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# VOROSHYLOVHRAD LOST: MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN A NOVEL BY SERHIY ZHADAN

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Serhiy Zhadan is not an ordinary Ukrainian writer. He is a poet, prose stylist, interpreter, literary critic, public figure, and anarchist. He is a major literary figure and one of the most prominent authors in Ukraine. His works stand out from the general literary oeuvre in many ways. Most importantly, Zhadan writes about those whom one would normally discard as lumpen, the flotsam and jetsam of the Ukrainian urban community. In line with the postmodern tradition established in Ukrainian literature by such writers as Oles' Ul'ianenko and Ievhen Pashkovs'kyi, he writes about these unknown people not to criticize and banish them from Ukrainian society on the basis of the mainstream popular culture, but to familiarize the reader with their world and make him sympathetic toward their life and suffering. While some Ukrainian writers seem to be struggling to establish a new "classical literary tradition" (Lina Kostenko's novel *Diary of a Ukrainian Madman* (2010)—remarkable for its ostensible self-positioning as a grand narrative—would be a pertinent example in this respect), Zhadan undermines the very idea of developing a new master narrative to supplant the one that has passed away. This approach places him on the burgeoning Ukrainian postmodern literary scene, and his writing technique and insight into Ukrainian socio-political and cultural problems also place his work within the larger context of European fiction. His novels are appreciated not only in Ukraine, but also in Russia, Germany, Poland, Belarus, Serbia, and other countries.

Zhadan's popularity is not accidental. It has to do with his acute understanding of why he is writing on the margins of Ukrainian society. Postmodern criticism advances the liberating thesis of the multiplicity of meanings and narratives which may emerge in the process of interpreting a work of art.

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From this multiplicity and diversity stems its interest in those realms of our life and social phenomena which have been previously neglected and unknown to the general public. Serhiy Zhadan is a postmodern writer, and his latest novel *Voroshylovhrad*, which won the BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year prize in 2010, should be interpreted as a postmodern literary work which defies any contentious grand narrative. According to Lyotard (37), any grand narrative is inconceivable in the postmodern condition, and Zhadan explores the vagaries of this situation in his works. In my examination of the novel, Lyotard's thought about the impossibility of any grand narrative in the postmodern condition will play a pivotal role.

Yet Zhadan's novel operates by means of a productive divergence between the modern narrative structure of the text and its postmodern narrative strategy. From the vantage point of classical modernity, the novel can be read as a grand narrative of a redemptive journey by the main protagonist, which serves the purpose of familiarizing readers with Ukraine's recent past and its forgotten, neglected borderland inhabitants. As a postmodern work of art, however, *Voroshylovhrad* opens up new gaps in the interpretation of cultural memory and revisits the common understanding of the past, memory, forgetting, and the possibility of integrating Ukrainian society through the introduction of conflicting personal memories and micro-narratives. I wish to study the interplay of memory and identity as one of the leitmotifs of *Voroshylovhrad*. First and foremost, I will follow Assmann in his conception of cultural memory as well as his contention that memory has a social and neural basis. While memory is only possible within a viable community where memorial practices can be upheld, it is always individual, and its embodiment makes it impossible to relate memory to the whole society. For Assmann, memory is both individual and social (7–8), and this dichotomy is played out in *Voroshylovhrad* and serves the incompatible purposes of oppression and identity construction. Wood's thesis about the performativity of memory (2) also informs my critique and enables me to analyze the functioning and nature of memory in the novel. Memory revives the present and resurrects the past; it performs the animation of temporal wastelands in the borderland and helps the protagonist reconstruct his own self and recollect his past. Nietzsche's and Halbwachs's foundational ideas on memory (Nietzsche 38; Halbwachs 51) will help to better understand the functioning of memory and forgetting in the novel. Correlating their views on memory, this study makes it obvious that memory is both a function of the society and of the society's constitutive practice.

The research question which I will constantly bear in mind when speaking about the novel will be: "What function does memory play in a postmodern literary work?" Zhadan offers a number of possible answers to this question and advances yet further questions about memory and forgetting for the interpreter. By way of a close reading of the text, I will attempt to prove that Zhadan's work contributes to the postmodern memory discourse of European literature

and demonstrate how the formal structure of the novel, while complying with the modern conception of a literary work, is effectively counterbalanced by the postmodern cultural and social realities which impregnate the text with heterogeneity and with a radical multi-vocality of conflicting memories and discourses. The overarching thesis of the study is that *Voroshylovhrad* develops the concept of memory as a journey which has a redemptive quality and helps reconstruct identity from the modern realist perspective, and simultaneously undermines this contention by negating the possibility of a grand narrative in the postmodern condition. Besides, emptiness and lack seem to haunt the text from first page to last. Voroshylovhrad is not the city Zhadan is writing about, and this not-writing-about that which is the title of the novel has to be taken into account when the novel is studied.

The surge in violence and the mortality rate in the 1990s in Ukraine were major contributors to concomitant social disintegration; the reasons for such violence and high mortality have proven elusive to most sociologists. In her ground-breaking research on death and memory in post-Soviet countries, Merridale claims that it is essential to understand that this "history of violence did not grow from some national eccentricity, like a taste for eating chunks of salted lard, but from particular combinations of events and circumstances" (14). Studying these events and circumstances is not easy, as a plethora of symptoms and stereotypes are readily available to dismiss both Ukrainians and Russians as inherently prone to violence and sociopathic behavior. One of the first empirical analyses of the reasons behind these events was published in *The Lancet* in 2009, and its authors stated that mass privatization had been a major factor which contributed to high mortality rates in the post-Soviet countries (Stuckler et al. 406). As the blurb of the novel ironically says to a potential reader, *Voroshylovhrad* is a "tough" novel, penned in the tradition of social realism and dedicated to the history of corporate raiding (Zhadan 2). The novel touches upon the themes of violence and re-privatization, but the author does not manifestly deal with these problems in *Voroshylovhrad*. These issues are not central to what one comes to witness in the novel, and yet it does explain those "particular combinations of events and circumstances" which led to the traumatic experience and disintegration of Ukrainian society in the 1990s from a multitude of personal perspectives. In the novel, the 1990s and the Soviet past are viewed from the distance of the early 2000s. This distance is overcome through recourse to personal memories and experiences, which almost return to the protagonist his lost memory and identity, and thereby suggest the possibility of his reconstructing the social world around him.

Analyzing the text as a sequence of events, one can see that *Voroshylovhrad* appears to be a modern-age *odyssey* or a *Bildungsroman* narrative. Herman Korol'ov, a thirty-three-year-old historian who works as an "independent expert" at a shady public organization in Kharkiv, has to return to the town where he was born and spent his childhood and youth. He goes back be-

cause his brother, who worked at a petrol station on the border of the town, has disappeared. Herman returns to his hometown and finds out that the local oligarch wants to have the petrol station, but his brother did not want to sell it. Herman meets his old friends and recollects his past. As he does so, he gains resolve and the courage to fight for his property. Herman ultimately overcomes all obstacles and wins a "final battle" against the oligarch's minions. At the end, one has the impression that Herman decides to stay in his hometown for good. The classical modern narrative structure endows the novel with the lucidity of a fairy-tale. I will contend that this modern lucidity is only one of the possible interpretations. While not unconditionally debunked, the modern narrative structure is destabilized by the postmodern narrative strategy, which is deployed most effectively in the trope of memory.

Herman's homecoming journey begins with a mystical encounter with Moors on the bus going to Donbas. His dialogue with Karolina, one of the mysterious Moors, allows the reader to see the first clue. In his dialogue with Karolina, Herman says that he is coming back home for a few days because his brother has disappeared. He has to go back to Kharkiv soon. Karolina replies, "I think you are running away so fast because you have forgotten everything that happened to you. When you recollect it, it will not be so easy for you to go back" (27).[1] Karolina suggests that Herman eat some pomegranate and drink some water from her thermos flask. On drinking the water, Herman falls asleep. The pomegranate certainly alludes to the myth of Persephone (Nazarenko), and the water might be from the mythic river Lethe. After eating the pomegranate, Herman forgets his past and is taken back home on the "other side" to recollect everything anew. Eating pomegranate on the bus is a symbolic death of the protagonist, but death in this novel is viewed in a mystical and religious light. It "is not the end of life but a transition, almost rebirth" (Merridale 31), which makes it only logical that the author would choose the metaphor of death to portray the beginning of a voyage.

Memory and forgetting stay tightly intertwined throughout the novel. Forgetting is most remarkably felt in poetic description of the empty landscape of the region, of the "temporal wastelands" (Zaharchenko) which open up the abyss under the narrator's feet. The emptiness of the landscape is a very important metaphorical image in the novel which comes to denote both forgetting and the otherness of the borderland, the "other side" as it is described by the author. In the novel one frequently comes across such examples of landscape emptiness:

The courtyard was silent and empty. (4)
The parking lot was empty, and we looked suspicious there. (14)
I came closer to the petrol station. Everywhere it was dark and empty. (31)
I went to the window. It was dark and empty. (56)

1. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

The streets were empty. (61)
The alleys were light and empty. (65)
"Pakhmutova!" She was crying out to the empty fields. (104)

The emptiness of the landscape is discussed in the novel as an essential feature. It comes up when Herman thinks about his lost brother:

What made us different was this unjustified obstinacy that I could never understand. He was able to cling to this empty ground until his last breath, and I easily gave up the emptiness, trying to get rid of it. In the end, life has put everything in its rightful place. He was staying in Amsterdam and I was stuck on this mound, where it seemed to me I could see the end of the world, and it didn't appeal to me at all. (89)

Here one feels that emptiness is an inherent part of the landscape of the region which appears to be doomed and forgotten. Lacan's "lack" [*manque*] (223) would seem to be a germane term to describe one of the meanings of the emptiness in *Voroshylovhrad*. A desire for memory and its impossibility as a grand narrative becomes a grand narrative of heterogeneity in itself. The emptiness of the past in the borderland is a subjective perception of the protagonist which stems from a desire to recollect an alternative past without oppression. Hence willful forgetfulness opens up gaps in the cultural memory which can be filled with the micro-narratives of those who would otherwise be neglected. Emptiness becomes not only a metaphor for the erasure of memory, but is also the saving quality of memory, as it allows conflicting stories of pasts to escape oblivion. Furthermore, emptiness relates not only to the process of forgetting, but also to the "unsettled past" (Zaharchenko) which is lurking in the black holes of the landscape. The main characters of the novel are forgotten and lost. They have fallen out of favor. The metaphors of Heaven and Hell can be identified in the novel (e.g. Pustogarov), as the reader learns about the undead friends of Herman, the priest's fire-breathing tricks, and the pomegranate episode. The reader has an impression that even the petrol station, which Herman comes to possess and defend against the local oligarch, is an infernal and simultaneously heavenly place. Heaven and Hell come together in the novel and the border between them becomes transparent due to the emptiness which allows Herman to resurrect the dead through memory and even play soccer with them. Thus, emptiness opens the possibility of reading the novel as a mystical phantasmagoria full of inexplicable visions and revelations.

The most astonishing fact about the novel, however, is that its title does not describe a city, or a real place, as we would expect it to. Herman says that "now there is no Voroshylovhrad whatsoever" (183). The city known in Soviet Ukraine as Voroshylovhrad was renamed four times in the twentieth century; it is now called Luhans'k. The renaming of the city turns out to be a symbolic destruction of the past. What is left after such renaming is absence and loss. What is more, Herman has never been to Voroshylovhrad; there is nothing for

him to remember about the city. Here emptiness and loss are experienced as irrevocable and even desirable. It is a signifier without a signified, a city that does not exist. Voroshylovhrad belongs to the other side of the border:

> Soon there were no more woods, and wide spaces, full of fog and humidity, opened before us. Beyond them, the light and deep emptiness appeared and stretched out in the sunny gauze, unfolding right below our feet in eastern and southern directions; it was stretching out and sucking in the remainders of water and the green sunlit grass; it was dragging in the soil and lakes, heavens, and gas fields, which were shining under the earth this morning, surfacing as gold streaks on the skin of the motherland. And somewhere south, beyond the pink clouds of the sunrise, on the other side of the morning emptiness, the light and hazy gates of the heavenly Voroshylovhrad clearly showed through. (190–91)

Voroshylovhrad is understood by some critics as the city of the dead (Bushans'kyi, Pustogarov). But its relationship with the "other side" is much more complex. It is inextricably linked to Heaven and Hell, as well as to the real process of forgetting. The lack, caused by forgetting, is a trauma. It is important, but it cannot be the only thing one experiences. *Voroshylovhrad*, though, does offer a certain way out: a simplified, maybe primitive and self-delusionary, but mystical and liberating way of keeping one's identity.

In the poem inside the novel, which can be regarded as a religious hymn or jazz spiritual, the narrator says that "all that is awaiting us is emptiness and oblivion; all that is awaiting us is love and redemption" (383). Emptiness and forgetting are partially overcome during Herman's redemptive journey to the past, but structurally they remain at the core of what is happening. Emptiness is the void of the past and the unknown that is covered up with the endless enumerations and assemblages in the novel. These textual collages metaphorically stand for the work of memory.

Memory performs the vital functions of recollecting, reconstructing, and reviving the past and the identity of the novel's characters. Herman is a historian and his memory has a special, almost professional status. He could be called a "memory specialist." Thus, it appears to be an ironic gesture on the part of the author to make his main protagonist oblivious to his personal past before embarking on a homecoming journey. In this framework, the journey through space metaphorically stands for a journey through time, and the latter journey is navigated by memory.

It begins with Herman's recollection of his childhood fascination with planes and pilots. Here memory is experienced as uniquely private and tangible. The problem with the private memories which figure so prominently in the novel is that they are difficult to bring together without a social network, especially in a time of social upheaval (Merridale 126). However, *Voroshylovhrad* not only relates every private memory to the community, but also invites one to read it as a text that recollects the disadvantaged and traumatized outcasts as they struggle to gain social unity and identity. The redemptive journey of memory, which unfolds before the reader in the private recollec-

tions of the main protagonist, begins with collective longing for the lost past, contrasted with the bleak present: "All of us wanted to become pilots. Most of us have become losers" (29). It is not a grand narrative of memory that we come to appreciate and witness in the text, but the multiplicity of private memories of different protagonists, who all have something to say about their life and past experience, not only in a deprecating manner, but also with nostalgia and longing for their common loss of childhood and youth, their happy life in the past. The memories that one reads about in the novel are those of the "losers." The author wants us to recall those who would never be remembered in the official history, and he empathizes with them, attempting to reconcile their past with the present. Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" argues against a completely different way of writing history, against constructing a history of victors:

> Empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. (Benjamin 256)

Zhadan makes it clear with whom his empathy lies. The phantasmagorical procession of mystical creatures, strangely familiar to the narrator, warns us at the beginning of the text that it is the fallen that are being remembered in the novel. The procession of grotesque figures at night mesmerizes the protagonist and anticipates the intrusion of the past into the present. The losers arrive as ghosts from the past, who have to be redeemed through remembrance and empathy. Conversely, Herman and other protagonists confront as enemies the state and the oligarchy, which are the victors and rulers of modern Ukraine. Herman faces the victors as those who threaten his life in the borderland. It is most unusual that in the land of transit and transgression its inhabitants are so rooted in the land and will not let go of what they have there. They contrast starkly with "nomads" who constantly cross the border in different directions. Smugglers and migrants come to inhabit the land for a very short time and move on, but Herman and his forgotten friends are permanent residents of the border, on the margin, in close contact with the other side, which comes to symbolize the past, forgotten, lost, and fallen people, as well as the heavenly realm of Voroshylovhrad. The inhabitants of the borderland are also in close contact with the nomad people who venture through their land. As the reader finds out, Karolina is one of such nomads who regularly cross the border to lead migrants across the borderland. The symbolic losers, being forgotten by the rest of us, are rooted to this landscape with their memories. They are united with the nomad strangers, but also isolated through memory and forgetting. It is Herman's and ultimately the author's mission to remember all those people, to recollect their own identity and to make them recognizable and not forgotten in the larger social context. Herman's and other protagonists' memories are

individual only in their origin and nature, yet their function is as bonding and connection. Here we come to the dichotomy of memory and society, and their causal relations, outlined in opposite directions by Halbwachs and Nietzsche: "Halbwachs has shown that people need bonds in order to develop a memory and to be able to remember, Nietzsche has shown that people need a memory in order to be able to form bonds" (Assmann 5). Thus, Herman's encounters with the members of the community of the borderland enable him to reconstruct the present and recollect the past, while the return of his memory unites the scattered inhabitants of the forgotten land into a functional community that can stand up for their rights and will succeed in its struggle against the danger of the corporate raiding which could metaphorically stand for depriving the inhabitants of their memories of the past.

Herman starts to recollect his past thanks to the people whom he comes to know and recognize on his memorial journey. Kocha's recollections, Tamara's photo albums, Travmovanyi's memories, and Ernst's stories about the past all contribute as micro-narratives to Herman recollecting and reconstructing his identity. These memories are not officially imposed "correct" pasts of the heroic and terrible Soviet legacy, but private memories of one's childhood and youth that keep the main protagonist focused on reconstructing his own identity, recovering the lost bonds with the already disintegrated community. For Nietzsche, the official memories that help us to become socialized are traumatic and oppressive. However, Zhadan employs the postmodern technique of micro-narratives and assemblages which allow for multiplicity and diversity to liberate memory from its oppressive nature. The past is reconstructed in a distinct manner in the novel. It consists of private, sometimes mutually exclusive and incoherent, memories that become a constellation where they complement and contradict each other at the same time, as in the case of Herman and Kocha remembering very different events on the same date in the past. The text masterfully deconstructs the possibility of common memory, and yet its protagonist longs for recollecting the past which would bond him with the inhabitants of the borderland.

Herman's memories are only possible due to his interaction with his friends, and his recollections make our familiarization with Ukraine's traumatic past a revealing experience, rather than a shocking encounter. Zhadan does not erect a somber monument to the past, but reinterprets it to make it understandable and open to multiple interpretations. There is not one correct view or realistic vision of the past which could be shared by all. And yet the past provides opportunities for unity, solidarity, and social cohesion. In agreement with Halbwachs's contention about the social nature of memory (51), Zhadan implies that memories stem from living as a community, and this common living is what we have to recollect and enact in our everyday life. Ukrainians have to understand that there is no great difference among them as a people who are on the margin, living in the borderland. Memory is al-

ways connective for Herman. In resonance with Nietzsche's argument, the text elucidates how memory unites people and enables social bonds which are made stronger via collective memories. In his dialogue with his accountant Olha, Herman makes a distinction between old and new friends which is based on how much they remember:

"Have you got a lot of friends?"
"Yes. Childhood friends."
"How do they differ from ordinary friends?"
"They remember a lot." (Zhadan 95)

Memory appears to serve a disjunctive purpose in the novel when it comes to the classical modern grand narrative of the story. In this narrative the reader follows a classical conflict between "us" and "them," between good and evil, when Herman is trying to keep his petrol station, despite being attacked by Pastushok's minions. One of these minions is Nikolaich, a computer programmer, who obediently serves Pastushok and puts pressure on Herman to sell the petrol station. In the final and seemingly decisive conflict between "us" and "them," Nikolaich's and Ernst's streams of consciousness are juxtaposed. These streams of consciousness have two important and crucially distinctive features. First, while they begin as thoughts about the present, their unfolding reverses them to the past, and we come to observe how two individuals recollect their pasts. Secondly, these streams of memories, as I will call them, are simultaneous. The simultaneity of unfolding has to be narrated in the spatial boundaries of the book, and hence these streams are broken down into paragraphs and represented as a dialogue of memories between two rival protagonists. While the majority of recollections in the novel actually perform the function of conjunction and bonding, the memories of Nikolaich and Ernst appear to be deeply disjunctive, and collate two seemingly incompatible mentalities. Nikolaich recollects his shame and humiliation in social interaction caused by his selfishness and lack of sociability. Ernst, on the other hand, remembers growing up and his social integration. Nikolaich is viewed in a negative light, whereas Ernst is portrayed as one of "us." The author uses a postmodern technique of interspersing micro-narratives to imply the possibility of a classical modern confrontation of good and evil. But at the end of the dialogue of memories, which stretches across fourteen pages (394–407), Zhadan suddenly collapses the difference between "us" and "them," "because only common living and death can bond us together" (407). The dialogue of memories which appears to divide and delineate two mentalities is refuted at the end. *Voroshylovhrad* escapes giving prescriptive rules for identity reconstruction and constructing a grand narrative of remembrance, and hence memory as a means of making our past familiar is ultimately split up by multiplicity and controversy.

Memory in *Voroshylovhrad* has an active performative function, transmo-

grifying the present by recollecting the past. Here Wood's thesis about the performativity of memory finds its application and informs the reader about the constructive function of memory. In this regard, it is spatial and autobiographical memories that are given particular status in the novel. Space is always marked by the past in *Voroshylovhrad*. The petrol station, airport, cemetery, and even macro-landscape of steppe and corn fields act as points of entry into the world of the past. In this vision of space and interest in the steppe and nature, *Voroshylovhrad* is different from Zhadan's earlier novels, where urban environments dominate the narrative landscape. In this text, we can discern allusion to the Kharkiv Romantic School, whose representatives in the 1820s–30s also viewed the steppe and its mounds as sites imbued with historical context. However, urban space is also palpable in *Voroshylovhrad*. Spatial memory brings about recollections of the city; buildings and places become not just derelict ephemeral constructions, but revive one's personal past experiences that animate the space and close that absence, which is, after all, behind them. The novel provides a modern-age answer to the question of the function of memory, but as soon as this answer is becoming clear and unequivocal, Zhadan allows a postmodern question on the validity of our assumptions about the performativity of memory and the stability of identity to creep into the text. Most vividly it can be observed in the final pages of the novel, when Herman, going back to his petrol station after visiting Olha in hospital, appears to have once again "recollected everything":

> The air finally cooled down, the clouds were stretching across the sky. The city was silent and empty. The moonlight pulled heavy branches of fruit trees and cold dewy road signs out of the darkness. I was walking, recollecting what stands behind the buildings I was passing by. I walked past the hospital where my brother had stayed when he had appendicitis. I recollected how we, being younger, had sneaked up to see him, climbing over the brick wall. I walked past the white block of the prison, where my brother and I had gone to talk to the guards. My brother had some business there, and I was just hanging around. I passed by the monastery. It used to be a military base and our dad had served there. My school was behind the monastery [...] Farther ahead were silent courtyards, grassed and glued with cobwebs, dark passages where the asphalt had been diligently broken up. Then the highway went out of town, and walking along it I seemed to be once again leaving these streets and buildings for good, forsaking my friends, relatives, and the beloved ones in the city. An amazing combination of loss and anxiety seized me for a moment and immediately let go, and the sweet sense of rhythm indicated that the highway was starting and that you could drive along it for an indefinitely long time in any direction. [...] Nothing has changed since I was last here. (435–36)

Memories have finally revealed the home landscape in its totality to the narrator. The redemptive journey through time and space appears to have come to an end with these final recollections which bring back memories from childhood and place Herman in this cold, ahistorical landscape, where "nothing has changed." He has recollected his past and reconstructed his identity to a certain point. This reconstruction being a radical alienation from both past and present, Herman is confronted with a dilemma which leaves the

text without closure. Herman has recalled everything, and now he can either once again forsake his past forever and walk the highway of life in any direction away from the city of his past, or immerse himself in the past and experience the illusion that "nothing has changed," induced by the performativity of memory, whose active powers are virtually unlimited in the novel with its ability to revive the past. We are left to wonder which of the ways he is about to follow, and both of them appear to be intertwined with forgetting or being forgotten. This last excerpt returns us to the initial role of space as a metaphor of time, and memory and the function of cultural memory in *Voroshylovhrad*.

In the novel, spatial memory activates autobiographical memory, and space is used to understand memory and time. By visiting "sites of memory"—to use Nora's term (Wood 1–37)—Herman revives them and revitalizes his past. Zhadan helps the reader see how the sites of memory serve the purpose of recollecting the past. All the seemingly meaningless assemblages and collages in the novel serve a constructive mnemonic purpose; like Lacan's collections of matchboxes, they stand for something else than just multiple items. They do not overtly represent the Real, as Lacan (113–14) would possibly argue, but rather hide it and present diversity and difference, which is the reality captured by memory in its multiplicity. These collages are radically different from the monuments of Voroshylovhrad. Those Soviet monuments come to stand for the oppressive cultural memory of the past. It is this memory that Zhadan attempts to forsake. Herman's hatred of Soviet monuments, which he had to describe in German at school, is contrasted with the narrator's fascination with enumerating different objects that have historical background, but not a single one of them attains priority over the others. These assemblages and diverse collages cover up the lack which is felt as one forsakes the horrible and haunting, yet simultaneously comforting and familiar, Soviet past with its lies and fabrications. These assemblages appear innocuous and diverse, familiarizing the characters with their personal memories of the past, although, on careful consideration, we can see that the absence behind them is still lurking and threatens to reveal itself:

> The wall above the sofa was covered with photographs, clippings, and colorful pictures. Like a maniac, Kocha obsessively pasted fragments of faces, body contours, and shredded crowds there, from which individual eyes and lips popped up; these were jolly collages, as if he had been pasting one excerpt next to another from different stories, clippings from random publications, and simply paper, made of paper. In the midst of it, one could make out alcohol labels and political leaflets, photos from fashion journals, black-and-white porn cards, football calendar cards, and somebody's driver's license. From a distance, it all created a chimerical pattern, as if somebody had mockingly vandalized photo wallpaper. In close-up, a multitude of details caught one's eye: the faded paper of newspaper clippings, the cut out eyes of models, freshly spilled glue, and deep purple drops of strawberry jam that looked like hardened nail polish. And all this was united by a common background: clay-colored and bright-green filling, densely covered with minute letters and signs, broken lines, and color fluctuations. I contemplated it for a long time but could not understand what the matter was. Finally, I pried off Kocha's "demobee" portrait photo [*dembel'skyi portret*] and, pulling it toward me, tore it off. A large letter "U" was be-

hind the photo. It was a map, most probably of the Soviet Union and most probably a geographical map: clay loam was the Carpathians, Caucasus, and Mongolia; bright-green was the taiga and the Caspian Plain. Deserts had to be where the clay loam hardened and acquired a chalky dryness. The Pacific was dark-blue, and the Arctic was glimmering blue. In place of the North Pole, there hung a naked woman with her head cut off. A circle of young ethnographers; I fell asleep into silence. (42–43)

By forgetting his past, Herman is free to recollect it as a "jolly collage" without the traumatic dominant narrative. This lack and absence suddenly opens the possibility of constructing something new and free, but dissociation from the past leaves the collage with a missing piece. There is constant tension in the novel between the oppressive nature of cultural memory and its potential to provide a sense of belonging. Assmann's term "cultural memory" and his contemplation of its ambivalence greatly contribute to one's understanding of the novel. Cultural memory is a collective memory that allows individuals to belong (Assmann 7–8), and it includes the sites of memory and memorial objects. In the novel, the sites of memory and memorial objects construct the "environment of memory" (*milieu de mémoire*) which is typical of ahistorical pre-modern societies (Wood 18). History and time are both metaphorically elaborated and ontologically questioned in *Voroshylovhrad*. Emptiness once again returns to the novel at the very end. All the performative memories and moral invocations suddenly crumble and appear to be a *deus ex machina*, just like the priest's magic trick with a Zippo lighter.

The lost brother and mysticism in *Voroshylovhrad* are two important themes which deserve to be studied in more detail. Both have to do with the narrator's discussion of solidarity and identity. Herman's brother disappears; he is lost, and although Herman knows his phone number, he cannot reach him. One presumes that Herman's brother has died and gone to Heaven, not just Amsterdam. Amsterdam is regarded as a *paradise* for cannabis lovers (Trofymenko) and marginalized people, and one can be absolutely sure that Zhadan is deliberate in his choice of the city which Herman's brother migrated to. All of Herman's friends acknowledge how brave and morally upright his brother was. The brother was certainly the one who could have taken care of all the troubles which Herman and his friends are facing now because of corporate raiders. However, Zhadan does not imply that Herman and the inhabitants of the borderland are inept and unable to deal with the problems in their lives. To Zhadan, they need no excuses, and that is why they deserve commemoration and redemption.

Herman embarks on a journey to the borderland between Heaven and Hell to redeem the dead and find the right way to the future for the living. He is in the land of the fallen, forgotten people, and his brother has ascended to Heaven... or descended into Hell. This duality and controversy of absence and loss stays there and finally undermines the modern narrative from the postmodern perspective. The lost brother and lost Voroshylovhrad are two radical

absences which cannot be fully forgotten or recollected. Heaven or Hell, forgetting or remembering, historical development or ahistorical memorial culture—it is impossible to make a final choice within the tenets of the postmodern condition. Longing to belong, we are still required to forget our past because its oppressive nature will not go away. The only possible solution is to recollect that which belongs to a certain group of individuals and change the perception of our traumatic cultural past. Hence, there are mystical elements in the novel. Mysticism and organized dissent through heretical extemporaneous poetic religion allow Herman to acquire a new sense of belonging and to see the possibilities of unification and solidarity based on common but private memory.

In search of a new and liberating idea that would unite and redeem the protagonists of the novel, and place them within their lost land, Zhadan turns to the dissident religion of sects who can be regarded as the mystics of de Certeau. De Certeau spoke of the mystics as those who

> introduce into our present-day world the language of a "nostalgia" in relation to that other country. There they create and maintain a place for something like the Brazilian *saudade*, a homesickness—if it is true that this other country also remains our own, but we are separated from it. (De Certeau 2)

"Shtundy," a religious sect which befriends Herman, long for the lost land of "heavenly Jerusalem," and their ideas of solidarity and unity find an important place in the narrative of the novel. When they are mourning the deceased mother, their religious hymn is reminiscent of the Soviet anthem (Zhadan 207–8). The text is ironically undoing the official cultural memory of the Soviet past and symbolically burying the USSR. The ritual of mourning, instead of producing the feeling of melancholy, appears to refute any possible nostalgia. The religious sect itself is subtly ridiculed at the end of the novel, when the preaching of the priest turns out to be based on a magic trick with a Zippo lighter. The priest tells the "farmers" a story about Daniel in the lions' den (440–41), and says that the lions did not harm Daniel, because he could breathe fire. In the obviously cinematic final gesture of the novel, the priest breathes fire to impress the gullible audience with the mysterious power of his preaching about togetherness and solidarity. The grand narrative is revealed to the reader as a hoax which is both necessary and artificial.

The mystical motifs of the novel have been discussed by Kratochvil (223), who argues that the poetic mythologizing in *Voroshylovhrad* has nothing to do with realism. There are elements of mystical realism in the novel, but mysticism is not free from postmodern questions and skepticism. There is no return to the lost country, but it is also true that for many of the characters in the novel, there is no escape from the realm of the past, because they are excluded from the center, discarded by the dominant culture. Despite the author's irony, the feelings of loss and nostalgia can be discerned in the novel,

and mysticism is not unconditionally cast away, but acquires the controversial status of conscious self-delusion. After all, Kratochvil's (224) argument about the soccer match in the novel can be partially accepted as a legitimate characterization of the whole project of resurrection of the past in the protagonist's imagination. As a result of this memorial practice, the past becomes not only a destination to be reached, but a parallel dimension which is always there for Herman.

On the classical modern plane, the whole book is a journey in time and space during which the hero recollects his past and reconstructs his identity. He becomes placed within the life stories of other people as well as within his hometown, and understands his bonds with the community. He is a historian not only by training but also by his mission in the novel. However ironic Herman's forgetting his past is, it allows the narrator to newly reconstruct his past and familiarize himself with it through micro-narratives of other people without the traumatic experience of recollecting it all as a grand narrative of recession and decline. At the same time, the postmodern technique of presenting memory through the micro-narratives destroys the illusion of the possibility of a new comforting grand narrative. Diversity and multiplicity of assemblages lure Herman into being lost in his redemptive journey. Thus, the novel leverages modern narrative structure for postmodern ends, and the past becomes a parallel dimension of reality in the text.

Voroshylovhrad is Herman's past, which he does not want to remember at first. He feels that it is meaningless and empty. But this very emptiness is induced by forgetting. And to fill the emptiness and loss one has to recollect the past from those seemingly arbitrary assemblages. There is constant tension between memory and forgetting. It is a forgotten place Herman comes to; his task is to recall it, to remember those people, to recollect, and recover his own identity.

The novel is nostalgic about personal childhood, youth, and the past, but not about the oppressive cultural memory of the USSR. "Sovok" is what the text criticizes in its every manifestation, and implies that this post-Soviet traumatic past has not left Ukrainians and is still haunting them. Zhadan attempts to help Ukrainians come to terms with their past and let bygones be bygones, and makes them aware of the fact that without individual and collective memory of the past, all that is left is emptiness and oblivion. Nonetheless, Zhadan realizes his limitations, which arise from the impossibility of any grand narrative, either oppressive or emancipating, in the postmodern condition.

My critical examination of the novel has focused on forgetting, memory, and identity. Cultural memory is what one sees from a certain distance. The novel itself is an artifact of cultural memory. It remembers people who are mostly forgotten and neglected in Ukrainian literature. Cultural memory is ambivalent, and Zhadan stresses this ambivalence in the novel. Being oppressive as a dominant grand narrative, cultural memory is still necessary for

bonding us together in a viable society. The novel is recovering a voice for those who live in the borderland and would otherwise be forever left unnoticed. Memory makes society functional, and society makes memory and identity possible. Connective and collective memory is what almost every recollection in the novel is. Ultimately, every recollection is always of individual nature and is fleshed out as a micro-narrative in the novel.

*Voroshylovhrad* can be read as a story about shared living experience in the land of the fallen, of those who are sometimes left with nothing but memories. The inhabitants of the land on the border with emptiness have forgotten their shared life experiences and have been scattered. The text implies that if they recollect their identity, they can rise up again and defend what they are left with. Unfortunately, all these people inhabit the borderland, and they are in the land of the fallen. This fall will always mar their existence. The black holes of the landscape which halt space and time can be closed only by memories of the past: those collages that hide the bigger picture. And it is exactly those collages and assemblages which we have to keep to. There is no sense of historical development in this land—all that comes and goes bonds its inhabitants together. They are forever lost in the nirvana of total presence, but this presence is in the past. The tension between memory and forgetting is absolutely irreducible in *Voroshylovhrad*. The radical emptiness is part of the "geopoetics" of the novel, and the memories one comes to observe are there to fill that gaping black hole of the "other side." Filling this emptiness of forgetfulness with memories as re-collections and assemblages is portrayed as the redemptive journey of the main character. Despite the noble cause of redemption, Zhadan's final gesture is one of irony, implying that no natural and ultimate solution is possible. The magic trick of bonding memory and moral invocation, like the priest's trick with a lighter, is deceitful, and we may have to give in to self-delusion in order to achieve solidarity and an integrated society.

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Резюме

Павло Шопін

Втрачений Ворошиловград: пам'ять та ідентичність у романі Сергія Жадана

У статті мова йде про пам'ять та ідентичність у романі Сергія Жадана «Ворошиловград». Автор статті стверджує, що в романі закладено протиставлення сучасної композиції та постмодерністської наративної стратегії. З класичної точки зору сучасної літератури роман може бути інтерпретований як великий наратив спокутної подорожі головного персонажа, який служить меті ознайомлення читача з недавнім минулим України, а також з її забутими та маргіналізованими мешканцями на кордоні простору і часу. Як твір постмодерністського мистецтва «Ворошиловград» розкриває лакуни в інтерпретації культурної пам'яті та критично переосмислює загальноприйняте розуміння минулого, пам'яті та можливості інтеграції українського суспільства. Незважаючи на те, що сучасна композиція не спростовується в романі, постмодерністська наративна стратегія, найбільш ефектно передана через тропи пам'яті та ідентичності, порушує структурну цілісність твору.