

VARLAM ŠALAMOV'S КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ:
THE PROBLEM OF ORDERING

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF SLAVIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
WITH A MAJOR IN RUSSIAN
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1995

STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Galina DeRoeck, for her genuine interest in me and my work. Her propensity to question, rather than answer, has not only compelled me to do my best work, but has also led me to a fuller understanding of the material. I would also like to thank Leona Toker for her taking the lead in setting the initial goals in the study of КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ, and for her firm personal support. It has been a privilege to follow in her footsteps. I am greatly indebted to Iraida Sirotinskaja, at the Russian State Literary Archives (РГАЛИ). She has been instrumental in instigating further study of Šalamov, and I cannot thank her enough for her role in bringing his work to light, and for answering my numerous and diverse questions about his biography and bibliography. I would like to thank Tea Malkova, for sending me numerous articles on Šalamov not available in the United States, Dr. Teresa Polowy, for her constructive comments on both style and content, Willis Harte and Laura Kline, fellow students and Šalamov scholars, who were open and cooperative in sharing information, my friends and fellow students in the Russian Department at the University of Arizona, and John Glad for his translations, which first introduced me to Šalamov's work. I would also like to thank the staff of the University of Arizona Interlibrary Loan office, who were instrumental in helping me to obtain many of the articles and books listed in the critical bibliography of Šalamov materials. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, K.C., for enduring my many hours at the computer, and supporting me throughout the researching and writing of this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this thesis is the problem of ordering in Varlam Šalamov's Gulag epic КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ. As КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ was written "в стол," or for the drawer, and its author was never actively involved in its publication, the presentation of the work has primarily been dictated by the political, financial, or personal considerations of others. This thesis researches the work's chaotic history of publication and how this may have affected its critical and popular reception. The close readings of "По снегу," "Сентенция," "Кант" and "Стланик" are meant to elucidate how the work, when read in the author's intended ordering, reveals its richness and web-like complexity.

КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ is a work of fiction, yet it is also highly autobiographical. As Šalamov once wrote, "[Колымские] рассказы — это моя душа" (О моей прозе 60). The fact/fiction dichotomy in the work plays an important role. For this reason, the thesis begins with a biographical essay. The appendices are meant to both support the conclusions drawn in the body of the thesis, as well as stimulate further study of Šalamov and his works. The appended bibliography of Šalamov materials is extensive, and is the first of its kind.

PREFACE

This Thesis assumes a knowledge of Russian. Whenever possible, I have quoted sources in the original Russian, so long as it does not upset the flow of the sentence or paragraph. In the transliteration of Cyrillic characters, I have used the SR system¹ (Slavic Review), as it most closely reproduces Russian phonetics.

I have rendered journal, book, and newspaper titles in the original Russian. All translations are mine. Acknowledgment for quotes and bibliographic citations are given according to MLA guidelines. All quotes from КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ are cited from the 1992 edition in two tomes, published by "Наше Наследие."

¹On the maps of Kolyma, Višera and European Russia, due to restrictions built into the map-making software, I was not able to use the SR system. I have opted to use the BGN (Board of Geographic Names) system, with a few minor changes in the representation of vowels — ю - ју, я - ја, ё - о, ѝ - ј.

INTRODUCTION

Varlam Šalamov's КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ is an enormous and exceedingly complex work, one which is only beginning to get the critical attention it so richly deserves. It is a work of considerable artistic maturity, generic innovation and thematic power. In addressing with ruthless clarity one of the century's most tragic phenomena, the Soviet labor camp system, Šalamov puts on display the very soul of humanity.

The fact that recognition has come so slowly to such a major contribution to twentieth-century literature can be traced, in large part, to the chaotic history of its publication, itself a reflection of the political struggles of the times. As Šalamov wrote "for the drawer," and was himself not involved in the publication of his work, nearly all aspects of how it finally appeared to the public were dictated by the political, financial or personal motivations of others.

Šalamov's stories began appearing in the late 1950's in *samizdat*. Yet Šalamov had little respect for the dissident community which created *samizdat*, and made his work first available. *Tamizdat*, or the émigré journals of the West, published a number of Šalamov's stories over a period of about ten years beginning in 1966. For them as well, Šalamov's work was primarily a political tool. This is equally true of the translations, which were often made to support the rhetoric of the Cold war.²

²See for instance, William Gavin's "A Book Carter Should Read." The translation of the stories themselves also seems to have caused many problems. The first translations were into German in 1967. In the same year they were then translated from the German directly into both French and South African, (along with the initial German misspelling of the author's name — Schalanov/Chalanov/Šalanov). There then even seem to have been translations from this (or possibly the later 1969) French edition back into Russian. See Mixail Geller's chapter "Полюс лютости: Варлам Шаламов" in his book Концентрационный мир и современная литература. Though many of the quotes in this article

It is understandable that КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ, given the nature of Šalamov's subject, and given the nature of contemporary politics both East and West, would be appropriated first and foremost as a historical document.³ However, it is no longer appropriate to allow the vagaries of special circumstances to obscure the full measure of Šalamov's work. In particular, the fact that the reading of randomly selected single stories vitiated Šalamov's conception of a carefully planned architectonic whole.

In the late 1980's, when formal publication became possible in the Soviet Union, КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ began being printed, first in journals, and then in book form. Unfortunately, (as is evident from the chronology in Appendix B), it was published in no more a systematic way than it had been in the West. With the dramatic upsurge of new material, and the openness within which to print it, it seems that the "author's plan" of the ordering was considered secondary. Soon, however, with the publication of the author's correspondence and notes, it became clear that Šalamov considered ordering crucial to the meaning of his work. He felt that a reading of the whole work in the correct ordering elicited a very different response than did a reading of separate stories (О прозе 420). This was his experience, and there seems to be at least some evidence as to this being the case in the West as well.⁴

many have also been translated into Russian from some other language (presumably French). This is also evidenced by the remarkable similarity in the titles of these particular stories to the titles in the translated French version.

³The stories' use strictly as factual accounts of the Gulag by historians such as Robert Conquest and others, though undeniably important, has also relegated their artistic qualities to a lesser role.

⁴In reviewing the book reports of John Glad's collections of translations of КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ, (entitled Kolyma Tales and Graphite), it seems that many of the criticisms stem from a misunderstanding of how the "stories" are interrelated. The problem being that, in Glad's collections, the stories were artificially ordered according to *theme*, destroying the author's more subtle *semantic* ordering. They also each contain only a fraction of the complete epic.

In a Structuralist view of meaning, one may see the entire work as 147 signifieds,⁵ to which we may assign a particular meaning alone, but really only take on their true meaning within the system of syntagmatic and associative links with the others. Many of the stories, read outside of the larger framework, yield a decidedly different impression. Much of what Šalamov writes about is completely alien to our understanding of existence, and as such, we have no words to describe such material. In this way Šalamov uses syntagmatic links, juxtapositions and associations to create new lexical units, which do not exist outside of the text. The entire work, then, in many ways works like a *language*, as certain words have little meaning outside of their placement within the *system* which is КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ. Resorting to footnoting does not help, as the often belated understanding of a term, behavior or symbol itself augments the overall effect. The most common of words — *life, hope, bread, tree, thief, good or bad* — do not correspond with their counterparts outside of the text, or often, as is the case, outside of the author's intended ordering.

Bound up with the question of ordering is the important question of genre, and how the assumed genre of the work has impacted on its reception. The reading of Šalamov's stories in the West has been either as single short stories, or as collections of various stories under a single heading. Even many of the translations, prefaced by stressing the interaction between the stories and the importance of ordering, are ordered incorrectly according to what has been posthumously recreated as the "author's plan." КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ also undoubtedly belongs to the rubric of Gulag literature, and to the larger grouping of Camp literature.⁶ Gulag and Camp literature show a remarkable diversity of

⁵147 — the number of stories in the epic.

⁶"Gulag" literature referring only to the Soviet state, and "Camp" literature to the larger grouping of prison and camp literature, which is not limited in time or place.

generic innovation and this is evident in КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ as well. There are differences, however, in the way they portray similar subjects and themes. Šalamov's inclusion into a group with authors as diverse as Solženicyn, Ginsburg, Dostoevskij, Šelest, Djakov and Sinjavskij, not to mention non-Russian writers, is problematic. Šalamov is more than a memoirist, didactician or chronicler of events. He is also in many ways apolitical, more interested in the larger questions of Good and Evil. He gets at the crux of what it is to be human, by examining the ways in which humans react in extreme conditions, at the depths of existence between life and death.

Any study of КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ is also incomplete without at least touching on the author's biography. Šalamov's work must be put into a biographical and historical context, for although КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ is a work of *fiction*, it is certainly also highly autobiographical — as Šalamov once wrote, "[КОЛЫМСКИЕ] рассказы — это моя душа" (О моей прозе 60). The line between fact and fiction, between memory and reality, is often blurred nearly beyond recognition. This distinction, or lack thereof, plays a large part in the way the stories are perceived by the reader, and was a device Šalamov was well informed on using.

As we can see, a critical study of Varlam Šalamov's КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ is an immense task, one which cannot hope to be squeezed into a single Master's thesis or even a Ph.D. dissertation. As Šalamov once wrote in reference to the Camp "theme," — "это очень большая тема, где разместится сто таких писателей, как Солженицын, пять таких писателей, как Лев Толстой. И никому не будет тесно" (О прозе 551). I think this is equally relevant to the discussion of КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ. And so in keeping with this, in this thesis I have only introduced many of the basic problems that face Šalamov scholars in the future. In the body, I have limited my focus to a discussion of

Šalamov's biography and an examination of the formal and historical problems of ordering, and how they have impacted on the work's critical and popular reception.

In the brief biography I have listed the important dates and occurrences in Šalamov's life and have inserted commentary where I felt it was pertinent. In the chronology of Šalamov's internment, I have also tried to make references to particular stories that I feel may have evolved from certain life experiences.

The author's correspondence and notes support the view that the work has an intended ordering and that it was constructed and reconstructed by the author toward a certain artistic and semantic goal. I have researched the placement of certain stories within the work, positing why the author's ordering in these instances is important. The repetitions of key narrative events, lyrical passages, camp aphorisms, and other units of text, also link into the importance of ordering — Šalamov's ordering of stories with repeated elements serves to build on their meaning as symbols, as well as ironically juxtapose diverse narratives. The close readings of "По снегу," "Сентенция," "Кант" and "Стланик" are meant to elucidate how the work, when read in the author's intended ordering, reveals its richness and web-like complexity.

Following the conclusion, I have supplemented the thesis itself with a number of appendices. These are meant to both support the conclusions drawn in the body of the thesis, as well as stimulate further study of Šalamov and his works. The appended bibliography of Šalamov materials is extensive, and is the first of its kind.

In Appendix A, I have put together a list of the stories which make up the "author's plan" or intended ordering of the epic. I have included the dates of authorship,

the historical time frame, the setting, the point of view, and the names of the narrators. I feel this will be a helpful listing for further narratological study of the epic.

In Appendix B, I have given the chronology of the publication of КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ in Russia, the Soviet Union, and the West. It is meant to point out the chaotic history of publication, and the multitude of ways in which the stories have been published, read, and therefore, understood by the public.

Appendix C, is a series of maps relating to Šalamov's biography as well as to the epic. The creation of the maps began as my own desire to better understand the geographical points mentioned in the epic and the complex history of Šalamov's exile and internment. I have tried to give all relevant locations mentioned both in the thesis as well as the work itself. As I was unable to obtain (or even find mention of any) detailed maps of the Kolyma Labor Camp System, I have put this map together using documents from various sources, (including the U.S. Board on Geographical Names for the Soviet Union), as well as a ruler to determine the correct latitude and longitude. Owing to this necessary lack of precision, there may be inaccuracies.

Appendix D is an extensive critical bibliography of Šalamov materials. It includes both works by Šalamov as well as those written about him and his works. Though it is by no means complete, I have added significantly to previous bibliographies by Iraida Sirotinskaja, Genadij Trifonov and Michael Nickolson.

In referring to the entire work, I have used the term "epic" [эпопея]. This is the term Iraida Sirotinskaya, heir to Šalamov's estate, and deputy director of the Russian Literary Archives, uses. I like the term. It conveys its magnitude, while recognizing that it is composed of many pieces, and does not impose a chronology. In reference to

КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ. Mixail Geller, among others, has used the term "mosaic," which seems a fitting metaphor, though, in my view, too prescriptive. I see it more as a vast constellation. As in a book of constellations, many of the linear connections from one star to the next are prescribed, but the gaps between them, the actual flesh and fur of the mythic beast it represents, are only suggested. Like the face in a cloud or the carpet, it will look different from person to person, or from reading to reading.⁷

⁷Šalamov himself used only the terms "книга" or "сборник," often using the former indiscriminately for both individual cycles as well as the entire work. He did not like the term "цикл," as it was used in poetry, and, as far as I can tell, never used the word to describe КОЛЫМСКИЕ РАССКАЗЫ. (В примечании к КОЛЫМСКИМ ТЕТРАДЯМ 273).

Biography to 1937

Varlam Tixonovič Šalamov⁸ was born in Vologda on June 5, 1907.⁹ He was the youngest of eight children, three of whom died in infancy.¹⁰ His father, Tixon Nikolaevič (1868-1933), was an Orthodox priest of Russian descent, whose ancestors had also been priests.¹¹ In his autobiographical *povest'* Четвертая Вологда, Šalamov often describes his father as more of a Social Democrat, of whom there were many exiled to Vologda in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who often seemed as near "shamanism" as Orthodoxy. Though Šalamov's description may be a somewhat distorted one, it is his own and reveals much about his complex relation to his father. Prior to his youngest son's birth, the older Šalamov had done missionary work on Kodiak island, Alaska, from 1893-1904. Šalamov scholar Valerij Esipov credits what Šalamov terms his father's "shamanism" to Tixon Nikolaevič's 12 year tenure on Kodiak island, where he took on the attitude and lifestyle of the Russian/American frontier: avidly hunting, trapping and fishing.

Tixon Nikolaevič was an extraordinarily capable man, who knew English fluently and traveled extensively in the United States (Harte 4). On Kodiak island he was well

⁸ He was christened Varlaam, after Varlaam Xutinskij, patron saint of Vologda, which he later changed to Varlam (Воскрешение лиственницы 28). One critic sees this as symbolic of his concurrent break with God, and with religion — from the overtly religious Varlaam to the more secular Varlam, in opposition to the religious renaming of Abram as Abraham (Russian Аврам to Авраам) (Полищук 120).

⁹ June 5, 1907 by the old calendar, June 18, by the new calendar.

¹⁰ His siblings were: Valerij - 1894-1953; Galja (Soroxina) - 1896-?; Sergej - 1898-1920, and Nataša 1900-1937.

¹¹ In Šalamov's autobiographical *povest'* he writes that his family was of Zyrian descent, a people who speak a Fino-Urgic language and live in the Komi Autonomous Republic in Northern Russia. It seems, however, that his ancestors had only traveled to the North to work in the priesthood, and had actually been Russians from Velikij Ustjug (Сиротинская. «Из истории рода Шаламовых» 244). See Figure 1.4. Both his father, Nikolaj Ivanovič (1827-1900?), and his grandfather, Ioann Maksimovič (1790-1849), had been priests. His brother, Prokopij Nikolaevič, (18??-1930), was also a priest.