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# Testimony on the margins: Silence, innocence and the other in Vasilii Grossman's late fiction

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## Abstract

This article examines the mode of testimony to trauma employed by Vasilii Grossman in his short later works. Deflecting attention from his main subject, and focusing on peripheral figures and unusual viewpoints, Grossman explores the possibilities and limitations of representing trauma, interrogating how those involved understand and testify to their experiences. The article first discusses the novella *Everything Flows*, in particular the encounter between Ivan, the Gulag returnee, and Anna, the former activist, that leads to her testimony about the terror famine. It then analyses two stories, 'Mama' and 'The road', which are characterized by the adoption of marginal focalizers. The article discusses recurring themes such as the absent mother figure and the embodiment of testimony through the senses. These become central to the construction of two modes of witnessing, the relational and the pure, which make testimony possible but also illuminate the difficulties of realizing it.

## Keywords

Vasilii Grossman, Gulag, Russian literature, Stalinism, trauma, testimony

The opening chapter of Vasilii Grossman's unfinished novella *Everything Flows*, in which passengers wash, pack their belongings, and prepare for the arrival of the Khabarovsk train in Moscow, gives little indication of the incendiary material to come.<sup>1</sup> As we read on, we realize that not only the ordinariness of the scene, but also its focalization through the young, shaggy-haired Gosplan economist, seem designed to deflect attention away from the true subject of the story, and from its main protagonist. Ivan

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Grigor'evich, whom we subsequently follow as he visits his successful scientist cousin Nikolai, goes to Leningrad in search of times lost, and settles in a provincial backwater, remains unnamed here. He receives the least attention of any of the travelling companions in the train compartment, primarily because the young economist, busy playing cards and chatting to a trades union inspector, barely notices him. His behaviour, such as we see of it, also implies self-effacement:

When the construction superintendent said to him, in the voice of a man used to giving orders, 'Move out of the way, Grandad – I need the table for my tea!', the old man jumped to his feet like an obedient soldier and went out into the corridor ... He smoked *makhorka* and, after rolling a cigarette, he would go to the platform at the end of the carriage, so as not to upset the others with his horrible smoke. (Grossman, 1994: 266; 2009: 5–6)<sup>2</sup>

Our first view of Ivan suggests that his attention too is directed elsewhere: 'a thin old man ... sitting and looking out of the window, resting his head on his brown fists' (1994: 266; 2009: 3). This sense persists even in the echo of this phrase that marks the shift of focus to his character at the end of the chapter: 'Resting his head on his hands, the old man was sitting at the little table and looking out of the window' (1994: 268; 2009: 9).

Thus, while nominally the protagonist, Ivan, returning to mainstream Soviet life after decades in the Gulag, is presented as marginalized from his own story before it even begins.<sup>3</sup> The reader continues to follow him in the present, but the past of his arrest, imprisonment and years of hard labour remains obscured and never moves fully into the foreground. From the moment his cousin Nikolai receives the telegram informing him of Ivan's impending arrival, which sparks memories of his own – rather than Ivan's – experience of Stalinism, full of moral compromises and material compensation, a pattern forms in which Ivan's experience is displaced by other perspectives. The text remains largely silent about what he has suffered himself. As we hear the stories of collaborators and perpetrators, this absence in what is ostensibly the story of a survivor is surprising and at times troubling. Throughout *Everything Flows*, we anticipate this story, the presence of which is hinted at in descriptions of Ivan remembering, collecting his thoughts and gaining greater clarity on his experience:

These camp memories kept coming back to him. There were no links between them, and this chaotic quality was painful and tormenting, But he felt he knew that it was possible to make sense of this chaos, that it was not beyond him, His journey through the camps was now over and it was time to see clearly. (1994: 317; 2009: 96)

However, the outcome of this process is not the expected profusion of personal memories. Instead, it results in other lines of thought, each of which again deflects attention away from his own experience, placing Ivan in the position of the third-party eye-witness or *testis*, in addition to that of the *superstes*, who has experienced events directly (Agamben, 1999: 17).

At times there is a movement towards more abstract reflections on Soviet history and politics, as in the famous chapters on Lenin and Russia's 'slave soul'. These begin:

It was strange. When Ivan Grigoryevich remembered the year 1937, and the women who had been sentenced to hard labour because of their husbands, when he recalled Anna Sergeyevna's account of total collectivization and the famine in the Ukrainian countryside, when he thought about the laws according to which workers were sent to prison for getting to work twenty minutes late and peasants were sentenced to eight years in the camps for hiding a few grains of wheat; when Ivan Grigoryevich pondered these things, it was not a man with a moustache, not a man wearing a military tunic and boots [i.e. Stalin] whom he saw in his mind's eye. (Grossman, 1994: 352; 2009: 165)

Elsewhere, his focus is on the general atmosphere, emphasizing the experience of those around him, as when he recalls his incarceration in Butyrka prison:

Ivan Grigoryevich often thought about his months in the Lubyanka, and then in the Butyrka prison. He had been three times in the Butyrka, but it was the summer of 1937 that he remembered best ... Only now could he make out what had happened. The cell in 1937 had been packed – hundreds of prisoners in a space intended for a few dozen. (1994: 343; 2009: 148)

The interpolated stories of individual non-survivors that follow the historical sections are also related to this type of memory. In particular, the story of 'Dear, quiet little Mashenka' (1994: 319; 2009: 100) is directly mediated as an omniscient third-person narrative that simultaneously personalizes the torments of the camps and elevates them to general significance. Yet it is also by implication presented as if from Ivan's memory, as the continuation of his thoughts about women in the Gulag. The abrupt introduction of Masha's name as though we already know who she is suggests that Ivan, at least, certainly does. The return to Ivan at the end of this chapter equally frames her story as his act of remembering.

These inserted stories and discussions reflect preoccupations that are typical of labour camp narratives. The emphasis on the experience of the other prisoners rather than the self has been part of the blueprint of the genre since Dostoevskii's *Notes from the House of the Dead*. This established a double effacement of its author, by presenting a fictionalized account of his incarceration as the notes of Gorianchikov, a nobleman who had murdered his wife, and then using this perspective primarily to examine not the narrator, but the peasant convicts and their mentality. Frank (2010: 196) describes this approach as 'impersonal and collective, rather than confessional and personal'. Many of the best-known portrayals of the Gulag in the Soviet era similarly direct attention from the author's experience to that of other convicts. For example, the first volume of Evgeniia Ginzburg's memoirs, *Into the Whirlwind*, describes her own journey but is emphatically concerned with the community of women convicts she encounters (Holmgren, 1994: 131–2). Varlam Shalamov's mixture of first- and third-person narrators and use of alter egos in *Kolyma Tales* frequently projects his own experiences onto different characters, blurring the boundaries between self and other as he explores ways of speaking with the voices of those who did not survive (Young, 2011: 369–71). Such works de-emphasize the personal mode and instead create forms of collective biography, an idea expressed most fully through the 227 witnesses who contributed to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. The status of this work as a collaborative history of the Gulag and

state-sponsored violence in the USSR, as well as of its victims, also reflects the search for meaning and understanding that is shared with many survivor narratives.

The treatment of Ivan in *Everything Flows* does more than place Grossman's text within a generic tradition; in emphasizing the position of Ivan as a returnee, it also provides the context that frames the question of witnessing. It is generally accepted that the novella is unfinished, and that the author would have made further changes and additions had he lived longer. While speculation on the nature of those possible revisions takes us unhelpfully into the area of authorial intention, John Garrard's examination (1994: 275) of the so-called Zabolotskaia manuscript show us that many of the later insertions were the polemical passages addressing Soviet history and Lenin's legacy. Some of these sections are weakly integrated (Garrard 1994: 276), but there are clear, if slightly clumsy, attempts to indicate that they originate in Ivan's thoughts, as in the case of Mashenka's story. In particular, the reflections on Lenin begin, 'Now and again Ivan Grigoryevich wrote down his thoughts in a school exercise book left behind by Alyosha' (Grossman, 1994: 352; 2009: 165); this long section ends, 'It did not surprise Ivan Grigoryevich that the word "freedom" had been on his lips when he was sent to Siberia as a young student, and that this word was still alive in him, still present in his mind, even today' (1994: 373; 2009: 200).

By framing such passages in this way, Grossman gestures towards an adjustment to their polemical tone, so that they become part of the representation of the individual's process of witnessing; simultaneously, they deflect attention away from personal experience to present an alternative paradigm that focuses on the other and on the broader context in which testimony takes place.<sup>4</sup> Thus both the content and form of the insertions suggest that Grossman's conception was transformed from an initial draft that told a relatively straightforward story of a Gulag returnee to one containing not only Grossman's own testimony and a meditation on questions of responsibility, but also an interrogation of the very possibility of producing and representing testimony in a context where it was officially prohibited.<sup>5</sup> This article explores these issues in relation to both *Everything Flows* and two of Grossman's later short stories, 'Mama' and 'The road'.

## Relating to testimony

Ivan's marginalization is fully established through his encounter with Nikolai Andreevich. It is not simply that the telling of his own story is postponed to another occasion by his cousin, who 'wanted very much to talk about himself – more than he wanted to recall their childhood, or to list relatives who had died, or to question Ivan' (1994: 284; 2009: 37). The meeting also reinforces the social superiority of the Soviet scientist over the former *zek*, as Nikolai's wife triumphantly perceives: 'Maria Pavlovna felt that she had never before so fully sensed the strength of her husband's soul. Yes, she herself had no doubt who was the conqueror and who was the conquered' (1994: 286; 2009: 40). When, shortly afterwards, the informer Pinegin assuages the murmurings of his conscience with a visit to an exclusive restaurant, we understand that the power structures of Soviet society have not changed. The displaced, such as Ivan, will not be restored;<sup>6</sup> their stories will remain unheard and unacknowledged, while the stories the powerful and successful tell about themselves and their involvement in the Stalinist system will remain in the realms

of self-justification and exculpation. The return of the outsider focuses unwelcome attention on the insider's experience and the mentality of those within the system, but communication between the two is aborted by the continued existence of that system and Nikolai's place within it.<sup>7</sup>

When Ivan takes a job in a workshop that employs the disabled, and lodges with a poverty-stricken war widow denied a pension, he entrenches his own marginal status. Laughing at the teacher's suggestion that he should study art, he responds to Anna's comment about him finding a better type of work: 'I'd be no good anywhere else, my knowledge comes from books with half the pages torn out, with no beginning or end' (1994: 312; 2009: 87). Ivan is excluded from the privileges that instil ideological complicity and he implicitly rejects the state's demand that in order to be rehabilitated he should construct a narrative of worthy Soviet citizenship.<sup>8</sup> His status as an outsider, simultaneously imposed and voluntary, effaces him and underpins a mode of relating that maintains the primacy of the other. It is this, in his encounter with Anna, that enables her testimony to the traumas of Stalinism to emerge.

Both a lament and a confession, Anna Sergeevna's beautiful and terrible story of the collectivization famine represents one of Grossman's greatest achievements. The combination of compassion and despair evident in Anna's descriptions, rooted in her sense of her own guilt, challenges the idea that great art requires a pitiless gaze (Sontag, 2004: 67); a gaze devoid of pity, it is quite apparent, was the cause of this destruction of so much human life in the first place, and only the awakening of pity allows the story to be told in this way. But her testimony is also significant in terms of the mode of relating it establishes, both within her story and in its telling.

Identity is the central theme of Anna's story. Describing the dekulakization campaign, she highlights the strategy of differentiation employed to separate the so-called kulaks from others, deprive them of human status, and turn the population against them:

The activists looked on those who were being dispossessed as if they were cattle, or swine. Everything about the kulaks was vile – they were vile in themselves, and they had no souls, and they stank, and they were full of sexual diseases, and worst of all, they were enemies of the people and exploiters of the labour of others. The poor, the Komsomol, the police – they were all Chapaevs, every one of them was a hero. (Grossman, 1994: 329–30; 2009: 118)

Judith Butler (2004: 145) suggests that for identification to occur, an initial 'disidentification' must be present, but Anna shows how this process has been reversed to manufacture antagonism. Having recovered from the 'spell',<sup>9</sup> she now understands the falseness of the proclaimed differentiation, and in its place asserts a common identity between the activists and those they were persecuting: 'you only had to look at these activists and it was obvious they were just people like any other people' (Grossman, 1994: 329–30; 2009: 118). This extends beyond the idea that people are all the same, to emphasize ties of community, since the activists are from the same villages as those they are persecuting: 'The activists were just villagers like anyone else, they were people everyone knew ... for the most part they were people from our own village' (1994: 329; 2009: 118). She also acknowledges her own identity with the activists – 'And so I became an activist' (1994: 329; 2009: 118) – and with their attitudes: 'What did we care? We were – activists' (1994: 331; 2009: 121).

Anna accentuates the essential identity of victims and perpetrators through the language of her story. In particular, her use of the all-encompassing possessive *svoi* (one's own) in the above quotations indicates everything that is in common between the opposing sides. She also uses the first-person plural possessive to emphasize ties to the area – 'In other provinces things may have been different, but this is how it went in our province' (1994: 329; 2009: 116) – and its inhabitants: 'Our people are strong' (1994: 332; 2009: 123). At the same time, throughout the chapter, the persistent use of past-tense plural forms without an article – a standard construction in Russian to convey a minimally passive voice – elides the difference between 'we' and 'they', peasants and activists, to convey their similarity, and Anna's identification with both groups:

During the autumn [people] took to living on potatoes, but without bread, it doesn't take long to get through potatoes. Towards Christmas cattle began to be slaughtered ... Chickens were slaughtered, of course. Soon all the meat had been eaten ... And worst of all, there was no grain. Every last kernel in the village had been requisitioned. (1994: 334; 2009: 127)

Finally, her use of the informal *ty* form, not only to address her interlocutor, Ivan, but also to refer to common actions, implicates and personalizes the wider community in these events: 'You couldn't buy bread in the district centre – it was only for those who had ration cards. And you couldn't buy it at a railway station kiosk – there were armed guards who didn't let you anywhere near the station' (1994: 334; 2009: 127).

This fluid understanding of identities also shapes the context in which Anna's story emerges, as she appears by Ivan's side in place of his mother: 'He opened his eyes in despair. Bending over him was a woman, half dressed. He had called out to his mother in a dream, and this woman had come to him' (1994: 328; 2009: 115). The exchange of identities, particularly relating to mother figures, appears frequently in Grossman's writing, most notably when the eponymous hero of 'The old teacher', who has previously longed for his mother's love, is protected by the little girl Katia when facing death in the Nazi massacre of the town's Jews:

The little girl turned towards him. Her face was calm ... And in a sudden silence he heard her voice. 'Teacher', she said, 'don't look that way, it will frighten you.' And, like a mother, she covered his eyes with the palms of her hands. (Grossman, 1962: 500; 2010: 124)

One person becoming another for the sake of the other emerges as the ultimate act of love and kindness in the face of traumatic experience: 'She had heard him cry out in his sleep and she had come to him, feeling tenderness and pity towards him ... She was beautiful because she was kind' (Grossman, 1994: 328; 2009: 115). The emphasis on such qualities in Anna allies her to Todorov's (2000: 113–18) conception – outlined in relation to *Life and Fate* – of kindness as the absence of ideology and the opposite of the morality of principles. It is significant that in the scene with Nikolai, the absence of Ivan's mother is noted:

Ivan Grigoryevich wanted someone's kind hands to lift from his shoulders the burden that he was carrying. And he knew that there is only one power in the world before which it is good and wonderful to feel that you yourself are small and weak. But Ivan Grigoryevich's mother had

died long ago and there was no power that could release him from this burden. (Grossman, 1994: 285; 2009: 38)

Thus Anna's adoption of this role provides the love that enables communication, in sharp contrast to Nikolai, whose self-pity prevents it.

Robert Chandler describes Anna's confession as a 'gift of love' (Grossman, 2009: xi), and as she changes identity again from mother to lover, a further dimension of her testimony is revealed, in the context of a physical encounter. A number of factors are at work here. The notion Butler develops (2004: 24–8) of the proximity of grief and desire posits a primary vulnerability that marks the condition of the human. This is evident above all in the capacity of the sexual act – like grief – to take people outside of themselves, to be for the other. This provides a framework for embodied ethical relations that extends beyond the Levinasian conception of the face-to-face encounter with its core injunction, 'Thou shalt not kill' (Butler, 2004: 131–46; Levinas, 1969: 187–203).<sup>10</sup> The emotional vulnerability of Ivan, evident as he cries out for his mother in his sleep, and of Anna, as she exposes herself by confessing her own guilt, are both encompassed in the physical vulnerability inherent in their sexual encounter, which takes place on the boundary between grief and desire.<sup>11</sup>

Ivan's contemplation of his own testimony when Anna is in hospital – the only extended description of his experience – reveals his understanding of the physical encounter as a source of comfort and forgetting in the darkest hour, and therefore as a space also for remembrance and witnessing. This is emphasized by the repetition of *tiazhelyi* (difficult, burdensome), which unites the experience and its narration:

He was alone in the room, but in his mind, in his thoughts, he was talking to Anna Sergeyevna: 'Do you know? At the most difficult times I used to imagine being embraced by a woman. I used to imagine this embrace as something so wonderful that it would make me forget everything I had been through ... But it turns out that it's you I have to talk to, that it's you I have to tell about the most difficult time of all ... Happiness, it turns out, will be to share with you the burden I can't share with anyone else. When you come back from the hospital, I'll tell you about that most difficult hour.' (Grossman, 1994: 373; 2009: 201)<sup>12</sup>

Addressing the problematics of testifying to events in which human dignity is maximally jeopardized, Agamben (1999: 67–9) refers to the parallel lack of dignity in the sexual act. This suggests that a situation in which dignity becomes irrelevant is one that enables testimony. Again, a comparison with Nikolai's attitude is revealing, as in his bourgeois household decorum is precisely what prevents Ivan's story being heard:

But since [Nikolai] was well mannered, since he knew how to say and do things he did not want to say or do – he said, 'We ought to go and stay in a dacha somewhere, somewhere without telephones, and listen to you for a week, a month, two months.' Ivan Grigoryevich imagined sitting in a dacha armchair, sipping wine, and talking about people who had departed into eternal darkness ... No, there were things that could not be spoken. (Grossman, 1994: 284; 2009: 37)

Both Nikolai and Ivan understand, albeit in markedly different ways, that bearing witness in either the present or the proposed setting would be in extremely poor taste.<sup>13</sup>



In addition to the emotional and psychological dimensions, the physical nature of the encounter between Ivan and Anna takes it beyond the verbal, as is emphasized by Ivan's silence. Anna too understands the limitation of words, and that the implication of language in the original crime – the labelling of people as kulaks and therefore as non-human – makes it difficult for language alone to enact a recovery of the human from that position: 'I can tell you the story, but a story is only words – and this was a matter of life and death, of torment, of people dying from starvation' (1994: 333; 2009: 126).

As the opposition evoked by the words, 'life, torment, people dying from starvation' implies, the physical becomes the focus of her narrative as well. In particular, she emphasizes that the horror of starvation lies in the physical transformation it causes:

And the children's faces looked old and tormented ... By the spring they no longer had faces at all. Some had the heads of birds, with a little beak; some had the heads of frogs, with thin, wide lips; some looked like little gudgeons, with wide-open mouths. Non-human faces. And their eyes! Dear God! (Grossman, 1994: 336; 2009: 131)

The dual meaning of *litso* as 'face' and 'person' here indicates that with the loss of human form, humanity itself is in danger of being extinguished before death: 'they weren't people, they looked more like some kind of filthy little cats or dogs' (1994: 338; 2009: 135).

More than any other feature, it is the eyes, as the juncture between the inner and outer person, that reveal the unrelieved torments of the famine victims:

There were some people who lost their minds ... You could tell who these people were by their bright, shining eyes ... As the human being died in them, the wild beast came to the surface. I saw one woman ... She had a human face, but the eyes of a wolf. (1994 338; 2009: 136)

As their eyes become 'clouded, as if drunk' (1994: 335; 2009: 130), the ability of the starving to perceive what is happening is diminished, leaving this task for others, who can survive to tell the story. But while Anna undertakes this moral duty with great compassion and, as Garrard and Garrard (1996: 95) have noted, at times almost photographic detail, visual perception remains problematic.

Sontag (2004: 105) observes that 'sight can be turned off (we have lids on our eyes, we do not have doors on our ears)'. When on trains passing through the affected area, 'the OGPU guards had to close the windows and lower the blinds. Passengers weren't allowed to look out' (Grossman, 1994: 336; 2009: 132), both the standard of visual witnessing as verifying the truthfulness of the events,<sup>14</sup> and the ease with which purely visual forms of witnessing may be disrupted, become apparent.<sup>15</sup> If sight cannot be relied upon when regarding the pain of others, then relating it in this way is even more problematic. Thus while Anna emphasizes her position as an eye-witness with repeated reference to what she has seen, she equally bears witness through her other senses, in some of the most haunting passages of her story, such as when she tries to avoid listening to the village's death howls:

From the village came a howl; it had seen its own death. The whole village was howling, without mind, without heart ... You had to be made of stone to carry on eating your ration of bread to the sound of that howling. I used to go out into the fields with my bread ration; I'd stop

– and I could still hear them howling. I'd go a bit farther – and it would seem they'd gone silent. Then I'd go farther still – and I could hear it again. Only by then it was from the next village. It seemed as if, along with the people, the whole earth had begun to howl. (Grossman, 1994: 336–7; 2009: 132–3)

This connection to the earth, evoking the physical world as grounding the human body,<sup>16</sup> is also implicit in the smell that cannot be eradicated, which gives the memory of these events more tangible form:

Once all the corpses were gone, they brought in the women to clean the floors and whitewash the walls. Everything was done properly, but the smell was still there. They whitewashed the walls a second time, and spread new clay on the floors, but the smell still wouldn't go away. (1994: 339; 2009: 137–8)

Through the introduction of the other senses, the embodiment of witnessing emphasizes both the physical nature of the original trauma and the importance of the physical encounter in creating the context for testimony.

As a perpetrator and bystander, Anna's aim is to reveal the other's trauma. Her focus on the horrific treatment of the peasants emphasizes both their position as other within Soviet society in the 1930s and their marginalization within official discourse on the crimes of Stalinism during the Thaw era, which dealt overwhelmingly with the Great Terror and the wounds inflicted on the party (Dobson, 2009: 81–2). Anna's rejection of the language of separation, and her affirmation of an identity that encompasses both the peasants and other Soviet citizens, including the activists who are persecuting them, allows her to give voice to the pain she has helped to cause, and to indicate the extent to which it has affected society as a whole. But as the contrast with Ivan and Nikolai's meeting suggests, this is only able to happen because of the specific nature of her encounter with Ivan. Accepting a position of physical and emotional vulnerability, with trust born of intimacy, she steps outside herself to grieve for the effects of her own actions. At the same time, she responds to Ivan's vulnerability, as the traumatized other, no more able than those permanently silenced to speak of the torments he has experienced. This awakens the compassion that allows her to speak for those silenced others and point to their 'missing testimony' (Agamben, 1999: 34). In the case of both Anna's and Nikolai's experiences, it is the mode of relating – being for the other – that determines their ability to tell their story.

## Pure witnessing

In a world of such moral complexity, where responsibility for society's traumas is so widely spread, and passive bystanders can be compromised as much as active perpetrators, the impossibility of clearly delineating guilt and innocence renders judgement problematic (Grossman, 1994: 296–304; 2009: 58–71). In *Everything Flows* individuals of varying degrees of guilt are confronted by Ivan as a symbol of innocence. It is not political or judicial innocence that particularly defines Ivan: Ivan committed no crime to merit his punishment, despite Nikolai's assumptions that his cousin's outspoken and reckless nature was responsible for his arrest, but we also understand that this was the case for

many convicts sentenced under Article 58 of the Soviet penal code. Rather, his innocence is established by the evocations of his mother, which transform him back into a child, and suggest an affinity with the child victims of the famine described so harrowingly by Anna. Moreover, Ivan's voluntary silence during Anna's tale, as well as his silencing by Nikolai, relates to a mode of unvoiced witnessing that is linked in Grossman's oeuvre to innocence, and is frequently invoked in the context of family and loving relationships.

Parent-child relationships are central to 'Mama', a tale based on the remarkable story of the adoption of a baby girl by NKVD chief Nikolai Ezhov and his wife, which represents the Great Terror from the perspective of the baby and her Pushkinian nanny.<sup>17</sup> As we see Ezhov and his wife, and their political and cultural circles, through Nadia's uncomprehending eyes and the silent wisdom of Marfa Dement'evna, events are divorced from their political significance through a focus on the purely human dimension. It is this that allows the expression of pity for Stalin's chief executioner, as the destruction he has precipitated is about to claim him in turn:

It was possible that Marfa Dement'evna was the only person in the entire world who felt pity for Nikolay Ivanovich; even his wife now feared him ... Marfa Dement'evna, however, remembered calm, pockmarked comrade Stalin, master of all and everyone, and felt pity for Nikolay Ivanovich. She thought his eyes looked confused, pathetic, lost. (Grossman, 1994: 73; 2010: 232)<sup>18</sup>

The narrator comments, 'It was as if she did not know that the country lay frozen in horror, that Yezhov's gaze had frozen all of vast Russia' (1994: 73; 2010: 232), but we already know that she 'saw, and understood, a great deal' (1994: 73; 2010: 231); her pity, it seems, derives not from ignorance, but from the survival of innocence in her 'virgin's soul' (1994: 75; 2010: 235).

Moreover, the notion of all people being alike, blurring the identity of victims and perpetrators, as in Anna's story, is introduced through Nadia's perception:

Everyone Nadya knew had the same look in their eyes. There was the same look in Mama's brown eyes, and in Father's grey-green eyes, and in the yellow eyes of the cook, and in the eyes of every one of Father's guests, and in the eyes of the guards who opened the dacha gates, and in the eyes of the old doctor. (1994: 72; 2010: 231)

She also, disturbingly, equates the calm eyes of Stalin and her nanny:

But these new eyes, these new eyes that looked at Nadya for several seconds, slowly and without curiosity, were entirely calm ... In the home of Nikolay Yezhov there was no-one with calm eyes except Marfa Dement'evna. (1994: 72; 2010: 231)

Nadia's insight into the positions of these two figures enables us to see who remains outside the storm engulfing everybody else. Her mute observation leaves space for the reader's understanding of the motives and characters of those involved.

Repeated references to eyes and vision place perception at the centre of a cluster of themes in the story. Nadia's sense of those around her as she sleeps or pretends to sleep in her cot – in particular, the smell of wine on visitors' breath – echoes the idea of

perception beyond vision and words in *Everything Flows*. The dream in the story's denouement further displaces perception into the unconscious as it entails a fleeting and unfathomable recollection of her birth mother – a victim of an earlier stage in the purges – that haunts the reader beyond Nadia's own rationalization, and reminds us of her ineradicable personal loss of two families. Meanwhile, the shifting identities of the child in the dream – who both is and is not Nadia – and of the mother figure – from Evgeniia Ezhova ('Mama'), to Nadia's birth mother, to Nadia herself on the verge of motherhood, as well as the nanny – signify a widening of the circle of being for the other. Imported into the highly politicized world of the Kremlin elite, protective maternal love not only represents what can survive, but also, by existing beyond the political realm, makes witnessing possible.<sup>19</sup>

The voiceless child and nanny achieve insight because they are effectively non-persons, able to see what is happening around them, while remaining invisible to its agents, who are separated from the realm of being for the other. Located within, but innocent of these events, the perspectives of Nadia and her nanny contain the potential for the experience of private remembrance and the awakening of love that can transcend orphanhood and forgetting. The ironic subversion of Nadia's near epiphany, when she recalls a film she saw at the orphanage and takes it as the source of her dream, maintains the dynamic of her seeing but unknowing perspective and the reader's understanding; the reader's completion of her memory enables the narrative to transcend the traumatic events that form its background.

The marginal positions of Nadia and Marfa Dement'evna provide a remarkable dual perspective on the unfolding of the terror at the highest level of Stalinist society, and the loss and displacement it inflicted on 'normal' life; yet the story also posits a third position, that of the reader, to fulfil the act of witnessing. The short story 'The road' also pivots on the innocence and voicelessness of the witness, as it depicts the Second World War in the Soviet Union from the point of view of an Italian mule, Giu. The position of the mule as the focalizer serves to defamiliarize the context in much the same way that Tolstoi's use of animal narrators and perspectives does (Shklovsky, 2004: 16). The device is also depoliticizing, since it shows us how the war is experienced by those caught up in it without any sense of its wider meaning.

From the beginning of the story, the embodied nature of Giu's witnessing is emphasized through reference to different senses:

Giu, a young mule who worked on the munitions train of an artillery regiment, sensed many changes on 22 June, 1941 ... People would have been astonished how many things the mule noticed that day: music everywhere, the radio blaring away without a break ... the smell of wine coming from people who did not usually smell of wine, the trembling hands of his driver, Nicolo. (Grossman, 1994: 128; 2010: 245)

Being and perception are intertwined, so the deterioration of the body under the weight of suffering gradually also diminishes the senses: 'He became a shadow of himself – and this living, ashen shadow could no longer sense either its own warmth or the pleasure that comes from food or rest' (1994: 131; 2010: 252). The sights and sounds of war are violent and intense, presaging destruction and jeopardizing the possibility of witnessing:

'But when the silence was violated by tanks, Giu heard them. Their iron sound filled the air; this sound entered the dead ears of both people and animals, and it penetrated the ears of the sad, living mule' (1994: 131; 2010: 253–4).

As being fades into bare existence, identity is eroded, and Giu becomes indistinguishable from his surroundings ('he was merging with it, becoming one with the misty plain' (1994: 132; 2010: 253)) and other creatures: 'It was now impossible to tell him apart from the old mule walking beside him' (1994: 131; 2010: 252). But this very loss of identity also has restorative potential, when he gains a new partner: 'They trotted alongside each other ... and their two smells, the smell of a mule and a mare pulling the same cart, merged into a single smell' (1994: 135; 2010: 257). In a scene that echoes Anna and Ivan's encounter in *Everything Flows*, grief, compassion and desire merge within the frame of physical contact and the memory of maternal love:

Her soft, gently moving lips touched his ear and he looked trustfully into the sad eyes of this collective-farm mare, and his breath mingled with her breath, which was kind and warm. In this good, kind warmth all that had gone to sleep awoke again. All that had been long dead came back to life: milk from his mother, the sweet milk that a new-born being so loves. (1994: 135; 2010: 257–8)

As in 'Mama', memory is protective and potentially restorative; far from revisiting the trauma, Giu's memory returns to before it to act as a stabilizing influence in a chaotic world. It is this that allows the moment of transformation, as Giu's voiceless witnessing becomes a shared silent testimony to the horrors of war and pain that contains an echo of Grossman's epic novel: 'Through their warm breath and their weary eyes, Giu the mule and the mare from Vologda spoke clearly to each other of their life and fate' (1994: 135; 2010: 258).

Both 'Mama' and 'The road', therefore, construct a form of witnessing that is dependent on the innocence of the perspective, symbolized by the image of the mother. I would argue that such figures function as 'pure' witnesses in a highly ambiguous moral world. The point is not simply that in their marginal position they can bear no responsibility for the events that touch them, but also that they do not comprehend evil as such; they inspire being for another in contexts where this is rare. Because of their position beyond language, they transcend the limits of speech's ability to describe experience and its potential for corruption and contamination; moreover, and crucially, in the unspoken testimony that arises from their stories, there is no 'I'. Rather than presenting a narrated experience that incorporates its own interpretation, they represent a silent embodied experience that not only inspires love or pity, but also requires another – whether companion or reader – to bear witness to it; by itself, pure witnessing is the story that senses but cannot be told.

The silence of Ivan's unnarrated memory is at the centre of *Everything Flows*. It is located somewhere between the pure witnessing of voicelessness outside or prior to language, as in the case of Giu and Nadia, and the silence after language of the dead village Anna mourns. It indicates the impasse surrounding his own testimony in the wake of Anna's death; partially imparted to the reader, this nevertheless remains suspended: 'He did not have the chance to share with her all that he had recalled, all that he had thought

through, all that he had noted down during the months of her illness' (Grossman, 1994: 375; 2009: 204–5). His thoughts, directed to the other, have revealed a great deal to the reader about the Soviet experience, the general experience of the camps and women's experience. The unspoken form they have taken has confirmed his outcast status, but the loss of the other in Anna means he is unable to testify to his own outcast experience. Approaching, but unable to attain, pure witnessing, the possibility of relational testimony eludes him.

All that remains is a final evocation of – and refuge in – maternal love: 'and his mother would come out towards him, towards her prodigal son, and he would kneel down before her, and her young and beautiful hands would rest on his grey, balding head' (1994: 377; 2009: 208). But in Ivan's isolation, it seems this will no longer be sufficient to restore him. This lack of resolution may be due to the unfinished nature of the novella. Yet it also embodies Grossman's insights into the ambiguities inherent in giving voice to one's own suffering amidst a larger trauma and the difficulties of finding a context in which testimony can emerge.

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### Notes

1. On Grossman's unprecedented attack on the role of Lenin in Soviet history in *Everything Flows*, see Garrard and Garrard (1996: 290–1).
2. I have made occasional alterations to published translations to clarify linguistic points.
3. On the fate of Gulag returnees in Soviet society, see Adler (2002), Cohen (2010) and Dobson (2009).
4. My understanding of testimony draws on that of Stevan Weine (2006: xiii–xxiii), who focuses on the personal, truthful and ethical characteristics of testimony in its dialogic narrative dimension. The idea that traumatic events engender a crisis in literature, which subsequently requires other forms of expression, is central to Felman and Laub (1992). The epistemological and performative dimensions of testimony are explored in Coady (1994: 25–53).
5. On Gulag survivors' strategies for dealing with this problem, see Gheith (2007).
6. On the marginalization of returnees as a result of official ambivalence and failure to acknowledge fully the history of the Gulag, see Adler (1999).
7. As Shulga (2012: 75–89) has shown, Nikolai proves unable to step outside the state's ideology to articulate his testimony.
8. This context is discussed in Dobson (2009: 54–5).
9. Geller (1988: 102–3) views the 'bewitchment' Anna describes as the precise word to convey 'the state of a Soviet person subjected to intensive ideological processing'.

10. It should be noted that, in defining the idea of the face as more than a face, Levinas refers to the image of a queue of detainees' relatives outside the Lubyanka from Grossman's *Life and Fate* (Butler, 2004: 133).
11. A further dimension of physical vulnerability becomes apparent when Anna is revealed to be suffering from cancer and is taken into hospital (Grossman, 1994: 343; 2009: 146).
12. The repetition of the word 'burden' (*tiazhest*) in the passage about his mother's absence cited above creates a further connection with Anna Sergeevna.
13. Dobson's discussion (2009: 219–22) of readers' concerns about the 'vulgarity' (*poshlost*) of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* relates to this question, while, conversely, Anatoly Marchenko's criticism (1969: 318), within his own aggressively vulgar memoir of the camps, of Solzhenitsyn's novella as being too polite suggests that testimony to traumatic experience necessarily transcends the boundaries of taste.
14. The exploration by Blocker (2009: 123) of the visual dimension of testimony makes clear that the vulnerability of witnessing lies in the claims on reality of the act of both witnessing and representation.
15. It is worth noting, however, that in other contexts blocking vision can also have a protective function, as in the above-quoted scene from 'The old teacher'.
16. Anna also describes people's faces during the famine as 'like earth' (Grossman, 1994: 335). The emphasis is not so much on ordinary man, made of clay, but on humans returning to dust.
17. Robert Chandler provides the true story behind Grossman's tale in Grossman (2010: 325–34).
18. To aid an English-language readership, the published translation of 'Mama' changes the nanny's patronymic to Domityevna (Grossman, 2010: 377). In this and subsequent quotations, I have restored the original form.
19. The role of the mother–child relationship and the theme of innocent suffering are also developed in Grossman's essay 'The Sistine Madonna' (2010: 181–92).

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