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Criminalizing Creativity: Language, Performance, and the Representation of Convicts in Imperial and Soviet-Era Prisons and Penal Colonies

Narratives of the Soviet labour camp experience frequently incorporate comparisons with the works of their pre-revolutionary counterparts, in particular Fedor Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from the House of the Dead*, 1861), which is generally considered the foundational text of the genre of Russian prison writing.[1] While certain writers, such as Gustav Herling, view the relationship between the two eras as primarily one of continuities, most Gulag survivors emphasize instead the differences between the Soviet and tsarist penal systems. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn comments, in one of a number of such references in *Arkhipelag GULag* (*The Gulag Archipelago*, 1973):

> Что до омской каторги Достоевского, то там вообще бездельничали, как легко установит всякий читатель. Работа у них шла в охотку, впритруску […]. После работы каторжники «Мертвого дома» подолгу *гуляли* по двору острога – стало быть не примаривались. Впрочем, «Записки из Мертвого дома» цензура не хотела пропустить, опасаясь, что *легкость* изображенной Достоевским жизни не будет удерживать от преступлений. И Достоевский добавил для цензуры новые страницы с указанием, что «*все-таки* жизнь на каторге тяжка»! (Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie*, 5:186).[2] [3]

[1] For more details on references to Dostoevsky in Gulag narratives, see my blog, "Dostoevsky and the Gulag."

[2] The author's source for the claim that Dostoevsky amended his manuscript in this way is a letter from I. A. Gruzdev to Maksim Gor'kiĭ, in *Arkhiv Gor'kogo* (11:157).

[3] As for Dostoevsky's hard labor in Omsk, it is clear that in general they simply loafed about […]. The work was agreeable and went with a swing […]. After work the hard-labor convicts of the "House of the Dead" would spend a long time strolling around the prison courtyard. That means that they were *not* totally exhausted! Indeed, the Tsarist censor did not want to pass the manuscript of *The House of the Dead* for fear that the *ease* of the life depicted by Dostoevsky would fail to deter people from crime. And so Dostoevsky added new pages for the censor which demonstrated that life in hard labor was *nonetheless* hard! (Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag*, 200; translation amended).

On the subject of hard labour in his tale "Tatarskiĭ mulla i chistyĭ vozdukh" ("The Tartar Mullah and Fresh Air," 1955), Varlam Shalamov puts it more succinctly: "Время Достоевского было другим временем, и каторга тогдашняя еще не дошла до тех высот, о которых здесь рассказано"[4] (Shalamov, 1:129).[5] In particular, Shalamov sees the status, behaviour and social hierarchies of the professional criminals as a notable difference between the two systems, as he describes in the story "Ob odnoĭ oshibke khudozhestvennoĭ literatury" ("On an Error of Artistic Literature," 1959?): "с блатными Достоевский не встречался. […] По-видимому, в каторге Достоевского не было этого "разряда". […] Ни в одном из романов Достоевского нет изображений блатных. Достоевский их не знал, а если видел и знал, то отвернулся от них как художник"[6] (Shalamov, 2:8-9).

In terms of the historical context, this perception of a discontinuity between pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era prison conditions is correct. The *Vory v zakone* (thieves in the law), the secret fraternity of professional criminals akin to the Japanese Yakuza or Sicilian Mafia that operated in the Stalinist Gulag, were a twentieth-century phenomenon, albeit with antecedents in the pre-revolutionary period (Varese, 14-15). The elaborate code of "honour" professed by an established network of "thieves in the law" that adopted a deliberately outcast position through their refusal to participate in society's institutions was therefore not a feature of tsarist prison life (Varese, 10; Chalidze, *Criminal*, 35; Glazov, 40).

However, I would argue that with respect to literary depictions of creativity in the context of Russian prison life, and particularly the role of language in the construction of the criminals' identities, there are more similarities than differences between Imperial and Soviet-era texts. The aim of this article is to examine the effect of contact with the criminal population, from the peasant convicts and vagrants (*brodiagi*) of the Imperial era to the non-political convicts and professional thieves that populated Soviet prison colonies, on the artistic personae of four writers: Dostoevsky, Vlas Doroshevich, Shalamov and Andrei Siniavsky (Abram Terts). Focusing on the preoccupation with criminal language shared by both pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era writers on labour camps and the carceral system, the analysis will also explore two parallel lines of development of this theme. For Dostoevsky and Siniavsky, a sense of identification with the verbal creativity of criminals posits a

[4] "Dostoevsky's time was a different time, and *katorga* [penal servitude] then had not yet reached the heights described here."

[5] For Shalamov's stories, dates of writing are also given where known; question marks following dates indicate that the year given in the collected works has been deduced by the editors. Translations of Shalamov's works are my own.

[6] "Dostoevsky never encountered thieves […] Apparently, in Dostoevsky's *katorga* this 'category' did not exist. […] In not a single one of Dostoevsky's novels is there any representation of the thieves. Dostoevsky did not know them, or if he did see them and know them, then he turned away from them as an artist."

connection between freedom and the artistry inherent in the playful use of language. For Doroshevich and Shalamov, by contrast, a critique of convict creativity as lacking true emotion or artistry denies any possible identification with criminals, and associates creativity with the very crimes the artist-convicts commit. In both cases, however, connections between the convicts and artists as outcasts contribute to the reshaping of the authors' identities, as well as their work.

Representation of convicts' verbal play in Dostoevsky and Terts

Whilst in the Omsk stockade, Dostoevsky collected examples of the prisoners' speech in his *Sibirskaia tetrad'* (Siberian Notebook), which he later incorporated in his fictionalized memoir *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma*. He viewed this component as an essential part of his artistic plan; a letter to his brother of 9 October 1859 emphasizes that giving voice to the prisoners themselves is what endows his narrative with the authenticity that makes it unique (Dostoevskiĭ, *Polnoe*, 28/1:349).[7] Over a hundred years later, Andrei Siniavsky's *Golos iz khora* (*A Voice from the Chorus*, 1973), the product of his own incarceration written under the name of his alter ego Abram Terts,[8] likewise interpolates genuine examples of the convicts' speech between his musings on multiple subjects evoked by the camp experience. The two texts are in many ways very different, as Terts' collection of reflections on aspects of Russian culture and the process of artistic creation is very far removed from the largely chronological narrative form employed by Dostoevsky. However, the inclusion of the words of the criminal, rather than the political, convicts who lived alongside the authors, gives voice in both texts to a community that is seldom heard, and indicates a common approach.[9] This is particularly evident in the emphasis on the creativity of the criminals' verbal play.

In both works, the criminals' utterances frequently appear nonsensical. This sense is heightened in Terts because of the presentation of the "chorus," as he describes the collection of overheard phrases of anonymous convicts, which he intersperses in his own writing.[10] This deprives words of their

[7] The commentary and notes to *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* give full details of the use of this notebook (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:301-10).

[8] The name Abram Terts was '[b]orrowed from Abrashka Tertz, a legendary Jewish outlaw whose exploits were celebrated in a thieves' song popular in Odessa in the 1920s' (Nepomnyashchy, 1).

[9] I discuss a different aspect of Dostoevsky's depiction of the peasant convicts in "Knowing Russia's Convicts," focusing on the narrator's inability to understand his fellow prisoners.

[10] According to Nepomnyashchy (166), the use of word repetitions and reprisals of thematic clusters gives the presentation of the convicts' utterances a sense of melodic variation that

context, as, for example, in the following extract, which is positioned immediately after a recollection of various creatures encountered in the camps:

> – А всего хужее, что ничего не скушаешь. Если б мясокомбинат или кондитерская. А то – одни железяки!
> – Ремонтируй эти машины – они не пожалуются.
> – Бревнотаска.
> – В шахте у человека развивается характер мечтательный.
> – Мужик лаял на трактор.
> – А контейнеры волнистые – как на сопках Маньчжурии.
> – Сорвал нарезку на сердце (Siniavskiĭ, *Sobranie*, 1:572).[11]

Common strands running throughout the text often indicate loose connections between individual utterances from the chorus, and between these and the wider text. Such coincidences reinforce the sense that language, rather than meaning, is the main point here. In *Zapiski*, whole conversations seem absurd in their lack of connection to the surrounding events being described, as when the following confrontation arises out of a description of daily life and practical arrangements in the barracks:

> – Да ты что за птица такая? – вскричал тот вдруг, раскрасневшись.
> – То и есть, что птица!
> – Какая?
> – Такая!
> – Какая такая?
> – Да уж одно слово такая!
> – Да какая? […]
> Все это было довольно характерно и изображало нравы острога […]
> – Каган!.. […]
> – Подлец ты, а не каган!
> То есть что он птица каган (Dostoevskiĭ, *Polnoe* 4:23).[12]

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resembles an orchestrated choral work. The title *Golos iz khora* is taken from a 1914 poem by Aleksandr Blok.

[11] "But the worst of it is there's nothing here you can eat. If it was a meat factory or a confectionery... But there's nothing apart from a lot of old iron."
"Repair these machines – they won't complain."
"In the mines a man develops a dreamy kind of mentality."
"The peasant was barking at a tractor."
"The containers are all wavy – like the hills in Manchuria."
"He wore down the thread on his heart" (Tertz, *Voice*, 190).[11]

[12] "What kind of bird are you anyway?" he shouted suddenly, turning red in the face.
"Just a bird!"
"What kind?"
"This kind."
"What kind's this kind?"
"Just this kind."
"What kind?" […]

The prisoners' language in both Dostoevsky and Terts more closely resembles poetry than everyday speech, with the frequent use of rhyme (e.g., "Богат Ерошка, есть собака и кошка"[13] [Dostoevskiĭ, 4:200; 310], which appears, apropos of nothing, in the midst of the discussion about who has the right to protest about food) and poetic imagery, as in the example given above ("сорвал нарезку на сердце"[14] (Siniavskiĭ, 1:572; 190). Indeed, Dostoevsky's narrator, Gorianchikov, characterizes the elaborate swearing practiced by the convicts as "artistic": "Ругались они утонченно, художественно"[15] (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:13; 33). Terts states that the prisoners in this mode are akin to poets: "Почти как у поэтов, в воровском этикете первенство отдано зрелищу и зрелищному пониманию личности и судьбы человека"[16] (Siniavskiĭ, 1:543; 147; translation amended). For the criminals in both works, expression takes precedence over meaning, as language becomes a signifier without a signified, the primary aim being delight in pure creativity: "Да и сами враги ругаются больше для развлечения, для упражнения в слоге"[17] (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:25; 49).

Robin Feuer Miller notes that in Dostoevsky's novel, creativity and art for art's sake, in which verbal artistry takes first place, are crucial as expressions of freedom (31-32). Gorianchikov makes it clear that the other main source of feelings of liberty amongst the prisoners is the pursuit of money: "Весь смысл слова 'арестант' означает человека без воли; а, тратя деньги, он поступает уже по своей воле"[18] (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:66; 109).[19] Money and the means of gaining financial freedom acquire an aura of artistry in Gorianchikov's perception. Of the money earned from the crafts and trades practiced by the convicts, he states: "Контрабандист работает по страсти, по призванию. *Это отчасти поэт.* Он рискует всем, идет на страшную опасность, хитрит, изобретает, выпутывается; иногда даже действует по какому-то вдохновению. Это страсть столь же сильная, *как и картежная игра*"[20] (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:18; 6-7; my emphasis).

All this was fairly typical, and illustrative of the way men behaved in prison. […]
"King cockerel!.."
Meaning that he ruled the roost (Dostoyevsky, *House* 46-47).[12]

[13] "Eroshka's well off, he's got a dog and a cat."

[14] "He wore down the thread on his heart."

[15] "They swore with finesse, with artistic skill."

[16] "Almost as in the case of poets, what counts most in the thieves' code of behaviour is performance and a performative understanding of the personality and fate of man"

[17] "indeed it was rather for the sake of entertainment and as a verbal exercise that the two enemies swore at one another."

[18] "The whole meaning of the word 'convict' implies a man without a will of his own; when he spends money, however, he is acting from *his own will*."

[19] Dostoevsky's emphasis. Gorianchikov describes this as 'coined freedom' [*chekannaia svoboda*] (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:17).

[20] "The smuggler works passionately, with a sense of vocation. *He's something of a poet*. He risks everything, faces terrible dangers, employs cunning, inventiveness, gets himself out of

In *Golos*, Terts reinforces this connection by comparing the persona of the gambler to that of the artist: "Игровой человек не постеняется рассказать о себе любую гадость. С удовольствием даже расскажет: вот я какой! Он отделяет себя от себя и созерцает свои непотребства в третьем лице – *как художник*. Судьба для него лишь сюжет, требующий занимательности. Но сколько в этом сюжете он бед натворил!.."[21] (Siniavskiĭ, 1:530; 129; my emphasis; translation amended). The connection Mikhail Bakhtin establishes between penal servitude and roulette[22] completes the circle of identification, marrying the figures of the convict to those of the gambler and the artist, through the common striving for freedom that unites these different personae.

The theme of freedom is also apparent in the markedly theatrical dimension of the criminals' verbal creativity. Gorianchikov notes that, "Диалектик-ругатель был в уважении. Ему только что не аплодировали, *как актеру*"[23] (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:25; 49; my emphasis).[24] His long description of the prison theatrics, in which so many of the convicts are involved, emphasizes their propensity for and enjoyment of performance as an escape from the everyday reality of incarceration that has a transformative potential: "Только немного позволили этим бедным людям пожить по-своему, повеселиться по-людски, прожить хоть час не по-острожному - и человек нравственно меняется, хотя бы то было на несколько только минут..."[25] (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:129-30; 203).[26]

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scrapes; sometimes he even acts according to some kind of inspiration. This passion is as strong as the *passion for cards.*"

[21] "A gambler will have no compunction in telling the vilest things about himself. He will even do it with gusto: that's the sort I am! He stands aside from himself and examines his own outrageousness in the third person – *like an artist*. Fate for him is merely the subject matter for a tale that must be entertaining. But how much trouble he causes with his tale!.."

[22] "Both the life of convicts and the life of gamblers — for all their differences in content — are equally '*life taken out of life*'" (Bakhtin, 172).

[23] "The dialectician of the curse was held in great esteem. He was applauded almost *like an actor.*"

[24] Serman notes that "Достоевский подчеркивает зрелищность, театральность этих сцен [referring to the "king cockerel" argument cited above], которые разыгрывались 'для всеобщего удовольствия'" ("Dostoevsky emphasizes the audience appeal, the theatricality of this scene, which is played out 'for everybody's enjoyment'") (133). The highly theatrical behaviour of Isaĭ Fomich in the bathhouse scene (Dostoevskiĭ, 4:92-96) also indicates the role of performance in establishing this character's identity. My thanks to Elena Katz for pointing out this connection.

[25] "All that was needed was for these poor men to be allowed to live in their own way for a bit, to enjoy themselves like human beings, to escape from their convict existence just for an hour or so – and each individual underwent a moral transformation, even if it only lasted for a few moments..."

[26] Mørch cites the Christmas theatrics as a space engendering the chronotope of freedom, transporting the convicts temporarily beyond the confines of the prison camp (59-60).

Terts characterizes the criminals' habit of boasting about their own exploits as a performance: "*Театральная поза* и репутация вора породили сотни легенд, которые до сих пор, когда воровской закон уже поломан, на добрую половину составляют *поэзию лагеря*"[27] (Siniavskiĭ, 1:544; 148; my emphasis).

Dmitrii Likhachev's early article on criminal speech, which was written shortly after his release from incarceration on Solovki, highlights the role of performance in the verbal creativity of criminal society in four ways.[28] Firstly, he likens the thieves' boasts about their feats (*podvigi*) to shamanistic rituals (*kamlanie*), the aim of which is to increase the speaker's own strength by impressing his powers on his audience ("Cherty," 63-64). Secondly, he shows that the thieves' unconscious belief in the magic power of the word--the effect it can have, its "active" [*deistvennyĭ*] nature, and its ability to act upon the world and the listener--derives from an emotional relationship to language, in which the absence of a gap between feeling and pronouncement indicates a diminished sense of differentiation between the word and its reference ("Cherty," 62, 68-69). This is in contrast to the more literary nature of intellectuals' speech, which forms the basis of the bulk of memoirs we have on the labour camp experience. Thirdly, Likhachev suggests that the importance of gesture in thieves' speech demonstrates the action of the word upon the muscular system, endowing it with a physical character ("Cherty," 87-88). Finally, he characterizes thieves' speech as a "collective performance," its improvisational aspects not only underlying its transitory nature ("Cherty," 77), but also, significantly, being used to demonstrate belonging to the larger whole of "thieves in the law."[29] The role of language in shaping the thieves' collective, in addition to serving as a determinant of action, points to a performative process that places the verbal creativity of the criminals at the centre of identity construction.[30]

At the same time, this identity, by virtue of its performed nature, also contains an element of artifice. Likhachev notes that "*истинность*

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[27] "The thief's *theatrical panache* and reputation has given rise to hundreds of legends, which even now, when the thieves' law is not what it was, make up a good half of all *labour camp poetry*" (My emphasis; translation amended).

[28] In his memoirs, Likhachev observes that for intellectuals on Solovki, "questions of language and linguistic culture became one of the most important topics of our conversation"; Likhachev, *Reflections*, 139. He also notes that the historian and *kraeved* N. P. Antsiferov worked in *Krimkab* on Solovki, where letters, drawings, and verses by criminal prisoners were collected, in order to "come to understand the psychology of the people of Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*" (346).

[29] On the role of performance in belonging, see Fortier (42).

[30] Austin outlines the basis of performative theory. On the linguistic character of action and the performative nature of identity, see in particular Butler. This performative aspect of criminal slang relates to the wider Russian folk belief, derived from paganism, which equates words with deeds. See Harrison (218), cited in Smith (177-78).

происшедших событий не играет в этом рассказе [о своих подвигах] особой роли"[31] ("Cherty" 63; my emphasis). Shalamov also observes a tendency toward embellishment in these stories, which he interprets as part of the creation of the thieves' self-image (Shalamov, "Apollon sredi blatnykh" ["Apollo among the Thieves"], 1959: 2:95). The idea of the promotion of a false identity by the thieves is significant because of its relation to another criminal type that resonates strongly in the Russian cultural imagination: the imposter. In *Progulki s Pushkinym* (*Strolls with Pushkin*, 1975), Terts connects the imposter with the artist and poet: "Самозванец! А кто такой поэт, если не самозванец?"; "Но самозванцы у Пушкина не только цари, они — артисты"; "Самозванщина берет начало в поэзии и развивается по ее законам"[32] (Siniavskiĭ, 1:422, 424, 425; *Strolls*, 133, 136).[33] Thus Terts suggests through this image that the writer is both an outsider and a criminal. Moreover, by linking this idea to the figure of Pushkin, who "stands behind the back" (Siniavskiĭ, 1:387) of every writer in Russia who came after him, Terts emphasizes the artist's ability and need to create new personae.[34]

The idea of adopting a criminal persona for artistic reasons is evident in Siniavsky's creation of his alter ego as a legendary criminal. Introduced in earlier works, it is employed in *Golos iz khora* for the first time as part of Siniavsky's autobiographical project (Nussbaum, 240), further erasing the boundaries between Siniavsky and Terts (Rat'kina, 90-91). The separation of the authorial persona from the biographical figure suggests that the writer's identity is at least in part dependent on or shaped by incarceration and the outcast status this imposes. The merging of different voices within the text of *Golos iz khora* suggests a loss of a separate identity between the author and the criminals who surround him. The result is that "[i]f the writer is an outlaw, then the act of writing literature becomes a crime and the text a site of transgression" (Nepomnyashchy , 2).

Similarly, Dostoevsky creates the narrative persona of a criminal. His letter to his brother cited above claims "чичность моя исчезнет"[35] (Dostoevskiĭ, 28/i:349), and his narrator, Gorianchikov, is imprisoned not for political crimes, as the author was, but for killing his wife. However, the discrepancies in the text, suggesting that the narrator is in fact a political prisoner, serve to

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[31] "*The truth* of the events that had taken place plays no particular role in this story [of the criminal's feats]."
[32] "An imposter! But what is a poet if not an imposter?"; "But Pushkin's imposters are more than just tsars – they are artists as well"; "Imposture has its source in poetry and unfolds according to its laws."
[33] Nepomnyashchy (150), also notes that "*A Voice from the Chorus* affirms art's vocation to transform the 'I' into the 'not-I.' It celebrates the text as imposture."
[34] In this context it is worth noting Likhachev's comment about "what a typical prison or camp invention [Terts's] whole idea of Pushkin is" (*Reflections*, 85).
[35] "my personality will disappear."

place Dostoevsky in the frame as well.[36] Thus, Gorianchikov emerges as neither Dostoevsky himself, nor as an entirely fictional character; here too, the author is developing the image of his narrator as a type of imposter. Underlining his status as an outsider, in the labour camp as well as at liberty,[37] Gorianchikov-Dostoevsky, like Terts, is both criminal and artist, and an artist because he is a criminal. For both authors, the subversion of their identities, through their identification both *as* criminals and *with* the criminals, implies that the creation of their texts derives from their participation in and emulation of the verbal creativity of the criminals. Giving the latter a voice enables their self-transformation, which in turn engenders their literary work.

Poet-murderers in Doroshevich and Shalamov

For many writers and commentators on the Russian prison system and its inhabitants, in both the Imperial and Soviet eras, the role of language in constructing the identity of the criminals is prominent.[38] Vlas Doroshevich's *Sakhalin (Katorga)* (*Sakhalin: Hard Labour*), which began to appear in feuilleton form in 1897 during the author's visit to the penal colony, is a prime example of a text that emphasizes criminal language. He uses criminal slang to enable the prisoners to tell their own stories (Doroshevich, 1:75-80), but also employs it himself in his categorization of the hierarchy of convicts (1:269-86), and more analytically in a section devoted to the terms used to denote crimes (1:350-59).[39] Here it is apparent that the criminals prefer to refer to their acts indirectly, with euphemism and metaphor playing a significant role.[40] However, while Doroshevich agrees with Dostoevsky, whom he cites frequently (e.g., Doroshevich, 1:136, 129; 2:183), on the general significance of language in the prison settlement, his approach departs from that of his predecessor in relation to the crucial question of the criminals' creativity as a route to identification for the author. Instead, he develops a critique of their creativity, which, as with that advanced by Dostoevsky and Terts, underlies his own analysis of the construction of the prisoners' identities, as well as his position in relation to them. I would suggest that this alternative line of

[36] These discrepancies are usually cited as evidence that the adoption of a fictional persona was merely a convention to appease the censors (Frank, 219-220).
[37] Ruttenburg analyses the trope of the outsider in relation to the unbridgeable gulf between Gorianchikov and the peasant convicts he encounters in the Omsk stockade (51).
[38] See, for example, Dikselius [Dixelius] and Konstantinov, relating the concept of the criminal fraternity to its development of its language system (9). The Russian edition of Chalidze's *Ugolovnaia Rossiia* contains an appendix of criminal slang (348-74).
[39] Gentes notes that Doroshevich has been unfairly criticized for his "sensational" use of prisoners' slang (xxvii).
[40] Likhachev also notes the tendency towards euphemism, as an indication of a fear of the word that derives from belief in its performative power ("Cherty," 67-68).

development can be traced from Doroshevich's *Sakhalin* to Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy* (*Kolyma Tales*¸ 1954-73).

In the case of Dostoevsky and Terts, we know that Siniavsky was fully conversant with Dostoevsky's text, and in conscious dialogue with it. The same, however, cannot be said of Shalamov with regard to Doroshevich. Various mentions of memoirs of the *narodovoltsy*[41] incarcerated in tsarist prisons, such as those by Vera Figner and N. A. Morozov,[42] as well as his dialogue with Dostoevsky, indicate Shalamov's interest in the history of Russian penal servitude. In contrast, no references are made to Doroshevich in any of his writing. This is perhaps not surprising, as *Sakhalin* was not reprinted in the Soviet Union (Gentes, xxvii), but it does make the coincidence of the two writers' approaches all the more striking, and suggests that the similarities between the two texts derive from common features they encountered in the criminals.[43]

In the context of a general absence of information about the essentially closed society of the thieves' fraternity of the Soviet era, which remained impenetrable to outsiders because of the use of identifying marks such as tattoos, and a constantly evolving language that only insiders would know, Shalamov's depiction of the criminal world is generally considered among historians, criminologists, and sociologists to be both reliable and valuable in its detail (Chalizde, *Criminal*, 35-36; Varese, 10-13). The collection *Ocherki prestupnogo mira* (*Sketches of the Criminal World*, 1959), in which Shalamov collates many of his ideas about the criminals he encountered, has, in contrast, been comparatively neglected within literary and cultural studies, and is not always included in consideration of the collections that make up *Kolymskie rasskazy*.[44]

While Shalamov's overall emphasis is on the brutality and lack of humanity of the criminal world, what is particularly significant about *Ocherki prestupnogo mira* is the importance of art and literature to the author's understanding of thieves. This forms the subject of half of the eight sketches.

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[41] *Narodnovoltsy* were members of the left-wing terrorist organisation *Narodnaia volia* [The People's Will].

[42] See, for example, "Pervyĭ zub" ("First Tooth," 1964): "Огромные ледяные своды пугали меня, и я – неопытный юнец – искал глазами подобие печки, хотя бы такой, как у Фигнер, у Морозова"; "The huge icy vaults frightened me, and I – an inexperienced youth – searched with my eyes for the semblance of stove, as in Figner or Morozov" (Shalamov, 1:618).

[43] Although they fall outside the scope of the current article, structural parallels between Doroshevich's work as a collection of feuilletons and Shalamov's collections of short stories, both of which rely on forms of fragmentation to convey aspects of the experience of imprisonment, would be worth examining. It is the strength of the similarities I have observed that leads me to compare these two works, despite the very different circumstances of their writing and the fact that Doroshevich was not, unlike the other writers who are the subject of this essay, a convict.

[44] For example, it is excluded from the overview of the collections in Toker (161).

The collection begins with "Ob odnoĭ oshibke khudozhestvennoĭ literatury," which argues that previous depictions of criminals in literature have been incorrectly romanticized--and immediately alerts us to the aim of this collection to dispel such romantic myths. It ends with descriptions of their own culture, focusing on thieves' songs ("Apollon sredi blatnykh"), the "appreciation" of poetry among criminals ("Sergei Esenin i vorovskoĭ mir" ["Sergei Esenin and the Thieves' World"]), and the role of "novelists", or storytellers who narrate improvised tales for the thieves' entertainment ("Kak tiskaiut rómany" ['How Novels are Spun"], 1959).[45] The performance of the "novelist" is mirrored by the theatricality of the thieves in other respects, which is emphasized on several occasions.[46] This again suggests the role of performance in the construction of identity, which breaks down the boundary between art and life: "границы искусства и жизни неопределимы, и те слишком реалистические "спектакли," которые ставят блатари в жизни, пугают и искусство, и жизнь"[47] (Shalamov, "Apollon," 2:80).

Doroshevich likewise alludes frequently to performance, describing *katorga* as a whole as a spectacle (Doroshevich, 1:43).[48] He links performance not only to the prisoners' habit of telling stories and bragging about their exploits (Doroshevich, 1:387-88), but also to the art of forging documents:[49]

> А вот Валентин, настоящий Валентин, которому вы так горячоаплодируете по окончании 4 акта "Фауста." […] Своего Валентина я увидал тоже на подмостках, – на нарах кандального отделения Онорской тюрьмы. Он встал передо мной с опухшим, опившимся лицом. Обдал меня запахом перегорелой водки. Обвинялся, уже на каторге, в неоднократной подделке и сбыте документов (Doroshevich, 1:328).[50]

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[45] Although thieves feature in numerous stories in the other collections, such as "Krasnyĭ Krest" ("Red Cross," 1959), two notable examples, "Zaklinatel' zmeĭ" ("The Snake Charmer," 1954) and "Bol'" ("Pain," 1967), also focus on the figure of the "novelist" who entertains the criminals.

[46] "Для перехода в новый воровской закон был изобретен обряд, театральное действо. Блатной мир любит театральность в жизни"; "In order to introduce a new thieves' law, a rite was contrived, a theatrical act. The thieves' world loves theatricality in life" (Shalamov, "Such'ia voina" ["The Bitches' War"], 1959, 2:66).

[47] "the boundaries between art and life are indeterminate, and those all too real 'dramatics' that the thieves stage in life menace both art and life."

[48] Gentes notes that Doroshevich's interest in the theatre can be seen in his extended description of the Easter performances (Doroshevich, *Russia's Penal Colony*, 85-94) which rivals the parallel Christmas scene in Dostoevsky (xvi). However, it is clear from the language of performance he frequently employs that Doroshevich perceives the theatrical elements of *katorga* as going far beyond this.

[49] Shalamov also refers to forgery as an art form ("Zhenshchina blatnogo mira" ["Women of the Criminal World"], 1959, 2:41).

[50] This is Valentin, the veritable Valentin you so warmly applaud at the end of act four of [Gounod's] Faust. [...] I, too, saw my Valentin 'onstage' – on the sleeping platform in Onor Prison's chains division. He stood before me with a puffy debauched face, the stench of warmed-over vodka washing over me. Since entering *katorga* he's been repeatedly charged

But it is on the question of poetry that the similarity of Shalamov's and Doroshevich's views of criminals' verbal artistry becomes most apparent. In "Sergei Esenin i vorovskoĭ mir," Shalamov insists that the thieves' love of Esenin has nothing to do with real appreciation of art, as they reject all of his spiritual verse and poetry about nature, to focus purely on the drunken carousing, *khuliganstvo* (hooliganism),[51] and contempt for women (Shalamov, "Esenin," 2:90-91). He emphasizes the absence of real emotion that their attitude to Esenin reveals: "Какие же родственные нотки слышат блатари в есенинской поэзии? Прежде всего, это нотки тоски, все, вызывающее жалость, все, что роднится с 'тюремной сентиментальностью'"[52] (Shalamov, "Esenin," 2:90). He views the cult of the mother figure among thieves, likewise related to the popularity of Esenin, as a product of sentimentality that precludes genuine feeling (Shalamov, "Zhenshchina blatnogo mira," 2:51-52). The sentimental and touching performance of prison songs gives the impression that the singer is "не актер, а действующее лицо самой жизни. Автору лирического монолога нет надобности переодеваться в театральный костюм"[53] (Shalamov, "Apollon," 2:79). Thus, Shalamov connects sentimentality to the artifice of performance in the self-image projected by the thieves.

Doroshevich comes to the same conclusion in relation to the "poet-murderers" he encounters, comparing them to the French poet and murderer Pierre François Lacenaire.[54] Posing the supposed "riddle" of Lacenaire's cruelty combined with the ability to produce such delicate poetry, he asks:

> Как помирить такие два контраста: жестокость и мягкость, нежность, сантиментальность? "Сантиментальность" - вот в чем и объяснение загадки. Если даже "гений и злодейство" несовместимы, то жестокость и сантиментальность уживаются отлично. Люди, когда у них нет масла, довольствуются маргарином. А сантиментальность – это маргарин чувства. Люди добрые бывают часто грубы в своей доброте, люди сантиментальные чаще других жестоки.[55]

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with forging and selling documents (Doroshevich, *Russia's Penal Colony*, 225).

[51] The link between *khuliganstvo*, art, and performance is explored in Neuberger (142-52).

[52] "What kindred notes do thieves hear in Esenin's poetry? Above all, melancholy notes, everything that arouses pity, everything that is born from 'prison sentimentality.'"

[53] "not an actor, but a character in his own life. The author of a lyrical monologue has no need to change into a theatrical costume."

[54] Pierre François Lacenaire (1803-36), an army deserter who became a thief, was ultimately executed for double murder. He became famous for the poetry he wrote in prison, and for portraying himself as a principled fighter against social injustice during his trial. Lacenaire is depicted, most famously, in the 1944 film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (*Children of the Gods*), directed by Marcel Carné, which is, notably, set around the Parisian theatre scene. He is also mentioned in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (8:350) as a prime example of the criminal mind. For further details, see Demartini, or Foucart.

[55] How does one reconcile the contrast: cruelty and softness, delicacy, sentimentality? Sentimentality – in this lies an explanation to the riddle. Even if genius and villainy are

Reviewing the "жалостные стихи" ("mournful poetry") that a Sakhalin murderer such as Pashchenko has written in a literally and metaphorically blood-soaked little notebook (Doroshevich, 2:147), Doroshevich emphasizes the self-pity inherent in much of the verse. Sentimentality is also apparent in the prisoners' performances, from their singing,[56] to the stories they tell Doroshevich about their own fates: "Жалко! Этот мотив постоянно звучит в разговорах Полуляхова, убившего топором восьмилетнего ребенка. И когда он говорит это 'жалко,' в его лицо есть что-то умиленное, кроткое. Он сам трогается своей добротой"[57] (Doroshevich, 2:30; 331). Noting that "С 'бахвальством,' с рисовкой, с гордостью рассказывают о своих преступлениях только 'Иваны'"[58] (Doroshevich, 1:391; 269), he suggests this type of performance is used to mask true feelings: "Часто, однако, за этим бахвальством кроется нечто другое. Часто это только желание заглушить душевные муки, желание нагнать на себе 'куражу.' Желание смехом подавить страх"[59] (Doroshevich, 1:391-92; 270).

Thus Doroshevich, like Shalamov, defines the convicts' self-projection in terms of the artificial emotion that underlies its creative expression. But this conception of play-acting and artifice is also used to elucidate the authors' positions in relation to the criminals they portray. Doroshevich emphasizes the powerful physical effect of the revulsion he experiences when placed in the role of audience to the criminals' performance of their own stories. This is particularly apparent in the case of Poluliakhov: "Я чувствовал, что все плывет у меня в глазах. Что еще момент, – я упаду в обморок. И только нежелание показать свою слабость пред каторжником удерживало меня крикнуть: 'Воды!'"[60] (Doroshevich, 1:388; 324). His horror at such moments indicates a strong sense of separation from the prisoners, which is also apparent in his interventions and moral exhortations, as when he visits an exile-settler and his female co-habitant: "'Да ведь срам! Ты бы встала,

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incompatible, cruelty and sentimentality get on exceedingly well. When people don't have butter they'll settle for margarine, and sentimentality is the margarine of emotion. Kind people are often rough in their kindliness; but sentimental people are crueler than others. (Doroshevich, 2:144; 417).

[56] "Говорят, что песня – это 'душа народа.' И каторга поет песни, от которых <...> веет сантиментальностью"; "They say that songs are the 'soul of the people,' and *katorga* sings songs that exude sentimentality" (Doroshevich, 1:365; 253).

[57] "'A pity!' This motif resounds constantly throughout the stories of Poluliakhov, axe-murderer of an eight-year-old child. When he says this word 'pity' there is something gentle and meek in his face. He himself is moved by his own kindness."

[58] "Ivans [the top rank of the prisoners' hierarchy, and forerunners to the Thieves in the Law – SJY] speak of their crimes only with braggadocio, play-acting and pride."

[59] "Often, however, this braggadocio excises something else. Often, there is simply a desire to smother spiritual torments, the desire to instil oneself with 'courage.' A desire to suppress the horror with laughter."

[60] "I was having difficulty breathing. I would have shouted 'Water!' if I hadn't feared showing weakness before a criminal. It felt like everything was swimming before my eyes."

поработала!' […] Становилось прямо невыносимо слушать эту наглую, циничную болтовню, эти издевательства опухшей от сна и лени бабы"[61] (Doroshevich, 1:91-92; 64-65). Doroshevich's sense of alienation when faced with a sort of convict morality which he does not understand and of which he does not approve indicates a lack of identification with the convicts. This is in sharp contrast to Dostoevsky's construct regarding the depiction of the common criminals, which posits a similarity with them on the question of verbal artistry.

For Shalamov, as well, there can be no question of identifying with the criminals in the way that Dostoevsky's and Siniavsky's narrators appear to. Indeed, Shalamov perceives the closeness of Dostoevsky-Gorianchikov to the other convicts he describes: "С точки зрения блатных – убийцы и воры Петров и Сушилов гораздо ближе к автору 'Записок из Мертвого дома,' чем к ним самим"[62] (Shalamov, "Ob odnoĭ oshibke," 2:8). In his own work, by contrast, he separates his sketches about the criminal world from the other tales by placing them in their own collection, suggesting a strong desire to designate the thieves as different; as he states in *Vospominaniia* (*Memoirs*, 1961?), "Понял, что воры – не люди"[63] (Shalamov, 4:627). Shalamov's denial that there is any humanity in the criminals, or any similarity between them and convicts like himself, is significant because he encountered them in their native context. As Varese (9) shows, "the *vory* were a peculiar brand of criminals produced by prison culture"; although criminal gangs existed in the tsarist era, it was the conditions in the Soviet penal system, where they were brought together, viewed as "socially friendly," and allowed control over other groups, specifically the political prisoners convicted under Article 58 of the Stalinist penal code, that enabled their power to grow and their code to develop (Varese, 15).[64]

Shalamov, as is well known, views the camps as inhumane places where only the inhuman can flourish: "Лагерь – отрицательная школа жизни целиком и полностью. Ничего полезного, нужного никто оттуда не вынесет [...]. Каждая минута лагерной жизни – отравленная минута. Там много такого, чего человек не должен знать, не должен видеть, а если видел – лучше ему умереть"[65] (Shalamov, "Krasnyĭ krest," 1959, 1:185-86).

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[61] "'This is really a disgrace!' I say. 'You should get up and do some work!' […] It becomes absolutely unbearable to listen to this insolent, cynical chatterer, to the mockeries bursting from this sleepy indolent woman."

[62] "From the thieves' point of view, the murderers and robbers Petrov and Sushilov are closer to the author of *Notes from the House of the Dead* than they are to the thieves themselves"

[63] "I understood that thieves are not people."

[64] Chalidze sees the connection between pre-revolutionary Bolshevism and brigandage as a factor in their development (*Criminal Russia*, 25); Dikselius [Dixelius] and Konstantinov relate this question to the notion of revolutionary legality (59-63).

[65] "The camp is a wholly and entirely negative school of life. No one will take anything useful or necessary from there. . . . Every minute of camp life is a poisoned minute. There is a great

One of the reasons he sees the camp experience as so negative is because it engenders this criminal world. But more than this, I would propose that in the brutality bred by the camps, he perceives that anyone forced to exist in such conditions, himself included, risks becoming like the thieves. When he describes the feelings that have been lost, what remains appears to place the convict in closer proximity to the thieves than to "normal" human beings.[66]

Shalamov's insistence on the negative effects of the camps, which punctuates the stories, even if this is frequently contradicted by small acts of kindness and honesty, suggests a fear about what that loss of humanity means, and what type of person might emerge from this environment. The criminals provide a constant and terrifying reminder of what could happen; their performance is all too real in its effects, and the author's emphatic rejection of identification with them seems to originate in anxieties about identification being actualized.[67] It is also for this reason that Shalamov focuses so strongly on the criminals' artistic mores; his own role as poet and particularly an admirer of Silver-Age poetry[68] bears little resemblance to the crude and sentimental preoccupations of the thieves. This, therefore, becomes a means of asserting an identity that survives their assault on his humanity and sensitivity. Thus it is the fear of resembling the criminals, and the assertion of difference from them, that inform his representation of the camps and the self within that system.

Identifying the outsider

Dostoevsky and Siniavsky, and Doroshevich and Shalamov, therefore exhibit markedly different attitudes towards the criminals, in particular on the question of their verbal creativity. While the former writers celebrate the wit demonstrated by the criminals' verbal play as potentially engendering a crucial sense of freedom, the latter perceive it as a symptom of cruelty that may infect others. For both lines of interpretation, however, the question of identification remains central. I would suggest this is because of a perception that the outcast status of a writer is akin to that of the convict. Prisoners were

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deal there that man should not know, should not see, and if he has seen it, then it's better for him to die."

[66] "Все человеческие чувства – любовь, дружба, зависть, человеколюбие, милосердие, жажда славы, честность – ушли от нас с тем мясом, которого мы лишились за время своего продолжительного голодания"; "All human feelings — love, friendship, envy, concern for one's fellow man, charity, longing for fame, honesty — had left us with the flesh we had lost during our starvation" (Shalamov, "Sukhim paikom" ["Dry Rations"], 1959, 1:75).

[67] As I have suggested elsewhere, the idea of an intellectual attempting to identify with criminals leads to disaster in the story "Bol'" (Young, "Recalling the Dead," 366-67).

[68] See "Afinskie nochi" ("Athenian Nights," 1973), in which Shalamov describes the poetry evenings he organized with two fellow convicts at the hospital in Debin (Shalamov, 2:414-16).

physically cut off from the rest of society, not least by the remoteness of most of the penal settlements in both the tsarist and Soviet eras, and the figure of the convict as outcast was emphasized by the 'thieves in the law' through their non-participation in Soviet society. Each of the writers exemplifies in their own way an aspect of the outcast persona. For Dostoevsky, the outsider status he acquired through his imprisonment was compounded, as he was treated as an outcast by the other convicts as well.[69] Siniavsky adopted a criminal persona long before his conviction in order to define himself as an outcast in Soviet society. The difficulties Shalamov had in reintegrating after his return became increasingly apparent in his later life, as he gradually isolated himself from friends and associates in the community of writers and dissidents. Although not a convict, Doroshevich, writing about Sakhalin as an outsider, also had 'an outcast status among intellectuals' because of his popular style, and was seeking to gain more serious literary credentials through his work on the island (Gentes, xvii, xxii).[70]

For the criminals, being an outcast is related to remaining free from society's rules and restrictions, but it also, because of the close association between *vory* and *brodiagi*,[71] provides an opportunity to shape a new identity, akin to that of the imposter discussed above.[72] The *brodiaga* habit of adopting a pseudonym, frequently overtly challenging the authorities with the aggressively anonymous 'Nepomniashchiĭ' (literally, 'don't remember'), appears repeatedly in Doroshevich, as it does in other works on the penal system from the late imperial era, such as Anton Chekhov's *Ostrov Sakhalin* (*Sakhalin Island*, 1895; Chekhov, XIV-XV:69) and George Kennan's *Siberia and the Exile System* (1:293). The *brodiagi* whom Doroshevich depicts, and whose guise he was even prepared to adopt,[73] may share with those encountered by Chekhov and Kennan the romantic notion of "changing one's fate" by taking on a new identity. However, they are in other respects not the benign outcasts portrayed in other works; they threaten those whom they suspect may reveal their identity, and are surrounded by an aura of fear (Doroshevich, 1:268, 348). They more closely resemble some of Shalamov's thieves, in particular the *blatar'* Kononenko, who has adopted the name Kazakov, and threatens Golubev (one of the author's alter egos) not to give

[69] Serman notes the impossibility of *tovarishchestvo* (comradeship) and sense of alienation engendered in the prison camp (129-30).
[70] See also Bukchin on Doroshevich's status as a journalist writing himself into the literary tradition (264).
[71] Chalidze notes the similarities between the *Vory v zakone* and earlier *brodiaga* artels (*Criminal Russia*, 40-44). See also Galeotti (5).
[72] Doroshevich (2:187), emphasizes the connection between the figures of the *brodiaga* and the imposter when he mentions a *brodiaga* called Boris Godunov.
[73] Doroshevich contemplated declaring himself a *brodiaga* to police in Vladivostok in order to gain access to Sakhalin through the six-month sentence this would have incurred (Bukchin, 255).

away his true identity (Shalamov, "Kusok miasa" ["A Piece of Meat"], 1964, 1:336-38). Thus the *brodiaga* ideal of anonymity, as a means of attaining freedom, acquires a menacing dimension as it is taken on by the thief. The idea of transformation, and of art as transformation, remains, but its morally precarious aspects are foregrounded, not only in the violent behaviour of the criminals, but also as a dangerous potential within the authors.

The freedom of creativity consists not only in the positive element that allows the convicts to take on a new guise and temporarily break off their shackles, but also in the destructive side that led to their incarceration in the first place, and that has the potential to deprive others of their freedom, or even their lives.[74] The ambivalent nature of both the writer's art and freedom is inscribed in each work by authors at transformative moments in their lives and careers through their comparisons with the criminal convicts. Whether they identify with the criminals, or reject any such possibility, their contact with the thieves' sub-culture is instrumental in shaping their own artistic personae and their work.[75]

[74] Miller suggests that the flip side of creativity, the artistic cruelty of executioners, relates to the amorality of "everything is permitted" (32).

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