There is not a single fictional character in Dostoevsky's opus who could be explained through his passion – a character who would love, hate and be jealous in the manner of the heroes of Balzac and Turgenev. The hero who is determined by passion is also determined by representation and it is then easy to assert about him: he is in love and he is suffering. It is assumed that such an assertion is saying something about the human condition and this assumption then becomes the ground for a poetics which is the condition of possibility of the work of fiction. In a work of this type, the author describes what happens to his heroes. However, Russian fiction boasts another tradition which has broken away from a descriptive poetics. In this tradition the hero is always self-reflexive. He is defined as hero by the fact that he describes his own life. What “happens” to this hero is always a coordination of life with the subjective perception of life, of life as process and life as object of reflexive thought. The sujet – or the events in the hero’s life – become inessential. What is of interest for both the writer and the reader is to clarify the relationship of the hero’s consciousness to the hero’s life. Consequently, the author does not reflect about what is “happening,” in order to display or ‘describe’ events, but about the relationship of consciousness to life. The author reflects about the very possibility of reflection or thought. His subject is his self-appointed right to make life into a subject. The author does not describe the hero, he is co-conscious with the hero. A dualistic and descriptive poetics – namely the poetics of consciousness and being, of author and heroes – gives way to a poetics in which “being” is defined as the relationship to being and the sujet as the hero’s relationship to the sujet. A ternary poetics ensues, the main preoccupation of which is the possibility of writing the written [Derrida’s writing – SVG] or of justifying its own
existence as a poetics. Just like metaphysics, the work of fiction thus focuses on its own form.

Lermontov is already in command of this poetics. In *The Princess Mary*, the focus of interest is not on the “immediate grief” and not on the “sincerity” of emotions. The “consuming passion,” which could have transformed the hero into a fictional character and the work of fiction into a description, is exposed as comic and affected. Grushnitsky’s only wish is to love and to “become the hero of a novel” in Romantic style. But he is not a character – or rather, he is a character who wants to but who cannot become a character. Through Grushnitsky, Lermontov does not represent a vulgar and affected man but a manner of writing. A man imagines himself through such-and-such a fantasy and this fantasy becomes the subject of the “creative imagination” of the author.

Grushnitsky has no character features which could form part of an authorial description. He is constituted wholly by the faculty of the imagination. Hence to interpret him does not mean to tell his story or find something out about him but only to understand him. Grushnitsky is not a type – such as the type of a dreamer, like [Gogol’s] Manilov. But even when Grusgnitsky tries to appear as a “type,” as a “dreamer,” he is not a type or a dreamer because his aim is not to be someone but to imagine himself as being someone. The fictional character Grushnitsky is self-reflexive in that he represents a pure relationship to life. Lermontov, his creator, is self-reflexive in the truly metaphysical sense in that he constructs the experience of a relation to a relation or the comprehension of man in his relation to being.

On the face of things, Grusgnitsky may appear subordinated to the power of the sujet in the same way as Pierre Bezukhov is determined by the plot involving his marriage. However, this is not so. Grushnitsky does not “stumble” into plots/sujets but transforms everything that happens to him into a plot/sujet. Unlike the young Rostov, Grushnitsky does not go “imagining in all sincerity” things which did not exist in reality. Grushnitsky imagines with or through the very reality of his life. That is why Lermontov’s hero, unlike Tolstoy’s hero, is not subordinated to his author. Lermontov’s hero embodies a sovereign relationship to life. To ‘portray’ him does not mean to make him the mouthpiece or embodiment of some idea the author wishes to express. Lermontov’s hero is not a means to an end conceived by the author, fulfilling those aims of the author for whose sake the hero has come into existence as a character. No, to portray him means to ‘understand’ him as a sovereign figure, created for his own sake alone. To perceive Grushnitsky as a person crushed by the passion of his own invention is to ‘do just what Grushnitsky wants: namely, to satisfy his vanity by taking him seriously as a character. To understand Grushnitsky, on the other hand, is to understand his