

Although Silvestre says that "time is irreversible," memory makes the time he experiences conform to the laws of space, for he finds that memory obeys a law of the gravity of the past (p. 344). The past compels the present to reflect, and art, memory, and the mirror eternalize by crystallizing what has been. In this sense time within the novel operates like a pendulum, striking the mirror of the present and receding to the past ("like a pendulum, swinging back the way we came," p. 341). In their journey through time-space in the "Bachata" section, Cué and Silvestre swing back both in actual space and in time through memory (pp. 313-481). In retrospect, the journey, which they symbolically repeat in reverse, becomes an accomplished destiny, as does life after it is completed and crystallized by death. In this sense, Silvestre observes that Bustrofedon is probably immortal, beyond change. Nothing is lost from the self-contained chaos which is the world, as well as the world of the novel, because the future is a way back to the past, the mirror's reversed image. As Cué points out, *yo soy backwards is still yo soy* (p. 388).

It is the mirror images in time and space which make the book complete in itself. A word game about people playing word games, it is a mirror of people looking in mirrors and art concerned with the nature of art. By being thus self-contained, the novel need not seek any metaphysical explanations beyond its own existence. Its world is infinite in that it is a mirror of worlds within worlds. Cabrera Infante says in an imaginary self-interview that the "book is about what the book is about and what the book *is* is what the book is about . . ." ³ It is a happy combination of metaphysical necessity and crystallized nostalgia in its very self-containment. The justification for death or life lies in the permanence of memory and the eternity of possible reflections and circles within circles, and the novel itself is precisely these things: memories, mirrors, and circles within circles.

Barbara L. Hussey
Purdue University

NOTES

¹Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *Tres tristes tigres* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, S. A., 1967). English translation by Donald Gardner and Suzanne Jill Levine in collaboration with the author, *Three Trapped Tigers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). Subsequent references are to this edition.

²Julio Ortega citing the author in "An Open Novel," *Review* 72, 4 and 5 (Winter 71/Spring 72), 18.

³Guillermo Cabrera Infante, "Epilogue for Late(nt) Readers," *Review* 72, 4 and 5 (Winter 71/Spring 72), 30.

On Abram Tertz's *A Voice from the Choir*

Could Dostoevsky ever have written about the fantastic murderers, the nightmarish confessions, or his characters' insatiable desire for freedom, had he himself not been arrested, sentenced to death, pardoned at the last moment at the site of execution, subsequently sent to a labor camp, and at last, after ten years of suffering and despair, been allowed to return to European Russia? As a writer, he needed that journey through hell; and even though the first account of this journey, *The House of the Dead* (1861) might not have done justice to the depth of his impressions, the five big novels which followed did.

Among contemporary Russian writers, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Siniavski repeated in a miraculous way the life experience of their great compatriot, and also used that raw material as the lifeblood of their literature. Beginning with *Ivan Denisovitch*, up till his *Gulag Archipelago*, everything that Solzhenitsyn has written so far feeds from the ten years of his captivity. With the publication of *A Voice from the Choir*, in Russian, *Golos iz khora* (London: Stenvalley Press, 1973),¹ under Siniavski's pen name, Abram Tertz, we have Siniavski's account of the same experience. Solzhenitsyn's *Odyssey* produced a literature which is rather well known by now. In the reader's mind, Solzhenitsyn's personality and his fictional characters seem to be fused into a literature which could be compared to some medieval mystery play, complete with the suffering of the innocent, voluntary martyrdom of the faithful, and the promise of paradise as their final reward.

With the appearance of Andrei Siniavski's *A Voice from the Choir*, we have a different, and probably more complex, account at hand. The reasons are to be found in the difference of the times from which their experience stems, and of course, in the difference of personality of the two writers. If Solzhenitsyn's labor camp experience reflects the cruel and sadistic bestialities of the *Gulag* system up to Stalin's death, then by the time Siniavski got to the camp, this system was no longer in existence. Siniavski's camp is more similar to the *katorga* (penal colony) in which Dostoevsky served his sentence; although in comparison Dostoevsky's prison appears almost benevolent (with the exception of the floggings); an unhurried, patriarchal place. Siniavsky, who went to a Mordvinian labor camp in 1966 and spent there (in different locations) nearly six years, was not plagued by the two greatest enemies that people of the Solzhenitsyn era had suffered from—the murderous conditions in the camp (undernourishment and inhumanely hard labor) and the terror of the *blatnye* (the professional criminals) over the political prisoners. Having gone through the so-called “destalinization” period, with its emphasis on “socialist legality,” the Soviet system could not afford to use the labor camps as the equivalents of the Nazi annihilation camps any more. The prisoners were given more or less adequate food, clothing, and certain legal rights; the terror of the *blatnye* had already been broken. When Siniavski entered camp life, only the remnants, some individuals (but not the *zakon*, nor the *blatnoy*, code of behavior), their memories, and their folklore, were still alive. Of course, Siniavski's personality and his background are also different. Solzhenitsyn began to write from the standpoint of an army officer, an idealistic-minded professional frontline soldier, with only some unpublished juvenilia behind him; Siniavski entered camp life as an accomplished writer, a professional literary critic, and an acclaimed professor of literature at Moscow University.

The *Voice from the Choir* is a collection of impressions and remarks (in the form of *Thoughts Unaware*, published in the West after Siniavski's trial in 1966) selected from letters that Siniavski wrote to his wife, Maria Vassilyevna. The collected letters made up about 1500 pages by the time of Siniavski's release from prison.

Anyone who is familiar with Siniavski's work will realize that they represent a continuation of his work, both as a literary critic and as a creative writer. In many respects these excerpts provide us with an unprecedented insight into Siniavski's mind, into the development and reevaluation of many of his cherished ideas, into the deepening and maturing process of his unique vision of reality. In vain will the reader look for a political exposé here. To the great surprise of his captors as well, who did not want to believe him at his trial when he stated that he was not a

“political writer,” Siniavski’s basic concern, even in the labor camp, was the same as before his arrest—the interrelationship between art and reality. Of course, in a political system which arrogates to itself the right to judge in these matters, Siniavski is still a “political writer”—but this is not his choice or doing.

The book is divided into seven chapters, one of which is devoted to each year in captivity, and with an additional one for the first impressions in freedom, Siniavski records in it, in the form of loosely-connected random remarks, sometimes in diary form, all the impressions and thoughts he experienced from the moment of his arrest, up to the time of his first days in freedom. There is no narrative, as Siniavski writes in the first sentence: “I shall speak directly because life is short.”

What were his impressions? Not, as might have been expected, complaints about the horrors of prison life; but rather, the reactions of an intellectual to an experiment. He had heard and read much about it, and now was experiencing it himself. He marvelled at the lines of poetry that came to his mind; he was astounded by the sentimentality of the *blatnye pesenki* (criminal songs); he remembered situations from world literature, and was surprised to see that depending on men’s situation in life, literature and art talk to us with different tongues; he memorized long religious songs from the Caucasus, sung to him by some Turkish prisoners; collected the linguistic peculiarities of the prisoners’ speech; and was in general confirmed in his belief that: “In principle, only miracles are worthy of portrayal. This is what the folk tales know very well. Or, if we want to talk about everyday things, they will have to be resurrected in a supernatural illumination. A narrative language always has to have big eyes” (p. 259).

Looking closely at the “random remarks” one easily discovers recurring topics, familiar from other works by Siniavski. The most prominent place is taken by remarks about art, the meaning of art, the interrelationship between art and life. “For a writer, even death is useful” (p. 48), notes Siniavski, in a half-sarcastic, half-serious vein. Or, talking about the concept, known to the Romans as “*poeta natus*,” i.e., man is born to art, Siniavski jots down: “Man gets into the ‘situation of art’ the same way as, having been born, he gets into the ‘situation of life.’ If this is the case, then everything is art for him. Under every little leaf he can set up his workshop. People say: ‘He has a particular vision’ (because he is an artist). But what is it that he sees? Only one thing: that everything is permeated with art” (p. 15).

Siniavski has always been not just an artist, but an art critic, and the *Voice from the Choir* bears out fully what Siniavski said at his trial: “Literary criticism was for me not a cover-up, but the lifeblood of my existence.”² Seeing art everywhere, he is always driven by the desire to analyze it, to get down to the very source of man’s urge for creative activity. The literature of the past presents itself in a different light in the labor camp. A random remark about Gogol and Dostoevsky: “It seems to me, that the *Poor People* of Dostoevsky were born out of an analogy and contrast to the *Dead Souls*. Dostoevsky says poetically—and he is very angry at that—that/one should call people/not ‘dead souls’/but rather ‘poor people’ ” (p. 64). There are a great number of similar analytical observations about many poets and writers. Pushkin and Gogol figure prominently, but so do Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Shakespeare, and Goethe.

Siniavski has always extended the dual vision of art and art criticism to practically all spheres of life; and his observations about sex, language, and religion are direct continuations of his previously known ideas. Only the place of experience, the point of observation have changed—Siniavski sees them through his camp experience. About sex:

“In the women’s prison: ‘Give me your shirt, I’ll wash it for you.’ (If this sentence is pronounced with an intonation of asking a favor, then one realizes that with this, family life begins; perhaps even if this lone shirt represents the entire commonly-shared household, the house and love). It appears that there is the possibility of one more variation on the lowly-erotic theme—with a positive accent. Sex, as the sign of trust (since what can be more trusting than such a closeness of people who were strangers only yesterday, when we allow the other to share in something we wouldn’t show to anybody?).” (P. 50)

Or a female supervisor in the prison to a male prisoner:

“‘Come to see me, after they release you. I myself will take off your pants.’ (She knows very well that he won’t be released for another eleven years.) But you hear through this offer the pitifulness and defenselessness of the host—Everything that I have you can have, too. Here, take it, help yourself (establishing a close friendship with a beggar who has not been given a thing by anybody) look, here, I’m not holding back anything, I’ll share my last bit of food with you, no pretensions, just like people who meet by chance and sit down together to share a cigarette. Is there anything else that we can offer each other?—In general, sex is a great cry at the rivers of Babylon.” (P. 63)

Particularly interesting are Siniavski’s observations on the *blatnye* in the camp. He analyzes their folklore, describes individual ones with incredible names (such as Pushkin) and in general penetrates the *blatnoy* psychology to such an extent, and in such a way, that some comments are called for. In the *Gulag* and other works, Solzhenitsyn always talked about the *blatnye* like criminals who were not human. Siniavski liked them. Of course, they are not the same *blatnye*; as was mentioned at the beginning of this article, they have lost their power over the political prisoners. Siniavski sees in them the people of free spirit, who in a Dostoevskian way have overstepped the limit, who, in trying to escape the determinism of everyday life, became criminals. Siniavski is drawn to their free spirit, to their sentimental folklore, to their particular language, and to their complete disregard for life’s amenities, that are valued so highly by the petit bourgeois Soviet society (or for that matter, by any such society).

It is not generally widely realized, nor has it been dealt with in critical works on Siniavski, that from the very beginning of his career as a writer of fiction, Siniavski always had this preference for the *blatnye*. The very pseudonym he chose—Abram Tertz—is that of a Jewish bandit from Odessa, whose “heroic deeds” are immortalized in *blatnoy* folklore. At his trial, the judge pressed Siniavski for an explanation of his pseudonym, but Siniavski would not go into details; he only denied the judge’s allegation that the name had an “anti-Semitic connotation.” At the time that Siniavski was still in the Soviet Union, it could easily be assumed that his pseudonym was used only as political camouflage, and that he would revert to his own name once the compelling political circumstances did not exist any more.

This assumption proved to be false. The *Voice from the Choir* was still published under the name of Abram Tertz. The editors of this book were mistaken when they described this book on its dust jacket as a “farewell work by Abram Tertz.” In January, 1974, in a personal conversation I had with Siniavski in Paris, he told me that Abram Tertz still exists, and will continue to do so in the future. He said that he had rejected the publisher’s wish to change the author’s name to Siniavski, presumably for publicity reasons. Siniavski needs Abram Tertz; and when pressed on this issue, he explained that he feels there are two different personalities at work in his creation—Abram Tertz is the creative artist, while Andrei Siniavski is the academic, the university professor, the literary critic. He wants to keep the two separate and distinct from each other. Whether this is possible or not remains to be seen. However, the observations about the *blatnye* in *A Voice from the Choir* serve as a marvelous insight into this complex aspect of Siniavski’s personality.

Part III of the *Voice* is dedicated to a great extent to observations about *blatnye*, and in the final entry, dealing with the death of a *blatnoy* chief nicknamed Pushkin, Siniavski says: “When the *suki* [bitches, i.e., the adversaries of the *blatnye*, who informed on them] put Pushkin on the iron plate and started the bonfire underneath, Pushkin yelled out to the spectators standing some distance away a sentence that is better than any epigraph that I could discover for myself, if only I considered myself worthy of repeating it: Hey, you *frayerá* [those who are not *blatnye*, a derogatory expression meaning dud, honkey, etc.] tell the people that I have died as a real thief” (p. 159).

The random remarks are organized in seven chapters, and they definitely show the changes that Siniavski went through as time passed in the labor camp. At the beginning, he is full of curiosity about his new environment, records every detail of the other prisoners’ conversations, correlates them with theoretical observations of life and literature. As time goes on (approximately after the third year) Siniavski becomes more and more depressed by the enforced community in which he finds himself, and very much like Dostoevsky, suffers more and more from the lack of privacy and from the stupid and empty ways of passing time that characterize most of his fellow prisoners. Even though the prison camp was a great school in which Siniavski discovered the “real” Russian people (as Dostoevsky did) after a while he realizes that the dichotomy between the individual (especially the creative person) and the masses, is just as real as it was for Pushkin or Dostoevsky. The Choir is always an enforced community for the individual singer, and even though he might be happy to join the Choir at times, he is always cramped by the restriction of community.

In an analytical Afterword, written by Siniavski’s friend and codefendant, Golomshtock, the title is explained as being derived from this dichotomy. For Siniavski, who is a very complex writer, this explanation seems to be only part of the truth. From one of the entries a further, and perhaps a more real explanation can be deduced: “He hears a choir of voices during the night, perhaps that of the spirits of the earth, or that of all the peoples and nations strewn around all over it, and listening to it, he suddenly feels that if he understands even one word of what the choir sings about then he has to lose his mind. To understand is to lose one’s mind” (p. 74).

Laszlo M. Tikos
University of Massachusetts

NOTES

¹Abram Tertz, *Golos iz Khora* (London: Stenvalley Press, 1973), pp. 338. All subsequent references are to this edition. All translations are mine.

²A. Siniavski, *For Freedom of Imagination* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1971), p. xvii.

B/Z and S/Z

There are some books which become essential reading by their own manifest importance, and others which become essential reading because of the critical acclaim with which they are received, and the second category can be independent of the first. In the five years since *S/Z* was first published, in French, I have sometimes wondered whether the fortunes of the book, now appearing in a first-rate translation by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), are due to its intrinsic merit, or to the press it has had. What puzzled me about the critics' reception was the unanimity with which Barthes's essay was hailed, in literary and philosophical reviews all over Europe, by reviewers whose primary interest was not literary criticism. Yet the truth is that Barthes's book is difficult reading, rewarding if you persevere, but discouraging, one would have thought, to anyone not familiar with the language of semiology, or not addicted to the critical examination of texts.

Why should a meditation on a little known *nouvelle* of Balzac command the attention of so many readers—readers who, one imagines, are not fervent followers of Balzac (Balzicians have on the whole been reticent about *S/Z*, and we might have witnessed a repetition of the confrontation of new and old criticism which revolved round Racine in the mid-sixties)? Because Barthes's essay is not simply an exegesis of Balzac's *Sarrasine*. It is a meditation on the nature of reading, sustained by a phrase by phrase (more accurately, *lexia* by *lexia*) commentary on how an alert reader decodes Balzac's text. The commentary is frequently interrupted by short passages (numbered I-XCIII) in which Barthes scrutinizes the aspect of the reading process which is involved in the phrase under review. Why *Sarrasine*? Barthes's own explanation is disappointing: "Why? All I know is that for some time I have wanted to make a complete analysis of a short text and that the Balzac story was brought to my attention by Jean Reboul" (p. 16). Reboul's article, in the psycho-analytical *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* is not the sort of thing literary critics read as a matter of course (it was not even spotted by the regular Balzac bibliographers), any more than *Sarrasine* is a story nonspecialists would read as a matter of course. I suspect that Barthes was attracted to *Sarrasine*, once he had discovered it and read it, because he recognized subconsciously that it would provide him with the possibility of writing a book on literature which would be an illustration of its own principles. (Chance?