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Writing vulnerable worlds: Siberian exile and the anthropology of world-making

Mattias Viktorin

On his descent through Hell, close to its bottom, Dante comes upon a giant locked up in chains. Virgil, who serves as Dante's guide, identifies him as Nimrod, the Hebrew king who instigated the building of the Tower of Babel, and explains the horrible punishment the giant has to endure as a result: 'this is Nimrod, through whose wicked thought / one single language cannot serve the world. / Leave him alone – let's not waste time in talk; / for every language is to him the same / as his to others – no one knows his tongue' (Inferno xxxi: 77–81). Nimrod himself utters but one unintelligible sentence – '*Raphael mai amech izabi almi*' (ibid.: 67) – before Dante and Virgil move along, leaving him as they found him: banished from the face of the earth, despairing, outside of time, in complete linguistic isolation.¹

Towards the end of the nineteenth century more than 300,000 people were living in exile or in prison camps in Siberia. Most of them were illiterate and without means to let the outside world know about their fates. '[T]his should all be written up! Only, no one's writin' it ... I'll die, 'n' so ever'thin'll disappear, like it ne'er happened', one penal labourer lamented (quoted in Iakubovich [1895–1898] 2015: 175). Yet some prisoners did write about their experiences, and attempted to speak also on behalf of those whose own words failed: to let a wider public know what life was like 'in the world of the outcasts' – an expression that was used as a title for one prominent autobiography (Iakubovich [1895–1898] 2014, 2015). Others travelled voluntarily to Siberia to witness and document the realities of the exile system. Several such writers made references to Dante's pilgrimage. 'I

¹ All translations from the *Divine Comedy* are by Allen Mandelbaum. The entire text is available online at <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/> (accessed 24 January 2021).

feel that this is Inferno; I am Dante, and that my investigations might be called “Studies in Hell”, wrote Benjamin Howard in his book *Prisoners of Russia*, which was based on a journey he made in 1890 to Sakhalin Island (Howard 1902: 265). Peter Kropotkin ([1887/1906] 1971: 124–5), Harry de Windt (1896: 94), Vlas Doroshevich ([1903] 2011: 13–14, 129), and Elsa Brändström (1921: 61) – along with many others – made similar comments. Indeed, in Siberia the exiled prisoners suffered a fate not entirely unlike that of Nimrod and other condemned souls Dante encountered. Locked up in chains and banished, in Anton Chekhov’s phrase, to ‘the end of the world’, they were left to perish in despair. No wonder, then, that they longed, like those in Inferno’s ‘eternal exile’ (Inferno xxiii: 126), for someone who would write their stories down and report back to the world of the living. ‘There was a chorus’, Howard (1902: 107) tells us, ‘of “Don’t forget me! Put me in,” etc.’ Other authors recall similar scenes (see e.g. Iakubovitch [1895–1898] 2015: 174). These writers, however, had in turn to overcome another kind of problem; a predicament they shared, in fact, with Dante himself: ‘Who, even with untrammelled words and many / attempts at telling, ever could recount / in full the blood and wounds that I now saw?’ (Inferno xxviii: 1–3).

The analogies between Inferno and Siberian exile on the one hand, and between Dante and writers like Howard on the other, help to illustrate how Siberian exile writing actualizes fundamental aspects of the problem of witnessing. John Durham Peters (2001: 708) has observed how ‘the witness’ has appeared more recently as an actual ‘survivor of hell, prototypically but not exclusively the Holocaust or *Shoah*’. In the Preface to the 2006 translation of *Night* (republished in the 2018 edition), for example, Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel ([1958] 2018: xiv–xv) writes, ‘I knew that I must bear witness. I also knew that, while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them ... It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language.’ Wiesel here identifies three facets of the problem: the urge to bear witness, the lack of appropriate words, and the need to reinvent language. This resonates with what Primo Levi has observed about the literature of Nazi camps more generally:

In all of our accounts, verbal or written, one finds expressions such as ‘indescribable’, ‘inexpressible’, ‘words are not enough ...’, ‘one would need a language for ...’ This was, in fact, our daily thought [in the camps]: that if we came back home and *wanted to tell*, we would be *missing the words*. Daily language is for the description of daily experience, but here it is another world, here one would need a *language ‘of this other world’*, a language born here.

(Levi 1994: 185, emphasis added)

Wiesel and Levi exemplify, in these quotes, ‘the fragility of witnessing: the difficult juncture between experience and discourse’ (Peters 2001: 710, cf. Rabinow 2017: 12–14). To witness thus has two faces: ‘the passive one of *seeing* and the active one of *saying*. In passive witnessing an accidental audience observes the events of the world; in active witnessing one is a privileged possessor and producer of knowledge’ (Peters 2001: 709, emphasis in original). In this way, witnessing relates to world-making. To ‘translate knowing into telling’ (White 1987: 1) by narrating personal experiences stabilizes, however momentarily, a world for others to share; and the ‘presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us’ as Hannah Arendt ([1958] 1998: 50) points out, ‘of the reality of the world’. However, when Levi says that a language, in order to describe a world, needs to be *of* that world, he also intimates that a world could bring forth a language; that the relationship between language and world is a reciprocal one.

This chapter, which is an investigation of Siberian exile writing from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, unfolds against the backdrop of the problem of witnessing conceptualized in this way. I am interested in what these narratives could tell us about language and world-making (Ganguly 2016, Goodman 1978, Hayot 2012). To explore this, I seek to elucidate the anthropological problems to which the texts respond when, for example, they speak of Siberia as a Dante-esque inferno at ‘the end of the world.’² But what kind of literature are we dealing with here, exactly?

Siberian exile writing

Background

Banishment to Siberia reached its most infamous and deadly form with the Gulag system of forced labour camps during the Soviet era (see e.g. Applebaum 2003, Barnes 2011, Jakobson 1993, Khlevniuk 2004). Along with historical research, a considerable corpus of Gulag memoirs and works of literature has continued to grow since the early 1950s. These narratives have played a major role in terms of

² This inquiry takes a phenomenological assumption as its theoretical starting point: that the reciprocal relation between world and language is characterized not by congruence, where world and language fully coincide (and which would reduce expression to either pure repetition or pure creation), but by levels of *non-coincidence* that call for continued, and continuous, expression (Merleau-Ponty 1968; Landes 2013; Viktorin 2017: 40–4; Wiskus 2013).

providing insight into the camp system's unspeakable circumstances of suffering and death (Maltsev 1976: 171–251, Toker 2000, 2019). Gustaw Herling's *A World Apart* (1951, in Polish), Eugenia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind* and *Within the Whirlwind* (1967, 1981, in Russian), Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* (1954–1974, in Russian) and Alexander Dolgun's *An American in the Gulag* (1975, in English) stand out as particularly powerful examples.³ There exist in addition a large number of works of fiction about Soviet Gulag camps and Siberian exile under Stalin – for example Victor Serge's *Midnight in the Century* (1939, in French), Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940, in German), Vasily Grossman's *Everything Flows* (1955–1964, in Russian), Herta Müller's *Hunger Angel* (2009, in German), Sergei Lebedev's *Oblivion* (2010, in Russian) and Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (2015, in Russian).

Inseparable from the Soviet regime of repression, the Gulag system was in many ways historically unique. Yet the Gulag is also part of a much longer and, indeed, still ongoing history of exile and prison camps in Russia. The 'history of the post-Stalinist Gulag is not yet encapsulated', as Leona Toker reminds us: 'the camps still exist in Putin's Russia, though more as forced-labour prisons than as preextermination facilities' (Toker 2019: 207; see also Attius Sohlman 2019: 91–2). The Gulag was also preceded by a system of exile and prison camps that had existed in Siberia for more than 300 years (see e.g. Badcock 2016, Beer 2016, Gentes 2008, 2010, Wood 2011: 118–42). Following the Battle of Poltava in 1709, for example, when Peter the Great defeated the Swedes, it is estimated that about 25,000 Swedish soldiers were banished to Siberia (Jonsson and Salytjeva 2009, Villstrand 2011: 212–15). Some of them wrote memoirs and diaries; and such documents, collected and published in the eighteenth century, constitute early examples of Siberian exile writing. In addition to recollections and personal experiences from life in exile, several of these narratives include careful ethnographic and geographical observations (see e.g. Sjebalina 2009).

³ Other classic Gulag memoirs include Andrei Almarik, *The Involuntary Journey to Siberia* (1970); Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (1975, 1978); and Alexander Dolgun and Patrick Watson, *Alexander Dolgun's Story: An American in the Gulag* (1975). Other memoirs, published in the late 1990s, have more recently found their way into the mandatory corpus: e.g. Janusz Bardach and Kathleen Gleeson, *Man Is Wolf to Man: Surviving Stalin's Gulag* (1998); Lev Razgon, *True Stories* (1997); and Julian Better, *Jag var barn i GULAG* (2013). Recent years have seen the publication of diaries and memoirs by Gulag guards: Ivan Chistyakov, *The Day Will Pass Away: The Diary of a Gulag Prison Guard 1935–1936* (2017) and Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss: A Soviet Memoir* (2011) are powerful examples.

As such, they have remained significant points of reference. Jonas Stadling (1847–1935), a Swedish author I discuss, refers for example in his book *Genom Sibirien (Through Siberia)* to several stories from these documents (Stadling 1901: 52–3, 318–19). Verner von Heidenstam's ([1897–1898] 1934) *Karolinerna (The Carolines)*, a two-volume collection of short stories, also helped establish this early episode of Siberian exile as a literary theme in Sweden.

The scale and intensity of the exile system in Imperial Russia continued to increase until the turn of the twentieth century, with more than one million people being banished between 1801 and 1917 (Beer 2016: 4). During this period, Siberian exile writing also evolved into something of a literary genre in Russia, characterized by recurrent tropes about Siberia, about exile and about life in prison (see e.g. Diment and Slezkine 1993, Murav 1993, Tiupa 2006). Inaugurated with the publication in 1861–1862 of Fyodor Dostoevsky's semi-biographical *Notes from a Dead House*, this genre includes such books as Chekhov's *The Island of Sakhalin* (1895), Dmitry Mamin-Sibiryak's *Ural Stories* (1895), Pëtr Iakubovich's *In the World of the Outcasts* (1895–1898), Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (1899), Vlas Doroshevich's *Sakhalin* (1903) and Vladimir Korolenko's 'Siberian Stories' (1880–1904).

A world literary corpus

In this chapter I detach Siberian exile writing from this national literary tradition, and approach it instead as *a world literary corpus* (Beecroft 2015, Cheah 2016, Helgesson et al. 2018, Viktorin 2018a: 229–32). It is a literature which is *of the world* in several ways, which the following five observations illustrate.

The first observation concerns language. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the publication of a great number of books on Siberia in languages other than Russian. If we move beyond 'the nation and its literature', we are left with a significant body of texts of extraordinary plurality in terms of linguistic, cultural and geographical scope (see Viktorin 2018b, 2019: 41–8). This corpus comprises several different and occasionally overlapping genres.⁴ These include memoirs and first-hand accounts, for example Ewa Felińska, *Revelations of Siberia* (1852, in Polish), Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1899,

⁴ The years refer to when the texts were first published in their respective language. Some of the texts have not been translated into English. In such cases I have provided provisional translations of the titles within parentheses.

in English), Marie Sukloff, *The Life-Story of a Russian Exile* (1914, in Russian), Ivar Hasselblatt, *Förvisad till Sibirien* (*Banished to Siberia*, 1917, in Swedish), Henrik Wrede, *I Sibirien för trettio år sedan* (*Thirty Years Ago in Siberia*, 1918, in Swedish) and Jan Welzl, *Thirty Years in the Golden North* (1932, in Czech). Another genre is travel writing and journalism. Henry Lansdell, *Through Siberia* (1882), George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System* (1891), Harry de Windt, *The New Siberia* (1896) and Benjamin Howard, *Prisoners of Russia* (1902) are frequently cited examples, all written in English, while various books by Scandinavian authors are less well-known: Jonas Stadling, *Genom Sibirien* (*Through Siberia*, 1901, in Swedish), Holger Rosenberg, *Det ny Sibirien* (*The New Siberia*, 1904, in Danish), Fridtjof Nansen, *Through Siberia* (1914, in Norwegian), Elsa Brändström, *Bland krigsfångar i Ryssland och Sibirien* (*Among Prisoners of War in Russia and Siberia*, 1921, in Swedish) and Ester Blenda Nordström, *Byn i vulkanens skugga* (*The Village in the Shadow of the Volcano*, 1930, in Swedish). Travel writing also sometimes takes the form of a more academically oriented ethnography. Representative examples include Benjamin Howard, *Life with Trans-Siberian Savages* (1893, in English), Charles Hawes, *In the Uttermost East* (1904, in English) and Kai Donner, *Among the Samoyeds in Siberia* (1915, in Swedish). ‘Siberia’ and ‘Siberian exile’ appear in addition as literary motifs in several works of fiction, such as Jules Verne’s *Michel Strogoff: The Courier of the Czar* (1876, in French), William Murray Graydon’s *Exiled to Siberia* (1897, in English), and Joseph Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes* (1911, in English). I should also note here that there is a growing body of literature of later dates that in various ways continues to address Siberian exile at the turn of the twentieth century (e.g. McConkey 1984, Petri and Sjöberg 1992, Donner 2006, Frazier 2010).⁵

⁵ If we take into account all of those who were banished or travelled to Siberia but did not write about it for publication, the cultural and linguistic plurality of Siberian exile becomes even more remarkable. Several studies retrace such unpublished exilic experiences. In *The Princess of Siberia*, for example, Christine Sutherland (2001) narrates the life of Maria Volkonsky, wife of one of the leaders of the 1825 Decembrist Rising, who spent twenty-nine years in Siberian exile between 1826 and 1855. Erik Appel (1998) draws on letters, diaries and other archival sources to retrace the story of a group of Swedish-speaking Finns who attempted, rather unsuccessfully, to establish a commune in the Amur region in the mid-nineteenth century. Sergei Kan’s (2009) biography about Lev Shternberg – anthropologist, Russian socialist and Jewish activist – documents in detail how Shternberg was arrested, incarcerated in St. Petersburg, banished to Siberia and ended up spending seven years in exile on Sakhalin Island between 1889 and 1897, before he returned to become a prominent Russian anthropologist. And Erkki Räikkönen’s book *Svinhufvud in Siberia*, which was first published in Finnish in 1928, draws on interviews conducted with Per Evind Svinhufvud, who was exiled to Tomsk between 1914 and 1917 (and later became the third president of Finland, from 1931 to 1937).

The second observation has to do with the politics of representation. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Siberian exile writing took shape in a context that transcended the geographical boundaries of Imperial Russia, and in relation to transnational debates about crime and punishment and legitimate forms of governing (see e.g. Adams 1996, Foucault 2015, Schrader 2002). Polemical exchanges characterized by explicit animosity were common. One of the first foreigners to compose a book-length overview of exile and prisons in Siberia, and whose text exemplifies the political context of exile writing, was the English priest Henry Lansdell (1841–1919). In his *Through Siberia*, a two-volume book of almost 800 pages published in 1882, Lansdell criticizes almost all previous texts on the subject as ‘garnished accounts of horrible severities, which they [the authors] neither profess to have witnessed, nor attempt to support by adequate testimony’ (Lansdell 1882, vol. II: 4). He goes on to assert his own position of authority: ‘I have visited Russian houses of detention from the White Sea in the north to the Black Sea and the Persian frontier in the south, and from Warsaw in the west to the Pacific in the east’ (ibid.: 5). His claims of authority were met by counterclaims. The Russian prince Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), for example, was not impressed by Lansdell’s work. In the Preface to the 1906 Russian edition of his own book, *In Russian and French Prisons*, which had originally been published in English in 1887, Kropotkin called Lansdell a ‘Russian agent’ (Kropotkin [1887/1906] 1971: xxi), and dedicated an entire chapter to a critique of him:

The truth is that Mr. Lansdell has cast a hasty glance on what the authorities were willing to show him; that he has not seen a single central prison; and that had he visited every prison in Russia in the way he visited some of them, he still would remain as ignorant as he is now about the real conditions of prison-life in Russia.

(Kropotkin [1887/1906] 1971: 233)

My third observation concerns the epistemology of representation. The particular ways in which Lansdell, Kropotkin and other authors vied for authority is significant. ‘I was there’ was increasingly turning into something of a foundational knowledge claim within the era’s scientific culture, which connects Siberian exile writing to turn-of-the-century developments within the emergent social sciences in Russia, Europe and the United States (see e.g. Beer 2008, Debaene 2014, Kuklick 2008). Anthropology, which at the time was developing into an ethnographically oriented field science, constitutes an illuminating example. A synchronic focus on sociological functionalism reoriented anthropology

towards the empirical collection of first-hand data, and long-term participant observation among ‘real people on the ground’ turned into a trademark of the discipline (Viktorin 2016: 234–6). In Russia, anthropology co-evolved in this regard very concretely with the institution of exile and Siberian exile writing, as the discipline’s ‘founding fathers’ had themselves been banished to Siberia as political prisoners. It was during exile that Vladimir Bogoraz (1865–1936), Lev Shternberg (1861–1927) and Vladimir Jochelson (1855–1937) had taken an interest in the lives of indigenous peoples and begun to conduct ethnographic work (see e.g. Kan 2009, Ssorin-Chaikrov 2008: 191–206, Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2015: 441). Stadling, who was personally acquainted with Bogoraz, makes the following observation on how exactly this came about:

The official research expeditions always have the disadvantage that the participants must conduct their research trips in their capacity as *public officials*, of whom the natives are afraid, and as a rule they also lack knowledge of the native languages. Both of these circumstances of course constitute serious obstacles, particularly for detailed ethnographic or anthropological studies. The banished political prisoners, on the other hand, come to the natives as their equals, earning their trust and often establishing true relations of friendship with them. By living in such a way among them, spending time with them on intimate terms for several years, they have had the opportunity to study their everyday life, their language, traditions and religious beliefs, etc.

(Stadling 1901: 114–15, emphasis in original, my translation)

A fourth observation is that writers from different countries who took an interest in Siberia often became personally acquainted. Such transnational connections of friendship helped shape Siberian exile writing into a world literary corpus. The American journalist George Kennan’s (1845–1924) *Siberia and the Exile System* (Kennan [1891] 2012) is one of the best-known accounts of Siberian exile in Imperial Russia. While the Russian government, as Bruce Adams (1996: 6) notes in his book *The Politics of Punishment*, was far from thrilled with what Kennan had written, most Russian and foreign commentators agreed that the result was trustworthy. The book appeared in 1891 and had required fifteen months of travel – which led to physical exhaustion and near mental collapse for both Kennan and his travelling companion, the artist George Frost. In addition to his first-hand examination of the exile system in Siberia, which took ten months, Kennan also studied the conditions in European Russia, and met with Russian revolutionary émigrés in London (Travis 1990: 111–52). Kropotkin recalls in his memoirs how he met with Kennan:

When Kennan came back to London from his journey to Siberia, he managed, on the very next day after his arrival in London, to hunt up Stepniák, Tchaykóvsky, myself, and another Russian refugee. In the evening we all met at Kennan's room in a small hotel near Charing Cross. We saw him for the first time, and having no excess of confidence in enterprising Englishmen who had previously undertaken to learn all about the Siberian prisons without even learning a word of Russian, we began to cross-examine Kennan. To our astonishment, he not only spoke excellent Russian, but he knew everything worth knowing about Siberia.

(Kropotkin [1899] 2010: 181–2)

The friendship between Stadling and Leo Tolstoy is another example of such acquaintances. Stadling and the Russian author had first met in the 1880s (see Stadling 1893: 29–94), and in 1898, on his way back through European Russia after having travelled through Siberia, he received an invitation to visit Tolstoy in his home. 'He greeted me with a heartfelt welcome', Stadling remembers, 'and immediately steered the conversation to our journey through Siberia. ... He was at the time of my visit eagerly occupied with the writing of "Resurrection"' (Stadling 1901: 278, my translation). Social connections among authors – whether friendly or antagonistic – arguably played an important part in the composition of texts. Also, they illustrate how Siberian exile writing of this time must be understood as a world literary corpus in sociological terms, too.

My final observation here is that Russia – and Siberia itself – was remarkably diverse in terms of the ethnic and national origins of its inhabitants (Hingley 1967: 65–90, Wood 2011: 95–117). Such plurality shaped the experience of exile and of Siberia. Examples that illustrate this abound in the literature. Stadling, for instance, makes the following observation from his 1898 journey on the Lena River:

Many decent and sympathetic people were among the passengers, and life aboard [the steam ship] had a cosmopolitan touch to it. Unintelligible Tartar dialects could be heard, German and French were spoken, and once we had crossed the border between Irkutsk and Yakutsk, we heard for the first time the Yakutsk language, which would then sound in our ears until we reached the mouth of the Yenisey in the month of November. The only thing reminiscent of Russia was 'The Volga Song', its majestic notes echoing between the high riverbanks during the light nights of spring.

(Stadling 1901: 73–4, my translation)

The exiles, too, comprised a category that was far from homogeneous. In the following scene, Kennan inspects a convict barge ready to depart from Tiúmen:

The exiles, although uniformly clad in gray, presented, from an ethnological point of view, an extraordinary diversity of types, having been collected evidently from all parts of the vast empire. There were fierce, wild-looking mountaineers from Daghestán and Circassia, condemned to penal servitude for murders of blood-revenge; there were Tatárs from the lower Vólga, who had been sunburned until they were almost as black as negroes; Turks from the Crimea, whose scarlet fezzes contrasted strangely with their gray convict overcoats; crafty-looking Jews from Podólia, going into exile for smuggling; and finally, common peasants in great numbers from all parts of European Russia.

(Kennan [1891] 2012, vol. I: 114)

Even Sakhalin – ‘the island of punishment’ (Hawes 1904: 78) – was characterized by cultural and linguistic plurality.⁶ ‘With twenty-five languages spoken on the island and large populations of Catholics, Lutherans, Muslims and Buddhists, Sakhalin Island was’, according to Sharryl Corrado (2010: 7), ‘one of the most diverse regions of the empire.’ In Vladivostok and other places the national and ethnic diversity of the population had given rise to a cosmopolitan atmosphere (Ingemanson 1996); in contrast, on Sakhalin Island the fact that inhabitants shared no common language, culture, ethnicity or religion led to what might be described as ‘failed world-making’. The island appeared, to several witnesses, as ‘the end of the world’.

Literary tropes and anthropological truths

The five observations above illustrate what I have in mind when I speak of Siberian exile writing as a world literary corpus. While it is a literature which is mostly *about* a particular world – ‘a world apart’ (Dostoevsky), ‘the world of the outcasts’ (Iakubovich) and so on – Siberian exile writing in various ways also extends beyond ‘Siberia’, ‘exile’ and ‘literature’ *per se*, and thereby reflects more general features of the world at large (cf. Viktorin 2018a).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century ‘Siberia’ had also begun to circulate *in* the world as a literary motif in its own right. The novel *Exiled to Siberia* by the American author William Murray Graydon ([1897] 1900), exemplifies this. An adventure book for a youth audience in the West, it tells the story of two

⁶ Sakhalin Island is the focus of several of the first-hand accounts I discuss in this chapter: Chekhov ([1895] 1989), Doroshevich ([1903] 2011), Hawes (1904), Howard (1893, 1902) and Windt (1896). For scholarly overviews of the island’s significance see Beer (2016: 241–69), Corrado (2010), Semjonow (1955: 195–202) and Stephan (1971).

nineteen-year-old boys from the USA who travel to Russia, where they find themselves falsely accused of espionage and end up in Siberian exile. The boys manage to escape, and through an incessant succession of implausible events they ultimately make it back to America. Siberia functions in the novel as little more than a sensational setting for the adventurous plot, and to evoke the right atmosphere Graydon makes repeated use of a number of tropes: that Siberia is the epitome of a remote place – ‘Before them stretched the dominions of the czar, an empire that reached thousands and thousands of miles across Siberian wastes and deserts to the far-away Pacific coast’ (Graydon [1897] 1900: 24); that suffering in Siberia resists verbal representation – ‘The period of suffering and misery that began with the departure from Tomsk almost defies description’ (ibid.: 105); and that Siberian exile disrupts temporal orientation – ‘There were times when the boys found it difficult to convince themselves that the past was not all a dream’ (ibid.: 106).

Sometimes, however, outworn clichés like these turn out to be true. In what follows, I allow for this possibility and take seriously the literary work through which different authors attempt to convey authentic experiences. My investigation evolves in an anthropological fashion as a ‘tentative twining of conceptual work and empirical materials through inquiry’ (Rabinow 2017: 5). More specifically, I approach Siberian exile writing as *anthropological sources* that have something to tell us about language and world-making. Rather than reducing the texts to examples of already existing literary forms, I want to understand what the texts seek to accomplish. I am interested in the problems to which the texts respond, which means that I am interested in the relation between the texts and what they represent.

The end of the world

Literary work

In 1890 Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) travelled across Siberia to Sakhalin Island, where he stayed for three months to conduct fieldwork (Friedlaender 1959: 115–28, Kleberg 2010: 106–27). In the arrival scene in his subsequent book, Chekhov characterizes Sakhalin thus:

Scarcely visible ahead is a hazy strip of land; this is the penal island. To the left, dropping away in its own convolutions, the shore disappears into the haze on its way to the unknown North. This seems to be *the end of the world*, and there is

nowhere else to go. The soul is seized with the same emotion which Odysseus must have experienced when he sailed an unknown sea, filled with melancholy forebodings of encounters with strange creatures.

(Chekhov [1895] 1989: 4, emphasis added)

‘The end of the world’ is a trope of Ovidian exile (*‘Nobis habitabitur orbis / ultimus, a terra terra remota mea’*),⁷ which previously had been redeployed in Russia by Pushkin (see Kennedy 2011). Chekhov makes repeated use of this and other literary references – ‘the same emotion which Odysseus must have experienced’, and so on – to convey what he felt when he came face to face with Sakhalin.

‘The end of the world’ also suggests that Sakhalin exhibits something for which Chekhov does not have the right words; that Sakhalin forces him to extend language beyond the vernacular world that produced it. In a letter to his publisher, written on his return trip, Chekhov intimates as much when he reports that ‘I saw *everything*; so the question now is not *what* I say, but *how* I say it.’⁸ In this section, I am interested in how Chekhov and various other writers responded to this kind of challenge. A consideration of several different texts evinces a pattern, and I explore the recurrent themes towards which the texts gravitate.

‘Lost to history’

Sakhalin is represented as the end of the world, not only in terms of geographical limits but frequently also in the sense of an ending. The Russian journalist Vlas Doroshevich (1864–1922), for example, who visited the island a few years after Chekhov, addresses precisely how the world from Sakhalin’s horizon seems to vanish:

You cannot believe that somewhere in the world there is an Italy, blue sky, warm sun, that there are songs and laughter in the world ... Everything ever seen up to now seems so distant, as if on some other planet, as if it were dreamt, unreal, unfeasible.

(Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 6)

⁷ ‘[M]y habitation is *the end of the world*, a land far removed from my own land’ (Ovid, *Tristia*, 1.1: 127–8; translation by D. F. Kennedy, emphasis added). On Ovidian exile, and exile after Ovid, see Inglehart (2011) and Williams (2002).

⁸ Anton Chekhov, letter to A. S. Suvorin, the Gulf of Tartary, on the steamship *Baikal*, 11 September 1890 (McVay 1994: 97).

Several authors make similar observations. The Englishman Benjamin Howard (1836–1900), for example, who travelled to Sakhalin in 1890, writes that ‘Sakhalin is the place of the dead; the world has long become but a distant recollection’ (Howard 1902: 265). Pëtr Filippovich Iakubovich (1860–1911), himself a former penal labourer, recalls how fellow prisoners spoke of Sakhalin Island as ‘a living grave from which no one ever returned’ (Iakubovich [1895–98] 2014: 222). Kennan ([1891] 2012, vol. I: 60) deploys analogous imagery: ‘the Siberian *tundra* not only becomes inexpressibly lonely and desolate’, he writes, ‘but takes on a strange, half terrible unearthliness, which awes and yet fascinates the imagination.’ And, most famously, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) describes the Siberian prison where he was incarcerated as ‘an alive dead house, a life like nowhere else’ (Dostoevsky [1861–62] 2015: 8).

The references to unearthliness and death are not coincidental. Exile is often compared to death (again, an Ovidian trope), and in the Siberian case the metaphor has particular resonance. ‘A person sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia is removed from normal human environment without any hope of ever returning’, writes Chekhov; ‘*he is dead* to the society in which he was born and bred. So the convicts say, “The dead never return from the grave!”’ (Chekhov [1895] 1989: 214, emphasis added). Those exiled to Siberia were indeed treated in certain respects as if they were in fact dead. Kennan explains:

As a general rule, exile to Siberia, under the severer sentences and for felony, involves first, deprivation of all civil rights; second, forfeiture of all property, which, upon the conviction of the criminal, descends to his heirs *as if he were dead*; and third, severance of all family relations, unless the criminal’s family voluntarily accompanies him to his place of exile.

(Kennan [1891] 2012, vol. I: 82, emphasis added)

At the same time, actual deaths were managed without any of the dignity commonly shown to the dead. Henrik Wrede (1854–1929) was a Swedish-speaking Finn who spent two years in Irkutsk and other parts of Siberia in the mid-1880s under the auspices of the British and Foreign Bible Society. In his memoirs, published in Swedish in 1918, he relates how a group of exiled prisoners from Finland turn to him in distress. They tell him how the corpse of a fellow Finn who had just died in the infirmary has been thrown into a grave, too shallow and poorly covered, ‘like a dead dog’, without any religious ceremonies. He accompanies the men to the cemetery, where they remove the coffin from the grave and begin digging until it is twice as deep. Wrede then leads a funeral

service before they rebury the coffin and cover the grave. 'On our way back,' he recalls, 'these hardened lifetime prisoners were more than distressed by the thought of who would one day bury them, and in what manner it would be carried out' (Wrede 1918: 88, my translation; cf. Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 257).

Siberian exile seems to be located not only at the end of the world, but also outside of time. It is perhaps not surprising to learn that people who were exiled to 'the end of the world' would tend to feel deprived of a future. Yet on Sakhalin people also lost their pasts. 'Nowhere are past times so quickly forgotten as on Sakhalin,' writes Chekhov ([1895] 1989: 196). 'What transpired twenty to twenty-five years ago is considered to belong to a dark antiquity, already forgotten, lost to history.' Some people had lost track of time entirely, and were unable to recall when exactly they had arrived on the island:

'When did you arrive on Sakhalin?' Very few of the Sakhalin dwellers answered this question immediately, without strain. The year he arrived on Sakhalin was the year of dire misfortune. Furthermore, they don't even know the year, or have forgotten it. I asked an old convict woman when she had arrived on Sakhalin and she answered dully, without thinking, 'Who knows? Maybe in '83.' Either her husband or her lover interrupts, 'So why do you wag your tongue for nothing? You came in '85.' 'Maybe in '85', she agrees with a sigh.

(Ibid.: 23–4)

If people happened to meet someone from their old home town, however, the 'forgotten past' would reappear in a flash, fully reanimated (Badcock 2016: 82–90, Donner 2006: 59, Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 363). In his 1917 book *Förvisad till Sibirien* (*Banished to Siberia*), the Swedish-speaking Finn Ivar Hasselblatt (1864–1948) recalls a scene from an overcrowded Petrograd prison where he unexpectedly meets a fellow countryman:

Then appeared from the group a young, blond man with an open, bold look in his blue eyes. He reached out his hand to greet me, and asked me in Swedish: 'Do you speak Swedish?' Surprised to be addressed here in my own mother tongue, I asked in turn who he was that spoke this language. He then presented himself as a trader S., from Helsinki, who was engaged to be married to a daughter of Captain P. in Hangö, an old friend of mine. The ice within now began to melt. The friendly greeting made me feel warm inside, and we soon sat down together in pleasant conversation, and the remaining hours of the evening disappeared quickly.

(Hasselblatt 1917: 29–30, my translation)

Another example comes from Ewa Felińska (1793–1859). In her memoirs, *Revelations of Siberia*, originally written in Polish and published in English in 1853, Felińska recalls a conversation she had with a soldier who had been stationed in her old home village:

This circumstance, trifling as it may appear, made us consider each other in the light of old acquaintances; such as had *seen the same objects and places, or, at least, had some reminiscences in common*, which alone speaks volumes to those who, removed from their native place, happen to meet in a distant land. I shall for ever remember the few moments of conversation I had with the veteran soldier.

(Felińska 1854: 7, emphasis added)

Yet most of the time there was no one around who had ‘seen the same objects and places’, as Felińska phrases it. There were few elderly people present, and almost no old objects existed either. On Sakhalin Island this caused for Chekhov ‘a persistent feeling that something important is missing; no grandmother, no grandfather, no old paintings, no inherited furniture; consequently, the household contains *nothing from the past*, nothing traditional’ (Chekhov [1895] 1989: 26, emphasis added). This helps explain why those who did have an older object in their possession treasured it immensely. Among so-called free convicts and their families, for example, Howard (1902: 93) discovered that ‘great pains are taken by each person to wear something or other which is both an ornament and a souvenir of a former home’.

World-making demands the humanization of time. Since time itself is intangible, this means it has to be manifested through rituals, material objects and, as in the examples above, social relations (see e.g. Viktorin and Widmark 2013, Viktorin 2013). Indeed, without such displays of the past, and without people who have ‘seen the same objects and places’, world-making fails. Hannah Arendt explains:

The reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors. Human life, in so far as it is world-building, is engaged in a constant process of reification, and the degree of worldliness of produced things, which all together form the human artifice, depends upon their greater or lesser permanence in the world itself.

(Arendt [1958] 1998: 95–6)

On Sakhalin Island, no shared forms for expressing the passing of time existed. Without common time-space configurations, time never becomes truly humanized, which means that a world fails to appear. Instead, there seems on Sakhalin to exist a 'present without a future, or an eternal present'. From a phenomenological perspective, this is 'precisely the definition of death' (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012: 388).

Changing fates

Myths and stories on exile often tell us that a banished person cannot continue to exist in the same way as before, but must recreate her sense of self and fashion a new world around her. In Siberian exile this was sometimes literally the case. So-called *brodiagi* (vagabonds) deliberately tried to conceal their pasts and claimed not to remember who they were, assuming nicknames such as 'Ivan I-Don't-Remember'.

In 'the world of the outcasts,' this strategy to conceal, or deliberately forget, one's identity and one's entire past sometimes made sense. Doroshevich claims, for example, that 'Few escape [from Sakhalin Island] with the prospect of returning to Russia, but each hopes "to change his fate", to proclaim himself a *brodiaga* while on the lam and so cut a ten- or twenty-year *katorga* [penal labour] sentence in half' (Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 239). Charles Hawes, an anthropologist who spent fifty days on Sakhalin in preparation for his book *In the Uttermost East* (1904), explains how exactly the prisoners sought to accomplish this:

If identified, he [the escaped prisoner] will have his sentence lengthened by an addition; but if he professes to have forgotten his name and family, and whence he comes, and he cannot be identified, there is nothing to be done but to sentence him as a *brodyaga* to four years' hard labour. On Sakhalin it is not so easy to outwit the authorities as in the vast region of the mainland, but should he succeed, this 'Mr. Ivan Dont-remember' scores considerably.

(Hawes 1904: 151)

In Siberian prisons it was considered an obligation for every penal labourer to help a fugitive. According to Stadling, Siberian etiquette also strictly forbids one to interrogate another person about his past (Stadling 1901: 163). Thus no one would reveal the true identity of a recaptured prisoner. For prisoners who were in debt from gambling, to escape and then return, claiming to have forgotten

one's past, would also clear them of debt – at the price, of course, of irrevocably losing one's identity. According to Doroshevich:

Once a man has escaped from prison all his responsibilities and debts amount to nothing and can never be renewed. Often, a man buried in debts flees without any hope of gaining freedom. Having wandered for two weeks half-insane from hunger, bloodied by thorns in the taiga and chilled to the marrow, he returns in rags to the same prison he fled from. He receives an extended term (a 'bonus') and settles former debts with his flesh. But because of this his debts are wiped out and he is once again a credit-worthy man.

(Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 238)

Others lost their past in an even more radical way – by selling their identity for a trifle. Dostoevsky's *Notes from a Dead House* includes one of the most famous accounts of this custom:

For instance, some Mikhailov, sentenced for murder or some other capital offense, finds going to hard labor many years unbeneficial. Suppose he's a clever fellow, an old hand, who knows his business; so he's on the lookout for somebody in the same party who is of a simpler, more downtrodden, more uncomplaining sort, and whose sentence is comparatively lighter: a few years in a mill or a settlement, or even at hard labor, only for the shorter term. Finally, he comes across Sushilov. Sushilov is a house serf and is simply being sent to a settlement. He has already gone a thousand miles, naturally without a kopeck to his name, because Sushilov will never have a kopeck – he goes on, exhausted, worn-out, eating only government rations, without a fleeting bite of something good, in nothing but government clothes, serving everybody for pitiful small change. Mikhailov strikes up a conversation with Sushilov, makes his acquaintance, even becomes friends with him, and finally, at some stopping place, treats him to vodka. He finally makes the suggestion: how would he like to exchange? 'I, Mikhailov, this and that, I'm going to hard labor, not really to hard labor, but to a "special section." It's hard labor, but special, meaning better.' ... Sushilov is a bit tipsy, a simple soul, filled with gratitude for Mikhailov's kindness to him, and therefore does not dare to refuse. ... They come to an agreement. The shameless Mikhailov, taking advantage of Sushilov's extraordinary simplicity, buys his name from him for a red shirt and a silver rouble, which he gives him on the spot in front of witnesses.

(Dostoevsky [1861–1862] 2015: 71–2)

This story relates in particular ways to fate, time and the authenticity of being. The prisoner is not himself, but someone else. He has lost both his past and

his future. 'On his legs are fetters – another's. His crime – another's. His fate – another's. His name – another's. No, now all this is not another's, but his' (Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 209). While some people, like Sushilov, too easily gave up their fates for vodka or money, others, like Mikhailov, too readily took advantage of them.

The Siberian custom of changing fates is a radicalization of its mythological template – the Genesis story about how Jacob talks Esau into selling his birthright, simply by offering him some food, and later receiving his blessing too, by fooling his father, thus in practice exchanging fates with him (Genesis 25: 29–34). The person who too easily merges with the present – who focuses too much on immediate satisfaction – to the detriment of a long-term perspective appears not to deserve what he has lost. Genesis seems to suggest that since Esau has 'despised' his birthright, he 'has no right to complain about his fate' (Shinan and Zaikovitch 2012: 156). Again, in Siberia this logic is repeated, even exaggerated, as fellow prisoners, according to several accounts, merely find it amusing to see how an exchange will unfold: 'Will he hang himself?' (Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 209). The exiled person who left his old life behind and sold his identity for a trifle is thus forced into 'the world of Esau' – a dehumanized world 'of hunting, tracking, transformations of the human-animal margins. Here one becomes whatever one has to become, in order to eat and to feed others' (Zornberg 1993: 155).

Deathly silence, endless noise

In his description of the Sakhalin village of Dué, Chekhov notes that it is 'always quiet'. 'The ear soon becomes accustomed to the measured clang of chains, the roar of the surf and the hum of the telegraph wires, and because of these sounds the impression of *dead silence* becomes even stronger' (Chekhov [1895] 1989: 74, emphasis added).

The Siberian soundscape recurs as a significant theme of Siberian exile writing (cf. Mrázak 2020: 83–103). Many authors speak about silence and sounds. Stadling, Howard and Doroshevich, for example, all characterize their impressions of Siberia in relation to silence:

Everything is quiet and still: you listen, and hear only the sound of your own heart beating; you walk, and only the sound of branches crushed under your foot interrupts the profound silence. Something enigmatic and horrible creeps up on you in this semi-darkness and deathly silence, as you walk among mute

immobile tree trunks, that surround you like pillars in a gloomy temple or columns in a dark tomb, while the clammy air helps to generate a peculiar indeterminable blend of moods, reminiscent of those sometimes conjured up in dreams.

(Stadling 1901: 39, my translation)

The song of birds is an unknown sound. This all-pervading silence deepens, if possible, the dreaminess of the forests, in which the deadliness of the solitude finds its most dismal expression.

(Howard 1902: 313)

There is a deathly silence. Only the crunching of wind-fallen branches underfoot. Stop, and there's no sound. No bird sings, not a peep ... One is awestruck, as if in an empty church. The silence of the Sakhalin taiga – it is the stillness of a desolate abandoned cathedral beneath whose arches no whispered prayers are heard.

(Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 6)

When we hear sounds – or, as in the examples above, encounter unexpected silence – we 'grasp something at a sensuous level that is considerably more abstract and difficult to convey in a written ethnography' (Feld and Brennies 2004: 465). Ethnography, according to the anthropologist Steve Feld, should therefore ideally also include what it is that people hear every day, what he calls *acoustemology*: 'one's sonic way of knowing and being in the world'. The central idea here is 'to have the sound raise the question about the indexicality of voice and place, to provoke you to hear *sound making as place making*' (ibid.: 462, emphasis added). As an integral part of Siberia's acoustemology, silence signifies the end of the world in the sense that it powerfully suggests something 'non-human' and undomesticated.

When faced with the profoundness of nature, people also tend to respond with silence. Indeed, in the Siberian wilderness, as Stadling writes, 'The old songs fall silent, old memories fade, even the voice is muted' (Stadling 1901: 41, my translation). The Swedish journalist Ester Blenda Nordström (1891–1948), who spent over two years in a small Kamchatka village in the 1920s, suggests something similar. As the 'surrounding beauty sank into' her, she recalls how it filled her 'with silence and a sort of almost shy dread'. It was as if 'there was nothing else on earth but this wilderness' (Nordström 1930: 138–9, my translation). Ordinary language seems to fail in situations like these. 'Our conception of a forest', as Stadling puts it, 'is *not applicable* for the *taigá* of Siberia' (Stadling 1901: 36–7, emphasis added, my translation). Such moments of silence,

however, also constitute potential moments of world-making literary work, and an imperative to rethink and reinvent language. To ‘speak with the clarity of the poet’, as Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg observes, is precisely ‘to hear in the silence the babble of infinite combinations’, and such word-making is world-making (Zornberg 1993: 118–19, 108, cf. Goodman 1978, Merleau-Ponty 2007: 241–82).

Inside the prisons another kind of silence reigned, which in contrast suggests the failure of world-making and the dehumanization of language. Doroshevich tells the story of how a Sakhalin prisoner, Matvey, was approached by one of the highest-ranking criminals – this category of criminals were called Ivans (not to be confused with ‘Ivan I-Don’t-Remember’). The Ivan turned to Matvey: ‘The warden wants me for something at the chancery. But I’ve sold my cassock. Gimme your gov’ment issue to wear. Gimme it, y’hear? If the warden sees me without a cassock he’ll stick me in the “dryer”’ (Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 197). Matvey found himself in an impossible situation, and finally gave up his cassock.

No one stood up for Matvey, whose last piece of property was taken and for which he’d have to answer with his back. No one stood up for him because: ‘You don’t talk back to Ivans!’ ...

As they were telling me this story they introduced Matvey himself.

Well, how about that cassock, chap?!

Matvey was silent.

‘Don’t be scared. The barin [master, lord] already knows everything. Nothing bad’ll happen to you!’ the prisoners urged him on. But Matvey maintained the same gloomy downcast silence.

(Ibid.)

The literature of Siberian exile also includes examples of what, following Elaine Scarry (1985), we might call ‘the destruction of language’. These are the torture scenes (Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 28–9, 151, 180–2, 356–8, cf. Wiesel 2018: 64–6). On one occasion, Chekhov was permitted to witness the flogging of a prisoner:

The executioner stands to one side and strikes in such a way that the lash falls across the body. After every five strokes he goes to the other side and the prisoner is permitted a half-minute rest. Prokhorov’s [the prisoner’s] hair is matted to his forehead, his neck is swollen. After the first five or ten strokes his body, covered by scars from previous beatings, turns blue and purple, and his skin bursts at each stroke.

Through the shrieks and cries *there can be heard the words*: ‘Your worship! Your worship! Mercy, your worship!’

And later, after twenty or thirty strokes, *he complains like a drunken man or like someone in delirium*:

Poor me, poor me, you are murdering me ... Why are you punishing me?

Then follows a peculiar stretching of the neck, the noise of vomiting. *Prokhorov says nothing; only shrieks and wheezes*. A whole eternity seems to have passed since the beginning of the punishment. The warden cries, 'Forty-two! Forty-three!' It is a long way to ninety.

(Chekhov [1895] 1989: 208, emphasis added)

The torture successively deprives the prisoner of his ability to speak and then his ability to keep silent. At first he begs for mercy. Next, while he continues to utter words, his speech does not make any sense: he is 'like a drunken man'. Finally, he 'says nothing; only shrieks and wheezes'. 'To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans', according to Scarry (1985: 6), 'is to witness the destruction of language, but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself'. Siberian exile writing illuminates both these extremes.

Those who were flogged lost their ability to speak, but they could not remain silent. Yet the sounds they uttered were incomprehensible and repellent, 'the noise of vomiting'. Several accounts describe the penal colonies as defined by precisely such noise, what Doroshevich ([1903] 2011: 27) calls Sakhalin's 'repulsive vernacular'. In his novel *Resurrection* (1899), for example, Tolstoy describes a scene within a Siberian prison:

While still in the yard Nekhlyudov could hear the din of voices and the general commotion going on inside, as in a beehive when the bees are preparing to swarm; but when he came nearer and the door opened, the din grew louder and changed into distinct sounds of shouting, abuse, and laughter. He heard the clatter of chains and smelt the well-known foul air.

(Tolstoy [1899] 2009: 419)

Chekhov, too, speaks about a 'diversity of sounds':

Under my windows the convicts passed along the street to the measured clanging of their irons. Opposite the apartment, in the military barracks, musicians were learning the marches with which they would greet the Governor-General. The flute played passages from one song, the trombone from another, and the bassoon from still another, and the result was inconceivable cacophony.

(Chekhov [1895] 1989: 16)

The ethnographer and journalist Nikolai Iadrinchev, who was incarcerated in the prison in Omsk, similarly describes how each of the prisoners was occupied with his own things, which gave rise to contrasts that were at the same time comic and repulsive:

The sounds sometimes merge together and sometimes fragment, crashing into each other in striking contrasts. In one cell someone is reading the Bible aloud while alongside him another convict is dancing in the most disgusting manner.

(Quoted in Beer 2016: 167)

E. Krivorukov, a former *katorga* prisoner, remembers how this ‘endless noise’ in the cells made up ‘an infernal symphony that made one feel like it was nearly impossible to exist’ (quoted in Badcock 2016: 38).

A world does not appear out of such diversity, only particularities where everything seems to demand equal attention but nothing matters any more. And outside, there is silence: ‘Neither a rustle. Nor a peep. Only a woodpecker occasionally taps, as if nailing shut a coffin’s lid’ (Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 298).

Semiotic perplexity

For many authors, previous attempts to replicate Siberian exile and prison life appeared inadequate. At the beginning of *In the World of the Outcasts*, for example, Iakubovich eulogizes Dostoevsky, who is often regarded as the untouchable literary master of Siberian exile writing. Yet Iakubovich points out that so much has changed during the thirty years that have gone by since the publication of *Notes from a Dead House* that this book fails to speak to the present. Like Dante, who had to leave Virgil behind when he entered Paradise and trust his own power of expression without the support of literary tradition, Iakubovich realizes that he ultimately has to face his task alone. But unlike Dante he is not in paradise, but in what appears to be hell.

Yet even ‘hell’ falls short of expressing Siberian exile. Cathy Popkin (1992) has suggested that, for Chekhov, one of the most shocking aspects of Sakhalin was precisely that it diverged from the central notion of the myth of hell as represented for instance by Dante. While the forms of punishment in *Inferno* are often exceptionally cruel, they always correspond to particular crimes: the more serious the offence, the more terrible the punishment. This allows Dante to retain, and convey to the reader, a sense of divine justice. On Sakhalin such correspondence is missing (see e.g. Chekhov [1895] 1989: 35; Doroshevich

[1903] 2011: 123, 128; Beer 2016: 275). There appears to be no relation between the crimes committed and the punishments meted out. This observation led Chekhov to experience what Popkin (1992; cf. Young 2013) diagnoses as an 'epistemological crisis'.

Situations when we fail in our capacity to read and produce signs, of which Chekhov's epistemological crisis is an example, might be characterized as instances of 'semiotic perplexity' (Toker 2019: 6). Semiotic perplexity constitutes a literary topos that recurs in much travel writing. For example, Douglas Botting (1973: 76) suggests that Alexander von Humboldt and Aime Bonpland experienced a kind of semiotic perplexity, what he describes as 'sensory ecstasy', when they arrived in the port of Cumaná, Venezuela, on 16 July 1799: 'Nothing – no shape, no form, no voice, no colour, no smell – was familiar to them. Nothing would readily fit into their existing pattern of memory and experience, therefore everything seemed to demand equal attention.' This helps explain why even with the best will, and the greatest insistence on precise observation, early European observers could not accurately record what they saw: 'human perceptions and the ability to communicate depend on the existing stock of cultural and intellectual knowledge, and a long process of rapprochement and growing familiarity had to take place before the peculiar contours of the New World could become visible' (Liebersohn 2008: 19).

The semiotic perplexities of Siberian exile writing exhibit several intriguing features. Rather than gradually rendering visible a 'New World', these texts instead speak of 'the end of the world'. Rather than Humboldt's 'sensory ecstasy', travellers, exiles and prisoners in Siberia instead repeatedly speak of *apathy* (see e.g. Doroshevich [1903] 2011: 231, Howard 1902: 145, 179, Wrede 1918: 62, 161). For Humboldt everything seemed to demand equal attention; in Siberia nothing matters any more. Although emotionally reversed, the perplexity itself is founded on similar premises: nothing fits into existing patterns of memory, language or experience. Indeed, semiotic perplexity, and its condition of such 'non-coincidence', is constitutive of the exilic experience (cf. Viktorin 2017).

Literature, anthropology and world-making

What is the significance of Siberian exile writing? How exactly does this literature, understood as a world literary corpus, relate to world-making? To

address these questions, I place Siberian exile writing, by way of conclusion, in a larger historical context of world-making literature.

Literature on travel and exile traditionally tends to project an already established worldview on to the new and the foreign, thereby domesticating it. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is perhaps the most obvious example, but we recognize the same tendency in older works too. Grimmelshausen's (1621–1676) *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* (1669) is illuminating in this regard. In response to the anxieties of living in involuntary exile on an uninhabited island, Grimmelshausen's hero Simplicissimus strives to make the desolate wilderness less frightening by engaging in deliberate symbolic work. He forces himself to think about his surroundings in terms of a biblical landscape, and succeeds in fashioning a world around him by projecting on to it what he holds to be universal truths (Hirn 1928: 76–8).

Such literary and symbolic work, which reveals the world-making capacity of language in a very distinct way, has religious origins. According to the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament, God created the world through a series of speech acts. 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made ... For he did speak and it came to be', and so on (Psalms 33.6, 9). Humans were in turn invited to praise God's creation – and to grasp and make sense of the world – by reciting it: 'when I recall Your wonders of old. / I recite all Your works, Your acts I rehearse', etc. (Psalms 77.12–13). Humans, as God explains, were thus made 'to hold sway' over the world (Genesis 1.27), to take care of, reproduce and expand it. Literature on travel and exile that repeats this logic thereby tends to reiterate a particular configuration of the universal as well.

This kind of domesticating world-making is widespread outside the domain of religion, too. Dante's *Commedia* helped enable such proliferation, as neither theological comprehension nor fluency in Latin (or Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek) was required to access biblically configured universality once it was rendered as literary allegory in a vernacular language. Indeed, one could argue, as does Peter Hawkins (2007: 139), that the larger effort of the *Commedia* was precisely to rewrite the Bible: 'Dante reimagined the world of the Bible and turned its sacred *figura* into his own literary "fulfilment"'. What this entailed most obviously was the transformation of biblical character, narrative, and typology into the vernacular of his imagination.' In the process, however, the vernacular went through a remarkable transformation: it seemed as if the particular configuration of the universal animated through the vernacular was also derived from within it.

In the eighteenth century, with the publication of voyage narratives by Captain James Cook (1728–1779), Louis de Bougainville (1729–1811) and others, descriptions of real geographical locations gradually became more important in relation to social imaginaries than the fictitious worlds of older literature (see e.g. Edwards 1994: 1–14, Hirn 1928: 399–450, Hirn 1941: 293–306, Liebersohn 2006). The poet Friedrich Wilhelm Zachariae (1726–1777), as if to mark how reality had literally surpassed fiction, even explicitly eulogized Bougainville as a seafarer more significant than Odysseus (see Hirn 1928: 427–8). Although the fictitious now seemed to have given way to the actual, travellers and authors nevertheless continued to project on to exotic locations pre-existing representations: ‘the scene we saw was the truest picture of an arcadia’, wrote Joseph Banks (1743–1820), for example, in an attempt to convey his first impressions of Tahiti (quoted in Edwards 1994: 101). Through such projections, along with the invention of domesticating place-names and other colonization practices, a certain concept of the universal now seemed to be mapped on to the actual world, where it could then be ‘discovered’.

Yet the ‘literature of report’ (ibid.: 221) is nevertheless significant precisely because it originates in the real. In spite of its tendency to reproduce existing beliefs, it also inevitably takes shape in response to what one might call ‘the resistance of the real’: situations characterized by ‘semiotic perplexity’, situations that inspire, or even compel, world-making literary work. Nineteenth-century Siberian exile writing evinces key dynamics of this mode of world-making, and I conclude by highlighting what I take to be the four most important such insights.

First, Siberian exile writing is a world literary corpus that reflects a modern world in the making. The narratives are themselves *of* this world, and appear as decidedly modern in the sense that they are ‘premised on the emergence of advanced communication techniques and a global public sphere’ (Osterhammel 2014: 138). In the transnational debates, which began in the 1860s, of the pros and cons of the Siberian exile system, it is obvious that the authors had an educated, cosmopolitan audience in mind. But memoirs and works of literature, too, are typically directed towards the wider world. The exile texts in addition tend to address the questions actualized at the time by the emergent social sciences. What are the limits of progressive thought? Is it possible to draw a line between the variable and the invariable in relation to human behaviour? Do human universals exist? And what, ultimately, is *anthropos*?

Second, Siberian exile writing gravitates towards similar empirical observations, which function as ‘negative examples’ of world-making. One such

observation concerns temporality. Sakhalin Island seems, for example, to be located 'outside of time', where those banished live in an eternal present, while the past, as Chekhov notes, has disappeared without giving way to the hopes of a future. Another concerns language. Sakhalin, as Doroshevich ([1903] 2011: 27) phrases it, exhibits its own 'repulsive vernacular', which consists of endless and odious noise, unintelligibly Babel-esque and ultimately meaningless. And a final observation here has to do with social relations. In place of an authentic community, there exists in the penal colony what several accounts characterize as a plurality of seemingly interchangeable particularities. Through recurrent observations such as these, the exile narratives collectively convey what is conspicuously missing in Siberia. As such, the texts function as anthropological sources that intimate what must exist for a world to flourish.

Third, Siberian exile writing invites a rethinking of a particular configuration of the universal. In the voyage narratives of the eighteenth century, real geographical locations, such as Tahiti, appeared astounding precisely because they seemed to coincide even more fully with existing discourses than the fictitious worlds they thereby 'surpassed'. By contrast, attempts to 'recite' Sakhalin Island by using well-known imagery invariably failed. An attempt to represent 'the world of the outcasts' truthfully in writing actualizes three facets of the problem of witnessing: the imperative to speak, the lack of appropriate words and the necessity to reinvent language. For Chekhov and others, the semiotic perplexity they experienced in Siberia ultimately inspired them to engage in world-making literary work. However, to allude to Dante, as Howard and so many others tended to do, did not ultimately offer a productive way forward. Instead, I think it would be fair to conclude that Sakhalin appears here truly as 'the end of the world', if by that we have in mind a domesticating and one-directional worldview which the reality of the island resists and thus forces us to rethink.

Finally, Siberian exile writing contributes to the emergence of a cosmopolitan worldview. In their attempts to represent Sakhalin Island – along with Siberia and the exile system more generally – authors repeatedly oscillate between different language registers. On the one hand, they characterize Siberia as 'a world apart'; but collectively, on the other hand, their narratives also actualize facets of 'the world at large'. This is arguably the ultimate world-making promise of the corpus. Siberian exile writing – again, not any individual text, but the world literary corpus considered as a collective whole – transcends the vernacular worlds it represents by placing them within a single world which thereby epiphenomenally begins to appear.

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