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Shalamov's Testament: Pushkinian Precepts in Kolyma Tales

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Shalamov's Testament: Pushkinian Precepts in *Kolyma Tales*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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I began my undergraduate education eight years ago at Pasadena City College, and since then, despite my missteps, I have had the unending love and support of my family: my parents, Blake Whittington and Garrett Biehle, and my brother and sister, Robert and Danielle. Thus, I dedicate this paper to them.

Introduction

The Gulag Chronicler and the National Poet

By writing *Kolyma Tales*, a collection of well over a hundred short stories documenting the cruel and inhuman conditions in the Soviet labor camps, Varlam Shalamov was following the long-standing tradition of the prison narrative in Russian literature. As he set to work on his *magnum opus*, the Soviet author and survivor of the gulag turned to Alexander Pushkin for the principles by which he would compose his works. Despite the seemingly vast biographical differences between the two authors, the gulag chronicler felt an unmistakable kinship with Russia's national poet. Perhaps this was due in part to the fact that, though he was never a prisoner himself, Pushkin appeared to recognize the devastating effect that prison had on the lives of inmates and their loved ones. Having been the close friend of several of those who were tried and condemned for their participation in the Decembrist Revolt of 1825,¹ the poet understood the compassion required of those who endeavored to convey, through their art, the trials of a life of internment—or indeed, of any kind of suffering. The unsuccessful insurrection left an ineffaceable impression on Pushkin which can be discerned in many of his works. In 1827, for example, addressing his former companions directly, he wrote the following verses:

In the depths of the Siberian mines
Guard your proud patience,

1. Pushkin was also implicated in the revolt, though ultimately nothing came of the accusations. That he was allowed to remain free despite his closeness to the chief actors in the event certainly would have imparted on the poet some sense of guilt. T.J. Binyon, "Mikhailovskoe, 1824-26," *Pushkin: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 216-218.

Neither will vanish your mournful toil
Nor the lofty intentions of your thoughts.

Faithful sister of misfortune,
In a somber dungeon, hope
Awakens courage and joy.
It will come, the longed-for time.

Love and friendship will reach you
Through the somber gates,
To your seclusion,
As does my free voice.

The heavy fetters will fall,
The prison will collapse—and at the gate,
Freedom will greet you joyously,
And to you the sword will your brothers give.²

The poem was to be delivered by Alexandra Muraveva, to whom Pushkin entrusted it when he met her in Moscow on her way to Siberia to join her husband, the Decembrist Nikita Murvev.³ “On bidding her goodbye, overcome with emotion, he squeezed her hand with such force that for some time thereafter she could not resume her correspondence.”⁴ Two years after the failed uprising, Pushkin was evidently still moved by the memory of it. Like the too-ardent handshake,

2. Alexander Pushkin, “Vo glubine sibirskikh rud,” *A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: V desiati tomakh*, vol. 3 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977), 7. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

3. T.J. Binyon, “In Search of a Wife, 1826-29” *Pushkin: A Biography*, 248.

4. *Ibid.*

the poem is a moving gesture on the author's part and speaks to the loss experienced by both parties—freedom, on the one hand, and dear friends on the other.

“In the depths of the Siberian mines” serves as the poet's lamentation of his friends' new life in seclusion, beyond “the somber gates” of the prison. Though the poet offers few details of this isolation, for he cannot possibly know first-hand what the Decembrists are experiencing, he is cognizant that internment in Siberia is a grim fate, from which freedom is the only reprieve. As he assures them that their “mournful toil” and “lofty intention” will not be forgotten, he pleads that they preserve their “proud patience,” no doubt a difficult task to accomplish when one is faced with debilitating hard labor. In the end, Pushkin imagines a time when the prisoners will be free once more, reunited with their close ones and spiritual brothers, the poet presumably among them.

Yet, paradoxically, Pushkin's assurances seem to convey his uncertainty as regards the Decembrists' eventual liberation. In the lines “Neither will be forgotten your mournful toil/ Nor the lofty intentions of your thoughts,” the poet intimates that it is only later generations that will appreciate the great deed of the rebellious young men and the retribution they faced as a result. Indeed, given the harsh treatment of those even remotely affiliated with the revolt,⁵ Pushkin had no reason to expect any leniency for those who had been more directly involved. Despite the hopeful chords struck by such promises as the arrival of “the longed-for time,” the fall of “heavy fetters,” or freedom's joyous greetings, a melancholic tone prevails throughout the poem. To the prisoners, Pushkin can only offer these verses, his love, and his friendship. It is a poignant tribute

5. T.J. Binyon notes that a priest who read Muravev-Apostol's “Orthodox Catechism” was “...unfrocked, court-martialed, disenfranchised, disinherited and sentenced to hard labour.” He was amnestied only decades later in 1858. “Mikhailovskoe, 1824-1826,” *Pushkin: A Biography*, 217.

to his former companions, genuine in its expression of tenderness and commiseration as well as in its uncertainty.

Pushkin later alluded to his fallen brethren in another poem, “I have raised a monument to myself not made by hands” (1836), in which he envisages his eventual legacy. “I have raised a monument to myself,” in particular, the prediction made in it that he will be remembered “for summoning mercy to the fallen,”⁶ would later guide Shalamov as he pondered his authorial mission, following his release from Kolyma.

In Russian letters, the prison narrative was popularized by Fyodor Dostoevsky, author of *Notes from a Dead House* (1862), a semi-fictionalized account of his internment in a Siberian camp. However, the work that Shalamov composed within this genre is markedly different from that of his predecessors. In the 1960s and 70s, former gulag inmates began to write prison prose that surpassed Dostoevsky’s account of incarceration and hard labor. Indeed, the tone struck by such authors as Shalamov, in *Kolyma Tales*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) and *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), and Evgeniia Ginzburg in her memoirs *Journey into the Whirlwind* and *Within the Whirlwind* (1967)—along with others who documented the terrors of the Stalinist regime⁷—is objectively more tragic. While Dostoevsky

6. Alexander Pushkin, “Ia pamiatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyi,” *A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 340.

7. Authors Vasily Grossman and Lydia Chukovskaya must also be included in any list of chroniclers of the atrocities committed by the Stalinist regime. Grossman’s massive novel, *Life and Fate* (1980), modelled after Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1865), is an all-encompassing account of a Jewish-Soviet family’s struggle to cope with the consequences of World War II. Grossman’s account is greatly affected by his mother’s death in a Nazi concentration camp. Though not a work of gulag prose, Chukovskaya’s *Sofia Petrovna* (1965), in particular, is a noteworthy piece of documentary fiction, concerning the effects of Stalinism outside of the camps. Chukovskaya wrote her novella in the midst of the Stalinist purges with incredible prescience of mind. Like Shalamov, Chukovskaya pierces through the regime’s lies to reveal the purges’ consequences as they unfolded before her very eyes. Moreover, also like the gulag

lamented the lack of freedom and the bitter suffering of low class, poorly educated, and less fortunate prisoners, Soviet writes of the prison narrative depicted the perpetual starvation, brutal violence, and incalculable loss of life across the gulag. For that matter, their narratives also stand in stark contrast to Anton Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island* (1893), a survey of the living conditions on the infamous prison colony of the same name. Shalamov, underscored this contrast when he noted that "[t]here was no Kolyma in the Dead House."⁸ He believed that "Dostoevsky would have fallen mute <...>." had the nineteenth-century author endured the camps as he endured them.⁹

Certainly, a great disparity exists between the sympathetic world rendered in *Notes from the House of the Dead* or *Sakhalin Island* and the nightmare, populated by frost-bitten and flea-ridden walking skeletons, that Shalamov portrays in the six cycles of *Kolyma Tales*. Unlike his literary forerunners, as well as his contemporaries, he refused to romanticize the criminal world. Yet, Shalamov stands out even among other writers of his time. While survivors like Solzhenitsyn did not deny the horror of their experiences, they did derive moral significance from them. Shalamov, on the hand, considered the labor camps and their gruesome consequences a truly senseless crime against the Soviet people, and therefore, any experience connected to them was, at its core, void of meaning. For the author of *Kolyma Tales*, the gulag, in which he and others were terrorized by a brutal criminal element and a merciless state apparatus, were irredeemably hopeless. They were a destructive force that left no man or woman unbroken.

writer, she abstains from moralizing or condemning her tragic heroine, the story's namesake, Sofia Petrovna.

8. Varlam Shalamov, "Termometr Grishki Loguna," *Kolymskie rasskazy v odnom tome*, (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo E, 2018), 644.

9. Ibid.

Though their bodies of work could not be more disparate in subject matter, Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* contains much that is thematically and stylistically similar to Pushkin's poetry and prose. The Soviet writer's lyricism and linguistic precision are more than merely the requirements of the mode—that is, the short story—in which he chose to document his time in the Far North, for they reveal the author's studied understanding of Pushkin's artistic technique. This is, of course, not coincidental as Shalamov considered himself the inheritor of the poet's literary legacy. Additionally, as a documentarian of Russia's recent past, he was also continuing Pushkin's work as a national historian, started in earnest in the later part of the poet's life. Thus, the aim of this paper is to illustrate how Shalamov did indeed incorporate Pushkinian narrative strategies into his chronicle of life, death, and survival in the gulag. Moreover, I seek to demonstrate how the former inmate imbibed the nineteenth-century poet's authorial mission “summon mercy to the fallen,” to portray truth in art without moralizing, and to contemplate the defining moments of his nation's history.

Shalamov's aim therefore possessed twofold significance. Firstly, in documenting his and others' horrific experiences, he was revealing the truth about life in the labor camps to a readership who could not otherwise fathom the pain and suffering that the inmates endured on day-to-day basis. Secondly, through his implementation of Pushkinian artistic principles, he was seeking to restore the poet's image to what it had been prior to the Soviet Union's deliberately politicized interpretation. For Shalamov, Russian literature had long ago deviated from the Pushkinian tradition. Moreover, though ostensibly embracing the national poet and all that he stood for, the Stalinist regime had utterly degraded Pushkin and his legacy as they “elevated” him to the status of Socialist revolutionary. Thus, in writing *Kolyma Tales*, Shalamov attempted to free Pushkin from the influence of the “banner of Stalinism,” which had cast such a heavy

shadow on the poet. In doing so, the Soviet author hoped to reinstate Pushkin, liberated from the state's discordant political agenda, as the premier literary paragon in Russian letters, as he considered him the only model on which he and other authors could rely to convey the immensely traumatic experiences of the twentieth century.

The first aspect of Shalamov's authorial mission, his commitment to exposing the truth of the gulag, has already been well explored by such scholars as Alexander Etkind and Leona Toker.¹⁰ For this reason, it is the second aspect, his relationship to Pushkin, that I chose to focus on in my paper. Despite the rigorous scholarship conducted by other writers on the gulag chronicler's prose and, to a lesser degree, his poetry, Shalamov's connection to Pushkin has yet to be explored.¹¹ This, the author's own professed affinity with Russia's most celebrated cultural icon notwithstanding. To achieve my goal, I begin each chapter of my paper, with an analysis of one of the different sides of Pushkin's authorial mission, which, I argue, directly affected Shalamov as he formulated his own goals as a writer of documentary prose. Additionally, I consider Shalamov's contemporaries and what, in his eyes, was their failure to uphold the literary heritage entrusted to them by the "father of the contemporary Russian language." Thereafter, I discuss the Soviet author's understanding of the particular Pushkinian principles under discussion and the ways in which he manifests them in *Kolyma Tales*.

10. See, for example, Toker's chapter on Shalamov in her book *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 141-187.

11. Though the connection has garnered little attention in Western scholarship, there does exist some literature on the subject written by Russian academics. See, for example, Sergei Fomichev's "Po pushkinskomu sledu," *Varlam Shalamov*, accessed April 24, 2020. <https://shalamov.ru/research/85/>

In chapter one, “Pushkin’s Heir,” I attempt to establish Shalamov as the national poet’s literary successor. I first form the link between the two writers with an interpretation of Pushkin’s authorial mission as he describes it in the poem “I have raised a monument to myself.” Thereafter, I analyze Pushkin’s legacy and his significance to Russian and Soviet literature. To this end, I explore the various iterations of the Pushkin myth as propagated by key figures in Russian culture and politics, in particular Ivan Turgenev and Dostoevsky, at the 1880 Pushkin Celebration, and the Communist Party officials, during the Pushkin Jubilees of 1937 and 1949, endorsed by Stalin. For my analysis of the evolution of the poets’ legacy, I turn to the brilliant study on the subject, *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880*, in which Marcus Levitt discusses, in-depth, the controversy surrounding Pushkin in the decades following his death and leading up to the unveiling of the first monument dedicated to him in Moscow in 1880.

From there, I look briefly at the attempts made by the Symbolists and Futurists of the first quarter of the twentieth century to reinterpret Pushkin and his oeuvre as well as the entire Russian literary canon. I refer both to what the proponents of the two schools had to say about the poet as well as the role of art in society as defined by the Soviet state. This section concludes with an analysis of the regime’s imagining of the liberal poet as the forefather of the Russian Socialist Revolution of 1917. For this portion of my study, I rely primarily on articles from various periodicals from the Stalinist era, including a brief piece of propaganda written by Shalamov himself.

Subsequently, I begin my explorations of Shalamov’s response to Pushkin as he recorded it in his essays on literature and in his letters to friends. I pay particular attention to his essays regarding the prose that was being written in the second half of the nineteenth century as well as

his comments on the role that authors of the nineteenth century played in the 1917 Revolution. Additionally, through his connection to Pushkin, I investigate Shalamov's relationship to other great Russian writers—Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Mikhail Kuzmin, among others. In particular, I home in on his vehement denouncement of Lev Tolstoy and those who, in his opinion, had abandoned the rich literary heritage founded by Pushkin for the kind of literature that sacrifices art for “universal moral truths.”¹² The chapter concludes with a brief analysis of two of Shalamov's most famous short stories, “Lendlease,” and “Through the Snow,” the purpose of which is to illustrate how, in writing *Kolyma Tales*, the author was indeed “summoning mercy to the fallen.”

In the second chapter, “Pushkinian Authorial Techniques in *Kolyma Tales*,” I look solely at Pushkin's artistic influence on Shalamov and the ways in which it is manifested in his collection of short stories. I begin with a concise survey of what the poet's contemporaries, such as Nikolai Gogol, had to say about the transcendence of his art. I continue with a synopsis of Wolf Schmid's study in *Proza kak poeziia* (Prose as poetry) (1998), in which Schmid outlines the poetic elements of Pushkin's prose. The scholar's definition of “the poetization or prose” and his reading of Pushkin's *Belkin Tales* (1831) will serve as the paradigm against which I will evaluate Shalamov's short stories. Specifically, I investigate the lyrical, linguistic, and thematic tendencies which Shalamov borrowed from his forerunner and according to which he composed his tales.

Thus, I return briefly to “Through the Snow” for its musicality and linguistic organization before turning my attention to another lyrical short story, “The Siberian Pine.” In this reading, I

12. Marcus Levitt, “Turgenev's Last Stand,” *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 100.

discuss Shalamov's use of metaphor and his take on a characteristic theme of gulag prose—hope. I continue the chapter with further analysis of “Lendlease,” in which I expand upon Shalamov's employment of Pushkinian poetics in a story with a clearer narrative form. I discuss, moreover, the story's epic nature and the objectivity with which the survivor revisits the mass graves of Kolyma. The final third portion of the chapter consists of a close reading of the story, “The Carpenters,” in which Shalamov fully utilizes the principle of “the poetization of prose.” I emphasize his masterful manipulation of the thematic elements of life and death and compare his meditations on these themes with those of Pushkin, as revealed in the story “Grobovshchik” (“The Gravedigger”) from *Belkin Tales*. I discuss the central role these motifs play in the story's narrative structure as well as explore their relevance to the plot, and, furthermore, to the very language of Shalamov's prose. I argue, moreover, that Shalamov, who was still reeling from the experience of the Stalinist camps, was able to reveal new depths of the Russian soul with these techniques, like Pushkin did before him.

In the beginning of chapter three, “A Chronicler of His Time,” I discuss Pushkin's historical works and the scholars' response to the poets' endeavors in shaping national history. I juxtapose the poet-historian with the French philosopher Voltaire and the Russian national chronicler, Nikolai Karamzin, on whom the poet modeled his historiographical undertakings, in order to explicate how Pushkin himself defined the goal of historical work. I am also interested in Pushkin's departure from the scholarly methods employed by his immediate predecessors in the field of historical studies. Namely, I focus on the poet's discarding of the government-approved historical “narrative templates”—a term I borrow from James V. Wertsch—to achieve a more critical approach in his own work. David Bethea's interpretation of Pushkin's historical mission and the scholar's analysis of his efforts serve as the foundation of my assessment.

Moreover, I examine Pushkin's most ambitious investigation into his nation's history, *The History of the Pugachev Rebellion* (1834). I discuss how Pushkin exercised objectivity by emphasizing the role of chance—happenstance rather than powerful men—in forever altering the trajectory of an individual's life and the consequences that this change can have on an entire country's development. I conclude this section with T.J. Binyon's analysis of Pushkin's contemporaries' disappointingly cold reception of his impressive study and Shalamov's acceptance, over a century after the poet's death, of the mantle of Russia's national historian.

The section that follows analyzes Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* as a historical document. I first compare Shalamov's objective description with the moralizing account of arguably his most famous and well-regarded contemporary, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. For this, I identify the new narrative templates that Solzhenitsyn and others began employing to record their traumatic experiences, following the collapse of the Stalinist regime. Additionally, I briefly survey several of Shalamov's short stories—namely, “An Individual Assignment,” “Typhoid Quarantine,” “Handwriting,” and “Berries”—and contrast them with Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Finally, I perform a close reading of “The Lawyers' Plot,” one of Shalamov's autobiographical tales. I look at how, like Pushkin, but unlike Solzhenitsyn, the gulag chronicler highlighted the considerable role that chance played in one's survival in the gulag. I emphasize the author's forthright honesty in the portrayal of his protagonist, who is ambivalent to morality and the suffering of his fellow inmates.

In my conclusion, I consider contemporary Russian prose and the efforts made by Russian authors today to preserve Pushkinian precepts as they attempt to make sense of their nation's imperialist and Soviet past as well as its precarious present regime. Ultimately, I hope to

have proven that Shalamov's commitment to Pushkin's legacy resulted in a canonical body of work unsurpassed in its honesty, clarity and artistic and civic merit.

Chapter 1

Pushkin's Heir

1.1 Pushkin's Testament

Following the defunction of the Stalinist regime, the ex-Gulag convict, poet, and prose writer, Varlam Shalamov chose to embrace Pushkinian artistic precepts as he began work on his cycle of short stories about Soviet labor camps, *Kolyma Tales*. Like his contemporaries, Shalamov was acutely aware of Alexander Pushkin's literary prominence and his reputation as the founder of the contemporary Russian language. Indeed, for decades, the poet's life and works had been synonymous with Russia's national identity. "Pushkin is our everything," proclaimed Apollon Grigoriev in 1859. In the 1950s, when Shalamov had returned to Moscow from Kolyma, Grigoriev's proclamation continued to resound sonorously in the spheres of Russian literature, culture, and politics. Due to the many Pushkinian celebrations—in 1880, 1899, 1937 and 1949—and the Communist Party's "hijacking" of Pushkin for its own ideological needs, one may have found it difficult to imagine an author worthy of occupying the literary throne left vacant since the great Russian bard perished in a duel in 1837. Nevertheless, Shalamov regarded himself as just such an author. "In my prose," the author wrote in a letter of February 20, 1972 to the literary scholar Oleg Mikhailov, "I consider myself the inheritor of the Pushkinian tradition, of the Pushkinian phrase <...>."¹³

13. Varlam Shalamov, "V krug deviatom. Varlam Shalamov" (2003), ed. by Oleg Mikhailov, accessed on April 28, 2020, <https://shalamov.ru/memory43/>.

In spite of the boldness of Shalamov's claim and the difficulty of the task of preserving the Pushkinian tradition, he was not alone in his laying claim to Pushkin's legacy. Under Stalin, even the Soviet state declared itself a successor to Russia's national poet. In 1937, the Bolshevik government-sponsored Pushkin Jubilee sought to unequivocally establish the oppressive dictator's status as Pushkin's heir. Stephanie Sandler notes: "The word great (*velikii*) resounded constantly. It described Pushkin, elevating him to heroic status, but also the new Soviet state, the jubilee, and Stalin himself."¹⁴ The effect of the instantiation of Pushkin as a Soviet hero was immediate and paradoxical. It formed a unity between the writer and Stalin, which the latter hoped would be inviolable. Sandler continued: "Lest anyone miss the way that greatness joined the political leader and the literary hero, any number of public places and ceremonies provided reminders; in the vestibule of the restored Moika 12 apartment in Leningrad, for example, busts of Stalin and Pushkin were placed alongside each other."¹⁵

Despite the ardor with which a host of successor writers strived to continue the lyrical legacy of their forebear, or the Soviet state's ruthless distortion of the poet's life and corpus of work for the sake of its own socialist agenda, Shalamov believed that Pushkin's dictum, as set forth in the poem, "I have raised a monument to myself not built by hands" remained unanswered in contemporary Russian letters:

And long to the nation shall I be dear:
 For rousing with my lyre its noble feelings,
 For extolling freedom in my cruel age,

14. Stephanie Sandler, "The 'Great' Jubilee: 1937," *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of a National Poet* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 108.

15. *Ibid.*

For summoning mercy to the fallen.¹⁶

In Shalamov's view, mercy for the fallen remained absent from contemporary Soviet literature. A twice-sentence survivor of the forced-labor camps, Shalamov heeded Pushkin's edict that writers alert their audience to the casualties of the pervasive social problems as he began composing the first cycle of *Kolyma Tales* in 1954.¹⁷ For the author, this meant informing those not directly impacted by the atrocities of the labor camps of the crimes regime as well as its victims. In *Kolyma Tales*, Shalamov brought to light the unfathomable horrors that he and his fellow inmates were made to endure with forthright clarity and powerful brevity of speech. In putting his stories to paper, he sought to return to Pushkinian principles of artistic creation and to inveigh against Soviet totalitarianism by evincing the truth of life in the gulag. Though the two missions were seemingly disparate, they were, in fact, undeniably linked. Each of Shalamov's stories is a precise and resonant "slap in the face of Stalinism,"¹⁸ guided by tenets of Pushkinian literary style. Thus, each is also a tribute to Pushkin. This chapter seeks to elucidate Shalamov's artistic mission by way of exploring his return to the roots of Russian literary tradition and its connection to his revelations of camp life. My close readings of Shalamov's essays on literature and his own prose will demonstrate that, in writing *Kolyma Tales*, his authorial intent was to

16. Alexander Pushkin, "Ia pamiatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvorynyi," *A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 340.

17. Shalamov was first arrested in February 19, 1929 for his participation in the printing of the pamphlet "Lenin's Testament" ("Zaveshchanie Lenina"). He was sentenced to three years in the camps. On January 13, 1937, Shalamov was arrested once more, this time sentenced to five years hard labor for "counter-revolutionary Trotskyist activity." In 1943, he received an additional ten years. He began writing *Kolyma Tales* in 1954 while living in Turkmen, a village in the Moskovskaia oblast'. (Irina Sirotinskaia, "Biografiia," *Varlam Shalamov*, accessed April 28, 2020, shalamov.ru/biography/)

18. Varlam Shalamov, "O moei proze," *Vse ili nichego* (Saint Petersburg: Limbus Press, 2016), 115.

portray the relentless suffering to which he and untold millions were subjected and to tell their story as only Pushkin could.

Pushkin's death gave rise to debates of the author's literary merit and as to whether and to what extent he should be celebrated. It seemed that no one could deny Pushkin's immense talent, yet, in the 1830s-70s, there was hesitation to elevate him to the status of national literary treasure. In his seminal book on the Pushkin celebration of 1880, Marcus Levitt notes: "To proclaim Pushkin a world-class genius meant in some measure to sanction Russia's oppressive political, economic, and cultural order."¹⁹ Even for Pushkin's most fervent supporters, such as the philologist Iakov Grot, the question of Pushkin's artistic virtuosity was concomitant with Russia's political and cultural degeneracy. "Karamzin, Zhukovksy and Pushkin," wrote Grote to a friend in 1848, "serve as the standard for the highest literary merit that could have matured in present day Russian society; but can you really say they achieved the full height they might have given different social conditions?"²⁰ For those like Grot, to allow Pushkin into the literary echelon occupied by Western masters of letters such as Shakespeare, Goethe, and Dante meant to deny the urgency and necessity for political and cultural change in Russia. Despite such concerns, Pushkin remained for many burgeoning authors of prose and poetry a shining exemplar of the heights which Russian literature could reach.

In June of 1880, the elite of Russian intellectual life—notable among them, Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoevsky—gathered in Moscow to celebrate the opening of a monument to Pushkin and to settle the decades-long debates regarding his role in the development of

19. Marcus Levitt, "Introduction: The Pushkin Celebration of 1880 and the Crisis of Russian Culture," *Russian Literary Politics*, 7.

20. *Ibid.*

Russian literature and culture. Perhaps not explicitly on the agenda, but of no less great concern, was the question of a “rightful heir” to Pushkin. For many, Turgenev seemed the answer as the most eminent representative of the Western liberalism which had become so ardently ascribed to the late poet.²¹ Turgenev had believed that Russian literature was moving towards a “return to Pushkin.” He had seen in the Russian youth and in public opinion a growing acceptance of Western liberal thought, and thus, considered the Celebration the optimal moment to usher Pushkin into the literary Pantheon.²² Despite having left his fatherland for Europe and his lack of direct involvement in the literary circles in Russia since his departure, the prominent role, verging on complete orchestration, that Turgenev assumed in the Pushkin Celebration suggests that he believed that he was worthy of leading the movement himself.²³ Indeed, the émigré writer was received as the legitimate inheritor of Pushkin’s legacy. As one unnamed attendee of the Moscow University ceremonial put it after the author rose to meet A. A. Saburov, the new minister of education: “At that moment the public ovation reached its highest intensity...It was a real apotheosis of the late genius in the person of this living luminary. It was a laying of hands, turning Turgenev into a public idol in Pushkin’s name.”²⁴

For all of Turgenev’s sincere reverence for Pushkin, he nevertheless refused to pronounce him a “universal poet” in his keynote speech. The audience met Turgenev’s unwillingness with great disappointment and, in turn, abandoned their initial enthusiasm for the would-be inheritor.²⁵ Instead, it was Dostoevsky who, not keen to vie for the position of Pushkin’s literary

21. Marcus Levitt, “Turgenev’s Last Stand,” *Russian Literary Politics*, 91.

22. *Ibid.*, 93.

23. *Ibid.*, 91.

24. *Ibid.*, 104.

25. *Ibid.*, 110

heir, was the first to assert the poet's universality. Whereas Dostoevsky understood himself to be a strictly Russian author, he saw in Pushkin, with his uncanny ability to "recreate the essence of other nations in his work,"²⁶ a "universal poet," and, moreover, a prophet and revealer of truth greater even than Shakespeare.²⁷ It was Dostoevsky's messianic declaration about the literary paragon that resonated with those present and that is remembered today as the highest point of the Pushkin Day's festivities. Yet, though the Celebration accomplished much in the way of honoring Pushkin, his heir remained uncrowned.

The attempts to mythologize Pushkin, which had already begun prior to 1880, had become a search for a more abstract, possibly more schematic, figure of a national poet. Pushkin the man and the artist had been wholly transformed into a symbol that anyone could manipulate and exploit for his own aims. Authors coming of age in the 1890s-1900s, Andrei Bely and Alexander Blok included, looked to the traditions established by Pushkin and other such nineteenth-century Russian poets as Fyodor Tyutchev, for a foundation upon which to build their own school of literature. This school they would come to call Symbolism. Their immediate predecessor, the early Symbolist Merezhkovsky, had been disquieted by the utilitarian view that art act as a means by which the author can—and should—preach to his reader. In *A History of Russian Symbolism*, Avril Pyman explains: "Indeed the decline [Merezhkovsky] speaks of...[is] the decline in artistic standards brought about by preaching the 'useful prejudice' of a morality as though it were sacred truth."²⁸ Echoing Dostoevsky's pronouncement at the 1880 Celebration,

26. Marcus Levitt, "Dostoevsky 'Hijacks' the Celebration," *Russian Literary Politics*, 130.

27. *Ibid.*, 135.

28. Avril Pyman, "Prologue: Decadence of Rebirth," *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 9.

the Symbolists considered it their mission to search for and reveal this “sacred truth” in art as Pushkin had, unencumbered by the “useful prejudice” so often employed by didactic authors such as Lev Tolstoy.

Bely, Blok, and their coevals subsequently assumed the responsibility for this quest for truth. Similarly, though not exactly like Turgenev, Blok looked upon “the succession to the cumulative heritage of Russian literature” as his “birthright” and sought to innovate it through the Symbolists’ artistic paradigm.²⁹ Symbolists like Bely recognized their contemporary as a vessel through which not only Pushkinian precepts but the entirety of the Russian canon could be reenvisioned in their aesthetic schema.

Still others, the founders of Russian Futurism, protested Pushkin’s artistic principles, considering them antiquated and restrictive. Poets Vladimir Maiakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, and their fellow “Futurians” wished to dismantle the Russian literary canon and start anew, advocating in their manifesto, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” “[throwing] Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.”³⁰ They deemed the language of their predecessors, Pushkin in particular, unintelligible and unable to accommodate their poetic needs and to facilitate the development of the “art of the word.”³¹ Hence, the Futurists were no inheritors of the Pushkinian tradition, but rather its annihilators. They were innovators of what they considered an entirely new art. After the Russian Revolution of 1917,

29. Avril Pyman, “Gleams of Paradise: The Turn of the Century,” *A History of Russian Symbolism*, 218.

30. David Burluk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Maiakovsky, and Victor Khlebnikov, trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, *Russian Futurism through its Manifestos, 1912-1928* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51.

31. *Ibid.*

the writers of this novel avant-garde tendency sought to create a literature in service to the Revolution, earning them the patronage of Bolshevik leaders. Though he thought the Futurist poets had not “mastered the elements of Communism,”³² the commissar for foreign affairs of the Soviet Union Leon Trotsky found value in their anti-Pushkinian declarations. He deemed the Futurians vital to the development of a new Socialist art, stating in his 1924 treatise on literature, “In the evolution of [Socialist] art, Futurism will have proven to be a necessary link.”³³

This ambivalence towards Pushkin was replaced, under Stalin, by a fanaticism for the national poet, whom the party ideologues thought capable of embodying the spirit of the Revolution. The Pushkin jubilees of 1937, a century after his death, and 1939, one hundred and fifty years after his birth, were celebrated across the entire expanse of the Soviet Union. The poet whom Turgenev believed to be a beacon of Western liberalism, became, in the Soviet government’s skillful hands, a Socialist thinker of the highest caliber, a genius of the rhetoric of the rebellion, whose influence was matched only by Lenin’s and the dictator’s own.³⁴ To this end, the Communist Party’s Ideological Committee employed its propaganda machine to its

32. Leon Trotsky, trans. Rose Strunsky, *Literature and the Revolution* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968) 146

33. *Ibid.*, 161.

34. In 1937, for example, in a front-page article in the 10 February issue of *Volzhskaia kommuna*, the author credits Pushkin for the creation of Russian realism, a new Russian language, “near to and understood by the masses,” and for placing Russian literature on par with the rest of world literature, but not before recognizing his value to the revolution: “The bourgeois-nobleman critic has attempted to interpret Pushkin in his own way. <...> These distortions of the essence of Pushkin’s work persisted in the decades before the Great Socialist Revolution. The Soviet people are exposing and rejecting these lies about Pushkin. They honor the cheerful, red-blooded poet as their contemporary, as a genius artist, aiding us in our fight for socialism.” The author further asserts that only under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin have the Soviet people been able to truly understand and appreciate the poet. Thus, the author of the article unites Pushkin with the founder of the revolution and his immediate successor. “Velikii narodnyi genii,” *Volzhskaia kommuna*, no. 33 (1937): 1, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.vkonline.ru/newspaper/1.2.1937>

fullest capacity; newspapers, academic journals, radio programs, and industrial and agricultural institutions all contributed to the representation of Pushkin as a revolutionary figure. A front-page article entitled “Slava russkogo naroda (Glory of the Russian People)” from the February 10, 1937 issue of *Pravda* read: “Our Pushkin is completely Soviet, for the Soviet government has inherited all that is best in our people...In the final consideration, Pushkin’s creations have merged with the October Socialist Revolution like a river flows into the ocean.”³⁵ Thus, according to Stalinist propaganda, the government could lay claim to Pushkin’s legacy not only because it was Socialist in nature, but also because Pushkin and his works were, “in fact,” the inspiration for the October Revolution.

In 1936, working as a journalist for the Moscow monthly, *Za promyshlennye kadry* (For the Industrial Cadres), Shalamov himself submitted to the Soviet regime’s preposterous agenda. In his article “Gotovimsia k pushkinskim dniam vo VTUZakh” (“Preparing for the Pushkin Days in Technical High Schools”), he espoused Stalinist rhetoric, highlighting Pushkin’s affinity for the Russian people (“narod”), remarking on his struggles with the tsarist reactionaries (“tsarskie mrakobesy”), and even propagating the myth that the poet’s death was more likely a murder than the outcome of a duel.³⁶ The vast discrepancy between Shalamov’s perception of Pushkin in 1936 and that of his later response to the poet is, perhaps, due to his fear of arrest. Having already survived a three-year sentence in the labor camps, he was no doubt anxious about a second interment—a fear not unwarranted. His submission to the party line regarding Pushkin,

35. “Slava russkogo naroda,” *Pravda*, no. 40 (1937): 1, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://pravda37.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/pravda-1937-40.pdf>

36. Varlam Shalamov, “Gotovimsia k pushkinskim dniam vo VTUZakh,” *Za promyshlennye kadry*, no. 17 (1936): 69, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://shalamov.ru/library/31/15.html>

however, would not save him. On January 13, 1937, Shalamov was arrested and sentenced to five years of hard labor for “counter-revolutionary Trotskyist activity.”³⁷

In 1949, Stalin again sought to reimagine Pushkin, this time as a messianic figure, “to reinforce the idea of the Soviet “salvation” of Europe” in the aftermath of World War II.³⁸ Paradoxically, Russia’s fervor for Pushkin, who, the Soviet state’s insistence notwithstanding, had been heavily influenced by Western literary tradition and liberal thought, seemed to coincide with the height of Stalinist repressions. Both Pushkin celebrations occurred when the dictator was at his cruelest, during the purges of 1937 and the peak of the “servility” campaign in 1949.³⁹ Shalamov himself provides evidence to this paradox, having been arrested in 1937, only a month before the anniversary of Pushkin’s death. Thereafter, he received an additional ten years for “anti-Soviet agitation” and was consequently serving his twelfth consecutive year in Kolyma at the time of the 1949 celebration.⁴⁰ It may be that, during his imprisonment, Shalamov’s conception of Pushkinian tenets, of the artist’s onus to “summon mercy to the fallen,” began to take form.

37. Irina Sirotinskaia, “Biografiia.”

38. Olga Voronina, “‘The Sun of World Poetry’: Pushkin as a Cold War Writer,” *Pushkin Review/Pushkinskie Vesti*, no. 14 (2011), 73.

39. *Ibid.*, 65.

40. Irina Sirotinskaia, “Biografiia.”

1.2 Shalamov as an Heir to Pushkin

Stalin's death in 1953 signaled the beginning of the so-called "Thaw," a period of openness in Soviet politics and culture. No longer feeling himself under the deadly threat of arrest, Shalamov was able to embark on his authorial mission to expose the crimes of Stalinism and to make Soviet citizens aware of their brutality. He developed this literary agenda under the pennant of Pushkin, which he sought to cleanse of the Bolshevik influence. Just as Turgenev before him, Shalamov celebrated Pushkin's Westernism and liberalism, as well as his freedom of artistic expression.⁴¹ However, unlike Turgenev, who had refrained from announcing himself as Pushkin's heir, Shalamov went as far as to designate himself the inheritor of the great nineteenth-century poet's legacy. "In my prose," he wrote, "I consider myself the heir to the Pushkinian tradition, the Pushkinian phrase, with its laconism and precision."⁴² Moreover, it was both as a successor to Pushkin's style as well as his civic stance that Shalamov wrote his own prose. For this reason, Shalamov called upon other writers, his contemporaries, to observe Pushkin's testament to "rouse noble feelings," "extol freedom in a cruel age," and "summon mercy to the fallen"—even if only in print. In his opinion, Soviet writers should honor Pushkin's artistic legacy not merely by proclaiming him a national poet and recognizing his propensity to inspire the people to linguistic eloquence, but also by exposing the national trauma engendered under Stalinism.

41. Varlam Shalamov, "Chernovye nabroski 'O proze,'" *Vse ili nichego*, 114.

42. Varlam Shalamov, "V krug deviatom. Varlam Shalamov."

In another letter to Oleg Mikhailov, dated 1968, Shalamov remarked on Russian prose being written in the wake of such profoundly traumatic experiences as the detonation of the atom bombs over Japan, the Nazi concentration camps, and the Stalinist repressions:

Prose should be made and experienced as a document. Such prose, with its laconism and warmth of tone, rids itself of any trinketry and signifies a return, after a hundred years, to the Pushkin banner. Enriched by the experiences of Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and Kolyma, Russian prose is returning to Pushkinian precepts.⁴³

Shalamov here made a declaration as regards the direction in which Russian prose was headed; namely, towards a re-embracing of Pushkinian precision and clarity of speech, or laconism as the author so frequently calls it. Shalamov's interpretation of the "Pushkinian phrase" recalls that of Mikhail Kuzmin's. In the Acmeist writer's essay "O prekrasnoi iasnosti" ("On Beautiful Clarity") (1910), Kuzmin argued the need for logical speech, appropriate language reflective of the times, and linguistic prudence, all of which he believed Pushkin to be a master. Adding to Dostoevsky's appraisal of the deftness with which Pushkin brought to life characters of other nations, Kuzmin celebrated the poet's unassailable exactitude and complete command over the linguistic nuances of any epoch that he chose to portray: "Thus, Pushkin's language, while preserving the irreproachable purity of Russian speech, does not lose its own essence ["aromat"]; somehow, inconspicuously, yet palpably, it changes dependent upon wither the poet is writing *The Queen of Spades*, *The Covetous Knight*, or 'Caesar was travelling,'"⁴⁴ Judging how closely Shalamov's perception of Pushkin approximates Kuzmin's, it is clear that the assessment of Pushkin's genius made by the gulag survivor was markedly influence by writers who

43. Ibid.

44. Mikhail Kuzmin, "O prekrasnoi iasnosti" (1910), accessed on April 28, 2020, https://web.stanford.edu/class/slavic272/materials/declarations/kuzmin_iasnost1909.pdf

championed other literary tendencies. Hence, by embracing Pushkin's artistic doctrine, Shalamov was also able to incorporate the aesthetics of other writers who honored the ideal of Russian poetics.

Yet, Shalamov was explicit: style matters only if framed by an anti-totalitarian perspective. He put an emphasis on the civic approach to art, as outlined in Pushkin's poem, "I have raised a monument to myself," signaling a major divergence from the strictly aesthetic approach of his predecessors. According to Shalamov, only authors whose prose aims to convey the experience and importance of the terrible concentration camps and the battlefields of the twentieth century can belong to the movement towards Pushkinian precepts. "Such prose," Shalamov said, "is the only form of literature which can satisfy the reader of the twentieth century."⁴⁵ The contemporary reader, he asserts, "does not want to read fictional stories."⁴⁶

A return to Pushkinian artistic principles and the mission for truth, for Shalamov, implied a departure from those great authors who had abandoned Pushkin's testament. He believed that no author best epitomized the break from the poet-genius than Tolstoy, the writer of richly descriptive psychological novels in which the clarity of historical experience is obfuscated by the authorial voice, so prevalent in every line. In a draft of his essay "O proze" ("On Prose"), Shalamov censured the influential master of psychological realism as Pushkin's polar opposite: "One may consider L. N. Tolstoy the apex of the anti-Pushkinian beginning of prose. Both for his artistic principles and his pretentious private life as a moralist and [public] adviser."⁴⁷

45. Varlam Shalamov, "O moei proze," 121.

46. *Ibid.*, 120.

47. Varlam Shalamov, "Chernovye nabroski esse 'O proze,'" 113.

Tolstoy's credo as an artist, that is, that [literature]...must serve larger, universal moral truths,"⁴⁸ greatly disturbed Shalamov, who understood reflection of his time to be the artist's primary mission. A writer's job was to convey factual reality, while keeping prose free from didacticism.⁴⁹ Shalamov insisted that the author must not present himself as a lofty preacher but must instead be one among the suffering congregation. This sentiment echoes Dostoevsky's interpretation of Pushkin's brilliance voiced at the Pushkin Celebration; namely, that the poet revealed the world as it truly was.⁵⁰

For Shalamov however, Tolstoy's "preaching" was a greater offence than the abandonment of what Pushkin's art stood for. He believed that Tolstoy and others of his ilk had, with their "universal moral truths," laid the foundation for the Russian Revolution. Himself a victim of Bolshevism, Shalamov considered its advancement a crime: "Russian writers of the twentieth century carry a great sin on their souls. It was under their banner that blood was shed in the twentieth century. All the terrorists were Tolstoyites...., they were all fanatics, disciples of the Russian humanists."⁵¹ Shalamov believed that Tolstoy had provided the impetus for the Russian Revolution and, by extension, the camps with which he and millions of others would become so tragically familiar. The author of *Kolyma Tales* thus perceived Tolstoy's denial of Pushkin's genius and his mission "to extol freedom in a cruel age" as well as his conviction that an artist must foster morality in his reader as a personal affront. Hence Shalamov's categorical rejection of Tolstoy in favor of Pushkin:

48. Marcus Levitt, "Turgenev's Last Stand," *Russian Literary Politics* 100.

49. Varlam Shalamov, "O moei proze," 129.

50. Marcus Levitt, "Dostoevsky 'Hijacks' the Celebration," *Russian Literary Politics*, 133-135.

51. Varlam Shalamov, "Chernovye nabroski esse 'O proze,'" 113.

A wooden stake has been hammered into a mass grave. With time, as we look back, we look upon all that falls beneath its shadow and reject it all.

There lies Chernyshevskii, Nekrasov, and, of course, Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, 'the mirror of the revolution' <...>⁵²

Shalamov here evoked images from his own story "Lendlease," in which he brought to the foreground the brutal image of the mass graves that sat atop a hill in Kolyma's Left bank. After the thaw, the frozen bodies of the dead appeared to crawl out of the pit, as if preparing to resurrect.⁵³ Shalamov wished Tolstoy's legacy, and those of Chernyshevskii and Nekrasov, the same fate with which the fallen prisoners met. In driving a wooden stake, a weapon used for vanquishing the undead and the impure, into the shared grave of the Russian authors, he hoped to bury permanently their political and artistic legacies.

Shalamov's intent to restructure the Russian literary canon evokes the Futurist manifestos of the 1910s-20s. Indeed, Shalamov's "slap in the face of Stalinism recalls the Futurians' "Slap in the Face of Public Taste." However, rather than wishing for a total annihilation of the existing canon, he wanted only to reconfigure it, releasing it from its Tolstoyan fetters and from so-called "public taste" which had come to be entirely dictated by the Stalinist regime. Only if the influence of the pretentious dogmatists and political ideologues were nullified would the writer and his contemporaries be able to continue their work in Pushkin's vein.

Shalamov wrote "Lendlease" in 1965, three years prior to the letter in which he explained to Mikhailov how he understood the return to Pushkinian precepts in prose. In the short story, which one can find in the second cycle of *Kolyma Tales*, "The Left Bank," the gulag chronicler

52. Varlam Shalamov, "Chernovye nabroski esse 'O proze,'" 114. "The mirror of the revolution" is a quote of Lenin's essay *Tolstoi kak zerkolo russkoi revolutsiia* (1908).

53. Varlam Shalamov, "Po lendlizu," *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 332.

employs the laconism and clarity of speech which that characterizes his work—and Pushkin’s. “Lendlease” begins with a catalogue of the items received from the “overseas gift” by way of the United States’ Lendlease Act of 1941.⁵⁴ The narrator’s language is terse, almost technical, and yet, darkly humorous. Towards the middle of his story, before the revelation of the waking nightmare that is the mass grave, filled to capacity with frozen corpses, the narrator recalls the “creamy butter”—in fact, solidol, that arrived with the American shipment—, and the joy with which his fellow prisoners consumed it: “The lucky ones devoured this creamy butter from Lendlease, not believing that it was simply solidol—after all, the healthful American bread was also tasteless; it also had this strange trace of iron.”⁵⁵ Shalamov imbues the sentence with a sense of irony that is both tragic and comedic. Moreover, in the span of a few lines, he reveals the starvation Soviet camps perpetuated, the prisoners’ resultant desperation for sustenance, and also the United States’, perhaps unwitting, complicity in the totalitarian dictator’s incredible abuse of power against the Soviet people. Through the Lendlease Act, the Soviet Union acquired the latest American technologies, using them not to develop its infrastructure, but to increase the efficiency with which it ran its labor camps. Shalamov writes: “The superiors decided that the first run of the bulldozer, received through Lendlease, would not be work in the forest; rather, there was more important business to take care of.”⁵⁶ The “important business” he speaks of is the “proper” disposal of the fallen prisoners who had previously been heaped in a hand-dug mass grave. Thus, the Americanisms—“studebekker,” “traktor,” “bul’dozer”—acquire new meaning; they are no longer solely tokens of technological innovation, but also of the United States’

54. *Ibid.*, 328.

55. *Ibid.*, 330.

56. *Ibid.*, 333.

contribution to the prisoners' troubles. Situated in the middle of the short narrative, the sentence signals a shift from the banal—a list of clothing, foods, and other goods received from the United States—to the horrifying: the trials of the author and his fellow “dokhodiagi” (“goners”).⁵⁷ Such is the power of Pushkinian precision, of Shalamov's laconism.

And yet, in this story, as all as in most of his tales, Shalamov refrains from offering his reader a moral judgement, condemning neither the Americans, responsible for the Lendlease Act, nor the Soviet government. Even as he describes the mass of bodies in the Kolyma gravesite, he does not allow his text to become clouded by didacticism:

In Kolyma, bodies are not given to the earth but to stone. The stone keeps and reveals secrets... The permafrost keeps and reveals secrets. Each of those close to us who perished in Kolyma, those who were shot, beaten, wasted by hunger might still be identified—even after decades. In Kolyma there were no ovens. The corpses wait in stone, in the permafrost.⁵⁸

Whereas an author writing in the Tolstoyan tradition would have undoubtedly, and quite understandably, resorted to a rageful diatribe against those he felt were responsible for this violation of others' humanity, Shalamov documents only what is observable. The mass of corpses is indeed composed of the friends and relatives of the Soviet population; there were, in fact, no ovens as there had been in Auschwitz to incinerate the prisoners and, with them, the evidence of the state's crimes against humanity. Instead, there was only stone and permafrost to preserve forever those who were murdered or who had otherwise succumbed to fatigue and hunger. “Lendlease” ends with the patricide and skilled tractor operator Grinia Lebedev's stone face—a portentous detail that suggests Lebedev will ultimately occupy a grave like the one that

57. “Dokhodiaga” refers to a prisoner who is very nearly dead (from “dokhodit”—to reach the final point).

58. *Ibid.*, 332.

he has just himself dug—prideful of the duty he has fulfilled.⁵⁹ Thus, there is no explicit lesson to be learned. It is not for Shalamov, even as a victim of the despotism to which his stories serve as testimony, to preach to his reader. He must profess only the truth as Pushkin had in his own prose and poetry. Let the reader make of it what he will.

This is the task Shalamov also puts forth to his readers in “Through the Snow,” which opens *Kolyma Tales*. Much like in “Lendlease,” The narrator of the lyrical short story adopts a procedural tone as he details the method by which a road is stamped out in the snow.⁶⁰ The central sentence again signals an important shift, this time from the convicts’ physically making a trail through the snow, to the author’s recording his and their experiences on paper: “On this narrow, paved, and faithless track, five to six men move in a row, shoulder to shoulder..., they turn around and again go through the snow, stepping in the spots where others have not stepped.”⁶¹ Though they move in tandem and towards a common end, Shalamov tells us, each writer must forge his own path, taking care not to step in the tracks of others. As an act of almost poetic self-reflection, it is akin to Pushkin’s “I have raised a monument to myself,” for Shalamov addresses other authors as they begin to chronicle the traumas of the twentieth century. Hence, it is not incidental that “Through the Snow” persists as one of his most famous pieces. His final word, however, is directed not at his contemporaries, but at his audience: “And on tractors and horses will come not writers, but readers.”⁶² Thus, Shalamov, as a true heir to Pushkin, advances forth from the great poet’s testament. It is to the reader, not the artist, of the twentieth century—

59. *Ibid.*, 333.

60. Varlam Shalamov, “Po snegu,” *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 39.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

and the centuries to follow—that he entrusts his tale of suffering and survival. It is to them that Shalamov leaves the task of interpreting his works, of deriving meaning and value from his truth.

Chapter 2

Pushkinian Authorial Techniques in *Kolyma Tales*

2.1 The Power of Pushkin's Poetic Prose

While investigating Shalamov's response to Pushkin, both as an instrument of Soviet propaganda and as a literary paragon, I became continually more interested in the authors' psychological and biographical kinship. The political repressions to which each author was subjected—albeit to significantly varied degrees—and their impact on their artistic missions is one of the reasons why *Kolyma Tales* may be read as a Pushkinian text. In the present chapter, however, I will analyze the ways in which Shalamov borrows from Pushkin, in particular, how the Soviet author appropriates and adapts Pushkin's narrative strategies, plot devices, and thematic patterns. Though he may have also drawn inspiration from, among other authors, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, and Andrei Bely,⁶³ Shalamov composed his prose foremost using authorial techniques first perfected by his most admired predecessor—and the one with whom he felt the greatest psychological and biographical affinity. Shalamov's reliance on Pushkin's legacy freed him from the limitations imposed by Socialist Realism, such as revolutionary romanticism or the mythologizing of the working-class struggle,⁶⁴ for, as Turgenev

63. Leona Toker remarks on the influence of other authors, including those mentioned, in her seminal study on gulag prose. Her analysis, however, excludes any connection between Shalamov and Pushkin. "Varlam Shalamov," *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, 158.

64. Hans Günther characterizes Socialist Realism as the "paradoxical synthesis of realism and romanticism, of fact and myth. Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* is, in essence, the destruction of the "myths" constructed according to the doctrine of Socialist Realism. "Soviet Literary

noted in his 1880 speech, celebrating the national poet, “In [Pushkin’s], there is a liberating moral strength, for it is sublime.”⁶⁵ A chronicler of life and survival in the Kolyma camps, Shalamov believed that the moral power and finesse of Pushkin’s art comprised an impressive creative force that he adopted, enabling him to present the psychological, bodily, historical, and societal trauma inflicted upon the prisoners of the gulag and the Soviet people at large.

Pushkin’s significant contributions to Russian literature were recognized not only by his successors, such formative authors as Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Lev Tolstoy, but also by writers of his own epoch. In 1827, for example, the P. I. Shalikov wrote of Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin*: “Who has given him the brush and the colors to paint for the imagination, precisely as one paints nature for the eyes? <...> He is a sorcerer, ruling over them absolutely; [his poetry] is a magic mirror, revealing everything under the image of life, the soul, truth.”⁶⁶ For Shalikov, the clarity, linguistic sophistication, and stylistic elegance of Pushkin’s storytelling was undeniably apparent. Others saw in Pushkin something transcendent, beyond what had hitherto appeared in Russian arts. Nikolai Gogol, an author formidable in his own right, said of Pushkin in 1832: “In him <...> lies all the richness, the strength, and the fineness of our language <...> In him, the Russian nature, the Russian soul, the Russian language, [and] the Russian character are reflected in the same purity, in such refined beauty, as a landscape is reflected on the convex surface of an

Criticism and the Formulation of the Aesthetics of Socialist Realism, 1932-1940,” *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond*, ed. Evgeniy Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 90-108.

65. Ivan Turgenev, Rech’ po povodu otkrytiia pamiatnika A. S. Pushkinu v Moskve, accessed April 28, 2020, <http://turgenev-lit.ru/turgenev/rechi/rech-pamyatnik-pushkinu-v-moskve.htm>.

66. P. I. Shalikov, “kriticheskaia stat’ia ‘*Evgenii Onegin*. Glava III,’” (1827), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.literaturus.ru/2018/03/kritika-pushkin-tvorchestvo-otzyvy-sovremennikov.html>.

optical glass.”⁶⁷ Gogol here unities the author with his art so that one is indistinguishable from the other. He praises Pushkin’s then unmatched ability to reveal with astonishing nuance the psychological depths of the Russian soul—the innovation for which Russian novelists, adherents of realism, who come of age in the 1840s-60s, would be beholden to him. However, when Shalamov began his post-gulag literary undertaking of exposing historical falsities propagated under Soviet Realism and analyzing and representing—with aesthetic force as well as historical precision—the horrors of Stalinism and their impact on Soviet society, the methods of exploring, the depth of the Russian soul,” which Gogol attributed to Pushkin, acquired urgency and relevance for him as well.

Of special significance for my analysis of Shalamov’s aesthetic indebtedness to Pushkin is the principle which Wolf Schmid calls “the poetization of prose.”⁶⁸ According to Schmid, Pushkin, as the preeminent Russian poet of the nineteenth century, introduced into Russian literature new methods for composing prose. In his collection of essays *Proza kak poeziia (Prose as Poetry)*, Schmid outlines the principles of this technique:

- [T]he schematization [“paradigmatizatsiia”] (the introduction of equivalences, i.e. of similarities and of contradistinctions, to the text, on all distinguishable levels);
- the tectonics [or] the geometry of the formation of action and text (by virtue of the application of the schematization to traditional literary narrative, plot and textual formulae;
- the rejection of motiveless symbols [“nemotivirovannosti znaka”] in relationship to that which they denote <...>;
- the dual significance (literal and figurative) of all words, foremost of clichés; the development of the plot and the flattening of semantic figures <...> and paroemia <...>;

67. Nikolai Gogol, *Neskol’ko slov o Pushkine*, accessed April 28, 2020, <http://feb-web.ru/feb/gogol/texts/ps0/ps8/ps8-050-.htm?cmd=p>.

68. Wolf Schmid, “Proza i poeziia v ‘Povestiakh Belkina,’” *Proza kak poeziia: stat’i o povestvovanii v russkoi literature* (Saint Petersburg: Gumanitarnoe agestvo Akademecheskii proekt, 1994), 17.

—the increase in meaning and the extrication of the semantic potential of individual verbal and thematic motifs by virtue of their inclusion in intertextual connections of various types.⁶⁹

Schmid analyzes these prescripts as Pushkin employs them in *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*, highlighting the novellas' symmetrical (or asymmetrical) narrative structures, their phonic, linguistic, and symbolic motifs, and the subversion of well-worn proverbs, maxims, and other clichés. Schmid's investigation reveals Pushkin's gift of storytelling, his penchant for imbuing every line, indeed, seemingly every word, with multifarious meaning.

Schmid's excellent analysis of "The Blizzard," for example, reveals the ways in which Pushkin playfully undermines his reader's expectations by distorting familiar plots and motifs of French and Russian sentimentalist literature. Schmid examines closely the fates of each character, beginning with the doomed Vladimir. The scholar compares him to Aleksei of Karamzin's *Natal'ia, boiarskaia doch'*. Vladimir's pathetic demise, Schmid notes, is an inversion of the heroism Aleksei demonstrates in Karamzin's tale.⁷⁰ Appearing at first like a hero from one of Mariia Gavrilovna's French novels, the poor boy is suddenly lost to obscurity.⁷¹ He first loses his bride, then, the ensuing war brings him neither glory nor honor, and finally he perishes, having lived a life of little consequence. This kind of "inversion," typical, in fact, of all the Belkin tales, is evidence of the "extrication of semantic potential" of which Schmid writes.

69. Wolf Schmid, "O poetichnosti 'Grobovshchika,'" *Proza kak poeziia*, 36-37.

70. Wolf Schmid, "Nevezuchii zhenikh i vetrenye suzhenye," *Proza kak poeziia*, 64.

71. Aleksandr Pushkin, "The Blizzard," *Novels Tales, Journeys: The Complete Prose of Alexander Pushkin*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 2016), 56.

By overturning such motifs as heroism and fate, the scholar suggests, Pushkin is at once able to expose their vapidness and imbue them with new semantic value.

Fading into obscurity instead of achieving greatness by performing a heroic deed is a familiar plot for Shalamov, a master of poetic reversals. As a poet himself, he understood well the power of artistic transformation.⁷² And though not known for his verse, Shalamov-the-poet is undeniably present in *Kolyma Tales*, in which his lyrical gift is manifested through his implementation of Pushkin's poetic formulae. What defines Shalamov's work is the merging of Pushkin's artistic methods, grounded in the principle of poetization of prose, with the historical authenticity of documentary prose—the genre which Pushkin embraced in his later years.⁷³ Schmid's analysis is profoundly effective due to its precision, depth, and the insight it provides into Pushkin's artistic inventiveness. In my study of *Kolyma Tales*, I will apply the features presented in Schmid's exploration to illustrate how Shalamov is, in fact, preserving the Pushkinian tradition as he contemplates his and his nation's trauma and the Russian people's new relationship to life, death, and fate, following the collapse of the Stalinist regime.

72. In 1949, twelve years after his internment for “counter-revolutionary Trotskyist activity,” Shalamov wrote his first lines, poems, in a handmade notebook. He would not begin working on *Kolyma Tales* until 1953. Valerii, Esipov, “Iz pervykh taezhnykh tetradei,” *Varlam Shalamov*, accessed 8 March 2020, <https://shalamov.ru/library/37/>

73. In his later years, Pushkin embarked on several historical projects, even having access to government archives. Works such as his *History of Pugachev*, a book on the peasant rebellion of 1773-74, were purely historical in nature. Others, such as “The Captain's Daughter,” were works of fiction, the plots of which Pushkin derived from historical events. In both cases, as T.J. Binyon puts it in his biography of the poet, Pushkin “[conveys] the flavor of the age ... material which the historian can find in no official source.” “The Tired Slave,” *Pushkin: A Biography*, 413.

2.2 The Poetry of *Kolyma Tales*

The poetic nature of Shalamov's stories transpires, in particular, in his application of such elements of Pushkinian "poetization of prose" as textual schematization, the concept of dual significance of semantic elements, and the technique of emphasizing verbal and thematic motifs. Many of his stories, while graphic in their depiction of the camps, are nevertheless lyrical. For example, Shalamov imbues "Through the Snow" with a cadence and rhythm which make it more akin to a poem in prose than to a short story. In "Through the Snow," the word "chelovek" ("person" or "man") begins many of the sentences in the first paragraph, just as it might begin the lines of a stanza. The repetition of phonetic elements, as in the following excerpt,⁷⁴ is also more suggestive of poetry than prose: "Chelovek ukhodit daleko, otmechaia svoi put' nerovnymi chernymi iamami. On ustaët, lozhitsia na sneg, zakurivaet, i makhorochnyi dym stelëtsia sinim oblachkom nad belym blestiaschim snegom. Chelovek uzhe ushël dal'she, a oblachko vsë eshchë visit tam, gde on otdykhал – vozdukh pochni nepodvizhen." Shalamov repeats the phonemes "ch," "sh," "shch," and "zh"—the "shpiashchie," or so-called "hushers"—measuredly throughout the passage. He repeats the technique, this time with the alternating sounds "s" and "b" in the second sentence of the excerpt. Similarly, the recurrence of the instrumental case in the first and second sentences also assists in determining the passage's rhythm. Finally, in the last sentence, Shalamov utilizes rhythmic alliteration, relying heavily on

74. The excerpt has been transliterated in order to illustrate the recurrence of certain phonemes, for such elements are often lost in translation. It is included here in the original Russian for reference: "Человек уходит далеко, отмечая свой путь неровными черными ямами. Он устаёт, ложится на снег, закуривает, и махорочный дым стелется синим облачком над белым блестящим снегом. Человек уже ушел дальше, а облачко все еще висит там, где он отдыхал, – воздух почти неподвижен." Varlam Shalamov, "Po snegu," 39.

sibilants. Likewise, the author uses metrical assonance, with several instances of the unstressed “a” and “o” and successive vowel pairs as in the stressed “e” in “Chelovek uzhe,” the unstressed “u” in “uzhe ushël,” the stressed “ë” in “vsë eshchë,” and finally the stressed “i” in “pochti podvizhen.” A brief story to be sure, and yet heavily laden with poetic elements that make it appear lyrical. These are but a few examples of the ways in which Shalamov crafts for his reader elegant narratives, truly poetic in their form.

Shalamov continues in the same poetic vein with his short story, “The Siberian Pine,” in which he eulogizes the titular tree. Calling it the “tree of hope,”⁷⁵ the author metaphorizes the Siberian Pine, transforming it into something otherworldly. With its “emerald paws” and “verdant feathers,” it resembles an octopus as it stretches its limbs along the cold ground, appearing to surrender to the coming winter.⁷⁶ Indeed, the tree seems to be more a beast from the Homeric epics, a Russian Scylla, than a taiga plant. Moreover, in the pitiless cold of the Siberian tundra, the mythical tree embodies hope: Shalamov intones that “it is the only evergreen tree in the Far North. Amid the snow’s blinding shimmer, its mint-green needles bespeak the South, warmth, life.”⁷⁷ In the snowy white void, the Siberian pine endures: whereas others succumb to the bitter frost completely, it lies down only to rise again, as if in protest to the harsh fate it is has been allotted. For Shalamov, the tree’s significance is immeasurable, for the Siberian pine is a symbol of endurance and resurrection, of the hope that, though one might be brought to his knees by the crushing conditions of his life, he is yet capable of rising once more. In describing the tree so, he undermines the cruel fate he was meant to succumb to.

75. Varlam Shalamov, “Stlanik” *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 151.

76. *Ibid.*, 150.

77. *Ibid.*, 151.

In the background, observing this remarkable tree as it bends and crawls and rises again, is the author-narrator. Just as Pushkin revisits the family of pine trees (*sosna*) in “...Vnov’ ia posetil” (“...Again, I visited”),⁷⁸ Shalamov returns, so to speak, to Kolyma to contemplate the thousands of lives lost, to heal from his own trauma, and to re-channel his grief into poetic language. The Siberian pine for him is like the arboreal giants Pushkin portrays in the poem: it is always present, and its resilience resembles the “eternal” quality of the evergreen “mladaia porosl’” (“young growth”)⁷⁹ Pushkin describes. While perhaps not directly alluding to Pushkin’s poem, Shalamov, in “The Siberian Pine,” adopts the same role as the poet returning to his place of exile. Although a site of bitter confinement, it was also a place formative for Pushkin’s creative development. In “The Siberian Pine,” Shalamov’s presence reveals his presence subtly at first, in a direct address to the reader: “Nature, on the other hand, is more precise than man in its feelings. Do you recall the salmon, coming to spawn only in the river in which it itself was spawned? Do you recall the secret migration routes of birds? Little is known to us of plant-barometers and flower-barometers.”⁸⁰ This apostrophic digression serves several functions. First, it acknowledges the reader’s presence; secondly, through his use of the third-person plural, it reveals the author-narrator’s presence; and thirdly it unites the author and the reader as “man,” distinct from “nature,” that is the salmon, the birds, and the Siberian pine. Yet, it should be noted, the narrator acts as a mediator, someone between man and nature whose duty it is to convey the mystery of the Siberian pine to those unable to access it. Shalamov concludes his eulogy, unambiguously granting himself the final word: “The Siberian pine always seemed to me

78. Alexander Pushkin, “...Vnov’ ia posetil,” *A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 3, 313.

79. *Ibid.*,

80. Varlam Shalamov, “Stlanik,” 150.

the most poetic of the Russian trees; more so than the celebrated weeping willow, the sycamore, or the cypress. And its wood burns warmer.”⁸¹ Not lacking in his characteristic irony, Shalamov’s concluding remarks make clear his poetic intentions.

The poetization of prose—and the lyrical affinity with Pushkin—is evident in Shalamov’s longer narratives as well. As Pushkin did in narrative poems such as “The Bronze Horseman,” “Mazepa,” and “Poltava,” Shalamov at times acts as an epic poet who, reflecting upon his nation’s bitter history, records it with poetic eloquence. Like the stones in “Lendlease,” for example, Shalamov cannot forget and so must document the secrets of Kolyma: “The stone, yielding, vanquished, humiliated, promised to forget nothing, promised to wait and to protect the secret <...> The earth opened up, revealing its underground treasures; for among the underground treasures of Kolyma are not only gold, not only tin, tungsten, uranium, but also imperishable (“netlennyi”) human bodies.”⁸² This passage equates the stone and the victims of the labor camps. Like the camp inmates, the stone has been “vanquished” and “humiliated;” like the stone, the victims of the Stalinist purges are lifeless and yet eternal. Shalamov bestows human characteristics unto the stone, consequently emphasizing the absence of the humanity of which the fallen prisoners were deprived. Furthermore, by listing the victim’s corpses among the “treasures” to be found in Kolyma, he brings to light the view of the totalitarian state responsible for the incredible loss of human lives: like gold, tin, tungsten, or uranium, the prisoners were a resource to be exploited and disposed of as the government saw fit. Thus, for Shalamov,

81. *Ibid.*, 151.

82. Varlam Shalamov, “Po lendlizu,” 332.

“Lendlease” serves as an elegy to the victims of the camps, the “loved ones⁸³” lost to an epoch dominated by a cruel regime.

The poetic nature of Shalamov’s short story is further evidenced by his employment of an asymmetrical narrative structure, an example of the schematization of the text which Schmid identified in Pushkin’s tales. The narrative is divided into thematic opposites; on the one hand the mundanity of everyday life; on the other, the perpetual presence of death. In Kolyma, life means hunger, desperation and, of course, labor. The prisoners, however, are perpetually reminded of the death that awaits them by the presence of the mass grave that will serve as their final resting place. Structurally, whereas the story’s first half consist of an extensive, almost tedious, list of items received from the United States through the Lendlease Act, its second half reveals the more sinister, though no less commonplace, reality of the mass graves of Kolyma. The “studebekkery,” “daimondy,” and “bul’ dozery” of the first half⁸⁴ are counterposed to those victims, “shot, beaten, [and] waisted by hunger” in the second.⁸⁵ It is a powerful juxtaposition of the two central figures of the narrative: the massive multi-ton machines, the bulldozer in particular, arriving from abroad, and the frozen mass of vanquished prisoners they have come to replace. The effectiveness of this approach lies in its ability to encapsulate, succinctly, the destruction of societal and psychological norms fomented in the camps. When Shalamov writes, “[a]nd I and my comrades—if we freeze, if we die, there will also be a space for us in this new grave, this new dwelling for the dead,”⁸⁶ he both condemns the regime which erected the camps,

83. Ibid., 332.

84. Ibid., 329.

85. Ibid., 332.

86. Ibid.

these monuments to death, and exposes the unnerving aesthetic complexity of the new historical, social, and existential reality.

“Through the Snow,” “The Siberian Pine,” and “Lendlease” are far from being isolated cases of Shalamov’s poeticized prose. Indeed, Shalamov relies heavily on poetic technique, both for its aesthetic potential and, more significantly, its narrative potency. Using the principle of literary analysis introduced by Schmid, I will now perform a close reading of “The Carpenters,” to demonstrate how, following in Pushkin’s stead, Shalamov explores the themes of life and death and what they mean to the inmates he describes in *Kolyma Tales*.

2.3 In Pushkin’s Stead

With rare exceptions,⁸⁷ Shalamov’s narratives end in one of two ways: the hero’s unexpected survival—often by means of his cunning; other times simply by chance—or his death, the likely consequence of the horrific conditions of his existence. In “Typhoid Quarantine,” for example, the inmate Andreev attempts to deceive the camp supervisors to save himself from perishing in the gold mines.⁸⁸ In “Condensed Milk,” Shalamov’s hero must outwit a fellow prisoner who himself is trying to entrap the protagonist and other prisoners in a plot, doomed to fail, to escape the camps.⁸⁹ Whereas the protagonist of “Handwriting,” is saved only

87. “Through the Snow,” and “The Siberian Pine,” for example. There are no apparent protagonists in these stories and Shalamov appears rather ambivalent to life and death. These stories are meditations, the first on the writing process and the second on the nature in Kolyma.

88. Varlam Shalamov, “Tifoznyi karantin,” *Kolymskie rasskazy* 171-185.

89. Varlam Shalamov, “Sgushchenoe moloko,” *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 90-93.

when his unnamed supervisor, in an unexpected display of insubordination, burns the order calling for the inmate's death.⁹⁰ Potashnikov of "The Carpenters," too, is spared only because his supervisor allows him to work for two days in the warmth of the workshop though he realizes Potashnikov knows nothing of woodworking.⁹¹

Yet, throughout all these tales of survival, death remains ever-present. For Shalamov, death provides the ultimate narrative closure. Walter Benjamin's explanation of the significance of death in fiction will shed light on the potency of death in Shalamov's prose: "What we seek in narrative fictions is the knowledge that knowledge of death which is denied to us in our own lives: the death that writes *finis* to the life and therefore confers it its meaning <...> Only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality."⁹² Shalamov, a survivor of the labor camps in which he witnessed many of his fellow inmates perish and who himself was only spared death by the act of kindness of another, was indeed well acquainted with death. For this reason, he understood acutely the "meaning" which death "confers" life. Hence, he endeavors to present to his reader the experience of the camps, of the horrors they could not have witnessed; that is, as Benjamin states, to convey to his reader "that knowledge which is denied to [him] in [his own life]."

Similarly, Schmid observes many instances of death's meaning presented to the reader in Pushkin's "Grobovshchik" ("The Gravedigger"), a story within the *Belkin's Tales* cycle. For example, he notices that "the themes of life are forced out by the themes of death."⁹³ Schmid's

90. Varlam Shalamov, "Pocherk," *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 359-363.

91. Varlam Shalamov, "Plotniki," *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 46-50.

92. Walter Benjamin quoted by Peter Brooks. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 22.

93. Wolf, Schmid, "O poetichnosti 'Grobovshchika,'" 39.

interpretation leads to the conclusion that, in Pushkin's novella, life is defined by death. The most readily apparent example of this "definition," Schmid notes, is the life of the titular gravedigger, Adrian Prokhorov, whose livelihood is built upon the deaths of his "clients."⁹⁴ Life in *Kolyma Tales*, too, is inherently informed by death—and, as in "The Gravedigger," may be forced out by it. In such stories as "Children's Drawings," for example, the survival of Shalamov's lead protagonists is contingent upon their ability to recover the clothing from the corpse of another inmate.⁹⁵ In "Condensed Milk," the antagonist Shestakov believes that by sacrificing his fellow prisoners he can ensure his own survival. In other words, in *Kolyma Tales*, one's ability to live sometimes depends on the demise of another and can, therefore, be understood only in relation to death. In "The Carpenters," to be discussed below, the stark contrast affected by the juxtaposition of life and death as two opposing themes forms the very foundation of the story's narrative architecture.

"The Carpenters" follows the fate of Potashnikov, a man thirty years of age, emaciated and on the verge of death.⁹⁶ Desperate for warmth and growing weaker by the day, Potashnikov is forced to endure the biting Kolyma frost, which the narrator notes has sat at fifty-five degrees below zero for two consecutive weeks.⁹⁷ The inmate is only able to find relief when he volunteers to work as a carpenter, a profession in which he has no experience.⁹⁸ Though ultimately found out, Potashnikov and his partner, the student of philology Grigoriev, are

94. Schmid also identifies linguistic patterns within the text which demonstrate how Pushkin develops these motifs not only through the development of the plot but also through the very words themselves. Wolf Schmid, 39.

95. Varlam Shalamov, "Detskie kartinki" *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 88-90.

96. Varlam Shalamov, "Plotniki," 47.

97. *Ibid.*, 46.

98. *Ibid.*, 48.

unexpectedly allowed to remain in the workshop where they are left to sharpen saw blades next to an oven for two days—just long enough for the pair of inmates to outlast the frost and overcome death. The story is a simple one: like many of Shalamov's tales, it is one of survival, of death's being forced out by life. What makes it so powerful is the writer's ability to compose his narrative with aesthetic grace and complexity.

Shalamov divides the text of "The Carpenters" into two opposing thematic vectors. The first, situated at the beginning of the narrative, is formed by the minor motifs of hunger and cold and the primary motif of death. The narrator establishes the dominance of these motifs early on, noting: "... Potashnikov understood that he could not hold out any longer. Breakfast was enough for an hour of work at most, and then came the fatigue, and the frost that penetrates the whole body, down to the bones <...>."⁹⁹ Though not explicitly mentioned, death's presence and its imminence are obvious. Like the cold that pierces Potashnikov's bones or the hunger that gnaws at his stomach as he is forced to work, death's presence can be felt throughout the passage. Together, these motifs comprise what Schmid calls a "network of equivalencies." They form a thematic triangle, so to speak, three points united by the author, with death fixed firmly at the apex as the principle theme. Thus, hunger, cold, and death, as well as their opposites, satiation, warmth, and life act as a thematic blueprint from which Shalamov is able to construct his narrative.

A quintessential element of the story's structure, death serves yet another function in "The Carpenters." It acts as an omnipotent antagonist against which Shalamov's hero must wage a futile struggle, death threatens to claim Potashnikov. Yet, despite the his deteriorating state, the

99. Ibid., 46.

desire to survive urges the man to act: “Potashnikov suddenly heard his own voice: ‘Here, I’m a carpenter,’ and he took a step forward.”¹⁰⁰ The wish to best death, this great tormentor, induces Potashnikov to act, even against his own will. Thus, death in “The Carpenters” possesses twofold significance. For Shalamov, it is not only a theme to be explored and meditated upon but also a vehicle for the progression of the plot.

The Pushkinian subtlety of Shalamov’s storytelling reveals itself in his reliance on death as a main theme and a plot-building device in “The Carpenters.” Just as Pushkin obfuscates death’s interference in the life of the gravedigger—who appears not to distinguish between his dead “clients” and the living clients of his neighbors—Shalamov reveals that Potashnikov’s relationship to death is more nuanced than it might first appear to the reader. The narrator is torn by the expectation that he will soon die and the instinctual desire for self-preservation: “Potashnikov was possessed by the wish to at once warm himself and to simply lie down on the stinging frozen stones and die.”¹⁰¹ The value of these conflicting desires to the short story and, indeed, to the whole of *Kolyma Tales*, cannot be underestimated. For Shalamov, life in the camps was in no small part characterized by the dual wish to continue living and to give in to death, to put an end to the suffering. Potashnikov embodies this conflict completely. Though he steps forward when the man with the deer-skin hat asks for woodworkers, he knows well that his demise is inevitable in such dire circumstances. For the inmate, it is not a question of when he will succumb to death, but rather how: “Potashnikov was waiting for death from day to day, and

100. Ibid., 48.

101. Ibid., 47.

the day, it seems, had arrived.”¹⁰² If he does not perish from starvation then surely the all-conquering frost will take him.

And yet, contrary to what the reader might expect, the sentence does not preface the story of Potashnikov’s demise. In fact, it signals the end of the supremacy of hunger, cold, and death, indicating a narrative movement toward the opposite thematic pole, conversely formed by the motifs of satiation, warmth, and life. In fact, the narrator makes almost no direct mention of the previous themes following this sentence. The words “golod” (“hunger”), “kholod” (“cold”), and “smert” (“death”)—and their linguistic roots—are noticeably absent from the remaining text. Only “moroz” (frost),¹⁰³ which Shalamov employed so generously in the first half of the story, is present, and then only when the narrator notes that it has passed, having gave way to the warmer temperatures: “Today and tomorrow they warmed themselves by the oven, and the day after tomorrow the frost fell to thirty degrees—winter was already over.”¹⁰⁴ These linguistic elements have been thoroughly routed from the text. Just as in Pushkin’s “The Gravedigger,” the themes Shalamov wishes to explore are incorporated into the words themselves. The subsequent absence of these roots is as significant as their earlier prevalence as the sudden linguistic shift anticipates the narrow victory of Potashnikov and Grigoriev over death.

Still, uncertainty looms, for, even though Potashnikov lives, he remains surrounded by death, forced to return to from where he came, as his supervisor Arnstrem demands.¹⁰⁵

102. Ibid., 48.

103. The root appears two other times in “primerzshaia dver” and later, in the same paragraph, “otmorozhennye pal’tsy.” Otherwise, Shalamov has even disposed of this often-used word. Ibid., 49.

104. Ibid., 50.

105. Ibid.

Potashnikov must return to a life yet defined by death. He remains traumatized. And therein lies the ultimate existential question which Shalamov is contemplating. He wonders: “In a state of cold and hunger, the brain is poorly supplied with nutrition; the brain cells dry up—this an undeniable physical process. And god knows if, as they say in medicine, it is reversable, like frost bite, or whether the disintegration is permanent. And so, it is with the soul—it freezes, constricted, and, perhaps, remains cold forever”¹⁰⁶ The question permeates the whole of *Kolyma Tales*. Survival is not the end; unlike death, it provides no narrative closure.

Instead, Shalamov forces his reader to further contemplate with him the fate of these unlucky men. Having himself confronted death as he struggled against an interminable hunger and a cruel frost, Shalamov possesses a rare knowledge of death. Like Potashnikov, he understands what it is to want, at once, to live and to die. He is, moreover, courageous enough to return to that abyss, to convey to his reader that frightening duality that haunted him and his fellow inmates. Thus, Shalamov is able to reveal the darkest depths of the Russian soul—those that were secreted even from Pushkin. He achieves this through the implementation of poetic techniques which he borrowed from his literary predecessor. These techniques, collectively termed the “poetization of prose,” extend beyond the lyricism of stories like “Through the Snow” and “The Siberian Pine.” As is evident in “The Carpenters,” Shalamov endows, to the extent that it is possible, every element of his narrative with manifold significance. Thematic motifs are especially important as the author weaves them into the foundation of his narrative and even into the words themselves. Moreover, like Pushkin before him, Shalamov employs the poetization of prose to reflect upon his and his nation’s history, to present it, as Gogol once said about Russia’s

106. Ibid., 47.

national poet, “in the same purity, in such refined beauty, as a landscape is reflected on the convex surface of an optical glass.”¹⁰⁷

107. Nikolai Gogol, *Neskol'ko slov o Pushkine*.

Chapter 3

A Chronicler of His Time

3.1 A Shared Historical Mission

Pushkin's foray into historical studies was of great importance to Shalamov, impacting the development of his authorial mission. Although the poet's work as a historian was cut short by his untimely death, it left a lasting mark on the style and methods of exploration of Russia's past in documentary prose and fiction. As he matured, Pushkin began to seek out truth in his nation's history in much the same way as he had pursued truth in art. For Pushkin, the force leading him on this new path could be said to have been the "love" that he felt for his homeland, a sentiment he expresses clearly in the following 1830 poem:

Two feelings are wonderfully close to us –
 In them, the heart finds food –
 Love for the hearth of the motherland,
 Love for the graves of the fatherland

A life-giving sacred place!
 The earth would be dead without them<...>¹⁰⁸

Though one might translate "pepelishche" as "smouldering remains," hearth seems a more fitting choice as it captures the warmth and domesticity suggested by the adjective "rodnoi" (often

108. Alexander Pushkin, "Dva chuvstva divno blizki nam," *Pushkin A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 203.

translated as “native” or “home,” “rodnoi” is translated here as belonging to or being an attribute of “motherland”). The “hearth” is, moreover, the “life giving sacred place” that Pushkin honors in the second stanza; it signifies life, past, present, and future. The “graves of the fatherland,” too, recall the past and evoke the nation’s history, in which the poet was growing increasingly interested. The use of the first-person plural pronoun also indicates that he considers these two feelings universal to all Russians, if not all peoples. It seems that, for Pushkin, history carries significance not only for the poet or the historian, but for all of his readers, a considerably more comprehensive take on the subject than he once held. As a young man, Pushkin had often addressed history in a mythological or romantic register, praising that which he considered just and passing judgement on that with which he disagreed. He did not reflect on history objectively but criticized those views he thought retrograde or too conservative. The poem therefore suggests a shift in Pushkin’s thinking on historical matters, as he moves from the subjective paradigm that he once used to a consider the past to a more objective one.

In “Two feelings are wonderfully close to us,” not only does Pushkin express a more sophisticated understanding of the importance of a national historical narrative to a country and its people, he also bids farewell to the romantic model of historical writing and thinking. Pushkin signals his departure from the “entertaining” or “story-telling” quality that was characteristic of the works of historians of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in favor of the rules and conventions required in genuine historical study.¹⁰⁹ Unlike other historians, such as Nikolai Karamzin, a dear friend and mentor who was, nonetheless, loyal to the royal family, Pushkin enjoyed the benefits of being a court historian while remaining free to engage in serious

109. David M. Bethea, “Pushkin as Historical Thinker,” *The Pushkin Handbook*, ed. by David M. Bethea (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 268.

scholarly research, his goal having been to write historical works with an artist's pen in hand and academic objectivity in mind.

Pushkin's interest in the main elements of historical analysis were also different from those of Karamzin, whose *History of the Russian State* (1816) focused on the deeds of great men. As David Bethea notes, "On a more human level he [ceased] to see the meaning in history as synonymous with the actions and thoughts of the 'great' personality (the *muzh sudeb* or the hero selected by fate) and begins...to view the unfolding of events without partisan blinders<...>."¹¹⁰ The two kinds of "love" of which Pushkin writes in "Two feelings are wonderfully close to us" are felt by all. They are not unique to any single "great personality," whether he be a tsar, a general, or other kind of hero. More concretely, for Pushkin, the study of history calls for one to be able to reflect on his individual past within the context of a greater cultural-historical narrative. What fascinates him is the story of "us," a word that unites both the individual person and his fellow countrymen.

Pushkin himself was driven into "the dark archives of history"¹¹¹ by his desire to understand his past through his ancestors. In the autobiography that he begins to draft, he devotes considerable attention to his family tree. From the story of his predecessors, his kin, Pushkin moves to exploring the history of his nation:

Not only can I be proud of the glory of my ancestors, but I must be, to not respect them is shameful faintheartedness. We can trace our family from the Prussian émigré Radshi or Rachi (*an honest man*, says the chronicler, that is of the nobility) who departed for Russia in the time of the principality of Saint Alexander Iaroslavich Nevskii. From him came the Musins, Bobrishchevs, Miatlevs, Povodovs, Kamenskiis, Buturlins, Kologrivovs,

110. *Ibid.*, 267.

111. Pushkin, Alexander, "1824," *Pushkin A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 10 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1979), 102.

Sherefedinovs, and Tovkarovs. The name of my ancestors is gradually returning in our history. In a small number of notable families, survivors of the bloody disgraces of Ivan Vassel'evich the Terrible, the historiographer also named the Pushkins. Grigorii Gavrilovich Pushkin belongs to a time of interregnum, beginning with the separate troop, the one with Izmailov, according to Karamzin, he managed his affairs honestly. For Pushkins signed a document about a return to the reign of the Romanovs, but one of them, the okol'nichii Matvei Stepanovich, signed a synodic act about the erasure of localisms...¹¹²

One's family history gives an individual a right to feel close to the important events of national past. It also permits the memoirist to replace the official interpretation of history with a grounded historical narrative, rich in detail, that members of his class passed down from generation to generation. This is why in his endeavors in the historical realm, Pushkin was willing to forego the state's official word on the past. He was drawn toward a more holistic approach characterized by nuance and depth. It was, after all, his own history, not the government's, that he was exploring. His nations' past served as the backdrop for these explorations.

With this more comprehensive method, in 1827, Pushkin began work on *The Moor of Peter the Great*, a project that lasted a decade and was published posthumously in 1837. It is a historical novel based in part on the life of his maternal great-grandfather, Abram Petrovich Ganibal, brought to Russia from Africa in December 1704 and gifted to Peter I when he was only a boy.¹¹³ As he described his great-grandfather and his royal patron, Pushkin was certainly aware that there existed "great personalities," such as the tsar himself. Yet, for every "Peter the Great," there existed countless Russian's beneath him—women like Natal'ia Gavrilovna in *The Moor of Peter the Great* and mean like Eugene in "The Bronze Horseman" (1833). Their stories were

112. Alexander Pushkin, "Nachalo avtobiografii," *Pushkin A. C. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 8 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1978), 56.

113. T.J. Binyon, "Ancestry and Childhood, 1799-1811," *Pushkin: A biography*, 4.

also worthy of being recorded. Pushkin's historical mission was therefore not framed by the actions of a single man, who had, nonetheless, already been added to the national Pantheon. Rather, his task consisted of documenting actions and revealing the personalities of the Russian people, including those that were a part of his personal history. Thus, by its very nature, Pushkin's mission did not coincide with the official, that is, government-propagated, perspective on history.

In *The Moor of Peter the Great*, *The History of the Pugachev Rebellion*, *My Autobiography*, and even *The Captain's Daughter* (1836), and "The Bronze Horseman," Pushkin's historical exploration were marked by an unwillingness to proffer any particular narrative template.¹¹⁴ That is to say, Pushkin did not approach his research with a preconceived narrative blueprint onto which he could fit appropriate details, simplifying or otherwise ignoring those facts which went against the agenda he had set for himself or which the government endorsed. Instead, as a historian, he wanted to contemplate his country's past as a philosopher might. For this he looked to Voltaire, who he said "...was the first to go on the new road and carry the torch of philosophy into the dark archives of history."¹¹⁵ For Pushkin, Voltaire and his approach to the study of history were of importance as the French philosopher had written about Peter I in his studies on Charles XII. Having read Voltaire's text for his own research on the Russian ruler, Pushkin decided to adopt a philosophical model for his study of history. Pushkin

114. The term "narrative template" was coined by James V. Wertsh. The scholar notes: "A Past that is imagined through narrative templates is one in which interpretation relies heavily on abstract-meaning structures not anchored in specific places, times characters, or events. Information—especially information that contradicts these schemas—routinely distorted, simplified, and ignored." "Collective Memory and Narrative Templates," *Social Research*, vol. 75, No. 1 (2008), 133-156.

115. Pushkin, Alexander, "1824," *Pushkin A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 102.

was not content with merely compiling a mass of dates and facts. Like Voltaire, he sought also to understand deeply the opinions, motives, actions—and their consequences—of the players in great historical dramas, for genuine knowledge of the effects of history allows the historian, and the reader, to know himself better through his ancestors.¹¹⁶

It must be noted that, just as Pushkin admired Voltaire, he also relied on the work done by his Russian predecessors. Karamzin was at the top of the list of national historians whom Pushkin admired. A close friend of the Karamzins and a bosom buddy of the historian's son-in-law, Peter Viazemskii, Pushkin read *The History of the Russian State* as it was being published. He highly praised its style, depth, and the conscientiousness with which the historian painstakingly collected and verified his facts. In an 1836 edition of his quarterly *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*), Pushkin lauded the “poetic freshness of the chronical,” though he emphasized the need for the “criticism necessary in history.”¹¹⁷

However, Pushkin took issue with Karamzin's bias—as well as with the many prejudices that other Russian historians from the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries revealed in their work. In Pushkin's opinion, there was not much to be gained from a document patent informed by the author's perspective and void of critical analysis. Pushkin also opposed the

116. Ira O. Wade, “Voltaire and History,” *Intellectual Development of Voltaire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 462-463.

117. Pushkin was commenting on the unfinished work of the Belorussian archbishop, Georgii Koniskii. He continued to write: “By the word criticism, I mean the deep study of authentic events and the clear, sharp presentation of their causes and consequences.” Given his high opinion of the archbishop's scholarly work, it follows that Pushkin would have modelled his own historical studies on this understanding of the role of the historian. “Sobranie sochinenii Georgiia Koniskogo, arkhiepiskopa belorusskogo” in *Pushkin A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 7 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1978), 230.

authors' use of the ideological framework of their historical narratives. Defined by the nineteenth-century Russian scholar, Sergei Uvarov, the ideology that dominated Russian historiography consisted of three principles: the supremacy of orthodoxy, autocracy, and the people's fealty ("pravoslavie, samoderzhavie i narodnost"). These three tenets prescribed the Russian scholars' interpretation of historical facts—for example, Karamzin's documenting Russia's past from the perspective of the royal family. In Pushkin's opinion, historians should refrain from offering personal interpretation of the events that they are recording. They should refer instead to first-hand documentation to form reasoned hypotheses of the causes and consequences of the events describe in their work. A dedicated archivist himself, Pushkin sought to maintain the pathos of the Karamzinian chronicle, its so-called "poetic freshness," while simultaneously engaging in the rigorous scholarly work demanded of a historian.

In the 1830s, Pushkin embarked on the grand historical project, "The History of Pugachev." Having received access to the government archives, he was awash in a collection of documentation of the 1773-74 uprising led by the Yaik Cossack, Emelian Pugachev. Additionally, he was so dedicated to conveying the events as they factually that he even ventured to the Orenburg guberniya to record the first-person accounts of surviving witnesses. Pushkin's mission, which Bethea outlines concisely in the thirteenth chapter of his book, *The Superstitious Muse: Thinking Russian Literature Mythopoetically* (2009), was thus: "to tell, without moralizing *razmyshleniia* (meditations), the verifiably accurate story of the *pugachevshchina* in a way that preserves its fatal energy—the ignitable combination of 'daring, happenstance, and luck'—against the backdrop of an otherwise untellable cacophony of sources."¹¹⁸ Not reliant

118. David Bethea, "Pushkin's *The History of Pugachev*: Where Fact meets the Zero-Degree of Fiction," *The Superstitious Muse: Thinking Russian Literature Mythopoetically* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 306.

upon the government-sanctioned narrative template, as Karamzin had relied before him, Pushkin set a task to himself that was arguably grander and more challenging than his predecessor's. Indeed, to make sense of the often-contradictory accounts of pro-state military archives, memoirs and personal correspondences, the folklore that the rebellions inspired, and his own interviews with eyewitnesses and their families, was a feat nearly impossible to execute. Yet, without a ready-made paradigm onto which he could plot the events he was describing, Pushkin did accomplish this mission. In *The History of the Pugachev Rebellion*, as his *magnum opus* was ultimately titled, he managed to convey the many sides of the controversial and politically dangerous—even in the 1830s—peasant uprising.

The literary prowess of Pushkin the historian is readily apparent. For example, in chapter one, he establishes a portentous tone for his entire work, which culminates in the following sentence: “In this time of trouble an unknown vagrant drifted about among the Cossack homesteads, taking jobs now with this now with that master and dabbling in all manner of handicrafts.”¹¹⁹ This sentence creates a smooth transition from the first to the second chapter, where Pugachev's vagrancy acquires a more sinister tint, his “handicrafts” now including robberies and murders. It is surely evidence of Pushkin's maintaining “the poetic freshness” that he valued in the works of Russian chroniclers, that could maintain the reader's interest in his narrative by subtly manipulating its nuancing and its suspenseful atmosphere.

As Bethea notes: “[t]his sentence is indeed one of the most enigmatic and ‘pregnant’ in the entire historiographical text. Pushkin commences by deliberately not naming this force, since it is *sluchai* [happenstance or chance] incarnate<...>.”¹²⁰ Yet, although Bethea goes on to say

119. Ibid., 310.

120. Ibid.

that Pushkin identifies the source of the “force” as Pugachev, as already noted, Pushkin no longer viewed the events of history as synonymous with the acts of a single “great” man. Instead, he placed an emphasis on “sluchai” to indicate that he wished to distinguish the man from the events. The inconspicuous vagrant Pugachev was not “great,” for Pushkin, but the chance that fate bestowed upon him, and that he seized so readily, was. Hence, while unable to fully refrain from narrativizing history, Pushkin was still able to observe the distance required of a true historian from his subject, an accomplishment, until then, unimaginable in Russian historical studies.

Despite such an admirable feat, *The History of the Pugachev Rebellion* was a critical and commercial failure. Undoubtedly disappointed that Pushkin had chosen to remain an objective scholar, one contemporary criticized him for not having “painted [Russia’s past]...with the fiery brush of a Byron.”¹²¹ The lack of success was also due to the fact that *The History* was far removed from the poet’s other works of a historical theme. Narrative poems like “The Bronze Horseman,” “Poltava” (1829), and the Shakespeare-inspired drama *Boris Godunov* (1831) had colored the public’s expectation of the work Pushkin produced to such a degree that any deviation was considered stylistic error on the poet’s part. And though some came to Pushkin’s defense, admiring his ability “not to be a poet,”¹²² *The History* failed to gain any traction. According to Binyon’s calculation, Pushkin had hoped to make approximately 40,000 rubles from the book but, in the end, earned less than half of that, about 16,000 rubles.¹²³ At the time of

121. The critique belongs to major-general Vladimir Bronevsky. Binyon includes it in his analysis of the reception of Pushkin’s *History*. “A Sea of troubles,” *Pushkin: A Biography*, 462.

122. Ibid.

123. Ibid., 463.

his death 1,775 copies out of the 3,000 that were printed remained in the poet's apartment, still in the printer's unwrapped bundles.¹²⁴

Ultimately, Pushkin's ambitious historical work was overshadowed by his literary oeuvre. He could have become Russia's next great historian, had he not already become Russia's greatest poet—as well as a celebrated author of prose and dramatist. The Russian reading public would have preferred that Pushkin continue composing verse; it took scholars, and then readers, almost a century to embrace his legacy as a historian. Yet, for Shalamov, Pushkin's historical mission would not be forgotten. By choosing to tell the story of the victims of the gulag, “without moralizing *razmyshleniia*,” Shalamov followed in Pushkin's steps as a man who recorded his country's past with facts in hand, objectively, and in full opposition to the government's “narrative template.” Like Pushkin, he veered away from the narrative patterns of historical storytelling employed by his contemporaries—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in particular—to portray life in the Soviet labor camps as it really was.

3.2 Shalamov's Testament

For Shalamov, the critical eye required of a historian was integral to his account of gulag experiences of his generation. In the nation that oscillated between attempts to reveal the atrocities committed under the Stalinist regime or excuse them,¹²⁵ Shalamov's testimony carried

124. *Ibid.*

125. Alexander Etkind notes that as recently as 2007, Russian textbooks describe the Stalinist terror as “the price of the great achievements of the Soviet Union.” He continues: “It states that the violence achieved ‘the utmost efficiency of the ruling elite.’ Stalin's purges shaped ‘the new managerial class, which as adequate to the tasks of modernization <...> This class was

immense historical value. Shalamov refused to see the past obscured by others. He made a commitment to convey to his reader the truth that had been continually denied to him. Though living under a regime that had dictated every facet of the historical narrative so as to advance its political agenda, he strove toward the “pure light of truth,”¹²⁶ just like Pushkin had.

This is to say that he sought to ascribe a higher moral sense neither to his survival nor to the survival of the others whom he depicts in *Kolyma Tales*. In fact, unlike his contemporary and fellow survivor Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov saw no positive value to be discerned from his camp experience, stating: “Nobody becomes better or stronger after the camp. The camp was a negative experience, a negative school, the corruption of everyone—the bosses and the prisoners, the guards and the onlookers who walked by, and the readers of fiction.”¹²⁷ In Shalamov’s opinion those complicit in the propagation of the gulag’s horrors were susceptible to its corrupting effects. Indeed, many of the guards and bosses Shalamov portrayed in his stories were devoured by the very machine they helped to keep in motion. In “Handwriting,” for example, the narrator reveals that, while the protagonist Krist survives, his unnamed supervisor does not, having been executed at some point after the events described in the story.¹²⁸ It is a roll of the dice, chance, that determines whether you survive the camps, not morality, piety, or any other

unconditionally loyal to those in power. Its executive discipline was irreproachable.’ No count of victims is impressive enough to overshadow these fabulous results.” Overall, the view is quite positive in its appraisal of the Stalinist regime. In writing *Kolyma Tales*, Shalamov sought to correct such gross misinterpretations of the facts. “Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2009): 633.

126. Alexander Pushkin, “Ty prosveshcheniem svoi razum osvetil,” *Pushkin A. S. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 357.

127. Varlam Shalamov, “O proze,” *Vse ili nichego*, 92.

128. Varlam Shalamov, “Pocherk,” 359-363.

virtue. Just as Pushkin did in *The History of the Pugachev Rebellion*, Shalamov chose to emphasize the role chance, coincidence, and luck play in the gulag.

This is in sharp contrast to the way Solzhenitsyn portrays the camps in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, in which the author delineates clearly the good from the bad, the right from the wrong. In “Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction,” an excellent study of present-day’s Russia’s attempts to accept and interpret its Soviet past, Alexander Etkind presents the different methods with which gulag writers attempted to narrativize their suffering: “There are several ways to make sense of the gulag experience <...> The survival argument proposes that survival in the gulag required rare human qualities, and therefore, those who survived the gulag were heroes. The witness argument posits that the survivors’ task was to tell the truth about the gulag, and therefore, those who survived in order to bear witness were heroes.”¹²⁹ These two methods of interpretations serve as the new narrative templates for the post-Stalin era. In both, there is an apparent elevation in status of survivors, while those who perished, unable to tell their stories, become martyrs.

Solzhenitsyn, in his *One Day*, is utilizing the survival argument, if not a combination of the two narrative templates presented above. Etkind notes: “While Solzhenitsyn presented his experience of survival as a moral lesson for mankind, Shalamov denied any value in the gulag and decried the vanity of survival. Individual survival could be accidental, or it could be earned by skills and tricks like those that Ivan Denisovich demonstrated: for Shalamov, survival was as senseless as the whole system of the gulag.”¹³⁰ Shalamov’s protagonists are not heroes. Nor are

129. Alexander Etkind, “Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction,” 642.

130. Ibid.

they martyrs. In his final moments, Dugaiev thinks not of his own suffering, not of those he leaves behind, nor of the government that facilitated his death; instead he merely regrets having worked so hard on the last day of his life;¹³¹ in “Typhoid Quarantine,” Andrei’s cunning, what might be called his heroism, is ultimately undone when he discovers that, despite his admirable efforts to preserve his life, he will still be forced to work the gold mines, which he understands means certain death;¹³² in “Berries,” it is again chance that spares the narrator-protagonist, who was the intended target of the vindictive guard, Seroshapka.¹³³ Shalamov does not endow these men with any “rare human qualities,” nor does he elevate them to any higher status. Instead, each story reinforced the assertion that, in the camps, there are only victims. And though fortune may have favored some, allowing them “to tell the truth about the gulag,” in Shalamov’s opinion, they remain victims, nonetheless.

Shalamov illustrates this point effectively in the story, “The Lawyers’ Plot,” in which the narrator-protagonist, Andreev, and other prisoners with backgrounds in law are implicated in a plot, the details of which are completely unknown to them. Andreev recalls his journey as he is transferred from one prison to another until he finally arrives at the Magadan camp, “Vas’kov’s House,” where he is to be executed, along with all the other “lawyer-prisoners.”¹³⁴ It is only when the chief orchestrator of this false lawyers’ plot, Captain Rebrov, is himself arrested that Andreev and the other inmates are released from custody, and thus, pardoned an execution. Lest the reader think the prisoners have been spared by some divine Providence, for they are morally

131. Varlam Shalamov, “Oдиночnyi zamer,” *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 50-52.

132. Varlam Shalamov, “Tifoznyi karantin,” 171-185.

133. Varlam Shalamov, “Iagody,” *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 78-80.

134. Varlam Shalamov, “Zagovor iuristov,” *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 170.

or ethically superior to the captain, Andreev reveals his shortcomings at the beginning of his tale. Upon arriving at the Shmelev brigade, some three weeks prior to the events he is describing, Andreev regards the other inmates with whom he will be forced to reside for the time being: “Here there were people even weaker than I was, and this brought me some kind of comfort, a kind of inadvertent joy. Here, I was still human.”¹³⁵ Andreev, himself a goner, a dokhodiaga,¹³⁶ is only able to define his humanity by the absence of it that he recognizes in others still weaker than he is. If he were with stronger prisoners, Andreev would not feel himself still human. Their strength would emphasize his frailty, his proximity to death. Moreover, the “inadvertent joy” that Andreev feels at the sight of the other suffering inmates forces the reader to question the protagonist’s virtuousness. Compared to Solzhenitsyn’s Ivan Denisovich, the prisoner Andreev is hardly someone worth of hero-status. His questionable integrity disproves the survival narrative template and his survival at the story’s end deprives him of a martyr’s death.

Shalamov also addresses the question of victimhood in “The Lawyers’ Plot.” As he continues his story, Andreev blurs the boundaries between inmates and camp official. The first hint of this ambiguity is, not coincidentally, Andreev’s first meeting concerning his involvement in the titular conspiracy. Andreev notes: “The plenipotentiary Romanov stood before me. “Rather, I stood before him <...>.”¹³⁷ Despite their significantly different position within the camp network, the mirrored actions suggest that Romanov and Andreev are, in fact, on equal footing. It is a portentous moment, obfuscating whose fate is really at stake, the inmate’s or his oppressor’s. Shalamov conjures up this ambiguity to call attention to the arbitrary mode in which

135. Ibid., 158.

136. Andreev remarks that Shmelev is only two steps removed from “the anonymous mass graves.” His presence at Shmelev indicates that he is very near death. Ibid., 157.

137. Ibid., 159.

the Soviet machine disposed of its citizens—and in which history generally operates. In fact, no Soviet citizen was guaranteed exemption from the camps, regardless of his position within the party. This insecurity permeates the whole of the narrative, threatening to take down each and every character, whether he realizes it or not.

Shalamov even manages to weave this uncertainty into the very name of one of his characters, the NKVD official, Smertin, whose surname is derived from the word “smert” (“death”).¹³⁸ Such a conspicuous name does not go unnoticed. Andreev remarks upon seeing it written on a nameplate, hanging from the door of the room that he is about to enter: “So threatening a pseudonym (it is not a genuine surname) left an impression even on me, who was infinitely tired.”¹³⁹ For the inmate, the name portends his certain demise. For the reader however, the name intimates the death both of the prisoner and of the man who bears it. However, not only is the room marked by death on the outside, with the nameplate hanging on its door; inside, too, there is an image that connotes the loss of life, this time of a massive scale: “... it was already time to enter,” Andreev remarks, “to walk around the huge room with Stalin’s portrait on every wall <...>.”¹⁴⁰ The moment stands out as the only instance in all of *Kolyma Tales* in which Shalamov explicitly makes reference to Stalin. It is a poignant moment of confrontation for Andreev, and by extension Shalamov, in which the victim comes face-to-face with the perpetrator of all of his suffering, with the man responsible for the deaths of millions. This includes men just like Smertin, whom Stalin hired, trained, empowered, and now surrounded on all sides.

138. Ibid., 160.

139. Ibid.

140. Ibid.

Whereas one may only surmise Romanov's and Smertin's demise, Captain Rebrov's downfall is unambiguous. Andreev first foretells the captain's death, again, upon entering the man's office: "An ordinary office, not much bigger than the one where I had been about two hours ago."¹⁴¹ As was the case with Romanov, Andreev draws an equivalency between himself and Captain Rebrov. Andreev notes that the same portraits of Stalin that hung on Smertin's walls are also there in the captain's office. The exchange is brief, just long enough for Rebrov to establish Andreev's connection to the other lawyers he has sentenced to execution, in particular, Parfent'ev, a former prosecutor and the head of the mining team to which Andreev belonged prior to his transfer to Shmelev. It is, however, long enough for Andreev to piece together the plot that has been set in motion against him:

I began to understand something. Before his arrest, Parfent'ev was the regional prosecutor in Cheliabinsk, the Karelian prosecutor. Vinogradov, through 'Partizan,' found out that his university comrade in the mine had transferred him money, and asked he head of 'Partizan' to help Parfent'ev. Parfent'ev was transferred to forge as a hammerman. Anisimov told Smertin, in the NKVD, about Vinogradov's request, who told Captain Rebrov, in Magadan, and [he] entered into the Vinogradov affair. All of the lawyer-prisoners were arrested from all of the mines in the North. The rest was a matter of investigative technique.¹⁴²

The plot, convoluted though it may be, is characteristic of those schemes that occurred not infrequently under Stalin. The plotter casts an indiscriminately wide net, trapping beneath it many who cannot fathom how they have been implicated in such an affair. The bewilderment Andreev and his "co-conspirators" experience upon seeing each other mirrors that which the average Soviet citizen felt upon his arrest. The implicated inmate's subsequent accusations

141. Ibid., 168.

142. Ibid., 170.

against those they fear are “enemies of the state”¹⁴³ was also a typical reaction of prisoners who felt that, though their case had without a doubt been a mistake, the others were genuine saboteurs.

In the end, true to form, Shalamov subverts his reader’s expectations. It is Rebrov who meets his end, surely just as bewildered as Andreev had been.¹⁴⁴ The conclusion sees the reversal of fortune, until then only intimated, come to fruition. The camp official has become a victim himself. Rebrov is not a martyr, however. The reader does not mourn his death and may even relish it. Yet, though Rebrov may have been an agent, complicit in horrors enacted by the Stalinist regime, he is also a victim. Andreev himself remains an unheroic protagonist, completely passive, resigned to his death due to the unimaginable hunger and fatigue he feels.

Following in the Pushkinian tradition, in *Kolyma Tales*, Shalamov recorded and studied his nation’s past—and his own— while refraining from passing judgement on his characters’ moral and ethical shortcomings. Like Pushkin, moreover, was not to portray a single “great personality,” himself included. Rather, Shalamov sought to document the experiences of many men, all of whom struggled terribly for their survival in inhuman conditions. In such short stories as “The Lawyers’ Plot,” the author turned his attention to the question of victimhood in the camps, in which, he asserts, there were no martyrs nor heroes. Everyone who was a part of the camps, “the bosses and the prisoners, the guards and the onlookers,” was a victim. In order that he could more freely explore his subject, like Pushkin before him, Shalamov eschewed the government-endorsed narrative templates employed by his contemporaries, and in doing so, he accomplished something truly unique. The reader of *Kolyma Tales* should not expect from

143. Ibid.

144. Ibid., 171.

Shalamov inspiring tales of humanity, of suffering men turned saintly, of inmates who, despite the unending terror to which they are subjected, maintain their moral and ethical integrity.

Instead, he reveals to his reader broken men, the hopelessness of their plight, and the unimaginable physical and spiritual weakness engendered in the gulag. Thus, Shalamov forces his reader to bear witness to life in the camps as it really was and the truth as he knew it.

Conclusion

The Testament of Pushkin in Contemporary Russian Fiction

Kolyma Tales, Shalamov's nuanced testament to the bitter life of the gulag prisoner, was the author's return to Pushkinian precepts.¹⁴⁵ This project's aim was to illustrate that Shalamov completely imbibed Pushkin's civic, poetic, and historical legacies as he composed his short stories. The author's commitment to "summon mercy to the fallen" is evident in all of his narratives, in which he portrayed, with frank honesty, men subjected to unendurable physical and psychological degradation. In his work, the survivor accurately conveyed to his reader the widespread hunger, frightful cold, and cruel abuses inmates bore at the hands of the camp officials. Like Pushkin responding to the trials of the Decembrists, his former comrades, in Siberia, Shalamov documented his nation's trauma with admirable precision and compassion while remaining Pushkin-like in his artistic approach.

Moreover, it is significant that the author was not the central figure of the six cycles of short stories comprising *Kolyma Tales*. It is as if his work, lacking the "vanity of survival,"¹⁴⁶ was as much the account of those who were unable to tell their stories as it was his own. The expansiveness of his scope and the resultant objectivity, along with Shalamov's precision and clarity of speech illustrate the writer's acute understanding of Pushkin's poetics. The Soviet author's implementation of the principles of "the poetization of prose,"—that is, his lyricism, mastery of linguistic elements, and his ability to seamlessly integrate tragic themes into the

145. Varlam Shalamov, "V krug deviatom. Varlam Shalamov."

146. Alexander Etkind, "Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction," 642.

narrative structures of his stories—make his work a creative feat. *Kolyma Tales* is an impression infusion of Pushkinian poetic technique into a work of documentary storytelling.

Shalamov's stories are, furthermore, void of the pathos so often employed by other writers of gulag prose. Always critical but never sanctimonious, the author strove for truth, free from the government's influence and the burden of an unnatural moral interpretation of his pain. His account remains a revelatory work of artistic verity and civic clear-sightedness. For these reasons, he was, indeed, Pushkin's heir.

Since Shalamov's death in 1982, new generation of Russian writers have attempted to contemplate their country's history as well as their current dubious political circumstances. And though the task of naming an heir to Pushkin is ongoing, the national poet's influence among contemporary writers addressing Russia's past in their works remains prevalent. One such author is Vladimir Sorokin. In his novel *Day of an Oprichnik*, he reflects on the pre-Pretrine as well as Soviet history by imagining a future in which the country has returned to the oppressive and violent principles that dominated both. Though of a vastly different genre than *Kolyma Tales*—*Day of an Oprichnik* is, of course, not documentary prose, but science fictions—in writing his novel, Sorokin sets a goal for himself that echoes that of Shalamov. Moreover, the narrative techniques that he employs therein are similar to those which the gulag chronicler used in his short stories.

In *Day of an Oprichnik*, Sorokin takes an objective stance as he evaluates Russia's past, present, and future. By juxtaposing different aspects of Russian cultural memory in a single work of art, the author and his reader are able compare at once the course of history with the nation's current political atmosphere as well as with the author's fictionalized future. Marina Aptekman notes: "Sorokin's novel...is an 'open' narrative, a cultural game, not directed towards a single

particular ideological interpretation. Upon closing the book, the reader remains puzzled as to whether the world he has just read about is, in fact, a utopia or dystopia. The implied author gives no definite answer, but rather leaves it to the reader to interpret.”¹⁴⁷ The absence of a clearly formed narrative template certainly recalls tactics utilized by Shalamov and Pushkin. It, moreover, allows both Sorokin and his reader to engage in a dialogue, to question the current prevailing interpretations—both liberal and conservative—of Russia’s political and economic trajectory. In Russia—and in the West—a critical, objective voice is often muffled or otherwise excluded from such conversations. Sorokin challenges the paradigm of state violence with *Day of an Oprichnik*, just as Shalamov and Pushkin challenged it in their art.

Sorokin, too, addresses Russia’s imperial past. In his novel, Russia is once again a monarchy. This return to the country’s tsarist roots also means a return to the previous state ideology: “pravoslavie,” “samoderzhavie,” and “narodnost” (“orthodoxy,” “autocracy” and “the people’s featly”) are once again the tenets by which life is structured. Sorokin’s main character, Komiaga, embodies these principles completely. Aptekman explains: “He belongs to a cast of chosen people, *oprichniks*, who are given the highest authority in the state, but he, at the same time, remains a simple person <...>.”¹⁴⁸ An Orthodox Russian, a powerful agent of the state, and a man of simple folk, Komiaga is orthodoxy, autocracy and the people’s featly incarnate. He is the embodiment of these three imperatives of Russian life, their complete harmonization in one vessel. Thus, despite the reestablishment of the autocratic institution, the “oprichnik”¹⁴⁹ does not

147. Marina Aptekman, “Forward to the Past, or Two Radical Views on the Russian Nationalist Future: Pyotr Krasnov’s *Behind the Thistle* and Vladimir Sorokin’s *Day of an Oprichnik*,” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2009): 250.

148. *Ibid.*, 251.

149. The term “oprichnik” was used to designate a member of the oprichnina, an organization of bodyguards established by tsar Ivan Vasil’evich (also known as Ivan IV or Ivan

feel at all oppressed by the state, which has vested him, a man of humble origins, with great authority.

However, Sorokin's depictions of grotesque, state-sanctioned violence, which echo the Soviet past as much as they do Russia's imperial history, are clearly meant to prompt the reader to question Komiaga's faith in the institutions which govern his life—and theirs. Yet, just as Shalamov offers no clear judgment of his heroes' moral integrity," Sorokin also refrains from presenting an unambiguous interpretation of his protagonist's questionable ethics or the legitimacy of the totalitarian state. By extension, the author does not impart on his reader a precise conclusion regarding Russia's monarchical or Soviet history, allowing the reader to decide for himself, the author's own views notwithstanding.

It seems, therefore, *One Day of an Oprichnik* is a clear example of Pushkinian principles in art as Shalamov understood them. Thus, decades after Shalamov's death, Russian authors are continuing to pay heed to Pushkin's testament as they endeavor to chronicle their country's past. And in their wake, to make sense of their work, "on tractors and horses will come not writers, but readers."¹⁵⁰

the Terrible). Viacheslav Shpakovksy and David Nicolle, *Armies of Ivan the Terrible: Russian Troops, 1505-1700* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2006), 3.

150. Varlam Shalamov, "Through the Snow," 39.

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