Dehumanization and Re-Humanization in Gustav Herling’s *A World Apart*

by

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Introduction

*Here there is a world apart, unlike everything else, with laws of its own, its own manners and customs, and here is the house of the living dead life as nowhere else and a people apart. It is this corner apart that I am going to describe.*

Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead*

The Gulag memoir has been graced with a special status in the world of literary scholarship, as the fluidity of the genre and ability of the author to choose the voice, tone, subject, and relayed message has resulted in a range of works, each unique and distinct from the other. It is a genre that has experienced periodic revivals over the past half century, as the messages and topics remain interesting and relevant to different generations, perhaps because of the complicated history of veiled truth inherent to the Soviet Gulag. Unlike in the post-World War II Germany, the Soviet administration was never forced to immediately account for the crimes against humanity it had committed, and it continued to avoid admitting those realities for as long as it was politically feasible. Meanwhile, Western intellectuals approached the topic with skepticism. Gulag historian Anne Applebaum explains this reluctance to accept Gulag realities by Western scholars: “Even if communist ideology meant something very different in practice, it was harder for the intellectual descendants of the American and French Revolutions to condemn a system which *sounded*, at least, similar to their own. Perhaps this helps explain why eyewitness reports of the Gulag were, from the very beginning, often dismissed and belittled by the very same people who would never have thought to question the validity of Holocaust testimony written
by Primo Levi or Elie Weisel.”¹ Memoirists also suffered in their craft, as by writing about their experiences under the Stalinist regime, they attracted potentially negative attention to their work, leaving them unable to create honest depictions of their reality. Beth Holmgren, in her introduction to *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*, writes:

> The state not only censured alternative points of view, but also outlawed or tampered with all attempts to document a negative present, even when such documentation purported to be objective. Like other totalitarian societies, the Stalinist regime depended on a vast propaganda effort for its popular support; the government was adamant in equating the depicted with the real, and airbrushed that depiction accordingly.²

The airbrushed accounts overshadowed testimonies based on reality, and because of this rule, memoirs written by dissident authors did not surface to serious popular consciousness until long after the crimes they witnessed had been committed.

It is not surprising, then, that Gustav Herling’s memoir *A World Apart* did not cause a great stir in the West when it was published in London in 1951. The realization that the might of their allies was built on the backbone of a concentration camp system similar to that employed by the Germans would be a seriously demoralizing blow for those who had been allied with the Soviet Union in fighting the enemy, as “no one wants to be told that there was another, darker side to Allied victory, or that the camps of Stalin, our ally, expanded just as the camps of Hitler, our enemy, were liberated.”³ Despite mentioning several times in his book that he did not reserve ire towards the Russians, but only towards the oppressive system they had

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created, Herling was accused of being anti-Russian because of his Polish nationality. At that time, the heads of Polish government were in exile in England, as the Soviet Union had replaced them with their own puppet government, so any writer criticizing the State, especially one who came from Poland, was automatically cast as a propagandist for the anti-Soviet side. It was not until Khrushchev allowed Solzhenitsyn to publish *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* that Gulag memoirs were rocketed into the center of literary celebrity in the Soviet Union and the West, as Solzhenitsyn was a Russian himself, and so his depictions of living under the regime of the Soviet Union were not perceived as being driven by national prejudices.

Herling claims in an interview that even as late as 1999, a conversation with him that was supposed to be the prologue for an Italian edition of Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales* was rejected because he drew too many parallels between the Soviet state and the Nazi regime.

Gustav Herling, known as Gustaw Herling-Grudziński in Poland, was born in Kielce in 1919 to Jewish parents, although he did not identify strongly with his Jewish heritage. He attended the University of Warsaw, where he contributed to Poland’s flourishing literary scene during the interwar period, a time of great productivity for Polish artists, who celebrated their long-denied independence from occupying forces. He involved himself in literary critique, assessing the works of Witold Gombrowicz and Czesław Miłosz, before the Nazi invasion interrupted his

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studies in 1939. During the outbreak of the war, Herling worked to create one of the first anti-Nazi resistance cells, after which he fled to join the Free Polish Army in the East. There he was arrested by the Soviet NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs) because of his German-sounding last name, and he was unreasonably accused of trying to fight with the Germans against the Soviet Union. In November 1940, he was placed in the labor camp at Yercevo on the White Sea, and it was on this experience that Herling based *A World Apart*. He was twenty years old at that time. A year later, in November 1941, four months after “amnesty” was announced for the imprisoned Poles in the USSR under the Sikorski-Mayski Agreement, Herling and five other Poles participated in a hunger strike since they were being held in the prisoner longer, despite the agreement. A rare, bold, and isolating move, it ended in the successful release of the prisoners from the labor camp in January 1942. In Kazakhstan, Herling joined the Polish army of General Władysław Anders, and moved through the Middle East, northern Africa, and eventually Italy, to take part in the 1944 battle of Monte Cassino.

While in the army, Herling picked up his pen once more to write essays deploring society created by radical revolution, and the philosophical tradition of Polish messianic myth and exalted religious patriotism. He also critiqued the one-sided representation of war in literature, and the pervasive silence on the topic of Soviet labor camps. At the end of World War II he decided not to return to Poland, but instead he settled as an émigré in Italy, banned from his fatherland until 1991,

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7 Bolecki, “*Inny Świat*” Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego, 18-21.
8 Ibid., 25.
9 Ibid., 33.
10 Ibid., 38.
where he continued to write, publish, critique, and involve himself in the intellectual community.\textsuperscript{11}

In the decades after his move to Italy, Herling was consistently and predictably denied a visa to visit Poland. Because of his reputation as a vocal opponent of Communism and an ally to the democratic movements, including support of the underground literature, the administration of the People’s Republic of Poland banned the publishing of his works, or even mentions of his name or titles in local publications. It was not until the 1980s that the underground press had gained more agency, and fragments of Herling’s works could finally appear. In the 1990s he finally attained a celebrity status, as his work was discovered and rediscovered by new audiences. Herling died on July 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2000, in his home in Naples. His lifetime’s supply of literary material is considered to be a continuous meditation on the moral experience of society during World War II, and a reflection of his own personal transformation. Although \textit{A World Apart} was his first major work, it has remained the most popular, often chosen as mandatory reading for high school students in Poland.\textsuperscript{12}

Such is the historical context of the memoir. However, an analytical reading of \textit{A World Apart} is incomplete without placing it in the context of its own literary genre of the Gulag literature. The diversity that exists in the genre is impressive, and the multitude of literary devices and perspectives change depending on the purpose of the author, even if the subject remains the same. Dariusz Tolczyk, in \textit{See No Evil: Literary Cover-Ups and Discoveries of the Soviet Camp Experience}, writes that Polish camp literature follows “a noticeable pattern in which one of the basic

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 64.
organizing principles of the image of the camp experience is that of heroic human resistance against dehumanizing pressures.” These authors tend to resort to a selective memory, and “only those who pass the moral test of the camp are to be immortalized through literature.” An alternative pattern found in Gulag memoirs is one of deliberately provocative understatement, where events and deeds that are considered heinous by the reader are normalized in the character’s observations and voice. The memoir can also be the story of a moral transformation, as the character, through his perception of the horrors of the camp, gradually accepts the new rules of the morality. Or it can even be a dry account of daily facts, avoiding questions of morality, such as Henry Mochulsky’s dry narration in *Gulag Boss*. There are many voices and artistic directions that memoir writers can take when discussing highly contentious moral issues.

Herling’s memoir does not subscribe solely to any one of those patterns.

As Włodzimierz Bolecki says about Herling’s style:

As a work of literature, *A World Apart* is without doubt one of the greatest achievements of Polish literary prose. Aside from references to Dostoevsky—which I have already mentioned—and metaphorical, although emotionally subdued, style of narration and a special composition of the whole, the artistic uniqueness of this book is determined by the superstructure of three reflective—and one might say, non-empirical—perspectives of narration: biographical, psychological, and philosophical (moralistic). Augmenting over the order of events and empirical facts, they transform historical, political, and historical truth about the camps into a literary truth about spiritual human experiences.¹⁴

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The search for the balance between historical truth and literary truth is reflected in his own conception of what good prose should look like, as he concludes as early as 1950 that:

…in literature it is not enough only to live through, pay in honest blood, be moved without moving others, sob, howl in pain, tear one’s garments, lie down on the threshold, jerk the scars grown over with a membrane of evil, curse, swear, flame in indignation, tear the hair from one’s head. It is also necessary to carefully observe, think, compare one’s own conclusions with those of others, and watch the “first reactions” as suspiciously, as the “first inspired words.”

Emotion can be expressed without hysterics. In his writing, Herling additionally finds that in order to explore the unique moral environment of the Gulag, to make it as vivid and understandable and shocking to the reader as possible, he must avoid applying terms from outside world of the camp to describe what happens within the walls of the camp. The end product is effective because his depictions of humans are so realistic. He says in his interview with Kelly Zinkowski that one woman even called him to say that a pretty nurse he mentions in his book is her mother because she has her name, and that she would like to know more about this character as her mother never spoke of her time in the Gulag. Although the woman he describes was based on a real person, the name is invented.

Simultaneously to providing the reader with a form of literary depiction of historical events, the memoir is ultimately a work of an artist. The prose reads smoothly, as Herling is well-versed in artistic writing. However, even as the text switches between vivid descriptive passages and philosophical treatise on morality,

the author avoids over-intellectualizing his content, while still making valid points. Ultimately, the artistic merits of the memoir do not overshadow its purpose: a cautionary lesson against history repeating itself. Leona Toker says:

> By describing human behavior in extreme situations, concentration camp literature provides us with a testing ground for political ideologies as well as for psychological, ethical, and even aesthetic theories. It helps us dismantle stereotypes, calls our attention to the suffering of individual victims, gives faces and names to statistical figures, and engages us in the ritual of commemoration. It also reminds us—insofar as we tend to forget—what it is like to have to live under totalitarian regimes.¹⁷

Unlike many Gulag writers who have only focused on one capacity of literary art, truth, ethical dilemmas, or heroic portrayal of human beings, Herling combines all aspects to create a stunningly complete picture of the Soviet labor camp. This thesis explores how both the artistic form and the ethical message that Gustav Herling provides in his memoir, *A World Apart*, help describe and explain the loss of moral agency of the Gulag prisoners. Therefore, the two main focuses are the relationship between gulag morality and dehumanization, and resistance and re-humanization.

The message gleaned from Herling’s focus is that the Soviet system, rather than bad people, was the real perpetrator of the deplorable actions and horrors of the Gulag. Anne Applebaum writes that “from 1917 on, a whole society’s set of values was turned on its head: a lifetime’s accumulated wealth and experience was a liability, robbery was glamorized as ‘nationalization,’ murder became an accepted part of the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat.”¹⁸ The Gulag was one of the results of this subversion of former values. According to Herling, the aim of the

Soviet prison establishment instituted by the totalitarian regime was to dehumanize the individual in order to mold the prisoners into slaves, both physically and mentally, completely and unquestionably dedicated to the state. The morality of Yercevo depends on the individual’s loss of former standards from the free world. However, his portrayal and analysis of the camp morality does not stop there, as Herling describes moments of resistance to the Gulag-instated morality, as moments of re-humanization. The push and pull, oppression and resistance, ultimately allows humans to triumph over the system even in times of great pressure.

The first section of the thesis deals with the ways in which the Gulag system dehumanizes individuals, leading them to identify as something less than human, no longer bound to the system of morality of the free world. The second section describes how Herling’s characters refuse to succumb to the morality instituted by the Soviet labor camp system, as they cling to moments of humanity by different techniques.

Herling’s epilogue contains the difficult and often misunderstood dilemma of how to judge acts performed in the Gulag environment. In this episode, the narrator runs into a man he had met in the camp, whose company he greatly enjoyed. The setting is June 1945, in Paris. The location is important, as the two former prisoners are no longer in the Soviet Union, but in the West. The man confesses to him that at some point in the labor camp he was forced by the Soviet police to choose between either falsely denouncing four German prisoners, leading to their death, or his own life. Naturally, he chooses to preserve his own life. He pleads to Herling to simply tell
him that he understands how he could have made the decision that directly led to the
death of four other people. The narrator freezes:

I felt the blood rushing to my head. Images and memories crowded before my eyes. At that time, three years after I had left Russia, when I was forcing the camp from my mind in order to preserve faith in human dignity, these images were blurred and indistinct, though now when I have finally obtained some peace, I look at them with detachment and they are clear but quite remote. I might have been able to pronounce the word that was asked of me, on the day after my release from the camp. In 1945 I already had three years of freedom behind me, three years of military wandering and battles, of normal feelings, love friendship and sympathy....The days of our life are not like the days of our death, and the laws of our life are not the laws of our death. I had come back among people, with human standards and conceptions, and was I now to escape from them, abandon them, voluntarily betray them? The choice was the same: then it had been his life or the lives of the four Germans, now it was his peace or mine. No, I could not say it.\(^\text{19}\)

The following pages, in addition to answering why the narrator was not able to forgive the man, describe the machinations of the Gulag system, and the forces that exist to counteract the dehumanizing effects of the Soviet labor camps, as described in Gustav Herling’s *A World Apart*.

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\(^{19}\) Herling, Gustaw, Joseph Marek, and Bertrand Russell. *A World Apart, by Gustav Herling. Translated from the Polish by Joseph Marek.* (London: W. Heinemann, 1951) 247-248. All of my citations are from this English translation of the book, which is the only translation into English. I compared the English version to the Polish, and unfortunately much is lost in the translation. For example, every time Herling includes dialogue spoken by a Russian prisoner, he uses the Russian language, but with a Polish phonetic spelling, making the distinction between the Poles and the Russians more defined. The phrase “back to work tomorrow” in Polish is “jutro znowu do roboty,” while in the Polish-phonetic version it is “zawtra opiat’ na rabotu.” This adds another rich dimension of analysis that I do not include in this thesis, but would like to explore in the future, working with the original Polish text.
Dehumanization

But the trouble is that a writer who wishes to describe a Soviet labour camp objectively must descend to the depths of Hell where he should not seek human motives behind inhuman deeds.

Gustav Herling, A World Apart

The symptoms of dehumanization manifest themselves in different ways, at different levels of perception. Nick Haslam, a psychologist specializing in morality, observes that dehumanization occurs when unique human traits such as civility, refinement, moral sensibility, rationality and logic, maturity, emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, agency and individuality and depth are replaced with a lack of culture, coarseness, amorality and lack of self-restraint, irrationality, childlikeness, inertness, coldness, rigidity, passivity and superficiality. Herling’s work offers many examples of how the environment of the Gulag exchanges the human traits for the second list of dehumanized traits. The unanswered question of how “good” people are corralled into doing “bad” things, and the process by which this happens, is one of the reasons why readers reach for memoirs of tragic events. While not a justification for the deeds, memoirs, especially ones that deal with the psychological and behavioral observation of the individual in extreme conditions, provide insight on such matters.

The psychological type of dehumanization occurs regularly in A World Apart, and the narrator, rather than blaming any person in particular for the cruelties, suggests that the fault lies in the flawed Soviet system. As Bertrand Russell says in

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his preface: “I hope that Mr. Herling’s book will be very widely read, and that it will rouse in its readers not useless vindictiveness, but a vast compassion for the petty criminals, almost as much for their victims, and a determination to understand and eliminate the springs of cruelty in human nature that has become distorted by bad social systems.”

*A World Apart* is the story of how human strength and weaknesses manifest themselves in an environment where moral norms and ethics ultimately do not exist. An argument could be made that morality does exist, but it is a modified morality based on the rules of survival in the Gulag. The standards for humanity are greatly diminished in the Gulag, and for people to adjust to these standards they must be dehumanized.

Throughout his book, Herling provides several recurring motifs associated with the dehumanization of the prisoner. The following four sections describe how Herling presents the Soviet a Gulag as a place that: (1) turns the man into a machine, and the Gulag becomes a factory where the inmate is less than human, and more like a cog in the wheel of the military-industrial complex; (2) changes man into something less than human and more like an animal, a process captured by Herling’s characterizations of the prisoners as non-human species; (3) after taking away all semblance of humanity in the prisoner, it leaves the prisoner with a goal of only satisfying his most basic desires of sex and hunger; and, finally, how it destroys bonds between human beings as it eliminates empathy, trust, and love from its daily equation (4).

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1. Prisoners and the Industrial Machine

It is impossible to delve into the language choices and narrator voice without Bakhtin’s theories from Discourse in the Novel. Simplified, Bakhtin’s theory on a term he calls heteroglossia states that language in artistic works such as the novel is stratified. This means that there exist two or more voices within the novel that are all in conflict with each other. Applied to A World Apart, this means that the author uses many voices to affect the reader, and the reader can find his own meaning based on context. Bakhtin additionally states that “every socially significant verbal performance has the ability—sometimes for a long period of time, and for a wide circle of persons—to infect with its own intention certain aspects of language that had been affected by its semantic and impressive impulse, imposing on them specific semantic nuances and specific axiological overtones; thus, it can create slogan-words, curse-words, praise-words and so forth.” The ability of language to change its meaning to the reader is exploited by Herling when he adopts the language of Soviet Union propaganda to describe the dehumanization of the prisoner. He appropriates the terms of industrialization that the State often uses (such as “production norms,” “quota,” etc.) and uses it to present the prisoners he observes in an objectifying way.

Difficult living conditions, complete isolation from the outside world, the deprivation of all rights, destructive physical labor, and the reduction of the human to the role of a unit of work force in the prison lead to the gradual degradation of the prisoner’s personality and a loss of moral values that are necessary for normal life. Herling’s humans are presented as tools for the disposal of the Soviet camp-industrial

complex. The paradox in this case is that the tools are treated deplorably, with malnutrition and demoralization, as the administration cannot afford the upkeep of the prisoners likely because of economic limitations and mismanagement. From a practical standpoint, the poor treatment of the inmates is justified by the administration, since if the prisoners were to be kept in a healthy state, the point of the punishment would be nullified, and there would be a higher risk of the prisoners rebelling against their captors. As the language Herling provides several examples during which the prisoners are treated like machines, including the roud rationing system, interrogation, and the overflow of labor camp attitudes into “free” society.

An explicit example of the appropriation of Soviet language to describe prisoners happens at the beginning of the chapter “The Ice Breaker,” when Herling writes that “the whole system of forced labor in Soviet Russia—in all its stages, the interrogations and hearings, the preliminary imprisonment, and the camp itself—is intended primarily not to punish the criminal, but rather to exploit him economically and transform him psychologically.”23 The economic exploitation cements the role of the individual as a tool in the greater plan of the Soviet Union. To the Soviet and Gulag administration of Herling’s world, the prisoners are not worthy of the respect that conscious beings living in a functional society typically deserve because they have in some way committed a dangerous crime against the dogma of the State in their thoughts or actions. As punishment for this crime, the administrative class views the prisoners as tools for the smooth running of the industrial complex, machines that are only worth something if they can fulfill the physical labor norms that they are

built for. At best, when one of the prisoners suffers an injury that can heal or contracts a remediable illness, the administration makes an effort to repair the machine. At worst, the prisoners who are unable to contribute to the production output are cast away to die.

It should be noted that these attitudes between the guards and the prisoner come during an important development in Soviet propaganda. Gustav Herling’s experience in the labor camp coincides with the flourishing of the Stakhanovite movement. Starting in 1935, during Stalin’s Second Five-Year Plan, the movement encouraged Soviet citizens to liken themselves to the miner Aleksei Grigorievich Stakhanov, who was known to mine record amounts of coals. It encouraged over-achievement at work as one of the main characteristics of a successful Soviet citizen.\footnote{Overy, R. J. \textit{The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia}. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004), 258.} As maximal labor productivity for the sake of rebuilding of the Soviet economy was a mark of success, it was natural that the labor camps tried to turn their inmates into this type of ideal man. More importantly, the administrators and guards tried to follow the new ideal of the Soviet man by showing results of over-achievement that, in their position, could only be attained through exploitation of slaves in the Gulag. Full sets of clothes were issued to the “best ‘stakhanovite’ brigades of prisoners,” among other privileges.\footnote{Herling, \textit{A World Apart}, 27.}

Where do humans find the capacity to dismiss other humans as objects? Perhaps one explanation can be found in Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky’s memoir \textit{The Gulag Boss}, written from the point of view of a member of the administration who
had never been a prisoner himself—it claims to be the first memoir from a member of the NKVD to be translated into English. One of the most remarkable traits of his account is the absence of references to cruelty. Instead, Mochulsky includes many references to the prisoners as a means of production, useful for the sole purpose of fulfilling the norm. For example, while Herling is describing hellish scenes of survival, Mochulsky casually comes to the obvious conclusion that “the absence of civilian doctors at the units had an extremely negative impact on the prisoners’ productivity on the job.” Although he understands that in order to fulfill the norm he has to make sure that his prisoners have adequate living conditions, he is still guided by his desire to serve the Soviet Union by increasing the production of his labor camp. Such a psychology helps explain why the prisoners are treated like machines by the characters in Herling’s memoir. Like Mochulsky, the administration looks at the prisoners as tools for fulfilling the norms which they are assigned. The guards are unable to follow the Stakhanovite ideal unless they squeeze the very last ounce of productivity out of their labor camps, and the only way they can achieve that goal is through the thorough exploitation of the prisoner. Perhaps this is a method of justification for the guards, and an excuse for the subhuman treatment of their charges. Herling’s narrator, as a member of the Gulag complex that is coming from the opposite side of Mochulsky’s point of view, reinforces this idea when he describes the negative attitudes of the guards towards the prisoners.

As a primary example in A World Apart, the description of the food rationing system involves the ideas and language of the administration in terms of state-induced

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economic output, especially since it is one of the crucial parts of the labor camp. The prisoner here is described in non-human terms because he can be manipulated, modified and tweaked in a way that suggests he is a machine rather than man. In the memoir, the system of food rationing divides the prisoners into three groups, where the groups that fulfill the norms outlined by the Gulag administration receive slightly richer and bigger rations from different “cauldrons” than those who are weaker and receive smaller, thinner rations. This slowly weeds out the prisoners who are unable to fulfill their function as workers, and thus are unable to contribute to the labor output.\(^27\) As these members are technically useless to the Soviet administration, the guards show them no mercy, instead leaving them to be cast out like a broken machine in a junkyard through a type of natural selection. Veiling the victim in metaphor helps the victimizer feel more justified in his actions. The Soviet jargon of economics reduces the prisoner from the status of a human to a figurative cog in the wheel of the industrial complex, as Herling recounts in his description of how the prisoners organize themselves to go out into their daily labor:

At a given signal the prisoners drew themselves up into brigades, standing in twos. In normal brigades the old were at the front and the young at the back, but in brigades whose output did not come up to the prescribed norm the order was reversed. This practice must be explained more fully. There were very few prisoners who believed that it was better to work less and eat less, and in the overwhelming majority of cases the cauldron system was successful in obtaining the maximum physical effort from the prisoners for an insignificant increase in their rations.\(^28\)

By using terms such as “output,” “prescribed norm,” and “maximum physical effort,” Herling subscribes to the dehumanizing language of the Soviet Union. The

\(^{27}\) Herling, \textit{A World Apart}, 35.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 36-37.
industrialization that Soviet labor camps take part in glorifies work output and results rather than focusing on the success and growth of the individual, especially if they are a prisoner, because the individual is not an individual but a machine. Naturally, preference is given to the young and the healthy prisoners, who will work harder and compensate for the weaker links within their brigade.

The administration refocuses the value of the prisoners in both life and death, from their individuality and ability to be a cognizant, thinking, and feeling being to an item that is worthless unless he is constantly able to apply himself physically. As Herling writes, “the inhuman thoughtlessness of Soviet labour camp legislation has created a situation in which a prisoner who drops dead at his work from exhaustion is just a nameless unit of energy, which with one stroke of the pencil is eliminated from the plan of production, while a prisoner wounded at work is a damaged machine, which is sent off for repairs as soon as possible.”

Herling, characterizing the administration as operating with an “inhuman thoughtlessness,” affirms that the State does not have the ability to empathize with the prisoner. The system itself is a factory that can only accept its constituents if these are able to provide the desired output. This includes the prisoners, but also the guards and the members of the administration who themselves are held to some norms of production, and who may be acting to protect their own hide from the rules of the Stalinist ideology. Herling describes the prisoner as “nameless” at the moment of his death, which supports the claim that he is just a machine, as machines do not have the privilege of having a name that is unique, and a machine that “dies” does not have to be remembered or commemorated by

\[29\] Ibid., 18.
anybody. Therefore, anonymity in death also sets apart the prisoner from the free man, as the free man receives a name by which he can be remembered. The Soviet administration cares for no such thing. The “one stroke of pencil” which eliminates the dead prisoner from all memory shows the triviality with which the system deems the prisoner, since such a small, careless, inconsequential action or a pencil mark represents how small and inconsequential the lives and memory of the prisoner is to the system. The sacrifice of the prisoner to the workings of the machine is not glorified or recognized, as the prisoner is only a part of the machine and a machine himself, and machines do not deserve any glory.

A damaged machine can still be fixed, so the wounded prisoner is “sent off” to be repaired, like an item that goes into the shop. The prisoner does not have the right to choose to be repaired, but he is sent away by the system that now owns and controls his body. The body, like a machine, has its limits, and the Gulag administration recognizes this. However, when a threshold is reached when the body cannot contribute anymore, it is discarded. In traditional moral systems, the human being cannot be disposed of in this way, but in the modified system of the Gulag, where the prisoner is not even considered human, this can occur regularly.

In the interrogation scenes of A World Apart, the narrator makes the dehumanization aspects even more obvious as the victim is objectified. Herling claims that this preface is necessary to understand the story of one character whom he describes, Mikhail Alexeyevich Kostylev, who is tortured excessively, but then resists the process. The “signature” refers to putting one’s name under the accusation, as a
confession. It is the part where the prisoner succumbs to the accusations of the State, even if he has committed no crime:

A prisoner is considered to have been sufficiently prepared for the final achievement of the signature only when his personality has been thoroughly dismantled into its component parts. Gaps appear in the logical association of ideas; thoughts and emotions become loosened in their original positions and rattle against each other like the parts of a broken-down machine; the driving-belts connecting the past with the present slip off their wheels and fall sloppily to the bottom of the mind; all the weights and levers of mind and willpower become jammed and refuse to function; the indicators of the pressure gauges jump as if possessed from zero to maximum and back again. The machine still runs on larger revolutions, but it does not work as it did— all that had a moment before appeared absurd now becomes probable even though still not true, emotions lose their colour, willpower its capacity. The prisoner is now willing to admit that he had betrayed the interests of the proletariat by writing to his relatives abroad, that his slackness at work was sabotage of socialist industry. This is the crucial moment for the examining judge. One final blow at the rusty mechanism of resistance, and the machine will stop altogether.  

Herling describes the type of torture that is used on the prisoners not as something that is supposed to punish the individual, teach him a lesson, or extract information, but rather as a method for the degradation and depravation of the individual of his personality. Once the individual is rid of personality and the things that make him human, he can be manipulated and transformed to be used by the Soviet administration. “Torture is applied at the hearings not on principle, but as an auxiliary instrument. The real object of a hearing is not the extortion from the accused of the prisoner's signature to a fictitious indictment, but the complete disintegration of his individual personality.”

When the personality is taken apart, the shell of the human body is like a robot, ready to be manipulated in the way that the master wants it to be,

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30 Ibid., 65-66.
31 Ibid, 64.
in this case, for labor. The very implications of Herling’s presentation of personality as something that can be taken apart and reassembled are not only an astute observation by Herling, but also force the reader to think from the perspective of the Gulag guards, an experience not necessarily pleasant to the reader. Herling makes a distinction of the human body as a machine, and the machine into which the Soviet Union aims to turn the individual.

The factory, assembly line language continues throughout the whole paragraph. The reference to “component parts” of the personality is dehumanizing, as it suggests that the human psyche is simple and can be easily dismantled. Before the interrogation, Herling suggests that the typical prisoner is an entity that can still experience a colorful array of emotions and has the capacity for willpower. However, when the human psyche is pressured in an inhumane way, the formerly collected entity starts falling apart. The “driving-belts connecting the past with the present” are discarded when the interrogation occurs, and eventually the prisoner convinces himself that he is indeed guilty of whatever crime the government is accusing him of, regardless of how improbable, arbitrary, or blatantly false the claims against him are. The “one final blow at the rusty mechanism of resistance” is what breaks the prisoner’s spirit during the interrogation, and it is what stops the functioning of the individual as his own agent. Then, this machine, which was already starting to get reprogrammed when the prisoner believed the NKVD’s accusations, is completely broken.

After this passage, Herling describes the interaction between the prisoner and the interrogator as that between a patient and a surgeon, with the false evidence
against the prisoner characterized as the scalpel that is the tool for modification. The grotesque imagery of cutting through flesh adds a gross, physical dimension to the machine-prisoner. The body is modified, as “in feverish haste the surgeon cuts out the heart, his probing instruments transplant it to the body's right side, strip flakes of infected tissue from the brain, graft small patches of skin, change the direction of the blood flow, repair the torn network of the nervous system.”

Although the description is very physical and concerns itself with the body, it is a metaphor for what is happening in the prisoner’s head as he is manipulated by the interrogator to reconstruct his beliefs and memories. As Herling dwells on this description of the interrogation, he makes it known to the reader that that the process is strongly dehumanizing as no person who is born with free will should be manipulated in this way. Herling confirms again that interrogation is meant to reset the prisoner’s personality when he reverses the process of being taken apart:

The human mechanism, arrested at its lowest ebb and taken to pieces, is reconstructed and altered; those gaps between disjointed ideas are filled by new connections; thoughts and feelings settle in new bearings; the driving belts start to turn in the opposite direction, transmitting not the past to the present, but the present to the past; the efforts of mind and will are directed to different purposes; the arrows of the gauges will always point to maximum.

In this sentence, which mirrors the string of descriptions from earlier in the paragraph, the “pressure gauges” that had previously teetered between zero and maximum are now stuck on maximum, and the “driving belts” are moving in the opposite direction, which signifies that the belief that the prisoner previously had, in which all he knew was what had happened before the moment of torture, is nullified.

32 Ibid., 66.
33 Ibid., 66.
Instead the prisoner applies what he has been brainwashed with to his past, and he eventually starts to believe that he indeed committed the crimes against the Soviet people of which he has been accused.

Herling intertwines ideas of the physical machine with the ideas of the ideological machine. For example, in his description of the horrors of hunger he says: “The human organism is an unfathomable machine; it is true that it possesses a certain limit of endurance, but beyond that limit there is either complete submission, or else unexpected rebellion which is itself only a form of anesthetic in extremis.”\textsuperscript{34} It is ambiguous whether he is referring to “human organism” as an “unfathomable machine” in the psychological sense or the physical sense, as the former would refer to the human’s ability to retain his humanity during times of struggle, while the latter refers to the organism’s ability to survive extreme physiological situations such as starvation or harsh labor. Regardless, both options dehumanize the prisoner by turning his body and psyche into a machine.

The problem with the interpersonal objectifying attitude is that it seeps out into the greater Soviet society as well. Herling recounts an incident after his release from the Gulag where he witnesses a soldier, who had lost a leg during the defense of Leningrad, trying to skip the line for bread. Although the soldier asks quietly and politely if he can enter the shop without having to wait because he is having difficulty standing, the free citizens around him act in a deplorable manner and tell him antagonistically that “he need be in no hurry, for with only one leg he would not be taken back to the front anyway.”\textsuperscript{35} Although the soldier has been injured at the war

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 75.  
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 231.
front, fighting during the defense of Leningrad, the people around him do not recognize his sacrifice, but instead write him off as being of no use anymore. Herling concludes that “thus the contempt for a damaged machine which is out of circulation has permeated all strata of the Russian people and has polluted fundamentally honest hearts.”\textsuperscript{36} The soldier’s face is “full of helpless despair”, perhaps because he recognizes that he has lost his value to the Soviet Union, and he is no longer useful to the very system and country for which he was fighting for, and for whom he had sacrificed his body. In this passage, Herling refers to the wider problem of the Soviet Gulag, which is that the inhumane, dehumanizing practices have spread to the wider society. The “little zone” of the Gulag has spread itself out to include the “big zone” of the whole Soviet Union, and innocent bystanders who have no business in being cruel to others for no reason are picking up on the trends espoused by the prisons. Toker says, “According to Herling, the world of the camps is sick, and its outskirts are infected.” The \textit{zone-within-a-zone} motif shows that “the camp is but a more condensed expression of the tendencies at work in the country as a whole. The uniqueness of its semiotic system, accountable for turning the camp into ‘another kingdom’ or ‘a world apart,’ can be seen as a result of the dialectic leap from quantitative changes to a qualitative difference.”\textsuperscript{37}

Whether it is through the process of interrogation, the language of economics and exploitation, or the alienation by the free society of people who are physically handicapped, Herling provides several moments when the reader can witness the dehumanization that occurs when the human is compared to a machine. Although the

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 231.
\textsuperscript{37} Toker, \textit{Return from the Archipelago}, 93.
administration claims that the prisoners are sent to the camps because they are “enemies of the people” and need to be reeducated, there is a greater stress on the labor component rather than the ideological component. Despite the fact that in the Soviet Union labor and ideology are inherently connected, the administration’s choice to see the prisoner in terms of a tool for labor rather than a human who has the capacity for reeducation is one of the reasons why this system is particularly cruel.

2. From Human to Animal

Psychologically, the usage of animal metaphors is consistent with labor camp social dynamics. Comparison to animals underlines the dehumanization in the Gulag as animal qualities are often attributed to the out-groups. This permits the in-group (the administration) to mentally prime themselves for an abusive relationship with the out-group (prisoners). Unlike the Nazi concentration camps, the victims of the Gulag were not discriminated against for their nationalities in particular, but encompassed all social groups. Since the distinction between the prisoners and oppressors is not as clear, Herling resorts to animal metaphors as one way to help the reader quickly identify the status of his subject.

Herling's narrative form is based on descriptions of the people around him, especially since he wrote and published the book while the people he met and the events he survived were still fresh in his memory. Leona Toker comments that “the number of people an author has befriended in the camps is sometimes in inverse

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proportion to the vividness with which they are recollected. Gustav Herling’s eighteen-month camp experience being relatively limited, the prisoners who populate his memory are relatively few and do not have to compete for the author’s retrospective attention; it is partly for this reason that each portrait, charismatic or otherwise, is presented with a forceful emotional engagement.”

Another critic writes, “Herling presents his camp companions with concise characteristics or in closed stories, like short novelettes, masterly written. There is a whole unforgettable gallery, an incredible human Panopticon, through which one can observe the horrifying world of the USSR and the nightmare of Soviet life.”

The Panopticon, originally a prison design proposed by Jeremy Bentham, was supposed to be a surveillance structure where the guard would be hidden from the prisoner in a privileged central location, so that the prisoner would never know when he was being observed. Similarly, Herling observes the behaviors of his fellow inmates, who often bare their soul to him, as they have no idea that he will document their existence, let alone share it with a public readership. In these portraits, Herling often attaches bestial descriptors to his characters to reflect their emotional significance as people who have been dehumanized by the ethics of the Gulag.

One of the first characters whom Herling introduces is an old Jew, with whom he shares a cell while waiting for his transport to the prison. This is Herling’s first exposure to the Russian prisoners, and he states that he does not feel compelled to speak to any of them aside from his neighbor. After a while, the Jew finally asks

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39 Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, 81.
40 Wierzyński, Review. of *Inny Świat*. My Translation.
Herling if he is Polish, and if his son could have been in the Polish army. Then, he provides a context for the question, telling his story about how he was a shoemaker in Vitebsk, and he suspects that he was arrested because somebody in his shoemaker’s guild was jealous of his son’s success, especially since he was Jewish. The official reason was that he opposed to sole new shoes with leather scraps, and for this he was sentenced for five years in the prison. Aside from showing how absurd the system of arrests in the Soviet Union was, how men abused the system to wage their own private vendettas, and how anti-Semitism was alive and rampant at that time, Herling shows that the shoemaker is still hopeful that his son will write a petition and that he will be released. The old man even shows him a crumpled photograph of his son.\footnote{Herling, \textit{A World Apart}, 6.}

Through the whole interaction with the old shoemaker, Herling stereotypes him with avian features. Physically, he describes the man as having a narrow mouth and a hooked nose. This is a stereotyped, caricature-like characteristic that Herling repeats several times in reference to the Jews.\footnote{Herling often presents his Jewish characters in a negative light. The anti-Semitic undercurrent of these characterizations turns the Jews into caricatures, both in descriptions of physical features and character. This is especially puzzling, as Herling came from a Jewish family. The Jewish-Polish writer Henryk Grinberg even goes as far as to say that “it is sad, but sometimes Jews do not want to be Jewish to such an extent, that they hate Jews, because—so they claim—it is because of them that they are seen as Jews and so they occupy themselves with anti-Semitism at the cost of other Jews. Gustav Herling-Grudziński is a classic example.” Grynberg, Henryk. Interview by Agnieszka Sowińska. “Jak Człowieka.” \textit{Dwutygodnik}, October 2011; My translation.}

“When I came in, several boys, aged between fourteen and sixteen, were lying on wooden bunks, and by the window, through which I could see a scrap of dark, lead coloured sky, sat a small man with red eyes and a hooked nose, munching in silence a
piece of stale brown bread.” This chewing accompanies his character for the rest of the interaction, as he is constantly chewing on dry bread which he keeps in a sack. He has “claw-like hands darting into the sack” to pick out the crumbs of bread. When he walks back from the latrine (in which he takes an exceptionally long time to relieve himself), he is always “hopping aside to avoid the warder’s pushing.”

This first real encounter that Herling choose to expose to the reader coincides with his first witness of a betrayal. One of the juvenile delinquents informs the warden of the photograph in exchange for a cigarette, and the photograph is confiscated. This event completely destroys the old man and he loses his will to live as his last connection to the free world is annihilated. From that moment, his transformation into a subhuman species is complete. In the final image of the old Jew, Herling encapsulates his helplessness perfectly: “When, a few days later, I left the cell to join a transport, the old shoemaker was still rocking on his bunk like a stunned parrot on its perch, chewing his crusts and mumbling a few monotonously repeated words.”

The “parrot” is an exotic creature, one that seems out of place in the Gulag environment, just like the old shoemaker is out of place in this prison. He repeats words monotonously like a parrot, mumbling them, and the reader is left to wonder what he is saying. It is evident that when the guard took away the picture of his son, the old shoemaker, who had already exhibited some bird like features, succumbed completely to the hopeless, animalistic description. There is no longer anything human about his existence, and that is the last image of this man that Herling provides for the reader.

Typically, birds in cages are associated with organisms that yearn for the ability to fly

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44 Ibid., 6.
free. The parrot-like shoemaker seems too resigned to fit the typical bird trope, and his dehumanization at the hands of Gulag ethics is complete.

Herling uses the image of the bird to describe prisoners in other instances, usually to underline massive movements of people. By recalling images of birdlike migrations, he diminishes the individual to simply become a part of a large flock that is tending towards a direction without knowing what the final aim is. For example, Herling describes the transit barrack as a place similar to a Western café, where crowds of people moved through to chatter, make new friends, complain, and “grumble a little about Stalin and his praetorian guard.” He then states that he learned after the war the some cafes actually became this way, as “crowds of refugees on the move took the place of a handful of habitués, until the cafes came to resemble the small wooden boxes which my native countryside we nailed to trees to rest and house the flocks of chattering birds on their flight to a warmer country, rather than the Kaffenshausen of Vienna or the ‘cafes-chantants’ of Paris.” The atmosphere of “chattering birds” in the transit barrack suggests that the people who are coming through this place are constantly being replaced by new people who then move on to different places. The massive migration of prisoners, with the transit barrack as their stop, underlines how large the Gulag system was, and how many people it affected, as people who leave are constantly being replaced by new people. The migration also spills out beyond the Soviet Union, as ex-prisoners scatter across the world after they are freed en masse.

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46 Ibid., 58.
47 Ibid., 58.
The only instance where an image of the free bird appears in *A World Apart* is in the epilogue, when the prisoners in Vitebsk discover that Paris has fallen. The prisoners are accustomed to looking at the sky through the small window, and it is summer, so they see that “shadows of invisible birds flitted across it and disappeared with a cry in the silence of the afternoon which was thick and sticky as honey.” They are able to hear the bird, but seeing the bird would be too much for the prisoner, almost something too inspirational for the prisoner to deserve catching the glimpse of lest he desires to be free like the bird. This image of the free bird is strongly juxtaposed with the image of the new prisoner who arrives at Vitebsk with the news that Paris has fallen. This prisoner, a Jew, is described with “a face with two abnormally large ears sprouting from it likes wings and black eyes looking anxiously around,” and at the time of his arrival “he was like a bird who flies into a cage with much flapping of wings, with eyes veiled by a white cataract, and a half-open sharply hooked beak,” and who “grips the wooden perch with determination.” This prisoner still has the quality of determination, as he has just been thrust into this prison, but he is no longer like the free birds who are flying outside. Again, the physical characterization is typical of anti-Semitic undertones, probably the only area where Herling displays ignorance and insensitivity to the cultural attitudes of his environment.

This is the same man that Herling meets in the Epilogue, when he confesses that at some point he had betrayed four Germans by acting as a false witness in order

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48 Ibid., 242.
49 Ibid., 243.
50 Ibid., 242.
to save his own life from the NKVD. He asks for Herling’s understanding for why he did this. Herling is unable to forgive him. The last sentence of the memoir is: “I watched him as he walked out of the hotel, tripped across the road like a bird with a broken wing, and disappeared in the crowd without looking back.”51 To Herling, the man is never cleansed of his dehumanized image as a bird, and this is what the reader is left with in the end. According to Herling, the animalistic tendencies for survival of the Gulag prisoners are specific only to those in the Gulag, and those who choose to continue their life trying to justify their choices by the standards of the Gulag can never regain their humanity again. In this way the man who betrayed his fellow prisoners is an animal, specifically a bird, to the end, tripping across the road like a bird with a broken wing, who can never be free to fly away from the guilt that he harbors from his decisions in the labor camp.

In a circular fashion, the last person whose story is recounted in the Gulag is a Jew, just like Herling’s first subject. However, this time it is the Jew who is the traitor. This shows the Gulag’s dual dehumanizing fashion as even those individuals who would be acting immorally by the standards of the free world are as much victims of depravity as the people who suffer the brunt of their ethical downfall. Additionally, Herling’s dehumanizing language in reference to Jews can also be a part of an anti-Semitic tendency. Toker states that “The tone in which these details are presented smacks of the traditional Polish anti-Semitic sense of superiority akin to that of Tadeusz Borowski’s Auschwitz stories.52 Herling subscribes to the “ahistorical stereotype of the pro-Soviet, pro-communist, and anti-Polish Jew” that had emerged.

51 Ibid., 248.
52 Toker, Return from the Archipelago, 274.
in Polish attitudes by that time, which might be a reason why his Jewish characters are often collaborators with the State. As a result, the Jew in Herling’s story is dehumanized both by the Soviet system, and by the author himself.

Other than the bird, the second most common animal metaphor occurring in *A World Apart* is the dog. Alec MacLeod writes that “the unstable equation of dogs and humans creates a rich vein of metaphor, simile, and idiom. The propensity to move between the categories of persons and not-persons makes dogs especially amenable to be used as symbols of the Other. Their apparent comfort, even pleasure, in the subordinate role of the Other makes them both a signifier of non-Self and of the ideal Other as constructed by the dominant social group.” Because of the inherent nature of the labor camp’s slanted distribution in power between the dominant social groups (administration), the most subordinate groups (dying inmates) and everything in between, it is natural that Herling chooses the dog metaphor to describe the prisoners of the Gulag. The dog is typically portrayed as a subservient, blindly faithful animal, so it is natural that words associated with dogs are used derogatorily in the prison. The dog does not take initiative of his own fate, but rather follows his master’s instruction without questioning. It symbolizes weakness, subservience, and a lack of free will.

The status of the dog in Eastern European culture come from the prison system itself. In Russian criminal argot, a “bitch,” or a “suka,” is a term for someone

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who collaborates with the law enforcement, government, or administration. The Suka Wars occurred when prisoners, who were promised a shortened verdict by Stalin if they served in the Soviet army during World War II, returned to the prisons and clashed with the criminals who never worked for the administration. These Soviet collaborators, the suki, were placed on the lowest rung of the prisoner society, and in turn sought protection from the guards, furthering their collaboration with the government and sinking lower in the prison hierarchy.  

The internal clashes within the prison were conveniently ignored by the administration, as it got rid of the surplus of prisoners during times of famine. Thus the dog became integrated into the lexicon of obscenities.

In the description of the first cauldron queue of the food rationing system, which is the cauldron reserved for the least productive workers, and therefore contains the thinner, meager food, provides the best example of people being likened to begging dogs: “Dazed with exhaustion and swooning on their thin legs, they pushed their way through to the hatch, whined plaintively, begging for an extra dribble, and peered greedily into the cans of second- and third-cauldron prisoners as they left the hatches. In this queue arguments were most frequent, here the humble whining changed most frequently into the shrill falsetto of anger, envy and hatred.”

This description of the prisoners, with their plaintive whining and animal-like, jealous gaze, reduces them from humans, who can express their desires with words and can still fight for their own survival rather than beg. The passive greed expressed in their

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56 Ibid.
57 Herling, A World Apart, 35.
eyes adds to the inhuman quality of their existence. Additionally, the prisoners scuffle over the measly amounts of food, like a dog might snap when another animal threatens their food bowl.\(^5^8\) The extreme hunger has made this particular class of prisoners this way, as they no longer remember how to act with dignity, without begging for food. Herling describes another man, one who is not able to work anymore because hunger has made him physically blind, as he approaches him to beg for soup: “He did not recognise me, but looking in front of him only whined: ‘Give me some soup.’ And then, as if justifying this audacious request, he added: ‘Even the dregs.’” For this man, the “last remnants of human dignity were burning out within him.”\(^5^9\) The man is not a human anymore, but he is not like a wild animal either, even though he is unwashed and has lost control of his physical and mental capacities. Instead, he is like a dog, begging anyone who is above him in the hierarchy for food. His face expresses “inhuman effort to understand” and when Herling physically leads him back his barrack, he walks obediently. This man is so dehumanized that he is beyond knowing what basic hygiene is, let alone morality.

A different context for the dog metaphor occurs in the case of Yegorov, the head doctor of the camp. Having once been a prisoner himself, he is very attached to a woman who is a prisoner, bonded to her through some primitive version of love. Although she is betraying him with another man, Yegorov refuses to address it for a while. Herling speculates that Yegorov is in love with the woman because she is a tie to the prison to which he has been so attached through his imprisonment, and then service as a doctor. He ponders “Could he, who seemed to be fascinated by his

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{59}\) Ibid., 54.
slavery, tied like a dog to the spot where he had spent the hardest eight years of his life, could he ever have lived in true freedom again? This is an interesting case, as Yegorov chooses to remain in the camp as a doctor. Herling thinks that he is not choosing his own fate, but that he is tied to the camp by some invisible, psychological bond. The camp is his master, and he cannot make himself leave. He denies that his lover might be betraying him by loving another, as she is his greatest tie to the camp and he does not want to be free. There is no freedom for Yegorov, since he is bound by an invisible leash to the camp. He is dehumanized, because, like a dog, he cannot live in freedom, and he probably would not know what to do in a situation without the camp. He must be attached to something, and this causes him to connect with his particular prison and the Gulag with a doglike faithfulness.

Through calling his victim a dog, the oppressor finds it easier to harm the victim. By getting “shot like a dog,” the victim is again deprived of humanity, or even an honorable death. A situation where a death is honorable would imply that the oppressor acknowledges some sort of respect and honor for the victim. However, by being treated like an animal, the victim receives no way to defend himself with glory or honor, but is included into the nameless statistic of humans who are buried anonymously in mass graves, a terrible fate as Herling says, “death in the camp possessed another terror: its anonymity. We had no idea where the dead were buried, or whether, after a prisoner’s death, any kind of death certificate was ever written.”

One character named B. claims that the judge who examined him lost “all control

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60 Ibid., 111.
61 Ibid., 148-149.
over himself, beat me furiously, and threatened to shoot me like a dog.” In this case, the judge is acting more like an animal, but his actions are justified because in his eyes he is not dealing with a human, but with an organism of lesser value.

The only prisoner who manages to turn the dog idiom against the oppressor is a madman, who is too far into his mental illness to subscribe to the prison hierarchy and social norms. In his free life, he was a policeman, who (under the influence of alcohol) made a bet with his friend that he would shoot a portrait of Stalin in the eye. The trick works, but his friend tells on him to the authorities and he is imprisoned. After suffering night-blindness due to starvation, he becomes mad. “I killed Stalin...I shot him like a dog...like a dog...’ He laugh[s] with bitter triumph.”

This is the greatest type of blasphemy in the Soviet Union, but he is willing to say such things out loud. This is significant because the figure of Stalin receives cult like worship by the administrators of the camp. Herling says about Stalin’s image:

To appreciate the mental state of astonishment which I felt at the sight of Stalin’s portrait in a prison cell, it must be understood that prisoners in Russia suffer a kind of excommunication from political life and are allowed to take no part in its liturgies and sacred rites. The period of repentance must be passed without their God, though also without the advantages of enforced political atheism. Thus they may not praise Stalin, but neither are they free do deny him.

To the prisoners, Stalin is a representation of the system that destroys the lives of the prisoners and citizen of his own land, the significance of the madman’s utterance is immense. By likening Stalin to a dog, the man denies him of all humanity. Perhaps only the madman who is on his death bed can make Stalin as unhuman as the rest of

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62 Ibid., 233.
63 Ibid., 55.
64 Ibid., 10.
the prisoners, showing that the source of inhumanity is the system and ideology propagated by Stalin and his entourage.

In his writing, Herling keeps away from using profanity unless it is absolutely necessary, or unless he is speaking in a voice of a character. The word “bitch” is used only once in the memoir, and it is used solely in reference to a woman who insults a group of criminals. The woman, Marusia, “with a gleam of a wounded animal in her face,” spits in the face of one of the criminal comrades of her lover, Koval. Instead of defending her, the man turns to the girl and says “”Lie down, you bitch, and off with your clothes, or I'll choke the life out of you." Then to his friends: "She's yours, brothers." The gang of criminals then proceeds to rape her. In this case, the word “bitch” is dehumanizing as it refers to a female prisoner who has insulted a criminal prisoner male. In the prison society, she is on a lower social rung than the men, so when she steps over her bounds, the men quickly put her back in her place in the social order. “Bitch” refers to subservience, as the woman does not have the power to do anything except succumb to the physical force of her perpetrators. By calling Marusia a bitch, Koval dehumanizes her to fit in with the prison standards of justice. Punishment can be exacted because Marusia is not a human worthy of forgiveness or a fair, less cruel punishment, but she is now something less than human, something that can be objectified and shared by all the men. Koval is placed in a position where he has to reconcile his desire for a “heterosexual relationship with homosocial bonds”66, and by using a derogatory term for a female he makes it clear that he is more committed to preserving his homosocial bonds, which, in terms of survival in

65 Ibid., 31.
66 Toker, Return from the Archipelago, 36.
the Gulag, is significantly more important, while a romantic relationship with a woman is a liability. Again, dehumanization forces the humans in the Gulag to participate in the prison morality.

The other time when Herling uses the simile of the “wounded animal” is when, after being released to freedom, Herling describes the whole town of Svedrlovsk: having “no vitality, it rolls around from side to side like a wounded animal, plagued by its human vermin.” He quotes his own diary which was written at that time, and it is interesting to see that the author, even at the time that the action is happening, had the instinct of describing something with animalistic terms.

Although the town is not a person being dehumanized, Herling makes sure that it is not being personified. Just like the prisoner in the Gulag, the town has no vitality. After the quote from the diary, Herling laughs at the language of his diary entry, denouncing his own exaggerations in his description of the town (“that wounded animal!”) However, calling the town a wounded animal does add to its image as a place that is trying to thrive, but its citizens and their depraved morality are what is making the place have animal-like qualities rather than human-like traits.

*A World Apart* presents the Gulag as a place that reduces the human back to the basics. When the rational, cognitive part of the human’s psychology is damaged by physical and mental pressure, the human reverts to a state of animalistic tendencies. Herling’s artistic descriptions pay attention to such details, and the dehumanization through this process is made evident. The animal tendencies are captured in Herling’s intertwining of sex and hunger.

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67 Ibid., 234.
3. Reversion to Primal Instincts: Sex and Hunger

Many of the episodes that Herling describes are filled with nauseating descriptions of bodily functions. Leona Toker characterizes this inclusion of corporeal detail as a feature of early Gulag writing:

Concentration camp inmates had to unlearn conventional physical shame: the communal character of camp life made it impossible to hide one’s body from the eyes of the others; accordingly, their memoirs tend to reject decorous reticence. Narrative coyness about the body and its functions would risk belying the flavor of the actual experience. As some survivors believed, it was necessary to inform public opinion not only about the brutality of the interrogators and the callousness of the guards but also about the disgraceful sanitary conditions, which to a large extent characterized the ethical culture of the captors. Thus the concept of dignity is not merely an issue raised but also a factor in the selection of material, in the deliberately sustained attention paid to the minutiae of the daily hardships in the camps.68

The laws of Herling’s Gulag place the preservation of the human body at the top of the list of priorities for the inmates. Since satisfaction of the body is so important to the Gulag morality, the inmate reverts to obscene action to satisfy sexual impulses and food hunger. This is a part of dehumanization that is perhaps most difficult for the reader to get through, since Herling does not spare scenes of graphic sexual violence and rape, and sodomy, written with a gusto that shows how deeply the events have engrained himself into his memory. As the moral code of the Gulag reevaluates taboos that the free society might avoid, those topics that are frowned upon by free society and deal with the body become the norm, and certain things that are dismissed in the free world are considered invaluable in the prison.

68 Toker, Return from the Archipelago, 84.
As the object of the male prisoners’ sexual gratification, women occupy a confusing spot in the morality of the labor camp. They are considered a whole class of their own, mistreated as objects in the prison environment more than anywhere else. They quickly learn that they can trade their own bodies as sexual satisfaction to men in exchange for the satisfaction of food, and therefore they are looked down upon as prostitutes, or depraved women. The women who get involved with camp officials receive the most derision from the male prisoners, because “a woman who left the zone at night to sleep with the camp chief was dubbed a prostitute, and of the worst type, for she broke the solidarity of prisoners against free men.”69 The opera singer, Tania, is the best example of this. A Moscow opera singer convicted for espionage after dancing for “more than the prescribed amount,”70 with the Japanese ambassador, she is assigned to the foresters’ brigade. Unfortunately, she is desired by Vanya, the foreman who is a criminal prisoner, and he purposefully puts her to work at a task with a huge axe she can hardly lift. “What could that filigree princess with thing, delicate hands do in a forest? Throw twigs on the fire, perhaps, if she had the luck to be under a human brigadier.”71 After two weeks, considered a heroically long time, “Tania quietly entered the foresters’ barrack, and not looking Vanya in the face, dropped heavily on to his bunk…she became something like a brigade mascot until the lustful hand of some camp chief dragged her out by the hair from the rubbish-heap and placed her behind a table in the camp accountants’ office.”72 She sleeps with the foreman for the sake of survival, but eventually ends up as the property of the

70 Note the institutionalized State language. Example of heteroglossia.
72 Ibid., 136.
administrator. Because of this, even though it was a circumstance out of her control, she is considered a traitor, especially to the members of the forest brigade, who call her a “Moscow whore” when she performs at the camp concert. The woman is a danger to the male prisoners, because she cannot share the same bond with the men as the men do. In the eyes of the prisoner, a woman is more likely to betray them and fraternize with their common enemy.

Herling recognizes the contradiction within the morality of the Gulag in relationship to women, when he says “in defense of women it should be said that the camp morality, like any other system of values, created also its own hypocrisy. Thus, for instance, no one would dream of blaming a young boy who, in order to improve his conditions, became the lover of the elderly woman doctor, but a pretty girl who from hunger gave herself to the repulsive old man in charge of the bread store was, naturally, a whore.”73 The hypocrisy of the double standard for men and women is underlined by the fact that for some reason, women are expected to abide by the same moral rules as those in the free society. Herling makes an apt observation, which is that women are treated poorly in the gulag because “they brought with them, even to the camp, the burden of the conventional morality of the outside world, which rules that every man who possesses a woman after only a few hours of flirtation and acquaintance is a dashing seducer, and that every woman who gives herself to a newly-met man is a wanton.”74 The issue of the woman inhabits a gray area, as the man can act on the morality based on the camp, where he is dehumanized and prone

73 Ibid., 132.
74 Ibid., 133. In the Polish text, Herling uses the phrase “obłuda moralna z wolności,” which means “moral hypocrisy from the free world,” rather than the translator’s “morality of the outside world.”
to acting on an animalistic desire to seek sexual satisfaction, while the woman who acts on an animalistic desire to seek sexual satisfaction or satisfaction of hunger through any means possible (including sex), is irrevocably denounced.

The nature of sexual relationships in the Gulag is reflective of the diminished, dehumanized status of women. The memoir lacks moments of love, as most romantic relationships end in infidelity or neglect. Herling asserts that relationships with women are not cherished at all, as women usually had nothing to trade but their bodies. “A free official could have any woman prisoner that he fancied for a slice of bread, but it was unthinkable that he should dare or even wish to give this momentary transaction a permanent character. Women came and went like the succeeding waves of transports, and what invariably remained was the possibility of possessing them without the slightest difficulty.”75 Sexual intercourse between the woman and the official is described as a “transaction,” with the woman’s body being her currency. Unlike the men, the women seem to have greater inter-camp mobility because they might not always be assigned to labor in the woods, so they are always passing through the camp, making a romantic relationship difficult aside from the fleeting moments of sex. Herling even describes sex in the Gulag as something unfeeling and mechanical: “But it is difficult to talk of feelings, of genuine human feelings, when we were forced to make love before the eyes of our fellow-prisoners, or at best in the store of old clothing, on piles of sweaty and stinking rags.”76

In the camp morality, the objectification of the woman as something that can be sold provides the dehumanization that is necessary for the subhuman treatment of

75 Ibid., 111.
76 Ibid., 134.
the females, as “unbridled sexual depravity was the rule in the zone, where women were treated like prostitutes and love like a visit to the latrine, and where pregnant girls from the maternity hut were greeted with coarse jokes.” In the free society, respect is typically given to women who are going to be mothers. In the Gulag, however, the identity of the father is unknown and the future for the child seems bleak, as women typically keep their babies to receive special rations and temporary release from work. The “unbridled sexual depravity” is no longer something taboo, but it becomes the norm, as men forget about their mothers and why women should be treated with respect. Sexual depravity is not only dehumanizing to the women, it is also dehumanizing to the perpetrators. Herling says:

> Individual moral outlook, and consequently hypocrisy, varied according to the circumstances of a prisoner's life before imprisonment. The problem did not really exist for the Russians, accustomed to "five-rouble marriages" and copulation practised in public conveniences according to immediate physiological needs, and their attitude to it was expressed by the mockery with which they greeted the institution of legal equality for women under the new regime. Foreign prisoners, including veteran communists, frequently shook their heads over "the general decline of morality in Russia.

The epidemic of the mistreatment of women is not contained solely to the Gulag, but instead it also leaks out into free society.

Herling, when he speaks of sex, rarely separates it from hunger. This is because in order to justify the actions of the girls in the camp who are bound by the confusing “new morality,” he must explain what drives them to perform the once-taboo sexual deeds. He says that “there it has been proved that when the body has reached the limit of its endurance, one cannot, as was once believed, rely on strength

77 Ibid., 95.
78 Ibid., 133.
of character and conscious recognition of spiritual values; that there is nothing, in fact, which man cannot be forced to do by hunger and pain.\textsuperscript{79} As the extreme conditions of the Gulag lead to the dehumanization of the women, their character and spiritual values disappear and are instead replaced by instinct for survival and a need to satisfy hunger by any means necessary. Herling believes that the women of the Gulag must not be judged, as they are acting in the context of the Gulag. Still, hypocritically, he describes the memory of sexual acts as a “memory of disgust like rolling in the slime left behind at the bottom of an empty fountain, and a deep distaste for oneself and for the woman who once seemed so close…”\textsuperscript{80} This is because his point of view at the time of his writing is contextualized in the morality of free society, rather than the morality of the prison, and he cannot remember the act in terms of pleasurable detail.

The moment of greatest hunger occurs in 1941. At that time, Herling describes a dream that he has, which “assumed a cannibalistic, erotic form; love and hunger returned to their common biological root, releasing from the depths of my subconscious images of women made of fresh dough whom I would bite in fantastic orgies till they streamed with blood and milk, twining their arms which smelt like fresh loaves round my burning head.”\textsuperscript{81} This intertwining of nourishment and sex expresses the prisoner’s desires, those fostered by the “common biological root” that all men share, which is the fitness for physical survival and reproduction. His bizarre dreams are whittled down to the basic “want” that animals are motivated by, which is

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 141.
sex, and the basic need of sustenance by food. The “cannibalistic” form which the woman takes objectifies her, but Herling’s dream goes beyond the objectification and into the realm of worship as she turns into the things he wants most.

The juvenile delinquents, considered the “plague of the Soviet prisons, though they are almost never found in labour camps,” exemplify a group that lives only to satisfy their basest needs. Herling describes this group as “unnaturally excited, always ferreting in other men’s bunks and inside their own trousers...they give themselves up passionately to the only two occupations of their lives, theft and self-abuse.”

Living their lives as “bezprizornye” (“the homeless”), they get by stealing and joining the society of organized crime, similar to the mafia of the “urkas.” These adolescents have a unique status with the authorities, as “the Soviet authorites wink at all this activity; they regard the bezprizornye as the only true proletariat free of the original sin of counter-revolution, as a plastic mass of raw material which can be moulded into any shape they choose.”

The administration is glad to have these boys in their camps, as they represent the most raw, untouched, primal group in the camp. From Herling description, it seems as if no feelings of morality or empathy exist within this group of boys. The episode with the old shoemaker in the transport barrack is a good example of their behavior, since one of them readily and unscrupulously denounces the old shoemaker in exchange for a cigarette. The warden then confiscates the photograph of the man’s son. The results of the juvenile delinquent’s actions essentially destroy the old man psychologically, but the culprit does not show any

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83 The translation of this word into Russian refers specifically to “homeless children.” However, Herling’s translator simply adds “homeless.”
remorse. This is because has been conditioned from a young age to participate in the debased morality of the camp, and in his circle of friends, selfish and harmful decisions are glorified rather than disapproved.

A step up from the “bezprizornye,” the “urkas” are the greatest perpetuators of the violence against women, because of their natural, pack-like animalistic nature. Marushka becomes the lover of Koval because of a typical “night hunt” in which gangs of “urkas” prowl around the women’s barrack, waiting for a lone woman who did not know any better to come out before they gang raped her. Of course, by the prison morality, the rape is always the woman’s fault: “If they complained in the guard-house the morning after the ‘accident’, they were met with derision; and besides, what woman would have been willing to risk bringing on herself the merciless revenge of the urkas?”85 The “accident” is not an accident to the parties involved, as they expect that the woman draws her fate to herself. Victim-blaming is apparently a recurring phenomenon in A World Apart. Herling shows that the guards and the administration are aware of these rapes, but they let the justice of the camp run itself, choosing non-intervention in the well-established laws of the prison, instead allowing for the animalistic tendencies to continue the circle of dehumanization that keeps everyone in line.

4. Man vs. Man: The Destruction of Prisoner Solidarity

The most popular moral systems in society, whether they are initiated by religious, political, or philosophical inclinations, typically have clear definitions on

85 Ibid., 23.
what is fundamentally “good” or “bad.” For example, the biblical Ten
Commandments, the Golden Rule, or laws made by governments provide a
framework by which citizens can orient their moral compass. A factor that connects
many such systems is the focus on the individual in the context of his fellow human
beings, and it encourages positive interactions that are within the realm of personal
freedom. Herling’s Gulag morality, as administered by the State, does not support
relationships between humans. Instead, it expects the adherents of its system to place
their relationship with the State above anything else, disregarding the benefits that
solidarity and unity with the humans living together might have.

In his documentation of the labor camp, Herling describes all of the different
classifications of people that he encounters. This focus serves a dual goal. First, it
stresses the fact that social hierarchies that had existed in the free world are no longer
relevant in the Gulag, as the prisoners are reorganized into new social groups and
definitions. Secondarily, the segmented nature of prison society is not conducive to
humane treatments of fellow inmates, and it is a key force in the creation of labor
camp ethics.

As one of the methods of social control that pervades the story throughout the
book, the destruction of inter-human relationships seems to be truly effective. The
State cannot afford an uprising of prisoners, so it tries to do everything in its power to
discourage the formation of friendships that might potentially threaten the social
order. Most of the people coming into the Gulag as prisoners still hold on to the
memories of the former relationships, such as the shoemaker from the interrogation
cell, or the men who await seeing their loved ones in the visiting area called the
“house of meetings,” even when their wives abandon them after they have been sentenced for long terms in the prison. The humans coming into Herling’s Gulag desire to form relationships with the people around them, just as they have been taught in the days of their youth and freedom. However, since the social and moral system in the prison is different than that of the free world, such relationships are often impossible and seriously frowned upon by the authority. Dehumanization of the individual by the destruction of relationships allows the depraved morality of the Gulag to become the norm, as the prisoners experience decreasing feelings of social obligation to their neighbors. Rather than being shared by all of suffering prisoners, the plight becomes something that the individual must bear on his own. As the prisoners become apathetic to the suffering of other humans, they passively accept the new morality that is imposed on them through the camp system and the laws of the “urkas,” who are the vicious professional criminals that make up their own system, separate from the political prisoners and the petty criminals. As the prisoners are exposed to more realities of the camp, their reactions to degrading and dehumanizing events are dulled. Survival and self-interest becomes a priority, and if that means that another prisoner will be harmed, then so it must be. The administration has several systems in place in which the prisoners are divided between each other, including the system of the labor brigades and a social hierarchy in which the members of the top of the pyramid are the most likely to survive, while those at the bottom are fated for death.

The system of labor brigades that Herling writes about is not conducive to solidarity with other prisoners. Instead it encourages a Darwinian process of natural
selection and survival of the fittest. Every morning, the brigades of prisoners are organized before going out to fulfill their punishment of labor. Each of the brigades has to fulfill a certain work quota that is prescribed by the administration, or else it will be punished with diminished food rations, a penalty which might have deadly results in this environment. This means that if an individual is not contributing to fulfilling the norm because he is old, starving, ill, or psychologically unable to motivate himself to perform his duty, he is eliminated as quickly as possible to be replaced with someone who is stronger. This elimination of the weakest link does not lend itself to merciful tactics, as “the fascination of the norm was not the exclusive privilege of the free men who imposed it, but also the dominating instinct of the slaves who worked to it. In those brigades where the work was done by teams of men working together, the most conscientious and fervent foremen were the prisoners themselves, for there the norms were reckoned collectively by dividing the total output by the number of workers.” As this passage suggests, the system takes advantage of the fact that the prisoners are responsible for the output of the brigade. Their “dominating instinct” as something primordial and basic causes the individual to disregard social norms and instead replace it with hostility towards those who cannot keep up with the group. Herling continues to say that “any feeling of mutual friendliness was completely abolished in favour of a demented race for percentages.” The “race for percentages” replaces the human instinct of collaboration.

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86 Ibid., 37.
87 Ibid., 37.
Herling describes this event as something that makes the prisoner dehumanized, especially when he is in the role of the “foreman.”

An unqualified prisoner who found himself assigned to a coordinated team of experienced workers could not expect to have any consideration shown to him; after a short struggle he was forced to give up and transfer to a team in which he in his turn frequently had to watch over weaker comrades. There was in all this something inhuman, mercilessly breaking the only natural bond between prisoners—their solidarity in face of their persecutors. The formation of brigades in the morning brought this system to monstrous cruelty.88

The “natural bond” that Herling speaks of is the connection that all the prisoners have, which is their common persecutor, the administration. Since the role of the persecutor is switched to the prisoners themselves, there is no longer anything that can bind them together, especially as they all come from varied religious, nationalistic, ethnic, political, and occupational backgrounds, often with divisive language barriers. Herling describes this as “inhuman” because it leads to the dehumanization of the prisoner, as opportunities to empathize with fellow humans are eliminated.

What occurs in the prisoner is a cognitive dissonance, a discomfort caused by the two contradictory attitudes going through the minds of the prisoners. Ultimately division dominates over collaboration. If the prisoners collaborate, they might have an easier time working and be more like to fulfill the norms. However, because of the system in place, division between the prisoners is more beneficial to the individual in these cases. In this way, the Soviet Gulag system replaces sympathy with antagonism.

Herling does not deny that the system is brilliant, as the prisoners execute the unsavory work that the administration might have originally been responsible for. By

88 Ibid., 37.
allowing the prisoners to police each other, the administration is spared from having to micromanage the productivity of every single prisoner, and instead it guarantees that bonds do not form between the inmates that could lead to subversive group mentality. Additionally, it helps eliminate those who are a burden to the labor camp, the weaklings who are wasting the resources of food and board and taking up the spot that somebody more physically able might occupy: “In brigades which failed to come up to the norm the pace of the march was set by the youngest prisoners to save time, while the older and feebl er ones were dragged behind. This natural selection resulted in rapid rejuvenation of the brigades in question, for the old ones who could not keep up gradually disappeared for good.”

“Rejuvenation” sounds like a word choice seeped in irony, as there is nothing rejuvenating about the description of the camp that Herling provides in that instance.

Another prison system in A World Apart is the divisive social hierarchy which provides the prisoner with more enemies in the already difficult situation of difficult labor. In the Gulag, the prisoner not only has to survive the wrath of the administration, but he must also endure the cruel practices of fellow inmates. Herling provides a description of the many social groups. These are divided into the politicals, “bytovniks” (petty criminals), “urkas” (professional criminal prisoners), “nacmeny” (central Asian prisoners), “night blind,” and the “dokhadyagas,” divided into the “weaklings” and the “incurables.”

The bottom of the social hierarchy is occupied by the “dokhadyagas”: “A prisoner was transferred to the mortuary on the basis of a medical examination, which

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89 Ibid., 37.
could be repeated, when he stopped being a ‘working man’: and became a ‘dokhadyaga’—a word which can best be translated as ‘one who is dying by inches.’ The men who still have the hope of going back to work are dubbed the “weaklings,” and they get a medium ration and a light workload, in the hopes that they can still regain their strength and go back to being fully functional prisoner-laborers with the rest of the inmates. The “incurables,” however, receive no additional rations, and they are not forced to work, but instead are forced to passively and patiently wait for their death, as they can no longer fulfill their prison sentence fully and are useless to the State. Herling says that typically both groups were doomed as even the “weaklings” rarely got cured. However, in his typical blunt fashion, he describes the relationship between the inmates and those in the mortuary as lacking sympathy, even as those in the mortuary were approaching death, which is usually something that unites men as they all fear it at some point in their life. “...And yet a prisoner in the mortuary did not even have the sympathy of others to accompany him on the last stage of his life’s journey. ‘That rubbish, that shit, they eat our bread and do nothing for it. Better for us and for them if they were put out of their misery’—that was the usual comment whenever the mortuary was mentioned in the barracks.” The lack of sympathy for those who are helpless can only be uttered in the Gulag. The statement shocks the reader and causes a sense of disgust at the individuals who might say such things, since we typically belong to a society that values the individual that requires care at no lesser a price than a person who is healthy.

90 Ibid., 210.
91 Ibid., 211.
The description of the mortuary wavers between a positive depiction of comfort and gathering, and a negative description of the underlying hatred, fatigue, aimlessness and despair that exists in that environment. The mortuary is a liminal space, since the “dokhadyagas” are suspended in a state between life and death. It is one of the more lively spaces during the day, but at night, the proximity of death reminds the prisoners of the suffering around them:

Only towards evening, when the prisoners from the weaklings' brigade returned with news and gossip from the zone, and the electric lights went on, the mortuary came to life for a time with quite unsuspected reserves of energy. The very sight of prisoners playing draughts round the table or gathering in groups in the spaces between bunks was encouraging and comforting. Heat filled the barrack, opening the sores on our legs, opening too our hearts and our mouths. The bulbs shone above us, handfuls of light thrown at the frosted white tiles of windowpanes. Voices were raised above a whisper, laughter was heard, and even the tentative harmonies of mouth-organs circled in the air, fluttering like moths in the bright circles of light. After nightfall the mortuary was silent again, but its accumulated suffering burst out with screams and babblings more piercing and more desperate than in any other barrack. The atmosphere was a stifling compound of exhaled breath, feverish sleep, and fetid excrements.\(^{92}\)

The description is initially filled with life, light, laughter and music. Herling then replaces this cheerful description with the nightfall in place of light; atmosphere of silence in the place of music; screams and babblings instead of laughter, and “fetid excrements” instead of “harmonies of mouth-organs.” Herling recreates for the reader the danger of hopefulness. The reader, like the prisoner, must not hope for a happy ending because the threat of disappointment always exists, a threat that is a certainty for the most dehumanized, babbling “dokhadyagas.”

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\(^{92}\) Ibid., 216.
Herling characterizes the mortuary as a microcosm of the camp, with its own rules and arguments, hidden inside like a matryoshka doll. If the moral code of the prison is a ruined version of the free man’s moral code, and the moral code of the mortuary is a debased version of the prison moral code, then the moral situation in the mortuary is exponentially bleak:

Even the beggars and tramps of a prison camp had evolved a code of existence, a set of rules of behavior which were themselves a caricature of the laws governing the laws of ordinary prisoners. For instance, in other barracks universal envy and greed were checked by the fact that everyone ate only as much he had earned by his work; mutual hatred was forgotten in common work and the consciousness of a common fate; even despair was sometimes drowned by fatigue. But in the mortuary, where time dragged unbearably slowly, all these emotions were given full rein, and in the emptiness of an aimless life without hope the barrack became charged with an atmosphere of malice and hatred which grew in intensity like a flooding river behind the dam of artificial courtesy, almost, but never quite, sweeping it completely away.93

As the regular inmates are dehumanized to fit their moral code, the “dokhadyagas” are even more dehumanized: “Expiring human emotions revealed themselves here in their primordial form, distorted and deformed but horribly vivid.”94 The primitive, primordial form is exhibited especially in those who are near death, an inevitability which all living things must share regardless of their cognitive capacities.

A little bit above the “dokhadyagas” on the social ladder of the Gulag are the “night blind,” who are afflicted with a deficiency in their diet in which they cannot see from dusk until dawn. Their tragedy is that they must rely on the help of others to survive. While in a normal society they would receive special attention, like the people in the mortuary, they are instead ignored by the other inmates. Herling

93 Ibid., 215.
94 Ibid., 206.
introduces “Stalin’s murderer” as a “night-blind” who is transferred to his brigade to get cured. When dusk arrives, the man is severely handicapped and cannot descend from the wagon safely, and yet none of the observing inmates attempt to help him:

Finally he appeared in the door of the wagon and a moment searched for the gangway with his outstretched foot. When his leg found it, he walked halfway across in a few long steps and suddenly stopped. Then he raised his right leg into the air and waved it several times in mid-air like a ballerina, but every time it landed again in empty space. The plank was very narrow and he put it down again and froze in expectation. It was all obscurely funny and did not arouse our sympathy. Only later we understood that we had been watching a grotesque dance of death. But at the time Karinen only laughed shortly, and Ivan shouted angrily: ‘Hey, you, Stalin’s murderer, what sort of a circus do you think this is?’

Although the inmates perceive this scene as humorous, it ultimately ends with the death of the night-blind man as he expires of exhaustion a few months later. In the context of the free world, this type of mockery would never happen. All of the prisoners are being dehumanized in this situation, as those who mock the helpless “night-blind” had forgotten the feeling of empathy. This loss happens gradually after the prisoner is sentenced, a process that Herling calls the “rebirth”. First, “he feels dimly that if he is to save the slight thread that still binds him to the buried past in which he was a different person, he must at all costs generate in himself a feeling of pity for his companions in misery, and of compassion for the suffering of others, which could prove to him that, despite his inner transformation, he has remained a human being.” As a form of self-preservation, the prisoner convinces himself that the only way he can stay human after going through the interrogation is if he carries over emotions for those who are suffering. Even then, the intention is selfish. **“Can**

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95 Ibid., 53.
96 Ibid., 67-68
one live without pity?’ he asks himself at night, turning from side to side and mopping his forehead anxiously as he tries to remember whether once, in that obliterated past, his only reaction to human suffering had been the same painful indifference that he has felt since his rebirth. Can one live without pity?"

Eventually, the prisoner discovers that his acts of kindness are dishonest. They are a method of self-preservation, and he is not driven by compassion but is in fact disgusted with his fellow inmates. When the prisoner sees that his deeds do not lead to any sort of gratitude from the crazed, starving inmates, and that the night blind they help are still beaten down by the guards, and the people in the mortuary are laying helplessly in the “stench of excrement,” the prisoner becomes disillusioned and he joins the apathetic crowds. “After several weeks he realises that his motives in all this are neither pure nor really disinterested, that he is following the egoistic injunctions of his brain and saving first of all himself. The camp, where prisoners live at the lowest level of humanity and follow their own brutal code of behaviour toward others, helps him to reach this conclusion.” His human instincts of empathy are replaced with repugnance. In this passage, Herling repeats statements that the prisoners might say about their fellow inmates: “Those bastards in the mortuary stuff themselves with our bread, and don't even work for it”; “Those night-blind lower our norms after dark and then sprawl all over the paths so that you can't even move”; “Those madmen ought to be locked up in the punishment cells, they'll be stealing our bread soon.” In situations where the human would typically feel compassionate

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97 Ibid., 68.
98 Ibid., 68.
99 Ibid., 68.
towards the sick or the blind, the prisoner is instead filled with a socially acceptable and vocal disgust. The free man’s code of morality does not satisfy any more, but the inhuman code of the Gulag does, and so prisoners trade civility for the easier route of degradation.

The “nacmenys,” or the Central Asian prisoners, share their own social group because they are separated from the rest of the prisoners by language, culture and race. Herling says that although they were stereotyped as “incurable simulants,” “they were dying simply of homesickness, of longing for their native country, of hunger, cold and of the monotonous whiteness of snow.”\textsuperscript{100} They constant presence in the hospital is due to their inability to adapt to the harsh climate of the Russian North.

Finally, the most powerful group within the Gulag is made up of the “bytoviks” and “urkas.” The “bytoviks” are the short term petty criminals, while the “urkas” are the long term, professional criminals who have been to prison several times. When questioning a fellow inmate at the “luxurious” Intourist prison, Herling asks him if he knows what happens at the thousands of other camps that are spread across the Soviet Union. “Yes, he knew all about that, but then those were ‘politicals’. ‘Those’ he nodded his head towards the small barred windows of the Peresylka's other block ‘those are the living dead. Here one can breathe more freely than at liberty.’ ‘Our Winter Palace', he called it affectionately.”\textsuperscript{101} Through the book, the tension between political and criminal prisoners is extremely evident. It is part of the morality, as many of the criminal prisoners explicitly include the harassment of the political prisoners into their code. For example, they may gamble the lives of political

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 11.
prisoners in their card games, the loser killing the unsuspecting political. Still, the administration believes that the political prisoners deserve harsher treatment than the criminals, as “Stalin knows well, from his own experience, that only the “bytoviks”, the short-term criminal prisoners, can be forced into repentance and humiliation by the provision of human conditions of life in prison, never the politicals.”102 This means that while the small time thieves might benefit from the imprisonment and change their ways, the political prisoners are incarcerated because of thoughts, which are more difficult to control.

The distinction between the criminals and the politicals allows the dehumanization of the prisoners to occur more smoothly and organically. By encouraging a rivalry between the two groups, the administration itself protects itself from the danger of solidarity between the prisoners. The criminal prisoners, who have their own code of morality by which they closely abide, are the administration’s best tool for doling out justice. In combination with the “bytoviks,” who often end up taking positions in the administration of the Gulag, the “urkas” can regulate the politicals by using their thieves’ law. The criminal prisoners are even allowed special privileges, such as the ability to move around the camp without being constantly monitored by a guard, or special positions in the kitchen. Only a free official or a released criminal prisoner could hold the position of the director of the “cultural and arts section,” in case a political prisoner might contaminate the rest of the prisoners with literature and blasphemy against the state propaganda.103

102 Ibid., 12.
103 Ibid., 152.
The “urkas” have a sense of morality that stands in contrast with the morality of the free people. Foremost, the their importance is measured by the amount of time that the criminal has spent in the camp, and the seriousness of the offence for which he is sentenced. In the free world, such accomplishments are not idealized, but rather condemned. Additionally, bonus respect is given for the size of fortune collected on the black market, theft, and the murder of the “byelorutchki” (“white hands”), who are the political prisoners. Obviously, murder would never be looked at a source of pride in the real world, but since the “urkas” have been rejected from normal society, they create their own laws that stand in contrast to the morals of the free society. Other factors, such as the number of cooks and camp officials who are friendly to him, his status as a supervisor for the “brigades” of prisoners, and the number of women that he owns are qualifications for the importance of the “urka.” The culture of the criminal prisoners had an influence on the modern language, as prison and criminal slang warped into a subversive vernacular based on obscenity. This is called mat.

The stratification of the social groups in the camp happens based on the prisoners’ backgrounds, their decision-making in the prison, and their physical strength. With the factor of physical capability weighing the most strongly on the prisoner’s position in the hierarchy, mobility between the strata is predominantly in a downward direction.

In conclusions, the Gulag brilliantly pits men against each other, systematically destroying the relationships and mutual trust that might make their survival easier by encouraging hierarchies and providing an environment where
rivalries flourish. However, free humans need other humans to preserve their
humanity. For the prisoners, the urge to help their other humans passes when they
realize that they are no longer dealing with humans, but dehumanized creatures who
are unable to recognize that they are still alive among humans. This disillusionment
leads to the surrender of the prisoner’s morality to the new morality of the prison.
Re-Humanization

Though the road was difficult and long (about three miles each way), I would walk out at dawn with the brigade in single file, with a light and springing step, and in the evenings I returned sunburnt, exhausted, full of fresh air, berries and the beauty of the landscape, drunk with the smell of the forest and of hay like a gad-fly which stumbles on its thin little legs when the horse's blood has gone to its head.

Gustav Herling, *A World Apart*

Herling provides many shocking examples of how a situation might make a person do things that would ordinarily would be out of the boundaries of human group behavior. However, he also provides counterexamples that might redeem the characters in the eyes of his audience. One of the many struggles of the prisoners in Yercevo is the psychological fight for their humanity, as the prison system works to take apart morality and identity. There are several instances when the characters make conscious and unconscious decisions that subvert the system that tries to take away their civility.

Herling paints scenes of resistance to dehumanization to show that not all characters and people who came through the Gulag were cold-hearted animals, who could only function in the constructed morality of the labor camp, based around their primary, physical desires. After all, a good population of the prisoners was released back into the Soviet public to assimilate back into free society and continued with normal lives, bound by the rules of free society. To the reader, and probably to the author himself, the moments of victory provide a relief from the other horrors which he describes in explicit detail, while showing different facets of human psychology under extreme stress. The person who is the product of the Soviet system is still
human. However, when still in the prison, this is a human that is modified to correspond with the standards of the system under which he is operating. Toker writes:

The authorial persona is strangely passive during the scenically rendered episodes—apparently, he is as powerless to change the course of events as a spectator is at a play. Yet Herling’s theory that this play is set in a different moral universe is subverted by his inclusion of such literary topoi as the prodigal song, the kiss of Judas, physical martyrdom to stifle moral anguish, the conflict between heterosexual desire and homo-social bonds, and chess as the game of life: in the camp versions of such situations, values are distorted but not beyond recognition.\textsuperscript{104}

As long as the prisoner still exists as a moral agent struggling against his physical needs, occupying himself with a moral life rather than mere survival, he is succeeding in defying the annihilating effects of the Gulag. Even at the time of the greatest hunger, Herling specifies that the prisoners had “besides hunger, other sorrows to distract us,”\textsuperscript{105} human sorrows such as relationships, heartbreak, and other “normal” conditions.

The following pages show how Herling reflects the re-humanization of the prisoner through 1) the power of choice through personal memory and martyrdom; 2) the rehabilitative effects of art, literature, and theater; and through liminal spaces of the prison that bridge the free with the imprisoned (3).

\textsuperscript{104} Toker, Return from the Archipelago, 36.
\textsuperscript{105} Herling, \textit{A World Apart}, 169.
1. The Empowering Effects of Choice

The issue of freedom of choice is very complicated in Herling’s Gulag. There is a discrepancy between the freedoms that the prisoner has, versus the freedom that the prisoner perceives. Personal freedom inherently opposes the State, making it a nearly taboo topic that is surrounded by a superstitious fear. For example, speaking about the day of release is prohibited by custom, as it implies that there is hope in a place devoid of hope, and hope sets the prisoner up for a position where he might be disappointed, a vulnerability which he cannot afford in his already compromised state. It is better not to tempt fate by uttering statements about freedom. Unlike the ‘normal’ prison, Herling says that the Soviet prison is unique as the prisoners can never be certain when their sentence will come to an end, as their fate can change with the whimsical flick of a pen. “In our silence, rather like the taboo which forbids the men of certain primitive tribes to pronounce the names of vengeful deities, humility was combined with a quiet resignation and anticipation of the worst. Disappointment was a fatal blow to a prisoner who lacked this armour against fate.” In the case of the prisoner, freedom takes upon a god-like proportion, not to be treated lightly. In the best case, spiritual life, instead of being replaced with Soviet ideology, is instead replaced with a faith in freedom. Therefore, consideration and contemplations about freedom are never trivialized.

The special status of freedom appears among Herling and his fellow Poles, when they celebrate Christmas in the mortuary after suffering through a hunger strike to protest their detainment in the camp after all the other Poles have been released.

106 Ibid., 32.
under the Sikorski agreement. Again, Herling attributes a deity-like status to freedom: 

"'All the best to you,’ [the prisoners] would say, shaking my hand, ‘for the next year at liberty.’ That was all. But anyone who knows a Russian prison camp will understand how much this meant. In Russia the name of liberty is not taken in vain." Just as certain religions forbid the usage of the name of their deity for fear of sin or retribution by some great calamity, the words of liberty and freedom are forbidden from the common discourse of the prisoners. Instead of blessing each other through God, they instead bless each other with Freedom. To support this claim, Herling recounts another story of a prisoner who counts down the days to his freedom. When he finds out that his sentence has been extended, he commits suicide, fulfilling the superstition. According to the onlookers, he brings the calamity upon himself by cherishing too much hope and talking about his freedom. Some even condemn him for breaking the prisoner’s code, saying, “He had suffered, yes: but had he not brought it on himself? Was it not playing with fire to talk freely about his release? Did he not invoke freedom, instead of putting his faith humbly in the sentences of destiny?”

In these hypothetical questions, the religious language with freedom as a deity continues with words pertinent to invocations of faith.

Although the prisoners are not allowed to talk about freedom, their actions exhibit a drive to attain it. Even with the administration’s attempts at barring the prisoners from freedom, Herling’s writing indicates that there are many ways in which the inmates subvert the system by claiming certain freedoms as their own. They try to claim agency over their own bodies by escaping, secretly participating in

107 Ibid., 220
108 Ibid., 34.
groups and activities that go against the authorities, or even harming their bodies on purpose. Even the idea of “having a choice” is subversive in this extreme situation.

The prisoners often choose to use memory as a defense mechanism. Herling implies that those prisoners who are more resilient against the brainwashing of the system use the memories from their time as free citizens to protect themselves against the cruelty of the Gulag. Remembrance, execution, or even the discussion of old habits is an acceptable way to cope with the Gulag: “I frequently heard remarks like: ‘I always used to play draughts after supper,’ or: ‘My wife always grumbled because I wandered about propping up other people’s mantelpieces, instead of staying at home and going to sleep. A habit is a habit, after all, and it’s stayed with me all my life.’”

The most mundane and petty habits in the Gulag achieve the status of a lifeline. In the time of rest after work but before nightfall, Herling describes the many ways in which the prisoners tried to retain normality in their schedules. Ultimately, however, their actions are just a “parody of the gestures, habits and responses of our former existence, observing the symbolic ritual of a dimly remembered routine particularly when the form had lost all meaning in the conditions of the camp.” The habits and everyday actions mirror those of the free world, but do not reach the same ends as they might in the free world.

Still, memory plays a role in the identity of the prisoner. Herling says that “one thing, however, is certain: it is impossible to understand slavery without applying to it even the most deformed standards of freedom.”

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109 Ibid., 143.
110 Ibid., 143.
111 Ibid., 144.
prisoners remember the standards of freedom, they can understand that they are operating in a system that has turned them into slaves. This realization is important in the identity of the prisoner, since as soon as he loses consciousness of himself as a former member of free society, he is turned towards the Gulag system of morality. An understanding that life was not always the way it is in the camp might help the prisoner cling to his humanity.

The narrator himself participates in the memories and habits of his freedom. When he is in the mortuary with the other Poles after going on hunger strike, they gather together to celebrate Christmas. The “older prisoners preserved the old calendar in their hearts and memories, carrying out its injunctions humbly and in secret,” which not only reflects the national and religious consciousness that is left over from their days of freedom, but it also provides them with a new group consciousness, as they are joined together within the camp as a group that is more united than any other clique within the prison. Relative to the social norms and morality of the gulag, they do form a cohesive unit. The Poles ceremoniously share a piece of bread that is saved especially for this occasion, and it is a very emotional moment, as they all remember the longing for their homeland. Miss Z. gives the five other prisoners a gift of handkerchiefs embroidered with symbols, and the memoir provides a photograph of this handkerchief, which is decorated with a Polish eagle, a fir branch, the date and a monogram. After this, Herling recounts the story told by the Pole he mentions as B. The pre-Gulag traditions evidently create an atmosphere that evokes a desire to share the memories from the past of the prisoners.

112 Ibid., 220.
The desire and natural tendency for humans to try to mirror their old life within in the prison is brought up by Herling several times, as he attempts to convince the reader that the human will is stronger than the extreme conditions that the prisoners are placed in. Through allowing themselves the memories of the little freedoms that may have been taken for granted in their pre-labor camp life, the prisoners can recall the values that were associated with love, family, and individuality. This is a form of resistance to the Gulag morality tried by many, and Herling shows it to be successful to varying degrees.

Another way in which the prisoners exhibit freedom of choice is when they convince themselves and others that they possess autonomy over the fate of their own bodies. This sort of subversion may seem counterintuitive to the reader, as it often involves serf-mutilation and harm, but Herling provides an explanation for such behaviors, as he often does with his in-depth psychological observation and analysis. When the prisoners are faced with choices that concern them, they often choose the route of more difficulty, such as working more or staying in the camp as an official, which is unexpected and incomprehensible to the free individual. However, Herling believes that any sort of activity protects the prisoner from the demoralization of the prison camp, as “in the camp, the normal process was reversed: inertia and apathy hastened death, while any form of activity postponed it for an unforeseen period.”

Those who can solely occupy themselves with food and rest eventually succumb to the morality of the camp and become depraved. However, those who actively take matters into their own hands still have a chance of the survival of their morality.

113 Ibid., 144.
beyond their basic physical needs, as they can still keep their wits about them even in the most desperate situations.

One such attempt at self-determination is described in the behavior of the brigade of which Herling is a member. He states that his brigade was always formally asked to work overtime, which the prisoners never refused and instead used as a bargaining chip: “We had no money, but we could bargain with the remnants of our strength, and we were as lavish with them as Tsarist exiles with their kopeks, when it was a question of maintaining the barest appearance of our humanity.”\textsuperscript{114} If they had refused, the supervisors could substitute “coercion for a procedure of good-will.”\textsuperscript{115} However, in the case of Herling’s brigade, the administrators never use force before trying kindness and persuasion first. This is because the prisoners take “care not to be deprived even of these modest illusions of freedom, for every prisoner feels the need to preserve the vestiges of his own free-will. Forgetting that the first law of camp life is physical self-preservation, we look[ed] upon our freedom to sanctify the unlimited exploitation of our labour by a pretence of voluntary agreement as a precious privilege.”\textsuperscript{116} Knowing that the outcome of the situation would be the same whether they are given a choice or not, the prisoners choose to make a decision that they know is physically more demanding. However, the method in which the end is achieved is in their hands, making them feel less like slaves and more like humans who can make decisions on their own.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 42.
Another attempt at self-agency is suicide, a topic mentioned several times in *A World Apart*. Although it is not a popular decision as most of the characters described are unable to take their own life for various reasons, Herling presents suicide as the ultimate decision that can make the prisoner free, as a final reclamation of one’s own humanity.

This is made particularly clear in the episode with the woman, Natalya Ivanovna, who lends Herling Dostoevsky’s *House of the Dead*, to which he is drawn in a dark way. When he reads *House of the Dead*, he realizes that there is a connection between those who had been subjected to Russian labor camps in the past, who had died in suffering and anonymity, and this fact that history is repeating itself in his own life terrifies him to a point of despair, convinced that his end and the end of his fellow prisoners is predestined, simply because the situation has not been able to change in generations. This despair leads to thoughts about suicide, of which he eventually breaks free. Natalya Ivanovna, however, takes a different, subversive meaning from the text as she says:

“There is always room for hope when life becomes so utterly hopeless that nobody can touch us, we belong to ourselves…Do you understand? We become absolute masters of our lives…When there is no hope of rescue in sight, not the slightest breach in the surrounding wall, when we can't raise our hand against fate just because it is our fate, there is only one thing left to us—to turn that hand against ourselves. You probably can't understand the happiness which I found in the discovery that eventually one belongs only to oneself—at least so far that one can choose the method and the time of one's own death…That is what Dostoevsky has taught me. In 1936, when I first found myself in prison, I suffered greatly, for I believed that I had been deprived of freedom because I had in some way deserved it. But now I know that the whole of Russia has always been, and is still, a house of the dead, that time has stood still between Dostoevsky's hard labour and our own, and now I am free, completely free! We died so long ago, though we still won't admit it. Just think: I lose hope when
the desire for life awakens within me; but I regain it whenever the longing for death comes upon me.”

The realization in this speech that the prisoner can be free through choosing the time of his death becomes drenched in irony when Natalya Ivanovna is deprived of choosing her own death as her bunkmates alert the authorities and her suicide attempt is halted, showing that even the choice to die can be controlled. However, suicide in the camp is a form of humanization for some who do not do it out of despair, but rather as an act of defiance against authority. Herling does not agree with her point of view. In an interview with Bolecki, he claims that

…my rebellion is based on the fact that I—as opposed to Natalya Ivanovna—don’t believe that suffering cleanses. I do not believe to the type of person who finds catharsis only in suffering. Suffering can be cleansing, but this is an exception rather than the rule. In any case, in my opinion, suffering is not a test that has a positive influence on personality. And this was the thesis of Natalya Ivanovna, a lovely woman, but unhappy and unfortunately very sick. In Dostoevsky’s story, she found only confirmation of the perpetual continuity of unchanging suffering. And this, of course, helped her, because thanks to this interpretation, she herself identified herself in the endless stream of Russian suffering.

Just because suffering is not a cleansing method for himself, doesn’t mean that other characters do not believe in its power. Herling’s friend Kostylev is an example of this.

Kostylev, a young engineer who is sentenced after he develops a love of the West after reading French literature in its original form, is transferred to Yercevo from a different camp, where he tries to rehabilitate himself from his “crimes” but is instead greeted with the harsh realities of the camp. Since he feels as if he has been

117 Ibid., 163-164.
cheated twice, he develops a strong hatred toward the system. Herling catches him performing *toufta* by burning his arm. *Toufta* is the practice of deception to avoid labor in the camp. Because of the arm, Kostylev never has to go out to work. Herling tries to warn him that his avoidance of work would not go unnoticed, to which “he only smiled at my warnings and repeated with childish obstinacy: ‘I shall never work for them again. Never, do you understand? Never!’” Eventually, he is chosen to be sent to Kolyma, which is considered to be the equivalent of a death camp, from which there is no hope of return, and which all the prisoners try to avoid by putting in a greater effort in order to not be selected. When he finds out that he has been chosen, he spills a vat of boiling water over his head and dies. Kostylev prefers suicide to working for his oppressors.

Although a different type of suicide, three Hungarian nuns suffer a similar fate in the chapter titled “Martyrdom for the Faith,” a phrase Herling borrows from *House of the Dead*. In Dostoevsky’s work, the man whom the phrase refers to is a “fanatic” who “wouldn’t give an inch on any of his convictions, but there was never a trace of anger or hatred in his objections to my arguments.” However, he is liked and trusted by all of the thieves and political prisoners, serving as an angelic counterexample to the depravity that goes on between the prisoners. The rumor in the camp is that “they had worked well until the autumn of 1941, when one day they suddenly refused to leave the zone in the morning, saying that they would not ‘work for Satan.’” It is confirmed that the nuns are indeed suffering for their faith when

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119 Herling, A World Apart, 83.
120 Dostoyevsky, House of the Dead, 40.
121 Ibid., 40.
Herling ends up in the single cell, being held for his hunger strike. He considers that “the severity of martial law gave to their mysterious madness the character of certain suicide.”122 Herling thinks the nuns are long dead, but they appear when the Poles are placed in separated cells as punishment for their hunger strike. The nuns are taken away, presumably to get shot, and Herling is filled with an “incomprehensible excitement and apprehension.” He asks his neighbor, T., to describe “how did they walk?” “How did they look?” T. responds that they looked “quite ordinary” and they walked “quite ordinary.” In this way, they die in the name of their faith as they refuse to denounce God. At this point, Herling feels weak, and he is ready to give up the hunger strike, but T. responds from beyond the wall with “unexpected force”: “No, I won’t.”123 The nuns, in the simplicity of their refusal to succumb to the administration’s manipulation, retain their humanity as they choose to die rather than give up their faith.

To supplement the phenomenon of suicide in the Gulag, Varlam Shalamov writes in Kolyma Tales about discovering the suicide of a man named Ivan Ivanovich:

Fedya Shapov and I didn’t know what to do—Ivan Ivanovich had some good foot rags that weren’t torn. He also had some sacks, a calico shirt that he boiled to remove the lice, and some patched felt boots. His padded jacket lay on his bunk. We talked it over briefly and took the things for ourselves. Savelev didn’t take part in the division of the dead man’s clothing. He just kept walking around Ivan Ivanovich’s body. In the world of free men a body always and everywhere stimulates a vague interest, attracts like a magnet. This is not the case either in war on in the camps, where the everyday nature of death and the deadening of feeling kills any interest in a dead body. But Savelev was struck by Ivan Ivanovich’s death. It had stirred up and lit some dark corners of his soul, and forced him to make decisions of his own.124

123 Ibid. 208.
In this story, Shalamov confirms Herling’s claim that in the camp, the phenomenon of suicide can be perceived as a liberating action that can inspire and revive the prisoners who are still alive to participate in self-advocacy. In the end, if a man is too weak to end his own suffering by suicide, even if he harbors no hope for the future, he is lost. Herling observes an old man who wishes for death, but who does not kill himself. The narrator wonders: “How could I have convinced this fundamentally religious man, who prayed for a speedy death as for God's greatest blessing, that man's greatest privilege is free will in slavery, that he always retains the right to make his own ultimate choice between life and death.”

He treats the man as an example of someone who has already died, but not because of a choice he has made. He is dehumanized as he has been lost to the hopelessness of the Gulag, but he cannot make the decision to take his own life.

The freedom to choose one’s own destiny in an environment where all autonomy is taken away is a recurrent theme in *A World Apart*. Even moments of voluntary self-harm, hunger strike, self-imposed additional labor, and suicide are often portrayed as acts of heroism, as the prisoner most often chooses the fate for himself. In such a way, he can reclaim his humanity.

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2. Art, Music, and Literature

At the time of his arrest, Herling already has experience as a dedicated student of Polish literature. At his young age he has dabbled in journal editing and literary critique, polemical writing and other outlets that display his familiarity with the world of contemporary literature. In his own writing, he combines many genres in which he has familiarity. Because of Herling’s proximity with the world of literature, art and culture on an academic level, part of his interest in *A World Apart* is showing how such outlets can be used to bring back the prisoners, especially the political prisoners, into the world that they were familiar with before their time in the labor camp.

The administration of the Soviet Union, throughout its existence, was extremely aware of the dangers that literature posed to the well-being of the state. Since the justifications for the Bolshevik reign had been ideological from the very beginning, having been birthed from a movement that was primarily intellectual, the administrators were especially afraid that counter-ideologies and movement might try to steal back the method of the dissemination of ideas through literature. Censorship was an inherent part of the Soviet state, as the enemies of the state were the political prisoners, those who could not be cured easily from the sins against the Soviet society, especially if these sins came from their minds. The control of media and information, including the doctoring of non-fictional texts describing the West, was common. Anne Applebaum writes: “A 1940 NKVD directive on the cultural-educational work of the camps stated explicitly that those who had committed counter-revolutionary crimes were not suitable targets for re-education…As was often the case, the orders were ignored more frequently than they were obeyed…If
Moscow intended the KVCh\textsuperscript{126} to force prisoners to work harder, the prisoners used the KVCh for their own purposes: for moral support—and for survival.\textsuperscript{127} Herling’s memoir reminds the reader how desperately the State needed to control information, literature and art. Literature, music, and film are all important in rehumanizing the prisoners as they evoke higher cognitive capacities, feelings of connection, and reminders of emotions and empathy.

To the educated population of the Gulag, literature is very important. Since the political prisoners are more dangerous than the criminal prisoners, and the administration’s main justification for the creation of labor camps is ideological purification, literature can serve as a tool for the restructuring of the prisoner’s thoughts. In the hands of the State, literature and learning are riddled with empty slogans, often misunderstood and distorted by those who are exposed to them, as is the case with the juvenile delinquents.

Occasionally, a vospitatel (education officer), with an angelic face, flaxen hair and blue eyes, would come into our cell, and, in a voice which sounded like the gentle whisper of the confessional, call the handful of bezprizornye [juvenile delinquents] out for a ‘lesson’: ‘Come, children, let us go and learn a little.’ When the ‘children’ came back from their instruction, our ears burned at the obscenities which they mixed freely with the stock phrases of Soviet political propaganda. Accusations of ‘Trotskyism’, ‘nationalism’, and ‘counter-revolution’ were constantly flung out at us from their corner, then assurances that ‘Comrade Stalin did well to lock you up,’ or that ‘the power of the Soviets will soon conquer the whole world’ all this repeated again and again with the cruel, sadistic persistence typical of homeless youth. Later in the labour camp I met an eighteen-year-old boy who had been appointed chief of the local ‘Kulturno-Vospitatelnaya Chast’ (cultural and educational section) only because once, as a bezprizrorny, he had gone through such a course of instruction in prison.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{126} KVCh stands for Kulturno-Vospitatelnaya Chast, or the Cultural-Educational Department.
\textsuperscript{128} Herling, \textit{A World Apart}, 5.
However, there are many moments in the memoir where art, especially literature, serves to restore the prisoner’s humanity. For Herling, this is especially important because of his background, but other characters in his tale are also deeply affected by literature, art and music.

The power of literature is an undeniable force in *A World Apart*. It has the potential to change the course of a human’s life, especially in the context of the totalitarian state. Herling’s friend Kostylev, mentioned before, is sentenced to the labor camp because of how he is affected by French literature. The literature that he reads in French inspires him to create an image of the West that is extremely desirable to his mind, especially as he has been betrayed by the Soviet Union, ending up in the labor camp. "But, Misha…that is only literature,” Herling would argue. “You’ve no idea how much misery and suffering exists in the West.”

The irony from Herling’s words is that he cannot be sure of his statement, which aligns with Soviet propaganda at this moment. Although he says that it is “only literature,” trying to trivialize literature’s role in the course of history, Herling should know, from his studies of literature and involvement in writing, that literature can have a great effect on the individual and social level. In Polish, there is a term (coined by Adam Mickiewicz in his play *Dziady*), that translates into “ruffian books.” This term refers to pieces of literature that have a deciding and long-lasting effect on a character’s life. Examples of literature that involves “ruffian books” include Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. In Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, Tatyana is a character who is strongly affected by “ruffian books,” as they bring her into a world.

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130 Bolecki, *Inny Świat Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, 204.
of fantasy that changes her perspective on Onegin. Bolecki writes that the motif of “ruffian books” is “written into almost every story of the narrator. In other words, the book, letter, document, artistic production, are the elements that play a key role in the biographies of the characters in A World Apart.”[131]

Nevertheless, Kostylev responds to him: “I know, I know…my examining judge said the same thing. But if I have ever known, even for a short time, what freedom is, then it was while I was reading those old French books. I was like an ice-bound ship, and it's no wonder that I tried to escape into warm waters.”[132] From this statement the chapter gains the title “The Icebreaker.” Literature helps Kostylev at least imagine a life of freedom, and he does not seem to have any regrets in his decision, instead reading books even more fervently when he is placed in the camp.

When Kostylev is chosen to be moved to a camp that guaranteed death, Herling offers to go in his place, the deputy says that the camp is not a “sentimental romance.”[133] As the “ruffian books” are a “symbol of the cultural values, which were destroyed by the “world apart,”” their recollection always initiates a “flash of awareness, a clarity in recognizing the situation of the self and others, ability to precise recognition, attribution of value of events and occurrences.”[134] The awareness apparently leads to Kostylev’s suicide.

The camp administration is aware of the potential of literature, as they make certain that the camp library contains only strictly Soviet propaganda works, some

131 Ibid., 205.
132 Ibid., 73.
133 Ibid., 84. The original phrase is actually the Polish-phonetic Russian “sientymentalnyj roman” which translates to “sentimental novel.”
134 Bolecki, Inny Świat Gustawa Herlinga Grudzińskiego, 206.
classics, and pamphlets of speeches and resolutions. Herling claims to have only read the *Collected Works of Griboyedov* and *The House of the Dead* in the camp secretly, but he takes out the camp library books for appearances, including the book of the Spanish revolutionary leader Dolores Ibbaruri, *La Pasionaria*. He says, “I remember that in Pasionaria’s book I came across and underlined in pencil a sentence dating from the period of the defence of Madrid: ‘Better to die than to live on your knees.’ From that time the book enjoyed great popularity in the camp until an NKVD commission of inspection from Vologda withdrew it from circulation. Apparently those proud words, which I had first heard at a meeting of my high-school communist group in Poland, had a different ring in captivity, and had to be suppressed.”

The prisoner who reads these works, in this case, gets a taste the same power as the administration, as he can distort their message for their own purposes of freedom and defiance. The very weapons of the State are being turned against them, because words can indeed be very dangerous. The statement “Better to die than to live on your knees,” previously a slogan for the oppressed, is now appropriated for the oppressed of the formerly oppressed. Even as the director of the KVCh is always a criminal prisoner, to avoid contamination by “seditious literature,” the system is flawed because the criminal prisoner cannot recognize which statements might be ideological threatening to the state. In this realm, the intelligentsia and political prisoners have the upper hand.

And so, especially to the intelligentsia, literature in Herling’s Gulag is something that ties the prisoner to the external world. Since this particular caste of

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136 Ibid., 153.
society is used to an intellectual modality of life experience, any connection they have with the external world through literature is necessary for their survival as a moral agent. In his time in prison, Herling meets Professor Boris Lazarovich N., an elderly professor who had moved to Russia after the Revolution of 1918. This man is in prison after he and his wife were given ten-year sentences for “organizing a literary salon which discussed exclusively Polish literature.”137 The old man is unable to withstand hunger, but the narrator brings him extra food in exchange for lectures on literature, and the two develop a relationship as master and pupil. “Occasionally, to my great joy and pride, we exchanged roles, and he listened attentively while I told him of all that had occurred in European and Polish literature since his imprisonment. I remember how his eyes, their fire extinguished by the hopeless struggle with hunger, blazed afresh and his pale cheeks flushed as I told him of Maritain’s thomistic theory of art, which I myself had heard at Warsaw University in 1939, just before the war broke out.”138 The professor, who is slowly dying of hunger as he is moved to the thinnest cauldron and sentenced to the mortuary, finds hope and vitality in hearing about the literature from outside of the Gulag. He counteracts his hunger with intellectual exercise, clinging to the values brought in from beyond the zone.

Music in the labor camp is a more inclusive form of art that is a tool for the cultivation of the prisoner’s emotional life, transcending the mere basic physical existence of the body and exalting his inner soul. Because of the special status of music, “instruments were the most precious and sought-after objects in the camp.”139

137 Ibid., 139.
138 Ibid., 140.
139 Ibid., 115.
Herling attributes the importance and positive reception of music to the fact that “Russians love music quite differently from Europeans; for them it is not a mere distraction, or even an artistic experience, but a reality more real than life itself. I often saw prisoners playing their instruments...as if they were exploring the most painful places of their souls. Never has the word ‘soul’ seemed so understandable and so natural to me as when I heard their awkward, hastily improvised compositions, and say other prisoners lying on the bunks, staring vacantly into space and listening with religious concentration.”\[140\] He describes the prisoners’ handling of the instruments in gentle, tender terms that stand in contrast to the otherwise crude and brutal environment of the camp. It contrasts with the environment, as “the surrounding silence seemed to emphasize the power of that music and the emptiness in which it resounded like the sharp, sorrowful tones of a shepherd’s pipe on a deserted mountainside.”\[141\]

In addition to fostering individual spirituality (“religious concentration”) and a time for retrospection, music in the Gulag creates a collective spirit that unites the prisoners in a situation where they are often divided:

The player became one with his instrument, he pressed it hard to his chest, stroked it with his hands and, hanging his head reflectively, gazed with misty despair at the inanimate object which, at one dexterous touch, spoke and expressed for him all that he could never put into words. Sometimes these musicians were asked to stop: "It tears one's soul." And then immediately a guitar or an accordion would break out into the familiar strains of a Ukrainian ballad or a prison song. Various voices joined in with increasing confidence, and soon the whole barrack was full of the sound of singing, sending out into the darkness strange verses about the prisoner who "burst into tears on his way to work, or the men who met at night to "elect a secret committee", or that prisoner who at the New Year greeted his friends.

\[140\] Ibid., 115.
\[141\] Ibid., 115.
from "the darkness of OGPU dungeons, which move men to tears and to laughter".\textsuperscript{142}

Some of the ballads are known by all of the prisoners, and these songs unite them in their common plight, reminding them that they are suffering in the company of their fellow men. Characterized by an honest portrayal of the criminal and prison life, the songs of the prisoners act as a source of defiance against the totalitarian state, an outlet of resistance against the oppressor, standing in opposition to the empty values of the Soviet Union in exchange for raw emotions. The elusive nature of music as an organic medium of expression does not lend itself as easily to revisions and manipulation by the state, as it cannot be controlled. In this way, music provided a unique way to connect the prisoners’ threatened spirituality in opposition to the loss of moral agency.

In a similar way, the one exposure to cinema within the Gulag shows how prisoners react to a different type of media. In reaction to rumors that there would be a film screening, the prisoners say “Cinema! A little extra soup, or a hundred grammes of bread, would do us more good.”\textsuperscript{144} The words reflect the physical needs of the prisoners. However, Herling claims that “these words did not express their true feelings; the cinema meant more to them than bread, and if they spoke of it contemptuously it was because they believed that only those desires to which outwardly one pretends to attach no importance can ever come true.”\textsuperscript{145} Just like uttering the words about freedom, speaking about any other desires than those of food puts the prisoners in danger of disappointment. However, they need the cinema more

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 152.
than food to retain their spiritual humanity. After all, one of the main markers between the animal and human worlds is the capacity for human beings to create work of art, and to have an emotional reaction to an artistic experience that elicits such feelings. After a short Soviet propaganda film, the feature comes on, and it is the American musical “The Great Waltz.” The prisoners respond to the propaganda film with silence (since any “careless word could sound like a cry of rebellion.”):

"The Great Waltz", on the other hand, moved us deeply. I would never have believed that an average American musical, full of women in fitted bodices, men in tight jackets and frilly cravats, shining chandeliers, sentimental melodies, dances and love scenes, could reveal to me what seemed to be the lost paradise of another epoch. I held back my tears, my heart beat faster, my throat was choking, and I cooled my feverish cheeks with my hands. The prisoners watched the film spellbound, without moving; in the darkness I saw only wide-open mouths and eyes absorbing passionately all that was happening on the screen. "How beautiful," voices were whispering all around me. "So that's how they live outside."\[^{146}\]

The film provides fairy-tale imagery that is far removed from anything that the prisoners are accustomed to. In any other context, the content of the film seems trivial. To the prisoners, however, this is a reawakening. Herling captures the wave of emotions that takes over:

Filled with naive admiration, barred from that outer world, they forgot that the action of the film was taking place over half a century ago, and these images of the past became the forbidden fruit of the present. "Shall we ever live like men again? Will the darkness of our tomb, our living death, never come to an end?" I heard these words by my side, so distinctly that someone must have whispered them in my ear, and though against the background of prison slang the exaggerated language was unusual, at that moment I felt no astonishment. The decorated barrack, the figures weaving on and off the screen, the music, the concentration in the faces around me, the sighs which

\[^{146}\] Ibid., 157.
\[^{147}\] Ibid., 157-158.
suggested an inner thawing, all pushed us back into the past and released the long-frozen sources of emotion.\textsuperscript{148}

The cinema allows the prisoners to remember feelings from before their imprisonment. The “forbidden fruit” which is the influx of emotions is bittersweet, as some of the prisoners may harbor thoughts that are so overwhelming, powerful and hopeless that they may lead to despair. The tree of knowledge and awareness may not necessarily present the happiest of scenarios. However, the “thawing” of the “long-frozen sources of emotion” puts the prisoners back into a place where they can feel for themselves, and in turn for their fellow prisoners. The cinema returns forgotten feelings of empathy, distancing the inmates from the destructive influence of the labor camp. Similarly to how the technique of remembering old habits helps the prisoner remember the values that he once had when he was free, the cinema helps the prisoners remember what emotions existed in the free world, before they were thrust into the morally desolating environment of the forced labor camp.

Art is an important part of \textit{A World Apart}, as the author, because of his past involvement in literature, recognizes the role which literature, cinema, and other forms of expression can provide. “Ruffian books” in the Gulag allows the prisoners to reach higher levels of awareness, develop a sense of community, and recall human emotions. Creativity and appreciation for literature, music, and cinema can only exist in beings with a higher intellectual and emotional functioning, so Herling describes them as a tool for the re-humanization of the prisoners.

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 158.
3. Liminal Space in the Gulag

There are certain areas of the Gulag that allow the prisoners to experience a partial re-humanization. These places are the House of Meetings, the camp hospital, and theatre concerts. All three of these places serve as liminal places, as they cannot be classified as purely belonging to the prison world or to the free world. “Liminal entities,” the way they are defined by Victor Turner, are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”149 The threshold nature of the liminal space causes the prisoners inhabiting these spaces to lose their sense of identification with a group, which for the prisoners means that they shed some of their prisoner-ness.

The House of Meetings is the most literal representation of the conceptual borderline:

“Dom Svidanyi," literally "the House of Meetings," was the name which we gave to a newly-built wing of the guard-house, where prisoners were allowed to spend between one and three days with their relatives, who had come from all parts of Russia to the Kargopol camp for this short visit. Its topographic situation in the camp zone was to some extent symbolic: our entrance to the barrack was through the guard-house, from the zone, and the way out was already on the other side of the barbed wire, at liberty. Thus it was easy to think that the house in which the prisoners saw their relatives for the first time after so many years was on the borderline between freedom and slavery; a prisoner, shaved, washed and neatly dressed, having shown his pass and the official permit for the visit, walked through the partition straight into arms extended to him from liberty.150

When the prisoner enters the House of Meetings, he exits one type of classification as the prisoner. Although he stands apart from the other prisoners because at this

150 Herling, A World Apart, 85.
moment he is “shaved, washed, neatly dressed,” and treated in some sort of humane fashion, he is simultaneously deprived of privileges that members of the free world are allowed. Therefore, he is neither a member of the free world bound by the rules of the free world, nor is he a prisoner, bound by the social rules of the prison. The house is set up in a pleasant manner, with curtain, tables, and beds, but simultaneously, the prisoner is extremely limited in what he is allowed to do there. Some prisoners even feel ashamed for their presence in the house of meetings, and they feel “awkward in their disguise, as if ashamed and humiliated by the thought that they were being made use of as a screen to hide the camp’s true face for three days.”

After the meeting is finished, the prisoner goes “straight to the clothing store to shed his disguise and take up his true skin once more.” The proximity of the prisoner to the other side of the fence to freedom, followed by the return to the pre-threshold state, often results in identity crisis, marked by a loss of hope and a despair.

Those prisoners who anticipate to see one a relative in the house of meetings allow themselves to hope for an idealized version of the free world:

Men isolated forcibly, or even voluntarily, from the rest of the world, idealize everything that occurs beyond the frontiers of their solitude. It was touching to hear prisoners, before the expected visit, recalling the liberty whose mere taste they were about to enjoy. It seemed that never before in their lives had they experienced either important events or bitter disappointments. Freedom for them was the one, blessed irreplaceable. At liberty one slept, ate and worked differently, there the sun was brighter, the snow whiter, and the frost less painful. "Remember? Remember?" excited voices whispered on the bunks. "I remember, at liberty, I was stupid and wouldn't eat brown bread." And another would take up: "I wasn't satisfied with Kursk, I wanted Moscow. Just wait till my wife comes, I'll tell her what I think of Kursk now, just wait till I tell her…"

151 Ibid., 91.
152 Ibid., 91.
153 Ibid., 94.
The excitement for the meeting is shared among the prisoners. Their perception of reality however, this excitement can quickly turn into dangerous hopelessness.

Despite the often depressing outcomes of visits at the House of Meetings, Herling describes the House as a location where the prisoners could approach the free world and even touch it. This contact re-humanizes the prisoner since “the prisoners in the windows of the house of meetings frequently smiled at us and sometimes greeted us by fondly embracing their visitor, as if in this simple and touching way they wanted to remind us that they were human, with well-dressed relatives, free to touch intimately those ‘from the other side.’”154

The camp hospital is threshold environment in the Gulag: “The camp hospital was something like a refuge for the ship-wrecked. Few prisoners could pass the well-built barrack with large windows without sighing inwardly at the thought of two or three weeks in a bright ward, on a clean bed, being looked after by a kind, comforting nurse and a polite doctor, with other prisoners who seemed to be transformed, more human somehow and sympathetic.”155 Like the House of Meetings, the hospital is a transition space that is in the Gulag but not exactly part of it. The prisoners are in a liminal state where they are treated less like vermin and more like humans, and this re-humanization makes the return to the normal prison life even more painful:

We longed for a visit to the hospital and dreamt of it, at work and during the night, although the object of our longing was not the short rest which it gave, but rather the return to humanity, the transitory, impermanent revocation of our former ideas of life and of men which, even a short time before death, restored our self-respect and the consciousness of our human dignity. A prisoner went to the hospital, as to the house of meetings, to see his reflection in the mirror of the

154 Ibid., 92.
155 Ibid., 96.
past. And, as from the house of meetings, he returned to the barrack more dispirited than before: that was the price of his brief return to humanity.\footnote{Ibid., 96.}

The third liminal space which Herling describes is the theater. This space is treated with a reverence unlike any of the other spaces that Herling describes. In the theater, the same people who steal, rape, and betray on the regular try to maintain a human standard, one like exists outside of the camp. The old men willingly decorated the barrack where the concert would occur with paper decorations, scrubbing the floors with “energetic” scrubbing and polishing. The enthusiasm and energy for the theater barrack is unique in the Gulag, as there are rarely things that the prisoners are noted to feel passionate about aside from their own survival. Behavior of the prisoners also changes dramatically on the day of the concert. In this space, “the prisoners took their caps off at the door, shook the snow from their boots in the passage outside, and took their places on the benches with ceremonious anticipation and almost religious awe.”\footnote{Ibid., 156.} Even the status of women is inverted in this space, as “politeness was obligatory, and women who came in late had seats in the first rows of the benches offered to them. There was never enough room on the benches for all the prisoners, and large groups of them stood in the doorway and against every wall.\footnote{Ibid., 156.} As the show is about to start, a “murmur of satisfaction” runs through the audience, at the acknowledgement that “the theatre was indeed like a foretaste of liberty.”\footnote{Ibid., 157.}

Dostoevsky provides a similar scene in \textit{House of the Dead}: “Before the rise of the curtain, the room presented a strange and animated look. In the first place, the crowd

\footnote{156 Ibid., 96.} \footnote{157 Ibid., 156.} \footnote{158 Ibid., 156.} \footnote{159 Ibid., 157.}
pressed, crushed, jammed together on all sides, but impatient, full of expectation,
every face glowing with delight.”

During a powerful scene in the Gulag theater, a prisoner named Vsevolod performs sea shanties to an excited audience. For his final song, he chooses to sing a sad shanty: “We are sailing away, far, far from Russian soil.” He encourages the audience to join in, and they stand up and sing together. “All the faces were full of emotion, in some eyes I even saw tears. And though the words sung with such feeling were like a curse flung by galley-slaves chained to the ‘Russian soil,’ yet the singing itself was full of a boundless nostalgia…” The nostalgia is for a land of “suffering, hunger, death and degradation…the barren desert of human longings,” and it causes the prisoners to “hating it, long for it and recall it with all the strength of their choking feelings.” The confusing feeling can only be inspired by the liminal space of the theater, as the individual prisoners are joined together by song in a communal, genuine outpouring of emotion.

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160 Dostoevsky, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, 158.
162 Ibid., 172.
163 Ibid., 172.
Conclusion

The war had ended a month ago. Rome was free, Brussels was free, Oslo was free, Paris was free. Paris, Paris, Paris. . . .


The response to A World Apart’s Epilogue was mixed. Why wouldn’t Herling forgive the man who asks only for an “I understand,” who had at one time been a fellow prisoner and a friend? Is he really so harsh, cold, indifferent, that he is unable utter those two words that would mean the world to the man who clearly feels a strong sense of guilt? Herling replies to these questions in his final interview with Włodzimierz Bolecki on A World Apart:

In the ending I show the difference between imprisonment and freedom, writing simply. It is impossible to say this clearer. The rules of freedom are simply different from the rules of enslavement, and I say in the epilogue of A World Apart that I refuse to accept the rules of enslavement when I am free. Clearly speaking: If I had found out what this prisoner had done while I was still in the camp, and if he had asked me then for the words ‘I understand,’ then maybe I would have said them. Not because I would have understood and accepted his deed, but because, in that place, in that world apart, I would have simply “swallowed” his request. However, in freedom, when I was already living with normal human emotions, love, and friendship, where the world was based on normal values, on knowing the difference between right and wrong, lies and truth, I could not say the words he asked for. I just couldn’t. Not because of spite, since I liked this person, and I had befriended him quite sincerely in the Grodno prison. I could not say them, because it seemed to me like a betrayal of the rules of the free world. I could not resort to the rules of the “world apart,” since I was living in the free world. My attitude in the epilogue of this book is simply a defense of the free world.
Sovietism and all totalitarian systems saturate people with a relativization of basic values, which define us as humans. Of course, my friend, who sentenced four innocent people to death because of his denunciation, did not do this without a reason. It was a contract with the camp administration, who promised him that they would spare his life in return. This is not a circumstance that justifies his act, maybe it is an explanation, but not something that abolishes the stigma of crime. A monstrous invention of the Bolsheviks was the so called “revolutionary morality,” which was used to excuse the wildest crimes and villainy because they allegedly helped the revolution or were executed in its name. Therefore, a total lack of morality was called “revolutionary morality” and people were forced to believe in it. This was a terribly dangerous manipulation, being, to this day, one of the most poisonous sources of totalitarianism.

Herling’s conception of the Soviet Union and the Gulag stays the same from the time that he writes the novel to the time he gives his final interview. He is committed to the message against Soviet totalitarianism for his whole life, and *A World Apart* is supposed to be his dire warning against the dangers of manipulated morality. For those who wonder how it is possible that man can be destructive towards another man, this memoir outlines the process.

Herling’s intellectual contemporary and friend Czesław Miłosz, a Polish Nobel Prize laureate, published a nonfiction book in 1953 called *The Captive Mind*. In it, he tries to explain why intellectuals were so easily seduced by Stalinism, theorizing about deep internal processes and developments that occurred when choosing to collaborate with Stalin’s regime. To many, this came as a justification

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164 The term is taken from Hannah Arendt, a German-American political theorist who also introduced the controversial phrase “banality of evil” from her conclusion that the Germans who participated in the Holocaust were not driven fanaticism or sociopathy, but by a view that their actions were normal because they were acting in accordance with the state. 


166 Miłosz, Czesław. *Zniewolony Umysł*. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999.)
for their decisions. This is the opposite stance of *A World Apart*, in which Herling claims that the main reason for peoples’ collaboration with Communism was based solely on fear, opportunism and morality. “Miłosz does not find the “moralistic” criterium to be useful, for him it is too shallow. I claim it as the main criterium, if not the only criterium. I know somewhat about this from my own observations, from Lvov under the Soviet occupation, which was a sort of polygon of postwar national reality: fear, stupidity, debasement. To my list, I have to add a chronic illness among writers: vanity.”

Although Herling and Miłosz respect each other’s works for artistic merit, the polemic between the writers reflects the perspective difference between someone who had witness the dehumanization of the individual at the most primitive level, and someone who saw Stalinism through a purely intellectual lens. Gulag morality is both a cause and effect of the dehumanization in the Gulag.

In essence, Stalinism is based on dehumanization. This can happen when the prisoners become integrated into the machine of the Soviet Industrial-Camp-Military complex, their value as humans replaced with the value of a tool. It is a process worse than slavery, for the slave is cared for by the master (since he was bought at a price), while the Soviet totalitarianism creates a system where human lives are expendable. It only takes a lie and some torture to create another prisoner. Dehumanization can happen when prisoners are perceived as animals. It is easy to dehumanize a person who, due to the harsh circumstances of the Gulag, receives subhuman treatment at the hands of fellow prisoners. The system strips the prisoners of their humanity as normal human emotions are abolished, especially trust. Hunger and a basic desire for survival

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replace any other human traits as motivators, and it overthrows the desire to remain a moral person. Finally, the Gulag destroys inter-human relationships by encouraging a system of social castes, and an attitude that focuses solely on the self.

However, Herling’s memoir is not all that dark. Even after the prisoners have been exposed to the Gulag, there are some ways by which they cling to humanity. Even after they had been stripped of everything, the prisoners can protect themselves from total moral bankruptcy by reminding themselves of what life was like in the free world. The process of remembering plays an integral role in moral survival. The creation of moments of freedom and defiance, even if they are just illusion, help the prisoners feel like they have some sort of agency over themselves. Music and art in the labor camp can have the power to restore emotions, and unite the prisoners. Finally, the liminal spaces in the Gulag, such as the theater, “house of meetings,” and hospital are areas where the prisoner can reverse the process of dehumanization, at least for some time.

Gustav Herling is not immune to dehumanization, and he becomes indifferent to the suffering of his fellow prisoners. This happens over a year and a half of time in the prison, a relatively laughable amount of time compared to some other prisoners who survive in the Gulag for decades. However, his life, especially in writing his memoir, shows that it is possible to recover from the dehumanizing effects of the labor camp, as long as one does not revert to its morality.
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