

## Memory's Entrapment

A century ago Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet set out a series of hypotheses on false memory that proved to be the basis of the discovery of the "Mandela Effect", where an individual or a group can recall with great precision something that did not actually happen.

Have you really seen a lizard on a gravestone?

Many, including me, could easily describe a thin, rusty, green creature frozen in time and proudly glued to the edge of a headstone. But with the same ease we can appreciate that this short fragment of memory was but a part of our imagination; an experience drizzled down from other parts of our consciousness as another of the brain's antics.

Archil Kikodze's novel, titled with this innocuous flash of (false) memory, deals with memory's mystique and its impenetrable nature, and invites the reader on a journey through and beyond its many layers. It may sound paradoxical that the protagonist's name, to whose polyphony of memory we listen, is never revealed. We know exactly what happened at concrete periods of his life; how he searched for the answers in his mother's mood; how he observed his friend's prostrate figure in some ancient mountain ritual; how he passed by his grandparent's grave with his mistress in that 'foreign' graveyard.

Manana, Gigo, and Alde are the three characters who occupy a special place in the novel's multifaceted narrative, and the protagonist's equally complex memory that at times resembles long, modulating melodies where at the end of one lies the beginning of another. I think it is because of the author's unique insight that in the wanderings of a stranger we come upon insights that speak not only to his personal sense of memory but have a national significance which unravel the Volksgeist.

I have in mind those small, fleeting experiences that do not capture our immediate attention but pile up in the attics of our consciousness. It is those experiences that rise in the future as the collective consciousness of a people. Be this the image of a lizard on a gravestone, or the smell of grandma's age-old remedies that gush from a newly-opened cupboard.

In its own way, collective memory is the shared experience of history as it has evolved over time. When we ponder on our [Georgian] national character and its attributes, we immediately think of Ilia's [Chavchavadze] trichotomy: "fatherland, language, and faith." It is one thing to treat this motto as *ιδέα* and quite the other to perceive it in *πραξις*. If we take the latter approach then the novel becomes a mirror identifying the reality in which the true faith is not an abstract Christianity but a modest, Pshavian temple built by the protagonist's friend where strangers come to leave Icons and donations. And fatherland becomes Manana's village, a destitute farmland with earth that is both cursed and hallowed.

The protagonist's roving, time-scattered reminiscences parallel my own, sharpening my feelings and impressions. At first, I felt like a tourist descended upon an alien town, who took to heart the hope the author's insight that at times strangers have a better eye for discovering details that locals could not see or dream of. Later, this feeling turned into an awkward intimacy with the character and ended with an invitation to plunge into my own landscape of memories.

In Kikodze's novel, there is no such notion as a future. What is more, it is the task of the present to forge a chain between different ideas of a past. This is why the big questions it raises are retrospective in nature, having to do with myth, gravestone symbolism, and memory. Each chapter is deeply anchored in the theme of death and passing. But, as the author says, death had a different meaning in the past. The protagonist's marriage to Alde, which took place in a graveyard, serves as a sacred seal on his concept of death.

Life is but a stage on the way to death, but dreads touching it; epitaphs on gravestones tell us more about the living than the dead. Lizard on the Gravestone leaves us face-to-face with the painful reality that mortals can only resist their fate by inscribing epitaphs, by writing myth as fact. But if the author and an old Greek proverb are to be believed, one who can pass into heaven and retain his memory is to be revered as a hero. Gigo's plea, like Patroclus', to be disposed of in a funeral pyre and buried along with his memory haunts the protagonist.

The allusion to Patroclus is no mere figure of speech. The hero of the Trojan War and the Pshavian painter [Gigo] are both heroic figures transfigured by death, abiding now in the realm of myth. There is, however, one point of difference: Patroclus is slain by Hector and Gigo dies after playing sixty games of table tennis in a row.

Kikodze's novel with its liberal use of symbolism, unique narrative style, unexpected ending, and the probing of universal and national questions in our memories is an exceptional story of human connection, memory's entrapment, and our meta-narrative.

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