

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF GROSSMAN'S PHILOSOPHY IN EARLY WESTERN RECEPTION: LÉVINAS, TODOROV, GIUSSANI

GIOVANNI MADDALENA
UNIVERSITÀ DEL MOLISE
maddalena@unimol.it

Received July 2024; Accepted January 2025; Published online April 2025

Vasily Grossman's early reception in Western countries (1980–2005) includes essential philosophical interpretations. Among them, we find the celebrated insights of Tzvetan Todorov (1996) and Emmanuel Lévinas (1988, 1991). Lévinas interprets Grossman within his vision of an ethics that transcends all metaphysics, while Todorov makes him a champion of a new humanism with an Enlightenment tone. The first wave of Western interpreters also includes Luigi Giussani, who inserts Grossman within his conception of religious sense and reasoning (1980) as a mechanism for asking totalizing questions that identify God as the only possible partner of human rationality. The article focuses on these three authors and then hints at proposing an in-depth view of metaphysical realism derived from the most recent studies on the Russian author. This kind of realism also accounts for the three positions mentioned.

Keywords: Lévinas, Todorov, Giussani, Realism, Metaphysics

0. Introduction

Many scholars have underlined the Western intelligentsia's peculiar reception of Grossman. This singular treatment was marked by difficulties in accepting Grossman's unusual characteristics. Grossman was neither an "official" author nor an "official" dissident. Seen from the West's point of view, he was known for being a famous Soviet journalist whose report about the Treblinka extermination camp had been used during the Nuremberg trial. In the seventies, the publication of *Everything Flows* (Grossman 2010a)¹ was acknowledged by only a few commentators. Even fewer knew about the manuscript of *Life and Fate* (Grossman 2006a), which arrived in the West in 1978 after many attempts. As the owner and director of the publishing house *L'âge d'homme*, Vladimir Dimitrievich, recalled at the 2006 International Conference in Turin, many publishers were uninterested because it seemed that everything about the gulag had already been said. On the one hand, the Communist intelligentsia in both Italy and France, the nations with the two largest Western Communist parties, did not want to endure additional scandals arising from the inhuman practices that took place in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the adversaries of com-

¹ See also Ellis 2018.

munism and the Soviet regime in the West wanted something politically more substantial that could be used against the regime rather than cultural commentary and novels.

Therefore, few intellectuals acknowledged its importance when *Life and Fate* was published in France (1980) and then in Italy (1984).² However, among those few, some inserted Grossman's work and thought into their philosophical frameworks. Here, I will recall perspectives on Grossman from three commentators: E. Lévinas, T. Todorov, and L. Giussani.

Beyond the speculative side of their observations, these founding fathers of philosophical scholarship focused on Grossman also engendered a small but continuous stream of readers that eventually resulted in Grossman's rising fame, particularly after the 2006 foundation of the Study Center Vasily Grossman in Turin (Italy), new translations of the author into many languages,³ and a BBC radio drama.⁴ From then on, the story of Grossman reception has completely changed, with the continuous flow of Grossman scholarship leading to a deeper study of the philosophical topics initially tackled by the founding fathers of Grossman scholarship.

Investigations into Grossman's philosophy usually focus on his politics: his description of totalitarianism, the comparisons to Hannah Arendt, and the legitimacy of the parallels between Nazism and Communism described in Grossman's pages. The other common approach is to focus on his moral teaching: Grossman is the author advocating for the "small goodness" and "senseless kindness" versus the implacable conclusions of formidable ethical doctrines, free choice versus the deterministic fate preached by various ideologies, and love of life versus the temptation to embrace death. The three approaches taken by Lévinas, Todorov, and Giussani put these crucial topics within more comprehensive theoretical frameworks. Each of these approaches captures essential aspects of Grossman's work, and each, in its own way, advances our understanding of the Russian author.

This paper attempts to recall those fundamental early readings and put them within a qualified realism's theoretical framework. Grossman's realism changed over the years, deepening its metaphysical, cosmological, and epistemic character. In the end, it can be called "metaphysical realism," I believe the three readings discussed here can find a familiar and complementary background in this realism.

² See the introduction of Calusio, Krasnikova, Tosco 2016. See Calusio 2017 for Grossman's reception in Italy.

³ As for the English language, after the announcement of the Turin conference, the translator Robert Chandler revised his own translation of *Life and Fate* (1985), republishing it in 2006. The first part of the saga, published in Russian under the title *За правое дело* (1952), was published by Chandler himself in 2019 under the title *Stalingrad*, with particular editorial choices expressed in the introduction. In 2000, *Pour une juste cause* was published in French (*Pour une juste cause*, Lausanne). Tzvetan Todorov edited Grossman's *Oeuvres* in 2006 and *La paix soit avec vous: notes de voyage en Arménie* in 2007. In Italy, during the same years, readers welcomed a new version of *Vita e destino* (2008), which was followed by translations of *L'inferno di Treblinka* (2010) and the short stories of *Il bene sia con voi!* (2011). In Spain, the first translation of *Vida y destino* (2007) was a literary event and was followed by a Catalan version (*Vida i destí*, 2008) and then by translations of *Todo fluye* (2008), *Por una causa justa* (2011), and *Años de guerra* (2009). War notebooks have appeared in English (*A Writer at War*, 2005), French (*Carnets de Guerre de Moscou a Berlin 1941–1945*, 2008), Spanish (*Un escritor en guerra: Vasili Grossman en el Ejército Rojo, 1941–1945*, 2006), and Italian (*Uno scrittore in guerra*, 2015).

⁴ *Life and Fate*, BBC, London 2011.

1. *Lévinas and transcendental ethics*

Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) read Grossman at a time when his thought had already become settled (Anckaert 2021). In Grossman, the French philosopher finds confirmation of his central argument: ethics precedes and surpasses metaphysics. Following Heidegger's insights, Lévinas draws a parallel between metaphysics and an objectification of Being that accompanies its loss of meaning. The more you focus on Being as an object, the more you objectify it in language, doctrine, and technique, and the more you restrict it to a measure that Lévinas calls "totality." The error of Western metaphysics has been to confound totality with infinity; that is, with the meaning of Being, of its possibility of revealing itself (Lévinas 1961). Beyond Heidegger, Lévinas maintains that this possibility is not a new form of truth, not even in the form of new interpretations and understandings. Instead, it is something completely different that goes beyond any measure: it is an absolute, ethical call to responsibility. This importance of ethics as a personal call to commitment cannot but resonate with Grossman's small goodness, the gist of Ikonnikov's manuscript presented in *Life and Fate*, possibly the only theoretical manifesto in Grossman's works. As it is well known, in that passage, Grossman advocates for gestures of small goodness and senseless kindness as opposed to ethical theories of the Good. The latter tend to become ideological and violent.

People began to realize how much blood had been split in the name of a petty, doubtful good, in the name of the struggle of this petty good against what it believed to be evil. Sometimes, the concept of good became a scourge, a greater evil than evil itself. [...] There is a deep and undeniable sadness in all this: whenever we see the dawn of an eternal good that will never be overcome by evil [...] whenever we see this dawn, the blood of old people and children is always shed. Not only men, but even God himself is powerless to lessen this evil. (Grossman 2006a, 404–406)

Grossman observes the same tendency in the natural realm and makes a supreme generalization:

Once, when I lived in the Northern forests, I thought that good was to be found neither in man, nor in the predatory world of insects, but in the silent kingdom of the trees. Far from it! I saw the forest's slow movement, the treacherous way it battled against grass and bushes for each inch of soil [...] Only the blind conceive of the kingdom of trees and grass as the world of good [...] Is it that life itself is evil? (Grossman 2006a, 407)

The opposite of this theoretical Good is only the senseless kindness.

Yes, as well as this terrible Good with a capital 'G', there is everyday human kindness [...] The private kindness of one individual towards another; a petty, thoughtless kindness; an unwitnessed kindness. Something we can call senseless kindness. A kindness outside any system of social or religious good. (Grossman 2006a, 407–408)

Lévinas's philosophical considerations based on anthropology and religion acknowledge the perennial validity of this law:⁵

Vassily Grossman, dans *Vie et Destin* – livre si impressionnant au lendemain des crises majeures de notre siècle – va plus loin encore. Il pense que la petite bonté allant d'un homme à son prochain, se perd et se déforme dès qu'elle se cherche organisation et universalité et système, dès qu'elle se veut doctrine, traité de politique et de théologie. Parti, État et même Église. Elle resterait pourtant le seul refuge du bien dans l'Être. Invancue, elle subit la violence du Mal que, petite bonté, elle ne saurait ni vaincre, ni chasser. Petite bonté n'allant que d'homme à homme, sans traverser les lieux et les espaces où se déroulent événements et forces! Remarquable utopie du Bien ou le secret de son au-delà. (Lévinas 1991, 242)⁶

As much as this picture of life and the fate of the universe and human beings is congenial to Lévinas's thought, Anckaert notices a crucial point of distinction.⁷ Lévinas builds up a theory of justice that derives from this ethical primacy. Justice is the call to responsibility that does not exhaust its meaning in the dangerous and always manipulable I-Thou relationship. The call to responsibility is also the call to consider the third presence, the mute face who is present in the I-Thou relationship without being an overt character. This thirdness implies that responsibility becomes justice, which can be administrated not directly but through institutions.

Grossman's radical, senseless kindness questions Lévinas's structure of justice. Small gestures cannot become institutions without losing their goodness, novelty, and absolute gratuity. The call of the other is absolute, as Lévinas notes in reference to a particular scene in *Life and Fate* in which this call is not even the face but the back of the head of the other.

Grossman raconte dans *Vie et Destin* comment à la Loubianka, à Moscou, devant le fameux guichet où l'on pouvait transmettre lettres ou colis aux parents et amis arrêtés pour "délits politiques" ou prendre de leurs nouvelles, les personnes faisaient la queue – en lisant chacun sur la nuque de la personne qui le précédait, les sentiments et les espoirs de sa misère. [...] le visage peut prendre sens sur ce qui est le "contraire" du visage! (Lévinas 1991, 244)⁸

⁵ For the Lévinas-Grossman comparison, see also Blumenkranc 2011.

⁶ "Vassily Grossman, in *Life and Fate*—such an impressive book, coming right after the major rises of our century—goes even further. He thinks that the "small goodness" from one person to his fellowman is lost and deformed as soon as it seeks organization and universality and system, as soon as it opts for doctrine, a treatise of politics and theology, a party, a state, and even a church. Yet, it remains the sole refuge of the good in being. Unbeaten, it undergoes the violence of evil, which, as small goodness, it can neither vanquish nor drive out. A little kindness going only from man to man, not crossing distances to get to the places where events and forces unfold! A remarkable Utopia of the good or the secret of its beyond." (Lévinas 1998, 230)

⁷ Anckaert does a good job reading the relationship between Lévinas and Grossman but needs to correct his reading of Grossman as atheistic or without hope. Grossman's scholarship agrees in considering Grossman a bearer of a mysterious positivity towards being. Many readers read this positivity in a religious way, sometimes referring to his Jewish origins, and sometimes to his understanding of religion beyond any confession or creed.

⁸ "In *Life and Fate*, Grossman tells how in Lubyanka, in Moscow, before the infamous gate where one could convey letters or packages to friends and relatives arrested for 'political crimes' or get news of them, people

Lévinas thus integrates Grossman's view into his own by affirming that this radicalism of otherness is the dialectical contestation of the plan of justice that we have already settled. Small goodness is a call to revise institutional justice and to keep it away from ideology and violence.

2. *Todorov and the humanist cosmos*

The I-Thou relationship, the critical turn in Lévinas's reading of Grossman, is also fundamental to Todorov's reading. Tzvetan Todorov (1939–2017) inserts Grossman into his book *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien: enquête sur le siècle* (2000). He confronts totalitarianism's extreme political and moral evil with the example of lives that resist this evil and find a path towards freedom and democracy. The memory of all of these people fosters humanity, in contrast to the cruel animality that seems to be the fate of human beings in such extraordinary circumstances. Loyal to this vision, Todorov sees Grossman as a character of this resistance, which is centered on the conception that other human beings are the aim of human beings. They find their realization in the gestures of goodness they make for one another. Light within the moral darkness of totalitarianism comes from this naturalistic and humanist view. The moral stance also becomes political because this view cannot but go towards the possibility of engaging in free gestures, which leads to democracy.

Todorov posits a continuity between humanism, the Enlightenment, and this form of liberalism. Beyond the famous parallel between Communism and Nazism that Todorov tackles in a long chapter of his book, he sees Grossman as a moral philosopher who, within the horror of totalitarianism, sees a higher order, a sense, that of humanity not wanting to succumb to chaos. This sense is needed to explain the trauma of his mother's death at the hands of the Nazis (Todorov 2000, 76). Grossman is, in this sense, an ancient philosopher or, in Todorov's words, a humanist who places freedom and goodness at the center of his philosophy as the outcome of the biological impulse of the human being, which must be embodied in individual gestures.

La pensée de Grossman ne s'arrête pas à l'analyse critique du phénomène totalitaire, même si elle y trouve son assise. De ce qu'il voit comme source du mal totalitaire – la soumission et la dégradation de l'individu – il déduit sa propre valeur suprême : l'éloge de l'individu à la fois comme source de l'action (autonomie du je) et comme son destinataire (finalité du tu), incarnation simultanée de la liberté et de la bonté. (Todorov 2000, 77)⁹

Que l'élan vers la liberté fasse partie de la vocation biologique de l'espèce humaine peut apparaître comme rassurant : cela suggère que les régimes qui reposent sur une sup-

formed a line, each reading on the nape of the person in front of him the feelings and hopes of his misery [...] the face can assume meaning on what is the 'opposite' of the face!" (Lévinas 1998, 232)

⁹ "Grossman offers more than a critical analysis of totalitarianism, although that is the underlying thread of his writing. He sees the enslavement and degradation of the individual as the source of the evil in totalitarianism; this leads him to see the individual as his own guiding value. By 'individual,' Grossman means both a source of action (the autonomous self) and a target of action (the finality of the other). To put it in other words, Grossman's values are freedom and kindness". (Todorov 2003, 69)

pression systématique des libertés individuelles sont condamnés à plus ou moins brève échéance. [...] Mais cela ne peut suffire pour nous rassurer : même si tel est le sens de l'évolution biologique rien ne prouve que tel soit aussi le sens de l'histoire humaine. (Todorov 2000, 78–79)¹⁰

Certainly, Todorov's conception of individuals has a different tone than Grossman's. That is why Todorov has to integrate individual freedom with goodness as if they were two separate steps.¹¹

La liberté est la première valeur humaniste, la bonté est la seconde. En effet, l'homme seul n'est pas l'homme entier, l'individualisme n'est pas l'humanité, les hommes deviennent le but de leur action, et non seulement sa source. Or le sommet de la relation à autrui, c'est l'apparition de la simple bonté, le geste qui fait que, par nos soins, une autre personne devienne heureuse. (Todorov 2000, 79)¹²

Grossman is understood in terms of one of his essential cultural roots, the Enlightenment. Indeed, Grossman, as a good Marxist of his time, took the Enlightenment as a crucial step towards Marxism and communism. It is no wonder we find many pages in Grossman that invoke the order and universalism of reason as the opposite of violence. Above all, Grossman frequently condemns Fascism as something against human beings. For example, take the preface to the *Black Book*:¹³

The pure heart of the people was deeply shaken by seeing rivers of innocent blood spilled. Old peasant women and young kolkhozniks, workers, teachers, doctors, professors, and clergy did everything in their power to save the condemned, [...] often putting their own lives and those of their loved ones at risk. [...] Through the dark clouds of racial madness, in the disgusting fog of hatred toward mankind, the eternal, inextinguishable stars of reason, good and humanitarianism continued to shine, announcing the imminent decline of the horrible empire of darkness and the approach of a new dawn. Though they sought to drown them in a sea of blood, the Fascists were unable to subdue the forces of good and of reason lying dormant in the soul of the people. (Ehrenburg, Grossman 2003, 8)

However, Todorov is also correct when he describes Grossman's search for a humanist sense that somehow puts human beings at the top of the universe, conscious of that transcendental stance that is their unique Self. In the end, trust in this transcendental but naturalistic

¹⁰ "It should be comforting to know that the instinct for freedom is part of humanity's biological nature, for that would suggest that political regimes based on the systematic suppression of individual liberty cannot last very long [...]. But that is only half comforting. The trend of biological evolution does not necessarily determine the history of humankind." (Todorov 2003, 69)

¹¹ I thank the anonymous reviewer for underlining this difference of nuances. See also Grossman 2006a, 281–282.

¹² "Freedom is the first humanist value; kindness is the second. A single person is not a whole person: 'individualism is not the same as humanity', for people then become the sole targets of their own actions and not just their source. The highest form of the relationship with another is simple kindness, an act or token by which we make another person happy." (Todorov 2003, 70)

¹³ For an exhaustive account of the complicated history of the *Black Book*, see Boschiero 2015.

and humanist order seems to constitute the kernel of Grossman's thought. It is a kind of objective-idealist reading that we find in one of the most famous scenes in Grossman's pages, the death of Sof'ja Osipovna:

When a person dies, they cross over from the realm of freedom to the realm of slavery. Life is freedom, and dying is a gradual denial of freedom. [...] What constitutes the freedom, the soul of an individual life, is its uniqueness. The reflection of the universe in someone's consciousness is the foundation of his or her power, but life only becomes happiness, is only endowed with freedom and meaning when someone exists as a whole world that has never been repeated in all eternity. (Grossman 2006a, 555)

3. Giussani and epistemic realism

Fr. Luigi Giussani (1922–2005) is at the center of the Italian reception of Grossman. Giussani was a professor of theology at the Catholic University of Milan and the founder of a Catholic movement called Communion and Liberation. His philosophical stance is a traditional Thomism filtered through the pragmatist idea of “experience” he derived from his studies of Niebuhr and American theology (Giussani 2003). Dedicated to the education of youth and the promoter of many charities and cultural activities, he was also a consultant and friend of Fr. Scalfi, the founder of Russia Cristiana, one of the hubs of dissident literature in Europe. Giussani read *Life and Fate* when it was published in Italy by Jaca Book in 1984. From then on, he recommended the book in every year of his teaching with vivid words, underlining Grossman's realism. As we shall see below, realism is one of the crucial keys to reading Grossman. Giussani focuses on the epistemic value of this philosophical position: realism means accepting reality in its richness. For Giussani, realism is the antidote to ideology because it places the importance of the object of thought above our subjective ways of understanding.

Grossman è diventato un grande scrittore non perché era figlio del ceto medio dell'epoca rossa, è diventato grande — così come voi non diventerete se non mi seguite nel leggere certe cose, come per esempio *Vita e destino*, il romanzo «Panta rei», *Tutto scorre...*, che è la sintesi dell'altro — perché ha accettato di impattarsi con le cose come succedevano, col cuore liscio e aperto come una scheda di macchina fotografica; non ha detto una sola bugia in quelle quattrocento pagine. (Giussani 1996, 546–547)¹⁴

For Giussani, realism implies that the reality that affects our senses or minds (ideas and ideals are also real) acquires meaning when they touch the level of affection, which he considers the root of reason and reasonableness.

¹⁴ “Grossman became a great writer [...], great as you will not become if you do not follow me in reading certain things, such as *Life and Fate* or the novel *Everything Flows...*, which is the synthesis of the first, because he accepted the impact on himself of things as they happened, with a heart as smooth and open as a camera card; he did not tell a single lie in those four hundred pages.” My translation.

La conoscenza non è mai tale se non termina in un'affezione. Questa affezione può essere diversa. A seconda di questa affezione, viene motivato l'atteggiamento di un altro fattore, che sta dietro le quinte, dietro questo fenomeno della conoscenza, che si chiama libertà. La libertà è come un coltello che sta lì ed entra tentando di tagliare il nesso tra l'impatto della conoscenza e l'*affectus* che produce. Fa sentire così astratta la cosa, poiché rimane solo la conoscenza (idea astratta) e arresta all'istintività l'atto, se rimane solo l'*affectus*. E né l'una cosa, né l'altra sono giuste. Invece non si può tagliare in due il fenomeno della conoscenza: la conoscenza è registrazione di una cosa in quanto c'è secondo uno shock, un *affectus* che ti produce; e in base a questo c'è poi tutto il gioco della libertà. (Giussani 1996, 232)¹⁵

From this epistemic pattern follows a moral stance: accepting and adhering to reality as it happens. Here, Grossman enters Giussani's theoretical landscape.

Non vi hanno fatto certamente leggere il romanzo *Vita e destino*. Nessuno di voi l'ha letto, prendetevelo e in tre anni lo leggerete! È descritta la vita del popolo russo sotto Stalin, è un libro storico, terribile, bellissimo: è un libro degno di Dostoevskij. Sono vite tutte massacrate e pestate, eppure o era giusto che si suicidassero, o era giusto che vivessero: era giusto che vivessero, perché vivendo accettavano, senza saperlo, la strada che conduceva al loro destino. È ragionevole vivere; altrimenti, quando le cose non vanno, sarebbe ragionevole soltanto spararsi nella tempia: eh, no! (Giussani 1994, 100)¹⁶

Even in this colloquial form, you see the bulk of Giussani's philosophical reading. Grossman's realism is an emotional registration of what happens. This realism implies the role of freedom, called to accept or deny the value of experience. As in classic Thomism, true freedom is only the acceptance of truth, good, and being. Therefore, Grossman's realism is powerful insofar as it introduces us to this conception of freedom.

The three crucial authors of Vasily Grossman's first wave of reception tackled relevant points that hint at a more complete theoretical framework. Lévinas introduces the transcendental level in Grossman's work. There is something, a call that asks for the exercise of responsibility, that comes from a level that is not within the historical realm or any ideological

¹⁵ "Knowledge is never such unless it ends in an affection. This affection can be different. This affection motivates the attitude of another factor behind the scenes, behind this phenomenon of knowledge, which is called freedom. Freedom is like a knife that stands there and enters. Sometimes, freedom tries to cut the nexus between the impact of knowledge and the *affectus* it produces. If only knowledge remains, the thing feels abstract (idea); if only *affectus* remains, it becomes instinct. Both are wrong. Instead, one cannot cut the phenomenon of knowledge: knowledge is the registration of a thing insofar as there is, according to a shock, an *affectus* that it produces in you. This kind of knowledge then starts the whole game of freedom." My translation.

¹⁶ "I am sure they did not have you read *Life and Fate*. Not one of you has read it. Get it, and in three years, you will finish it! In it, the life of the Russian people under Stalin is described; it is a historic, dramatic, and terrific book: it is a book worthy of Dostoevsky. Their lives are all massacred and crushed, yet it was either right for them to commit suicide or right for them to live. It was right for them to live because in living, they were accepting, without knowing, the path that led to their destiny. To live is reasonable; otherwise, when things go badly, it would only be reasonable to shoot yourself in the temple: no way!" (Giussani 2008, 85–86)

pattern. It does not come from the Self itself. It is transcendent. Todorov, who would not agree with absolute transcendence, agrees with the identification of a cosmos, an order of universal values that allow strength and human hope against a century of totalitarianism. Giussani underlines the epistemic value of Grossman realism. These characteristics, singled out by the three authors, guide us towards a new depth in the study of Grossman's theoretical philosophy. I will denote this new step by employing the expression "metaphysical realism."

4. *Metaphysical realism*

As many authors have acknowledged, from the beginning to the end of his work, Grossman's central concern is telling the truth by describing the correspondence between what is real and what the pen puts down on paper.¹⁷ Analysis of the texts shows that Grossman's conception of this reality changed profoundly over the years. His initial realism was materialist, imbued with a certain classical humanism; Gorky did not overlook this when he invited young Grossman to consider that realism is not describing the reality that you see – the reality of poor, suffering people – but writing about a reality that ideology will create.¹⁸

Biographical evolution and philosophical maturation expanded Grossman's initial humanitarian realism. The reality to be described is not only that of the "little people" and their sorrows but began to encompass the enormous stage of nature and world history as they came to play out decisively during the battle of Stalingrad, as well as moral themes of goodness and evil, the necessity of telling the truth, the ultimate meaning of life, the possibility of eternity, the existence of the soul and God. It is thus an enlargement in scope and intent, taking Grossman's realism from a physical to a metaphysical plane. Reality includes the physical, material, social, and political but also the good, the true, the beautiful, and the just (with their opposites resulting from their absence). Reality is thus also full of what medieval philosophy called the transcendentals, the fundamental properties found everywhere in being at every degree, level, and realization.

Significantly, Grossman adds life and freedom to these traditional transcendentals. Freedom and life form a hendiadys that Grossman employs in all his novels and short stories of the second part of his life. Perhaps the most iconic affirmation is his language at the end of the short story *The Sistine Madonna*.

What can we, people of the epoch of Fascism, say before the court of the past and the future? Nothing can vindicate us. We will say, "There has been no time crueller than ours, yet we did not allow what is human in man to perish." Seeing The Sistine Madonna go on her way, we preserve our faith that life and freedom are one, that there is nothing higher than what is human in man. This will live forever and triumph. (Grossman 2010a, 192)

¹⁷ Dell'Asta 2007, Sarnov 2007, Strada 2007, Tosco 2012.

¹⁸ On this exchange with Gorky, which Grossman recalls many times in his novels, see all of the major biographies, for example Garrad, Garrard 1996, Popoff 2019.

The contemporary view of Grossman's work completes the classical picture: truth, goodness, beauty, but also life and freedom, *inter se convertuntur*. A separate discourse could be made for "motherhood," whose power is such in Grossman that it could be included among the transcendentals, were it not that it perhaps coincides *tout court* with life.¹⁹ In any case, reality is no longer what we see, touch, and feel with our senses but also includes all ideas, feelings, abstractions, and ideals that constitute the uniqueness of every human individual. Grossman is not a philosopher and does not analyze this belief in order to establish whether it is explicitly religious. He is not interested in this consequence, but his openness to religion in a broad sense, to his Jewish roots, to a sense of forgiveness, is apparent, as Suslov himself recognized in the notorious dialogue that took place after the seizure of the manuscript of *Life and Fate*.²⁰

The broadening of realism to encompass transcendentals has a counterpart in the theory of truth. The initial truth of Grossman's works is reduced to a correspondence with what happens or has happened, hence the egalitarian or humanitarian impulse. Metaphysical realism from *Life and Fate* onwards is a recognition of transcendentals and an openness, which does not find fulfillment, to their unfolding in the world and in history without, however, doing so according to any dialectic, which would bring Grossman back into the sphere of idealism. His theory of truth becomes similar to that proposed by the pragmatist Charles S. Peirce: it is the embodiment and unfolding of effects over the long course of history. The correspondence between reality and its description takes time to appear. Still, it occurs in a gradual unraveling that coincides with a growth of awareness on the part of human beings. A famous line of William C. Bryant, often quoted by Peirce, which is steeped in ancient Christian wisdom, comes to mind here, perhaps representing Grossman's art and biography: "Truth, crushed to the ground, will rise again."²¹

Truth is not a mere description of states of affairs but is the sure aim of a process that does not invalidate its uniqueness but, rather, expands its possibilities. It will always remain true for Grossman that "truth is one, not two" – his reply to Gorky's theory of duplicitous truth – but the one truth will have to wait to reveal its content entirely. It will take Ivan's years in the concentration camp and loneliness to allow Anna Sergeevna to "confess" to actively participating in the Holodomor (Grossman 2010a, 123–149). It will take Grossman's years and suffering to admit that Lenin was no less guilty than Stalin of the subsequent totalitarian terror (Grossman 2010a, 177–186). It will take years, Grossman seems to say in one of his last stories, to understand the full horror of the atomic bomb (Grossman 2006b, 751–767).

In this expectation of correspondence that will take place in the long run, transcendentals occasionally happen in the flesh, causing people to discover new aspects of their nature.

¹⁹ Maddalena 2023, Sisto 2007.

²⁰ For the transcription of the dialogue with Suslov, see Garrard, Garrard 1996, 357–360. Among Suslov's statements, Grossman recalls: "Your book contains direct comparisons between us and Nazi Germany. [...] You speak favorably in your book about religion, about God, about Catholicism. You defend Trotsky. You often express serious doubts about our Soviet system."

²¹ Bryant 1840.

Indeed, part of Grossmanian realism is the well-known issue surrounding “acts of senseless kindness” or “madness,” the issue of the sudden and gratuitous – and therefore unrepeatable – gestures that appear in human life, not as a consequence of antecedent factors. As we know, Grossman will oppose these gestures to any theoretical conceptualization of the good, the true, the beautiful. These gestures embody transcendentals that form the human in man, the highest level of his freedom, life itself. Transcendental goodness is suddenly manifested in the widow who cures her husband's murderer (Grossman 2006a, 408–409) or the woman who gives a piece of bread to the German prisoner who was a perpetrator of violence (Grossman 2006a, 805–806).

Truth is embodied in Ikonnikov's refusal to build a gas chamber and also in the kiss on the hand of the Catholic priest who blesses God's madman in his “crazy” decision (Grossman 2006a, 304–305). Beauty is embodied entirely in Raphael's Sistine Madonna, recognized as alive in the streets as she begs for bread in the Ukrainian famine, as she looks down from the stairs at her son kidnapped by the KGB, as she tries to defend her newborn from the clutches of the Nazis at Treblinka. Life, freedom, and motherhood live on in the unique gesture of Sof'ja Osipovna, who dies in a gas chamber, remaining to the last with the little David she has just met. Nature itself becomes a gesture as it happens in *добро вам!* (The Good be with you!). In the Ararat stone, Grossman sees embodied “the migrations of peoples, paganism, the ideas of Marx and Lenin, the wrath of the Soviet state” (Grossman 2013, 170).

Gestures of senseless kindness are the sublime moments of the embodiment of transcendentals in action. Their strength lies in their sudden and unique appearance, as well as the weakness of their unrepeatable happening as an event, bringing Grossman's thought closer in this sense to that of Buber than that of Lévinas.²² Grossman's gestures are not external to metaphysical reality as Lévinas would have said, but are instead – and more classically – expressions of a logos, of a metaphysical order. Grossman does not recognize this position theoretically – emphasizing the difference between this plane of gratuitousness and the rational one – but his realism, which expands metaphysically without yielding to forms of nihilism or pessimism, testifies to a conception of it that to structure itself theoretically would have needed a philosophical training that Grossman did not possess.²³

However, while understood as unrepeatable events, gestures that embody transcendentals show their full extension and intention. They are the beginning of the revelation of the truth that will emerge in the long run. Thus, following Grossman's characters in his later works, justice, an intrinsic aspect of truth, becomes a necessity for forgiveness; we understand from the Judas chapter of *Everything Flows* (Grossman 2010a, 61–75) and Anna Sergeevna's confession (Grossman 2010a, 123–149) that goodness becomes gratuitousness as it happens in the many gestures already mentioned of aiding the enemy or, even more emblematically, in the virginal offering Our Lady makes of her Child who will die on the cross (Grossman 2010b, 184–185). Finally, beauty becomes comprehensible only as goodness and truth, as Ivan and Anna Sergeevna say on their night of love, confession, and

²² Buber 1937.

²³ For this acknowledgment see Maddalena 2007, Riconda 2007.

consolation. Speaking the truth means accepting that transcendentals happen and widening our narrow ideological views, leading us to new, unexpected meanings.

Viewed from this perspective, Grossman's philosophical-political position is also better explained. The ideology that prevents one from seeing what happens as the occurrence of transcendentals is and always will be the adversary of every human being. Nazism and communism were striking examples of this because they turned ideologies into the state in the age of society's massification. But in the play *Если верить пифагорейцам* (*If you believe the Pythagoreans*), staged immediately after the war – and not surprisingly much criticized, even though Grossman was at the height of his fame at the time – Grossman portrayed progressives and conservatives as belonging to narrow, ideological circles, just as did the Pythagoreans, who preferred to keep secret, and then erase, the unexpected discovery of irrational numbers, just as the Bolsheviks did with their erasure of the massacres of the kulaks, the purges of '36–'37, and postwar anti-Semitism. One can be ideological in small and large systems, in the family, and in one's group, parish, movement, association, office, party, or union. One can always be ideological because to be ideological is to prevent transcendentals from manifesting themselves or, if one cannot prevent them, to make sure they are silenced. But the truth, even crushed to the ground, will tend to re-emerge, as the events of Grossman's work illustrate in exemplary fashion.

In this light, Grossman's vague adherence to a democratic perspective can be better understood. Democracy is a space in which free events have a better chance of being recognized and affirmed. In fact, in Grossman, the anti-authoritarian perspective emerges primarily and is able to resist the common mindset. The many "no's" characterize the individual's resistance to authority in the name of reality and a larger truth. It is Novikov's "no" to Stalin's order to attack, said in the name of the larger truth of his soldiers' lives (Grossman 2006a, 647–648). It is Ikonnikov's "no" to constructing the gas chamber for the larger truth of non-cooperation with evil (Grossman 2006a, 304–305). It is Ženja's "no" to marriage to Novikov in the name of the larger truth of exercising charity towards her imprisoned ex-husband (Grossman 2006a, 746–753). This force of resistance to the dominant public and state mentality, as well as to a private and perhaps even internalized one, is Grossman's manifesto for democracy.

5. Conclusion

By means of his evolutionary metaphysical realism, Grossman appears to be a classic author of Russian, Jewish, and Christian religious literature. He is not entirely so, but this alone explains the history of his reception. It explains, for example, his having been read and "rescued" mainly by Jewish and Christian scholars like Lévinas and Giussani who, in various ways, recognized a religious aspect in him. Only in this way can it be explained that he was always compared with Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, with the great names of nineteenth-century literature, whose work was pervaded by impelling and imposing metaphysical questions. Finally, this interpretation is the only way to explain the admiration for Grossman in the French philosophical world, which recovered the possibilities of meta-

physics understood as transition, embodiment, and movement in the wake of Bergson. The success of Grossman's thought, contrary to Lévinas's framework, lies in his recovery of metaphysics, but of a metaphysics that must become action, gesture, face, and even politics.

Finally, even in this seemingly classic rediscovery, there remains the very modern quality of a missing ending. Whereas in classical metaphysical realism, the individual, the cosmos, and history seem to find fulfillment and pacification in higher orders, be they religious or historical-ontological, in Grossman's metaphysical realism, the non-repeatable embodiment of transcendentals means that there are only partial developments and that the end of human life and freedom is neither already decided nor already written. It is no accident that *Life and Fate* ends with a series of questions from the grandmother about the destiny – this time understood in the sense of task and fulfillment – of her loved ones (Grossman 2006a, 860–862). Destiny thus conceived is not fate because it is not necessary. The possibility of other incarnations of transcendentals and order is still open. The fact that those ultimate questions and sudden gestural realizations of transcendentals exist is a sign of the possibility of a final and totalizing answer, of a positive and happy outcome for our lives. Still, nothing will happen without our acceptance of what happens and the concomitant sacrifices. Nothing will come to pass without our freedom.

References

- Anckaert, Luc. 2021. "Goodness without Witnesses: Vasily Grossman and Emmanuel Lévinas." In *Lévinas and Literature*, edited by Michael Fagenblat, Arthur Cools, 223–237. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Blumenkranc, Michail. 2011. "Le vie del bene e i beni della libertà. L'antropologia etico-filosofica in *Vita e Destino*." In *L'umano nell'uomo. Vasilij Grossman tra ideologie e domande eterne*, edited by Pietro Tosco, 177–192. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.
- Bonola, Anna, Giovanni Maddalena, eds. 2018. *Vasily Grossman. A Writer's Freedom*. Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press.
- Boschiero, Manuel. 2015. "Intorno alla nuova edizione del Libro nero." *Russica Romana* 22: 109–125.
- Bryant, William Cullen. 1840. *Poems*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Buber, Martin. 1937. *I and Thou*, transl. by Ronald Gregor Smith. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark.
- Calusio, Maurizia. 2017. "Василий Гроссман и первый опыт художественного исследования Гюлага (О повести Все течет...)." *L'analisi linguistica e letteraria* 25, 175–186.
- Calusio, Maurizia, Anna Krasnikova, Pietro Tosco, eds. 2016. *The Legacy of Contemporary Classic*. Milano: EDUCatt.
- Dell'Asta, Adriano. 2007. "Dal sogno all'incubo. Nazismo e comunismo in Vasilij Grossman." In *Il romanzo della libertà, Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo*, edited by Giovanni Maddalena, Pietro Tosco, 41–66. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.
- Ellis, Frank. 2018. "The Russian Idea, Lenin, and the Origins of the Totalitarian State in Vasily's Grossman Forever Flowing." In *Vasily Grossman. A Writer's Freedom*, edited by Anna Bonola, Giovanni Maddalena, 123–140. Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press.
- Ehrenburg, Ilya, Vasily Grossman, eds. 2003. *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*. London: Routledge.
- Garrard, John, Carol Garrard. 1996. *The Bones of Berdichev: The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman*. New York: The Free Press.

- Ghini, Giuseppe. 2018. "Everything Flows but Ivan Grigorievich stands still: Grossman, Heraclitus, and the Prodigal Son". In *Vasily Grossman. A Writer's Freedom*, edited by Anna Bonola, Giovanni Maddalena, 79–94. Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press.
- Giussani, Luigi. 1980. *Il senso religioso*. Milano: Jaca Book.
- Giussani, Luigi. 1994. *Si può vivere così*. Milano: Rizzoli. English transl. by J. Zucchi (2008). *Is It Possible to Live This Way? An Unusual Approach to Christian Experience*. Vol. 1: Faith. Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press.
- Giussani, Luigi. 1996. *Si può (veramente!?) vivere così*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Giussani, Luigi. 2003. *Teologia protestante americana*. Genova/Milano: Marietti 1820.
- Grossman, Vasily. 2006a. *Life and Fate*. New York: New York Review Books.
- Grossman, Vasily. 2006b. "Abel. Le six Août." In *Oeuvres*. Paris: Laffont.
- Grossman, Vasily. 2010a. *Everything flows*. London: Vintage books.
- Grossman, Vasily. 2010b. *The Sistine Madonna*. In *The Road*, 181–92. London: MacLehose Press.
- Grossman, Vasily. 2013. *An Armenian Sketchbook*. London: MacLehose Press.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1961. *Totalité et infini*. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1988. *À l'heure des nations*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1991. *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle. English translation by M.B. Smith, B. Hashan (1998). *Entre nous. On Thinking of the Other*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Maddalena, Giovanni. 2007. "'L'umano dell'umano': Vasilij Grossman e il possibile esito felice della vita." In *Il romanzo della libertà, Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo*, edited by Giovanni Maddalena, Pietro Tosco, 247–61. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.
- Maddalena, Giovanni. 2023. *Il pensiero di Vasilij Grossman*. Torino: Rosenberg & Selliers.
- Maddalena, Giovanni, Pietro Tosco, eds. 2007. *Il romanzo della libertà, Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo*. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.
- Popoff, Alexandra. 2019. *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Riconda, Giuseppe. 2007. "La 'religione' di Grossman." In *Il romanzo della libertà, Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo*, edited by Giovanni Maddalena, Pietro Tosco, 217–46. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.
- Sarnov, Benedikt. 2007. "L'evoluzione artistica e ideale di Grossman nei romanzi *Per una giusta causa* e *Vita e destino*." In *Il romanzo della libertà, Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo*, edited by Giovanni Maddalena, Pietro Tosco, 127–41. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.
- Sisto, Marco. 2007. "Vasilij Grossman: il realismo materno contro l'ideologia." In *Il romanzo della libertà, Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo*, edited by Giovanni Maddalena, Pietro Tosco, 195–202. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.
- Strada, Vittorio. 2007. "Russia e Germania nei romanzi di Vasilij Grossman." In *Il romanzo della libertà, Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo*, edited by Giovanni Maddalena, Pietro Tosco, 31–40. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 2000. *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien: enquête sur le siècle*. Paris: R. Laffont. English translation by D. Bellos (2003), *Hope and memory: lessons from the twentieth century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tosco, Pietro. 2012. "*Ho scritto quello che ho visto*. La poetica di Grossman e il problema delle verità." PhD diss., Università di Verona.
- Tosco, Pietro, ed. 2011. *L'umano nell'uomo. Vasilij Grossman tra ideologie e domande eterne*. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino.