A Parable of Misrecognition: Anagnorisis and the Return of the Repressed from the Gulag

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In 1930, Grigoriii Etkind was arrested at his apartment in Leningrad. Five months later, his twelve-year-old son came home from the school one day and asked a grey-bearded man, who sat on the staircase, “May I pass, please?” “Efim,” said the stranger, who turned out to be his father. Later that night, Grigori did explained to Efim that he had been arrested for not being able to pay the exorbitant anti-NEP taxes with money he did not have. He was tortured with heat, blinding light, and continuous interrogation. Months of this treatment followed, until an official gathered a large crowd of prisoners and announced that four of them, including Etkind, would be executed. These four were pushed into a paddy wagon. After a short trip, Etkind was thrown out of a speeding car onto the pavement in front of his home. He waited for his family, not knowing if they themselves had been arrested or were dead, until he saw Efim and realized that his son did not recognize him. The next morning, Grigori took Efim to the barber shop and asked the barber for a “full renovation.” But the psychological damage was irreversible; Efim wrote that his father never returned to his former self. Grigori Etkind died of starvation twelve years later during the siege of Leningrad.

A sophisticated scholar and effective memoirist, Efim Etkind knew how to begin his story so that a feeling of horror would haunt his readers. He began with the scene on the staircase: one day he came home from school and did not recognize his own father. He also used two literary comparisons to relate this horrifying event to his readers. Comparing his father’s experience to the mock execution of Dostoevsky in 1849, Etkind wrote that when he worked on Dostoevsky in the 1990s, he was still thinking about his father’s mock execution and anticipation of death. In another attempt to capture this horror, Etkind compared

This essay was written while I was a fellow at the Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University. Elizabeth Moore provided invaluable help at all stages of this project. I am grateful to Yuri Slezkine and Jana Howlett for reading a draft of this essay and making important suggestions; to Eric Naiman for his creative translation of one of the central concepts of the essay; to Martin Ruel for sharing with me his expertise in Nazi cinema; to Michael Gorham and Kurt Schultz for their support and editorial work; and to anonymous readers of The Russian Review for their efforts to improve this essay.

The Russian Review 68 (October 2009): 623–40
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his father’s story with the novel by Nikolai Gogol, *The Terrible Revenge*. Interestingly, Etkind used the Dostoevsky allusion to discuss his father’s feelings and the Gogol allusion to express his own response to the event: “What I heard from my father seemed to me even scarier than Gogol’s *The Terrible Revenge*. How can one possibly live with this? I do not remember how I managed to handle my disgust with the world.” Written in 1832, *The Terrible Revenge* tells a story of magic and murder. A sorcerer seduces his daughter; the dead rise from their graves; the earth shudders as if alive. In the end, peace is restored by still another apparition of magic forces. What happens at the start of the story, however, resonates with the terrible but unavenged experience of Grigorii and Efim. Gogol’s story begins at a wedding party where the father-sorcerer arrives in disguise and even his daughter does not recognize him. People are scared by his foreign look, but they seem to have seen him before. Maybe he has come from hell. He is the uncanny. Though at first, not much may connect Gogol’s and Etkind’s stories, the underlying motifs are similar. One is the misrecognition of the father; the other is fear itself.

My grandfather, Grigorii Etkind was not a sorcerer. He was a small entrepreneur who recycled old books and magazines. It was the treatment that he received in prison that made him unrecognizable. The horror of power attached to its innocent victim and accompanied him even after this power released him. With surprise, I found similar situations in other stories which describe the return from the gulag. Some of these stories read as true; others are definitely fictions; most present a mixture of memory and imagination.

**WHY MISRECOGNITION?**

This essay analyzes several memoirs and fictional narratives in which those who returned from the gulag were misrecognized by their loved ones. I wish to reveal the narrative of misrecognition as an important, though by no means exclusive, trope in the memoirist and fictionalized literature about the gulag. Identifying a number of texts that reinvent this trope, I subject them to close reading and analyze their poetic and ideological aspects. I do not claim that cases of misrecognition were statistically frequent in real life. However, the prominence of these narratives in the memoirs and imaginative literature about the gulag deserves study. In this essay, I focus on the early narratives, which have provided the rhetorical models for subsequent memoirs and family legends.

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1 Efim Etkind, *Zapiski nezavgorchshika: Barselonskaia proza* (St. Petersburg, 2001), 316. I would speculate that Etkind’s late project of “psychopoeics” (a poststructuralist method of looking at ways in which authors put into words the variety of their characters’ internal experiences) was rooted in that indescribable horror which his father was struggling to express that night of 1930. For psychopoeics see Efim Etkind, *Psikhoceptika* (St. Petersburg, 2005).

2 The variety of the regimes of state violence (prisons, camps, deportation, administrative exile, restriction of rights, and so on) are not discussed here. I focus only on those survivors/returnees who were lucky enough to see their families again and I analyze only the moments of these reunions. The terms these people served and their routes through the system of “repressions” were vastly different.

3 Various aspects of memoirs of gulag survivors were explored in Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (London, 2000); Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Bloomington, 2000); and Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York, 2007). Most recently, the Sakharov Museum in Moscow has published 1505 memoirs of
Anagnorisis, or recognition, is a concept from classical poetics that made its way into philosophy and political theory. In his Poetics, Aristotle defined anagnorisis as “a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, on the part of personages marked for good or evil fortune.”

Developed by Hegel and advanced by the French-Russian philosopher Alexandre Kojève (Kozhevnikov), the problem of individual and group recognition has been revisited by Charles Taylor, Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Ricouer, and other philosophers. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth juxtapose the struggle for recognition, which aims at achieving respect for cultural differences, with the struggle for redistribution, which aims at reaching economic and legal equality. The application of these ideas to Russian literature and socialist societies has not been adequately discussed. This essay aims to stimulate such a discussion through looking at the feelings and speculations that were provided by the early and original witnesses of the return from the camps, who were trying to make sense of the unimaginable events that happened to them or their significant ones in the gulag. In analyzing these narratives, I will use certain concepts from psychoanalysis and political theory, but my main interests are rhetorical.

The French literature scholar Terence Cave has analyzed the motif of anagnorisis, or recognition, in tragedies, comedies, novels, and criticism from Sophocles and Aristotle to Joseph Conrad and Northrop Frye. Starting with misrecognition as a scandal, such stories end with recognition that signals a resolution of the conflict and celebration of the restored order. According to Cave, recognition performs “one of the most quintessential of all acts of fictional narration.” Relying on personal identity as the cornerstone of social order, these plots toy with the danger that misrecognition presents to this order. “Recognition invests in securities, moral, legal, social, political,” writes Cave.


On the dependency of the later memories of the gulag on cliches that were created by early publications in samizdat and glasnost see Leona Toker, “Belated GULAG Memoirs: Amending Contexts,” Gulaq Studies 1 (2008): 1–26; and Figes, Whisperers, chap. 9.

Terence Cave, Recognitions: A Study in Poetics (Oxford, 1988), 4, 496. Earlier, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch presented anagnorisis as the creative aspect of memory: “Anamnesis makes everything a gigantic déjà vu. ... Anagnorisis is a shock: he whom they cast into a pit suddenly stands there. ... In anagnorisis there always should be a distance between the former and present reality, otherwise it would not be so difficult and astonishing” (quoted from Vincent Geoghegan, “Remembering the Future,” in Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch, ed. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London, 1997), 22. See also Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas (Berkeley, 1986), 237–38.
Rich and perspicacious, Cave’s analyses of anagnorisis do not focus on the opposite phenomena of misrecognition, which in some plots prepare only a setting for the cathartic scene of recognition, but in other plots have a separate significance. A change from knowledge to ignorance, misrecognition manifests the loss of personal identity and the demise of those many values that depend on it, such as love, trust, and sanity. The social order may remain intact; it is inside of this continuity of order and power that the fate of the transformed, misrecognized individual generates scandalous (comic or tragic) effects. In Soviet comedies as much as in Shakespeare’s (Comedy of Errors) or Pushkin’s (“Domik v Kolome”) acts of misrecognition created distances, switched statuses, and deconstructed gender and social order. In the Soviet cinema, the most popular comedies such as The Diamond Hand (director Leonid Gaidai, 1968) or The Irony of Fate (Eldar Riazanov, 1975) were stories of misrecognition. In tragedies, misrecognition does not drive the plotline as it does in comedy but rather provides a summary reflection and, sometimes, a culmination of the plot. When the act of misrecognition occurs inside the family or among friends, it demonstrates the power of fate that tragically overwhelms individual love. Fate transforms a hero beyond recognition: even those who love him do not recognize him. Odysseus’ wife and son did not recognize him after decades of wandering; his dog and wet nurse did. Oedipus failed to recognize the father he did not know; Hamlet hesitated to recognize the ghost of his father. In a famous scene, Evgenii Onegin did not recognize his old friend Tatiana, now a married woman. In The Bronze Horseman, another Evgeni misrecognized his own home destroyed by the flood. In many of these situations, brief moments of misrecognition signify the gravity of protagonists’ change and foreshadow their unfortunate ends. A corollary of misrecognition is imposture, when an individual denies her identity and continuity by pretending to be a different person. Historical narratives of Martin Guerre and False Dmitrii provided vivid examples that were eagerly developed by literature. In Boris Godunov, when the impostor deceives everyone into accepting his false identity, he discloses his real self to the only person whom he loves. Ironically, only when everyone misrecognizes him in the way he desires does he realize his deepest desire to be recognized as his real self. Impostors played an unusually large role in Russian and Soviet history and memory.9 Among the many reasons for this is their ability to generate allegories for crucial ideas about identity, power, and recognition.

In 1919 the young Osip Mandelstam told his girlfriend and later wife, Nadezhda, that he was more interested in recognition (uznavanie) than in anything else. “He was thinking not only about the process of recognition of what we had already seen and known, but about the spark which accompanies the recognition of something hidden and still unknown, but appearing in the proper moment, such as fate.” Osip Mandelstam’s strong definition of recognition as the grasping of fate was connected to his understanding of death. “I had the feeling that death for him was not the end but the justification of life,” wrote Nadezhda Mandelstam decades later.10 But Osip Mandelstam’s lonely death in a distant camp, the

9Sheila Fitzpatrick, Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia (Princeton, 2005).
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typical death of a soon-to-be-dead (dokhodiaga), was far from being “the justification of life.” In her memoirs, Nadezhda Mandelstam set herself the purpose of “justifying the life of Osip Mandelstam” by preserving his verses and deciphering his fate.11

In his analysis of the memoirs of the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben noted that the victims bore witness only rarely. Survivors write memoirs, not victims, who often lost their ability to communicate, to tell their stories before their physical death. But only the memoirs of victims could possibly tell the truth about the camps.12 Addressing the Soviet rather than German camps, Nadezhda Mandelstam resolved this paradox in the same way that Agamben did decades later: “Only those who were about to perish in the camps, but accidentally survived, can testify about them.”13 Failing to find such a witness of her husband’s death, she incessantly returns to the circumstances and meaning of this death in two unfinished volumes of her memoirs. For many years she had a painful, persistent nightmare: she stands in line to buy food and Osip stands behind her; but when she looks back, he is not there. She runs after him to ask, “What is being done to you ‘there’?”14 A monument of the recognition of the Other, Mandelstam’s memoirs constitute the most important document of personal mourning of the Soviet era. Rereading Nadezhda Mandelstam after Giorgio Agamben helps to understand the impact of her writing.

In Agamben’s terms, since bare life in the camps had no value for the state, victims could not be sacrificed, only killed. Osip Mandelstam died in a camp, eliminated like millions of others. In the camp, he was just a soon-to-be-dead, a semi-corpse whose suffering from hunger, labor, and humiliation deprived him of any decency or hope.15 The author’s and readers’ attitudes toward Osip Mandelstam, a great poet and unique personality, contrast with the impersonal, nonsacrificial character of his mortification in the camp. Boldly, Nadezhda Mandelstam made no attempt at ascribing a sacrificial meaning to the death of Osip. She admired his courage before his arrest, but did not try to construe his death as an act of self-sacrifice. After all the detective work that she had done in order to delineate the circumstances of her husband’s murder, she realistically saw it as a senseless act which had no reason, purpose, or justification. She really wished to imagine the unimaginable, a bare life of a soon-to-be-dead who used to be the Osip Mandelstam that she knew. The rhetorical effect is created by the tremendous disparity between the author’s and

13Mandel'shtam, Vtoraja kniga, 685.
14N. Mandel'shtam, Vospominaniniia (New York, 1970), 386. The quotation marks, in which Mandelstam put “there” in her question, as if she saw these marks in her dream, are meaningful. For many reasons, there was no concept to name the place where prisoners were kept. The nightmare did not use the concept of gulag or related words. However, the author needed a grammatical fiction, which remained unspecified but with some irony was put into quotation marks.
readers’ attitude toward the poet and the faceless, senseless, nonsacrificial character of his eradication.

Unlike Primo Levi and his comrades in the Nazi camps who were subjected to “selections” (periodical exterminations of the weak and sick), Mandelstam was left to die by himself. Sometimes, the soon-to-be-dead even received medical help, which supported them for a while or even enabled them to survive.16 Some of the most significant evidence of life in camps that we have, such as Varlam Shalamov’s short stories and Boris Sveshnikov’s drawings, come from those soon-to-be-dead who were saved by camp doctors. Historians know that those victims of the gulag who survived and returned to their families experienced multiple problems of a social and personal character.17 On top of somatic and neurological symptoms caused by years of hunger, hard labor, and untreated diseases, the former prisoners typically suffered from a particular psychological condition, which one could reasonably attribute to the deferred impact of their traumas.18 Nadezhda Mandelstam brilliantly described this condition: disturbance of memory, lack of sense of time and change, and cyclical reenactments of the critical moments of survival. Former prisoners “did not draw a firm line between facts, which they witnessed, and the legends of the camps. ... In the consciousness of these stricken people, places, names, and events mixed together into a roll that I had never been able to untangle. Most of these camp stories, as I learned them, were confused lists of those bright moments when the narrator was on the brink of death but miraculously stayed alive.”19 For the life that was reduced to its bare essence, only death was meaningful enough to enter the narrative. Scholars of Holocaust literature also state that “only a few of the few who survived the camp believed they had remained ‘themselves’ throughout their ordeal.”20 Multiple memoirs of the gulag survivors and their relatives say, as a cliché, that those who returned from the camps returned as different people.

Returned to civil life, survivors struggled with a massive psychological transformation that was partially an institutional mission of the gulag, and partially its collateral effect. One could speculate that in cultural memory, mass murder became the most prominent feature of the Nazi camps, while the massive transformation became the most prominent feature of the Soviet camps. While the Nazi ideologists were concerned about “race” and, therefore, used mass murders to engineer biological selection among the population, the Soviet ideologists proclaimed the goals of the ideological, psychological, and aesthetic transformation of the population. The practical methods of this transfiguration varied from

18 The cultural specificity vs. universality of post-traumatic stress disorder is a complex issue that is irrelevant to the following analysis. See, for example, Ruth Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy (Chicago, 2000); idem, From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After (Princeton, 2007); and Roger Luckhurst, The Trauma Question (London, 2008).
19 Mandel'shtam, Vospominaniiia, 397–98.
20 Inga Glendinnen, Reading the Holocaust (Cambridge, England, 1999), 36.
the subtlest to the most violent.\textsuperscript{21} With the return of the survivors, their identity loss—staying alive though not remaining themselves—became visible and horrifying. If the internal perspective on this transformation was beyond representation, the act of misrecognition of a survivor by her/his family illustrated the nightmare of the identity loss in a short, clear plot. In a bitter irony, this plot manifested the victorious power of the state, which achieved its transformative goal by changing its targets beyond recognition. By the same token, this plot expressed the despair of survivors and their families, who felt their estrangement precisely at the moment of reunion. Emphasizing the external, physical change of face, body, dress, and hair, the story of misrecognition worked as a parable for deeper feelings of internal, psychological change. In cultural memory, the parable of misrecognition became a potent device for expressing the horror of living in the camps, the guilt of those who escaped the camps, and the lack of communication between those two parts of Soviet society. This is my explanatory hypothesis for the stories of misrecognition with the return from the gulag.

**MISRECOGNITION OF THE RETURNED**

A short story by the author and singer Bulat Okudzhava, “Woman of My Dreams” (1985), describes Okudzhava’s memory of his mother’s return from the gulag in 1947.\textsuperscript{22} The protagonist is a twenty-two-year-old student whose mother is serving ten years in the gulag. He studies Pushkin at the University of Tbilisi and lives in a communal apartment with an aged neighbor. The student is poor and lonely. He feels “no despair” but admits to yearning for his mother. He has a few photographs of his mother and he cherishes her “dear and ghostly” image.\textsuperscript{23} His neighbor, a heavy, aged man “with sticking-out ears and grey wool
sticking out from them,” recently returned from the camps. He never talks to the student, avoids looking at him, and seems literally ghostly: “nobody saw him entering the doors” and the student imagines him flying “in and out of the window.” Suddenly, the student’s mother sends a telegram about her release. She is coming to live with her son and she will soon arrive by train from Karaganda in Kazakhstan to Tbilisi in Georgia. The student is petrified by the fear that he will not recognize his mother upon her arrival. He fantasizes that she is an old, hunched, grey woman. With horror, he imagines that she will see that he does not recognize her and that his misrecognition will aggravate her suffering. But he imagines how they will be happy together and talk endlessly about their lives in separation. When he finally meets her, he does recognize her; to his relief, she has barely changed physically; she is still strong and young. They hug each other and go to his home. He wants to ask her how it was there, but he stops himself as he senses her lack of responsiveness. “Her face was hard, stony.” Her eyes were “dry and empty; she looked at me but did not see me.” She would not answer the questions addressed to her personally, such as “Do you want cherries?” In response, she would say, “Who, me?”

When the neighbor comes to say hello, the mother starts talking with him, but the son does not understand them. Communicating with strange words and gestures, they exchange the geographical names of the places where both of them were kept. They speak a secret language which he does not share. Trying to entertain his mother, the son brings her to a famous trophy movie from Germany, *The Woman of My Dreams.* 24 Watching a beautiful actress living her happy, peaceful life on the Danube is “the most precious” experience that this student has. Moreover, he hopes that this film will help his mother as if it were “a prescribed medicine or even better, a miracle.” In fact, for the mother this movie is intolerable; she leaves the cinema in the middle.

The internal transformation that this woman underwent during her ten years in the gulag was so deep that “she is entirely different,” the student tells his neighbor with horror. This neighbor seems to understand what had happened; the author and the reader who, unlike the mother and the neighbor, do not have the camp experience, do not understand it. The student, his mother, and his neighbor form a classical triangle that would resemble Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius if there were a hint of sexual flirtation between the mother and the neighbor. However, what we see is only a camp-produced affinity, which feels entirely hermetic to the son. Set inside the most intimate relationship between the mother and the son and aggravated by the unusually good physical condition of the mother, this gap is deeply unsettling. Since she cannot talk about her experience to her son, there is no

again met her son, who was serving in the army, in 1949. Varlen wrote to his mother: “Can you imagine me, if only vaguely? I do not have a single photograph of you.” Having received such a photo in September 1947 (“you are really young and look good”), he wrote her: “It is still the same: I cannot imagine you, as you are. In any photograph, I can only guess and remember the old, now erased, features of my mama as you were in 1937. But you know me even less.” See http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfed/auth/auth_pages.xhtml?key=23975&page=0 (last accessed October 12, 2008).

24This film was produced in Berlin in 1944 under Joseph Goebbels’ supervision and was a wartime hit. It featured Marika Rökk, “the undisputed prima-ballerina of National-Socialist cinema” (Klaus Kreimeier, *The UFA Story: A History of Germany’s Greatest Film Company 1918–1945* [New York, 1996], 234.) Decades later, Okudzhava remembered her name. Writing his story in 1985 and mentioning Marika Rökk, Okudzhava made the success of the Nazi masterpiece in the postwar USSR a meaningful part of the narrative.
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way for them to bridge their mutual estrangement. Punished by her avoidance, he does not ask questions either. “I wanted to ask how she lived there but I was scared and did not ask.” Two lives, one in the camp and another “in freedom,” are incommensurate.  

In the analysis which Okudzhava eloquently presents here, his twenty-two-year-old character could not establish any contact with women of his age and culture, because his development was delayed by the “black mystery” of his mother’s arrest. But with her release, the mystery and guilt only deepened. He could not betray her by feeling and making love to another woman. For a while, his struggling libido is captured by Marika Rökk, who probably seems more attractive because she is a foreigner and, even better, a screen image. (Much later, another famous bard, Vladimir Vysotsky, married a star whom he saw in a French film.) He feels that his admiration of Marika, shared by “everyone in Tbilisi,” does not imply his betrayal of his mother; now that his mother is with him, he wants to share with her his fascination. But his mother has no patience for Marika. The student is left to combine his desire for the foreign girl of his dreams with love and compassion for his long-suffering mother. This awkward mix will unfold in the inconsistent cultural developments of the Thaw, of which Okudzhava became a leader.

A symmetrical moment of misrecognition, documented from the opposite perspective of the exiled mother who misidentified her son, is described in a classical gulag memoir, Evgeniia Ginzburg’s Journey into the Whirlwind. In 1948, Ginzburg, then in exile in Kolyma, managed to invite her son, the future writer Vasilii Aksenov, to join her there. Vasili, sixteen, had not seen his mother for eleven years. They met in the house of the local big shot, during a party. The hostess improvised a little game of anagnorisis by suggesting that Vasili guess which one of two women was his mother. Vasili recognized his mother. However, Ginzburg felt that Vasili looked like her elder son, Alyosha, who had died years earlier, and not like Vasili. She inadvertently burst out with the name “Alyoshenka!” at the moment that she met Vasili. At this instance, her mourning for the dead son outweighed her joy at finding the living one.

This part of Ginzburg’s life story is set in the same historical moment as Okudzhava’s “The Woman of My Dream.” Both narratives involve future leaders of the Thaw and their repressed mothers. Both involve moments of misrecognition. Okudzhava’s story is written from the perspective of a son who imagines misrecognizing (even though for just a moment) his mother, while Ginzburg’s story is written from the perspective of the mother who does (even though for just a moment) misrecognize her son. Okudzava’s story is written as fiction with an explicit autobiographical element; Ginzburg’s story is written as a memoir, that is, a truthful recounting of the past with some measure of selection or exaggeration. But the most important difference lies in the follow-up to the moment of misrecognition. Okudzhava’s character remains distanced from his mother; in this case, the fear of misrecognition prefigures alienation. In contrast, Ginzburg and her son, Aksenov,

25While the past of his family served Okudzhava as a source of inspiration for his historical novels and memoirs, the camp years of his mother remained untouchable. In his nonfictional study, “Uprazdnennyi t-cat” (1995), Okudzhava describes events that preceded the arrest of his parents in 1937, including his mother’s visit to Beria; the book ends with the arrest of his mother, who returned from the Karaganda camps to Tbilisi only in 1955.  

26Evgeniia Ginzburg, Krutoi marshrut (Moscow, 1990), 219.
develop a deep relationship. During their first night together, she tells him the story of her
arrest and life in the camps; this was, she writes in *Journey into the Whirlwind*, the first oral
performance of this future book of memoirs. While in both narratives the moment of
misrecognition illustrates the changes in the personalities involved, it does not predeter-
mine the subsequent development of their relationships.

Though the physical and psychological change of a person figures in all these stories,
the ideological background is crucial for the plot of *anagnorisis*. In Aleksei Tolstoy’s “The
Russian Character” (1944), lieutenant Egor Dremov is severely burned in his tank in a
major battle of World War II. Plastic surgery saves him but disfigures his face and changes
his voice. His face is so scary that even his general avoids looking at him. Upon his
recovery, Dremov visits his parents and his fiancée in a kolkhoz village. He pretends to be
Dremov’s friend and they do not recognize him; in despair, he leaves them. His home is
now with his military comrades, who know his ordeal and recognize his continuity. But
then he receives a letter from his mother, who has discerned that the visitor was her son. In
response, Dremov reveals his identity. Very soon, his mother and fiancée visit him in his
heroic battalion. Naming this well-crafted story “The Russian Character,” Tolstoy used the
plot of anagnorisis for creating the positive hero for Russo-Soviet nationalism. The power
of the protagonist (who is repeatedly compared with “the God of War”), the omniscient
maternal love, and the perfect beauty of the fiancée make this story a masterpiece of Soviet
classicism; only the strange name of the Russian character, Dremov (The Dreaming One),
gives a slight hint of deconstructive irony. Inside the Soviet ideological community, the
shared context of beliefs is able to redeem the trauma that makes a person unrecognizable.
On the other hand, the exclusion from this community changes the excluded beyond recogni-
tion, making their experience radically different—unrecognized, unimaginable, and not
communicable—from those who belong to it.

**MISRECOGNITION BY THE RETURNED**

In Vasiliy Grossman’s novel *Forever Flowing* (1955–63), Ivan Grigor’evich returns from
the camps after almost thirty years there. Ivan had been arrested as a student; his fiancée,
friends, and relatives thought about him for a long time, but not that long. Grossman
analyzes the process of forgetting the camp prisoners by using the Soviet concept of *propiska*,
local registration of residence, which he combines with uncanny Freudian metaphors: “Time
worked carefully, without haste. First, the person lost his registration in life and travelled
into people’s memory. Then, he lost his registration in memory and moved into the uncon-
scious. From there, he popped up sporadically, like a Weeble doll (van’ka-vstan’ka), and
frightened people with these unexpected, instantaneous appearances.”\(^{27}\) Ivan Grigor’evich
is constantly preoccupied with the issue of recognition. Once, after his release from the
gulag in 1955, he sees his late mother in a dream. She is walking along a road full of tracks
and tractors, a road that he probably had seen in the camp; he cries out to her but she cannot
hear him. “He had no doubt that if she looked back, she would recognize her son in the

grey prisoner; if only she heard, if only she looked back, but she did not hear, did not look back.”

This fear of having changed so much that he would not be recognized, as a physical individual, even by his mother, is then realized when he is not recognized, as a moral individual, by his cousin. Arriving in Moscow, Ivan Grigor’evich visits his cousin, Nikolai Andreevich, a prosperous scientist. Decades ago, the cousins loved one another; but when they meet, both feel discomfort. Nikolai Andreevich wants to ask Ivan Grigor’evich about his experience in the camps. He also wishes to tell Ivan Grigor’evich about his guilt at some of the compromises that he made in his life as a typical Soviet intelligent. But he cannot start asking and confessing. His is the guilt of the survivor; neither of the cousins is ready to discuss it, and both respond to it aggressively. To express this feeling, Grossman uses striking metaphors of “foreignness” which explore the alienation between cousins. Ivan Grigor’evich’s face seemed “foreign, unkind, and hostile” to Nikolai Andreevich. “It was the same feeling that Nikolai Andreevich felt during his trips abroad. There he felt it impossible, unthinkable to talk to foreigners about his doubts, to share with them the bitterness of his experience.” Now he felt the same toward his cousin. The ex-prisoner did not want to share his pain with his respectable cousin. “Ivan Grigor’evich imagined how he, comfortably sitting at his dacha and drinking wine, would talk about those who had gone into the darkness. Their fates were so intolerably sad that even the most tender, quiet, and kind word about them would feel like the touch of a dumb, abrasive hand to a naked, bloody heart. It was impossible to touch them.” Avoiding this theme, the only one of interest to him, in his conversation with his cousin, he chooses an exoticizing metaphor for his camp experience: to talk about the camp would be like telling fairytales of one thousand and one polar nights.

Ivan Grigor’evich and Nikolai Andreevich recognize one another as physical persons; they do not deny that they are the same relatives who once loved one another. However, they deny each other their mutual acknowledgment as moral individuals. Their internal monologues, which they refuse to share, are full of surprise and fear. Both of them experience the changes that have occurred during the thirty years that they have not seen each other not just as an aging but as a radical alteration of identity, as if the person who is known from memory is replaced by another and unfamiliar one. “Who is the real Kolia?” Ivan Grigor’evich asks himself: is it the one whom he remembers or the one whom he sees now? For his part, Nikolai Andreevich responds to his guest with a feeling which is “entirely opposite” to the brotherly sentiment that he expected of himself. As a result, both cousins declare truths which are “entirely opposed” (Grossman uses this emphatic formula several times) to what they wanted to say. Since they see one another as the opposite of what they remember, what they say to one another is the opposite of what they were going to say. Hence, the respectable Nikolai Andreevich perceives the released Ivan Grigor’evich as “crazy,” while the wretched Ivan Grigor’evich finds himself even more lonely after visiting his cousin.

From the formerly beloved cousin, the calamity of misrecognition is transferred to the formerly beloved city. Traveling to Leningrad where he had lived before his arrest, Ivan

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28Ibid., 328.
29Ibid., 284.
30Ibid., 285.
Grigor'evich simultaneously “recognized the city and did not recognize it” (this part of the story contains explicit allusions to Evgenii’s misrecognition of St. Petersburg in The Bronze Horseman). Ivan Grigor’evich does not recognize people on the streets but sees, in his imagination, his dead camp-mates greeting him from behind corners. Everywhere he smells “the spirit of the barrack”; from now on, he will always fight against the obsessive desire to return to the camps or their ruins and accept them as his destiny.31 As the story develops, Ivan Grigor’evich finds a job, a room, and a woman who has also come from the camps. Though she dies soon afterwards, he keeps talking to her about love, camps, and history. The story ends with Ivan Grigor’evich’s trip to the house of his parents in the Caucasus. At the site where the house once stood he is rewarded by a vision of his late mother’s affection. Everything has changed except Ivan Grigor’evich; he is the same as he was when his mother was alive. He is recognizable, and that is his victory. “The same, unchangeable” (vse tot zhe, neizmennyi) are the final words of the story.

VARIEITIES OF MISRECOGNITION

Identity has many levels, and so does identification. For textual situations of misrecognition, an important dimension is the assumed familiarity between the subject and the object, which correlates with the intensity of experience that they shared in the past. Andrei Bitov’s Pushkin House (finished in 1971, published in 1978) illustrates the complexity of this dimension. The central character, Leva Odovtsev, is longing to meet his famous grandfather, Modest, who was arrested before Leva’s birth. As a young literary scholar, Leva admires his grandfather, the founder of an important school of literary studies. He wishes to be his heir. Looking at old photographs with pride, “Leva saw in his own face the face of his grandfather.”32 Having never seen his grandfather, Leva nevertheless feels that he knows him well.

In 1956, Modest Odovtsev returns to Leningrad after twenty seven years in the gulag and invites his grandson to visit him. When Leva arrives at his grandfather’s place, a person with a tanned face and dumb look greets him. Drinking beer with a friend, the redneck introduces him to Leva as his former jailor: “He is a good man; he did not kill me twice.” This redneck is Leva’s grandfather who, as he tells Leva, “has become a different man.” He is not a scholar anymore; he does not want to revert to what he was before his arrest. This “rehabilitation” is a second sentence, he says to his grandson: when he was arrested, he was forced to change his life so that a famous scholar became a manual worker; now, he is forced to change it again. Even if “they” want him to be a scholar again, he does not wish it.33 Modest Odovtsev disappears and his death turns into the subject of legends. Transformed by this meeting, Leva responds with his scholarly essays, which Bitov included in his novel as “developing one of the branches of the tree that was planted by the grandfather.” Later, the grandson takes part in the creation of the cult of the late scholar in the Leningrad Institute of Russian Literature.

31Ibid., 294.
32A. Bitov, Pushkinskii dom (Ann Arbor, 1978), 49.
33Ibid., 62–69.
Bitov’s experiment in pure fiction with no autobiographical underpinnings is astonishing. Fiction is a land of extremes; Bitov exploits this license with an intensity that an actual memoir cannot afford. Subverting the canon of Soviet scholarship, Bitov imagines a Bakhtin who is so changed by his exile that even his camp guard looks “more intellectual”; or maybe Bitov imagines a Gukovskii who survived the gulag and outlived it to prefer it to the Soviet “freedom.” In a more plausible way, Bitov depicts descendants who betray their forebear, a Soviet victim, by creating his Soviet-style cult. The misrecognition of the grandfather by his admiring grandson emphasizes the scale and, in this case, the irreversibility of the transformation that the gulag imprinted on its prisoners. Based on this, Bitov analyses the transgenerational transmission of the traumatic experience from the heroic and broken grandfather to the father, a hapless denouncer, to the talented, heavy-drinking, and always immature grandson.

Another variety of misrecognition spreads from the physical to the moral to the spiritual. Its scandal may be interpreted as a lack of understanding and empathy rather than the misidentification of a physical person. In 1952 another future leader of the cultural Thaw, Andrei Siniavskii, met his father, Donat, at the gates of a provincial prison. Andrei learned that his father had not been beaten or tortured, but had become the subject of a “scientific experiment.” In a Moscow prison, he was connected to a frightening electric apparatus; since then, “they” were controlling his thoughts and words by a kind of radio communication. “They” were listening to this conversation as well; the father was able to detect when the apparatus in Moscow was turned on and off. He told nobody about it but his son. Since his thoughts and words were remotely recorded by “them,” the father could not tell his son much: Donat was afraid that in response, Andrei would say something that would result in his arrest. The father stopped the conversation abruptly; the son was in despair. Writing about this situation decades later in the autobiographical Good Night, Siniavskii was self-consciously ambiguous about his father’s condition: maybe it was a hallucination which resulted from a psychological trauma; maybe it was an actual surveillance by some secret technological advance, which was reached by “them.” What is clear from Siniavskii’s account is that the father’s revelation caused a painful alienation between father and son. The son was tortured by this newly open gap between his adored father and himself. In Siniavskii’s narrative, the father’s revelation ends with the son’s confusion and guilt:

The joy of seeing my father was mixed with an inexhaustible longing; it was as if by finding him I lost something forever. ... We intensely enjoyed the sight and smell of one another. But still, we were separated, as never before. ... I had to rush back to Moscow, having left my father with his haunting voices alone, with no help, in this uncanny desolation. He could not help me in my solitude, either. ... But my sense of guilt before him is no less for all that.36

34In his auto-commentary, Bitov states that he was inspired by the first rumors about Bakhtin’s life and work. See A. Bitov, “Pushkinskii dom: Kommentarii,” in his Blizkoe retro (Ekaterinburg, 2004), 472. Grigori Gukovskii (1902–50), a literary scholar who worked at Pushkinskii Dom, was arrested in 1949 and died in prison.

35In 1950, Donat Siniavskii was convicted to five years of exile for having worked with the American Relief Administration in 1922 (Abram Tertz, Spokoinoi nochi [Paris, 1984], chap. 3).

36Ibid., 260.
Siniavskii presents this conversation with his father as a life-shaping insight, an initiation into the particular kind of literature that he would practice. Calling it “grotesque” or “fantastic,” Siniavskii felt that he received from his broken father a mysterious ability to communicate with improbable worlds. Having lost contact with his father, the future Abram Tertz developed his strange literary style through a secondary identification with the father. “Spirits were at work. I could not disentangle myself from them, being elevated by a sense of something like poetic horror ... a horror on the edge of the sublime. ... My father passed his condition to me.” The source of suffering for the father became the source of inspiration for the son. The shock of seeing a loved one transformed by an unimaginable experience to the point of nonrecognition shaped the literary career of Siniavskii.

MISRECOGNITION AND MELANCHOLIA

Memoirs and fiction document the variegated phenomena of misrecognition at the exit from the gulag: the actual moment of misrecognition (Efim Etkind, Ginzburg, Bitov), or the anticipation (Okudzhava), fantasy (Grossman), or nightmare (Mandelstam, Siniavskii) of misrecognition. The momentary failure to recognize a returning father or arriving son; the fantasy of misrecognizing a mother or being unrecognized by her; the nightmare of not being recognized by a husband—all this opened a gap in the most intimate texture of the self. The gap had to be filled by a narrative construction that could take a lifetime and, possibly, be transmitted to the second and third generation after the trauma. Whether misrecognition actually happened or was imagined, its meaning in a story is still the same: a parable of terror, an all-embracing allegory for the subjective experience of “repressions.” Anna Akhmatova summarized this experience in her verses of 1945, “Northern Elegies” (“Est’ tri epokhi u vospominanii”). There are three ages to mourning; as the last and bitterest, Akhmatova depicts the mutual misrecognition between the dead and the living:

... we have forgotten Even the path to that solitary house. ... Everything has changed.
... And nobody knows us — we are strangers. ... We realize that ... those who died we would not recognize.38

Interpreting ways of life and death within a relatively legitimate society, Sigmund Freud distinguished between “healthy” mourning and “pathological” melancholia, basing this distinction on the subject’s ability to acknowledge the reality of the loss. In Freud’s logic, if the loss is not recognized, it is repressed; when repressed, it turns into new and strange forms; from then on, it threatens to return as the uncanny. The failure to recognize

37 There is a lack of studies of the transgenerational transmission of the Soviet traumas. On the descendants of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators see Eric L. Santner, Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany (Ithaca, 1990), chap. 2; Marianne Hirsch, Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory (Cambridge, MA, 1997); and Vamik D. Volkan et al., The Third Reich in the Unconscious: Transgenerational Transmission and Its Consequences (New York, 2002).

death as death produces the uncanny; when the dead are not properly buried and mourned, they turn into the undead.

But in the historical situation in which the beloved person disappears for reasons which nobody understands; in which she may be alive and might possibly, miraculously return; in which no information about the loss is available or trustworthy—Freud’s clinical distinction should be modified.

In this situation, uncertainty was external and realistic rather than internal and pathological. In an indefinitely large part of the Soviet experience, death could not be recognized as death, and survival could not be relied upon as life. The state, the source of repressions, was also the only source of information. Millions were condemned to long terms “with no right of correspondence”; no information was received from them for years or decades. As we know now, some of the victims were executed immediately after their false sentence and some of them died later in the camps. Relatives were usually not informed in either case. Some of the victims returned from the camps. Sometimes they returned before their sentences expired, often later. The sentence had little or no predictive value. De jure as well as de facto, the Soviet condition did not provide reality checks for either hope or mourning. Since there was no certainty of loss, there was no opportunity for healthy mourning.

In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev used the concept of “unjustified repressions” as the euphemism for mass murders, arrests, and deportations. Millions of the surviving victims of these “repressions” were coming back to their homes after years or decades of separation from their families. In Sigmund Freud’s famous definition of 1919, “something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it,” was the uncanny.

The two readings of the term “repression(s),” Freud’s and Khrushchev’s, are intimately correlated. When the repressed returned, these long-mourned, secretly familiar, inadvertently forgotten people were perceived as the uncanny. They returned with an experience of violence, humiliation, and suffering which was out-of-scale for their family, friends, and neighbors. Cultural contact between these two groups triggered the typical phenomena of the Thaw.

While perpetrators imagined the dead returning to take a terrible revenge, children and poets imagined the fate of the repressed with horrifying details which mixed

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oral histories, personal fears, and literary paradigms. Yearning for their imprisoned parents, the Soviet orphans imagined them as exotic heroes or romantic martyrs. It was not easy to recognize them in the aged and exhausted victims of senseless terror who actually returned from the camps.

Like the young Okudzhava, the contemporaries of the Thaw were split between their inherited sorrows and the new interest in foreign products that, like “The Woman of My Dreams,” had little connection to their lives and gave satisfaction precisely for this reason. Though, over time, this commercial trend has become dominant, the burden of guilt and memory has not ebbed away. Survivors and their relatives continued to write, read, and watch stories that focused on survival, return, and misrecognition. Projecting their own traumas onto the repressed, their friends and relatives construed the prisoners’ bodies and experiences as strange, foreign, and uncanny. Nadezhda Mandelstam documents this quasi-melancholic process of incomplete mourning in the situation where the exact nature of the loss is uncertain. “I did not live by memory; I continued to live with Mandelstam,” she wrote. But when she finally received the reliable evidence of her husband’s death, she felt relief. Her nightmare, in which she asked Osip, “What is being done to you ‘there’?” haunted her until she received an official paper which informed her about Osip’s death, though even this paper did not give the date of it. This paper dispelled the dream, not hope; Nadezhda finished her first book of memoirs in doubt (maybe he is still alive?) and the second with a letter addressed to him in case she should die first.

Like Freud’s melancholia, Nadezhda Mandelstam’s mourning did not recognize the loss. In contrast to Freud’s melancholia, this psychological process did not deny the reality of the loss by wishful fantasies on the edge of delusion, but responded to the actual uncertainty of the information about the loss, subjecting available information to reality checks. In her efforts to learn the fate of her husband, Mandelstam found and interviewed several ex-prisoners who said that they met him in the camps, but their stories were not credible. One of them was the poet Iurii Kazarnovskii (1904–56?), a soon-to-be dead who survived and bore witness. Nadezhda Mandelstam’s words about Kazarnovskii’s stories of Osip’s death are exemplary critical: “his memory turned into a huge soured pancake, where the facts and realities of living in the camp were baked along with fantasies, legends, and mere fiction.” She wanted facts, actually one single fact: “What is being done to you ‘there’?”; but Kazarnovskii only told her about his own miraculous survivals. Mandelstam believed that this pancake-like cognition, which was not structured by time and space and did not

42Mandel’shtam, Vtoraya kniga, 673.
44In 1944, Kazarnovsky came to Tashkent to live with Nadezhda for a while and tell her his untrustworthy stories about Osip, whom he allegedly saw in the camp near Vladivostok. On Kazarnovsky as a flamboyant poet in the Solovetski camp in 1930 see D. Liikachev, Vospominaniia (St. Petersburg, 2005), 254. On Kazarnovsky as a beggar and drug addict in the 1950s see Gleb Vasil’ev, “Vstrechi s Iuriem Kazarnovskim,” Gran’i 182 (1996).
45Mandel’shtam, Vospominaniia, 397.
distinguish between fact and fiction, was characteristic for many (“almost all”) survivors whom she happened to know. She called this post-camp condition “memory disease.”

Reading Mandelstam’s brilliant analysis of this situation, one cannot escape the feeling of a profound lack of communication between her, who survived the Soviet “freedom,” and Kazarnovskii, who survived the camps. While Mandelstam questioned the reality of her loss, Kazarnovskii questioned the reality of his survival. Acting out their melancholic, fictional realities, they could not find a common ground. If Osip had returned, he would probably have established better contact with Kazarnovskii; maybe these three would have repeated the tragic situation that Okudzhava described in “The Woman of my Dreams.”

SCANDAL OF MISRECOGNITION

Symbolizing the horror of a situation that was difficult for those who returned from the camps and for those who remained “free,” various memoirists and writers converged on a rare and striking event. Unlike the recognition-acknowledgment of political and cultural groups, which is normally the subject of struggle, recognition-identification inside the family is usually taken for granted. Family life relies on the recognition of personal identities which are construed as continuing throughout a lifetime. Precisely because of this, misrecognition among people who are connected by family relations and common experience has an enormous impact on those involved. When misrecognition occurs between those who love each other, it is charged with guilt and fear. These uncanny moments seem to testify to the loss of compassion, trust, and solidarity. Short moments of misrecognition are attributed to larger factors, such as historical shifts, unlawful incarcerations, or the flow of hostile, irreversible time. Even after recognition has been reestablished, misrecognition leaves gaps in the psychic machinery of interpersonal relations. These holes in the ego need to be filled by communication, imagination, and writing. In a private narrative of a survivor, misrecognition of a significant other works as a striking device, a trope of utmost intensity. It demonstrates the scale of the transformation that narrators and/or their significant others underwent in the hands of the state. It mourns the unforeseen alienation between those who were “free” and those who were “repressed.” It reveals the guilt of the survivor-narrator.

At another level of interpretation, the scene of misrecognition stands as a parable for the story of Soviet socialism, its idealistic aspiration and tragic failure. According to its ideological purposes and legal foundations, the Soviet regime sacrificed the recognition of individual and group differences for the sake of redistribution of material goods, such as food, residence, basic services, and, ideally, all forms of capital. Despite its massive violations in all practical spheres, the ideal of redistribution was proclaimed the normative principle of socialism and was not questioned throughout the Soviet period. In order to eliminate what the system called “classes,” it split itself into two vastly different regimes,

46Ibid.
47The Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1918 used the formula of “the entire elimination of class divisions in the society” (article 3). Soviet Constitution of 1936 softened the formula to “equal rights of all the citizens of the USSR” (article 123; a similar formula in article 34 of Soviet Constitution of 1977).
making their difference larger than people could have imagined before, after, or outside of this process. In lieu of all human differences, one bipolar dimension of disparity, indeed a binary opposition, was constructed: the formidable contrast between “free citizens” and the prisoners of the gulag. All human differences were compressed into this one. All the power of the state was spent enlarging this difference and preventing the meeting of the resulting two halves. The project was largely successful. When the inhabitants of these two worlds met, they could not communicate, talk about their different experiences, or cohabitate in common spaces. They did not recognize one another.

Though no single narrative can embrace the Soviet terror, the story of intrafamilial misrecognition can serve as its allegory. In an uncanny way, scenes of misrecognition of a father by his son, of a son by his mother, or of a brother by brother, illuminated the successful intervention of the communist state into the most private aspects of family and kinship. The closest relatives did not recognize each other because the state effectively transformed one or both of them. With the collapse of the gulag and, later, the USSR, the story of the misrecognition of the returned became a trope for the tragedy of “repressions” and the futility of the “rehabilitation.”