

Title: Testimony Trouble: To Die As a Poet and To Write As a Witness in Varlam Shalamov's "Cherry Brandy"

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Abstract:

Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* blur the distinctions between fiction and fact yet have often been interpreted as witness literature. Several of these short stories subvert the generic expectations of witness literature, and Leona Toker argues that they, like many works of Gulag literature, are "bifunctional" texts that can be read for both their testimonial and aesthetic qualities. "Cherry Brandy" is a striking example of such "bifunctionality": it narrates the death of Mandel'shtam in a Vladivostok transit camp in 1938, an event that is factual yet fictional since Shalamov was not a witness to this event. My paper explores the destabilization of testimony in this short story through the tension between the representation of the death of the other, in this case a famous poet, and the act of the writing subject, the witness who is also the author. Following Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, which I have paraphrased for my title as "Testimony Trouble," I argue that the status of the witness, like gender, is performative. In Shalamov's prose in general, and in this short story in particular, there is no stable identity as a witness but rather a combination of textual acts that shape the reception of them as literary testimony. When witnessing is seen as an act of performativity, rather than as only an ethical imperative, we can approach the entitlement claims made by authors who, although witnesses to and survivors of atrocities in the Gulag themselves, represent the experiences of an other that cannot write his own story. When the "true" witness, according to Giorgio Agamben, cannot speak, it becomes the imperative of someone else to speak in his place; what kind of witness does Shalamov perform in "Cherry Brandy" and how does this text represent not only an inaccessible death but also the death of a poet?