Steve Sem–Sandberg

Even nameless horrors must be named

It is high time to lift the aesthetic state of emergency that has surrounded witness literature for so long, writes Steve Sem–Sandberg. It is not important who writes, nor even what their motives are. What counts is the "literary efficiency".

I.

On 20 September 2009, shortly after Herta Müller's novel Atemschaukel (soon to be published in English as Everything I Possess I Carry With Me) came out in Germany and only a few months before the announcement that she had won the Nobel Prize for literature, the German weekly magazine Die Zeit published two articles about her book. One was written in defence of the book, the other was critical.

The latter was the work of Die Zeit's own critic Iris Radisch. Radisch dismisses as work "aus zweiter Hand", second--hand literature, Herta Müller's attempt to tap into the experience of another human being and give voice and words to one of the most appalling episodes of the last century.

The biographical material in Atemschaukel came mainly from Müller's compatriot, the poet Oskar Pastior, who spent four years at the end of the 1940s in a Ukrainian labour camp. In Communist Romania, collective deportations was a means of punishing the country's ethnic German inhabitants, even those who had had nothing to do with the Nazi reign of terror. Müller and Pastior later went together to visit the camp in which Pastior had been held, and they originally planned a jointly written book. But when Pastior died unexpectedly in 2006, Müller opted to write the book herself.

So here we have a writer with no direct personal experience of forced labour, writes Radisch; in her view, this grafting of Müller's language onto Pastior's experience does not show the former to advantage. Radisch contrasts Müller's at times almost painfully "perfumed" prose with the work of Russian writer Varlam Shalamov, whose austere style and avoidance of metaphor make Müller's lyrical distillations seem like "tasteless and formulaic" exercises in self--reflection.
Aside from her occasionally puzzling animosity towards Herta Müller, Radisch's criticism is not new or even unusual. It is claimed by many that any attempt to describe the reality of the camps in the twentieth century by someone who has not experienced it in the flesh is doomed to failure. Not necessarily because the author lacks a language in which to clothe the experience. But when confronted with reality of that kind, all language is bound to seem like an attempt to dress it up. A camp inmate's experience, writes Shalamov, can basically only be understood in negative terms. As an absence of experience. As an absence of anything even remotely akin to reason and comprehension. Thus if there is nothing left in the camp that is recognisably human, the argument goes, then there is nothing to write books about, either.

Criticism of this kind, however, more often tends to be couched in moral terms. It is less to do with the fact that one cannot write, more to do with the fact that one must not, or should not. This applies particularly to a range of literary attempts to depict the Nazi death camps, which were very different in nature from the Soviet labour camps and served quite another purpose. A novel about Treblinka or Majdanek is not only about blasphemy, it is blasphemy, says author Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor. What he means is that any attempt to give literary form to the absolute hell that was the extermination camp experience robs that experience of its very essence.

Varlam Shalamov can't really claim anything like that, since he processes his own experiences into literature. In fact, his work is one of the few full-scale attempts to forge convincing literature out of existence in the Gulag.

The question is: how does he go about it?

Varlam Shalamov started his cycle of short stories, Kolyma Tales, in 1954, after surviving seventeen years as a political prisoner in a labour camp; it took him twenty years to complete. The first volume of stories was published in 1978 by a Russian publisher in exile in London. For a number of reasons, however, it took a long time for non-Russian readers to discover this great work. It was 2003 before the first non-Russian publication of all six parts (1700 pages in total) in one volume, by the French publishing house Verdier. Then in 2006, the Berlin-based publisher Matthes & Seitz began publishing the complete works of Shalamov, comprising not only the Kolyma suite but also his two volumes of autobiography, written in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Matthes & Seitz accompany the collected works with a short volume of Shalamov's articles, letters, and extracts from his workbooks, under the matter-of-fact title Über Prosa (On Prose). One of the first attempts, as far as I am aware, to formulate what might be called a poetics of labour camp literature.

Every section of the book shows Shalamov grappling with the same basic problem: how to make literature out of something that naturally resists all literary portrayal?

The primary requirement — Shalamov calls it a "mission" — is to show life in the camps of Siberia with absolute and faithful realism. "Not a depiction of
life, but life itself.” But for that to happen, everything normally associated with literary realism has to be stripped away. A camp inmate doesn't think. Thinking hurts. A camp inmate doesn't remember. It takes too much effort. A text describing such an existence has literally to be without either tense or prospect. There can be no sense of perspective in the story, backwards or forwards. But what is left of a narrative when there is nothing to bend your characters around, nothing that can shape the motivation behind their actions, nothing that can give any space or depth to the nightmarish state of living in a soulless hell, day after day?

Shalamov sees the solution not in individual narratives but in an accumulation of narratives. To the surprise of some, he calls William Faulkner the most significant writer of the twentieth century. Faulkner's baroque prose is of course light years away from Shalamov's sternly purged and pared-down variety. It is hardly Faulkner's elaborate sentence structure that appeals to Shalamov, however, but more his ability, in book after book, to conjure up a world that is completely and utterly itself, held together by an idiom of its own (a language only spoken in these books), where every single text continues to build on, and intensify, the set of symbols and motifs that run through them all.

Reading the complete *Kolyma Tales*, it is indeed this Faulkneresque element that leaps out. The world of the labour camp with its gigantic superstructure and the barren landscape all around does not merely serve as a backdrop, but develops by degrees into a hellish space with clearly delineated boundaries, governed by its own laws. Here are the mines to which a constant supply of new work brigades are sent, to be used up like so much dross; but also the camp hospitals, a clinical world within a world, to which those with the right contacts might have the good fortune to be temporarily or permanently transferred. And last but not least: the world of professional criminals that constitutes the foremost circle of the camp, those with the true power, its aristocracy. When Shalamov describes this criminal circle, his language becomes positively biblical. The criminals are not human beings, he says, and that simple statement encapsulates a whole universe.

Several times in his notes, Shalamov returns to the notion that the Kolyma world is too big, reaches too far and penetrates too deeply to be accommodated in literature. But Shalamov does not refrain from literary strategies when he depicts it. In fact, he does the opposite: in his writing, Kolyma is suffused with literary technique. By evoking its soulless landscape over and over again, he is able to bring it alive for the reader, despite the fact that not one of the characters he portrays spares it a single thought. Similarly, episodes and characters in one story, even whole discussions, can turn up in new incarnations in another, but in different ways and with different functions.

If one reads all the stories in swift succession, the repetitions eventually grow grindingly monotonous; but in literary terms, the device is effective. Shalamov does not share Solzhenitsyn's epic patience; he lacks Tjechov's instinctive feeling for style: the psychological screen he places over his characters is at times crude, and when words do not take him where he wants to go, he often falls back on simple moralising. His loathing of the criminal aristocracy in the Kolyma world, for example, never deserts him. But what also never deserts him is his ambition to reproduce that world in its totality, from the smallest detail — like how to keep the glowing embers of a piece of wood alive for ten hours when the temperature is minus forty — to bullying, scurvy, frostbite, self-mutilation, casual murder, the moral degeneracy that immediately corrupts the slightest impulse of consideration and decency towards fellow
Shalamov considers the camp theme, this "state-aided human annihilation", to be the overridingly most important literary theme of our era. But the topic is not wiped out of history just because the few who endured the exile and survived have given their testimony. For as long as the theme still exists, it will demand to be depicted in new ways.

Shalamov was perhaps fanatical in his demand for literal fidelity to the facts about the camps that are at our disposal. As when he went through Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* just after its publication in 1962 with a red pen in his hand and pounced on everything that seemed to show the reality of camp life in too positive a light. For all that, the Kolyma suite is far from the formally strict exercise in linguistic purity that some have made it out to be. On the contrary, there is hardly a single literary device, no matter how artificial it may seem, that Shalamov does not employ in order to achieve his realistic effect. There are elaborate experiments with stories inserted in framework narratives, advanced inner monologues, texts of a documentary nature and occasional long strings of garbled words. There is also an extensive system of metaphors, stabbed bloodily into little weak spots here and there, as in the beautiful passage about the taiga's tenacious conifers, larches and Siberian stone pines which, "like humans, die standing": an image that could easily have come from Herta Müller.

In other words, it is not the means by which reality is described that are important, but the fact that it is described, and without respite; so that the history of all the exiles, and the world in which they found themselves, is kept open to depiction. It then seems reasonable that no way of getting there is wrong, as long as the writer, once he arrives, knows how to depict the reality he encounters by the very force of what makes it real: both the mechanisms that make it function and the horror of knowing that one will never leave there alive.

There are simple ways to do this, and hard ways. One apparently simple way, which I feel would have found favour even in Shalamov's stern eyes, is to describe over and over again how it feels to hold a shovel. That's what Herta Müller does in one chapter of *Atemschaukel*. For anyone forced to do nothing but shovel coal for hours on end, the terrible weight of the shovelled coal on exhausted arms can be described in countless ways, and however monotonous and fatally strenuous the work is, no description will ever be able to put an end to the coal itself. There lies one of the great paradoxes of literature. And of course one can call it vapid self-reflection if one will. The metaphor — the imagined image, the merely depicted event — has no value beyond itself, and is therefore hard to justify morally for anyone who wants literature to do more than "just" be literature.

But it can, on the other hand, make the shovel real.

And thus the labour of the camps, too.

And thus the camp.

II.

But to what extent can an aestheticisation of mass murder be seen as acceptable or valid? Is it question of content or purpose, or rather about who is
doing the actual writing? And if one kind of aestheticisation is legitimate, on what basis should another be disallowed?

This is a complex question. Those seeking to answer it can easily find themselves drowning in noncommittal goodwill statements of the "this must be shown" variety, without touching on the complications involved in all literature based on things that really happened. Just as there is no such thing as pure literature, literature that tells the truth and nothing but the truth, so there is no such thing as innocent literature. Everything written about historical events has consequences for the way those events are to be interpreted. To believe anything else would be naive.

Many of my generation, born in the early 1960s or before, will remember the huge impact made by the television series *The Holocaust* when it was shown around 1980. It triggered initiatives to deepen our knowledge of the Holocaust, the results of which we see today, but also unleashed a wave of excessive sentimentalisation. Our receptivity to what is now termed witness literature is dependent on increased social acceptance of this kind of storytelling; but what is socially acceptable is ultimately what has already been allowed to appear in the media in some shape or form. Today we are surrounded by Holocaust kitsch on a scale we can scarcely appreciate. This kitsch permeates our understanding of what happened, at all levels. The Holocaust is something we would rather solemnly commemorate than actively remember; Auschwitz is turning into a place of pilgrimage, a place in which to exorcise evil rather than investigate it, while the concrete suffering in that and other places is reduced, with the help of popular culture, to images of boys in pyjamas and little girls with plaits.

Perhaps this sentimentalising, trivialising trend can be defended to some extent on pedagogic grounds. We have to find ways to come to grips with evil for it not to become abstract and hence intangible. But the consequence of our collective ritualisation of remembrance is that it inhibits our own individual relationship to, and responsibility for, what actually happened. From what we perceive as a moral duty to give this unprecedented event the space it deserves, we adopt a submissive position that we prefer to see as humility. Instead of talking about the war, and the actual victims of war, we restrict ourselves shamelessly to our own way of relating to what happened, often with self−flagellating phrases along the lines of: "who am I to talk about...", "what right have I to..." etc, as though the whole discussion of what made the Holocaust possible only becomes tangible when it can be linked back to some psychological problem within ourselves.

This is cowardly. We demand of every testimony that it shall be authentic. But by insisting that only those who personally experienced something have a right to tell the story, we are saying that we are not at heart touched by it, that it is possible to draw a line between us and them. Because they are victims, and thus by definition beyond our own horizon of understanding, then the only attitude demanded of us is that of noncommittal genuflection.

The major problem is not that we don't know enough. The question ought really to be why we find it so necessary to convince ourselves that we don't
know. What is it that we see in what we do know that makes us think we cannot understand it?

Our understanding and knowledge of the Holocaust has expanded considerably in recent years, and in interesting directions. Yale historian Timothy Snyder, for example, claims in his *Bloodlands* that what makes Auschwitz unique, from a strictly historical point of view, is not the fact that mass murder was committed there on an industrial scale, but that so many individuals (relatively speaking) were still able to survive the mass murder, individuals who were later able to convey their testimony of what had happened in the world. Only now, broadly speaking since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has it been possible to understand how unique, in all senses of the word, these testimonies are. When those researching the subject chart the landscape of the Holocaust far into Ukraine and Belarus, they find nothing but an interminable landscape of mass graves, dead and burned villages and towns. From this scorched earth there are simply no testimonies at all.

So now we have a paradox. While historians are increasingly preoccupied with the rule, the fact that nobody survived, other versions of the Holocaust focus increasingly on the exceptions to that rule. Not on the survivors' testimonies about those who did not survive, which would be logical, but on what the survivors have to say about their own survival. But the story of the Holocaust is not the story of a miraculous rescue mission like the one Schindler mounts in Steppe Spielberg's film. Nor is the Holocaust the story of a pianist who plays so beautifully that even a hardened Nazi sheds a tear. Nor is the Holocaust, to look at it from another side, the story of how a woman becomes a Nazi guard just because she never learned to read. All these stories are exceptional stories, accounts of modern miracles. They are the result of grafting the external narrative structure of the survivors' stories onto the dramaturgical demand of popular culture that every story should end in salvation and atonement. These stories become insidious, even downright dangerous, the moment they aspire to the higher purpose of making us understand what took place, and thereby try to seek social acceptance for what is essentially a sophisticated lie.

We live in an age obsessed with healing, and try any means of seeking atonement, scared out of our wits by the slightest suspicion that there might be none. This, I think, is one explanation of why the Holocaust has in recent years come to play an ever larger role as a theme of, and metaphor for, that fictive self−insight which popular culture is so obsessed with trying to articulate and even propagate.

It seems probable that our emotional response to popular culture's interpretations of the Holocaust will always be marked by the duality I have been trying to highlight. The events described in the witness literature, for example, are so unparalleled that we have a moral obligation to hold them up as examples. But sometimes, paradoxically enough, the power of the example can be so great that it creates distance where there should not be any. And this distance can, in turn, prevent us from understanding the heart of the matter, namely what applies to all great catastrophes: that they are not exclusively tied to, or even conditional on, the historical periods in which they occur. Nor can we reduce them to special cases of a general law, whether we call that law racism or fascism or anything else, and then believe that such a definition says everything there is to say, and that all we need to do beyond that is simply to repudiate its pronouncements on moral grounds.
In my eyes, the only meaningful way of relating to the stories of Primo Levi, Imre Kétesz' great novel *Fatelessness*, Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* or Herta Müller's novels and short stories from totalitarian Romania is to read them as testimonies of a total collapse of human conduct and responsibility: a collapse of such a nature and on such a scale that it transcends any attempt to explain them exclusively in terms of historical, political or psychological concepts; a collapse that is like a contagion, and like a contagion penetrates our self-knowledge at all levels. That is why those hunting high and low for the "authenticity" in all texts that deal with totalitarianism and subjugation are on such a terribly wrong track. In reality, the only reality that counts, there are no unblemished witnesses, as it is perfectly possible to be a victim yet not wholly blameless. And ultimately there is no language, either, through which pure, unsullied experience could find expression. As Herta Müller has put it on more than one occasion, most recently in her essay collection *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel* (Always the Same Snow and Always the Same Uncle), language is often the last thing to remain uninfected by this contamination.

Anyone who wants to engage critically with this literature has to realise that outlawing metaphor is not enough to bring out "the truth" about anything at all. Literature that is meaningful does not arise out of some kind of refining process. It does not restore, or create safe havens. Literature that is meaningful tears down boundaries and knocks our self-knowledge off course. This is where the moral force of literature and its aesthetic justification lie. "I don't want to view the world reasonably, so that it can look back at me," writes Imre Kétesz in his *Gályanapló* (Galley Boat Log). "I don't want atonement. I want existence, opposition..."

I believe, with Kétesz, that it is time to lift the aesthetic state of emergency that has surrounded witness literature for so long. The important thing is not who does the writing, nor even what their motives are. The important thing is the literary efficiency of the texts. How far do they succeed in giving people back the contours of their own existence, or as Kétesz puts it: giving the individual his life, his fate? Literature can either be steered by a genuine will to open up new access points to, and broaden our view of, the reality that is portrayed. Or it does its best to shut away reality by making it a museum object, rendering the past inviolable (and thus intangible), or by making the case for some form of atonement that is in fact little more than a veiled desire to embellish, and by embellishing simply to set amnesia to work by other ways.

We choose for ourselves the sort of literature we want.