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# State of Emergency Literature

## Varlam Shalamov vs. “Progressive Humanity”

### The *Natural School* and its Heirs

In opposing Sentimentalist cliché for its falsification of depictions, Russian realism demanded that *language be constantly brought into contact with the senses*. Readers who had acquired a taste for immediacy of the senses, in no small part due to Sentimentalism, now saw the latter as tainted by the sin of inauthenticity. But since the ideal of authenticity had been preserved, it was simply transferred from the compromised region of the senses to the region of social reality.

Realism declared this project to be a process of *demedialization*, a striving to overcome any and all kinds of code conventionality, to radically curtail literary methods and to effectively abolish the distance between the one depicting and the thing depicted in the interest of approximating “reality itself.”

It is characteristic, however, that the use of rhetoric began to be recognized as a hindrance not only on the path to artistic well-being but to this approximation of social reality as such. This followed *de facto* from the new definition of the social functions of literature, but the problem lay in the fact that the scale for evaluation itself was an attribute of this state of affairs, which had still to be confirmed in the struggle for the “*démontage of eloquence*.”<sup>1</sup> Thence follows the paradoxical demand for a *nonliterary literariness*.

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1 As is demonstrated in Renate Lachmann, *Die Zerstörung der schönen Rede. Rhetorische Tradition und Konzepte des Poetischen* (München: Fink, 1994).

By emphasizing the transition from the “authentic” (with regard to the truth of the senses) to the “real” (with regard to social reality), the *Natural School* turned to the gold standard of all revolutions—the as-yet-non-rhetoricized “low style,” which, naturally, looked like a rejection of style out of hand. The eloquence latent in the rejection of eloquence is usually perceived as a long-awaited liberation from conventionality generally. The *vulgarity and simplicity* discovered in the prose of the 1820s would by the 1840s be considered indicative of stylistic perfection. Naturalism owes its invention to the situation expertly constructed by Belinsky, wherein the “natural” was opposed to the “rhetorical;”<sup>2</sup> this rhetorical move beat down adherents of Sentimentalism, but with the help of an argument that had previously been used by them against their own opponents (the Archaicists, who had fought for a return to even more classicist rhetoric.) Thus, Belinsky razed both preceding camps in one fell swoop and strategically averted the possibility of a revanche, previously guaranteed by the alternation of the two sides—truth senses and power of rhetoric.

In this way, the realism of the *Natural School* made rhetoric (as something opposed to the natural) synonymous with both the routine use of existing artistic devices and with social conservatism. But while Belinsky himself still believed fervently in the possibility of rejecting rhetoric out of hand (as a practice of the ruling classes), later modernist calls for a rapprochement with reality would express ever greater doubts in the possibility of a total rejection of all filters. This would nevertheless make their calls for rejecting all mediation only more ambiguous.

The documentary approach, as a euphemism for *authenticity*, appears regularly on the horizon of literary history at moments of radical breaks in the literary canon, often in accordance with revolutionary politics. Maybe the most interesting incarnation of this tendency in the history of Russian literature was the radical project of overcoming “fictions and prettiness” in writing, usually linked to the *Literature of the Fact* school and the review *Novyi LEF*. Just as Productionist art had proclaimed a transition from the forms of easel painting to the production of real objects, Productionist literature *Literature of the Fact* (henceforth—LF) was aimed at liquidating the “life-descriptive” forms of literature and transitioning to a literature

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2 Which got its name, as is often the case with artistic movements, from a castigating opponent—Bulgarin, who criticized the “exclusion of the senses and of pathos in favor of dark and dirty scenes.”

of “life-building” or a “productive-utilitarian” literature, in which facts themselves would appear as real, non-abstract objects.

What can literature do to participate in the formation of a new everyday reality and a new human being? Put simply: it can stop being merely itself. That is, literature should not simply narrate the new but should work to destroy the very “inert literary forms” of utterance and thought (the LF theoreticians understood ideology as implementation of form, and [literary] form as a derivative of ideology).

As in any *rejection of a former self*, however, LF left a gap open for ambiguity. As Shklovsky mentioned, “we believe that the old forms of literature are useless for the formation of new material, and that today’s stance overall favors material, fact, and message.”<sup>3</sup> This kind of formulation is obscure: either literature as a whole (with all of its old forms) is not useful, or it is only the old forms of literature that are useless (which would imply a demand for the invention of new forms).

For the LF theoreticians, however, this was dialectic rather than ambiguity: even an imaginary plot is not understood to be an error *per se* but rather a historically obsolete device. Thus, during Nicholas’s reign historical necessity turned social activists toward the path of *belles-lettres* as the most viable form available at the time. But the “literature of idle imagination” ceased to be an “abstractly-progressive” phenomenon when the social atmosphere was changing, as Chuzhak depicts it.<sup>4</sup>

The life-building pathos of production literature led to a rejection of the thesis about the activity of the superstructure, within which it had previously had to operate: “The revolution fundamentally abolished those prerequisites that had driven the writer away from facts and forced him into invention. All need for the imaginary fell away and in its place there grew a demand for facts.”<sup>5</sup> In the context of these new “practical tasks of

3 Viktor Shklovsky, “V zaklyucheniye,” in *Literatura fakta: Pervyy sbornik materialov rabotnikov LEFa*, ed. Nikolay Chuzhak (Moscow: Zaharov, 2000), 192.

4 “Vague symbolism, reticence, Aesop-like muddle ... gave the writer the opportunity to push through certain forbidden little notions even under the harshest censorship of Tsar Nicholas’s reign. ... People experienced ‘real life’ in novels, and this was a comfort to them. ... It was as if people had silently agreed to take this innocent counterfeit as real life, and in essence everyone gave themselves a conditional sort of break to imagine things as they wished. So-called realism was a conventional language for them ... and no one to this day has yet exposed its conventionality.” Nikolay Chuzhak, “Pisatel’skaya pamyatka,” in *Literatura fakta*, 5.

5 Ibid., 15.

the new literary culture, which have nothing in common with the aesthetic influence of literary classics,” priority is given to “sketches as truthful as reflexes.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the very designation “Literature of the Fact” is already somewhat inconvenient in connection with the epistemological status of the type of discourse described. This genitive assumes two different ideas:

1. Literature immediately striving to be fact, that is a literature that proclaims factualness as a *property* of a certain kind of *writing* that is moving away from literature “as such” toward the documentary (in this case “of the fact” plays the role of an adjective—literature of what? i.e. what kind of literature?),
2. and simultaneously the activity of the fact itself, taking literature’s initiative and place, i.e. a literature that the actual fact is produced as a *reflex*, and the fact is registered—importantly—by a *non-professional author* (while still striving to abandon its status and move toward a sort of legitimate literary existence).

This ambiguity is quite significant given that our epistemological perspective depends on the choice of what we see as the authority that provides the impetus to a literature of the fact: we will assume either a particular *documentary viewpoint*, which enables us to view and constitute reality thanks to its specific construction (just as Vertov’s technique of kino-eye enables viewing processes otherwise hidden to the human eye), or a *reality that speaks for itself* (which is ultimately free from all the limitations of tsarist censorship and thus can replace imperfect and bureaucratized devices of literature.) The way we understand the status of LF in its struggle with the “old literary relationship to things” will also depend on the logic of this expression and arising from here an epistemological perspective: LF can be either an avant-garde literary movement (struggling for a new relationship to things) or even a gnoseological challenge non-literary relationship to them (attempting to exclude the very figurative nature of language).

On the one hand, this was a defense of the new socialist material from the danger of spoilage and deformation by old literary devices (“it is becoming clear that this Party man came out of the literary tradition rather

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6 Petr Neznamov, “Derevnya krasivogo opereniya,” *Novyi LEF* 8 (1928): 8.

than the local committee;”<sup>7</sup> “the complex is being built up north according to the laws of a very special kind of engineering: the laws of the A. Bely school”).<sup>8</sup> Here some remarkable metaleptic effects are found: the hero should come only from life, otherwise he is an agent of (modernist) literary tradition. On the other hand, given that half the editorial board was made up of Formalists, they were aware that in order to let new material live, they needed not only to abandon old plot and stylistic constructions (in favor of “life itself”) but also construct new ones.<sup>9</sup>

The factographer, whose efforts were previously directed wholly toward the precise registration of facts (despite all of the aforementioned ambiguity of this procedure,) is now expected to engage in practice as well, in production. “We do not conceive of a break between the writer and the object he is writing about.”<sup>10</sup> This thesis seems to pretend to be refuting the entire modern Western comprehension of the subject-object relationship. The efforts of authors treating only the revolutionary theme or even—in addition to this—experimenting with form appeared insufficient (to the editors of *Novyi LEF*) since these authors “are only observing but not participating in the building of life.”<sup>11</sup> A merely thematic and formal approach to the revolution was not enough; artists must swear allegiance on the *pragmatic* level, that is, they should speak only after having become a part of what they describe.

Having recognized that the category of fact was theoretically problematic and ideologically ambiguous, the LF theoreticians shifted or complicated the deictic utterances about “facts” as such by the pragmatic imperative “to reorient literature toward action.”<sup>12</sup> But the performative quality of language (including literary or quasi-literary language) is fraught with still more epistemological problems.

Since presenting facts “as they are” was no longer adequate, LF rearranged things as it went along: “for us, the men of fact, there cannot exist

7 Petr Neznamov, “Dradedamovyi byt,” *Novyi LEF* 6 (1928): 23.

8 Vladimir Trenin, “Intelligentnyye partizany,” *Literatura fakta*, 101.

9 Of course, in order to perceive or formulate something, that something must be deformed. Thus, backed up by the Formalists, the *LEF* artists would never speak out against Constructivist principles, but merely clarified that the deformation necessary for perception should be conditioned by technique rather than psychology.

10 Chuzhak, “Pisatel’skaya pamyatka,” 15.

11 Ibid., 16.

12 Ibid., 15.



facts as such”<sup>13</sup>; “a person does not merely see a defect, he is already thinking about this defect and making a suggestion as to how it can be amended.”<sup>14</sup> In this way LF approached the realm of practical activity (which brought it closer to American pragmatism or to Vygotskian anthropology, according to which meaning emerges in the world of human actions in connection with the aims and interests of speakers—and in relation to them—and, consequently, also has a pragmatic aspect.)

Thus, in a fairly roundabout way (through the idea of a transitive language), LF arrived at the idea that things do not have their “own names,” just as there are no facts outside of a certain—practical—relationship to things; and that facts are fabricated in acts of (linguistic) interaction. LF rejected an objectivist epistemology of language but not its old dream of bringing facts into literature. If there are no facts that can be impartially registered, then they must be *fabricated*—on the one hand through the factographer’s direct involvement in production and participating observation, and on the other through a special linguistic technique of objectifying language’s own materiality. “Factual material can be introduced into literature only by means of the LEF devices of selection and montage of facts.”<sup>15</sup> This technique, consisting exclusively of selection and montage (combination), does not differ at all from Roman Jakobson’s description of the work of language. The factographer works with reality like a native speaker with her paradigmatic and syntagmatic toolbox. The method of LF coincides, as it were, with the most natural sign system known, speaking through the pieces of reality itself.

Thus, on the way of transitioning from the production of representations of reality to the latter’s immediate transformation, not only the old form (with the conservative social manner of being a writer) appears, but also the obstacle of language itself. To duly acknowledge the theoretical intuition of the factographers, it should be said that they were fully aware

13 Sergey Tretyakov, “Prodolzheniye sleduyet,” *Literatura fakta*, 282.

14 Tretyakov, “Prodolzheniye sleduyet,” 223. Cf. another statement by a leading LF theoretician: “there cannot be a single artwork that does not aim to register facts. ... Only two things can be done with facts: they can be used in reports or in proclamations. The report does not distort the facts—it registers them in all their reality. The proclamation does not register facts, but rather uses them and distorts them in the direction most useful to it.” Osip Brik, “Blizhe k faktu,” *ibid.*, 81.

15 Vladimir Trenin, “Nuzhno predosterech,” in *ibid.*, 217.

of this circumstance.<sup>16</sup> This is precisely why it is necessary to analyze the inventive doctrine within which the LEF theoreticians conceived the literary utterance as a locutionary event, that either exposes its speculative nature or in its pragmatics approaches the language of ideology. Despite the fact that this linguo-pragmatic orientation toward a “mobilization of facts” seems to indicate the starting point of a movement leading to the speculative language of Soviet bureaucracy, it actually conceals peculiar safety measures of linguistic representation. The refusal to naturalize facts uttered (*énoncé*) and the objectivization of the fact of utterance (*énonciation*) might suggest propaganda, but it would be a propaganda that “exposes the devices of influence rather than obscures them.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus LE, as a radicalization of the ideas of the *Natural School*, acknowledging both the suspension of the referential status of “all that has been written above” and the inescapable figurality of language, moves from a search for a guiltless language and transparent communication to a maximally speculative version of Brechtian realism, emphasizing the very conditions of seeing and understanding.

We cannot avoid mentioning Platonov as well as an example of a no less paradoxical *interception* of the realist tradition by means of a *realism of language*: one that preserves socialist construction as a referent of narration, but that also demonstrates the deconstructive effect a self-criticism of language can have on it. At the same time, Platonov shifts the communist ideal from the content of the utterance (its glorification or critics) into the very construction of the act of utterance itself, laying out the only possible communism, a *communism of speech* (the interconnection of all functional styles and voices) in his writing [cf. Walter Benjamin, “exporting communism” in his *Moscow Diary*]<sup>18</sup>).

In this context, Shalamov—henceforth our main topic of interest—represents a different type of a way out of the LF paradox: a *realism of the body*.

16 “Can a ‘living’ person exist in literature? We think that there can—allowing for the deformational qualities of the word. Even the most objective photograph does not register the object with absolute accuracy, since by its very nature it is two-dimensional and thus distorts the three-dimensionality of things. The word too has its own particular ‘two-dimensionality,’ and it is only by taking into account the degree of deformation of this lexical ‘two-dimensionality’ that we can talk about ‘objective’ methods of depiction.” Teodor Gritc, “Mertvyi shtamp i zhivoy chelovek,” in *ibid.*, 134.

17 Boris Arvatov, “Agit-kino i kino-glaz,” *Kino-zhurnal A.R.K.* 8 (1925): 3.

18 Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

The subject of Shalamov's prose is more of an extended than a thinking substance, nearly naked life, devoid—by the catastrophe of history—of conceptual mechanisms of mediation but also placing a taboo on any kind of didacticism in literature overall. The “report-like” quality of Shalamov's writing not only departing from the factographic “epic of the newspaper,”<sup>19</sup> but also Platonov's broken “bureaucratic” sociolect.<sup>20</sup> For Shalamov, speaking is performed by the ruined body of history, and the style of report is used to register its voice. This is an obvious conflict between functional styles: the confession and the interrogation report,<sup>21</sup> the blood-stained document that nevertheless still carries juridical force (as is usually the case with documents that bear the traces of bystanders) and actually only intensifies it.

The document is a genre of testimony of certain facts in a maximally unambiguous form and, in some sense, also a material object, all the more so as it is not subject to rhetorical redistribution. In any case, the document is something that is maximally protected from the aberrations of individual readings. It can be personal, that is identify its subject, but it cannot be understood subjectively. Everything subjective, emotionally colored, etc. belongs to a diametrically opposed means of using language. These lexicological observations are necessary in order to feel the full ambiguity of the following statement:

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19 Shalamov was familiar with the LF project and always correlated himself with it: “Sergey Mikhailovich Tretyakov tried to consolidate the newspaper, to give it priority. Neither Tretyakov or Mayakovsky ever managed to make anything out of this attempt. ... Literature of the Fact is not literature of the document. It is just a particular case inside of the big documentary doctrine. The LEF artists produced a whole series of articles recommending ‘documenting facts,’ ‘collecting facts.’ ... But that is a calculated distortion. There is no fact without its being presented, without the form of its registration.” Varlam Shalamov, “O moyey proze,” in *Sobraniye sochineniy* (Moscow: Khudlit, 1998).

20 Besides constant references to this kind of official-business genre as a report, we can also point to the story “The Snake Charmer,” which tells the tale of a screenwriter, Platonov, and his life in the labor camp. This Platonov demonstrates something Shalamov himself found unacceptable: the illusion that he would acquaint the thieves and criminals with real literature. We can see in this a hint of a no less ambitious task set by Shalamov himself: to acquaint the world of literature with the camps.

21 Platonov exists “on both sides of utopia,” thanks to the level of the sign's figural quality; Shalamov meanwhile invents his own type of duality at the level of the pragmatics of the artistic utterance: he feels himself to be both victim (thus “blood-stained”) and guilty before the judgment of history (thus the obsessive reporting of the underground Trotskyite unable to stop the Thermidor). Cf. Hans Gyunter, *Po obe storony ot utopii: Konteksty tvorchestva A. Platonova* (Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2012).



The *documentary* prose of the future is *emotionally colored*, a memoir document stained by *blood and the soul*, where the whole thing is document and at the same time represents emotional prose. The task here is simple: to find a *verbatim report* of the protagonists and specialists involved, about one's own work and *one's own soul*.<sup>22</sup>

If something secondary to the simple registration of facts (as well as their institution) slips into the document, then the latter drops out, as it were, of its genre, ceasing to be a document. On the other hand, if something gets blood-stained or people start talking about things like “the soul,” then we can forget about any objectivity. This is evident at the level of language, and yet in Shalamov the legal metaphoric of writing gets systematically confused with the spiritualist one.

Furthermore, this kind of prose seems to exclude the question of “How was it made?” If a tale about a little man and a titular councilor demonstrates its own stylistic accentuation and calls for Formalist deconstruction; but such “big” topics as the siege, war, and labor camps place a prohibition on dismantling the construction, while also hinting that there is nothing there to dismantle, one should just pay attention. But in truth, rather than the state of emergency *represented* in such literature, attention should be paid to the state of emergency *instituted* in literature itself through such gestures.

## The Epistemology of Emergency: Hesitation

Shalamov was constrained by an extremely equivocal relationship not only to some dictionary meanings but also to such constitutive definitions of literariness as *fiction* and *style*. To compare him with LF as a point of negative reference: LF stood both “against fiction” and “against prettiness,” transforming this from manifesto declarations into linguistic facts. They may have blundered to some extent with regard to the real linguistic possibilities of such a *démarche* and the finality of the solution to the problem (art, as we know, prefers to rework and embrace first and foremost its critics and destroyers), but in any case we understand what they meant. In Shalamov's case, we know that such meta-utterances about the nonfictional character, the “precision of the blood-stained report” and other rhetorical structures calling for a rejection of rhetorical structures are necessary

22 Shalamov, “O moyey proze.”

because the author suffered from crushing doubts as to the possibility of bringing writing to bear on this kind of state of emergency.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, Shalamov assumes that the referential world of his prose has the right not to care about style; on the other hand, this world is not only uttered before our very eyes but also equipped with an additional emergency quality ingrained in the very act of such an utterance. In other words, while Western European modernism experimented with the fragmentation of narrative conventions and referential instability, Shalamov, the Soviet convict, is allowed not to worry about even the bare minimum of formal proficiency and rhetorical knowledge; all he has to do is give testimony, fill out a “blood-stained” report. And yet Shalamov does demonstrate this proficiency and this knowledge.

It might sound like a truism to say that Shalamov is no adherent of Formalism or of the ornamentalist understanding of writing. But look at how he himself sums up the ancient dispute connecting the technical to the thematic: “A new, unusual form *for* registering a unique condition and unique circumstances.”<sup>24</sup> This surfeit of the unusual and the unique prevents us from determining what is going on here: is this about *form* performing the decisive work of novelty, or about the *unique circumstances* that will have all the more impact the less literary processing it is subjected to? Obviously, new referential objects entail a redistribution of expressive means, while new form by definition tends to contemporary material. But in any of these cases the order of the *initial* initiative is preserved, and Shalamov meanwhile consistently avoids verb copulas: “a form *for* a state.” If form “was necessary,” then it would follow the material and yield to it; if form itself “made demands,” then it would be possible to estimate the referential object of Shalamov’s prose—only as an “occurrence of style” (as formalists did on the different material). But while the ode could still be described as belonging to the *oratorical genre* as something paradoxically required by external series and at the same time requiring them itself merely

23 Cf. “The astonishing union of rhetorical figures and anti-rhetorical utterances demand attention.” Elena Volkova, “Teksty ‘Kolymских рассказов’ Varlana Shalamova v raketse neoritoricheskikh i antiritoricheskikh smysloporozhdeniy Y. M. Lotmana,” in *K stoletiyu so dnya rozhdeniya Varlana Shalamova. Materyaly konferentsii* (Moscow: DerDiDas Grupp, 2007), 25–32.

24 Cf. “The Kolyma Tales are a registration of the exclusive in a state of exclusion.” Shalamov, “O moyey proze.”

as motivators of its form,<sup>25</sup> this kind of perspective on Shalamov's short stories seems prohibited by the distinctly extreme, "emergency" quality of the referent, which as it were exceeds the ontological horizon of any and all literature. We do not intend to doubt the legality of this prohibition, but nevertheless are compelled to analyze the conditions under which excellent literature is still produced by means of the rejection of literature. "*The Kolyma Tales* lie outside of art, and nevertheless they possess both artistic and documentary force."<sup>26</sup> Owing to this paradoxical situation, when something is breaking out of its own cage and simultaneously striving to arrange it in its own image, Shalamov is forced to stand up for the priority both of the authentic material and of its artistic quality at the same time, while also satisfying the rules of art. At the same time, he seeks to establish his own rules, called upon to refute art (the "leaky pot" strategy). This is why it is possible to speak with the same seriousness about both Shalamov's formalism and his anti-formalism.

"I had such reserves of novelty that I had no fear of any repetitions."<sup>27</sup> Once again something external feeds the agent's movement inside the space of literature, lending him less professional finesse than confidence in his strength to stand against it. Evidently, if you have something new to say (hitherto still *external* to literature), you need not fear repetition. But perhaps this tautology should be understood as a declaration of the absence of fear in the face of intentionally inertial form, rather than the triviality of the material? And even as an indirect confirmation of that form's "peculiar richness" given the material's particular "reserves of novelty."

"I considered the novelty of the material the primary and sole quality that gave it the right to live." It would seem again that this utterance lies completely on the side of the referential; it particularly recalls Schopenhauer's phrase, "In essence the primary and sole prerequisite for good style is the situation in which you have something to say." However, just as in this famous simpletons' slogan, the self-sufficient state of "having something to say" or possessing "reserves of novelty"—theatrically tearing down the criteria of (Ornamental) literariness—is nevertheless forced to justify its

25 Yury Tynyanov, "Oda kak oratorsky zhanr," in *Poetika. Istoriya literatury. Kino* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 227–52.

26 Shalamov, "O moyey proze."

27 Note that Shalamov acknowledges the impending contradiction and strives to avert it: "My material would rescue any repetitions, but there were no repetitions, for my qualifications and training proved their worth, I simply had no need to use anyone else's models, similes, plots or ideas." Ibid.

existence within the bounds of literature (evidently, what Shalamov has in mind but characteristically leaves out of the phrase “the right to life” is *in literature*—after all, one doesn’t need any reserves of novelty for physical survival.) This is where the contamination in Shalamov becomes evident: the “living” qualities are brought forth before the court of literature, presented as preparations of writing and not anything else that might be utterly unable to submit to a *Hamburg reckoning*. But in literature itself such a combination brings about a *state of emergency*.

In a word, all of these epistemological contradictions in Shalamov’s testimonies (collected for the most part in his manifestos and notes on literature) show that his prose need not be examined only on the thematic and formal levels between which thought usually flits, but rather on the level of *the pragmatics of the artistic utterance*.

### Emergency Pragmatics: Mixing

As Mikhail Ryklin demonstrates on two stories by Shalamov, war is that which can only be interesting to someone spared the extreme experience of the camps:

Andreev has more important things to do: get bread, buy sacks, rest on his hospital cot after the punishing labor of the camps. If the inhabitants of the camp underworld noticed the impact of the war at all, it was only through increases in the strictness of the regime and the manufacturing norms and cuts in their already miserly rations.<sup>28</sup>

Along with the epistemological, the pragmatic level of Shalamov’s prose immediately becomes evident in this light.

Shalamov’s prose has “more important things” to do than just witnessing extreme anthropological circumstances too.

The camp theme, broadly interpreted and fundamentally understood: this is the main, the most important question of our time. ... This question is much more important than the theme of war. War in some sense plays the role of psychological camouflage (history tells us that during wartime the tyrant

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28 From Mikhail Ryklin, “The camp and the war. A history of the defeated from Varlam Shalamov” (paper presented at the conference *The Fate and Work of Varlam Shalamov in the Context of World Literature and Soviet History*, Moscow, July 16, 2011), accessed December 20, 2017, <http://shalamov.ru/events/23/9.html>.

grows closer to his people.) There are attempts to hide the camp theme... behind war statistics.<sup>29</sup>

Establishing a hierarchy of degrees of emergency (between war and camp), Shalamov makes a sovereign decision regarding literature, even if he doesn't want to. Appealing to the documentary quality appears as a regularly repeating gesture of laying claim (to the establishment of rules) to new art, but in Shalamov's case, this intention has a paradoxically mixed character, since it gets combined with undisguised linguistic arbitrariness. Alongside the confusions described (the very experience that generates the radical claim of Shalamov's literature), he speaks in nearly Bourdieusian terms, emphasizing his understanding of this experience's *value*: "the experience in prison will not go to waste. Regardless of all circumstances that experience will be my moral capital, the incommutable ruble of life to come."<sup>30</sup>

We thus realize that Shalamov's claim (unlike the claim of LF) works not so much on the level of an ultimatum for the documentary quality of the new material or the strange cogency of weak form, but rather on some third level. This is why it is tempting to extend Schmidt's famous formulation about the sovereign as one "who makes decisions about emergencies"<sup>31</sup> to the sphere of narrative fiction that Shalamov belongs to at least bibliographically. Within this sphere, Shalamov manages to extend the description of *extreme experience leading to writing* to the *state of emergency of the very experience of writing*, thereby suspending the laws of artistic circulation. In this way literature, going outside the bounds of the law of language's fictive and rhetorical qualities in cases of serious internal or external threat (diagnosed by the selfsame literature), turns out to be *literature that establishes a state of emergency*. It is no longer literature talking to us, but Necessity itself. Independently of how self-aware literature is, we still have to clarify a few more characteristic features of this kind of specific formation.

The new writing, pointing out both the inadmissible didacticism and the unforgivable remoteness of old literature, seeks not just to present extreme material or suggest extreme stylistic solutions but to establish a certain emergency method of action, a special *pragmatics of writing*.<sup>32</sup> As

29 Warlam Schalamow, *Über Prosa* (Berlin: Mathes und Seitz, 2009), 30.

30 Shalamov, "Butyrskaya tyurma," in *Sobraniye sochineniy*.

31 Karl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George D. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004).

32 The particular existential circumstances sketched out place strategic stylistic limitations onto writing itself as well. "And the pattern has no time to bloom / To keep the meter /



a result of this search, “new prose” gets distanced from both the old order of writing and, more generally, the order of writing *per se*, thus approaching an existential act: “Descriptions are not enough for our times. The new prose is the event itself, the battle and not its description. That is, a document, the author’s direct participation in life events. Prose experienced as document.”<sup>33</sup> Shalamov seems to extend the emergency from the *referential* to the *pragmatic* level of his prose.

Manifestos constitute one of the most public spaces for the expression of artistic pragmatics: marked by a type of subordination to tradition and contemporaries, manifestos also lay down the foundation for how things should look in the future. Just as in the questions discussed above regarding the relationship between material and construction, here there is a strategic blurring of the relationship between predecessors and contemporaries. Shalamov’s symbolic gamble lies in the simultaneous adherence to and *démarche* of tradition: “After all, I write documentary prose, and in some sense I am a direct descendent of the Russian realist school—documentary like realism. My stories criticize and refute the very essence of literature, such as is studied in textbooks.”<sup>34</sup> Shalamov amazingly manages to combine his crusade against the “common sense” of literature with statements presenting himself as its only heir. In this way, “new prose” becomes synonymous with the documentary; the latter paradoxically emerges from both the extremely traumatic experience that transcends the value and logic of pure literature, and from a maximally precise understanding of the rules of literary succession and prevalence.

And thus, Shalamov’s suggested construction of relations between material and technique and between convention and innovation is distinguished by a captivating inconsistency. We could try to explain it by means of such as yet uncoordinated factors as Shalamov’s being a professional literary figure and yet having had experiences that deny all possible literature. On the one hand, Shalamov was always wary of the literary-intellectual betrayal of unbearable reality; on the other hand, he was also irritated by the populist approach to questions of art.<sup>35</sup> Both his particular perspective

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For the old Sermon on the Mount / Is a daunting example.”

33 Shalamov, “O ‘novoy poze,” in *Sobranie sochineniy*, 157–60.

34 Shalamov, “O moyey proze.”

35 “The Russian writer is not attending to his own profession, his own activity. The topic of writer is only important for Chernyshevsky or Belinsky. Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov. In journalistic terms, each of them understood nothing about literature,

on writing and unprecedented hybrid of *realist modernism* (using these terms in Lifshits's sense, implying mutual exclusion) are rooted in these nearly *physically* incompatible circumstances.

On the one hand, Shalamov seems to be a writer who scorns excessive attention to language, denies the value of careful editing and literary frills;<sup>36</sup> on the other hand, he is enchanted by the very idea of language, inspired by all of its legends and concerns. To start with the most obvious, we should say something about the speculative rapprochement of the act of writing with physical labor: "Inspiration as a miracle, as an illumination, does not happen every day; when it does you are utterly powerless to stop writing, you only stop when forced to by the purely muscular exhaustion of the hand holding the pencil. The muscles ache just as they do after felling trees or chopping wood."<sup>37</sup> With one movement of a fountain pen, the subtle and free labor of artistic creation is likened to crude, forced manual labor.

This kind of seemingly innocuous comparison conceals a whole program of philosophy of language, while the physical metaphor acts simultaneously as an epistemological argument and a pragmatic gesture. Shalamov talks about creative labor as physical not only in order to explain the degree of its difficulty, but to contrast himself with the adepts of other (more idle) writing doctrines within literature itself. Every time the movement of the pen and the spade (the axe, the bayonet, etc.) draw close, innocent language gets targeted and Shalamov declares his loyalty to the "language of the lumberman." In his constant insistence on the similarity between the writing-table and the camp saw-bench,<sup>38</sup> Shalamov declares himself a close colleague of the carpenter Roland Barthes.

This takes us to the entirely recognizable *morality of form*, which can be boiled down to certain recommendations of writing skills. But it is much more interesting to stay at the level of the pragmatics of writing displayed in the rapprochements of the creative act with rather dangerous existential actions: "They have no finishing touches, but there is closure: a story like 'The Cross,' written in one sitting, in a state of nervous

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and if they evaluated it, it was in application to the previously given political usefulness of the author." Ibid.

36 "In prose of the *Kolyma Tales*-type, however, this correction stays beyond the tongue, the gullet, even beyond thought." Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 "Thus there is an inspector in the brain, a selector who pushes the unnecessary log on the raft toward the narrow neck of the factory power saws." Ibid.

excitement, *for immortality and death*—from the first to the final phrase.”<sup>39</sup> The state-of-emergency circumstances inherited by the act of utterance from that utterance’s content place a prohibition on both stylistic procedures such as “finishing touches” and compositional elements such as the suspiciously self-sufficient description: “At one point I took a pencil to one of Babel’s stories and crossed out all of the beauty, all of the fires that resembled resurrections, and then looked at what was left. Not much Babel was left, and absolutely no Larisa Reisner.”<sup>40</sup>

Pragmatics is always encoded in the model of a tool (or weapon)<sup>41</sup> the action of which is tantamount to writing: this is Kharms’s poem that breaks the window when it strikes, and Mayakovsky’s demand to *write by means of war*. The tool always assumes one or another stage of writing—“stage” more in the theatrical than the psychoanalytical sense. In Shalamov’s case this is the staging of an interrogation, perhaps even of torture: the report will be spattered with the “living blood of history,” while the document will be torn from the paws of oblivion. In any event, it will bear the traces of quick but well thought-out actions: “Every one of my stories is a slap in the face of Stalinism and, like every slap, has laws of a purely muscular character;” “Another piece of advice—there are no unnecessary phrases in the story... A slap should be short and resonant.”<sup>42</sup> The slap as a pragmatic metaphor, also ultimately boiling down to its “muscular character.” Following the slap formula, Shalamov analyzes a few other means of action in writing, revealing a sensitivity to the perspective of instrumental analyses of the artistic utterance:

A phrase can be measured according to Flaubert’s measure—the length of a breath—and there is some physiological ground for this. Literary scholars have often said that the tradition of Russian prose is a shovel that needs to be stuck in the ground and then wrenched upward to extract the deepest layers. We can let economists busy themselves with digging up those layers, but not writers and *littérateurs*. For the latter this kind of digging up seems like strange advice.<sup>43</sup>

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39 Ibid.

40 Shalamov, “O moyey proze.” This reminds us that Shalamov had passed his young years in *Literature of the Fact* circles.

41 In total agreement with the idea of one thing transforming into another during wartime.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

Shalamov usually manages metaphors of literary tools, like the shovel, more artistically than the nineteenth-century realists he criticizes.<sup>44</sup> He is usually reduced to an impartial mechanism of recording horrors, a transparent registrar, but his key self-definitions always reveal a paradoxical enchantment with the opposite: the deforming activity of this apparatus: “My story—a document—is also an improvisation. And still it remains a document, a personal testimony, a personal bias. I am the *chronicler of my own soul*. No more.”<sup>45</sup> The biased recording apparatus and, moreover, its internal processes—this is the ideal (rather dissonant with the era of scientific progress he constantly refers to) of the machine of Shalamovian inspiration. In general, Shalamov’s dialogue with the hard sciences (which he understands to encompass both the science of matter and in terms of cybernetics and structuralism) is no less polemical than that with the tradition of nineteenth-century realism. Ultimately, Shalamov does not oppose “normal literature” to *expressive documentalism*, but literature in general (which Shalamov simultaneously repudiates and takes forward) to scientific epistemology (“The scientist cannot quote from a work of poetry, for these are different worlds.”<sup>46</sup>) Though all of his prose relates to both the history of realism as literary tradition and to realism as an epistemological principle of a number of scientific traditions. Alternating the roles of the plaintiff and the defendant, the two parties in this dispute are raw facts and the viewpoint that forms them, empirical reality and the transcendental apparatus, extralinguistic reality and speech activity.

Along with other objects of the physical world, Shalamov uses the stone (featured on the banners of formalists as well) to oppose something non-resident, speculative, seeking always to violate the borders of fact: “If it is a person’s hand [doing the writing]—then my work is imitation, unoriginal. If it is a stone’s hand, a fish’s or cloud’s—then I give myself over to that other sphere, perhaps without having any say in the matter. How can anyone check to see where my will ends and where the boundary of the stone’s authority lies?”<sup>47</sup> However, the traditional epistemological skepti-

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44 Shalamov, “Artist of a Shovel.”

45 Shalamov, “O moyey proze.”

46 Ibid.

47 There are other formulations that recall the LEF program even more strongly: “The thing about influence more dangerous than influence (itself)—to fall prisoner to someone against one’s own will—the precious material is wasted and it turns out that it recalls someone else’s work, which is to say it kills the story.” Shalamov, “O moyey proze.”

cism (widely spread in the last decade) reappears in the very next sentence, in the context of a purely practical literary task: “But logs are often selected, hooked into the neck of the timber mill, the power-saw, before which all kinds of other standard logs are floating, all of which have the right to turn into phrases.”<sup>48</sup>

In other words, the mystery of Shalamov’s “depth” lies in the fact that the notorious state of emergency of the described circumstances turns out to be furthermore faced with another war—linguistic, epistemological (but no longer just literary). This would seem to be blasphemy if it did not also advertise the emergency state of the writing itself. When pondered, reducing the camp experience to a metaphor of the cognitive processes going on during the creative act can turn out to be no less radical than wishing to acquaint the world with the horrors of the Stalinist labor camps. This is why traditional criticism has immured this line of thought, but it goes on slyly peeking out of virtually every one of Shalamov’s phrases; his prose attracts people for whom the camps and Soviet history are far from topics of primary interest. Certainly, Shalamov himself never makes this explicit, but it lies on the surface of all of his statements. One need only describe the “emergency conditions” in slightly greater detail and they immediately take on the attributes and features of a purely linguistic catastrophe, a rout of / by language itself.

For instance, the story “Through the Snow,” which opens the *Kolyma Tales*, provides an entirely transparent hint toward the pragmatic gesture, in which the emergency of the experience described turns out to be a metaphor for the emergency experience of writing itself and of artistic invention. In two short paragraphs (which make up the entire piece), describing in detail and with practical recommendations how the convicts dig out a road through unbroken snow, in a landscape against which the rest of the *Kolyma Tales* will take place, Shalamov closes the text with words that unexpectedly take us into the context of literary pioneering: “It is not writers riding on the tractors and horses, but readers.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus, at every stage the corruption of representation leads to the actualization of the idea of the material and indexical quality of expression: with the *Natural School* it was the project, erected in the name of social progress, of radical demedialization, the rejection of the fracturing of representation

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48 Ibid.

49 Shalamov, *Sobraniye sochineniy*, 7.



that separated the signifier from the signified; with early *Literature of the Fact* it was the positivist project of direct registration of facts in the rawest form possible for the needs of the revolution; and finally, with Shalamov, it is “life itself” taking on the features of *naked life* (Agamben). He is testing that life’s ability to speak on its own when he establishes a state of emergency in literary history and simultaneously “saves [literature] from the Auschwitz of scrap-paper.”<sup>50</sup>

In a certain sense, *state-of-emergency literature* connotes not only the historical and anthropological circumstances that generate it but also the modernist convention of the emergency state of literature and art themselves. After a certain point they are summoned to live in a mode of renewed self-abnegation. Aesthetic significance has been wedded once and for all with the procedure of its own *démarche* and of a reassessment of its foundations (excluding the principle of self-abnegation itself, which becomes a meta-criterion). Having become autonomous, art develops (reproduces) through performative acts, which paradoxically reject the right of everything (or almost everything) to call itself art. This preceded the author of the new act, which simultaneously expropriates from everyone the category of art itself.<sup>59</sup> The paradox here is rooted in the fact that the struggle unfolds around an “empty name” or empty term: for if everything that belongs to its history is refuted on the basis of its not (any longer?) corresponding to its essence, then wherein does that essence actually lie? If it has no historical precedents of a correct realization, then in the name of what is it even possible to struggle? It is astonishing that in order to be faithful to art today, one must refute all of the precedents of art, wherein consists its only negative essence.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Shalamov, “O moyey proze.”

<sup>51</sup> It is also important to take into account the fact that even the responses that sound forth against this logic of self-undermining, insisting that “this is not art,” ultimately strengthen the very logic of the theory of performative acts of art, but in a negative mode. They say, as it were: “this is an unsuccessful speech act,” thereby unwittingly becoming hostages to the category of agreement.

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