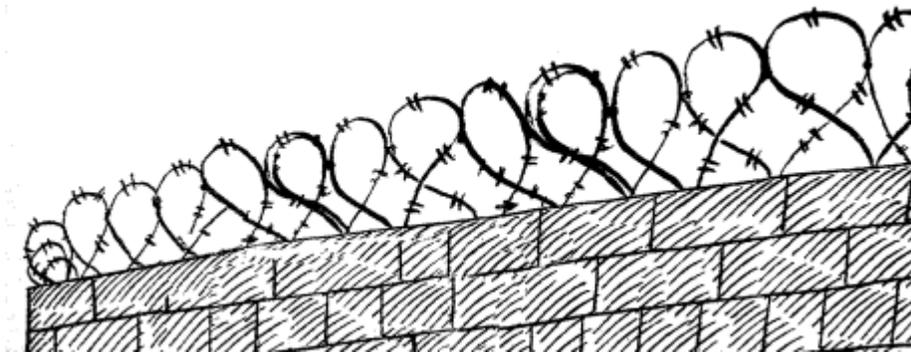


## Found Poems in Russian Prison Literature



Gwendolyn Rak

## Artist's Statement

For this project, I chose to use the form of “found poetry,” in which lines of another work are either blacked out or, as I have done, highlighted to create a new composition. I saw this as an opportunity to incorporate a number of the various texts we’ve read in a final project and to bring new meaning through connections. The form also works well for Russian literature specifically; as we have discussed in class, the tradition of Russian prison literature is strong, as authors draw on the techniques and structures of those before them. In the gulags, too, poems and entire novels were memorized and recited while in prison. Using these texts as the basis of my project seemed to be an appropriate way of taking the idea of literary tradition one step further.

Nevertheless, it felt wrong to modify such beautiful, poignant literary texts—particularly the poetry. I don’t believe I have the authority or skill to rewrite the narratives of the author’s experiences, so I opted to leave the *literature* in its unadulterated form as excerpts. On the other hand, I, like any reader, am able to interpret these texts. With that in mind I decided to pair short selections of poems, novels, and memoirs with found poems that I composed from the theoretical texts we’ve read, offering a creative form of analysis of the interactions between the texts and themes present in each.

As for the format, I initially decided to make this project digitally for the cleaner, more cohesive design that typing enabled. Found poetry is typically done by physically writing on print materials with a highlighter or sharpie, but I don’t think that method would serve my purposes as well. My goal was to blend these texts and their themes into a vision of Russian incarceration narratives as a whole, rather than a hodgepodge of all its parts. The sharing of prison poetry is a common theme in opposition to the oppressive Russian regimes, so the accessibility of the Internet makes it an apt location.

The poems begin with a plea to tell one’s story, and they end with a testament of successful remembering. The others are intended to express the pain of those subjected to the prison system and convey certain truths about that system. Of course, I could not fully encompass every theme we encountered in class, but I hope that the breadth of ideas below serves as an indication of the richness of Russian prison literature.

## “Pain has no voice”

Physical **pain has no voice, but** when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story that it tells is about the inseparability of these three subjects, their embeddedness in one another. Although it is the task of this book to record that story—and hence to make visible the larger structures of entailment—it may be useful here at the opening to **speak** briefly of each subject in isolation. The Inexpressibility of Physical Pain **When one hears** about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no **reality** because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth. Or alternatively, **it may seem** as distant as the interstellar events referred to by scientists who speak to us **mysteriously** of not yet **detectable** intergalactic screams or of “very distant Seyfert galaxies, a class of objects within which violent events of unknown nature occur from time to time.”

*The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry*

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“The main thing is, kiss—and say nothing!” he taught her. “Later you may speak—after a while—but when you kiss him, be silent. Don’t speak right after the kiss, do you understand? Or you will say what you should not say.”

“I understand Nikolay Sergeyeovich,” answered the mother, weeping.

“And you must not weep. For God’s sake, do not weep! You will kill him if you weep, old woman!”

“Why do you weep?”

“With women one cannot help weeping. But you must not weep, do you hear?”

“Very well, Nikolay Sergeyeovich.”

Riding in the *drozhky*, he had intended to school her in the instructions again, but he forgot. And so they rode in silence, bent, both gray and old, and they were lost in thought, while the city was gay and noisy. It was Shrovetide, and the streets were crowded.

They sat down. Then the colonel stood up, assumed a studied pose, placing his right hand upon the border of his coat. Sergey sat for an instant, looked closely upon the wrinkled face of his mother and then jumped up.

“Be seated, Seryozhenka,” begged the mother.

“Sit down, Sergey,” repeated the father.

They became silent. The mother smiled.

“How we have petitioned for you, Seryozhenka! Father—”

“You should not have done that, mother—”

The colonel spoke firmly:

“We had to do it, Sergey, so that you should not think your parents had forsaken you.”

They became silent again. It was terrible for them to utter even a word, as though each word in the language had lost its individual meaning and meant but one thing—Death.

“The Seven Who Were Hanged,” Leonid Andreyev

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### “Power possessed by the ‘soul’”

If the surplus **power possessed by the** king gives rise to the duplication of his body, has not the surplus power exercised on the subjected body of the condemned man given rise to another type of duplication? That of a ‘non-corporal’, a ‘**soul**’, as Mably called it. The history of this ‘micro-physics’ of the punitive power would then be a genealogy or an element in genealogy of the modern ‘soul’. Rather than seeing this soul as the reactivated remnants of an ideology, one would see it as the present correlative of a certain technology of power **over the body**. It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it **has a reality**, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is **exercised on those** punished — and, in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects, over madmen, children at home and at school, the colonized, over those who are **stuck** at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives. This is the historical reality of the soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born **in** sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of **punishment, supervision and constraint**. This real, non-corporal soul is not a substance; **it is** the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge, **the machinery by which** the power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power. On this reality-reference, various concepts have been constructed and domains of analysis carved out: psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness, etc.; on it have been built scientific techniques and discourses, and the moral claims of humanism. But let there be no misunderstanding: it is not that a real man, the object of knowledge, philosophical reflection or technical intervention, has been substituted for the soul, **the illusion of** the theologians. The man described for us, whom we are invited to **free**, is already in himself the effect of subjection much more profound than himself. A ‘soul’ inhabits him and brings him to **existence**, which **is** itself a factor **in** the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the **effect** and instrument of a political anatomy; **the soul is the prison of the body**.

*Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault

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And so they are *leading* you. During a daylight arrest there is always that brief and unique moment when they are *leading* you, either inconspicuously, on the basis of a cowardly deal you have made, or else quite openly, their pistols unholstered, through a crowd of hundreds of just such doomed innocents as yourself. You aren't gagged. You really can and you really ought to *cry out*—to *cry out* that you are being arrested! That villains in disguise are trapping people! That arrests are being made on the strength of false denunciations! That millions are being subjected to silent reprisals! If many such outcries had been heard all over the city in the course of a day, would not our fellow citizens perhaps have begun to bristle? And would arrests perhaps no longer have been so easy?

In 1927, when submissiveness had not yet softened our brains to such a degree, two Chekists tried to arrest a woman on Serpukhov Square during the day. She grabbed hold of the stanchion of a streetlamp and began to scream, refusing to submit. A crowd gathered. (There had to have been that kind of woman; there had to have been that kind of crowd too! Passers-by didn't all just close their eyes and hurry by!) The quick young-men immediately became flustered. They can't *work* in the public eye. They got into their car and fled. (Right then and there she should have gone to a railroad station and left! But she went home to spend the night. And during the night they took her off to the Lubyanka.)

Instead, not one sound comes from *your* parched lips, and that passing crowd naïvely believes that you and your executioners are friends out for a stroll.

I myself often had the chance to *cry out*.

*The Gulag Archipelago, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

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### **“The incorrigible, the insane, the vicious”**

Dear \*\*\*\*, - I observed t'other day in one of papers, an advertisement relative to a House of Correction therein spoken of, as intended for \*\*\*\*\*. It occurred to me, that the plan of a building, lately contrived by my brother, for purposes in some respects similar, and which, under the name of the *Inspection House*, or the *Elaboratory*, he is about erecting here, might afford some hints for the above establishment. I have accordingly obtained some drawings relative to it, which I here enclose. Indeed I look upon it as capable of applications of the most extensive nature; and that for reasons which you will soon perceive. To say all in one word, it will be found applicable, I think, without exception, to all establishments whatsoever, in which, within a space not too large to be covered or commanded by buildings, a number of persons are meant to be kept under inspection. No matter how different, or even opposite the purpose: whether it be that of *punishing the incorrigible*, *guarding the insane*, *reforming the vicious*, *confining the suspected*, *employing the idle*, *maintaining the helpless*, *curing the sick*, *instructing the willing*

in any branch of industry, or *training the rising race* in the path of *education*; **in** a word, whether it be applied to the purposes of **perpetual** prisons in the room of death, or *prisons for confinement* before trial, or *penitentiary houses*, or *houses of correction*, or *work-houses*, or *manufactories*, or *mad-houses*, or *hospitals*, or *schools*. It is obvious that, in all these instances, the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly with the purpose of the establishment have been attained. Ideal perfection, **if that were the object**, would require that each person should actually be in **that** predicament, during every instant of time. This being impossible, the next thing **to be wished for** is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive himself to be so. This point, you will immediately see, is most completely secured by my brother's plan; and, I think, it will appear equally manifest, that it cannot be compassed by any other, or to speak more properly, that if it be compassed by any other, **it can only** be in proportion as such other may approach to this. To cut the matter as short as possible, I will consider it at once **in** its application to such purposes as, being most complicated, will serve to exemplify the greatest force and variety of precautionary contrivance. Such are those which have suggested the idea of **penitentiary-houses**: in which the objects of *safe custody*, *confinement*, *solitude*, *forced labour*, and *instruction*, were all of them to be kept in view. If all these objects can **be accomplished** together, of course with at least equal certainty and facility may any lesser number of them.

Letter I ("Idea of the Inspection Principle"), *The Panopticon Letters*, Jeremy Bentham

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The first little throb of *Lolita* went through me late in 1939 or early in 1940, in Paris, at a time when I was laid up with a severe attack of intercostal neuralgia. As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage. The impulse I record had no textual connection with the ensuing train of thought, which resulted, however, in a prototype of my present novel, a short story some thirty pages long. I wrote it in Russian, the language in which I had been writing novels since 1924 (the best of these are not translated into English, and all are prohibited for political reasons in Russia). The man was a Central European, the anonymous nymphet was French, and the loci were Paris and Provence. I had him marry the little girl's sick mother who soon died, and after a thwarted attempt to take advantage of the orphan in a hotel room, Arthur (for that was his name) threw himself under the wheels of a truck. I read the story one blue-papered wartime night to a group of friends—Mark Aldanov, two social revolutionaries, and a woman doctor; but I was not pleased with the thing and destroyed it sometime after moving to America in 1940.

“Forgoing the intent of punishments”

Chapter XII. Of the Intent of Punishments. From the **foregoing** considerations it is evident, that **the intent of punishments, is** not to torment a sensible being, nor to undo **a crime** already committed. Is it possible that torments and useless cruelty, the instrument of furious fanaticism, or of impotency of tyrants, can be **authorized by a political** body, which, so far from being influenced by **passion**, should be the cool moderator of the passions of individuals? Can the groans of a tortured wretch recall the time past, or reverse the crime he has committed? The end of punishment, therefore, is no other than to prevent the criminal from doing further injury to society, and to prevent others from committing the like offence. Such punishments, therefore, **and** such a mode of inflicting them, ought to be chosen, as **will make** the strongest and most **lasting impressions** on the minds of others, with the least torment to the body **of the criminal**.

“An Essay on Crimes and Punishments,” Beccaria

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I heard the dry crack of a shot, and Rybakov fell face down among the hummocks. Seroshapka waved his rifle and shouted:

'Leave him there, don't go near him.'

Seroshapka cocked his rifle and shot in the air. We knew what this second shot meant. Seroshapka also knew. There were supposed to be two shots — the first one a warning.

Rybakov looked strangely small as he lay among the hummocks. The sky, mountains, and river were enormous, and God only knew how many people could be killed and buried among the hummocks along these mountain paths.

Rybakov's can had rolled far away, and I managed to pick it up and hide it in my pocket. Maybe they would give me some bread for these berries, since I knew for whom they were intended.

Seroshapka calmly ordered us to get in formation, counted us, and gave the command to set off home.

He touched my shoulder with his rifle barrel, and I turned around.

'I wanted to get you,' he said, 'but you wouldn't cross the line, you bastard!'

*Kolyma Tales*, Varlam Shalamov

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## “Total isolation”

Walnut Street’s austere regime—**total isolation** in single cells where prisoners lived, ate, worked, read the Bible (if, indeed, they were literate), and supposedly reflected and repented—came to be known as the Pennsylvania system. This regime would constitute one of that era’s two major models of imprisonment. Although the other model, developed in Auburn, New York, was viewed as a rival to the Pennsylvania system, the philosophical basis of the two models did not differ substantively. The Pennsylvania model, which eventually **crystallized** in the Eastern State Penitentiary in Cherry Hill—the plans for which were approved in 1821—emphasized total isolation, silence, and solitude, whereas the Auburn model called for solitary cells but labor in common. This mode of prison labor, which was called congregate, was supposed to unfold **in total silence**. Prisoners were allowed to be with each other as they worked, but only under condition of silence. Because of its more efficient labor practices, Auburn eventually became the dominant model, both for the United States and Europe. Why would eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reformers become so invested in creating conditions of punishment based on solitary confinement? Today, aside from death, solitary confinement—next to **torture**, or as a form of torture—is considered the worst form of punishment imaginable. Then, however, it was **assumed** to have an emancipatory effect. **The body** was placed in conditions of segregation **and** solitude in order to allow **the soul** to flourish. It is not accidental that most of the reformers of that era were deeply religious and therefore **saw** the architecture and regimes of the penitentiary as emulating the architecture and regimes of monastic life. Still, observers of the new penitentiary saw, early on, the real potential of **insanity in** solitary confinement. In an often-quoted passage of his *American Notes*, Charles Dickens prefaced a description of his 1842 visit to Eastern State Penitentiary with the observation that “the system here is rigid, strict, and **hopeless solitary confinement**. I believe it, in its effects, to be cruel and wrong.”

*Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis

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The broad wooden gate of the citadel yawned open before me, and my fear was replaced by ecstasy. For five years I had not seen the night sky and the stars. Now this sky was above me, and its stars shone down on me. The high walls of the old citadel gleamed white and the silvery radiance of the May night poured into the deep, square, well-like space enclosed by them. The whole plaza was overgrown with grass. It lay thick and fresh and cool, lightly brushing one’s feet, and it had the allurements of the dewy expanse of a free field. From wall to wall stretched a low, white building, while in the corner a single tree loomed dark and tall. For a hundred years this splendid creature had grown there alone, without comrades, and thus solitary had spread about it, unhindered, its luxuriant crown. Keys grated, and with difficulty, as though the lock had grown rusty, they opened the outside door of the prison, which led into a

dark, tiny antechamber. I smelled the musty odour of a cold, damp, uninhabited building. Before us stretched the naked stones of the broad corridor, at the far end of which glimmered a little night lamp. In the cold twilight the dim figures of the gendarmes, the indistinct outlines of the doors, the dark corners—everything looked so ominous that the thought suddenly flashed into my mind that this was a real torture dungeon, and that the inspector had spoken truly when he said that he had a place where no living soul could hear one. A moment later they opened a door on the left, and thrust in a small lighted lamp; the door slammed, and I was alone.

I was in a small, unheated cell, which had never been cleaned. The walls were dirty, and here and there crumbling from age. The floor was of asphalt; there was a small stationary wooden table with a seat, and an iron bench on which there was no mattress, nor any kind of bedding.

Silence.

*Memoirs of a Revolutionist, Vera Figner*

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### **“The persistence of individuals”**

In fact, **the persistence of** such features in Russian criminal justice as arbitrariness, informal rules, personalized decision-making, and treating mere threats to state authority as graver offenses than bodily harm to private **individuals** makes one wonder about the resistance **to** change of the underlying political culture. Such an idea was famously propounded by Richard Pipes in *Russia under the Old Regime*. More recently, the idea has been reformulated in the term “transcontinuities,” meaning “elements ... which **survive revolutionary** alterations **and always re-emerge.**” It is hard to come away from a careful study of the history of criminal justice in Russia without a healthy appreciation for transcontinuities. William E. Butler, a leading scholar in the field, concludes that “Russia has inherited its burdens of the past, both Imperial and Soviet—autocracy, intolerance, russification, bureaucratism, backwardness, absence of modern legal tradition.”<sup>14</sup> **It seems unlikely** Russia had to remain a prisoner of its political culture. The dramatic reforms brought about by many of its rulers **and** leaders suggest that multiple paths were possible. **Yet** the historical records show that the actual path followed was one mostly of continuity.

*Crime and Punishment in Russia, Jonathan Daly*

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When darkness fell, we were all brought to the barracks, where we were locked in for the night. I always found it hard to go back to our barrack from outside. It was a long, low, and stuff room, dimly lit by tallow candles, with a heavy, stifling smell. I don't understand now how I survived for ten years in it. Three planks on the bunk: that was all my space. Some thirty men shared the same bunk in our room alone. In winter they locked up early; it was a good four hours before everybody fell asleep. Meanwhile—noise, din, guffawing, swearing, the clank of chains, fumes and soot, shaven heads, branded faces, ragged clothes, everything abused, besmeared ... yes, man survives it all! Man is a creature who gets used to everything, and that, I think, is the best definition of him.

*Notes from a Dead House, Fyodor Dostoevsky*

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### **“In a small notebook”**

In 1944, the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti was sent to a forced-labor camp in what became Yugoslavia. While there, he was able to procure **a small notebook**, in which he wrote his last ten poems, along with the following message in Hungarian, Croatian, German, French, and English: “... [this] contains the poems of the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti ... to Mr. Gyula Ortutay, Budapest University lecturer ... Thank you in advance.”

When it was clear that **they** would be defeated, the Germans decided to evacuate the camp and return the workers to Hungary. Radnóti, assuming that the first column would be the safest, volunteered for the march and recorded it in his poetry. Once in Hungary, the soldiers in charge, unable to find hospital room for these prisoners, took Radnóti and twenty-one other to a mass grave and executed them. Had Radnóti not volunteered to return to Hungary, he might **have been saved** by Marshal Tito's partisans. However, **the story does not end**—as millions of such stories ended—with execution and the anonymity of a mass grave. After the war was over, Radnóti's wife was among those who found and exhumed the grave in the village of Abda. The coroner's report **for** corpse #12 read: A visiting card with the name Dr. Miklós Radnóti printed on it. An ID card stating the mother's name as Ilona Grosz. Father's name illegible. Born in Budapest, May 5, 1909. Cause of death: shot in the nape. In the back pocket of the trousers a small notebook was found soaked in the fluids of the body and blackened by wet earth. This was cleaned and dried in the sun. Radnóti's final poems are represented in ***Against Forgetting*** along with the poems of 144 other significant poets who endured conditions of historical and social extremity during the twentieth century—**through** exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination. Many poets did

not survive, but **their works** remain with us **as poetic witness** to the dark times in which **they lived**.

"Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness," Carolyn Forché

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"I'm here because of my poems."

"How's that? Your poems against the government, were they?"

"No, independent of the government, so they took offense."

"About God eh?"

"About God, too."

"Yeah, they wouldn't like that. Say, how about reciting some of them? Remember them, don't you?"

How could I forget? I recite the poem I dedicated to Sakharov:

Don't attempt to coerce,  
If a boy flies the nest and bereaves you—  
Write it off as a loss, you exemplary homeland and nurse!  
You are quick to forget how to bless your own son as he leaves you,  
And instead you have learned the cruel art of pronouncing a curse!

What you put in your bread—  
So that no one looks elsewhere for savor,  
How you lose on the trail your swift dogs and their practical art,  
And poverty, jail and the nightmare asylum for ever—

Cease to harp on those strings.  
We have studied and learned them by heart.

Those with wide-spreading wings,  
Who from birth have been stubborn and awkward—  
Don't attempt to coerce, using bribes or the menacing word—  
We're not reached by such things.  
We leave and go onward and onward . . .  
People say that a shot in the back simply cannot be heard.

*Grey is the Color of Hope*, Irina Ratushinskaya

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