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Translation Of "On Prose" By V. Shalamov

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ON PROSE¹

The best modern prose is Faulkner. The novel is broken, exploded, and only Faulkner's authorial rage helps him complete the job, to build a world up from the wreckage.

The novel is dead. And no force in the world will resurrect this literary form.

People who have gone through revolution, war and concentration camps have no time for the novel.

The author who aims at the depiction of an imaginary life, of artificial collisions and conflicts (the author's inadequate personal experience that cannot be hidden in art) irritates the reader, who puts aside the bloated novel.

The need for the author in art has been retained, but faith in literature has been undermined.

What literary form has the right to exist? What literary form retains the interest of the reader?

In recent years science fiction has become popular worldwide. The fantastic successes of science have given rise to the success of science fiction.

But science fiction is nothing but a pitiful surrogate for literature, an ersatz literature, and it is of no use to the reader or the writer.

¹ Translated from: Varlam Shalamov, "O proze," in *Sobranie sochinenii. V 4-kh tt.* Tom 4 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Vagrius, 1998), 357–70.

Science fiction does not confer knowledge; it passes ignorance off as knowledge. Capable authors of this type of work (Bradbury, Asimov) aim only at narrowing the gaping chasm between life and literature without attempting to bridge it.

The success of literary biographies, from those by André Maurois to Irving Stone's literary biography of Van Gogh,² is also witness to the reader's demand for something more serious than the novel.

The enormous interest worldwide in the genre of the memoir is a voice and a sign of the times. Today's man checks himself and his actions not against the actions of Julien Sorel or Rastignac or Andrey Bolkonsky, but against the events and people of real life, that life in which the reader himself is a witness and participant.

Again, the believable author, to use the expression of Niels Bohr, should be "not only a witness, but a participant in the great drama of life." Niels Bohr used this phrase to refer to scholars, but it can justifiably be used to refer to literary authors.

Faith in the genre of the memoir is limitless. This genre is characterized by that "effect of presence" which constitutes the essence of live television. I can't watch a recorded soccer match when I already know the result.

Today's reader engages only with documents and is persuaded only by documents. Today's reader has the strength, knowledge and personal experience to make this argument. And he trusts this literary form. The reader doesn't feel that he has been deceived, as he does when he reads a novel.

Before our eyes the entire range of demands on the literary work change, demands which a literary form such as the novel does not have the strength to fulfill.

Bloated and verbose descriptiveness becomes a vice that nullifies the work. The description of a character's appearance impedes understanding of the author's idea.

Scenery is not accepted at all. The reader has no time to think about the psychological meaning of digressions about scenery.

² Irving Stone, *Lust for Life*. A novel of 1934 about Vincent Van Gogh.

If scenery is incorporated, then it should be used extremely economically. Any detail of the landscape becomes a symbol, a sign, and only then does it retain its meaning, vitality, necessity.

Doctor Zhivago is the last Russian novel. *Doctor Zhivago* is the collapse of the classic novel, the collapse of the authorial precepts of Tolstoy. *Doctor Zhivago* was written according to Tolstoy's formula, but what emerged was a novel-monologue, without "characters" and other attributes of the nineteenth-century novel. In *Doctor Zhivago* the moral philosophy of Tolstoy scores a victory and endures the defeat of Tolstoy's artistic method.

The symbolic cloaks in which Pasternak wrapped his heroes, which effect a return to the ideas of his literary youth, diminish rather than increase the force of *Doctor Zhivago*, which is, again, a novel-monologue.

To debate "character development" and so forth is not merely old-fashioned, it is unnecessary and, therefore, harmful. The modern reader understands what the work is about in two words and has no need for detailed descriptions of appearance, has no need for classical plot development and the like. When Anna Akhmatova was asked how her play ends, she answered: "Modern plays do not have an end." This isn't a fad or a nod to "modernism," it's just that the reader does not need authorial efforts directed toward "rounding out" the plot through those well-trodden methods known to the reader since high school.

If a writer attains literary success, genuine success, success in its own right and not merely positive reviews, then who cares whether there are "characters" in the work or not, whether there is "individualization of characters' discourse" or not.

In art the only type of individualization is the distinctiveness of the authorial personage, the distinctiveness of his artistic handwriting.

The reader searches, just as he searched before, for answers to the "eternal" questions, but he has lost hope of finding them in belles-lettres. The reader does not want to read nonsense. He demands a solution to genuinely important questions, searches for answers about the meaning of life, about the links between art and life.

But the reader does not pose these questions to literary writers, not to Korolenko or Tolstoy, as in the nineteenth century, but searches for the answers in memoirs.

The reader no longer believes in fictional details. Any detail that does not contain a symbol seems extraneous in the literary fabric of the new prose.

Diaries, travelogues, memoirs, and scientific descriptions have always been published and have always enjoyed success, but now the interest in them is unusually high. They constitute the main section of any journal.

The best example of this is *My Life* by Charlie Chaplin. A mediocre thing in the literary sense, it's the number-one bestseller, having surpassed each and every novel.

Such is the trust in the memoir. A question: should the new prose be of a documentary nature? Or can it be more than a document?

One's own blood, one's own fate—these are the demands of today's literature.

If the author writes with his blood, then there is no need to collect material while visiting the Butyrka prison or "transit" stations, no need for research trips to regions like Tambov. The very notion of preparing to write is outdated and invalid; not only are other aspects of depiction sought after, but other paths of knowledge and cognition as well.

All the "hell" and "heaven" in the writer's soul, and vast personal experience, confer not only moral superiority, not only the right to write, but also the right to judge.

I am deeply convinced that the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam³ will become a milestone in Russian literature, not only because they are a monument to an era, a passionate condemnation of the era of the wolf-hound. Not only because the reader will find in this manuscript the answers to a whole series of questions troubling Russian society. Not only because memoirs are the fate of the Russian intelligentsia. Not only because questions on

³ The widow of Osip Mandelstam, who authored the memoirs *Hope Against Hope* (1970) and *Hope Abandoned* (1972).

the psychology of creativity are posed here in brilliant form. Not only because the testament of Osip Mandelstam is set forth here and his fate recounted. It is clear that any aspect of the memoir will arouse enormous interest worldwide and among Russia's readers. But the manuscript of Nadezhda Mandelstam has yet another very important quality. It is a new form of memoir, very capacious and very comfortable.

The chronology of Osip Mandelstam's life is interwoven with everyday scenes, portraits of people, philosophical digressions, and observations on the psychology of creativity. From this angle the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam present enormous interest. A major new figure enters the history of the Russian intelligentsia and the history of Russian literature.

The great Russian writers have long felt the loss, the false stature of the novel as a literary form. Chekhov's attempts to write a novel were fruitless. "A Boring Story," "Story of an Unknown Man," "My Life," "Black Monk" — all these are persistent yet unsuccessful attempts to write a novel.

Chekhov still believed in the novel, but failed at it. Why? A longstanding habit of writing story after story had been implanted in Chekhov, who held only one theme, one topic in his head. After a story was written, Chekhov would begin a new one in turn, without even thinking it over to himself. Such a method is not suitable for the novel. They say that Chekhov didn't find the strength in himself to "ascend to the novel," that he was too "grounded."

The prose of *Kolyma Tales* has no relationship to the sketch. The pieces in sketch form are sprinkled in for the greater glory of the document, but only here and there, each time dated and with intent. Real life appears on the page by entirely different means. In *Kolyma Tales* description is absent, as are data, deductions, and journalistic material. The point of *Kolyma Tales* is the depiction of new psychological patterns, the artistic investigation of a terrible theme, not in an "informative" tone, not in the collection of facts. Although, to be sure, any fact in *Kolyma Tales* is irrefutable.

Fundamental to *Kolyma Tales* is that it shows new psychological patterns, what is new in the behavior of a man who has been brought down to the level of an animal. Incidentally, animals are

made from better material; not one animal would endure the torments man has endured. There is something new in the behavior of man, new—despite the enormous literature on prisons and their prisoners.

These changes of the psyche are irreversible, like frostbite. The memory aches like a frostbitten hand at the first cold wind. No one who has returned from imprisonment lives a day without remembering the camp, the humiliating and terrible labor of the camp.

The author of *Kolyma Tales* considers the labor camp a negative experience for man—from the first to the last hour. Man should not know, should not even hear about it. Not one man becomes better or stronger after the labor camp. The labor camp is a negative experience, a negative school, and the defilement of all—of the staff and the prisoners, of the security guards and the onlookers, the passersby and the readers of belles-lettres.

Kolyma Tales examines people without a biography, without a past or a future. Does their present resemble a savage or humane present?

In *Kolyma Tales* there is nothing that could be considered the overcoming of evil or the triumph of good, in terms of the big plan, the artistic plan.

If I had had a different goal, I would have found an entirely different tone, different colors, using the very same artistic principle.

Kolyma Tales is about the fate of martyrs, who were not, could not be, and did not become heroes.

The need for documents of this type is extremely urgent. After all in every family, and in the village and the city, among the intelligentsia, the workers and the peasants alike, there were people, or relatives, or acquaintances, who perished while imprisoned. The Russian reader—and not only the Russian reader—is waiting for an answer from us.

It is necessary and possible to write a story that is indistinguishable from a document. But the author must research his material with his own hide, not only with his mind; not only with his heart, but with every pore of his skin, his every nerve.

A conclusion has been lying in my brain for a long time, a kind of judgment about this or that side of human life, of the human

psyche. I came to this conclusion at the dear price of blood and protect it as the most important thing in life.

There comes a time when one is overcome by the need to put this conclusion forward, to give it real life. This persistent desire acquires the character of a resolution. And you no longer think about anything else. And when you sense that you once more feel with that same strength as you did then, when you encountered events, people and ideas in real life (maybe the strength is different, on a different scale, but that's not important now), when once again warm blood flows through your veins . . .

Then you begin to search for a plot. It's very simple. There are so many encounters in life, and so many of them are retained in your memory, that to find the essential one comes easily.

The writing begins—it is very important to retain its immediacy and not spoil it with corrections. The rule in effect for poetry, that the first version is the most sincere, is in effect and retained here as well.

The completeness of plot. Life is endlessly plotted, as are history, mythology; fairy tales and myth are all encountered in real life.

It is not important whether the *Kolyma Tales* have plot. There are tales with plot, and tales without, but no one will say that the latter are less of a story or are less important.

It is necessary and possible to write a story that is indistinguishable from a document, from a memoir.

But in the higher, more important sense, any story is always a document, a document about the author—and it is this characteristic, probably, that makes one see in *Kolyma Tales* the triumph of good, not evil.

The shift from the first to the third person, the entry into the document. The use of authentic names here and fictional names there, the transitory protagonist—all this is material serving one goal.

All the tales have a common musical pitch that the author knows. Noun-synonyms and verb-synonyms must strengthen the desired impression. The author has thought out the composition of the collection. The author has rejected the short phrase as literary pretentiousness, has rejected the physiological measure of

Flaubert: “the human breath dictates the phrase.” He has rejected Tolstoy’s “that” and “which,” rejected Hemingway’s discovery: jagged dialogue, combined with phrases drawn out into moral admonitions, into pedagogical examples.

The author wanted only to capture real life.

What qualities should a memoir possess besides verisimilitude? . . . And what is historical accuracy? . . .

I had a conversation in the editorial office of a Moscow journal with regard to one of the *Kolyma Tales*.

“Did you read ‘Cherry Brandy’ when you were at the university?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Was Nadezhda Mandelstam there?”

“Yes, Nadezhda Mandelstam was there.”

“That means your legend about the death of Mandelstam is being canonized?”

I say:

“In the story ‘Cherry Brandy’ there are fewer historical inaccuracies than in Pushkin’s ‘Boris Godunov.’”

Keep in mind:

1) “Cherry Brandy” describes that very same transit prison in Vladivostok where Osip Mandelstam died and where the author of the story had been a year earlier.

2) Here one finds an almost clinical description of death from nutritional edema, or simply speaking, from hunger, that same hunger of which Mandelstam died. Death from nutritional edema is particular. Life returns to a person, then departs from him, and you may not know whether or not the person has died for five days. And whether he can still be saved, returned to the world.

3) Here the death of a man is described. Is that really too little?

4) Here the death of a poet is described. Here the author attempted to imagine with the help of personal experience what Mandelstam may have thought or felt as he was dying—that great equality of bread rations and high poetry, that great indifference and serenity that death from hunger brings, in contrast to all “surgical” and “infectious” deaths.

Is that really too little for “canonization”?

Do I really not have the moral right to write about the death of Mandelstam? This is my duty. Who can refute a story like "Cherry Brandy," and how? Who will dare to call this story a legend?

"When was the story written?"

"The story was written right after I returned from Kolyma in 1954 in Reshetnikov in the Kalinin region, where I wrote day and night, trying to nail down something that was most important, to leave witness, to put a cross on a grave, to not allow a name dear to me my whole life to be hidden, to commemorate this death, which cannot be forgiven or forgotten."

And when I returned to Moscow I saw that Mandelstam's poetry was in every house. It had gotten along without me. And if I had known this, I perhaps would have written differently, not that way.

Contemporary new prose may be created only by people who know their material to perfection, for whom the mastery of material, its artistic transformation, is not purely a literary exercise, but a duty, a moral imperative.

Similar to the way that Saint-Exupéry opened the skies for man, people will come from every corner of life who will be able to tell about what they know and what they have lived through, not just what they have seen and heard.

There is this notion that a writer should not know his material too well, overly well and intimately. The notion that the writer should narrate to the reader in the language of those very readers in whose name the writer began to prepare his material. That the understanding of what is depicted should not depart too far from the moral code, from the worldview of the reader.

Orpheus descending into hell, not Pluto ascending from hell.

According to this idea, if the author knows his material too well, he will go over to the side of his material. Values will change, the scale will be shifted. The writer will measure life by new measures, which are unknown to the reader and which frighten and alarm him. Inevitably the connection between writer and reader will be lost.

According to this idea, the writer is always a bit of a tourist, a bit of a foreigner, a bit too much of a man of letters and a craftsman.

An exemplar of such a writer-tourist is Hemingway, no matter how much he fought in Madrid. It's possible to fight and live an active life and at the same time to be "outside." It makes no difference whether one is "above" or "on the side."

The new prose rejects this principle of tourism. The writer is not an observer, not an onlooker, but a participant in the drama of life, and not in the guise of a writer or in a writer's role.

Pluto ascending from hell, not Orpheus descending to hell.

What has been earned by suffering with one's own blood enters the page like a document of the soul, transformed and enlightened by the fire of talent.

The writer becomes the judge of his time, not someone's assistant; it is precisely the deepest knowledge, the triumph in the very depths of real life that bestows the right and strength to write. It even suggests the method.

Writers of the new prose, like memoirists, should not place themselves higher than everyone else, smarter than everyone else, should not lay claim to the role of judge.

On the contrary the writer, the author, the storyteller should be lower than everyone, less than everyone. Only here can one find success and trust. This is the moral and artistic demand of contemporary prose.

The writer should remember that there are a thousand truths in the world.

How are results achieved?

Above all, through a serious and vitally important theme. Such a theme may be death, destruction, murder, Golgotha . . . It should be told smoothly, without declamation.

With brevity, simplicity, and the elimination of everything that could be called "literature."

Prose should be simple and clear. Enormous conceptual weight, and chiefly, enormous emotional weight does not allow for patter, trifles and rattling. It is important to resurrect feeling. Feeling should return, conquering the control of time, the changing of values. Only under these conditions is it possible to resurrect life.

Prose should be a simple and clear statement of what is vitally important. Details—new and unusual particulars, new kinds of

description — should be brought in, planted in the story. The novelty, accuracy and exactitude of these particulars in and of themselves will make one believe in the story and in everything else, not as information, but as an open wound to the heart. But their role is much greater in the new prose. It is always the detail-symbol, detail-sign that translates the entire story into a different plan, giving it a “subtext” that serves the author’s will and is an important element of the artistic resolution, the artistic method.

An important aspect of the work in *Kolyma Tales* was prompted by artists. In *Noa Noa* Gauguin writes: if the tree seems green to you, take the very best green paint and draw. You will not err. You found it. You solved it. Here it is a matter of the purity of tone. With regard to prose this question is solved with the elimination of everything extraneous not only in descriptions (a blue axe, etc.), but in the elimination of all the chaff of “half-tones” in the depiction of psychology. Not only in the elimination of the dryness and uniqueness of adjectives, but in the very composition of the story, where much is sacrificed for the sake of this purity of tone. Any other solution leads away from the vital truth.

Kolyma Tales is an attempt to pose and answer certain important moral questions of the time, questions that simply cannot be solved using other material.

The question of the encounter between man and world, the struggle of man with the governmental machine, the truth of this struggle, the struggle for oneself, inside oneself, and outside of oneself. The possibility of influence over one’s fate, ground up by the cogs of the governmental machine, the cogs of evil. The illusoriness and gravity of hope. The possibility of relying on forces other than hope.

The author destroys the border between form and content; better yet, he does not understand the difference. For the author it seems that the importance of the theme itself dictates particular artistic principles. The theme of *Kolyma Tales* does not find an outlet in ordinary stories. Such stories are a debasement of the theme. But in place of the memoir *Kolyma Tales* offers a new prose, the prose of real life, which at the same time is reality transformed, a document transformed.

The so-called labor camp theme is a very big theme, one with room for a hundred writers like Solzhenitsyn and five writers like Tolstoy. And no one will feel crowded.

The author of *Kolyma Tales* strives to prove that the most important thing for the writer is to preserve the living soul.

Compositional unity is no small component of *Kolyma Tales*. In this collection it is possible to replace and move around only a few stories, but the main ones, the supporting ones, must stay in their places. Everyone who has read *Kolyma Tales* as one book, not as separate stories, has acknowledged the great and powerful impression it makes. All its readers say this. This is explained by the deliberateness of selection, the careful attention to composition. The author considers all the stories of *Kolyma Tales* to be in their place. "Typhoid Quarantine," which finishes the description of the circles of hell, and the machine that throws out people into new suffering, into a new stage (stage!), is a story that cannot begin a book.

"The Red Cross" is brought into service here, embedded, and journalistic in its fabric, for in the camp the criminal world is of great significance, and he who does not understand this has understood nothing about the camps and understands nothing about modern life.

Kolyma Tales is the depiction of new psychological patterns in the behavior of man, of people in new conditions. Will they remain human? Where is the border between man and animal? The tales of Vercors or Wells' *Island of Doctor Moreau*, with its ingenious "Sayer of the Law," are only eye-opening and amusing in comparison with the fearsome face of real life.

These patterns are new, new despite the copious literature on prisons and prisoners. This proves once again the force of the new prose, its necessity. Overcoming the document is a matter of talent, of course, but the theme of the labor camp places very high demands on talent, most of all from the moral angle.

These psychological patterns are irreversible, like frostbite of the third or fourth degree. The author considers the labor camp to be a negative experience for man—negative from the first to the last hour—and regrets that his own strength must be directed toward overcoming this material in particular.

The author has asked former prisoners a thousand times, a million times, whether there has been even one day in their lives when they did not recall the labor camp. The answer was always the same: no, there has been no such day in their lives.

Even the highly educated and cultured people who spent time in the camps—if they weren't crushed and if they fortuitously came out unscathed—tried to erect a barrier of jokes and anecdotes, a barrier protecting their own soul and mind. But the labor camp deceived them as well. It made these people proponents of principled unprincipledness, and their enormous cultural knowledge served them as an object of intellectual entertainment, of mental gymnastics.

The analysis of *Kolyma Tales* lies in the absence of analysis. Here people are taken without a biography, without a past and without a future, taken in the moment of their present—a savage or humane one? To whom is the material more suited—to beasts, to animals, or to people?

Kolyma Tales is the fate of martyrs, who were not and did not become heroes.

In *Kolyma Tales*—so it seems to the author—there is nothing that could be considered the overcoming of evil or the triumph of good.

If I had wanted something else, I would have found a completely different tone, different colors, employing the very same artistic principle.

My own blood—that is what cemented the phrases of *Kolyma Tales*. The questions that life poses—these questions are not only not solved, but not even posed correctly. My memory has retained thousands of plot variants on the answer, and it remains for me simply to choose and drag a suitable one onto the page. Not in order to describe something, but in order to answer. I have no time for description.

Not one line, not one phrase in *Kolyma Tales* exists that could be called “literary.”

What's more: life of the present day retains the features of fairy tales, epics, legends, mythology, religions, works of art (which bothered Oscar Wilde quite a bit).

The author hopes that in the 33 tales of the collection no one will doubt that this is the truth of real life.

The change and transformation were achieved not only by embedding documents. "The Injector" is not picturesque padding in the vein of "Elfin Cedar." Actually it is not picturesque at all, for it has no picturesque lyrics whatsoever, only the author's conversation with his reader.

"Elfin Cedar" is necessary not as picturesque information, it is the soul's necessary condition for the struggle in "Shock Therapy," "The Lawyers' Plot," and "Typhoid Quarantine."

This is a kind of picturesque padding.

None of the repetition or the slips of the tongue that the readers upbraided me for were the product of accident, carelessness, or haste.

They say that if an announcement has a typographical error it is easier to remember. But this is not the only reward for carelessness.

Authenticity and immediacy themselves require this type of mistake.

Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* breaks off in mid-sentence yet it does not evoke disapproval in anyone.

Why do all readers of the story "How it Began" manually write out and correct my unfinished phrase "Are we still wor . . . ?"

And how does one fight for a style, how does one defend the author's rights?

The utilization of synonyms, verb-synonyms and noun-synonyms, serves that same dual purpose—the underscoring of the main point and the creation of musicality, aural support, intonation.

When an orator gives a speech a new phrase is formed in his brain while synonyms exit upon his tongue.

The preservation of the first variant is unusually important. Corrections are inadmissible. It is better to wait for further inspiration and write the story again from the start with all the truth of the first version.

Everyone who writes poetry knows that the first version is the most sincere, most unmediated, subjugated to the haste of expressing the heart of the matter. The subsequent finishing—correction (in its various meanings)—is the control and the violence of the idea over feeling, the interference of the idea. In 12–16 lines of poetry of any of the great Russian poets I can guess which line was written first.

I have correctly guessed what was most important for Pushkin and Lermontov.

Thus for this prose, conditionally called “new,” the success of the first draft is unusually important. [. . .]

They will say that none of this is necessary for inspiration, for sudden insight.

The author answers: sudden insight appears only after an indispensable waiting, intense work, searching, summoning.

God is always on the side of the big battalions. A la Napoleon. These big battalions of poetry get in line and march, learn to shoot while hidden, while in the depths.

The artist always works, and reworking of material always, constantly, carries on. Sudden insight is the result of this constant work.

Of course there are secrets in art. They are the secrets of talent. No more and no less.

The correction, the “finishing” of any story of mine is unusually difficult, for it has particular tasks, stylistic ones.

You correct a little and it destroys the strength of authenticity, of immediacy. That’s how it was with the story “The Lawyers’ Plot.” The deterioration of quality after correction was immediately noticeable (N. M.).⁴

Is it true that the new prose relies on new material, and this material makes it powerful?

Of course, there are no trifles in *Kolyma Tales*. The author thinks, maybe mistakenly, that it’s a matter, after all, not only of the material, and even not so much of the material . . .

The author has a story called “The Cross.” It is one of the best stories in terms of compositional completeness; in essence, the principles of the new prose are observed, and it seems to me the story succeeded.

Why the theme of the labor camps. The camp theme, broadly interpreted, in its fundamental sense, is the foundational and chief

⁴ On Sept. 2, 1965, Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote to Shalamov: “In ‘The Lawyers’ Plot’ it seems as if I had read a more detailed variant, and it was stronger.”

question of our day. Is the destruction of man with the help of the state not the main question for our time, for our ethics, that has entered into the psychology of every family? This question is much more important than the theme of war. War in some sense plays the role of psychological camouflage (history says that in times of war the tyrant draws closer to the people). They want to hide the “camp theme”⁵ behind the statistics of war, statistics of any kind.

When I am asked what I am writing I answer: I am not writing memoirs. There are no memoirs of any kind in *Kolyma Tales*. I am not writing stories either. Better to say, I am trying to write, not stories, but something that is not literary.

Not the prose of a document, but prose, long-suffering like a document.

Translated by Brian R. Johnson

⁵ That is, to hide any discussion of the Gulag.