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## Exploring Hidden Narrative Elements through a Close Reading of Vasily Grossman's Short Story "The Life of Il'ya Stepanovich" (1935)

### Abstract

The subject matter of this paper concerns the early phase of Vasily Grossman's literary career in the mid-1930s. Prior to this period, the author proved his ability to evaluate the mechanisms of censorship and developed his understanding of what was publishable and what could be sanctioned through the publication process of his first novel (*Bit-Yunan*, Fel'dman 2019). The research material selected for this paper is the lesser-known short story *Zhizn' Il'i Stepanovicha* [The life of Il'ya Stepanovich], published in 1935, and the aim is to provide a close reading and an interpretation key to this text. In order to expose the hidden ambiguity of the short story, the chosen research perspective includes a focus on the function of the protagonist as an entity that does not legitimise the socialist myth; a narratological approach on the use of proper names, on "perspective" and the role of the narrator with regard to the axiological structure of the text.

**Keywords:** Vasily Grossman, Socialist Realism, positive hero, censorship, self-reflection, historical progress, narrator

To establish himself as a writer after his journalistic debut, Vasily S. Grossman had to be aware that he was entering a field of literature and text culture of primary interest to the Soviet authorities and under their strict direct control. By the 1930s, censorship was operating on several levels throughout the literary process, starting from the authors' self-censorship practices to reach party ideological censorship (Bljum 2000: 14–22). This was so that writers, among whom the novice Grossman, had a good understanding of what was publishable and what could be harshly sanctioned. As shown by Yuri Bit-Yunan throughout his comprehensive study of Grossman's journalistic and literary activity, he soon realised that the

contradictions in Soviet policies and reality were not just temporary dysfunctions but systematic failures<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, analysing the *rasskazy* and sketches published by Grossman between 1934–1937 could further shed light on the survival strategies he had to implement to meet the formal requirements of the new socialist realist canon and be published. This attitude seems to comply with a self-censorship mechanism, as in the attempt to foresee the ideological, political and aesthetic claims that could be moved towards a manuscript (Bljum 2000: 14). Yet, whereas Bljum concludes that self-censorship could result in loss of originality, Grossman exploits the potentialities of the language, the narrative techniques and stylistic devices in order to leave the possibility open for a problematised reading of his works. Moreover, although the centrality of the topic and ideological contribution of a literary work helped to identify its preferable interpretation, Grossman did not provide the necessary clarity and unambiguity for this, thus finding himself “u grani dopustimogo”, close but still within the limits of the acceptable (Bit-Yunan 2010: 88-89). This attitude that Bit-Yunan explored with regard to the publication of the *ocherk* “Berdichev, not as a joke but seriously” in 1929 implies the ability to evaluate the political issues behind censorship mechanisms and, therefore of identifying the right time for publishing (Bit-Yunan, Fel’dman 2019: 94–99).

The short story *Zhizn’ Il’i Stepanovicha* was published in the eleventh issue of the monthly magazine *Znamja* in 1934, together with the text *Zhenshchina* [A woman]. Later, it appeared in 1935 in the collection *Schast’e* [Happiness] and was reissued in 1937 in *Rasskazy* [Short Stories]. Il’ya Stepanovich needs to participate in the inauguration of a new steel plant. His mother visits him, and he forgets to meet her at the station with his wife because he is busy at work. The mother’s visit makes him think about death and his childhood for the first time. The story opens with Il’ya leading a meeting and listening to an engineer, when suddenly he shouts the word “Excalibur”, the first word of the text, that emerges from Il’ya’s subconscious, providing an interpretation key for the story and the protagonist’s life.

The title of this short story does not seem to anchor it to the main composition axes of the volume<sup>2</sup>. These were the concept of happiness and the interest in the social role and function of the protagonists; among those were the revolutionaries of the pre-Bolshevik times, members of the technical intelligentsia and commissars. However, both themes are explored within the narration. The word “life” leaves room for expectations as the reader may be encouraged to approach the text as an exemplum, the proposal of a model life and social path that, if followed, leads to the happiness anticipated by the collection’s title<sup>3</sup>. Still, the narrator does not provide any explicit information about Il’ya until further on in the narration. There is little detail about his occupation, education and social status, so the reader will be able to infer and complete some of this information based on the places and objects surrounding him and the characters’ interactions. Nevertheless, the fact that Il’ya is designated from the title through the use of his proper name could be symptomatic of the fact that he could be read as a fixed element in a changing world (Margolin 2002: 109)<sup>4</sup>. Although the narrator uses the protagonist’s proper name a few lines from the beginning, Il’ya has already been introduced in the narrated world. The first lines of the story are:

1 This awareness had already been traced back to the second half of the Thirties. See Frank Ellis (1990: 653–666).

2 Unless otherwise indicated translations are those of the author. The other titles in the collection are *The Chief Engineer*, *The Chageman*, *Little Story about Happiness*, *Again about Happiness*, *Happiness*, *Misery*, *A Woman*, *In the Town of Berdichev*, *Comrade Fëdor*, *At Dawn*, *Purple*.

3 About socialist realist titles, see: Andrei Sinyavsky (1988: 21–22).

4 *Comrade Fëdor* (dated 1931) is the only other case when a proper name is used for a title.

– Эскалибур!, – громко и внушительно сказал кто-то и все сидевшие за громадным столом оглянулись в сторону председателя. Краснощекий, седой инженер, делавший доклад, замолчал и растерянно вскинув голову, скосил глаза на Илью Степановича. Он, точно лошадь, неожиданно остановленная и озиравшая из-за оглобли сердитым оком кучера, повернул свою толстую уверенную шею в сметанно-белом воротнике [...]<sup>5</sup>. (Grossman 1935: 5)

The authorship of the first word is attributed to a generic “*kto-to*,” someone, later pointed out by the turning of all the onlookers, who direct their attention to the side of the “*predsedatel*,” the chairperson. At that point the engineer, holding a report, questions Il’ya with his gaze and later with words (“*Pra-a-astite?*” [I beg you pardon]). Il’ya, whose perspective the narrator now assumes, sees the engineer turn around like a horse being held back by the coachman. However, a confirmation as to which actor uttered the word “Excalibur” is only given through Il’ya’s thoughts: “Вот так номер, – удивленно подумал он. – Откуда вдруг выскочило это идиотское слово: «эскалибур», точно вареником ляпнул об стол. И заорал я его, как эврику какую-то” (6) [“What do you know!,” he thought in amazement, wondering where the idiotic word “Excalibur” had suddenly come from. I slammed it down on the table like a dumpling and I shouted it out like some kind of eureka.”]. At this stage, Il’ya is not introduced to the reader through any explicit description of his physical or mental characteristics<sup>6</sup>. First of all, Il’ya’s words and actions are introduced. Unlike what the first utterance suggests, the protagonist appears to be a man of a practical nature, down to earth and straightforward, maybe even slightly arrogant. He is a functionary, part of the new technical intelligentsia. On first reading, his behaviour seems predictable and normal. He listens to some engineer and gives his suggestions to provide a simple and concrete solution to a concrete problem and ease the way to the regular functioning of industry and production. After the engineer notifies the failure of completion of the construction plans of a plant, Il’ya’s response is not condescending:

– Связаться с заводом Чубаря, который кстати у вас под носом и который кстати же построен для обслуживания южных строительных, вы, конечно, не могли, – сварливо перебил Илья Степанович: – столь безумная и смелая мысль не пришла вам в голову<sup>7</sup>. (Grossman 1935: 6)

This problem-solving attitude represents a canonical feature of a socialist realist hero, hinting at a fixed interpretation of this episode. Il’ya is capable of keeping an overview of the situation; he is analytical and knows when and where to act, unlike the engineer, who is still speaking joyfully. Besides, Il’ya is strict, but he is expected to be fair and virtuous. The engineer knows exactly how to look at him with crying eyes and address him in a womanly voice, somehow relying on Il’ya’s fairness while underlying the conceit in his reprimand. Later, the narrator signals that Il’ya may be a good functionary, but he is neither magnanimous nor pure and takes a certain pleasure in exercising his power. As his secretary, Draudin, asks for some time off because he has rheumatism, Il’ya replies that it will not be possible until October,

5 “– ‘Excalibur!’ said someone in a loud and authoritative tone, and everyone sitting around the large table looked toward the chairman. The red-cheeked, grey-haired engineer giving the report fell silent and looked at Il’ya Stepanovich bewilderedly. Like a horse suddenly stopped, he looked behind the shaft at the coachman with an angry eye. He turned his thick firm neck in a creamy white collar [...].”

6 In the 1937 edition the narrator describes him leaning over the table and sitting with his lower lip protruding after asking the speaker to resume (Grossman 1937: 130).

7 “You certainly could not have contacted the Chubar factory, which by the way is right under your nose and which by the way is built for serving the southern constructions... but such a mad and daring idea had not occurred to you.”

to which Draudin resentfully reacts by reminding his superior that he will have to leave the same day to attend the inauguration of a plant:

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«На съезд» – говорит его [Драудина] лицо. Он знает, что Илья Степанович не любит торжественных открытий. Илья Степанович начинает звонит по телефону-вертушке.

– Ну-да, конечно – Цека. Что? А-а, не выйдет говоришь?

– У вас меняется характер, товарищ Драудин, – говорит он. – Вы улыбаетесь, а вчера едва не лопнули от смеха на заседании, думаете я не слышал?

Но Драудин снова мрачен. Он уходит в управление делами<sup>8</sup>. (Grossman 1935: 13)

As underlined by the use of the prestigious *vertushka*, an object that thematises Il'ya's higher status, he is aware of his position and does not bother recurring to it as a way of getting out of an uncomfortable situation. As a man in charge and as a man who averts the danger of putting one's petty concerns before official commitments, Il'ya seems to possess some of the qualities of the positive hero, among which Sinyavsky lists and not without irony "the clarity and directness with which he sees the Purpose and strives toward it. Hence the amazing precision of all his actions, thoughts, tastes, feelings, and judgments. [...] For him there are no inner doubts and hesitations, no unanswerable questions, and no impenetrable secrets." (Sinyavsky [1957, 1988] 1960: 48–49). Still, as more information is added, the protagonist's world shows signs of instability and uncertainty, meaning that his belief system is not as solid as the hero himself took for granted. The first hints of unease are found in metaphors concerning animals and child-bearing, often introduced by the word *tochno* (exactly, just), that signals a change in perspective: the narrator assumes a subjective psychological point of view, identifiable with Il'ya's perspective (Uspensky 2000: 108–109). The colour scheme used to represent the story world and its inhabitants reflects the same internal focalisation. As for the first case, the site manager waiting for Il'ya has the riotous attitude of a woman waiting for too long with a little child in her arms in line at the cooperative shop. The evening air is as humid as the breath of a horse, where the horse could stand for the stagnation of older times, a slow pace that contrasts the rhythm of modernity. Draudin, the secretary, is *mrachnyi* (gloomy) and *zhěltyi* (both his face and hair are yellow), and he has the same expression of a cat after giving birth to half a dozen kittens. As far as the colours are concerned, yellow shades dominate. Yet they do not seem to stand for the brightness of the new reality, even though they contrast the grey, lifeless countryside around the plant. Yellow is the colour of Draudin's sick face and of leaves illuminated by electrical lights so as to mark the contrast between natural seasons and the striking pace of work and industry. Il'ya's mother is standing in a room surrounded by autumn leaves as if the picture of death was announcing itself in front of the protagonist, who is indeed reprimanded because of his appearance. He is not even forty, but his hair is grey, and he looks much older. This suggests that the narrator is not objective but judges the character according to a fixed system of values. This first description of the protagonist need not be read as a sign of wisdom but rather of fatigue, discomfort and lack of balance between Il'ya's inner self and the outstanding reality. At the same time, this internal turmoil does not equate the restlessness of the revolutionary character that can evolve from exerting his uncontrolled, negatively individualistic will to

8 "It serves you right!" - says his [Draudin's] face. He knows that Il'ya Stepanovich does not like ceremonial openings. Il'ya Stepanovich starts calling on the rotary phone.

- Well, yes, of course, Central Committee. What? Oh, it is not possible, you say?

- Your temper is changing, Comrade Draudin, - he says. - You are smiling, and yesterday you almost burst out laughing at the meeting, do you think I have not heard? But Draudin is gloomy again. He walks off to the administration office.

a more conscious, politically oriented course of action, reaching a “greater harmony both within himself and in relation to his society” (Clark 1981: 16–17).

The circumstances force Il’ya to focus on his inner self. Talking to a comrade in the elevator on the way to another meeting, Il’ya recalls the morning episode that he addresses with laughter. The comrade offers him a simple explanation: – Ты не думай, – сказал товарищ, – это, брат, из подсознательной сферы – и они вдруг перестали смеяться и молча пошли по коридору (Grossman 1935: 8) [“Do not be fooled”, said the comrade, “my friend, it is from the subconscious,” and they suddenly stopped laughing and headed down the corridor in silence]. This character’s function is to thematise that the interpretation key has to be found in the protagonist’s subconscious, where the referent for the name “Excalibur” hides. Still, indulging in one’s subconscious is the typical occupation of a different kind of hero, not an active socialist one, but rather a “superfluous” one. Introspection and solipsism are a relic of an overcome set of values and beliefs, among which one could also identify an explanation for women’s immense love and the bother it provokes in the protagonist, for it cannot be conceived as an improvement factor, as it was for the superfluous hero, anymore (Sinyavsky 1988: 36). Moreover, both love and laughter seem to suggest that the inner sphere and its unexplored and uncontrollable nature are something the protagonist is wary of.

Some superfluous men have understood to give up their past and re-educate themselves to become positive heroes (Sinyavsky 1988: 42–43). Or, in another way, socialist realism is a cultural mode and not only a literary theory, so the new hero has to find a way to master the ideology and prove that they are neither backward nor weak-minded. Similarly, when discussing diaries of the Thirties, Jochen Hellbeck notices that the diarists operated a distinction between “the mind and the body, a diarist’s ‘will’ and his ‘heart,’ or individuals’ ‘ideology’ and their ‘psychology’”, where the latter element of the pairs bears a rather negative meaning, as addressed in the diary entries of a coal miner:

“It’s interesting how much disparity there is between psychology and ideology. Ideologically, I mobilized myself to bridge the gap, and I do work actively, but the psychology still draws me back home, to my home environment. This is evidenced by the more frequent dreams of the past two days, in which I saw my mother. But ideology will improve psychology, this must happen.” “Psychology,” in diaries of the early Soviet period, invariably had a negative ring. It was a lowly, chaotic, and dangerous force operating in the dark recesses of spirit and body [...] Ideology, by contrast, was attained through a person’s conscious struggle against psychology. (Hellbeck 2006: 68)

From this perspective, Il’ya faces the challenges of a modern Soviet man, despite what Gecht (1937) writes about the short story in a review of the 1937 *Rasskazy* collection. He considers this text the least successful because the protagonist is old-fashioned and he has been transposed in a mechanical way from the arsenal of characters from the past, and the author has assumed a false tone, prone to naturalism (Gecht 1937: 9). Il’ya seems indeed aware that within Stalinism, the responsibility of the individual for their shortcomings extends both to actions and thoughts, and faults are not only to be traced back to external, social dynamics but rather to one’s soul and psyche (Hellbeck 2006: 34).

As Il’ya recalls on seeing his mother after more than ten years in his apartment, his attention focuses on her “суровое, напряженное, почти злобное выражение” (Grossman 1935: 10) [stern, tense, almost spiteful expression]. The same adjectives are repeated in the line that follows. Stern and tense bear association with clichés used in the representation of the revolutionary hero. While discussing Gorky’s *Mother*, Clark states that the positive heroes are drawn through two techniques: “One is the symbolization of physical features also commonly used in earlier radical fiction as for instance the furrowed brow or

pinched face which are signs of the revolutionary's dedication and sacrifice. The other technique is the use of code words, or epithets: a select group of adjectives that indicate moral political qualities and/or corresponding nouns or adverbs (e.g. *ser'eznyj*, "serious") (Clark 1981: 57). When they appear on his mother's face, dedication and sacrifice are misplaced attributes within Il'ya's supposed beliefs-system, just as much as her love toward the son is misplaced in the new reality, but they do reveal yet another internal struggle of the protagonist.

Shortly before recalling this image, Il'ya looked at himself in the room's mirror, where, not surprisingly, he could only see the reflection of a precociously old man, not at all the stern image he should cast. Instead of acting and changing his behaviour through the exertion of conscious willpower to be a better model of the new man and a better son, Il'ya can find the solution in the necessity of the laws of the system he inhabits and in the schematic way he handles his relationship with his mother:

«Вот мать нужно было привезти сюда» – подумал он. – Как этот казак принес своего сына». И ему показалось, что если б она была тут с ним, на лице ее никогда не появлялось бы выражение глубокого, ей самой непонятного, злого упрека, выражение, пугавшее и даже сердившее его<sup>9</sup>. (Grossman 1935: 16)

So, in front of the newly tempered steel (facing "Excalibur"), she would feel the whole comprehensiveness of a shared beliefs-system and finally understand Il'ya as well. No qualitative change is shown in the way Il'ya approaches others through dialogue or actions as seen in the last lines of the short story also uttered by him: «Александр Александрович, соду против вашей изжоги можно вероятно достать в заводской лаборатории.» (Grossman 1935: 16) [Aleksandr Aleksandrovich, soda against your acid reflux can probably be sourced from the plant laboratory]. If anything, he is more confident in his judgment when he juxtaposes a petty way of looking at things and the whole comprehensive truth given in revelation to the mature individual. Nevertheless, this truth allows him to change the narrative about his past and past dreams in a way that naturally fits into that reality. On the one hand, the author addresses everyday Soviet reality as a chronicle in a canonical but cliché way (the delay in the construction work of a plant, the official opening of another one...). On the other hand, it is also possible to notice the attempt to schematically legitimate the hero. As Il'ya, for the first time, finds himself thinking about his childhood, he recalls what appears as an ideal or necessary path, the beginnings of which were apparently of no interest. Therefore, childhood can, in this sense, be regarded as a period of unawareness and be removed or remain unaddressed.

Пройденная жизнь была громадна. И вот сейчас, после десяти лет подполья, после Цюриха и Лондона, после командования армией, после работы в промышленности, Илья Степанович впервые оглянулся на свое детство. Это было сложное чувство, чувство чего-то навсегда ушедшего, чувство, которое вызывает робкая полоска зари в дымном прямоугольнике городского неба. Утром мальчик бежал в сад. Яблони, осыпанные нetaющие снегом, затаив дыхание, любовались весной, а он ходил меж их стволов в мокрой холодной траве и думал о

9 "See, this is where the mother should have been brought," he thought. "Just as this Cossack brought his son". And it seemed to him that if she had been here with him, her face would never have shown the expression of deep, incomprehensible to her, spiteful reproach, an expression that frightened and even angered him.

мече, словно выкованном из капель росы. И седому человеку почему-то стало жалко, чего – он и сам не знал<sup>10</sup>. (Grossman 1935: 11)

It is useful to look closely at the repetition throughout the short story of one word, mainly in the form of an adjective, also present in the previous quote: *gromadnyĭ* (immense). This adjective / noun recurs as an attribute of life and (motherly) love. Il'ya, an unwillingly questing hero, finds himself looking at an immense lived life, and he is afraid of it, as he recalls being and probably still is in front of the immense love of his mother. After meeting her, while lying in bed, Il'ya remembers the moment he saw his mother at home:

Когда он вошел в комнату, она стояла прямо и смотрела ему в лицо и у нее было суровое, напряженное, почти злобное выражение. И он вдруг вспомнил, что когда-то, очень давно, лет двадцать тому назад, его ночью уводили жандармы, она стояла молча среди комнаты и смотрела в его лицо совершенно так же сурово, напряженно, почти злобно. Тогда ему была неприятна громадность этой любви. Он закрыл глаза. Мать, детство<sup>11</sup>... (10)

Instead of being severe and dignified, Il'ya's life is difficult to grasp as it is the love of a mother or a woman that cannot help the character's development or his reconciliation with reality. On the other hand, it only proves the superficiality of Il'ya's attitude. The only way he can verbalise it passes through irony and laughter. As he explains to his wife that a woman should better address her powerful love to science and industry for the cause of socialism, she cuts it short by replying that it is all the philosophical fog. Suddenly angry, he proceeds to explain how this love was bound to necessity as it has sprung from the social dangers that threaten families and children, so that now socialism will find a more dignified use for this love. As he preaches fervently, the result is funny for him and his wife, and they start laughing. (Grossman 1935: 12–13). In this case, the narrator characterises the axiological system of the fictional world through a direct speech, but the subsequent laughter delegitimises and contradicts Il'ya's fervent tone and explanation.

Laughter, however, should better pursue an edifying aim than show disrespect because irony is a risk, as it is the bedfellow of unbelief and doubt, and it can only disappear with faith (Sinyavsky 1988: 46). Il'ya experiences an epiphany, if he receives faith along with it, it remains unclear. Showing no organic deepening of the psychological nature of the character, Grossman appears to contradict his own intentions according to his contemporary and critic A. Lezhnev. In his article "Chuvstvo tovarishchestva" [Sense of

10 The life lived was immense. And now, after ten years of underground life, after Zurich and London, after commanding in the army, after working in the industry, Il'ya Stepanovich looked back on his childhood for the first time. It was a complicated feeling, a feeling of something forever gone, the feeling evoked by a timid streak of dawn in the smoky rectangle of the city sky. In the morning, the boy ran to the garden. The apple trees, covered with unmelting snow, held their breath and admired the spring while he walked between their trunks in the wet, cold grass and thought of the sword as if forged from dewdrops. And the grey-haired man felt sorry for some reason, for what - he did not know himself.

11 "When he entered the room, she was standing straight up and looking him in the face, and she had a stern, tense, almost spiteful expression on her face. And he suddenly remembered that once before, a long time ago. About twenty years earlier, he had been taken away at night by the gendarmes, and she had stood silently in the middle of the room and looked at his face with a stern, tense, almost spiteful expression. Then he was disturbed by the enormity of that love. He closed his eyes. His mother, his childhood..."

comradeship] (1935)<sup>12</sup>, he comments that if a text has no fabula, that is replaced with the *prostaiā pravda* (simple truth) and the actions are kept as simple as possible for the sake of *bezyskusstvennost'* (lack of artifice, unpretentiousness), it is probably due to the intention of the author to focus on the interior world of the characters. To accomplish this, it is a fortiori necessity to fill with meaning the conscious simplicity of the story construction by fully exploring the dialectic of the psychic life. According to Lezhnev, Grossman must still learn how to master this kind of writing (Lezhnev 1935: 223). Indeed, the narrator builds the life of Il'ya inside the protagonist's mind, a seemingly subversive space, where sudden laughter and irony are uncontrolled forces that process the narrated world in contrast to its official ideological structure, thus creating a problematic character that cannot function as a role model legitimising the socialist myth.

The assumption that Il'ya is not the positive hero in the story world is further supported by the possibility of identifying at least two substitute entities in the text that cover this role. The first one is introduced by the already mentioned proper name "Excalibur", a word which does not have a referent in the story world, but rather in the belief-system of the characters and the implied reader. The second is a character that only appears in the final passage of the short story, a Cossack worker who brings his child to the opening of the steel plant. As the reader encounters this character, they are forced to question the reliability and suitability of the narration so far.

As the proper name "Excalibur" is introduced in the narration through the protagonist's speech, without having a corresponding concrete referent in the story world, it leaves the same character who uttered it wondering about its referent, the search for which seems necessary to access some more profound level of understanding of events. Il'ya lacks some information, i.e. that he alone could have, whereas the narrator does not share it with the reader either, often assuming Il'ya's perspective on people and facts. Therefore the story world could be conceived as a projection of Il'ya's interior life and thus work according to his way of thinking, counterbalanced by the ideology determining the functioning of the story world, that the narrator explicates through an extensive metaphor describing Il'ya's workday. The narrator's repetitive use of Il'ya's name and patronymic can also be taken into account, as no other character has the faculty of naming. The narrator offers a couple more definite descriptions and a proper name for Il'ya: *predsedatel'*, chairman, *desiatiletanii mal'chik*, ten-year-old boy, *Iliūsha* – maybe out of a twitch of nostalgia, *sedoi chelovek*, grey man. As the narrator shifts between proper names and descriptions, thus changing perspective, a hierarchy among the characters is established that follows the schematic organisation of their roles. This seems to confirm that there is no genuinely external point of view about the protagonist, and the only two possible perspectives for representing and understanding the story world are the ones of the narrator and Il'ya's mediated one. The perspective moves from Il'ya towards the outside and not the other way around, and when it is directed towards Il'ya, it comes from his glance into the mirror (a real one or the one provided by the presence of other characters)<sup>13</sup>. That is also the case for Il'ya addressing himself as a *mechtaiuushchii tovarishch* (dreaming comrade), pronounced in that same tone used at work by the protagonist as he indulges in his memories.

12 In this article, Lezhnev does not refer directly to *Zhizn' Il'i Stepanovicha*, and it discusses mainly *V gorode Berdicheve* and *Gliūkauf*.

13 About this use of proper names, see: Uspenskii (2000: 40ff).

The image of the sword, especially one as famous as Excalibur, must not have been unfamiliar to the reader,<sup>14</sup> both as a symbol of physical and mental strength. The sentence «Только люди безжалостно прямые и твердые, как мечи, — только они пробьют...» (Gorky 1950: 83) [Only men as ruthlessly straight and firm as swords – only they will get through...] from Maksim Gorky's piece *Meshchane* (1901) anticipates the necessary traits of the positive hero, the sword being an attribute / a characteristic of this figure, a symbol for his attitude. The sword could also stand for an idea that brings clarity and discernment. In Gorky's poem *Chelovek*, written in 1903 (see: Gorky 1975: 289–294)<sup>15</sup>, the faculty of Thought is the characteristic of Man that serves as an instrument or weapon, namely a sword, allowing him to march forward and above, a tragic figure capable of correcting the mistakes that surround him and overcoming the obstacles represented by emotions and instincts. Thought is the faculty evoked in the hours of fatigue of the spirit and when the darkness of the past is revived in the mind. The faculty of Thought, as sharp and bright as a sword, casts light and opens a path forward for men. In this poem, it is discussed along the capacity of man to shape his world, whereas this latter characteristic would not be fruitful without the first. Still, man has Thought and Creation power, which is also to be acknowledged in Grossman's story. In the end, "Excalibur", a luminescent stream of steel, is a creation of man, but at the same time, it is a man's life ordinating principle. Indeed the concept of Thought as light and guide operates equally on the chaos of a man's heart and that of the world he inhabits. In Gorky's poem, the accent could be set on the development of the conscience, on overcoming the old towards what is new and rational (Günther 1993: 41–42).

As steel starts pouring from the furnace, the light streams through the window; it is a fire that cuts the darkness and enlightens the surrounding grey countryside (Grossman 1935: 16). The colour scheme is a central element here as the white embrace of light illuminates is all that is necessary for the Soviet man to be happy, while the grey tones of the earth represent what is most backward. Il'ya still observes this scene as a spectator, hinting at a possible fracture in his attitude towards modernity. Indeed, not everyone can look directly at the Heraclitean fire, and Il'ya's attention is captured by one of the workers. The narrator assumes Il'ya's location in space on the balcony, where he is standing above the workers with other functionaries. The narrator paints a perfect picture of the workers, framed in front of the open mouth of the furnace, moving rhythmically as a whole body and performing their role in the sanctuary that the plant has become until when the steel is poured. The revelation happens, and a Cossack worker stands out from the crowd as he steps forward towards the light, holding his frightened and excited child. Il'ya's reaction to the revelation is the naïve defeat of all doubts as this child does not need to dream of having wings, freedom, and heroic deeds, as happiness is not an aim but an accomplished fact. Returning to the collection's title, it is possible to find a clue on how to read "Excalibur's" presence in the story as the progression *Happiness > The life of Il'ya Stepanovich > Excalibur!* suggests that the legendary sword is the element that will ensure Il'ya happiness.

14 About Excalibur as a specific sword, it is possible that its image had also acquired popularity recently. In fact, in 1923, a successful work was published by Sventitskii A. (*Kniga skazanii o korole Arture i o rytsariakh Kruglogo stola / illiustratsii* L.E.Feinberga. – M.: t-vo "Mir", 1923). I could not verify whether Grossman had direct knowledge of this book.

15 According to Hans Günther, the poem was rejected by the contemporary critique (Günther 1993: 43), but it contains some fundamental thoughts for *Na dne*, that Grossman intended to see, as he states in a letter to his father dated February 12th 1929 (From John and Carol Garrard collection of Vasili Semënovich Grossman papers, [at:] Houghton Library: Harvard University's repository for rare books and manuscripts).

“Excalibur” is not just any *mech*, it is unequivocally the sword of the Arthurian legends, through which many great exploits were accomplished, adventures that a child could only dream of. It stands for bravery and strength, and liberation from oppression. Indeed, in the atlas by Petri<sup>16</sup>, the child wrote “Ah, if only I had wings!” (Grossman 1935: 11), a sentence that appears in a letter sent by the author to his father in 1928, where he complains that, although located in Tashkent, he is not allowed to travel to neighbouring Asian countries and recalls what his father had written as a child on a map (Bit-Yunan 2019: 62).

King Arthur and his knights represent a particular heroic ideal as they can be virtuous, brave, and adventurous and follow a conduct code shaped according to the values of the culture they originated in. Still, the only way these values can be concretised (in a Western context) seems to be through the dimension of legend, romances and pseudo-historical accounts. Something that can fascinate and impress a child’s mind. Indeed, given the importance of intertwining one’s path of life with the necessity of historical development, it is possible to hint that this child-myth dimension is what Il’ya is asked to overcome. The individual’s development dialectically replicates the movement of the spirit in history. Recalling a mythological, non-Slavic past cast the shadow of infantility or of a time of unawareness. The path of historical necessity can come to fulfilment in the Soviet Union so that the proper name “Excalibur”, which, at the beginning of the story, calls an entity into only being in Il’ya’s mental representation of the story world, thus characterising him. It is eventually resemanticised in a way that is both determined and determines the official social model of reality.<sup>17</sup>

Besides, the parallel could be drawn between the use of the proper name Il’ya Stepanovich, which designates an entity that should undergo maturation and change but stays qualitatively the same. In contrast, the name “Excalibur” eventually seems to designate two different entities that can only be brought together for the sake of the ideological axis that supports the story world. A structure that is presented through an embedded metaphorical story describing Il’ya’s working day. Here the protagonist is assigned the task of regulating the flow of logs floating down a river, and he has to ensure that the *obshchii potok* (the general flow) is not interrupted by beating back into place the pieces that do not flow along. The meaning of this episode should be unambiguous. Still, its clarity makes everything else in the story ambiguous, starting from the main character, who acts as the log breaking the constant and fast flow of life.

In conclusion, Grossman managed to create his character as both the man with the stick supervising the general flow from the banks and the queer log disturbing the flow. Identifying a happy ending for Il’ya is superficially possible, but there is no indication of a path to follow to get there. “Excalibur”, the sword that should ensure happiness and cast light on the path, is not an attribute of the positive hero but rather a substitute since, in the case of Il’ya, its function as the representation of the faculty of Thought is overshadowed by its symbolic revelation both as (man-)created and creating principle giving sense to reality. Il’ya lives in revelation, stuck in an atemporal past-future, child-old man dimension, ideologically corrected on the surface but hiding unresolved doubt. Although some canonical features are respected, as the examples showed, the protagonist cannot be read unambiguously, and the light towards which

16 Probably the *Uchebnyi geograficheskii atlas* by Eduard IŪ’evich Petri that was issued for the first time in 1898 and later reissued several times.

17 About proper names without referents see: Uri Margolin (2002: 107–27).

socialist realist literature strives, rather than enlightens, blinds, perhaps making the shadows even darker and more misleading.

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