

IMPRISONMENT: THE ELSEWHERE EXPERIENCE. ÉDUARD LIMONOV
AND OTHER RUSSIAN WRITERS FROM PRISON
LA RECLUSIONE COME ESPERIENZA DI UN ALTROVE. EDUARD
LIMONOV E ALTRI SCRITTORI RUSSI DAL CARCERE

Giulia BASELICA¹



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Abstract

The well-known Russian writer Eduard Limonov, aka Eduard Savenko, was a political activist. He lived the hard experience of the maximum security prison Lefortovo from 2001 to 2003. In the two years of imprisonment he wrote eight books; all have been published; all, explicitly or indirectly, in an exclusive or allusive way, represent the daily life of the prisoner Limonov and describe his external reality and his inner world.

The prison is an occluded surface, devoid of landscape and horizon, where every event appears magnified and where every man is the same as the other, whether criminal, prison guard or saint. For Limonov the place of confinement becomes a sort of monastic cell, in which he experiences a visionary dimension, a vivid representation of his hidden perceptions. The prison then turns into a meeting place for another self, which is, paradoxically, truly free and pacified. This contribution primarily aims to reconstruct the multiple identity paths that Eduard Limonov finds himself following, meeting his other ideal realizations in remote times or places of the Russian land, to reach a new self-awareness. Secondly, it tries to compare Limonov's existential and literary experience with that of other Russian contemporary writers, who shared a similar fate.

Keywords: *Eduard Limonov; imprisonment; prison literature, Russian literature*

Riassunto

Eduard Limonov, alias Eduard Savenko, noto autore russo recentemente scomparso, è stato, oltre che scrittore, un attivista politico. Nel periodo compreso fra il 2000 e il 2003 ha vissuto l'esperienza della reclusione nel carcere di massima sicurezza di Lefortovo. Durante la detenzione ha scritto otto libri in seguito pubblicati; tutti, in maniera più o meno esplicita, sono espressione più o meno diretta, della propria, individuale esperienza di vita carceraria e descrivono la realtà esterna e il mondo interiore dell'Autore. La prigione è una superficie occlusa, priva di paesaggio e di orizzonti, nella quale ogni accadimento appare ingigantito e ogni uomo si confonde con ogni suo simile, che possa trattarsi di un criminale, di una guardia carceraria o di un santo. Per Limonov il luogo della pena diviene una sorta di cella monastica, ove sperimenta una dimensione visionaria, e trova espressione la vivida rappresentazione di quanto più interiormente egli percepisce. La prigione assurge in seguito a ideale luogo di incontro di un altro sé stesso, paradossalmente libero e pacificato. Il presente contributo intende innanzitutto ricostruire i molteplici percorsi identitari che Eduard Limonov intraprende, ritrovando le proprie identità altre di remote epoche e terre russe fino a raggiungere una nuova autoconsapevolezza. In secondo luogo, il tentativo è quello di porre a confronto l'esperienza esistenziale dell'autore con quella di altri scrittori russi contemporanei che con lui hanno condiviso un analogo destino.

Parole chiavi: *Eduard Limonov; universo carcerario; letteratura carceraria; letteratura russa*

¹ Dott.ssa, Università degli Studi di Torino, giulia.baselica@unito.it, ORCID 0000-0003-1420-4584

After the famous literary works by Solženicyn, Şalamov and other authors, who made the inhumanity of the Soviet prison system known to the whole world, one would have expected analogous considerable interest for the subsequent Soviet prison literature. Yet, starting from the Sixties of the last century some recurrent dynamics began to appear in the Soviet prison population, capable of generating a specific prison subculture, which became, in turn, object of literary elaboration.² Prolific, and often silent, prison literature usually takes on the connotations of the biographical or autobiographical genre. It becomes memory, not only of the writing subject, but of an entire community. Collective imagination then stems from this memory, a karst and heterogeneous memory, rooted in cultural self-awareness that dates back to the most ancient times in the history of Russia. The prison narrative draws inspiration from the post-Soviet context and is expressed in a copious, continuous, albeit silent production.

The silence of the prison experience is however broken by the stentorian literary voice of Édouard Limonov, the only Russian intellectual arrested by both the old and the new regime.³

The multifaceted biography of Édouard Limonov, aka Édouard Savenko, who passed away on 17th March 2020, is expressed in his generous literary production, which is markedly autobiographical or pseudo-autobiographical and ascribable to the genre of autofiction.⁴ In his work, however, a discriminating line between at least two distinct perspectives and, consequently, two visions of the world, is revealed: it is the boundary that separates free men from non-free men; it is the prison fence, which opposes humanity residing in the world behind bars to those who do not know or even imagine that world.

The narrator and protagonist of his stories crosses both territories, not infrequently assuming in each of the two chronologically distinct dimensions the connotations of the other. Outside the prison, the Limonovian character adopts unconventional, provocative and scandalous

² See Y. VAVOKHINE, *La sous-culture (post) soviétique face à l'utilisation pour l'administration pénitentiaire des doctrines d'autogestion*, «Champ pénal/ Penal field», vol. I, 2004 (<https://journals.openedition.org/champpenal/7?lang=en>).

³ See M. SLODZIAN, *Les enrégés de la jeune littérature russe*, Paris, Politique Éditions de la différence, 2014.

⁴ In the early 2000s, at the time of the Author's sudden international renown - as a rebellious intellectual and demystifier - Andrej Rogačevskij, at the end of a thorough examination of the Limonovian work says it is not possible to identify the boundary between the identities of Édouard Limonov and Édouard Savenko and, consequently, the distinction between the invented biography and the real biography (See A. ROGACHEVSKII *A Biographical and Critical Study of the Russian Writer Édouard Limonov*, New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 2003). In 2001 Mauro Martini already stood on similar positions: «it has to do with an autobiographical narrative pushed to excess, where the supporting characters appear regularly with name and surname. Nothing is spared, also because the protagonist is not afraid of ridicule» (M. MARTINI, *Oltre il disgelo. La letteratura russa dopo l'Urss*, Milano, Paravia-Bruno Mondadori, 2002, p. 19). The limonovian narrative would therefore seem to fully correspond to the definition of autofiction proposed by Johnnie Gratton: the ideal autobiography is a transparent medium or a window overlooking the past and, in autofiction that same window turns into a mirror that is, at the same time, the writing scene (See J. GRATTON, *Autofiction*, in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. by M. Jolly, London-Chicago, Fitzory Dearbon Publishers, 2001, pp. 86-87).

behaviours,⁵ giving rise to a further contrast: the countries of emigration, France and the United States, induce the main character to acts and representations not contemplated in the motherland,⁶ thus recalling, perhaps not so implicitly, the eternal cultural antithesis, in a European perspective, between West and East. In his anti-American novels, as the Ukrainian scholar Viktorija Sukovataia notes, - in addition to *Èto ja - Èdička* (It's me, Edička); *Dnevnik neudačnika* (Diary of a bankrupt); *Istorija ego slugi* (History of his servant); *Palač* (The Executioner) - the Author addresses a series of questions that characterize, on the one hand, the experience of Soviet youth in the Sixties and Seventies and, on the other, the experience of Soviet emigrants in the West, looking for a renewed identity. The literary representation of these themes is characterized by the same and common motif: the gender issue, to which the male identity of the post-Soviet generation refers to; the contrast between the Soviet and Western male identity models; the perception of female sexuality and gender roles in the West and in the United States in particular;⁷ the evolution of gender identity constructs, resulting from the encounter with a different migrant culture; emigration as a cultural *topos* and self-realization practice, with the consequent destruction of gender stereotypes of one's own culture.⁸

⁵ The behaviour of the eponymous hero, marked by an ostentatious self-centeredness and the expression of a pathological hypertrophy of the ego, as well as a marked tendency to break taboos, is central to the novel *Èto ja - Èdička* published in Paris in 1979. In particular, Rosanna Giaquinta observes, the writer arouses a feeling of unease in the Russian reader of the Eighties, forced to deal with a raw language that deprives the sexual *realia* of any usual, euphemistic artifice (R. GIAQUINTA, *Èto ja - krysa. O literaturnom gibride v rannej proze È. Limonova*, «Russica Romana», XI, 2004, pp. 97-112).

⁶ See M. PULERI, “*Sospendo il giudizio*”. *Il ritratto dell'ego limonoviano di Emmanuel Carrère*, «Studi Slavistici», X (2013), pp. 219-236.

It is therefore possible to identify at least two strands in Limonovian literary production: the strand of prose inspired by free life to which the cycle of American novels and the Charkov cycle belong (See R. GIAQUINTA, cit): *Èto ja - Èdička* (It's me, Eddie, 1979), *Dnevnik neudačnika* (Diary of a loser, 1982), *Istorija ego slugi* (His Butler's story, 1982); *Podrostok Savenko* (The Teenager Savenko, 1983), *Molodoj negodjaj* (A Young Scoundrel, 1986); *U nas byla velikaja epoha* (We had a great epoch, 1988) and the vein of novels inspired by prison life, or composed in prison, and published between 2001 and 2005.

⁷ Cfr. V. SUKOVATAIA, *Èduard Limonov in Search of a "New Masculinity"*, «Russian Politics & Law», 2008, January-February, pp. 20-30.

⁸ Therein.

⁶ Limonov «had transformed his cell in the transit prison of Lefortovo into a first-rate literary forge, producing thousands of pages» (M. MARTINI, *L'utopia spodestata. Le trasformazioni culturali della Russia dopo il crollo dell'Urss*, Torino, Einaudi, 2005, p. 150). (Unless otherwise indicated translations are by the author of this article).

The cycle of prison novels is made up of: *Svjaščennye monstry* (The Holy Monsters), *Drugaja Rossija* (The Other Russia), *Kontrol'nyj vystrel* (Control Shot), composed in 2001 and published in 2003; *V plenu u mertvecov* (Imprisoned by Dead Men) and *Kniga vody* (The Book of Water) written and published in 2002; *Po tjur'mam* (From one Prison to another) written and published in 2004 and *Toržestvo metafiziki* (Triumph of metaphysics), written and published in 2005.

⁷ Èduard Limonov's prison experience began in 2001, when he was arrested on charges of terrorism, conspiracy against the constitutional order and arms trafficking. The writer was also accused of planning the invasion of Kazakhstan. He was imprisoned in Lefortovo; then the Saratov court sentenced him, after a year of pending trial, to four years, with a single charge, the purchase of weapons. He was therefore acquitted of other charges and, released for good behaviour in 2003, served only two years of the sentence initially imposed.

According to the Ukrainian scholar, Limonovian novels played an essential role in the evolutionary process of liberal-oriented social consciousness in the post-Soviet era. This is achieved through the representation of a different type of gender relationship based on the deconstruction of the Soviet cultural myth of virility and the growing awareness of the need to guarantee greater tolerance, with respect to gender roles, along with the expansion of several cultural representations of men and women. By literally transfiguring this territory of cultural emigration, the US context, Limonov therefore designates, in the American cycle, the space in which an individual - therefore the literary self or the writing self - of Soviet cultural education can get rid of gender stereotypes, capturing the opportunity for self-realization. However, a much deeper liberation far beyond the boundaries of individuality takes place, oximorically, in the Russian context. It is literature that allows the whole process to be carried out:⁹ autobiographism or explicit autobiography is grafted into hyper-realistic narratives, in the closed space of the prison.¹⁰ Limonov embodies an unprecedented overall vision, not only that of a humanity secluded and deprived of any opportunity of redemption, but, of an ontological and ethical perspective unhinged by the traditional system of values still markedly conditioned by the cultural myths of a Soviet past still close. Prison thus becomes a metaphysical dimension, a place for reflection around ethical and moral issues; of profound elaborations aroused by direct observation, reading and meditation. It is perhaps not irrelevant to observe that, in the first two decades of the 2000s, the awareness of this peculiar dimension unites other writers or people who, through their traumatic experience of prison and the profound need to narrate it, discover their literary identity and «they make us live experiences that are not ours, avoiding falling into the indefinite».¹¹ Among these Authors we can remember, for example, Azriël' (pseudonym of Jurij Sarkisjan), first sentenced to death, and who has been serving a life sentence for more than twenty years in an Armenian prison. He told his experiences in *Vysřajja mera nakazanija* (Life sentence, Moskva, Ė. RA, 2016); Vitalij Lozovskij, a Ukrainian doctor who, held from 1998 to 2001 in twelve institutions, prisons and prison camps, in Ukraine and Russia, is the author of various books, such as *Kak vyřit 'i provesti vremja s pol'zoj v tjur'me* (How to survive and spend time profitably in prison, volumes I and II, Moskva, Lit Res, 2005 and 2016); *Obosnuj za řiřn '. Vorovskoe, ljudskoe, gadskoe v voprosach i otvetach* (Justify your life. Crime and cowardice in questions and answers, Moskva, Izdatel'skie reřenija, 2014); *Intensivnyj kurs podgotovki k svobode* (Intensive preparatory course for freedom, Moskva, Lit Res, 2019); *Sokrytoe vo sne*

¹¹ M. RAVAIOLI, *Prefazione*, in M. Urich, *Il bicchiere mezzo pieno. Il racconto di un sopravvissuto alla Shoah*, Torino, Yume, 2015, p. 11.

(Concealed in the dream, Moskva, Lit Res, 2018); Aleksej Pavlov, pseudonym of Il'ja Stařevskij, detained for one year in Russian prisons, in 1998, is the Author of *Dolžno bylo ne tak* (It had to go differently, Praha, Heldenburg, 2003).

Names, events and narratives together with other authors of the past and present and their contributions, form a vast galaxy whose center of gravity is ideally represented by the prison literary production of Eduard Limonov. The latter - or the Narrator who is a screen or a reflection of the Author, according to what can be inferred from Rogačevskij's¹² considerations – plays the role of the observer.¹³ In the prison microcosm he observes humanity with particular attention: he dwells on the physiognomic features of the inmates, identifying peculiar elements and, not infrequently, their ethnic origin, perhaps remote. In *Po tjur'mam* he notes that Sočan's face does not denounce its origin from the city of Engel's, in the Saratov region, and indeed it could be mistaken for a character of the *Gospel according to St. Matthew* by Pasolini; he has clear eyes under marked eyebrows and one could imagine him on a tank marching on the Russian steppe, like a Germanic. Lisichin is instead a buried mixed blood, with traits inherited from the tribe of Genghis Khan, to which a distant Chinese component is added; Artëm has large ears and a moon like round face, external signs of Kazakh blood; finally the Russian Jurij has a skull that would have made Lombroso happy. A microcosm, therefore, heterogeneous and multicultural and yet united by a dramatic existential trait: the suffering inflicted by the prison regime.¹⁴ The inmates are martyrs, tortured by prison guards and persecuted by Rok, Fate, the punitive overseer, happy with the sufferings undergone

¹² Cfr. A. ROGACHEVSKII *A Biographical and Critical Study of the Russian Writer Eduard Limonov*, cit.

¹³ In the literary production connected with Limonov's prison experience, the scholar Natalja Tiřenکو proposes the distinction between three types of discourse: the metaphysical discourse, closely connected with the belonging cultural tradition and aimed at identifying the perception of the nature of things and selecting the ways leading to truth; the reflective discourse, which is linked to the dissident tendency. It is active in the belonging culture and oriented towards the consolidation of the existential, legal and social status of the author's personality; the didactic discourse, connected to mass culture and intended to illustrate prison subculture (See N. TISHENKO, *Prison and Freedom: Three Discourses of Prison Subculture in Soviet and Russian Literature*, «International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies», V .3, March, Issue 2017, pp. 259-271). As a whole, Limonov's prison writing, all three forms of discourse defined by the Russian scholar can be identified and this finding would refer to the observation of the same scholar on the tendency, proper to the studies dedicated to Gulag literature, to connect the work exclusively to the Author's biography, renouncing to a wider context consisting of the contributions by other literary works, historical events and cultural trends (See A. GULLOTTA, *A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies: the Gulag Press*, «Slavistic Studies», VIII, (2011), pp. 95-111. In prison novels if Limonov keeps constant attention to the prison reality, in all its aspects, subjecting it to a meticulously critical analysis and detecting its effects - prison authority is, for example, a process of elimination of the individual - he however aims at consolidating his existential status as well, even transforming his character into a cultural myth. The narrations inspired by his interlocutors, the episodes he witnesses or the stories he collects finally make up the varied and yet unitary mosaic of a world hidden from view and common knowledge by prison bars but, all the same, an expression of a complex and stratified culture, of that prison subculture that the Author brings to light.

¹⁴ Azriel offers a metaphorical and vivid, even pictorial, representation of spiritual suffering: the heart and soul sink in anguish, like in a swamp. And yet the prisoner survives, because, spiritually, he is actually partially dead and really dies as soon as he tries to resurrect memories which are incompatible with the condition of imprisonment: life stops, time abdicates its power: the long years separating the condemned from capital execution seem to him as one day (AZRIEL, *Vjššaja mera nakazanija*, cit.).

by the inmates, whom God probably does not care for. Limonov defines the prison «the empire of a great project»¹⁵ where everything, being close, appears magnified, as in an interminable close-up, which alternates with the obsessive framing of a detail. In prison, Limonov points out, there is no extension, there is no landscape, more important, there is no horizon.¹⁶ Hence, the transfiguration of reclusive humanity, evoked in the multitude of pumpkins or bristly eggs, the prisoners' heads, torn by the holes in the eyes. They are bushy and, like ponds, invaded by the rush, that is, covered with eyelashes and eyebrows; they are cloudy and viscous ponds, surrounded by furrows. The nose has dark caves: the nostrils. The mouth is a moist opening, with the roots of the teeth (either healthy and young or decayed and coated with gold). And then the gray hollows of wrinkles on the chin. This, the author concludes, is the vision that is offered to the cockroach that climbs onto the inmate, sunk in his sleep.¹⁷ But sometimes the landscape, the nature, whose direct and real vision the prisoner is deprived, acquire a poignant concreteness in the act of re-enactment, in memory. A significant example of this is the memory of the Seine water, of its changing colours - milk white, gray or blue - with the changing of the seasons, therefore according to the colour of the sky, the clouds, the inclination of the sun's rays or again, according to the amount of rain that has fallen or the type of algae floating on the surface, it recalls the brown colour of the Don in autumn, with the reflection of the trees that have not yet lost their leaves.¹⁸

The metaphorical assimilation of the inmate to a natural landscape, to the wildness, to the anarchist luxuriance of nature, which is indeed thriving because free and independent, if, on the one hand, identifies in the actions of the judicial authority the cause of the prisoner degradation process,¹⁹ on the other hand, refers to his continuous claim of independence, constantly punished by prison surveillance. It is therefore the prison itself that induces the prisoner to take actions and adopt reactive behaviours of an anarchic nature, to then punish him with acts that are not without sadism. Limonov observes and, mostly, listens to his fellow prisoners. He listens to their stories,

¹⁵ «Tjur'ma – eto imperija krupnogo plana» (E. LIMONOV, *Po tjur'mam*, Moskva, Ad Marginem, 2004, p.6).

¹⁶ In *Dolžno bylo ne tak* Aleksej Pavlov reflects on the space-time dimension of the cell: the insufficiency of space is compensated by the excess of free time; while in the chronicle of *Vysšaja mera nakazaniya* in the existential perception of Azriël the temporal dimension dramatically widens by projecting the individual into another parallel.

¹⁷ Cfr. E. LIMONOV, *Po tjur'mam*, cit.

¹⁸ Cfr. E. LIMONOV, *Kniga vody*, Moskva, Ad Marginem, 2000. Aleksej Pavlov, on the other hand, recalls the impressive and even cruel image of a landscape challenged by man: the north face of Pik Svobodnaja Koreja, in Kirgizija. In 1987, Pavlov participated in the Soviet Mountaineering Championship. Of that failed enterprise he remembers every detail and entertains his cellmates with his story. In *Dolžno bylo ne tak* he ponders over that time: to appreciate freedom it is necessary to be temporarily deprived of it. In fact, the ascent to the summit involves extreme control of every single gesture, the rigorous limitation of each movement and the strenuous resistance to fatigue.

¹⁹ The transformation, primarily external, of the secluded recalls Goffman's observations: prison, as a total institution, is the place where authority acts on all components of the inmate's self; form, behavior and, namely, appearance. It violates the territories belonging to the inmate's self and «the boundary that the individual places between his being and the environment is invaded and the embodiment of self profaned» (E. GOFFMAN, *Asylums. Essays on the Condition of the Social Situation of Patients and Other Inmates*, New York, Anchor Books, 1961, p. 23).

collects their confessions, attends their outbursts: he witnesses their suffering, which must become a written word, in the form of narrative.²⁰ Limonov then welcomes the serious exhortation of the prisoner Sočan: «Write for us, Limon. So that people know how things are here. We can't do it. You know how to do it»²¹ and concludes the fourth chapter of the novel *Po tjur'mam* with the words: “Done, Andrej Sočan, I wrote about you, as promised”²².

The inmate's request, accepted by the writer, evokes a similar and famous exchange, the one between Anna Achmatova and an unknown woman, both lining up in front of the Kresty prison in Leningrad, both waiting to deliver their parcel, so that it could be given to their imprisoned relatives.²³

Thus only the poet, the writer, can therefore tell the horror and the suffering;²⁴ Anna Achmatova describes them from outside the prison: they are the horror and suffering of those condemned to await, not infrequently in vain, of news or even just a proof that their loved ones are still alive. Limonov's telling is from inside the prison: after having transformed the testimonies of the prisoners into narratives, he then draws interesting conclusions.²⁵ The sentences of the courts, much heavier than the guilt of the accused - Limonov observes - are the result of the heavy tradition of Russian despotism, with the annexed, programmatic intent, perpetrated by the State, to destroy the personality of the subject who opposes the authoritarianism of absolute power.

²⁰ From the prisoners' self-narratives, as acts of a subjective and spontaneous will, derives the re-appropriation of the self, which, at the time of admission, had been exposed to a foreign public, with an act of violation □ therefore a sign contrary to the subsequent self-narration □ of one's own private world (See E. GOFFMAN, *Asylums. Total institutions: the mechanisms of exclusion and violence*, cit.).

²¹ «Ty napiři za nas, Limon. Čtob ljudi znali, kak tut- Napiři. My-to ne možem. Ty umeeř' »». (Ė. LIMONOV, *Po tjur'mam*, cit., p. 39).

²² «Ty vidiř ' , Andrej Sočan, ja napisal or tebe. Ja obeřçal'» (Ė. LIMONOV, *Po tjur'mam*, cit., p. 52).

If, in general, prison writing - diaries, memoirs, notes, fragments - conceived to safeguard one's sanity, one's own life, is not infrequently characterized by a crude and primitive narrative style, since it is not finalized, in the urgency of its creation, to dissemination (M. HOMBERGER, *Prison Writings*, in 2001 *Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. by M. Jolly, London-Chicago, Fitzory Dearbon Publishers, 2001, pp. 728- 730); the Limonovian narrative, on the contrary, presents itself as a wise and accurate writing, already standing as a literary work.

²³ Achmatova retells the episode, which inspired the poem *Rekviem* (Requiem), in the preface to the poem:

During the terrifying years of the Yezhov repressions, I spent seventeen months in Leningrad prison lines. One time, someone thought they recognized me. Then a woman standing behind me, who of course had never heard my name, stirred from her own, though common to all of us, stupor and asked in my ear (there, all spoke in a whisper):
—Could you describe this?

And I said:

—I can.

Then, something akin to a smile slipped across what once had been her face.

(CIGALE, *Anna Akhmatova, Requiem*, «The Hopkins Review», (2016), 9, 3, pp.339-347 Torino, Einaudi, 1992, p. 339).

²⁴ In *Dolžno bylo ne tak* Aleksej Pavlov specifies, however, the impossible identification of the reader in the prison narrative, unless one day he finds himself in the same tragic condition.

²⁵ A further difference between the respective intentions of the poet and the writer is evident in the attitude of the lyric I which, in the case of Anna Achmatova, aims at identification with the multitude of suffering women, canceling out in them in order to be their voice. Limonov, on the other hand, probably draws new blood from his role as story-teller to feed the myth of himself.

The criminal justice system represents one of the three main institutions of Russian life. The Russian citizen is trained by school, army and prison. The latter cannot make an individual better.²⁶

In Russian prisons, Limonov notes, the main source of energy of the Nation, man, is held captive and is due to the fact that the State is unable to attract and usefully involve the energies and will of the most tumultuous component of the population, persecuting subjects that in other eras would have conquered, for that same State, Turkey or Pakistan; they would engage in gunfights on the caravan routes, as agents of the Comintern. In this category Limonov also includes the Chechens, the mountaineers who challenged the Russian Empire, and whose *passionnarnost'*, indicated by the historian and ethnologist Lev Gumilëv²⁷ as that surplus of biochemical energy typical of living beings, capable of inciting action and to change one's life.²⁸ In the eyes of Limonov, the Russian state is above all guilty towards youth, whom it mutilates twice: creating outside the prison, particularly in provincial areas far from large urban centers, a squalid and miserable reality, and then severely punishing that same youth, for misdemeanours, namely insignificant crimes.²⁹

The prison is therefore for Limonov a place of observation and reflection. It is the place of change, if not of transformation. In prison Limonov claims to have become wise; to have lived and suffered together with the Russian people; to have dreamed of his own dreams. He claims to



²⁶ See O. ROMANOVA, *Rus' sidjařçaja*, Moskva, Izdatel'svto Corpus, 2018.

²⁶ Anna Achmatova and Nikolaj Gumilëv's son, subjected to numerous arrests and sentenced to long years in prison and in labor camps; he was the young man for whom the Achmatova waited long hours in line in front of the Leningrad prison.

²⁷ Limonov submits to his prison companions the reading of the work by Lev Gumilëv *Drevnjaja Rus' i Velikaja Step'* (Ancient Rus' and the Great Steppe).

²⁸ See E. LIMONOV, *Po tjur'mam*, cit.

Pavlov also spoke about the State intervention, in an autobiographical essay *Otricaju tebja Jotengejn!* (I don't recognize you, Jotuheimr) the sequel of *Dolžno bylo ne tak*, self-published and disseminated onto the Internet in 2004: the Russian prisoner who has been arrested without motivation finds himself in an absurd world, beyond reality, as happens to *Alice in Wonderland*, with the only difference that the mirrors and the wonders of the Russian prison are dirty and stinky. Yet, an act of collective purification is produced, Aleksej Pavlov observes how prisoners become real people, as never witnessed in any time and place - the redefinition of the space-time dimension returns here - in the vast expanses of Russia. If this is the final outcome of the prison experience, the Author comments with bitter sarcasm, then Russian rulers carry out a perfect re-education function.

have gotten rid of all instincts of homologation to the new.³⁰ The experience of prison summarized in the *Preface to Industrial Zone* becomes a painful catharsis process.³¹

Prison is also a place of deconstruction of Soviet cultural myths, characters or institutions, still considered essential reference values. Limonov offers an interesting rereading of Lenin's character: examining the letters written by Vladimir Il'iç between 1914 and 1917, the Author concludes that the real reason for Lenin's escape abroad, after exile to Šušenskoe, was not as much to found the Marxist-socialist newspaper, «Iskra», as to become the early twentieth century Marx, the leader of all the socialists in the world, standing at the head of the world socialist movement.

The invective against the Kremlin, another symbol of Soviet power and history, is fierce: «It is from there [...] that the clever and greedy commanders suck the blood of the Russian peoples. We will shoot you down, stone spider, and in your empty place we will make a public park. We will disperse your miasmatic buildings in the brick dust ... ».³² But it is also a place for the construction or rediscovery of cultural myths, of characters marginalized by institutional memory. Limonov reconstructs the story of Emel'jan Pugaçev, the leader of the peasant revolt in the years 1773-1774, with which he intended to restore the freedom and prosperity of the Cossacks and peasants oppressed by the Caterinian government. And even before Pugaçev, in the prison writing of Limonov, Sten'ka Razin appears, recalled in the Don chapter of the novel *Kniga vody*. The Author doesn't fail to mention Bobrov, the birthplace of both the father of the famous Cossack - leader of the revolt in 1670 against Tsar Alexis I – and the writer's father.

Finally, it is perhaps the place where the limonovian cultural myth acquires completeness. If the first chapter of the novel *V plenu u mertvecov* begins with a sort of handwritten declaration, a long and detailed description of the Author and his condition of being imprisoned in a cell in the prison of Lefortovo, *Po tjur'mam* opens with the appearance of another character, the recluse Sočan. The Author attributes himself the role of an active witness; finally in *Toržestvo metafiziki*, he expresses the real content of his mission - to endure trials and leave traces of it – revealing a

²⁹ Even for Lozovsky, as express end in the autobiographical essay *Kak vyžit'i provesti vremja s pol'zov v tjur'me*, the state of imprisonment is an opportunity to carry out a self-analysis and it is therefore essential to profit from the excess of free time available, and prevent the inevitable perception of insufficient space from becoming a real obsession, which would end up transforming the period of detention into an interval of time canceled from one's life. The state of the prisoner is determined by his strength and by his vision of the world and the only goal to which he can and must aim is to raise the level of intensity of his own strength, to achieve spiritual freedom.

³⁰ È. LIMONOV, *V syrach*, Sankt-Peterburg, Izdatel'stvo K. Tublina, 2014.

³² «Ja opiat' okunulsja v moju ličnuju nirvanu» (È. LIMONOV, *Toržestvo metafiziki*, cit., p. 125).

second biography - which is imbued with mysticism. In prison Limonov discovers the metaphysical dimension, which prevails over the physical one, beyond the sensitive reality melted with it. The two years of detention will allow him to find refuge in the metaphysical world, source of well-being and inner peace.

It even acquires the ability to abandon the dimension of the present and that of concrete reality to access other chronological dimensions or even other planets or ideally assume the features of a microscopic entity. Sometimes, on the other hand, it sinks into a sort of «private nirvana»,³³ free from any emotion and desire. It is an ecstatic trance, not a mere interior experience, but also an expression of an exteriority that pertains to asceticism and going beyond any earthly constraint. This is how he describes his state in the external space of the penal colony: «I raised the visor of my chepì as much as possible and I turned my face to the sun. I narrowed my eyes. I was standing like this, happy monk, communicating with the Sun and, through the Sun, with the Creator of all living things. I was numb with happiness».³⁴

Limonov recognizes in himself the gift of foresight and prophecy,³⁵ a gift that manifests itself in the most difficult moments of his turbulent existence: he sees the 1980 earthquake of Southern Italy in a dream and, again in a dream, in January 2003, he learns in advance the result of the fourteen years sentence, reduced by two for having already served them.³⁶ Limonov notes in himself the progressive growth and strengthening of his faith in an invisible world; a predominant faith fueled by the manifestation of the phenomenon of thought which Limonov places in the fifth dimension, «larger than the three dimensions of space in addition to time».³⁷ Thought is an independent sphere and it also constitutes the proof of the existence of the metaphysical and

³³ In confinement Aleksej Pavlov also experiences mystical moments, determined by the re-enactment of intense emotions, aroused by a vision imprinted in his memory and which has become a recurring dream image: against the background of impetuous clouds, the red walls of Svobodnaja Koreja are illuminated by a mystical light that announces the overcoming (*Dolžno bylo ne tak*).

³⁴É. LIMONOV, «Ja kak mog vyše pripodnjaj kozyrek svoego kepi i postavil lico solncu. I suzil glaza. Ja tak stojal, ščastlivyj monach, obščajuščijsja s Solncem i čerez Solnce s Tvorcom vsego živogo. Ja ocepnel ont Ščast'ja» (E. LIMONOV, *Toržestvo metafiziki*, cit., p. 122).

We also find in Azriel'a thought dedicated to the sun. Dawn is an enchanting sight. The horizon to the east lights up gradually. At the beginning it is like the spark of a large bonfire, with sudden splashes of gold. The disappearance of the sun is painful, it is a loss, and the prisoner tries to slow its disappearance with his eyes, to prolong the farewell. The sunset is always richer in content than sunrise: it is the *redderationem* with fulfilled wishes and unfulfilled fears. The sunset is greeted with a feeling of gratitude, for the day just passed, mingled with breathlessness for the day that has yet to begin (*Vysšaja mera nakazanija*).

³⁵ In the novel *Kniga vody* Limonov claims to have discovered through writing the gift of anticipation and foresight and to have been aware of it at the time he was writing the novel *Dnevnik neudačnika*.

³⁶«Dlja menja eto vlijanie ne sekret. Kogda ja byl vnimatelen, v etich slučajach ja zamečal ego množestvo raz» (E. LIMONOV, *Toržestvo metafiziki*, cit. p.123).

Limonov refers to it in the novel *Anatomija geroja* (Anatomy of a hero) where he says that part of the statements reported in the novel *Dnevnik neudačnika* would have proved twenty years later to be an authentic prophecy : he had actually lived those years mystically (É. LIMONOV, *Anatomija geroja*, Smolensk, Rusič, 1998).

³⁷ «bol'see, čem tri prostranstvennyh plus vremja» (É. LIMONOV, *Toržestvo metafiziki*, p. 131).

invisible world. The latter, the Author points out, does not require proof of its existence, while it would be important to determine and quantify the interaction between the physical and the metaphysical world, the influence of the second on the first and, Limonov specifies that to him that influence was not a secret. When he was careful, he had noticed it many times. One example of this is the composition - like a real mental appearance - which took place in 1969, of one of his famous, long poems entitled *Saratov*. The poem announces the death of the lyric I, in Saratov, a city that the Author would have seen for the first time in 2002, when he would have been arrested and imprisoned in Lefortovo prison. However, the final image «and the strong man in Saratov was tormented / But after his death he was scrupulously studied». ³⁸Limonov himself does not realize the lack of fulfillment: «but they were unable to condemn me in such a way as to torment me. My own prophecy had underestimated my strength. I have overcome the forces of darkness». ³⁹

It is interesting to note in the Limonovian self-belief the attribution of the prophetic character to poetry; perhaps, the literary word itself constitutes a way, the privileged way, to access that other world defined as "metaphysical"; perhaps the spiritual teaching dispensed by literature allows the Author to go beyond the limits of sensitive experience and to know the mystical dimension. But even prose assumes a prophetic character for Limonov, who states in *Kniga vody* that he predicted his future life. The memory of literature comes alive, often unexpected, to comfort the protagonist and to transfer him, ideally, elsewhere: in *Toręestvo metafiziki* Limonov evokes for example a sentence in the novel *Geroj nařego vremeni* (A hero of our time) by Michail Lermontov, observing that the air is «fresh and clean like a baby's kiss». And it is a memory that the Author aspires to transmit to his prison companions, offering them collections of poems, their own or others' novels, essays, therefore sharing with them readings and reflections.

Inmates who have read his novels have feelings of respect and consideration for him; they admire his condition and Limonov undertakes to deliver the message "knowledge is strength", ⁴⁰ knowledge is power, and takes on the task of instructing fellow prisoners, especially young people, ⁴¹ and holds real lessons for them of history, often offering unconventional chronological perspectives. ⁴²

³⁸ «I sil'nyj byl v Saratove zamučen/A posle smerti třčatel'no izučen». (E. LIMONOV, *Toręestvo metafiziki*, cit. p. 137). The poem was published in the United States in the Russkoe (Michigan, Ardis) collection in 1979; in 2002 it was reported as a prologue (*V mesto predislovija*) in *V plenu u mertvecov* (cit., pp. 7-10).

³⁹ «No osudit' tak, čtoby zamučit', ne smogli. Moe sobstvennoe proročestvo nedoocenilo moju sobstvennuju silu. Ja pobedil sily t'my» (E. LIMONOV, *Toręestvo metafiziki*, cit. p. 137).

⁴⁰ «Znanie - sila» (E. LIMONOV, *Po tjur'mam*, cit., p. 87).

⁴¹ In this way preventing the process of "disculturation" which is activated whenever imprisonment is prolonged (See E. GOFFMAN, *Asylums. Total institutions: the mechanisms of exclusion and violence*, cit.).

⁴² For example, indicating the year 1380 as the date of foundation of Moscow, that coincides with date of the battle of Kulikovo, when the Tatar army suffered the first defeat by Russians. According to Limonov the battle would have

Perhaps a further way to the metaphysical world is inherent in the nature of rejected humanity, locked up in prison. It is the way of generosity of prisoners, of Ali Pařa who cripples the Russian without any pity, who contracts his face in frightening grimaces, but who never forgets to divide with his three cronies, among whom Limonov himself, a figure homemade cake or a chocolate.⁴³ And generosity is at the same time the source and expression of the brotherhood of the suffering, of that purely and exclusively human feeling, eternalized by literature, capable of elevating man to an interiorly free, metaphysical, mystical and saving dimension.

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taken place exactly where the capital of Muscovy was built. According to official historiography, in fact, the first mention of the urban agglomeration of Moscow dates back to 1147.