ELENA MIKHAILIK

DOSTOEVSKY AND SHALAMOV: ORPHEUS AND PLUTO

“When I’ve fallen to the very bottom I heard a tap from below.”

Stanislav E. Lez

In Varlam Shalamov’s story “The Funeral Oration” two political prisoners heaving stone in a Kolyma goldmine compare their lot to that of the Decembrists sent to the Siberian mines more than a century ago.

I told Fediakhin about the quotas the Decembrists were assigned at Nerchinsk according to the “Memories of Maria Volkonskaia,” – three poods\(^1\) of ore per worker.

– And how much would our quota weigh, Vasilii Petrovich? – Fediakhin asked.

I did a calculation – it was about eight hundred poods.

– Well, Vasilii Petrovich, look how the quotas have gone up. . . .\(^2\)

If one was to choose a single quotation that defines Shalamov’s manifold relationship with Dostoevsky it will probably be this one, the passage where Dostoevsky’s name is not even mentioned. And yet it neatly captures the nature of the distance between the House of the Dead, Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov, and the Kolyma Tales. The production quotas have been increased 266.666666666(6) times.

This radical change in the limits of human experience sets the framework within which Shalamov sees Dostoevsky’s philosophical ideas and creative devices.

Here I would like to say that in my opinion the whole scope of Shalamov’s Dostoevsky connections cannot be covered within the boundaries of a single article or even a series of articles. Therefore the aim of this article is to define several interesting aspects of the problem and tentatively suggest the ways, along which those aspects might be explored.

When beginning the Kolyma Tales Varlam Shalamov set for himself two ambitious tasks:

- to create a comprehensive literary rendition of the prison camp reality;

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1. A pood is an ancient Russian weight measure, about 16.38 kg.
2. V. Shalamov, The Kolyma Tales in two volumes (Moscow: Nashe nasledie, 1992), p. 354. All the Russian texts in the article are given in my translation unless otherwise specified.
to create a new medium, capable of projecting the author's experience upon the consciousness of the reader, thus endowing a literary text with an authentic intensity of the first reality.³

Within the limits of conventional literature both those tasks were by definition impossible.

Joseph Brodsky has once commented that a true witness of a death has to be its victim. Consequently any account of a death must be either untrue or incomplete for the narration would have to end before life ceases. Moreover, if there was a way to describe death from a viewpoint of one experiencing it, it would remain incomprehensible, for the narrator and his still living addressees would have no common language, no common reference points. Thus death cannot be fully shared or even represented. And if that is true for a normal individual death, it must hold true also for the wholesale destruction and degradation that was a prison camp, where inmates (at least in Shalamov's personal view) became completely divorced from humanity long before their physical death occurred.

So in order to reproduce his object - the prison camp universe - properly, Shalamov had to find a way to convert the language of an abyss into the language of the living, to establish a translation protocol that would work within the text, making it essentially bilingual.

As to the creation of the reality-analogue prose, that task seemed no less daunting. In order to maintain a sensorial load comparable to that of real life, Shalamov had to construct a text of an extraordinary semantic density. Yet such a text would not have been viable as a message carrier, for once the semantic volume reaches a certain saturation point, connections and associations begin to originate spontaneously, often without the author's will or knowledge. Once begun, the process goes on like an avalanche, generating the ever-increasing number of possible meanings and tearing the fabric of the text apart.

So both Shalamov's chosen theme and his declared literary approach presented him with nearly unsurmountable obstacles.

Yet Shalamov was not exactly sailing in uncharted waters. For within Russian culture there already existed a tradition of exploring both the boundaries of a human soul and the boundaries of text. In creating his "New Prose" (the name Shalamov coined for his literary experiment), Shalamov could not have ignored that tradition. (Actually, the label "New Prose" in itself implies a well-developed and complex relationship with the "Old Prose"). And in doing so Shalamov had to define his position towards the most powerful and influential voice in that tradition - Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky.

The author who made generations of readers confront the abyss of the everyday life could not have failed to impact on the author who wrote about the everyday life of an abyss.

And indeed Shalamov's notebooks show that he took a singular interest in Dostoevsky. The only other figure that had a similar importance for Shalamov was Boris Pasternak. Shalamov was highly aware of both the minutiae of Dosto-