

The Game Of Life And Death” In The Novel Everything Flows

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“Once there was a toy merchant named Markus and he took away with him all the toys in the world.”
(Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*)

Abstract: The study is focused on a tragic period in the history of the 20th century – the Soviet Union under the brutal rule of Joseph Stalin. „Everything flows” is a great tribute to the human spirit, a novel in which Vasily Grossman, a close observer of the psychology of totalitarianism, portrays the terror and suffering of innocent people. In caustic, furious language, Grossman describes the cruelties of Stalinism, he writes about the experiences of those people who were arrested, imprisoned, interrogated and finally sent to death, useless deaths, people who were simply „toys” in the hands of the Great Leader.

Keywords: totalitarianism, terror, Stalinism, innocent people, death

I. Introduction

The value of a writer is judged by the manner in which he covers the acute problems sprung forth by life and humanity, by the manner in which he manages to evoke certain aspects with gravity, expressiveness, compassion and emotion. Vasily Grossman is such an author who manifests his compassion for the reviled human being, dehumanized by the traumatic experiences of the past century, a century whose defining magnitude is human tragedy.

His unfinished novel *Everything flows* is incumbent, yet the encumbrance of images described by him is only a feeling of painstakingly observed reality – the Stalinist period, a terrifying experience which mutilated destinies, dehumanized, killed, breached the fundamental right of human beings to freedom, the right to decide on their own fate and not to be limited by the status of simple “toys” at the discretion of afflicted minds.

II. Brief Reflections On War, Life And Death

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Genesis 9, 6). From a Christian point of view, killing a man means the suppression of a being created in the image of God for a higher purpose. Taking the life of a person equates to a crime against humanity and it is also a crime against the Creator because „Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12, 4, 5). The first chapters in the Book of Genesis reveal everything that was to be repeated throughout the history of mankind, as we witness the first murder, the killing of one’s own brother. (Genesis 4, 8). According to the Holy Scripture, Cain is the first man born of man and woman, he is the first killer, the one to unveil the face of death, its initiator. In the mirror of his own conscience, each human being discovers Cain’s traits. The history of his life is of unrivalled greatness, that of a man fallen prey to his own self, who takes every risk in existence and faces all the consequences of his deeds. Cain is the symbol of human responsibility. When man is deprived of his ability to see, he can no longer distinguish between light and darkness. The same occurs when a man deprived of his divine conscience can no longer distinguish between good and evil.

In *The Game of Life and Death in the Ashen Desert*, a masterpiece of contemporary drama, Horia Lovinescu uses the biblical legend of fratricide as a starting point. Cain and Abel become archetypes, thus symbolizing Good and Evil, the eternal struggle between the two forces. In Lovinescu’s play, Cain and Abel are depictions of Dostoyevsky’s characters – Dimitri and Alyosha – from the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Abel – gentle, idealistic, Cain – harsh, telluric, they both represent essential instances of human nature. Lovinescu

adapted the ancient biblical myth to the social and psychological experience of the 20th century turmoil. Keeping to the theological sphere, the sixth commandment of the Decalogue: “*You shall not murder*” (Exodus 20, 13) is the one governing the relation between man and his peers. It is a commandment meant to protect the value and sanctity of human life, the commandment categorically banning homicide.

According to Christian teachings, man, in his dual structure – body and soul – has a destiny, a unique value and importance in the universe. During the 20th century, the century of great human tragedies, death is perceived as an innate phenomenon, being deemed as a necessity because only it can lead to a renewing of society, potentiate the occurrence of individuals with new social and creative features – “*the new man*.” This may be the reason why Stalin declared with cynicism that: “*The death of one man is tragedy, the death of millions is statistics*.” (apud McCAULEY, 2003, p. 26). Millions of lives were destroyed as a result of the conviction that the fate of mankind may only be altered if the “*useless populations*”, (Arendt, 1962, p. 231) as Hannah Arendt put it, are eliminated. During the 20th century, Europe was subject to two main totalitarian regimes: Stalinism and Nazism, which led to a defiance of human rights and liberties, to crimes against humanity. The Italian historian Emilio Gentile believed that “*totalitarian experiments, however imperfect and flawed, conditionally implied, transformed, deformed and ended the existence of millions of human beings. In all certainty this fact was determined by the belief of the main protagonists that they represented the forefathers of a new mankind, the founders of a new civilization, the interpreters of a new truth, the holders of a distinction between good and evil and the rulers of destinies for the people caught in their endeavor*”. (apud Tismaneanu, 2012, p. 52). The human dramas of the bloody 20th century constituted a source of inspiration for artists, they managed to recreate on paper, canvas or film tragedies which must be sealed in the collective memory so as not to be repeated again.

In the novel *The tin drum* written by Günter Grass, the main character, Oskar Matzerath, born on the border between Germany and Poland, deliberately stops growing up at the age of three as a sign of protest towards a reality hard to accept. His toy drum accompanies him everywhere, and it gives voice to Oskar’s life altering events. The evolution of Germany towards Nazism and war in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, the horrors of war – all these events are seen through his child eyes, and the only way to condemn the madness of the modern world is to hit his toy drum and shatter the windows with his shrill voice. Oskar “*(...) sets a much more vivid, direct and unyielding conscience to the world of adults, he is at the same time the disabled person overturning values, demonstrating that there are certain ages when, in fact, normality is abnormal and vice versa*”. (Grass, 2009, p. 6).

An impressive summoning of the horrors of World War Two and, not least, of the Holocaust is depicted on film by Italian director, screenwriter and actor Roberto Benigni in the movie “*La vita e bella*” (1997). Roberto Benigni opposes a world where criminal minds control everything to humor, the only weapon a father can fight with to protect his only son. A Jew sent to the camp along with his son, Guido Orefice, played by Benigni, builds an elaborate game to calm and protect his son. Thus, after setting the rules of the game, the winner gets a tank, not a toy one, but a real one, a tank which Giosue, his son, can drive through town. In order to protect him from the guards, the father will thus resort to the same method – the game, his very death being transformed into a game. The atrocities committed by the Fascists and Nazis, in Benigni’s view, fall to the background, the main focus is on hope, the desire to save that which is beautiful and pure in man’s soul.

III. Everything Flows: “The Game Of Life And Death”

In both his novels *Life and Fate* and *Everything flows*, the writer Vasily Grossman states that the Stalinist destruction policy is similar to the Nazi extermination policies against certain social groups deemed racially inferior. The same idea may be found in the writings of Igal Halfin, an expert in Soviet archives, who noted that: “*(...) Stalin and his agents deemed themselves no lesser to Hitler in the disposal of bad or incurable people*”. (Halfin, 2002, p. 6). Yet, the Soviet population was the victim of its own regime, as a character from the *Everything flows* novel was bound to note: “*Here you go, just like the Germans who gassed the Hebrew children: you shall not live, you are the Jews. Only things were even more confusing here – Soviets here, Soviets there, Russians here, Russians there, and the power – labor – rural, so why all the havoc?*” (Grossman, 2009, p. 116). The Bolsheviks sought to renew the human soul. “*Your tanks will be worth nothing if the soul (dusha) in them is rotten. No, the “production” of souls is more important than the production of tanks*” stated Stalin on October 26, 1932 trying to describe the full nature of Bolshevik metamorphosis. The mass extermination of a “race” or “class” is the subject of the same political pathology specific to the past century, the two aforementioned totalitarian systems not only aimed to create “*the new man*”, but also to return the old one into nothingness.

In his novel *Everything flows*, Grossman gave voice to the suffering and turmoil faced by millions of innocent people whose only fault was being born in the century of those terrible experiments. By the artistic power of words, the author went beyond the concentration system wall, surfacing truths that are hard to imagine regarding the grim Stalinist terror, denouncing the repression system with its entire series of methods: the

arrests, interrogations, splitting of families, transportation in unheated cars used for cattle, forced labor, cold, famine and eventually useless death. The pages of his novel reveal a world entirely corresponding to the writer's accusatory and critical intentions. It is a bleak “labyrinthine” world where the individual struggles against hostile, strange, sometimes unidentified powers, a world facing a deep spiritual crisis, where the events are the “symptoms” of a tragic reality. The novel represents a severe deprecation of the Stalinist regime, Grossman, like Solzhenitsyn, describes the havoc of terror, the constant tracking and denunciations, the suppression of entire social classes (Dekulakization), an environment of completely helpless individuals, deprived of any rights before the powers of the state.

We basically follow a single hero, Ivan Grigoryevich, who in fact, represents the author, is his *alter-ego*. Ivan is going through a double existence crisis: on the one hand, being freed from the Gulag, after a period of 29 years, makes him uneasy because he fails to recognize people and places, and on the other hand, he feels uprooted, because it is too late, the “game” called life is nearing its end. What he discovers beyond the prison walls only helps to deepen his spiritual crisis: “*He felt that the barbed wire had become useless, that life beyond the barbed wire falls to its intimate existence, with the barracks of a camp.*” (Grossman, 2009, p. 44). Thus we see the transfer of a part of the population in a concentration regime, between the greater prison – The Soviet Union, the “Bolshaya area” and the lesser prison – the Gulag, the “small area”, even if the differences between the two “areas” eventually faded out.

“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 more thorough than the one imposed by the authorities, faces a lack of the feeling of help, coming from terror, but is contrary to the idea of socialist “collectivity”. In this world, the feeling of loneliness becomes more of an encumbrance, loneliness is also a lack of freedom. Ivan can't find his place, he feels “isolated” from the rest of the world, although it is a self-imposed isolation he is striving to hide. He feels alien, hopeless and lost, in a foreign world, at “home”. Through the main character, the author expresses his own perspective and impression of the historical period evoked. Next to this character, the reader is confronted with the Dekulakization experience of 1929, the collectivization of 1930, the famine of 1932, the processes of 1937. Convinced that this is the destiny of Russia – facing hardships – the author depicts these episodes bleakly, cruel and very much real, without concealing in the least respect the atrocious feature of all these events.

Ivan is overwhelmed by memories from camp, and by reminiscing them, a burdensome atmosphere is created, but this also constitutes proof of “healing” and “forgetting”, so necessary for life. All things are reconsidered when they are lived without remorse, simply, their meaning is much easier to understand. He realizes that the camps mostly included people who represented a risk of becoming spies, due to their relatives living abroad, those who, although still loyal to the party, could have turned against it, those who “*according to the opinion of the repressive authorities, inspired more possibilities than others to become criminals*” (Grossman, 2009, p. 111).

All these individuals became “the enemy of the people” and were deemed a threat to the regime. “*Once again, people were not being arrested for what they had done, but for what they were*”. (Applebaum, 2003, p. 86). Hence the idea that the entire state policy is based on presumptions and suspicions, that, along with an extensive list of fictive accomplishments (the kolkhozes failed to meet the plan set by the party) and these false accusations were part of a grotesque play.

When playing God, man takes the place of the Divinity, as an absolute principle of knowledge and action. “*Stalin's ascension made the role of the party alter. The party wasn't the omniscient entity. But Stalin's mind had become the source of all wisdom*”. (McCauley, 2003, p. 118). Stalin was to play this role during the cruel history of Bolshevik Russia – the famine that decimated Ukraine was an episode deliberately and criminally triggered by Stalin to punish the Ukrainian rural population opposing forced collectivization, the purpose of collectivization being to break the *Russian soul*. This episode was described by Grossman in apocalyptic notes, difficult to read and impossible to forget: “*Famine is such a ruthless force, a dam can hardly separate man from his bread. The need for food, natural and proper, is turned into a force that annihilates millions of people, forces mothers to eat their young, and which becomes beastly, savage*”. (Grossman, 2009, p. 92). The Dekulakization and famine are presented by the female character who was close to Ivan Grigoryevich when the latter, haunted by his dreams, calls for his mother in his sleep. Through this character, we are introduced in detail, first to the enforcement of increasing taxes, then the subsequent arrests, the unrelenting crimes and fury against the Kulaks. Famine is described as grotesque as it is sad. From the woman's words, from the image depicted of the suffering village, one may construe that what makes man inhuman is not evilness, vileness, but famine and his instinct of preservation, of survival: “*Their children? Papers have been publishing pictures of children from German camps, have you seen them? They were the same: their heads like cannon balls, thin necks like storks, you could see all their little bones connecting through their arms and legs, skeletons dressed in yellow gauze. Their little faces were aged, tormented, as if these toddlers have been living on this world for seventy years; but come spring, even their faces seemed to fade*”

away – they looked liked bird heads with beaks, or a fog’s face, with large thin lips, like a piglet with his snout agape. Inhuman turmoil, and their eyes? Goodness me, their eyes! Comrade Stalin, have you seen those eyes?” (Grossman, 2009, p. 119).

The subtle irony helps Grossman highlight the blatant contradictions between essence and appearance in the totalitarian society, one can observe such an ironic attitude towards writer Maxim Gorky: “*the children, he wrote, need educational toys. Could Maxim Gorky have actually been oblivious to the children being ferried away in carts to the landfills? Is it really toys they needed?*” (Grossman, 2009, p. 123). The universe of children is normally populated by toys, and animals are naturally deemed as friendly to children, play mates, yet in the world depicted by Grossman, animals eventually face the same cruel fate of people: “*By that time, neither dogs, nor cats were left in the village – they had cut them. But it was hard to catch animals, they feared men, had gone feral. They boiled them, all wrinkly veins; made aspic from their heads*” (Grossman, 2009, p. 118). “*The word “impossible” wasn’t the only one taken out of use; “unimaginable” was also meaningless*” as Victor Klemperer stated in his work entitled “*I Will Bear Witness*”. (Klemperer, 2001,p. 127). And we’re inevitably faced with the question: “*Does that make Stalin worse than Herod?*” (Grossman, 2009, p. 119).

The novel features excellently constructed characters, human destinies broken by the system, descriptions which underline the writer’s genius. Immaculate human feelings were trampled by the Stalinist boot, everything connecting two beings – woman and man – was set under the prohibition which “*also weakens the body and soul*”. “*Everything associated with women – tenderness, care, passion, maternity – are the bread and water of life. And all these take shape in a woman because the world is populated by men, sons, fathers and brothers. And all of it fills the life of men because the world is populated by wives, mothers, daughters and sisters*”. (Grossman, 2009, p. 92). The portrait of a camp woman, the fate of thousands and millions of women is depicted for the reader through tales heard by Ivan – “*bloody, sad, dirty stories*”: “*In these stories, the woman was either groveling, lesser than an animal, or pure, enlightening, greater than the holy*”. (Grossman, 2009, p. 80). For those outside the barbed wire fences, life has proven to be even worse: “*Wenches have proven to be more resilient than men, clinging more fiercely to life. Yet they had to endure even more, as children came to them for food*.” (Grossman, 2009, p. 118). The explanation provided by the author regarding the conditions in which such heinous acts occurred, the psychological mechanism governing the minds who fulfilled the duties was astounding: “*Only one judgement is passed on the executioner – he ceases to be a human being. Though looking on his victim as less than human, he becomes his own executioner, he executes the human being inside himself. But the victim – no matter what the executioner does to kill him – remains a human being forever.* ”. (Grossman, 2009, p. 110).

IV. Conclusion

The novel *Everything flows* is Grossman’s testimony, it is a critique of Soviet history from a man who shared the Revolution’s claimed ideals, who never lost his internationalism and socialism, but who wrote the most terrible indictment of what the Revolution actually created. In fact, all his later writings, following Stalin’s death, deal with the reign of terror, the arbitrary arrests, executions, slave labour, mass famine and the process by which people were turned into scared, isolated individuals, trying to save their own lives by false testimony, by informing, by murder and acts of inhumanity. We don’t have to agree with all of Grossman’s analysis of Soviet history. It is important to understand his incredible legacy, the way he managed to write about those traumatic times. His friends vanished, his colleagues were executed, his wife was sent to the camps, his mother was killed by the Nazis. Yet, he writes so beautifully on human kindness, solidarity, dignity, and above all, the human thirst for freedom.

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