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**SIBERIA IN V. SHAMALOV'S PROSE:  
ON THE PROBLEM OF THE SPATIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT**

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**Abstract**

The article considers the features of the spatial organization of "Kolyma Tales" by V. Shalamov in the context of Siberian discourse. The "points of view" in the stories "Bread" (1956) and "The Letter" (1966) are analyzed in terms of their spatial and temporal characteristics.

**Keywords**

Space – Time – Camp prose – Kolyma – North – Yakutia

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## Introducción

Through his personal and creative destiny, V. Shalamov contributed to the development of the theme of Siberia in Russian literature and had a decisive influence on the formation of the "Siberian discourse". The image of Yakutia is recreated in the writer's works from a certain point of view (depending on the epoch, circumstances, conditions, ideology, etc.). Nevertheless, Siberia and Yakutia have a special place in the writer's life and work. Shalamov, having experienced the terrible world of katorga labor in the Far North, wrote his famous "Kolyma Tales" and, creating "new prose", became the discoverer of the camp theme. Here, in Yakutia – at the pole of the cold, his cycle "Blue Notebook" was created as well.

It seems important to explore the features of the category of Siberian (in particular, Yakut) space in the context of the poetics of the "Siberian text". For this purpose, it is necessary to analyze Shalamov's prose of the period of his Siberian exile and highlight the features of everyday and mythological spaces in it, because the image of Siberia was initially considered a mythogenic phenomenon. In other words, it is necessary to consider the features of the environment that fills the Siberian space, climatic and landscape aspects, the system of images, mythological symbols, the "material world", and "points of view" in terms of spatial and temporal characteristics.

Shalamov is the author of the world-famous "Kolyma Tales" and one of those convicts who told the tragic truth about the Kolyma life of Gulag prisoners. In 1937, he was sent to the Kolyma camps for five years for counter-revolutionary activity. Later in 1943, he was convicted again – ten years for anti-Soviet agitation. In Kolyma, Shalamov suffered everything – cold, hunger, hard physical labor, beatings... He called the Kolyma camp a camp for the systematic destruction of people. Returning to Moscow in November 1953, fearing not to have enough time to write about this huge tragedy of the 20th century, he began to write the chronicles of state cruelty, violence, and mass deaths of innocent people.

The book includes six collections of stories: "Kolyma Tales", "Left Bank", "A Spade Artist", "Essays on the Criminal World," "Resurrection of Larch," "Glove, or KR-2". Shalamov spent almost 17 years in the Kolyma camps and worked on his stories for 20 years. Camp prose is documentary works, a transformed reality, which cannot be fit into any framework of genre classification. The theme of reality and its significance themselves create certain artistic principles. The place where Shalamov spent his exile was one of the most severe camps of the Soviet period, called hell by some. Kolyma is a huge territory in the north-east of Siberia, in the Magadan region. The Kolyma River flows through this territory, originating in Yakutia, streaming through the Magadan region, and feeding into the East Siberian Sea. Shalamov arrived in Yakutia in the 1950s. As the author himself mentioned, "In 1949, while working as a feldsher in the camp, I went on a 'forest trip' and spent all of my free time writing – on the back of prescription books, scraps of brown paper, some kind of paper bags. In 1951, I was released, but could not leave Kolyma. I worked as a feldsher near Oymyakon, in the upper reaches of the Indigirka, at the cold pole, and wrote night and day – in homemade notebooks"<sup>1</sup>. Shalamov worked as a feldsher in Kuidusun, which is 3 km from the village of Tomtor (Borogon) of the Oymyakon district.

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<sup>1</sup> V. Shalamov, *Neskolkо moikh zhiznei: Vospominaniya. Zapisnye knizhki. Perepiska. Sledstvennye dela.* (Moscow: Respublika, 1996).

Shalamov's exile to Kolyma has its own chronological time and geographical space. However, the author does not create real time and space in his stories. The reader is transported to some mystical, irrational world. There are no exact chronological characteristics. This place is completely different, even the time here has no future, present, or past. The convicts consider the time before their exile past life, a "dream": "Bad coagulability", Glebov said indifferently. 'Are you a doctor, or what?', asked Bagretsov, sucking blood. Glebov was silent. The time when he was a doctor seemed very distant. And was there ever such a time? Too often, that world beyond mountains and seas seemed to him some sort of a dream, fiction"<sup>2</sup>. They do not think about their past lives and do not dream or even remember; they live for today and not even a whole day, but hours. Every hour is survival; in the morning they survive until noon and then until the end of the working day is announced. This continues the next day: "Life came back like a dream, the doors opened again: white wafts of steam lying on the floor, running to the far wall, people in white fur coats"<sup>2</sup>.

## Methods

For the first time, the temporal and spatial features of "Kolyma Tales" were noted by L. Timofeev in "Poetics of the camp prose" (1991). Nobody can leave this space, everything is surrounded by barbed wire or barrack walls. This opens only for those who fall, die – freed: "Rybakov lay, unexpectedly small between the tussocks. The sky, the mountains, the river were huge and God knows how many people can be put in these mountains on the paths between the tussocks"<sup>2</sup>. For others, survivors, the sky was still no different from camp life, still low and hopeless: barbed wire, barrack walls, cells, bunks. Regarding the characteristics of the time in the Kolyma stories, Timofeev defines time as today; moreover, today it is not an intermediate point between today and tomorrow, but a rather uncertain part of what is called by the word "always" (or more precisely, "never"). Time seems to have stopped, nothing changes here, fate ends with death, and death is the definition of the world where readers find themselves. To determine the author's position, it seems interesting to try to isolate the various points of view, from which the narrative (description) is conducted in "Kolyma Tales". The work of B. Uspenskij "Poetics of Composition"<sup>3</sup> is used as the methodological basis. Considering the spatial features of the Kolyma stories, it is also necessary to turn to a structural approach related to determining the points of view, from which narration is carried out in fiction. The points of view in terms of the spatial and temporal organization of the text, according to Uspenskij, represent a fixed and definable position of the narrator in the coordinates of space and time, which may or may not coincide with the position of a certain character in the work<sup>3</sup>.

## Results

The article considers the works written during Shalamov's exile in Kolyma. Here the North is considered from the point of view of a Soviet prisoner. Shalamov does not establish a specific time and geographical space. Kolyma is presented as a completely different world. Researchers of Shalamov's works often call it an island fenced off from the rest of the world, a continent, another planet. The prisoners do not remember their lives before katorga, before Kolyma. That world seems to them distant, unreal, fictional: "Too often, that world beyond mountains and seas seemed to him some sort of a dream, fiction" ("At Night"). We see a sharp spatial and temporal difference between the camp world and

<sup>2</sup> V. Shalamov, Izbrannoe (SPb.: Azbuka-klassika, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> B. A. Uspenskij, Poetika kompozitsii (SPb.: Azbuka, 2000).

the real world. Two types of space descriptions can be distinguished in "Kolyma Tales", which replace each other throughout the narrative: the space of mines, camps and space outside of the camp. The latter can be related to, for example, the features of space after the writer was released from the camp, when he had not left Kolyma yet and lived and worked in Yakutia. Thus, we observe a somewhat different spatial position in the story "The Letter", where the time is characterized when Shalamov worked as a feldsher in Yakutia. The story most likely describes the period of correspondence between the writer and B. Pasternak.

A specific feature of the Kolyma stories is that the reader does not follow the character or the author, who would lead the reader, but transforms into the narrator, the convict, feels and experiences everything that happens to him. That is why Shalamov's stories are very difficult to read. The reader has to face the time and space without any "embellishment" and feel torment, horror, fear, and indifference – all this hell. The nature of Kolyma is similar to the convicts in the stories – like permafrost. In such conditions, people soon turn into matter, living and moving material. They become so automatic that lose their willpower, feeling, and, in general, their mind. All that remains is empty physical flesh, responding to beatings, cold, heat, and bread rations. The closed space, having its specific positions, is the motive of Shalamov's stories: "White fog stayed all day long and was so thick that you could not see a person in two steps. However, you didn't have to go far alone. The few directions – the canteen, hospital, watch – were guessed by an unknowingly acquired instinct, similar to the feeling of direction fully possessed by animals, which, under suitable conditions, awakes in a person"<sup>4</sup>.

## Discussion

Consideration of the closed locus in the stories "Bread" and "The Letter" from "Kolyma Tales" allows showing the features of the spatial and temporal organization of Shalamov's text in detail. From the very beginning of the story "Bread", the reader observes how a huge door opens, a distributor enters the transit barrack, and "two thousand eyes looked at him from everywhere: from below – from under the bunk, directly, from the side, and from above – from the height of four-story bunks, were those who still retained strength climbed up the ladder". In this case, the position of the narrator coincides with the position of the character, which means that he is in the same place as the hero – inside the barracks. At the same time, he is not attached to the character, he is next to him, but at an indefinite point in space. We understand this by the view from everywhere, from all sides: from below, directly, from the side, from above. The character, however, could not see these eyes, looking at the distributor, being at one point in space (for example, if he is on the lower bunks, he cannot see the person from above). In addition, his eyes are among the two thousand, also directed at the distributor. This can be seen by the narrator only. Then the narrator takes a seat next to the prisoners and watches the approaching distributor: "In addition, the tray was approaching and the most exciting minute was coming", "While the distributor was approaching, everyone had already calculated which piece would be extended to him by the indifferent hand". The narrator looks around, watches the prisoners: "Some people closed their eyes, unable to cope with the excitement". Then notes one of them: "Grasping the herring with dirty fingers, stroking it, shaking it quickly and gently... he cannot help but glance at those who surround him and who also stroke and crumple herring pieces. He doesn't eat herring, he licks it, licks it, and the tail gradually disappears from the fingers". Here we also observe the point of view in

<sup>4</sup> V. Shalamov, Izbrannoe (SPb.: Azbuka-klassika, 2003).

terms of ideology: "Herring is eaten, bread is eaten, tea is drunk. It immediately becomes hot and you don't want to go anywhere, you want to lie down, but you already have to dress up". The narrator, in this case, shares the point of view of the character and feels what only the prisoner himself can feel; he ideologically perceives the depicted world.

Then the space changes: the prisoners go outside, assemble and go for the distribution. Again, the narrator shares the prisoners' point of view, he transforms into the protagonist, and the narrative follows the prisoners: we, us. Further, until the end – on behalf of the character: "I stood without seeing the sympathetic and kind faces of workers. I heard nothing". The amount of work is determined and the character and his neighbor are chosen to work at the bakery plant: "the warmth of the hotly heated workshop, for which the body was so hungry after long winter", "rooms with baking ovens and on the shelves everywhere, there was bread". The change of space has transformed the morning picture in such a way that it seems that the characters have temporarily found themselves in a different dimension – the workers treat them kindly, they manage to eat a warm loaf of bread, drink boiling water with jam, and even smoke a cigarette during the break – a long-forgotten luxury. Seeing something new, as if for a second, the characters escape from this very different world for a while. Space is not so closed anymore: "Through a wide window without gratings, we saw that the sun had moved to the sunset". The author could have written simply "through a wide window", which already breaks this closedness, but he also emphasizes that the window is without gratings. Time in this story also has a closed character. It is the description of one day in the camp: the hero returns to the camp, to his seat, shares the brought bread with his neighbors and falls asleep. Like in other stories, where, to a greater extent, frost and cold are described, we see blue snow, dirt, dampness, frost, puddles and the very isolated space of the camps – barracks, bunk beds, barbed wire fence of the yard, guards, dogs, lines. The time of year in the story is spring. The place of the beginning is the camp, then the reader is transported to the bakery and returned to the camp again. Thus, the reader follows the narrator throughout the day. At the same time, the point of view in space passes from the point of view of the narrator to the point of view of the character himself.

As we consider the spatial characteristics that make up the main features of the poetics of "Kolyma Tales", we pay attention to the story accurately characterizing the writer's place of exile in Yakutia. In "Kolyma Tales", Shalamov usually does not specify the geographical space; his definitions of the place of events are mostly extensive – the North, the Far North, Kolyma. Sometimes, Magadan – the centre of the camps – is mentioned, as well as names of the camps. From time to time, some Yakut features are described: "a man in a deer hat, Yakut torbas", "stocky and shaggy Yakut horses, Yakut women", and so on. Cold, frost, fog, snow, taiga, forest, temperatures below -55°C, in which spit freezes on the fly, – features typical of the North. For the analysis, we chose the story "The Letter" (1966) from the collection of stories "Resurrection of the Larch". Perhaps everyone knows about the correspondence between Shalamov and Pasternak during the writer's exile in Kolyma. According to M. Boyarova<sup>5</sup> [5], the head of the museum of the Tomtor Secondary School in the Oymyakon region, this correspondence began in 1952, when Shalamov lived in Kyubyum (150 km from Tomtor); a year later he moved to live in Tomtor. Here, in 1952-1953 in Oymyakon, at the pole of cold, working as a feldsher, Shalamov wrote his famous collection of poems "Blue Notebook". In terms of the prose, mentioning Yakutia, we can highlight the stories "Yakov Ovseevich Zavodnik", "Chasing Steam Smoke", and "Riva-Rocci". The story "The Letter", most likely, describes the same period of correspondence

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<sup>5</sup> Mariya Boyarova, K stoletiyu so dnya rozhdeniya V. Shalamova (Moscow: 2007).

between the writer and Pasternak. The time of the year is winter, the place – the village. The narrator is not far from Baragon, he needs to get to the left bank for the letter. The narrator has completely transformed into a protagonist, i.e. the story is narrated on behalf of the hero. We learn that the hero is in Yakutia from his dialogue with the head of the district: "Good. But don't drag things out. No sense waiting to hitch a ride. The local Yakut tribesmen will take you by dogsled to Baragon"<sup>6</sup>. It is remarkable that in this story, the narrator calls himself a resident of Kolyma for the first time: "I, a resident of Kolyma, didn't have a fur coat!". Judging by the text, he did not start a conversation with Yakuts. They were dealt with on his behalf – for the first time, by the head of the district and for the second time, Marya Antonovna. It seems that Yakuts were perceived by the hero as stern, yet mysterious people: "the sharp, black eyes of the Yakut who drove the dogsled, my own numb fingers gripping the sled. The black eyes are mentioned in the text again: "Last year, last summer, a little Yakut boy, a five-year-old child, got lost and Maria Antonovna and I tried to start looking for the child. The mother stopped us. She was smoking a pipe, smoking for a long time, then her black eyes looked at me and Mary Antonovna. 'You don't have to look for him, he'll come himself, he won't get lost. This is his land'. Upon arrival, the hero silently settles with Yakuts and sits in the five-ton sledge. As usual, he is accompanied by frost: "now I have to run out in the frost", "you can't ride to the top so far, in such a frost". This fog, mist, like the obscurity, cause fear in the hero: "When dawn came, the white winter fog didn't seem as terrible as it had the night before". The trip to retrieve the letter lasted a few days, but to the author, 500 km seem quickly covered: "the distance fell away behind us, bridge followed bridge, gold-mine followed gold-mine", "I have not yet had time to freeze, as the car began to slow down – the bridge, the left bank, I got down". Perhaps the excitement that he is going to get the long-awaited letter of his friend, though he doesn't know the addressee yet, it made the time fly by faster, imperceptibly, the very time that in Kolyma stories lasted seemingly forever. In the final space – at the destination point, the narration ends as the goal is achieved: "The next day I knocked and entered the office where the letter awaited me. I knew the handwriting well – swift, soaring, but at the same time precise and lucid. It was a letter from Pasternak". The temporal and spatial structure of the stories is simple and unique. Closed space and stretched, as if stopped, time reflect the harsh reality of the camp, with its barracks, bunk beds, and cold. Shalamov, describing the closed space and time of the camp with documentary precision, views the North in a context that refers mostly to the mythological semantics interpreted symbolically in the text. For the author, the North is a mystical space of eternal cold and white silence. Yakuts, the native people of Yakutia, are also considered in this symbolic context. For Shalamov they are an inseparable part of northern nature, whose black eyes and quick movements remind him of the snowy mist. Shalamov's interpretation of nature is based on mythological semantics while the mechanism for recreating the closed space and time of the camp is productive in the plot organization of the text.

## Conclusions

Shalamov made a significant contribution to the development of the Siberian theme. In "Kolyma Tales", the space of the North is formed in terms of the closed "other space" of the camp. In other words, Shalamov limits the boundless space of the North, giving it the characteristics of a different, otherworldly space, isolated from the rest of the world. Artistic space can be seen as a model of the world, constructed both horizontally and vertically. If the horizontal appears as the camp, barracks, pits, slaughterhouses,

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<sup>6</sup> V. Shalamov, Izbrannoe (SPb.: Azbuka-klassika, 2003).

taiga, etc., then the vertical space is the sky, the sun, the star, the mountain. Even in the horizontal direction, the Kolyma space is closed (exactly opposite to the space of V. Korolenko). For example, Shalamov's sky is low, pressuring, restricting freedom; it seems to open only after death, after liberation. The prisoners' sun is "a dim electric sun, spotted by flies and shackled in a round screen <...> affixed to the high ceiling" ("Cherry Brandy"). The features of "Kolyma Tales" include the presence of vividly expressed key motives, such as loneliness, hopelessness, resurrection, through which the writer's philosophical reflection on the camp experience occurs. Moreover, the writer, describing the camp space, views the North in the context that refers mostly to mythological semantics. The main mythopoetic meanings in the Kolyma works embody the mythologemes of land, water, fire, and air. In his stories, Shalamov, in fact, does not establish a specific time and geographical space. The reader feels as if they are transferred to a mystical, strange world, in which there are no exact chronological characteristics. The writer's descriptions of the North in some places are diverse – as if considered from different points of view. We see a sharp spatial and temporal difference between the camp world and the real world. There are two types of space descriptions in the stories: the space of mines, camps and space outside of the camp. The latter possesses the features of the space after the liberation of the writer from prison when he had not left Kolyma yet and lived and worked in Yakutia. The landscape of the northern space can be seen in the central motives of cold and permafrost. Significantly, the motives of cold characterize not only the world outside but also the inner state of the characters. For example: "And the soul shuddered and froze – perhaps to remain frozen forever" ("Carpenters"). The image of the North formed in literature as "the kingdom of blizzards and frosts", "the country of silence", "the country of exile" is supplemented by "the country of the dead", "hell", "grave", "the country of eternal permafrost".

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