



Thou Shalt Not Speak: Divine Violence in Serhiy Zhadan's The Life of the Virgin Mary (2015)

NATALYA DOMINA
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO

*The fall sky above them is made of ice and steel.
Cold rivers. Unknown faces.
What they fear most is that this will keep going.
What they fear most is that nothing is on the way.*

Serhiy Zhadan, *The Life of the Virgin Mary*¹

Abstract:

Divine violence, says Walter Benjamin in his Critique of Violence, is "the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution." A Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan in his 2015 collection of poetry and translations *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, frames his narrative of the war in Donbas as dystopia with divine violence being the driving force. The text also problematizes the possibility of a dialogue as the means to stop subjective violence.

Keywords:

violence, divine violence, dystopia, Serhiy Zhadan, Walter Benjamin.

¹ Here and below the translations from Ukrainian are mine.

The question of violence is linked to that of law and justice. More specifically, according to Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, it is centered on the problem of means and ends. A question that arises is whether violence is still justified with moral means and just ends. For positive law violence is concerned with just means and natural law with just ends. The first is blind to ends and the second – to means, says Benjamin in his *Critique of Violence* (Benjamin, 1986, p. 279). He also suggests looking at sanctioned and unsanctioned violence that positive law uses to assess the legality of violence. The Law's monopoly of violence, Benjamin argues, is not about preserving ends, but about preserving the law itself because (...) *violence, when not in hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law* (Ibid., p. 281). As an example, he talks about civil strikes that, being sanctioned by the state, threaten the legal system that gave them this very right. Thus violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving (Ibid., p. 287). What eliminates this problem is the idea of pure immediate violence or divine violence. This kind of violence cannot be seen and is never means of sacred execution. Benjamin distinguishes between mythical and divine violence saying: *mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it* (Ibid., p. 297). Divine violence suspends the law and is considered "sovereign."

A case study of such sovereign divine violence, as I argue, could be Serhiy Zhadan's book of poetry and translations *The Life of the Virgin Mary / Життя Марії* (2015). Its central narrative mirrors the Book of Revelation and tells a story of the Donbas war as Apocalypse. It also problematizes the possibility of a dialogue as the means to stop subjective violence.

Zhadan frames his book with a translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Annunciation to Mary* and a few poems by Czesław Miłosz. Together they refer to the Gospels. Zhadan juxtaposes his poems on the ongoing war in Donbas with the ones by Miłosz on pre- and post-apocalyptic Warsaw during World War II. Both Donbas and Warsaw are imagined as dystopian spaces that are ruled by violence. However, if Miłosz's last poem in Zhadan's book *Escape/Втеча* ends with the utopian dream (=escapism) of a new nation that is free from evil and happiness (*We were destined to give birth to the new people in this desert/ free from evil and happiness. / Нам судилось новий народ народити по цій пустелі, / вільний від зла і щастя* (Zhadan, 2015, p. 178)), Zhadan's narrative remains in the time of history; in other words, it is the ongoing one: *The lights are on, animals are falling asleep, winters keep coming / Горять вогні, засинають тварини, тривають зими* (Ibid., p. 143)

For Zhadan there is still life after Apocalypse. Like in the short novella *The Grand Inquisitor* that is part of Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is no place for Christ precisely because people choose happiness over freedom and consequently Satan over Christ. Choosing the latter would mean the end of history of mankind and Christ certainly understands it. His violent gesture, namely, the kiss which he grants the Grand Inquisitor with, only seals the deal. However, if Dostoevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor* is a deliberately prophetic text, Zhadan's *The Life of the Virgin Mary* plays with the possibility of being prophetic.

The choice of happiness over freedom is yet again reaffirmed:

One must come to terms with the fact that/ Everything will pass. /One must not talk /about what is key and what is important. / one will come to fear freedom, /remain in the boundaries.

/Happiness is not to be avoided/ Happiness is not to avoided.

Доведеться змиритися з тим, /що все мине. / Доведеться не говорити /про важливе та головне, / Доведеться боятися свободи, / триматися меж. / Щастя не оминеш. / Щастя не оминеш. (Zhadan, 2015, p. 27)

Similar to *The Grand Inquisitor*, *The Life of the Virgin Mary* presents the opposition "our children" vs. Christ. The former (children of Donbas) force Christ out of their land but call for his return later to save them:

Let him take all these people, / let him amuse them with his ideas. / Let him come back later to save if not us, then at least our children.

Хай забирає звідси всіх цих людей, / хай тішить їх якоюсь із власних ідей. / Хай повернеться згодом, щоб врятувати якщо не нас, то хоча би наших дітей.

(Ibid., p. 9)

Here we see another opposition that has to do with subjective violence: people vs. their enemies (= "всіх цих людей" / all those people). The collective "we" is juxtaposed with "вороги" / enemies, "чужі", "чужинці" / others / foreigners:

But we who our enemies are / We know how many comb the beaches / How many work in out factories / How many pray to our gods (...) And that's why our kids want us to tell him / Get out of here, go back to his darkness / take all of these foreigners with you/ Everyone who, for some inexplicable reason trust him.

Але ми самі знаємо своїх ворогів. / Знаємо, скільки їх снує вздовж берегів, / Скільки їх працює на наших заводах, / Скільки їх звертається до наших богів {...} / Тому наші діти просять переказати йому: / Хай забирається звідси в свою пітьму, / І хай із ним

забираються всі ці чужинці, / всі хто вірять йому, невідомо чому.

(Ibid., p. 9)

The problem of the "other" is crucially important for understanding *The Life of the Virgin Mary*. The "others" are both internally displaced people and those who remain in destroyed towns. Moreover, the characters that are literally on the road continue Zhadan's motif of homelessness that Tamara Hundorova in her *Pislyachornobylska Biblioteka* defines as the key of Zhadan's oeuvre (Hundorova, 2013, p. 252). According to Hundorova, Sergiy Zhadan's marginal characters – eternal teenagers from the 1990s – symbolically renounced their parents. They neither grew up, nor found home (Ibid., p. 253). Moving through various topoi – railway stations, asylum, church, check points – the homeless characters of *The Life of the Virgin Mary* simultaneously encounter violence and spread it further. In a way, they are the carriers of an infection. This theme is well illustrated in the chapter titled "why I am not in social networks" / "чому мене немає в соціальних мережах." The characters such as a tattoo artist, brothers Adventists, mentally ill person, shop looter, quiet drunkard, etc. serve as object of the divine sacrifice to channelize violence. What defines them is their otherness and thus exclusion from the community.

Christian universality "love thy neighbor" already implies exclusion, notes Slavoj Žižek in his book on violence: the notion of neighbor is incompatible with that of universality. This so-called all-inclusive attitude involves (...) *a thorough exclusion of those who do not accept inclusion into the Christian community* (Žižek, 2008, p. 54).

As if following Žižek's notion, Zhadan's narrative is constructed in the way that "love thy neighbor" transforms itself into "fear the neighbor." However, Zhadan insists on not

embracing the differences, but on emphasizing the sameness:

I am just like you: i have the same bristle, same tanning, same angry wife, / same burns and cuts, and a thin net of wrinkles. / same outrage at our unfair treatment at the hands of the Lord; / The same willingness to use any chance / To show my strength, to demonstrate my guile. / So go ahead and kill me for our shared woes / for everything we've been taught. / Wake me up in the middle of the night with heavy keys. / In response I'll also be killing you / Recalling all your flaws.

Я такий, як і ти: в мене така ж щетина, / Така ж невитравна засмага, така ж холодна дружина, / Опіки і порізи, зморшок тонка павутина. / Така ж образа на господню несправедливість, / Готовність використати найменшу можливість, / Показати незламність, виявити кмітливість. / Давай, убивай мене за наші спільні печалі, / Убивай за все, чого нас колись навчали, / Будь мене серед ночі важкими ключами. / Я теж у відповідь буду тебе вбивати, / Буду собі пригадувати усі твої вади.

(Zhadan, 2015, p. 17)

The question is, however, how can we approach the language of the other?

The problem of violence is that of language. To name something means to designate its borders, to reduce it to something else. Language, according to Žižek, (...) *dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it* (Žižek, 2008, p. 61) By this logic speech itself is always an act of violence. Poetic narrativization of the war in Donbas is thus unconditionally imbedded in the discourse of violence and, perhaps, itself multiplies violence. However, entering into a dialogue leads to understanding of what sustains it. Slavoj Žižek puts it quite elegantly:

The wall of language which forever separates me from the abyss of another subject is simultaneously that which opens up and sustains this abyss – the very obstacle that separates me from the Beyond is what creates its mirage (Ibid., p. 73)

What Zhadan does in his *The Life of the Virgin Mary* is precisely this: he draws an apocalyptic picture of divine violence where humans are the ultimate losers and another one, ruled by subjective violence, where there is still a possibility for a dialogue and first of all the dialogue with oneself. 🗨️

Natalya Domina is a PhD student in Comparative Literature at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. She holds a BA and an MA from the National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy". Natalya's research interests include utopian discourse, violence, and soviet and post-soviet literatures.

Afiliacja:

Natalya Domina
University of Western Ontario, Canada
Email: domina.nata@gmail.com

Bibliography:

- Benjamin, W. (1986). Critique of Violence In: W. Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (pp. 277–300). New York: Schocken Books.
- Hundorova, T. (2013) *Pislyachornobylska Biblioteka*. Kyiv: Krytyka.
- Zhadan, S. (2015) *Zhyttya Marii*. Chernivtsi: Meridian Chernowitz.
- Žižek, S. (2008). *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador.

„Nie będziesz bluźnić przeciw Bogu!”. Boska przemoc w *Żywocie Maryi* (2015) Serhija Żadana.

Streszczenie:

Boska przemoc jest, jak twierdzi Walter Benjamin w *Krytyce Przemocy: znakiem i pieczęcią, ale nigdy środkiem świętej egzekucji*. Ukraiński pisarz i poeta Serhij Żadan w wydawnym w 2015 roku zbiorze poezji i przekładów pt. *Żywot Maryi*, wkomponowuje swą narrację o wojnie w Donbasie jako dystopii w ramy owej boskiej przemocy, stanowiącej jej siłę napędową. W tekście przedmiotem refleksji uczyniono także możliwość dialogu jako środka powstrzymującego subiektywną przemoc.

Słowa kluczowe:

przemoc, boska przemoc, dystopia, Serhij Żadan, Walter Benjamin.