

Prison Theatricality in the Romanian Gulag

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Inside the Romanian Gulag (1945-1964), there existed a sort of prison theatricality concerning the way in which the repressive apparatus within the Communist regime sought to express itself through an "artistic" and morbid form. This theatricality manifested itself in satanic performances and rituals which were a blasphemy of Christian ritual and religion. The prisoners, for their part, wanted to assume and act out grandiose performances of Christian festivities precisely for the reason that they were prohibited.

In any show, there are directors and actors; in the Romanian prisons the torturers, the jailers and all other members of the repressive apparatus were, in a sense, the "directors". In talking about an "art" of performance, we mean performances of torture ceremonies and the Black Mass (at Christmas and Easter) conceived as grotesque and blasphemous shows. The prison of Pitesti near Bucharest is a clear example of this between the years 1949-52. The torturers essentially understood the torture as both ceremony and pedagogy, what happened there circumscribes to what Michele Foucault defines as a "theatre of punishments". Obviously, this prison theatricality during the entire Pitesti experiment is absurd, but not tragic in all senses. Some of the prisoners remember that they were obliged to be disguised and masquerade as Saint John, Uncle Sam, The Pope, Jesuit Monks, and to act as jesters. Sometimes the victims were called by the names of various saints or martyrs, and then were tortured exactly like that particular saint or martyr. One question that should be raised is whether the executioners' theatricality was dependent on the individual's personal history, or if the whole performance was representative of an absurd carnival where all the values were twice turned upside down. First, because every carnival is a reality turned upside down, and second, because the performance took place in prison.

However, the show of torturers and tortured was a show fundamentally of power through which both the body and soul of the victim was manipulated. The question is whether the torture rituals should be interpreted only as a morbid theatricality or if in fact, the theatricality changed its meaning when applied to the prison conditions. There are numerous scenes from the Romanian Gulag which exist on the borderline between act and torture. The repressive apparatus orchestrated all the gestures as rituals of punitive omnipotence: for the prisoners, they were grotesque performances of decrepitude and human promiscuity. If the torturers consciously assumed the role of manipulators of human puppets, thus legitimizing their power as "directors," the prisoners were both spectators and actors, justifiably horrified by the part they were forced to act.

One witness, whose testimony is based on his experience with the satanic reeducation programs of Pitesti and Gehrla in Transylvania, in the north of Romania between 1949-1952, maintained that the reeducators (torturers) were bedeviled and possessed. Thus the reeducation was essentially a metaphysical phenomenon, beyond torture it was a confrontation between

Christians and those possessed by Satan. The witnesses described the torturers as a Satanic sect, noting that Eugen Turcanu, the "Great Re-Educator," and leader of the Pitesti experiment was an "angel decayed", demonically intelligent, having the haughtiness of Lucifer, "rabid" of violence and "drunk" on the power of becoming Master. The witness explained the ritual of the victims' dehumanization. "The torturers had in view the dehumanization and the possession of the human being, because all those who passed through the Pitesti and Gherla prisons became possessed. Some of them, namely those who scrupulously executed the orders of the guards were irrevocably possessed, while others, despite suffering continuous terror recovered after some time." This testimony is chiefly relevant to the blasphemous rituals which took place at Christmas and Easter, which were always accompanied by Satanic rhetoric during the Pitesti reeducation.

The reeducators designed the Christmas of 1950 as a ceremony of ingesting feces, accompanied by the "Satanic choral songs" (scabrous Christmas carols). On the day of Epiphany, the reeducators executed another satanic ceremony, where the christening was desacralized, by using urine as holy water. Easter of 1951 was consecrated in Pitesti prison as an Anti-Easter: the prisoners were forced to make crosses from torture tools, the scabrous Christmas carols were replaced by a vulgar funeral service of Christ; prisoners were made to cross the cell on their knees for the entire Week of Passion, each of them carrying a cross. From them, the torturers chose a symbolic Christ, crowned with thorns. It is important to note that apart from a blasphemous prison theatricality, the torturers could not avoid the profoundly transfigured essence of Easter. Even if the ritual was blasphemous at an oral and gestural level, the prisoners literally lived a sort of obscene "Imitatio Christi," albeit, a grotesque one. Other witnesses remembered scenes of obscene crucifixion or the "baptism in the privy." In fact, the parody of all religious ceremonies was emblematic of the reeducation in Pitesti prison, but the most important was the "phallus ceremony" of Easter. In this ceremony, "the shirt of Christ" was made by a bed sheet dirty with feces, the key of this scene being a sort of totem phallus which the victims were forced to adore. It was not, of course, a primitive fertility ceremony, but was rather intended to pervert the content of the Resurrection; the Resurrection in spirit was replaced by an abject one, the Resurrection as defecation. Remembering the famous expression of one remarking on the apogee of horror in Auschwitz, I should note that Pitesti prison was another "annus mundi." From an anatomic point of view, the torturers opposed to the head and heart and all the organs considered to be impure and inferior. Sometimes, even the Holy Mother was represented during the black mass as a feminine sex, carved in a bar of soap, on which the prisoners were forced to mimic intercourse.

If the theatricality of torture was the norm in Pitesti prison, the reeducators believed that watching the torture had a "pedagogic" effect; seeing the other being tortured was often a cathartic one in the Aristotelian sense, because the victim's feelings were fear and pity, only perverted. Another witness explained that when the reeducators began the collective beating of their victims, they manifested a sort of warrior fury which looked like a "dance of cannibals, before eating."

The same Easter of 1951 was experienced as a "performance of salvation" by the prisoners from the camp of Baia Sprie in northern Romania. The resurrection in the mine was performed as an improvised show in the catacombs, but this show was also intensely lived. The descent into the abyss by the prisoner/miners represented a symbolic mounting of the Golgotha (although here the movement is in reverse), the bells were substituted by drills, the mine vaults were church cupolas, the miner lamps were candles, and the prisoners had even prepared Eucharist bread.

After this "performance," some of those who had been operating as informers confessed, renouncing their collaboration with the repressive apparatus, and all the prisoners dreamed with their families. For all of them, the most important factor of the performance was an auditory one: the sound of the drill-bells. An analogous Easter was to take place in the camp/mine of Căvnic, also in northern Romania, in 1953. The Easter light came from the miner's lamps, but the sound of bells was obtained by striking the drills arranged in a sort of hanging cembalo. All those who participated in such ecumenical "performances" in prisons or camps, confessed to being transfigured by the even, seeing only collective prayer as a return (in time) of the first Christians in the catacombs. The body itself, the one which was so abjectly utilized in the Black Mass during the Pitesti prison reeducation, now became a substitute for the altar.

Remembering the Christmas of 1958, one of the women who was imprisoned described how the political prisoners manufactured the child Jesus from soap, the manger from mattress straw, and the night with stars from a tissue. The imprisoned women were spiritually closer to Christmas, because of the holy birth which reminded them of their own motherhood.

But the art of performance in the Romanian Gulag not only refers to the production of the great Christian festivities. One of the witnesses related in detail the "production" of a New Year's Eve show (1959), performed by political prisoners. It was a collective work in which "actors", "directors" and "script-writers" all participated. They had rehearsals, conceiving a penitentiary performance about the prisoner's life in the Romanian Gulag. The show also included sarcastic portrayals of the repressive apparatus (guards and officers) and it was explicitly ironic in the style of a lampoon, denouncing the authorities.

To the "art of performance" in the Romanian Gulag also belongs the "Ring Dance of the Bonnets," as remembered by a female prisoner: apparently it was a childish game, in fact a macabre dance, but had the effect of an exorcism. Women of all ages who lived in the same cell turned and danced increasingly, while each woman took her bonnet and put it on the head of her neighbor. It was not a dance, but a whirlpool which ended only because of cautiousness and tiredness. It was a well-known game in the prisons for women. The prisoners were relieved of both their physical and psychological suffering. The younger women really were "playing", and the older women forgot their suffering and a bit of the misery of old age in prison. Another New Year's Eve, women succeeded in doing a prison "carnival", complete with theater scenes, fashion shows, disguising and a masked ball.

At the borderline between performance and torture there were many scenes in the Romanian Gulag, such as "taking the bath" which was orchestrated by the guards as a ceremony of punitive omnipotence and was experienced by the political prisoners as a grotesque revelation of human promiscuity and decrepitude. If the turnkeys aspired to a performance of nude marionettes, verifying their power as directors, then the prisoners were the horrified actors, appalled by the parts they played. For the majority of witnesses, the bath had the effect of a thermal shock, for the alternative inferno of boiling and freezing.

The ceremony of feeding the Gulag was yet another opportunity for humiliation and torture, because it seemed to be a quasi-mystical ritual performed by a procession of famished and starving human beings. The political prisoners became a "herd of men-pigs" or at least the members of the repressive apparatus wanted to see them this way.

Michele Foucault describes the convoy of gaolbirds and their "Saturnalia of Punishment." The political prisoner of the Romanian Gulag had a theatricality of faith that disciplined him, sometimes he played little games to pass the time and animate his cell. But when the theatricality belonged to the oppressors, it always dealt with torture.

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