

FREEDOM – A WAY OF SURVIVING IN THE NOVEL EVERYTHING FLOWS

PhD Alina Sora

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures
Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies
alina.sora@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present study focuses on the way in which a great humanist, the Russian writer Vasily Grossman, succeeds in understanding 'his century', the century of the totalitarian regimes which denied and suppressed one of the most important human values: freedom. In his novel *Everything Flows*, Grossman concentrates on the idea that life cannot exist in the absence of "freedom and kindness". The absence of these two essential values made those unimaginable human tragedies possible.

Keywords: freedom, kindness, human being, totalitarian state, tragedies.

Abstrait

Cette étude se focalise sur la manière dans laquelle un grand humaniste, l'écrivain russe Vasily Grossman a réussi à entendre « son siècle », le siècle des régimes totalitaires qui ont nié et supprimé l'une des plus importantes valeurs : la liberté. Dans son roman, « Tout passe », Grossman est concentré sur l'idée que la vie ne peut pas exister sans « liberté et gentillesse ». L'absence de ces deux valeurs essentielles ont fait être possible ces tragédies humaines et inimaginables.

Mots-clés : liberté, gentillesse, être humain, État totalitaire, tragédies.

"The history of humanity is the history of human freedom."
(Grossman, 1972: 212)

1. Introduction

The value of a writer is judged by the manner in which he covers the acute problems of humanity, by the manner in which he manages to evoke certain aspects of life with gravity, expressiveness and emotion. Vasily Grossman is such an author, with great talent he wrote about one of the darkest periods of European history: Nazism and Stalinism.

The present paper aims to offer an overview of the way in which this great humanist, the Russian writer Vasily Grossman, succeeds in

understanding "his century", the century of the totalitarian regimes which denied and suppressed one of the most important human values: freedom. In his novel *Everything Flows*, Grossman concentrates on the idea that life cannot exist in the absence of "freedom and kindness". The absence of these two essential values made those unimaginable human tragedies possible.

2. Totalitarian regimes: Nazism and Stalinism

Time works its way, the tragic history of the 20th century remains somewhere behind us, the temporal distance between *now* and *then* grows bigger and bigger. It is very easy for us to forget that cruel past, the bloody 20th century with all its human dramas, with all its terrible experiments. For a few decades during the last century, Europe was under the domination of two main totalitarian regimes: Stalinism and Nazism which led to mass murder on a huge scale. Totalitarianism, whether embodied in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia, denied some of the most important needs of a human being – human dignity, his inexhaustible need for love and compassion, his desire for freedom. The intentions of the two extremist ideologies were similar, they tried to reshape the world artificially and brutally, the mass extermination of a 'race' or 'class' was the monstrous purpose of the same political pathology specific to the past century, they aimed to create 'a new man', to establish a new world order.

Vasily Grossman's major literary works – *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows* remain some of the most vivid testimonies, by the artistic power of words Grossman portrays the growth and consequences of totalitarianism. Robert Chandler, the translator into English of the two novels, considers that *Life and Fate* "is almost an encyclopedia of the complexities of life under totalitarianism, and no one has articulated better than Grossman how hard it is for an individual to withstand its pressures". (Chandler, 2006: X). *Life and Fate* provides the most complete picture of the Stalingrad battle, a crucial moment during the World War II which proved that Germany wasn't invincible, Stalingrad represented the beginning of the end of Hitler's dreams in Eastern Europe. In his masterpiece, Grossman also draws our attention to the parallels in the two aforementioned totalitarian systems. Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* highlights both similarities and differences between the two political regimes, being followed by Raymond Aron, Alain Besançon, François Furet, Ernst Nolte, Martin Malia who have also analysed them. *Everything Flows* is a great tribute to the human spirit, a serious indictment of the Stalinist regime. Grossman, like Solzhenitsyn, gives voice to the suffering of millions of innocent people, we cannot remain indifferent to all those tragic events which tore the Sovietic society apart in the 1930s: The Great Terror, collectivisation (1932-1933 – the terrible years of the Great Famine imposed

by Stalin in Ukraine – the breadbasket of Europe – in order to destroy the kulaks and to establish the collective farms), mass arrests, denunciations, isolation, death. Grossman was indeed 'the chronicler of his time', he saw what millions of people also saw and he omitted nothing, he placed the two major totalitarian systems and their consequences under the microscope.

Grossman had a moral strength which was felt by all, and after the tragic event in his life – in 1941 his mother Yekaterina Savelievna was killed by the Nazis in the Berdichev ghetto along with other 30.000 Jews – his mother became his 'inner witness', his 'inner light' who gave him strength to keep on writing and telling the truth. In a letter to Ilya Ehrenburg, Grossman wrote that he felt it was his moral duty to speak "on behalf of those who lie in the earth". (Garrard, 1996: 206). When the manuscript of *Life and Fate*, the fruit of twelve years' work, was 'arrested' by the KGB officers in 1961, he wrote a letter to Khrushchev in which he took the liberty to express the way he was feeling: "There are bitter and tragic pages in my book. Maybe reading them won't be easy. But, believe me when I say, they weren't easy to write either. And anyway, I simply had to". (Apud Lipkin, 1986: 10).

3. Vasily Grossman – "the apostle of freedom"

Everything Flows was written in an atmosphere of corrosive fear and suspicion (Grossman started writing it in 1955, Stalin was dead, but the totalitarian state was still 'alive' – the Khrushchev 'Thaw' was just an illusion). The novel – "a work still more critical of Soviet society than *Life and Fate*" as Chandler notes in the preface of the novel *Life and Fate* – tells the painful truth of a society dominated by terror. (Chandler, 2006: XVii). *Everything Flows* was published in the Soviet Union twenty years later, in 1980. Frank Ellis in his work *Vasily Grossman – The genesis and evolution of a Russian heretic* states that "Everything Flows was born in chains, but it was written in freedom". (Ellis, 1994: 217). Indeed, after Stalin's death, Grossman felt free from the ideological chains imposed by the so-called competent authorities, he chose to tell the truth, to unveil the Stalinist lies. If his two important novels mentioned above had been published in the 60s, the Soviet literature would have had a lot to gain, reading his novels, many people in West and East wouldn't have been so reluctant to believe the misery and brutality of life under the rule of Joseph Stalin, despite the terrible evidence. *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* published in 1962, remains the only book available to the public during those years, a book in which its author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn denounces the cruel life beyond the barbed wire of the concentration camps. The "apostle of freedom", (Markish, 1986: 40) as Shimon Markish – a Grossman specialist – calls him, is convinced that the human aspiration towards freedom can never be eradicated and that despite the threat of death, people and their values will

endure: "truth and good are going to be victorious, the ideas of freedom, good and humanity will triumph over the forces of darkness and slavery". (Ellis, 1994: 63).

Ivan Grigoryevici, the hero of the novel *Everything Flows*, returns to the Moscow of his student years after he has spent nearly thirty years in various camps. "Ivan's life was ruined, and he himself had helped to ruin it". (Grossman, 1972: 30). A free spirit, Ivan refuses to be manipulated, he openly attacks the regime in a lecture hall. "He proclaimed freedom a boon as important as life itself, and declared that limitations on freedom cripple people as surely as an ax that cuts off their fingers or their ears, and that the annihilation of freedom is the equivalent of murder". (Grossman, 1972: 38-39). Beyond Ivan's creed we recognize Grossman's creed, the hero of the novel identifies himself with the author, is his *alter-ego*.

His return to Moscow after such a long period of time is richly symbolic. It is a confrontation between past and present, between the old world and the new one, between Judas, the betrayer and the betrayed. These elements are brought together in a series of memorable meetings. The meeting with Nikolai Andreyevich, Ivan's cousin, is one of them. At the news of Ivan's release, Nikolai becomes anxious, he starts repeating to himself the Nekrasov verses: "The son knelt down before the father/ And washed the old man's feet". (Grossman, 1972: 44). It is the voice of repentance, but he doesn't have the moral strength to follow his inner voice to the end. When Ivan asks him if he has signed the letter condemning the doctor-assassins, Nikolai tries to justify the past and...himself. "In the beginning was the word. Truly it was so". (Grossman, 1972: 69), if we take into consideration the following meeting between Pinegin and Ivan, the betrayer and the betrayed. In Vitaly Antonovici Pinegin, a former university student, now a successful scientist, Ivan confronts his denouncer. Pinegin is sure that Ivan doesn't know anything about his betrayal, but nothing remains hidden from Ivan's eyes and Pinegin finally understands this: "he would give up everything, everything, if only he did not have to feel that glance on him". (Grossman, 1972: 67). Unlike Nikolai and Pinegin, Anna Sergeyevna, his landlady and lover – they share a short relationship which makes Ivan feel the meaning of freedom more intensely, has no fear in facing her past. In fact, she needs to confess, to free her soul and Ivan becomes her confessor, Ivan is identified with Christ: "I regard you, don't be angry now, as a kind of Christ. I feel the need to tell everything before you, before God". (Grossman, 1972: 122).

Grossman is more a God-seeker than a believer, but the confession before another human being represents a Christian way of liberating your soul from the chains of pain. Anna Sergeyevna, a young Party activist during the Famine years, depicts those terrible events which took place during the

implementation of the collectivization policy. Mass starvation that decimated Ukraine is Anna's most painful recollection of Stalin's war against the kulaks – 'the enemies of the people', 'the parasites'. Deprived of all his supplies, the peasant simply starved to death, it was Stalin's way to punish Ukrainian rural population who opposed forced collectivization. The episode is described in apocalyptic notes which make it difficult to read: "Everyone was in terror. Mothers looked at their children and began to scream in fear. They screamed as if a snake had crept into their house. And this snake was famine, starvation, death. What was to be done? The peasants had one thing only on their minds – something to eat. They would suck, move their jaws, and the saliva would flow and they would keep swallowing it down, but it wasn't food". (Grossman, 1972: 153).

Children's fate was even worse, their little bodies and pitiful cries were a real torture for their parents, more powerful than hunger itself. "They were just like that: their heads like heavy balls on thin little necks, like storks, and one could see each bone of their arms and legs protruding from beneath the skin, how bones joined, and the entire skeleton was stretched over with skin that was like yellow gauze. And the children's faces were aged, tormented, just as if they were seventy years old. And by spring they no longer had faces at all. Instead, they had birdlike heads with beaks, or frog heads - thin, white lips - and some of them resembled fish, mouths open. Not human faces. And the eyes. oh, Lord! Comrade Stalin, good God, did you see those eyes?" (Grossman, 1972: 157). In the middle of the slaughter, Gorky's articles concerning children's education were useless: children didn't need "educational toys", they needed food. Anna was a small cog inside the destructive machinery, but also a witness.

Miron Dolot, the author of *Execution by hunger. The hidden Holocaust* was one of the survivors of the terrible famine, an eyewitness. In the pages of his book he describes the confrontation between man and despair, the book is a tragic picture of man's fight against death, but also a lesson of human dignity. In his philosophical essay *From Hope and Fear Set Free*, Isaiah Berlin states that "A rational man is free if his behaviour is not mechanical, and springs from motives and it is intended to fulfil purposes of which he is, or can at will be, aware (...) The unfree man is like someone who is drugged or hypnotised (...) we consider him to be in the grip of forces over which he has no control...". (Berlin, 1999: 175).

Hunger was such a force, the State's instrument that transformed people into beasts, slaves of the 'black death', the instinct of preservation, of survival was stronger than any other human feeling, that hostile force made mothers eat their children. People had no control over their lives, the totalitarian State had the absolute control over people's lives and "the greater the part played by this force, the smaller the freedom of the individual".

(Berlin, 1999: 180). Both Grossman and Dolot portray unimaginable pictures of human despair, but in the midst of such dehumanizing conditions, man can save his dignity, an elementary gesture of kindness addressed to another human being is his choice to stand tall and not to obey the destructive force.

There are parts in *Everything Flows* in which Ivan is overwhelmed by memories, both from his childhood and camp, and by reminiscing them a burdensome atmosphere is created, these memories open a door to a painful world, but in Grossman's view this is another way in which an individual gets rid of his pain, it constitutes proof of healing."He could remember reading, with legs drawn up beneath him on the couch – and the pleasant coolness of his oil-cloth on the divan on hot summer days. He sometimes tried to recall his mother's face, and at such moments his heart ached, and tears would appear in his squinched-up eyes, just as in childhood when he tried to look at the sun". (Grossman, 1972: 54). The memory of freedom helps Ivan remain attached to life, he is there, striving to understand his destiny, 'his century'. Truth and freedom – there is a profound connection between these two elements that give sense to human existence. The new rulers imposed their own 'truth' and suppressed human liberty, they 'got rid of' these concepts, they were considered undesirable and replaced with some other 'useful' instruments specific to the new Sovietic society: oppression, terror, fear. 'Freed' after the camp experience, people fear being free, fear transforms people, subjugates them, imprisons them within their own fears, condemns them to detention, sometimes even worse than the one imposed by the authorities. Ivan Grigoryevici experiences the same feeling, he feels uprooted, isolated from the rest of the world, he realizes that the barbed wires between *here* and *there* have become useless, the differences between the two 'zones' have faded out. In a world dominated by terror and confusion people are faced with questions: Who confiscated the grains? Who was it who then signed the act which imposed mass murder? And where is this life, where is this terrible suffering? Who was guilty and who is going to answer for it? Is it going to be forgotten without words? – these are just a few questions in the novel. People realize they have questions to ask, they need answers, they need to find out the TRUTH.

4. "The century of Vasily Grossman"

In the book *Hope and memory: Lessons from the twentieth century*, Tzvetan Todorov, a historian, literary theorist and moral philosopher, in a number of essays on six outstanding humanists, concentrates on the way in which these people have succeeded in understanding 'their century'. Vasily Grossman, Margaret Buber-Neumann, David Rousset, Primo Levi, Romain Gary and Germaine Tillon experienced suffering in different ways – some of them came back from the Hell called Auschwitz or Gulag, others were

eyewitnesses of the war horrors. These people resisted the temptation to describe the 20th century in black and white, Primo Levi, for instance, saw the camp as a moral "grey zone" where people, guards and prisoners, were capable of doing good or evil. As Todorov says, for Vasily Grossman "freedom and kindness" are the antidotes a human being should possess and use against the totalitarian system. "There are no guilty people in the world" according to Lev Tolstoi, in the totalitarian state the formula is different "the whole world is guilty and no one is innocent". (Grossman, 1972: 80). We cannot close our eyes and pretend that bad people don't exist, we cannot run away from reality, but Grossman considers that the totalitarian State is guilty of bringing their dark side to life. Human nature is not always strong, in the battle between man and state, the latter – the strongest – is the victorious one.

Marx, Engels and Lenin may have wanted to liberate man from what they called "economic slavery" in order to transform man from a slave into a noble man. But they seriously neglected those noble impulses that set a man free: his free thinking, free speech, free will. Stalin inherited this theory and implemented it with brutality. In the novel *Everything Flows* there are some passages in which Lenin is directly indicted as the destroyer of Russia's freedom, the book represents "the systematic annihilation of the Lenin cult" which makes it the most subversive piece of literature that has ever been written by a Soviet writer. (Ellis, 1994: 1). In order to understand Lenin's role, we must place him within the context of Russia's long and bloody history. Grossman considers that Lenin, the one "who transformed her most" did not destroy the tie between Russian progress and her "nonfreedom", but he succeeded in strengthening it. (Grossman, 1972: 219). The author diverges from the major thinkers of the 19th century and rejects the beliefs advanced by writers such as Chaadayev, Gogol, Dostoyevsky for whom Russia was "the chosen people", – a strange people, strong believers in the Christian ideal embodied in their *Russian soul*. According to their opinions, Russia's great destiny was to lead the spiritual development of the world. The history of the twentieth century is a series of demographic catastrophes, mass deaths began with World War I and continued with World War II, it is the century whose defining feature remains human tragedy.

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, using Vasily Grossman's *Everything Flows*, I have focused on a terrifying period in our recent history which mutilated destinies, dehumanized, killed, breached the fundamental right of human beings to freedom, the right to decide on their own fate. In the present study I have also focused on the way people find 'solutions' in order to survive. "Freedom is life itself" – this is Grossman's 'solution', his profound message expressed in a very lucid way: life cannot exist in the absence of freedom and kindness

– this is the key to our existence, this is the very 'humanity of humanity'. Vasily Grossman remains a great humanist, he doesn't share Dostoyevsky's ideal image concerning Russia's mission in the world, but he manifests the same dostoyevskian kind of affection for the oppressed human being, for all human beings whose incomprehensible destiny on this Earth remains...a mystery.

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