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## The Semantic Role of Intertext in Mikhail Elizarov's *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years...*

The article examines a confessional autobiographical short story by Mikhail Elizarov, *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years...*, that takes place in the early 1990s. The protagonist, a young university student who successfully proved himself in the poetic field, suddenly changes his usual bookworm scholar lifestyle to the lifestyle of a bodybuilding fanatic socializing with "gang lads". The analysis found that an important semantic role in the short story is played by accented intertextual parallels that correlate the life path of Elizarov's character with the – largely similar – search of the autopsychological characters by Yukio Mishima and Eduard Limonov. It seems that one of the important keys to understanding the paradoxical path of Elizarov's character is Yukio Mishima's autobiographical essay *Sun and Steel* which is directly devoted to bodybuilding. Elizarov's short story should be interpreted as the story of an autopsychological character transforming into a true writer. The path of the short story protagonist being an aspiring writer acquires relative clarity only in the context of intertextual links to the autobiographical texts of the two renowned writers of the twentieth century.

**Key words:** Elizarov, Limonov, Mishima, bodybuilding, culture, identity.

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The autopsychological protagonist in *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years* (his name is Mikhail Elizarov), a short story that takes place in the early 1990s in Kharkiv, is a young man who intends to change his own life dramatically: he decides to leave the university life and bohemian environment where he used to enjoy a reputation of a classy intellectual and "a gentle poet" [2, p. 174] for a gym workout routine and socializing with the "gang lads". An encounter with a low-life yet attractive girl who spoke squeamishly about him looking "doughy and thin like

a scholar" [2, p. 167] played a decisive part in this metamorphosis. "Get yourself some workout already, you silly goose. The bar is right there, and here are the weights. You look like a seaweed..." [2, p. 167]. For some reason, it was a remark of a drunk, low-life (albeit attractive) person that made a sharp revolution in Elizarov's value system. "Something happened to my perception. I no longer saw myself as home to spirit and thought. I saw only a sunken, dull body" [2, p. 168]. The very next day, the young man joins the gym and begins his "desperately depressed journey" [2, p. 170] of engaging in bodybuilding. Having plunged into the element of muscle building, Elizarov virtually breaks up with his former girlfriend and university comrades, and loses all interest in what is happening in the country and the world. Thanks to that, by the next summer, the protagonist has grown "a good half pood of stone-like muscles" [2, p. 173]. Despite being seemingly successful in adapting to the new behavioral code, Elizarov does not at all feel at home in the company of toned "lads". He hesitates, trying to preserve some features of his former bookworm scholar lifestyle in a new setting – especially since the "lads" appreciate Mikhail primarily for his well-educated and refined personality. Elizarov's connection with the world of spirit and culture turns out to be an object of ridicule only on the part of Slavik, another neophyte in the gangster setting, who is competing with Mikhail for the status of the lads' best fellow. Yur Yurich, the most senior man in the gang who holds the Order of the Red Star for the Prague Spring likes Mikhail the most [2, p. 178]. This character clearly stands out not only for his extensive reading experience, but also for his inclination toward intellectual provocation – the same creative practice Elizarov utilizes in *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years*. A vivid example of this provocation is the case when Yur Yurich makes the "lads" get to know the personality and biography of Yukio Mishima. First, he tells Vitaly, a gym owner, a long story about the bright life of the Japanese hero, and only when the simple-minded listener wishes to decorate the room with a poster with his photo, he provides information about the samurai bodybuilder's homosexual orientation. Clearly being an instrument for the realization of the author's demiurgical will, it is Yur Yurich who also introduces the name Eduard Limonov into the artistic and semantic room of the short

story. Defending Elizarov from ridicule, Yur Yurich constantly repeats, “But Mishanya is an intelligent young man from a good family. He even read Limonov...” [2, p. 179]. Yur Yurich’s phrase that Elizarov read Limonov soon becomes a meme in the gym that others learn to repeat out of habit.

In the end, Mikhail shaves off his long hair so that his appearance corresponds to the new worldview; yet after that, he feels as if he changed into an enemy uniform [2, p. 188]. An episode in the open-air cafe Troyanda where the protagonist is invited to enjoy kebabs with the “lads” is the plot culmination. In the midst of a feast, a strange couple suddenly appears on a plank terrace under a tent: a young man and a girl, both pale, detached, wearing “black long-sided clothes and iron trinkets” [2, p. 192]. Slavik, seeing the exotic-looking strangers, decides to make fun of them in front of the “lads”, for which he bullies the “neformaly” emphasizing them as being similar to Elizarov at the same time, “Mishanya was just the same! Him looking like a real lad is a recent thing!...” [2, p. 192]). He insults them and then grabs the “dark” guy by the shoulder. In response, the guy pulls out a long nail from his belt then sticks it and beats it right down into the Slavik’s chest “with a whipping blow, like a forger” [2, p. 195]. Before leaving, the “dark” guy, not paying attention to either the defeated Slavik or the “lads”, takes a close look at Elizarov and seemingly “winks, as if knowingly” [2, p. 196].

This is where the doubts and hesitations of the protagonist that are associated with the painful search for his own identity actually end. Elizarov grows hair he imprudently cropped earlier and sings his old songs to his former friends. “I am grateful for that event. It brought me back to the looking glass I was so reckless to escape from” [2, p. 197].

### **Materials and Methods**

Among the critical responses to this Elizarov’s short story is an article by literary critic and writer Andrei Astvatsaturov, *The Archaic Ritual in Mikhail Elizarov’s Art (Based on We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years)*. Astvatsaturov focuses on the ritual and mythological plan of the short story, in whose coordinates the opposition of two disjointed worlds plays the key role: the world of bookworm scholar culture and that of “gang

lads” with big muscles. According to him, the plot is organized by a set of similar situations resembling liminal ritual actions. Hence, the autopsychological protagonist “is emphatically liminal; he does not have a stable status, internally wandering between two worlds, the world of the spirit he is trying to abandon and the world of “gang lads” he seeks to join” [1, p. 168].

The article focuses on the additional semantic perspective that occurs in Elizarov’s short story in connection with the figure of Eduard Limonov. At first glance, the message “he read Limonov” only illustrates Mikhail’s intelligent personality, yet Yur Yurich clearly recalls the future National Bolshevik Party leader for a reason. It seems that the accented “trace” of Limonov helps to look at Elizarov’s alter ego fluctuating between bohemia and gangsters from a slightly different angle, which form the plot and conceptual ground in *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years...*

## Results

First of all, let’s ask ourselves: What kind of Limonov’s texts could a well-read Kharkiv “lad” know and appreciate in the early 1990s? I would venture to suggest that we can talk primarily about three novels: *It’s Me, Eddie*, *The Teenager Savenko*, and *A Young Scoundrel*. The reason for this choice is simple: the scandalous novel about Eddie was then incredibly popular, and the setting of two other books (not so widely known) is in Elizarov’s native city; the image of the Kharkiv gangster world occupies a significant place in the books. All three novels are autobiographical in nature, reflecting upon the different stages of the main character’s life, that is, Eduard Limonov-Savenko. In *The Teenager Savenko*, he is 15 years old, in *A Young Scoundrel*, he is 24 years old, and in *It’s Me, Eddie*, he is about 30 years old. Even a superficial comparison of Limonov’s books with Elizarov’s short story reveals obvious features of similarity that set off fundamental differences.

Limonov’s character, like Mikhail Elizarov in *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years...*, is intensely seeking his own identity, which, according to A. Orlova’s exact observation, takes the form of oscillations “between the gang and the bohemia” [4, p. 33]. Baby Eddie (*The Teenager Savenko*) lives in Saltivka, criminalized outskirts of Kharkiv, but, for the time being, enjoys a well-deserved reputation as a real book reader and intellectual. “In his

spare time, Baby Eddie read everything that came to hand” [3, p. 139]. Eddie’s life turns a radical upheaval after he gets ruthlessly beaten by Yurka, a hefty grade repeater. Literally the day after the beating, the eleven-year-old character begins to work-out and gets closer to the gangster world: “Baby Eddie decided to leave his books, go meet the real world and become the strongest and bravest guy in reality” [3, p. 182]. However, the planned departure from books to physical strength and brutality gets complicated, and Limonov’s character finds himself hanging between two worlds: in *The Teenager Savenko*<sup>1</sup>, we can see a thief (almost a bandit!) “walking with a dangerous razor in his jacket pocket” [3, p. 305], and a novice intellectual poet at the same time.

This ambivalence, partly reminiscent of what Elizarov’s Mikhail experiences, continue in *A Young Scoundrel*, where the autopsy-psychological protagonist decides to leave the dangerous razor and bodybuilding for books and culture yet faces an unexpected challenge: for full-fledged creativity, he needs intellectual sophistication and refinement, but as he gains them, he loses muscle and courage. While adapting to the world of culture, a twenty-four-year-old Eduard, now proudly calling himself Limonov, gained “extraordinary refinement”, but “lost many kilograms of weight” [3, p. 392], and, at the same time, his former brutality: “... Along with a horse dose of culture poured into him from the books he had read, Limonov got the timidity which is handed over to every freshly baked intellectual; that never happened to the teenager Savenko, resident of Saltivka, who had never known it before” [3, p. 522]. The protagonist in *It’s Me, Eddie* is also marked by a long experience of extra-structural, liminal existence. Describing himself, Eddie emphasizes his own effeminate refinement. However, Eddie combines the aesthetic femininity with the gangster brutality memorable from his first “Kharkiv” novel. He does not part with his knife and virtually craves total violence.

It can be confidently argued that the biography of Eduard Limonov unfolded under the sign of the antinomy of “gang lads and bohemians”: remaining within the framework of this binary opposition, he first achieved fame in the literary field and then (largely due to abandoning his creative endeavors) also succeed-

<sup>1</sup> The novel subtitle is not at all an accident: *Self-Portrait of A Young Bandit*.

ed in the field of severe political struggle, becoming a violent and brutal leader of an extremist party.

Thus, in Limonov's confessional autobiographical discourse – especially in the “Kharkiv” novels, *The Teenager Savenko* and *A Young Scoundrel* – there is a collision that organizes the semantic plot structure of Elizarov's *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years*. We have “two disjointed worlds, the two fields the protagonist moves in between” [1, p. 170].

However, as already emphasized, the goals of Eduard and Mikhail, two talented Kharkiv intellectuals who join the world of gangsters and bodybuilding, are sharply different even along with external similarities. Eduard's path is conditioned by an understandable desire to win in male fights (hence the dangerous razor in his pocket) as well as please the women. All his street buddies are convinced that the muscles attract the opposite sex like a charm: “The Saltivka lads workout continuously, for several hours a day, taking their barbells and other gym gear out of the small rooms where they live with their parents, outside into fresh air, even when it snows, for the sole purpose of showing off their muscular bodies to the girls from the center later in the summer. Just like to the weak-bodied stooped university students from the center. The power of Saltivka!” [3, p. 150]. It is characteristic that the eleven-year-old protagonist marked the beginning of a new life (after being beaten by Yurka the grade repeater) with a landmark action – he committed “the first sexual offence in his life” [3, p. 182] by rushing into the women's school toilet and “pinning one of the girls to the wall.” Further, it is striking that, within the framework of Limonov's confessional autobiography discourse, any tilt towards refined bookworm culture negatively affects the character's sexual appeal.

It would seem that the Elizarov's character went to the gym for the same reason as Eduard – after he had been humiliated by beach “blokes” [2, p. 167] who took away his cigarettes and portwein and insulted by their girl friend who squeamishly compared the subtle student body with “seaweed”. But it is not true. Mikhail avoids participating in fist fights in every possible way, not to mention armed gangster showdowns; if it is not possible to avoid the situations (as in the case of Aslan the persistent Caucasus-native fighter), he follows the situation but does

not show any zeal. The Elizarov's character loses any interest in sex as his biceps and triceps get pumped up. Among the gym regulars, there are very few fans of showing off their muscles to girls. Moreover, sexual abstinence is cultivated in the gym to avoid wasting the precious protein. Slavik's stories about sex with minors in the sauna cause a negative and ironic reaction from the "lads". Mikhail himself, having turned into an irresistible Tarzan after his long workouts, walks along the summer coast of Sudak being "desirable and appealing" [2, p. 188] but does not initiate any contact with women, limiting himself only to a photo shoot with one of the girls, at the urgent request of her father.

Thus, the Limonov's teenager Savenko, despite his very young age, is very aware of what goals he wants to achieve, deciding to leave books for hand weights. Similarly, the "young scoundrel" Ed demonstrates the ability to adequately understand his own self, solving the problems he faces: big muscle and brutality brings success in sex and fights yet deprives him of the refinement necessary for creativity, and vice versa. Meanwhile, the aspirations of Elizarov's Mikhail seem extremely vague. It is not clear what other significant results, along with the mundane "stone-like muscle" build-up, the Elizarov's protagonist intends to achieve with bodybuilding, if neither girls nor fights interest him and he avoids any thorough rapprochement with the "gang lads".

It seems that the issue of the nature of these changes can be clarified by referring to another confessional autobiographical work by Elizarov devoted to the same situation – the song *Passionarity Push*, where a character compares the transformation that happened to him to a passionarity push:

Passionarity push, passionarity push,  
History caught me on a hook.  
I was an ordinary, low-value jerk,  
But here's the push – and now I'm a writer and a jock<sup>1</sup>.

Obviously, both the song and the short story contain two substantially different versions of the same event. The short story protagonist, who had a reputation of a "gentle poet", leaves his

<sup>1</sup> Elizarov, M. *Passionate Impulse*. The text is given in accordance with the transcript of audio recordings of Elizarov's songs, published on the writer's official website. Available at: <https://pesenok.ru/12/Mikhail-Elizarov/tekst-pesni-Passionarnyy-tolchok> (accessed 24 February 2025).



intellectual and creative activity for the sake of bodybuilding. Meanwhile, it is different in the song. The quoted stanza emphasizes the character's transformation from a "low-value jerk" into both a "jock" and a "writer".

### Discussion and Conclusions

In this regard, we can suggest that the short story, among other things, touches upon the issue of the character's creative genesis: perhaps, the (largely unconscious) impulse that forced Mikhail to leave his intellectual and writing activity for the sake of the gym was not so much due to his desire to please girls or win fights but due to his deep disappointment in his early works and wishing for radical personality renewal. It is possible that Elizarov's short story should be interpreted together with the song *Passionarity Push* as the story of an autopsychological character transforming into a true writer.

In this regard, it also seems logical to appeal to the figure of Mishima. Although Yur Yurich does not emphasize the connection between "Mishanya" Elizarov to Mishima, in contrast to Limonov, the readers can perceive the image of samurai bodybuilder as fitting the coordinates of the same semantic association field, marked by the issue of a protagonist actively searching for his own identity. The fact that Yur Yurich, who has read many books, recalls Mishima along with Limonov, can hardly be considered an accident. Yukio Mishima is Eduard Limonov's favorite writer. It seems that one of the important keys to understanding the paradoxical path of Elizarov's character in *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years* is Yukio Mishima's autobiographical essay, *Sun and Steel*, which is directly devoted to bodybuilding. The essay protagonist, a writer, joined the gym in his thirst for finding the authenticity of existence. He dreamed of overcoming the fatal split of soul and body, finding harmony, primarily in the creative field, and combining his spiritual and intellectual aspirations with the logic and ideology of corporeality.

Let us return to the previously expressed assumption that the insulting remark of an insignificant, low-life beach girl turned into a revolution in Mikhail's value system only because it exposed the systemic crisis caused by the long-term split of the character's soul and body extremely well. It is no coincidence that,



as a result, Mikhail sees only his “sunken, dull body” not “home to spirit and thought”. We can suggest that the protagonist goes to the gym to “master the language of the flesh” just like Mishima did, and, on this basis, gain the authenticity of existence that is necessary for a full-fledged creative activity.

It seems that the author needed Limonov and Mishima to serve as reference points for the readers in the complex semantic structure of *We Went Out For A Smoke For 17 Years*. The path of the short story protagonist being an aspiring writer acquires relative clarity only in the context of intertextual links to the autobiographical texts of the two renowned writers of the twentieth century.

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## Смыслообразующая роль интертекста в рассказе М. Елизарова «Мы вышли покурить на 17 лет...»

В статье рассматривается исповедально-автобиографический рассказ Михаила Елизарова «Мы вышли покурить на 17 лет...», действие которого происходит в начале 1990-х. Главный герой произведения, молодой студент, успешно проявивший себя на поэтическом поприще, внезапно меняет привычный книжно-университетский образ жизни на фанатичные занятия бодибилдингом и общение с «братвой». В ходе анализа обнаруживается, что важную смыслообразующую роль в рассказе играют акцентированные интертекстуальные параллели, соотносящие жизненный путь елизаровского героя с во многом аналогичными исканиями автопсихологических персонажей Юкио Мисимы и Эдуарда Лимонова. Предполагаем, что одним из важных ключей к пониманию парадоксального пути персонажа Елизарова является автобиографическое эссе Юкио Мисимы «Солнце и сталь», которое напрямую посвящено бодибилдингу. Возможно, рассказ Елизарова следует трактовать как историю трансформации автопсихологического персонажа в настоящего писателя. Путь героя рассказа как начинающего писателя приобретает относительную ясность лишь в контексте интертекстуальных связей с автобиографическими текстами двух известных писателей XX века.

**Ключевые слова:** Елизаров, Лимонов, Мисима, бодибилдинг, культура, идентичность.

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