

Title: Too Real for Realism: Compromised Agency in Shalamov's Kolyma Tales  
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Abstract:

In my paper I will explore the presence of human agency within Varlam Shalamov's Kolyma Tales. While the ethical challenges faced by writers of the Gulag has been well-documented, far less critical attention has been paid to the artistic strategies these authors employed to reshape preexisting literary forms and structures to better capture the fundamentally altered reality of camp life. My paper is built upon, and explores the repercussion of, one basic idea: the Gulag prison system radically transformed the relationship of prison inmates to the external world. Already deprived of their freedom, prisoners were forced to operate within a system that rigidly controlled their access to resources, future possibilities, and even the right to end their own life. Given the realities of the Gulag, are the ideological assumptions and stylistic norms that shape conventional "realist" literature still applicable? While each Gulag author responded to this artistic challenge in a variety of ways, I will restrict myself to one single author, Varlam Shalamov, and closely analyze a selection of short stories drawn from Kolyma Tales. While the profound effects of prisoners' compromised agency manifest at both a character and narrative level, I will restrict myself to the latter; paying special attention to narratorial style, character presentation, the use of imagery, as well as the conspicuous absence of narrative arcs. The new possibilities and restrictions that appear in Shalamov's work are not simply the result of gradually changing perceptions of social dynamics or aesthetic innovation, but instead represent a dramatic shift elicited by concrete physical conditions. Shalamov's rejection of many of the tenets of "realist" fiction does not imply a rejection of reality. Rather, it suggests that mimetic fidelity depends upon the use of artistic techniques as fluid and dynamic as the ever-changing world from which they were drawn.