

From Old World Syndrome to History: Understanding the Past in Askold Melnyczuk's *Ambassador of the Dead*

Olha Poliukhovych

National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Department of Literature

Heather Fielding

Purdue University Northwest, Department of English

Abstract

Askold Melnyczuk's novel *Ambassador of the Dead* (2001) narrates the process through which a second-generation, assimilated American learns to comprehend the Ukrainian historical experience of his family and their generation. This article argues that the novel is centrally concerned with Nick's learning process: as he begins to better understand his parents' generation, he transforms his own identity. As a child, Nick is unable to see Ada—his friend's mother, who is haunted by traumatic experiences—as anything other than an unchanging, incomprehensible enigma: "Old World Syndrome." Eventually, Nick comes to follow the example of Anton, a displaced Ukrainian who narrates a story-within-the-novel that returns Ada's experiences to their historical and cultural contexts, while using magical realism to place her Ukrainian experience on a historical scale. Through Anton's example, Nick learns how to see both Ada and his parents as complex historical actors in world history. Understanding the past then enables him to see himself as Ukrainian and claim an identity that is both Ukrainian and American.

Key Words: Ukrainian-American novel, Askold Melnyczuk, Ukraine, displacement, postmemory, identity, World War II.



Introduction

Askold Melnyczuk (b. 1954), a second-generation Ukrainian-American, was the first American novelist of Ukrainian origin to fully break into mainstream US literary culture, while writing about Ukraine and Ukrainian immigrants. A native of New Jersey, he is now based in Boston, where he is a professor of creative writing at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. As an academic, as the founding editor of the important literary journal *Agni*, and as a novelist and translator, Melnyczuk has been a particularly significant force in making Ukrainian immigrant culture part of the literary landscape of the US. He is the author of four novels, which have been translated into German, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. His work has attracted significant attention: in one milestone among others, his first novel, *What Is Told*, was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of 1994.

Tetyana Ostapchuk suggests that Melnyczuk's break into the mainstream "showed a way for young Ukrainian American writers and poets on how to find the balance between their present and past."¹ Indeed, Melnyczuk's breakout novel, *What Is Told*, was widely praised for the way it integrates the story of the Ukrainian past with the American present of its immigrant characters. The novel begins in Ukraine, and follows the events leading up to the displacement of the Zabobon family, situating their experience concretely in not only historical but also cultural context, through folklore and magical realism. It then traces subsequent generations in the US, as they reflect on the past and reform their identities in a new national context. In order to narrate this reshaping of identity, Melnyczuk uses what Nicholas Sloboda describes as "a unique perspective, at once individual and socio-historic."² Thus, he alternates between personal and national-historical narratives, balancing one against the others and using them to contextualize each other. The resulting narrative continually "points to the integral relation between national consciousness and individual conscience."³ His characters' American lives are firmly situated in relation to Ukrainian culture and history. For Oksana Zabuzhko, this attention to Ukrainian history was ultimately what made Melnyczuk's first novel significant for American literature and readers.⁴

Melnyczuk's second novel, *Ambassador of the Dead* (2001), is quite different, due largely to its point of view, which seems, as Jeffrey Eugenides put it in a critical *New York Times* review, to be "fully assimilated."⁵ The novel is narrated by Nick Blud, the child of successfully-assimilated immigrants, who moves away from their Ukrainian diaspora neighborhood while Nick is a child. As he narrates the story of his own growth and development, Nick also tells the story of his much less assimilated neighbors, the Kruk family, including Ada, a traumatized first-generation immigrant, and her sons, both of whom die by the story's end. For most of the novel, Nick, as the narrator, does not perform the work of negotiation that preoccupies *What Is Told*: Ukraine remains an opaque enigma to him, and he cannot situate the story of his own family or Ada's in historical or cultural context. Melnyczuk's choice to filter Ada's story through Nick's assimilated point of view disappoints Eugenides: "throughout the novel, Melnyczuk struggles with the consequences of his decision."⁶ Seen through the lens of Nick, a successful American, Ada—and with her, Ukraine and its historical and cultural contexts—cannot be understood.

1 Tetyana Ostapchuk, "Constructing Memory and Disseminating Identity in Ukrainian American Narrative," *East/West* 13–14 (2009): 226.

2 Nicholas Sloboda, "Individual and Cultural Presence in Askold Melnyczuk's *What Is Told*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 41 (1997): 459.

3 Sloboda, "Individual and Cultural Presence," 460.

4 See more in Oksana Zabuzhko, "'Shcho skazano,' abo yak ukrainska literatura 'vykhodyt v liudy' [*What Is Told*, or How Ukrainian Literature Becomes 'Public']," in *Khroniky vid Fortinbrasa* by Oksana Zabuzhko (Kyiv: Fakt, 1999), 255–69.

5 Jefferey Eugenides, "New World Disorder," review of *Ambassador of the Dead*, by Askold Melnyczuk, *New York Times*, June 10, 2001.

6 Eugenides, "New World Disorder."

In Eugenides' reading, Melnyczuk seems to acknowledge the problem with Nick's narration when the novel introduces another version of Ada's story: several chapters of the second half of the novel are comprised of "The Ambassador of the Dead," a magazine story written by Anton, a poet and Ada's love interest from the Displaced Person's camp before she migrated to the US. Anton's story is what the whole novel should have been, in Eugenides' view: "Writing as Anton, Melnyczuk revisits the landscape of his first novel. . . and reclaims his authorial powers."⁷ Anton's style of narration is significantly different from Nick's: he embeds Ada's story in the context of Ukrainian history and culture, what Nick cannot do throughout most of the novel.

But what Eugenides diagnoses as a stylistic failure might be understood instead as the novel's most ambitious project: to trace how a second-generation subject like Nick can learn to understand the historical and cultural context of Ukraine and his own family's place in it.⁸ This article will argue that the novel is the story of how Nick learns to restore his own Ukrainian heritage as something historically comprehensible. Nick's point of view is not as unproblematically assimilated as it seems: throughout much of the novel, he is unable to understand Ada and her generation, and when his parents die, this lack of understanding foments a crisis in his American identity. The generation before him were not able to communicate the story of their lives in Ukraine to their children: Ada obsessively repeats the same story, but cannot construct a meaningful narrative. Nick's parents avoided telling him almost anything about Ukraine, which may have aided his assimilation but leaves him feeling incomplete.

With no information from his parents, Nick instead fixates on Ada. He is haunted by and even obsessed with her, but he does not understand her. Instead he sees her as an unchanging symbol of the past, of what the novel calls "Old World Syndrome," rather than as a real figure in history. Ada's sons, Paul and Alex, experience a more self-destructive version of Nick's uncomprehending obsession. While Nick's parents avoid the old world, Ada, by contrast, communicates so much pain to her sons that they experience what Marianne Hirsch has called "postmemory": they feel as though they were there, and experience some of the trauma that shaped Ada and her generation. Ada's sons, coping with this postmemorial trauma, want to escape the past, and they do so in ways that destroy them both.

7 Eugenides, "New World Disorder."

8 With this concern, the novel broaches a problem that has become increasingly important in second and later generation Ukrainian-American fiction: how the assimilated western diaspora subject can confront and narrate the historical traumas of Ukraine. These writers (and their characters) are further away from their family's origin stories, and from the experiences that led to their immigration. They are also writing in a North American literary tradition that has historically privileged narratives of assimilation. In Melnyczuk's novel, the question takes this form: how can Nick redeem Ada by understanding her, rather than just imagining her as an incomprehensible symbol of a dark past? For an analysis of how this tension motivates another contemporary second-generation novel, see Peter Babiak, "Toronto, Capital of Ukraine: The Ends of Desire and the Beginning of History in Janice Kulyk Keefer's *The Green Library*," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 29.1–2 (2003): 97–130.

The Kruk children die, and their family legacy does not continue through Nick's generation. So Nick feels the responsibility to redeem those who do not survive—thus, in the novel's frame, he returns to his childhood home to begin retrospectively narrating the Ukrainian-American community of his childhood. But for much of the novel, his ability to tell the full story is stymied by his lack of comprehension.

Anton's story-within-the-story is significant because it signals a way for the second generation to comprehend the first generation, and a path for Nick to incorporate his Ukrainian heritage into his American identity. By situating Ada's story in historical context, he reveals her to be a complex and concrete figure in history. This is not a simple process, and requires his poetic imagination: he uses techniques of magical realism to render the reality of Ukraine under the historical condition of statelessness. Both his strategy of historicizing and his use of magical realism function to give Ada's story relevance: to make her an actor on the stage of world history and culture, not just a victim of trauma in an isolated, unreal fantasy space within Nick's imagination. The resulting nuanced, contextualized narrative makes Ada feel understood, and makes her story comprehensible to Nick.

When Nick's parents die, he realizes the need for a more profound understanding of their experience. He goes abroad, and his learning process accelerates when he meets Ukrainians in Europe. Though he does not go to Ukraine, when he meets Ukrainians abroad, he begins to figure how to deal with the uncertain legacy of his own family's traumatic past. He learns how to restore historical reality and uniqueness, but also to envision Ukraine as an integrated part of the world and its history, not some remote, irrelevant site.

Eugenides criticizes Melnyczuk's novel for narrating the story of Ada and her generation through Nick's assimilated point of view. But Nick's perspective grows and changes across the novel, as he learns how to integrate the past into the present and to comprehend the first generation's experience of the loss of their homeland and their subsequent displacement. Thus the choice of Nick's point of view is crucial for the novel's project: to show how the second-generation, assimilated subject comes to apprehend the generation before him, and to see his Ukrainian identity as part of his successful American life.

Syndromes of the Old World Through the American Bildungsroman of the Second Generation

The story of the Ukrainian heroine, Adriana Kruk, who did not manage to adjust to her new homeland, is portrayed from the standpoint of privileged narrators: Nick (the whole novel) and Anton (the short story "The Ambassador of the Dead"). Ada's story includes tragic historical events of Ukrainian history of the 1930s-1940s, and her narrators approach it from different standpoints. While Anton, as a witness to those events, describes her story before the emigration from a historical perspective, Nick approaches it from the prospect of the past of his parents, who he desperately tries

to understand after their death. Nick starts his narration from the description of his childhood and adolescence in an ethnic community in New Jersey. His Bildungsroman, in fact, unfolds through the description of the lifestyle of the whole community and in particular through the narrative of another family, the Kruks, who do not manage to survive in their new homeland. After the death of his parents, Nick is aware of his duty and responsibility to know their past stories, i. e. who they were in the old country. Thus Nick's Bildungsroman is dictated by the duty of memory to comprehend the stories of his parents—this shapes the whole narrative of Melnyczuk's *Ambassador of the Dead*.

The clue to the past and the answer to the question of who his parents were resides in his childhood. Indeed, a great part of *Ambassador of the Dead* is devoted to Nick's childhood and adolescence. The history of his development includes the incomprehensibility of his parents and their peers—Ukrainian refugees from the postwar DP camps who migrated to America. The old world, the old country, OWS (old world syndrome)—all these designations of the parents' homeland were a solemn source of children's irritation and frustration: "For us the old country was alternately Atlantis, Oz, or Devil's Island, looming so large in our parents' minds that it felt like an iron curtain between us."⁹ Nick's Bildungsroman stresses the generation gap: children do not comprehend the world of their parents. On the other hand, this quotation is unsettling in the novel as Nick's parents, Peter and Slava, loved him and spoke to him in English, but they did not tell him about their traumatic past and lost homeland. The explanation of the generation gap in the novel is that Nick is narrating in plural voices about his peer group and tries to be objective, introducing different experiences, because he feels that his life is not entirely representative for his ethnic group.

The trope of misunderstanding between the generations is reinforced, first of all, by a cultural marker. Nick attended Saturday school, listened to masses in Church Slavonic, learned Ukrainian prayers, was friends with Alex, Ada's son—these were features of his ethnic belonging and overall happy childhood and adolescent years. As a child Nick was forced to recite Taras Shevchenko's poems, the content of which he did not comprehend, in Ukrainian in front of a large audience of émigrés. Reciting incomprehensible poems does not give a clue to the parents' experience, but it provokes powerful emotional feedback from the elders. This episode comes from an autobiographical experience he describes in his essay "God Hunger: The Politics of Nonidentity":

At the age of six, I stood in front of people I'd otherwise see only Sundays in church and recited the poet's seven page *Testament*. I understood nothing of what I was saying, but I couldn't miss the effect my mouthing the poet's words had on the crowd. Surely something of a puzzle. How could manufactured emotions sway people so powerfully?¹⁰

9 Askold Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead* (Washington, D. C.: Counterpoint Press, 2001), 16.

10 Askold Melnyczuk, "God Hunger: The Politics of Nonidentity," *Kenyon Review*, March/April 2019, accessed April 8, 2019, <https://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2019-marapr/>

During the historical defeats of Ukrainian history, the poet was a person who supported people's aspirations and hope, inspiring them not to give up through his emotional influence. This remains in emigration and is even strengthened by the fact of displacement. Even though the second-generation children did not know their parents' stories and their pasts, they could observe these bare emotions. Poetry and art become the source of a powerful emotional connection to a lost homeland.

Nick was attracted to the Kruk family because their turbulent life in America was the opposite of his own happy childhood. Alex had a completely different story, driven by *malus invisibilus*. One of the most compelling episodes occurred when a teacher mispronounced Alex's name Crook instead of Kruk (raven in Ukrainian) in front of the whole class. He actually felt himself the deceiver: when the teacher asked him to show the homeland of his parents on the map, Alex could not find it, because there was not an independent Ukraine at the time and it "seemed nothing like the one he'd studied at home." "That's in Russia now," prompted the teacher.¹¹ In the eyes of his classmates he became a person with no name and with no country. Although they both were of the same background and status, this experience did not happen to Nick—but nonetheless the episode became meaningful for his Bildungsroman. As a successful American adult, Nick reflected on this incident much later when Alex died: "I like to imagine Alex in seventh grade again looking at the new map of the world, and I overhear his teacher, tutored in sensitivity training, straining to pronounce his name."¹² "The new map of the world" specifies the experience of the whole community and their expectation of an independent Ukraine. In this episode, Nick narrates from the standpoint of future political prospects—but Alex, who belongs to the past, merely feels out of place.

Ada also could not tell her own story, as she embodies historical traumas which she did not manage to understand or overcome. Although Ada "was a popular raconteur" among her peers, she is not a principal narrator of *Ambassador of the Dead*.¹³ Adriana's identity was shaped by traumatic historical events experienced by her family. Her father was killed by a German soldier in the street, and she witnessed this, trying to help him. Her mother died in a week after, leaving 15-year old Ada to care for her 8 brothers and sisters, according to Anton's version of her story. Before that, at the beginning of war, she was raped by a soldier when her parents sent her to an aunt's house in the countryside, which was supposed to be a safer place. Ada had never told this story to anyone, but after that she could not control her dreams and heard voices from the past, hardly differentiating between dream and real life. Ada lives in the past and repeats plots of her life in America. The most striking evidence of this is that when she was 40, she had a sexual affair with Nick, a friend of her son Alex and narrator of the novel. At that time Nick was 15 years or slightly younger—exactly her own age when she was raped by a soldier during wartime.

selections/askold-melnyczuk-656342/.

11 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 46.

12 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 259.

13 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 14.

As a consequence of these devastating events, Ada lost her connections to the real world and the ability to communicate. Her favorite story, which she told many times, is about a paratrooper and prostitute, who both jumped out of an airplane: he died as his parachute did not open and she landed successfully, only breaking her leg. This is the only linear story she tells in the novel. Its narrative can be comprehended in terms of existentialism and contingency, and it demonstrates the absurdity of life (including her own) during wartime. Apart from this repeated story, Ada possesses images from the past, which she develops in her mind, talking to her dead family and thus becoming an ambassador of the dead. Her stories from the past cannot fit into her present in the US, thus turning her image into a symbol of the traumatic history of Ukraine.

Without the ability to tell her story, Ada instead attaches herself to some pictures she collects depicting religious scenes. She discloses these pictures of God to Nick. While Nick is concentrated on the pictures of God and their meaning, Alex rejects them, and tries to shift Nick's attention by showing him a copy of *Playboy* magazine. Here the novel provides a classic Bildungsroman scene—Alex and Nick masturbating together looking at the *Playboy*. Thus this typical scene of boys growing up substitutes for a chance to understand Ada.

Nick was dissatisfied by the album Alex showed him, and felt cheated: the album did not include anything resembling the pictures of the God Ada once described to him at the Black Pond resort. However, he finds another explanation:

He [Alex] didn't know where the real album was, so he had brought out this poor thing instead. Or maybe he did, but he didn't want me in on the secret. No, it pleased me more to imagine that he was not in on it—that Ada kept the album hidden from him. One day she would show me. Because I felt a curious intimacy with his mother and believed that in certain situations she might choose me over Alex.¹⁴

In Nick's story, Ada appears as an exotic, incomprehensible character who attracts him. When Ada shows him pictures of God, he feels extraordinary and exceptional.

The enigma of the past (like the pictures of God) stimulates Nick's further search for identity. The pictures of God symbolize Nick's metaphysical connection to his community through historical trauma. At the same time this feeling is underpinned by his sexual desire. This incestual episode in the novel shows how Nick metaphysically searches for the past and at the same time cannot understand it. The pictures of God are static and idyllic (this resonates with a portrait of Ada's family in pre-war times): they do not have any sense for Nick, and they are not turned into postmemory. Instead they produce a feeling of conspiracy with Ada and create a metaphysical connection between them. Ada turns into Nick's symbolic mother with her unarticulated traumatic past (contrariwise to his real happy mother). Ada also becomes Nick's teacher, while

14 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 56.

Alex taught Nick how to grow up. These moments of initiation cannot be fully grasped by Nick—thus he feels the incompleteness of his desires, both sexual and transcendent. Her pictures of God and their dialectics of presence and absence in Melnyczuk's novel expose the past, its fragility, and the complexities involved in how the next generation understands it.

Also, the episode with the pictures of God can be compared to the magical realist scenes of Ada's peaceful pre-war life with her family at the Black Sea resort. This scene is framed through elements of magical realism: "It was a December Saturday. We were in the Kruks' kitchen. Snow had fallen the night before, giving the world a fine festive feel. Had I been God, I would have chosen just such a moment to show myself."¹⁵ Here, Nick feels the force of what these pictures mean to Ada, but he cannot understand their meaning. This magical realist scene in the novel is associated with the magic world of Nick's childhood. Later, when he narrates this from a standpoint of the assimilated American, it contributes to Ada's mystical image. On the other hand, these images demonstrate his transcendental connection to the past, as Ada is described as his "window on the past."¹⁶

Nick's and Alex's reception of their parents is completely different. Nick's Bildungsroman and the bigger picture of his ethnic community in *Ambassador of the Dead* are enabled by the story of Alex, who is the recipient of Ada's oral history of the family over the years. This character could not get rid of Ada and her images from the past. Thus he is stuck in a feminized world of images: "Fatherless, Alex never learned to move beyond the veil of inherited images."¹⁷

Alex is trapped in Ada's images due to postmemory. According to Marianne Hirsch, "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."¹⁸ Alex's postmemorial interpretation becomes art. He paints comics on long strips of paper, producing his own family narrative, which is hardly differentiated from the traumas of history. Some of the strips were dedicated to his father: "Father as ogre with one eye; Father with horns; Father wielding a knife."¹⁹ These horrifying pictures turned his father into a non-human surreal creature. Alex's stories are not accessible to a broad audience: Nick was the only watcher of his movies. And Alex's reception of his family did not change in adulthood: in Ada's house there are many of Alex's bright pictures with surreal elements. These pictures fit into the Kruks' family narrative: the trope of misunderstanding unfolds through a dominant feeling of horror without understanding.

Alex's postmemorial connection to the old country of his parents is underlined by his mysterious disease, which was typical in the old world and rare in the USA.

15 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 55.

16 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 7.

17 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 261.

18 Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): 103.

19 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 22.

His disappearing disease, when “some part of him wanted to stay asleep”²⁰ and only screaming could wake him up, makes his image more extravagant and mysterious, showing an unbreakable connection with the past at the same time. This disease also demonstrates the impossibility to survive in a new circumstance, cultivating his connection with the old world. Because of it he is able to see his dead uncles and aunts, something that makes him closer to Ada, her pictures, and the world of the dead.

In the aftermath of the parents' traumatic experiences of war, exile, the loss of their country, and refugeehood, Alex's “transgenerational transmission of trauma” (Marianne Hirsch)²¹ does not gain any rational or clear form; it is expressed in an intensive feeling of fear and horror. The reader observes the powerful influence of the unarticulated stories of the old world on the generation of children, as Alex could not overcome the traumas of his parents. Even his art was a weak weapon against this. Marianne Hirsch claims: “Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.”²² Ada wanted Alex to be her Messiah and he failed this mission; she insisted that they were one soul. Alex is afraid of his father Lev, who cannot control his emotions, and subsequently left the family. In such a milieu, Alex failed postmemorial work, which, according to Hirsch, “strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression.”²³ Alex just repeated the stories of silence, loss, and absence.

In Melnyczuk's novel, these historical traumas cannot be narrated by the Kruks, but by Nick. Marianne Hirsch uses the example of the Holocaust to show how trauma influences the generation of children. She asks: “Can the memory of genocide be transformed into action and resistance?”²⁴ Telling the disastrous story of Ada and Alex, Nick discloses acts of resistance by attempting to understand them. This memory transmission is enabled by his search for origins, through his attachment to the collective catastrophe of the war and postwar Ukrainian history. The Kruks' lifestyle is a kind of memory which belongs to no one as there are no linear stories. Moreover, there is no continuation of this story, as Paul and Alex died. Children of the survivors and victims did not survive in a new homeland. Nick saves their images from historical oblivion, which is why for him it is crucial to narrate in a plural voice and present different experiences in a long-term perspective.

Paradoxically, despite the vivid differences in the children's behavior, i. e. Paul's decision to go to Vietnam and Alex's (artistic) rebellion, there is no generation gap between them, as all the children repeat the stories of their parents, slowly vanishing from the historical horizon in a new homeland. Nick's narrative is redemptive because

20 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 43.

21 Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 103.

22 Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 106.

23 Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 111.

24 Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 104.

he enables a sense of continuity and reveals the value of the Kruks' family story in historical perspective. Nick's last name, Blut, is an allusion to biblical *bludnyi syn* (prodigal son). And Ada's name is correlated with Slavonic *ad* (Hell). As Melnyczuk puts it in his essay: "The problem with 'redemption' is not simply that it's a moment by moment affair. The very word suggests we can know when we've been condemned or redeemed. And I'm not so sure of that. So many selves—so many impulses and conflicting imperatives—inhabit us."²⁵

Nick is not able to understand his parents' or the Kruks' past because of the historical inconsistency of his narration. In his narration, they are represented through different syndromes (including Ada as a syndrome of the traumatic past), but never appear as real people with a definite historical background. The very first pages of *Ambassador of the Dead* may confuse readers. The country the Kruks (and the narrator himself) originate from is not initially mentioned, but this sentence at the beginning of this novel is supposed to be a clue: "In different ways I had loved all the Kruks—they were my little Russian novel, so impulsive and uncontrollable..."²⁶ Further reading of Melnyczuk's novel does not clarify this omission. Adriana has "high Slavic cheeks," and Alex's appearance is similarly characterized by Slavic features.²⁷ Such lenses of pan-Slavic rhetoric in Nick's narration obscure Ada's story, and leave an impression of incompleteness. The novel's first indication of Ukraine is not a direct representation but the reference that it is "a country you won't find on any map."²⁸

Thus through his Bildungsroman Nick demonstrates the complexity and incompleteness of his understanding of the past of his parents and the Kruks. The traumas experienced by the first generation are so powerful that they infect the generation of children: his friend Alex did not manage to get out of the traumatized experience of his parents. From Ada, who embodies traumas of Ukrainian history, Nick obtains a sense of this history: dark, incomprehensible, and desired.

Narrating History Through Cultural Perspectives

While Nick tells Ada's American story, in which she looks mysterious, extravagant, and incomprehensible, poet and literary critic Anton presents her story from the perspective of Ukraine's history. He is a native Ukrainian and a professor of literature living in England. His displacement, which changed his identity and facilitated his critical reception of history, enables his historically-distanced standpoint.

Anton's short story "The Ambassador of the Dead," published in a popular magazine, introduces Ada's experience from the standpoint of historical events in Ukraine—beginning from her childhood years until her departure from the DP camp to the USA. Anton's story rescues Ada from being entirely a syndrome of the old world, from Nick's point of view. Unlike Anton's short story, Melnyczuk's novel is entitled

25 Melnyczuk, "God Hunger."

26 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 9.

27 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 12.

28 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 68.

Ambassador of the Dead, without “the” in the beginning. These two narratives echo each other, however, their modes differ essentially: while Nick concentrates on the people he knew from the Ukrainian community (arranged around Ada), and includes a description of his childhood years, Anton’s narrative is focused on one character—Adriana Kruk (maiden name—Sich). Anton himself witnessed the events of Ukrainian history of the 1930s–1940s he is writing about, which is why his short story, exquisite and unequivocal, is told in a comprehensible linear manner. Nick, as a second-generation American citizen, tries to understand the past of his parents from the standpoint of his prosperous life in the USA. For him, the history of Ukraine is represented by the generation of his parents—who, paradoxically, never told him about it. Melnyczuk’s whole novel serves as a vehicle to understand the past of Ukrainian postwar émigrés, from the standpoint of the second-generation. At some point, Nick’s story about Ada turns her into an ambassador (without “the”) of the dead—an allegorical figure of historical trauma; this initiates a crisis in his narration. Meanwhile Anton’s story contributes to the evolution of her image in the novel as a historical heroine with a definite story. Such dialectics in the representation of Ada’s image, through Nick’s and Anton’s narrations, both historicize and individualize her. Thus Melnyczuk’s novel is able to capture both synchronic and diachronic perspectives of Ukraine’s history.

In Anton’s short story, *Ada*, who is from Western Ukraine, is depicted with her family on a vacation at a Black Sea resort in Crimea a year before the beginning of the Famine, the artificial hunger imposed by the Stalinist regime in Ukraine in 1932–1933 (the Holodomor). It was her last jovial and careless summer (however, rumors about the riots in Vienna had already appeared) with her friend Slava from Eastern Ukraine. Her father, Dr. Taras Sich, was a member of the National Democratic Organization and a respected figure in the social and political life of Western Ukraine. He had an ambitious mission: “The people around her father’s table were trying to build a country.”²⁹ Ada had heard the political discussions at the dining table, however, it was her childhood time to switch from Pippi Longstocking to Selma Lagerlöf. She felt protected in her world: “It was her country: no matter where she travelled within it, she was home.”³⁰ Later, step by step, her family, her home, and her homeland were destroyed, and the political project of her father and his counterparts was not fulfilled.

Ada and her family are portrayed against the background of the historical events in Western Ukraine, threatened by both communists and the Germans. In the 1930s (Famine, Stalin’s great terror, ethnic purges) and during World War II, Ukraine, contested between the Nazi and the Communist regimes, became a territory of mass killings. Timothy Snyder calls it the bloodlands.³¹ The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, mentioned in Anton’s story, divided Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries between the Soviets and Germans. As described in Melnyczuk’s novel, communist violence proceeded in Western Ukraine and affected Ada’s life: “For a time, the communists of Voskresene were in power, and many of Ada’s family’s friends were arrested and either deported

29 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 121.

30 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 117.

31 See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

or executed. Among the nearly two million people who disappeared from the region in less than a year was Ada's brother, Viktor."³²

In his short story, Anton describes a painting of a pre-war portrait of Ada and her family—capturing their last moment of normal existence. This idyllic picture contrasts with the rest of the story as a chain of disasters in Ada's life. The painter created a peaceful image of her family together—a moment that never repeated in real life but became realistic and vivid in Ada's imagination. Before Ada's mother had died she looked at that family portrait and asked if she remembered the day when it was painted. Ada kept that day in her memory through the frame of her childish impatience to head for the Black Sea. The sea serves as a symbol of the fluidity of life and its quick flow: Ada's father was killed by a soldier during the war and her mother died in a week, leaving her to serve as head of the family with her 8 siblings. Later she lost trace of all her relatives, except Viktor. Her family from the idyllic picture dissolved, proceeding to the realm of her imaginary life and turning into the pictures she lived with later in America. This portrait contrasts with Alex's horrible pictures of his own family. Thus we can trace different modes of understanding family narratives.

Along with historical topoi (the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, the Famine, among others), Anton's story includes components of magical realism, which demonstrate an imperfect memory of a fragile past and the general powerlessness to capture and apprehend historical calamity. From the very beginning, the story seems whimsical and surreal: "Adriana was born in the city of Resurrection, on the River Memory, the eldest of nine children."³³ The technique of allegorical representation of topoi is connected to a trope of survival in a world that loses its borders, contrasting with what Ada's parents instilled in her—"a confidence about her place in the world that she never lost."³⁴

The pre-war figures of children in the short story, Ada—a giraffe, and Slava—Queen of the Winds, are also marked by the magical realist technique. During the war, Ada's aunt persuaded her dogs and chicken that they were the sons of Noah. Such aesthetic projections serve as a means to re-create the world that vanished anew, and to make it more universal sounding from a historical standpoint. On the other hand, such mythological and Biblical projections serve as a trope of survival and a means to overcome the inertia of invisibility by making her story broadly relatable and relevant.

The magical realist mode also functions to resist assimilation, by creating a more authentic landscape of Ada's childhood.³⁵ Magical realism is an oxymoron, which in Melnyczuk's novel is both (1) a reference to the idyllic pre-WWII world, and (2) an expression of a quick flowing existence that cannot be comprehended as real from the standpoint of postwar life.

32 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 133.

33 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 109.

34 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 109.

35 See more on this mode: Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," *Canadian Literature* 116 (1988): 9–24.

In representing these topoi (City of Resurrection, River Memory) through magical realism, the novel deterritorializes them. Indeed the core plot of “The Ambassador of the Dead” concerns a lost country, which Ada’s father and the other representatives of the intelligentsia tried to build. And in postwar perspective it becomes not only lost but absent.³⁶ Anton’s short story attempts to restore it through historical and mythological perspectives. With both historical and magical realist techniques, Ada’s image is defamiliarized and acquires uniqueness:

If the realism of magical realism articulates the vicissitudes of a real culture and people, the magic emerges from a place and moment where culture is articulated, through the invention of new myths—myths whose origins, or people, are as yet missing.³⁷

There is an opposition between, on the one hand, the defeated project to build a country, and, on the other hand, Anton’s sense that this project was not defeated but folded into a longer-term project of ensuring cultural continuity. Anton presents this opposition as he describes the condition of statelessness and becomes a voice for Ada’s unarticulated identity. In such a frame Ada is not a refugee without history, or one of the syndromes of the old world, as Nick interprets her, but a person with a distinct historical and cultural identity. Indeed, adding magical realist elements to history “allows for the imagining of a new people unfettered by the constraints of existing politics, society and culture; unfettered, indeed, by the real.”³⁸ Anton’s short story enables Ada’s alternative imaginary biography to be told through historical and mythical lenses of the lost family and homeland, i. e., her *Lebenswelt*. In Anton’s short story, magical realism is a way to grapple with disappearance—a way to save a person from disappearance and marginalization. Magical realism helps to compensate for statelessness: the political project of the Ukrainian state was not fulfilled historically, but it lived on in other dimensions (poetry, imagination, culture, magical realism). This technique was a means to see Ada as not stuck in the stasis of old world syndrome and the past, but as having a development—what she could have been. This is enabled by Anton’s poetic gift and imagination.

Anton’s image emerges in the novel when he comes to the US and gives a talk in the local community. This character is, to a large extent, schematic, however, his role is important in the novel. Apart from narrating Ada’s story through a historical frame, his image serves to underline the alienation between the Ukrainian-American community and the figure of the poet. His Ukrainian counterparts meet him enthusiastically with

36 See more in Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

37 Eva Aldea, *Magical Realism and Deleuze: The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011), 148.

38 Aldea, *Magical Realism and Deleuze*, 149.

passionate applause, welcoming him as a national prophet. To their disappointment, instead of Ukrainian, the “false Messiah” speaks in English about Walt Whitman’s poetry and “the importance of cultivating an appreciation for the literary heritage of one’s new homeland.”³⁹ Finally, he fails to meet the expectations of the crowd, who wants to know about the political prospects of their homeland. In this episode we can trace the caustic representation of the second wave of Ukrainian immigrants to the USA after World War II—a group that was called a political emigration.

In Melnyczuk’s novel, Anton anticipates the insecurities and concerns of his peers regarding losing their language inside the new language, but he claims that such alienation can be “an intensification of who you are”: “I know we have duties to the past. To know history is essential: without that, there can be no conscience. And without conscience, there can be no self.”⁴⁰ While Anton understands the anxieties of his counterparts regarding history, culture, and language, the community’s reception of the poet is unsophisticated: he just “sold himself to the English.”⁴¹ This episode is telling: it demonstrates Anton’s acknowledgement of other dimensions of the national culture, and its proliferation in terms of a postwar crisis of worldview and historical disorientation. This understanding and overall his cultural stance broaden the artistic sensitivity of the post-World War II world. After forced exile, people are disoriented and they want a poet to support them in their political aspirations. However, he could not be their Messiah.

Anton tries to save Ada not only symbolically, by telling her story to the world, but in a real way, by suggesting to her to go to England to start a new life there. Instead, she prefers to stay in the US with her brother Viktor who lives in her apartment, watching television and drinking alcohol. Her devotion to the past is uncompromising, and after reading the story of herself, she does not change at all. In this episode Melnyczuk demonstrates the impossibility of a better future for Ada. Nonetheless, Anton has an ambiguous intention to spread his poetic power into real life: “What use was literature if it didn’t move people to action?”⁴²

Ada was Anton’s old-time love, and by offering her to go to England, he tries to restore this connection. The past can be narrated (as in his short story) and thus understood through narration; however, it cannot be appropriated and relieved. He loses Ada—who, with her European identity and her father’s unfulfilled project “to build a country,”⁴³ defines the loss of native culture and Ukraine.

“Ada had no idea of the effects she had on the poet. . . . He would wait, vainly as it turned out, a lifetime moment of similar intensity.”⁴⁴ This is a description of the

39 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 101. Overall Anton’s articles were devoted to world classics: Charles Dickens, T. S. Eliot, and Isaiah Berlin.

40 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 102.

41 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 102.

42 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 159.

43 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 121.

44 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 150.

moment of Ada's friendly kiss. Right after that follows a sentence: "The day he left his country the door closed on the sources of his poetry."⁴⁵ The loss of the beloved Ada and the homeland are connected in the novel and are both equally important.

Although they are from the same generation and witnessed the same events, Anton managed to overcome trauma and Adriana did not. Adriana's story, told through the tropes of loss and absence, is told like the history of Ukraine, whose project was lost and defeated. As Homi Bhabha puts it: "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye."⁴⁶ In Anton's story, Ukraine is told as a nation which did not come into being and whose project was lost.

Anton, who managed to adjust himself to a new cultural milieu, paid his price—the loss of his poetical gift and his beloved Ada. The readers of Melnyczuk's novel know little about Anton, as he vanishes when Ada rejects him. Surprisingly, this figure, who can be identified as Nick's duplicate character (who managed to assimilate and become a professional), is removed from the novel. He remains an undeveloped character, who also had his personal disasters and misfortunes, which are not unfolded as a narrative. However, the conclusion here is evident—he managed to learn historical lessons, making his life at least bearable: "I have a decent job at a vocational college. City's ugly, students aren't Einsteins, but summers I hike in the Lake district and visit the Reading Room at the British Museum."⁴⁷ Could Melnyczuk possibly imagine the status of poet as "non-Messiah" in communities who undergo political and historical defeats? It is not accidental that Anton lost his poetical gift when he left his homeland. Who would be his audience? The answers to these questions are not developed in *Ambassador of the Dead*. Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko, another author mentioned in the novel, also emerged episodically. His poetry could evoke emotional effects in the generation of the parents of the Ukrainian-American community, however, his poetry does not gain any development in the reception of children who do not understand its meaning.

Paradoxically, Anton's poetic inspiration did not vanish when he left his homeland but was transformed into a powerful tool of remembering, thus enabling Ada's story. Due to it, he could tell the story of Ada to the world in such an authentic and trustworthy manner that it overshadowed her real story: "Anton's images seemed more powerful than her own memories. ... How was it possible that the things Anton imagined could displace what had really happened?"⁴⁸ This all was possible due to his poetic imagination, which makes events more intense and acute in a historical milieu.

Anton can order the past as his identity changes as a result of displacement. Although he and Ada have similar historical experiences, Anton has an awareness of the distance of the historical events while Ada does not, as she constantly relives her past without references to a more global picture of the world. He is not an entirely

45 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 150.

46 Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

47 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 104.

48 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 153.

successful Messiah in the novel—he wanted to save Ada but could not. His goal was redemption, but instead, he was only able to provide temporary relief and nothing else can be done: “The sins of the fathers. Old story. Bible says it takes three generations to dissolve,” Anton claims.⁴⁹

Becoming Ukrainian Beyond Ukraine

While Anton cannot save Ada, his work has an unexpected result: his narrative influences Nick and enables him to learn how to see Ada more clearly. In particular, Anton also helps Nick to understand his parents, whose death casts Nick into crisis just after the novel presents Anton’s short story. Anton helps Nick to understand his parents as two concrete people, not just images or cartoon villains.

The death of Nick’s parents exposes the shallowness of his understanding of his parents and their past, of old world syndrome. In a key image, the novel suggests that Nick suddenly feels “this sensation of walking the tightrope with no net below”: he realizes that he has no foundation or roots, “no deeper sense of the past,” now that his parents have died.⁵⁰ On one level, this sense of depthlessness has to do with his own personal past. He realizes he is alienated from his own childhood: he is intensively concerned with his own future success, and so does not feel the need to think about his childhood, especially after his family moved away from their Ukrainian immigrant neighborhood. Living in this way, he found himself stuck in the shallow space of the present: he “surrendered to [his] immediate world.”⁵¹ He is not aware of other dimensions of his identity, which cannot be inscribed in the successful story of his American life.

On another level, this historical depth that Nick cannot access is also national: it is the Ukrainian past that his parents have attempted to keep away from him. The novel makes this connection when Nick describes his parents’ death as “their disappearance.”⁵² Although his parents assimilated and moved away both from Ukraine and from the Ukrainian immigrant neighborhood where they first settled in the US, nonetheless their death, as disappearance, becomes a form of the novel’s mysterious “disappearing sickness.” This folk illness, *malus invisibilus*, is “the organism adapting itself to the world,” screaming to avoid disappearance.⁵³ Nick’s parents may have avoided this illness, and Ukraine, during their American lives, but their death reconnects both them and Nick to the national past of their homeland. For him to emerge out of the shallow world of his present, for him to get off this tightrope, he will have to trace his roots back to Ukraine. An allegory for Ukrainian statelessness, disappearing sickness

49 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 238.

50 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 215.

51 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 217.

52 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 215.

53 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 43.

is how the national condition manifests itself in individual consciousness—and after his parents' death, Nick too begins to feel the effects of this disappearance.

Just after his parents' death, he returns to Ada, this time to learn about his parents' Ukrainian past. But in this episode, Ada continues to act as the syndrome of the past, and does not help him to understand the reality of his parents' experience: she sets up an emotional effect, but does not contribute an explanation that will allow him to comprehend his parents. She tells him a shocking story that only makes his past even more shallow, rather than giving him a sense of his roots: "suddenly how flat my sense of things became."⁵⁴ Ada reveals a dark but simplistic, schematic version of their story: that his mother ate her sister during the Famine, and that his father collaborated with the Germans.

Nick's feeling of tragedy and horror overwhelms his ability to imagine his parents as real historical characters playing these roles. Instead,

images of death camps, heaps of corpses, and skeletal faces rolled through my mind... I would be interviewed on the news: son of a Jew killer uncovered living incognito in Boston! Pictures of me at twelve in my Boy Scout uniform in *People*: son of Nazi doctor claims to be a radiologist!⁵⁵

Nick's consciousness becomes a kind of cinema, replaying familiar stock images that resonate with Alex's traumatic family pictures. Nick cannot process Ada's story of his parents into the feeling of depth he longs for, and he cannot understand the specific historical experiences of his parents. Instead, he sees them from the point of view of an American, who understands such a story through familiar media images of a distant foreign tragedy, rather than through deep historical or national understanding. At the same time, Ada's revelation also endangers his successful assimilation, threatening to expose him as a bad American, the son of a World War II villain masquerading as the perfect Boy Scout. Rather than helping him to understand his parents, Ada, acting as a syndrome of the old world, only intensified Nick's identity crisis.

He does not find a more satisfying answer, or begin to feel a sense of depth and connectedness, of having a net below him, until he leaves this American context and travels to Europe. As he travels across the continent, Nick instead suddenly feels at home: "everywhere I went I felt connected."⁵⁶ Here, the novel repeats the language it used to describe Ada's feeling that she was at home everywhere in Ukraine as she traveled: Nick is beginning a journey that will eventually allow him to achieve a version of the Ukrainian identity Ada had before the war.

Initially, though, the novel signals that when Nick feels this way abroad, he is just playing another American role—this time, that of the modernist expatriate, who goes

54 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 222.

55 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 223.

56 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 231.

abroad not because he is displaced but because he chooses to, to advance his own aesthetic experience. The novel's title alludes to *The Ambassadors*, Henry James's 1903 novel about a young American man who goes to Europe to find himself. With Nick's stop at a bullfight, the novel explicitly invokes Ernest Hemingway, another famous modernist expatriate who glamorized the experience of travel in the same era when Ukrainians were forcibly displaced. From this position, Nick is a privileged American wanderer, in stark contrast to the postwar traumatic experience of his parents' generation, who immigrated out of dire necessity and struggled to adapt to their new country. As a new Hemingway or James, Nick has no such troubles.

But the novel's flirtation with the privilege of American cosmopolitanism begins to take on new meaning when Nick's feeling of connectedness becomes specifically and historically Ukrainian. He finds a Ukrainian church in Rome; at a bar near the Pantheon, he finds himself sitting next to a Ukrainian-Canadian man. In these two instances, he is connected to the world not just in an abstract cosmopolitan sense enabled by his identity as a privileged American who can travel at will, but because he is Ukrainian-American. When he meets Ukrainians abroad, he sees that his family's story is not exceptional: he can trace parallels between his own family and other Ukrainians across Europe.

Nick travels to his new friend's monastery and spends two months there, where he meets not only Anton, but also a real historical figure, a Cardinal—based on Josyf Slipyj (1892–1984)—who was arrested by the Soviets and, like Ada's brother Viktor, spent decades in a Siberian camp, only to be released due to American efforts in the 1960s. As he spends time with these exiles and expatriates—characters that the novel grounds in historical reality—Nick's own expatriate story gains new meaning, as a mode of historical narration appropriate to Ukrainian statelessness and the condition of displacement. Indeed, Nick introduces this section by taking on the identity of exile, as someone who cannot return to Ukraine: "Technically, my parents and I were Soviet citizens, and while it would not have been likely, I was liable to be arrested if I 'returned.'"⁵⁷ Even though he sets out on this journey as a way to get away from what he has found about his past, nonetheless his expatriate journey begins to link him to Ukraine, not as the old world but as a specific, currently existing place in history. Meeting Ukrainians abroad is a historical fact of displacement and statelessness—and he feels himself living in this specific history. He begins to think of Ukraine in history, the way Anton does in his story.

At the same time, this cosmopolitan turn also leads Nick to situate Ukraine within European culture. Anton tells Nick that the place where they met, a monastery outside of Rome, was the inspiration for the opening of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), a history of mythology that influenced modernist artists and intellectuals. As Anton points out, *The Golden Bough* is particularly famous for inspiring a great American expatriate poem: T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922). Frazer's text and *Ambassador of the Dead* link together in Crimea: Frazer describes Orestes killing a king in ancient

57 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 231.

Crimea, and it is also where Ada spent her summer vacations.⁵⁸ Here Ukrainian heritage becomes part of world mythology, what links all of Europe, and indeed the world. “That’s why people used to come to Europe—because they heard these stories and they wondered how to connect with them,” Anton says.⁵⁹ Nick learns that Ukraine is an essential part of these European stories.

“Connection” is also the novel’s term for what Nick has already been feeling, at this point, across Europe. Anton shows Nick that his feeling of connectedness to Europe is also him, necessarily, connecting to Ukraine—he is connected to Europe *through* his Ukrainian heritage. This connection operates through culture—which is what provides continuity during the period of Ukrainian statelessness, when Ukraine disappeared as a political entity. This cultural, cosmopolitan connectedness helps to make him feel Ukrainian, compensating for his feeling that he has no past, that there is no net below to catch him. At the same time, the focus of Nick’s search changes: he is no longer just looking for answers in his parents’ lives, but in a broader sense, in the history and culture that shape Ukrainian identity.

In realizing these connections through culture, Nick helps to recuperate Ada. Her story of horror sent him running away, but in understanding Ukraine’s position in European culture, he gives reality to the pan-European-American identity she experienced as a girl, when she read Stefan Zweig, Franz Werfel, George Orwell, Pearl Buck, and John Steinbeck. It was this cultural identity that drew her to Anton, who took her to the opera and talked with her about books.

Anton also helps to recast the specific past of Nick’s parents, helping him to understand them in a complex, realistic historical context. Anton casts doubt on Ada’s story about Nick’s parents, and adds some first-hand memory of Nick’s father. He offers an alternative story, in which his father was an *Ostarbeiter*, rather than a willing Nazi collaborator. Nick is not entirely persuaded by this specific account. More important is how Anton urges Nick to change his thinking: “We have blood on our hands. No denying... I’m not saying don’t wonder what your father did. Do. But have your own life. Don’t get trapped.”⁶⁰ First, he asks Nick to take on a sense of collective responsibility that goes beyond the specific, unknowable historical details of his father. This sense of responsibility requires identifying with a collective—it requires Nick to think of himself as connected to Ukraine, as part of a “we.” Second, he advises Nick to separate himself from his parents, to realize himself as an individual and part of a different generation. This is the only way to avoid being trapped in a self-destructive cycle, the way Ada and Alex were. Nick does not believe Anton’s story over Ada’s exactly, but Anton’s story opens up space for him to claim his heritage, in all of its complexity,

58 Frazer mentions this account in the first chapter of *The Golden Bough*: just after killing the king of the Tauric Chersonese, in what is now called Crimea, Orestes fled to Italy, where he initiated the worship of Diana at Nemi. James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 2.

59 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 236.

60 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 238.

without being reduced to his family's legacy: "my sense of the past was changed. I would have to live with doubt. I wouldn't let my desire for sentimental simplicities obscure the shadowy labyrinths of that invisible world."⁶¹

To access this version of the past, he has to accept his Ukrainian identity in all of its complexity, to claim both the trauma of the Holodomor and the moral ambiguities involved in surviving Nazi rule. Nick is challenged in these terms by Shelley, his future wife, who engages Nick, before she knows him well, by accusing him of complicity in the Holocaust: "your parents were murdering my parents in the old country."⁶² Nick first responds by situating Ukraine in world history, by claiming the Holodomor as a significant world historical event, and Shelley responds with encouragement: "How come you hear about the Holocaust all the time, but never the Famine?' 'Go and tell the world about it,' she said. 'The community thinks the information's suppressed,' I said."⁶³ This is a significant moment for Nick's developing Ukrainian identity, as he reveals that he has never before discussed these issues; now he takes on the point of view of the Ukrainian community. In the process, he finally takes on the responsibility of presenting Ukrainianness as something beyond old world syndrome, as a unique part of world history.

Nick gradually comes to terms with the sense of collective responsibility that national identity entails, according to Anton. Initially, Nick responds to Shelley's challenge by disavowing his Ukrainian identity, but Shelley will not let him off so easily: "Americans, that's who my people are,' I said. 'We don't live on air. We have roots. Even now can you admit your complicity? Just once?'"⁶⁴ Shelley demands that he claim his Ukrainian heritage, but she also does not persist in seeing him as an enemy. Instead, they find common ground in the challenge of coping with the traumatic pasts of their parents: "Pasts like ours make most of what people worry about seem crazy."⁶⁵

This is where Nick most fully takes on the challenge of collective responsibility: he keeps talking with Shelley, about their pasts, their families, history, and Jewish-Slavic relations. They keep talking through the unsolvable and inescapable problem of culpability for the deeds of past generations, a problem that, as they point out, certainly extends to America, from its slave-owning past to the dropping of the atomic bomb and beyond. Rather than feeling trapped, like Alex, and rather than running away, with Shelley he engages in what Maxim Shrayer calls the exilic phenomenon of the "unburdening of guilt," in which "Jews and Slavs unburden each other of their mutual historical and sociopolitical accusations" through dialogue, having gained distance in time and space in their new countries.⁶⁶ In framing this work as a conversation with

61 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 241.

62 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 248.

63 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 249.

64 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 251.

65 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 251.

66 Maxim Shrayer, "Exile and the Unburdening of Guilt: Aizman, Melnyczuk, and the Jewish-Slavic Confrontation," *Symposium* 57 (2013): 138, 151. Anton's story of Ada also presents another

his wife-to-be, the novel imagines Nick's coming-to-terms as an unending, ongoing discussion that can never be resolved into, for example, the flatness of a picture of a villain in a magazine. This form of talk therapy that is "like a compulsion, the completion of something": it gives Nick the feeling of connection—to his past and to others—that he seeks.⁶⁷

As he gains access to a complicated, unresolvable version of his Ukrainian heritage, Nick simultaneously emerges into a new kind of American identity:

Was this what it meant to be an American, this constant uncertainty, looking over your shoulder at nothing—not knowing what was ahead? . . . The past was broken; it would remain broken. I would get no satisfaction from it; nor could I repair it. The most I could do was my work.⁶⁸

This version of American assimilation is not about flatness, about losing ethnic identity, but instead about holding onto a relationship to a past that cannot provide redemption. After his trip to Europe, Nick realizes that what is at stake in the story of his father is not his own personal responsibility, but instead the historical complexity and inevitable uncertainty of collective identity. In linking this feeling to American identity, Nick repeats the operation of cosmopolitan European connectedness that Anton models: feeling this way about the past does not isolate Nick in some uniquely traumatic horror, but instead binds him to world history, and specifically here to the history of Ukrainian immigration to North America.

Conclusion

Ambassador of the Dead is a second-generation fiction that represents the complexity of Ukrainian history of the 20th century and how it is understood in the situation of displacement. This history is transmitted, through the trope of misunderstanding and inarticulateness, from the first to the second generation. As a consequence of the defeat of the project to establish Ukrainian statehood after World War II and the subsequent displacement of many Ukrainians, in Melnyczuk's novel, two approaches are presented: not to mention the past and to live happily in the US (the Blud family) and not to articulate the past but to feel the consequences of trauma (the Kruk family). Having no relations to their present life in the USA, the Kruks slowly become syndromes of history. Having no distance from their parents and traumas, the second generation (Paul and Alex Kruk) did not survive under the burden of their parents' past. Because

positive, supportive account of Jewish-Ukrainian relations when, during the war, Ada shelters two Jews, former students of her mother.

67 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 252.

68 Melnyczuk, *Ambassador of the Dead*, 239.

of an unarticulated postmemorial family narrative, expressed in feelings of fear, misunderstanding, and horror, Alex's art did not bring salvation.

Nick feels an attachment to his Ukrainian origins and tries to understand who his parents were after their death. His peaceful existence in his family and childhood did not provide clues. This stimulates him to narrate in a plural voice, thus manifesting his attachment to Ukraine and representing different experiences. As his guides to the past he chooses Ada and Alex Kruk, who give him a deeper feeling for his identity and its complex Ukrainian aspect. However, he cannot understand it through his Bildungsroman.

Meanwhile, Anton's story contributes to Ada's evolution into a historical heroine with a definite story and saves her from being one of the syndromes of the old world. Along with historical topoi, Anton's short story "The Ambassador of the Dead" includes magical realism and mythological and Biblical references. These techniques enable him to describe Ada's experiences in a way that makes them both historically real but also universal—relatable to the experiences of people outside of Ukraine. While he cannot save Ada or redeem her, he does teach Nick how to understand her and her generation, and their experience of statelessness and displacement.

Nick does indeed learn to think about his Ukrainian heritage in Anton's poetic-historical terms. After his parents' death, he is cast into crisis, as he realizes how shallow his relationship to that heritage—and his own past—is. He turns to Ada for help, but her scandalous account of his parents only serves to alienate him further. Nick goes to Europe, and while he cannot return to Ukraine in the era before independence, he does finally begin to see himself as Ukrainian. Meeting Anton and other Ukrainians abroad, he begins to think about Ukraine as an integral part of European history and culture, rather than an incomprehensible enigma from his past. At Anton's urging, he learns to think about himself as part of a Ukrainian "we," while simultaneously constructing a specifically second-generation identity that frees him from the kind of destiny Alex faced, of reliving the traumas of the previous generation.

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Olha Poliukhovych holds a PhD degree in Literature from the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (2015). She is an associate professor at the Department of Literature of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. In the 2017–2018 academic year she was a Fulbright Fellow at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute of Harvard University. Her research interests include questions of displacement and émigré literature, identity politics, power relations, and memory studies.

Heather Fielding holds a PhD from Brown University. She is an associate professor of English and associate dean of the Honors College at Purdue University Northwest in Indiana, USA. The author of *Novel Theory and Technology in Modernist Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), she has published articles on topics ranging from digital pedagogy to modern and contemporary fiction in journals including *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Studies in the Novel*, *Feminist Modernist Studies*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, and *Computers and Composition*. In 2018–2019, she was a Fulbright Scholar at Ivan Franko Lviv National University in Ukraine.