Gleb Nerzhin, the autobiographical hero of Solzhenitsyn's novel *In the First Circle*, declares: "An objective moral order is built into the universe." A friend agrees: "We ought to spell Good and Evil not just with capitals but with letters five stories high!"

Many, including Solzhenitsyn, took the next step and accepted God. Why not remain an atheist who believes in an absolute moral law? Here again we must understand the thought-shaping power of Russian literature, particularly Russia's specialty, the great realist fiction of ideas. Great novels test ideas not by their logical coherence, as in academic philosophy, but by the consequences of believing them. Novels of ideas—whether by George Eliot or Tolstoy, Joseph Conrad or Dostoevsky, Henry James or Turgenev—exhibit a masterplot: a hero or heroine devoted to an idea discovers that reality is much more complex than the idea allows. For example, a materialist believes that love is nothing but physiology and that individual people differ no more than frogs, yet he falls deeply in love with a particular woman (the plot of Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*). A moralist asserts that only actions, not wishes, have moral value, yet winds up consumed by guilt for a murder he has fostered only by his wish for it (the plot of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*). For Innokenty Volodin, the Epicurean hero of *In the First Circle*, the experience of arrest shows the

limitations of his favorite philosopher's ideas. Epicurus, the great materialist of the ancient world, had said: " 'You should not fear physical suffering. Prolonged suffering is always insignificant; significant suffering is of short duration.' But what if you are deprived for days of sleep in a box without air? What about ten years of solitary confinement in a cell where you cannot stretch your legs? Is that significant or insignificant?"

Volodin recalls Epicurus's words: "Our inner feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction are the highest criteria of good and evil," and only now does he understand them. "Now it was clear: Whatever gives me pleasure is good; what displeases me is bad. Stalin, for instance, enjoyed killing people—so that, for him, was good?"

How wise such philosophy seems to a free person! But for Volodin, good and evil are now distinct entities. "His struggle and suffering had raised him to a height from which the great materialist's wisdom seemed like the prattle of a child."

Thinking novelistically, Solzhenitsyn asks: how well does morality without God pass the test of Soviet experience? Every camp prisoner sooner or later faced a choice: whether or not to resolve to survive *at any price*. Do you take the food or shoes of a weaker prisoner? "This is the great *fork* of camp life. From this point the roads go to the right and to the left. . . . If you go to the right—you lose your life; and if you go to the left—you lose your conscience." Memoirist after memoirist, including atheists like Evgeniya Ginzburg, report that those who denied anything beyond the material world were the first to choose survival. They may have insisted that high moral ideals do not require belief in God, but when it came down to it, morals grounded in nothing but one's own conviction and reasoning, however cogent, proved woefully inadequate under experiential, rather than logical, pressure. In Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*—I regard these stories, which first became known in the late 1960s, as the greatest since Chekhov—a narrator observes: "The intellectual becomes a coward, and his own brain provides a 'justification' of his own actions. He can persuade himself of anything" as needed.

Among Gulag memoirists, even the atheists acknowledge that the only people who did not succumb morally were the believers. Which religion

they professed did not seem to matter. Ginzburg describes how a group of semi-literate believers refused to go out to work on Easter Sunday. In the Siberian cold, they were made to stand barefoot on an ice-covered pond, where they continued to chant their prayers. Later that night, the rest of us argued about the believers' behavior. "Was this fanaticism, or fortitude in defense of the rights of conscience? Were we to admire or regard them as mad? And, most troubling of all, should we have had the courage to act as they did?" The recognition that they would not would often transform people into believers.

Read as autobiography, the key moment of *Gulag* may be Solzhenitsyn's conversation with "a pale, yellowish youth, with a Jewish tenderness of face," named Boris Gammerov. Solzhenitsyn happened to mention a prayer by President Roosevelt and "expressed what seemed to me a self-evident evaluation of it: 'Well, that's hypocrisy, of course.'" Gammerov replied: "Why do you not admit the possibility that a political leader might sincerely believe in God?"

And that was all he said! But what a direction that attack had come from! To hear such words from someone born in 1923! I could have replied to him very firmly, but prison had already undermined my certainty, and the principal thing was that some kind of clean, pure feeling does live within us, existing apart from all our convictions, and then it dawned on me that I had not spoken out of conviction but because the idea had been implanted in me from outside. And because of this . . . I merely asked him: "Do you believe in God?" "Of course," he answered tranquilly. . . . Was it not here, in these prison cells, that the great truth dawned?

The great truth dawned: unexpectedly, astonishingly, this harrowing story of cattle cars and the secret brand has a redemptive ending. A person—not a hero, just a flawed person—finds faith. Everybody has been indoctrinated with the slogan that, in a material world where nothing beyond the laws of nature exists, "The result is all that counts." But camp experience taught that that was a lie. "It is not the result that counts . . . but *the spirit!*" Once you realize this, "then imprisonment begins to transform your character in an astonishing way." You begin to appreciate friendship differently. Recognizing your own weakness, you

understand the weakness of others. When another prisoner relates how he became a Christian, Solzhenitsyn recognizes that when he had been most certain he was doing good he was actually doing evil. He understands "the truths of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the *evil inside a human being* (every human being)." He reflects on prison and on literature:

Leo Tolstoy was right when he *dreamed* of being put in prison. . . . I . . . have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation:

Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!

Gary Saul Morson, the Lawrence B. Dumas Professor of the Arts and Humanities at Northwestern University, co-authored, with Morton Schapiro, *Cents and Sensibility* (Princeton).

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 38 Number 1, on page 4