

THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO: FROM INFERNO TO PARADISE

David Matual
Wright State University

That Alexander Solzhenitsyn is familiar with at least the imagery of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is evident from the title of his novel, *The First Circle*.¹ In the second chapter, entitled "Dante's Idea," the character Rubin draws a parallel between the first circle of hell, where the pagan sages of antiquity are confined, and the *sharashka*, or special scientific installation, where arrested Soviet scientists are forced to devote their knowledge and skill to the advancement of the Soviet state. There are also hints of Dantean imagery, however few and subtle, in Solzhenitsyn's longest and most ambitious work, *The Gulag Archipelago*. In Part III, for example, before his account of the historical development of the correctional labor camps, the author calls upon I. L. Auerbach to be "our Virgil," i.e. to guide the reader through the maze of historical details about to be presented.² It will be recalled, of course, that Virgil is Dante's guide through the nether regions in the *Comedy*. Moreover, the mythological "gates of the archipelago," which exist only in the imagination of the *zeks*, with their two signs reading "Do not be discouraged" for those entering and "Do not be too happy" for those leaving are inevitably reminiscent of the famous sign over Dante's inferno: "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate."

While the occasional references to *The Divine Comedy* have no compelling hermeneutical value for *The Gulag Archipelago*, they point, nevertheless, to the possibility of a Dantean model for the proper ordering and understanding of the spiritual evolution which some of the *zeks* undergo. True, most of the men and women of the archipelago are static figures, fixed in this or that phase of the spiritual process. But others, like Dante, are made to pass through

inferno, the site of torments, *purgatorio*, the place of cleansing and enlightenment, and *paradiso*, the realm of perfect knowledge and wisdom. The most notable and—for this study—the most interesting of these travelers is Solzhenitsyn himself, who, over the course of many years, proceeds from the unmitigated misery of the Soviet inferno, continues through the purgation of suffering, and ends at last in an exalted state of spiritual tranquility.³

Each inhabitant of the archipelago, whether static or dynamic, is doomed to experience, if only for a short time, the horrors and anxieties of Solzhenitsyn's inferno. Though there is no fixed entrance to this twentieth-century hell (despite the myth of the "gates" with their portentous inscriptions), it affords easy access to everyone. Initiation into its terrors begins, as Solzhenitsyn demonstrates so powerfully in Part I, with the cataclysmic moment of arrest. But unlike Dante's Christian inferno, Solzhenitsyn's Stalinist hell does not presuppose the commission of serious sin or even the violation of man-made laws. Everyone without exception is subject to arrest, and it comes in the most varied ways and at the most implausible times.⁴ Once arrested, the anguished victim is then subjected to tortures, both physical and psychological, inflicted by interrogators during the inquest. After he has signed the obligatory confession of guilt, his agony assumes new forms—in prisons, transit stations, or forced labor camps. One of the most memorable passages in *The Gulag Archipelago* is devoted to the atrocities of the prison camps on the Solovetsky Islands, which Solzhenitsyn characterizes as the prototype of the entire archipelago, a cancer that metastasizes until it holds the entire nation in its power. During the first Five-Year Plan, it manifests itself in the building of the White Sea Canal and other construction projects with their ghastly tolls in human life. At the height of Stalin's terror the cancer becomes a vast network of labor camps (usually in the most inhospitable areas of the country), teeming with millions of prisoners tormented by NKVD demons. The atmosphere they breathe is polluted by falsehood and a never-ending stream of party propaganda, which Solzhenitsyn treats as one of the most onerous punishments imposed upon the condemned. They suffer too from subhuman living conditions: long hours of drudgery often in sub-zero temperatures; crowded barracks; inadequate clothing; malnutrition and disease. In addition to all these afflictions they must endure the company of venal informers and the depredations of rapacious thieves, who are given virtually free rein to do what they please to whomever they choose.

Yet Solzhenitsyn's inferno is much more than a place where suffering is caused by external forces which the *zeks* are powerless to resist. It is, to a certain extent, the creation of its own inhabitants. Through their hatred, mercilessness, and boundless selfishness they have poisoned their existence far more effectively than their demonic overseers. "The *zeks*," Solzhenitsyn remarks, "are not only an atheistic people, but nothing at all is sacred to them and they always ridicule or degrade everything exalted" (III, 507). The rules they live by are based on the deepest cynicism and the coldest calculation: mind your own business; leave me alone; trust no one; ask for nothing. If, as Dostoevsky claims in *The Brothers Karamazov*, hell is the inability to love, Solzhenitsyn has captured the essence of the experience. Moreover, he himself has known the horrors of arrest, investigation, prison, and camp; he too has felt the hatred and the gnawing desperation of the archipelago. So great are his tribulations in the inferno, that at the end of Part III, Chapter 6, he writes: "Lord, Lord. Under artillery shells and bombs I asked you to preserve my life. Now I ask you: send me death" (p. 194).

If, in Dante, hell, purgatory, and paradise are depicted as well defined *places*, in Solzhenitsyn they appear as states of mind or stages in the *zek's* spiritual development. The most decisive of these stages is the second. In purgatory sinners are cleansed of their offenses and prepared for the ultimate joy of heaven.⁵ The principal difference is that in Solzhenitsyn's version the emphasis is somewhat less on expiation and considerably more on intellectual growth and spiritual transformation.

On a purely intellectual level, Solzhenitsyn observes, the sensitive *zek*, as a result of accumulated experience, learns to perceive the world with an unprecedented clarity. This is especially true, he claims, at the transit stations, where prisoners gradually come to an understanding of what is happening to them, "to the people, and even to the world" (III, 545). One young man, experiencing the transforming power of his purgatory, writes to his girlfriend: "Here you listen to an inner voice, which, in a life of abundance and vanity, is drowned out by the roar outside" (IV, 593). That same heightened consciousness enables a group of intellectuals, during their last hours on earth, to conduct seminars at which each shares with his fellow victims the knowledge he has acquired over a lifetime and which is destined soon to be lost forever.⁶

Far more important than the intellect, however, is the spirit—specifically, the spirit considered in its purely religious dimensions.

The intellectuals are noble in their unflagging devotion to knowledge and culture, but religious people are shown to possess a gift that transcends nobility and leads to the loftier spheres of paradise itself. There are many episodes scattered throughout *The Gulag Archipelago* in which Solzhenitsyn records his admiration for the numerous men and women whose Christian faith made them seem oblivious to the torments of the inferno.⁷ By contrast, the people who suffer most cruelly are those who lack a “stable nucleus,” who “have not been enriched by any morality or any spiritual upbringing” (IV, 612). Prisoners who are endowed with such a “spiritual nucleus” rise to an exalted state of being and present at the same time an impressive testimony to those still languishing in hell. Thus, Solzhenitsyn waxes eloquent as he describes the women in the camps who refused to wear number tags because they considered them to be the seal of Satan. Of the Lithuanian men and women who exchanged wedding vows over a wall which permanently separated them, Solzhenitsyn writes: “In this union with an unknown prisoner over a wall—and for Catholics the union was sacred and irreversible—I hear a choir of angels. It is like the disinterested contemplation of heavenly bodies. It is too lofty for an age of calculation and jumping jazz” (III, 242–43). Equally impressive to him is the story of a young girl named Zoia Leshcheva. At the age of ten, Zoia finds herself, in effect, an orphan; her parents, grandparents, and brothers have all been arrested and sent to camps throughout the USSR because of their religious faith. She is sent to an orphanage, where she adamantly refuses, despite the most persistent harassment, to remove the cross she always wears around her neck. She makes it clear that her cross as well as her convictions will be part of her until the moment of death.

Solzhenitsyn’s own journey through purgatory begins rather modestly in Part II with a man named Boris Gammerov. The first step is taken during a conversation with him in which Solzhenitsyn dismisses as “bigotry” a prayer said by President Franklin Roosevelt and reprinted in many Soviet newspapers. Gammerov responds sharply to the remark: “Why don’t you admit that a statesman can sincerely believe in God?” Astonished by such a reaction from a man born after the Revolution, Solzhenitsyn asks, “Do you believe in God?” Gammerov answers simply, “Of course” (II, 603). Solzhenitsyn is surprised not just by his reply and the confident tone in which it is made but by the sudden realization that his own opinions have been grafted on his mind by external pressures and that on the crucial questions of life and death he has no ideas that are truly his own.

In this state of intellectual insecurity and aroused curiosity he meets Anatolii Vasil'evish Silin, an erstwhile atheist who having experienced a conversion to Christianity while a prisoner in a German camp, is now a philosopher, theologian, and poet. Solzhenitsyn quotes a number of his verses, but one quatrain in particular goes to the heart of the question which troubles him most deeply at the earliest stages of his quest: the problem of evil, and especially the evil of the archipelago:

Dukh Sovershenstva ottogo	The Spirit of Perfection
Nesovershenstvo dopuskaet—	Permits imperfection—
Stradan'e dush, chto bez nego	The suffering of souls—
	because without it
Blazhenstva cenu ne poznaiut.	The value of bliss would not
	be known.

The dilemma of theodicy is even more effectively confronted by Boris Nikolaevich Kornfel'd, a Jewish convert to Christianity. Because it is not enough for Solzhenitsyn to know that his sufferings will enhance his appreciation of happiness, as Silin's quatrain implies, and because at this stage he is more interested in ultimate causes than in possible consequences, a remark made by Kornfel'd on the subject of evil makes a lasting impression on him: "You know, in general I've become convinced that no punishment in this earthly life comes to us undeserved. Apparently, it can come for something of which we are not truly guilty. But if we go over our lives and think them through carefully, we will always find a crime of ours for which the blow has now fallen upon us" (IV, 600). Looking over his own life, Solzhenitsyn finds ample confirmation of Kornfel'd's contention. To deal with the difficulty of evil and guilt, he turns, as his friend has done, to religion. He begins to understand that the truth of religion is predicated upon its ability to combat evil in man. Revolutions, on the other hand, especially the Bolshevik Revolution, strive to eradicate "contemporary *carriers* of evil (and also in their haste the carriers of good)" (IV, 603).⁸ Only religion (and for Solzhenitsyn that is the Christian religion) can effectively contend with the evil of the world and with the present evil of the Gulag archipelago. It is the path to the city of God, which is truth and salvation. Purely human contrivances designed to uproot the *expressions* of evil lead to the city of man, a realm of falsehood and destruction. In Part VI Solzhenitsyn tersely states his position: "The very deepest root of our life is the religious

consciousness, and not party and ideological consciousness” (p. 456).⁹

Solzhenitsyn’s journey through purgatory has come to an end. He has observed and admired the strength of character typical of fervent believers: Orthodox priests and laymen, sectarians, Lithuanian Catholics, men, women, and children who lived only by faith and rejected Soviet rule as anathema. His conventional atheism has been softened by their courage and integrity and shaken by the quiet religious conviction of Boris Gammerov. Silin, the Christian poet, has introduced him to the Christian approach to the problem of external evil. Boris Kornfel’d has helped him to view that same evil as punishment, to connect punishment with guilt, and to associate guilt with that inner evil which runs through the heart of every man. Solzhenitsyn now realizes that parties and ideologies attempt to deal only with the outer manifestations of evil. Religion alone, he believes, is the antidote to man’s misery and the key to his lasting and genuine happiness. He has come full circle. He no longer merely admires believers at a distance. He has become one of them.

As a result of his many observations and impressions Solzhenitsyn now finds himself far from the pangs of hell and the crucible of purgatory. He now lives in the empyrean, in a paradise founded on wisdom and bestowing an unearthly bliss. In Part IV he speaks of the spiritually salubrious effect of prison, and what he says on this subject can also be applied to his experience in the camps:

That prison profoundly transforms a man has been well known for centuries In our country Dostoevsky is always mentioned. But what about Pisarev? What was left of his revolutionary spirit after the Peter-and-Paul Fortress? One can argue whether this is good for revolution, but these changes always tend to deepen the soul (IV, 592).¹⁰

This “deepening of the soul” which is requisite for entrance into paradise proceeds in two directions. First, the man who has achieved wisdom understands, perhaps for the first time in his life, that earthly attachments are vain and ephemeral and that, as Solzhenitsyn succinctly puts it, “only he will win out who renounces everything” (I, 139). This means that the prisoner must divest himself of all possessions and obliterate from his heart whatever value he may ever have attached to them. Solzhenitsyn sees such material impoverishment

as a common theme in the teachings of history's wisest men: "'Have nothing.' This was taught to us by Buddha, Christ, the Stoics, and the Cynics. Why can't we greedy people get this simple lesson into our heads? Why can't we understand that we destroy our souls with property?" (II, 513). But there is still more to Solzhenitsyn's notion of renunciation. In addition to possessions one must give up one's family and friends. Any hope of seeing them again must be abandoned. The benefit which derives from such an unconditional abnegation and which constitutes at the same time a vital precondition of paradise itself is freedom. In Part IV he writes: "You cannot be deprived of family and property: you are already deprived of them. What does not exist even God will not take. That is basic freedom" (p. 595).

But freedom brings us only to the threshold of paradise. The very highest state of being, Solzhenitsyn's version of the Dantean contemplation of the Beatific Vision, is achieved by those who, in effect, shed their mortal crust and become pure spirits. As Tolstoy would say, they have learned to "live for the soul." Solzhenitsyn dramatically illustrates this transformation by contrasting those who have experienced it with those who are immune to its joys because they live "out in freedom." The scene is a railroad station. A prisoner about to be transferred eavesdrops on the conversations of the unarrested. One of them talks about problems with in-laws; another tells of a man who beats his wife; some complain about their neighbors while others discuss a new job in a new town. The prisoner is horrified by the vacuousness of all such chatter because only he has "the genuine measure of things in the universe" (II, 583). Solzhenitsyn pursues his theme in a remarkable rhetorical aside:

Only you who are without flesh are truly, genuinely alive while all these people only mistakenly consider themselves to be living. And the abyss between you is unbridgeable. You cannot shout to them; you cannot cry over them; you cannot shake them by their shoulders. After all, you are spirit, you are a ghost, and they are material bodies (II, 583).

In summary, the inhabitant of Solzhenitsyn's paradise has renounced family, friends, possessions, and all emotional attachments to them. Indeed, he has stripped himself of his very physical being and become, as Solzhenitsyn puts it, an "Interstellar Wanderer" (II, 587), whose body is fettered and abused but whose soul is subject to

the whims of no one. He is now the possessor of the highest consciousness, the deepest wisdom, and the greatest happiness.

In a book so singlemindedly devoted to the subversion of the Soviet system it is paradoxical that the Gulag archipelago should emerge as a potential paradise as well as a veritable hell. Even more surprising is the fact that this vast realm of darkness proves to be more spiritually fruitful than the "free" expanses of the Soviet Union or Western Europe and the United States. In short, the profoundest evil somehow manages to become the highest good.¹¹ Solzhenitsyn does not seem to notice his paradox. If he does, he does not dwell on its implications for the multitudinous, age-old theological disputations on the nature and causes of evil. He merely observes that in most cases the released prisoner who has first attained the most sublime level of consciousness has a better understanding of life than his fellow citizens, that he has a "new standard of things" (VI, 485), and that he feels no despair or depression because he has been "spiritually born" in the camps and prisons (VI, 476). So great, in fact, is the difference between captivity and freedom that emotional adjustment is difficult and in some cases even impossible. One man, we are told, hanged himself on the very day he was to be released—apparently because he could not face an illusory life in freedom (IV, 587). Solzhenitsyn himself longs to cry out after only a few hours among the free: "I want to go home. I want to go to my archipelago" (II, 586). And in Part IV he utters the incredible words: "*Bless you, prison*, for being in my life" (p. 604). The Gulag archipelago remains, of course, an inferno for the vast majority of those who languish and toil there. But Solzhenitsyn clearly believes, in spite of its monstrosities, that for those who have risen from hell and wandered through purgatory it can become the occasion of the final and absolute spiritual triumph.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of Dantean imagery in *The First Circle*, see Andrej Kodjak, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), pp. 76–79; Vladislav Krasnov, *Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky: A Study in the Polyphonic Novel* (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980), pp. 105–106.

2. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag Gulag*, 3 vols. (Paris: YMCA, 1973–76),

III, 103. All subsequent references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text. All translations from Russian are my own.

3. Writing on a number of Solzhenitsyn's fictional heroes, Leonid Rzhevsky observes: "All of them are at heart rebellious lovers of truth, defenders of justice, individuals with a strict measure of conscience toward themselves and their surroundings; all of them have endured years of prison camps; all, in one way or another, are undergoing a kind of catharsis, a reexamination of their former views of life, a rebirth to another, a higher spirituality." See *Creator and Heroic Deed*, trans. Sonja Miller (University, Ala.: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1978), p. 15. Olga Carlisle speaks of a catharsis in the reader of *The Gulag Archipelago*. See *Solzhenitsyn and the Secret Circle* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), pp. 117–18.

4. For an account of the arrests, see *Arkhipelag Gulag*, Part I, Chapter 1.

5. Evgenii Barabanov speaks of the archipelago as "the road to redemption and purification." See *Zhit' ne po lzhi: sbornik materialov* (Moscow: Samizdat; Paris: YMCA, 1975), p. 54.

6. For more on this theme, see Stephen Carter, *The Politics of Solzhenitsyn* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1977), p. 46.

7. For a study of the religious and ethical beliefs of Solzhenitsyn and his characters, see Tat'iana Alekseevna Lopukhina-Rodzianko, *Dukhovnye osnovy tvorchestva Solzhenitsyna* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1974).

8. Niels C. Nielson makes the same point: "Solzhenitsyn's Christian faith is to be explained intellectually from the fact that he had come to feel the need for the steady presence of a powerful good which would take him through suffering giving perspective." See *Solzhenitsyn's Religion* (Nashville, Tenn., and New York: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1975), pp. 25–26.

9. Roy Medvedev is contemptuous of Solzhenitsyn's ideas, claiming that they "smack of utopia" and are not "very original." See *Zhit' ne po lzhi*, p. 99.

10. Francis Barker rejects Solzhenitsyn's views as "prison mysticism." See *Solzhenitsyn: Politics and Form* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1977), p. 11. He further remarks: "It is no longer the voice of a realistically limited character who perceives that, owing to the peculiarities of his unique personal history, he has derived certain unexpected advantages from prison, but the voice of a seeming omniscience which has begun to make much larger, mystifying claims for the abstract and unspecific 'prisoner' who is thus canonised" (p. 13).

11. K. Pomerantsev notes the same theme in the fictional works. See "Dobro i zlo u Solzhenitsyna," *Novyi zhurnal*, 95 (1969), 150.