

Irish and Ukrainian Famines: Literary Images, Historical Memory and Aesthetic Emotions

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ABSTRACT

The following essay examines how literary images can transmit the historical memories and aesthetic emotions related to the famine experience of the people of both Ukraine and Ireland, as illustrated in five contemporary novels: Ulas Samchuk's *Maria: A Chronicle of a Life* (1934); Vasyl Barka's *The Yellow Prince* (1963); Yevhen Hutsalo's *Holodomor* (1990); Mary Pat Kelly's *Galway Bay* (2009); and Alexander J. Motyl's *Sweet Snow: A Novel of the Ukrainian Famine of 1933* (2013). The selected novels show that famine fiction may be an instrument contributing to the memorialization of national identity, for these literary works describe similar emotional reactions to state-induced famines, and all have powerful moral and emotional functions. The famine fiction here discussed, relating to the Irish An Gorta Mór and the Ukrainian Holodomor, fulfills the purpose of catharsis.

KEYWORDS: An Gorta Mór, Holodomor, literary image, contemporary famine fiction, historical memory, aesthetic emotions

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Famine, the extreme scarcity of food and the long-lasting feeling of the physical need to eat something and eating nothing, a condition which generally leads to starvation and, consequently, to death, has been experienced in full by the people of Ukraine and Ireland. In the context of Ireland, this most destructive historical event took place between 1845 and 1852. The main causes for the Irish Potato Famine, also known as the Great Famine or Great Hunger (in Irish, “An Gorta Mór” or “An Drochshaol”), were a fungal infection in the potato crops and extreme government regulations. During this period, as estimated, about one million people died and a million more, escaping the famine, emigrated from the country, usually to America aboard boats known as coffin ships because they were overcrowded and disease-ridden, with poor access to food and water, resulting in the deaths of many people as they crossed the Atlantic. The great Ukrainian famine (in Ukrainian, “Голодомор,” i.e. “Holodomor” which means “death by forced starvation” or “hunger-extermiation”),¹ which took place between 1932 and 1933, was a man-made famine in the Ukrainian SSR, which had been the most productive agricultural area of the Soviet Union. During this famine-genocide, between 7 and 10 million Ukrainians died of starvation in a peacetime catastrophe, unprecedented in the history of Europe. It was the result of Joseph Stalin’s policy of forced collectivization aimed to consolidate individual landholdings and labour into collective farms, mainly kolkhozes and sovkhoses. Stalin and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union blamed the prosperous peasants, known as kulaks (*kulaks* in Russian, *kurkuls* in Ukrainian) who had organized a resistance movement against collectivization,² and resolved to eliminate them as a class. Many peasant families were forcibly resettled in Siberia and Kazakhstan into exile settlements, and most of them died on the way. The Soviet government responded to further acts of peasants’ resistance by cutting off food rations meant for them. Stalin and the CPSU sharply increased Ukraine’s production quotas, ensuring that they could not be met. Starvation became widespread

¹ It is believed that Vasyl Barka was the first to use this term in his preface to *The Yellow Prince* in 1963. From the middle of the 1960s, we can find it in several Ukrainian dictionaries.

² The word “kulak” means a comparatively wealthy peasant who employed hired labor or possessed farm machinery and who was characterized by Communists as having excessive wealth. “Kulak” is from the Russian word “*kulak*” literally, fist; “*kurkul*” is derived from Turkish *kürklü* (someone who is wearing a fur, furred).

and the ensuing deaths, also caused by disease due to malnutrition, reached catastrophic levels.

Literature can provide insight into the way specific historical events shape a society, and the attitudes, morals and behaviour of its members. It does so by interpreting important events (whether positive or negative), questioning perceptions and meaning-making devices, showing how these events affected the community in question and its people. Images of famines appear mainly in fictional works which explore historical instances of tragedy provoked by the deprivation and extreme poverty of large numbers of people. Such literature also presents the recorded memories of the traumatic events by portraying witnesses' emotions in the context of psychological trauma. The narratives constructed to express great famines usually serve the concepts of memory, identity, and representation.

Through five contemporary Ukrainian, Irish-American and Ukrainian-American novels, this essay will examine how the literary images of famines transmit the historical memories and aesthetic emotions of the people of both Ukraine and Ireland. The texts selected for comparison are: Ulas Samchuk's *Maria: A Chronicle of a Life*, written in exile and first published in Lwów in 1934; Vasyl Barka's *The Yellow Prince*, also written in exile and published in New York in 1963; Yevhen Hutsalo's *Holodomor*, Kyiv, 1990; Mary Pat Kelly's *Galway Bay*, published in the US in 2009; and Alexander J. Motyl's *Sweet Snow: A Novel of the Ukrainian Famine of 1933*, also published in the US, 2013.³ The comparative method of this study will be supported by Maurice Halbwachs' and Jan Assman's respective theories on social (collective) and individual memory.

In the first two Ukrainian novels, created when the effect of the tragic events was still strongly felt, the narrators' individual memory dominates. It is worth noting that in Soviet literature, until relatively recently, *Holodomor* was a forbidden theme.⁴ However, some witnesses of the tragedy managed to

³ The larger number of Ukrainian novels in the present analysis establishes a certain asymmetry in relation to Irish novels. Nevertheless, this approach is explained by the lesser knowledge surrounding the Ukrainian situation as opposed to the Irish situation.

⁴ Vasily Grossman (1905-64), for example, a Soviet Russian writer and journalist, born in Berdichev, who was an eyewitness of this Ukrainian tragedy, but could not relate what he had seen in writing during Stalin's regime. He did it in his *Forever Flowing* written after Stalin's death, but the novel was censored by Nikita Khushchev's ideologists as anti-Soviet fiction. Fortunately, a copy was eventually smuggled out of the Soviet Union by dissidents and first published in the West, before appearing in the Soviet Union in 1988.

write about it, concealing it under an artistic disguise. The first post-famine fictions were published mainly abroad. Among their authors was Ulas Samchuk (1905-87). Born to a peasant family, he told the world about the unprecedented tragedy that had taken place in Soviet Ukraine, when he published his novel *Марія (Maria)* in Polish Lwów, in 1934. Samchuk composed his book, having immigrated to Prague in 1933, soon after the events. His novel was arguably the first factual book about the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33. Written in the form of a chronicle (similar to Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Margaret Brew's *Chronicles of Castle Cloyne*) of the life of an ordinary Ukrainian peasant-woman, his novel makes the title character, Maria, an emblematic figure of long-suffering Ukraine.⁵ Samchuk dedicates his novel to the mothers who died of hunger in Ukraine in 1932-33. Yet, the story covers more than the famine as it describes Ukraine before the tragedy took place, taking the reader through three stages, entitled: "A Book about the Birth of Maria," "A Book of Maria's Days," and "A Book about Bread." Each is important in its own way, as Maria grows, matures, loves, gives birth to several children, suffers and dies—all 26,258 days of her peasant life, as highlighted by the author. Maria is a reflection of the Virgin Mary (referring to "belief" and "faith"), and Maria's daughter is named Nadia ("hope"). The tragic end of the novel is in stark contrast to its light and sunny beginning: peasant weekdays and rich, colourful feasts in the most bountiful zone of Ukraine with its fertile soil are replaced by the tragedy of starvation. All the characters die. For thirty days, Maria progressively declines—lonely, in the throes of a slow famine death, without anybody to help her. With bitter grief and pain, one of the characters sums up the results of this great tragedy: "Mothers do perish. Honest, kind women who carried out work and brought to life happiness, joy and young laughter, vanish from the face of the earth" (Самчук 155).

Samchuk succeeded in describing this tragedy with the precise documentary evidence of an eyewitness of the Great Ukrainian Famine. He thus allowed the truth about the great Ukrainian tragedy to be known, first in

⁵ For details, see Оксана Веретюк, "Художній образ Землі як оберегу екзистенції українства в творі У. Самчука "Марія," *Улас Самчук – видатний український письменник XX ст* (Тернопіль-Кременець: ТДПІ, 1994): 46-50.

Germany and Canada, where he lived.⁶ In Canada, an English translation of the novel was edited by Paul Cipywnyk in 2011. Cipywnyk started his introduction with the words of William Blake, “To see a world in a grain of sand . . . ,” and wrote: “*Maria* gives the modern reader a sense of how that love of land, combined with a lack of it, led to the conditions in which hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians left their native villages” (6). In this, it resembles Mary Pat Kelly’s *Galway Bay* whose narrative is also built around the stark contrast of how life was before and after the famine,⁷ in this case, in Ireland.

Author and filmmaker Mary Pat Kelly was born in 1944 and raised in Chicago. She has perpetuated her family’s oral stories on famine, told by five generations since her great-great grandmother, Honora Keeley Kelly who was born in 1822 near Galway Bay, lived in Bearna (Connemara), managed to survive the Great Famine, and saved herself and her children by immigrating to Chicago. Honora is the heroine of Kelly’s long family saga. The novel thus draws on family history, but also, as the author underlines in her “Afterword,” on “the stories of all other groups . . . forced to leave their homes” (Kelly 553), escaping starvation. It draws, moreover, on the author’s research which benefited greatly from the participation of Mary Qualter of the Galway Country Library, who “helped solve many mysteries and introduced [Kelly] to excellent local stories, especially the works on Bearna by Pdraig Faherty and artist Geraldine Folan” (554). Now then “In a hidden Ireland, where fishermen and tenant farmers find solace in their ancient faith, songs, stories, and communal celebrations, young Honora Keeley and Michael Kelly wed and start a family” (front cover). Because they and their countrymen must sell both their catches and their crops to pay exorbitant rents, potatoes have become their only staple food. All should be well, nevertheless, as they are in love, brave, hard-working, and quick-witted. However, they face starvation after the potato blight destroys all their plants. As all grain harvests are shipped to England, they are left with nothing to eat.

⁶ In Germany, in 1944, he founded and headed the literary-artistic organization MUR until 1948. In 1948, Samchuk immigrated to Canada and became the leader of the “Slovo” Association of Ukrainian Writers in Exile. He died in Canada. For more on Samchuk’s biography see Oksana Bryzhun-Sokolyk’s “Author Biography” in Ulas Samchuk’s *Maria: A Chronicle of a Life*, Trans. Roma Z. Franko, Ed. P. Cipywnyk (Toronto: Language Lanterns, Inc., 2011): 7-13.

⁷ A new Kelly novel, *Of Irish Blood*, the sequel to *Galway Bay*, was published by Forge/Macmillan in 2015.

The first hunger winter is “mild”: they “ate once a day—in the evening, so children could sleep through the night—oatmeal, mostly with two potatoes from the pit” (Kelly 150). They have to sell their clothes, nets, pots, cups, and blankets. The following year, the Great Famine strikes. The narrator (Honora) remembers: “November the eve of Samhain. Ghosts walked the roads—not the souls of the dead, but real people dying. . . . No help of any kind from the government. Our three gold coins were gone, with the guts of the winter ahead of us” (181). They eat now poorer meals or sip nettle tea mixed with blood drawn from their horse. They are lucky to have a horse and they manage to survive. But famine fever now comes. Crowds of starving people wander the streets of Galway, many dead bodies appear in the streets; there is typhus in Clarenbridge and cholera in Bushy Park: “A new year was coming, 1847. A black old year it will be. Black ’47” (195). The Irish people would help each other, if they only could, but no support comes from the British government. Moreover, when blight destroys the potatoes for the third time in four years, and a callous government and uncaring landlords do nothing to prevent the unfolding tragedy, a natural disaster turns into The Great Famine that kills one million Irish people.

All of Honora’s statements and notes concerning British politics match Cecil Woodham-Smith’s, Michael L. Redmond’s, and Cormac Ó Gráda’s findings, i.e. famine historians of the revisionist and post-revisionist generations⁸. According to these historians, the disaster was largely caused by the British Government’s decisions. In his vivid and disturbing book, Woodham-Smith provides a damning account:

The treatment of the Irish people by the British Government during the famine has been described as genocide—race murder. The British Government has been accused, and not only by the Irish, of wishing to exterminate the Irish people, as Cromwell

⁸ The meaning of the Great Famine has been contested by historians from the 1850s to the present day. Three main positions are put forward: nationalistic (from the very beginning till the 1940s); revisionist (from the 1940s to the 1980s); post-revisionist (since the late 1980s). Margaret Kelleher characterizes the revisionist generation as that which “largely avoided eyewitness sources and testimonies, considering them to be unduly emotive” (92), and the post-revisionist generation as those “continuing to challenge the excesses and simplifications of earlier nationalistic interpretations” (90). One of the first historians who classified these three generations is Peter Gray with his book *The Irish Famine* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

wished to “extirpate” them, and as Hitler wished to exterminate the Jews. (407)

Redmond carefully analyses the conditions in Ireland prior to the Great Famine. Like Woodham-Smith before him, he calls Gustave de Beaumont, a French magistrate to witness. De Beaumont, while travelling to Ireland in 1835 and 1837, had observed that the Irish were treated worse than slaves in chains. Redmond also quotes from Kohl, the German traveller, who had said that “the poor in Europe had a life of comfort compared to the poverty and misery of the Irish” (25). Redmond accusingly declares: “The outcome of the British Government’s famine policy in Ireland in December 1846, with particular reference to Charles Trevelyan’s letter of 8th December to Sir Randolph, was to let the Irish starve” (32). Ó Gráda, with the help of strong economic facts, concurs with Redmond. Interestingly for the present comparison, Ó Gráda parallels the Great Irish Famine with the Ukrainian Holodomor:

History provides many examples of famines that cost more human lives than the Great Irish Famine. Reliable evidence on famine casualties tends to be skimpy, but fine comparisons are not called for: enough to note that in northern China in 1877-8 a famine accounted for 9 to 13 million deaths, and in 1932-3 in the Ukraine another for probably at least 3 million In this league of doom the cost of Ireland’s misfortune—about one million lives—may seem small. Measured in proportionate terms, however, the Irish famine’s toll exceeded these others. (vi)

In *Galway Bay*, Honora and Michael fight bravely, but the fever takes Michael’s life and the hunger takes the life of their newly-born son. The orphaned family then joins two million other Irish refugees in their emigration from Ireland. From a distant “Amerikay,” Michael’s brother serves the revolutionary cause (Young Ireland) and compares Irish people with the local Indian tribes, persecuted and starved by the democratic American government (as the Ukrainian peasants were by the Soviet regime). This family saga is also a patriotic hymn to Ireland, portraying the fight for the Irish cause and presenting communal celebrations, ancient faith, songs, stories, myths, legends about strong, invincible and united Celts and their Green Land. It is

also a hymn to Irish moral strength, as formulated by Honora: “But remember, boys, glory comes from living for Ireland, not from dying for Ireland” (Kelly 256). This unusual vitality surpasses the emotional image of famine—a feeling of being brought to bay, vision of breath of death, a sense of irretrievable loss.

Vasyl Barka (Ocheret), with *Жовтий князь* (*The Yellow Prince*), published in 1962-63, adopts the same genre as the previous two authors, i.e. the chronicle of a family dying from hunger. The novel has been translated into French, German, and Russian and has served as the basis for Oles Yanchuk’s Ukrainian feature film (1993) *Holod-33* (*Famine-33*).⁹ During the famine, Barka worked as an assistant professor of medieval literature in Ukraine. Living with his brother in the Poltava region, he personally experienced great hunger and was even close to dying. However, after surviving this ordeal, for almost 25 years, he collected material from direct witnesses of the Ukrainian holocaust and integrated their memories into his novel on the Holodomor. The narration involves the voices of characters participating in the event, giving the text captivating and humanistic qualities, which arouse emotions in the reader. *The Yellow Prince* offers its own perspective on the time of the terrible hunger and the deaths that resulted from it. It emphasizes the immensely hard struggle of starving people against death and the failure of some due to unequal opportunities. The Katrannyk family is at the centre of these events. Everything has been eaten: rotten beets and potatoes, a dead horse dug up from the frozen ground, little sparrows, gophers, plant rootlets, cats, and dogs. More than once, acts of cannibalism take place. Those who have lost their senses eat those who are weaker:

They trooped the passage and opened the door, noticing a man near an oven who was dressed in shirt rags and was looking insanely, with his upper eyelids raised high and piercing glare at the newcomers. There was blood everywhere—on the bench was a killed child terribly mutilated.—The man lit a fire on the very fore part of an oven and in a smoke-filled house is cooking food on a pan chewing something and holding a knife in his hand.—One of the men who entered after the first one shrieked:— He

⁹ Olga Papash has analyzed this work in her article “Collective Trauma in a Feature film: *Holod-33* as One-of-a-Kind” in *Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine*, edited by Noack, Christian, Lindsay Janssen, and Vincent Comerford (London: Anthem, 2012).

has killed his child and is frying it! He's gone mad. (Барка 140)¹⁰

Such things really did happen. That anthropophagic behaviours became possible was the result of the desperation of the Ukrainian peasants facing the Soviet power's ruthless removal of all consumables. The title of the novel translates Barka's use of the ambiguity perceived in the colour yellow, here symbolically associated with the prince of evil and also with hunger—representing the totalitarian ruler bringing desolation. Barka's narration resembles that of a biblical parable of an apocalyptic, unimaginable hell on Earth.

The colour of Alexander Motyl's image of famine is white as the Holodomor takes the form of the title's snow, a cold and overwhelming whiteness. Ukrainian villages are thus lifeless, as one of the protagonists notices:

“. . . [T]hey appear to be empty. No smoke, no people, no life, *nichts*. Absolutely nothing. Just this accursed white.”

“Animals?”

“No, nothing. There is nothing but snow—nothing but white snow—*nichts ausser diesem verdammten Schnee*. And white sky.” (Motyl 48)

Sweet Snow is set in the winter of 1933 in Ukraine. A terrible famine is raging in the countryside, while the Soviet secret police is arresting suspected spies in the cities. Among them are: a German nobleman from Berlin working as a diplomat in the USSR (von Mecklenburg), a Jewish, fanatic communist from New York, who was born and spent his childhood in Ukraine (Golub), a Polish professor from Lwów, attaché and spy in Ukraine (Pieracki), and a young Ukrainian poet and nationalist from Vienna (Kortschenko). These men, from different countries and political views, find themselves gathered in a cell in some unknown prison, locked up by the KGB to be destroyed—and where

¹⁰ “Перейшли гурбою через сніги і відчинили двері: побачили біля печі чоловіка, що мав на собі стріп'я від сорочки і дивився шалено; верхні повіки підняті високо і погляд врізається на прибулих. Скрізь по хаті кров: на лаві зарізана дитина і жаско спотворена. Чоловік розвів огонь на самому припічку: диму повна хата!—і готує їжу на сковорідці; щось жує, тримаючи в руці ніж. Один з дядьків, які ввійшли слідом за першим, скрикнув:—Він дитину зарізав і смажить! Збожевлів.”

indeed they suffer physical and mental abuse. One day, as they are being transported to another prison, their van overturns, their drunk driver and the guard that accompanies them die, and thus they find themselves free—only to wander amidst devastated and snowbound villages, desolate landscapes, and frozen corpses. The two who are foreign diplomats in the Ukrainian SSR are well cognizant of the tragic situation. Pieracki remembers when he saw his “first corpse, lying half on the sidewalk, half in the gutter” (35), not far from the Polish consulate in Kharkiv. The cruellest part for him was that no one paid attention to the dead body lying there:

They walked around it, over it, as if it wasn't there. I stopped—I felt I had to stop—and people scowled and told me to get out of their way, to keep moving, that they'd be late for work. I couldn't understand their coldness, their indifference, their inhumanity. (35)

The ongoing situation in Ukraine in 1932-33 was monitored by the officials of the diplomatic legation, and the most convenient observation points were the Polish consulate general in Kharkiv (the capital of the Ukrainian SSR at that time) and the consulate in Kiev. Jan Jacek Bruski, a researcher from Krakow, mentions their double function:

These missions carried out typical consulate functions but they also acted as undercover agencies for Polish intelligence services. Their employees gathered invaluable information during their numerous journeys across Ukraine. The exchange of information with foreign diplomats, especially those representing Italy and Germany, added to the picture. Information collected through various channels reached the Polish authorities in the form of reports. Polish elites' perception of events in the USSR was also affected by [the bulletin] *Biuletyn Wschodni* (till 1932), which was a bit more widely distributed. (217)

Polish reports indeed informed about the ongoing mass starvation and gave “a very vivid picture of the worsening—week by week, month by month—of the famine disaster in Ukraine” (220). The diplomats in Motyl's novel are not spared, and neither do the American, communist journalist or the young

Ukrainian poet and nationalist survive the collective ordeal. The horror of their last journey across Ukraine is depicted in vividly realistic terms. Their situation is as ghastly as it was for all at the time. *Sweet Snow*, being a historical novel, “attempts to re-create an historically significant personage or series of events” (Morner and Rausch 99) and conveys the spirit, manners, and social conditions of the Ukrainian Holodomor in realistic detail and fidelity to historical fact.

Paradoxically, Motyl’s characters are in the breadbasket of Europe, but they have nothing to eat. Only snow, qualified as “sweet” by the author, which is ironical as this snow does not have a pleasant taste. Soon enough, the four intellectuals observe evidence of rampant cannibalism around them. The description of one incident offers a naturalistic portrayal of the damaged corpse of a young woman:

They espied, half covered in a snowdrift, a battered head attached to a disemboweled torso. The head had once belonged to a young woman, a blonde, with long eyelashes—which might have fluttered in the breeze if they had not been sprinkled with blood—and a long thin nose and tight mouth. The arms, legs, breasts, and buttocks were missing and the abdominal cavity lay open and mangled before them. Two crows were pulling at sinews and picking excitedly at the blue intestines. . . .

“Cannibals,” Golub said, so quietly as to be almost inaudible. “They’re not scavengers. They’re *cannibals*.” He surveyed what remained of the woman’s body with glassy eyes. “I think she was still alive. I think they tore her to pieces while she was still alive. I thought I heard groans.” He placed one hand on his forehead. (Motyl 76)

Everywhere, there were shocking, dreadful sights: the dead and the half-dead, lying together in huge piles of corpses on the roads, and in a “House of Horror,” a destroyed church.¹¹ The four men ask: “how could they [the Ukrainians] all just *accept* death?” They draw the conclusion that “They knew there was no alternative. . . . They knew their destruction had been planned

¹¹ Similar naturalistic images are found in Mrs. Hoare’s horrific stories.

and that there was no escape” (134). Similarly, there will be no escape from famine and cold snow for the four protagonists.

In Irish fiction, from the first post-famine generation onward, starved people are generally presented as a monolithic, ethnic, and social community, made of Irish peasants opposed to landowners and British authorities. In such novels, the farmers help one another and display unflinching concern for their native language, customs, and traditions. Representations of An Gorta Mór mostly do not include betrayers of the nation, informers, profiteers, et al., people who manage to survive quite comfortably at the detriment of others. On the other hand, where such people are present in Holodomor fiction, as in Yevhen Hutsalo’s *Голодомор (Holodomor)* or Motyl’s *Sweet Snow*,¹² they are described as expropriating the food belonging to their countrymen, very often their own neighbours, but also they are shown not to survive in the long run. Hungry villagers, driven to famine despair by the local Bolsheviks, feel no compulsion to help them when it is their turn to die. In Hutsalo’s micro novel (story), the main protagonist, formerly a prosperous peasant, Pavlo Muzyka, father, husband and devout Christian, has been bled dry by his neighbour, Bolshevik Harkusha. When famine reaches its most acute manifestation, Muzyka’s hatred towards his neighbour grows to such a degree that he even hates Harkusha’s children. Not only does he not save them from starvation, he rejoices at their misfortune and suffering:

And you do not want him to survive so that Harkusha’s seeds remain. Leave no trace. You see, it has eaten its fill—snorting, and blinking its sleepy eyes, it will certainly get some sleep now, eternal sleep on you. . . . It isn’t falling asleep, but grabbing hold of the belly and squirming instead! What, have you overeaten, have you choked? Well, you will shrink with pain a bit, you’ll learn how to steal, God sees everything. And maybe God in heaven is hungry and has fainted so that he doesn’t punish the Gaudens for injustice? You will suffer, you will suffer. (Гуцало 396)¹³

¹² The English version of Hutsalo’s Holodomor prose was published in *Hunger Most Cruel: Selected Prose Fiction by Anatoliy A. Dimarov, Yevhen Hutsalo, Olena Zvychnayna* (Winnipeg: Language Lanterns, 2002).

¹³ “А не хочеться, щоб вижив, щоб насіння Гаркушине залишилося, хай би й сліду не зосталося. . . . Бач, наїлося—й сопє, й кліпає очима сонними, тепер поспить, звісно, щоб ти заснуло вічним сном. . . . Але ж не засинає, а руками за живіт хапається, а корчиться! Що,

The representation of the Holodomor, in this novel, is formed as a poignant image of hell, related to a moral fall, in the extreme conditions of a desperate wish for survival. One's attitude during the famine thus becomes the criterion measuring a person's moral integrity. Transferring historical memory to his novel, Hutsalo succeeded in recreating the emotional atmosphere of the situation.¹⁴

Expressing the reality of famine, Ukrainian and Irish fictitious narratives transmit their respective collective memories that parallel individual memories. Maurice Halbwachs,¹⁵ who was the first sociologist to use the term "collective memory" and whose work *On Collective Memory* (published after his death) is considered the foundational framework for the study of societal remembrance, has shown the interconnection of collective and individual memories, emphasizing the role of the latter: "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember" (48). Lewis A. Coser, editor and translator of *On Collective Memory* explicates Halbwachs's thought in the following way: "It is, of course individuals, who remember, not groups or institutions, but those individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past" (22). Politicians and those in positions of authority can manipulate memories to tell a story differently or encourage people to think in a certain way, as opposed to collective memory that reflects the experience of specific groups that are delineated in space and time. According to Halbwachs, "individuals always use social frameworks when they remember" (40). The history of the perpetrators of the famines examined here, Britain and the USSR, show how powerful groups can promote versions of events that reflect their ideological needs. For instance, Soviet Ukrainians, on the whole, had to erase their remembrances of the Holodomor. However, the collective memory constructed by this powerful group clashes with the collective memory of Ukrainian farmers and families. Furthermore, as a bilateral relation between individual memory and collective memory, the memory ("contemporized

об"ївся, не туди пішло? Ну, покорчя трохи, будеш знати, як красти, господь бог усе бачить. А може, й господь бог на небі так зголоднів та знемігся, що не годен покарати за несправедливість? . . . Помучся, помучся."

¹⁴ An expert on Ukrainian literature, Mykola Zhulynsky, stated that "creation of the emotional atmosphere of the situation" was a distinguishing feature of Hutsalo's fiction (Жулинський 30).

¹⁵ Maurice Halbwachs was a student of Durkheim.

past”) of oppressed, colonized groups has its continuation (“transition”) in the sphere of objectivized culture—whether in texts, images, rites, buildings, monuments, cities, or even landscapes (Assman 128).

The selected novels show that Irish and Ukrainian individual memories take part in the composition of historical and cultural knowledge, as they build collective memories which represent the past of their respective nations. “*Mémoire*” is thus transformed into “*histoire*” (128), but if, as Jan Assman claims, “objective culture [also] has the structure of memory” (128), we can then speak about cultural and historical memory.

Cultural memory has its fixed points. “These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments),” called “figures of memory” (129). The Holodomor and the Great Famine have become the common points that help Ukrainian and Irish people to feel that they are a nation (as opposed to their previous oppressors, colonizers). Even in faraway America, the Ukrainians and the Irish similarly preserve their ethnicity: they are the children of nations that survived. National identity can be most pronounced when a nation communally confronts its enemy or a natural disaster. The artistic portrayal of tragic historic events, in its turn, accomplishes the transmission of collective memories, which “work much the same way—they foster and define group identities, telling a group of people where they have come from, who they are and how they should act in the present and future” (Gillis 7). Famine/Holodomor fiction (“figure of memory”) may actually be an instrument of memorialization and identity-building (or saving).

Our selected novels all describe similar emotional reactions to famine situations, the emotional states in extreme conditions of survival and agony before death, and most of all, the longing of the starved people, their prolonged and unfulfilled desire of food, and their strong feeling of wanting to eat and survive. Through their remarkable depictions of the events that caused physical and psychological traumas, changed knowledge, psyche, bodily condition and behavior of those who survived,¹⁶ Samchuk, Barka, Hutsalo, Kelly and Motyl make readers empathize with their characters’ feelings—an approach that brings a moral and emotional dimension to the texts.

¹⁶ Carthy Caruth presented a compelling analysis of the traumatic events and trauma, noticing in particular that “The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge . . .” (153).

Irish Famine and Ukrainian Holodomor fictions both fulfil the purpose of catharsis as purification and purgation, and intellectual clarification.¹⁷ Nadiya Stepula's view of the catharsis and moral function of Ukrainian famine fiction could apply to its Irish counterpart: "The power of pain contained in this fiction changes into a healing medicine, which completely cures our souls from indifference, disremembering and oblivion" (Степула). Then, a reader receives the greatest pleasure from the "stylized union" of pity and terror, which are usually "painfully and utterly irreconcilable in real life."¹⁸

As the Great Famine lasted much longer than the Holodomor, its memorialization process has been more intensive, and the history of literary figures of memory is richer in Irish culture. Indeed, from the very beginning of famine episodes, Irish literature was deeply preoccupied with famine remembrance and commemoration, while it was only after the political changes of its post-communist period that Ukrainian culture started to pay respect to the long-silenced voices of those who had suffered the Holodomor horrors.¹⁹ At last, as the political climate changed, the story of the terrible Ukrainian famine emerged fully. The fact that in 2005 Natalia Tymoshchuk presented her thesis on Holodomor fiction illustrates this situation. She underlined that the better part of the Ukrainian famine fiction "was a peculiar synthesis of the deep national sensation of the world and mastering of the modern European aesthetic ideas" (Тимошук 162). Increasingly, academic studies are coming out. In 2015, Galyna Dranenko, a Ukrainian researcher at the University of Chernivtsi, published a study on the "Famine Literature" genre, and on the basis of eleven poetic and prose works on the Holodomor, she identified the factors that "place it in the representative scale of this genre" (Драненко 270). Comparative reflections on the Holodomor and An Gorta Mór are also beginning to emerge, and a historical book, *Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine*, edited by Christian Noack, Lindsay Janssen and Vincent Comerford, was published in 2012 (Noack, Janssen, and Comerford). Such fiction as we examined here, which articulates the

¹⁷ See "Catharsis" in Preminger, Alex, et al., eds., *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986). See also Donald W. Lucas's appendix "Pity, Fear, and Catharsis" in *Poetics* by Aristotle (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968).

¹⁸ Elisabeth Schneider's definition (1939) in Preminger et al. 30.

¹⁹ In 1995, for the first time in history, the highest and most prestigious state prize in Ukraine, the Shevchenko Prize, was given to Vasyl Zakharchenko for his Holodomor story, *Прибутні люди*, published a year before in the magazine *Вітчизна*. Later, the author changed the title to *Пришли люди* (*Newcomers*).

harrowing past of two European, oppressed nations, is now receiving full recognition and is fostering an interest among readers beyond their borders. Indeed, they represent more than a historical and human need to find out about the plight of one's ancestors; they are meaningful to all as they unearth and give voice to mankind's painful memories of traumatic events.

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