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## MEMORY AS A SOURCE OF IDENTITY: MORDECAI RICHLER'S *BARNEY'S VERSION* AND VICTOR PELEVIN'S *CHAPAYEV AND VOID*

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**Abstract.** *In our article, we look at the importance of memory in constructing personal and national identity in Barney's Version and Chapayev and Void, the novels of the two well-known contemporary Canadian and Russian writers – Mordecai Richler and Victor Pelevin. Structuring their books as memoirs and using postmodern technique, the authors turn their narratives into a play with memory and the protagonists' consciousness, which impedes defining their personal identity. In search of national identity, the writers address such crucial historical events as escalating separatism in Quebec and the 1995 referendum as well as the October coup d'état and the Civil War in Russia. Although Quebec and Canada are assessed critically on the whole in Richler's novel, its characters identify themselves with their country, while Pelevin's novel totally dismisses the revolutionary historical experience and its myths, making it impossible for the main characters to obtain their national identity.*

**Keywords:** *memory, personal and national identity, Richler, Pelevin, postmodern esthetics, history.*

*Gazing at the faces of the horses and the people, at this boundless stream of life raised up  
by the power of my will and now hurtling into nowhere across the sunsetcrimson steppe,  
I often think: where am I in this flux?  
Chengis Khan [8, epigraph]*

Thinking of forgetting and remembering, we actually mean memory, i.e. the ability to retain and recall past experiences. These experiences include childhood stories, anecdotes of one's life, myths and real events interpreted in different ways. Going back to the past experiences, a person inevitably identifies him/herself with certain things and rejects the other ones. Thus, memory is instrumental in constructing **personal** identity. On a larger scale, collective remembering and forgetting play an important part in shaping **national** identity. Gerrit W. Gong, a well-known American international political analyst, has given convincing arguments to prove the point in his article "The Beginning of History: Remembering and Forgetting as Strategic Issues":

Those who assume time heals all wounds are wrong. Accelerated by the collision of information technology with concerns of the past, issues of "remembering and forgetting" are creating history. They are shaping the strategic alignments of the future. Remembering and forgetting events define what individuals and countries remember and when, as well as what individuals and countries forget and why. Remembering and forgetting issues tell grandparents and grandchildren who they are, give countries national identity, and channel the values and purposes that direct the future in the name of the past. [5, p. 45]

At the same time, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction, and, especially, in postmodern prose, memory is frequently used as an artistic technique for approaching or challenging personal and national history. In our article, we are going to look at the way memory is interpreted to reveal the two types of identity we have mentioned above. Our analysis will be based on comparing two novels stylized as

manuscripts – Mordecai Richler’s *Barney’s Version* (1997) and Victor Pelevin’s *Chapayev and Void* (1996).

Mordecai Richler (1931-2001) is one of the foremost Canadian novelists, journalist, radio and television scriptwriter. He lived in Paris, Spain and England. Richler won two Governor-General Awards and many others. *Barney’s Version* brought him the 1997 Giller Prize, the 1998 Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for Best Book, the QSPELL Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction, and the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour. The writer was made a Companion of the Order of Canada a few months before his death in 2001.

Victor Pelevin (born in 1962) is acclaimed as one of the most famous and original contemporary Russian writers; his books have been translated into many languages. Pelevin belongs to a group of contemporary postmodern writers (the conceptualists as they are sometimes called) who brought a fresh approach to Russian prose in the 1990-s. Together with Vladimir Sorokin, Victor Yerofeyev, Vladimir Zalotukha, Dmitry Lipskerov, Victor Pelevin broke new ground in acquiring postmodern technique to depict the country’s past and present. Pelevin has received Richard Schenfeld German Literary Prize, Nonnino-2001 given to the best foreign writer, National Bestseller-2003, Big Book 2007 and many other awards. *Chapayev and Void* was translated into English under the titles *Buddha’s Little Finger* and *The Clay Machine-gun*; the references to the novel’s text in the article have been made from *Little Buddha’s Finger* translated by Andrew Bromfield. In 2015, the English-language film bearing the same title was released in Germany. Pelevin’s novel was staged in two Moscow theatres: *Teatrium in Serpukhovka* and *Praktika*; over three million people have seen the performance in *Praktika* since its premiere in 2014.

### STRUCTURING BOTH NOVELS AS MEMOIRS

Significantly, both *Barney’s Version* and *Chapayev and Void* are organized as memoirs, which gives the narrative a certain framing; however, there is a marked difference in their modes.

Richler’s protagonist Barney Panofsky, the sixty-seven year old Montreal film and TV producer presents his “version” of his life, trying to deny his friend’s charges about him. The novel is sectioned in three parts by Barney’s three marriages. Yet, the book spanning four decades and two continents is far beyond personal details; in fact, it provides a panorama of Montreal and Quebec social, cultural and political life in 1950 -1996.

Pelevin’s novel is introduced as a manuscript found in a Mongolian monastery in the early 1920-s. Sergey Polotovskiy and Roman Kozak, the authors of *Pelevin and the Generation of Void*, consider this beginning a traditional frame typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction [4: 23]. As usual, Pelevin mystifies his readers saying in the book’s preface that the author of the memoir cannot be named for many reasons, but his intention is to create a real image of Vassily Chapayev, a legendary Red Army cavalry commander who was killed in combat in 1919. The novel is set at two different levels – the period right after the October Revolution (1918) and the mid -1990s. The main characters are Vassily Chapayev and Pyotr Pustota (Void), a psychiatric hospital patient in modern Russia who has nightmares of being a poet in post-revolutionary Petrograd. St. Petersburg was named Petrograd in 1914-1924.

### MEMORY AS A NARRATIVE VEHICLE

Both writers use the protagonists’ memory as a vehicle that makes the narrative develop; moreover, Richler and Pelevin, having chosen a fragmented and non-linear first-person narrative, demonstrate postmodern playfulness with the fragility of memory and consciousness.

In his preface to Richler’s novel published in the Russian translation in journal “Innostranaya Literatura”, the journal’s chief editor Alexander Livergant argues “it is the word ‘play’ that determines the novel’s genre, its creative method, and the main character’s raison d’etre” [3, p. 5]. Indeed, Richler’s novel has a loose narrative structure that expresses the author’s intention – to reveal Barney’s elusive nature and to imitate the chaos of his life. Recounting his life story, Barney Panofsky, a bon vivant and womanizer, goes from one subject to another, and obviously ignores

logics and chronological order in his writing. Besides, throughout the book, Barney's memory is failing because his Alzheimer's disease is progressing, and his adult son Michael's footnotes integrated into the text are supposed to help reconstruct the true picture. The main character's intellectual disintegration is stated in Michael's afterword to the story.

Richler's playfulness might have deluded the experienced critic like Kerry McSweeney, *Canadian Literature* reviewer of the novel who justly called Richler's narrative rambling and digressive [7, p. 188], but unfortunately failed to see the author's purpose. That is why the critic's conclusion that the novel seems pooped, technically amateurish and embarrassing does not appear to be convincing.

Memory plays a vital part in Pelevin's novel too as Pyotr Pustota (Void) actually lives in two different times (during the post-revolutionary period and in the post-Soviet Russia) and is totally confused about it:

'Then what is my surname?' I asked anxiously.

'Your surname is Void', Volodin replied, 'and your madness is caused by your denying the existence of your own personality and replacing it with another, totally invented one'. [8, p. 24]

Being a patient in the mental hospital, Pyotr has been undergoing a psychiatric treatment for split personality because his persona has ousted his ego – he insistently identifies himself with the poet who fled from Petrograd to Moscow and then with the Soviet political commissar who was offered the job in Chapayev's division. Evidently, Pelevin bases the concept of the self on the developments of Freud and Jung as well on the major propositions of the existentialist philosophy.

### PERSONAL IDENTITY PROBLEM

However, Pyotr Void is not the only character who has trouble with personal identity. Both books' fragmented narrative full of forgetting and remembering constantly makes the reader wonder what kind of personalities Barney and Chapayev have because their identities are fairly muddled.

Barney Panofsky is viewed from multiple perspectives: his own, his wives' and his children's. Barney does not only relate his version of his "wasted" life, he also presents his version of himself, "speaking" nonchalantly and humorously:

I was an anomaly. No, an anomie. A natural-born entrepreneur. ...

I was a voracious reader, but you would be mistaken if you took that as evidence of my quality. Or sensibility. At bottom, I am obliged to acknowledge, with a nod to Clara, the baseness of my soul. [9, p. 1]

He does not seem to have any illusions about his character and behavior; in fact, he often feels remorseful about his adultery, drinking too much, being unable to discipline himself, but his persona (i.e. mask) and true self are inseparable. His third wife Miriam reveals another "side" of Barney blaming him for being domineering, for never letting her take her own decisions. Neither can his elder son Saul accept his father's loose morals; he openly accuses Barney of ruining their family life and divorce.

Finally, when Barney dies at the end of the book, all his children get together to discuss his memoirs, and they realize their father was not quite the person they saw. As one of them says, he cast a long shadow.

Victor Pelevin has a more ambitious and challenging project of presenting Vassily Chapayev after almost eighty years since his death and an absolute distortion of his image in the Soviet Union. Paradoxically, in the Soviet art and mass media, Chapayev's figure was mythologized to such an extent that in the 1970-s – 1980-s he became a folklore character, the hero of numerous anecdotes. The famous commander acted in the stories together with his aide Pet'ka and the female machine-gunner Anka. We see the trio in the novel, but **re-mythologizing the old myth**, Pelevin

has totally changed their personalities. Instead of common people of peasant descent, they are presented as elegantly-dressed highbrows who are fond of refined amusements, classical music, books by Hamsun, Rilke, Remark. As Pyotr is overwhelmed by the fact that Chapayev is entirely different from the stereotypical image of the Red Army commander, he tries to identify him, asking persistently: «Who are you really?». There is no definite answer – finally, both Pyotr and Chapayev realize that they void, nothing, a sort of fictions with no identity.

Importantly, interpreting the Soviet regime as a period of antiquity with its myths became a popular view in contemporary Russian literary criticism and journalism at the turn of the millennium. Leonid Parfyonov, an acclaimed journalist, TV presenter and writer, introduced the term “the Soviet antiquity” referring to the 1970-s. Speaking about the USSR at a meeting with journalists, Parfyonov said: “We live in the Renaissance of the Soviet antiquity. The Soviet times have become Greenwich meridian, the starting point on all counts” [10]. Other Russian critics use the term in a wider context, meaning the Soviet era in general. Analyzing Pelevin’s prose in his article “Pelevin’s Phenomenon”, Alexander Genis, a well-known Russian critic and author living in the USA has made a keen observation on his writing: “As a matter of fact, Pelevin treats the reality like any other artist at all times - he mythologizes it. The Soviet regime is for him the same initial material as Troy for Homer or Dublin for Joyce” [2]. Earlier, comparing the writing of Victor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin, another foremost postmodern Russian author, Genis noted: “Pelevin is rather constructive than deconstructive. Using the same remnants of the Soviet myth as Sorokin, Pelevin combines them into plots and conceptual constructions” [1].

### ADDRESSING NATIONAL IDENTITY

Discussing national identity, among other things, presupposes accepting the country’s historical experience or rejecting it. Although the historical periods both writers describe in their books are sometimes dramatic, for example, Quebec separatist movement and 1995 referendum in *Barney’s Version*, we cannot compare these events with the October revolution and the situation in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet regime in *Chapayev and Void*.

As mentioned above, Richler’s novel gives a wide context in which Barney’s life is related; the story is set in Canada, the USA and France during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the book’s focus is on Montreal Jews, their habits and traditions, way of life and character. Barney’s inner monologue full of typical Jewish vivacity and humour reveals his ethnicity to the utmost. At the same time, stressing Barney’s and other characters’ Jewishness, the author shows the protagonist as a Quebecois and Canadian mainly through his strong criticism of the province and the country. Barney severely criticizes Quebec for provincialism, coloniality and nationalism, he’s skeptical about Toronto and modern Montreal, he calls Canada an asylum, an incredibly rich country ruled by idiots. Yet, it is rather love than hatred that guides him.

Interestingly, the novel’s final episode provides another perspective on the national identity problem. As the family cottage was sold after Barney’s death, his elder son Saul arrives in the Laurentian Mountains to take the estate agent and the new owners around the house. While sitting in the veranda and thinking of the old times, he suddenly sees a water-bomber making a training flight over the top of the mountain and dropping tons of water on it. Saul is very proud of this typically Canadian sight as he calls it, and he wishes his children could see the flight.

Obviously, Russian historical experience differs greatly from that of Canada, but analyzing Pelevin’s novel in terms of national identity, we should start with Margaret Laurence’s remark that she made in her essay “A Place to Stand On”. Researching the past in the contemporary Nigerian writing and her own, Laurence noted:

...it was only several years ago ... that I began to see how much my own writing had followed the same pattern – the attempt to assimilate the past, partly in order to be freed from it, partly in order to try to understand myself and perhaps others of my generation, through seeing where we had come from. [6, p. 14]

Actually, a similar pattern emerges in Pelevin's book when he looks at the process of national identification at the moment of radical change in Russia (in the 1990-s) that had to come to terms with its totalitarian past. Desperately wanting to be freed from it, the author flatly rejected the two historical cataclysms – the October Revolution and the Civil War - as national catastrophes. He also denounces Soviet ideological myths and clichés, which were used to shape the Soviet national identity. Consequently, Chapayev is ironically represented as a person who didn't exist in reality. Looking back to the past, Pyotr realizes there is only void, nothing to support him. He has no national identity as he is unable to find any national symbols or historical facts/personalities to identify with.

### CONCLUSION

Summing up our discussion of the two novels, we should state that they both are organized as memoirs, and the common narrative feature gives their authors an opportunity to use memory as a narrative vehicle.

In the postmodern context, Mordecai Richler and Victor Pelevin manifest obvious playfulness with the fragility of memory and consciousness. However, Richler's book is based on play as a genre and Barney's failing memory as the main narrative technique, while Pelevin focuses on the split consciousness of Pyotr Void, and the combination of two time levels allows the writer to reconstruct the post-revolutionary Russia.

The main characters' personal identities appear to be difficult to determine for different reasons. The personality of Barney Panofsky, an unreliable ranting narrator having progressing Alzheimer's disease, is presented in the novel through multiple perspectives. Both Pyotr's and Chapayev's characters are absolutely different from their prototypes as Pelevin deliberately re-mythologizes the old Soviet myth of the famous commander and his aide.

Memory is vital in addressing the national identity problem for both authors. In his recollections of forty years, Barney is extremely critical of Quebec and Canada, yet he definitely admits them as native province and country. On the contrary, Pelevin rejects the revolutionary period and its myths categorically; hence, his main characters are devoid of national identity.

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## ПАМЯТЬ КАК ИСТОЧНИК ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ: МОРДЕХАЙ РИХЛЕР «ВЕРСИЯ БАРНИ» И ВИКТОР ПЕЛЕВИН «ЧАПАЕВ И ПУСТОТА»

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***Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается роль памяти в процессе конструирования личной и национальной идентичности в романах Версия Барни и Чапаев и пустота двух известных современных писателей Канады и России – Мордехая Рихлера и Виктора Пелевина. Структурируя свои произведения в виде воспоминаний и используя некоторые постмодернистские приёмы, авторы романов превращают повествование в игру с памятью и сознанием своих главных героев, что затрудняет определение личной идентичности каждого из них. В поисках национальной идентичности авторы обращаются к таким судьбоносным историческим событиям своих стран, как обострение сепаратизма и референдум 1995 г. в Квебеке, а также Октябрьский переворот 1917 г. в России и Гражданская война. Несмотря на критику Квебека и Канады в целом, персонажи романа М. Рихлера отождествляют себя со своей страной, тогда как роман В. Пелевина демонстрирует полное неприятие революционного опыта и порождённых им мифов, что препятствует обретению национальной идентичности его героями.*

***Ключевые слова:** память, личная и национальная идентичность, Рихлер, Пелевин, постмодернистская эстетика, история.*