Samizdat and the Problem of Authorial Control: The Case of Varlam Shalamov

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Abstract

The article offers an explanation of Varlam Shalamov’s negative attitude to the samizdat in the 1970s, particularly puzzling in view of the samizdat’s role in making him unofficially famous in the 1960s. It explains the change in Shalamov’s views by his struggle for authorial control of the accuracy, structure, and accessibility of his work. Lack of such control was, in a sense, an extension of the Gulag prisoners’ inability, despite their best-laid plans, to rule their own fate—a theme explored in Shalamov’s story “A Piece of Meat.” One of Shalamov’s last acts in the struggle for the control of the fate of his works was his 1972 letter to Literaturnaia gazeta protesting against the piecemeal publication of his work in foreign journals. Contemporaries tended to read that document as a recantation letter renouncing Kolyma Tales; as a result, Shalamov’s status was transformed into that of a fallen idol. Yet if one reads the letter with close attention to its composite language, in which current clichés combine with the lexis of the twenties, as well as in the context of Shalamov’s predicament in the 1970s (when a work that had appeared in the samizdat had practically no chance of getting into the official press), one may see a message about the importance of Kolyma Tales hidden in plain view. Ultimately, however, it was the samizdat dissemination that, more than anything else, ensured the preservation and the early as well as the future impact of Shalamov’s Gulag prose.

An About-face

In a late 1971 entry in his notebooks, Varlam Shalamov (1907–82) made the following remark: “The Samizdat is a ghost, the most dangerous of ghosts, a poisoned weapon in the struggle between two intelligence services [the
KGB and the CIA], where a human life costs no more than in the battle for Berlin” (2004: 339). Indeed, in the seventies, the decade of solitude and illness that led up to his 1979 hospitalization in an institution for the handicapped, Shalamov, who was developing glaucoma while also losing his hearing, seems to have kept clear of samizdat materials (at least there is no record of his reading any). Nor did he allow his own new work to reach the samizdat. This might seem strange because it was to the samizdat that he owed his standing in the minds of the initiated literary audience. When his typescripts were turned down by journals in the early sixties, they were diverted into unofficial channels and started passing from hand to hand, both before and after such a circulation came to be widely perceived as a social phenomenon that required a name. And yet his prose of the seventies was written strictly “for the desk drawer” (v stol). The change in his attitude to the samizdat, both in general and in relation to his own narratives, took place at approximately the time when he distanced himself from the circles of dissidents, including those around Nadezhda Mandel’shtam.

It would not be right to account for this change of strategy by any single cause, such as his deteriorating health, or growing bitterness, or a wish to plant a decoy for the KGB, which, as Shalamov well knew, could easily access the papers in his room in a communal apartment. (Though the notebooks seem to avoid carefully whatever might further “incriminate” the writer, they do not contain deliberate red herrings.) Nor are mood swings a sufficient explanation, since the above remark about the samizdat is in tune with other notebook entries. The same 1971 notebook, for instance, contains a bitter memory of the dramatic self-incineration of Jan Palach in protest against the suppression of the Prague Spring by Soviet tanks in 1968: “And when Palach was burning—everybody shouted: ‘That was his own wish, do not touch him, do not violate his will!’” (2004: 340). Palach, in Shalamov’s view, did not just kill himself—he was sacrificed by his own admirers.

The simile in Shalamov’s statement—samizdat is a weapon in a struggle “where a human life costs no more than in the battle for Berlin”—is ambivalent. No one could doubt the importance of the 1945 battle for Berlin, the last stronghold of the Third Reich, yet one need not condone the Soviet generals’ tendency to disregard the casualties on their own side. The prestige of Soviet military leaders often seemed to be proportional to the numbers of their own soldiers killed in the “heroic” (which often means ill-prepared) battles. In the 1970s Shalamov no longer wished to be another

1. Here and below, unless specified otherwise, the translations are mine.
2. Cf. his 1966 entry, “I need to burn myself in order to attract attention” (ibid.: 307).
casualty in an oppositional struggle against the bureaucratic/repressive regime in his country. Some commentators (in particular Esipov 2007) go so far as to deny that Shalamov was opposed to the regime; but this denial largely stems from the blurring of the distinction between the desire to overthrow the social structure and oppositionality within the structure. Shalamov had paid his dues to oppositional politics—his first arrest in 1929 and his three years in the camps of the Urals had followed his involvement in the activities associated with the left opposition. His second arrest (“for nothing,” as the camp formula had it) in 1937 was part of the Great Terror practice of rounding up the usual suspects, the survivors of earlier repressions. Upon his return from Kolyma in 1953, with twenty years of ordeal behind him, Shalamov was entitled to retirement from oppositional politics.

The change in his attitude to the samizdat in the 1970s was, in fact, a reprise of his own earlier agenda: it was largely “for the desk-drawer” that he had been writing between 1954, the date of his first Kolyma tales, and 1961, the year of the Twenty-second Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, during which the de-Stalinization initiated by Khrushchev’s secret speech of 1956 was conducted openly. Sadly, this reversal was a prelude to the resurfacing of his camp habits in the home for the handicapped, in which he spent his last two years (and from which he was transported, on a freezing January day, to a psychiatric institution, where he died a few days later). Viewed in this light, his avoidance of the samizdat must have meant not his reconciliation with the regime but his (not inaccurate) assessment of it as returning to the bad old ways of the decade before Khrushchev’s “thaw.” It was also a result of the confluence of his own condition and that of the literary samizdat in the 1970s.

Catch-22

In the 1970s Shalamov, living alone after two failed marriages and a relationship that did not lead to a third, was suffering from Ménière’s disease and hurt to see that the liberalization of the Soviet press did not extend to publishing his “Kolyma Tales.” Only a few selections of his poems had come out in the Soviet Union. He was no longer the young man who had followed a friend to the Trotskyite opposition’s momentous (and last) 1927 counterdemonstration on the tenth anniversary of the October revolution, no longer the young man who in 1929 had been glad that his life had started “so fortunately,” as he wrote in the sketch “The Butyrskaya Prison” (1929; see Shalamov 1998, 3:152)—that is, with arrest and prison, the traditional sine qua non qualification of a liberal Russian intellectual.
The latter type of credentials had been amply achieved by his almost eighteen years in prisons and labor camps (1929–31 and 1937–51). Now with the “thaw” refrozen and replaced by what would come to be called the “stagnation period,” the samizdat had turned into a forbidden fruit: mere possession of these typescripts, let alone their production, could lead to banishment from the comparative paradise of his ascetic Moscow home. The samizdat that circulated at the time was, moreover, not only literary: it included the underground journal *Chronicle of Current Events* that was devoted to political dissent and the police crackdowns on it; the collection of dissident essays *The Twentieth Century*; protocols of dissident trials; the proclamations of various oppositional groups; open letters; and so on. All these could well strike Shalamov as a low-pulse revival of the circulation of the oppositionist literature of the 1920s (cf. Saunders 1974: 8); in retrospect, it is almost symbolic that the left opposition led by Trotsky, and later also by Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, had intermittent access to underground typographies, relics of the revolutionary activities under the tsars, rather than just to manual typewriters and amateur photography. Shalamov’s first arrest in 1929 was for helping to operate one such printing press to multiply opposition documents—as well as, it is believed, “Lenin’s Testament,” that is, Lenin’s December 1922 “Letter to the Congress” that contained a warning against electing Stalin to the supreme leadership position (see Shalamov 2004: 945–70).

The literary samizdat was, for Shalamov, a more troubled issue. As Lev Losev (1984: 163; cf. also Skilling 1989: 3–4) observes, this polygenetic phenomenon, with its numerous roots, was part of the Russian tradition of resistance to oppressive regimes, dating from well before 1917 (see also Wreath 1973: 77–78). Its immediate origins are usually traced to the post-Stalin years, even though it was already in the forties that the poet Nikolai Glazkov put the word “samizdat” (publishing house of oneself by oneself—by analogy, for instance, with abbreviations like Gosizdat for the Government Publishing House) on the title page of his typescript (Losev 1984: 165; Sukhikh 1996: 18; Aleinikov 1998: 248). Up to the sixties, about the only literary materials that circulated in the samizdat were collections of unpublished poems by yet unknown authors. These collections were associated with the tradition of handwritten poetry albums of romantic young ladies and the notebooks of youths; but under Stalin even those, depending on the details of their content, could earn their writers or keepers up to ten years in prison. The groups of young poets who issued their hand- or typewriter-copied collections were numerous but unlinked

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and usually unaware of each other. Hence members of separate groups were often convinced that the credit for starting the samizdat belonged to them (see Alekseeva 1984: 242–49).

Indeed, the Samizdat arose spontaneously in many places at the same time in response to the same cultural-political conditions. Among its harbingers were students’ literary wall newspapers and handwritten collections. These manuscripts were at first almost tolerated by the post-Stalinist authorities as no more dangerous than the time-honored custom of transcribing one’s favorite verses for mnemonic aid. Their apparent innocuousness was further enhanced by the impression they produced of expecting festive changes (see Ivanov 1995: 189; Aleinkov 1998), awaiting but not quite defining the oneiric utopia that would come to be called “socialism with a human face.”

Manual transcriptions most often produced only one copy of the text at a time. A qualitatively new stage in what Anna Akhmatova called the pre-Gutenberg stage of Soviet literature, a stage in which the samizdat separated from its precursor forms, began with the circulation of typescripts with carbon copies. Here lay the difference between reproduction and dissemination.

There was nothing illegal in typing up a narrative or a poem for submission to a journal, and the journals finally seemed to have begun publishing rather courageously innovative works, works with more truth and “sincerity” (a topical issue in the USSR since the midfifties) than stencil products of the socialist-realism school. After the semimiraculous publication of Solzhenitsyn’s “One Day of Ivan Denisovich” in Novyi Mir in November 1962, the flow of typescripts about concentration camps to editorial offices increased considerably. It was at about that time that Shalamov also attempted to publish his “Kolyma Tales” in Novyi Mir—he may have submitted them before the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s novella, but after that publication he expected Solzhenitsyn to promote their cause.

4. For a while Shalamov worked for Novyi Mir as a freelance referee of the samotek, the flow of unsolicited and unrecommended manuscripts, mainly poetry; in his notebooks (2004: 328) he states that his relationship with the journal deteriorated around 1966, when he recommended for publication a tale of a doctor, a former Gulag prisoner, but the tale was not accepted. Esipov (2007: 67–68), however, suggests that the ill-paid freelance slavery was discontinued after Shalamov’s pension was increased (from forty-two to seventy-two rubles a month—miserable sums) in recognition of his labor in Kolyma.

5. Solzhenitsyn’s detractors suspect that he used his influence with Aleksandr Tvardovsky, editor of Novyi Mir, to impede rather than promote the publication of Shalamov’s work (see, e.g., Esipov 2007: 74–75). Though jealousy among scribes has been known since biblical times, I do not believe that it could play a role in the matter. Neither Tvardovsky nor the official literary establishment was ripe for works that made no compromises with socialist realism.
All in vain: the dosage of narratives deemed potentially subversive was closely monitored, lest a journal or a publishing house should be accused of developing “a tendency.”

Around 1966, at the end of the “thaw,” the publication of “risky” materials was almost completely discontinued. Some space on the pages of the journals was left for works with a slightly unofficial flavor—those eventually termed “intermediate literature” (приемущественная литература; see Sukhich 1996: 23–24). Shalamov’s verse was part of this literary layer; one can argue that some of it was allowed into press not despite but because of its understated nonconformism, partly concealed under an almost obsolete polish of meter and rhyme. Even so, editors and publishers of the “stagnation period” often sensed subversive attitudes in poems which a twenty-first-century reader may deem lyrical and devoid of political engagement. In his notebooks for 1972, Shalamov records that the publication of his poetry was impeded not by external censorship but by an editor (probably in the publishing house “Советский писатель”) who claimed personal “heroism” and “sacrifice, immediately exposing him almost to the threat of death” for taking the responsibility of allowing each of his poems into print. A large part of the work of the censorship was, indeed, transferred to the editors, who would be liable to pay a price for lack of circumspection. A duly self-censoring editor could thus account for rejecting most of Shalamov’s poems by claiming self-sacrificial courage in accepting a few of them—even for those he could pay with his job, his life, his . . . what else?

As to Shalamov’s stories, the main work of his life, the very act of bringing a manuscript about the suffering of millions of Gulag prisoners out of the desk drawer exposed the author to incalculable dangers—especially if his work was free of lip service to the triumphant march toward Communism, to the Communists’ unflinching devotion to their ideals in the face of unjust imprisonment, or just to the innate goodness of ordinary people. The existence of the book would no longer be a secret from the “appropriate” organization. The risk involved was not offset by the probability of acceptance for publication, which remained low. Catch-22.

A way out of the double bind came when typescripts started to live a life, as it were, of their own. Paradoxically, if their authors became more widely known, especially abroad, their fame (“popularity,” “notoriety”—e.g., that of Evgenia Ginzburg, author of a celebrated Gulag memoir which was like-

6. Insights into high-ranking editors’ discourse can be provided by, for instance, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s recollections of Nozy Mir editorial discussions of his work in the second and the third chapters of The Oak and the Calf (1980)—his memoirs of his literary career in the Soviet Union.
wise rejected by *Novyi Mir*) could spell personal safety rather than danger. Even if that was not the case, if the authors—Anatoly Marchenko, Yuly Daniel, Andrey Siniavsky—were imprisoned, their fate would be watched, known, cared about by supporters in the country and abroad.

It is generally believed that the typescripts of Shalamov’s stories slid into the samizdat from the very editorial offices that blocked them, via lower-ranking editors mortified by their own helplessness.

By the seventies, however, authorship of a samizdat typescript almost ceased to be a claim to distinction. The typewritten materials now included not only literary, political, philosophical, and theological works, often collected in journal format, but also mysticism, occult literature, varieties of self-help, as well as erotica. The regime’s persecution of people involved in the reproduction and reading of these materials was not as massively ferocious as it would have been under Stalin; editors of collections were liable to arrest but not necessarily their assistants and typists. (These were, however, likely to be questioned, which could also be traumatic.) One may even surmise that the painstaking process of retyping may have appeared as one of the pseudo-leisure pastimes—the interminable standing in lines for food or pottering about in the garden plots (allotted, usually at considerable distance from home, as a badge of run-of-the-mill professional success)—that, from the point of view of the authorities, may have helped to keep urban intelligentsia busy and out of mischief.7 Shalamov may have been right about samizdat as a double-edged “poisoned weapon”—among four or five recipients of the carbon copies there was likely to be an informer; moreover though typewriters no longer had to be registered, as under Stalin (see Feldbrugge 1975: 3), the police could trace copies to the specific instrument on which they were produced.

Moreover, talentless writers could also claim that they were not published for political reasons, though the separation of grain from chaff was partly helped by the emergent “tamizdat”8—publication abroad of smuggled out manuscripts whose authors remained in the Soviet Union. Such publications, unless translated into English, yielded practically no income for the authors (and transfer of funds from abroad was a risky endeavor—witness the arrest of Boris Pasternak’s friend Olga Ivinskaia and her daughter), but they helped to establish the writers’ status in their own environment.

Shalamov’s stories were read by a very narrow circle of friends in the late fifties, but they started circulating from hand to hand more widely

7. For this comment on Soviet pastimes, I am indebted to Algimanta Pranckevičienė, in conversation.
8. Apparently while the word “samizdat” has become a recognized standard neologism; *tamizdat* retains the flavor of slang.
around 1964, after being rejected by *Novyi Mir*, the most liberal of the thick journals. For a brief while Shalamov became a peculiarly Moscow-unofficial version of a literary lion (see Scammell 1970: 18). Moreover, in 1966 his anonymous comments on the trial of Daniel and Siniavsky, “Letter to an Old Friend” (Shalamov 1986), were included, apparently with his consent, in the samizdat *White Book* put together by Aleksandr Ginzburg. Upon meeting Shalamov in the library the same year, Ginzburg told him about the layout of the volume. He reports that Shalamov asked him, “And how much do you think you will get for this?” What in most countries would be read as a question of honorarium was immediately understood as a question about the penal “tariff.” To Ginzburg’s surmise that he would get seven years, Shalamov responded by saying that in his times it would have been twenty-five. “I later got 5 years—we were both wrong,” Ginzburg (1986) comments.

Shalamov’s stories were among the materials that “went out” (*ushli*, a contemporary colloquial term) from the samizdat to the tamizdat. In her 1982 article in the émigré journal *Posev*, which, it seems, did not bear a grudge against Shalamov for his 1972 attack on it in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (about which more later), Irina Kanevskaia claims that in 1968 she and her husband visited Shalamov and received from him a suitcase of manuscripts; they safely carried it to Prague, whence it made its way to their contacts in Paris. Unfortunately, the further fate of the materials was not what Kanevskaia (and, as she hints, Shalamov himself) had expected. Instead of the stories coming out in a single thick volume (this would only happen in 1978), selections were published in several issues of émigré journals—the New York–based *Novyi Zhurnal* and the Frankfurt-based *Posev*, the latter associated, in the minds of the Soviet citizens who knew about it, with the Nazi collaborators among Russian expatriates. Though this publication meant a broadening recognition, especially abroad, it also cut off Shalamov’s access to the mass reading public at home: up to the late 1980s works that were first published in the West were strictly denied publication in the Soviet Union itself. Moreover, what now looked as the one and only edition of “Kolyma Tales” was flawed, unfaithful to the author’s intentions: the selection did not observe the proper sequence of the stories,

9. In a 1990 poem about having once seen Shalamov on a Moscow street (a Flying Dutchman? a reed in the wind or a moving rock? a resurrected Lazarus? a Dantean shadow?) Mikhail Pozdniakov (2002: 44) recollects identifying him with the help of a friend, who says, “Do you know who that was?” (Знаеш’—кто?).

10. Judging from Shalamov’s (2004: 365) notebook entry for 1972, for six years he had not been “letting a single story out of the desk-drawer”; this, however, must have applied only to new work, not to work that had already left the desk drawer before Kanevskaia’s visit.
whereas for Shalamov it was vitally important how the stories should be arranged in each cycle. Their general effect largely depended on the pulsating deployment of the material, testimony to atrocities alternating with narratives of moments of reprieve. The general movement of each story cycle from a self-reflexive piece, through tide-and-ebb records of suffering and injustice, to a more hopeful narrative at the end (see Toker 2000: 160–76) was also obscured in the piecemeal journal presentation.

In contrast to foreign journal editors, the people who retyped the samizdat collections of Shalamov’s work seem to have attempted to preserve the sequence of the stories as devised by the author. However, they may have sinned against the authorial intention in other ways. In a letter to Irina Sirotinskaia, recollecting the middle-of-a-sentence ending of Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, Shalamov (1996: 432) complains that readers tend to complete, correct, the word *rabol[tali]* (‘we worked’) which he had deliberately left unfinished in the story “How It Began.”

Indeed, readers of the samizdat typescripts, would, like the typists themselves, double as self-appointed editors (and when one gets a sheaf of typed pages with some longhand corrections, one usually cannot tell whether the corrections have been authorized). Shalamov’s narratives—sparse, at times emaciated like the bodies of his main heroes—make use of what in more traditional fiction would have been perceived as blemishes (repetitions, self-contradictions, ambiguities, asyndetically aggregated modifier clauses) but what actually embodies a distinctive aesthetics of sincerity. Attempts to “edit” Shalamov’s individual style amounted to misunderstanding his painstakingly protected authenticity; this, unfortunately, is also characteristic of some of the translations of his works into other languages. Shalamov was denied the writer’s legal right to “inviolability of the work” (see Loeber 1974: 85), involving control of the accuracy in both proofreading and structure, even as he could not control the work’s distribution. As his correspondence with L. M. Brodskaia suggests, as early as 1956 he became highly sensitive to his readers’ possible attempts to “correct” his texts (Shalamov 2004: 556). The reproduction of the typescripts in the sixties, sometimes on ciga-

11. For a more detailed analysis of this story, see Toker 2007.
12. It must be noted that official Soviet publications violated this aspect of the international copyright law, de facto if not de jure, much more massively, because publishing houses were entitled by law to rescind publication agreements and reject manuscripts if the authors refused to comply with the interventive “suggestions” of the editorial board or a government censorship agency (see Loeber 1974: 94–95). It is believed that the compromises Anatolii Kuznetzov had to accept in order to get his *Sequel to a Legend* published led to the beginning of his drinking problem. The edition of his major work *Babii Yar*, published after his defection to England, suggestively includes in boldface type, the materials that were excised from the Soviet publication of this work in the journal *Iunost*. 
rette paper, which allowed a greater number of carbon copies, increased the number of their readers but at the same time signified the loss of the author’s power to keep the texts intact (see Komaromi 2004: 604).

From Issue to Theme

Shalamov’s inability to control the fate of his writing in his postcamp years was, in a sense, an extension of his lack of control over his own fate as a prisoner in the camps. This lack of control, and the potential failure of the best protective intentions of his friends, are forcefully presented in his 1964 short story “A Piece of Meat” (Shalamov 1994a: 222–31; 1998, 1:290–97), written at precisely the time when typescripts, including Shalamov’s own, were sliding from editorial offices into samizdat.

The protagonist of this story, Golubev, one of Shalamov’s avatars, knows that in order to survive he has to avoid being sent away from the hospital, where he works as an orderly, back to the deadly gold mines. An NKVD commission arrives to inspect the hospital: its purpose is to round up all the prisoners employed as janitors and nurses though sentenced under the “political” article 58 of the penal code; such prisoners are to be sent back to hard-labor camps. This is a cyclical occurrence: the plot of “A Piece of Meat,” like that of the majority of Shalamov’s stories, unfolds against the background of fabula elements representing the typical camp conditions or serial, statistically plausible situations. The plot itself, however, stages an event which is extraordinary, rare, yet still of a shape that could only be produced by in-camp relationships, which it thereby characterizes in an indirect manner. In the regular course of events, Golubev would have been among those carried away from the hospital to the gold-mining camps. Yet he decides to use a loophole of which he became aware during the previous raid, when he was still too sick to be transported: a convict surgeon had dropped a hint about “an attack of acute appendicitis” (Shalamov 1994a: 225). Golubev now simulates a fit of abdominal pains and is given what is presented as an emergency appendectomy (with insufficient local anesthesia): his fellow convict apparently extends the Hippocratic oath to alternative ways of life saving. Meanwhile, the raid is over, and the commission departs. The “piece of meat” of the title is the quite healthy appendix which, in the narrator’s meditation, becomes the camp counterpart of the bloody sacrifice and of the pound-of-flesh topos:

Yes, Golubev offered this bloody sacrifice. A piece of meat was cut from his body and cast at the feet of the almighty god of the camps. To placate the god. To placate him or deceive him? Life repeats Shakespearean themes more often than we think. Did Lady Macbeth, Richard III, and King Claudius exist only in the Middle Ages? Shylock wanted to cut a pound of flesh from the body of the merchant of Venice. Is that a fairy tale? Of course, the appendix is but a worm-like spur of the cecum, a rudimentary organ that weighs less than a pound. And, of course, conditions of absolute sterility were observed in offering the bloody sacrifice. . . . The rudimentary organ turned out to be not rudimentary at all, but essential, functional, life saving. (Ibid.: 222)

After the surgery, while every cell of his recovering body is rejoicing at the new lease on life, Golubev recognizes in a fellow patient hospitalized in the same recovery ward the criminal convict Kononenko. This gangster, now sporting an alias, is known to have committed new murders serially in order to be held in prison and tried again instead of being sent to the mining camps. He recognizes Golubev, and Golubev realizes that precisely because of this recognition he himself will be chosen as the serial murderer’s next victim if the latter again opts for a new trial rather than a transport to the gold mines. Thus Golubev’s “bloody sacrifice” to the Moloch of the camps seems to have been in vain—he has only passed from the frying pan into the fire. However, Golubev is saved by the outbreak of an all-out war between criminal factions throughout the mining camps:¹⁴ Kononenko receives a message from fellow criminals demanding his presence in that theater of war to help defend his own. The murder would now be useless—the gangster has to obey the summons and allow the authorities to take him to the mines. Golubev’s struggle for survival has been subverted by a chance encounter, but his life was saved again by another chance event: the summons reaching Kononenko in the nick of time.

On a second reading, free of the suspense of this striking plot, one may notice that most of the material of the story is organized around the theme of the prisoners’ attempts, usually futile, to control their own fate. This is the major thematic strand of the story, which can also be read as a tragic comment on the issue of the Gulag writer’s defeated and at times self-defeating struggle for control over his or her own work. In a hospital where Golubev had stayed in the past, prisoners used to rub dirt into their postoperative wounds to impede their healing and prolong the recovery span. Golubev used to scorn this self-mutilation, but now he considers it

¹⁴ Shalamov (1998, 2:56–76) describes this wave of in-camp violence in the sketch “The ‘Bitch’ War.” The two sides of the conflict were the professional criminals, who lived by a strict code of their own, and “the bitches,” that is, criminal convicts who had started breaking that code by collaborating with the authorities.
an option for himself. His other neighbor in the recovery ward cuts open his skin and drops blood into his urine in order to be registered as still sick and kept on in the hospital; until Kononenko recognizes Golubev, it is that malingerer whom Kononenko plans to kill. But as Kononenko is preparing to assert his control over his destiny by a new immolation (not of his own body but of that of another) on Moloch’s altar, his own strategy is disrupted by his associates’ summons, possibly fatal, to the war within the camps: a professional criminal must show total obedience to the laws of his own underworld. Whether ethical or unethical, the best-laid plans of prisoners are variously disrupted by unforeseen circumstances, by incalculable consequences of the agendas of those around them.15

The fate of a samizdat author and the fate of his or her work were likewise to a large extent at the mercy of the different forces in his or her environment. An artist like Shalamov was likely to perceive his lack of control over the publication or even the ultimate shape of his work as an extension of his lack of control over his own destiny as a prisoner.16 The plot of “A Piece of Meat” turned out to be not only a piece of testimony about the past but also a prophetically symbolic anticipation of the future events in its author’s life. Conversely, bearing in mind the date of the composition (1964) as established by Irina Sirotinskaia, Shalamov’s literary heir, the story could be read as turning an issue into a theme, a more radical camp version of the postcamp helplessness of the author, still at the mercy of unforeseeable circumstances despite occasional victories in his struggle to control the fate of his work.

The Last Dilemma

Shalamov is one of the artists who do not seem to have left drafts—not because, like Nabokov, he destroyed them but because each story would ferment for a long time in his mind and each sentence would be written down on paper only after it had crystallized in mental and oral composition, with the writer talking to himself in his room, shouting, threatening, weeping, as he describes it in a 1971 letter to Sirotinskaia (Shalamov 2004: 847). In a note attached to his four-volume Collected Works (Shalamov 1998, 1:613), Sirotinskaia states that there are only slight textual differences

15. A similar phenomenon, termed “Death in Teheran,” is also discussed in Victor Frankl’s Man’s Search for Meaning (1962 [1946]: 54–56) with the help of a parable of a man fleeing as far as Teheran to escape Death, only to run into Death on a street of that city.
16. It is telling that when Shalamov was confined to the institution for the handicapped, a whole complex of his camp habits revived there; see Shklovskii 1991: 61; Sirotinskaia 1990: 111 and 1992: 219.
between the three versions in which his work has reached the archive: the handwritten manuscript, the typescript with corrections, and the fair typescript copy. She took these documents to the State Archive of Literature and the Arts (now the Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts [RGALI]).

There are indeed only minor differences between Sirotinskaia’s publications of Shalamov’s work made on the basis of these typescript copies and the text based on samizdat copies published by Mikhail Geller (Michael Heller) in London in 1978. However, there are major differences in the structure of these editions. Michael Heller’s edition, like the early samizdat collections, presents the cycle “The Artist of the Spade” as coming second, after the cycle “Kolyma Tales” (eponymous with the whole three-cycle collection), and the cycle “The Left Bank” is presented last. In Sirotinskaia’s editions, except for the first journal publications of the early years of glasnost, “The Left Bank” precedes “The Artist of the Spade,” the suggestion being that Shalamov rethought the sequence in the seventies. The new sequence makes better sense biographically, because “The Artist of the Spade” ends with two stories of a released prisoner leaving Kolyma and traveling back to Moscow. Artistically, however, the older sequence is the more impressive, since it ends with the story “Sententia,” one of Shalamov’s masterpieces, which deals not with the end of one’s imprisonment but with the gradual rehabilitation of a prisoner’s body and mind, from the state of a “goner” (similar to that of the Auschwitz “Muselman”) to one closer to relatively normal vitality, when given a lighter job in a less cruel camp.17

For other reasons, however, Heller’s edition, twice reprinted in the eighties by the YMCA Press in Paris, is not a winning alternative. Unaware of Shalamov’s plans for several additional story cycles, on receiving manuscripts of new stories (many of them, apparently, with the help of the poet Genadii Aigi), Heller inserted them in different places in the first three cycles. Arguably, his choice of the places for insertions showed good literary taste, yet the result nevertheless changed the immediate context of each story as planned by the author; it thus disrupted the intended “artistic web”

17. Paradoxically, therefore, there now exist two versions of the three-cycle Kolyma Tales—as in the case of The First Circle by Solzhenitsyn, a writer of whose strategies Shalamov disapproved. Indeed, the “lightened” 1968 version of The First Circle, which has also been translated into a variety of languages, including English, is almost a companion piece to the version that Solzhenitsyn “restored” in emigration, after the hopes of publishing the novel in Russian, even in the censored or self-censored form, had vanished (see Toker 2000: 196–200): the two versions, of which the later is more politically subversive but arguably not a better work of art, indirectly comment on each other.
(Sirotinskaia in Shalamov 1998, 1:613) of each cycle in which the additions were made, though less so, perhaps, than in the selections published in Posev and Novyi Zhurnal and then, in the late eighties, in the Moscow journals Iunost’ and Novyi Mir. It is therefore not surprising that the first English and French translators of Shalamov (John Glad and Catherine Fournier, respectively) felt free to pick and choose the individual stories for their versions of Kolyma Tales and, in the earlier editions, to group them according to principles totally different from Shalamov’s own. (Hence the groupings under rubrics such as “Working,” “Eating,” “Dying,” or “The Criminal World” in Glad’s two different selections [1980 and 1981] published prior to his 1994 Kolyma Tales [Shalamov 1994a], which arranges the stories in the right sequence in each cycle but does not present all of them.) Shalamov, however, did not live to see the latter developments.

Meanwhile, in the late sixties and early seventies he was faced with the period of “the tightening of the screws” (Trotsky’s term from the 1920s, revived in the intellectual circles of the late 1960s), in the context of which, as noted above, the samizdat circulation and the émigré journal selections of his stories virtually precluded their publication in the Soviet Union. This meant not only that he was unable to control the details of his texts by authorial proofreading but also, more painfully, that their consciousness-raising effect within the country would be severely impeded. It also could mean the danger of his being forgotten: the samizdat fame seemed (not quite justly) to be of a limited and often short-lived variety.

I believe that such worries may have been in the background of Shalamov’s 1972 “recanting” letter to Literaturnaia Gazeta. The most immediate context for the letter was the delay, clearly deliberate, in the publication of his poetry collection Moskovskie oblaka (Moscow Clouds)—the “clouds” of the title were supposed to be symbolic rather than meteorological (see Shalamov 2004: 317). There is no record of where the suggestion about the letter had come from—probably either from a delegate of the newspaper itself, under KGB tutelage, or from some of the editors of the publishing firm “Sovetskii pisatel’” or the journal Iunost’. Sirotinskaia (1990: 110) only testifies that Shalamov considered writing this letter for a long time, in fits of despair. The larger context for the event was the concerted KGB effort to discredit dissidents—that organization’s other great victory came later the same year, with the recantation of Pyotr Yakir and Victor Krasin.19


19. Pyotr Yakir, the dissident son of the General Yona Yakir, executed in 1937, had spent many years in prisons, in camps, and on the run; had written his memoir, A Childhood in
The KGB drive for the dissidents’ public breast-beating was a revival of the methods of the intraparty struggle of the 1920s. The historian Isaac Deutscher (1959: 138) believes that the idea of the Trotskyite opposition’s recanting was first suggested, with “fatal recklessness,” by Zinoviev (still a member, with Stalin and Kamenev, of the triumvirate) at the Thirteenth Congress of the Communist Party in 1924. At the time the idea was shocking even to that assemblage, already dominated by Stalin’s men, and Nadezhda Krupskaya’s speech, including her protest against this “psychologically impossible” demand, received applause (Trinadtsatyi s’ezd 1963 [1924]: 236–37). But the seed had been planted: it would sprout two years later, when the Politburo demanded a recantation from Zinoviev himself and from his associates: insufficiently confident of its estimations of the depth and breadth of the popular support for the opposition and of the ability of the still relatively young “metaphysical police” (Nabokov 1960 [1957]: 35) to suppress it by main force, the ruling faction sought to discredit the leaders of the opposition in the eyes of their adherents. Remnants of this agenda would persist in the public self-accusations of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, and others at the show trials of the thirties, but by that time the main purpose of the pressure to recant seems to have been not even to “prove” the accusations but to humiliate the puppeteer’s victims before destroying them.

Shalamov was acutely alert to the signs of the recidivistic return of political repression. He reacted to them somatically: the first onset of Ménière’s disease (reflected in his story “Pripadok” [“An Attack”]), from which he suffered up to his death, took place in 1957, during the setback that ended the first stage of Khrushchev’s “thaw,” the stage that had culminated in his secret speech at the Twentieth Congress in 1956. Shalamov had been skeptical about the “thaw” from the start; nevertheless, it had produced welcome changes in his life, such as his Moscow residence permit. Yet in 1957 it seemed that the authorities were reversing their course: the journal Moskva, for which Shalamov then worked as a freelance journalist, came under attack; moreover a painful blow to Shalamov was the arrest (for “anti-Soviet agitation”) of his friend Arkadii Dobrovolskii, who had stayed

Prison (1972); and had gained a position of prominence in Moscow dissident circles but, a helpless alcoholic, was arrested again and broken by the KGB pressure.

20. For an analysis of the mechanisms of the pressure to recant as reflected in several transcripts of Politburo meetings, see Toker 2009.

21. In his January 23, 1955, letter to Arkadii Dobrovolskii, Shalamov (2004: 488) made a coded remark on the weather: “As to the thaw, I must say that, having been frozen, it seems, to the bone marrow, I do not feel it—not the way I would have liked it, and my demands are most modest.”
on to work in Kolyma after being liberated from the camps. Within a year the “thaw” overcame its 1957 caprice (and so Dobrovolskii obtained an early release in 1958), though the fear of going too far down the path of de-Stalinization seems never to have left Khrushchev and his entourage. For Shalamov, the nine years that followed were among the most productive and the most reasonably happy. Then, as Esipov (2002: 170–71) notes, the years 1966–67 (following Khrushchev’s fall and the massive reconsolidation of media censorship) constituted a negative watershed, after which Shalamov’s self-isolation from his social environment entered a race with his deteriorating health—the progress of Ménière’s disease and the gradual loss of hearing and of sight. The solitude of his life, only partly compensated for by his emotionally charged friendship with Irina Sirotinskaia (who, however, was married and a mother of three), formed an immediate background for the fatal recantation letter. It stands to reason that had Shalamov remained in daily contact with a tightly knit group of nonconformist intellectuals, such a letter would have been unthinkable. Yet he had moved away from dissident circles. “They need me dead,” he would say. “They would push me into a hole in the ground and then write petitions to the UN” (Sirotinskaia 1990: 109).

One could attempt to construe Shalamov’s dilemma as follows. More than a hole in the ground, he may have feared an Orwellian memory hole: his earlier poetry collections did not even earn him entry into the Writers’ Union; his short stories were likely to vanish from samizdat circulation (“The Samizdat is a ghost,” its cigarette-paper sheets could be seen as fragile and fleeting). New and old works could be confiscated from his own desk drawers (he was under observation by the KGB to the end of his days) and kept inaccessible in government archives (to which Sirotinskaia carried copies of his works). Nor was the memory of individuals a reliable storage place. The writer would then go to his grave in an obscurity little different from that of the sundry graphomaniacs for whom censorship was an alibi for lack of success. Shalamov underestimated the power of the publication of his stories, even if only in selections, by émigré journals; he also misinterpreted the serial character of these publications (a few stories per issue) as motivated by a wish to misrepresent the author as a regular contributor. His notebook entry for the fatal year of 1972 records his fear for his safety: “With my difficult biography the last thing I need is connections with emigrants” (Shalamov 2004: 365). A new book of poetry, appealing to a discriminating reader, could reverse that process: in the better future times (they had happened once—perhaps they would recur . . .), the prose story cycles of a known poet would be a challenge to researchers and a discovery to a broad readership.
On the other hand, Shalamov knew that a public recantation letter would damage his standing with the liberal circles. At the time, however, seeing very few people, he did not entirely realize the nature of his standing as a moral stronghold against the repression-accelerating regime. The dissident circles, which often exercised a tight hold on their members, seemed to him a photonegative of the regime; he referred to them sarcastically as “Progressive Humanity” and spurned them, including Solzhenitsyn and his supporters, with the animosity of a disappointed lover. Clear minded about the past and partly divining the future, Shalamov did not quite understand the present, did not, for instance, realize how much he stood to lose in the eyes of samizdat readers.

This 315-word letter, which would appear in the newspaper on February 23, 1972, in a black frame reminiscent of obituaries, stunning Shalamov’s admirers, had, unlike his stories, undergone revisions. It starts with the following one-sentence paragraph: “It has come to my knowledge that an anti-Soviet little journal [zhurnal’chik—a scornful diminutive typical of Bolshevik rhetoric, especially of the twenties] Posev published in West Germany in the Russian language, as well as the anti-Soviet émigré Novyi zhurnal of New York, have decided to exploit my honest name as a Soviet writer and Soviet citizen and are publishing, in their libelous issues, my ‘Kolyma Tales.’” Sirotinskaia (1990: 110) says that she had persuaded Shalamov to remove the most irritating passages, such as the one about these foreign journals trying to make him look like their “resident” writer. However, the published text of the letter contains the remark that says the same thing with just a different word: “The blackguardly method of publication used by the editors of these foul-smelling journals—one or two stories per issue—seeks to give the readers the impression that I am working with them on a regular basis.”

Parrying the post-factum explanations of others, Shalamov (1994b) denied that he was “forced” to write the letter or that it was written by someone else and only signed by himself. Evgenii Shklovskii (1991: 60) records, from hearsay, that after the fact Shalamov boasted to Yulii Shreider about the “trick” that he had played on the authorities by this letter. Sirotinskaia (1990: 110), who writes that she wept for a week over a toppled idol when the letter was published, recollects that Shalamov’s moods fluctuated from self-defense to total despairing self-disparagement to a gradual (but not slow) recovery and continued self-delusionary self-justification, at one point painfully punctured by her reproach.

Her memoirs, however, do not explain the nature of what Shalamov understood as the “trick” he played on the authorities—beyond the facts that the poetry collection Moscow Clouds indeed went to the typesetter two
months later and that Shalamov was accepted into the Writers’ Union and (grudgingly, it seems) granted some of its benefits, such as rest cures at the Black Sea. Despite the promise of these improvements, on October 28 of the same year Shalamov (2004: 318) writes in his notebook: “I am simply sick, gravely psychically sick.” An even earlier notebook entry for April 1972 calls Moscow Clouds a “scarred book” (ibid.: 345)—perhaps a metaphor for its having been shortened or perhaps a metonymy for the wounds inflicted on the author in the struggle for its publication.

I believe that Shalamov’s February letter had an undertext. On the one hand, it bears traces of his style, such as incantatory repetitions and asyndetic modifying constructions. On the other hand, it uses the typical Bolshevik-invective epithet “foul-smelling” (zlovonnye) for the émigré journals: a striking feature, since olfactory imagery, literal or metaphoric, is rare in Shalamov’s prose (he had chronic rhinitis). To the readers of Shalamov’s prose, this word is strikingly “alien”—an unassimilable lexical body, a “piece of meat” thrown to the hurdle audience of the letter (the newspaper editors, the censors) in order to distract its attention from what the letter really accomplishes—smuggling the one and only public reference, by the actual title, to his “Kolyma Tales” into the official Soviet media. The target audience of the letter is thus informed that such a work exists, a record is left, questions about accessibility are encouraged; the readers of the letter, who would know what the toponym Kolyma stands for, would hardly avoid asking “Kolyma Tales? Where?”

The major point of the letter is Shalamov’s denial of responsibility for sending his stories to foreign journals (“I never entered into any contact with them”); this is a letter about lack of authorial control and at the same time an attempt to exert it. It is not a recantation about writing the stories, even though it was generally read as such. Its incantatory repetitions highlight the word “honest”: “I am an honest Soviet writer” and, in the next paragraph, “I am an honest Soviet citizen, well aware of the significance of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in my private life and in the life of the whole country.” These sentences likewise contain decoys, namely, the familiar clichés (both used in one more place in the short letter) “an honest Soviet citizen” and, in particular, “an honest Soviet writer.” The latter point reads as a suggestion that, unlike all too many (dishonest) Soviet writers, Shalamov’s work tells the honest truth rather than painting a disinfected mirage. Furthermore, “The Soviet Writer” (Sovetskii pisatel’) was the name of the publishing house that, in the wake of the Twentieth

22. On the hurdle audience, which stands between the author and his or her target readership, see Toker 2005.
Party Congress (reference to which is also a keynote; the phrase “Soviet writer,” also a keynote, is used three times in the letter), had published Shalamov’s previous poetry collections—and was now delaying the publication of Moscow Clouds.

A further decoy that allows the reference to “Kolyma Tales” in the brief text of the letter is the ostensible gesture of dismissal which frames the second occurrence of this reference: “The problematics of ‘Kolyma Tales’ has long been removed by life” (davno snaita zhizn’iu). The dismissal is only apparent. Another expression that one would be hard put to find elsewhere in Shalamov’s prose is precisely snaita zhizn’iu, “removed by life.” This expression for “no longer relevant,” as well as its antonym, postavlen zhizn’iu, “posed by life,” belongs to the postrevolutionary language broadly in use in the twenties but much less so in the seventies. In the same 1924 speech against the demand for recantation, Krupskaya recommends that the old discussion (between the opposition and the ruling faction) be discontinued and that it should be replaced by dealing with “those questions that have been posed by life before the party” (ostanovit’sia . . . na tekh voporsakh, kotorye postavleny zhizn’iu pered partiei)—it is this statement that was followed by a long ovation (Trinadtsatyi s’ezd 1963 [1924]: 237). Shalamov’s use of the negative form of this expression echoes a reference to cooperatives and state capitalism made by Nikolai Bukharin at the Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party in 1926: “the problem in its 1921 formulation has been removed by life” (vopros v toi formulirovke, v kakoi on stoial v 1921 godu, snaiat zhizn’iu). It is interesting that in the preceding sentence, having been reminded by a member of the audience of something he had written in the periodical Krasnaia nov’ in respect to his temporary disagreement with Lenin, Bukharin says, “I do not renounce the quotation from Krasnaia Nov’” (ya ot tsitaty is “Krasnoi novi” ne otrekaius’), which is received with a shout of “Too bad” (Naprasno) from the audience (Chetyrnadtsatyi s’ezd 1926: 145). Shalamov’s reference to the camps not being the way they were under Stalin, “the problematics” of his stories being “removed by life,” may thus be, consciously or otherwise, also a way of saying with Bukharin (executed in 1938), “I do not renounce.”

The undertext was lost on contemporary readers: those who had read “Kolyma Tales” were not the same people who would study stenographic accounts of Party Congresses. Besides, in their shock at the very act of Shalamov’s publishing such a statement in an official newspaper, some con-

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23. One of the means at the disposal of Soviet intellectuals who wished to acquaint the readership with some “unacceptable” theories, such as Freud’s, was to write outwardly conformist works attacking such theories—while explaining them in detail in the process.
temporaries did not pay close attention to its text. On February 24 Lev Kopelev (a former “true believer,” then a Gulag prisoner—prototype of Rubin in Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle*—and in 1972 a dissident) makes the following entry in his diary: “Yesterday in ‘Literaturka’ [a familiar or scornful diminutive for *Literaturnaia gazeta*]—a smoothed down interview with Böll. Two little articles against Solzhenitsyn—Martti Larni and some idiot from the GDR. And on top of it all—a terrible letter of Varlam Shalamov, cursing the West and our ‘renegades,’ and Solzhenitsyn” (Orlova and Kopelev 1990: 173–74). But Shalamov’s letter contains no mention of Solzhenitsyn or the “dissidents” (“renegades” [*otschepentsy*]). Kopelev had clearly not read it attentively enough to prevent his memory of it from being contaminated by the articles on the same newspaper sheet. Over such contexts Shalamov, grasping for control, could have no more influence than Golu-bev had over the choice of neighbors in his convalescence ward in “A Piece of Meat.” The disastrous effect of Shalamov’s letter on his admirers was enhanced by its contexts in the same issue of the paper.

I realize that the above reading of Shalamov’s letter may be attributed to wishful thinking and a reluctance to consider the aging Shalamov’s case as that of a willing spirit and a weak flesh. The wish and the reluctance are not to be denied, but there is also more indirect evidence to bolster the case. Indeed, Shalamov (2004: 33–129) himself did read Communist party materials of the twenties, materials pertaining to the period of his own involvement in the activities of political opposition—the brightest, most energetic, and most hopeful time of his life, recalled in his 1962 memoir “The Twenties,” not without a sarcastic distance of winter remarks about summer impressions. In 1926, the stenograms of the Fourteenth Congress were reprinted several times; the early sixties saw further reprints of the materials that had been off-limits under Stalin. In a 1973 letter to Sirotinskaya, commenting on a manuscript memoir about the twenties that she had sent him, Shalamov (ibid.: 851) distinguishes between “documentary literature” and “a document”: “A document is, for instance, the stenogram of the Ninth Party Conference conducted by Lenin during the war with Poland (December 19–21, 1921) and which was recently published—which burns in one’s hands even now.” A 1971 notebook entry quotes an unidentified speaker on writing “with all the responsibility of a document” and comments as follows: “But documents are not objective at all—any docu-

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24. Lev Kopelev testifies: “Varlam Shalamov, one of the most talented, most merciless artist-annalists of the Soviet *katorga*, would be transformed when recollecting the twenties—would become kind, trusting, merry, would tell about the evenings of Mayakovsky and other poets, about Lunacharsky’s debates with Vvedensky, about Meierhold’s first performances, about the colors and the noises of Moscow streets” (Orlova and Kopelev 1990: 57–58).
ment is someone’s pain, someone’s passion” (ibid.: 341). At least up to the midtwenties, stenograms of party conferences and congresses (all too joyfully discarded from some libraries in the nineties) still contained a great deal of “pain” and “passion.”

We shall never know whether Shalamov consciously meant to allude to Bukharin’s speech in his letter to Literaturnaia Gazeta. However it may be, this speech forms one of the subtexts of that particular document, as uncontrollable as the genuine gifts of memory.25 In the end, Shalamov’s attempts to exert control over the fate of his works proved futile. Under the regime as he knew it, Kolyma Tales remained unpublishable in the Soviet Union; their turn came after the change in that regime, during the new “thaw” under the name of glasnost, first as a measure of Gorbachev’s liberalism (its publication followed Evgenia Ginzburg’s and Solzhenitsyn’s works) and then as a natural perestroika development. But for this development to take place, Shalamov’s works had to have been kept available. It is impossible to overestimate the role of the samizdat in having rescued them from a memory hole in the first place.

In “A Piece of Meat” it is the convict surgeon’s improvisation with the Hippocratic oath that, one way or another, saves Golubev’s life. When all is said and done, it is the improvised polygraphy, the fragile sheets of the ghostly Samizdat of the sixties, that had helped to preserve the work of one of the greatest Russian prose writers of the twentieth century. Mikhail Bulgakov may or may not have been right that manuscripts do not burn, but, mysticism aside,26 it is when people care to remember and extend their existence that they do not turn into dust.

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25. Though the prose of Shalamov’s memoirs, letters, and stories is largely free from Sovietisms, except in the direct speech of the characters, the language of the twenties has left some imprint on it—such as, for instance, the use of the word ibo (“for” in the sense of “because”). “These days there is no Soviet official without ibo” (Selishchev 1928: 61).

26. Cf. Bergson’s (1929: 93–102) influential distinction between memory as a cultivated bodily habit and genuine memory, which is as generous as it is capricious.

27. After Shalamov’s second arrest in 1937, his first wife burned all of his unpublished manuscripts, which were, it seems, never reconstructed.
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