Philosophy and Aesthetics Interaction in S. Aseyev's Book *The Light Path*

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Abstract The article analyzes the book of Stanislav Aseyev, a Ukrainian writer and journalist, dedicated to his memoirs and philosophical reflections related to the author's imprisonment in the concentration camp "Izoliatsia," located in Donetsk that is occupied by Russia, from 2017 to 2019. The purpose of this article is an attempt to characterize the philosophical and aesthetic mechanism of the transformation of memoir discourse into a phenomenon endowed with undeniable artistic content and potential, using hermeneutic and comparative-typological methods. Hence, Aseyev's book is studied in a comparative context along with J. Améry's books *On the Other Side of Crime and Punishment. Attempts of the Defeated to Defeat*, P. Levi's *Is It a Human?*, L. van Eeckhout's *This was in Dachau*, V. Frankl *Saying's Yes to Life: A Psychologist in a Concentration Camp* and V. Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*. As a result, the conclusion was made that, unlike the books of the writer's predecessors, using literary techniques and artistic symbolism, Aseyev's testimony has acquired the character of a particular artistic essay the content of which aims at both witnessing the monstrous crimes and, at least partially, recovering after the severe post-traumatic syndrome, but also at looking into the ontological depths of man and his fate.

Keywords Concentration camp "Izoliatsia"; memoir discourse; comparative context; artistic essay.

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Може, саме це – наш острах, наша зневіра
і пояснюють цю несамовиту мовчанку гірких очевидців,
котрі бачили все, котрі мають свідчити,
співом виказуючи убивць…

Introduction

The book by Stanislav Aseyev, a Ukrainian writer and journalist, *"The light path": the story of one concentration camp,* literary, can hardly claim the status of a work of fiction because the text presents reminiscences and related reflections concerning the author's captivity under the occupation – according to Ukrainian law (see, for example, Reintegration of Donbas) – of the Russian Federation administration in the occupied part of the Donetsk region of Ukraine or, in otherwise stated, as a captive of the terrorist group called "ДНР/DPR".

Aseyev ended up in captivity due to the fact that as a journalist he contributed to such media outlets as the newspaper *Zerkalo Nedeli*, the magazine *Ukrainskyi Tyzhden*, and Radio Svoboda under the pseudonym Stanislav Vasin, truthfully reporting the news of the events which took place on the territory of the "DPR" since 2015.

On June 2, 2017, Aseyev was arrested for his professional activities and charged "with espionage", whereupon he was imprisoned for 31 months, until December 29, 2019, twenty eight months of which he was in "Izoliatsia". As the author writes in the introduction to his book, "'Izoliatsia' [is] a secret prison in the Russian-controlled part of Donbass which is turned into a concentration camp"[2] (Aseyev 221). Therefore, this book does not simply refer to "a secret prison in the heart of Donetsk", but to "a prison that was called the 'Donetsk Dachau'" (223) and in which Aseyev depicted his experiences in Russian, later the text was translated into Ukrainian by Victoria Stakh and published as a separate book, containing both language versions.

It should be highlighted that, according to Aseyev, "this book was conceived as a dry reportage without neither evaluations nor emotions", "but once he was free, [he] realized the impossibility of dry journalism", hence, "when he began writing this book, [he] himself had no idea how many questions it [would] raise", and "when he finished writing it, he could not believe that he had never answered any of them" (224).

1 Perhaps it is our fear, or our disbelief
which explains the heartbreaking silence of the bitter eyewitnesses,
who have seen everything, who must testify,
by singing out the murderers...
Serhiy Zhadan. *Perhaps it is the very moment to start* (Ukr.) (The translation is mine. – F. Sh.)

2 Hereinafter the translation is mine. – F. Sh.

The specific content of Aseyev's book appears sufficient to define the purpose of this article as an attempt to characterize the philosophical and aesthetic mechanism of the transformation of memoir discourse into a phenomenon endowed with undeniable artistic content and potential on the basis of hermeneutic and comparative-typological methods.

Comparative and Theoretical Context

The list of literary works written by former concentration camp prisoners or devoted to this tragic topic is relatively long. However, the choice should be made on the books that are relevant to Aseyev's work to a feasible extent, such as, *This was in Dachau* by Ludo van Eeckhout, *On the Other Side of Crime and Punishment. Attempts of the Defeated to Defeat* by Jean Amery, *Is It a Human?* by Primo Levi, *Saying Yes to Life: A Psychologist in a Concentration Camp* by Viktor Frankl, and Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*.

To explain, such choice is justified by the fact that all these texts, first, are devoted to the experience of staying in concentration camps, second, they are written directly by people who survived these inhumane conditions, and third, in genre terms they are memoirs or testimonies (Malyshev; Ardamatskaya, and others) about their experiences namely genres of documentary-fiction prose or close to it, for instance in Shalamov's work.

From my personal standpoint, it is inappropriate to delve into theoretical studies concerning this complex genre problem, but it is still worth noting that, according to specialists in the field, "the literature of memories, letters, and reflections is a direct conversation about the person". Moreover, "it is like poetry due to the open and insistent presence of the author", therefore "its sharp dialectic is in the freedom of expression and the unfreedom of fiction, limited to what really happened" (Ginzburg 63; see also: Mestergazi 3–4, 8; Kostyukova, and Saini 243; Kryvoruchko 32 etc.)

Comparatively, in his seminal monograph on the Stalinist camps, which is widely reflected in Polish literature, Tadeusz Suharski argues that "the creative act does not deny the credibility of the evidence, although it relieves one from the obligation to adhere strictly to the facts" (125).

To summarize the points of view presented above, it can be concluded that the genre of testimony, despite its obvious documentary nature, nevertheless almost doomed to use a variety of techniques that contribute to a greater or lesser degree to the fictionalization or, more precisely, the implicit de-documentalization of the events presented in the narrative.

Markedly, this is not the first experience of a comparative study of testimony

literature. For this reason, Alain Parrau's monograph *Ecrire les camps* should be mentioned, in which the author turned to a comparative reading of the texts of Primo Levi, David Rousset, Robert Anthelm, Varlam Shalamov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (Parrau) and which, according to Françoise Carasso, "requires our moral, political and aesthetic reflection because it concerns both history and memory, and also the need for artistic and philosophical reflection" (244).

Aseyev's book gives new meanings to this problem, even though the scale of the violence depicted in his text is incomparable to the books on Stalinist and Nazi concentration camps. For example, Aseyev asserts that "in 'Izoliatsia' there were only eight cells, not counting the punishment cells, the 'suite' (a narrow cell without ventilation for two) and the basement". But even when "a second tier of bunks, built in the basement, the prison could hold up to 80 people. However, in the worst times, when people were literally thrown into the cellars wave after wave, no more than 70 people were kept here" (349).

In addition, in the concentration camp in the center of Donetsk, there was no question of the prisoners' national or social background, their political preferences, or even a "death factory", since the physical destruction of prisoners was not one of the tasks of the officially non-existent and institutionally unidentifiable institution.

In this regard, we can conclude that Van Eeckhout's Dachau, Levi's Auschwitz, Frankl's Amery and Shalamov's Kolyma are topoi of embodied death, places the only function of which was to ensure that the more prisoners the better would remain there forever. In contrast, prisoners were not taken to the "Izoliatsia" in order to stay there, but in order for the "Izoliatsia" to remain indelibly in them, despite the fact that they faced neither gas chambers nor grueling labor in forty-degree frost, nor even death from starvation and exhaustion. Nevertheless, Aseyev's book, like those of his predecessors, is an attempt to overcome what cannot be eradicated.

Apparently, unlike his predecessors, Aseyev was not directly threatened with death, but he experienced fall and dehumanization nevertheless. Once free, it took time for him to recover, returning to his human form both mentally and physically. In spite of the obvious difference in the experience, there is a similar cause that gives rise to such a situation. This reason is fear, a phenomenon to which Aseyev devoted an entire chapter with the same title in his book.

Ontology of Fear

In Dachau or Auschwitz, for obvious reasons, fear inevitably determined the condition of the prisoners, moreover, van Eeckhout argues that "the SS men maintained this fear, and their henchmen in the camp followed the method of the

masters" (244).

The paradox, however, was that, as Levi reports, the cultivation of fear in concentration camps led the opposite result in many cases because when the prisoners became "muselmanner", that is "goners", then it was difficult even to "call them alive, it is difficult to call death their death, in face of which they felt no fear, because they were too tired to realize it" (111).

Anyway, this paradoxical dependence, albeit on the contrary, is confirmed by Shalamov, with no mention of prisoners' fear, except for one episode in the story *Typhoid Quarantine* in which the protagonist named Andreev only then "realized that he had no fear and did not value life" (630) when he had a fairly ghostly chance to save his life.

Contrariwise, Aseyev highlights that "fear occupies a special place in the prisoners' life system" in "Izoliatsia" (258). We think that this is not accidental, as there was no immediate and unavoidable threat of death here, although it was not excluded as a result of torture, for example, as it happened when one of the prisoners "had his spleen beaten, with his internal organs damaged", then "three days later the guy passed away" (405). However, the prisoners still had reasons to hope that they would not die, that they would also be released-if not completely, then at least they could be free from "Izoliatsia" due to their supposed future transfer to other places of detention.

Without exception, all authors argue that the flip side of fear was the loss of human dignity. For instance, van Eeckhout, comparing an ordinary prison and a concentration camp, insists that "the concentration camp is primarily and basically designed to suppress human dignity" (8). Nevertheless, even he was forced to admit that, despite the titanic efforts to "preserve dignity", "all of us experienced a moment when preserving that dignity became impossible" (248).

This disappointing conclusion is echoed by Levy, who believes that "there are few people capable of meeting death with dignity" (18). Comparativly, Shalamov ignores the use of the word "dignity" as completely irrelevant one to virtually all Gulag inmates.

On the contrary, Frankl and Amery actively use this concept, offering in one way or another quite slender concepts, the basis of which is human dignity (see, for example, Smirnov; Anastasieva; Galysheva).

As for Aseyev's book, the writer introduces this problem at the very beginning, in the short chapter "For Reference", which precedes even the "Preface", let alone the main text, and dispassionately informs the reader that during the existence of "Izoliatsia" "hundreds of people passed through it, most of whom were subjected to

electric shock torture, rape, humiliation of human dignity and heavy forced labor" (221).

At the same time, in the content of the book, this notion occurs infrequently and mainly in those episodes in which, paradoxically it may sound, the problem of death is discussed not only in the form of suicide, which would be quite natural, but also in the chapter devoted to reflections on the "Experience of Death and Freedom".

Moreover, the specificity of the interpretation of the theme of fear and dignity, their interdependence and mutual influence, proposed in Aseyev's book, unlike his predecessors, is not conditioned by the inevitability of death and the direction from it, but, on the contrary, by the direction toward it. Or, to use philosophical terminology, the authors who left accounts of the Stalinist and Nazi death camps were guided by the principle of teleology, justifiably seeing in death the purpose of the existence of the camp prisoner. Aseyev, in contrast, appeals to the principle of causality, believing beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was through "freedom to leave life", that is to say the possibility that "seemed to [him] the only drop of dignity that each of the prisoners still had here" (299).

Another fundamental difference in Aseyev's views is that if fear can be overcome by the prisoner's desire to regain his human dignity at least partially, then this act is seen by him not as a spiritual feat or as an act of self-sufficiency, but as a possibility of "infinite freedom, which [he] feels while choosing the basement rather than the shard of glass in his hand" (389), in other words, not suicide. Correspondingly, the paradox is that "freedom is a leap into death, which is always one step before it", but this freedom "is only possible when one remains alive. Such is the strange basement dialectic" (388).

It is noteworthy that, using such philosophically motivated inferences, Aseyev does not limit himself to the individual level of the particular prisoner, he formulates broad socio-political or even national-ontological generalizations, according to which "a similar course of thought is also true for the state – if we return to the metaphysical [...] side of the question". We are talking, in particular, "of a State which is consciously prepared to die in a struggle with a stronger rival. A struggle in which, on the face of it, the country has no chance" (390). Yet,

> from the democracies of antiquity to today, also including Ukraine, the highest form of freedom has been connected precisely with the phenomenon of death: either of the whole state or its individual parts. In fact, the basement prisoner, deprived of a chance to win the situation, differs from the ancient Greeks,

ready to die here and now, only by the collectivity of their common experience. (390)

Imaginary Devaluation of Words

As can be seen, no matter how accurate the memories of surviving eyewitnesses may be, their testimonies are not dry documents or dispassionate statistics. On the contrary, they are always a narrative, an account of the events and characters involved in these events, even if they remain nameless, as, for example, in Aseyev's book, who mentioned only the name of Palych, "the master of 'Izoliatsia'" (262), and deliberately, but for various reasons, concealed the names of other executioners, along with the names of prisoners.

Apparently, the absence of names in Aseyev's text can be explained, in particular, by the impossibility for the reader to understand what the concentration camp prisoners had to endure. Thus, Aseyev writes that one of the few cellmates with whom throughout his captivity he "could afford a fairly frank and professional conversation, once told [him]: 'All these phrases they prepare for us on the other side-especially «we understand» are all utter nonsense'" (379). For this reason, the author's cellmate "sometimes feels that after liberation it is better to keep quiet at all" and even "not give any interviews – so as not to confuse people" and not to "put [...] labels" (380) on themselves.

There is another episode in the book in which Aseyev, already freed, "went down to the Kyiv subway for the first time" and experienced "a shock" or "what Buddhists call satori – only in reverse" because he "suddenly realized that [their (prisoners')] experience is not known to anyone" and "moreover – useless, because people do not want to live torture and basement". On top of all that, it "suddenly seemed to him that all those years of screaming and moaning had stretched into one mocking smirk" (400).

This perception echoes the statement of Amery, who wrote that "society is concerned only with self-preservation, it is not moved by a traumatized life, it looks forward, at best wishing that nothing like this would ever happen again" (121).

Thereupon, the desired collision becomes more complicated, as the concentration camp inmate inevitably tries to live out the terrible and humiliating experience, only occasionally resorting to words, but even words are powerless before the incredible task that they must solve.

Nevertheless, in the proposed context it is not quite clear what task we are talking about. In particular, even in chronological terms, in the first of the analyzed

books, Frankl's book *Say Yes to Life! Psychologist in a Concentration Camp*, which was published in 1946, its author specifies in the preface that "it is a story more about experiences than about real events", and that "the purpose of the book is to reveal, to show the experiences of millions of people", to show "the concentration camp seen 'from within', from the perspective of someone who personally experienced everything that [...] will be told about" (27) in this book.

Similar motifs can be found in Levi's book *Is It a Human?*, which came out only a year after Frankl's book, in 1947. Besides the author's statement that his book "was not written to make new accusations; rather, the facts it contains can serve as a dispassionate study of certain features of the human soul" (8), Levy states that "the main impetus for writing the book was an attempt at inner liberation" (9).

Van Eeckhout, in his book *This was in Dachau*, written in 1976, focuses even more on the individual experience because he is convinced "that even the life of a single person in the camp deserves attention" (7). Therefore, having survived a concentration camp, he later concluded "that [his] duty is to be a witness" (7).

Whereas, Amery, who had remained silent for more than twenty years after the end of World War II, admitted in the preface to his 1966 book *On the Other Side of Crime and Punishment…* that he "planned an unhurried, rational essay, instead, a confession full of subjective reflection has emerged" (10). As a result, "confessing and reflecting, [he] came to explore or, if you will, to describe the essence of existence in the role of the victim", to describe "how it is to deal with a trampled, enslaved man, that is all" (10).

The searches of Shalamov lie on a completely different plane, for whom, according to Diana Ardamatskaya, "literature is an event, a way of life of the author in a literary text" (142). Therefore, Shalamov does believe that "the death, the collapse of the novel, the story, and the novella is the death of the novel of characters, descriptions. Everything invented, everything 'composed' – people, characters – everything is rejected...", as a result of which there is "an inevitable gap between the reader and the writer" (132).

Consequently, another similarity between the books under the analysis is the desire of their authors both to tell about the events they participated in and witnessed and also to try to share their inner individual experience gained in connection with those events. However, it turns out that this experience of impossibility can become possible only owing to the unlimited artistic potential of the word.

The aforementioned things, combined with Aseyev's assertion that "borderline experience can hardly be comprehended" (407), can help to follow, at least partially, this author's narrative strategy of making philosophical sense of traumatic

experience, which claims that it can be understood, paradoxically, does not guarantee the latter, since "knowledge is not enough to understand" (410). For this reason, philosophical reflections themselves become a weighty element of Aseyev's discourse, for

> we have to understand that life is not totally unfair, perhaps the situation is even worse [...] Well, you used to live within a set of meanings understandable to most, namely home, career, family. Then suddenly, one day, you find yourself in a basement, stripped naked, with wires in various parts of your body. This does not fit into any generalization, no theory explains why this happens [...] So, several years go by. And, then a bright light comes: this is freedom. It is a situation that may be in some ways more complicated than yesterday's basement. A person who has experienced such a thing is completely devalued in time: he does not understand either the past or the present, which was once taken from him, and taken away in a single day. Do you have to start all over again? What for? And how, if no one, even your dearest and nearest, can picture what you have been through, while the 'new life' fits into a travel bag and offers to fill out a couple of formal papers? (409-410)

In this situation, when the author "fails to force himself not to think", he realizes that he has "another salvation-these words", with which he "can write it all down". Of course, "it's not much, but it's something. To reconcile oneself to this absurdity, to become part of it, and to absorb it with your life, making yourself to create meaning in it, is the general plan" (Aseyev 412). Equally important, the concrete realization of this plan requires a detailed analysis, which should begin, first of all, with the composition of "these words", framed in a certain way.

Repertoire of Composition

The first feature that characterizes the composition of Aseyev's book is the preservation of the general chronological sequence of the chapters that make up the book, in the sense that the narrative begins at the beginning, that is, with the author's arrival in an "air conditioned concentration camp" (230), and ends when he is already at liberty both physically and metaphysically, as the author ends his narrative by being "in Europe", where in general "another world, and it is in a way luxurious" (413).

At the same time, the internal arrangement of the chapters is not determined by chronology but by the key themes and knots of meaning, that are important

both in terms of the author and his attempts to reflect on his experiences, and in terms of informing the potential reader of what the author has gone through. In this regard, the seemingly chaotic arrangement is compensated for by the significance of questions, for example, about "absolute evil" or "humor in captivity", "why there was no rebellion", or about "sex in 'Izoliatsia'", included in the chapters of the same name in Aseyev's book.

One cannot but notice the similarity between this composition and that of the books by Primo Levi, Viktor Frankl and Jean Amery, the only difference being that the latter does not describe events, but presents only reflections on "resentment" and the "necessity and impossibility of being Jewish" or the question of "how much homeland does one need?".

The fundamental difference between Aseyev's book and Ameri's one is that the latter pushes back from his own experience to address certain universal problems, which, for example, "in connection with the social function of the spirit or its absence, a Jewish intellectual with a German cultural basis has" because "whatever he turns to, nothing belongs to him but to the enemy" (Ameri 29). Or, "that resentment is unnatural, also logically contradictory" (Amery 118-119), because "it nails us firmly to the cross of a ruined past", moreover, it "makes the absurd demand to make the irreversible reversible, the accomplished to the undone" and "blocks the exit to the human dimension proper, to the future" (Ameri 119).

On the contrary, Aseyev seeks universal formulas to make sense of his own experience. Thus, it is particularly evident in the chapters of the books with almost identical titles – "Torture" in Ameri's work and, respectively, "Torture: How It Was" in the book by the Ukrainian author.

In particular, Ameri, first, asserts that "when talking about torture, it is inappropriate to brag" (50). Second, despite the fact that he "has not had red-hot needles driven under his fingernails, nor burnt cigars extinguished against his bare chest", Ameri is still convinced that "torture is the most terrible thing a man can keep within himself" (51). Third, "with the first blow that [...] strikes" a man, "he loses something", and "tentatively, perhaps, one might call it trust in the world" (59). Fourth, "torture was not an invention of National Socialism. But it was its apotheosis" (59), because "Hitler's fascism was not an idea at all, but only evil", unlike communism, which, according to Ameri, "was able to de-Stalinize", whereby "today there is no more torture in the Soviet sphere of influence, according to unanimous reports" (64).

It appears unlikely that Aseyev could agree with the latter thesis, because in fact, "in the Soviet sphere of influence" no one and never, except in words, refused

to use torture. Apparently, the forms and scale of torture may have varied, however they never ceased, being poorly masked by hypocritical and brazen lies, as it was evidenced precisely by the book by the Ukrainian author, which attests that in "the 'underground [world]' Donetsk" "Ninety-nine out of a hundred people are tortured" (Aseyev 314).

Nonetheless, the most important conclusion that emerges from Aseyev's torture experience is that, in the world he describes, torture is not some anomaly, aberration or deviation, on the contrary, it is an integral and largely defining part of this world, the "Russian world" (231) which occupied the Ukrainian city of Donetsk. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Aseyev "was stunned when [he] was seated in handcuffs on a chair next to a window overlooking one of the central boulevards" (312). And "this absurdity, placed on a single piece of urban space, will strike [him] more than once more", for "while [his] muscles will painfully contract" under the influence of the electric current, "trees will still be visible outside the window (they will even remove the bag from [his] head before torture), the May sun will still shine, and people will wait for their bus at the bus stop a little further away" (313).

As explained by Aseyev, "the task of those who torture is not so much to cause physical suffering as to break you as a person, above all, your will" (318). "Of course, if we are not talking about outright sadism, that is, torture for the sake of torture, which was quite often practiced both in 'Izoliatsia' and in general in the 'MGB'[1]" (318) and which seems to be another proof of not only the absurdity, but also the absolute evil embodied by the "Russian world".

In other words, Aseyev, unlike his predecessors, depicts an evil that is not placed far to the outside, which takes time to reach by some form of transportation, since in the case of this type of evil, the latter is nearby, in the city center, without hiding, because it is the very center that determines the life of all of society.

These circumstances reveal another fundamental difference between Aseyev's book and those of his predecessors. The matter is that, while describing the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, both Ameri and other authors constantly kept the pre-camp world in mind, and their books could also be possibly written because they themselves were lucky enough to find themselves in the post-camp world, which of course had nothing to do with the world of the concentration camp. Shalamov's prose stands out in this sense because in his view – in the view of a man who spent a total of 16 years in prison at Kolyma – a non-camp world does not exist.

1 "MGB" is the name of the "secret police" in the Russian-occupied part of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine; the name corresponds to one of the names of Stalin's NKVD, which was called "Ministry of State Security" in 1941 and from 1943 to 1953.

As Galina Zhilicheva articulates, perhaps Shalamov sees hell in the camp and therefore resorts to the "strategy[s] of Pluto" of "getting out of Hades and taking it with him" and then "dissolving" it by "transforming it into literature", because "one cannot aestheticize hell by traditional means" (101).

Aseyev does not even think of anything like that, because even as a so-called "minus-perception" (Zhilicheva 98), the image of hell in relation to "Izoliatsia" is neither relevant, nor simply appropriate. In Aseyev's description, the cruelty of the world that has come to the Ukrainian land is immanent to the essence of this world and, at the same time, daily in its form, and therefore devoid of mythological or, even more so, poetic potential, which is paradoxically further demonstrated by the fact that Palych had another nickname, "Hades". Therefore, Aseyev is inclined to a completely different choice, explaining that "a man who has long wandered in the labyrinths of depression and despair, sooner or later still comes to the need to sum up ontologically, philosophically..." (309).

In many ways, this is the result of the book under analysis, for from the very first sentence, in which the author confesses that he "is still not sure he is choosing his words correctly" (223), he is in a relentless search for the meaning of what happened to him. But he finds no answer, because

> people cannot [continue to film [on video cameras] their crimes for six years with impunity, with the irony of every UN report. Or can they? Or if they can, 'Izoliatsia' is the answer to what our world is all about. All the senselessness, all the cruelty and injustice is concentrated right here at 3 Bright Path Street. Without punishment, without retribution, with laughter at us, the defeated. (227)

In the meantime, this answer, concerning "Izoliatsia" and "our world", only partially addresses the question of one of the defeated. Another problem is that "many amuse themselves with future eternal judgment", but Aseyev is not one of them as he believes only "in the laughter of those people in the basement when they tape someone to a table" (227). On the other hand, he is also alien to resentment since his "feelings for them are not just hatred: they are deeper. One can forgive those people whom one hates, but this place stands outside all meanings, including forgiveness" (227).

Typology of Symbolic Collisions

In this connection, Aseyev's text unfolds the endless mystery of a man either waiting to be taped to a torture table or already lying on that table, for example,

"with an electrode in his anus" (304). If one turns to the titles of the chapters that make up Aseyev's book, without knowing the content or going deeper into the text, one might get the impression that the reader is not facing a story about the "Donetsk Dachau" (223), but rather a philosophical treatise that addresses issues related to the terminological apparatus (Chapter 2. "'Izoliatsia' and 'concepts'") and with the categories of time (Chapter 5. "Time of the Quiet", Chapter 7. "Time in Captivity"), evil (Chapter 4. "Absolute Evil"), God (Chapter 16. "God Behind Bars"), death and freedom (Chapter 21. "Death Experience and Freedom").

Moreover, a third of the chapters are titled as polemical questions worthy of the highest worldview debates (Chapter 8. "The Blue Lamp: Kill Yourself or Not?", chapter 14. "Why There Was No Revolt", or Chapter 18. "Who Are These People?"), and the remainder, such as chapter 3. "Fear" or chapter 12. "Escape", are problematized substantives that also open up an endless philosophical discourse for interested disputants.

But the main content of the discourse sought is found, of course, in the text of the book, on one of the first pages of which Aseyev categorically states that "here [in 'Izoliatsia'] everything is symbolic" (231). It is difficult to accept such a characterization for a concentration camp, but in this case it is exactly one of those narrative strategies that the author of the book under analysis chooses, differentiating them into appropriate types.

Given these points, the first type of symbolism, subject to philosophical reflection, could be defined as *socio-historical*, because "if you walk through 'Izoliatsia' without a bag or bag on your head [....] you will see pictures of Lenin hanging right at the bottom of the basement" and which irrefutably testify that "with the arrival of the 'Russian world' and the FSB to Donetsk Lenin and his 'Shining Path' won", whereby "the road to communist paradise once again turned into a basement and hell" (231).

With certain reservations, the "criminal world in its harshest forms, like the 'special' regime", should be included in this type too, because, according to Aseyev, "it is as much a world of symbols as, say, a temple" (240). After all, the reference to this specific community was necessary for the author because some of the prisoners in "Izoliatsia" were convicted not under "political" but under criminal articles, besides emphasizing to an even greater extent the cardinal difference between concentration camps and ordinary places of confinement. In particular, as follows from the text of Aseyev's book, even the absurdity of the "notions" adopted among the criminals was no comparison with the fact that "any order or rule of the administration-even an absurd one-should be strictly obeyed" (243).

On this basis the author makes quite a philosophical conclusion that "the rules of the familiar [...] world did not work here", and "the prisoner's identity was being destroyed", and "he no longer understood who and where he was, how to behave in a place where the outward form resembled a prison and the content a mixture of a madhouse and an army" (245).

Significantly, the key word in these reflections should be defined as "absurdity", which generated "the greatest hatred of 'Izoliatsia'" (Aseyev 252) even among criminals. The outlined disposition forces us to recognize that in this case we are talking about an implicit refutation of existential ideas by one of their most talented adherents, Albert Camus. The fact is that, as Alexei Rutkevich professes, the French philosopher's essay "*The rebellious man* is a story of the idea of rebellion, metaphysical and political, against the injustice of human destiny" (Rutkevich 17). But the problem is that in the "Izoliatsia" "not a single case of mass disobedience of the administration ever occurred" (Aseyev 307), although it would seem that injustice as well as absurdity did not abound in the fate of the Izoliatsia's prisoners. Yet, regarding the category of absurdity, Aseyev's book categorically rejects the position of Camus, who argued that "accepting the absurdity of life allows one to become completely immersed in it" (Camus 89), and "it may happen that a sense of absurdity is born of happiness" (Camus 19).

In the Donetsk Dachau, the concept of "justice" was totally annihilated, and absurdity was indeed born out of happiness – out of the happiness associated, for example, with the fact that when at some point "several people" had to be transferred from "Izoliatsia" "to the Donetsk 'central prison'", that is, sent to just an ordinary prison, "there was an atmosphere in the cell comparable only to Christmas" (Aseyev 225).

To be fair, it should be noted that Aseyev refutes the philosophical constructions of Camus, as well as the concepts of many other authoritative intellectuals. Particularly revealing in this respect is the failure of the certainly interesting and noteworthy ideas of Konrad Lorenz, a former concentration camp inmate, who devoted one of his works to the problem of aggression.

In particular, Lorenz writes that "one can probably only truly hate something that one once loved and still loves, even though one denies it" (276). But such a maxim does not stand up to criticism even after we learn that both the criminals and Aseyev himself have an incomparable "hatred of 'Izoliatsia'" (252), that is, of an institutional phantom that "officially did not exist" (253).

Thus, we can speak of another type of symbolism namely the *absurdist-existential*, which serves to characterize existence in "Izoliatsia", which is deprived

of even elementary meaning, because here "linear logic did not work, there was no 'if A, then B'" (Aseyev 351), but existence that is more than significant for both prisoners and their executioners.

To demonstrate, it is particularly revealing in this sense the episode of Palych's arrest, who "in February 18 [...] was finally locked in the cellar himself" (Aseyev 262), and such parallel multivalent symbolic details as a balaclava or a plastic bag on his head.

Balaklavs were used by representatives of the concentration camp administration, hiding their faces for security reasons, so that prisoners could not identify them and later themselves or with the help of their relatives or friends would not avenge these executioners for all their suffering, since "most of them were united in one thing: if given the chance to take revenge, no one would think for a second" (Aseyev 307).

As for the sacks and plastic bags, this was an obligatory attribute for a large proportion of the prisoners, who were not allowed to remove these bags from their heads even when they had to move around outside the cell, and who, with the bags on their heads, were disoriented the whole time, their sense of fear increased exponentially.

Besides, this was not the only link between the executioners and their victims because, as Aseyev accentuates, "in the faces of these men in balaclavas you reflect yourself, realizing that in a moment of torture or just their laughter you are ready for even harsher things than they do to you" (307).

From these observations we can conclude that the configuration of the relationship between the two, conventionally speaking, social groups in this type of concentration camp differed significantly from the Nazi or Stalinist concentration camps in both the different social structure and the existential nature of the relaying between them namely relays whose participants posed mutual and real mortal danger to each other.

To put it differently, the meaning of this existential disposition was that all those involved in it were inevitably divided into two categories, one of which was to torment the other, but they could easily swap places at any moment. Thus, in the outlined perspective, it was no longer a question of differentiation into the so-called "superior" and "inferior" or "insiders" and "outsiders", but of a certain way of life that initially assumed precisely this kind of relationship and reminded us that they could be or had once been different, only balaclavas, bags and sacks concealing faces and eyes.

In this regard, another extremely important type of symbolism in Aseyev's

book is the *ontological* type, expressively presented throughout the text, but most vividly in the chapters "Absolute Evil" and "God Behind Bars". Given the common meaning of these two titles, indicating a kind of implicit absolute, it is perhaps worth beginning with the last chapter, because "the scraps of wallpaper on the walls, the dim light, the screams and groans" all "proved to weigh more heavily than all Kantian ontology", because, according to Aseyev, that is, the man in the concentration camp at the time, "if God is ubiquitous, then he stands now also in the 'monitor'. [...] and just watching people being tortured with a smile" (362). Nevertheless, the author offers his own essentially blasphemous understanding of religiosity, believing that "by religion" one should "mean being filled with meaning" (365), for "meaning is the key to freedom", and therefore "it does not matter what exactly to believe in a place where, apart from faith, there is nothing left at all" (364).

But if Aseyev had confined himself to these reflections, his philosophical efforts would not have been as convincing as they appear after the story that illustrates these philosophical theses and tells the story

> how a man was once handed a piece of paper from his beloved wife. It was a small note with words of encouragement, which he could not read without his glasses. In the first evening alone, [the narrator] read the three sentences to him a dozen times. What's more, his spouse guessed to lipstick her mouth and pressed her lips to the sheet of paper in several places as if she had been kissing him. What happens to a man when he gets here such a seemingly small thing! Everything around bothered him no longer because he literally glowed as he was looking at the note and listened to her words. No prayer or icon here achieved such an effect. (365)

Something similar can be observed in the chapter "Absolute Evil", in which the one who embodies such evil, "that famous sadist" (Aseyev 267), that is, Palych, appears as some "man lounging around on the couch in shorts, a T-shirt and some shower slippers" (Aseyev 266). But it is he, who at first glance seems non-threatening and even amusing, who, in Aseyev's opinion, is the ultimate evil, because we are talking about "people who before this war walked with us on the same streets [...] people who even now walk on these streets without balaclavas, not giving away the fact that yesterday someone was tortured" (376).

However, the author of the book extends it, recalling Palych's words that "this whole war is held by people like [him (Palych)]. Those who can get over everything, such as yelling, sniveling, articles..." and that he is "a god, a head, and a judge

here" (271). Yet, Palych's "god" was somehow ambivalent, because as an alleged celestial, the temporary, as it turned out, "master" of the "Izoliatsia" "hated [the prisoners] for being a prisoner here himself: wallowing in [their] blood, he could not afford to go even outside the factory, fearing the revenge of those he had once tortured", and so "he lived on the second floor, just above [the prisoners], repeating from time to time: 'It's not you who are sitting with me, it's me who's sitting with you'" (263).

This example of either dialectical thinking or black humor, which correlates quite well with something similar, but already authored by prisoners, when "someone even suggested opening an 'Izoliatsia' cafe after liberation – in some basement, where waiters would wear masks and camouflage, and visitors would be banged on the iron doors with a cry: 'Beasts, come alive!'" (Aseyev 373). In short, a correlation of this type allows extremely complex issues to be viewed not only from a philosophical perspective, but also to give them obvious artistic meaning.

Conclusion

"Surprisingly", Aseyev's "philosophical education" "came in handy" in "Izoliatsia" (Aseyev 359), then for writing a book that, through numerous philosophical reflections and, unlike the books of his predecessors, acquired the character of a kind of artistic essay. Its content, on the one hand, testifies to the crimes against humanity and to the criminal and misanthropic nature of the "Russian world", which extrapolated the metaphysics and meaning of its own existence into some complete social form of a concentration camp, as a natural and adequate continuation and realization of the foundations of national existence of this world. On the other hand, the content of Aseyev's book asserts a completely different ontology.

Aseyev reasons that the meaning of this "new" ontology is defined, first, by the total impossibility of elementary social, let alone ethical, norms, and, second, by the indiscriminate brutality as something self-valuable or, better said, as a modern "thing in itself. And, the indivisibility and triumph of this brutality is due both to the power of the entire state machine and to the intents of ordinary, unremarkable citizens, because concentration camp, torture and mockery – "it was not done for 'state security', on national or religious grounds, it was done to the military, carriers, businessmen and doctors-it was done to everyone. And just like that" (Aseyev 377).

In the final analysis, Aseyev's book is a philosophical and artistic attempt to bear witness to the monstrous crimes, at least in part to overcome the consequences of the severe post-traumatic syndrome and, perhaps most importantly, to use literary techniques and artistic symbolism to look into the ontological depths of man.

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