

CHAPTER 2

Poetry after the Gulag: Do Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov Have a Lyric Mindset?

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1 Introduction

Theodor Adorno's question about whether it is possible "to write poetry after Auschwitz" demands to be posed in Russian. In an often-quoted sentence from 1949, Adorno called the writing of poetry after Auschwitz "barbaric." In two essays from 1962, he explicitly corroborated this statement. In 1966, however, Adorno conceded that the "tortured has the right to scream" and admitted that he may have been wrong not to allow for poetry after Auschwitz.¹ For Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov, Auschwitz was undoubtedly a valid metaphor for the Gulag. However, neither author addressed Adorno's problem directly.² They instinctively chose poetry in the first place to express their ordeal. Their prose response to the Gulag emerged only later, after their release from the camps.

There are quite substantial differences between Solzhenitsyn's and Shalamov's understanding of poetry. Solzhenitsyn has an old-fashioned taste when it comes to poetry. In 1965, he praised Aleksandr Zhigulin's very traditional poetry about the Gulag experience. In a letter to Zhigulin, Solzhenitsyn complained that most of the Russian poetry of the 20th century is "loud, aims at something, wants to show off, surprise and make a special impression."³ In another letter to Zhigulin, he identified this tradition with the works of Blok, Akhmatova, Pasternak and Shalamov. For Solzhenitsyn, this was the mainstream:

I am very much indebted to Michael Nicholson for his valuable remarks.

1 *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*, ed. Petra Kiedaisch (Stuttgart: 1995).

2 Svetlana Boym, "Banality of Evil, Mimicry, and the Soviet Subject: Varlam Shalamov and Hannah Arendt," in *Slavic Review* 67 (2008), 342–363.

3 "... крикливая, куда-то лезет, хочет как-то изощриться особенно, обязательно поразить и удивить." Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Dva pis'ma A. Zhigulinu" [Two Letters to A. Zhigulin], in *Za chto? Proza. Poeziia. Dokumenty* [What for? Prose, Poetry, Documents], ed. Vitalii Shentalinskii and Vladimir Leonovich (Moscow: 1999), 233. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

From all sides, people tell me, that this is the only true poetry—when words do not even have a direct sense, when transitions are elusive, illogical, when they do not have a logic, but hint at something or insinuate something. I agree—this poetry is great, subtle, elegant, real, I love all of them. But I will never agree that there cannot be another kind of poetry. In my opinion, most of Pushkin's and Lermontov's poetry does not match these criteria, but are they worth any the less for that? I doubt it.

Со всех сторон мне толкуют, что вот это и есть единственная и истинная поэзия – когда слова даже не имеют прямого смысла, когда переходы неуловимы, алогичны, но вдруг на что-то тебе намекают, что-то напевают. Я согласен – поэзия эта великая, тонкая, изящная, настоящая, я их всех очень люблю. И все-таки никогда не соглашусь, что другой поэзии быть не может. По-моему, большинство стихов Пушкина и Лермонтова совершенно не отвечают этим критериям – но ниже ли они? Едва ли.⁴

A late echo of Solzhenitsyn's predilection for what he would probably call classical Russian poetry appears in his critique of Joseph Brodsky. According to Solzhenitsyn, Brodsky's poetry is rife with "cold irony" and lacks "human simplicity" and "spiritual accessibility."⁵ Basically, these claims stem from the aesthetic norms of socialist realism.⁶

Shockingly, Solzhenitsyn explains these deficits as due to Brodsky's imperfect moral education in the Soviet penitentiary system. He belittles Brodsky's sentence, calling his five-year forced-labor term (that eventually was reduced to seventeen months' exile to a provincial village) "completely childish." And yet, it is the very poetry that stems from the time of Brodsky's banishment that Solzhenitsyn deems "clearly expressed, with sincere feelings, without any posturing." Solzhenitsyn goes so far as to regret Brodsky's early release from exile, as a longer stay would surely have improved Brodsky's poetry.

Solzhenitsyn consciously sought to continue the tradition of Pushkin and Lermontov in his early poetry. The romantic tone of Lermontov's poetry can

4 Ibid., 232.

5 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Iosif Brodsky: Izbrannye stikhi" [Joseph Brodsky: Selected Verse], in *Novyi Mir* 12 (1999), accessed August 10, 2018, (magazines.russ.ru/novy_i_mi/1999/12/solgen.html).

6 Michael Nicholson, "Solzhenitsyn as 'Socialist Realist,'" in *In the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China*, ed. Hilary Chung and Michael Falchikov (Amsterdam: 1996), 55–68.

easily be detected in Solzhenitsyn's two rather pretentious poems, each with the title "Prayer," which mirror Lermontov's famous two "Prayers." Solzhenitsyn's first prayer goes back to the 1960s, the second to the late 1990s. The prayer from 1962 is closely connected to the sensational publication of *Ivan Denisovich* and reflects the romantic concept of the poet's divine inspiration:

How easy it is to live with You, Lord!
 How easy it is for me to believe in You! [...]
 On the peak of earthly fame
 I look back in wonder at the path
 That led me through hopelessness to this place,
 From where I could send
 The reflection of Your rays to mankind.

Как легко мне жить с Тобой, Господи!
 Как легко мне верить в Тебя! [...]
 На хребте славы земной
 я с удивлением оглядываюсь на тот путь
 через безнадежность сюда,
 откуда и я смог послать человечеству
 отблеск лучей Твоих.⁷

The second prayer follows quite an anachronistic pattern as well. It echoes Solzhenitsyn's apocalyptic view in *Russia in Collapse* (1998) and reanimates the self-image of a poet who is able to talk directly to God and to convey heavenly messages to his disciples—much in the way Lermontov saw himself:

All-merciful Father!
 Do not Leave Your dear, long-suffering Russia
 In her dazed and troubled state,
 In all her many wounds,
 Impoverishment
 And spiritual confusion!

Отче наш Все милостивый!
 Россиюшку Твою многострадную

⁷ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Proza. Literaturaia kritika. Publitsistika* [Prose, Literary Criticism, Essays] (Moscow: 2004), 227.

не покинь в ошеломлении нынешнем,
в её израненности,
обнищании
и в смутности духа!⁸

Even more prominent are the traces left by Pushkin in Solzhenitsyn's lyric production. The future dissident wrote most of his poetry in the early 1950s, when he had not yet reached the limit of Pushkin's lifetime. In a poem addressed to the "Russian Poets!," Solzhenitsyn even pondered whether he could ever survive this limit. Death at the age of 37 seemed to be a prerequisite for every poet who aimed to become the successor of the Russian national poet in the 20th century. And there were quite a few candidates for this honorable office: Maiakovsky, Mandelstam, Evtushenko, and Brodsky vied with Pushkin and aspired to take his place. It is quite telling that Solzhenitsyn enlarged the pinnacle of classic Russian literature to a triumvirate as he would have it in the title of a rather self-indulgent poem from 1953: After finishing his work, the lyric ego trembles not before the judgment of the world, but before the critical reaction of Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoi. In terms of genre, it is significant that these three names represent poetry, drama (albeit in a novelistic form), and epic. Solzhenitsyn wishes to be acclaimed by all three masters—which means that he aims to excel in all of the classical literary genres. In fact, Solzhenitsyn's literary oeuvre may not be attributed exclusively to one specific genre. His writing synthesizes elements of poetry, drama, and epic. Ultimately, Solzhenitsyn claims to present a hermeneutic key to explain the precarious position of the human being in history, society, culture, church, and the state. As his later biography proves, Solzhenitsyn dedicated his entire creative energy to his literary projects. The largest of them was, of course, the monumental depiction of the Russian tragedy during the early 20th century, published under the title *The Red Wheel*, but other texts, too, eventually acquired epic dimensions.

2 The Synthesis of Literary Genres: Solzhenitsyn

The synthesis of literary genres may already be observed in Solzhenitsyn's early short story "Matriona's Home" which dates back to 1959. The introductory paragraph is composed like a prose poem. In 2000, Solzhenitsyn recorded

8 Ibid., 235f.

his own reading of the short story. In this performance he stressed the poetic dimension of the text.⁹ The lyrical structure becomes evident when the first section is broken down into single syntactic units. At the same time this text contains a meta-rhyme of the train, slowing down. The language is clearly rhythmicized; the lines feature assonant rhymes. The text is rich in “instrumentation,” as the Russian formalists would have it.¹⁰ The main consonants can be read as a variation on the strange name “Torfoprodukt,” where the plot of the story is set. The consonants t, r, f, p, d form a sound pattern that is composed like a fugue.

One hundred and eighty-four kilometers from Moscow
 on the branch that leads to Murom and Kazan
 trains were still slowing down to a crawl
 a good six months after it happened.
 Passengers stood glued to the windows or went out to stand by the doors.
 Was the line under repair, or what?
 Would the train be late?
 It was all right. Past the crossing, the train
 picked up speed again and the passengers went back to their seats.
 Only the engine drivers knew what it was all about.
 The engine drivers and I.¹¹

На сто восемьдесят четвертом километре от Москвы, (m, k, t, v)
 по ветке, что ведет к Мурому и Казани,
 еще с добрых полгода после того (p, l, d)
 все поезда замедляли свой ход (f)
 почти как бы
 до ошупи.
 Пассажиры льнули к (*extra space*) стеклам, (p, l, m, k, t)
 выходили в тамбур: (f, t)
 чинят пути, что ли? Из графика вышел?
 Нет.
 Пройдя переезд, поезд опять набирал скорость, (p, r, s, m)
 пассажиры усаживались.

9 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Matrenin dvor,” read by the author, accessed August 10, 2018. [youtube.com/watch?v=ZRaYxUNBV5U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRaYxUNBV5U).

10 Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine* (The Hague: 1980), 74.

11 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Matryona’s Home,” trans. Harry Willetts, in *Encounter* 5 (1963), 28–45, at 28. The translation was slightly amended by me [U. S.].

Только машинисты знали и помнили, отчего это все.
Да я.¹²

“Matryona’s Home” is also a good example of the dramatic dimension of Solzhenitsyn’s texts. There are many sections where direct speech dominates the narration.

“Where’s the woman of the house?”

“I don’t know.”

“This is the place the tractor with a sledge came from?”

“This is it.”

“Had they been drinking before they left?”

The four of them were looking around them, screwing up their eyes in the dim light from the table-lamp. I realised that they had either made an arrest or wanted to make one.

“What’s happened then?”

“Answer the question!”

“But...”

“Were they drunk when they went?”

“Were they drinking here?”¹³

– Где хозяйка?

– Не знаю.

– А трактор с санями из этого двора уезжал?

– Из этого.

– Они пили тут перед отъездом?

Все четверо шурились, оглядывались в полутьме от настольной лампы. Я

так понял, что кого-то арестовали или хотели арестовать.

– Да что случилось?

– Отвечайте, что вас спрашивают!

– Но...

– Поехали пьяные?

– Они пили тут?¹⁴

12 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Rasskazy. Sobranie sochinenii* [Stories, Collected Works], vol. 3 (Paris: 1978), 123.

13 Solzhenitsyn, “Matryona’s Home,” 41.

14 Solzhenitsyn, *Rasskazy*, 149.

begins by spelling out a numerical date—this is not just a technical indication, but a rhythmicized structure.

In the year one thousand nine hundred and forty nine....¹⁸

Году в тысяча девятьсот сорок девятом....¹⁹

In a way, the poetic prose of *The Gulag Archipelago* may be considered a counterpart to Solzhenitsyn's early narrative poem *Dorozhenka*.

The mix of poetry and prose is complemented by a tendency towards a dramatic presentation of different voices. In most of his texts, Solzhenitsyn's tries to avoid a single hero, though his own lyrical ego occasionally stands out quite prominently. This is evident in the ending of the lyric introduction to "Matriona's Home": "Da ja." The lyric ego sets himself on display even more clearly in the epigraph to *The Gulag Archipelago*:

I dedicate this
to all those who did not live
to tell of it.
And may they please forgive me
for not having seen it all
nor remembered it all,
for not having divined all of it.²⁰

Посвящаю всем,
кому не хватило жизни
об этом рассказать.
И да простят они мне,
что я не всё увидел,
не всё вспомнил,
не обо всём догадался.²¹

The lyric ego presents itself here as a collective instance that gives a voice to all prisoners of the Gulag. Apparently, the legitimation of the authorial voice is a purely economic one. Only the lyric ego has a lifespan sufficiently long to tell

18 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, ix.

19 Solzhenitsyn, *Arkipelag Gulag*, 7.

20 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, v.

21 Solzhenitsyn, *Arkipelag Gulag*, 5.

what happened. However, this is a classic example of the rhetorical modesty *topos*. The true reason why the inmates of the Gulag did not tell their stories themselves was obviously not lack of time but lack of literary proficiency. In Solzhenitsyn's only partially veiled literary self-empowerment, the tragedy of the Gulag may be told only by a writer who masters poetry, drama, and epos all together.

3 The Separation of Literary Genres: Shalamov

If Solzhenitsyn tries to synthesize the genres, Shalamov separates them. His main strategy is not to create a harmony of different literary discourses, but to confront them in a contradictory way. Shalamov's understanding of poetry is very complex and ambivalent. The most difficult problem is the question of the lyrical sublimation of a given subject matter. From very early on, Shalamov reproached Solzhenitsyn with instrumentalizing the Gulag to advance his own literary career. The two authors had met in the editorial offices of the literary journal *Novyi Mir* in 1962, shortly before Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich* came to be published with Khrushchev's personal blessing. However, the relationship between Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn was at best respectful and later became openly hostile. From the beginning, the two authors were rivals and got off on the wrong foot. Shalamov had tried to speed up the publication of his prose and poetry by asking Solzhenitsyn to forward his materials to the open-minded editor-in-chief of *Novyi Mir* Aleksandr Tvardovskii. Solzhenitsyn without further comment confined himself to presenting only Shalamov's poetry to Tvardovskii.²²

Shalamov's harsh comments about Solzhenitsyn, and above all about his poetry, are well known. Shalamov, who never curbed his tongue, was especially outspoken in his notebooks from the 1960s:

Solzhenitsyn's secret lies in the fact that he is a hopeless lyrical graphomaniac with the psychological make-up that goes with this horrible illness, a man who has churned out a huge amount of useless verse, which

22 Varlam Shalamov, *Novaia kniga. Vospominaniia. Zapisnye knizhki. Perepiska. Sledstvennye dela* [The New Book: Notebooks, Letters, Trial Documents] (Moscow: 2004), 374. The literary rivalry between Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov seems to echo a similar relationship between Bunin and Nabokov: Nabokov always praised Bunin's poetry highly in order to affirm the supremacy of his own prose. Maksim D. Shraer, *Bunin i Nabokov, Istoriia sopernichestva* [Bunin i Nabokov: The History of Their Rivalry] (Moscow: 2015).

should never be shown anywhere, let alone printed. All his prose from “Ivan Denisovich” to “Matriona’s Home” was no more than a drop in this ocean of dross.

Тайна Солженицына заключается в том, что это – безнадежный стихотворный графоман с соответствующим психическим складом этой страшной болезни, создавший огромное количество непригодной стихотворной продукции, которую никогда и нигде нельзя предъявить, напечатать. Вся его проза от «Ивана Денисовича» до «Матрениного двора» была только тысячной частью в море стихотворного хлама.²³

In this passage, Shalamov formulates the gist of his reproaches against Solzhenitsyn: the Gulag may neither be moralized nor aestheticized. However, the overly aggressive tone seems to point toward a deeper problem. My contention is that Shalamov’s attacks on Solzhenitsyn are based on his own incapacity to write the Gulag without applying literary devices. In a way, he hates Solzhenitsyn as the incarnation of his own shadow, as the worst consequence of the pitfalls created by the utter incompatibility of the inhuman horror of the Gulag and the inherent beauty of poetic language.

There are many notes by Shalamov that point to his sober ideal of a literature that consciously rids itself of its “literariness,” as the formalists would have it. He constructed his own literary ideal as the opposite of ornamental prose, as famously represented by the writings of Isaak Babel:

I re-read Babel and crossed out all the “conflagrations blazing like resurrection” or the “girls who resembled jackboots” and so on. After that there was not much Babel left. It is very important not to rewrite a short story many times. The first version—as in poetry—is always the most sincere. As with the sense of “being there” that we get in television it is imperative not to lose this authenticity under a welter of revisions and prettification. The short story will become too literary—and this spells the death of the story. The material from Kolyma is such that it cannot bear literariness. Any literariness seems insulting, fraudulent.

Я перечитывал Бабеля и вычеркивал «пожары, пылающие, как воскресенье», «девушек, похожих на ботфорты» и т. п. Мало тогда оставалось от Бабеля. Очень важно не переписывать рассказ много раз.

23 Shalamov, *Novaia kniga*, 374.

Первый вариант – как в стихах – всегда самый искренний. Вот эту первичность, сходную с «эффектом присутствия» в телевидении, очень важно не утратить во всевозможных правках и отделках. Рассказ делается слишком литературным – и это смерть рассказа. Материал Колымский таков, что не переносит литературности. Литературность кажется оскорблением, кражей.²⁴

As a first attempt, Shalamov tried to solve the contradiction between his own need to write and the avoidance of “literariness” by reducing the creative role of the poet. He even recurred to Rilke’s fictional hero Malte Laurids Brigge, who maintained that poems need to be rooted in a special life experience, such as the presence of death. According to Rilke, it is impossible to write poems on a regular basis. They can appear only in times of emergency.²⁵ It is not by chance that Shalamov turned to the authority of the poet par excellence, Rilke, in order to legitimize his own conception of a poetry that is not written by a skilled master, but produced by life itself.

In a similar vein, Shalamov stresses that the real material of poetry is not words, but blood. In a famous poem from 1962, he programmatically declared that poetry is not the result of literary artistry:

Poetry—is fate, not craftsmanship,
And if blood does not well up between its lines,
If the soul does not lay bare its nakedness,
Then there is no virtuoso alive

whose observations, precise though they be,
whose innovations however daring,
Will shake the world with thunderous silence
And conjure tears that rise to the throat.

Стихи – это судьба, не ремесло,
И если кровь не выступит на строчках,

24 May 24, 1965, to Yakov D. Grodzenskii. Sergei Y. Grodzenskii, *Vospominaniia ob Aleksandre Solzhenitsyne i Varlame Shalamove* [Memoirs about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov] (Moscow: 2016), 113.

25 Varlam Shalamov, “Stikhi—eto opyt” [Poetry is Experience], in Varlam Shalamov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 7 tomakh* [Collected Works in Seven Volumes] (Moscow: 1998), vol. 4, 322–323.

Душа не обнажится наголо,
То наблюдений, даже самых точных

И самой небывалой новизны
Не хватит у любого виртуоза,
Чтоб вызвать в мире взрывы тишины
И к горлу подступающие слёзы.²⁶

To be sure, this may be an impressive poem. But it is in itself a concealed, and aestheticized version of the Gulag experience. The virtuosi with their literary innovations are portrayed negatively here, but Shalamov himself uses quite daring rhymes and melodramatic metaphors to express his poetic idea. However, the surplus of pathos cannot hide the ambiguities of Shalamov's lyric text. There is even a double contradiction in this poem. Firstly, Shalamov voiced in his notebook the precise opposite of what he presents in the poem:

Poetry is not all about “fate,” and that is not why I write poems every day, as Irina thinks, but because I feel myself to be the best qualified master in this field, to be a mechanism so refined, that it is simply a shame to spend my time on anything other than poetry.

В стихах тут дело не в том, что это «судьба», и потому я каждый день пишу стихи, как думает Ирина, а в том, что я чувствую себя квалифицированнейшим мастером по этой части, настолько тонким механизмом, что просто жаль использовать время на что-либо другое, кроме стихов.²⁷

In the beginning of the 1960s Shalamov even planned to write a book with the title “How to write verse.”²⁸ Later, Shalamov penned a letter to Yurii Lotman with a proposal to contribute a monograph on the lyric “intonation” for the series published in Tartu in the 1970s.²⁹ This was not a random choice. Shalamov admired the work of the members of OPOYaz in whose tradition

26 Varlam Shalamov, “Stikhi—eto sud'ba” [Poetry is Fate], in *Sobranie sochinenii v 7 tomakh*, vol. 3, 393.

27 Shalamov, *Novaia kniga*, 347.

28 Sergei Solov'ev, “Teoriia zhizni i iskusstva byla u nego zakonchennaia ...” [“He Finished the Theory of Life and Art ...”], in Varlam Shalamov, *Vse ili nichego. Esse o poezii i proze* [Everything or Nothing: Essays on Poetry and Prose] (Moscow: 2015), 5–25, at 21.

29 Shalamov, *Novaia kniga*, 933.

Lotman stands.³⁰ Shalamov knew Lotman's *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1969) very well, and Lotman helped Shalamov to publish his article on sound-repetition (*zvukovoi povtor*) in the collection *Semiotics and Information Technologies* in 1976.³¹

Secondly, Shalamov eventually converted another, related notion, once despised, into a positive one. This time, his concern was not craftsmanship, but innovation. The complaint about misguided artistic innovation for its own sake runs throughout his essays. In 1968, Shalamov included the following sentence in an autograph to Gennadi Aigi: "I do not believe in free verse, but I do believe in poetry!" Already in conversation with Solzhenitsyn 1963, Shalamov asserted that it was useless to search for "formal innovations" or "fragmented forms."³² In Shalamov's eyes an especially negative example was the poet Genrich Sapgir.

In his notebooks Shalamov highlighted the fact that Aleksandr Blok wrote better poetry in rhyme and strong meter than he did in the form of *vers libre*. "Vers libre," maintained Shalamov, was, in sporting parlance, very much "second-league."³³ On another occasion, he called "vers libre" second-rate: "it is the literal version of a poem that has yet to be written."³⁴ Shalamov's verdict on poets who did not follow this injunction was harsh: they were mere poetic amateurs, who felt entitled by sheer literary enthusiasm to turn their hand to verse.³⁵

In these notes, Shalamov seems to advocate a strict adherence to the iron laws of traditional poetry. However, in a surprising about-face, Shalamov boasts in his notebook: "I am the innovator of tomorrow's tomorrow."³⁶ The contradiction could not be more striking: Shalamov scolds poets who want to be innovative in their works—and, at the same time, claims to be the most innovative of all and far ahead of his time.

In his literary essays, Shalamov provides a good deal of negative information, defining how poetry ought *not* to be. What then, according to Shalamov's

30 Shalamov, "Pokhod epigonov" [The Attack of the Epigones], in *Vse ili nichego*, 314–319, at 317.

31 Valerii Esipov, *Shalamov* (Moscow: 2012), 313.

32 *Varlam Shalamov v svidetel'stvakh sovremennikov* [Varlam Shalamov in Contemporary Testimonies], ed. Dmitrii Nich (Moscow: 2014), 29, 479.

33 Shalamov, *Novaia kniga*, 933.

34 "Свободный стих – это стих второго сорта. Это – подстрочник еще не написанного стихотворения." Varlam Shalamov, "Tablitsa umnozheniia dlia molodykh poetov" [The Multiplication Table for Young Poets], in *Vse ili nichego*, 303–313, at 308.

35 Shalamov, "Pokhod epigonov," 317.

36 Shalamov, *Novaia kniga*, 358.

view, should poetry be? The most important feature of a poem is what he calls the “intonation.” Shalamov defines intonation as the “poet’s face, his voice, his literary passport, his right to write poetry.”³⁷ More precisely, “intonation” is the sum of all the specifics present in each line, each strophe, and each single poem. These specifics relate primarily to the position and the order of the words in a poetic line.³⁸ Intonation is a question of phrasing, which is achieved by applying a regular poetic meter.³⁹ In a more poetic idiom, Shalamov defines a poem as a “slowing down of the river of sounds by means of sense,” “casting the molten lava of sounds into forms of sense.”⁴⁰

To Shalamov, the cornerstone of intonation is the musical triad of consonants. He divides the Russian consonants into so-called “phonetic classes” and arranges them in a chart.⁴¹

Класс	Обозначение класса	Class	Title of the class
Д–ДЬ–Т–ТЬ	Т	D–D’–T–T’	T
В–ВЬ–Ф–ФЬ	Ф	V–V’–F–F’	F
М–МЬ–Н–НЬ	Н	M–M’–N–N’	N
Л–ЛЬ–Р–РЬ	Р	L–L’–R–R’	R
З–ЗЬ–С–СЬ	С	Z–Z’–S–S’	S
З–Ж	З	Z–Zh	Z
Ш–ШЬ–Ч	Ч	Sh–Shch–Ch	Ch
С–Ш	Ш	S–Sh	Sh
Х–Г–К	К	Kh–G–K	K
Б–БЬ–П–ПЬ	П	B–B’–P–P’	P
Ж–Ш	Ж	Zh–Sh	Zh
Ц	Ц	Ts	Ts

Not unlike Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov is an admirer of Russian classical poetry. For him, Pushkin’s poem “Mednyi vsadnik” is the pinnacle of Russian poetry. In an essay on lyric rhyme, Shalamov even elevates the Russian national poem to

37 Shalamov, “Tablitsa umnozheniia dlia molodykh poetov,” 310.

38 Varlam Shalamov, “Poeticheskaiia intonatsiia” [Lyric Intonation], in *Vse ili nichego*, 320–337, at 321.

39 *Ibid.*, 334.

40 Varlam Shalamov, “Zvukovoi povtor: poisk smysla” [The Repetition of Sounds: In Search of Sense], in *Vse ili nichego*, 386–413, at 411.

41 *Ibid.*, 396–399.

absolute righteousness: “In poetry, Pushkin knew everything.”⁴² But Shalamov is also full of praise for Lermontov. He sees him as a champion of the lyric repetition of sounds in the poem “The Prophet.” The basis of this high appreciation is his own chart of “phonetic classes” that perfectly applies to Lermontov’s poetry:

I put sackcloth and ashes on,
And ran—a beggar—from the town,
And there I live in desert lone,
Like birds, on food that God sends down.⁴³

Посыпал пеплом я главу,
Из городов бежал я нищий,
И вот в пустыне я живу,
Как птицы, даром Божьей пищи.⁴⁴

Now, Shalamov certainly has many an excellent poem to his name, but his attack upon Solzhenitsyn in a certain sense rebounds upon Shalamov himself. Unfortunately, there is also some poetic dross—the precise word Shalamov used for Solzhenitsyn’s lyric production—among Shalamov’s own poems. Consider his poem about the Danish fairytale writer Andersen (1960) which is very traditional, both in terms of form *and* content:

Andersen
He compasses the seas and land
The depths and shallows of the world,
And people’s wounded souls he sets
In fairytales of plainest form.

Андерсен
Он обойдет моря и сушу –
Весь мир, что мелок и глубок,
Людскую раненую душу
Положит в сказочный лубок. ...⁴⁵

42 Varlam Shalamov, “Rifma” [Rhyme], in *Vse ili nichego*, 360–374, at 361.

43 Trans. Yevgeny Bonver.

44 Shalamov, “Zvukovoi povtor,” 390.

45 Shalamov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 384.

In other poems from the same period, however, Shalamov was able to live up to his own program of poetic intonation. “Ust’e ruch’ia” (1959) abounds in sophisticated sound patterns:

The mouth of a creek
 An unknown creek,
 without name, without purpose
 not southern enough
 for these nights of ours,

Amidst seagulls’ flight
 and polar summer,
 and the shining ice of
 emerald colour.

Устье ручья
 Безвестный ручей,
 Безымянный, ненужный,
 Для наших ночей
 Недостаточно южный,

Где чаек полет
 И полярное лето,
 Светящийся лед
 Изумрудного цвета. ...⁴⁶

In this poem, many of Shalamov’s literary devices, including alliteration, intonation, and rhythm may be observed. Shalamov claimed that prose is constructed in the same way as poetry. In fact, one of his most famous texts from the Kolyma stories, “Cherry Brandy,” is more of a poem than a prosaic text. This becomes clear if the text is broken up according to its poetic lines and its phonetic intonation units.

The poet was dying.
 His hands, swollen from hunger
 with their bloodless fingers
 and filthy overgrown nails,

46 Varlam Shalamov, “Ust’e ruch’ia” [Water Mouth], in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 376.

lay on his chest,
exposed to the cold.⁴⁷

Поэт умирал.
Большие, вздутые голодом кисти рук
с белыми бескровными пальцами
и грязными, отросшими трубочкой ногтями
лежали на груди,
не прячась от холода.

Shalamov read his text aloud at a literary gathering dedicated to Mandelstam in 1965. One person who attended this evening characterized Shalamov's performance as follows:

[He is] pale, with fire in his eyes, and reminds one of the Archpriest Avvakum, his movements are uncoordinated, his arms are separated from the man, he speaks ceremonially, free, at the limit, he is about to crash and fall down ...

бледный, с горящими глазами, напоминает протопопа Аввакума, движения некоординированные, руки все время ходят отдельно от человека, говорит прекрасно, свободно, на последнем пределе, – вот-вот сорвется и упадет ...⁴⁸

In that same year, in a personal letter Shalamov insisted on the higher truth of his description of Mandelstam's death. Ultimately, he valued his literary imagination higher than a factual testimonial—of course, Shalamov himself had not personally witnessed Mandelstam's death:

In the short story “Cherry Brandy” there are fewer violations of historical truth than in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. It describes the transit camp in Vladivostok where Mandelstam died. It describes death from starvation, death from dystrophy, when life recedes by turns. Mandelstam starved to death. What other truth do you need?

47 Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, trans. John Glad (London: 1994), 69.

48 “Vecher pamiati O. E. Mandel'shtama” [An Evening in Memory of Osip Mandelstam], in Varlam Shalamov, *Vospominaniia* [Memoirs] (Moscow: 2001), 304–315, at 313.

В рассказе «Шерри-бренди» нарушения исторической правды меньше, чем в Пушкинском «Борисе Годунове». Описана та самая пересылка во Владивостоке, где умер Мандельштам. Описана смерть от голода, от алиментарной дистрофии, где жизнь то возвращается, то уходит. Мандельштам умер от голода. Какая вам нужна еще правда?⁴⁹

An important issue in Shalamov's understanding of poetry is the notion of "écriture automatique," as the French avant-garde of the 1920s would have it. But in this case, too, we can observe some striking contradictions.

Shalamov claimed that he wrote his "Kolyma" poem "He warms his frozen fingers" *en plein air*, immediately upon its conception.⁵⁰ The text was allegedly never altered. Shalamov even purports to have thought it a blasphemy to change its "rhythmic design."⁵¹

This contradicts the textual history of most other poems written in Kolyma. Shalamov himself pointed out that his other poems from Kolyma were written in more than 100 variations.⁵² This is probably the opposite extreme of exaggeration when it comes to depicting his own writing practices. The middle ground seems more likely. In fact, Shalamov himself admitted that the writing of poetry was a technological process:

Many consider poetry to be a miracle, a riddle. I do not think so, and I explain its appearance in a notebook in the most satisfying, completely materialistic way. Poems get into the notebook by dint of being set down in written form. This fixation is unique and subject to laws different from those which apply to oral speech.

Многие считают стихи чудом, загадкой. Я не считаю и самым удовлетворительным, вполне материалистическим образом объясняю их появление в тетради. В тетрадь стихи попадают путем письмен-

49 May 24, 1965 to Yakov D. Grodzenskii, in *Vospominaniia ob Aleksandre Solzhenitsyne i Varlame Shalamove*, 111.

50 Michael Nicholson, "Shalamov v spore o lagernoi poezii" [Shalamov in the Debate about Labor-Camp Poetry], in *IV Mezhdunarodnye Shalamovskie Chteniia (Moskva 18–19 iunია 1997 goda)* (Moscow: 1997), 104–113.

51 Varlam Shalamov, *Kolymskie tetradi* [Notebooks from Kolyma] (Moscow: 1994), 270.

52 *Ibid.*, 267.

ной записи. Эта фиксация и своеобразна, и подвержена другим законам, чем просто устная речь.⁵³

Generally, Shalamov maintained there should be only two redactions of a poem:

In theory, every poem can be improved. It can be enhanced, and such improvement could well go on endlessly. The editing of the second written version is for me an incredible, purely physical torment; any further enhancement and improvement costs me so much nervous strain that it is better to dispense with it altogether. The difficulty here is that it is very hard to return to that unique state, that specific tension of nerves, talent, spirit, that first thrust the poem onto paper.

Теоретически любое стихотворение можно улучшить. Добавить кое-что и, вероятно, улучшать можно бесконечно. Я так не делаю. Переработка второй записи представляет для меня невероятное, чисто физическое мучение; дальнейшее улучшение и добавление стоят таких нервов, что лучше от него отказаться. Трудность здесь заключается в том, что очень трудно вернуться в уникальное состояние определенного напряжения нервов, таланта, ума, которое ранее вытолкнуло на бумагу стихи.⁵⁴

There is another clue that reveals the advantages of editing and reworking lyric texts. In a contribution to the important journal *Voprosy literatury* in 1963, Shalamov carefully tracked the different versions of Bunin's translation of Longfellow's epic poem "The Song of Hiawatha." He concluded that the last of several versions was the most successful.⁵⁵

We can note a final contradiction in Shalamov's challenging conceptualization of poetry. Famously, he likened the "true Gulag writer" to Pluto who rises from hell. At the same time he rejected what he called the touristic approach: Shalamov refers to Orpheus, who visits hell with his instrument to sing there.

53 Varlam Shalamov, "Poet iznutri" [A Poet from within], in Varlam Shalamov, *Neskol'ko moikh zhiznei. Proza. Poeziia. Esse* [Some of my Lives: Prose, Poetry, Essays] (Moscow: 1996), 434–441, at 439.

54 Shalamov, "Zvukovoi povtor," 392.

55 Varlam Shalamov, "Rabota Bunina nad perevodom *Pesni o Gaivate*" [Bunin's Work on His Translation of *The Song of Hiawatha*], in *Sobranie sochinenii v 7 tomakh*, vol. 7, 238–245.

Shalamov, however, does not really have Orpheus in mind so much as Solzhenitsyn, who is not merely a tourist but, even worse, a “manager” of his own fame.

And yet, Shalamov praises one of these tourists in one of his notebooks from 1954—namely Chekhov, who, after Sakhalin, did not write a single “happy” short story. As Shalamov puts it, “a new, more serious period in his literary activity begins.”⁵⁶ From Shalamov’s perspective, such a turn towards seriousness should certainly be valued positively. At the same time, tourism to catastrophic places would seem to yield some literary benefit.⁵⁷

Shalamov’s strict theory of pure poetry without artistic embellishment or personal disinvolvement of the author is not tenable. This is not to say that Shalamov was a shallow theoretician of literature. Rather, the irresolvable contradictions in his reasoning should be seen as a tragic consequence of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of writing the Gulag.

4 Poetry under the Conditions of Prose: Hegel

In order to answer Adorno’s question, adapted to the Russian case, we should turn to a more fundamental problem: Do Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov have a lyric mindset? Only if they do would it be possible to say that the Gulag lends itself to a description in poetry (or in prose that is very close to poetry).

What is a “lyric mindset”? Probably this concept is most adequately explained with reference to the Hegelian categories of poetry and prose.⁵⁸ Hegel considered poetry to be the original mode of human expression, as presenting an unconditional truth. Prose followed poetry, and prose applied the logical categories of human thought such as causality or consecutivity to reality. However, after the emergence of prose, poetry is only able to emulate its original claim to truth and freedom.

Truth is a central category in the works of Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov. Both writers claimed to put truth at the heart of their literary writings. However, their poetics are radically different: Solzhenitsyn believed in the possibility of a “literary investigation” of the Gulag, whereas Shalamov advocated a direct transcription of the horrors of the Gulag that he claimed to render without

56 “Это новый, более серьезный период в его литературной деятельности.” Shalamov, *Novaia kniga*, 269.

57 Elena Mikhailik, “Dostoevsky and Shalamov: Orpheus and Pluto,” in *The Dostoevsky Journal* 1 (2000), 147–157.

58 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. Francis Osmaston (London: 1920), vol. 4, 21ff.

the slightest artistic elaboration. Shalamov went so far as to attribute to poetry an all-encompassing capacity to represent the world:

One of the poetic truths that I have discovered is the observation that there is no physical, spiritual, social or moral phenomenon in the world that could not be mirrored in verse. Poetry is a universal language, the only common denominator to which all the phenomena of the world may be reduced with no remainder.

Одна из поэтических истин, найденная мной, – это наблюдение, что в мире нет таких явлений физического, духовного, общественно-го, нравственного мира, которые не могли быть отражены стихами. Стихи – всеобщий язык, единственный знаменатель, на который делятся без остатка все явления мира.⁵⁹

Eventually, both approaches to literary truth are doomed to failure when describing the Gulag experience. From a Hegelian point of view, poetry historically comes before prose and reappears again under the conditions of prose. Both Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov write their texts in a literary continuum between poetry and prose. In their writings, they oscillate between an archaic poetic claim of lyrical truth and their own literary achievements that necessarily imply stylistic devices.

The post-lyric condition of both Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov could also be termed their post-Dantesque condition. Both writers allude to the *Divina Commedia*, which, of course, is the most important model when it comes to depicting hell. However, Dante was able to embed his *Inferno* in an optimistic theological conception that eventually leads to Paradise. The allusions to Dante are in both cases quite obvious. Solzhenitsyn used Dante's vision of hell as title metaphor in his novel *The First Circle*; Shalamov arranged his first cycle of *Kolyma Stories* in 33 stories.⁶⁰ Like Dante, both Russian authors incorporated a very coarse style into their depiction of hell. But unlike Dante, Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov cannot return to Paradise. For modern authors, paradise got lost in the course of the literary developments of the 19th and

59 Shalamov, "Koe-chno o moikh stikhakh" [A Word or Two about My Verse], in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, 339–354, at 354.

60 Valerii Esipov, "Ob istorizme kolymskikh rasskazov" [About the Historicism of The Kolyma Stories], in *Varlam Shalamov v kontekste mirovoi i sovetskoi istorii* [Varlam Shalamov in the Context of World Literature and Soviet History], ed. Sergei Solov'ev (Moscow: 2013), 131–140.

20th centuries, when the prose novel was established as the principal literary structure within which the individual and the world clash. Shalamov explicitly stated that the novel as a literary form was hopelessly dead.⁶¹

At this point, it makes sense to turn to Georg Lukács's terminology. The young Lukács tried to apply Hegelian categories of literary appropriation of the world to contemporary culture. For Lukács, the most appropriate literary form for the situation of modern man was the novel with its "transcendental homelessness." The epic was dead for Lukács, because its literary cosmos endowed even tragedies with a higher purpose, thus making individual suffering part of a holistic conception.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Lukács hailed the emergence of Solzhenitsyn as a writer. In Lukács' eyes, Solzhenitsyn's works epitomized a serious manifestation of Socialist Realism in which Lukács fervently believed.⁶² For Lukács, Solzhenitsyn represented the new Dostoevsky. In 1916, when Lukács wrote his acclaimed *Theory of the Novel*, Dostoevsky heralded for him a new kind of literature that transcended both the classic epic and the bourgeois novel. Now, in 1970, Solzhenitsyn was able to present a similar synthesis in the Hegelian sense of the word. Lukács went so far as to celebrate the novels *In the First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* as "preliminary summits" of world literature.

For Lukács, Solzhenitsyn presented the perfect solution to his own dilemma. Since 1956, Lukács had engaged in a battle on two fronts: firstly, against the Stalinist writers, and secondly, against what he called avant-gardism, with writers such as Kafka, Musil, Beckett, Proust, and Joyce at the helm. Stalinist literature engaged in a misconceived exclusive objectivism, avant-gardism in a misconceived exclusive subjectivism.⁶³ Solzhenitsyn, with his realistic prose, seemed to assign a place in society to the single individual.⁶⁴

There may be a lot of wishful thinking in Lukács's appraisal of Solzhenitsyn. But Shalamov's criticism of Solzhenitsyn points in exactly the same direction—with the values reversed. In Shalamov's eyes, there was too much sense and too much aesthetics in Solzhenitsyn works. Conversely, Solzhenitsyn criticized the *Kolyma Stories* because there were too few "characters, persons," these people had no "past," and "no individual view on life." Solzhenitsyn was enough of a writer himself to ask whether Shalamov deliberately

61 Shalamov, "O proze" [On Prose], in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, 357–370, at 357.

62 Ranjana Saxena, "György Lukács and the Russian Soviet Factor," in *Social Scientist* 46/1–2 (2018), 65–90, at 83.

63 Georg Lukács, *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus* (Hamburg: 1958).

64 Georg Lukács, "Solschenizyn: Ein Tag im Leben des Iwan Denissowitsch," in Georg Lukács, *Russische Revolution, russische Literatur (Ausgewählte Schriften III)* (Reinbek: 1969), 296–312.

avoided creating individual characters, but eventually came to the rather condescending conclusion that all the characters in Shalamov's prose were basically stand-ins for the author's own biographical self. Quite consequentially, Solzhenitsyn confessed that he had always liked Shalamov's poetry better than his prose.⁶⁵

In the end, both writers had a point in their mutual criticism. But ultimately, neither of them is to blame. In the post-Dantesque situation of the 20th century, there is no perfect literary solution when it comes to the poetics of horror, truth and its artistic representation.

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⁶⁵ *Varlam Shalamov v svдетель'stvakh sovremennikov*, 478; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "S Varlamom Shalamovym" [With Varlam Shalamov], in *Novyi mir* 4 (1999), accessed August 10, 2018, magazines.russ.ru/novy_i_mi/1999/4/solgen.html.

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