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## Solženicyn and Wisdom

One of the main features of Solženicyn's prose is certainly the presence of proverbs, to such an extent that he has been designated *l'homme des proverbes* (Durand 2012). Until now, critics have suggested four main functions for proverbs in his works: as an element of the compositional structure of his novels and stories (Šešunova 2004: 105-106), as a means of defense from the rhetoric of communist ideology (Šešunova 2004: 107, Nivat 1993: 547), as a means to distinguish some characters (Šešunova 2004: 108, Durand 2012: 36; Kohan 1998: 94-95; Safronov 2012: 125), or as a part of his program for recovering the authentic Russian language (Šešunova 2004: 103). Consequently, proverbs have been considered as an expression of Russian folklore (Šešunova 2004, Russell 1989: 75), of the wisdom of peasant speech (McKenna 2008: 70), or of the popular roots of some literary models (the model of *the righteous*, for example; see Barykova 2009). Although their relationship with popular culture is certain, Solzhenitsyn's proverbs can be exclusively related to Russian folklore only when pulled out their context. It seems necessary, therefore, first to reconstruct the context in which he uses proverbs.

- a) The first element of the context is the didactic dimension of reality, of life, which according with S.S. Averincev we could define as *the world as a school*. Let us consider *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovič*<sup>1</sup>. The author presents Ivan as a prisoner well-trained by Gulag life. His experience deals with the entire life of the lager and his observations and judgements give a sure guide to the reader completely unaware of that life. In particular, his experience involves with some concrete matters, which in the camp can be a matter of life or death: footwear<sup>2</sup>, mess<sup>3</sup>, queues<sup>4</sup>, proficiency in handling the tray<sup>5</sup>. Ivan "knows how to live"<sup>6</sup>, "he learnt how to live"<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> As regards *Ivan Denisovič*, I refer to Ralph Parker's translation (*Den.*), with few adaptations.

<sup>2</sup> "Разных порядков с обувью наглядился Шухов за восемь лет сидки" (SSS, I: 20).

<sup>3</sup> "Паек этих тысячу не одну переполучал Шухов в тюрьмах и в лагерях" (SSS, I: 27).

<sup>4</sup> SSS, I: 95.

<sup>5</sup> "Но Шухов к этому за столько лет привычен, глаз у него острый и видит: Щ-208 несет на подносе пять мисок всего, значит – последний поднос в бригаде, иначе бы – чего ж не полный?" (SSS, I: 95).

<sup>6</sup> "Шухов понимает жизнь".

<sup>7</sup> "А по Шухову правильно, что капитану отдали. Придет пора, и капитан жить научится, а пока не умеет" (SSS, I: 59).

- b) This implies – and this is the second element of context – that his behaviour in the Gulag does not follow a theoretical morality, but rather a morality that takes into consideration the lager’s extraordinary situation: the bowl of gruel he has stolen is his lawful booty<sup>8</sup>, cheating is permitted when it damages the administration and not the other prisoners. In the former case it is a badge of honour and the verbs used are *kosit’*, *kosanut’* – “to appropriate something in spite of established rules”, explains Solženicyn himself<sup>9</sup>. Ivan’s morality considers how often the prisoners are defrauded by Soviet system and allows them to establish a sort of compensation: they can, ethically speaking, pretend to work<sup>10</sup>, and distinguish between work for themselves (*dlja sebja*) and for the system (*dlja proizvodstva*)<sup>11</sup>.
- c) Experience and morality combine to produce a vivid contrast between the character of the ideal *zek* and the *fool*, the prisoner who is not able to bend in order not to break<sup>12</sup>, the one who will be not able to avoid the hardest punishments. It is not by chance that, at the end of the day, the poorest and the greatest *fools* will be sent to the terrible “Socialist village”<sup>13</sup>. The well-trained *zek*, praised by Solženicyn precisely with proverbs and sayings, is slow-moving (“малоподвижный”, SSS, I: 59), can work slowly (“Кто быстро бегает, тому сроку в лагере не дожить – упарится, свалится”, SSS, I: 84), is prudent (“осмотрительный”, SSS, I: 59) and thrifty (“Запасливый лучше богатого”, SSS, I: 61), is meek (“Смирный – в бригаде клад”, SSS, I: 69), is skilled in manual works (“Кто два дела руками знает, тот еще и десять подхватит”, SSS, I: 70), minds his own stomach (“Брюхо – злодей, старого добра не помнит, завтра опять спросит”, SSS, I: 98), eats thoughtfully (“рассудительно”, SSS, I: 58), knows the difference between summer and winter sun (В январе солнышко коровке бок согрело! – объявил Шухов, SSS, I: 48).
- d) However, the main element of context which has to be considered together with proverbs is that in this story the world with its order reveals the mysterious presence of God, and history is mysteriously directed by God (see also Šešunova 2004: 106 as regards riddles). In *Ivan Denisovič* this presence is related to a kind of superstitious faith, characteristic of the main protagonist and to other characters. It is clear that in an environment where God breaks up the old moon to make stars (“Старый месяц Бог на звезды крошит”, SSS, I: 77) and faith comes from thunders, the presence of God is given in a very elementary way. This is how the foreman Tjurin comments on

<sup>8</sup> “И сейчас же он наклонился над своей законной добычей” (SSS, I: 58).

<sup>9</sup> See SSS, I: 115.

<sup>10</sup> “Работа – она как палка, конца в ней два: для людей делаешь – качество дай, для начальника делаешь – дай показуху” (SSS, I: 21).

<sup>11</sup> See SSS, I: 61.

<sup>12</sup> “Это верно, кряхти да гнишь. А упреешься – переломишься” (SSS, I: 42).

<sup>13</sup> “На Соцгородок победней да поглупей кого погонят” (SSS, I: 29).

the execution of the battalion commander and the political commissar who had discharged him from the army as a son of a kulak: “So Thou art there in heaven after all, O Creator. Thy patience is long, but thy blows are heavy”<sup>14</sup>.

*Matryona’s Home* is somewhat different. A first-person narration, the story presents old Matryona through the eyes of Ignatič, Solženicyн’s alter-ego. The author builds the entire story on a proverb in the same way as Ostrovskij and Lev Tolstoj have done before him (Šešunova 2004: 105): in a 1963 version the proverb “No village can stand without a righteous one” appears only at the end of the story. In the original version, as we know, the proverb should have been the title itself. Only at the very end, with a sudden flash of inspiration, Ignatič should have given a new explanation of Matryona’s life and a new understanding of the title: a dénouement, a *razvjazka*, based on the proverb, the key to interpreting the entire narrative. This circular construction is common to other Solženicyн short stories. *Vsë ravno* (*Doesn’t matter*) and *Na izlomach* (*At the fractures*), for example, recall their titles’ words in their conclusions: consequently, narration is presented as a realization of the title, and the final reprise as an interpretive key to the story. In *Matryona’s Home*, Solženicyн initially chose this circular construction with the proverb as the final key.

We had all lived side by side with her and never understood that she was that righteous one without whom, as the proverb says, no village can stand.

Nor any city.

Nor our whole land<sup>15</sup>.

The author presents here a proverb which is clearly of biblical derivation. According to Claude Durand, a French writer and editor, this conclusion refers to The Book of Proverbs, chapter 11, verse 11: “Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed”. Conversely, the usual interpretation (see, for example *Reader*: 24; Ericson, Klimoff 2008: 97; Nemzer 2014: 96) seems to me indisputable: the proverb recalls the hard negotiation between Abraham and God himself in the Book of Genesis, chapter 18, when the latter wants to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and the former tries to save the two sinful cities. We all remember the sequence of the negotiation: “Abraham said to the Lord: ‘Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?’ [...] The Lord said: ‘If I find fifty

<sup>14</sup> “Перекрестился я и говорю: “Все ж ты есть, Создатель, на небе. Долго терпишь да больно бьешь” (SSS, I: 63).

<sup>15</sup> “Все мы жили рядом с ней и не поняли, что есть она тот самый праведник, без которого, по пословице, не стоит село.

Ни город.

Ни вся земля наша” (SSS, I: 148). As regards *Matryona’s Home* I refer to H.T. Willets’ translation (see *Reader*: 24-56).

righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake’”. From 50 righteous Abraham moves to 45, then to 40, 30, 20 and finally to 10. In *Matryona* the righteous who lets the village stand is only one, in fact it is a small Russian village and not a great town like Sodom or Gomorrah.

The role of the proverb taken together with the presence of God in history is much clearer, now. The former is strictly connected with the latter, conveys the way the wise understand history and expresses how wise men interpret historical events in the light of God’s sovereignty over history.

At the end of the short story, Ignatič gives a new interpretation of Matryona’s life based on God’s point of view. Ten righteous people are sufficient to spare a sinful city. One righteous one is enough to save a Russian village. And this interpretation is given as a proverb. The idea that the proverbs convey an exclusively human wisdom, a popular one, independent of divine plans seems not to fit Solženicyn’s use of proverbs in *Matryona’s Home*. It suggests exactly the opposite.

This idea of a mysterious divine plan, of a divine guidance of history and fate is common also to Solženicyn’s historical novels, such as *August 1914*. Let us mention two characters in the book. In chapter 48, after the destruction of the Russian Second Army at Tannenberg, general Samsonov rereads his own fate in the light of the mysterious divine plan. “What had happened was part of God’s plan and we were not meant to understand it”<sup>16</sup>. And after a while, “Samsonov thought: the hand of God was in it. Who had darkened his mind and made him leave his army? Yes, the hand of God was in it!”<sup>17</sup>.

Likewise, in Volume II of the novel the author presents minister Stolypin as being always conscious of God above him, of His guidance and inspiration<sup>18</sup>. Stolypin reads Russian history as a design arranged by God himself and, therefore, beyond human understanding<sup>19</sup>, interpreting in this light his own personal and family destiny<sup>20</sup> and Nicholas II’s accession to the throne<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> “Был на то – замысел Божий, а понять его не нам и не сейчас” (SSS, VII: 412). As regards *August 1914*, I refer to Willetts’ translation (Penguin 1990) with few adaptations.

<sup>17</sup> “А Самсонов подумал: то Божий перст. Кто затемнил его, чтоб он покинул свою армию? То перст!” (SSS, VII: 415).

<sup>18</sup> “Столыпин и сам над собой постоянно знал – реющего, веющего, направляющего Бога” (SSS, VII: 268).

<sup>19</sup> “Как это устроено Тобюю, Господи, с непонятным планом для нас” (SSS, VII: 268).

<sup>20</sup> “А Оля? ... А шестеро? – маленьких и взрослых? ... Наказанье это Божье или милость Его” (SSS, VII: 268).

<sup>21</sup> “Слабый, и сам несчастный своею слабостью, уклончивый, отвращённый-так и не пришёл. И не без Божьей же воли нам послан в такие годы – такой Государь... Не нам Твой замысел весить” (SSS, VI: 273).

However, from this point of view, Solženicyn's most interesting text is certainly *The Oak and the Calf*, whose title – notice – returns the reader to a proverb. In fact, this is not a mere quotation, since the author does not want to recall an everlasting truth summarized in a proverb. On the contrary, the quotation forces the reader to notice that occasionally the calf-writer can win against the oak-regime. Solženicyn's approach to the proverb is not passive. On the contrary, his approach is typical of the wise man who gives his contribution to the formulation of truth, who listens to tradition and compares it with his own destiny. This is probably why in his thorough research on proverbs in this text, McKenna was so often unable to find the exact Russian source<sup>22</sup>.

Furthermore, in *The Oak and the Calf* Solženicyn presents his own point of view and deals with his own life. Every reader has noticed the passage where the author reveals that the proverbs were of great support to him:

During those months, I derived much comfort from reading daily, as I might read my prayer-book, Russian proverbial sayings. First, I learned that:

“Grief won't kill you, but it will knock you off your feet”.

“Some troubles you can't sleep off”.

“When fate is ready, it will tie you hand and foot”.

“If you miss your chance, you miss your footing on a mountain – it's too late to look back”<sup>23</sup>.

At this point, Solženicyn stops to list the proverbs and comments (the brackets are in the original): “(This was said about the mistakes I had made when I was raised to the heights, only to dawdle and hesitate and let slip my opportunities...)”<sup>24</sup>. Hereafter the author starts again listing the proverbs. Let us notice, however, that this is not a mere list of proverbs. On the contrary the proverbs are again an interpretive key to the author's life. It is a matter not of Russian folklore but of an idea of history where concrete knowledge summarized in proverbs is a gateway for understanding one's own circumstances, both past and still to be.

<sup>22</sup> Though interesting, McKenna's research is intended to determine Solženicyn's material sources (Dal's collection, Solženicyn's notebook compiled together with his first wife etc.) and to document his tendency to rely on proverbs.

<sup>23</sup> “Очень утешало меня в эти месяцы ежедневное чтение русских пословиц, как молитвенника. Сперва:

– Печаль не уморит, а с ног собьёт.

– Этой беды не заспишь.

– Судьба придёт – по рукам свяжет.

– Пора – что гора: скатисься, так огянешься” (*Bod.*: 128). As regards *The Oak and the calf*, I refer to Willetts' translation (*Oak*) with few adaptations.

<sup>24</sup> “(Это – об ошибках моих, когда я был взнесен – и зевал, смиренничал, терял возможности...)” (*Bod.*: 128).

Solženicyn continues:

“Whatever your troubles, don’t put your head in a noose”.

“Man is full of grief, but God is ever merciful”.

“All else will pass, only the truth will remain!”<sup>25</sup>

From here on, proverbs and author’s comments intermingle.

This last was particularly comforting, except that it was not clear to me how I could help the truth to prevail. After all:

“Misery won’t get you over the water”.

Then there was one that might have been made for me:

“One man dies of fear, another is brought to life by it”.

There is also the enigmatic saying:

“If trouble comes, make use of that too”<sup>26</sup>.

The proposition which closes this long reference to Russian proverbs is very revealing. “What it came to was that I must be ‘frightened alive’. I must turn my troubles into blessings. Perhaps even into a triumph? But how? How? Heaven’s cipher remained unsolved”<sup>27</sup>. Again, proverbs and heaven – proverbs that reveal an unquestionable presence of a superior, divine sense of history, and the wise man looking for this sense, trying to decipher this mysterious plan. It is not by chance that somewhat later Solženicyn refers again to this clue: “So that was what the old saying meant: ‘If trouble comes, make use of it’. *Misfortune can open the door to freedom*, if we have the wit to read it aright”<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> “– От беды не в петлю головой.

– Мы с печалью, а Бог с милостью.

– Всё минется, одна правда останется!” (*Bod.*: 128).

<sup>26</sup> “Последняя утешала особенно, только неясно было: а как же мне этой правде помочь? Ведь

– Кручиной моря не передешь.

И такая с прямым намёком:

– Один со страху помер, а другой ожил.

И ещё загадочная:

– Пришла беда – не брезгуй и ею” (*Bod.*: 128).

<sup>27</sup> “Получалось, что надо мне “от страха ожить”. Подучалось, что беду свою надо использовать на благо. И даже, может быть, на торжество? Но – как? Но – как? Шифр неба оставался неразгадан” (*Bod.*: 129).

<sup>28</sup> “Так вот оно, вот оно в каком смысле говорится: ‘пришла беда – не брезгуй и ею!’ *Беда может отпирать нам свободу!* – если эту беду разгадать сумеет” (*Bod.*: 148).

If awareness of God's guidance of history is present in *Ivan Denisovič* and *Matryona*, in *The Oak and the Calf* it plays a key role, since Solženicyn grounds on it his understanding of his own task in the world. Thus, after a mysterious recovery from cancer, he writes: "I did not belong to myself alone, [...] my literary destiny was not just my own, but that of the millions who had not lived to scrawl or gasp or croak the truth about their lot as jailbirds"<sup>29</sup>.

The author does not seem to leave room for doubt:

I had learned in my years of imprisonment to sense that guiding hand, to glimpse that bright meaning beyond and above myself and my wishes. I had not always been quick to understand the sudden upsets in my life, and often, out of bodily and spiritual weakness, had seen in them the very opposite of their true meaning and their far-off purpose. Later the true significance of what had happened would inevitably become clear to me, and I would be numb with surprise<sup>30</sup>.

Hereafter, the author refers to Vjačeslav Vsevolodovič Ivanov who came to the same conclusion, even if his life was very different: "Many lives have a mystical sense, but not everyone reads it aright. More often than not it is given to us in cryptic form"<sup>31</sup>. Some years after that, Solženicyn adds:

I had enough experience of such sharp bends in the road to know from the prickling of my scalp that God's hand was in it! It is Thy will!<sup>32</sup>

This active presence of God, this "Hand of the Highest" guiding and conducting the author does not determine fatalistically human events. The same fact that "I do not plan and manage everything for myself"<sup>33</sup>, as Solženicyn himself writes, neither paralyzes nor distresses him. On the one hand, it drives Solženicyn to work hard ("Mourn if you must,

<sup>29</sup> "Что я – не я, и моя литературная судьба – не моя, а всех тех миллионов, кто не доцарапал, не дошептал, не дохрипел своей тюремной судьбы" (*Bod.*: 51).

<sup>30</sup> "Я в своей жизни эту направляющую руку, этот очень светлый, не от меня зависящий, смысл привык с тюремных лет ощущать. Броски моей жизни я не всегда управлялся понять вовремя, часто по слабости тела и духа понимал их обратно их истинному и далеко рассчитанному значению. Но позже непременно разъяснялся мне истинный разум происшедшего – и я только немел от удивления" (*Bod.*: 126).

<sup>31</sup> "Есть мистический смысл во многих жизнях, но не всеми верно понимается. Он даётся нам чаще в зашифрованном виде" (*Bod.*: 126).

<sup>32</sup> "Но, достаточно уже ученый на таких изломах, я в шевеленьи волос теменных провижу: Божий перст! Это ты!" (*Bod.*: 319).

<sup>33</sup> "Вероятно, опять есть ошибки в моём предвидении и в моих расчётах. Ещё многое мне и вблизи не видно, ещё во многом поправит меня Высшая Рука. Но это не затемняет мне груди. То и веселит меня, то и утверждает, что не я всё задумываю и провожу, что я – только меч, хорошо отточенный на нечистую силу, заговорённый рубить её и разгонять" (*Bod.*: 344).

but don't stop fighting"<sup>34</sup>), on the other to trust in God ("Lord, [...] let me not fall from Thy hand"<sup>35</sup>) and to realize "how wise and powerful is thy guiding hand, O Lord"<sup>36</sup>.

Let us notice that this presence of God's guidance in human history is often summarized in proverbs. The most evident is the classical proverb *Quos vult perdere Jupiter, dementat prius*, to which Solženicyn refers more than once. If its Greek-Roman origin is beyond doubt, it is certain that it was fully Christianized already in ancient Russia, and that the *God [who] deprives of reason those whom wishes to destroy* since time immemorial was the Christian God: from the Ipatian Chronicle (1178) to Vladimir Dal' – the very source of Solženicyn's proverbs – passing through Mel'nikov-Pečerskij, Gogol', Dostoevskij and Tolstoj<sup>37</sup>. Consequently, when Solženicyn quotes this proverb, he clearly wants to express the Christian concept of the divine hand that drives human history, and particularly the history of a *calf* fighting with an *oak*.

Has God really deprived them of their minds up to this point?

God had utterly deprived them of that elasticity which is the distinctive mark of living creatures.

God has deprived them of the power of reason in order to destroy them – deprived them long ago (but still they will not perish)<sup>38</sup>.

The author of *The Oak and the Calf* refers to this idea of God's guidance of human history recalling the foreman's words from *Ivan Denisovič*: "So Thou art there in heaven after all, O Creator. Thy patience is long, but thy blows are heavy!"<sup>39</sup>, thus sharing his perspective.

God's presence in human history is not the only teaching of the Gulag school. "In the camp – explains the author – I took to heart the Russian proverb 'Don't let good luck fool you or bad luck frighten you'. I have learned to live by this rule, and I hope never to depart from it..."<sup>40</sup>. Here again we find *the world as a school*, the Gulag as a huge life lesson,

<sup>34</sup> "Минувшую неделю, – горе горюй, а руками воюй, – я занят был спасением главных рукописей" (*Bod.*: 125).

<sup>35</sup> "О, дай мне, Господи, не переломиться при ударах! Не выпасть из руки Твоей!" (*Bod.*: 344).

<sup>36</sup> "Как Ты мудро и сильно ведёшь меня, Господи!" (*Bod.*: 205).

<sup>37</sup> See <<http://dslov.ru/pos/p293.htm>> (latest access: 02.01.2019).

<sup>38</sup> "Неужели настолько лишил их Бог разума?" (*Bod.*: 141).

"Лишили их Бог всякой гибкости – признака живого творения" (*Bod.*: 196).

"Лишили их Бог разума на их погибель, давно лишил (а всё не гибнут...). В международной политике они справляются неплохо [...] во внутренней почти всегда *наши* выбирают худшее для себя решение из всех возможных" (*Bod.*: 207).

<sup>39</sup> "Всё ж таки есть ты, Создатель, на небе – долго терпишь, да больно бьёшь" (*Bod.*: 44).

<sup>40</sup> "Я усвоил ещё в лагере русскую пословицу: 'Счастью не верь, беды не пугайся', приладился жить по ней и надеюсь никогда с неё не сойти..." (*Bod.*: 46).



sometimes missed by the “pupil”: “The hardest blow was to find that after going through the full course in the camps school, I was still so stupid and vulnerable”<sup>41</sup>. Let us notice here a seminal although little-mentioned element: the one who does not profit from this school is not given the name ‘negligent’, ‘inept’, ‘mediocre’ but precisely *gluppyj*, ‘stupid, fool’. We have already met this particular term in *Ivan Denisovič* where, at the end of the day, the ones who are supposed to be sent to the terrible ‘Socialist village’ are the poorer and the greatest *fools* among the prisoners.

We must notice at least two more lessons from the Gulag school.

In the Vth appendix of *The Oak and the Calf* Mr. and Mrs. Zubov are introduced to the reader. “The Zubovs – explains Solženicyn – belonged to the better half of the *zek* race, to those who remember their years in the prison camp to their dying days and who consider this period a supremely important lesson in life and wisdom”<sup>42</sup>. Once more, the terms are not fortuitous: a supremely important lesson in life – *высший урок жизни* –, but above all lesson in wisdom – *урок мудрости*. And the last is expressed in proverbial form: “Call no day happy till it is done: call no man happy till he is dead”<sup>43</sup>. You can rate your life only at its very end, not considering its temporary, fading success. In Solženicyn’s works the Gulag appears to be a genuine school of life.

Gathering all these details, let us now compose an organic design from these apparently muddled up pieces.

In Solženicyn’s texts, particularly in *The Oak and the Calf*, we find not only *proverbs* but something more complex, of which the proverbs are just one part. Together with the proverbs, we must consider the *presence of God* in human history and in the world. The assumption of human experiences, even apparently negative ones, should be understood as a *school of life and wisdom*. A school that makes the *zek*, prudent, thrifty and *wise (mudryj)*, while the inept pupil is considered a *fool*.

Thus, there is a meaning in every single life and in history in general. This *meaning does not depend on the author*, who, on the contrary, is called to decipher its mystery, its obscurity. This meaning can be decoded by taking advantage of the long school of life, which for Solženicyn was a milestone step in the Gulag experience. Furthermore, this meaning is connected to the experience the old wise men left in the proverbs.

We find the same elements organically arranged in wisdom literature, as Gerhard von Rad explained in a beautiful book entitled *Wisdom in Israel*. In this book the author explains the characteristics of what is better defined as *wisdom discourse* rather than *wisdom*

<sup>41</sup> “Главный удар был в том, что прошёл я полную лагерную школу – и вот оказался глуп и беззащитен” (*Bod.*: 119).

<sup>42</sup> “Оба Зубовы принадлежали к той лучшей половине зэков, кто уже до смерти не забудет своего лагерного сиденья и считает его высшим уроком жизни и мудрости” (*Bod.*: 406).

<sup>43</sup> “Узда лагерной памяти осаживает мои загубья до боли: хвали день по вечеру, а жизнь по смерти” (*Bod.*: 206).

*genre*: discourse, because it can penetrate into non-wisdom text<sup>44</sup>. The main characteristic of biblical wisdom is the relation between the presence of God and the rules which the world is based on. “According to the convictions of the wise men, – writes von Rad – Yahweh obviously delegated to creation so much truth, indeed he was present in it in such a way that man reaches ethical *terra firma* when he learns to read these orders and adjusts his behavior to the experiences gained” (Rad 1972: 92). No matter how strange it sounds to us, the many secular experiences summarized in proverbs and in wisdom books are not alien to faith – they too are the word of God! For Israel there is only one world of experience and this is perceived by means of an apparatus in which rational perceptions and religious perceptions were not differentiated (Rad 1972: 61). In this sense, experience teaches ultimate truths – truths about God (Rad 1972: 92). The wise man who is so interested in the world of experience with its strange phenomena and prodigies, nevertheless is confident in God – who is the ultimate origin of the rules which make the world work. In the proverbs, biblical wisdom raises personal experiences to the rank of a general vision. Actually, here lies its appeal, experiences are not theoretical, but they are rooted in concrete, individual lives.

The same interest that the wise man directs at the real world, he directs at history too – at unpredictable human fortunes. Even if some wisdom texts present “the idea of a primeval, divine predetermination of specific events and destinies”, while others show the “belief in a providence, in a divine guidance of history and fate, [...] both beliefs are convinced that all events depend on Yahweh” (Rad 1972: 263). “Nothing has changed with regard to the old conviction of Yahweh’s complete sovereignty over history. [...] This sovereignty [...] reveals itself in the fact that, in accordance with a plan, God leads history to its end, an end where salvation dawns for those who were chosen from the beginning” (Rad 1972: 272). The awareness of God’s sovereignty over history and of the consequent limitations of all human planning is not depressing but rather liberating for the wise (Rad 1972: 101). More recently, Leo G. Perdue confirmed von Rad’s classical study: “For the sages, the ultimate object of the quest for knowledge was God, believed to be revealed in the order and workings of the world and in acts of providence both in maintaining creation and in directing human history” (Perdue 2007: 9).

In wisdom literature, proverbs and sayings don’t represent a sort of “neuter knowledge”; on the contrary the wise man must also be a “righteous man” (Rad 1972: 64), and wisdom stands and falls according to the right attitude of man to God (Rad 1972: 69). Consequently, life is a proof settled by God himself, a proof that can consist in punishment too: “As a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you” (Deut. 8: 5). Wise is the man who conforms his life to this wise knowledge. “Such a man, who behaves correctly and at the same time [...] is himself successful in life, was called by the teachers [...] a *saddiq*” (Rad 1972: 78).

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<sup>44</sup> About the penetration of ‘wisdom discourse’ into biblical non-sapiential texts, see Ravasi 1979: 124.

The wise man (the *saddiq*) prudent and temperate is contrasted with the ‘fool’, a word that plays a key role in sapiential literature. Here *fool* does not mean a person with an intellectual defect. Rather, in the case of the *fool* there is a lack of faith in the order controlled by Yahweh (Rad 1972: 95), or a lack of readiness to accommodate himself to God’s plan.

The last recommendation of the wise men is that human life can be evaluate only at its very end, it is the conclusion that is important. “The end [...] of the wicked is destruction, the end of those who trust in God is salvation” (Rad 1972: 204).

In his book on poetics in ancient-Byzantine literature, S.S. Averincev deals with the characters this culture – and Russian culture after this – inherited from biblical wisdom, particularly the moral behavior of the wise under despotic regimes. For Averincev wisdom is not only an inquiry into the world’s oddities and human lives, but also a school “of moral behavior in conditions of extremely authoritarian politics” (Averincev 1977: 60).

Thus, Solženicyn’s works must be interpreted in light of perspectives on *wisdom*. They are part of *wisdom literature*. Proverbs in his tales – and in *The Oak and the Calf* – are not mere expression of Russian folklore: they reveal God’s order of the world and God’s guidance of human lives. The Gulag is not only a Soviet form of punishment, but also an extraordinary school of life and of wisdom. Experiences teach ultimate truths. The trained *zek* is not only a good buddy but is presented as the wise man, the prudent and skilled *saddiq* who knows how to behave in the extreme Gulag conditions. He is the *saddiq* who tries to decipher God’s plan for his life. Finally, even his characters must be interpreted in light of wisdom literature. Solženicyn’s characters that are not heroic, but virile, prudent, slow-moving, meek, thrifly, experts of life and people.

Hence one of the possible reasons of the weak appreciation of Solženicyn in Western European culture. Averincev (1977: 156-157) explains how the great success of wisdom literature in European culture collapsed suddenly with the rise of Romanticism; how virile but not heroic sapiential ethics with their prosaic wisdom of common sense and passion for the *integrity of will* lose their appeal when the eternal questions, heroic revolutionaries or melancholic characters came into fashion. “All this is for him [the wise man] ‘folly’, folly conceived not as an intellectual defect, but as crisis of will and, at the same time, negation of God” (Averincev 1977: 163).

Not only his characters, but Solženicyn himself, were the opposite. He never wanted to appear as a hero, never looked for success either in the Soviet Union, the USA or in post-Soviet Russia. He always tried only to serve truth and to recommend wisdom: as a political virtue (see *Publ.*, I: 152, 595, 699; II: 100; III: 119, 361, 438), as a moral characteristic (*Publ.*, III: 45), as a feature of Christian medieval Rus’ (*Publ.*, III: 160) – where the saint iconographer Andrej Rublev “surpassed everybody in wisdom” (*Publ.*, III: 166).

*Abbreviations*

- sss: A.I. Solženicyн, *Sobranie sočinenij v tridcati tomach*, Moskva 2006-.
- Bod.: A.I. Solženicyн, *Bodalsja telënok s dubom. Očerki literaturnoj žizni*, Moskva 1996<sup>2</sup>.
- Den.: A.I. Solženicyн, *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovič*, Harmondsworth (Middlesex) 1963.
- Oak: A.I. Solženicyн, *The Oak and the Calf*, New York 1979.
- Publ.: A.I. Solženicyн, *Publicistika v trech tomach*, Jaroslavl' 1995-1997.
- Reader: A.I. Solženicyн, *The Solzhenitsyn Reader. New and Essential Writings, 1947-2005*, ed. by E.E. Ericson and D.J. Mahoney, Washington 2006.

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### *Abstract*

Giuseppe Ghini  
*Solženicyн and Wisdom*

The article starts by considering one of the main features of Solženicyн's prose, the presence of proverbs. The author analyzes this attribute in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovič*, *Matryona's Home* and, especially regarding *The Oak and the Calf*, discusses these works as part of *wisdom literature*. Proverbs in Solženicyн's works are not mere expression of Russian folklore; they reveal God's order of the world and God's guidance of human lives. The Gulag is not only a Soviet form of punishment, but also an extraordinary school of life and of wisdom. Experiences teach ultimate truths. The trained *zek* is not only a good buddy, but is presented as the wise man, the prudent and skilled *saddiq* who knows how to behave in the extreme Gulag conditions. He is the *saddiq* who tries to decipher God's plan for his life. In the end, Solženicyн's characters must be interpreted in light of wisdom literature, within which they are not heroic, but virile, prudent, slow-moving, meek, thrifty, experts of life and people.

### *Keywords*

Solženicyн; Wisdom Literature; Proverbs; The Oak and the Calf.