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CREATIVE VECTORS IN VARLAM SHALAMOV'S POETRY AND PROSE

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Abstract

The article deals with the topic of Varlam Shalamov's creative search in poetry and prose and his transition from realism with a fraction of romanticism to factual literature. In this context, the drastic change in the author's attitude towards the purpose of literary art and human nature are explained and the significant change in the pathos in a number of his lyrical and epic works is discovered. The analysis of many of his works reveals that Shalamov treated classical traditions critically and selectively while the poetics of his works changed substantially depending on the goals the master set for himself.

Keywords

Varlam Shalamov – Creative work – Poetry – Prose – “Kolyma Tales”

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Introduction

Varlam Shalamov (1907-1982), a prisoner of Gulag, took his rightful place in the history of Russian literature only in new Russia. His body of work has not yet been fully studied but there are already some substantive publications about him. For example, detailed information about the writer can be found in works by Elena Mikhailik¹ and Valerii Petrochenkov². Shalamov became famous in Russia and abroad as a witness and chronicler of a terrible time in Russia – Stalin's repressions. Shalamov's development as an author and the formation of his aesthetic system took place in the 1920s, when his voracious multifaceted personality that was ready to fight for its ideals, found itself in poetry.

The years of Shalamov's creative activity were a time of consideration of all that had happened in the USSR in the recent past, and the shaping of an attitude to those events that were "still free in its expression and artistic creation and opportunities"³. This book includes the writer's early short stories, the play "Anna Ivanovna" about daily life in the camp", poems, essays and articles. The poet and prosaist's life provided a lot of food for thought and creative development.

At 22, Shalamov was sent to a correctional camp for the first time as a "socially harmful element" for the "incorrect" understanding of "Lenin's Testament". Nevertheless, at the time, he saw this in a romantic light, thinking that he was following into the footsteps of the revolutionaries from the Narodnaya Volya party and the Socialist Revolutionary Party. After Shalamov's return, the writer's works from various genres were published. In 1937, Shalamov was sentenced again for "counter-revolutionary Trotskyist activities". The sentence was being prolonged indefinitely. Only in 1956, severely ill Shalamov returned to Moscow from the hell of Kolyma camps. The writer became famous after the publication of "Kolyma Tales" that he was working between 1954 and 1973. To a certain extent, these stories outshone his other extraordinary works.

From 1932 until 1936, over 80 of Shalamov's articles and stories were published in such magazines and newspapers as "Gudok", "Vechernyaya Moskva", "Prozhektor", and "Ogonek". At the same time, he was writing poetry and prose, developing his particular literary technique. About a hundred of Shalamov's works created during those years was destroyed after his second arrest. Only nine short stories survived: "Hans", "The Three Deaths of Doctor Austino", "Return", "The Peahen and the Tree", "At the Factory", "Liszt's Second Rhapsody", "The Map", "In the Mirror", and "Mr Bergere at the Hospital"⁴.

Results

Shalamov's first short stories were not connected to real events. They were based on the classical opposition of the good and evil and the necessity of the moral choice that

¹ E. Mikhailik, Varlam Shalamov: the short story "Yagody". Primer destruktivnoi prozy, IV Mezhdunarodnye Shalamovskie chteniya (Moscow: Respublika (1997): 74-85; E. Mikhailik, Kot, begushchii mezhdru Solzhenitsynym i Shalamovym, Shalamovskii sbornik: Vyp. 3. (Vologda: Grifon, 2002), 101-114 y E. Mikhailik. Kot, begushchii mezhdru Solzhenitsynym i Shalamovym...

² V. V. Esipov, Valerii Petrochenkov Shalamov i mirovaya kultura, Shalamovskii sbornik: Vyp. 3. (Vologda: Grifon, 2002), 92-100.

³N. V. Ganushchak, Tvorchestvo Varlama Shalamova kak khudozhestvennaya Sistema. Abstract of the Dissertation (Tyumen, 2003).

⁴ L. Klain, Ovladenie tekhniki (o rannei proze V. Shalamova). Available at: <https://shalamov.ru/research/91/>

the main character had to make. For example, the story “Hans” (1935) is relatively short and dynamic: the past and the future of a German officer fit into a few lines. The characters are outlined in broad strokes and the style is sharp, “clipped”: “Waiter, one more pint. Send the flower girl here. A small bouquet. Cheap ones, you know. Yes, yes, to that lady. Fair-haired, at the corner table... Do not say that. I did not mean to upset you, but you understand... I have very little time. I ask for minutes, short minutes, Margaret, you are a brave woman. You are quiet. I respect you. I love, do not get angry. I do more than just love. I hate. I wish I could fight together. Hans, you are mistaking me for someone else”⁵.

The short story “The Three Deaths of Doctor Austino” was written a year later (1936). Here the implementation of a slightly different writing technique is evident, as well as the inclusion of psychological and emotional-evaluative elements: “I refuse, – said doctor Austino loudly and clearly. – You be damned! ... Stop! Doctor! A person dies and a person is born... And why did he become a doctor? He loved people – he wanted to and began to cure them, to save life from death. By dying, the doctor is saving the lives of two people. And maybe a third – his own. The prison warden does feel human emotions. Gratitude”⁶. All character's feelings and thoughts are given in the author's descriptions. The narrator's stream of consciousness reveals his attitude towards the situation and the characters. The doctor, having a chance to escape from prison, does not. To save a child and a woman giving birth, he performs his professional duty and protects his honor. This costs the doctor his life.

The short story “Hans” is full of the characters' actions while “The Three Deaths of Doctor Austino” contains a lot of hidden reflections, inner dialogues, and the wavering between the efforts to stay alive and the wish to be remembered as a moral person. However, one can see that even in his early works, the writer did not strive for a happy ending, did not try to soften or embellish the reality he described. This trait was reflected in most of the endings of his later works while his style and language underwent an obvious change.

In a later short story “The Peahen and the Tree” (1937), the stylistics and the narrative are even more expressive and complex. The sentences get longer, there are adverbial participle phrases that give the text the feeling of smoothness and flow, and direct speech with colloquial, nation-specific, dialectic, and other distinguishing lexical units is used more often. For example, “It is hardly possible for us, mummy. You were the best lace maker in the North and now people call you that. Anespodist Aleksandrovich, the inspector, has recently said, ‘Your mother, Nastasya, would do well in the working crew’. – That's it. And the thread is too thick. This thread is only good for making pillowcase lace”⁷.

Over the years, Shalamov's poetics gained even more complex artistic and expressive devices. The writer's prose is close to poetry in terms of the number of figures of speech, which were often invented by the author. Everything was aimed at creating incredibly emotionally expressive images. Here are a few examples – expressions typical of Shalamov's writing at the time, “Anna Vlasevna's nature was lace”, “This changing geography of the log cabin was bothering the blind woman”, “What a thick voice it is”⁸. All this gave Shalamov's works some folk tale-like charm and a deeper meaning. Let us once

⁵ V. T. Shalamov, *V zerkale Series: Russkaya klassika* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009), 5.

⁶ V. T. Shalamov, *V zerkale...* 7.

⁷ V. T. Shalamov, *V zerkale...*15.

⁸ V. T. Shalamov, *V zerkale...*14-15.

again use the short story “The Peahen and the Tree” as an example. It says that “the old woman developed a habit: once alone, she would move around the room and touched new things. Once she touched a big mirror and started crying. This changing geography of the log cabin was bothering the blind woman. For years she had been moving confidently as if she could see and then she suddenly stumbled upon bent chairs, a dresser, a new iron-bound coffer. ‘At least leave my nook alone’, she would ask her children”⁹. The syntactical and lexical descriptive means of expression make it possible to not only understand what the author is trying to convey but also to somehow feel what is being described.

On the one hand, artistically, Shalamov continued the traditions of the former so-called democratic classical literature by depicting everyday life. On the other hand, content-wise, he somewhat departed from that tradition. According to both Russian and world classics, a person must preserve their morality and spirituality, that is, humanity, through any devastating trials, both moral and physical. Shalamov believed that one must, however, unfortunately, the powers of Homo sapiens are not limitless and outside of their scope lies the “process of personal moral degradation”¹⁰. Most of Shalamov's work during the hard labor years and afterwards were dedicated to this idea.

Discussion

Shalamov's prose

Shalamov realized the imperfection of the “human project” while being behind the barbed wire and this realization greatly influenced the rest of his life, his worldview, and, naturally, his work. He decided that friendship, kindness, or hope can never arise or survive in extremely severe living conditions “when life is at stake”. Moreover, he believed that due to constant hunger, cold, and beatings, a person turns into an animal that lives off spite and the thought of one's own survival at any cost. Hard labor camps do no good to anyone but only corrupt¹¹. The short article deals with what he saw and understood during his 16 years in Stalin's camps.

Certainly, it was a discussion not only with the classics but also with the pioneer of the topic of Gulag in literature A. Solzhenitsyn and some other authors, for example, G. Demodov, who wrote about the horrors of Stalin's labor camps. It is impossible not to address the relationship between Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov while speaking about the writers. Solzhenitsyn supposed the idea that it was possible to remain human in inhuman conditions¹². On ne proklinal tyurmu v svoem “issledovanii”: “Ya dushu tam vzrastil, dostatochno tam sidel, i govoryu nepreklyonno: – Blagoslovenie tebe, tyurma, chto ty byla v moei zhizni!” [He did not curse prison in his “investigation”: “I have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: “Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!”]. Ultimately, this idea is expressed already in his first camp-related story (short story, according to the author) “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich”. However, Shalamov suggested that Solzhenitsyn might have depicted “a ‘light’, not quite real camp”¹³. It is known

⁹ V. T. Shalamov, *V zerkale*... 15.

¹⁰ L. V. Zharavina, *Lyudi “tretego udela”*: V. Shalamov i russkoe zarubezhe (On the centenary of V.T. Shalamov's birth). *Vestnik VolGU* Vol: 8 num 6 (2007): 7.

¹¹ V. T. Shalamov, *Chto ya videl i ponyal v lagere*. Available at: <https://shalamov.ru/library/29/>

¹² A. I. Solzhenitsyn *Collected works in 30 tomes*. T. 5: *Arhipelag GULAG: Opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniya*. Parts III–IV (Moscow: Vremya, 2010), 497.

¹³ Short stories from the cycle “*Voskreshenie listvennitsy*”: Grafit; Gorod na gore; Letters to A. Solzhenitsyn [1962-1966]. *Znamya* num 7 (1990): 63.

that in 1950, Solzhenitsyn offered Shalamov to write “The Gulag Archipelago” together but his offer was declined. Dozens of years later, Solzhenitsyn wrote, “Only significantly later, while already working on “The Archipelago”, I thought – what about the views? could our perceptions of the world be combined? Could I merge with his ferocious pessimism and atheism?”¹⁴.

The difference in the positions of these suffering writers was in a way explained by a famous researcher of Solzhenitsyn's works: “Unlike V. Shalamov who believed the camp to be only a ‘negative school’, A. Solzhenitsyn pays attention to not only the negative experience that prisoners get but also on the problem of resistance and physical, moral, and spiritual perseverance. The writer described in equal detail the way that the camp corrupted human souls and how people found it within themselves to survive the uphill battle with the communist Leviathan”¹⁵.

To express his “perception of the world”, in “Kolyma Tales” Shalamov resorted to the so-called “new prose”. In a way, the writer was one of its founders. Unlike classical prose, it has a certain guided disharmony and lacks continuous plotlines and thoroughly fleshed-out characters. However, this type of prose was suitable for telling about the “brave” new world and the disharmonious life.

The main theme of Shalamov's prose was “the fate of martyrs who were not, could not be, and did not become heroes”. The writer brought forth from obscurity people who had no background and no past and whose future was taken from them while they were still alive. At the same time, Shalamov's narration is outwardly pointedly calm while the author's commentary is brief and seemingly unbiased. “Someone who wants to write about their camp experience authentically should actually turn their mind to ‘instinctive, primitive thoughts’ and use curt, barren language”, wrote Shalamov¹⁶. The short article deals with what he saw and understood during his 16 years in Stalin's camps. That is how he wrote. However, this “barren language”, briefness, and feigned impartiality affect the reader in an intended way – they astound the imagination. Shalamov uses the “inner dialogism of self-reflection”, aimed to create a multidimensional and multifaceted energetically charged text.

It can be assumed that the descriptions of the horrible reality, the true hell of earth, overshadowed the literary features of Shalamov's works even for researchers, let alone readers. At least these features have not been mentioned for a while. Due to this, the uniqueness of Shalamov's work and his originality were not noticed or appreciated and he was perceived merely as “the witness of events and the creator of a documentary work”¹⁷.

The literary theoretician Shalamov does not fully agree with the wordsmith Shalamov. Thus, according to Shalamov-theoretician, the new literary prose should be based on the principle of authenticity. Members of the Left Art Front (LEF) spoke in this way about the “literature of fact”. According to Shalamov, an author should not “adapt to readers' expectations”, soften, or embellish but tell the whole truth, however unpleasant. At the same time, Shalamov rejects the didacticism, moralizing of literature: literature “should not preach,

¹⁴ A. I. Solzhenitsyn, “S Varlamom Shalamovym”, *Novyi mir* num 4 (1999): 166-167.

¹⁵ A. V. Urmanov, *Tvorchestvo Aleksandra Solzhenitsyna: uchebnoe posobie* (Moscow: Flinta: Nauka, 2009), 218.

¹⁶ V. T. Shalamov, *Chto ya videl i ponyal v lagere*. Available at: <https://shalamov.ru/library/29/>

¹⁷ S. Yu. Vorobeva y I. A. Makevnina, *Varlam Shalamov: novyi vzglyad*. Review of the book: L.V. Zharavina “So dna bibleiskogo kolodtsa”: o proze Varlama Shalamova. *VestnikVolGU* Vol: 8 num 7 (2008): 185.

teach, or lecture”¹⁸. The collected poems were published during Shalamov's lifetime in a magazine in Paris. Overall, as a writer, Shalamov abided by this theory: his prose clamors and impresses, as it has already been said, by its contents. However, it is hard to ignore that the artist Shalamov achieves all this with the help of stylistic, literary devices! He spent a long time working on the concepts and principles of his works and paid attention to the way they sounded.

Still, there is something permanent in Shalamov's prose – his signature brief, curt phrases. Great examples can be found in every short story. Let us turn to the short story “At Night” (1954): “Glebov was silent. The time when he had been a doctor seemed very distant. Did it even really exist? Only too often the world beyond the mountains, beyond the seas seemed to him a dream, a fiction. The minute, hour, day from the morning alarm till lights out was real – he did not plan and could not find the strength to plan further. Neither did anyone else”¹⁹. However, it would be surprising if the writer's style remained unchanged in the post-camp period. Late Shalamov is almost devoid of emotion, there are few value judgments and a lot of intentional rudeness, simplicity, and even primitivity. The form seems to match the content. For example, here are a few lines from the short story “Sherry-brandy” (1958), “By night, he was dead. But he was written off two days later, – his ingenious neighbors managed to receive bread for the dead man for two days; the dead man would raise his hand as a marionette. Thus, he died before the date of his death – an important detail for his future biographers”²⁰. The word “death” is the most frequent in Shalamov's works. The writer often used it as a noun, verb, and adjective – “mortal, deadly”. In works of fiction, this word is usually labeled, emotionally loaded. Not in Shalamov's case. His narrator does not speak of “death as a tragedy”, “death as deliverance”, or “death as a celebration”. Here death is commonplace, an ordinary fact. In this way, camp life is shown “as it is”. In “Kolyma Tales” Shalamov created the style that submerged the reader into the depicted reality. Literary researchers characterize Shalamov's prose as “naturalistic” and “simple” but this is not quite correct. The writer proceeds from his artistic system and implements certain narrative devices. Such “submersion” is rooted in classics²¹.

Shalamov's poetry

In the last years of his life, Shalamov's various facets were gradually brought to light: in the 60-70s, he was a poet, by the end of the 80s, he was the author of “labor camp prose”, and in the 90s, after the publication of his memoirs and correspondence he was an intellectual, creative person²². The reveal was slow due to objective socio-political conditions, subjective experience of processing the past in the camps, and changes in worldview and understanding of the goals of art. S. Smirnov believes that Shalamov is first and foremost a poet by nature, that he “initially defined himself as a poet”, even before mastering the technique of writing poems²³. Shalamov realized that his numerous poems written in pencil in notebooks might not be of any creative value but he admitted that they

¹⁸ V. T. Shalamov y U kostra, Ognivo. Collected poems (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1961), 237-238.

¹⁹ V. T. Shalamov, Kolymskie tetradı (Moscow: “Eksmo”, 2010), 14.

²⁰ V. T. Shalamov, Kolymskie tetradı... 75.

²¹ S. M. Solovev, “Teoriya iskusstva i zhizni byla u nego zakonchennaya. Shalamov V. “Vse ili nichego”. Essays on poetry and prose (SPb.: Limbus Press, 2016), 11-12.

²² N. V. Ganushchak, Varlam Shalamov v sovremennom rossiiskom i zarubezhnom vospriyatii Materials of the 3rd Russian national scientific and practical conference “Sever Rossii: strategii i perspektivy razvitiya” (Surgut, 2017), 151.

²³ S.A. Smirnov, “Avtopoezis cheloveka: Varlam Shalamov”, Chelovek.RU. Gumanitarnyi almanakh num 4 (2008): 243.

were “essential to my resurrection, my transformation, my reveal to the world”²⁴. Hence, they were a form of self-improvement.

Shalamov's early poetic experiments were lost after the second arrest. The writer characterized them as “poor” and recording the impressions of youth²⁵. The motivic-metaphoric complex of Shalamov's poetry is covered thoroughly in this work. In his time in the camps, Shalamov tried to write poetry but he “found his lyrical voice, his poetic face” only in the early 50s. It was then that “blood and destiny” and the “emotional expressiveness and novelty of intonation” appeared in his poems²⁶.

There is comparatively less roughness in Shalamov's poetry, it seems to be more aesthetic. Unlike Shalamov's prose, it does not have artistic austerity, it is colorful and widely metaphoric. Shalamov's poetry is philosophical, addressing the matters of being, whereas his prose mostly refers to daily life, which is often terrible, inhuman. The poetry is freer from the influence of camps and, thus, there is less everyday naturalness. One can assume that while he wrote poetry, Shalamov sometimes rested, like his favorite classical writer I. Bunin who also had different styles in prose and poetry.

There are two main images in many of Shalamov's poems – the image of the author and the image of the surrounding nature – sky, river, forest, mountains. Shalamov's nature is truly “mighty and polyphonic”²⁷. His poetic thoughts are rooted in the natural-philosophic works of classical poets, such as A. Koltsov, A. Fet, and the aforementioned I. Bunin. The poet values the idea of the perfection of nature and his persona feels its inexpressible yet unbreakable connection to it, a kinship with all living things. Nature is the poet's living interlocutor, the participant in his joys and troubles, and the book he is reading:

I found the key to the riddle;
I grasped the hieroglyph's secret;
I carried into our own tongue
the work of the star-poet...²⁸

Shalamov also grew as a poet. His later works typically had more complex rhythmical structures. One could say that over the years his poetry grew increasingly lyrical. It became less categorical, less rigoristic. The poet's favorite device was alliteration. From the whole “stock” of consonants late Shalamov would tend to choose voiced and fricative consonants – “z”, “zh”, “sh”, “shch” – clearly understanding their artistic expressiveness during recitation and their ability to convey the sounds of the world:

Paying for all the ways in coin
Of the rustling, clinking leaves,
We will ask the clattering, clinking Moscow
For paper permission for this,

²⁴ V. T. Shalamov, *Neskolko moikh zhiznei: Proza. Poeziya. Esse* (Moscow: Respublika, 1996), 436.

²⁵ I. A. Makevnina, *Poeziya Varlama Shalamova: estetika i poetika a monograph* (Volgograd, 2017), 37.

²⁶ N. V. Ganushchak, *Tvorchestvo Varlama Shalamova kak khudozhestvennaya sistema* [Varlam Shalamov's creative work as an artistic system]: Abstract from the Dissertation (Tyumen, 2003), 20.

²⁷ A. V. Anoshina, *Khudozhestvennyi mir Varlama Shalamova: Dissertation* (Severodvinsk, 2006), 58.

²⁸ V. T. Shalamov, *Tochka kipeniya. Stikhi* (Moscow: Sovet. pisatel, 1977), 23.

A poet's eternal right...²⁹

Throughout his adult life, Shalamov never stopped considering the purpose of art and, specifically, literature, in human life. There was no way for the terrible life experience not to affect his understanding of the essence and the ability to think in images, as well as his understanding of the "law of beauty". He acknowledged and denied the power of art. He expressed his definite opinion on this topic in 1952 in his letter to B. Pasternak, "I have long believed in the terrible power of art, the power that cannot be measured but, nevertheless, a mighty and unparalleled power"³⁰.

Naturally, Shalamov's life experience was reflected in his other poems. In the poems, Shalamov spoke "for others", carrying out the mission of the surviving witness. Here the persona was the expositor of evil and the pillar of morality; one was supposed to believe him and be guided by him. According to Shalamov's figure of speech, he absorbed the suffering, tears, and blood of others and "melted them down into ozone", thus making them healing³¹. Such poetry, according to Shalamov, was a healing power:

Poems are pain and a healing band aid
That calms down the pain,
The medicine that gives instant calm –
Its role is miraculous...³²

In his poems, Shalamov sacralized poetic creative activity in a Pushkin-like manner, made the poet a divine being. Poetry is the product of a religious spirit:

Poems are stigmata,
The mark of the suffering of others,
The evidence of atonement
For all the people, poet...³³

Shalamov went through a severe crisis at the turn of the 1960s. He was plagued by loneliness and illness but most importantly politicians kept the innocent former Gulag prisoner from serious literature, being scared of his truth. During that time Shalamov again doubted the power of art: "I do not believe in literature. Do not believe it can straighten people out"³⁴. Soviet censorship corrected, cut, and, in their way, "improved" the literary works of all writers but Shalamov was treated most rigorously. If his poems did get published, they were smoothed out, "bloodless". Collections of poems were combined not chronologically but randomly to prevent the reader from dating them. Readers would wonder why "The Kolyma Notebooks" did not contain anything about the "horrors of labor camps".

²⁹ V. V. Esipov, Shalamovskii sbornik. Vypusk 5 (Novosibirsk: "Commonplace", 2017), 317.

³⁰ "Razgovory o samom glavnom..." Correspondence of B.L. Pasternak and V.T. Shalamov. Yunost num 10 (1988): 56.

³¹ D. V. Krotova, Naznachenie iskusstva: kontseptsiya V.T. Shalamova, Vestnik RUDN, series Literaturovedenie. Zhurnalistika num 1 (2016): 58.

³² V. V. Esipov, Shalamovskii sbornik. Vypusk 5...79.

³³ V. V. Esipov, Shalamovskii sbornik. Vypusk 5...115.

³⁴ V. T. Shalamov, "Novaya proza". Iz chernovykh zapisei 70-kh Novyi mir num 12 (1989): 57.

Conclusions

Shalamov's early work is characterized by naïve simplicity, clarity, liveliness, and briefness. Later, a different Shalamov came into literature, first of all, into prose – convict Shalamov, heavy, depressive, and painfully psychological. Shalamov's skill undeniably improved during the later years. This skill contributed significantly to achieving Shalamov's goal – to truthfully convey his life experience to the reader.

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