

"TO RASSHCHEPLENNOE IADRO": FROM LUCRETIAN SWERVE TO  
SUNDERED CORE IN SHALAMOV'S *ATOMNAIA POEMA*

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: "To Rasshcheplennoe Iadro": From Lucretian Swerve to Sundered Core in Shalamov's *Atomnaia poema*

Varlam Shalamov's *Atomnaia poema* addresses a primordial "wish to split" at the core of nature and within the human heart. This wish to split is informed by Shalamov's Gulag experience as well as his reflections on Auschwitz and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Whereas Lucretius interprets an atomic tendency to swerve as an indication of free will, *Atomnaia poema* posits an atomic proclivity to split, that is, to self-destruct and destroy others. *Atomnaia poema* weighs the role of science, "its verses and its faith," in this destruction. Neither a treatise nor didactic counsel, *Atomnaia poema* is a conversation between physics and poetry, human and world, held in a "third language" whose rhyme and rhythm carry an emotional impact rather than a cognitive load. Splitting its own elements as it grieves the splitting atom, Shalamov pursues "Ovid's epiphany," releasing what is "housed in a single verse."

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Interest in Gulag survivor Varlam Tikhonovich Shalamov's prose and also recently his poetry has been increasing in the past few years. Manuela Consonni, in her 2012 study "After the Camps: Semantic Shift and the Experience of Pain," takes note of Shalamov's account of a shift in values and semantics that took place in Kolyma: "Shalamov writes about the adoption by the inmates of the criminal language that affects ordinary language," notes Consonni. "The striking phenomenon in the prisoners' language" that her own paper addresses "is the semantic shift that occurs within the units of the language already at the disposal of the prisoners."<sup>1</sup> "Shalamov, like Primo Levi and Hannah Arendt," writes Svetlana Boym, "speaks repeatedly about "changed scales" for understanding the camp experience that apply to all human emotions and relationships [...] and require new modes of understanding."<sup>2</sup> Boym considers Shalamov's approach to writing about the Gulag, in light of Adorno's "paradoxical" reflection that while poetry after the Holocaust must be profoundly different from what came before, "it is," at the same time, "now virtually in art alone," in Boym's words, "that suffering can still find its own voice without immediately being betrayed by it."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Consonni, Manuela "After the Camps: Semantic Shift and the Experience of Pain," in *Knowledge and Pain*, ed. Esther Cohen, Leona Toker, Manuela Consonni, and Otniel Dror (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 203 (note 47).

<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Boym, "'Banality of Evil,' Mimicry, and the Soviet Subject: Varlam Shalamov and Hannah Arendt," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 2 (2008), 344.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 342. Boym cites quotations from Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Ernst Bloch et al. (London: Verso, 1980), 188-89.

While Shalamov primarily confronts the intellectual roots of Russia's deadly prison camps and mass killings during the Stalin era, his writings also crystallize a larger conversation between literature and the modern world, between classical aesthetics and "a person of the second half of the twentieth century"—a century crowned by "the infamy of Kolyma and the ovens of Auschwitz." In his 1971 essay "(o moei proze),"<sup>4</sup>

Shalamov asks:

Откуда все это возникает? Как это все происходит? Мне кажется, что человек второй половины двадцатого столетия, человек, переживший войны, революции, пожары Хиросимы, атомную бомбу, предательство, самое главное – венчающее все – позор Колымы и печей Освенцима, человек – а ведь у каждого родственник погиб либо на войне, либо в лагере, – человек, переживший научную революцию, – просто не может не подойти иначе к вопросам искусства, чем раньше.

Бог умер. Почему же искусство должно жить?<sup>5</sup>

Where did all this come from? How did it all originate? It seems to me that a person of the second half of the twentieth century, a person, having survived war, revolution, the fires of Hiroshima, the atomic bomb, the treachery, chiefly — crowning all — the infamy of Kolyma and the ovens of Auschwitz, a person — and in fact, every family member who perished either or in war or in a camp — a person, having survived the scientific revolution, -- simply cannot but approach questions of art differently than before.

God died. Why, then, should art live?

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<sup>4</sup> Note on transliteration and translation: When transliterating, I have employed the Modified Library of Congress romanization system in the body of this text, while retaining alternately transliterated names of authors who have published their works in English. Alternate transliterations and Cyrillic script in quoted passages have also remained intact. Unless otherwise indicated, the Russian to English translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> Varlam Shalamov, "(o moei proze)," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/21/61.html>

For Shalamov, the catastrophic events of the twentieth century have rendered the Hellenic (and any post-Hellenic) vision of an orderly, beautiful, and just universe tragically naïve, even culpable. Shalamov's writings embody his response to the question, "Why, then, should art live?"

Shalamov's fictional work, Boym finds, heeds a "paradoxical imperative" for art after the Gulag. Shalamov writes of "the new prose" that is now called for:

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.<sup>6</sup>

Boym reads Shalamov's fiction in light of his reflections on "the new prose," querying how they might themselves embody "a prose lived through like a document." His stories, she finds, are a form of "mimicry," aptly described by Nabokov as an imitative act that facilitates survival from predators, but artfully exceeds its utilitarian purpose, or mimesis strictly speaking. "Mimicry that "exceeds the predator's power of appreciation" persists," Boym writes, "as a form of trickery and as a homeopathic antidote to the gulag bureaucracy."<sup>7</sup> Boym's primary example of language that performs such mimicry is the intentional and collaborative commission of a typographical error, in Shalamov's short story "Lida." "Like Shalamov himself, who was rearrested many times," Boym writes, a political convict in "Lida" is "branded" by the letter "T":

Krist is "branded" by the letter "T." The abbreviation "KRTD" appears in his file, a term applied to the most dangerous political prisoners. "T"

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<sup>6</sup> Boym, "Banality of Evil," 342.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 360.

stands for Trotskyism and, therefore, for the "death tribunal," giving his 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.<sup>8</sup>

Krist conspires with Lida, a secretary and nonpolitical convict whom he had helped once in the past, to remove the "T" from the abbreviation in his file. The "T" in Krist's criminal record gets deleted as a "typo," thereby erasing the trace of his Trotskyite crime and reducing the perceived gravity of his political crime. "Krist's friends try to decipher his luck," writes Boym. "Was it a misprint, a human error? [N]one suspects that Krist co-created his liberation with his own hands."<sup>9</sup> Krist "lives through"—both experientially and by means of—the misprint.

The altered document, which mimics an official document for survival purposes in a collaborative act of artifice, is presented as the product of an ingenious moment of inspiration, within the framework of a literary masterpiece (Shalamov's short story). Shalamov's "Lida" is prose "lived through" like an altered document, deploying mimetic, documentary, and memoiristic elements blended with fictional elements and artistic choices. Any meaning to be gleaned from the story's mimicry of mimesis is to be co-created with its reader; as the narrator of "On Tick" notes, the dealer in the criminal underworld needs to keep a close watch on his partner.

Artful mimicry directed towards but transcending survival also surfaces in Shalamov's "Artist of the Spade," in which a prisoner mimics productive use of the spade in the mines. Leona Toker's study of this work focuses on Bakhtinian, carnivalesque

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 357-8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 359.

elements in the narrative's structure. While Boym has considered the mimicry in and of Shalamov's works and Toker has examined their carnivalesque elements,<sup>10</sup> and while Boym with Shalamov has explored the ethical limits of any aesthetic depiction of the Gulag, Josefina Lundblad-Janjić, has recently explored Shalamov's approach to the unknowable in his play *Anna Ivanovna*. The tragic death of the heroine takes place offstage, unwitnessed, but implied. Tragedy in this account resists mimesis, resists language, and can only be conveyed through an almost Kierkegaardian indirection.

Shalamov writes in "On Prose" that there are no longer memoirs, only memoirists (*Нет мемуаров – есть мемуаристы*).<sup>11</sup> While Shalamov's stories partake of documentary elements and highlight the absurd horror of everyday life in Kolyma, they are neither memoirs nor reflective mirrors; they are a prose that is "lived through." The mirror in Shalamov's "Engineer Kipreev" that absorbs rather than reflects (a reference, perhaps, to the mirror metaphor for the soul in Zamiatin's *We*)<sup>12</sup> is perhaps an apt symbol

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<sup>10</sup> See Leona Toker, "Discourse of Lent: Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" and Shalamov's "The Artist of the Spade," in *Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction: Narratives of Cultural Remission* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 179-90.

<sup>11</sup> Shalamov, "(o moei proze)."

<sup>12</sup> In "Record Sixteen" of *We*, a physician at the Medical Bureau describes a soul to the narrator, D-503, likening it to a mirror that "keeps forever a trace of everything it touches": "[I]magine a plane, let us say this mirror. You and I are on its surface. [...] Now imagine this very same surface softened by a flame so that nothing can glide over it any longer, so everything will instead penetrate into that mirror world which excites such curiosity in children. [...] You see, the cold mirror reflects, throws out, while this one absorbs; it keeps forever a trace of everything that touches it. Once you saw an imperceptible wrinkle on someone's face, and this wrinkle is forever preserved within you. You may happen to hear in the silence a drop of water falling—and you will hear it forever!" Eugene Zamiatin, *We*, tr. G. Zilboorg (New York: EP Dutton, 1952), 84-85. Compare with the following excerpt from Shalamov's "The Life of Engineer Kipreev": "Mirrors do not preserve memories. It is difficult to call the object that I keep hidden in

of Shalamov's fiction, insofar as it resists reflection; the words of Shalamov's document-like prose are dense, and hold memories more than they reflect or reveal them.

Geoffrey Hosking has noted that in contrast with Solzhenitsyn's sprawling historical tomes, Shalamov's short, dry works do not offer overarching truths or moralizing tropes. Silence and aporetic endings are deployed in Shalamov's stories, in contrast with the spiritual reconciliation that appears to be achieved by Ivan Denisovich or the historical sense that is made of the Gulag in *The Gulag Archipelago*, *Cancer Ward*, and *The First Circle*. "There is something radically inassimilable in Shalamov's prose," writes Boym:

[Shalamov's prose] 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.<sup>13</sup>

Shalamov's work stands apart from other Gulag writings: its document-like prose that mimics but does not mime diverges not only from Solzhenitsyn's grand, Tolstoyesque

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my suitcase a mirror. It is a piece of glass that looks like the surface of some muddy river. The river has been muddied and will stay dirty for ever, because it has remembered something important, something eternally important. It can no longer be the crystal, transparent flow of water that is clear right down to its bed. The mirror is muddied and no longer reflects anything. But once the glass was a real mirror - a present unselfishly given that I carried with me through two decades of camp life, through civilian life that differed little from the camps, and everything that followed the twentieth party congress, when Khrushchev denounced Stalin." Varlam Shalamov, "The Life of Engineer Kipreev," in *Kolyma Tales*, tr. John Glad (London: Penguin, 1994), 465. "Perhaps the mirror attracts and reflects rays of evil, keeping me from dissolving in the human stream, where no one except me knows Kolyma and the engineer, Kipreev" (Ibid., 466). Finally, compare with these lines from Shalamov's poem that begins "Конец надеждам и расплатам," ("At the end of hopes and reckonings,"): "What am I to the earth? "I" – a trail of tears,/ the crease on a wife's face./ "I" – the unmelted icicle/ that still waits in a dark wood for spring" (Appendix B).

<sup>13</sup> Boym, 342.

historical and moralizing view, but also from Evgeniia Ginzburg's documentary, autobiographical accounts and the reflections of Barbara Skarga, Polish survivor of the Gulag after WWII, who traces the implications of the Gulag for western philosophy. "I [c]onsider myself an heir," writes Shalamov in 1971 in his Notebooks, "not of the humanistic Russian literature of the nineteenth century, but of the modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century." He cites his experimentation with sound and meaning, as well as with genre: "A testing of sound. Multiplanar and symbolist. A documentary sketch driven to the extreme edge of art."<sup>14</sup>

Shalamov's genre-resisting *Kolyma Tales* answer Russian futurism's "slap in the face of public taste" (*Пощечина общественному вкусу*) with a "slap in the face of Stalinism" (*пощечина по сталинизму*).<sup>15</sup> Shalamov gazes at other writers and literary genres, not, like the Russian Futurist Manifesto's signatories,<sup>16</sup> "from the heights of skyscrapers" (*С высоты небоскребов мы взираем на их ничтожество!..*)<sup>17</sup> but from the depths of Kolyma. A writer of "new prose," his view is not from above but from

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<sup>14</sup> "Я тоже считаю себя наследником, но не гуманной русской литературы XIX века, а наследником модернизма начала века. Проверка на звук. Многоплановость и символичность. [...] Очерк документальный доведен до крайней степени художественной." Varlam Shalamov, *Zapisnye knizhki 1971g. III: ed. khr. 41, op. 3*, Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/23/18.html>

<sup>15</sup> "Каждый мой рассказ – пощечина по сталинизму, и, как всякая пощечина, имеет законы чисто мускульного характера." "Each of my stories — is a a slap in the face of Stalinism, and, like every slap, has laws of a purely muscular character." Shalamov, "(о моеi proze)."

<sup>16</sup> David Burliuik, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov.

<sup>17</sup> David Burliuik et al, "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu," in *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' krylatykh slov i vyrazhenii*, ed. Vadim Serov, <http://bibliotekar.ru/encSlov/15/172.htm>

below, that of "Pluto, rising from hell, not Orpheus, descending into hell" (*Плутон, поднявшийся из ада, а не Орфей, спускавшийся в ад*).<sup>18</sup> While Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky called for Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy to be thrown "from the Ship of Modernity" (*Бросить Пушкина, Достоевского, Толстого и проч. и проч. с Парохода современности*), for Shalamov, the "Ship of Modernity" has turned out to be Stalin's slave ship. Shalamov's "new prose," while it shatters previous literary models, is ultimately a far cry from Russian futurism.

The reader's approach, just as much as the writer's, is fraught with ethical danger in the wake of the Gulag and the Holocaust. As Shalamov's narrator attests in "The Used Book Dealer," Fleming, the former NKVD investigator who was an ardent, if macabre, fan of his own victim, Gumilev, had an appreciation for poetry, but could not apprehend "the moral values of poetry" ("Нравственные ценности поэзии таким путем, конечно, не постигают[ся]"). As "sacrilegious as this may sound," Fleming and his NKVD colleagues could only "commune with culture" through "investigative work" ("Для Флеминга и его сослуживцев приобщение к культуре могло быть – как ни кощунственно это звучит – только в следственной работе").<sup>19</sup> "When reading books I would first of all turn to the notes, the comments," Fleming tells the narrator, "Man is a creature of notes and comments." When asked, "How about the text?", Fleming replies:

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<sup>18</sup> Varlam Shalamov, "O proze," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/21/45.html>  
As Boym puts it: "The narrator speaks as Pluto, the permanent resident of the underworld, not as Orpheus, an overly excited one-time visitor." (Boym, 348.) For a discussion of Shalamov's distinction between Pluto and Orpheus, see Elena Mikhailik's "Dostoevsky and Shalamov: Orpheus and Pluto." *The Dostoevsky Journal: An Independent Review*, Volume I (2000), <http://shalamov.ru/research/122/#t14>

<sup>19</sup> Varlam Shalamov, "Букинист," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/3/24.html>

"Not always. There is always time for that."<sup>20</sup> Shalamov's stories reflect back on their reader's own integrity, or perhaps moral complicity.

Shalamov translator and scholar Robert Chandler observes that Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* are considered "a masterpiece of Russian prose and the greatest work of literature about the Gulag," "at least by Russians and readers of Russian."<sup>21</sup> While Shalamov short stories are widely read in Russia and abroad, Chandler also notes that the famed Gulag writer's poems have garnered little critical attention. Yet many of Shalamov's poems take up themes refracted in other ways in his fiction, and raise provocative questions about how his poetry intersects with his fiction and with his privileging of documentary over literary writing after the Gulag.

One reason Shalamov's poetry has received far less critical attention than his short stories may be due to the perception that his poetry is inferior to his fiction. John Glad voices this view, for example, in the foreword to his translation of a selection of Shalamov's short stories:

Shalamov's verse is intimately bound up with his experiences in Kolyma, a circumstance that could not be mentioned at the time in the collections themselves. But his true talent was as a prose writer, and his poetry did not bring him the recognition he had hoped for.<sup>22</sup>

This passage suggests that Shalamov's published poetry books failed to "bring him the recognition he had hoped for" because his "true talent was as a prose writer." Without

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<sup>20</sup> Varlam Shalamov, "The Used-Book Dealer," in *Kolyma Tales*, tr. Glad, 266.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Chandler, "The poetry of Varlam Shalamov (1907-82)," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/research/229/>

<sup>22</sup> John Glad, foreword to *Kolyma Tales*, xiv-xv.

citing a specific poem or considering other Soviet or post-Soviet factors that might have caused Shalamov's poetry to be coldly received, Glad moves on. Leona Toker begins her 2014 article, "On Robert Chandler's Translations of Varlam Shalamov's Poetry," by emphasizing the success of Shalamov's prose rather than his poetry:

The fame of Varlam Shalamov [...] is mainly based on his prose works, presenting a philosophically saturated artistic testimony to labor camps in Vishera and Kolyma. Yet, as it usually happens with writers who attain a canonical status, a closer look is these days being taken at his less well-known work, namely his poetry. In fact, it was his poetry that first received literary recognition, even if from the audience of one — that one being Boris Pasterna[k], who was among Shalamov's favorite poet[s...]<sup>23</sup>

Noting that Shalamov's poetry was first recognized by only one person (albeit one of his "favorite poets"), Toker attributes recent interest in Shalamov's poetry to his "canonical status" as a prose writer. The merits of Shalamov's poetry do not invite this "closer look"; instead, the recent attention to "his less well-known work" simply reflects a typical phenomenon, one that "usually happens with writers who attain a canonical status."

Toker's article was prompted by Robert Chandler's translations of a handful of Shalamov's poems, in a recent anthology of Russian verse.<sup>24</sup> Chandler's 2014 essay "The Poetry of Varlam Shalamov (1907-82)" addresses Shalamov's poetry on its own terms, highlighting the beauty of his language, and the distinctive flavor, the tart, mouth-puckering, "violet honey" of the poems distilled from Shalamov's sweat and tears.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Leona Toker, "On Robert Chandler's Translations of Varlam Shalamov's Poetry," *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* No. 47, Winter 2014, 368.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Chandler, Boris Dralyuk, and Irina Mashinski, *The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*, London: Penguin, 2015 (Kindle version).

<sup>25</sup> "И, мешая грязный пот/ С чистотой слезинки,/ Осторожно соберет/ Крашенные льдинки." Varlam Shalamov, "Lilovy med," Shalamov.ru.

Shalamov's poems are not the celebratory poems of Russian's odic past, nor are they Romantic lyric poems celebrating the "I" or the beauty of nature; yet a number of his poems contain these poetic elements. Josefina Lundblad-Janjić's "Poetry and Politics: An Allegorical Reading of Varlam Shalamov's Poem "Avvakum v Pustozerske"" examines Shalamov's 1955 poem "Avvakum in the Wasteland," which has clear links to his prose about the Gulag.<sup>26</sup> In her essay, Lundblad-Janjić analyzes Shalamov's poetry on its own terms, rather than assessing its quality relative to Shalamov's fiction. With an ear for its present significance rather than for its past reception, Lundblad-Janjić notes that Shalamov wrote "Avvakum v Pustozerske" "two years after his return from the camps of Kolyma," and that he considered it "one of his most important poems."<sup>27</sup>

Shalamov's poems that are not about poetry or clearly related to the Gulag, for example his poems about Homer and Hamlet, about Robert Frost and Archimedes,<sup>28</sup> have received less attention. His cluster of poems about the atomic bomb is especially

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<http://shalamov.ru/library/11/1.html>

<sup>26</sup> Shalamov's untitled, four-line poem in which he references Avvakum in the taiga, where no human is to be found, "not even an enemy" ("Все те же снега Аввакумова века./ Все та же раскольникья злая тайга,/ Где днем и с огнем не найдешь человека,/ Не то чтобы друга, а даже враг[a]"), also invites comparison with Shalamov's longer Avvakum poem. Varlam Shalamov, in *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh* Vol. 3. (Moskva: Khudozh. Lit-ra, 1998), 33.

<sup>27</sup> Josefina Lundblad-Janjić, "Poetry and Politics: An Allegorical Reading of Varlam Shalamov's Poem "Avvakum v Pustozerske,"" Shalamov.ru. <http://shalamov.ru/en/research/239/>

<sup>28</sup> Irina Sirotinskaia provides detailed textual criticism of Shalamov's "Как Архимед, ловающий на песке...", in her "Questions of Textual Criticism Concerning the Poetic Works of V. Shalamov" ("К вопросам текстологии поэтических произведений В. Шаламова"). A study of Shalamov's poem about Archimedes may be forthcoming, by the author of this essay.

significant, particularly his *Atomic Poem*, "Marie Curie," his poem beginning with "At the end of hopes and reckoning" and his short poem about Hiroshima beginning with "Gold, purple and lilac." The imagery and theme of these poems interact with Shalamov's short story "Engineer Kipreev," about a nuclear engineer, the first victim of the nuclear bomb, in that he was consigned to the Gulag. Short stories which reference poetry also refract readings of his atomic poems in explosive ways, especially "The Used Book Dealer," "Athenian Nights," "The Snake Charmer," "Cherry Brandy," and his essay "Apollo Among Thieves." The motifs of splitting, poison, and the abyss<sup>29</sup> as well as the larch and the resurrection of the larch which recur in his atomic poems also beg to be related to these themes in his fiction.

Shalamov's *Atomic Poem* is especially significant. In a December 1953 letter to his friend and literary confidant Boris Pasternak, Siberian Gulag survivor Varlam Shalamov describes his desperate attempt to "save" himself "with poetry":

Just two months ago, lost in a winter indifferent to everything that surrounds it, a winter with no care for the people wrenching from it some little corner with a stove, some huts among the inescapable stone and wood, among halfhumans with no care for life or death, I tried now timidly, now in desperation, to save myself with poetry from the overwhelming and soul-corrupting forces of this world, of a world which I had still not gotten used to after seventeen years.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Shalamov's invocation of the "abyss" (propast') invites comparison with Fedor Tiutchev's abyss motif; see, for example, Tiutchev's 1850 poem with first line "Святая ночь на небосклон вошла."

<sup>30</sup> "Всего два месяца назад затерянный в зиме, равнодушной ко всему, что ее окружает, зиме, которой вовсе и нет дела до людей, вырвавших у нее какие-то уголки с печурками, какие-то избушки среди неизбывного камня и леса, среди полулюдей, которым нет дела ни до жизни, ни до смерти, я пытался то робко, то в отчаянии стихами спасти себя от подавляющей и растлевающей душу силы этого мира, мира, к которому я так и не привык за семнадцать лет." Varlam Shalamov, "V. T. Shalamov — B. L. Pasternaku, Ozerki. 20 dekabria 1953 goda," in *Perepiska s Pasternakom B. L.*, Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/24/1.html>

Less than a year later, Shalamov writes that he has completed a "long poem" about the "splitting of the atom," tentatively titled "Atomic Suite" or "Suite A."<sup>31</sup> Later published as *Atomnaia poema* or *Atomic Poem*, the epic 383-line poem addresses a primordial "wish to split" at the core of nature and within the human heart. This wish to split differs profoundly from the Freudian death wish, and is informed by Shalamov's Gulag experience as well as his reflections on Auschwitz, plantation slavery, and the atomic bomb. *Atomnaia poema* might be read as a response to Lucretius's notion of the clinamen, embodying both the primordial tendency of atoms to swerve and swerving off from it, positing a more egregious tendency of atoms to split, that is, to self-destruct and destroy others. While Lucretius and others have interpreted this tendency to swerve as an indication of free will in the universe and in humans,<sup>32</sup> Shalamov both affirms this in his writings on poetry and his emphasis on luck<sup>33</sup> (c.f. "Engineer Kipreev") and swerves off

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<sup>31</sup> Shalamov, "V. T. Shalamov — B. L. Pasternaku, Ozerki, 3-11-54 g," *Perepiska c Pasternakom B. L.*

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the philosophical implications of Lucretius' notion of the clinamen, see Michel Serres' *La naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce: fleuves et turbulences* (Paris: Les Ed. de Minuit, 1977) and Keith Ansell-Pearson's "Affirmative Naturalism: Deleuze and Epicurianism" (in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2014): 121-137).

<sup>33</sup> In Shalamov's short story "The Train," a prisoner released after 20 years in Kolyma is about to be attacked by a gang of hostile criminals, when another criminal steps out of the shadows and recognizes him. "In my pocket I clasped the new penknife that I had just bought and said nothing. Luck was my only hope. Patience and luck are what saved and save us. These are the two whales supporting the convict's world. And luck came to me" (Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 395-396.) See also "The Life of Engineer Kipreev": "In camp, letters are not answered, nor are reminders of unanswered letters appreciated. The prisoner has to wait – for luck, an accidental meeting" (Ibid., 469). "I never in my life betrayed or sold anyone down the river. But I don't know how I would have held out if

from it by reading the tendency to split as an indication of a profound split within the human spirit.

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they had beaten me. I passed through all stages of the investigation, by the greatest good luck, without beatings — 'method number three'. My investigators never laid a finger on me. This was chance, nothing more. It was simply that I was interrogated early — in the first half of 1937, before they resorted to torture" (Ibid., 456-7).

## CHAPTER II

### PHYSICISTS AND LYRICISTS

In 1965, Shalamov identified three poems whose success was due less to the quality of their verses than to their reflection of the "the thirst of the times."<sup>34</sup> In one of these dubiously honored poems, Boris Slutskii's 1959 "Physicists and Lyricists" ("*Fiziki i liriki*"),<sup>35</sup> the speaker ruefully observes that physics holds the place of honor whereas poetry has been put out to pasture ("Что-то физики в почете./Что-то лирики в загоне."<sup>36</sup>) Shalamov touches on this disparity in his 1954 *Atomic Poem*. In Canto 7, the physicist ("ученый-физик") receives the honors while poetry's potential is forgotten:

Ему медали и венки,  
Забыты древние стихи,  
Овидия прозренье,

Что удивить могло бы свет,  
Как мог вместить его поэт  
В одно стихотворенье.<sup>37</sup>

To him go the medals and wreaths,  
forgotten are the ancient verses,  
the Ovidian epiphany<sup>38</sup>

that it might astonish the world,  
how much its poet can house  
in one line of verse.

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<sup>34</sup> "Стихотворения, чей успех вызван не столько качеством стиха, сколько жаждой времени: / "Гренада" <М. Светлов>, / "Жди меня" <К. Симонова>, / "Физики и лирики" <Б. Слуцкий>." Varlam Shalamov, *Zapisnye knizhki 1965 g. III*, ed. khr. 34, op. 3, Shalamov.ru, shalamov.ru/library/23/12.html

<sup>35</sup> First published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in 1959. <http://scientificrussia.ru/events/13-oktyabrya-1959-goda-literaturnaya-gazeta-napechatala-stihotvorenie-borisa-slutskogo-fiziki-i-liriki>

<sup>36</sup> Boris Slutskii, "Fiziki i liriki," 1959. <http://poetrylibrary.ru/stixiya/all-147.html#chtoto-fiziki-v>

<sup>37</sup> Varlam Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomach, tom 3, Stichotvoreniia* (Сумка поchtal'ona), sost. I. Sirotinskaia (Moskva: Knizhnyi Klub Knigovek, 2013 (55-66)), VII.9-12.

<sup>38</sup> John Weaver, *Plots of Epiphany: Prison-escape in Acts of the Apostles* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 58.

While both poems address the privileging of science over poetry in the quest for truth, the title of Slutskii's poem refers literally to what Matthew Jackson has characterized as "[h]eated discussions" that "broke out in the Soviet press" during the late 1950s and early 1960s "over questions of technocratic organization, as well as over the status of *fiziki i liriki* (physicists and lyricists)." These debates were sparked by Khrushchev's Thaw, in which "the liberalization of intellectual life," in Jackson's words, "brought art and literature into contact with cognitive models derived from the sciences."<sup>39</sup> These cognitive models included the cybernetic theory of American mathematician Norbert Wiener, whose "lessons of cybernetics" the sciences and the humanities were "encouraged" to "apply":

Biologists, economists, engineers, and mathematicians, not to mention their cohorts in intersecting disciplines in the humanities, were encouraged to apply the "lessons of cybernetics" in their work. Between 1958 and 1961, an avalanche of publications and conferences devoted to cybernetics drove the term from science's esoteric periphery into the popular consciousness.<sup>40</sup>

The academic in Shalamov's short fictional work "Akademik" (1961) recognizes the renowned but evasive author of one such publication which he remembers from his youth, titled "The Unity of Science and Literature" ("Edinstvo nauki i khudozhestvennoi literatury"). The year the article came out, he tells the author who is now a journalist, "these topics were all the rage. The article would still come in handy for talking about

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 35.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

physicists and lyricists using Poletaevan<sup>41</sup> cybernetics."<sup>42</sup>

At one level, Shalamov may be mocking his own past authorial self in "Academic." The fashionable article's title sounds suspiciously like the title of Shalamov's own article "Science and Literature" ("Nauka i khudozhestvennaia literatura"), published almost 30 years earlier in *Science and Technology Front (Front nauki i tekhniki)*.<sup>43</sup> In the 1934 article, Shalamov cites "the engineers of the Sevkabel plant," who "write to our writers" ("инженеры завода "Севкабель" пишут нашим писателям") that "[w]e need a Soviet Jules Verne or [H.G.] Wells" ("[н]ам нужен советский Жюль Верн или Уэллс").<sup>44</sup> In the same article, Shalamov cites Lucretius Carus's poem "On the Nature of Things," which "expounds on the science of Epicurus—"radical enlightener of ancient times," to use Marx's expression."<sup>45</sup> Shalamov praises Lucretius' deployment of poetic techniques to expound on atoms and "the structure of the world." Not only can poetry convey scientific ideas; Lucretius' poem demonstrates that

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<sup>41</sup> A reference to Igor Poletaev, author of *Signal (O Nekotorykh poniatiakh kibernetiki)*.

<sup>42</sup> "В те годы, – академик улыбнулся, показывая свои хорошо отремонтированные зубы, – были в моде такие темы. Статья бы и сейчас пригодилась для разговора о физиках и лириках с кибернетиком Полетаевым" (Shalamov, "Akademik," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/3/9.html>).

<sup>43</sup> The article was published after Shalamov's first arrest in 1929 and his return in 1931 to Moscow; he would be rearrested and sent to Kolyma three years later, as the Stalin purges began.

<sup>44</sup> "Nauka i khudozhestvennaia literatura," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/31/9.html>

<sup>45</sup> "Римский всадник Лукреций Кар, [...] в своей поэме "О природе вещей" излагает учение Эпикура, — по выражению Маркса, "радикального просветителя древних времен"" (Ibid).

poetry can support thought, even "foste[r] a thought's development." Shalamov writes:

Поэма трактует физику Эпикура, развивает теорию атомов, теорию строения мира. Для разработки вопросов философски, вопросов чисто научных избрана форма художественного произведения, использованы средства искусства. И это не просто популяризация науки средствами поэзии. Ритм, образность поэмы не препятствуют, а способствуют развитию мысли. Искусство, поэтическое творчество здесь неотделимо от научного мышления. Ломоносов написал поэму "О пользе стекла", которая имела большую по своему времени познавательную ценность.<sup>46</sup>

The poem, a treatise on the physics of Epicurus, develops a theory of atoms, a theory of the structure of the world. For the development of philosophical questions, of purely scientific questions, he chose a form of artistic production, used the medium of art. This is not simply the popularization of science by means of poetry. The rhythm, the imagery of a poem do not impede, but foster, a thought's development. Art, poetic creation is inseparable here from scientific thinking. Lomonosov wrote the poem "On the Use of Glass," which had great cognitive value in its time.

Shalamov appears to be reclaiming a role for poetry in natural philosophy, effaced during what Foucault has identified as "the organization of disciplines"<sup>47</sup> that began to emerge in the sixteenth century and gathered force during Newton's time, solidifying in the nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Physical, life, and medical sciences emerged as distinct disciplines, clearly bounded from poetry's symbolic sphere by discursive practices that privileged the empirical and literal over the symbolic, the systematic and coherent over the aphoristic, and the anonymous over the authorial. In medical history, for example, "the practice of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 59.

<sup>48</sup> Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 71.

the aphorism and the commentary" gave way to "the practice of the case, of the collection of cases, of the clinical apprenticeship."<sup>49</sup>

Poetry's previous role in communicating scientific ideas was not limited to antiquity; poems continued to play an important role in "spreading ideas about natural philosophy" in Newton's time, Patricia Fara and David Money argue in "Isaac Newton and Augustan Anglo-Latin Poetry." Fara and Money write:

Although many historians of science acknowledge the extent to which Greek and Roman ideals framed eighteenth-century thought, many classical references in the texts they study remain obscure. Poems played an important role not only in spreading ideas about natural philosophy, but also in changing people's perceptions of its value; they contributed to Newton's swelling reputation as an English hero.<sup>50</sup>

Poetry went beyond the role of mouthpiece, actually "changing people's perceptions of" the "value" of science and of individual scientists. According to Fara and Money, Latin poets even influenced the "theoretical writing[s]" of Newton and other natural philosophers:

Whereas we are conditioned by our own two-cultures divide to place Latin and science in separate spheres, Georgian gentlemen drew no such distinctions: Latin poets discussed what we would call scientific topics, and philosophers—including Newton—brought their classical education to bear on their theoretical writing.

Shalamov's encomium to Lucretius and to the marriage of science and poetry reaches across what Fara and Money call the "two-cultures divide." At the same time, however, Shalamov's reach is not without ambivalence. "Lomonosov wrote the poem "On the Use of Glass,"" Shalamov observes, "which had great cognitive value in its time." Shalamov's

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Patricia Fara and David Money, "Isaac Newton and Augustan Anglo-Latin Poetry," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 35, no. 3 (2004), 549.

praise of Lomonosov's poem in this passage is arguably faint. The qualification "in its time" ("по своему времени") is especially telling, in light of the value Shalamov would later explicitly place on poetry's lasting truth as opposed to science's truths, which only hold "until tomorrow." More tellingly, perhaps, Shalamov omits praise for the poem's aesthetic value, speaking only to its "cognitive value," long expired, at that (the poem's "time" was the 18th century). Shalamov's second discussion of Lucretius and Lomonosov in the same article is more explicitly ambivalent. "Verse — the purest form of artistic emotion in the realm of words —" writes Shalamov, "can carry a cognitive load." The use of verse in the realm of scientific themes "promises, on the one hand," a way to "propagat[e] the ideas of science and technology." On the other hand, the use of verse in the realm of scientific themes "represents" (not merely "promises") "a most field of activity for the poet":

Вернемся к Лукрецию Кару и Ломоносову. И "О природе вещей", и "О пользе стекла" формально представляют собой поэмы, т. е. стихотворные произведения. Есть стало быть возможность разрабатывать научные вопросы в самой стесненной форме поэтического творчества — в стихе. Стих — форма наиболее чистой художественной эмоции в области слова — может нести познавательную нагрузку. Самая специфика стиха — ритм, звуковая организация — обладает по сравнению с художественной прозой большей силой непосредственного эмоционального воздействия на читателя. Использование в этой форме научной тематики сулит,

Let us return to Lucretius Carus and Lomonosov. Both "On the Nature of Things" and "On the Usefulness of Glass" formally present themselves as poems that is, poetic works. It became possible to develop scientific questions in the most constrained form of poetic creation--in verse. Verse - the purest form of artistic emotion in the realm of words - can carry a cognitive load. What is most specific to verse-- rhythm, sonic organization -- has in comparison with artistic prose a greater power to make a direct emotional impact on the reader. Its use in this form of scientific themes promises, on the one hand, a large channel

с одной стороны, большое русло пропаганды идей науки и техники, а с другой — представляет интереснейшее поле деятельности для поэта.

for propagating the ideas of science and technology, and on the other — represents a most interesting field of activity for the poet.

Exactly what this "field of activity for the poet" consists of, is left vague. Shalamov does not explicitly complete the implications of the last sentence's parallel structure, namely, that just as verse could be made to carry a cognitive load, science could be made to carry an emotional load. "[R]hythm, sonic organization" may be deployed to impact the reader—even the reader of science—*emotionally*. A "most interesting field" of the poet's activity may, it turns out, swim against the logical positivist current of science and technology. Dystopic science fiction that scares people away from science might be one such emotional load-bearing "field of activity." If poetry can, to refer back to Fara and Money, change "people's perceptions of [science's] value,"<sup>51</sup> the change might not necessarily be in favor of science.

While Shalamov does not discuss examples of "antiscience" poetry in his 1934 article, he does cite two "antiscience" novels ("Оба романа —антинаучны"), both by Aleksey Tolstoy: *Aelita* and *The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin*.<sup>52</sup> He also describes Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, in which "[t]he world is ruled by scientists" in "a Golden Age" which coincides with "the Ford era" and which is "created at the cost the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "К сожалению, широкую читательскую популярность получили романы Алексея Толстого "Гиперболоид инженера Гарина" и "Аэлита"" (Shalamov, "Nauka i khudozhestvennaia literatura").

loss of people's capacity for emotional life, of the forsaking of art."<sup>53</sup> Unlike Lomonosov's poem "On the Use of Glass," these novels are written by non-scientists<sup>54</sup> and address science in its modern inception, separated from the hexameters as well as the truths of poetry. Shalamov closes the paragraph with a powerful acknowledgement of the power of antiscience fantasy, citing the suicide of *Brave New World's* protagonist: "Such a science-fantasy novel might sooner scare readers away from science, than bring them closer to it" ("Такой научно-фантастический роман может скорее отпугнуть читателя от науки, чем приблизить к ней").

Shalamov does mention that Huxley's novel depicts *Western* artists' concerns over a science that has fallen into the hands of "the bourgeoisie," specifically the technocratic ideals associated with the U.S. However, in his article Shalamov moves fluidly between his discussion of "bourgeois" science and "science" in general. In addition, he does not explain what it is that distinguishes Soviet science from Western science other than being "young;" the very next paragraph begins:

Но если научная фантазия  
художников Запада скована их  
социальной слепотой, то какие  
необъятные перспективы  
научного предвидения  
открываются в стране  
победоносной молодой науки —

But if the science fantasy of  
artists of the West was  
shackled by their social  
blindness, what limitless  
prospects of scientific  
foresight open up in a country  
of victorious young

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<sup>53</sup> "В романе Альдоуса Хэксли "Великолепный новый мир" проповедуется идея "наука для немногих". Миром правят ученые (сравни с идеями технократии в США), и золотой век, ведущий летоисчисление с "эры Форда", создается ценой потери способности людей к эмоциональной жизни, отказа от искусства" (Ibid.).

<sup>54</sup> For a description of Lomonosov's scientific activities, see "Lomonosov, Mikhail Vasilievich," in *Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, Encyclopedia.com, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-2830902664.html>

в СССР! [...] Наше величайшее  
научное будущее ждет своего  
описания.<sup>55</sup>

science—in the USSR! [...] Our  
greater scientific future  
awaits its own writing.

The article shifts from asserting that artists of the West critiqued a bourgeois science, to dismissing these same artists as "shackled by social blindness," which rendered them blind to the promise of science in general. In the next passage, it becomes even less clear how Soviet science is different from "bourgeois science," as the USSR indiscriminately "soaks up all the scientific discoveries of the world" and "realizes" them:

Страна жадно впитывает все  
научные открытия мира,  
реализует их. Расщепление атома,  
переливание крови трупов,  
работы по определению пола  
зародыша, работы Мичурина,  
Иоффе, Павлова — сотни и  
тысячи интереснейших проблем  
ждут своего художественного  
воплощения.<sup>56</sup>

The country eagerly soaks up all  
the scientific discoveries of the  
world, realizes them. The  
splitting of the atom, transfusing  
the blood of corpses, work on  
determining fetal sex, the work of  
Michurin, Ioffe,  
Pavlov—hundreds and thousands  
of interesting problems await their  
artistic embodiment.

It is shortly after this passage that Shalamov describes Aleksey Tolstoy's artistic embodiment of science, that is, his "antiscience" fiction.

Shalamov's discussion of Huxley's novel and Aleksei Tolstoy's "antiscience" fiction in his "Science and Literature" article brings the pro-science status of his own article into question. Perhaps most tellingly, Shalamov originally introduces Lucretius as "[t]he Roman horseman" ("Римский всадник"), ominously echoing the title of Pushkin's narrative poem "The Bronze Horseman" ("Mednyi vsadnik"), in which a giant bronze statue of Peter the Great runs down a poor young man who has lost his love to a flood

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<sup>55</sup> Shalamov, "Nauka i khudozhestvennaia literatura."

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

and cursed the statue of the flood-prone city's founder in a fit of madness and rage. The very first words of his paragraph on Lucretius are "The Roman horseman" ("Римский всадник"); two paragraphs later, "Pushkin's" ("У Пушкина") opens a short, two-sentence paragraph about Pushkin's library. Shalamov is arguably deploying poetic techniques such as juxtaposition of words and literary references in his prose article, to generate contrapunctual subtexts and dissonant tones that color and complicate the explicit declarations of his prose article. Shalamov's "Science and Literature," in other words, houses a Trojan horse, or in this case, *Horseman*.

Whether or not Shalamov's early "Science and Literature" article ultimately fits the profile of its own spoof, or double, "The Unity of Science and Literature," the later Shalamov unequivocally identifies the danger of collapsing the boundaries between poetry and modern science. "The article would still come in handy," the academic in his "Academic" exclaims, "for talking about physicists and lyricists using Poletaevan cybernetics."<sup>57</sup> The real Igor Poletaev, whom the academic cites, writes in his 1958 book *Signals: On Certain Cybernetic Concepts (Signal (O Nekotorykh poniatiiakh kibernetiki))*:

We are nearing liberation from the fetishization [*fetishizatsiia*] of the human 'spirit' [*dukh*], soul [*dusha*], approaching the point where we can fully, or at least partially, understand the essence of those material, cybernetic phenomena that have been represented by these terms.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> "В те годы, – академик улыбнулся, показывая свои хорошо отремонтированные зубы, – были в моде такие темы. Статья бы и сейчас пригодилась для разговора о физиках и лириках с кибернетиком Полетаевым" (Shalamov, "Akademik").

<sup>58</sup> Igor Poletaev, *Signal (O Nekotorykh poniatiiakh kibernetiki)*, Moskva: Sovetskoe radio, 1958 (396), cited and translated by Jackson, note 110 in Notes to pages 34-35, *The Experimental Group*, 256.

As "material cybernetic phenomena," the inner lives of humans, and therefore human behavior, could be predicted and controlled through communication. Conversely, the "fetishization of the human soul" represented an entropic force to be overcome. Wiener's seminal cybernetic theory sought to trouble "the entropic tendencies present within all systems," by "examining tactics that inhibit entropy" and "develop[ing] modes of communication that would streamline and enhance organizational structures."<sup>59</sup> As Matthew Jackson puts it in *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*, Wiener's cybernetics sought to "reduce the "noise" that disrupts communication."<sup>60</sup> If in *Shklovskii's* terms true art is a "device" ("priem") that produces estrangement ("ostranenie"), deautomatizing our habitual compartments toward our lives, then Wiener's cybernetics is anti-art, an anti-estrangement device.

The cybernetic "avalanche" threatened to turn poetry's sacred ground, communication, into poetry's burial ground. The speaker in Slutskii's "Physicists and Lyricists" poem suggests that all poets can do is "watch as, like foam,/our rhymes fall/and our greatness gradually/retreats into logarithms" ("наблюдать, как, словно пена,/оппадают наши рифмы/и величие степенно/отступает в логарифмы"). Rhythms have been displaced by logarithms, soaring Parnassian flights by behavioral algorithms. Reading the poem "loga-rhythmically," mathematics has become the exponent to which poetry must be raised to produce the greatness enjoyed by science.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jackson, *Experimental Group*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>61</sup> "In mathematics, the logarithm of a number is the exponent to which another fixed

In Shalamov's view, Pasternak gave voice to a similar retreat, surrendering truth to physics, in an early manuscript version of *Dr. Zhivago*. In a December 1953 letter reviewing Pasternak's original, unpublished manuscript, Shalamov took issue with the following declaration: ""When a man is overcome by the riddles of the universe, he delves into physics, and not into the hexameters of the *Iliad*."" Shalamov's response: "This is so, and not so." The truths to be found in physics are very few, very dubious, and only true "until tomorrow." "Scientific truth," writes Shalamov, "is less durable than the truth of art."<sup>62</sup> Shalamov cites Goethe's "return" to an "old fairytale,"<sup>63</sup> whose poetic attributes help him come closer to disclosing the human soul than anything that might be proven in any scientific work:

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value, the base, must be raised to produce that number." Wikipedia contributors, "Logarithm," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Logarithm&oldid=665876925> (accessed June 7, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> ""Когда человека одолевают загадки вселенной, он углубляется в физику, а не в гексаметры Илиады". Это и так, и не так. В физике он найдет очень немного весьма сомнительных истин и то истин до завтрашнего дня.

И Гёте, зная косность современности (а сказка наша продолжает жить такой же, как и 100 лет назад, и также действует на детей), вернулся к старинной сказке, чтобы с помощью ее атрибутов провозгласить то, что душе людей было ближе поэтически, чем если бы было доказано в какой-либо научной работе. Научные истины менее долговечны, чем истины искусства и к тому же наука — не проповедь, искусство — проповедь" (Shalamov, "V. T. Shalamov B. L. Pasternaku, Ozerki. 20 dekabria 1953 goda").

<sup>63</sup> Shalamov may be referring to Goethe's closet drama *Faust*, which takes up "devil compact" lore, or (more likely) to Goethe's alchemical fairy tale, *Das Märchen*, translated by Thomas Carlyle as *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*. For a discussion of Goethe's alchemical motifs, see Ronald Gray, *Goethe the Alchemist: A Study of Alchemical Symbolism in Goethe's Literary and Scientific works*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1952.

И Гёте, зная косность современности (а сказка наша продолжает жить такой же, как и 100 лет назад, и также действует на детей), вернулся к старинной сказке, чтобы с помощью ее атрибутов провозгласить то, что душе людей было ближе поэтически, чем если бы было доказано в какой-либо научной работе.<sup>64</sup>

And Goethe, knowing modern conservatism (our fairy tale is just as alive as it was 100 years ago, and still moves children), has returned to an old tale, to proclaim, with the help of its attributes, what comes closer to the human soul poetically than if it had been proven in any scientific work.

Here Shalamov softens the boundary between creative prose and poetry, observing that Goethe's retelling of a fairy tale approaches the human soul "poetically." Shalamov writes, in "(About My Prose)": "Poetry is as far removed from science, as creative prose is distinct from the scientific" (*Поэзия настолько далека от науки, насколько творческая проза отлична от научной*).<sup>65</sup>

Shalamov returns to science's inadequacy before the human soul, in his 1970s essay "Sound Repetition—A Search for Meaning (Observations on Poetic Harmony)" (*Звуковой повтор — поиск смысла (заметки о стиховой гармонии)*). The human brain remains unpredictable, and therefore closed off to science: "[t]hose billions of nerve cells, which comprise the human brain, alas, are not able to help cybernetics predict the appearance of specific combinations of these nerve cells[.]" Science, which seeks "to make accurate predictions," runs aground on humans' aesthetic capacity. "[A]n observation of the brain's artistic abilities," he writes, cannot be turned "into a science experiment":

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<sup>64</sup> Shalamov, "V. T. Shalamov B. L. Pasternaku, Ozerki. 20 dekabria 1953 goda".

<sup>65</sup> "(About My Prose)."

Те миллиарды нервных клеток, из которых состоит человеческий мозг, увы, не могут помочь кибернетикам предвидеть появление определенной комбинации этих нервных клеток, не могут наблюдение за художественными способностями мозга превратить в научный эксперимент и дать нам возможность точного предсказания. Вероятность предсказания тут равна нулю. Это свидетельствует, что в данном случае речь идет об эстетических категориях — они-то и одерживают победу на наших глазах.<sup>66</sup>

Those billions of nerve cells, which comprise the human brain, alas, are not able to help cybernetics predict the appearance of specific combinations of these nerve cells, not able to turn an observation of the brain's artistic abilities into a science experiment and enable us to make accurate predictions. The probability of prediction here equals null. This bears witness, that in this case we are talking about aesthetic categories – those that are gaining victory in our eyes.

Poems and fairy tales, which tell truths about humans that exceed the discursive capabilities of science, likewise resist science's predictive powers. Science can neither account for art, nor for the soul that creates it.

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<sup>66</sup> Shalamov, "Звуковой повтор — поиск смысла: (заметки о стиховой гармонии)."

## CHAPTER III

### POETRY AS "THIRD LANGUAGE"

In July 1956, Shalamov wrote that poetry, above all other arts, is well suited for reflection on life's fate.<sup>67</sup> Rhyme, musical rhythms, alliteration and "intonation" are instruments of sense that exceed the grasp of logic; poetry's capacity for truth exceeds even its deployment in the "arsenal of philosophy," exemplified by Lucretius' "rhythmic treatise" *On the Nature of Things (de rerum natura)*.<sup>68</sup> For Shalamov, poetry's truth emerges not as a treatise, but as a conversation ("беседа") between human and world; the conversation takes place "in some kind of third language."

For me, poetry has never been a game or amusement. I have considered verses to be the conversation of a human with the world in some kind of third language, well understood by both human and world, though they may have different native languages.<sup>69</sup>

As a third language in which human and world converse and commune, poetry is thus for

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<sup>67</sup> "Стихотворная форма в своем развитии показала возможности особенные, оказалась незримо шире и глубже любого другого искусства — музыки, живописи, скульптуры" (Shalamov, "V.T. Shalamov — B.L. Pasternaku, Turkmen, 12 iulia 1956 g").

<sup>68</sup> "Она показала возможность размышления над судьбами жизни, возможность, превосходящую в некотором важном отношении средства художественной прозы, хотя бы (не говоря уже о собственно философии) эти стихотворные размышления не используют исключительно арсенал философии (как это было в ритмизованном трактате Лукреция Кара, например)[32]. Но самую природу свою звуковую и свое ритмичное музыкальное начало делает средством искания истины. Никакое другое искусство не обладает такой важной особенностью" (Ibid.).

<sup>69</sup> "Для меня никогда стихи не были игрой и забавой. Я считал стихи беседой человека с миром на каком-то третьем языке, хорошо понятном и человеку и миру, хотя родные-то языки у них разные" (Ibid.).

Shalamov a bridge language, a *lingua franca*. Shalamov perhaps refers to this "third language" in the twelfth canto (Canto XI) of his *Atomnaia poema*; "[T]hey will tell," he writes,

Как выговаривал слова,  
Какие знают деревья,  
Животные и птицы,

А человеческую речь  
Всегда старался приберечь  
На лучшие страницы.

[h]ow I uttered words  
the trees know,  
the animals and birds,

and human speech  
I always strove to set aside  
on the best pages.<sup>70</sup>

The third language is "uttered" ("выговаривал"), and it is "words" ("слова") that are "uttered," whereas the language native to humans, "speech" ("речь"), is implicitly *written*. On the best pages ("На лучшие страницы"), human speech is set aside. Human speech is thus set aside not *on*, but *for* the best pages. For the best pages, words are uttered, words that the trees know, the animals and birds." "[E]verything, that I wholeheartedly whispered," writes Shalamov in his poem "On Song" ("*O pesne*"), "Everything, that sounded faultless/In this mountain language, --" is "not given to translation/Into human language." He writes, in the fourth section of "On Song":

Не для анютиных ли глазок,  
Не для лобастых ли камней  
Я сочинил немало сказок  
По образцу Четьи-Миней?

Но все, что я шептал сердечно  
Деревьям, скалам и реке,  
Все, что звучало безупречно  
На этом горном языке, --

Псалмы, элегии и оды,  
Что я для них слагать привык,

Surely it wasn't for pansies' eyes,  
Surely it wasn't for rock faces,  
That I composed more than a few tales,  
Modelled after Saints' Lives?

But everything, that I wholeheartedly whispered  
To the trees, the crags and the river,  
Everything, that sounded faultless  
In this mountain language, --

The psalms, elegies and odes,  
That I used to compose for them,

<sup>70</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto XI.

Не поддаются переводу  
На человеческий язык.

Are not given to translation  
Into human language.

Так в чем решенье той задачи,  
Оно совсем не в пустяках.  
В том, чтоб тетрадь тряслась от  
плача  
В любых натруженных руках.<sup>71</sup>

So where is the solution to this problem,  
It is not at all in trifles.  
It is in this, that the notebook shakes from  
crying  
In any work-worn hands.

The "solution" to the "problem" of communicating to human readers what has been "whispered to the trees, the crags and the river" consists, not in translation into human language, but in a viscerally experienced "notebook" that shakes from the crying of its reader, a fellow survivor with "work-worn hands." If poetry is a "third language" between human and world, tears are a kind of third language between reader and poem.

The dying poet in Shalamov's homage to Osip Mandelstam, the 1954 short story<sup>72</sup> "Cherry Brandy" ("Sherri-brendi"), has neither the resources nor the need to write down his compositions:

Самое лучшее то, что не записано,  
что сочинено и исчезло, растаяло  
без следа, и только творческая  
радость, которую ощущает он и  
которую ни с чем не спутать,  
доказывает, что стихотворение  
было создано, что прекрасное

The best was that which was not written  
down, which was rejected and  
disappeared, melted without a trace, and  
only the creative labor that he sensed  
and could not possibly confuse with  
anything else proved that the poem had  
been created, that beauty had been

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<sup>71</sup> "On Song" is the first poem in the "High Latitudes" cycle (*Vysokie shiroti*) of Shalamov's *Kolyma Notebooks* (*Kolymskie tetradi*). A second, shorter poem with the same title ("*O pesne*") also appears in his "Postman's Bag" cycle of his *Kolyma Notebooks*.

<sup>72</sup> Shalamov writes, in "<О Mandel'shtame>": "Теперь я прочту рассказ "Шерри-бренди". Рассказ написан в 1954 году, когда я писал его, я не знал, что Мандельштама все знают и так. Возможно, теперь я написал бы этот рассказ по-другому. А теперь сам рассказ./ Я сказку тебе с последней/ Прямотой:/ Все лишь — бредни, шерри-бренди,/ Ангел мо[й]" (Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/21/54.html>).

было создано.<sup>73</sup>

| created.<sup>74</sup>

In this extreme instance, the poems may not even have been uttered aloud. Here, the poem is beauty itself ("прекрасное"), created ("создано") through creative labor ("творческая радость"). Unwritten and unspoken, the poem is Beauty itself, a kind of Platonic love child between human and world.

Whether the bridge between worlds is a "third language" or "beauty," whether it is written or uttered or simply "melts without a trace" ("растаяло без следа"), the boundaries between worlds must be respected for a "conversation" to emerge. Shalamov writes in his 1971 essay "(o moei proze)" that "[a] scientist cannot quote from a poetic work, for they are different worlds" ("Ученый не может приводить цитаты из поэтического произведения, ибо это разные миры").<sup>75</sup> "Norbert Wiener quotes from poetry and philosophy,"<sup>76</sup> Shalamov writes, but fails to acknowledge "the language barriers" ("языковые барьеры"):

Это делает честь эрудиции кибернетиков, но при чем тут поэзия. Надо ясно понять, что границы языка, языковые барьеры – непреодолимы. [...]

This does honor to the erudition of cybernetics, but where does it leave poetry. It needs to be clearly understood, that the boundaries of language, the language barriers are— insurmountable. [...]

Like a trophy captured from a conquered city, perhaps even like the art placed in the service of convicts' tattoos and the playing cards made of a cut-up Victor Hugo novel in Shalamov's short story "On Tick," the honor only goes one way: in this case, in the

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<sup>73</sup> "Sherri-brendi," Shalamov.ru., <http://shalamov.ru/library/2/14.html>

<sup>74</sup> Glad, *Kolyma Tales*, 72.

<sup>75</sup> Shalamov, "(o moei proze)."

<sup>76</sup> "Норберт Винер приводит цитаты из поэтов и философов" (Ibid.).

direction of cybernetics, at poetry's expense. The poem is mined for its contents in a pithy excerpt, while "the very soul, the very essence of poetry," is cast aside:

Ученый, который в своей научной (работе) цитирует какие-то строки то Гельдерлина, то Гете, то античных авторов, доказывает только, что он обращается только к содержанию, к мысли, отвергая самую душу, самую суть поэзии. [...] В Гомере ищут не гекзаметры, а прозаический, смысловой отрывок, а действительный подтекст поэзии неперево́дим — ничего другого у Гомера и взять нельзя.

A scientist who in his research (work) quotes some lines of Hölderlin, of Goethe, of the ancient authors, only demonstrates that he is drawn solely to the content, to the thoughts, rejecting the very soul, the very essence of poetry. [...] In Homer they are not seeking hexameters, but prosaic, suppositional excerpts, while the real subtext of the poetry is untranslatable —nothing else can be taken from Homer.

Poetry's language is "untranslatable" ("неперево́дим"), but not for the same reason that Leo Tolstoy's "absolute language" (with reference to Gary Saul Morson) is unparaphrasable. To try to pry a poem's meaning loose from its hexameters, its iambs and trochees, would be like trying to extract a snowflake from its crystalline structure.

"Le poème —" in the words of Paul Valéry, is "cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens."<sup>77</sup> As "hesitation between" sound and sense, poetry cannot be reduced to its sound or to its sense; poetry is equivocation, not equatable.

Shalamov refers to a poem's structure as its "sonic framework" (*звуковой каркас*) in his essay "Sound Repetition—A Search for Meaning (Observations on Poetic Harmony)":

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Valéry, "Rhumbs," in *Tel Quel, Œuvres*, II, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 637. Quoted in Hendrik Birus, Sebastian Donat, and Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek (Göttingen: Wallstein, *Roman Jakobson's Gedichtanalysen: Eine Herausforderung an die Philologien*, 2003), 206, note 21.

The sonic framework — it is the very artistic fabric on which are woven the most complex philosophical embroidered patterns. It is itself a domain of world knowledge...

Звуковой каркас — это и есть та самая художественная ткань, на которой вышиваются самые сложные философские узоры. Самостоятельная область познания мира...<sup>78</sup>

Philosophical knowledge can no more be disentangled from a poem's "sonic framework" than can patterns be lifted from the fabric on which they are embroidered. Echoes of Jakobson's "recurrent "figure of sound"" might be heard in Shalamov's 1970s poetic framing; Jakobson writes, in his much-cited "Closing Statement":

No doubt, verse is primarily a recurrent "figure of sound." Primarily, always, but never uniquely. Any attempts to confine such poetic conventions as meter, alliteration, or rhyme to the sound level are speculative reasonings without any empirical justification. The projection of the equational principle into the sequence has a much deeper and wider significance. Valéry's view of poetry as "hesitation between the sound and the sense" (cf. 426) is much more realistic and scientific than any bias of phonetic isolationism.<sup>79</sup>

Shalamov's philosophically embroidered "sonic framework" arguably resonates with Jakobson's Valerian vision of "hesitation between" sound and sense. However, in his much earlier essay, "About My Prose," Shalamov swerves from embroidery and hesitation, strongly privileging acoustics and dismissing a poem's philosophical content as a mere "slip." Shalamov's earlier view verges on what Jakobson characterized as "phonetic isolationism."

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<sup>78</sup> Varlam Shalamov, "Zvukovoi povtor — poisk smysla (zametki o stikhovoi garmonii)," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/21/62.html>

<sup>79</sup> Roman Jakobson, in reference to Paul Valéry's observation in "Rhumbs" (*Tel Quel, Œuvres*, II, 637), that "Le poème — cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens." Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960), 367.

Shalamov writes in "About My Prose": "For the poet a philosophical slip - all this is in passing, derived as a result of his main work with purely sonic material."<sup>80</sup> The poem's "sonic material" is its soul, its essence, whereas any philosophical content is a mere slip of the tongue. Returning to the poetry-quoting scientist, the scientist looks past the poem's sonic material, to the "philosophical slip." "What was for poetry an ancillary task," writes Shalamov, "a chance slip of the tongue, the scientist picks out and includes in his antipoetic argument."<sup>81</sup> To cite poetry in a scientific argument not only does violence to poetry; it enlists poetry against itself. Yet the poem abides; any poetry science touches will prove to be only the incidental, inessential elements. The poem's "real subtext" (действительный подтекст) cannot be "taken" ("взять нельзя").

If science is inherently "antipoetic" and the barrier between the language of science and the language of poetry is "insurmountable," then no bridge, no "third language" is possible. For a third language to emerge between poetry and science, as between human and world, a conversation—a mutually transforming encounter—must be possible. Shalamov's 1958 poem "Crystals" ("Kristally") addresses the birth of this third language, the distillation of human speech into poetic utterance. The poem's concluding lines present poetry not as a setting-aside of human speech, but as an almost alchemical transmutation, a crystallization: "Verse—it is crystals,/Crystals of our speech" ("Стихи – это Kristally,/Kristally нашей речи"). Verse materializes as "Snowflake-strophes"

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<sup>80</sup> "Для поэта философская обмолвка – все это попутно, производно в результате его главной работы с чисто звуковым материалом" (Shalamov, "(о моей прозе)").

<sup>81</sup> "То, что для поэзии было подсобной задачей, случайной обмолвкой, то ученый подхватывает, включает в свою антипоэтическую аргументацию" (Ibid.).

("снежинки-строфы"), "meticulous poetry/of an ancient measure" ("Точь-в-точь стихотворенье/Старинного размера") whose "clear structure" ("четкое строенье") dates back to the Homeric age ("Еще с времен Гомера –"). The snowflake-strophes, indeed, appear to crystallize ancient Greek culture: they are "clutching a single law,/The symmetry of the universe,/Of addition and division/And of excellent clarity" ("Един закон сцепленья,/Симметрии вселенной,/Сложенья и деленья/И четкости отменной.").<sup>82</sup>

"Crystals" wields a dissonant anti-strophe, however: Against the Homeric vision of clear structure and symmetry, the poem opens with a stray "anapest" wandering around in a nighttime blizzard ("В ночной метели белой/Скитается анапест"). The snowflake-strophes are "flying," moreover, "[w]here iambs and trochees,/like flashes of a catastrophe/are routed in the empyrean" ("Летят снежинки-строфы,/Где ямбы и хореи,/Как блески катастрофы/Разгрома в эмпирее"). The dys-strophic snowflake-strophes ("снежинки-строфы") encounter catastrophe ("катастрофы"), both in flying and in rhyme. Troy's fiery fall is invoked by the ash-like snowflakes falling in the midst of catastrophe and defeat or rout ("Разгрома"), and by the word for "structure," "строенье," Troy's (soft) rhymesake, in the first line of the very next stanza. The snowflake-strophes' subsequent "clutching" of "the single law," together with the weight of the snowflakes "crushing the shoulders" ("Снежинки давят плечи"), evoke Aeneas clutching his household gods with his father on his back, as he flees the fallen city.

"Crystals" echoes Mandelstam's encounter with "the Greeks" in his ironic 1931

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<sup>82</sup> Varlam Shalamov, "Kristally," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/9/36.html>

ode to cherry brandy: "Where to a Hellene/Gleamed beauty,/To me from black holes/  
 Gapes shame" ("Там, где эллину сияла/Красота,/Мне из черных дыр  
 зияла/Срамота"); "Where Greeks sped Helen/Over waves,/Salt foam spits/In my face"<sup>83</sup>  
 ("Греки сбондили Елену/По волнам,/Ну, а мне -- соленной пеной/По губам"). The  
 tidy symmetry of the universe, of addition and subtraction, the excellent clarity and  
 beauty, ring false to modern ears. Shalamov's "Crystals" evokes not only the fall of Troy,  
 but the fall of humanism associated with ancient Greece. "Crystals" evokes the utopic  
 Crystal Palace made infamous by Dostoevsky's underground man, the perverse  
 paradoxicalist for whom  $2 \times 2 = 5$ , for whom humanism's scion logical positivism falls  
 absurdly short in the face of human unreason, spite, and love of suffering. "And in our  
 day science is handed,/proffered an ingenious plan/by some kind of Homer," *Atomnaia*  
*poeta's* speaker wryly comments, yet science, with its "verses" and its "faith," all its  
 "authority and might," will never completely shatter the abyss ("пропасть"), "even if  
 everything under/its thumb, breathing with malice/and angst, longed to split itself":

И в наши дни науке дан,  
 Подсказан гениальный план  
 Каким-нибудь Гомером.

И озаряют сразу, вдруг,  
 Путь положительных наук  
 Его стихи и вера,

Его могущество и власть,  
 Которым сроду не пропасть,  
 Навек не размельчиться,

And in our day science is handed,  
 proffered an ingenious plan  
 by some kind of Homer.

And the path of positive science  
 will be illuminated all at once,  
 suddenly, its verses and faith,

its authority and might,  
 by which the abyss will never  
 shatter itself and for all,

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<sup>83</sup> Glad, *Kolyma Tales*, 68.

Хотя бы все, что под рукой,  
Дыша и злобой и тоской,  
Желало б расщепиться.<sup>84</sup>

even if everything under  
its thumb, breathing with malice  
and angst, longed to split itself.

Positive science, its path illuminated by a "plan," Homeric in its clarity and symmetry, its beauty in order, can never eliminate the abyss. Things will always get lost, go missing, on its clean, well-lighted path. "Propast" connotes both "abyss" and "to be lost, missing:" "propast" could indicate the noun "abyss" or the verb "to be lost, missing" depending on where the stress falls. In this passage, the rhyme and stress pattern of the previous line (ending in "i vlast") dictates that the stress falls on the second half of "propast'," indicating the noun meaning "abyss." The heteronym's other meaning, "to be lost or missing," is nevertheless in play. The darkness of the abyss obscures science's illuminating discoveries, losing one's way undermines the path of positive science.

An untitled poem Shalamov wrote four years after *Atomic Poem* that conjures "future Hiroshima" ("budushchaia Khirosima") begins with a travesty of Genesis: "Gold, purple and lilac,/ Gray, blue is the light" ("Золотой, пурпурный и лиловый,/Серый, синий свет,"):

Золотой, пурпурный и лиловый,  
Серый, синий свет,  
Вот оно, кощунственное слово,  
И спасенья нет.

Вот она – в кровавых клочьях дыма,  
В ядовитой мгле.  
Будущая Хиросима  
Встала на земле.

Как глазурь – зеленый крик ожога,  
Сплавленный в стекло.

Gold, purple and lilac,  
Gray, blue is the light,  
Behold it, the sacrilegious word,  
And no salvation.

Behold her - in bloody wisps of smoke,  
in poisonous mist.  
Future Hiroshima  
rises above the earth.

Like a glaze – the green cry of a burn  
fuses in glass.

<sup>84</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto VII.19-30.

Вот она, зловещая дорога,  
Мировое зло.

Девушке слепой огонь пожара  
Обжигает взор.  
...О судьбе всего земного шара  
Начат разговор.  
1959<sup>85</sup>

Behold her, sinister road,  
worldly evil.

A blind girl, flames of a fire  
burn out her gaze.  
...On the fate of the entire world  
the talks have begun.  
1959

The abyss of future Hiroshima rises above the earth: "Behold her - in bloody wisps of smoke,/ in poisonous mist." What is missing, lost, is evoked by the blinded girl. If Creation began with the word, followed by light, here light heralds the end, future Hiroshima, the abyss. The conversation between human and world, lyricist and physicist over "worldly evil" takes place in a blasphemous tongue, uttering the "sacreligious word.

Shalamov's 1959 poem "Marie Curie" addresses the Faustian promise of science. "Was it not for the sake of life," the poem's interlocutor asks, "that she opened to us/this very same radium/by which she was smitten?" (*He жизни разве ради/ Открыла нам она/ Вот этот самый радий,/ Которым сражена?*)<sup>86</sup> Radium, used in treating cancer,<sup>87</sup> was "opened to us" literally "for the sake of life."<sup>88</sup> Marie Curie and her

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<sup>85</sup> Shalamov, "Zolotoi, purpurnyi i lilovyi," Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/9/78.html>

<sup>86</sup> Varlam Shalamov, "Mariia Kiuri," in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomach, tom 7*, 132-133.

<sup>87</sup> "Radium is used to produce radon, a radioactive gas used to treat some types of cancer." Thomas Jefferson National Accelerator Facility, "It's Elemental: The Element Radium," Office of Science Education, <http://education.jlab.org/itselemental/ele088.html>

<sup>88</sup> "Radium" is derived from the Latin "radius," or "ray" (David Ball, "Elemental Etymology: What's in a Name?," A5). The Russian word for "radium" (*radii*) begins with "rad," a coincidental homonym with the "rad" in "radi," "for the sake of," which in turn shares a root with "radost'," Russian for "joy," and "rad," Russian for "pleased" or "glad," as in "glad to meet you."

husband Pierre "refrained from patenting the process" of isolating radium, Julius Liniecki notes, "in the belief that the potential benefits to society from the new element—especially in medicine—were too great to keep to themselves."<sup>89</sup> The speaker in Shalamov's poem is reflecting on an exhibit of Marie Curie's radioactive notebook at a Brussels exposition shortly after her death from radiation exposure in 1934:

Незримого свечения  
Отравленный поток;  
Хранящий излучение  
Тетрадочный листок...

Лежит листок полвека,  
Зловещий, как анчар,  
Он -- гордость человека,  
Разоблаченье чар.

Природы чар незримых,  
Где предвосхищены  
Пожары Хиросимы  
И ядерной войны.

И ты -- открытья жертва,  
Склодовская- Кюри,  
Листок -- твое бессмертье,  
Добейся и сгори.<sup>90</sup>

A poisoned flow  
indiscernibly glowing;  
holding radiation,  
the notebook leaf...

Lying half a century,  
sinister, like the anchar,  
the paper — pride of humanity,  
unmasking charms.

Nature's indiscernible  
charms, where portents rise  
of Hiroshima's fires  
and nuclear war.

And you — the victim of discovery,  
Sklodowska-Curie,  
the paper — your immortality,  
you achieve as you burn.

"Sinister, like the anchar," the notebook's "poisoned flow" portends "Hiroshima's fires/and nuclear war," and is yet the "pride of humanity."<sup>91</sup> Radium, despite its medical charms, brings death.

<sup>89</sup> Julian Liniecki, "Medicine after the Discovery of Radium," *Chemistry International* 33, no. 1 (2011), [http://www.iupac.org/publications/ci/2011/3301/9\\_lineiecki.html](http://www.iupac.org/publications/ci/2011/3301/9_lineiecki.html)

<sup>90</sup> Shalamov, "Mariia Kiuri."

<sup>91</sup> Uranium rather than radium was ultimately deployed in the nuclear bomb that devastated Hiroshima, and plutonium was used on Nagasaki. See "Types of Nuclear Weapons," Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty

"Marie Curie" plays on the partial homonyms "анчар" (*anchar*, the poisonous Upas tree) and "чар" (the genitive plural of *charms*), to suggest the deadly charm of Eden's forbidden tree. The image of the "anchar," or "Upas tree" also evokes Pushkin's 1828 poem "Anchar," originally published as "Anchar, Poison Tree" ("*Anchar, dreva iada*").<sup>92</sup> "Nature" has an "ominous quality" in Pushkin's "Anchar," writes John Mersereau Jr., "exuding its poisonous resin" which a tsar puts to deadly use:

Nature has a more ominous quality in "The Upas tree" ("Anchar," 1828), which paints a picture of a solitary tree growing in a pestilential desert, exuding its poisonous resin and shunned by bird and beast. But a tsar sacrifices a servant to get the poison, which he puts on his arrows to kill his neighbors.<sup>93</sup>

Through its invocation of Pushkin's "Anchar," "Marie Curie" casts radium as Nature's potential poison, put to murderous use by the powerful. In the "third language" of poetry, "Marie Curie" expresses a truth about the relationship between humans and Nature that a scientific proof could not.

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Organization, <http://www.ctbto.org/nuclear-testing/types-of-nuclear-weapons/>

Radium was used in the atomic bombs envisioned by H.G. Wells, in his 1914 novel *The World Set Free*.

<sup>92</sup> Wachtel writes: "This dark poem reflects Pushkin's thoughts on the origin of evil. The title is mysterious even to Russians; it would appear that this was the first time the word "анчар" was used in Russian. Pushkin himself felt it necessary to gloss it as "древа яда" — literally: "Tree of Poison." (Actually, in the first publication, it was not a gloss, but simply a part of the title: "Анчар, древа яда.")" Wachtel, *A Commentary to Pushkin's Lyric Poetry, 1826–1836* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 107-108.

<sup>93</sup> John Mersereau Jr., "The Nineteenth Century: Romanticism, 1820-1840," in *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, ed. Charles Moser (Cambridge University Press, 1999 (Google version)), 182.

"Marie Curie"'s "anchar" evokes the destructive potential, not only of science and of Nature, but of verse itself. To invoke Pushkin's "Anchar" is to invoke a tradition in which verses can catalyze death: "[Pushkin's] poem is powerful and suggestive," Mersereau writes, "as Turgenev demonstrated in his story "A Quiet Spot," where knowledge of these verses catalyzes the heroine's suicide."<sup>94</sup> "Poetry scalds, as it comes to us," writes Shalamov in "(About My Prose)":—"and is this not literary hypnotism?" (*Поэзия скальдов, как она доходит до нас, – и не есть ли это литературоведческий гипнотизм?*)<sup>95</sup> With hypnotic charms as ambivalent as Nature's, literature can scald as it saves.

Shalamov's *Atomnaia poema* explicitly references neither the "anchar" nor Pushkin's "Anchar." However, his *poema* does arguably play on the resemblance and possible etymological kinship<sup>96</sup> between "яд" (poison) and "ядро" (*core, nucleus*, as in "nuclear war"), evoking the "poison" which appears in the original title of Pushkin's "Anchar" poem ("*Anchar, dreva iada*"). Canto III opens with "This split core" ("*To расщепленное ядро*"), suggesting the destructive force of atomic splitting by sounding the kinship between "core" (*ядро*) "poison" (*яд*). The anchar's poisonous charm might also be heard in Canto V's concluding lines, which refer to taking poison on realizing that

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>95</sup> Shalamov, "(o moei proze)."

<sup>96</sup> Both words potentially share a common origin in the Greek words οἶδος "tumor", οἰδάω "swell," and ΟΥΓ εἶζ, "boil." See entries for "яд" and "ядро," in *Slovar' Fasmera/Vasmer's Etymological Dictionary*.

"[t]he core in any flower,/ In any chiseled petal/ Is ready to split itself[f]"<sup>97</sup> (Когда ядро в любом цветке,/ В любом точеном лепестке/ Готово расщепиться[я]):

Но я не знаю, как мне жить,  
И я не знаю, как мне быть:  
Травиться иль опиться,

Когда ядро в любом цветке,  
В любом точеном лепестке  
Готово расщепиться.<sup>98</sup>

But I don't know how I am to live,  
and I don't know how I am to be:  
whether to drink poison or to drink,

when the core in any flower,  
in any chiseled petal  
is ready to split itself.

The lines evoke the forfeited cup of Mandel'shtam's untitled 1935 poem that begins "За гремучую доблесть грядущих веко[в]":

За гремучую доблесть грядущих веков,  
За высокое племя людей, —  
Я лишился и чаши на пире отцов,  
И веселья, и чести своей.<sup>99</sup>

For the thundering valor of ages to come,  
For the lofty tribe of humankind,  
I'm deprived of a cup at my father's feast,  
Of happiness, and of honor.<sup>100</sup>

While the speaker in Mandel'shtam poem has forfeited his cup at his "father's feast," however, *Atomnaia poema's* speaker contemplates a poisoned cup, deprived even of the core in any flower, any chiseled petal.

In a tenuous and flickering "third language," *Atomnaia poema* holds a conversation between science and poetry, a conversation that never completely

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<sup>97</sup> The line might also be read in light of Tolstoy's description of Anna Karenina's chiseled appearance in *Anna Karenina*, as well as Anna's psychic and literal splitting within the novel.

<sup>98</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto V.13-18.

<sup>99</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, "За гремучую доблесть грядущих веков," Русская виртуальная библиотека, [http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/01text/vol\\_3/01versus/01versus/3\\_029.htm](http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/01text/vol_3/01versus/01versus/3_029.htm)

<sup>100</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, "For the thundering valor of ages to come..." *From the Ends to the Beginning. A Bilingual Anthology of Russian Verse*, russianpoetry.net, [http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner/Demo/texts/thundering\\_valor.html](http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner/Demo/texts/thundering_valor.html)

transcends "the ancient quarrel" (*В старинном этом споре*<sup>101</sup>) between philosophers and poets.<sup>102</sup> Like Marie Curie's radium and Pushkin's "Anchar," Shalamov's relentlessly ambivalent *poema* presents its reader with both healing and radioactive potentials. If the ideal poem is a "device" (*priyem*) that estranges, Shalamov's *Atomic Poem* is a device that threatens to split.

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<sup>101</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, X.25-27.

<sup>102</sup> Note: The line may also refer to the ancient dispute between Job and God.

## CHAPTER IV

### SHALAMOV'S ATOMIC POEM

Carmina sublimis tunc sunt peritura Lucreti,  
exitio terras cum dabit una dies.

Ovid<sup>103</sup>

#### *i. Background*

Закончил сейчас вчерне большое стихотворение (строк на 300) о расщеплении атома[.] Конечно, не в плане Хиросимы, бомб, ракетных самолетов и пр. Но если каждый атом материи таит в себе взрывчатую силу, то этим обнаруживается вся глубокая, затаенная враждебность мира, только притворяющегося нежным и красивым, и все — сирень, цветы — не может не выглядеть теперь иначе. [...] А, может быть, расщепление атома — это мщение природы людям — за ложь, обман [и т. д. и т. д.]

Называться стихотворение будет: "Атомная сюита" или "Сюита А", или что-либо в этом роде, сознательно нарочитое.<sup>104</sup>

I have now completed a rough draft of a big poem (300 lines) about the splitting of the atom[.] Of course, not in terms of Hiroshima, bombs, rocket planes, and so on. But if every atom of matter conceals within itself explosive force, then by this is revealed all the deep, concealed hostility of the world, only pretending to be gentle and beautiful, and everything— lilacs, flowers - can not look otherwise now. [...] And, perhaps, the splitting of the atom — it is nature's vengeance against humans - for falsehood, deceit [...].

The poem will be called "Nuclear Suite" or "Suite A" or something in this vein, consciously deliberate.

-Shalamov, letter to Pasternak  
1954

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<sup>103</sup> "The verses of sublime Lucretius will perish only when a single day brings about earth's destruction" (*Amores* 1.15.23-24). Cited and translated by John Miller in "Lucretian Moments in Ovidian Elegy," *The Classical Journal*, 92:4 (1997), 384.

<sup>104</sup> Shalamov, "V. T. Shalamov B. L. Pasternaku, Ozerki, 3-11-54 g.," *Perepiska c Pasternakom B. L. Pasternakom*, Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/24/1.html>

Shalamov's entire 1954 *Atomnaia poema* was only published posthumously, in 1989.<sup>105</sup> Shalamov wrote *Atomnaia poema*<sup>106</sup> in the small Kalinin community of Ozerki, after his 1951 release from Kolyma and subsequent release from Magadan.<sup>107</sup> In Siberia

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<sup>105</sup> The poem appears to have been published in mangled form during Shalamov's lifetime. Irina Sirotinskaia notes, in her "Questions of Textual Criticism Concerning the Poetic Works of V. Shalamov" ("К вопросам текстологии поэтических произведений В. Шаламова"), that Shalamov referred to *Atomnaia poema* as one of his "crippled verses" ("*стихах-инвалидах*") due to the aggressive editing and cutting it had been subjected to. However, Shalamov's notes about the poem, as well as revised versions, may have been lost due to the theft from the archive of his "thick notebooks" spanning 1956-1970. Sirotinskaia writes: "Textual criticism of the poetic works of V. Shalamov is unusually complicated. The texts are peculiarly multivariate, and what's more, the variance is often undated, unordered, with the loss of separate intermediate versions. [...] One more circumstance to keep in mind concerns the publication of the poems. [V]arlam Tihonovich spoke much about the "crippled verses," crippled by the editor. However, there is also a different judgement of his: they cut the verses, he regretted it, and then saw [t]hat it was better. [H]ow to give an account of a lifetime of publications? Well, when there is a digest with insertions (the poem "The Spawning"), or I remember the loss, which Varlam Tikhonovich grieved over ("On Song", "Atomic Poem"). But all of this is too unstable and accidental. Often unilateral and [...] subjective decisions must be made."

"Текстология поэтических произведений В. Шаламова необычайно сложна. Текстам свойственна много-вариантность, причем вариантность часто недатиру-ванная, неупорядоченная, с утратами отдельных про-межуточных вариантов. [...] Еще одно обстоятельство надо иметь в виду, оно касается опубликованных стихов. [М]ного говорит Варлам Тихонович о "стихах-инвалидах", искалеченных редактором. Однако есть и другие его суждения: обрубил стих, пожалел, а по-том увидел — лучше. [К]ак относиться к прижизненным публикациям? Хорошо, когда есть книжка со вставками (стихотворение "Нерест"), или я помню утраты, о которых сожалел Варлам Тихонович ("*O pesne*", "Атомная поэма"). Но все это слишком зыбко и случайно. Часто приходится принимать единоличные и, наверное, субъективные решения" (Sirotinskaia, "К вопросам текстологии поэтических произведений В. Шаламова," Shalamov.ru.. <http://shalamov.ru/research/21/>).

<sup>106</sup> First published in *Dal'nyi Vostok*, 1989, No. 7.

<sup>107</sup> He would not be rehabilitated and allowed to return to Moscow until two years later: "In 1951 Shalamov was released, though he remained in Kolyma, still working as a camp medical assistant. [...] From late 1953 Shalamov lived in the Kalinin province, but in

the previous year, the "first Soviet layer cake design bomb" was exploded.<sup>108</sup> On March 1, 1954, ten days before he announced the completion of his *Atomnaia poema* to Pasternak, "[t]he first deliverable hydrogen bomb design [was] tested in the Bikini Atoll," with "a yield of 14.8 megatons."<sup>109</sup> Later that year, the world's first nuclear power plant would begin to generate electricity in Obninsk, near Moscow,<sup>110</sup> ushering in "the nuclear power era."<sup>111</sup>

*Atomnaia poema* was written in the midst of rapid nuclear developments, in the wake of the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and as the Cold War's chill was deepening between the Soviet Union and western powers. Yet Shalamov's poem about the splitting of the atom is not about Hiroshima, bombs, or rocket planes (*не в плане Хиросимы, бомб, ракетных самолетов и пр*). "[I]f every atom of matter conceals within itself explosive force," he writes in his letter to Pasternak, "then all the deep, concealed hostility of the world is revealed by this." *Atomnaia poema* reads the splitting of the atom as nature's concealed hostility towards humans, as both sign and

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1956 he was allowed to return to Mosco[w]." Robert Chandler, *The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*, 382-3.

<sup>108</sup> "August 12[, 1953] - First Soviet layer cake design bomb explodes on a tower in Siberia. It was not a "true" hydrogen bomb." Atomic Archive, "Timeline of the Nuclear Age," <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Timeline/Time1950.shtml>

<sup>109</sup> "March 1[, 1954] - The first deliverable hydrogen bomb design is tested at Bikini Atoll. "BRAVO" has a yield of 14.8 megatons. Radioactive fallout affects local islanders and a nearby fishing boat" (Ibid).

<sup>110</sup> "June 27, 1954: World's First Nuclear Power Plant Opens," Tony Long, *Wired*, <http://www.wired.com/2012/06/june-27-1954-worlds-first-nuclear-power-plant-opens/>

<sup>111</sup> "The launch of the world's first nuclear power plant in Obninsk in 1954 was the beginning of the nuclear power era." "The Russian Electricity Market," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Russian Economy*, ed. Michael Alexeev and Shlomo Weber, 385.

execution of vengeance against a corrupt humanity: "[P]erhaps, the splitting of the atom — it is nature's vengeance against humans - for falsehood, deceit [...]". Invoking a form of poetic justice that might be found in Dante's inferno, the natural world only pretends "to be gentle and beautiful" (*только притворяющегося нежным и красивым*), that it might punish humans for their own "falsehood" and "deceit" (*за ложь, обман*).

## ii. Structure

Shalamov's entire *oeuvre* is both varied and vast. His famous *Kolyma Tales* (*Kolymskie rasskazy*) is but one of ten collections of his fiction listed on the official archival site for works by and about Shalamov.<sup>112</sup> Shalamov's poetry, on the other hand, is largely contained in his *Kolymna Notebooks* (*Kolymskie tetradi*), which he began in 1949.<sup>113</sup> Shalamov's *Kolymna Notebooks* (not to be confused with his *Kolyma Tales*) include six separately titled collections of poetry, with commentary:

***Kolymna Notebooks* (*Kolymskie tetradi*):**

"Blue Notebook" ("Siniaia tetrad'")

"The Postman's Bag" ("Sumka pochta'ona")

"Personally and Confidentially" ("Lichno i doveritel'no")

"Golden Mountains" ("Zlatye gory")

"Cyprus" ("Kiprei ")

"High Latitudes" ("Vysokie shiroti")<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> For a comprehensive list of Shalamov's works, see the "Oeuvre" ("Sochineniia") page of the online Shalamov.ru archive: <http://shalamov.ru/library/>

<sup>113</sup> Chandler and Dralyuk note: "From 1949," while working as a medical assistant in Kolyma, Shalamov "was able to write poems, which he later collected in his *Kolyma Notebooks*." In 1946 a doctor, finding Shalamov close to death, had risked his own life to enroll him in "a medical training course for which he was ineligible. After completing the course, Shalamov worked as a medical assistant at a hospital and in a lumber camp" (*The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*, 382).

<sup>114</sup> The shalamov.ru archive provides these titles, as well as links to the poems in each

*Atomnaia poema* is the fourth of 58 poems in Shalamov's "Postman's Bag" ("Sumka pochta'ona") collection.

*Atomnaia poema* is one of only two poems Shalamov explicitly titles a "*poema*;" the second, "New Year's Poema" ("Novogodniaia poema"), is not part of his *Kolyma Notebooks* collections.<sup>115</sup> Shalamov also refers to his "Avvakum in the Wasteland" ("Avvakum v Pustozerske") as "my little poema" ("моя маленькая поэма "Avvakum v Pustozerske"), in his *Kolyma Notebooks* commentary.<sup>116</sup> *Atomnaia poema*'s genre places it within (while not restricting it to) the lineage of Russia's Romantic *poema*; *Atomnaia poema* asks to be read as both a continuation of and a response to Russia's *poema* tradition.

Diana Greene defines the *poema* as a "verse epic,"<sup>117</sup> and identifies the epic as the source of both the *poema*'s genre and its "gender norms," in *Reinventing Romantic*

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collection, at: <http://shalamov.ru/library/>

<sup>115</sup> About this poema, Sergei Agishev writes: "Это стихотворение Шаламова, сочиненное экспромтом в краткий период относительного благополучия в его скитаниях "от больницы к забюю", не только шуточное – в нем невозможно не заметить повседневные ужасы Колымы и суровые условия работы лагерной медицины." Notes to Shalamov's "Novogodniaia poema," ed. Agishev, Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/library/8/21.html> <http://shalamov.ru/library/8/21.html>

<sup>116</sup> Shalamov, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomach, tom 3*, 450. Cited by Lundblad-Janjic, in "Poetry and Politics: An Allegorical Reading of Varlam Shalamov's Poem "Avvakum v Pustozerske,"" note 17, Shalamov.ru, <http://shalamov.ru/en/research/239/>

<sup>117</sup> Diana Greene, *Reinventing Romantic Poetry: Russian Women Poets of the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Madison, WI: Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 60. Greene offers a critical discussion of the "poema" as a genre within Russian poetry, 60 ff.

*Poetry: Russian Women Poets of the Mid-Nineteenth Century*:<sup>118</sup> Greene traces the origins of the Russian Romantic *poema* in particular, from the first Russian *poema* (Mikhail Kheraskov's 1779 *Rossiada* (*The Russiad*)<sup>119</sup>), through the four works published during Pushkin's lifetime with the title "Poemy,"<sup>120</sup> as well as to the "mock-epic parodies" of *Rossiada*, including Pushkin's *Ruslan i Liudmila*, and the "poemas" "inspired by the Decembrist movement that culminated in the abortive uprising of 1825." The latter "poemas," "like the classical kind, focused on national destiny," but "also served as covert calls to overthrow Russian autocracy—for example, Kondratii Ryleev's *Voinarovs'kii* (1823-1825) and *Nalivaiko* (1823-1825)."<sup>121</sup> According to Greene, the Romantic *poema*, "introduced by Pushkin,"<sup>122</sup> "continued the epic's focus on national destiny, but with a very different ideology." Citing Pushkin's 1822 *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* (*Bakhchisaraiskii fontan*) and his 1824 *The Gypsies* (*Tsygany*) among others, Greene identifies "significant generic differences from the classical epic," including "a rejection of "public, objective, universal, and heroic" norms."<sup>123</sup> The

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<sup>118</sup> "Various definitions of the epic describe it as a male-gendered genre, written by men, about men, and for men." Greene cites, among others, Ezra Pound, who called the epic "the speech of a nation through the mouth of one man." "Quoted in S. Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety, 204," cited in Greene, *Reinventing Romantic Poetry*, 60.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>122</sup> Greene cites examples that include Pushkin's 1822 *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* (*Bakhchisaraiskii fontan*) and his 1824 *The Gypsies* (*Tsygany*), *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

Romantic *poema* "replaced the epic's glorification of empire building or the founding of a nation with an implied approval of revolutionary politics."<sup>124</sup> In Pushkin's *Mednyi vsadnik*, Greene identifies both revolutionary politics and the Romantic hero's "seemingly personal quest for freedom," in what is at the same time an "open return" to the classical epic "theme of national destiny":

Contemporary readers thus understood in a broader political context one of the central conventions of the Romantic *poema*—the hero's seemingly personal quest for freedom expressed in his rebellion against authority. Another source for the revolutionary ideology of the Romantic *poema* may have been the Decembrist *poema*. In any case, Pushkin's open return to the theme of national destiny in his last *poema*, *Mednyi vsadnik* (*The Bronze Horseman*, 1833), suggests that this theme was always present in the genre."<sup>125</sup>

While Shalamov's "New Years Poema" might be classified as a "mock-epic parody"<sup>126</sup> *poema* (albeit with dark undercurrents), akin to Pushkin's *Ruslan i Liudmila*, his "Avvakum in the Wasteland" arguably approximates a Decembrist *poema*, along the lines of Ryleev's *Voinarovs'kii* or *Nalivaiko. Atomnaia poema*, on the other hand, both suits and bursts the bounds of what Greene identifies as Pushkin's "last *poema*," *Mednyi vsadnik*. Whereas *Mednyi vsadnik* addresses national destiny, *Atomnaia poema* concerns "the fate of the entire world."<sup>127</sup> *Atomnaia poema* is also a nod to Lucretius' *On the*

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<sup>124</sup> Greene cites "Byron's literary" and political "influence": "Byron's literary influence on the *poema* cannot be separated from his political influence as a well-known supporter of revolutionary causes." *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 62. Greene uses this term in a different context.

<sup>127</sup> "...О судьбе всего земного шара" (Varlam Shalamov, "Zolotoi, purpurnyi i lilovyi," *Shalamov.ru*, <http://shalamov.ru/library/9/78.html>), line 15.

*Nature of Things*, which Shalamov refers to as a "poema" in his "Nauka i khudozhestvennaia literatura."<sup>128</sup> To Lucretius' account of human destiny in light of atoms falling through a void, Shalamov answers with human destruction in light of the atom's capacity to split.

*Atomnaia poema* is composed of twelve cantos, including a prelude and eleven numbered cantos (I through XI). Each canto, in turn, is comprised of a distinct number of tercets. The number of tercets in each canto varies in an almost perfectly symmetrical<sup>129</sup> pattern, evoking a ring composition. What might more accurately be described as a "broken" ring composition emerges, in four descending waves of three: Cantos I-III contain 18-12-6 tercets, respectively; Cantos IV-VI contain 12-12-6 tercets; Cantos VII-IX contain 10-10-6 tercets, and Cantos X-XII contain 18-10-9 tercets. The nearly symmetrical pattern that emerges is perhaps best appreciated visually (see below). The grid on the left ("Tercet Count") lists the number of tercets in each canto; the grid on the right ("Canto") lists the canto number corresponding to the tercet count on the left. For example, the Prelude (abbreviated as "Pr.") has 18 tercets; so does Canto IX. Canto VII has 10 tercets:

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<sup>128</sup> "Римский всадник Лукреций Кар, умерший в 51 г. до нашей эры, в своей поэме "О природе вещей" излагает учение Эпикура, — по выражению Маркса, "радикального просветителя древних времен". Поэма трактует физику Эпикура, развивает теорию атомов, теорию строения мира" (Shalamov, "Nauka i khudozhestvennaia literatura").

<sup>129</sup> "Symmetrical," not in the sense of two opposing mirror images, but in the sense of having a balanced pattern or order.

**Tercet Count:**

18	12	10	18
12	12	10	10
6	6	6	9

**Canto:**

Pr.	III	VI	IX
I	IV	VII	X
II	V	VIII	XI

On the "Tercet Count" grid, note the break in the pattern in the lower-right corner (the "9"). Canto XI has nine tercets, whereas six tercets would have rendered the grid's pattern perfectly symmetrical.

The final canto's nine tercets might be an intentional play on the "'ninth wave" (*deviatii val*), which appears in Canto IV of *Atomnaia poema*: "[w]e were given a concert/ by some kind of ninth swell –/ a likeness of the netherworld,/ Only on an ocean wav[e]" ([н]ам концерт давал/ Какой-нибудь девятый вал–/ Подобье преисподней,/ То только на морской волн[e]). According to sailor's legend the ninth wave, or swell, is the highest and most destructive in a series of waves.<sup>130</sup> *Atomnaia poema* itself ends on a ninth wave, or, at least, a ninth tercet.

*iii. Canto Overview*

"Poetry is untranslatable," Shalamov writes in "O moei proze," and is "not given to prosaic exposition." (*Поэзия неперевода, не поддается прозаическому изложению*). The following overview of each canto, in English no less, is fallacious at its very inception. I offer this frayed rope ladder to the reader climbing into the ark of

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<sup>130</sup> "The Ninth Wave" (*Deviatii val*) is the name of a famous painting by Russian Armenian painter Ivan Aivazovskii. The final nine tercets might also conceivably refer to early twentieth century Symbolist composer and poet Alexander Scriabin's *Piano Sonata No. 9, Op. 68*, known as the *Black Mass Sonata*.

*Atomnaia poema* for the first time, with the intention that it be discarded immediately after boarding.

**Overview of the Cantos (With Stanza Count):**

Prologue: (18) Opens with ashes in a third person voice, then shifts to a first-person childhood reminiscence of a devastating forest fire (likely a reference to the mysterious Tunuguska explosion) that may have weakened the speaker's heart. Remember thinking the trees would rise again "in all their green might, with life's juices thickening in their roots; ends with a vision of emerald crowns rising high again.

I (12) Shifts to the present's "shuffle of leaving days," the speaker's pain, scientific discoveries that bring only death, allusions to a Last Judgement; a new Noah travels with rockets to an Ararat on Betelgeuse, blows into a feeling zurna and plucks a minor chord, singing of grief on a nearby radiowave, sorrows over the land he has left.

II (6) Describes the vanished past, which now seems like a fairy tale: there was bread for everyone, when exhausted people were not whipped like work horses, the 20th century was not yet visible, and Meccas flourished in which human tried to call human brother, flattery was not honored, honor was not trampled, and the atom did not split asunder.

III (12) An apocalyptic future is legible in a deceptive and corrupt present. That sundered core will turn the world's insides out, revealing to us what hydrogen means: the sticky green leaves, the world, is a weapons cache; describes the mineral's deceit, the clouds and black earth—matter—have become material for murder, malice conceals itself in flowers, the thunderstorm is like childish cap gun, the world holds spellbound

dynamite in its being, the drowsy lilac will lead us to grave, the seismologist will tremble, the New Testament will tumble down from bookshelves to earth.

IV (12) Emphasizes the unprecedented scale of atomic destruction, which would make Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* turn pale and flee his pedestal. Water has shown us on a small scale the caprices of high tide, but compared with what heavy water can do past floods were nothing, befitting only verses. Then, the ninth wave gave us concerts; a mere likeness of the underworld, it surged towards God's mercy. Looks back on the Romantic era, almost as a personal reminiscence of "our" past. Refers to unrequited love, a duel, dying of a love not believed in now, though decorum usually prevailed over spilled blood.

V (6) The speaker returns to first person, present: "What I took these forty years" for cherry flowers now climbs into arsenal, in the likeness of bomb; a terrifying raw material bursting into the speaker's own being, a sinister death mask. "I don't know how I am to live," when the core in any flower is ready to split itself.

VI (10) Describes what is now left to "us." They will take from us the yellow maple, we no longer believe them, we are still alive, we look into the world for something to believe in, for our eyes to rest on; to us is left the flickering celestial light, only light and sound until doomsday; losing the familiar world, we will demand for harps and lyres a singular trust.

VII (10) What ancient poets knew, the physicist now resurrects in lab, forgetting Ovid's epiphany, how much can be housed in a line of verse; it is too frightening to recall the fate of the prophets sent so many times, only to die in prisons and in hospitals. In our day, Homer hands science an ingenious plan, the path of positive science is illuminated,

but all its verses and its faith, its authority and might, will never shatter the abyss once and for all, even if everything under its thumb, breathing with malice, longed to split itself.

VIII (6) Before, the hand of God chastened sin, banished Eve from Eden. Levelled the earth, in a tide of wrath. Maybe nature has a wish to call us to account with a physical phenomenon, for the murderer's impunity, omnipotence of stupidity, the soul's corruption, lies, deception; nature, which has long been ready to take revenge on any country for trampled honor, prepares atomic vengeance without saying a word.

IX (18) Open with a Darwinian declaration about a law of nature, then seems to refute it. "Tough talk is born of a diseased heart set on duty and glory." Everyone lacks the strength to grasp their own truth, to be again at one. The speaker then shifts to first person: If bread is no longer shared, family is no longer supportive, and each seeks in the dark his own singular road to a deceptive dream, then "I'm" fit only to climb into the noose. The speaker looks with surprise at the dug-up abyss, and will not fall there, but will hold out on the slippery ice, where the wind of past years sweeps away someone's trail.

X (10) Cocks proclaim naïve verses, chained boats holding fast to dreams shudder from a wave. The rest of the Canto gives the sea's perspective, which takes a chilling turn at the end: To the sea, it seems in vain for anchors to hold them back with a rusty chain, that it's time to swim there, where silent water stoops to plowed steppes, resembling a field of virgin soil upturned, as if God's plow, archangel's plowshares were digging hummus. To the sea, it seems that if a squall overtook the boats, out of kindheartedness the squall would pass over them. To the sea, it seems that if dead rowers were planted in

place of the living, the dead rowers would wander among the skerries no worse than the living ones, in the manner of the Flying Dutchman.

XI (9) The speaker imagines his skeleton being carelessly pulled from the snow, and shifts almost imperceptibly from what "they will tell" about him ("how in the wasteland I rummaged through a Russian lexicon") to his own account: "how I uttered words the trees knew, the animals and birds." The speaker ends repeating I, echo-like, split between two sides: "I am—plaintiff and suitor of impassible grief," "I am—there, where there is pain," "I am—there, where there is groaning," "in eternal litigation between two sides."

*iv. Analysis*

Хрустели кости у кустов,  
И пепел листьев и цветов  
Посеребрил округу.

А то, что не пошло на слом,  
Толкало ветром и огнем  
В объятия друг другу.<sup>131</sup>

Bones of shrubs crunched,  
and ashes of leaves and flowers  
ensilvered the region.

And those things not reduced to dust  
were thrust by wind and fire  
into an embrace of one another.

—Prelude, *Atomic Poem*

Когда-нибудь на тусклый свет  
Бредущих по небу планет  
И вытащат небрежно

Для опознания примет  
Скелет пятидесяти лет,  
Покрытый пылью снежной.

Склепают ребра кое-как,  
И пальцы мне сведут в кулак,

Someday by the dimming light  
as planets wander through the sky  
they will carelessly pull out

for identifying signs  
a fifty-year old skeleton,  
powdered with snowy dust.

They will rivet the ribs any which way,  
fingers driven towards me in a fist,

<sup>131</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poeta*, вступление, 1-6.

И на ноги поставят,<sup>132</sup>

and I will be stood on my feet,  
—Canto XI, *Atomic Poem*

Shalamov's *Atomnaia poema* begins with fire, and ends with ice. From the prelude's childhood recollection of a burned-down forest,<sup>133</sup> to the speaker's vision in the final canto of his own bones being exhumed from an icy wasteland,<sup>134</sup> the poem begins with the powder of ashes and ends with the powder of snow. From ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Framed by a human lifespan, *Atomnaia poema* also exceeds this frame. Looking back at Eve's expulsion from Eden, the poem looks ahead to a "new Noah" whose ark will be in space, whose Ararat will be on Betelgeuse. The time and place of *Atomnaia poema* are Biblical, or rather, post-Biblical, backwards-looking even at its most futuristic, emotionally intimate at its most spatially distant. In lieu of a forward-looking covenant with God, the new Noah of Canto I "will pluck a thin string/trembling in mino[r]" ("И дернет тонкую струну,/ Дрожащую в минор[е]") and "sing of grief" ("запоет про горе"); the new Noah will look back and "sorrow over the land" he left ("И пожалеет ту страну"):

И от ковчегowych кают  
Ракеты мало отстают  
В своем стремленьи к звездам.

And out of the ark's cabins  
rockets lag a little behind  
in their urge towards the stars.

И каждый отыскать бы рад  
На Бетельгейзе Арарат,

And each would be happy  
to find Ararat on Betelgeuse,

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<sup>132</sup> *Atomnaia poema*, XI.1-9.

<sup>133</sup> Likely a reference to the mysterious 1908 Tunguska explosion in Siberia.

<sup>134</sup> Shalamov refers to a poem's "звуковой каркас," literally "sonic carcass," in "Zvukovoi povtor — poisk smysla (zametki o stikhovoi garmonii)."

Пока еще не поздно.

Он там причалит на ночлег  
Свой обтекаемый ковчег,  
И, слезы вытирая,

Там перед новою луной  
Протянет руки новый Ной,  
Избавленный от рая,

И дунет в чуткую зурну,  
И дернет тонкую струну,  
Дрожащую в миноре,

И при звездах и при луне  
На ближней радиоволне  
Он запоеет про горе.

И, перемножив ширину  
Площадки звездной на длину,  
В уме расчет прикинув,

Он снова вспомнит старину  
И пожалеет ту страну,  
Которую покинул...<sup>135</sup>

while it is not too late.

He will moor his gliding ark there  
for the night  
and, wiping tears away,

before a new moon  
the new Noah will stretch out his hands,  
delivered from paradise,

blow into a feeling zurna,  
and pluck a thin string,  
trembling in minor,

and by the stars and by the moon  
on a nearby radiowave  
he will sing of grief.

And, multiplying the width  
of the stars' square by the length,  
reckoning the cost in his mind,

he will again remember times past  
and sorrow over the land,  
which he left ...

Delivered, not to Paradise, but *from* it, the new Noah will reckon not in cubits but in *cost*:

"multiplying the width/of the stars' square by the length,/ reckoning the cost in his mind[,] he will "remember times past" and "sorrow over the land,/ which he left..." His hands are outstretched not to heaven, but to the earthly paradise he has lost. The sorrowful backward glance to an abandoned land and a time past, together with the sense of urgency—"while it is not too late" ("Пока еще не поздн[о]")—evoke Lot's wife, whose "restless voice" tells her "It's not too late" ("Не поздн[о]") in Anna Akhmatova's 1924 poem "Lotova zhena":

"It's not too late, you can still look back

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<sup>135</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto I.13-36.

at the red towers of your native Sodom,  
 the square where once you sang, the spinning-shed,  
 at the empty windows set in the tall house  
 where sons and daughters blessed your marriage-bed." <sup>136</sup>

Like Lot's wife, Shalamov's new Noah travels light: his ark is not packed with family members, animals, or helpers. His only company the stars and the "new moon," "on a nearby radiowave/ he will sing of grief." Through rhymed lines— "И, слезы вытира[я]" (*And, wiping away tears*) and "Избавленный от ра[я]" (*Delivered from paradise*), "Дрожащую в минор[е]" (*Trembling in minor*) and "Он запоет про горе." (*He will sing of grief*)— the scale of loss, the tone of grief, come across.

Shalamov's new Noah grieves not for the loss of Sodom, however, but over its arrival. The land he has lost, the time he mourns in his song of grief, is a time of integrity: "when flattery did not honor itself,/ honor did not trample itself,/ and the atom did not split asunder." The "cost" he reckons "in his mind" is "times past," "when there was bread for everyone," "when exhausted people/were not whipped/like work horses," "when human tried to call human/brother":

Когда хватало хлеба всем,  
 Когда подобных странных тем  
 Не выносило небо.

Когда усталыми людьми,  
 Как на работе лошадьми,  
 Не управляли плетью,

Когда в сырой рассветной мгле

When there was bread enough for all,  
 When the sky did not abide  
 such strange themes.

When exhausted people  
 were not whipped  
 like work horses,

When in the raw dawn mist

<sup>136</sup> Anna Akhmatova, *Poems of Akhmatova*, tr. and ed. Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1997), 76-77. "Но громко жене говорила тревога:/ Не поздно, ты можешь еще посмотреть/ На красные башни родного Содома,/ На площадь, где пела, на двор, где пряла,/ На окна пустые высокого дома,/ Где милому мужу детей родила" (*Ibid*).

Не видно было на земле  
Двадцатого столетья.

Когда так много было Мекк  
И человека человек  
Назвать пытался братом,

Когда не чествовалась лесть  
И не растаптывалась честь,  
Не расщеплялся атом.<sup>137</sup>

the twentieth century  
was not yet visible on earth.

When there were so many Meccas  
and human tried to call human  
brother,

When flattery did not honor itself,  
honor did not trample itself,  
and the atom did not split asunder.

Canto I's song of grief, trembling in minor, blown into a feeling zurna, is realized in Canto II's chant-like anaphora, with its refrain of "When" ("Когда") at the start of two lines in a row ("When there was bread for everyone,/When the sky did not abide") and then at the start of four more tercets ("When exhausted people," "When in the raw dawn mist," "When there were so many Meccas," "When flattery did not honor itself"). The disparity between times past and a fallen present is embroidered into the fabric of the chant's vowels and consonants." With each "Когда," the hard consonant "k" is repeated, forming a sonic refrain or chorus that invokes "times past." The plenty and brotherhood of the past is called forth with this same consonant, repeated: "Когда хватало хлеба все[м]" (*When there was bread enough for all*), "Когда так много было Мекк/И человека человек" ("When there were so many Meccas/And human called human [brother]"). The "k" consonant is similarly deployed in the first three lines of Canto VIII, to describe God casting Eve from Eden; in these lines the consonant "k" is supplemented by its fellow velar consonant, "g":

И раньше Божиия рука  
Карала мерзости греха,

Before, the hand of God  
chastened the filth of sin,

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<sup>137</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto II.7-18.

The fallen present, on the other hand, is announced by the "s" sound, consonantal home to "скатываться" and "скользит" (*slither*), "змея" (*serpent*), and "зло" (*evil*):

"Двадцатого столеть[я]" ("The twentieth century"), "Когда не чествовалась лесть/ И не растапывалась честь,/ Не расщеплялся атом" ("When flattery did not honor itself,/ honor did not trample itself,/ and the atom did not split asunder").

Canto II's reminiscence of times past embroiders sense into sound, not only through repetition of consonant sounds and sibilance, but through vowel rhymes. The consonant rhyme between "людьми" ("people") and "лошадьми" ("horses") in "Когда усталыми людьми,/ Как на работе лошадьми,/ Не управляли плеть[ю]" ("when exhausted people/were not whipped/like work horses"), is heightened by their couplet's (slanted) end rhyme; the rhyme embodies the treatment of people as if they were work horses. At the same time, the lack of assonant rhyme belies this treatment, suggesting difference where none is presently acknowledged. The perfect vowel rhyme of "братом" ("brother") and "атом" ("atom") is also suggestive, carrying "братом" into the line (and fate) of the "atom," which "split[s] asunder" (*расщеплялся*) at the Canto's end. Cain and Abel are invoked, in Canto II's prolonged hesitation between vowel sounds and sense.

Besides deploying sibilance, the final lines of Canto II ("Когда не чествовалась лесть/ И не растапывалась честь") echo Shakespeare's despairing Sonnet 66, translated by Pasternak in 1938. Pasternak's translation of lines 5-7 of Sonnet 66 ("And gilded

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., Canto VIII.1-3.

honour shamefully misplac'd,/ And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,/ And right perfection wrongfully disgrac'[d]" <sup>139</sup>) are especially resonant:

И наблюдать, как наглость лезет в свет,  
И честь девичья катится ко дну,  
И знать, что ходу совершенствам нет,<sup>140</sup>

Shalamov's "Когда не чествовалась лесть/ И не растапывалась честь" echoes the sound and sense of Pasternak's "И наблюдать, как наглость лезет в свет,/ И честь девичья катится ко дну," answering "лезет " with " лесть," and " честь" with "чествовалась" and "честь". While Shakespeare's sonnet deploras a disparity between the status quo and what ought to be, however, the speaker's own integrity is not in question; by contrast, the "I" of *Atomnaia poema* is profoundly split. The speaker expresses the violation of his integrity with multiple sibilants ("страшное сырье," "зловещей смертной маске," "мстить" and "Состарившейся сказке"):

И это страшное сырье  
В мое ворвалось бытие  
В зловещей смертной маске,  
  
Готово убивать и мстить,  
Готово силой рот закрыть  
Состарившейся сказке.<sup>141</sup>

A terrifying raw material  
is bursting into my being  
under a sinister death mask,  
  
ready to kill and avenge,  
ready to shut a mouth by force  
as in the aging fairy tale

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<sup>139</sup> William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 66: Tir'd with all these, for restful death I cry," Poetry Foundation, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174364>

<sup>140</sup> Vil'iam Shekspir, "Sonet 66," tr. Boris Pasternak, in *Angliiskaia poeziiia v russkikh perevodakh: XIV-XIX Veka*, ed. Mikhail Alekseev et al. (Moskva: "Progress," 1981), 77.

<sup>141</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto V.7-12.

The split within the speaker embodies the split he has witnessed in a world that has seen the twentieth century:

Что принимал я сорок лет  
Лишь за черемуховый цвет,  
За вербные початки –

Все нынче лезет в арсенал –  
Вполне военный матерьял –  
Подобие взрывчатки.<sup>142</sup>

What I took these forty years  
for bird cherry flowers,  
mere pussywillow catkins –

today climbs into the arsenal—  
war material, in full bloom—  
assuming the likeness of a bomb.

While in Sonnet 66 "impudence climbs into the light" ("наглость лезет в свет"), in *Atomnaia poema* seemingly harmless flowers and catkins "climb into the arsenal" ("лезет в арсена[л]"). "Scientific discoveries," which "bring only death to the earth" ("Научные разгадки// Одну лишь смерть земле несут"),<sup>143</sup> can detonate even "[t]he sticky green leaf,/the diaphanous rose petal[1]." Nuclear fission turns these inside out, revealing their "thunderous nature":

То расщепленное ядро  
Нам мира вывернет нутро  
Гремучую природу.

Отяжелевшая вода,  
Мутясь, откроет без труда  
Значенье водорода.

Липучей зелени листок,  
Прозрачный розы лепесток –  
Они – как взрыв – в засаде.

И, приподняв покров земной,  
Мир предстает передо мной  
Артиллерийским складом.<sup>144</sup>

That sundered core will turn  
the world's insides out to us:  
thunderous nature.

Heavy water,  
roiled, will readily discover  
what hydrogen means.

The sticky green leaf,  
the diaphanous rose petal--  
they lie– like explosions– in ambush.

Lifting its earthly cover,  
the world presents itself to me  
as a weapons cache.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., Canto V.1-6

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., Canto I.9-10

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., Canto III.1-12.

In an almost Schopenhauerian vision, nuclear science lifts the world's pleasing veil and reveals a "weapons cache" ("Артиллерийским складо[м]"), a "thunderous nature" ("Тремучую природу") lying in wait. These are not the sticky green leaves and wild bird cherry flowers, the thunderstorm, that Tolstoy's narrator celebrates in "Boyhood":

Here and there we come across a gloomy willow or a young birchtree with small, sticky leave[s]...The monotonous rumble of our wheels [...] do not drown the songs of the larks which circle around close to the road. [I] feel within me a joyful unres[t].<sup>145</sup>

A black cloud still covers the opposite horizon just as threateningly, but I no longer fear it. I experience an inexpressible, joyful feeling of hope in life, which rapidly replaces my heavy feeling of terror. My soul smiles in accord with refreshed and rejoicing nature.<sup>146</sup>

The delicious scent of the wood after the spring storm, the odour of the birches, of the violets, the rotting leaves, the mushrooms, and the wild cherry, is so enthralling that I cannot stay in the brichka but jump down from its step, run to the bushes, and, though I get sprinkled with the rain-drops that shower down on me, break off wet branches of the flowering wild cherry, stroke my face with them, and revel in their exquisite aroma.<sup>147</sup>

Terrifying though Tolstoy's thunderstorm might be, it passes, leaving behind an "enthralling" world of glistening plants in which a young boy revels. *Atomnaia poema's* "thunderous nature," uncovered by "that sundered core" ("То расщепленное ядро"), makes "[t]he thunderstorm's discharges/now seem like a childish to[y]" ("И кажутся

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<sup>145</sup> Leo Tolstoy, "Boyhood," in *The Portable Tolstoy*, ed. John Bayley (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1978), 95.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

разряды гроз/ Ребяческой игрушко[й]").<sup>148</sup> Even the young protagonist's loss of his mother in Tolstoy's "Childhood" is eclipsed by *Atomnaia poema's* horrifying transformation in which "mother" implicitly becomes "material" for "murder":

Мы лишь теперь понять могли  
Все лицемерие земли,  
Коварство минерала.

И облака, и чернозем,  
Что мы материей зовем, –  
Все стало матерьялом

Убийства, крови и угро[з]<sup>149</sup>

Only now are we able to grasp  
the earth's dissimulation,  
the mineral's deceit.

The clouds, the black earth,  
all of what we call matter, --  
have become material

for murder, blood, and threat[s]

We now grasp that "matter" ("материей") can become "material" ("матерьялом") for "murder, blood and threats[.]" Unspoken but evoked is the sound and sense of "mother" ("мать"), a partial rhyme with both "материей" and "матерьялом." Even мать can become a bomb. In the speaker's vision of a schizoid Mother Earth, not even a flower can be trusted:

Мир в существе своем хранит  
Завороженный динамит,  
В цветах таится злоб[а]<sup>150</sup>

The world in its very being holds  
spellbound dynamite,  
malice conceals itself in flower[s]

"The clouds," even "the black earth" ("чернозем") after which Osip Mandel'shtam named the first of his *Voronezhskie tetradi* poems,<sup>151</sup> can be weaponized.

<sup>148</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto III.1, 20-21.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., Canto III.13-19.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., Canto III.25-27.

<sup>151</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, "Chernozem," Русская виртуальная библиотека, [http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol\\_1/01versus/0234.htm](http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol_1/01versus/0234.htm) [Original source: *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh, tom 1*, (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 211.]

The splitting of the atom introduces a scale of destruction and terror that exceeds even the measure of the 1824 Petersburg flood, whose destructive effects are recounted in Pushkin's "Bronze Horseman: A Petersburg Tale" ("*Mednyi vsadnik: Peterburgskaia povest*"). Compared to the effects of "roiled" "heavy water," water's previous displays are miniscule:

В масштабе малом иногда  
Показывала нам вода  
Капризы половодья.

Сметая зданья и леса,  
Их возносила в небеса,  
В небесные уголья.

Но это были пустяки,  
Годились только на стихи.  
И бедный Всадник Медный,

Когда покинул пьедестал,  
Внезапно сам от страха стал  
Зеленовато-бледный.<sup>152</sup>

Water has sometimes shown us  
on a small scale  
the caprices of high tide.

Sweeping away buildings and forests,  
lifting them into the sky,  
into heavenly lands.

But these displays were nothing,  
befitting only verses;  
the poor Bronze Horseman

when he left his pedestal  
instantly turned  
greenish-pale from fear.

What makes roiled hydrogen so terrifying in Shalamov's *Atomnaia poema* goes beyond world annihilation; atomic fission uncovers a fissure in the familiar world, a "sundered core," which cannot be discovered without profound wounding. "They will tell," the speaker envisions in the final canto, "[h]ow blood gushed onto the ice/from my unhealed wound" ("Как кровь на лед моя лилась/ Из незажившей раны").<sup>153</sup> From Canto V:

Но я не знаю, как мне жить,  
И я не знаю, как мне быть:  
Травиться иль опиться,

But I don't know how I am to live,  
and I don't know how I am to be:  
whether to drink poison or to drink,

<sup>152</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto IV.1-12.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, Canto XI.17-18.

Когда ядро в любом цветке,  
В любом точеном лепестке  
Готово расщепиться.<sup>154</sup>

when the core in any flower,  
in any chiseled petal  
is ready to split itself.

The speaker's first-person encounter with splitting in these lines echoes the sibilants of Noah's fallen, twentieth-century present. "[P]асщепиться" is esconsed in sibilants: "Травиться иль опиться," "цветке," "лепестке." "[P]laintiff and suitor/ of impassible grie[f]" ("челобитчик и истец/ Невылазного гор[я]"), the speaker, occupying first-person present in the poem's final lines, persists in a painful half-life reminiscent of "victim of discovery" Marie Curie's "immortality," which she "achieve[s]" as she "burn[s]" in her radioactive notebook: "I am—there, with the pain, I am—/ there, with the groan,/ in eternal litigation between two side[s]" ("Я – там, где боль, я – там, где стон, В извечной тяжбе двух сторо[н]"). The speaker's first-person splitting culminates in these final lines:

И – пусть на свете не жилец –  
Я – челобитчик и истец  
Невылазного горя.

Я – там, где боль, я – там, где стон,  
В извечной тяжбе двух сторон,  
В старинном этом споре.<sup>155</sup>

And—let there be no life on earth—  
I am—plaintiff and suitor  
of impassable grief.

I am—there, with the pain, I am— there with the groan,  
in eternal litigation between two sides,  
in this ancient quarrel.

In contrast to the "k"-intensive alliteration of *Atomnaia poema*'s first line ("Хрустели кости у кусто[в]"), the poem's closing lines seethe with sibilants: "В извечной тяжбе двух сторон,/ В старинном этом споре." "В старинном этом споре" ("In this ancient quarrel") echoes *Atomnaia poema*'s gaping "расщепиться" topos while also invoking the Edenic serpent alluded to in Canto VIII, which opens with Eve's exile from Eden.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., Canto V.13-18.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., Canto XI.25-30.

"This ancient quarrel" could refer to the ancient quarrel between poets and philosophers, or to the quarrel between lyricists and physicists; the sonic fabric has a Biblical weave to it, however, evoking Job's litigious dispute with God, as well as the "Raskol," or great Schism, in the Russian Orthodox church resulting from Patriarch Nikon's 17th century reforms.<sup>156</sup> Dissenters from the church, or "Raskolniks," came to be known as "Old Believers," and included the exiled martyr Avakum, about whom Shalamov wrote two poems including the longer "Avvakum v Pustozerske."

Schism is sonically embroidered into the very fabric of Shalamov's *Atomnaia poema*, etymologically as well as through sonic allusions to Mandel'shtam's poem "Vek." The sibilant reflexive verb "расщепиться" ("to split oneself/itself") is especially significant: "расщепление" is the term for "fission," e.g., "расщепление атома" ("atomic fission") and "расщепление ядро" ("nuclear fission"), and is also related in meaning, if not etymology, to "раскол," or "schism." Splitting runs through *Atomnaia poema*: in "То расщепленное ядро" ("That sundered core"), the first line of Canto III, and again, in Canto VII: "Хотя бы все, что под рукой,/ Дыша и злобой и тоской,/ Желало б расщепиться" ("even if everything under its thumb,/ breathing with malice/ and angst, longed to split itself"), lines that evoke the irreparable fracture of Mandel'shtam's 1923 poem "Vek" (*The Age*): "Это век волну колышет/  
Человеческой тоской,/ И в траве гадюка дышит/ Мерой века золото[й]" ("It is the age that rocks/ The wave with human anguish,/ And a viper in the grass/ Breathes in gold

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<sup>156</sup> "Raskolnik," *Online Etymology Dictionary*,  
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Raskolnik>

measures of the ag[e]").<sup>157</sup> To Mandel'shtam's viper breathing in the gold measures of the age, *Atomnaia poema* answers with everything under the thumb of scientific measure, breathing with an angst ("тоской") that echoes "Vek's" "Человеческой тоской." "My age, my beast, who will be able," Mandel'shtam's poem asks, "[t]o look into the pupils of your eyes -/And with his own blood cement/ The vertebrae of two centuries?" ("Век мой, зверь мой, кто сумеет/ Заглянуть в твои зрачки/ И своею кровью склеит/ Двух столетий позвонки?")<sup>158</sup> Echoing the "Двух столетий" of Mandel'shtam's "Двух столетий позвонк[и]" ("the vertebrae of two centuries" which cannot be fused), *Atomnaia poema* concludes with "двух сторон": "В извечной тяжбе двух сторон," "the eternal litigation between two sides."

The very structure of *Atomnaia poema* suggests the splitting of an atom. *Atomnaia poema* is composed of tercets, each of which consists of a rhymed 8-syllable couplet and a loose 7-syllable third verse whose rhyme "couples" with the next tercet's third verse, in an AAB CCB DDE FFE GGH IIIH pattern. Dante's backwards-looking terza rima is perhaps its closest but still distant cousin, with an interlocking chain rhyme of ABA BCB CDC. Unlike Dante's infernal tercets, however, which enclose their unrhymed line between two rhymed lines ("Per più fiare li occhi ci sospinse/ quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;/ ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vins[e]," "And time and time again that reading led/ our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale,/ and yet one point

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<sup>157</sup> Osip Mandelstamm, "Vek," in *Modern Russian Poetry: An Anthology with Verse Translations*, ed. Vladimir Markov and Merrill Sparks (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 316-317.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

alone defeated u[s]"), <sup>159</sup> Shalamov's tercets end with their unrhymed line. From his

Prelude's opening lines:

Хрустели кости у кустов,  
И пепел листьев и цветов  
Посеребрил округу.

А то, что не пошло на слом,  
Толкало ветром и огнем  
В объятия друг другу.<sup>160</sup>

Bones of shrubs crunched,  
and ashes of leaves and flowers  
ensilvered the region.

And those things not reduced to dust  
were thrust by wind and fire  
into an embrace of one another.

Another "atomic tercet," from Canto X:

Провозглашают петухи  
Свои наивные стихи,  
Дерут петушьи глотки,

И вздрагивают от волны,  
Еще удерживая сны,  
Прикованные лодки.<sup>161</sup>

The cocks proclaim □  
Their naïve verses, □  
Tearing cockscombed throats,

and chained boats,  
shuddering from a wave,  
still cling to their dreams.

The chain of rhyme anchoring the third line to its tercet is rusty: The third line of each tercet ("Посеребрил округу[,] "В объятия друг другу[,] in the Prelude; " Дерут петушьи глотки," "Прикованные лодк[и]" in Canto X) appears to split off from the tightly rhymed couplet immediately above it. Since the third line from the next tercet rhymes with the third line from the prior tercet, the reader may come to anticipate the third line's split-off from its own tercet's couplet, to "join" the third line of the tercet below. The reader may develop an visceral expectation of a split well before the end of the poem; the poem's splitting may be habit-forming, infectious, radioactive. At the same

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<sup>159</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno, A Verse Translation*, Tr. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), V.130-132

<sup>160</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poeta*, вступление, 1-6.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., Canto X.1-6.

time, the third-line rhyme only extends between two tercets; a completely new rhyme is introduced at the third tercet. After "and chained boats,/ shuddering from a wave,/ still cling to their dream[s]" (И вздрагивают от волны,/ Еще удерживая сны,/ Прикованные лодк[и]), Canto X continues, in a passage that turns over Mandel'shtam's "Chernozem":

А морю кажется, что зря  
Их крепко держат якоря  
Заржавленную цепью,

Что нам пора бы плыть туда,  
Где молча горбится вода  
Распаханную степью,

Где море то же, что земля,  
Оно похоже на поля  
С поднятой целиною,

Как будто Божия соха,  
Архангеловы лемеха  
Копались в перегно[e]<sup>162</sup>

But to the sea, it seems in vain  
that anchors tightly hold them  
with a rusty chain,

that it is time for us to swim there,  
where silent water stoops  
to plowed steppes,

where sea is same as earth,  
resembling the field  
with virgin soil upturned,

as if God's plow,  
the Archangel's plowshares  
were digging into humu[s]

Note how the third-line rhyme of "глотки" and "лодки" give way to "цепью" and "степью," which in turn give way to "целиною" and "перегное." Evoking Mandel'shtam's flowing "Как на лемех приятен жирный пласт,/ Как степь лежит в апрельском провороте!"<sup>163</sup> ("How the fat earth pleases the plow,/ How the step lays in the April turning!"), Shalamov answers with the truncated "Как будто Божия соха, Архангеловы лемеха/ Копались в перегно[e]" ("as if God's plow,/ the Archangel's plowshares/ were digging into humu[s]"). Note the smooth flow between the 8-syllable

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., Canto X.7-18.

<sup>163</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, "Chernozem," Русская виртуальная библиотека. [http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol\\_1/01versus/0234.htm](http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol_1/01versus/0234.htm)

lines of the couplets, and the jerky transition to the third, seven-syllable line. With its odd number of syllables coming abruptly after two lines with even-numbered syllables, and with the syllabic stresses often switching abruptly from an iambic feel in the couplet to a trochaic feel in the third line (or from a trochaic feel to an iambic one). Shalamov's atomic tercets are in a sense tearing their own cockscombed throats.<sup>164</sup> At the same time, after each "tearing" the *poema* restores itself, like Prometheus' liver, returning to the stable, tightly matched rhyme and rhythm of the next tercet's couplet. The *poema* mirrors its speaker's "eternal litigation between two sides."

*Atomnaia poema's* turn from sea to plowed steppes evokes the shift from pine forest to ships at sea in Mandel'shtam's 1923 poem "Nashedshii podkovu (Pindaricheskii otryvok)" ("The Horseshoe Finder (A Pindaric Fragment)"),

Глядим на лес и говорим:  
 — Вот лес корабельный, мачтовый,  
 Розовые сосны,  
 До самой верхушки свободные от мохнатой ноши,  
 Им бы поскрипывать в бурю,  
 Одинокими пиниями,  
 В разъяренном безлесном воздухе;  
 Под соленую пятою ветра устоит отвес, пригнанный к пляшущей палубе,  
  
 И мореплавателю,  
 В необузданной жажде пространства,  
 Влача через влажные рытвины  
 Хрупкий прибор геометра,  
 Сличит с притяженьем земного лона  
 Шероховатую поверхность морей.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> There may also be an atomic significance to the two 8-syllable couplets followed by a seventh-syllable line, that is, the 8-8-7 syllabic pattern: 88 is the atomic number of radium, whose isotopes are highly radioactive, and which was discovered and named by Marie and Pierre Curie. Moreover, Marie Curie was able to extract a single gram of radium from 7 tons of pitchblende; hence, perhaps the 7.

<sup>165</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, "Nashedshii podkovu (Pindaricheskii otryvok)," Русская

We look at a forest and say:  
 Here's a forest for ships, for masts,  
 Rose-shadowed pines, in  
 Right to their very tops free of shaggy burdens,  
 They ought to creak in a windstorm,  
 Like solitary Italian pines,  
 In the furious forestless air.  
 Beneath the wind's salt heel the plumbline holds, set in the dancing deck,

And a seafarer,  
 In his insatiable thirst for space,  
 Dragging the brittle instrument of the geometer across sodden ruts,  
 Collates against the pull of earthly breast  
 The ragged surface of seas.<sup>166</sup>

Mandel'shtam's opening image of a forest and its imagined levelling to build ships, evoking Peter the Great's creation of a new ship of state,<sup>167</sup> finds a reverse echo in *Atomnaia poema's* Prelude. Facing a forest devastated by fire, *Atomnaia poema's* speaker recalls what "everything seemed to tell" him that the forest would return:

Мне все казалось, что они  
 Еще вернутся в наши дни  
 Со всей зеленой силой.

Что это только миг, момент,  
 Они стоят, как монумент,  
 На собственной могиле,

Что глубоко в земле, в корнях  
 Живет мечта о новых днях,

Everything seemed to tell me  
 that they would return in our day  
 in all their green might,

that it is only for an instant, a moment,  
 that they stand, like monuments,  
 on their own graves,

that deep in the earth, in the roots  
 lives a dream of new days,

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виртуальная библиотека,  
[http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol\\_1/01versus/0133.htm](http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol_1/01versus/0133.htm)

<sup>166</sup> Osip Mandelstam, *The Horseshoe Finder (A Pindaric Fragment)*, tr. Steven J. Willett, in *The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*, 285-286.

<sup>167</sup> See Clare Cavanaugh, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 168. Peter the Great studied shipbuilding, and levelled forests to build St. Petersburg, Russia's new capital, by the sea.

Густеют жизни соки.

life's juices are thickening,

И вновь в лесу, что был сожжен,  
Сомкнутся изумруды крон,  
Поднявшихся высоко.<sup>168</sup>

and again, in a forest that was burned down  
emerald crowns will close in,  
rising high.

The childhood vision of forest crowns returning "in all their green might" turns out to be no less naïve, however, than the verses tearing cockscombed throats in Canto X. By the end of *Atomnaia poema*, the speaker is split between "there, where there is pain" and "there, where there is groaning," "in eternal litigation between two sides," echoing the first-person despair that closes Mandel'shtam's "Nashedshii podkovu" ("Time lacerates me, like a coin,/And I'm no longer ample for myself"<sup>169</sup> ("Время срезает меня, как монету,/ И мне уж не хватает меня самого...")).<sup>170</sup>

Mandel'shtam's "Za gremuchuiu doblest' griadushchikh veko[v]" may be the source of the "bones" ("кости") that crunch in *Atomnaia poema*'s first line ("Хрустели кости у кусто[v]" ("Bones of shrubs crunche[d]")), specifically: "Чтоб не видеть ни труса, ни хлипкой грязцы,/ Ни кровавых костей в колес[e]" ("Let me no more look at the coward, at the mire,/ At the bloody bones in the wheel[l]"). Mandel'shtam's "Чтоб не видеть ни труса, ни хлипкой грязц[ы]" is also evoked in one of *Atomnaia poema*'s final tercets: "They will tell, how in the wasteland" ("Расскажут, как на пустыре"<sup>171</sup>):

Как тряс овсяным колоском  
И жизнь анютиным глазком

[I] shook like an oat spikelet  
and like a pansy's eyes

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<sup>168</sup> вступление, 25-36.

<sup>169</sup> Mandelstam, *The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*, tr. Willett, 288.

<sup>170</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, "Nashedshii podkovu," Русская виртуальная библиотека, [http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol\\_1/01versus/0133.htm](http://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol_1/01versus/0133.htm)

<sup>171</sup> Mandelstam, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto XI.10.

Разглядывал с полян[ы]<sup>172</sup>

witnessed life from a clearin[g]

Shalamov's "тряс" (*shook, shaking*) alliterates in a near-rhyme with Mandel'shtam's "трыса" (*coward*), as the speaker imagines that whoever carelessly pulls his bones out of the ice "will tell how," like a pansy, he passively witnessed life from a safe distance:

Склепают ребра кое-как,  
И пальцы мне сведут в кулак,  
И на ноги поставят,

Расскажут, как на пустыре  
Я рылся в русском словаре,  
Перебирал алфавит,

Как тряс овсяным колоском  
И жизнь анютиным глазком  
Разглядывал с полян[ы]<sup>173</sup>

They will rivet the ribs any which way,  
fingers driven towards me in a fist,  
and I will be stood on my feet,

They will tell, how in the wasteland  
I dug into the Russian lexicon,  
ran my fingers over the alphabet,

How I shook like an oat spikelet  
and like a pansy's eyes  
witnessed life from a clearin[g]

The ridiculing voice subtly seems to shift to the speaker's own voice, in the subsequent tercets:

Как ненавидел ложь и грязь,  
Как кровь на лед моя лилась  
Из незажившей раны.

Как выговаривал слова,  
Какие знают деревья,  
Животные и птицы,

А человеческую речь  
Всегда старался приберечь  
На лучшие страницы.

И – пусть на свете не жилец –  
Я – челобитчик и истец  
Невылазного горя.

Я – там, где боль, я – там, где стон,  
В извечной тяжбе двух сторон,  
В старинном этом споре.<sup>174</sup>

How I hated lies and filth,  
How blood gushed onto the ice  
from my unhealed wound.

How I uttered words  
Which the trees know,  
the animals and birds,

And human speech  
I always strove to set aside  
on the best pages.

And—let there be no life on earth—  
I am—plaintiff and suitor  
of impassable grief.

I am—there, with the pain, I am—there, with the groan,  
in eternal litigation between two sides,  
in this ancient quarrel.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., Canto XI.13-15.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., Canto XI.7-15.

The speaker is split against himself, groaning in eternal litigation between two sides of what should be indivisible. Out of place and out of time— "not believing the age by the calenda[r]" ("Не веря век календар[ю]"<sup>175</sup>— *Atomnaia poema*'s "I," like the spine of Mandel'shtam's backwards-looking creature, is shattered:

И еще набухнут почки,  
 Брызнет зелени побег,  
 Но разбит твой позвоночник,  
 Мой прекрасный жалкий век!  
 И с бессмысленной улыбкой  
 Вспять глядишь, жесток и слаб,  
 Словно зверь, когда-то гибкий,  
 На следы своих же лап.<sup>176</sup>

The buds will swell again,  
 And the green sprouts will burst.  
 But your spine has been shattered,  
 My beautiful, pitiful age.  
 And you look back, cruel and weak,  
 With a senseless smile,  
 Like a beast that was once supple,  
 At the tracks of your own paws.<sup>177</sup>

However, the tracks (*sled*) of Shalamov's speaker, of his nuclear age, will not remain:

"[t]he wind of past years blows/ and sweeps away someone's trail/ with a whirling snowdrif[t]" ("Где дует ветер прежних лет/ И замечает чей-то след/ Крутящейся поземко[й]"<sup>178</sup>).

"Who can know before the word "parting,"" Mandel'shtam's speaker asks in his 1915 poem "Tristia," "What kind of separation awaits us,/What the cock's outcry will occasion for u[s]" ("Кто может знать при слове "расставанье"/ Какая нам разлука

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., Canto XI.16-30.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., Canto IX.46.

<sup>176</sup> Mandelstamm, "Vek," *Modern Russian Poetry*, 316.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>178</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto IX.52.

предстоит, / Что нам сулит петушьи восклицанья[e]"<sup>179</sup>). In *Atomnaia poeta*, Shalamov answers Mandel'shtam's "'расставанье'" and "разлука" with "расщепленное ядро."

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<sup>179</sup> Osip Mandelstamm, "Tristia," in *Modern Russian Poetry*, 294.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: *ATOMNAIA POEMA'S* SWERVE FROM LUCRETIUS

"The verses of sublime Lucretius will perish," Ovid fatefully opines in his *Amores*, "only when a single day brings about earth's destruction" ("carminas ublimist unc sunt peritura Lucreti, / exitio terrasc umd abitu na dies").<sup>180</sup> Anticipating modern science's notion of quantum indeterminacy, Lucretius postulated that as atoms fall through "the void" they incline, or swerve, unpredictably in time and space. An English translation of Lucretius' account in Book II of *De Rerum Natura* follows, along with Fedor Petrovskii's 1936 translation of the same passage from Latin into Russian:

Я бы желал, чтобы ты был осведомлен здесь точно так же,  
Что, уносясь в пустоте, в направлении книзу отвесном,  
Собственным весом тела изначальные в некое время  
В месте неведомом нам начинают слегка отклоняться,  
Так что едва и назвать отклонением это возможно.<sup>181</sup>

The atoms, as their own weight bears them down  
Plumb through the void, at scarce determined times,  
In scarce determined places, from their course  
Decline a little- call it, so to spea[k]<sup>182</sup>

The atom's swerve leads to creative "collisions":

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<sup>180</sup> "At *Amores* 1.15.23, in a list of great poets, Ovid includes the *carmina sublimis ... Lucreti*, while echoing one of Lucretius' own verses: [*c*]arminas ublimist unc sunt peritura Lucreti, / exitio terrasc umd abitu na dies ("The verses of sublime Lucretius will perish only when a single day brings about earth's destruction")." John Miller, "Lucretian Moments in Ovidian Elegy," *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (Apr. - May, 1997), 384.

<sup>181</sup> Tit Lukretsii Kar, *O prirode veshchei*, tr. Fedor Petrovskii, <http://www.nsu.ru/classics/bibliotheca/lucretius.htm>

<sup>182</sup> Titus Lucretius Carus, *De rerum natura. On the Nature of Things*, tr. William Ellery Leonard (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co, 1916, urn:cts:latinLit:phi0550.phi001.perseus-eng1), II.218-221.

Если ж, как капли дождя, они вниз продолжали бы падать,  
Не отклоняясь ничуть на пути в пустоте необъятной,  
То никаких бы ни встреч, ни толчков у начал не рождалось,  
И ничего никогда породить не могла бы природа<sup>183</sup>

[W]ere it not their wont  
Thuswise to swerve, down would they fall, each one,  
Like drops of rain, through the unbottomed void;  
And then collisions ne'er could be nor blows  
Among the primal elements; and thus  
Nature would never have created aught.<sup>184</sup>

In lieu of divinity, atoms colliding indeterminately in the void kindle the sparks of creation. Likewise, in Lucretius' view (in the words of translator Martin Smith) "irregular phenomena such as lightning, thunder, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes have natural causes and are not manifestations of divine anger."<sup>185</sup> Shalamov reads Lucretius, in *Atomnaia poema*, through the filter of the twentieth century, a century in which a single atom, split, could destroy the world in a single instant.

While Lucretius gave an account of the universe's atomic creation, he did not anticipate its atomic destruction. Not only do atoms swerve; they split. Not only do atoms fall through the void; the void may burst open the atom. Any freedom associated with the atom's unpredictable swerve is countered by the "unhealed wound," the "impassible grief," of its proclivity to split. Shalamov thus answers Lucretius' swerve with fission,

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<sup>183</sup> Tit Lukretsii Kar, *O prirode veshchei*, tr. Fedor Petrovskii, <http://www.nsu.ru/classics/bibliotheca/lucretius.htm>

<sup>184</sup> Titus Lucretius Carus, *De rerum natura. On the Nature of Things*, tr. William Ellery Leonard (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co, 1916, urn:cts:latinLit:phi0550.phi001.perseus-eng1), II.224-227.

<sup>185</sup> Martin Smith, introduction to *On the Nature of Things*, Titus Lucretius Carus (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2001), xxiii.

counters freedom with suffering. Lucretius may have debunked divine anger, but did not account for nature's anger: "Maybe nature has the wish," suggests the voice of Canto IX, "to call us to account":

Быть может, у природы есть  
Желанье с нами счеты свести  
В физическом явленье

За безнаказанность убийц,  
За всемогущество тупиц  
И за души растленье.

За всю людскую ложь, обман,  
Природа мстить любой из стран  
Уже давно готова.

За их поруганную честь  
Готовит атомную месть,  
Не говоря ни слова.<sup>186</sup>

Maybe nature has the wish  
to call us to account  
in a physical phenomenon

for the murderer's impunity,  
for the omnipotence of stupidity  
and for the soul's corruption.

For all the human lies, deception,  
to take revenge on any country,  
nature has long been ready.

For their trampled honor  
it prepares atomic vengeance,  
without saying a word.

Without saying a word, not even in a word in a "third language" between human and world (stikhi), nature is prepared to express itself in elemental (stikhiia) revenge.

From *Atomnaia poema's* opening remembrance of "the black trail of fire" that still troubles its speaker's heart, to allusions to a "Last Judgement" that renders past disasters child's play; from scientific discoveries "which bring only death," to Noah's grief sung in a minor chord on a distant star; from "the mineral's deceit," to the the poem's split "I" and splitting tercets, Shalamov pursues "Ovid's epiphany," releasing what is housed in a single verse (*[U]divit' moglo by svet/Chto udivit' moglo by svet,/ Kak mog vmestit' ego poet/V odno stikhotvoren'e*).

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<sup>186</sup> Shalamov, *Atomnaia poema*, Canto VIII.7-18.

Shalamov's *Atomic Poem* deploys the etymological kinship between "Stikhi" (*verse*) and "stikhiia" ("element,"<sup>187</sup> a kinship he echoes as he disavows it, in his "On Song" ("O pesne")):

Она звучит в едином хоре  
Зверей, растений, облаков.  
Ей вторит Берингово море —  
Стихия вовсе не стихов.<sup>188</sup>

She resounds in a single chorus  
Of beasts, plants, clouds.  
To her the Bering sea echoes—  
The element is not at all poetry.

Splitting its own elements as it grieves the splitting atom, Shalamov's *Atomnaia poema* engages Noah and Lot, Cain and Job, turns over lines of Mandel'shtam, Akhmatova and Pasternak, communes with Shakespeare and Avvakum, Ovid and Lucretius. "And those things not reduced to dust/were thrust by wind and fire/into an embrace of one another." A conversation between physics and poetry, human and world, *Atomnaia poema* unfolds, in a profound hesitation between the sound and sense of the twentieth century.

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<sup>187</sup> "стихія: [...] др.-русск. стихия ж. и стихие ср. р., ст.-слав. стѣхи στοιχειόν (Супр.). Из греч." "Stikhia," Vesmer's Etymological Dictionary, <http://starling.rinet.ru/cgi-bin/main.cgi?flags=eygtmnl>

<sup>188</sup> Shalamov, "O pesne" (Shalamov.ru <http://shalamov.ru/library/10/1.html>), VI.9-12.

## APPENDIX A

### MARIE CURIE

#### Мария Кюри

Какое-то апреля,  
Полсотни лет назад --  
На выставке в Брюсселе,  
Бесценный экспонат.

Необычайно важный  
Научный экспонат --  
Простой листок бумажный  
приковывает взгляд.

Незримого свечения  
Отравленный поток;  
Хранящий излучение  
Тетрадный листок...

Лежит листок полвека,  
Зловещий, как анчар,  
Он -- гордость человека,  
Разоблаченье чар.

Природы чар незримых,  
Где предвосхищены  
Пожары Хиросимы  
И ядерной войны.

И ты -- открытья жертва,  
Склодовская- Кюри,  
Листок -- твоё бессмертье,  
Добейся и сгори.

И счетчик излученья  
Трепещет у листка --  
Всеобщее волненье,  
Волненье и тоска.

Не жизни разве ради  
Открыла нам она  
Вот этот самый радий,  
Которым сражена?  
1959

#### Marie Curie

Some April,  
half a century ago —  
at an expo in Brussels,  
a priceless exhibit.

An extraordinarily important  
science exhibit—  
a simple leaf of paper  
rivets the eye.

A poisoned flow  
indiscernibly glowing;  
holding radiation,  
the notebook leaf...

Lying half a century,  
sinister, like the anchar,  
the paper — pride of humanity,  
unmasking charms.

Nature's indiscernible  
charms, where portents rise  
of Hiroshima's fires  
and nuclear war.

And you — the victim of discovery,  
Skłodowska-Curie,  
the paper — your immortality,  
you achieve as you burn.

And the radiation counter  
flutters near the paper —  
all-out agitation,  
agitation and angst.

Was it not for the sake of life  
that she opened to us  
this very same radium,  
by which she was smitten?  
1959

## APPENDIX B

### AT THE END OF HOPES AND RECKONINGS

Конец надеждам и расплатам,  
Откроют двери в ад – и вот,  
Как безымянный скромный атом,  
Вернусь в земной круговорот.

Что я земле? Я – след слезинки,  
Морщинка на лице жены.  
Я – нерастаявшая льдинка,  
Что в чаще ждет еще весны.

Пускай толкут, как воду в ступке,  
Мои враги, мои друзья  
Слова мои и те поступки,  
Которым был причастен я.

Мне запечалиться о том бы,  
Чего не сделали стихи –  
Так не похожие на бомбы  
Комочки горя и тоски.

#### **(Untitled)**

At the end of hopes and reckonings,  
the doors to hell will open – and behold,  
as a nameless humble atom,  
I will return to the earthly whirl.

What am I to the earth? "I" – a trail of  
tears,  
the crease on a wife's face.  
"I" – the unmelted icicle  
that still waits in a dark wood for spring.

Let them grind away,  
my enemies, my friends  
at my words and those acts,  
which I took part in.

I would rather mourn  
what verses cannot do--  
so unlike bombs  
these bits of grief and angst.

APPENDIX C

GOLD, PURPLE AND LILAC

Золотой, пурпурный и лиловый,  
Серый, синий свет,  
Вот оно, кощунственное слово,  
И спасенья нет.

Вот она – в кровавых клочьях дыма,  
В ядовитой мгле.  
Будущая Хиросима  
Встала на земле.

Как глазурь – зеленый крик ожога,  
Сплавленный в стекло.  
Вот она, зловещая дорога,  
Мировое зло.

Девушке слепой огонь пожара  
Обжигает взор.  
...О судьбе всего земного шара  
Начат разговор.  
1959

**(Untitled)**

Gold, purple and lilac,  
Gray, blue is the light,  
Behold it, the sacrilegious word,  
And no salvation.

Behold her - in bloody wisps of smoke,  
in poisonous mist.  
Future Hiroshima  
rises above the earth.

Like a glaze – the green cry of a burn  
fuses in glass.  
Behold her, sinister road,  
worldly evil.

A blind girl, flames of a fire  
burn out her gaze.  
...On the fate of the entire world  
the talks have begun.  
1959

## APPENDIX D

### ATOMIC POEM

#### Атомная поэма

##### вступление

Хрустели кости у кустов,  
И пепел листьев и цветов  
Посеребрил округу.

А то, что не пошло на слом,  
Толкало ветром и огнем  
В объятия друг другу.

Мне даже в детстве было жаль  
Лесную выжженную даль,  
И черный след пожара

Всегда тревожит сердце мне.  
Причиной может быть вполне  
Сердечного удара.

Когда деревья-мертвецы  
Переплетались, как борцы  
На цирковой арене,

Под черным шелковым трико  
Их мышцы вздыбились клубком,  
Застыв в оцепененье.

А вечер был недалеко,  
Сливал парное молоко,  
Лечил бальзамом раны.

И слой за слоем марлю клал  
И вместо белых одеял  
Закутывал туманом.

Мне все казалось, что они  
Еще вернуться в наши дни  
Со всей зеленой силой.

Что это только миг, момент,  
Они стоят, как монумент,  
На собственной могиле,

Что глубоко в земле, в корнях  
Живет мечта о новых днях,  
Густеют жизни соки.

И вновь в лесу, что был сожжен,  
Сомкнутся изумруды крон,  
Поднявшихся высоко.

#### Atomic Poem

##### PRELUDE

Bones of shrubs crunched,  
and ashes of leaves and flowers  
ensilvered the region.

And those things not reduced to dust  
were thrust by wind and fire  
into an embrace of one another.

I felt sorrow even in childhood  
for the forested burnt distance,  
and the black trail of fire

still troubles my heart.  
It may very well be the cause  
of a heart attack.

When the dead trees  
cleaved together like wrestlers  
in a circus arena,

beneath black silk tights  
their muscles reared up in a tangle,  
frozen in torpor.

But evening, not far,  
decanted fresh milk,  
treating the wounds with balm,

and layer by layer laid gauze,  
muffling with fog  
in place of white blankets.

Everything seemed to tell me  
that they would return in our day  
in all their green might,

that it is only for an instant, a moment,  
that they stand, like monuments,  
on their own graves,

that deep in the earth, in the roots  
lives a dream of new days,  
life's juices are thickening,

and again, in a forest that was burned down  
emerald crowns will close in,  
rising high.

I

Ведь взрослому еще слышной  
Шуршанье уходящих дней –  
Листочков календарных,

Все ярче боль его замет,  
Все безотвязней полубред  
Его ночей угарных.

А боль? Что делать нынче с ней?  
Обличье мира все грозней.  
Научные разгадки

Одну лишь смерть земле несут,  
Как будто близок Страшный Суд  
И надо бросить прятки.

И от ковчегowych кают  
Ракеты мало отстают  
В своем стремленье к звездам.

И каждый отыскать бы рад  
На Бетельгейзе Арарат,  
Пока еще не поздно.

Он там причалит на ночлег  
Свой обтекаемый ковчег,  
И, слезы вытирая,

Там перед новою луной  
Протянет руки новый Ной,  
Избавленный от рая,

И дунет в чуткую зурну,  
И дернет тонкую струну,  
Дрожащую в миноре,

И при звездах и при луне  
На ближней радиоволне  
Он запоеет про горе.

И, перемножив ширину  
Площадки звездной на длину,  
В уме расчет прикинув,

Он снова вспомнит старину  
И пожалеет ту страну,  
Которую покинул...

II

Исчезли, верно, без следа  
И сказкой кажутся года

I

Especially audible to an adult  
is the shuffle of leaving days—  
of the calendar's leaves;

ever brighter the ache of his discernments,  
ever more inextricable the half-ravings  
of his smoldering nights.

And the pain? What to do with it now?  
The guise of peace is all the more dreadful.  
Scientific discoveries

bring only death to the earth,  
as if the Last Judgement were close  
and we had to give up hide-and-peek.

And out of the ark's cabins  
rockets lag a little behind  
in their urge towards the stars.

And each would be happy  
to find Ararat on Betelgeuse,  
while it is not too late.

He will moor his gliding ark there  
for the night  
and, wiping tears away,

before a new moon  
the new Noah will stretch out his hands,  
delivered from paradise,

blow into a feeling zurna,  
and pluck a thin string,  
trembling in minor,

and by the stars and by the moon  
on a nearby radiowave  
he will sing of grief.

And, multiplying the width  
of the stars' square by the length,  
reckoning the cost in his mind,

he will again remember times past  
and sorrow over the land,  
which he left ...

II

They vanished, truly, without a trace,  
and the years seem like a fairy tale

И выглядят, как небыль,  
Когда хватало хлеба всем,  
Когда подобных странных тем  
Не выносило небо.  
Когда усталыми людьми,  
Как на работе лошадьми,  
Не управляли плетью,  
Когда в сырой рассветной мгле  
Не видно было на земле  
Двадцатого столетья.  
Когда так много было Мекк  
И человека человек  
Назвать пытался братом,  
Когда не чествовалась лесть  
И не растаптывалась честь,  
Не расщеплялся атом.  
III  
То расщепленное ядро  
Нам мира вывернет нутро  
Гремучую природу.  
Отяжелевшая вода,  
Мутясь, откроет без труда  
Значенье водорода.  
Липучей зелени листок,  
Прозрачный розы лепесток –  
Они – как взрыв – в засаде.  
И, приподняв покров земной,  
Мир предстает передо мной  
Артиллерийским складом.  
Мы лишь теперь понять могли  
Все лицемерие земли,  
Коварство минерала.  
И облака, и чернозем,  
Что мы материей зовем, –  
Все стало матерьялом  
Убийства, крови и угроз,  
И кажутся разряды гроз  
Ребяческой игрушкой.  
И на опушке в тишине  
Нам можно сравнивать вполне  
С любой хлопушкой пушку.

and appear, like a fantasy,  
When there was bread enough for all,  
When the sky did not abide  
such strange themes.  
When exhausted people  
were not whipped  
like work horses,  
When in the raw dawn mist  
the twentieth century  
was not yet visible on earth.  
When there were so many Meccas  
and human tried to call human  
brother,  
When flattery did not honor itself,  
honor did not trample itself,  
and the atom did not split asunder.  
III  
That sundered core will turn  
the world's insides out to us:  
thunderous nature.  
Heavy water,  
roiled, will readily discover  
what hydrogen means.  
The sticky green leaf,  
the diaphanous rose petal--  
they lie— like explosions— in ambush.  
Lifting its earthly cover,  
the world presents itself to me  
as a weapons cache.  
Only now are we able to grasp  
the earth's dissimulation,  
the mineral's deceit.  
The clouds, the black earth,  
all of what we call matter, --  
have become material  
for murder, blood, and threats,  
and the thunderstorm's discharges  
now seem like a childish toy.  
On the sidelines in silence  
we may well compare them  
with any cap gun.

Мир в существе своем хранит  
Завороженный динамит,  
В цветах таится злоба,

И наша сонная сирень  
Преодолеет сон и лень  
И доведет до гроба.

И содрогнется шар земной,  
И будет тесно под луной,  
И задрожит сейсмолог.

К виску приблизит пистолет,  
И Новый грохнется Завет  
На землю с книжных полок.

IV  
В масштабе малом иногда  
Показывала нам вода  
Капризы половодья.

Сметая зданья и леса,  
Их возносила в небеса,  
В небесные уголья.

Но это были пустяки,  
Годились только на стихи.  
И бедный Всадник Медный,

Когда покинул пьедестал,  
Внезапно сам от страха стал  
Зеленовато-бледный.

Когда же нам концерт давал  
Какой-нибудь девятый вал—  
Подобье преисподней,

То только на морской волне,  
Вдруг устремившийся к луне  
И к милости Господней.

Без уваженья к сединам  
Подчас взрывало сердце нам  
Отвергнутой любовью.

Мы покупали пистолет  
И завещали наш скелет  
На доброе здоровье

В анатомический музей,  
А для романтиков-друзей  
На пепельницу череп.

И с честной горечью в крови  
Мы умирали от любви,

The world in its very being holds  
spellbound dynamite,  
malice conceals itself in flowers,

and our drowsy lilac  
overcomes sleep and sloth  
to lead us to the grave.

And the earth's sphere will shudder,  
and it will grow tight under the moon,  
and the seismologist will tremble.

The pistol will graze the temple,  
and the New will tumble Testament  
down from bookshelves to the earth.

IV  
Water has sometimes shown us  
on a small scale  
the caprices of high tide.

Sweeping away buildings and forests,  
lifting them into the sky,  
into heavenly lands.

But these displays were nothing,  
befitting only verses;  
the poor Bronze Horseman

when he left his pedestal  
instantly turned  
greenish-pale from fear.

Whenever we were given a concert  
by some kind of ninth swell—  
a likeness of the netherworld,

it was only on an ocean wave,  
suddenly surging towards the moon  
and towards the mercy of God.

Without respect for gray hair  
sometimes a heart blasted us  
with unrequited love.

We purchased a pistol  
and bequeathed our skeleton  
to the cause of good health

in an anatomical museum,  
and to our friends the Romantics:  
a skull for an ashtray.

And with honest bitterness in the blood  
we died of a love

Какой теперь не верят...

Но эти выпады реки  
Бывали слабы и мелки  
И зачастую личны.

Такая ж сила, как любовь,  
Не часто проливала кровь,  
Удержана приличием.

V

Что принимал я сорок лет  
Лишь за черемуховый цвет,  
За вербные початки —

Все нынче лезет в арсенал —  
Вполне военный матерьял —  
Подобие взрывчатки.

И это страшное сырье  
В мое ворвалось бытие  
В зловещей смертной маске,

Готово убивать и мстить,  
Готово силой рот закрыть  
Состарившейся сказке.

Но я не знаю, как мне жить,  
И я не знаю, как мне быть:  
Травиться иль опиться,

Когда ядро в любом цветке,  
В любом точеном лепестке  
Готово расщепиться.

VI

У нас отнимут желтый клен,  
У нас отнимут горный склон  
И капли дождевые.

Мы больше не поверим им,  
Мы с недоверием глядим.  
Ведь мы еще живые.

Мы ищем в мире для себя,  
Чему бы верили, любя,  
И наших глаз опорой

Не будут лилий лепестки  
И сжатые в руках реки  
Задумчивые горы.

Но нам оставят пульс планет,  
Мерцающий небесный свет,  
Почти что невесомый,

that noone believes in now...

But these lunges of the river  
tended to be weak and shallow,  
usually personal.

Such a power as love  
did not often spill blood,  
restrained by decorum.

V

What I took these forty years  
for bird cherry flowers,  
mere pussywillow catkins —

today climbs into the arsenal—  
war material, in full bloom—  
assuming the likeness of a bomb.

A terrifying raw material  
is bursting into my being  
under a sinister death mask,

ready to kill and avenge,  
ready to shut a mouth by force  
as in the aging fairy tale.

But I don't know how I am to live,  
and I don't know how I am to be:  
whether to drink poison or to drink,

when the core in any flower,  
in any chiseled petal  
is ready to split itself.

VI

They will take from us the yellow maple,  
They will take from us the mountain slope  
and drops of rain.

We no longer believe them,  
we look with suspicion.  
We are, after all, still alive.

We look into the world for our own sake,  
for something we might believe in, loving,  
and for our eyes to rest on:

there will be no lily petals,  
no musing mountains pressed  
in a river's hands.

But to us is left the pulse of the planet,  
the flickering celestial light,  
almost unweighable,

Давленье солнца и луны,  
Всю тяжесть звездной тишины,  
Так хорошо знакомой.

Мы ощущали ярче всех  
Значенье этих светлых вех,  
Их странное давленье.

И потому для наших мук  
Оставят только свет и звук  
До светопреставленья

Ведь даже в тысячу веков  
Нам не исчерпать всех стихов,  
Прозящихся на перья.

И, потеряв привычный мир,  
Мы требуем для арф и лир  
Особого доверья.

VII  
Все то, что знал любой поэт  
Назад тому пять тысяч лет,  
Теперь ученый-физик,

Едва не выбившись из сил,  
Лабораторно воскресил,  
Снабдил научной визой.

Ему медали и венки,  
Забыты древние стихи,  
Овидия прозренья,

Что удивить могло бы свет,  
Как мог вместить его поэт  
В одно стихотворенье.

И слишком страшно вспоминать,  
Как доводилось умирать  
Чудесным тем провидцам.

Их отправляли много раз  
Кончать пророческий рассказ  
В тюрьму или в больницу.

И в наши дни науке дан,  
Подсказан гениальный план  
Каким-нибудь Гомером.

И озаряют сразу, вдруг,  
Путь положительных наук  
Его стихи и вера,

Его могущество и власть,

the pressure of sun and moon,  
all the gravity of starry silence  
we know so well.

We sensed brighter than everything  
the meaning of these luminous milestones,  
of their strange pressure.

And this why for our torment  
there remain only light and sound  
until doomsday.

Even in a thousand centuries  
we will not exhaust all the verses  
supplicating on quills.

And, losing the familiar world,  
we will demand for harps and lyres  
a singular trust.

VII  
What any poet knew  
five thousand years ago,  
the physicist,

almost impotent,  
now resurrects in the lab  
and endows with a scientific visa.

To him go the medals and wreaths,  
forgotten are the ancient verses,  
the Ovidian epiphany

that it might astonish the world,  
how much its poet can house  
in one line of verse.

And it is too frightening to recall  
how it was that they died,  
these miraculous seers.

They were sent many times  
to end the prophetic story  
in prison or in a hospital.

And in our day science is handed,  
proffered an ingenious plan  
by some kind of Homer.

And the path of positive science  
will be illuminated all at once,  
suddenly, its verses and faith,

its authority and might,

Которым сроду не пропасть,  
Навек не размельчиться,

Хотя бы все, что под рукой,  
Дыша и злобой и тоской,  
Желало б расщепиться.

### VIII

И раньше Божия рука  
Карала мерзости греха,  
Гнала из рая Еву.

И даже землю сплющил Бог,  
Когда Он удержать не мог  
Прорвавшегося гнева.

Быть может, у природы есть  
Желанье с нами счеты свести  
В физическом явленье

За безнаказанность убийц,  
За всемогущество тупиц  
И за души растленье.

За всю людскую ложь, обман,  
Природа мстить любой из стран  
Уже давно готова.

За их поруганную честь  
Готовит атомную месть,  
Не говоря ни слова.

### IX

У всех свое добро и зло,  
Свой крест и кормчее весло.  
Но есть закон природы.

Что всех, кого не свалит с ног,  
Тех разгоняет жизни ток  
К анодам и катодам.

Родится жесткий разговор  
Больному сердцу вперекор  
О долге и о славе.

Но как же сплавить те мечты  
И надмогильные кресты  
В кладбищенской оправе?

И это, верно, не про нас  
Тот умильный рассказ  
И Диккенса романы.

Ведь наши версты велики,  
Пещеры наши глубоки

by which the abyss will never  
shatter itself once and for all,

even if everything under  
its thumb, breathing with malice  
and angst, longed to split itself.

### VIII

Before, the hand of God  
chastened the filth of sin,  
chasing Eve from Eden.

God even levelled the earth,  
when He could not stem  
the tide of wrath.

Maybe nature has the wish  
to call us to account  
in a physical phenomenon

for the murderer's impunity,  
for the omnipotence of stupidity  
and for the soul's corruption.

For all the human lies, deception,  
to take revenge on any country,  
nature has long been ready.

For their trampled honor  
it prepares atomic vengeance,  
without saying a word.

### IX

Everything has its own good and evil,  
its own cross and helmsman's oar.  
But there is a law of nature.

Whatever, whoever is not knocked off their feet,  
these life's current will disperse  
to the anodes and the cathodes.

Tough talk is born  
to the diseased heart set  
on duty and on glory.

But how to alloy these dreams  
with the gravestone crosses set  
in the cemetery's ring?

It is, truly, not for us  
the cloying story  
of a Dickens novel.

No, in our vast versts,  
our profound caverns

И холодны лиманы,  
И в разности температур  
Гренландии и Эстремадур –  
Такая есть чрезмерность,  
Что каждому не хватит сил,  
Чтоб мог, умел и воскресил  
Свою былую верность,  
Чтоб были снова заодно.  
Не называли жизни дно  
Благоуханным небом.  
А если это не дано –  
Не открывали бы окно,  
Не подавали хлеба.  
Ведь даже дружба и семья  
Служить опорой бытия  
Подчас уже не могут.  
И каждый ищет в темноте  
Своей обманутой мечте  
Особую дорогу.  
Мне впору только в петлю лезть,  
Мне надоели ложь и лесть  
И рабские поклоны.  
Но где ж мне отыскать надежд,  
Чтобы заполнить эту брешь  
Совместной обороны?  
И на обрывистом краю  
Преодолею я свою  
Застенчивость и робость.  
Не веря век календарю,  
Я с удивлением смотрю  
На вырытую пропасть.  
Но я туда не упаду,  
Я удержусь на скользком льду,  
На тонком и на ломком,  
Где дует ветер прежних лет  
И замечает чей-то след  
Крутящейся поземкой.  
Х  
Провозглашают петухи  
Свои наивные стихи,  
Дерут петушьи глотки,

and chilly estuaries,  
in the temperature difference  
from Greenland to Extremadura—  
are such extremes,  
that everyone lacks the strength  
to grasp and resurrect  
their own former truth,  
to be again at one.  
No longer calling life's bottom  
fragrant sky.  
But if it is not given—  
the window is not opened,  
bread is not broken;  
if even friendship and family  
can already no longer  
serve as supports of being;  
and if each seeks in the dark  
a singular road  
to his own deceptive dream—  
then I fit only to climb into the noose;  
I am fed up with the lies and flattery  
and slavish bows.  
But where am I to seek out hope,  
to make whole this breach  
of joint defense?  
On the abrupt edge  
I will overcome  
my own shyness and timidity.  
Not believing the age by the calendar  
I look with surprise  
at the dug-up abyss.  
But I will not fall there,  
I will hold out on the slippery ice,  
on thin and on brittle,  
where the wind of past years blows  
and sweeps away someone's trail  
with a whirling snowdrift.  
X  
The cocks proclaim  
their naïve verses,  
tearing their cockscombed throats,

И вздрагивают от волны,  
Еще удерживая сны,  
Прикованные лодки.

А морю кажется, что зря  
Их крепко держат якоря  
Заржавленной цепью,

Что нам пора бы плыть туда,  
Где молча горбится вода  
Распаханною степью,

Где море то же, что земля,  
Оно похоже на поля  
С поднятой целиною,

Как будто Божия соха,  
Архангеловы лемеха  
Копались в перегное,

Что, если б лодки настигал  
На полпути бродячий шквал,  
Он по добросердечью

Их обошел и пощадил,  
Не закопал бы в мутный ил  
И сохранил от течи.

А если б за живых гребцов  
В них посадили мертвецов,  
Отнюдь не самозванцев,

Они блуждали б среди шхер  
Не хуже прочих на манер  
Летучего Голландца.

XI  
Когда-нибудь на тусклый свет  
Бредущих по небу планет  
И вытащат небрежно

Для опознания примет  
Скелет пятидесяти лет,  
Покрытый пылью снежной.

Склепают ребра кое-как,  
И пальцы мне сведут в кулак,  
И на ноги поставят,

Расскажут, как на пустыре  
Я рылся в русском словаре,  
Перебирал алфавит,

Как тряс овсяным колоском  
И жизнь анютиным глазком

and chained boats,  
shuddering from a wave,  
still cling to their dreams.

But to the sea, it seems in vain  
that anchors tightly hold them  
with a rusty chain,

that it is time for us to swim there,  
where silent water stoops  
to plowed steppes,

where sea is same as earth,  
resembling the field  
with virgin soil upturned,

as if God's plow,  
the Archangel's plowshares  
were digging into humus,

that if midway a wandering squall  
overtook the boats,  
out of kindheartedness

it would pass over and spare them,  
not bury them in the muddy silt  
and would save them from leaking.

But if in place of living rowers  
the dead were planted,  
far from impostors,

they would wander among the skerries  
no worse than others, in the manner  
of the Flying Dutchman.

XI  
Someday by the dimming light  
as planets wander through the sky  
they will carelessly pull out

for identifying signs  
a fifty-year old skeleton,  
powdered with snowy dust.

They will rivet the ribs any which way,  
fingers driven towards me in a fist,  
and I will be stood on my feet,

They will tell, how in the wasteland  
I dug into the Russian lexicon,  
ran my fingers over the alphabet,

How I shook like an oat spikelet  
and like a pansy's eyes

Разглядывал с поляны,

Как ненавидел ложь и грязь,  
Как кровь на лед моя лилась  
Из незажившей раны.

Как выговаривал слова,  
Какие знают деревья,  
Животные и птицы,

А человеческую речь  
Всегда старался приберечь  
На лучшие страницы.

И – пусть на свете не жилец –  
Я – челобитчик и истец  
Невылазного горя.

Я – там, где боль, я – там, где стон,  
В извечной тяжбе двух сторон,  
В старинном этом споре.

witnessed life from a clearing,

How I hated lies and filth,  
How blood gushed onto the ice  
from my unhealed wound.

How I uttered words  
Which the trees know,  
the animals and birds,

And human speech  
I always strove to set aside  
on the best pages.

And—let there be no life on earth—  
I am—plaintiff and suitor  
of impassable grief.

I am—there, with the pain, I am—there, with the groan,  
in eternal litigation between two sides,  
in this ancient quarrel.

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