

ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN'S OVERCOMING PERSONAL, POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL AMNESIA THROUGH LITERARY-AESTHETIC ANAMNESIS

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Abstract: Very few writers have had such an impact on their culture as Alexander Solzhenitsyn on Soviet society in the '60s and '70s. Recently published documents from the KGB archives show the problem he posed to the Soviet leadership—not because he was the only one to point out the massive falsehood and injustice of Soviet society but primarily due to the scathing power of his artistic diagnosis. Many of Solzhenitsyn's writings in fictional, autobiographical, and publicistic genres can helpfully be understood in terms of Plato's struggle in the Athens of his day for a "remembering" or *anamnesis* of what it is to be a human being, a human society, and the cosmos as transparent for divinity. That struggle, even though Plato doesn't use the word "amnesia", was against the refusal to remember. The Austrian writer Heimito von Doderer called that refusal the *Apperzeptionsverweigerung* or refusal to perceive (in his case, regarding National Socialism). Here we'll explore Solzhenitsyn's work in terms of his struggle to remember over against the ideological "refusal to perceive" in the three fundamental dimensions of personal, social and historical existence. Solzhenitsyn expands Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of "polyphonic" characterization as a key technique for articulating his diagnosis of Soviet totalitarianism. The discussion will instantiate what can be seen as his understanding of personal amnesia and anamnesis in *Cancer Ward*, his exploration of social amnesia and anamnesis in *In the First Circle*, and his treatment of historical amnesia and anamnesis in *The Red Wheel* and *The Gulag Archipelago*.
Keywords: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, historical amnesia, memory, Gulag

As late as Nov 29, 1988, well into the Gorbachev period of "glasnost", Suslov's successor and top party ideologist, Vadim Medvedev, "confirmed Solzhenitsyn would remain on the Soviet Union's blacklist of forbidden writers, saying that 'to publish Solzhenitsyn's work is to undermine the foundation on which our present life rests'."¹ As Edward Ericson and Daniel Mahoney write in their introduction to *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*: "No other writer could plausibly claim to have brought down an 'evil empire' built upon the twin pillars of violence and 'the lie'."²

¹ John DUNLOP, "The Solzhenitsyn Canon Returns Home", *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 1992, 4:2, p. 429.

² Edward E. ERICSON JR, & Daniel J. MAHONEY, *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings 1947–2005*, Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006, p. xxxix.

Through the traumas of war, imprisonment, almost fatal illness, and his own taking on the role of an artistic St George versus a mighty totalitarian dragon, he raised the very questions that regime wished obliterated. His counter-thrust to that regime had a political and cultural impact arguably as great as Lenin's. And just as Socrates' readiness to die for the truth gives Plato's dialogues their tragic intensity, Solzhenitsyn's own moral authority as a writer was underpinned by a similar civic courage:

I am of course confident that I will fulfil my duty as a writer in all circumstances—from the grave even more successfully and more irrefutably than in my lifetime. No one can bar the road to truth, and to advance its cause I am prepared to accept even death. But may it be that repeated lessons will finally teach us not to stop the writer's pen during his lifetime?³

§1 SOLZHENITSYN'S LITERARY-AESTHETIC ANAMNESIS

The reason Solzhenitsyn had such an impact in Soviet Russia as well as abroad was because he combined a profound grasp of the effects of communist ideology on human existence with an outstanding aesthetic ability to express this in the language of literature. While a composer like Shostakovich, a painter like the later Malevich, a film director like Tarkovsky, had their own media of sound, colour and film, Solzhenitsyn's medium was the narrative restoration of memory, what Plato called anamnesis, where what's being remembered are the core elements of human existence which had been deliberately suppressed.

In the "Foreword" to his *Anamnesis*, Voegelin indicates how Plato carried out a triple anamnesis, or existential remembering. At the level of the individual human being, in dialogues like the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, where by means of the popular myth of the pre-existence of the soul he articulated his understanding of the essence of human nature which was being forgotten by his fellow-Athenians. In the *Republic*, with his introduction of the myth of the Cave – representing the society's "forgetfulness" of the nature of human community through its unjust behaviour, he "remembers" the nature of social-political existence as rooted in the Good, which will be the basis for a common experience of justice. Finally, in the *Timaeus-Critias* dialogues, he overcomes the forgetfulness of the order of the cosmos, rooted in human existence as attuned to the order of history.⁴

Solzhenitsyn set himself that specifically anamnestic task:

³ "Open Letter to the Fourth Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers" [May 16, 1967] in Leopold LABEDZ (ed.), *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974, pp. 110–16 at p. 116.

⁴ Cf. Eric VOEGELIN, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002, pp. 36f.

To fight against untruth and falsehood, to fight against myths, or to fight against an ideology which is hostile to mankind, to fight for our memory, for our memory of what things were like – that is the task of the artist. A people which no longer remembers has lost its history and its soul.⁵

Many Russians, as diverse as Nadezhda Mandelstam and Alexander Zinoviev, grasped Solzhenitsyn's anamnesis as central to any overcoming an ideologically charged manipulation of historical memory:

I know a very senior KGB official. He carries on a continuous battle against people who read *Gulag*. Yet his son knows *Gulag* by heart. What's the use of fighting in conditions like that! We underestimate the part that Solzhenitsyn has played in our history – he has elevated historical memory almost to the status of a religion. That is now an historical fact. It's a new starting point for calculating the calendar. He has driven such a stake into the tomb of Stalinism that now there can be no going back.⁶

Following Plato then, we'll have a word on Solzhenitsyn's performance of his self-imposed task of representative remembrance for his people through the dimensions of personal, social and historic existence overcoming the ideological repression or willed amnesia of Russian memory of human personhood, and of person-centred society and history. Solzhenitsyn concluded his Nobel Prize speech with the Russian proverb, "One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world", and even more than the word of truth is the person who utters it. Not power, not the lie, but the human person is at the centre of existence: "The Universe has as many different centres as there are living beings in it. Each of us is a centre of the Universe..."⁷

§2 PERSONAL AMNESIA AND ANAMNESIS IN CANCER WARD

Osip Mandelstam wrote ironically in his 1928 essay on "The End of the Novel", that "The measure of a novel is human biography or a system of biographies... The future development of the novel [that is, in Stalin's Russia]

⁵ BBC interview, 1 March, 1976, in *Warning to the Western World*, London: Bodley Head, 1976, p. 16.

⁶ Alexander ZINOVIEV, *The Radiant Future* [Moscow, 1976], London: Bodley Head, 1981, p. 231. Speaking of Solzhenitsyn specifically, in her chapter entitled "Memory", Nadezhda Mandelstam writes: "What counts is that memory has not been totally erased... A country in which people have been engaged in mutual destruction for half a century does not like to recall the past. What can we expect to happen in a country with a disordered memory? What is a man worth if he has lost his memory?" And later: "The value of our main samizdat writer, Solzhenitsyn, is that he restores our memory of time past." See Nadezhda MANDELSTAM, *Hope Abandoned*, London: Penguin, 1976, pp. 190 f.; p. 467.

⁷ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, Nobel Lecture, quoted in: ERICSON & MAHONEY, *op. cit.* pp. 512–26, at p. 526; *The Gulag Archipelago 1: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, London: Fontana, 1974, p. 3.

will be no less than the history of the atomization of biography as a form of personal existence.”⁸

How does Solzhenitsyn overcome this “atomization”? By conveying artistically the process of anamnestic descent into the depth of his own soul and of his meditative ascent towards its beyond. Solzhenitsyn’s preferred mode of articulating his anamnestic work is the expressive form developed by Dostoevsky and critically analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin as the “polyphonic novel.”⁹ In his interview with Pavel Ličko in 1967, Solzhenitsyn stated:

Which genre do I consider the most interesting? A polyphonic novel strictly defined in time and space. A novel without a main hero...How do I understand polyphony? Each person becomes the main hero as soon as the action reverts to him.¹⁰

Bakhtin explains Dostoevsky’s polyphonic technique (which he also found in Platonic dialogue and the Gospels):

It is not a multitude of characters and fates with a unified objective world, illuminated by the author’s unified consciousness that unfolds in his works, but precisely the plurality of equal consciousnesses and their worlds, which are combined here in the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness.¹¹

So Solzhenitsyn indicates how for him *Cancer Ward* is a knot or intersection of polyphonic characterizations, it “is not about a hospital because, *if one uses an artistic approach*, every particular phenomenon becomes, to use a mathematical analogy, a *bundle of planes*, that is, a multitude of life planes intersecting with each other at a chosen point.”¹²

In *Cancer Ward* – set in the period just after Stalin’s death—the clearest example of the forgetfulness or willed oblivion of what it is to be a person is Rusanov, a man of the regime. He tries to cut short the discussion triggered off by another patient’s reading aloud from Tolstoy’s short story, “What Men Live By” with the ideologist’s routine suppression of the core questions of

⁸ Osip MANDELSTAM, *The Complete Prose and Letters*, Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979, p. 199f.

⁹ Mikhail M. BAKHTIN, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* [1929], Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1973; cf. Vladislav KRASNOV, *Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky: A Study in the Polyphonic Novel*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980. For Bakhtin, “In modern times European rationalism with its cult of unified and exclusive reason, and particularly the Enlightenment, during which the basic genres of European prose were formed, abetted the consolidation of the monological principle... European utopianism is also based on this monological principle. Utopian socialism with its faith in the omnipotence of conviction belongs here. Unity of meaning is everywhere represented by a single consciousness and a single point of view.” (*op. cit.*, p. 66)

¹⁰ Quoted in Vladislav KRASNOV, *op. cit.*, 1980, p. 3.

¹¹ Mikhail BAKHTIN, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹² Quoted from Solzhenitsyn’s 1967 interview with Komoto Sedze, in Vladislav KRASNOV, *op. cit.*, pp. 166f.

existence: “There are questions on which a definite opinion has been established, and they are no longer open to discussion.”

A little later, Rusanov notices in *Pravda* that “The whole membership of the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union had been changed... All those who’d administered justice for a quarter of a century – gone, at a single stroke.” Later again, under the affects of sedation, his repressive amnesia of the harm he has done to others begins to disintegrate. Some of his gently chiding victims rise up in his imagination, until finally he gets a telephone call summoning him abruptly to the “new” Supreme Court. However, his forgetfulness of guilt is so effectively in control even of his delirious half-consciousness that this summons only intensifies his self-exculpation: “...he would simply shout at them, ‘I wasn’t the only one! Why put *me* on trial? Name one man who didn’t do what I did. How could he hang on to his post if he didn’t help?’”¹³

On the other hand, there are persons who make the huge effort to recall their humanity. Mortally ravaged yet morally purified, Shulubin’s life-time’s effort to achieve self-transparency is now attaining conscious participation in the transfinite substance of the Whole:

“*Not all of me shall die*”, Shulubin whispered. “*Not all of me shall die*. There’s a fragment, isn’t there?... Just a tiny fragment”, he kept whispering. It was then it struck Oleg that Shulubin was not delirious, that he’d recognized him and was reminding him of their last conversation before the operation. He had said, “Sometimes I feel quite distinctly that what is inside me is not all of me. There’s something else, sublime, quite indestructible, some tiny fragment of the universal spirit. Don’t you feel that?”¹⁴

§3 SOCIAL AMNESIA AND ANAMNESIS IN *IN THE FIRST CIRCLE*

In the First Circle was begun earlier than *Cancer Ward* but took much longer to write. But it’s also a “knot” like *Cancer Ward*, though a much more complicated one. Its relationship with *Cancer Ward* can be seen perhaps in terms of the geography of the two stories. *Cancer Ward* is centred in Tashkent,

¹³ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *Cancer Ward*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, pp. 150, 228f, 234, 235. Rusanov may have eclipsed his humanity, but he has proved unable to abolish it; at least in delirium he is aware that, as Voegelin remarks of Callicles in Plato’s *Gorgias*, “the Judgment of the Dead is the answer to the failure of communication in life.” Eric VOEGELIN, *Plato and Aristotle*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964, p. 30. Bernard LONERGAN in *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, London: Longmans, 1961, gives a technical term for the kind of honest dishonesty by which we knowingly conceal the truth from ourselves: “Let us name such an aberration of understanding a scotosis, and let us call the resultant blind spot a scotoma.” (191) Rusanov’s energetic refusal to face any further questions about his unjust past is his scotosis, the resulting lack of awareness because of the prohibition of relevant questions is the scotoma.

¹⁴ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *op. cit.*, pp. 516–17.

a provincial capital of the great Soviet empire. But just as cancer spreads from a primary tumour to various metastases or secondary tumours, the fatal illness spreading in all directions has its centre, so *In the First Circle* is centred in Moscow.

In a 1967 discussion on *Cancer Ward* with members of the Soviet Writers' Union in Moscow, Solzhenitsyn remarked that "in Rusanov I attack the consequences, and I ought artistically to get down to the causes."¹⁵ To diagnose the primary cancer of Russian communism as destructive of human communion in *In the First Circle* he draws on the *Divine Comedy*. Dante symbolized an entire medieval society along a central axis running from obdurate unlove to essential Love, with a range of characters along this axis in varying degrees of closure (*Inferno*), through painful pilgrimage from closure (*Purgatorio*), to utter openness (*Paradiso*). Through the figures closest to Satan – Judas, Brutus and Cassius – he conveyed the essence of Satan's evil as the betrayal of mutual love. And *In the First Circle*, at the bottom of the infernal circles of increasingly malign authority, Stalin occupies a position equivalent to Satan's in the *Inferno*.¹⁶ In his *Politics* (1262b7) Aristotle pointed out that "Friendship is the greatest good of the polis." So its opposite, betrayal, is at the dead heart of Solzhenitsyn's Stalin:

Distrust of people was the dominating characteristic of Joseph Djughashvili; it was his only philosophy of life. He had not trusted his own mother; neither had he trusted God, before whom as a young man he had bowed down in His temple. He had not trusted his fellow Party members, especially those with the gift of eloquence... In all his long, suspicion-ridden life he had only trusted one man... This man, whom Stalin had trusted, was Adolf Hitler. He had trusted Hitler... That trust had very nearly cost him his own life. All the more reason never again to trust anyone.¹⁷

The apparently absolute zero of unlove and unfaithfulness in Stalin's soul becomes the index of a Soviet anti-community devoid of real communication or communion. Almost everybody in *The First Circle* is under pressure to betray those nearest to them, is invited to share in Stalin's personal hell. Yet some refuse to participate.

In the chapter ironically called "Rendezvous", Nadya prepares for the yearly half-hour visit she is permitted to her imprisoned husband:

¹⁵ Quoted in Leopold LABEDZ, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁶ Gary KERN, "Solzhenitsyn's Portrait of Stalin", in *Slavic Review*, 33 (1974), 1, pp. 1–22.

¹⁷ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *The First Circle*, London: Fontana, 1972, p. 132f. It's interesting to see how accurate Solzhenitsyn's attempt at reconstructing Stalin's inner consciousness is when we compare it with comments made quite independently by Stalin's daughter, Svetlana: "Did I know a single person whose life turned out well? It was as though my father were at the centre of a black circle and anyone who ventured inside vanished or perished or was destroyed in one way or another." Svetlana ALLILUYEVA, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*, London: World Books, 1968, p. 233.

For the present she wanted to shut everything out of her mind except Gleb. She would think of what they were going to say to each other and of that timeless entity which was made up not just of him and of her, but of the two of them together, and which we usually call by that overworked word “love”.

Later, a painter-prisoner, Kondrashov-Ivanov, arguing against Gleb that environment doesn't determine consciousness, nor does it determine faithfulness between lovers, shows him his sketch for the Castle of the Holy Grail. His painting of Parsifal arriving at the Caste of the medieval Celtic legend conveys iconically an answer to the satanic substance destructive of human community. The Holy Grail of legend was the chalice used at the Last Supper, so the painting is an anamnesis of the timeless fidelity of God-Love entering time in the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ. The Gospel account was enfolded into the later legend of the cosmic Round Table becoming the focal point for the brotherly love uniting the knights.¹⁸

Both Nadya and Gleb, despite their separation through his imprisonment, remain faithful to each other. When they meet in prison, each wishes to set the other “free” from the restrictions of their marriage, while secretly hoping they will remain together, so there's a series of misunderstandings, and they separate from each other unhappily.

Soviet society is portrayed in *The First Circle* as the simultaneous co-existence of persons in the hell of betrayal and the heaven of faithful love. So the answer to the *Inferno* of Stalin's anti-world of betrayal is the *Paradiso* of Nadya's and Gleb's faithfulness, all the more heroic when neither can know of the fact of the other's fidelity. In that sense, while *The First Circle* focuses on those good souls unjustly bound by the circles of hell, it shows that they have achieved a spiritual freedom opening them to participation in the mutual love that is the key to Dante's *Paradiso*. Dante's journey from *Inferno* through *Purgatorio* to *Paradiso* culminates in his vision of the mutual love of the Trinity, absolutely opposed to the satanic unspirit of betrayal.

§4 HISTORICAL AMNESIA AND ANANMESIS IN

(I) *THE RED WHEEL*

George Katkov, a distinguished émigré historian, writes in the Preface to his study of the February 1917 Revolution:

The history of the Russian revolution in 1917 has been bedeviled by unconscious distortion and deliberate falsification more than any event in modern history... The major factor in this suppression of truth has been the dependence of the Soviet government and Soviet Communist Party on a conception of the revolution without which its claim to political and national leadership would collapse. Any attempt to give an account of Russia in 1917 at variance

¹⁸ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *First Circle*, pp. 257, 311–13; cf. *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, tr. Pauline MATARASSO, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971, p. 97f.

with the official “Marxist-Leninist” version is considered by the Soviet authorities to be seditious and treasonable.¹⁹

A few years ago, Solzhenitsyn remarked of his historical work “I feel like a bridge thrown between pre-revolutionary Russia and the post-revolutionary Russia to come, spanning the chasm of the Soviet years, a bridge which the train heavily laden with history passes over with great difficulty, so that its precious burden is not lost to the future.”²⁰ That bridge is partly spanned by the 6,000 pages of *The Red Wheel*—which runs from post-1905 revolutionary Russia through the February 1917 revolution to (very briefly) the last year of Lenin’s effective rule in 1922. The bridge is continued with the three volumes of *The Gulag Archipelago* (1918–1956) and could be said to be completed with his various writings from the Gorbachev and the post-Soviet period up to the present.²¹

A comment from *How Readers in the Soviet Union react to August 1914* clearly shows how the first readers of the earlier version of Solzhenitsyn’s *August 1914* were aware of its function as an anamnetic overcoming:

From the first days of the revolution, we have been accompanied by the demon of anti-historicism... Even the science of history, that organ of the social memory, we have all but done away with as unnecessary... And in retribution for all this, our society suffers from a terrible illness – historical amnesia.²²

Solzhenitsyn speaks of this historical amnesia as “a deliberate attempt to break the weave of time, to use Shakespeare’s expression. There’s been a virtual erasing of the memory of what has happened. So that the consciousness of our national identity should re-emerge, I feel it’s most important first of all to restore and correct the record of actual historical events.”²³ And of himself, he’s said: “I wanted to be a memory; the memory of a people doomed to tragedy. It all fitted into the collective epic which I carried in my head.”²⁴

Solzhenitsyn never accepted the Marxist view that history is an impersonal determining force. Rather, he has emphasized, as we saw with Gleb and Nadya, that society is constituted by the kind of people in it, not the other

¹⁹ George KATKOV, *Russia 1917: The February Revolution*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p. xv.

²⁰ *Esquisses d’exil: Le grain tombé entre les meules. Deuxième partie: 1979–1994*, Paris: Fayard, 2005, pp. 118–19.

²¹ Perhaps his two-volume history of the Jewish people in Russia should be included here: *Deux siècles ensemble, 1795–1995, I: Juifs et Russes avant la révolution; II: 1917–1972 Juifs et Russes pendant la période soviétique*, Paris: Fayard, 2002, 2003.

²² *Août quatorze jugé par les lecteurs russes*, trs. Lucille Nivat & Alfréda Aucouturier, Paris: Du Seuil, 1973, pp. 76–77.

²³ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, Unpublished transcription from BBC2 Interview, April 1976.

²⁴ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, “Solzhenitsyn in Zurich”, Interview with Georges Suffert [29/12/1975], *Encounter*, April 1976, p. 10.

way round. This was exactly Plato's point when he wrote in his *Republic*, "society is man written large." For Solzhenitsyn, not only must society be person-centred, but history too. So he writes: "History is us"²⁵ – at the heart of history is the genuine "We", not the ideological "unWe" Zamyatin satirized in *We*.²⁶

The specific new artistic means Solzhenitsyn required was an expansion of his symbolization of society as a knot of intersecting personal "planes" to a new symbolic form of "a cycle of 'knots'."²⁷ This cycle too is constituted by a range of representative characters – some fictional, mostly historical – caught in moments of tragic decision, through whom he conveys a whole people – "its main dramatis persona is Russia as a whole"²⁸ – exhibited in what T. S. Eliot would call "a pattern of timeless moments", yet in danger of extinction as a people.

This 6,000 page "collective epic", has four "knots", *August 1914, November 1916, March 1917* and *April 1917*. In his chapter on *The Red Wheel*, Andrew Wachtel speaks of Solzhenitsyn's "radical innovativeness vis-à-vis the Russian tradition" (of historical writing), and considers that "The *Red Wheel* cycle is certainly the most grandiose attempt to capture historical truth through the intergeneric dialogue of fictional and historical writing."²⁹ Solzhenitsyn assigned "Act One: Revolution" as the overall title for *August 1914, November 1916* and the four volumes of *March 1917. April 1917* has the subtitle, "Act Two: People's Government."

The remaining acts appear only in the final summary as "Act Three: The Coup", "Act Four: We Versus Us", and "Act Five: Forging the Paths". Thus, as it turns out, the structure is that of the five-act *drama-seria* (a tragedy, in fact), without, of course, the formal features of a play or any dramatic tautness. Still, the theatrical terminology does provide an interpretive framework for the cycle as a whole.³⁰

From these titles alone, Solzhenitsyn's reading of these events in Russian history can be understood – Act One deals with the outbreak of the First World War leading up to the February Revolution, in which the Tsarist regime is overthrown; Act Two refers to the debacle of the profoundly ineffective Provisional Government that replaced the Tsarist regime; Act Three subverts the ideological lie that the Bolshevik takeover of power was more

²⁵ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *From Under the Ruins*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974, p. x.

²⁶ Cf Yegeny ZAMYATIN, *We*, tr. Michael Glenny [Petrograd, 1920], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.

²⁷ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, "An Interview on Literary Themes with Nikita Struve, March 1976" in John B. DUNLOP, Richard S. HAUGH, and Michael NICHOLSON (eds.), *Solzhenitsyn in Exile: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1985, p. 301.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 312.

²⁹ Andrew WACHTEL, *An Obsession with History: Russian Writers Confront the Past*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 199.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 200f.

than a *coup d'état*, but in fact a great revolution; Act Four's title refers to the Civil War between the Red and White armies, with its millions of casualties; and Act Five indicates the short few years of relative peace when Lenin had assumed total power.

David Walsh has noted the variation between Dostoevsky's and Solzhenitsyn's spirituality, arising "from their different positions within the cycle of the present crisis":

Dostoevsky lived during the descending spiral and his work is primarily directed toward the struggle that occurs at the bottom of the abyss. Consequently we can look to him for an articulation of the power of Christianity in confrontation with the forces of revolt. More than any other thinker but Nietzsche, he foresaw the maelstrom into which Western civilization was about to descend; but unlike Nietzsche, he discovered within that confrontation the truth of Christ that overcomes the nihilistic lust for domination.

Solzhenitsyn has gone through the catharsis, but his work is primarily directed toward the restoration of order in its aftermath. As a consequence, his view of Christianity strongly emphasizes its moral component, the necessity for personal responsibility and struggle as well as the underlying role of divine grace in overcoming the impulsion toward evil and corruption in existence.³¹

In this context, it's not surprising to see how Solzhenitsyn portrays Zina, representing Russia, as offering a way beyond the tragic participation of Russian society in the self-assertiveness of the Enlightenment.

In *November 1916*, Zina, having lost her lover and her child, finds herself going to the church of Our Lady of Tambov, "a path she had never once taken in her young days". As she makes her way through "the broad empty middle aisle" she sees the image "of God the Father looking down from the clouds", catching a glimpse of "the countenance... of the Lord of Hosts... There was no trace of consolatory tenderness in the Creator's tense expression, but nor could vengefulness or menace have any place there. He Himself was the heaven above us all, and we were sustained by Him."

Walking further up the church, Zina finds herself "facing a large icon of Christ" and looks at "the Savior's brown-tinted face... Zinaida, with her heightened perception, saw that Christ was suffering acutely, suffering yet not complaining. His compassion was for all those who approached him – and so at that moment for her... His eyes could absorb whatever pain there might be – all her pain, as they had absorbed many times as much before, and would absorb whatever pain was still to come... A weight was lifted from her." The congregation in the side chapel of Our Lady are chanting a psalm deeply in harmony with her present state of soul: "For my soul is overwhelmed with calamities, and my life close to the bottomless pit."

³¹ David WALSH, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom*, New York: Harper, 1990, p. 169.

Then she confesses to Fr. Aloni, overcoming her desire to soften the harsh truth, her seduction of a married man, her informing his wife of this in order to have him for herself, her concealing her pregnancy from her mother out of self-love, her leaving her child unattended, resulting in the child's death. And after the priest has pronounced the words of absolution, "She had blurted out all she had to say, however horrible it was she had done all she had to do, and now she crouched with her head pressed to the crucifix, breathless. But another Breath, the Spirit, hovered over her and stole tremulously into her."³²

It may be that this Trinitarian conclusion to *November 1916* is the therapeutic centre to the whole *Red Wheel* cycle, in some sense equivalent to Kondrashov-Ivanov's icon of the Castle of the Holy Grail. In his "Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations", and later in *Rebuilding Russia* Solzhenitsyn has focused on the need for purification and repentance across the whole society if Russia is, like Zina, to be able to free itself from the great rocks weighing its soul down, one by one.³³

(II) *THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO*

Now a word on Solzhenitsyn's Gulag "Odyssey", after the "Iliad" of *The Red Wheel*. Olivier Clément has well described *The Gulag Archipelago* as "a symphonic history in which Solzhenitsyn orchestrates the recollections of 227 ex-prisoners with his own", a history "both personal and collective" with a "liberating *metanoia* as its sole aim."³⁴ In agreement with this is Solzhenitsyn's own remark, in a letter written for the one-volume abridged version of the *Gulag*, that "the main goal, the main sense of *Archipelago* [is] a moral uplifting and *catharsis*."³⁵

The location of the final section of *The Gulag Archipelago* 2, entitled "The Soul and Barbed Wire",³⁶ proves to be spiritually strategic. The quotation from St. Paul which heads the section illuminates that strategy: "Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all die, but we shall all be changed." (1 Cor. 15, 51) The section opens with the linked chapters on "The Ascent" and "... Or Corruption?" Those who belong to the "community of suffering"³⁷, innocent of crime, albeit not sinless, are so purified of all that is merely mortal that

³² Aleksandr SOLZHENITSYN, *The Red Wheel, Knot II: November 1916*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999, pp. 988, 992, 993f, 996f, 999.

³³ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *From Under the Ruins*, 1974, pp. 105–143; *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals*, London: Harvill, 1991, p. 45f; *November 1916*, p. 997.

³⁴ Olivier CLÉMENT, *The Spirit of Solzhenitsyn*, London: Search Press, 1976², p. 173.

³⁵ ERICSON & MAHONEY, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

³⁶ Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 2 (London: Fontana, 1976), pp. 577ff.

³⁷ Cf. Eric VOEGELIN, in his review of Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism", *The Review of Politics* 15 (1953): 68–85, at 68: "The vast majority of all human beings alive on earth is affected in some measure by the totalitarian mass movements of our time... What no religious founder, no philosopher, no imperial conqueror of the past has achieved – to create a community of mankind by creating a common concern for all men – has now been realized through the community of suffering under the earthwide expansion of Western foulness."

they are already ascending towards the immortality of resurrection. Placed at the centre of the *Gulag*, this section effects the transition from death to resurrection, at least for those who are willing to take the hard upward path of spiritual ascent.

(iii) Publicistic and Political Writings and Addresses

The importance of Solzhenitsyn's life and work as enacting an artistic subversion of Soviet ideology, I would suggest, lies in the clarity with which he has penetrated its ideological attack, both physical and cultural, on human existence in its personal, social and historical dimension, from each unique person up to the one family of humankind we all belong to. At the heart of the crisis Solzhenitsyn sees as affecting West as well as East, is man's self-contraction through his denial of his transcendent source. For Solzhenitsyn, as for Plato, the worst *agnoia*, deliberate not-knowing, or most radical amnesia, is the refusal to remember that God, not man, is the measure of all things. At the heart of his Templeton Lecture is a remark he'd hear older people saying, "Men have forgotten God."³⁸

Solzhenitsyn points beyond ideological tyranny – both in its external compulsion and inner surrender – as a way lying primarily within ourselves. And if we're able to make a response to grace, we may go beyond the self-divinization at the heart of the modern totalitarianisms to discover that the God-forsakenness of the ideologies can "provide us with a new point of departure to deepen our understanding of the mystery of Jesus crucified and forsaken as the reply... to the absence-of-God experienced by humans today."³⁹

The well-known passage from his 1978 Harvard Address addresses the closed anthropocentrism that the 1909 *Vekhi* and 1918 *De Profundis*⁴⁰ symposiasts had already diagnosed as central to the Marxist project:

I am referring to the calamity of an autonomous, irreligious humanistic consciousness. It has made man the measure of all things on earth – Imperfect man who is never free of pride, self-interest, envy, vanity... On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. It is trampled by the Party mob in the East, by the commercial one in the West. This is the essence of the crisis: the split in the world is less terrifying than the similarity of the disease afflicting its main sections.⁴¹

³⁸ "Templeton Lecture", London, May 10, 1983, in ERICSON & MAHONEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 576–84.

³⁹ Piero CODA, *Evento Pasquale: Trinità e storia*, Rome: Città Nuova, 1984, p. 48.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Vekhi/Landmarks*, trs. Marshall SHATZ & Judith ZIMMERMAN, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994; *Iz glubiny/De Profundis/Out of the Depths*, tr. William F. WOEHLIN, Irvine, CA: Charles Schlacks Jr., 1986.

⁴¹ "Harvard Address", June 8, 1978, in ERICSON & MAHONEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 561–575, at p. 574f.

I'll leave it to you, most of whom are familiar with Solzhenitsyn's work, to judge whether or not Solzhenitsyn has been successful, in the self-referential words he has Alex speak in his 1960 play, *Candle in the Wind*: "Well, I'd like to help pass on to the next century one particular baton – the flickering candle of our soul."⁴²

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⁴² Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *Candle in the Wind*, London: Bodley Head, 1973, p. 134.