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“Banality of Evil,” Mimicry, and the Soviet Subject: Varlam Shalamov and Hannah Arendt

Svetlana Boym

One of the most frequently quoted statements about art after the Holocaust is Theodor Adorno’s comment, “I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” What is less commonly known is that Adorno continues his reflection in a paradoxical manner. Literature, he insists, “must resist this verdict. For it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice without immediately being betrayed by it.” Varlam Shalamov, a survivor and a brilliant and unflinching storyteller of the Kolyma camps, claims a similar paradoxical imperative for art after the gulag: “In the new prose—after Hiroshima, after Auschwitz and Kolyma, after wars and revolutions—everything didactic should be rejected. Art does not have a right to preach. Art neither ennobles nor improves people. Art is a way of life, not a way of understanding life [poznaniia zhizni]. In other words, it is a document . . . a prose lived through like a document.”

But what kind of literature can be “lived through like a document”? Does this emphasis on art have something to do with the grand role of literature in Russian culture, the role of the unofficial cultural legislator, or does the practice of imagination become a “weapon of the weak” that teaches lessons in noncollaboration and tactics of survival?

There is something radically inassimilable in Shalamov’s prose: it confronts the experience of extremity but does not offer redemption through labor, suffering, religion, or national belonging. It proceeds through precise descriptions of life in the gulag, paying close attention to the historical facts, yet presents no history of the camps. The narrators of the Kolymskie razzkazy (Kolyma tales) often resort to apparent mimicry of Soviet discourse and the technologies of the gulag, but only to challenge any coherent conception of “Soviet subjectivity,” whether enthusiastic or defiant. Instead of performing ideology, Shalamov’s documentary prose exposes the breaking points of cultural myths that reveal possibilities for paradigm shifts.

3. Shalamov’s biography offers a tragic and ironic coda to the fate of the Russian and Soviet intelligentsia. Shalamov wrote that his name is related to two words—shalost’ (whim, frivolity, play) and shaman; whether etymologically correct or not, this was his own poetic reinvention of his origins. The son of an Orthodox priest from Vologda in the Russian north, Shalamov rebelled against his father and, disappointed from an early age in all forms of institutional religion, chose literature instead. In February 1929 he was arrested at the underground printing press that printed the full text of Vladimir Lenin’s testament criticizing Iosif Stalin. Shalamov received a five-year term for “KRTD,” the abbreviation for

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The experience of Auschwitz profoundly influenced western political philosophy of the twentieth century, but the experience of the Soviet gulag did not. The persistent difficulty in coming to terms with the gulag, besides complex historical and political circumstances, lies in large part in its dual image: it was represented as both paradise and hell, an ideal socialist construction site and a slave labor camp. During the gulag’s thirty-year existence, artists, writers, and filmmakers from the Soviet Union and abroad were recruited by Stalin’s state to celebrate the utopian land “where men breathe most freely.” All the gates and watchtowers of the gulag zone, where an unknown number of millions of prisoners perished, were decorated with the refrain from a popular song: “Labor is a matter of honor, glory, courage, and heroism.” Socialist realist art mass-reproduced a hypnotic simulacrum of the ideal Soviet territory through Soviet musicals, the twins of Broadway and Hollywood, which still enjoy frequent reruns on state television in contemporary Russia. This seductive, euphoric, and entertaining art helped to distract from and domesticate the powerful teleology of revolutionary violence that justified sacrifice for the sake of paradise on earth. Thus not only does the history of

“counter-revolutionary Trotskyist activity” covered under article 58. Later Shalamov would say that the “T” in this abbreviation stood for Lev Trotsky and tribunal as well as death sentence. (This letter “T” is a key cipher [for Trotskyist] in his story “Lida.”) He is rearrested repeatedly in 1937, 1938, and then again in 1943. One of the reasons for Shalamov’s later arrest was his having affirmed that the émigré writer Ivan Bunin had indeed received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Once again, as in the case of Lenin’s testament, Shalamov was accused of “anti-Soviet propaganda” for stating the factual or documentary truth. See E[vgenii] A. Shklovskii, Varlam Shalamov (Moscow, 1991).


5. The lines come from the popular “Pesnia o rodine” (Song of our motherland), music by Isaak Dunaevskii, lyrics by Vassili Lebedev-Kumach.
the gulag conjure up memories of terror, it also tampers with one of the most powerful utopian dreams of the twentieth century that extended far beyond the Soviet border. Legitimation of the gulag in Soviet life proved to be stranger than fiction; it estranged the commonsense perceptions and everyday experiences of ordinary citizens. They could only be “rehabilitated” through a double estrangement—from actual Soviet everyday life and from the official state fiction that supplanted it. Shalamov, like Primo Levi and Hannah Arendt, speaks repeatedly about “changed scales” for understanding the camp experience that apply to all human emotions and relationships—friendship, love, decency, freedom—and require new modes of understanding.

Shalamov’s gulag stories confront the reader with their “inhumanity,” and yet the author himself claimed that “there is nothing in Kolyma Tales that does not involve the overcoming of evil and the triumph of good—if we understand it in the plane of art.” To understand this paradoxical affirmation of humanism via negativa, one has to remember that Shalamov’s subject matter is not universal human nature but “the relationship between the individual and the state.” I propose to read the Shalamov stories not only in the Soviet context but also as a broader twentieth-century philosophical and literary reflection on totalitarianism and the confrontation with terror. Of particular interest is the work of Hannah Arendt (not only The Origins of Totalitarianism, 1951, but also The Life of the Mind, 1978; Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, 1982; and Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954, 2005). Such a juxtaposition exposes a mutually illuminating relationship between art and politics: Arendt’s political theory has many aesthetic and existential dimensions; in fact, at moments of extreme lucidity she speaks in parables and poems, using examples from Franz Kafka, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Osip Mandel’shtam. Shalamov’s literary work uses the same practices of estrangement, laying bare some common places in the political and historical narrative.

My approach comes partially in response to the situation in the early twenty-first century, which demands a rethinking of the political and specifically of the Soviet political legacy that persists in the practices of everyday life and in the new political and everyday rhetoric in Russia. Of course, this discussion has to move beyond the paradigm of the Cold War, but also beyond the scholarly and political context of the 1990s, which was characterized by the new access to the multiple archives and an important revisionary critique of the totalizing approach to Soviet history and of the implied “liberal subjectivity” of western and Russian historians of the previous decades. In the contemporary Russian situation, the excess of liberal subjectivity is hardly a threat, nor does it determine current historical paradigms. Rather the situation is characterized by the closing of archives and the rewriting of history books, by the censorship and self-censorship that is imposed on most political debate. A contemporary approach to Soviet and post-Soviet everyday practices requires an inter-

disciplinary rethinking at the crossroads of political theory, anthropology, history, and literature.

In her last project, *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt proposed a distinction between “professional thinking,” which emphasizes logical coherence of the scientific disciplines, and “passionate thinking,” which explores the limits of knowledge and engages in a double movement between different modes of knowledge and between theory and experience.8 Passionate thinking is an oxymoron that questions the emphasis on pathos, empathy, or acceptance of suffering, on the one hand, and yet does not equate thinking with scientific rationality, on the other. I believe that the understanding of the camp experience requires this kind of passionate thinking that is at once interdisciplinary and rigorous. A close reading of Shalamov’s stories does not merely reveal, in a good old formalist fashion, “how a literary work is made”; it also shows how ideology is made and what forms of communication corrode or elude it. My reading will pay attention to the different ways of working through the Soviet clichés and “de-aestheticizing evil,” to the tactics of intonation and the uses of blemish, human error, mimicry, and minor gift exchanges that mark unofficial solidarities and elective affinities.9

**Ethics of Intonation and Human Error**

In one of Shalamov’s few letters to Iurii Lotman, he writes about his desire to work on poetic intonation, a “completely underdeveloped topic in our literary studies.”10 At first there seems to be a degree of incommensurability between Shalamov’s Kolyma world and his concern for “purity of tone.” Intonation acquired great importance in the time of the terror. The writer, scholar, and student of formalism, Lidiia Ginzburg, recorded in her diary that people’s degree of collaboration with and affirmation of Stalinism could not be found in the explicit pronouncements: “In the years of Stalin’s terror the ‘untruth’ resided, not in the general ideological worldview, but often in the intonation, in the public display of one’s agreement with the regime.”11 The practice of speaking in ideological

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9. Shalamov wrote that the “celebration of Stalinism is the aestheticization of evil [*estetizatsiia zla*]” in *Vospominaniia, zapisnye knizhki, perepiska, sledstvennye dela* (Moscow, 2004), 309.


clichés (in public and in private, including in personal diaries) persisted through the Soviet regime and beyond as a necessary incantatory practice; as with medieval icon painting, its interpretation depended on minor iconographic/intonational variations.12 These minor variations revealed the degree of collaboration with the regime, or, in Arendtian terms, of complicity with banal evil.

Right after Iosif Stalin’s death, at the dawn of the Khrushchev era, Soviet “thick magazines” were engaged in a passionate debate—not about the experience of the gulag or justice for the victims—but about “sincerity” of tone. The very term thaw, introduced by the writer Il’ia Erenburg, was connected to this discussion. In cultural politics Nikita Khrushchev’s thaw was ushered in by a gentle revolution that did not turn the structure of society or Soviet discourse upside down but did affect its syntax and intonation. The unofficial (but never anti-official) thaw culture of poets and bards depended on the new intonation, which functioned like a password to an alternative network of Soviet friendships. The revolution in intonation—a rebellion in a minor key—was the first step in the Soviet unwritten contract with the state. Tone, like gesture, represented an invisible notation, unreadable to multiple “well-wishers” and informants, that could nevertheless serve as invisible glue to seal the imperfect informal networks of the Soviet time.

In his Kolyma Tales Shalamov seeks an uncompromising purity of tone that is linked to what Arendt called “the dignity of the defeated”—something that remains between the lines but shapes them like the prisoners’ tracks in the Kolyma snow.13 Shalamov’s intonation is not the “sincere tone” and light touch of the thaw but a particular authorial tool that threatens the practices of Soviet mimicry. Repetitions in Shalamov do not perform ideology but open up the dimension of difference and the space for independent judging and imagination.

Intonation complicates the readability of the stories but also gives insight into the complexity of the gulag system of communication that is reflected in many documents. Purity of tone does not mean monologism or authorial omniscience but an aesthetic and ethical dissent against what Shalamov calls the “banalization” (oposhlenie) of the camp experience. To make the reader understand what it is like to return from “the hell of Kolyma,” Shalamov fights against what he perceives to be the clichés of the Russian humanist tradition that teach acceptance of suffering and authoritarian morality: “Russian humanist writers of the second half of the nineteenth century carry a great sin in their soul [nesut na dushe velikiy

12. By the late Brezhnev era, irony and doublespeak that relied on clichés were superseded by the stiob discourse that used ersatz irony and a different intonation. On the rhetoric of stiob and the legacy of the Soviet heritage in contemporary Russian culture, see Svetlana Boym, The Future of Nostalgia (New York, 2001), 154–56.

13. This concept is fundamental for Arendt and occurs in one of the epigraphs to her unfinished project “On Judging.” It is discussed in Ronald Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on Judgment: Interpretive Essay,” in Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy (Chicago, 1982), 151, and in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World (New Haven, 1982), 533.
grekh], for the human blood shed in their name [pod ikh znamenem] in the twentieth century. All terrorists were Tolstoyan and vegetarian, all fanatics were the students of Russian humanists.”

Harsh as this verdict might appear, it is important to understand that Shalamov’s reading focuses less on Lev Tolstoi’s literary works than on his cultural mythology text, shaped largely by his prophetic late writing, the Soviet canon of socialist realism, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s appropriation of Tolstoi. In Shalamov’s view, any kind of cliché and the discourse on the historic necessity of violence betray the “corpses of Kolyma.” This issue comes up directly in the striking dialogue between Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn recorded in Shalamov’s notebooks—a dialogue worthy of Fedor Dostoevskii’s pen. In their conversations the two writers touch upon religion and spirituality, camp labor, faith, integrity, Russia and the west, Thomas Jefferson, Voltaire, and the American book market, but it is the issue of the “banalization” of the camp experience that becomes crucial in Shalamov’s final break with Solzhenitsyn. In the same entry in his notebooks Shalamov records that Solzhenitsyn knew that he (Shalamov) considered him to be a “polisher of reality.” At the end, the writer of the Kolyma Tales cannot forgive the epic author of the Gulag Archipelago and other works of historical prose for “the impurity of tone that is not so much an aesthetic as an ethical issue.”

16. In his notebooks Shalamov recounts several conversations with Solzhenitsyn, using only the initial “S” rather than identifying him using his full name. Consider, for example, the following account of “S” teaching a less successful Shalamov the way to publish his work abroad—an account that comes from Shalamov’s notebooks:

For America—said my new acquaintance quickly and instructively—the hero must be religious. They even have a law about this, so that no American publisher will take a story in translation where the hero is an atheist or simply a skeptic or a man of doubts.

—And what about Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence?

—Well, but this was a long time ago . . . Now I looked through your stories and haven’t found a single story where the hero was a man of faith. So, the voice was whispering, don’t send it to America.

The small fingers of my new friend quickly leaf through the typed pages.

—I am even surprised, how can you not believe in God?
— I don’t have a need for such a hypothesis, just like Voltaire.
— But after Voltaire came World War II.
— That’s precisely why . . .

Kolyma was Stalin’s extermination camp. I experienced all its particularities. I could never imagine that in the twentieth century there could be a writer who would use his memoirs for personal reasons. Shalamov, Vospominaniiia, 372–73.

In the next entries Shalamov observes: “The cheaper was the [literary] ‘device,’ the more success it had. This is the tragedy of my life” (373). Contrary to Solzhenitsyn’s observation, Shalamov does portray religious prisoners in the gulag, in particular the Old Believers, with great respect, but with a different intonation. When it comes to the complex and deeply personal issue of religious belief, Shalamov’s response to Solzhenitsyn is recorded in his notebooks (373, 377). A friendlier dialogue between the two writers can be found in Shalamov’s letters to Solzhenitsyn, 641–74.
Shalamov’s own prose focuses on the cracks in the process of polishing reality. Intonation for Shalamov is a trace of oral speech in the poetic form of the story that affects the stories’ narrative voice and syntax, linking his unique artistic form to the collective experience. Shalamov wanted to avoid what he considered a conventional psychologism, dismissively dubbed “the surface peel [shelukha] of halftones in the representation of psychology.”17 This kind of psychologism domesticates and erases the modern specificity of the camp experience. Intonation in Shalamov’s texts creates a special balance between the insider’s voice and the estranging viewpoint. The narrator speaks as Pluto, the permanent resident of the underworld, not as Orpheus, an overly excited one-time visitor. Shalamov’s stories are always in the present; the reader is put in the position of a fellow convict, a newcomer but not entirely an outsider. Creating this kind of visceral prose, that is not a description of experience but an experience in its own right, was for Shalamov an exhausting physical process akin to exorcism. He “screamed out every word of the story, screamed, threatened, cried, drying up tears only when the story was over.”18 Usually the stories begin and end in medias res, as if familiarizing the inhuman world of Kolyma with its radically changed scales of existence. However, “as if” here is crucial and is at the core of Shalamov’s double estrangement. His stories are modern parables written in a documentary style reminiscent of the “literature of fact” of the 1920s and the poetics of OPOYAZ through which Shalamov learned his literary skills.19

But what is “literary” about it? Aesthetic and ethical moments coincide in Shalamov. Like the OPOYAZ members in the 1920s, he attacks conventional literary forms in order to explore the foundation of estrangement and the radical practice of judgment and imagination. His approach to his storytelling consists of aesthetic and ethical sculpting (ustranenii usego lishnega) and involves the quest for “purity of tones” (chistota tonov); at the same time, he preserves traces of the singularity of experience and witnessing, including the author’s misprints, repetitions, and individual blemishes, everything deemed irrelevant in the Hegelian-Marxist-Leninist understanding of the laws of history. To the great irritation of his helpful editors, Shalamov insisted on leaving misprints and repetitions in his texts.20 For him they form another nonlinear “hypertextual” network that links the stories among themselves. Shalamov shared this peculiar poetics of misprint with other modernist writers who also addressed issues of totalitarianism—in particular, Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera. Nabokov uses mistakes, misrecognition, and, directly, misprints, as in Pale Fire (“Life everlasting based on a misprint?”) to create an ironic epiphany, a revelation with difference that incorporates human error and the

19. In fact, Shalamov’s discussion of documentary prose is not dissimilar from the 1920s discussions of the “end of the novel” and the new “prose of the document” (proza dokumenta), which is not accidental given Shalamov’s studies and friendship with members of the formalist circle. Shalamov avoids ostentatious literary devices of narrative framing or explicit decorative tropes.
Hannah Arendt: The Banality of Evil and the Art of Judgment

Arendt’s reflection on the banality of evil will help to elucidate Shalamov’s obsession with clichés and his insights into survival in the gulag, parallel but not equivalent to Levi’s reflection on survival in Auschwitz. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Arendt’s concept of totalitarianism was called into question and was discarded a number of times as a relic of the Cold War. More often than not, Arendt’s concept of totalitarianism was understood literally as total state control and was turned into a strawman of total domination over all dimensions of life. The broader existential, philosophical, and aesthetic aspects of Arendt’s conception of freedom and of totalitarian experience, of responsibility and judgment, received much less critical attention. For my own conceptual framework, three aspects of Arendtian thought are of primary importance.

The first is the radical strangeness of totalitarian domination that cannot be fully explained through a conventional social, psychological, or institutional rationalization. In line with Shalamov’s notion of radically changed scales of experience, Arendt uses an aesthetic concept of estrangement in order to think about the power of the “ideology of terror” and its reliance on conspiracy theory.22

The second concerns the conception of “legality,” conventional man-made laws versus the law of history and nature. Arendt argues that to-


22. In Arendt’s view, totalitarian ideology tends to be quite successful due to the “common-sense disinclination to believe the monstrous” and because a great part of the population of the totalitarian country “indulges also in wishful thinking and shirks reality in the face of real insanity.” Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York, 1985), 437.
talitarian ideology “pretends to have found a way to establish the rule of justice on earth—something which the legality of positive law admittedly could never attain.”23 This goal legitimizes any amount of (revolutionary) violence, since the end justifies the means. Arendt questions the basis of the Hegelian-Marxist framework for understanding the laws of history and the relationship between the state and the public sphere. Unlike Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and other thinkers engaged in examining forms of domination and the critique of the Enlightenment project, Arendt underscores the totalitarian difference and does not blur the distinction between the Enlightenment project and the Stalinist project. Nor does she erase the difference between the conventional or democratic understanding of law and the prophetic conception of the true law of history. Stalinism, from the Arendtian perspective, can never be described merely as a culturally specific project of Soviet modernization, since such a description would make it historically inevitable and therefore excusable. Moreover, continuing in the tradition of the Enlightenment, she questions the inevitability of the connection between violence and law and develops a conception of law and politics based on the public memory of the common world that totalitarian ideology tries to destroy.

The third aspect involves her investigation of the “banality of evil” that sustains the totalitarian glue and the role of imagination that can undermine it. Imagination for Arendt is a form of understanding that could lead to individual acts of judging and paradigm shifts even in conditions of extremity. Here Arendt revises Kantian conceptions of “common sense” and imagination in order to develop her original theory of judgment. She focuses on a variety of aesthetic practices (from theatrical performance on the public stage to the art of thinking and the life of the mind) that work in counterpoint to the state’s aesthetic totalwork. Such an understanding of practice presents an alternative model for thinking about everyday mythologies without domesticating and naturalizing them and allows for a variety of reactions, not limited to an enthusiastic embrace or heroic dissent. The task of the interpreter of everyday practices in conditions of extremity is to understand the minimal “zone” of deviation or noncompliance, the minor paradigm shifts that work in counterpoint to the official documentation of events.

In spite of Arendt’s elaborate analysis of the total control of the state, she looks unflinchingly into the issue of individuals’ capacity to judge for themselves and finds an unusual connection between judgment, imagination, and thinking. In her controversial account of the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the architect of the Final Solution responsible for the ideological basis of mass extermination, Arendt proposes to judge Eichmann as an individual, not as a devil, nor as a mere cog in the Nazi bureaucratic machine. In other words, she does not subsume Eichmann’s case into her own theory of state terror. Eichmann appears as the ultimate organization man who speaks in clichés from the beginning to the very end. While in an ordinary context, Eichmann’s behavior might be considered mere institutional conformism and traditional patriotism, in the context of the

23. Ibid., 462.
Nazi extermination machine this kind of clichéistic conscience leads to “thought and world defying banality of evil.” What does this mean? It does not suggest that evil is banal or that banality or everydayness is evil. Rather, Arendt draws our attention to the fact that an individual who authorized the worst crimes against humanity was an ordinary civil servant, neither a glamorous Shakespearean villain, nor the metaphysical embodiment of a Satan on earth. Arendt emphatically asserts that evil should not be mythologized; it should not be turned into a version of the negative sublime. In fact, the Israeli psychiatrist described Eichmann as absolutely normal. It is ironic that while in prison Eichmann was offered Nabokov’s *Lolita* to read, a book which he rejected as “unwholesome” (this is perhaps the best defense that Humbert Humbert could have hoped for). Remarkably, in the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov claims that true obscenity lies in the “copulation of clichés” and lack of curiosity and imagination, not in erotic subject matter.

Arendt claims that the automatization of Eichmann’s mind, his clichéistic consciousness and “failure of imagination” (understood broadly as moral imagination) led to the “colossal error in judgment” for which he bears individual responsibility. Arendt does not subscribe to the concept of collective guilt that might blame everybody and hence nobody; for her, guilt is individual and particular.

While Eichmann’s case can be explained sociologically, politically, and historically, it cannot be excused. To analyze the novelty of his existential position, Arendt uses aesthetic categories: the failure of imagination and banality. Arendt’s conception of banality is reminiscent of Nabokov’s critique of *poshlost* and kitsch and the writings on kitsch and cultural commodification by Hermann Broch, Adorno, and Clement Greenberg.

In her last, unfinished project, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt connects the question of ethics and responsibility directly to the issue of thoughtlessness on an unprecedented scale, reflecting in particular on “thoughtless” collaboration with the regime.

An individual’s capacity to engage in judging depends on the ability to mediate between a system of beliefs and lived experience, between


28. There is a form of thoughtlessness, as exhibited by Eichmann, which is not mere shallowness or stupidity but an ethical problem and a key to understanding war crimes from the point of view of the perpetrators. “Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected to our faculty of thought?” Arendt asks. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:5. On this issue, see Dana R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, 1999). On the connection between Arendt’s political theory and aesthetic theory of estrangement, see Svetlana Boym, “Poetics and Politics of Estrangement: Victor Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt,” *Poetics Today* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 581–611.
consciousness and conscience. Judging requires a double movement—
defamiliarizing experience through the practice of thought and defamiliar-
izing habits of thought in response to the changing experience. The
space of reflective judgment is like a Möbius strip that moves seamlessly
from the inside to the outside, from the known to the unknown.

The possibility of judgment is not determined by strict adherence to
a moral code but by moral imagination. Even the most antisentimental
witness of the camps, Primo Levi, a scientist and an agnostic, wrote about
the role of curiosity and culture in Auschwitz.29 First, like Shalamov, he
disavowed any romantic or redemptive quality in aesthetic experience,
but then he proceeded to explore a link between a capacity to survive and
a cultivation of memory, curiosity, and imagination.

Of course, “failure of imagination” is hardly the sole explanation for
the banality of evil. For Arendt the key lies in the destruction of the public
realm and the public world and the resulting corruption of communica-
tion and intimacy with terror that conditions citizens’ dependence on
the regime and the proliferation of vicious circles of victimization. This
is the irreducible political dimension of the totalitarian regime that can-
not be domesticated. Yet the moral imagination might provide a form of
necessary “perspectivism,” an opening of other horizons.30 Imagination
is heteronymous and moves from one country to another without visa
restrictions. It entertains the hypothetical; moves through leaps, lapses,
and ellipses; engages in double vision. Imagination can be defined as what
is inhuman in humans in the sense that it involves a capacity for self-
distancing, for moving beyond individual psychology into the experience
of the common world. Most important, imagination depends on cultural
commonplaces but is not bound by the borders of a single system of coor-
dinates and points beyond it.

Arendt did not have a chance to write about Shalamov, for his work
appeared in translation only in the last years of her life. But his stories
always engage the issues of the boundary—of the physical and mental
“zone,” and of the cultural common places that contribute to the banality
of evil and the banality of good. Each story offers us an exercise in double
vision, a creative document that stands in counterpoint to official histori-
cal documentation.

Rationing Clichés, Documenting Terror

The story “Dry Rations” opens almost like a fairy tale, with four convicts
embarking on a mythical journey to explore a limbo region of the gulag
zone and build a road through the snow. The story begins with them

For a more detailed discussion of imagination, see Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political
Philosophy (Chicago, 1992), 79–85; Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on Judgment: Interpretative
reading of Kant with a focus on aesthetic judgment is rather eccentric to the tradition, yet
crucial for her discussion of public freedom.
crossing beneath the camp gates with their familiar inscription: “Labor is a matter of honor, glory, courage, and heroism.” Overwhelmed with joy at their momentous luck, they do not dare break the silence, as if afraid to discover that their short escape was somebody’s error, a joke, or a misprint in some bureaucratic circular.

The official clichés of camp life frame the story like the barbed wire of the zone. In fact, since the Russian title is “Sukhim paikom,” the translation should be “By dry rations.” This elliptical adverbial construction indicates a mode of existence. The syntax of the title pushes us directly into the “rations” of camp language. “Dry rations” function as an “advance of short-lived liberation” that determines the time and space of the prisoner’s journey outside the zone.³¹ The rationing of food, labor, freedom, pain, punishment, and cruelty is central to camp life. Rationing was a form of rationalizing terror. The story proceeds by disrupting various clichés as well as official and unofficial rationalizations of camp existence.

The four unlikely fellow travelers represent a cross section of camp society. Yet they are not representative men in any shape or form, but singular individuals with uniquely (but not exceptionally) unlucky fates. Ivan Ivanovich, slightly older than his companions and described as “the most decent” prisoner, used to be “an excellent worker,” almost a hero of camp labor. The reasons for his arrest are of the everyday order (by-torye) and are not explained in detail. The youngest of the prisoners, Fedia Shapov, is a teenager from Altai with a not very strong “half-grown body.” His crime was slaughtering a sheep on his own farm in order to feed his mother and himself.³² Accused of sabotaging collectivization, he was sentenced to ten years in the camps. The third prisoner is a Moscow student named Savel’ev. Once a loyal member of the Young Communist League, he was accused of conspiring to create a counterrevolutionary cell that consisted of two members—himself and his fiancée. His romantic letter to his bride was used as evidence of anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation, for which he was given ten years of hard labor in Kolyma. The fourth convict is our narrator, a political prisoner from Moscow and a veteran observer of camp tactics, the prisoner without a biography.

Just as the convicts leave the gate of the zone with the uplifting slogan, they begin to ration their own efforts and debate the value and meaning of work in the camp. The narrator wonders whether “honest” work can still exist in the gulag context, and Savel’ev advances his own theory of surplus labor. First he speaks about the surplus of language that covers up the conditions of slave labor: “The only ones who call for honest work are the bastards who beat and maim us, eat our food and force us living skeletons to work to our very death. It is profitable to them but they believe in honest work even less than we do.”³³

The concept of “loafing” (filonit’) is crucial in Shalamov’s camp world.

³² Ibid., 1:77–78.
³³ Ibid., 1:73.
His storytellers are not heroes of labor but “artists of the spade” and masters of dissimulation. A slang word for this “light labor” and the “artistry of the spade” is “Kant,” a creative and survivalist approach to camp labor that manifests itself in seemingly harmless daily practices. The irony that the philosopher’s name coincides with a reprieve from camp duties and with artistry instead of effort is not lost on Shalamov. Love for “Kant” exemplifies the prisoner’s parodistically anti-Marxist theory of surplus value; it is the surplus value of “loafing,” of (relative) idleness and evasion that constitutes the prisoner’s personal “capital” of disobedience.

Savel’ev teaches little Fedia the ways of camp survival through the tactics of language and labor. He tells him a story about one dissenting loafer who refused to work.

“They made a report. Said that he was ‘dressed appropriately for the season.’”

“What does that mean: ‘dressed appropriately for the season?’ asks Fedia.

Savel’ev explains that this phrase was used when a prisoner couldn’t fulfill the labor norm or died, but instead of listing all the items of clothing he was missing, boots and mittens and so on, the bureaucrats simply affirmed in their report that the prisoner was “dressed for the season,” as a supposedly logical justification of inhuman labor.

“Well, they can’t list every piece of summer or winter clothing you have on. If it’s winter, they can’t write that you were sent to work without a coat or mittens. How often did you stay in the camp because there were no mittens?”

“Never,” said Fedia timidly. “The boss made us stamp down the snow on the road. Or else they would have had to write that we stayed behind because we didn’t have anything to wear.”

“There you have it.”

Behind a seemingly innocuous bureaucratic cliché, “dressed appropriately for the season” was a shortcut to cover up the naked truth that hardly anyone was ever dressed appropriately.

The prisoners bond together through an unofficial code of minimal camp decency that is never entirely deciphered. Neither prisoner transgresses certain ethical taboos of directly collaborating with the authorities and informing on the other prisoners or becoming a foreman (brigadir) and commanding the other prisoners. Somehow, in spite of the fact that they live at a time when everything is permitted and everything is possible, all four exercise inner restraint. They are most happy in the brief moments of loafing and storytelling—“storymaking-daydreaming” (vran’e-mechtanie), half-lies, half-dreams. Fedia particularly enjoys tales of the urban miracles, such as the Moscow metro. They let their imagination “go visiting” to escape the frost of Kolyma.

34. “Kant is a widely popular camp term. It refers to something like a temporary rest, not a full rest . . . but the kind of work that does not make one labor to the limit of his possibilities, but instead easier, temporary work [pri kotoroi chelovek ne vybivaetsia iz sil].” Shalamov, “Kant,” Sobranie sochinenii, 1:73.
"Banality of Evil," Mimicry, and the Soviet Subject

Yet there is a time bomb at the very heart of the story. The gasp of excessive freedom (relatively speaking, of course) for a convict in the zone is like a surfeit of bread for one who is starving: it can kill. As they are finishing their dry rations, the foreman from the camp arrives and immediately sees through their loafering and rationing tactics and orders them back to the camp. They have only one night left to daydream outside the camp. Ivan Ivanovich is the only one who continues working till twilight with the same tragic diligence.

The next morning Savel’ev finds Ivan Ivanovich hanged from a tree “without even a rope.” The best worker among the four companions, the “decent man” Ivan Ivanovich chooses his own way out. The foreman panics and tries to distract the convicts from the sight of the corpse. Savel’ev, for whom, unlike the veterans of the gulag, the spectacle of death has not yet turned into daily routine, picks up an axe and brings it down on his own four fingers—only to be promptly arrested for self-mutilation, or rather, for the mutilation of a worker—since the body of an able gulag prisoner was considered state property.36 Fedia and the narrator take Ivan Ivanovich’s clean clothes and return to the zone, to the same berths in the same barracks.

Late at night the protagonist wakes up and finds Fedia in a stupor, composing a letter to his mother. The narrator reads it, eavesdropping “across Fedia’s shoulder”: “Mama,—Fedia was writing—mama, I live well. Mama, I am dressed appropriately for the season.”37

This ending, with the central cliché of camp dissimulation—“dressed appropriately for the season,” stuns us into silence. Like the convicts at the beginning of the story, we the readers are afraid to break into speech and rush to interpretation. Something in the narrator’s intonation forces us to pause and rethink our assumptions.

Is Fedia knowingly telling half-truths to assuage his mother’s fears? Or is he so shocked that he can only rehearse the official clichés in his most personal letter? Is this exploration of the limbo zone an initiation into the banality of evil or a lesson in dissent? Is Fedia’s letter then an act of explicit conformity or of covert disobedience?38

This is an instance of Shalamov’s signature intonation. What makes all the difference is that the word *mama* is repeated three times.39 The “document” is interrupted. The intonation bursts open the letter’s official clichés. In one line we have two types of repetition: repetition as mim-

36. Andrei Siniavskii wrote about the prisoners of the first Soviet gulag, the Solovki camp, who put their mutilated body parts into a log of wood produced for foreign export. These were their messages to western buyers about the nature of the labor and the product. Savel’ev’s fingers sent a message that nobody might have received, yet it was his only means of horrific self-expression. Andrei Siniavskii, “Srez materiała,” in Shalamovskii sbornik (Vologda, 1994), 1:224–28.


38. To complicate matters further, Fedia is telling the literal truth. Since he took Ivan Ivanovich’s clothes, he now finds himself truly “dressed appropriately for the season.” And, like the nameless convict in Savel’ev’s story, he too has “loafed” appropriately for the circumstances.

39. I am grateful to Leona Toker for drawing my attention to this issue.
icry of the camp clichés and repetition as lament. The invisible author eavesdropping over Fedia’s shoulder makes minor notations that turn the bureaucratese of the letter into a lament: mama, mama, mama, like Anton Chekhov’s broken string in the background. There is a desperation in the address here that expresses the sheer phatic function of language; this is not even a desire to communicate but simply a desire to test already fragile communication. Such nuance makes the story a great work of fiction and “hurts” moral imagination.

The catharsis of the story involves neither the death of Ivan nor Savel’ev’s self-mutilation. It is the stunning ambivalence of Fedia’s epistolary document that breaks the frame of the story and un hinges our frame of reference. Shalamov is not interested in ecstatic Dostoevskian scenes of suffering or Eisensteinian eccentric pathos. His stories deny the reader the instant gratification of empathy and communal purification, which might explain why some readers interpreted Shalamov as a cruel, or unemotional writer despite his frequent protestations to the contrary. More than instantaneous catharsis, he is engaged in the torturous peripeteias of camp luck.

The tragic predicament plays an important role for Shalamov, but his understanding of tragedy is modernist. It has a lot in common with the notion of tragic catharsis that was developed by the psychologist Lev Vygotskii, who was also close to the critics from OPOYAZ and was interested in the psychology of art. According to Vygotskii, “a work of art always contains an intimate conflict between its content and its form, and the artist achieves his effect by means of the form, which is capable of destroying the content.” In this understanding of the psychology of art, catharsis resides in the clash of ambivalence. Form “murders” the content, or rather transports it elsewhere into the domain of imagination, immortalizing the experience and disrupting the chain of victimization.

How does Shalamov give us a lesson in camp literacy and in understanding the documents of the gulag? Let us for a moment imagine the hypothetical historian of the future in some distant provincial archive looking at this letter to Fedia’s mother. After going through many official documents, this historian rejoices at finding a personal one. The expression “dressed according to the season” might jar the historian a little, but then verifying the words in the dictionary, the researcher concludes that the peasant prisoner might have been gramotnyi, that is, well-educated in the new Soviet school built in his village in the Altai mountains. Fedia’s “Soviet subjectivity” as expressed in his own words tells our imaginary historian that some (not all) “lived well” in the camp, especially those who knew how to work hard. Were Fedia’s letter to reach its addressee, it would most likely be similarly misread.

Shalamov’s story concerns the clash of two texts: Fedia’s “document” of camp life and the story of how such a document came to be made. The

aesthetic ambiguity turns into the ethics of judgment and understanding. In fact, the whole story is about the deviousness of language that has lost its meaning.

The story works through constant disruptions and subversions: of the prisoners’ fears and expectations, of the reader’s conventional framework, of the clichés of conventional novelistic redemption, and of Soviet reeducation.41 The minimal “freedom” of the author and the reader is that they now share the other way of reading “across the shoulder” (cherez plecho) of the stupefied camp novice who learned about the temptation of nonconformity the hard way. Judging, in this literary form, is the ability to discriminate in reading, to acquire tact, to preserve multiple perspectives and multiple human fates, and to respect the choices. Judging is not about being judgmental but about giving imaginary space to the defeated and to their impossible human choices, leaving space and acknowledging the dreams of exit in a no-exit situation and according to the tactics of the zone. The secret of gulag communication is in the intonation, in the small successes of the condemned, in their varied stories’ singular irreducibility to any masterplot. The story is also about the tactics of minimal singularity. Each prisoner reacts to the gasp of freedom by choosing a different tactic: suicide, self-mutilation, the resilient survival of gulag veteran and writer-witness, and Fedia’s ambivalent lesson of pushing the boundaries of the zone. Each reaction is an unpredictable form of judging for oneself, a personal choice that does not agree with the official objectification and subjugation of the “human material.” Thus “Dry Rations” concerns not a liberal subjectivity that some historians love to hate but a liminal subjectivity that bends the barbed wire ever so slightly and yet significantly. Shalamov works through the Russian and Soviet clichés as one works through trauma, grieving over every word, every turn of phrase.

Mimicry, Misprint, and Technologies of the Gulag

If the first part of Shalamov’s Kolyma Tales concerns the early stages of the prisoner’s gulag sentence and the difficult initiation into camp life and survival, the second part of the book deals with the difficulties of liberation and self-liberation after years in the zone. In “Lida,” the hero of the story is a veteran survivor of the Kolyma camps who is approaching the end of his sentence but cannot see the end of the conspiratorial frames of the gulag system of well-wishers and informants, the “human chain” of enthusiastic perpetrators of the banality of evil. He is afraid that due to his political status, the end of his sentence will bring him not liberation but rather another imprisonment, another round in the vicious circles of gulag labor. Like Shalamov himself, who was rearrested many times, Krist is “branded” by the letter “T.” The abbreviation “KRTD” appears in his file, a term applied to the most dangerous political prisoners. “T” stands for Trotskyism and, therefore, for the “death tribunal,” giving his

41. The title “Suikhim paikom” has a syntactic similarity with another Russian proverb that uses a similar adverbial expression that might be invoked here: “Man does not live by bread alone” (Ne khlëhom edinym zhiv chëlovek).
boss and anyone else who might discover this information in his secret file “poetic license” for endless persecution or even a license to kill him. Krist envisions the many eager little Eichmanns forming the human chain of informants that was the foundation of the “low tech” gulag system that relied, not on technology the same way the Nazis did, but on “relentless manpower.”

The perpetual question of “what is to be done” occupies Krist. His name notwithstanding, he is hardly a suffering hero or a charismatic redeemer. Krist, a survivor of “bookish Russia,” does not believe in a single personal savior but thinks that in the world “there are many truths” and one must discover—co-create—one’s own. In the world of the camp where all scales have shifted to a radical degree, he has to rediscover what liberation means. For him survival is more than just a personal matter, it is a personal vendetta against the regime.

After months of torturous meditation, Krist comes up with a poetic license of his own. During one particularly intense night of thinking he experiences an “illumination” that comes to him “just like the best lines of a poem.” The name of the solution is “Lida.” Krist recalls an incident that happened several years before when he worked as a doctor’s assistant (feldsher) in the camp hospital. One night the doctor on duty “from the political prisoners” had asked him for a small favor. It concerned a young secretary from the nonpolitical convicts whose husband had died in the camps and whose boss, the lieutenant, was threatening her after she refused to “live with him” (that is, have sex with him). The young woman hoped to hide in the hospital until the lieutenant was moved to another station. Krist asked to see her: “A not very tall, blond young woman appeared in front of Krist and bravely looked him in the eyes. Many people passed by Krist, many thousands of eyes were understood and figured out. It was very rare that Krist made mistakes. ‘OK,’ said Krist, ‘put her in the hospital.’”

It is important that neither the doctor nor Krist knew the woman beforehand. They understand each other with half-words and gestures, following some kind of unwritten code of honor among the noncollaborators. This was not a major act of disobedience, but a minor dissent, mimicry of the bureaucratic hierarchies that could cost them much or nothing, for the sake of a stranger. Lida managed to escape her pursuer. Krist and Lida never spoke about the incident again, although they occasionally exchanged knowing gazes. Now Lida is once again working as a secretary, typing passport forms and prisoners’ files. Krist decides to ask her for a different kind of professional favor.

After his night of poetic revelation, Krist approaches Lida and tells her casually that she will soon type his documents of liberation.

“Congratulations,” said Lida, and brushed off the invisible dust from Krist’s feldsher’s robe.

“You will type old convictions, there is such a line there, right?”

43. Ibid., 1:320.
44. Ibid., 1:325.
“Yes, there is.”
“In the word ‘KRTD,’ drop the letter ‘T.’”
“Understood,” said Lida.
“If the boss notices when he signs it, just smile, say you made a mis-
take. Spoiled the form.”
“I know what to say myself.”

Two weeks later, Krist is called to the office to receive his new pass-
port. The letter “T” has disappeared from the nefarious abbreviation
“KRTD.” Was it a misprint, a human error? Krist’s friends try to decipher
his luck, but none suspects that Krist co-created his liberation with his
own hands.46

Once again, catharsis occurs in the ellipsis, in what remains unsaid.
Like a Greek tragedy, the story involves the confrontation of different
understandings of law, with the improbable law of Krist’s poetic justice
gaining a temporary victory.

Minimal communication is the reaction against the banalization of
speech in the camp and the impurity of tone: “The camp did not like
sentimentality, did not like long and unnecessary preambles and various
‘approaches.’”47 As “veterans of Kolyma.” Krist and Lida understood each
other with half-words.

Lida’s final action is not merely the return of a favor. It does not func-
tion within the economy of blat (the informal Soviet network of barter
that existed among the privileged and the not-so-privileged in the cir-
cumstances of scarcity). Instead it belongs to the improbable circulation
of minor gifts and acts of kindness among strangers that survived against
all odds in the space of the zone.

Only the description of the night of Krist’s feat of imagination com-
penstates for the absence of explicit moral or ethical discussion. The
impersonality of the gulag machine and the chain of informants who volun-
tarily perpetuate the banality of evil are not counteracted by a Tolstoyan or
Solzhenitsyn-style morality tale that might turn into the banality of good
but by minimal human solidarity and the exercise of extreme imagina-
tion. The epiphany of solution is described in aesthetic terms as a radical
act of poetic composition, not as a religious conversion.48 The inhuman

45. Ibid., 1:326–27.
46. The reasons Krist’s fellow-Zeks propose for his good fortune are interesting in
themselves. One sees there an accident of fate; the other believes it is a sign of the thaw,
of the change in the political climate; the doctor sees the “will of god.” Ibid., 1:327.
47. Ibid., 1:326. At the moment of liberation, Krist is afraid to speak, just like the
convicts at the beginning of “Dry Rations” who were incredulous over their transient luck.
The most important things are not to be profaned through impurity of tone.
48. “Revelation [ozarenie] arrived suddenly as usual. Suddenly but after an enormous
effort—not only intellectual, not only of the heart, but of his whole being. It arrived
the way poems or the best lines of a story came to him. One thinks of them day and night
without a response and then revelation comes: the joy of the exact word, the joy of solu-
tion. Not the joy of hope—for Krist had already encountered too many disappointments,
errors, and backstabblings. The revelation came: Lida.” Ibid., 1:324. Both metaphors and
the materiality of writing play an important role in Shalamov’s story. If the physical docu-
ment at the center of the story, the passport with a typo, the document of the liberated
Zek, were ever to be found in some imaginary archive, it would require a “thick descrip-
tion” and multiple layers of reading.
creative effort that Krist expends to come up with a solution has to counterbalance the inhumanity of the system.

In each of Krist’s moments of judging, ethics and aesthetics become closely intertwined even when it is a matter of life and death. Krist’s first brief encounter with Lida is an “ethical encounter,” as Emmanuel Lévinas understood it: it involves a face-to-face meeting that calls for an “anarchic responsibility” toward another particular human being.49 But the story is not only about empathy; it is also about judging and co-creating a philosophy of composition in the gulag. This is not about the individual’s romantic battle against the totalitarian system but about matching the “living chain” of denouncers with the chain of decent human beings who exchange gratuitous gifts. What breaks the vicious circle is an ingenious mimicry of the “low-tech” gulag system. In totalitarian circumstances, collaboration, survival, and belonging are all different forms of behavioral mimicry, and the nuanced distinctions are of crucial importance. In this case, however, mimicry is neither obedience nor the imitation of power; neither tautology nor parody. The best understanding of this kind of mimicry comes from the writer and lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov. Mimicry in the Nabokovian definition is a “cryptic disguise” and a “non-utilitarian delight” that defies the Darwinian evolution of the fittest and the Hegelian laws of history: “The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction for me. Its phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things. . . . When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in. ‘Natural selection’ . . . could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect . . . nor could one appeal to the theory of ‘the struggle for life’ when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator’s power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art.”50 Mimicry that “exceeds the predator’s power of appreciation” persists as a form of trickery and as a homeopathic antidote to the gulag bureaucracy. Mimicry, in the words of Homi Bhabha, is at once “resemblance and menace”: in Shalamov’s story, it lays bare a clichéd conscience, a survivalist collaboration with the regime and its different forms of daily camouflage, revealing practices of creative “cheating” and judgment.51 Such mimicry works as an example

51. Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” The Location of Culture (London, 1994), 85–92. Bhabha offers important insights into the hybridity and subversion of mimicry but his discussion is focused on the postcolonial and colonial contexts and has to be recontextualized when taken into the Stalinist context.
of Arendtian imagination, that enlarges mentality and estranges the ethos of making everything permitted and possible, of domesticating terror through new and old master narratives.

In Shalamov’s texts, the “human error and the authorial signature of the prisoner’s illicit creativity coincide. Blemish and poetic license work like the prisoner’s ephemeral individual traces in the virginal snow of Kolyma. The most striking expressive gesture of this minimal story is Lida’s brushing off the invisible dust from Krist’s medical uniform at the moment when he asks her to make a typo. This gesture is irreducible to any single moral symbol: it is at once a sign of gratitude, of wistful mutual understanding, of care, of the shamanism and mischief (shamanism i shalost) that Shalamov believed to have been ciphered in his old Russian family name. In fact, the story performs a shamanic act of transforming the deficient official passport into an artistic document: “Poetic intonation is a literary passport, that personal ‘brand’ [kleima], that provides the poet’s place in history. We do not have a patent bureau and intellectual property rights for poetic intonation.”52 A writer’s intonation functions like a fingerprint of his unofficial identity. Here Shalamov echoes Nabokov, another author obsessed with visas and watermarks. “Art is the writer’s only passport,” wrote Nabokov, the author of many tales of passportless spies.53

Poetic reflection for Shalamov is not a domain of autonomous literature but a practice of judging, of devising other horizons and reimagining a different system of coordinates for human existence. “In the visceral depth of any physical phenomenon we can find a poem and then switch this perception into real life.”54 Moreover, Shalamov’s authorial ambiguity goes beyond the Aesopian language practiced by the intelligentsia of the thaw and afterwards; his unassimilable stories break open the nature of Soviet fabulization. His is the radical elaboration of Viktor Shklovskii’s conception of art as a technique, in this case a technique of surprising survival through intense artistic and existential estrangement. Shalamov is one of Russia’s great modern writers, but the modern track he follows is different from official Soviet modernization or the route that goes from the grave of the avant-garde to the socialist realist necropolis. His is not the modernism of self-expression, invention of personal language, and stoic inner freedom. Rather it is a public modernism that engages the political in a non-party-line manner, in the style of Primo Levi, W. H Auden, Albert Camus, and others.

Shalamov shares Arendt’s view that clichés that produce the banality of evil as well as the banality of good not only package the experience but collaborate in the perpetuation of totalitarian horror. While opposing the clichés of both the authoritarian humanism of the nineteenth century and the no less authoritarian anti-humanism of the twentieth

century’s teleologies of universal happiness, Shalamov proposes a new form of imaginative documentary prose that does not describe but co-creates the experience. Shalamov and Arendt share one particular literary interest: the American writer William Faulkner. His statement, “The past is not dead, it is not even past,” especially beloved by Arendt, reflects Shalamov’s relationship to memory, and Faulkner is one of Shalamov’s favorite writers who practice fractured and explosive prose. For Shalamov, as for Faulkner, past and present have equal urgency; the past explodes the present while the present actualizes the past. Memories for Shalamov are as real as bodily aches and pains. “Memory gnaws at you like a frostbitten hand at the first cold wind.” Memory is a phantom limb, numb and undead. This kind of memory, which is part of the “dignity of the defeated,” works against Hegelian teleology of the law of history and the justification of historical violence.

Arendt insists that in the aftermath of the totalitarian experience we lost the yardstick with which to measure the common world, and we lost touch with our own living tradition. The answer, however, is not the invention of a national tradition, or the resacralization of the disenfranchised modern world and a prescriptive enforcement of moral rules. We cannot merely replace the yardstick or restore the broken vertebrae of common communication, covering up the scars. Rather we have to use our imagination to confront what might seem unimaginable. We have to “think without a banister” in order to understand the world that can no longer be measured with familiar yardsticks. Imagination might not be a panacea for the destruction of the public realm, but it can help keep the memory of another form of public solidarity alive. The larger-than-life collective inhumanity of twentieth-century mass movements requires a counterpoint: a creative and singular “in-humanity” of human imagination that can move outside the box of the temporal and spatial limitations of the present moment. Judgment and imagination negotiate the space “between” and “beyond” collective and individual, preceded and unprecedented. Judging keeps imagination in check, imagination enlarges the possibilities of judgment, and so it goes back and forth. “Between” is never completely bounded by familiar yardsticks, but neither is “beyond” synonymous with boundlessness. Imagination opens unforeseen perspec-


56. Shalamov writes, paraphrasing Karl Marx: “History that first appeared as tragedy, reappears a second time as farce. But there is also the third embodiment of the plot: as absurd horror.” Shalamov, *Vospominaniia*, 309. Marx’s original aphorism from “Eighteenth Brumaire” paraphrases G. W. F. Hegel, who claimed that history repeats itself. Besides the striking insight that this observation offers, it is curious that Shalamov uses formalist literary vocabulary and speaks of historic “plots.”

tives; but the moment they are transgressed or transcended they lose their horizon of wonder.

Rereading Shalamov in 2008 acquires a different urgency. It is no longer solely about the historical materials and the accuracy of the descriptions, but about the ways of understanding the Soviet legacy and the post-Soviet experience. In the present moment there is no widespread “gulag denial”; in fact, the brief opening of the archives and the activity of many Russian and international historians and researchers from Memorial made a lot of information publicly available. Yet in the new political climate, the increasing amount of information is in inverse proportion to the public’s interest in understanding the past. There is an uncanny persistence of the authoritarian Eros in post-Soviet culture and the gulag legacy, which in this case means the legacy of unconfronted memories, of critical history turning into a protected domain of national heritage. The Soviet past is a realm of state-sponsored nostalgia, carefully orchestrated by contemporary “political technologists” who activate age-old training in self-censorship. When history becomes heritage, there is little space for critical questioning. Shalamov’s work reveals how the gulag effect is created and how easy it is to domesticate terror and erase minor courageous acts as mere misprints in the official plot of history.

In “The Gap between Past and Future,” Arendt writes that the experience of freedom does not fit the historical, sociological, or philosophical narrative that protects its own internal logic at the expense of such disruptive experiences. Excluded from the conventional historiography, such experiences of freedom remain our other, forgotten heritage.58