

Leona Toker

On Robert Chandler's Translations of Varlam Shalamov's Poetry

The fame of Varlam Shalamov (1907—1982) is mainly based on his prose works, presenting a philosophically saturated artistic testimony to labor camps in Vishera and Kolyma. Yet, as it usually happens with writers who attain a canonical status, a closer look is these days being taken at his less well-known work, namely his poetry. In fact, it was his poetry that first received literary recognition, even if from the audience of one — that one being Boris Pasternak,¹ who was among Shalamov's favorite poets, along with Blok and Mandelstam. In both his poetry and his prose, Shalamov considered himself a scion, an heir, of the modernist writers of the Russian Silver Age.²

Shalamov did not live to see the publication of his *Kolyma Tales* in Russia, but five thin collections of his poetry did come out in Moscow in his lifetime. Only the initiated could recognize some of their landscapes as those of Kolyma. Moreover, their rhythms and rhymes sounded anachronistic against the background of the poetry of Evtushenko's generation. Tellingly, the avant-garde poet Gennadii Aigi, an admirer of Shalamov's prose and instrumental in smuggling large chunks of it to Mikhail Geller³ (who published

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¹ After Stalin's death, still from Kolyma Shalamov had sent a blue notebook with his poems to Pasternak and received an encouraging reply; this was the beginning of an inspiring exchange between them. See Варлам Шаламов, «Переписка с Б. А. Пастернаком», *Юность* # 10 (1988): 54—67.

² See also Валерий Есипов: «художественное дитя 1920-х годов; [Шаламов] был законсервирован почти на четверть века (с небольшим перерывом) в лагерной неволе и с новой силой восстал в другое время, где оказался не ко двору...». *Шаламов*. Москва: Молодая гвардия, 2012, с. 95.

³ Private conversation with G. Aigi during his visit in Jerusalem.

the collection in London in 1978), treated Shalamov's insistence on also being a poet as a weakness to be forgiven.⁴

A selection of Shalamov's poems in English translation by Robert Chandler is soon to appear in an anthology of Russian poetry.⁵ I am grateful to Robert Chandler for a preview of that section of the anthology as well as for our dialogue which has provided a basis and a stimulus for this paper.

Shalamov used rhyme not just as a mnemonic aid but also, and mainly, as an instrument of search. I believe that he treated polysemy in the same way. He wanted to go in directions in which language would lead him rather than trying to yoke language to intended effects. Polysemy, multiple suggestiveness, and a delicate combination of overdetermination and indeterminacy, are among the prominent features of his poetry. This, along with rhyme and meter, presents the translator with difficult choices, while also imposing on him a responsibility for the consequences of his choices.

Robert Chandler's translations are foretold, as it were, by Shalamov's remark, in his 1964 essay "Mutilplication Table for Young Poets," that "there are poet-translators, who write good poems of their own on the material of the poems in the original."⁶ I shall discuss here three types of the translator's influence on the reader response to Shalamov's poems: (1) the translator sometimes acts as an interpreter of particularly mysterious suggestions in the poem, his insight limiting his readers' interpretive options while enhancing the affect that is singled out; (2) in cases of what I would call, oxymoronicallly, "clear ambiguity," the translator can deliberately choose one interpretive option among two or more present ones; in such cases the reader's interpretive options are also limited, and a specific affect is enhanced, not by addition but by subtraction; and (3) the translation, forming a poetic achievement in its own right, sheds a new light on the text in a way that does not reduce

⁴ Геннадий Айги, «Один вечер с Шаламовым», *ВРХД* # 137 (1987): 156—61.

⁵ RUSSIAN POETRY FROM PUSHKIN TO BRODSKY, ed. Robert Chandler, Boris Dralyuk and Irina Mashinski (Penguin Classics, forthcoming in November 2014).

⁶ «Таблица умножения для молодых поэтов», *Собрание сочинений в четырех томах*, под ред. И. Сиротинской (Москва: Художественная литература / Вагриус, 1998), IV: 298. Unless otherwise indicated the translations are mine.

but, on the contrary, enriches its layers of meaning, stimulating further thought in the reader, increasing the number of the reader's interpretive options — creating an intersubjective experience that extends, sometimes in new directions, the author's and the translator's own days and hours of dwelling on this particular knot of poetic sense and sound.

(1) A case of translation as interpretation, or one based on an interpretation, can be found in Chandler's translation of Shalamov's poem from the collection "Golden Mountains" («Златые горы»):

Так вот и хожу —
На вершок от смерти.
Жизнь свою ношу
В синеньком конверте.

То письмо давно,
С осени, готово.
В нём всего одно
Маленькое слово.

Может, потому
И не умираю,
Что тому письму
Адреса не знаю.⁷

At a conference in Prague, in an aside from the main text of his paper, Robert Chandler told his wrapt audience how this poem obsessed him for days. After the discussion that followed, Chandler wrote: "What is this 'little word' remains a mystery for the reader. For a long time it seemed to me that it is something like 'Enough!' and that the letter is addressed to God, but it is not to be

⁷ *Собрание сочинений в четырех томах*, III: 146. The text is reproduced this way also on the site <http://Shalamov.ru> but numerous other sites have the word "всегда" instead of "всего" in the third line of the second stanza. This version enhances the allegorical meaning of the letter. The poem is not dated precisely, but grouped among the materials of «Колымские тетради» that, judging by I. Sirotinskaia's note to vol. 3 of the 1998 four-volume collection of Shalamov's works (p. 448), were composed in the period of 1937—1956.

ruled out that this word refers to the comprehensive Logos which Osip Mandelstam 'wished to say' but 'had forgotten.'"⁸

Chandler's rendering of the last quatrain asserts the more concrete of the two interpretations, his first. The translation goes as follows:

And so I keep going;
death remains close;
I carry my life
in a blue envelope.

The letter's been ready
ever since autumn:
just one little word —
it couldn't be shorter.

But I still don't know
where I should send it;
if I had the address,
my life might have ended.

The speaker's not knowing the address, which can be read as a metonymy for "addressee," may be a throwback to his loss of the religious beliefs of his adolescence and his pride in never having turned to God for help in the toughest spots of Kolyma. Chandler hears the loss of God in the poem as the reason for the continued dragging on of the speaker's life: there is no one he knows whom he might ask to end it. This interpretation is probably inspired by hindsight: the knowledge about Shalamov's sad last years, blind, deaf and very ill, in the invalid old-age home. And yet it would be possible to read the last quatrain of the poem as referring to unfinished business: the speaker is not dying because he is still on a quest, still looking for the addressee of the letter, still having something, albeit small, to say. On second thought, however, it is

⁸ «Что это за 'маленькое слово' — для читателя остается тайной. Мне самому долго казалось, что это слово — что-то вроде 'Хватит!' и что письмо адресовано Богу, но не исключено, что оно — тот самый всеобъемлющий Логос, то самое слово, что Осип Мандельштам 'хотел сказать,' но 'позабыл.'» Роберт Чандлер, «"Колымой он проверяет культуру": Шаламов как поэт», forthcoming.

not impossible to interpret Chandler's translation this way as well. "Poetry," Shalamov wrote, "needs precision rather than clarity."⁹

(2) The ambivalence of Shalamov's references to God and religion is disambiguated by the translator, without a similarly striking interpretive move, also in a poem about memory, from the collection "The Postman's Bag" («Сумка почтальона»):

Память скрыла столько зла
Без числа и меры.
Всю-то жизнь лгала, лгала.
Нет ей больше веры.

Может, нет ни городов,
Ни садов зеленых,
И жива лишь сила льдов
И морей соленых.

Может, мир — одни снега,
Звездная дорога.
Может, мир — одна тайга
В пониманье Бога.¹⁰

This poem is particularly disconcerting when coming from the author of prose fiction that doubles as testimony: has memory lied, covered things? Has it highlighted illusory cities and green gardens, covering up their precariousness in reality? The last two lines of the poem are, in my reading, ambiguous. Do they stand for subjective or objective Genitive — as in the Latin *amor matris* — mother's love for the child or child's love for the mother? Does God understand the world as just taiga, with its jungle laws; is it then man's rebellious task to write a different text under the stars on the page-white blank of the snowy expanse? Or does the world figure as just monotonous taiga when one attempts to understand God? Some of these questions are muted in Chandler's translation:

Memory has veiled
much evil;

⁹ «Поэзии нужна точность, а не ясность». «Таблица умножения», 296.

¹⁰ *Собрание сочинений в четырех томах*, III: 55.

her long lies leave nothing
to believe.

There may be no cities
or green gardens;
only fields of ice
and salty oceans.

The world may be pure snow,
a starry road;
just northern forest
in the mind of God.

Chandler opts for one of the above possibilities: “in the mind of God,” the world may be just “northern forest.” Moreover, his replacing the full stop by a semicolon after the second line of the last quatrain removes the possibility of a contrast between man’s seeing the world as a snowy expanse, across which one may be led by the stars, and God’s seeing it as the forest, framed by the snow below and the stars above and possibly traversed by a lonely road. In this melancholy version, snow is purified blankness that encroaches on memory — not Terra Incognita to be explored or written on but a kind of divine dementia, a white mass for which the fate of man holds no significance.

(3) The function of translation as a stage in the collective quest for the implications of the poem can be demonstrated on the basis of Chandler’s fascination with Shalamov’s relatively early and rather long 1955 poem *Avvakum in Pustozjorsk* (“He в брѣвнѣх, а в ребѣрах / Церковь моя”), whose speaker is the martyred old believer who can be seen as a political dissident.¹¹ Shalamov’s *Avvakum* presents his dissidence as a matter of freedom:

¹¹ In her paper “Poetry and Politics: An Allegorical Reading of V. T. Shalamov’s Poem «Аввакум в Пустозерске»” forthcoming on <http://shalamov.ru>, which, among other things, explains why Shalamov’s treatment of *Avvakum* is non-canonical, Josefina Lunblad’s suggests (14) that the number of the poem’s stanzas, 37, is an allusion to 1937. Some internet versions add a 38th stanza, which might as well refer to the murderous winter of 1938 in Kolyma, and which constitutes a kind of retraction from both the rhythm and the conclusive statement of the shorter version.

Наш спор — не духовный
О возрасте книг.
Наш спор — не церковный
О пользе вериг.

Наш спор — о свободе,
О праве дышать,
О воле Господней
Вязать и решать.¹²

Chandler's first version of the latter quatrain was as follows:

Our dispute is of freedom,
and the right to breathe,
about the Lord's free will
to act as he please.

The notion of the freedom of the will is here transferred from man to God, as in "thy will be done." Yet the last line of this preliminary version, "to act as he please," with its emphasis on God's decision-making (О воле Господней . . . решать) does not render the motif of "religio" as, according to some versions of its etymology, binding (вязать): binding man to God, man to community, the present to the traditions of the past. Chandler therefore replaces the blanket "act" by the more meaningful and image-bearing "bind." Among other things (such as a somewhat subversive reminiscence of Maximilian Voloshin's poem about Avvakum, where the "binding" is used in the context of Avvakum's claim — and his wife's denial — that family binds him and keeps him from the service of the faith), the verb "bind" establishes a contrast between free will and binding or the helplessness of being bound:

Our dispute is of freedom,
and the right to breathe —
about our Lord's free will
to bind as he please.

¹² *Собрание сочинений в четырех томах*, III: 185—89.

This translation may lead to further thought. The verb to “bind” is also used in the English traditional reference to the Old Testament story of “akedat Itzhak” — “the binding of Isaac,” a typological anticipation of Golgotha. Avvakum’s martyrdom in Pus- tozyorsk is thus not so much crucifixion as the immolation of the beloved son, for the sake of the metaphysical binding by a creed. The Russian perfective verb решить, however, means not only “to decide”, exercising free will, but also “to kill” (as in порешить), the two meanings being connected by the connotations of finality of “decision” as “verdict.”¹³ The finality of individual sacrifice dis- solves into the serial killing of the imperfective form of решать. In the English translation, the verb “bind” can, all by itself, be heard as loaded with the memories of immolation. The freedom of man, as elementary as the right to breathe, is also the right both to ask that the bitter cup pass him by and to concede that this be accord- ing to God’s free will rather than his own.

A translator’s work involves a creative obsession with the mystery of poetic experience but also a problem-solving endeavor. In an essay entitled “Intellectual Effort” the French philosopher Henri Bergson presents his theory of creative invention, using Théodule-Armand Ribot’s *L’Imagination créatrice* as a springboard:

As Ribot has observed, to create imaginatively is to solve a problem. Now, what other way is there of solving a prob- lem than by supposing it already solved? We set before ourselves, as Ribot says, a certain ideal, that is, we present to our mind a certain effect as already obtained, and then we seek to discover by what composition of elements we can obtain it. We pass at a bound to the complete result, to the end we want to realize, and the whole effort of invention is then an attempt to fill up the gap over which we have leapt, and to reach anew that same end by following, this time, the continuous thread of the means which will realize it. But how is it possible to know the end without the means, the whole without the parts? We cannot know this end or whole under the form of an image, because an image which would

¹³ As Elena Tolstaja mentioned in response to this paper at the conference in honor of I. Z. Serman, решать may also mean the opposite — a decision to release a prisoner.

make us see the effect being brought about would show us, within the image itself, the means by which the effect is obtained. It must necessarily be assumed, then, that the whole is presented as a scheme, and that invention consists precisely in converting the scheme into image.¹⁴

The gradual approximation of the translation to one's idea of the knot of poetic meaning and affect may likewise be comparable to a writer's trying to transcribe what, in the words of Vladimir Nabokov, "seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension"; one's job being "to take down as much of it as [one] can make out and as precisely as [one is] humanly able to."¹⁵ If this is, indeed, the case, then the translator's work-process is an extension, a shoot outgrowth, of the process of the author's own composition.

One can find a reprise of the theme of Avvakum in Shalamov's very late poem, dated 1981 and coming out in vol. 7 of his Collected Works:

Чтоб не быть самосожженцем,
Или Аввакумом,
Я усилием последним
Прогоняю думы.

Я на бреющем полете
Землю облетаю,
И тщеты земной заботы
Я теперь не знаю.

Not to set fire to myself
or be burnt like Avvakum,
I do what I can
to chase away thought.

¹⁴ Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy*. Trans. H. Wildon Carr. Ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Michael Kolkman. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 170. For the resonance between this thought of Bergson and the creative methods of Joyce and Nabokov, see Leona Toker, "Minds Meeting: Bergson, Joyce, Nabokov, and the Aesthetics of the Subliminal." In *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*, ed. Paul Ardoin, S. E. Gontarski, and Laci Mattison. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, pp. 194–212.

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 69.

I now circle the earth
in low-level flight,
life's burdens and vanities
far out of sight.

In his last years Shalamov no longer wished to be a sacrificial lamb, a dissident burnt at the stake,¹⁶ or a moth attracted to the fire of tormenting thoughts (as in Shalamov's poem "Мотыльки-самосожженцы"¹⁷), or a Jan Palach, a different самосожженец, one who burned himself in protest against the Russian tanks crushing the Prague spring in the fateful 1968.¹⁸ Shalamov's speaker had done and suffered enough to be exempt from the vanities of earthly tasks. With the thoughts about past acts of commission or omission chased away, his imagination is free to orbit, like a satellite, around his vision of the earth — in a space-age version of coasting voyage. This image contrasts with the omniscient gaze of God; and the polar opposite to divine omnipotence is evoked in the adjective "shaving" (бреющий, translated as "low-level"), bringing in the memory of a hygienic procedure performed on the helpless invalid. And yet the "shaving" flight may also be read as a skimming flight: perhaps the snows of taiga, the blank patches of the memory, can still be turned into poetic material in their own right.

¹⁶ For two different perspectives of Shalamov's attitude to the dissident movement in the Soviet Union as well as his problematic 1972 letter to *Литературная газета*, see Leona Toker, "Samizdat and the Problem of Authorial Control: The Case of Varlam Shalamov," *Poetics Today* 29.4 (2008): 735—58, and Валерий Есипов, *Шаламов*, pp. 265—309.

¹⁷ Collection «Златые горы», *Собрание сочинений в четырех томах*, III: 157.

¹⁸ «Западному миру мы нужны только в качестве горящих факелов... А горел Ян Палах — все кричали: "Он сам хотел, не трогайте его, не нарушайте его волю"» (Варлам Шаламов, «Записные книжки», *Новая книга: Воспоминания, записные книжки, переписка, следственные дела*, под ред. И. Сиrotинской, Москва: Эксмо, 2004, p. 340).