Kolyma Tales. by Varlam Shalamov: John Glad; Graphite. by Varlam Shalamov: John Glad
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Varlam Shalamov’s stunning and shattering short stories Kolymskie rasskazy deal with his experience, if that is the word, in Kolyma camps, the vast permafrost realm of the Gulag Archipelago where millions perished. He was there from 1937 to probably 1954. His great art is that of a precise and laconic chronicle. No more, no less. In chiseled miniatures he calmly presents extreme and at times unspeakable suffering when death loosens its grip of fear over starving, sick, brutalized prisoners. There rises from these pages a host of Stalin’s victims (not en masse but one by one), criminals, guards, and doctors. The stories are as John Glad says “a vivid account of individual moments in the lives of individual men, for only in the particular can we begin to comprehend the horror of the whole” (Kolyma Tales, p. 8).

Shalamov’s narrative is two things. It is a record, and it is poetry. It is neither sermon nor vituperation. It is also soothingly incomprehensible that what he recorded he made into art.

His eyes, his enormous power of observing man and nature are revelatory. “Trees in the north die down like people” (Kolyma Tales, p. 62). An eidetic vision, single purpose, and pantheistic feel of life and death are his own. Not only is it difficult to say anything at all about his tales — for what does it matter what we over here think of his literary talent — but forcing him into a literary tradition seems strained.

Among the difficulties of submitting these tales to an analysis, there loom two. The first is the distance the reviewer must conjure for himself. If he stands too close, he turns inarticulate because he is overwhelmed; if he stands too far, he sounds callous. Second, the precision and tightness of some stories, the cloisonné enamel of their surface make synopsizing or the flat retelling “in one’s own words” absurd. One must only quote. But then one must quote everything.

These gems were smuggled out of the Soviet Union in the mid-1960s and appeared singly or in small bundles as Novyi zhurnal and Grani. I found it then as I find it now unbecoming to grade them as to literary quality. Shalamov makes one forget what literature is or should be as he offers his blend of Dichtung und Wahrheit in bitter gulps. Of those that moved and frightened me most, I should mention “Major Pugachov’s Last Battle,” “The Bathhouse,” “In the Night,” as well as “Graphite” and “Epitaph.”

The émigré editors emphasized consistently that the stories were published without Shalamov’s knowledge. On February 23, 1972, Literaturnaia gazeta issued a protest, signed by Shalamov, against the publications. The authenticity or freedom of the signature is suspect. In 1978, a quarter of a century after Shalamov’s release, the overseas publications brought out the first Russian collection of these stories. And now, for the first time in English, a rich and well-chosen selection has been published by Norton in two books. Let us hope there will be a third.

Both volumes are John Glad’s tenacious labor of devotion. Having been turned down with the project by eight publishers, he writes a gallant note of thanks to Carol Houck Smith, an editor at Norton, for her courage in accepting the manuscript.

John Glad has given the books shape by a difficult yet judicious selection and by a thematic grouping of the stories. In the first volume, the seven parts of the deployment of Shalamov’s netherworld are named “Survival,” “Hope,” “Defiance,” “The Criminal World” (criminals make themselves more comfortable in hell than political, frequently at the literal expense of the latter), “The Jailers’ World,” “The American Connection”
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(an especially gruesome doublet of stories in one of which the use of a lend-lease bulldozer is described for pushing deep-frozen corpses into mass graves), and “Release.” In the second volume, Graphite, the seven trim existential gerunds “Living,” “Eating,” “Working,” “Marrying,” “Stealing,” “Escaping,” “Dying” contrast with the horror and grief in all the stories and with irony inside a few. For instance, “Dry Rations” is harbored under the heading “Hope.” Four zeks are shifted from lethal prospecting in icy waters to the relatively easy job of clearing a road in the taiga. They are overjoyed, these three men and a teenager. The men — Ivan Ivanovich, much beaten, brutalized, and debilitated; Savelev, a former Moscow University student of philosophy; and the narrator — are politicals. The teenager Fedya, the son of a peasant woman in the Altai region, has been sentenced to ten years for having slaughtered without permission his and his mother’s only sheep, their own sheep. Teamed up by chance, they are now trying to survive on dry rations in the forest. “We were so happy we virtually stopped talking to each other.” But they fail to fulfill the norm and are about to be sent back to the hell from whence they came.

Ivan Ivanovich didn’t ask any more questions. He hanged himself that night ten paces from the cabin in the tree fork without even using a rope. I’d never seen that kind of suicide before. (Kolyma Tales, p. 68)

Shortly thereafter, Savelev swung the axe and chopped off four fingers of his left hand. The first night back in camp, the narrator read over Fedya’s shoulder what the adolescent was writing: “Mama,” Fedya wrote, “Mama, I’m all right. Mama, I’m dressed appropriately for the season . . . .” (Kolyma Tales, p. 69).

The companion to this story, “Sententious,” seems to be the only one that bears a dedication. It is given to Nadezhda Mandel’shtam whose photograph together with Shalamov adorns the second volume. She smiles broadly with a focused spark in her eyes while Shalamov, tall, lips tightly pressed, head tilted to the side, seems friendly, if pensive, looking elsewhere. The dark eyes are deep-set.

John Glad’s translation is excellent. It is not padded, not embellished, not strained. It is vigorous, simple, just right. One could argue with him here and there. But I have thrown all my bickering notes away, except one that deals with Russian zloba, an important word, yet one without an obvious equivalent. In “Sententious” Shalamov answers a question which has bearing for all the survivors of Stalin’s justice. It is central to the mode and mood of Kolyma Tales and joins the many passages that starkly speak of human condition in extremis. “What remained with me till the very end? Bitterness. And I expected this bitterness to stay with me till death” (Kolyma Tales, p. 70). Shalamov’s word is not gorech’ but zloba. An acid force, it involves not so much the head or the heart but the stomach. It is all eaten in. It is spasmodic. I cannot translate it. Therefore, I salute Glad for his decision. Yet, it really is not bitterness that Shalamov frequently sees in the survivors. In “Epitaph” several zeks sit on a Christmas night around the stove “in a sleepy, lyrical mood” and talk. A former professor still believes in a miracle whereby he might someday go home. The narrator does not share the dream:

I wouldn’t want to go back to my family. They wouldn’t understand me, they couldn’t. . . . No man should see or know the things I have seen and known.

After they all have their say, they turn to one prisoner who had remained silent, a man possessing some clout among them, respected and even somewhat feared.

“As for me,” he said in a calm, unhurried voice, “I’d like to have my arms and legs cut off and become a human stump — no arms, no legs. Then I’d be strong enough to spit in their faces for everything they’re doing to us.” (Graphite, p. 282)
At times, “they” were doing strange things. Shalamov recalls in the title story of the second volume that, according to regulations, a plywood tag was attached to the left shin of every dead body, and the prisoner’s number had to be written on it. It was forbidden to write with ink which could be washed away. Strict instructions called for the use of simple graphite pencils that proved indelible.

The practice strikes one as odd. Can there really be plans for exhumation? For immortality? For resurrection? For reburial? There are more than enough mass graves in Kolyma, into which untagged bodies have been dumped. But instructions are instructions. Theoretically speaking, all guests of the permafrost enjoy life eternal and are ready to return to us — that we might remove the tags from their left shins and find their friends and relatives. (Graphite, p. 286)

Having recorded individual cases of affection for each other among prisoners and of violence against each other, of respect and of complete indifference, Shalamov invalidates clichés about solidarity in hell:

Friendship is not born in conditions of need and trouble. Literary fairy tales tell of “difficult” conditions which are an essential element in forming any friendship, but such conditions are simply not difficult enough. (Kolyma Tales, p. 66)

When conditions are difficult enough, it is neither anger nor bitterness, perhaps, but the secret discovered by Shalamov that sustains man’s inexplicable resilience:

One of the main sensations in camp is the limitlessness of humiliation but also a feeling of consolation that always, whatever the circumstances, there is someone worse off than you. Gradation is manifold. This consolation saves you and man’s main secret is, perhaps, hidden therein. This feeling saves you and it expresses at the same time reconciliation with the irreconcilable.

(This is the opening passage of “The Washed Out Photograph,” not included by John Glad [Novyi Zhurnal, no. 111, June 1973, p. 5].)

There is a gloss to this reconciliation in a passage dealing with sui generis cathartic passivity:

Our spiritual calm, achieved by a dulling of the senses, was reminiscent of the “dungeon’s supreme freedom” and Tolstoy’s nonresistance to evil. Our spiritual calm was always guarded by our subordination to another’s will.

We had long since given up planning our lives more than a day in advance. (Kolyma Tales, pp. 63–64)

Varlam Shalamov was born in Vologda in 1907. While a law student at the University of Moscow in 1929, he was arrested for reasons unknown and sentenced to five years of forced labor in Solovki. He must have returned to Moscow by the mid-1930s because the Concise Literary Encyclopedia, honoring him with a warped and cryptic thirteen-line entry (minus a short bibliography) written in the standard language for survivors of “unlawful repression,” lists three of his articles of literary criticism as having been published in 1936 and 1937. He was arrested for the second time in 1937 and sentenced to five years in the Kolyma camps for reasons once more unknown. At the end of the term, the sentence was extended, as the expression goes. In 1943, right there on the spot, he was sentenced, upon someone’s betrayal, to an additional ten-year stretch for calling Bunin a classic Russian writer. These happenings account for his seventeen years in Kolyma. It seems he was not permitted to return to Moscow much before 1956. His
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Poems, at any rate, began to be published here and there in literary journals in 1957. Four small collections of his poetry were published between 1961 and 1972. In them one finds poems about poems — pensive, simple, conventional.

Не спеши увеличить запас
Занесенных в тетрадь впечатлений,
Не лови ускользающих фраз
И пустых не веди наблюдений.

(День Поезии [Moscow, 1966], p. 148)

Don't hurry to augment the stock
Of your impressions written in a notebook,
Do not try to catch the fleeting phrases,
Do not collect the hollow things you see.

Boris Pasternak surely agreed. Shalamov had also said this:

Пoesия — дело седых,
Не мальчиков, а мужчин,
Израненных, немолодых,
Покрытых рубцами морщин.
Сто жизней проживших сполна,
Не мальчиков, а мужчин,
Поднявшихся с самого дня
К заоблачной дали вершин . . .

(День Поезии [Moscow, 1963], p. 119)

Poetry is the business of men with grey hair,
Not of boys but of men,
Wounded all over, un-young,
Wrinkled and covered with scars.
Having lived hundred lives in full
Not of boys, but of men, who
Rose from the very bottom
To heights that ascend above clouds . . .

Old-fashioned, properly metered, rhymed, and in a lofty lexical key to boot, these poems do not translate well. Just the same, they are part of Shalamov's precious oeuvre, for better or for worse. With recurring imagery derived from prospecting gold, with lyricism turned toward trees, beasts, sky, they show that side of Shalamov that craves peace.

И можно порвать черновик
И легкой походкой зверя
Уйти от могущества книг,
В могущество леса поверя.

(День Поезии [Moscow, 1966], p. 149)

It is possible to tear up the rough draft,
To abandon the power of books,
To go away with the light pace of a beast
In order to take to the power of forests.

It is hard to fathom what these poems mean to the Soviet readers who know nothing of Shalamov's life and work.

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