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# Becoming Diaspora: Global Armenian Literature and Film After 1950

DISSERTATION

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by

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## DEDICATION

To Armenians anywhere

hoping that this humble work

will bring them creative inspiration

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation analyzes literary and filmic works to point to the post-national and post-catastrophic nature of diaspora Armenian culture in or involving the Western Armenian language. After the 1915 Catastrophe, Western Armenian survivors were forced into exile from their ancestral lands, carrying with them a modern national literary language. By analyzing the works of Shahan Shahnour, Nigoghos Sarafian, Gariné Torossian, Vahé Oshagan and Krikor Beledian, this study traces the various forms in which the emergence of a diasporic Armenian culture is inscribed at the limits of realist and positivist practices of representation informing modern notions of national literature and history. It then theorizes multilingual diasporic culture on the basis of such analyses and positions the latter as a critique of post-colonial multiculturalism.

# INTRODUCTION

## Diaspora Armenian Literature and Multilingual Multiculturalism

The lives, desires and dreams of millions of Western Armenians is shaped and sealed by the fact that for generations they have been uprooted and scattered around this planet. What for most of them began as a forced exile in the wake of the 1915 Catastrophe — among whom were also the families of my paternal grandparents — turned into an open-ended journey accompanied by haunting pain, unpredictable encounters and strange opportunities. Amid this confusing and worrisome set of experiences, these scattered communities have attempted to sustain a sense of collective identity by making efforts to transmit Western Armenian culture to the next generations.

These efforts, naturally, have given rise to a number of ideologies. Dominant among them is a discourse of diasporic pessimism according to which scattered communal life in exile will sooner or later lead to assimilation. The proponents of this discourse advocate preserving Western Armenian cultural identity until there is opportunity to return to the ancestral lands. This conservative messianic discourse also promotes supporting current-day Republic of Armenia as a way to increase the likelihood of achieving the ultimate goal of return. It should be understood that this discourse is governed by the idea of a sovereign and territorially demarcated nation which is privileged over the reality of diasporic Armenian existence.

While the logic of conservative diasporic pessimism — which has been on the rise particularly in the wake of the waves of cataclysmic upheavals of the Middle East, forcing large numbers of Western Armenians into renewed exile, as well as after the

unexpected independence of the Republic of Armenia — is clear, its consequences are dire. In Western countries, where most of these newly uprooted Western Armenians have moved, the conservative attitude has led to a deep and predicable generational crisis. While the older generation of Armenians usually feels compelled to stay closed off within their communal boundaries and tries to pass on such attitudes to their children, the latter shun away from what appear to them as their parents' outdated culture trapped in a ghetto mentality. This has stymied the possibility for Western Armenian culture to survive and develop under its current diasporic conditions. And while, fortunately, more and more diaspora Armenians show awareness of this crisis, there is lack of effective models that would show how to overcome it.

In response to the above need, this dissertation draws attention and tries to contribute to a more engaging, inclusive and optimistic vision of Armenian diaspora — an attitude that has also accompanied the latter, albeit in a marginal way, from its beginning. To accomplish this double task, it brings together works of art from various time periods and cultural and geographical contexts, and shows how individually and together they imagine and practice diaspora in an open-ended manner. What binds them is not just their authors' Western Armenian ancestry, or their engagement with issues that concern the Armenians. Much more consequential is the fact that they transcend national ideology and, what is even more crucial, do so by being in or involving the Western Armenian language.

Language, arguably, is the most defining and sensitive — meaning both vulnerable and capable of nuance — of cultural heritages. If this is so, then, the possibility of making it survive a catastrophe and thrive under the conditions of diasporic

uprootedness holds the greatest promise. Moreover, literature in modern times has been one of the key vehicles of producing and sustaining a monolingual national culture. Modern literary Western Armenian, too, has formed as a result of this. Therefore, by analyzing the ways in which Western Armenian language and literature has been reshaped in the hands of diaspora Armenian writers and artists in general, we can build theoretically sensitive models to not only envision post-national multilingual literary culture but also affirm a new notion of culture conceived as multilingual diaspora.

**Forerunners of Diasporic Literature: Shahnour, Sarafian**

To explore the nature and the conditions of the emergence of diasporic Armenian literature in Western Armenian let us turn to Paris-based writer Shahan Shahnour's[1] novel *The Retreat Without Song* (*Լռահանջ առանց երգի*, 1929, Paris).[2] It narrates the lives of the young Armenian men who settled in France after the 1915 Catastrophe. Through a number of characters and their attitudes, Shahnour draws the portrait of a

[1] Shahan Shahnour (1903-1974) was born in the Scutari quarter near Constantinople. He moved to Paris in 1922 and worked as a photographer there until 1939. In 1936 he was struck by tuberculosis and moved from one sanatorium to another in the next two decades, and eventually passed away in Paris. Shahnour was an active contributor to the Armenian literary world, contributing to *Haratch* daily and later editing the review *Menk* (*We*) which defined his generation of writers. He had conceived *The Retreat Without Song* as the first of a series, of which Shahnour published the second as *The Betrayal of the Haralez* (Paris, 1933) as well as a few short stories. He was also a recognized Francophone poet, publishing a few collections with Gallimard and signing his works as Armen Lubin. For more details on his life and work see Krikor Beledian's *Fifty Years of Armenian Literature in France* (2001, English translation by Christopher Atamian appeared in 2016).

[2] I am grateful to Krikor Beledian for having suggested this approach to me. As for the focus on France, a brief historical note is due. Some of the Armenians who survived the 1915 Catastrophe returned to Istanbul and other parts of Anatolia, particularly to the region in the south called Cilicia, on the Mediterranean coast, which was historically an Armenian territory. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1922, the Armenians once again left Anatolia. While most of them settled in Lebanon and Syria, a sizable number of them moved to Europe, particularly to France, to which Western Armenians had particular cultural affinities. This is why already by late 1920s, a new generation of young and orphaned Western Armenian authors, most of them from Istanbul, came together in Paris. See Chapter 1 (pp. 3-29) from Beledian's *Fifty Years of Armenian Literature in France.*

survival community reacting both to the catastrophic events of which they are the survivors and the new reality in which they find themselves.[3] Among the characters of the novel, Zareh presents an extreme case. This young man with "a fair skin, a tender character, and a sweet nature,"[4] (108, Kudian) the son of a priest and a graduate of an elite school in Istanbul, constantly smokes and provokes "regrettable arguments and fights" (109) which betray his uncompromising adherence to the ideal of the Armenian nation, blocking him from adapting to life in France.[5] Even though Zareh is a good worker, he gives in to bitter homesickness, becomes a drug addict and goes mad. Insanity, in this case, as the figure of rejecting the other, stands for the impossibility of the self (identity) to survive.[6] This is one way *The Retreat Without Song* resolves the diasporic drama of encountering the other.

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[3] Here is the novel's general description of these young men: "Time separated them from one another. During the first months of the disaster [աղէտ], the youths thrown on to the Paris pavements, mostly still very young, were closely tied to one another with infinite affection and tenderness. Those Armenian boys, uprooted from their native land, their families, and their future, with their direction lost, clung together during those days, until time passed and they found their bearings, until their moustaches sprouted. But the rolling years gradually separated them from one another. The forming characters moved apart with the fanning out of the paths, and the difficulties of making a living, the demands of life, especially the turmoil of a hectic life, blew on to that feeble group and scattered it: the feathers flew away. Marianne, with her irresistible charm, approached each one of them and dragged them away, here and there. Whether here or there, the winner always remained the same: always the same Nenette, the grand-daughter of Manons, Ninons, and Nanas. Some were married, many lived with girl-friends, the Armenian Church became empty, the number of letters sent home decreased and, of course, far away mothers cried. / Now there were only small groups left, consisting of true, sincere friends, in the union of whose souls the Armenian spirit still shone, grown pale in this vortex of the slop of extinction. It would shine on, until it died away." (86, Kudian)

[4] Hence his nickname *Lokhum* which is the Armenian pronunciation of the Arabic word 'lokum' and refers to the Turkish Delight.

[5] He expresses himself thus in one such occasion: "… A French paper again, a French play again? Haven't you got any Armenian ones? Will you never shake out of yourselves, become conscious of our position? Will you never fight, struggle against our assimilation and degeneration? You are all burnt out cinders! You are all leather merchants! You are only interested in your own small gains, you only care about your own selves! We, too, have a motherland: we must be ready to go there!" (108, Kudian)"

[6] In *Flock* (Տարմ, 2015) Krikor Beledian reads *Lokhum*'s madness as a metaphor for closing onto oneself and repulsing the other, a phenomenon which Beledian situates at the first phase of the diasporic experience. (438) In *Fifty Years of Armenian Literature in France* (2001), he already considers such a ghettoizing tendency as a kind of relation with the other. (See p. xxii of the 'Introduction' of this invaluable work whose English and Armenian translations are available.)

The plots associated with the characters of Hratch and Souren point to the opposite extreme case of assimilation: relinquishing the self in the encounter with the other by becoming the other. Hratch has a lively character, is a good cook and is mostly interested in having sex with women. Towards the end of the novel, he invites his friend Pierre (Armenian name Bedros) to his wedding. Unbeknownst to him, Suzanne, the woman Hratch is marrying has slept with Pierre. This makes her a loose woman in Pierre's eyes. When the three meet, Suzanne victoriously looks at Pierre, sure that he will not tell anything to his friend. Pierre also learns that Hratch's son is given a French name. Towards the end of their wedding celebration, Pierre offers a toast to Hratch's parents who are in Istanbul. Hratch starts weeping; Suzanne offers a handkerchief "to have even his tears." (138) Assimilation here means not just marrying a non-Armenian woman, not just giving children French names and ceasing to speak Armenian, but also slipping into moral decadence as the hypocrisy between Suzanne, Hratch and Pierre is supposed to show. In this discursive site, the other is construed as the non-Armenian woman, a consistent and arguably uninterrogated feature of Shahnour's novel, which renders it open for criticism from feminist grounds. I will attempt such a critique in the next chapter on Gariné Torossian's film *Stone, Time, Touch* (2007).

In contrast to Hratch, Souren is an intellectual.[7] His provocative and sarcastic speeches berate Armenians, their elites and political parties, for being unable to foresee and prevent their catastrophic disappearance. He accuses Armenians of being petty and

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[7] The novel introduces him thus: "He was the most intellectual of the five young men. His friends had a kind of reverence and admiration for his wide, intellectual store of knowledge, which seemed to dominate, with his awareness, the glances of those simple young men. He had the makings of a fine writer, but he did not write, because he would read and sneer. He would very rarely express himself in that company, where he would go only to give a neighbourly satisfaction, different from intellectual relationship." (87)

not striving beyond their narrow individual existence towards higher ideals.[8] When he criticizes his friend Pierre for not living up to the expectations of his people, their friend Missak asks him to not fall into the trap of paralysis in the face of discouragement but to write and publish his ideas. (89) This way the novel thematizes the anxiety of sterility at the heart of the Armenian experience of diasporic exile. Towards the end of the novel, Pierre visits Souren and is exhilarated to learn that his friend is finally publishing a book. Pierre believes that they have had very similar life experiences and that through his friends' work his own views will also be expressed. When Pierre learns that the book is going to be published in French, the two friends fall silent. Souren justifies his choice by arguing that among Armenians there is no viable public sphere to which he can deliver his ideas, that he cannot wait any more and needs to create something out of his youthful energy based on faith in himself. In response, Pierre disappointedly insists that the Armenian reader will not be able to connect with Souren's text since their experience will be lost in translation.[9] As we can see, Souren's case expresses the diasporic anxiety of collective assimilation. With it, the novel clearly singles out the Armenian language and literary tradition as a major element under threat.

[8] Mischa Kudian's 1982 English translation renders this six-page-long section very selectively by cutting it into a single-page. It omits the provocative passage where Souren blames revered historical figures and icons of Armenian culture (e.g. 12th century monk Gregory of Narek's famous *Book of Prayers*) for the present dire condition of the Armenian people. The muting censorship in play here speaks loudly of the politics of (literary) translation in the Armenian diaspora, which, in this case, seems to fall victim to a moralizing national identitarian discourse. In another study, I would like to explore the postwar politics of translation from and to Western Armenian.

[9] Pierre reacts thus: "Your writings can't speak to any Armenian as long as they don't contain the word *garod* ["*désir ardent*"] in them! Don't laugh, because that isn't the only defect, you already know it, but let me remind you that the equivalents of other Armenian words don't exist in French either: for instance, the words meaning in French 'mother', 'exile', Armenian', are not proper equivalents of the corresponding Armenian words… any more than are those meaning 'refugee', 'orphan'… The exact words for them don't exist in French…!' " (139-140)

With the characters of Zareh, Hratch and Souren as foils, *The Retreat Without Song* mainly tells the story of Pierre, another Armenian youth from Istanbul who works in a photography shop in Paris as a photo retoucher. His experience develops a sharper image of the encounter with the other which allows discerning a more complex identity/alterity configuration. Already as his double name suggests, he occupies an in-between space.[10] This is indicated at the very beginning of the novel: Pierre, not a youth anymore and intimately acquainted with women is "not able to define either the prostitute or God." (9) This crisis of valuation is due to the superimposition of two frames of reference, French (Parisian) and Armenian, and arises from the peculiarities of each culture.

To explore this crisis at the heart of the diasporic emergence, let us take a look at a relatively early scene involving Pierre and Jeanne-Nenette. The couple is in bed:

> It is in this way that there comes a time when we say that which is in our blood and our bones, and which cannot be translated: because it is only a mother tongue which can give to words those sincere and simple stresses which do not demand any thinking. And when the heart speaks, it must not think. That was why Pierre, in a soft voice as if only to himself, said in Armenian with the appropriate stresses, 'Let me eat you, my Nenette, let me nibble you.' She listened to it with a smile; she asked him to repeat it, and perhaps she understood it, but most of all, she seemed to sense it. Pierre jumped out of bed, stood right in the middle of the room, letting a tongue of sunshine play with his feet and, being stark naked, with his legs and arms open, he began to recite with a bursting delight and overflowing joy:
>
> 'Oh, God of my fathers,
> I approach your altar,
> And bring a female,
> Dragging her by the collar,
> From the world of eroticism.
> See how fat my sacrifice is:
> There is the life of her race
> In her milk-white flesh!'

[10] To be sure, there are similarities with the three other cases. As with Hratch, Pierre indulges himself with French women and considers them loose, in contrast to Armenian women. Like Hratch, he falls in love with a French woman, Jeanne-Nenette. Pierre's case is different in that after learning that Jeanne-Nenette has been a model for pornographic photos, he nevertheless tries to build a family with her.

> Sitting on the bed, with her forefinger in the air, pretending to be a school-teacher, Nenette said:
>
> ‘That’s good, it’s very good, but it isn’t quite right, there’s a mistake in it!’
>
> ‘Oh, Nenette, Nenette *chérie!* Tell me, how could you tell? How could you tell there was something wrong? But I did it purposely, I changed it purposely!’ ” (39-40)[11]

The above passage begins with a claim by the narrator about the paradoxical nature of the mother tongue as the medium of the intimate, the unthought, the untranslatable, and therefore the immediate. It continues with Pierre expressing an intimate desire to “eat” his lover, then jumping up stark naked and reciting a vulgarized version of the opening of an important poem by Daniel Varuzhan.[12] Analyzing this poet’s output in *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire*, Marc Nichanian sees Varuzhan’s invention of poetic paganism as the manifestation of a “national project that had been formulated and stubbornly pursued to its logical conclusion” by the Catholic Armenian Mekhitarist Congregation based in Venice. (111) The latter in turn reproduced

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[11] This scene is ‘interrupted’ here as Pierre and Jeanne-Nenette hear Hratch and Souren climbing the stairs and approaching the door; the two lovers pretend that they are not in the room, while the two friends sit by the door to eat and talk in Armenian, not knowing that their conversation is being overheard.

[12] Daniel Varuzhan (1884-1915) was an Armenian poet from Constantinople educated in Europe (Belgium and Italy). Publishing three volumes of poems and active in the literary-critical scene, he became the most important Western Armenian poet of the turn of the century. He was one of the co-founders of the crucial Armenian literary journal *Mehyan* (“Temple”) (1914) which with prominent writers like Hagop Oshagan and Gostan Zarian promoted the idea of reconstructing Armenian nationhood through art and particularly literature. (See Marc Nichanian’s *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion At the Margins of the Ottoman Empire* (Fordham U Press, 2014) for a critical discussion of this period.) The original poem, titled ‘Vahagn’, after the ancient Armenian ‘pagan’ god of war, is from the 1909 volume *The Heart of the Race* (*Յեղին Սիրտը*), and is an instance of the poetic paganism invented by Varuzhan. Shahnour’s character displaces the following excerpt from the beginning of a longer poem, which I translate into English:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ո՛վ Աստուածն իմ հայրերուս,* | Oh, God of my fathers, |
| *Կը մօտենամ ահա բագնիդ, եւ ինծի հետ* | I approach your altar and with me |
| *Իր պախուրցէն քաշելով* | Dragging from its reins |
| *Կը բերեմ ցուլ մ՚հովիտներէն Տարօնի:* | I bring a bull from the valleys of Daron*. |
| *Տե՛ս պարարտ է զոհս իմին.* | Look, my victim is fertile: |
| *Երբուծին մէջ կաթնամոյր* | In its milk-white breast |
| *Հողին ամբողջ կեանքը կայ.* | Is all of earth’s life. |

*Daron is the name of a historically Armenian region east of Lake Van.

the principle of aesthetic nationalism formulated for the first time by F.W.J. von Schelling in the beginning of the 19th century. Appearing also as philology, aesthetic nationalism consisted of conceiving art as not just representing but creating the nation. ("Introduction," 1-12) Given the above, Pierre's vulgarization of Varuzhan's poem amounts to a displacement of an inherited modern national literary discourse.

What does this scene tell us about the way the novel configures the self and the other? What is the status of language therein? After being intimately 'united' in lovemaking, Pierre 'naturally' expresses the desire to be one with his lover, by saying in his "mother tongue" that he wants to 'eat' her. This inscribes the desire to completely assimilate the other. The fact that the text specifies that Pierre is compelled to say this in Armenian is indicative of the exclusionary logic of the national "mother tongue." When he jumps from bed "completely naked" and, "with his legs and arms open" in the sunlight, starts reciting before his lover a poem by Daniel Varuzhan, Pierre presumably is exposing his most intimate self, once again according to the same logic. Yet, by vulgarizing Varuzhan's poem, Pierre reveals his ambiguous relation to the Armenian national identity and its literary heritage.[13]

Furthermore, Pierre vulgarizes the poem in a comic attempt to tease his lover since he does not expect Nenette to detect the changes he makes to the poem that he recited. Nenette's joke about him making a mistake catches him off guard and makes him

[13] Pierre's and arguably the novel's ambiguous attitude towards the poetry of Daniel Varouzhan reflects Shahnour's generation's ambiguous (to put it mildly) attitude towards the generation of writers exemplified by the journal *Mehyan*. The former in its turn published the review *Menk* ("We") in Paris from April to November 1931. See Part 2, Chapter 2 of Krikor Beledian's *Fifty Years of Armenian Literature in France*, particularly pp. 120-123, a section titled "The Revolt Against the Fathers."

admit his act of parody.[14] Shahnour chooses to render Nenette's coquettish response in French, while Pierre's reply is first delivered in French, then in Armenian. Thus, this brief episode begins as a scene of untranslatable intimate union made possible by the notion of mother tongue, and evolves into a scene of comic dissimulation and parodic displacement. By the end of the scene, with the intrusion of written French into the text, the Armenian language, despite being described as a "mother tongue," gives in to French and the reader is in a space of translation. This happens through an ambivalent gesture of displacing the inherited national literary canon while not being completely assimilated into the other, in this case French culture, since after all, Pierre recites the poem in 'Armenian.' This way, Pierre leaves the orbit of the Armenian monolingual national ideology, displacing the status of the Armenian language by taking it into the in-between space that he occupies as a diasporic figure, without assimilating into the monolingual French national ideology that formed around and formed the French language.[15]

In *The Retreat Without Song*, which is largely devoted to him, Pierre struggles in this in-between space, shuttling between his difficult life with Jeanne-Nenette in the

[14] Marc Nichanian in *Image, Story, History Volume 2 Competitions* (*Պատկեր Պատում՝ Պատմութիւն Հատոր 2 մրցակութիւններ*, 2016) develops a superb reading of Shahnour's novel in the third part of the volume titled "Shahan Shahnour: The Play of Images and the Name of the Other" (342-410). Distinguishing five levels of reading (action, enigmas and their resolution, ideology, realism and *retouche*) and emphasizing the parody pervasive in the novel which renders authorial intention ambiguous and escapes being subsumed under conservative national ideology, Nichanian (evoking Barthes and Lacan) argues that beyond authorial intention, the novel reflects on the Armenian experience of encounter with the other by pointing to a profound identity crisis (as crisis of paternity and enchantment with the Other) and necessarily fails to 'correct' it (in the sense of the *retouche*), thus inscribing an experience of failing to novelistically perceive the Other as Other (from this the uncontrollable violence anamorphically inscribed at the end of the novel culminating with Jeanne-Nenette's suicide). Pierre/Bedros' vulgarization of the poem by Daniel Varoujan is one specific form and instance of parody in the novel.

[15] In addition to French, the novel oftentimes depicts its young Armenian characters using Turkish; they are, after all, from Istanbul. Thus, once again, the monolingual affective prejudice of modern nationalism is underlined.

countryside[16] and his Armenian friends whom life scatters around.[17] Yet, unlike with Zareh, Hratch or Souren, Pierre's narrative ends ambiguously. Shocked by the news of his partner's suicide, he tries to recite the Lord's Prayer in Armenian, is unable to finish and asks his companion to do so in French. Then Pierre hears an old tune, either for real or in his mind. The ambiguity lies in the fact that the novel does not specify whether it is an Armenian tune from his childhood or something else.[18]

In addition to displacing Western Armenian as a national literary language, *The Retreat Without Song* treats image as lacking in its capacity to represent. Early on, for instance, photographing numerous women has the following effect on Pierre: "The breasts, the navels, became confused with one another and there remained only one picture of perfection in his mind: that of a skilled hairdresser. Paris placed the stamp of outward decency upon him also, and the years passed, naked like those women without love." (18) As simulacrum, the image is contrasted with traditional Armenian values which the orphaned Armenian youth nostalgically long for, as is the case with Lokhum. The image is also associated with moral decadence through the figure of pornography. The latter figures explicitly in the novel when Pierre discovers hidden images in his boss'

[16] Jeanne-Nenette returns to Pierre after a car accident that kills her boss, who was involved in producing pornography and was most likely blackmailing her. Jeanne-Nenette herself loses an arm and has a scar on her neck and face. She and Pierre eventually decide to settle in the countryside with Jeanne-Nenette's son, opening a photography shop. But the little boy proves to be uncontrollably violent and Jeanne-Nenette periodically suffers from depression. The couple is full of hope when they learn that Jeanne-Nenette is pregnant. But she miscarries and when Pierre is in Paris for Hratch's wedding, she commits suicide.

[17] Shahan Shahnour's career as a writer reflects the emergence of this in-between-ness given his success as a Francophone poet using the pen name Armen Lubin.

[18] Here is that moment, the very last paragraph of the novel: "Among the tangled inner noises, transported by the endless buzzing in his ears, he suddenly seemed to hear the sounds of a violin from a nearby courtyard: it was an old, a very old and well-known melody, which climbed up with uneven waves, fluctuating and dawdling between floors, a melody which aimed to move those on the second floor rather than the ones on the fourth, but growing weary, clung to the water pipes and managed to climb up here – that old, very old melody, known to all." (152-1523)

house and is repulsed by them. Pornography becomes central to the novel when it turns out that Jeanne-Nennette has posed for such photos herself.

Yet, Pierre is not only a skilled photographer but also a skilled retoucher. Marc Nichanian reads the figure of the *retouche* in the novel as attempting to 'correct' the lack of the image. At one point, to give an example, Hratch asks Pierre to retouch the image of a naked woman. Unbeknownst to Hratch, it is an early naked photo of Jeanne-Nennette. When Pierre realizes this, it unleashes a new wave of violence between him and his beloved Jeanne-Nennette and is never resolved by the novel. Thus, retouching is unable to establish a relationship with the other. This way, the novel inscribes the failure of *retouche* to restore to images their representational plenitude. (400-402) In paraphrasing Nichanian's reading above, I want to draw attention to the profound need of treating images as lacking arising from the post-catastrophic diasporic experience. The diasporic Armenian existence, therefore, demands us to vigilantly theorize diasporic visibility at the limits of the image.

All in all, as we can glimpse from the reading above, *The Retreat Without Song* addresses the catastrophe that befell Armenians as a nation by writing about the exiled survivors. This gives the novel a post-catastrophic and post-national quality. Along the way, the novel displaces Western Armenian literary language, which allows the inscription of a diasporicity emerging in-between displaced French and Western Armenian cultures.[19]

[19] Zareh Vorpuni (1902-1980) was another prominent writer of the same generation as Shahan Shahnour. Like Shahnour, Vorpuni planned a novel series, twelve volumes in total, under the general heading *The Persecuted* to write about Armenian refugee's in France. The first volume appeared in 1929, titled *The Attempt*. The subsequent volumes *The Candidate* (1967), *Asphalt* (1972), *An Ordinary Day* (1974), *Room to Let* (unpublished) and *Because Such is Your Strength* (1985) were written after decades of interruption. In this study, I will not analyze Vorpuni's prose, which also explores the

While Shahnour's novel carries out ambiguous displacements that inscribe diasporic Armenian emergence by means of parody and tragedy, the poetry of Nigoghos Sarafian[20] seizes the post-national and post-catastrophic moment as an opportunity. His poetry collection *The Conquest Of A Space* (*Տիեզերքի մը գրաւումը*, 1928, Paris) opens with a poem titled "Journey", which introduces the figure of a traveler. Here are its first two stanzas.

> Neither a force nor a vice
> My soul, hateful of men
> Is a poor traveler
> Caught between one city and another
> Between one forever abandoned
> And another, uncertain and yet to come
> Facing the window
> That I lean against,
> On things
> Fluid and groundless
> My face is pale
> When my heart rushes
> Like a medusa
> In the opposite direction
> From the train…[21]

In the rest of the poem, the traveler tries to adapt to the new environment, the city and the people, striving to not look back like the biblical figure of Lot's wife. In another poem, titled "Farewell", the traveler asks his beloved Mari to forgive "the vice from his birth to travel the world."[22] The examples above suggest that Sarafian attempts a new beginning. Unlike Shahnour's *The Retreat Without Song*, *The Conquest Of A Space* does not dwell

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encounter with the other, referring the reader to Marc Nichanian's *Image, Story, History: Competitions* and Krikor Beledian's *Fifty Years of Armenian Literature in France* (Part 2, Chapter 2, particularly the section "The Novelistic Cycles" and "Trying to Survive" (159-165).

[20] Nigoghos Sarafian (1902-1972) was officially born in Varna, Bulgaria, but frequently claimed to have been born on a ship in the Black Sea. Sarafian grew up in Rodosto, the European side of the Ottoman Empire, near Constantinople. When briefly living in Constantinople after the war between 1921-1922, where he published his first works, his teachers in school were the major Armenian writers Hagop Oshagan and Vahan Tekeyan. After 1923 Sarafian settled in Paris and started to actively publish while working as a typesetter.

[21] I take this excerpt from Krikor Beledian's *Fifty Years of Armenian Literature in France*, translated by Christopher Atamian. (The Press California State University, Fresno, 2016, 41.)

[22] « *Երէ՛կ, Մարի, ծննդեան ախտըս աշխարհ շրջելու։* »

in tragedy and parody. While acknowledging the pain of uprooting, it strives to inhabit diaspora as a positive and creative space.

Sarafian's later work titled *Reflux and Flux* (*Տեղատուութիւն եւ մակընթացութիւն*), written between 1931 and 1938 and published as a volume in 1939 in Paris, makes further strides in thinking the diasporic condition of in-between-ness as a creative space. It opens with two long-form poems titled "Reflux" and "Flux" respectively, and is followed by 42 shorter poems. "Reflux" begins with the motif of a car speeding through the forest to a shore, which brings up the thought of infinity for the exiled poet in despair: "No ideal or dream. / Not even the tear – oh, exile! -, / That around my heart crushing in surrender and fall, / Is a powerful and benevolent light." For him, "All of the last ideas of a truth / Never had the form."[23] As for the nature of the despair, the following excerpt is quite explicit:

> Poison, degradation was and pain,
> Foreign and false was to me even the love for fatherland,
> Which my soul embraced
> At times with a foolish enthusiasm. Why lie, not a single tie
> To blood and land. One day
> My lips shook from the sham, before the image drained from blood,
> And fell silent. Born in exile,
> With the suns, images and sounds of ten countries
> I have grown up, who
> Barely speaks the language of his mother. Not a single world was
> Under my troubled fingers
> Leaven, clay of light, marble. But wretched, perplexed, from sea to sea,
> With a horrible disintegration,
> Only a nameless mob dying from delirium,
> And another one which, haughty and vain,
> Was disavowing us, wriggling unto itself all day long.
> Sometimes weak and gloomy
> Strolls. Sick and lazy, my soul would walk the sea
> Floors, behind it
> Leaving a trace of light, feeling a secret and waving
> Liveliness around it.[24]

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[23] « *Ձմշարաւթեան մը վերջին / Գաղափարները բոլոր չունեցան ձեւը երբեք։* »

[24] This excerpt is my translation of the Armenian here: « *Թոյն, խաթարում էր ու ցաւ, / Օտար ու խորթ էր ինծի հայրենական սէրն անգամ, / Որուն հոգիս փարեցաւ / Երբեմն խանդով մը չիմար։ Ինչո՞ւ խաբել, ոչ մէկ կապ՝ / Արեան, հողի։ Գոլացին / Օր մը շրթներս՝ կեղծիքէն, պատկերին դէմ արնաքամ / Ու լլուեցին։ Գաղմածին, / Տասը երկրի արեւով, պատկերներով, ձայներով / Ես մեծցած մարդ՝ որ իր*

As it is stated explicitly, fatherland and mother tongue are among the discarded myths sunk in the ocean of the poet's despair. Walking the seabed, the poet is in the realm of survival with its "secret and waving / [l]iveliness." The recurrence of his despair is conveyed by the long, undulating form of the poem. The poem begins with a long piece (about 99 lines) and then breaks down into relatively shorter stanzas. It almost always keeps the longer (about 15 syllable) verse syllable count followed by a shorter (about 6 syllable) one. These variations conjure the undulating rhythm of the sea retreating in reflux.

"Flux" opens with the poet reflecting upon his childhood and youth. Extrapolating from these events a law pertaining to collective experience, the poem states: "Centuries go back and forth, every fifth step / they take a step back. / Fevers have their modulation; loves take their reflux even / in the richest heart. Peoples their great / Death and wakening have fertile." Towards the end of this long poem, the poet embraces this profound undulating move, greeting the negativity and pain that have been part of his experience. This way he arrives at the thought of the flux as giving birth to him. The sea transforms itself from a graveyard to the space that renews life ad infinitum. "Flux" closes thus:

> Naked here I am, before the sea
> Giving birth to us, my chest wide, against the winds… in the cold, giant
> Green changing ad infinitum.
> Delight. Salutation to *my inner contradiction*, salutation to the big
> Inundating flux.

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*մօր / Լեզուով հազիւ կը խօսի: Ոչ մէկ աշխարհ՝ իմ խըռով / Մասներուս տակ, որ խըմոր / Ըլլար, լուսէ կաւ, մարմար: Ալ խեղճ, տարտամ, ծովէ ծով, / Քայքայումով մշտահաւտր, / Զառանցումով մը մեռնող ամբոխ մը լոկ անանուն, / Եւ ուրիշ մէնոր յոխորտ, սին՝ / Մեզ կշտուրանար, ինքն իր վրայ կը գալարուէր օրն ի բուն: / Երբեմնին թոյլ ու մըթին / Թափառումներ: Հիւանդ, ծոյլ՝ հոգիս կշտերթար ծովերուն / Յաւակներէն, իր եաին / Ձըգելով հեաք մը լոյսի, ըզգալով գալտ ու ծըփուն / Կենդանութիւն մշուիր չորս դին: »*

Salutation to the sea which anointed this new birth of mine.[25] (Emphasis mine.)

Formally, "Flux" continues the undulating movement begun with "Reflux" — both at the level of verse and stanza — while also reproducing with modification key motifs from "Reflux." This binds the two poems together while at the same time giving each its freedom of movement. Sarafian's poetic meditations on life result into a profound law of contradiction: birth and death, formation and destruction of identity, the other and the self are part of the same underlying and undulating motion. Hagop Gulludjian reads this "inner contradiction" across Sarafian's work as a creative state of liminality: "he [Sarafian/the poet] adopts contradiction and anchors himself in placelessness as a fertile homeland." (12) Gulludjian proceeds to formulate the undulating placelessness in Sarafian thus: "Motion is vitality, ensured with contradiction and rooted in chaos, which is the station where the rootless person can establish himself without surrendering either his past, or his future." (13)[26] In arriving at this general 'metaphysics' of life, Sarafian displaces the notions of fatherland and mother tongue, becoming symbolically an orphan. The formal innovations of the poem, as well as its use of foreign words perform this displacement that is explicitly stated in the end.

The above discussion of Shahnour's novel and Sarafian's poetry is meant to illustrate two points. First, the diasporic Armenian culture that emerges during the interwar period in Paris is *post-national* as it displaces the inherited national culture. In the cases of Shahnour and Sarafian, it is national literature that is displaced. Second, these displacements inscribe two different experiences of encountering alterity. Alterity

[25] « *Մերկ ահա ես, մեզ ծընող / Ծովուն առջեւ, կուրծքըս լայն, հովերուն դէմ… պաղ, հսկայ* / *Կանաչէին մէջ յարափոխ։* / *Հրճուանք։ Ողջո՛յն իմ՛նեղքին հակասանքիս, ողջո՛յն մեծ* / *Մակընթացման ողողուդ։* / *Ողջոյն ծովուն, որ այս նոր վերածընուիըս օծեց։* »

[26] I thank Hagop Gulludjian, my Western Armenian teacher at UCLA when I was an undergraduate there, for having trusted me with his unpublished manuscript on Sarafian.

as another culture — the unfamiliar cultural milieus into which survivors find themselves — and as the catastrophe haunting the diasporic "community." I put the word "community" in quotation marks because the 1915 Catastrophe — which destroyed Western Armenian communities on their historic lands and scattered the survivors into forced exile — makes it increasingly impossible to form and reproduce Armenian communities with pre-existent regional, monoethnic and monolingual modes of identification and affiliation. The possibility of this impossibility is what makes diasporic Armenian culture *post-catastrophic*. This second experience of alterity, moreover, affects the first one. A dispersed people of survivors with an essential crisis of identity cries out for more inclusionary and non-oppositional discourses of cultural coexistence, while simultaneously exposing the exclusionary and oppositional claims to identity sustained by and sustaining "host" cultures. In this manner, diasporic Armenian survival challenges our usual notion of culture. It asks us to think of culture as no longer a home, a defined territory and language that maintain and reproduce a static and homogeneous environment, but as a space where movement, difference and catastrophe are inscribed. Inscription here refers to the forms of the limits of realist and positivist representation of any medium (textual, visual, filmic, etc.). The diasporic experience of alterity — due to the encounter of other cultures and/or to undergoing catastrophe — exposes the universalizing and homogenizing nature of such representation. This, in turn, necessitates a notion of inscription to attend to the various forms in which the limits of representation are traced.

Moreover, I use the prefix 'post-' throughout this introduction precisely not to mean an absolute break from a prior mode or state of existence, but to theorize survival

as conditioned (if not defined) both by what was before (e.g., a modern nation-building project) a rupture and the rupture 'itself' (e.g., genocidal catastrophe). Such a non-linear notion of the 'post-' is implicit in the unresolved parody of Shahnour's novel and explicit in Sarafian's poetry when the latter takes diasporic exile as an opportunity. In the case of the works of these two writers, as well as the two others to which I shall turn next, at stake is tracing the peculiarities of the non-linear temporalities put in motion by their works.

Literature, written in what used to be Western Armenian before the Catastrophe, is only one, but arguably the most consequential, of the cultural practices that inscribes this post-national and post-catastrophic diasporic cultural emergence. It, in turn, demands us to theorize the multilingual nature of diasporic inscription beyond ordinary notions of semantic translation. To further explore the possibilities and implications of such a diasporic literature, I will turn to the postwar poetry of Vahé Oshagan and Krikor Beledian.

**Postwar Diasporic Poetics: Oshagan, Beledian**

Vahé Oshagan[27] published his first volume of poetry *Window* (*Պատուհան*) in Beirut in 1956, shortly after moving there from Paris. It is, however, with his second

[27] Vahé Oshagan (1922-2000) was a diaspora Armenian poet, writer and critic also born in Bulgaria. His father was the great Western Armenian writer Hagop Oshagan (1883-1948), who, along with Daniel Varuzhan and others was instrumental in reinvigorating Western Armenian literature in the first decades of the 20th century during the Ottoman era. In his teens, Vahé Oshagan moved with his family, growing up in Jerusalem and Cyprus. He studied in Paris from 1946 to 1952, eventually completing a doctoral degree in comparative literature in the Sorbonne. Settling in Beirut, Lebanon, in the early 1960s, he immersed himself in writing, publishing and teaching Armenian literature. At the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, Oshagan moved to the US, living in Philadelphia and San Francisco. He also resided in Killara, Australia, not far from Sydney, before returning to Philadelphia. In a separate study, I would also like to explore the links between the works of the two Oshagans.

volume, *City* (*Քաղաք*, Beirut, 1963), that Oshagan's work acquired lasting significance.[28] The "Entry" of *City* gives a panoramic view of the city under the morning light. Paradoxically, the city is the place where human beings are forbidden to really encounter each other, (15) something that exposes the absurdity (meaninglessness) of their existence. (17) Through figures, such as the prison guard, the porter, the judge, the smuggler, the prostitute, the teacher and the doctor, the poem describes absurd states of human existence. The different sections of the volume[29] elaborate on the places where humans lead their absurd existence.[30] What is more, as the place of inauthenticity par excellence, the city looks for at least a single witness to it, which it cannot find. (16) Oshagan's poetry is meant to be this witness. At the end of the opening section of *City*, Oshagan writes:

> The city that
> gathers thousands of people
> but does not equal to one man's
> one room's
> one unpostponable and erroneous yearning.[31] (25)

Accordingly, *City* describes not just the distractions from the meaninglessness of life that constitutes the city, but also the more powerful, "unpostponable and erroneous yearning"

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[28] Vahé Oshagan continued to publish innovative poetry throughout his career. Starting with the volume *Crossroads* (*Քառուղի*, Beirut, 1971), Oshagan pushed even further the formal and thematic experimentation even further by mixing theatre, historical fiction, radio sketch and poetry. The volumes *Alert* (*Ահազանգ*, Philadelphia, 1980), *Panic* (*Խուճապ*, New York, 1983), Suburbs (*Արուարձաններէ*, Los Angeles, 1991), *Embrace* (*Համբոյր*, Sydney, 1996), *Identity* (*Ինքնութիւն*, Antelias, 1996) and *The Traveler* (*Ճամբորդը*, Los Angeles, 2006, posthumous) are singular works and deserve close analysis, attending particularly to the changing status of the problematic of the absurd.

[29] The eight sections of the work bear the following titles: "Entry," (4-26) "Mind," (26-71) "Street," (72-83) "Café," (84-97) "Cinema," (98-111) "Cabaret," (112-131) "Room" (132-142) and "Church" (143-168).

[30] The cover by Arshak, a Paris-based Armenian visual artist, is a black & white abstract piece, echoing the light/dark dichotomy operating in the text, which is introduced explicitly at the end of "Entry." Vahé Oshagan and Arshak collaborated in a similar fashion throughout the years.

[31] « *Քաղաքը որ / հազարաւոր մարդիկ կը կուտակէ / բայց չհաւասարացներ մէկ մարդու / մէկ սենեակի / մէկ անյետաձգելի ու վրիպած տենչի։* » (25)

for meaning. Marc Nichanian refers to this when, in "Whispers from Vahé Oshagan," written in 1984 but published a decade later, writes that in *City* the absence of meaning needs to be understood with the "presaging of some meaning" in man, which Oshagan calls "desire." The absurd comes into being from the "collision" of the absence of meaning with the desire for meaning. This, in turn, gives rise to the "tragicness of existence." (150)

Krikor Beledian, similarly, has argued that "the experience of absence" is central to Oshagan's poetry. Beledian characterizes it in the following manner: "Whatever there is is the "duplicate" or the illusion of the man, his fake appearance. Things are not what they seem; the world, the universe carry in their center a general, unapproachable absence. Over it come and move all the shadows and entities. They become masks that cover that absence, occasions for conscience to ignore or deny it." (158) This absence is at the source of the absurd, from which, as Beledian argues in the same essay, the writer tries to inscribe traces. (165) ("Vahé Oshagan and the Contemporary Poetry," *Flock*.) As Beledian suggests, it would be profoundly misleading to claim that 'the' absurd is represented — "described" — *in* or *by* Oshagan's poetry since representing implies the existence of meaning independent and outside of the representation. Rather, as both Beledian and Nichanian suggest, Oshagan's writing distorts discursive patterns of representation in an attempt to inscribe and even perform absurdity, to make its whispers heard — to use Nichanian's metaphor.

What is crucial for us to note in the context of our exploration of the nature of diasporic Armenian literature is that Oshagan's absurdist inscriptions create a post-national and post-catastrophic diasporic literature. To begin with, the full title of the

volume is *City: An Epic, Volume 1*(*Քաղաք. Դիւցազներգութիւն մը, Հատոր Ա*). Among other senses, the word, which I am translating as "epic" — and which one could also translate as "epopee" or "epopoeia" — alludes to the Armenian epic *The Daredevils of Sassoun* (*Սասնայ Ծռեր*). Dating from the 8th century, it recounts the successful Armenian rebellion against the domination of the Islamic empire. Unlike *The Daredevils of Sassoun*, written down in the 19th century and giving impetus to the formation of modern Armenian national consciousness, Oshagan's epic hardly falls within a national logic. Instead, it strives to witness the meaninglessness of human existence. Moreover, a specifically post-national moment is inscribed in the beginning of the section titled "Cabaret," when Oshagan writes: "along the banks of mother araks / the fatherland stretches up to the borders of the dress." (112)[32] Here, "along the banks of mother araks" is a line from an Armenian patriotic poem "The Tears of Araks" by Rafael Patkanyan, a poet of the second half of the 19th century. Araks is a river that marks the southeastern border of Armenia. Patkanyan's emotionally charged poem anthropomorphizes Araks by having "her" speak of the country's erstwhile greatness in contrast to its current dismal state. Oshagan's poem distances itself from a national territorial logic by resituating Patkanyan's memorable line as part of the absurdist inscriptions of *City*. And, as the line "the fatherland stretches up to the borders of the dress" implies, it does this by ironically suggesting that in the consciousness of a survivor of a national catastrophe, the longing for a national homeland still lingers. The exposure of this longing as absurd allows reading the *City* as an epic on the impossibility of the national epic. By evoking the epic, Oshagan's work mobilizes its collective and collecting powers. It does this, however, by

[32] « *մայր արաքսի ափերով* / *հայրենիքը կը տարածուի մինչեւ սահմանները զգեստին* / … » (112)

displacing the national epic and in this manner inaugurates diaspora. This is how Vahé Oshagan's work is post-national and post-catastrophic. The work of Krikor Beledian can also be seen as part of this current, even though the two authors are a generation apart and Beledian's work draws inspiration not so much from existentialist but post-structuralist and post-modern currents.

Krikor Beledian[33] is a Paris-based Armenian writer who has been publishing poetry from very early on. From equally early on, he has been writing critical essays on poetry, offering readings of virtually every major, and some lesser known, Western Armenian poets. In 2010, Beledian published his substantial volume of poetry, *Mantras*, containing 32 mantras. The first three appeared in 1986, the other eight in 1993, both published in Paris. Opening the 2010 collected volume is an essay entitled "Rhythmic Cut" (2009) which reflects on the texts that follow. As far as I know, it is the latest text that Beledian has published that is explicitly on his poetry and poetics.

In the opening paragraph of the essay "Rhythmic Cut", Beledian describes what follows as striving "to accomplish a contour-less work in fact left in a ghostly state." (5) The essay further affirms that the texts that are brought together for the volume do not form a whole; they are uprooted from their world, are given back to language, and bear

[33] Born in 1945 in Beirut and having moved to Paris in 1967, Beledian defended a doctorate in philosophy on the transgression of the aesthetic in Heidegger's thought. Working as a journalist for about a decade, he simultaneously taught Armenian at the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* (INALCO). He contributed to the Paris-based Armenian daily *Haratch* and, starting from late eighties, for about two decades taught Classical Armenian language, literature and Church history in the Theological University of Lyon. From 1992 on, Beledian has been teaching Armenian literature at the INALCO and in 1995 submitted a second doctoral thesis, this time in Comparative Literature, to the Sorbonne out of which grew the volume *Fifty Years of Armenian Literature in France, 1922-1972, From Same to Other* (*Cinquante ans de littérature arménienne en France, du Même à l'Autre* published in 2001 (CNRS), translated into English in 2016 and Armenian in 2017.

the "blow" of the "rhythmic cut." At the same time, these texts aim towards adventure and experimentation. (6) Here is a key paragraph:

> Now what need is there to write poetry with more or less beautiful language, prose-verse, to strike words to each other, to make images gush, to polish ideas, to showcase an I that one does not have, to become intemperate, to adopt mythology and patrimonial myth, to put into work poetic enchantment, sublimity of emotion, imaginative power; in one word, to enter into the game of expression? Writing poetry seems so seriously ridiculous that you ignore the creative act. You ironize, do not believe in its erstwhile force. But since you do not want thought to abandon you, you do not want to abandon yourself which you are not anymore, to become thoughtless [*անբան*, *unban*, 'without logos'], you hand yourself over to the contrary. Destruction is ceremony [*արարողութիւն*, *araroghutyun*]. You unmask the illusion, you oppose the aim. You work [*բանիլ*, *bunil*, same root as for 'logos'] against it. You confront. Language turns over itself. With a somewhat quick and sovereign determination you turn poetry into antipoetry, you lean on it, like a guard pondering the beloved dead. The disenchantment has already begun. You are not a poet. (7)[34]

In the passage above, the word *արարողութիւն* (*araroghutyun*) is not chosen accidentally. Its primary denotation is 'ceremony, rite,' particularly in a theological (holy, sacred) sense. Yet, the root *արար* (*arar*) is the basis for the verb *ararel* or the noun *ararats*, meaning 'to create' and 'creature' respectively, also bearing theological connotations. Thus, in the above passage, it makes more sense to translate the sentence with the word *araroghutyun* as "Destruction is ceremonial creation." or, the other way around, "Destruction is creative ceremony." Either way, here we have come across a figure of post-catastrophe, since at stake is inscribing survival after destruction. Recalling that in the opening of his essay Beledian characterizes the volume as ghostly and in the next paragraph qualifies it as "in danger of becoming work" (5), *Mantras* is an anti-work

[34] This is not the first time that Beledian distances himself from the discourse of expression. In fact, it is a crucial critical gesture which is already explicit in the essay "Discourse and Reading," opening the volume *Discourse* (*Տրամ/Dram*, Beirut, 1980) — the first of Beledian's collected volume of criticism.

inscribing destruction.[35] With and perhaps beyond ceremonials acts of mourning, creation is what survives as inscription.

1. Language and Catastrophe

Immediately after the paragraph I cited, there is an implicit yet hard to miss reference to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, in the form of a question: "But who does not want to rest, to find solid ground, stable law and measure, to enjoy existence, to dwell, to simply dwell in language, as one great master used to say of a deeply rooted nest and dwelling." (7-8) That Beledian is entering into a dialogue with Heidegger is not surprising, given the fact that he wrote his first doctoral thesis on Heidegger.

In his "Letter on Humanism" (1949), starting with the very first paragraph, Heidegger makes his now famous claim: "Language is the house of being." (239) His overall argument is that humanism is part of the metaphysical tradition which for centuries — from Plato and Aristotle, the Romans, the Christians, Hegel, Marx and even Nietzsche — has not been able to properly pose the question of being, busying itself instead with thinking beings (in plural). Heidegger writes:

> Metaphysics closes itself to the simple essential fact that the human being essentially occurs in his essence only where he is claimed by being. Only from that claim "has" he found that wherein his essence dwells. Only from this dwelling does he "have" "language" as the home that preserves the ecstatic for his essence. Such standing in the clearing of being I call the ek-sistence of human beings. (247)

In the rest of the essay, Heidegger goes on to distinguish his understanding of existence from Aristotelian, Kantian and Sartrian less rigorous, still metaphysical, formulations. He understands existence — ek-sistence — through its etymological route as standing

[35] It is worth noting in passing that in 1972 Beledian published a volume of poetry titled *antipoem* (*Հակաբերթուած*).

out/being there, as "the clearing of being." (248) Language is given a central role here as "the clearing-concealing advent of being itself." (249)

After his tacit/not-so-tacit allusion to Heidegger, Beledian continues thus: "Only whoever has house, the one healing becomes the guard of the language. But the homeless, the inheritor of the lifeless is banished so far away that s/he has neither the essence anymore, nor is capable of being near it." (8) Accordingly, the gist of Beledian's rejoinder to Heidegger is that *the dying of Western Armenian points to an experience of homelessness which the thought of language as the house of being and metaphysics as its homelessness cannot adequately think. This homelessness is radical because it is language itself, "the house of being," that is dying.*

Having announced his differences with Heidegger, Beledian continues: "If the ground disappeared the dead language was left behind." (8)[36] To further think the remnant dying language, he introduces the notion of a second language: "You become yourself with the other, with a second language that now stirs in my language and indicates my continued incompleteness." (10-11) In other words, the writer experiences the death of a language as its supplanting by another language. This is a process that exposes the essential incompleteness of a language since it is its possible ending that is being experienced.

Immediately after this, Beledian makes a crucial gesture: "Whoever comes after poetry, its survivor, like the one escaping an untellable catastrophe, and diaspora belong to the same exteriority." (11) With the above claim, Beledian links and thinks together

[36] In 1983, Beledian published a volume titled *Grounds* (Վայրեր). This fragmentary prose poem performs the disappearance of a ground and sets out to find new ones through, for instance, the figure of the archipelago.

anti-poetry, surviving the Armenian Catastrophe and diaspora as the "exteriority" gained by the experience of the dying of Western Armenian.

## 2. Form and Catastrophe

After tacitly alluding to Heidegger, Beledian asks the following question: "But what form for the lacking language…?" (8) Later, he poses a more precise question: "Is not rhythm form in space?" (11) Indeed, what form does the inscription of the dying of a language take? Or rather, how are inherited poetic forms deformed due to this experience? To think this problematic, Beledian turns to ancient Indian mantras, which he describes thus:

> …forms of speech, filled with the erstwhile force of speech, linked with universal divine force and as such thanks to repetition they lead the applier to the supreme speech. They are a means of knowing, on the contemplative and practical level, but also beyond the mind, intra-mental and condensed entities. They have a commonality with linguistic application, except that the poetic forms rarely lead to merely sound combinations. In its supreme and most sublime sense, in the Vedic tradition mantra is determined as the vocal form of divinity. (13-14)

Mantras, as Beledian takes them, do not fit into the Western metaphysical categories of subjectivity (including the poetic category of the lyrical voice) and are not governed by the logic of expression. Instead, they are means through which "supreme speech" — a state of consciousness beyond subjectivity — is reached. At this juncture, what seems to intrigue Beledian the most is the idea of the mantra being the "vocal form of divinity." He pursues this idea further when he adds: "the universe is born from voice, as the only sonorous vibration that the essence-non-essence sounded. The whole a sound construction, spiritual matter, image of dance, rhythm. The hearer, the writer can infinitely construct the silence. (I interpreted. I choose. I metaphor.)" (14) The longer sentence before the parenthetical deploys figurative language by juxtaposing antithetical

qualities ("sound construction, spiritual matter, image of dance, rhythm"). This mode of figuration gives an idea of how the mantra disrupts ordinary mental and linguistic categories —how "thought is suspended by figuration," (16) to cite Beledian from the same essay — to move the consciousness beyond it. In the longer quotation above, Beledian treats the mantra as a tool for constructing silence. It is understood that he is interested in the mantra as a tool to approach and inscribe not so much the divine silence, but the radical silence of the experience of anti-poetic, catastrophic and diasporic exteriority.[37]

3. "Mantra XXXII: People-less Language"

After the above excursus, and acknowledging the unfairness of skipping 31 mantras — overall some 600 pages, written across three decades — let us read the last one entitled "People-less language." I chose this mantra also because, as its title suggests, it explicitly addresses the problematic of post-catastrophic language. This mantra has 13 numbered fragments. Let us read from fragment 10.

> to you every word
> they
> lent
> oh these guarding absent ones of every speech
> for you to return
> to them
> with the play of your voice
>
> separate the exact obscurity from darkness
> the breath from murmur

[37] There is another substratum to Beledian's intervention which deserves lengthier analysis. It has to do with Daniel Varuzhan, who in conceiving poetic paganism draws inspiration from ancient Indian Vedic literature. Beledian has published a book on Varuzhan, *The Fire Circle Around Daniel Varuzhan* (1988). It would be interesting to explore the critical and poetic dialogue between Beledian and Varuzhan in relation to ancient Indian literature. In a longer study, moreover, I would not only consider Heidegger's meditations on poetry, which become particularly explicit in his writings from the 1950s, and his famous links with The Kyoto School, but also more texts by Beledian, particularly the volume *Grounds* (1983, Paris.)

keep fever and panting keep
whatever shivers
                the vibrating
that which is most filled with life
the miracle of light in tree's drive

caress the dewdrop after the suffocating nights
forget star and moon and forest mirages
forget every comparison
                exempt from salt and tear
with brightness
                become
absent oh guard of loss
if words are not
  life-giving
improbably fragile
they will forever disappear
those who one by one lent them
to you
with their present rich denial (614)

The beginning of this fragment suggests that the language ("every word") of the text is borrowed from the unburied dead of the Armenian Catastrophe ("they") to whom he needs to return it. Fragment 8 gives to the "them" a spectral status and thinks of them as in an essential codependence with the poet: "you have not been / you have not died not in the least / as long as I exist." (609) What form could such a "return" take, which the text immediately characterizes as "the play of … voice"? An answer is provided soon after, when the text formulates the ordinance to "become absent," to clear space for the haunting silences to come to the fore. Otherwise, in an age of denial — when the ghostly presence of the unburied dead and the untellable experience of their catastrophe are constantly erased — the ghosts once again will be erased. At one level, denial is to be understood as the persecutors, their descendants and allies' refusal to acknowledge the catastrophic violence perpetrated against the Armenians, as is the case with contemporary Turkey. Yet, a more profound denial can take place when the acknowledgement of the Catastrophe is merely confined within realpolitik (based on exchange, calculation) and

realist, positivist historicist discourses that by definition cannot account for the incalculable and unrepresentable nature of catastrophic loss. [38] In the face of this threat — which touches everyone, including and especially the survivors — Beledian's writing attempts to rescue the death of the dead. Here, too, the great significance of writing in what used to be Western Armenian comes to the fore. By writing in the language of the dead, the catastrophic silence can be heard by the survivors. This act can contribute to the mourning of the dead. Through an internal process of transformation, such writing also changes the status of Western Armenian from a national language to a post-national and post-catastrophic survival language.

The quest to "hear" the catastrophic silence also affects realist conceptions of the image. While Shahnour and Oshagan treat images as simulacra, Beledian's *Mantras* deploy them to inscribe catastrophe. The problematic of the "untellable catastrophe" marking the "exteriority" of diasporic becoming, which is addressed in the introductory essay "Rhythmic Cut", is extended to images. The last line of fragment 4 of Mantra XXXII states: "with the country was lost every image" (603). The very last lines of the mantras, fragment 13 in its entirety, state: "but the detestable/ is the unmixed origin / of the image / that you ate // behold here again the people-less language" (618). As we shall see in the last chapter of this dissertation, Beledian's *The Palimpsest Man* (*Կրկնագիր Մարդը*, 2015) continues this reflection by inscribing a complex terrain that links language, catastrophe and image.

Furthermore, it is helpful to think of the strategic move towards silence attempted by Beledian's *Mantras* with Abraham and Torok's notion of cryptonymy. As "(words

[38] I have in mind two texts that address this threat, Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995) and Marc Nichanian's *The Historiographical Perversion* (2009).

that hide) because of their allusion to a foreign and arcane meaning" (*The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A* Cryptonymy, 18), cryptonyms allow the theorization of the hidden existence of a trauma. Abraham and Torok theorize such internal traumatic existence as "incorporation" and contrast it with the notion of introjection: the ordinary process of mourning through which the lost object becomes part of the self.[39] Moreover, a cryptonym is not formed by "simple metonymic displacement," the way psychoanalysis conventionally explains the mechanisms of transference. Rather, as with the Wolf Man's case, it involves *morphological displacements within and across languages as well as through psychosomatic phenomena, and visual perception and representation*. Such displacements induce Abraham and Torok to conceptualize cryptonyms not as words — understood as symbolizing entities that make possible ordinary processes of psychic representation and introjective mourning — but as "things" which are *incorporated* into the psyche and hide behind a living network of disguised traces. (18-19)

While Abraham and Torok's theory of incorporation is based on individual psychic experience, it can help gain insight on the collective experience of post-catastrophic linguistic survival in the Armenian diaspora. Interestingly, the opening fragment of Beledian's Mantra XXXI evokes a figure of incorporation: "we ate salt / sand / then the flakes of black snow / on mountains / now / the dry painful cold until disappearance / with shriveled / hands / stuttering / brave same / denied / witness / of nothing." (601) This fragment ventriloquizes the survivors of the Armenian Catastrophe who were put into death marches from their homes in Anatolia to the Syrian Desert. The last three words of the quotation — "denied / witness / of nothing" — refer to the threat

[39] This notion of introjection was first proposed by Sándor Ferenczi in the essays "Introjection and Transference"(1909) and "On the Definition of Introjection" (1912).

of the denial of catastrophe on which I elaborated above. This denial is further evoked with the recurring motif and image of eating "salt / sand / then the flakes of black now." With it the writing inscribes the state of traumatic incorporation affecting from within Western Armenian as a post-catastrophic language.

Moreover, the works of Shahnour, Sarafian and Oshagan can also be read as inscribing a post-national and post-catastrophic diasporic emergence through incorporation in Abraham and Torok's (and Ferenczi's) sense. In *The Retreat Without Song*, the poetry recitation scene with Pierre and Jeanne-Nennette begins by announcing Pierre's desire to assimilate the other culture. Pierre, to recall, says in Armenian, "Let me eat you, my Nenette, let me nibble you." (39) This desire to assimilate the other is neither actualized nor resolved through a compromise given the violence that unfolds throughout the novel all the way to its tragic ending. This failure is the inscription of the Armenian Catastrophe in its incorporated state. In Sarafian's work, the optimistic gesture of welcoming the survivor's "inner contradiction" tries to find a way out of this failure. So does Oshagan's attempt to bear witness to the absurdness of diasporic Armenian survival by writing in Western Armenian. These instances point to the need for theorizing diasporic incorporation, to think its specific forms of disguises, displacements as well as the possibilities of its undoing.

**Diasporic Incorporation and Multiculturalism**

Nevertheless, the differences between Abraham and Torok's theorization of incorporation and the diasporic inscription of the Armenian Catastrophe also need to be emphasized. This is so particularly regarding the multilingual aspect of both experiences.

In the Wolf Man's case, fragments in Russian and English languages surface as crypts in his adult psyche immersed in German. Thus, here Germen is the linguistic milieu where multilingual traces are incorporated. This makes the Wolf Man's experience only marginally multilingual. The collective and dispersed nature of diasporic Armenian incorporation, by contrast, is deeply multilingual and demands the theorization of at least two kinds of crypts: one within the surviving Western Armenian and another in other languages. I privilege the former in this dissertation in general and in my above discussion of the necessity for Beledian to write in Western Armenian in particular. In this kind of deeply multilingual diasporic incorporation, a survival language incorporates two types of intimate alterities: its catastrophe and other languages into the spaces of which it is immersed. The first phase of diasporic Armenian emergence, accordingly, would consist in reading the inscriptions of these two kinds of incorporations as well as attending to the hidden relationships between them. As we can see, the ordinary notion of translation — of attempting (and often failing) to transfer meaning from one language into another — cannot account for the complex intra- and inter-lingual incorporations that occur with the diasporic survival of Western Armenian.

This is not to say that literature written in languages other than Western Armenian and precisely addressing the post-catastrophic diasporic Armenian existence — leading to the second kind of diasporic incorporation — is of lesser value. While being much more common, and sharing similarities with Deleuze and Guittari's notion of minor literature (deterritorialized, political and collective),[40] such literature challenges us to theorize translingual hauntology to account for catastrophic loss in translation.

[40] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), translated by Dana Polan.

The above analysis of diasporic Armenian literature in Western Armenian poses fruitful challenges to the multiculturalism debate and post-colonial theory at least in the Anglophone world. In the mid-1990s, there is an attempt to formulate an open-ended, transformative vision of multiculturalism by upending the assimilationist and integrationist biases preceding it.[41] An influential instance of this attempt is Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). It criticizes the West's and its modernity's universalist, progressivist and rationalizing discourses from the disjunctive and overlapping grounds of post-colonial enunciations. This is how *The Location of Culture* theorizes the discursive sites which make possible diasporic and minority cultural formations to appear. By contrast, diasporic Armenian experience is not post-colonial in Bhabha's sense since it is not inscribed in a European colonizer language, but in Western Armenian which, and this is the second reason, is surviving a *national* catastrophe. One can state this differently, too. The diaspora Armenian experience is radically *post*-colonial in the sense that the colonized as a collectivity — on its way to re-emerge as a modern nation — has been destroyed by the colonizer. The survivors are scattered around

[41] For an example, see David Goldberg "Introduction: Multicultural Conditions," which opens the 1994 volume *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*. In this essay, Goldberg traces the emergence of multiculturalism to the post-WWII monocultural, Eurocentric and assimilationist formations of "area studies and applied social science" to serve US geopolitical interests. (4) During 1960s, induced by "the civil rights and countercultural movements" this assimilationist drive was substituted by an integrationist approach, which relegated non-dominant cultural formations ('minorities') to the autonomy of the private sphere while prompting them to establish relations with the center the values of which "continued to be defined monoculturally." (6) Out of this configuration emerged the demands for multiculturalism. Various forms of "managed multiculturalisms" (here Goldberg refers to Chicago Cultural Studies Group's characterization "corporate multiculturalism") or "difference multiculturalism" (Goldberg uses Terence Turner's phrase) promoted the ideology of liberalism and advocated for pluralism which conceives "groups constituted as givens … and entrenches the boundaries fixing group demarcations as unalterable." (7) Such multiculturalism does not challenge the power of the dominant culture while attempting to administer relations with various cultural formations conceived as minority. (8) Lastly, and partly as a result of "migratory shifts" (9), Goldberg argues that a third logic emerged within the multiculturalist debate, that of incorporation.

the world carrying with them and displacing an inherited modern national literary language. [42]

Since Bhabha's discourse has shaped the Anglophone multiculturalist debate so much, [43] it behooves us to ask the following question: How can we imagine a multiculturalism open to a post-national and post-catastrophic survival language? Generally speaking, the carriers of diasporic Western Armenian language would have to come to acknowledge it as the heritage that defines them most and thus that which has the

[42] An important development within postcolonial theory of the 1990s is Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Fredric Jameson's reading of non-Western literature as Third World national allegories. (See Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986).) A literary theory proper to the socialist position from which Ahmad avows in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) would take into consideration the objective determinations and material conditions that give rise to a specific literary configuration. Such a literary theory has to rely on some notion of mimesis of reality, unlike its wholesale rejection by post-structuralists who, according to Ahmad, irresponsibly over-textualize. For Ahmad, Derrida and Foucault emanate from a Nietzschean tradition of philosophizing which does not believe in human communication and thus finds representations (of reality, facts) inherently distorting. By contrast, Ahmad cites and sides with the Marxist tradition which holds true representations (mimesis) to be possible and sees language, human communication, capable of formulating them. (190-197) In the opening remarks to the last chapter of the book he adds that for a theory to deserve its name, it has to be grounded on empirical reality while being capable of both self-modifying its previous theoretical positions based on new facts and simultaneously thinking of the configurations that gave rise to that theory. Ahmad's self-reflective representational Marxist empiricism can hardly even register the possibility and the specificity of the post-catastrophic and post-national, let alone strive to theorize its multilingual inscriptions. As for Jameson, it is needless to say that diaspora Armenian emergence, which is at stake here, is neither 'Third World', nor national.

[43] Bhabha provides a vision of world literature from such grounds: "… world literature could be an emergent, prefigurative category that is concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma. The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'. Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature. The centre of such a study would neither be the 'sovereignty' of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on those 'freak social and cultural displacements' that Morison and Gordimer represent in their 'unhomely' fictions. Which leads to ask: can the perplexity of the Unhomely, intrapersonal world lead to an international theme?" (12) While Bhabha's theoretical framework is open to the emergence of diaspora Armenian literature, it leaves undertheorized the essential multilingualism that is at stake with the former. Gayatri Spivak's attempt, in *Death of Discipline* (2003), to rescue the multiculturalist debate with the notion of planetarity is also susceptible to this critique.

greatest potential for a cultural emergence that is most properly 'theirs.'[44] Their efforts would have to be two-pronged. On the one hand, they would need to profoundly engage with the Western Armenian literary tradition, to continue displacing it. On the other hand, they would have to profoundly explore other literary, artistic and intellectual currents which they encounter and choose to engage with. This would be the most general *form* of diaspora Armenian culture in Western Armenian and would have to be accompanied by a parallel transformation, driven by experimentation, in the socio-cultural institutions that sustain Western Armenian as a post-catastrophic language. In its turn, a discourse of multiculturalism, if it were to truly engage with diasporic Armenian culture and give it space to survive, would have to acknowledge the profound and indispensable role of Western Armenian as a *literary language*. With this, we could hope for a deeply and creatively multilingual multiculturalism to emerge.

With the above considerations, my hope is to have outlined the discursive parameters into which I will situate the subsequent analyses of postwar diaspora Armenian film and literature in the next three chapters. Chapter 2 analyzes Gariné Torossian's bilingual documentary fiction *Stone, Touch, Time* (2007) as opening to diasporic becoming by a series of non-assimilative self-reflective feminist gestures which problematize the representational status of image and narrative in patriarchal national discourses — both in Western Armenian and in the West. In Chapter 3, I analyze Vahé Oshagan's criticism and prose to further explore the ways his absurdist reinterpretation of the Armenian Catastrophe counters the tendency to reduce the latter to conventional national and historicist explanations dominant among Armenians and antithetical to their

[44] In a recent essay, Marc Nichanian has set out to think the survivor status of Western Armenian by contrasting it with languages of sovereign states as well as exploring the latter's historicity.

diasporic conditions of life. Chapter 4 turns to Krikor Beledian's novel *The Palimpsest Man*, set in the university circles of 1970s' Paris, as inviting the reader to reflect on catastrophe by staging an encounter between Armenian (phonetic) and Aztec (pictographic) traditions of writing as well as Armenian and Aztec experiences of loss and survival. These chapters are not just readings of instances of diaspora Armenian emergence — brought together as one study they also constitute and hope to facilitate their further emergence.

## CHAPTER 2

## Reading Diaspora With Gariné Torossian's *Stone, Time, Touch*

### Methodological Stakes

The introduction to this dissertation looked at works of literature to point to the post-national and post-catastrophic nature of diasporic Armenian culture. The analysis of this chapter elaborates on the latter by exploring the methodological stakes in theorizing diasporic inscriptions. To carry this out, I propose the formulation *"diasporic readings" as a generative gesture against the temptation of reading diasporic inscriptions with ready-made theoretical frameworks*. In what follows, I develop narrative, performative and incorporative readings and argue that attending to their mutual irreducibility brings forth a sufficiently nuanced and open-ended discourse for theorizing the Armenian diaspora.

A narrative reading attends to what a work of art is 'about.' I see this kind of reading standing closest to what Best and Marcus[45] theorize as "surface reading," tracking how explicitly stated and directly represented themes and questions are developed and resolved through the device of continuous *narrative*. However, since the discursive figure of the 'about' pre-supposes themes and questions existing more or less independently, both from the work as well as its reading, it can hardly account for the emergent quality of diasporic art — a configuration that is in an active phase of becoming. To be sure, the poverty of surface reading — and here I am echoing Ackbar

[45] See, for instance, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations*, Vol. 108, No. 1 (Fall, 2009), pp. 1-21.

Abbas' notion of "poor theory"[46] — has necessitated what Best and Marcus call "symptomatic readings," exemplified by Marxist and psychoanalytic readings that seek to unearth meanings hidden behind and beyond the text. Still, both surface and symptomatic readings tend to explain a work through pre-existing theoretical frameworks while emergent diasporic art calls for new ones. In response to this lack, I develop a performative reading to draw attention to the ways in which diasporic art facilitates the emergence of new configurations.

Diasporic art, nevertheless, oftentimes bears traces of unbearable loss that survive through patterns within but are irreducible to the play of narrative themes and performative gestures. Such traces necessitate reading diasporic art as incorporating trauma, which can certainly be thought of as a form of a symptomatic reading. To practice and *test* the three-dimensional reading called by diaspora, I will turn to Gariné Torossian's *Stone, Time, Touch* (2007).[47] The layered reading that follows interprets a moment from the film in one way and then returns to it in the next section for another kind of reading. This kind of helical motion of reading — meant to induce reflection on

[46] See "Poor Theory and New Chinese Cinema: Jia Zhangke's 'Still Life'," (CTI Public Lecture, December 3, 2008) where Abbas emphasizes three motifs in developing the notion of 'poor theory': (i) the "salutary uselessness of existent theory"; (ii) the "poverty of images" as the realization that "the city cannot be observed directly, but it can be deduced from effects and distortions it produces" which leads Abbas to suggest thinking of "cinema, architecture, design, new media, and so on" "as parapraxes: something like slips of the tongue or other inadvertent mistakes that provide evidence for the existence of what cannot be made evident: a spatial unconscious;" and (iii) the documentary as duplicitous, as "in the etymological sense of something made up of folds and doublings." (2-3).

[47] Gariné Torossian was born in Beirut in 1970 and has lived in Canada since 1979. Her earliest works appeared in the late 1980s, consisting of short films and song clips. See *Elective Identities: The Moving Images of Gariné Torossian* (edited by Tom McSorley, Canadian Film Institute, 2010) for details. *Stone, Time, Touch*, Torossian's first feature film, debuted at the Berlin International Film Festival and won the Best Creative Documentary prize at the 23rd Warsaw International Film Festival (2007). Recently, Torossian has been working on another feature-length film, *Noise of Time*, concerning Lebanon, where the artist was born and grew up, as well as Canada and France. It will be interesting to see how *Noise of Time* resonates with her previous work.

various modes of interpretation — is hopefully not to be confused with unnecessary reticence or repetition.

**Narrating Diaspora**

*Stone, Time, Touch* tracks the visits to Armenia of three Canadian Armenian women a generation apart, played by Kamee Abrahamian,[48] Gariné Torossian herself and Arsinée Khanjian.[49] Torossian and Abrahamian seem to be visiting the country for the first time, while Khanjian recounts her experience of visiting Armenia across the years at least four times. The film presents various layers and aspects of Armenian society and reflects upon the experience of diaspora Armenian women visiting the country. The narrative arc traced by the film suggests that its three protagonists come to understand that what they thought and imagined (and were made to imagine) about Armenia while living in the diaspora is very different from the real country. Thus, the film is about diaspora in the sense that it narrates the acquisition of a diasporic consciousness by its protagonists.

In *Stone, Time, Touch* the characters of Abrahamian and Khanjian thematize post-exilic diasporic consciousness by explicitly developing a discourse of impossible return to a homeland. In the case of Abrahamian, this is done through the staging of the character's inner voice accompanied with diary entries. Early on in the film, when she

[48] The youngest of the three, Kamee Abrahamian, was born in Canada in an Armenian family. Her diverse artistic and academic work revolves around ballet, dance, theatre and visual arts and interrogates among other works discourses pertaining to gender, diasporicity and ecology. I shall return to some of her recent work in the later section of this chapter.

[49] Arsinée Khanjian is a prominent diaspora Armenian actress and producer. Born in Beirut in 1958, she has been living in Canada since the age of 17. Besides her independent film and theatre work, Khanjian is also known for her roles in her husband Atom Egoyan's films.

lands in Armenia, as the screen superimposes images of the Yerevan airport with her writing in her diary, her voice, following incomprehensible whispers, states:

> I've always dreamed of going to Armenia some day. And now I am here. I can't believe my dream has come true. I needed to visit Armenia to get a deeper sense of the country. It has occupied my imagination all my life. Now I am here to see it for real and to find my answers to all my questions. I grew up Armenian. Where do I fit in? Where do I fit in? [1:45-2:52]

This opening statement by Abrahamian, as we can see, presents, in a direct and explicit manner, a diaspora Armenian woman visiting Armenia for the first time and hoping to understand what being Armenian means. Following this, Abrahamian, walking in Yerevan, repeats and adds an important detail: "I can't believe my dream has come true. It has occupied my imagination all my life. My imaginary homeland. My imaginary homeland. Now I am here to see it for real." [6:29- 6:45][50] Once again quite explicitly, it is stated that Armenia has been conceived as an imaginary homeland. This is where the notion of root, of origin enters into her discourse. Later, while visiting a village in Armenia, Abrahamian states: "I grew up Armenian… but I'm not Armenian like these people. I've always dreamed of coming here; is this the home I've been looking for? It is different than what I've imagined." [33:36-34:02] She then adds, "They don't look at me the way I expected them to look at me." [34:47-34:50][51] These thoughts reveal a new realization and a new state — that of a diasporan experiencing alienation in the real Armenia which she/he has always thought of as a homeland. This is the moment where the theme of impossible return to a homeland becomes explicit.[52] At the coda of the film,

[50] Abrahamian also adds: "I only knew Armenia through books, music and stories my grandparents told me." [11:03 –11:09]

[51] This statement is accompanied by the reflected image of Torossian, which associates Abrahamian's voice with the director's silent image; this shall be of importance later.

[52] Later, a priest serving in a small Catholic church in Yerevan (a special church, as Khanjian later has things to say with regard to it) states that he will never leave the country, that he does not want to have the soul of a 'refugee.' The Armenian term translated in the subtitles is *gaghtakan*. This moment is revealing of the anti-diasporic discourse prominent among Armenians of Armenia. It is in this context that

Abrahamian comes to state the following (writing the first sentence in the diary, too) with a pause between two sentences: "Now I have been a part of it. … It seems I only have more questions now." [1:06:25-1:07:19] As we can see, by telling the story of Abrahamian coming to this interrogative state of realization, *Stone, Time, Touch* offers a narrative of the impossibility of returning to a homeland for a diaspora Armenian.

Arsinée Khanjian's narrative expands upon Abrahamian's discourse of post-exilic diasporicity. Khanjian's earliest comments regarding her visit to Armenia state explicitly the awareness of the separation between the imagined and real Armenia and express the wish to encounter the latter.[53] Like Abrahamian, she has an indispensable sense of being Armenian and has acquired this sense of identity while being born and growing up in the diaspora.[54] Khanjian's subsequent commentary is even more explicit about the awareness of the gap between imagined and real Armenia: "Now Armenia being there not only just as an imaginary homeland but as a real country, I realize that every time that I try to come close to this sense of belonging to this culture I realize that actually I belong to something else that was Armenia but not what Armenia was really about." [4:47-5:07] The gap between imaginary and real Armenia leads to the awareness of the impossibility of returning to a homeland. Consequently, Khanjian arrives at this realization: "I thought the only way I can understand where is this confusion is [sic] if I just take a trip with

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Abrahamian's voice asks: "Could I live in Armenia?" [37:50-37:54] In this manner, the notion of a homeland is being, as it were, tested by the narrative.

[53] Her opening statement in the film is the following: "It was interesting that we are starting with this first photograph, where it's very dark all the way [?] around it and where there's this polar [?] of a church that doesn't have its roof anymore. You see it as open space. Now I think that's how I was imagining this trip for me to be. To come from a place, and perhaps dark with all kinds of references and so on and go into the unknown, this white space." [3:12-3:38] The image of the church without dome is telling. I will return to it in a later section of my analysis.

[54] Accordingly, after her initial statement, Arsinée continues thus: "I went because I felt that I needed to reinforce my connection to Armenia. I never ever say that I am a Canadian or a Lebanese; I always say that I am Canadian from Armenian descent or Lebanese from Armenian descent. So I realize at this point in my life that it's an inescapable part of myself to be Armenian." [3:45-4:10]

absolutely no predetermined setting for it, if I just go there and let myself be I might come to experience surprising things that I was somehow looking for it." [5:20-5:41][55] Like with Abrahamian, here too we see an emergent, open-ended attitude in Khanjian's narrative about visiting the real Armenia.

After these initial remarks, Khanjian's discourse further nuances the diasporan's attitude towards Armenia, accepting the latter's otherness and making real connections with it.[56] Then, Khanjian develops a vision of diaspora with the figures of stone, touch and time. Accordingly, different diaspora Armenians experience a sense of being connected with each other and with an Armenian past by touching the stones of ancient Armenian churches.[57] Khanjian later valorizes the indexical element in the ancient

[55] She also adds this: "Before I left Toronto, they would ask me why are you going to go to Armenia now, and ah I felt very in despair almost because I just did not know how to explain really my reasons and yet the drive was so strong, I needed so much to do it." [5:52-6:07]

[56] "There's a big difference between my first trip to Armenia and this fourth trip to Armenia where first time around I think I was so disillusioned; I felt cheated, I felt lied to because Armenia was this paradise the way it was described to me and when I first set foot in the country I did not recognize any of the things that I had imagined all those years and it took me all these years to understand that that's neither the fault of Armenia nor my own. This time what dropped from me — and I am so relieved about that — is that I will not judge Armenia, and as I try to get to know it better I realize that I get to know it less and less." [8:42-9:36] Later, Khanjian adds the following: "The one message that I wanted to bring home is that Armenia like any individual has beautiful qualities and impossible characteristics; the only way we can understand it is to understand its humanity; the fact that we have fantasized and made it so ideal of a place for such a long time should not impose on Armenia something that it's not; it's a culture like many cultures struggling to exist; it's a small country, it's a small place." [26:57-27:31] This is inserted with the scene of Abrahamian's visit to the village with the driver, a priest and another companion, and the scene in the barn, with a village woman speaking in dialect about the chicken and the cheese, etc. Finally, there is also this statement by Khanjian: "What I think I know of Armenia is not necessarily what Armenia is about; it's what I have created as a logical relationship so that it can coexist with my other realities. The fact that I was born in Lebanon, I had much more direct exchange with that culture and I have been living in Canada for thirty years and Armenia, *Hayastan*, homeland, was the most intangible of all, somehow in my sense of images of Armenia they're all drawn by me, and what Armenia has portrayed of itself." [32:45-33:30]

[57] While continuing to look at photos of an ancient Armenian church, Khanjian states as much: "Look at this texture on the walls, all these colors, this sort of literal change in the stone as time has marked it, it makes me think of who we are as people. Each Armenian community of different countries in the diaspora have taken on a different shade, a different tone, a different personality, and yet there are the commonalities of the history that brings us together; stone being this material that really crosses history with so much strength and ability to survive and yet you see the marks on it show time and its effects; that's what we are I guess as people." [11: 26-12:17]

churches in developing her views about the Armenian diaspora.[58] This further suggests that for her the discrepancy between real and imaginary Armenia is nonetheless bridged by touching the stones in Armenia, which are taken as indexical traces affirmative of an Armenian identity whether it is national or diasporic. Khanjian interprets a ruined Armenian church without a dome, the image of which appears in the beginning and at the end of the film, as standing for such belonging.

Khanjian also addresses the Armenian Catastrophe. *Stone, Time, Touch* devotes an episode to her visit to the main genocide memorial in Yerevan, the *Tsitsernakaberd.*[59] Accompanied by images from her visit to the memorial, as well as historical footage that presumably depicts Armenians a century ago, particularly women, she states the following.

> I've never been there, believe it or not, the genocide commemoration memorial; there was absolutely no one on that day, it was a gray and cold day, I was told that it's very impressive when you walk in there, that something happens to you; I assumed that after having gone through so much material dealing with genocides that I would be maybe not that emotionally surprised, but the moment I saw the fire something broke off in me and then I was just in tears, thinking that actually there's never ever anyway to remember well enough these events, and that history will never be able to properly relay to us what they mean; those are all efforts of remembering, that true remembrance remains in what we feel. [49:13-50:30]

As we can see, Khanjian acknowledges the limitation of historical discourse to properly account for and remember the Armenian Catastrophe. Unlike what Kassabian and

[58] Arsinée states: "Often I put my hand on the stone; I touch the stone; he said why do you do that; I said, I don't know, it connects me, I think, with time; its like touching Jesus' wound to make sure that it's there, and I sort of feel that the elements have gone through these spaces and other people might, must have touched it just building it they must have touched it and the history they carry, I guess it's the closest I can come to grab history in my hands." [39:04-39:45] Touch as a figure is taken up in various parts of the film, too.

[59] Literally meaning 'the swallow's fortress,' this memorial complex was built in 1967 on a hill overlooking Yerevan, two years after more than a million people gathered in the streets of the city to, for the first time, openly commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Catastrophe.

Kazanjian call *Hai tahd* ("Armenian case") films,[60] she does not instrumentalize the Armenian Catastrophe. Instead, she tries to contain it within the realm of the personal, by suggesting that true remembrance is in the feeling. Lastly, *Stone, Time, Touch* weaves Khanjian's reflections on the Armenian Catastrophe with an episode of Abrahamian and Torossian visiting an elderly survivor. This way, the Armenian Catastrophe as a theme reverberates across the narrative strands of the three protagonists.

What is more, Khanjian's diasporic take on Armenia is quite broad. She discusses the real Armenia in concrete ways, presenting actual stories of people living there in poverty, including as war refugees.[61] In doing so, she also addresses post-Soviet reality

[60] In "Melancholic Memories and Manic Politics: Feminism, Documentary, and the Armenian Diaspora," (*Feminism and Documentary*, eds. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1999, 202-223) Anahid Kassabian and David Kazanjian identify and call *Hai Tahd* ("Armenian case") as a discourse and cinematographic genre pertaining to Armenian cultural production in the diaspora thus: "*Hai tahd* films consistently ground two generic features in the historic fact of the 1915 genocide. First, they posit a transnational Armenian identity based in the shared experience of genocide. They draw on other commonalities — blood, language, culture — that loom large in Armenian and other nationalist discourses but tend to subordinate them to genocide. Genocide survivors appear in every one of these films, often bearing affectively charged witness to the dismembered and mutilated bodies of family members. *Hai tahd* films suggest that, like the dismembered bodies of mothers and brothers, the Armenian national body was fragmented by genocide and insulted by the Turkish state's continuing policy of denial. Ironically, however, it is that very fragmentation, that shared experience of loss, on which they base a transhistorical, transnational Armenian identity. Second, the films embrace a discourse of a particular exchange: rights for victimization. Since Armenians transnationally share the identity of victim of genocide, the films propose, certain reparations must be due. The bodies and psyches of four generations of victims and survivors should be paid for with, in the farthest-reaching vision, an independent nation-state, but in all cases at least a special place in twentieth-century world history and an admission of guilt from the modern Turkish nation-state." (205) Kassabian and Kazanjian go on to argue that the reduction of the complexity of the Armenian diaspora into a politico-judiciary calculation by this discourse is what is highly problematic.

[61] Khanjian finds it ironic that a family lives in a metal container overlooking Mount Ararat, whereas for diaspora Armenians it is a dream to have a house with a view of Mount Ararat, which stands for Armenian culture. [13:44-14:45] This is followed by the episode on trafficking and then by Abrahamian's visit to Gyumri. Then, Khanjian tells the story of another family, refugees from Azerbaijan, who live in a basement of an unstable factory building. She emphasizes the fact that this family had transported books with themselves — "a corner of luxury" says Khanjian. Shortly after, she speaks, continuing about the Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan, their dire housing conditions. Khanjian concludes: "The one thing that really struck me is how people live in amazing dignity regardless of what their conditions are; I mean they're so in touch with their predicament that they just don't want to dismiss it as other than condition of life, that one important thing about life is preserving one's dignity." [29:21-29:48]

and reflects on the Soviet influence on Armenian culture and identity.[62] Touching on the subject of social inequality in Armenia, she introduces the notion of diasporic activism as one mode of relating to Armenia.[63] Finally, Armenia's landscape also figures in Khanjian's discourse. Looking at a photo of a picturesque ravine in Armenia, she speaks of a spiritual connection with Armenia's nature.[64] All of these discursive modes of relating to Armenia allow Khanjian to affirm at the end of the film her interrogative,

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[62] Khanjian, looking at a photo from Armenia: "Both symbolically and historically, this is a very interesting statement of where the country is today. So when I see this picture, of course I recognize the church and then I have to understand a political regime that has created a neighborhood, a genuine neighborhood and therefore a history for families, for people, for individuals, for a culture, for institutions, to exist this close with so much antagonism. The Soviet era of you know of Soviet identity and yet you see a church which is the most symbolic reference to what Armenian culture stands for. I don't know what it means to be really having gone through this history; it's by talking to people and by seeing their real reactions over generations of people that I'm hoping to understand the little details that make up the larger truth about who Armenia is today." [36:10-37:18] This is followed by the scene which Kamee in her diary titles "The little Catholic Church of Yerevan," the same church about which Arsinée was talking, with Ashot Adamian, the priest, Abrahamian and another silent companion talking. The zooming-in montage focuses on the talking priest putting his hand on Ashot's arm while saying that Armenians are relics like the stones of this church which are from different churches that no longer exist. The theme of Armenia as index returns in this way. Arsinée further comments on a photo with a ruined church and an unfinished summer house: "I love the fact that here's the ancient church and then there is the *duchas* which are the summer houses that they used to have during the Soviet era outside of the city, but there're hundreds of these *duchas* that are empty and unfinished; and this is a house that has been bombed by the Azeris; you just don't know what will ever be the future it, for it to be re-inhabited or to serve for a more active purpose; I don't know, I love it; ancient Armenia and the Soviet Armenia and the present Armenia, conflict." [40:05-40:48]

[63] Arsinée ends piece 3 thus: "This could be anywhere, any wonderful resort in Europe, in Whistler, wherever privileged people go to ski; it was quite amazing for me to go from one extreme to the other; the contradiction, was, again, a revelation, about where the state of things are in Armenia, in as much as it made me very happy to see Armenia in this kind of economic rehabilitation, it made me wonder how cultures can fill the gap between these extremes; for me as an Armenian, again, with this notion of having the responsibility of this homeland was part of my upbringing, this trip gave me a sense that basically we can choose any issue and keep working at it to create a better living environment and for Armenia." [1:05:12-1:06:10]

[64] Here are Arsinée's words: "You know, when I see these landscapes, I sort of feel so part of it, and yet I've such brief almost inconsequential type of relationship with them because I've spent so little time with this nature, so, why is it that it's so close to me? Why is it that I feel like I'm part of it? What is belonging? I don't know, when I see a landscape I ask that question to myself more than when I talk to the people, I think, because there's an unspoken relationship between nature and one's self; all I have to do is feel it and nature allows me that with no words, and so the connection is set at a completely different level of practicality, it's another dimension is that what's called spiritual? I don't know, perhaps." [43:28-44:30] It should be stated that *Stone, Time, Touch* consistently juxtaposes this spiritualized image of the Armenian landscape with images of ruin and uncollected trash into which impoverished children roam. While Arsinée's discourse echoes the 19th century discourse of an emergent modern sense of Armenian nationhood, in which the land where Armenians have historically lived is figured as a paradise, *Stone, Time, Touch* as a film reflects upon this heritage by inserting real images of polluted, neglected, ruined landscapes from Armenia.

open-ended diasporic perspective, hoping that it will be part of the future of the Armenian world.[65]

The above narrative reading of *Stone, Time, Touch* is sufficient to make an initial remark regarding the importance of this film. Diaspora Armenian cinema is largely shaped by films that on the one hand idealize (a lost) Armenia, and on the other hand reject the diasporic state as an assimilative dead-end. Furthermore, such films are usually made from masculinist perspectives and are informed by a patriarchal national discourse.[66] *Stone, Time, Touch*, by contrast, not only refuses to idealize Armenia, but also reflects on the hold that such idealization has on the diaspora Armenians. By giving voice to a plurality of Armenian women the film distances itself from a masculinist worldview. Such a reading is certainly supported by the scenes with the two local Armenian feminist artists as well as the sequence that draws attention to the international trafficking of women. It is further supported by Khanjian's discourse which shines light on the plight of women in poverty.[67] For all that, the above reading does not at all suggest

[65] She states: "Through this trip, which is the first of its sort and hopefully not the last, [sic] it gives me the strength to ask more questions than believe having answers. The most assured way of getting to know someone or something is when you are open to be surprised by them. Our son has never been to Armenia; this coming summer will be the first time where he will go with us. I will be able to bring him along to this journey of search as opposed to this journey of affirmation. I want him, [sic] to pass on to him an identity of questioning, so then he can be intimately relating to his process of finding out who he is as opposed to being told who he is." [1:07:25-1:08:28]

[66] I refer the reader to Kassabian and Kazanjian's article, which I mentioned earlier, as one way to substantiate my claim. While more and more films break away from this ideological prison, they are still definitely in the minority. One of relatively early work is Atom Egoyan's *Calendar* (1993).

[67] Here's what the artist Arevik Arevshatyan says regarding her art as her paintings are being shown: "Clichés, common clichés… and male clichés, where they perceive females as beautiful things. The females are supposed to silently sit and they will admire them. Not only certain professions but, all women regardless of what they do are always perceived that way. I have also raised this issue that her mouth is closed and her ears. Only the eyes are speaking. The main symbols used are flowers and the eyes. They are portraits of women who do not speak but are able to observe everything and they can see everything." [12:43-13:30] As for Nora Badalyan, another artist from Armenia whom Abrahamian and Torossian visit, she says the following as they watch on video her performance of a veiled woman beating stone walls with a hammer. "This is why I decided this hammer because there are many limitations in this life, both internal and external. External limitations are many for an Eastern woman. Internally we limit many things within ourselves. We have to get rid of these limitations, so that we can develop fully, live to our maximum, create

a silent condescending attitude towards Armenia on the part of its visitors from Canada. Rather, the fact that *Stone, Time, Touch* presents three diasporic (Canadian, with Torossian and Khanjian born in Beirut) female characters visiting Armenia and interacting with local feminist artists suggests a more complex configuration. In giving space to female and feminist voices from Armenia and the Armenian diaspora, the film strives towards a diasporic feminist solidarity, without for all that projecting a homogeneous and 'West'-centered feminism on post-Soviet Armenia.

**Performing Diaspora**

*Stone, Time, Touch* does not merely narrate impossible return, but also performs it through a multi-layered texture woven with multi-sensory associations. This way the film denaturalizes realist filmic representation informing practices of conventional documentary. Since the latter tends to serve and reproduce the hegemony of national and patriarchal ideologies, the film, thus, interrogates and displaces them.[68] Here, I am using performance in J.L. Austin's sense, as, instead of stating or describing something with

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to our maximum. I believe, striking with that hammer, even though it was useless because the stones were very solid, only small pieces came apart. You can't fully destroy the obstacles, but we can try, because as much as a lot depends on the outside world, a lot depends on us. We have to destroy these limitations inside us ourselves." [47:54-49:00] I am using the film's English subtitles in each case. The video of Badalyan's performance continues a few more seconds with the background music being eerily and intimately silent. Lastly, the episode which touches upon the topic of Armenian women being victims of international trafficking and prostitution is definitely not from the genre of blissful celebration of an ancestral homeland. The framing is interesting, too, as it presents the person who won a grant from the US Embassy to make videos that would raise public awareness on this issue.

[68] In the "Introduction" to *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2000) Laura Marks offers an encompassing description of diasporic cultural texture, which resonates well with *Stone, Time, Touch* and my reading of it: "The violent disjunctions in space and time that characterize diaspora experience — the physical effects of exile, immigration, and displacement — also, I will argue, cause a disjunction in notions of truth. Intercultural films and videos offer a variety of ways of knowing and representing the world. To do this they must suspend the representational conventions that have held in narrative cinema for decades, especially the ideological presumption that cinema *can* represent reality (Mercer 1994b, Deleuze 1986). Formal experimentation is thus not incidental but integral to these works." (1)

words, which could be true or false, *doing* something with them.[69] What does *Stone, Time, Touch* do? In one phrase, it performs diaspora by facilitating the emergence of a multi-layered, multi-vocal and multilingual space of representation.

Still 1

While layered frames characterize the entire film, one such image is particularly powerful. [**Still 1; 1:04:01**][70] Here, we have superimposed images of Torossian and Abrahamian, both of them holding cameras and at times looking at their cameras and by extension at the audience. This way, this shot brings a double meta-dimension to the filmic representation by self-consciously including into the space of representation elements that are conventionally hidden from it: two cameras and at least one filmmaker. The significance of the double, or, rather the triple — in fact, with this shot, the viewer

[69] See Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*. A similar way to theorize filmic acts would be to draw from the theoretical framework developed by Gabriele Schwab in *Imaginary Ethnographies: Literature, Culture, and Subjectivity*, particularly in relation to the notion of the "experimental system," which, drawing from Rheinberger, Schwab uses to define literature as using "language to explore, shape, and generate emergent forms of subjectivity, culture, and life" (2). In a similar manner, *Stone, Time, Touch* facilitates the emergence of diasporic "subjectivity, culture and life."

[70] This shot is from the part where Abrahamian and Torossian attend a local wedding. The background music is Zulal's performance of an Armenian folk song, "Beautiful beloved from the mountain" (*Sari sirun yar*), whose main theme is love, tying well with the wedding. Zulal is an all-female New-York-based diaspora Armenian acapella trio specializing in performing Armenian folk songs.

may realize that all of the three main characters of the film are represented with cameras, since Khanjian, too, talks about Armenia by commenting on photos from there —lies in refusing to privilege the figure of the author/filmmaker *even after the gesture of revealing its conventionally hidden enunciatory position*. Here, diaspora is performed as the necessary problematization of representing (or presuming by hiding/avoiding to represent) positively given unitary identity, whether it is Armenia or the Armenians living in or visiting the country, or that of the artist. Impossible return here is performed as the lack of closure of the notions undergirding national — unitary and homogeneous — mode of identification.

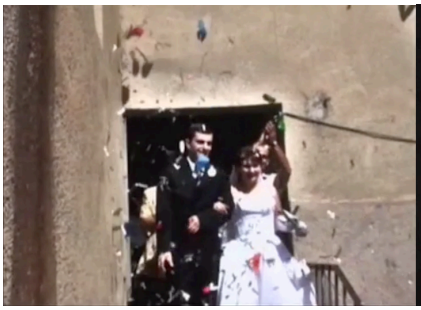
The self-reflective elements in *Stone, Time, Touch* also problematize (auto)biographical documentary. *Stone, Time, Touch*, instead of unproblematically relying on autobiography as an allegorical or metonymic vehicle for reaching the truth about Armenian identity, interrogates the very modes in which autobiographical accounts are constructed. The latter is done by inserting and shifting the elements that are key to the discourse of autobiography. One such element is Gariné Torossian's 'playing herself.' The shifting of this autobiographical element occurs when, instead of conventionally telling her story in a mode of confession, Torossian appears in silence, most of the time holding a camera, while the viewer sees her reflection on a mirroring surface. The silence of the representation of the film's director undermines the possibility of relaying autobiographical truth by telling it through the figure of a talking head. The holding of the camera folds the representational space unto itself, exposing the technological representational regime proper to autobiography and otherwise destined to stay invisible.

Another figure constitutive of autobiography which the film interrogates and shifts is the diary. Throughout the film, Abrahamian writes in English in her diary while whispering whatever she writes in Armenian. While giving a narrative scaffolding to the film, and being conveniently accessible to its audience (the vast majority of whom are either able to read English or understand spoken Armenian) these bilingual and multimedia (textual and audio) moments of representation of the diary entries subvert the univocity of the inner voice assumed by autobiography. A telling instance of the plurivocity of the inner voice, moreover, can be found in the beginning of the film, when right before hearing Abrahamian's character making her opening statement, one hears whispers of female voices. By selectively representing and homogenizing such voices, the film conceives autobiography as a meditation on the heterogeneous nature of lived experience.

Still 2

Still 3

Still 4



Still 5

Still 6

The self-reflective shot with both Torossian and Abrahamian holding cameras is followed by another with a sky view, which formally reproduces the frame of the preceding shot by having rocks on its right and bottom, forming a half frame. [**Still 2; 1:04:04**] Then, after a momentary close up of a local bride's face, looking into the camera, a window, another frame. [**Still 3; 1:04:10**] This is following by a panoramic shot of a cavern, again, with a door, a frame, which is black, and, once again, there are birds around. [**Still 4; 1:04:11**] Finally, it is followed by a shot with the bride and the groom walking out of a door, another black frame, with doves in their hands, to be let go in a moment. [**Still 5; 1:04:16**] The camera movement is choppy — one can see the frames following one another in a slow halting procession.

As we can see, part of the organizing logic of the above sequence is the figure of the rectangular filmic or photographic frame. This sequence, thus, constitutes a meditation on how representations of reality are constructed and perceived through film and photography. Let's take a closer look at how this is done. The frame of the cave is black. It is followed by another black frame out of which a soon-to-be-wed couple walks out (this is supposed to be the bride's home door or the door of the building where she lives) and soon the two release the doves. The rectangular frame is evoked before, too, through another home door, out of which a survivor of the Armenian genocide walks out. [**Still 6; 56:33**] Abrahamian and Torossian talk to her during their visit to an Armenian village.

This last shot marks the end of the episode in which the survivor of the Armenian genocide recounts stories form her horrific experience. Her exit can be read as life affirming *filmic act* that wishes to put to rest these horrendous stories. This is further

performed with the bride and the groom walking towards the audience from a frame. Here, the colors are the reverse, the outside of the frame is white, and the inside is black.

Furthermore, after the survivor exists, there is a brief episode with a tightrope walker, accompanied with masked dancers and lively traditional music. (This kind of street entertainment has a long history in Armenia but has almost gone extinct nowadays.) The rhythmic episode is a fast sequence, recalling an Eisensteinian revolutionary montage, with juxtaposed images of one and then two storks on a field on fire and the tightrope walker jumping surrounded by people watching the spectacle. I read the 'tightrope scene' as a scene of exorcism performing the magical wish of transformation from a deadly catastrophe of genocide to life. While the fire invokes catastrophic violence, the stork marks rebirth as the bird which seasonally returns and rebuilds its nest to lay its eggs, a common figure in the Armenian cultural imaginary. As for the tightrope walker, he is in the liminal state between life and death, jumping and flying, dancing in the face of danger, as if praying to survive a calamity. The music of this scene matches with that of the life-promising ritual of a wedding, which is the episode that follows the one with the genocide survivor. In this manner, the music serves as an affective bridge between the juxtaposed scenes of the survival and the young couple.

After the tightrope sequence, the scene with the genocide survivor resumes, but the tone is different. This time, her family members ask her to talk about happy days. She refuses, however, and the conversation moves towards her two marriages — something unusual for traditional Armenian women a century before but very common due to the violence of the genocide — which serves as segue to the wedding celebrations attended

and filmed by Torossian and Abrahamian. With the tightrope sequence — framed by the survivor walking outside the frame, and the to-be-wed couple walking into the frame — *Stone, Time, Touch*'s performance of diaspora goes a step further by confronting and *moving* beyond the catastrophic past through a filmic act of wishful thinking in the form of *magical exorcism*. This is how the film affirms life, an affirmation that, unlike most diaspora Armenian cultural production, bears no signs of privileging national or diasporic life.

In addition to troubling the ideologies dominant in the Armenian diaspora, *Stone, Time, Touch* experiments with ethnography. The film explicitly evokes an ethnographic attitude through Arsinée Khanjian's explorative approach to Armenia. Yet, in addition to exploring Armenia, Khanjian also feels a sense of responsibility towards the country which is partially expressed through her implied philanthropic work. Thus, inhabiting a diasporic subject position already complicates the basic premise of conventional ethnography — that of visiting 'other' cultures and studying them. For the three protagonists of *Stone, Time, Touch*, Armenia is both a homeland and a foreign country.

Moreover, *Stone, Time, Touch* enacts a diasporic ethnographic configuration in the scene with Abrahamian visiting the Sardarabad Ethnography Museum where she wears traditional Armenian bride's garments, while a guide explains to her the symbolism behind various elements.[71] Torossian, presumably, records the scene which is then interwoven into the sequence of the local wedding visited by Abrahamian and her.

[71] "The Armenian wedding dress, especially the bride's dress, is like tree of life. The way a tree flowers the wearer of the wedding dress has to blossom and have children. First, they dress her with a long red shirt. The collar is all embroidered to bring the wearer good luck. The red apron represents a married woman. If this belt was made for you, it would say 'for the enjoyment of Kamee." It is wrapped around the waist at least three times. Its magic ritual is to keep you protected from evil. Until the first child was born, the veil would cover the face." [1:00:31-1:02:18] (The background music by Zulal is on the theme of weddings, too.) I draw attention to the figure of magical wishful thinking in the female museum guide's ethnographic discourse.

The guide speaks here for conventional ethnography, of the post-Soviet nationalist kind. The purpose of this kind of ethnography is to accomplish the closure of a national identity, which it does in this case by relying on the figure of the traditional Armenian woman.[72]


Still 7

However, when coming across conventional ethnography practiced in a 'homeland' that has survived catastrophe, *Stone, Time, Touch* does not reject it by overtly criticizing or ironizing what might appear as essentializing and patriarchal about it; nor, however, does the film embrace conventional ethnography. What does it do then? It uses the ethnographic discourse as a means to reflect on loss and survival, since ethnography, particularly in the post-catastrophic emergence of the Armenian state, functions as a tool to confront and overcome catastrophic loss.[73] Thus, the scene with Abrahamian dressed

[72] Marc Nichanian critiques conventional ethnography by way of reading Borges' short story "The Ethnographer" in "On the Archive Iii: The Secret; Or, Borges at Yale," trans. Gil Anidjar (*boundary 2* (2013) 40 (3): 1-38). The critique consists in exposing the differential creation of the figures of the 'savage' and 'native' by ethnography and its most immediate predecessor, philology, to cast the non-Western others as either having no civilization or having lost one.

[73] The Sardarabad Ethnographic Museum is highly relevant here. The name and site of the museum refers to the Battle of Sardarabad, taking place in May 1918. Historians see the Armenian victory at this and a few

in a traditional wedding garment is an embodied performance of ethnography. [**Still 7**; **1:01:08**] The scene *performs* ethnography by 'wearing' it; in doing so, it strives to approach loss. The wedding scene presented immediately after, which Abrahamian and Torossian attend, is therefore a meditation on survival. It performs the ethnographic act of 'fieldwork' (partially staged, with the attendants of the wedding showing ample awareness of the presence of the camera) when Torossian chooses to show Abrahamian taking photos during it. It is no accident then that ethnography is evoked after the scene with the survivor of the genocide and in relation to life and survival. It is also no accident that we encounter the figure of exorcism in the 'information' provided by the museum guide – with it national ethnography expresses the desire to survive. This performative gesture in the form of wishful thinking is repeated by Torossian with the tightrope dance scene, this time wishing Armenians to survive the loss and pain of catastrophe, whether as a country or as a diaspora.

**Diasporic Incorporation**

There is more to *Stone, Time, Touch* than what a strictly performative reading can reveal. Interestingly, in an interview that I conducted with her, when asked about a possible "diasporic aesthetics" (a phrase which I borrowed from Stuart Hall) pursued in her films, Torossian replied, "I appreciate the distinction, but I don't see my work as falling into one paradigm or the other." She went on to claim having broad and selective inspirations and predicts the eventual "blurring" of sensibilities between Armenia and the

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other battles against Turkish forces as saving from annihilation the entire Armenian nation. See Hovannisian, Richard G., *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.)

diaspora.[74] This reticence, on the part of Torossian, to privilege the aesthetic aspects of her work suggests *a desire to transcend performative*, as if trying to get her conscious decisions out of the way so that the art *created* by her can 'speak for itself.' This striving, I suggest, is one form which experimentation takes with Torossian's filmic practice. In what follows, I deploy a specifically cryptonymic inscriptive reading of *Stone, Time, Touch*, inspired by Abraham and Torok's theory of traumatic incorporation and the crypt. According to Ferenczi, normal mourning consists in making the lost object part of one's psychic life, a process which he calls introjection. Abraham and Torok develop the contrasting notion of incorporation to account for unsuccessful mourning, in which the lost object is incorporated into the psyche without being part of it, acting like a hidden 'foreign' object; hence, the proliferation of crypts which actively hide their incorporation, while leaving distinct traces.[75]

Incorporated cryptonymic inscriptions, unlike performatives, are thus of the order of the un-intentional and the unconscious. In distinguishing between performativity and inscription based on conscious intentionality, I am aware of Derrida's critique of Austin and Searle precisely when it comes to intention. For Derrida, a performative cannot be fully attributed and reduced to an intention since the singular iterability of each illocutionary act has an element of unpredictability that by definition escapes any pre-

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[74] "On Movies That Move Us: An Interview with Gariné Torossian," *Critics' Forum*, March 2, 2015. Accessible online. Consider also the interview with Mike Hoolboom, "Gariné Torossian: Girl From Moush (an interview) (1997), where Torossian states not particularly in relation to *Stone, Time, Touch*: "I don't work by planning, I follow a feeling — the film only means something if you feel something, and this has to do with the experience you're able to bring to the images." I was made aware of this quote from an epigraph to Scott Birdwise's "On Passion: Towards a Response to the Moving Images of Gariné Torossian," *Elective Identities: The Moving Images of Gariné Torossian* (Canadian Film Institute, 2010), p. 19. http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=132#essay_13 (accessed January 31, 2010)

[75] See *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, translated by Nicholas Rand; foreword by Jacques Derrida (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986).

determined or preceding calculation or context, including that of the author.[76] Rather than contradicting Derrida's notion of singular iterability that escapes the grasp of intentionality, the merging of performance with incorporation in Torossian's work contributes to it by theorizing the unpredictable as partially shaped by post-catastrophic cryptonymic incorporation. It is as if Torossian is aware of the impossibility of rigorously defining beforehand the boundary between performance and incorporation and hopes to rely on it when approaching the Armenian Catastrophe.

How can a cryptonymic reading of a film be conducted? What would such a reading reveal about diaspora Armenian emergence? To answer these questions, let us return to the episode where the survivor of the Armenian genocide recounts stories of atrocities committed by the invading Turkish army. She tells the horrendous story of the Turkish soldiers heating water to boil Armenian babies in front of everyone. The mere idea of the threat is terrorizing. If the Bolsheviks had not arrived, the Turkish soldiers would do it. Is it an unconscious defensive act on her part to say that they prepared to but did not do it? After all, to survive the unforgettable trauma of this maddening violence, one's psyche would have to invent protective screen memories. We will never know. She continues to describe in undisclosed circumstances the murder of her father, uncle and his son, the men in their village, and how afterward her mother and siblings roaming the fields for six months, eating whatever they could find. In addition to a story of a murder of the men, we have a cannibalistic scene and a scene of starvation — both having to do with eating. The catastrophic stories recounted by the survivor testify to a threat of the possibility of destroying the human capacity to relate and, more specifically, to affiliate

[76] See Derrida's "Signature Event Context" (1972) and "Limited Inc. a b c..." (1977), both published in *Limited Inc,* (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL, 1988).

— the (threat of) the torture of watching one's baby boiled as a mother, destroying the possibility of motherhood for and in the tortured and the torturer.[77]

Still 8

Still 9

The performative ritual of filmic exorcism, carried out by *Stone, Time, Touch* in the tightrope dancer's episode, is not able to completely neutralize the scars of this catastrophic violence in the form of cannibalistic torture, which, for her diaspora Armenian visitors is a metonymy for the Armenian genocide as Abrahamian's diary entry states. The repressed wounds of the genocide open again in the wedding episode that follows the survivor scene. The image of burned flesh returns with the brief sequence of a woman arranging barbeque on the wedding table. The meat is burned. [**Still 8**; **1:03:29**][78] Furthermore, the blackness of the ash of the barbeque resonates with the black caverns dug into the mountains which haunt the wedding. These are cryptic spaces that hold the secrets of the untellable violence of the Armenian genocide. One Armenian word for 'cavern' or 'grotto' is ***քարայր*** *qarayr*; *qar* means 'stone,' *ayr* is the root for 'burn' but can also mean 'man,' while *ayri* (***այրի***) means 'widow.' *Qarayr* could be a crypt word,

[77] Here, I have in mind Gabriele Schwab's *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, which addresses the disparate effects of transgenerational trauma both for the victim and the perpetrator.

[78] It has been difficult for me to think and write these lines; an inner resistance, in the forms of fear, shame and pain, has accompanied me in the process. I would not be surprised if the viewers of the film would participate in the act of not seeing these traces of catastrophe, thus participating in a process of collective and transgenerational encryption.

haunting *Stone, Time, Touch*. Next to the burned barbeque meat, as the following close up shows, are dead, cooked fish, looking at the camera. It is as if the camera is looking into the eyes of death and death is looking back, while the lively wedding music is going on in the background. [**Still 9**; **1:03:34**] [79] It is no wonder that the film never represents anyone eating, unconsciously avoiding stumbling upon that which haunts and threatens it with destruction and madness.[80]

Haunting elements, accompanied with a haunting music and mood, also abound in the tightrope sequence. In the end of that episode, there is a blind man, with a sunburned face and a distorted gaze, looking in silence — an 'absurd' shot. It is as if he is 'looking' at the crows and a dog, shown immediately after, rummaging through a field filled with plastic and garbage. As for birds, mostly black, they are constantly present in the sequence of the frames which I analyzed above from the perspective of a performative reading. The shot with crow and dog in a field recalls another episode from the survivor's story: her mother and siblings roaming the fields looking for food. The ecological and social disaster of a field filled with garbage recalls similar scenes from Khanjian's socially conscious discourse. Yet, after the survivor's scene, these contaminated landscapes, oftentimes with poor children roaming in them, acquire another meaning. Plastic garbage begins to also stand for the leftovers of the violence of the past, hardly biodegradable, haunting. This way, ecological and genocidal catastrophes become cryptic metaphors for each other.

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[79] The refrain of the song by Zulal (*Sari sirun yar*) here comes from a distance, fading, barely audible and echoed, mixed with an auratic spiritual music, angelic and ghostly.

[80] Another cryptic figure is the urn with cheese inside, buried upside down in the barn of the village house where the survivor lives. Her daughter-in-law points to it, but says it is not ready to be eaten yet. The film brings this up somewhat inadvertently and almost in a benign ethnographic mood.

After the tightrope scene and before that of the wedding, the scene with the survivor resumes. This time, her family members, in a loving playful manner, in an attempt to lighten things up, ask her about happy days in her life. While this is a nice gesture on the part of family, it nevertheless reveals something that is also characteristic of post-catastrophic inscription. For her husband, it was the third marriage; for her, the second. There is shame in her expression, as this fact goes against traditional family values particularly deeply inculcated some hundred years ago. The survivor does not consider this as a 'real' marriage, or a 'real' occasion for happiness. This reveals what might be called, echoing Gabriele Schwab's notion of "replacement children," a 'replacement family' complex, a sign of transgenerational trauma with the new family being considered a mere replacement, a secondary substitute of what was lost.[81]

How does *Stone, Time, Touch* link and help us think genocidal catastrophe and patriarchal oppression of women? Kassabian and Kazanjian, in their essay mentioned earlier, have suggested that the instrumentalization of the Armenian Catastrophe by a juridico-political discourse is carried out through masculinist terms. This is indirectly confirmed by my reading of *The Retreat Without Song*, in the introduction of this dissertation, where the configuration of the post-catastrophic diasporic experience of encountering the other involved an Armenian man (Pierre/Bedros) and a French woman (Jeanne-Nenette). *Stone, Time, Touch* inscribes the two kinds of violences — patriarchal and catastrophic — without reducing one into the other. As a result, the inscriptions reveal traces of double crypts. The film's presentation of artist Nora Badalyan's performance can be considered as one. Stone, there, is not just the silent index of

[81] See "Chapter Five: Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss," *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* by Garbiele Schwab (Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.)

genocidal catastrophe, but also the patriarchal material that confines femininities. Diasporicity inscribed by the film, here, is the possibility of breaking this double seal.

With the above reading, my goal was to demonstrate that the cryptonymic inscription of catastrophe intrudes into the more consciously organized texture of the film. As I suggested above, such inscription is facilitated by the performative gestures that Torossian consciously makes. Even though the scene with the genocide survivor comes at the end, it *already* haunts the film. This is why that scene is placed immediately after the one in which Khanjian recounts her visit to *Tsitsernakaberd*, the Armenian genocide memorial in Yerevan and is followed by the scene in which Abrahamian and Torossian visit the same site.

In the same way, stone, which is invested with a powerful indexical value both through Khanjian's discourse and that of Abrahamian, stands not just for an open-ended Armenian identity full of possibilities in the diaspora, but also as the crypt where traces of catastrophic violence are held. Thus, Khanjian's claims to get closer to a sense of what it means to be Armenian by touching the stone also inscribes the communion with others through an encrypted wound. Echoing Laura Mark's view of the haptic image as accomplishing an embodied experience of filmmaking and viewership,[82] I argue that in *Stone, Time, Touch*, the haptic is both privileged and silent, hidden in plain sight and almost disavowed, a cryptic medium of getting in touch with wounds. Armenians born and living in Armenia and in the diaspora carry this wound. It binds them while at the

[82] Laura Marks writes: "Haptic images, I suggest, invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well." ("Introduction," 2) In "Chapter 3: The Memory of Touch," she elaborates the notion of haptic visuality thus: "Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish from so much as to discern texture." (162)

same time it threatens to tear them apart from inside, forcing them to hide it in their stories.

The narrative and performative readings which I conducted above are superimposed and underwritten by the haunting cryptonymic inscription of catastrophe. As a result, specific elements from the film which speak to these readings conducted earlier acquire further significance. In addition to what was discussed in the paragraph above, another such element is the recurring image of the destroyed dome of an Armenian church. Khanjian sees this as a symbol for the mystery of Armenia. The white emptiness of the dome returns at the end of the film, when Khanjian talks about preparing to visit Armenia with her son for the first time and seeing it as his initiation into an opened ended journey. As a Deleuzian time-image, the white dome is not just a neutral cover for a mystery but a post-catastrophic non-image. This ambivalence between an optimistic open-ended journey in search of a country — one that comes as close as possible to a 'homeland' and yet is not one — and the secret inscription of a catastrophic wound, constitutes diasporicity.

## CHAPTER 3

### Between Art and the Absurd: Vahé Oshagan's Vision of the Armenian Diaspora

In the introduction of this dissertation, I read from Vahé Oshagan's seminal volume of poetry *City* (1963) and argued that it gives rise to a post-national and post-catastrophic diasporic literature through absurdist inscriptions. In this chapter, I explore his literary criticism and prose to take a much closer look at how the entwining of the discourse of the absurd with diasporic Armenian literature evolves in the hands of Oshagan across decades.

This reading of Oshagan's (1922-2000) oeuvre self-consciously adopts a particular form. I first lay out the problematics that animate Oshagan's literary criticism and then elucidate the multiple contexts which inform it. Next, I read Oshagan's literary works through the lens of these critical literary issues. Far from being an exercise in solipsism, such a reading strives to take into account Oshagan's diverse and prolific output without privileging the irreducible discourses of cultural criticism and its 'objects': prose, theatre and poetry. Such an approach, more importantly, tries to read Oshagan's oeuvre on its own terms, which, I argue, gives us the best chance of not reducing the open-ended diasporic experience inscribed in and through his works into the pre-given theoretical frameworks of diversity and multiculturalism.[83]

[83] Given the constraints of time and space, in this study, I am not able to analyze Oshagan's poetry or his historical novel *Promontory*, which, to be sure, is a monumental gap and will have to be closed when I work on a book manuscript within the next year. Here, nonetheless, is a partial bibliography of Oshagan's published poetry: *Window* (*Պատուհան*, Beirut, 1956), *The City* (*Քաղաք*, Beirut, 1963), *Crossroads* (*Քառուղի*, Beirut, 1971), *Alert* (*Ահազանգ*, Philadelphia, 1980), *Panic* (*Խուճապ*, New York, 1983), "But Those Who Say" («*Իսկ Որք Ասեն*», *Asbarez*, Literary Supplement (*Գրական Յաւելուած*), 1987), *Suburbs* (*Արուարձաններ*, Los Angeles, 1991), *Embrace* (*Հաւքայր*, Sydney, Australia, 1996), *Identity* (*Ինքնութիւն*, Antelias, Lebanon, 1996), *The Traveler* (*Ճամբորդը*, Los Angeles, 2006). In

**Vahé Oshagan The Literary Critic**

The point of entry and the driving force of this reading will be the problematic of the possibility of art in a tragically absurd universe. This problematic runs through Oshagan's early works of criticism and informs a constellation of themes and tropes which will prove profitable to trace in his literary works. In the sixth essay of the 1962-1963 series "European and American contemporary literature," published in *Pakin*,[84] Oshagan formulates the aforementioned problematic as a double bind:

> Indeed, and here lies the greatest obstacle or inner contradiction of the theatre of the Absurd, if the absurd is presented as such, then it will be left outside the limit of art because art presupposes the control of reason, that is, it is conditioned by the effect of some synthesis within chaos; and if the absurd is presented as art, it will cease from being absurd…. (49)

Even though the immediate context of Oshagan's discussion above is the post-war European theatre of the absurd — which he also calls the anti-Theatre or the New Theatre and discusses in conjunction with the anti-Novel, or the New Novel — the text formulates the problematic in general terms. Accordingly, art presupposes synthesis in chaos which is another name of the absurd that does not tolerate any synthesis. As we can see, the absurd escapes realist and positivist representation. This is why this chapter will treat Oshagan's deployment of the discourse of the absurd as a mode of inscription.

Interestingly, in his 1961 volume *The Theatre of The Absurd,* Martin Esslin also sees an "inner contradiction that the dramatists of the Absurd are trying, by instinct and

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addition to the above, Oshagan has published poetry in, among others, the periodicals *Agos*, *Ahégan* and *Young Armenian*.

[84] *Pakin* (**Բահին**) is an important Beirut-based Armenian-language literary periodical created by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party and its institute promoting culture, the *Hamazagayin* Cultural Organization; published since January 1962, the periodical is active to this day. Vahé Oshagan's seven-part series "European and American contemporary literature" appears from February 1962 to June 1963, interrupted only by Oshagan's "William Faulkner" essay in September 1962 occasioned by Faulkner's passing and the essay "John Steinbeck: Nobel Laureate of 1962".

intuition rather than conscious effort, to overcome and resolve. The Theatre of the Absurd [unlike the more philosophical works of Camus and Sartre], has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images." (6)[85] Oshagan seems to be influenced by Esslin's formulation.

To better understand the stakes and complexities of this problematic let us take a closer look at the ways the notions of art and the absurd are deployed in Oshagan's literary criticism. True to its title, the series "European and American contemporary literature" describes and evaluates what, for Oshagan, appear to be the main currents of contemporary literary life in Western Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union. In the earlier essays of the series, Oshagan discusses the major cultural shifts taking place in Europe from the 19th to the 20th centuries as the background that informs contemporary culture. He then analyzes the conditions and qualities of European cultural life after World War II.[86] He claims that in philosophy, the disenchantment following the war has led to the strengthening of existentialist views among thinkers. I cite the following paragraph, significant for its thinking of the absurd in existentialist terms.

> First, in philosophy. Existentialism is not something new and does not the elevator descent or ascent all the way to Socrates? But wherever it goes, very few times was it able to get out of the metaphysical lived experience among scattered individuals. For postwar writers and philosophers, it turned into a sensibility of living, comprehending and judging life. Existentialism, with its negative side, rejected the easy, wounded human illusions, disavowed happiness and social values; but with its positive side, it turned all the *projectors* of the universe towards the human standing on the empty stage, it pushed,

[85] Esslin goes on to write: "This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet; the difference, to take an example from another sphere, between the *idea* of God in the works of Thomas Aquinas or Spinoza and the *intuition* of God in those of St John of the Cross or Meister Eckhart — the difference between theory and experience." (6-7, 1968 reprint.)

[86] The third series that Oshagan published in *Pakin* under the rubric "Contemporary literary movements" (1966-1967) discusses Social Realism, Nihilism, and Commercialization as the three main developments of 20th century European art, addressing French nihilism, existentialism, Sartre, phenomenology and other intellectual currents.

> it pulled and it threw him to fill with pride, despair and humanness [*մարդկայնութիւն*[87]] the emptiness left after a deserter god and a deceased morality. The philosophy, psychology, sociology and so on developed in this direction stayed and stay solely European phenomena. (56)

For Oshagan, a *collective European* existentialism is what marks the postwar period. As for the distinction between a positive and negative side to existentialism, one can hear echoes of it in Albert Camus' 1942 *The Myth of Sisyphus: Essay on the Absurd*. The negative side of existentialism would correspond to the following description by Camus: "in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home [*patrie*] or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity." (6) Later, Camus offers a more rigorous formulation of existentialist negation as "the movement by which a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation." (41) These negations, which Camus describes by way of Kierkegaard as leaps, Camus further elaborates as always aiming for the eternal: "They always lay claim to the eternal, and it is solely in this that they take the leap." (42) In the last two sections of his essay, "The Absurd Creation" and "The Myth of Sisyphus", Camus argues for the possibility and necessity of creating in the face of the absurd, and this possibility is the positive side of existentialism.

In his further allusions to existentialism, Oshagan emphasizes the possibility of freedom for the human being faced with the absurd. For instance, in his 1965 essay on Sartre, written in the wake of Sartre's rejection of the Nobel Prize, Oshagan first refuses

[87] In the seventh essay of this series Oshagan uses this word to translate the term "humanism," as well as the word *aylaserum* (*այլասերում*) to translate "alienation." (61) I note these choices of philosophical diction across translation in Oshagan's work to be able to deepen my analysis of both the linguistic and cultural encounter — traces of which are found in these texts — and to gain a critical distance from the operation of Oshagan's thought.

to characterize existentialism as a philosophy or a system of thought. He describes Sartre as having a few irreducible selves (artist, thinker and political activist at once) without conforming to bourgeois norms. As for his writings, they are in danger of losing their vitality in the hands of university professors. Oshagan then writes:

> This way, the only virtue that is left [to Sartre] is the *lucidité, the clairvoyance*. Not the clairvoyance of Descartes which leads to a dead end; not Valéry's pure intellectual clairvoyance which was an end rather than a means; nor was it Gide's psychological clarity, the yearning for honesty which did not go far from his skin, but that need for truth characterizing our modern times, the only crime and the only possibility of salvation for a humiliated, abandoned, deteriorating and precocious human. This is why Sartre's existentialism does not become stranded either in Husserl's *transcendental* pure consciousness, or in Kierkegaard's *mystic* subjectivity. His Existentialism is a different thing — it is the *lucid* person's despaired exertion to reconcile the deceitful, instantaneous, formless truth of existence with the consciousness of that existence. And when existence is stripped from all of its inherited disguises and rituals, has turned into the square root of insignificance, caught in the roundelay of universal deranged contradictions and senselessnesses, and when the consciousness of this state echoes from one corner of the universe's desolation to the other before itself entering into the same roundelay, then it is understood why Sartre's existentialism not only is not a philosophy but is not even a thought structure. Instead, it is the testimony of a lived experience in its Nietzschean or Bergsonian sense. Only by being absent from himself will the human be able to actualize himself; from his probable possibility of barely being, he has to draw his sense or presence or opportunity to live or value.
> The word 'value' throws us into the quicksand of the morality. Sartre's existentialism is the very contradiction of any current moral understanding. He, who declares the human being as absolutely free, outside the fence of the morality, he could not have given to freedom a moral valuation. And so freedom, like the atomic power kept inside human existence, is the only possible and amoral power. Not brain, not heart – but the frozen eye without an eyelid of consciousness, which tries, in so many futile ways, to actualize its only value, freedom. To actualize, but where? Inside humans and art. ("Sartre: a progressive or regressive?" *Pakin*, March 1965. 51-52)

In the above passage, as its last word indicates, Oshagan formulates art by way of Sartre's existentialism as "the testimony of a lived experience." Art, therefore, is the "exertion to reconcile the deceitful, instantaneous, formless truth of existence with the consciousness of that existence." What is crucial to note at this stage of my analysis, is the problematic of form that emerges. It is one *form* of the double bind with which I began this essay and which will help us interpret the formal experimentations of Oshagan's own literary works.

The link between art and existentialist witnessing is already quite explicit in the last essay of the "European and American contemporary literature" series, where Oshagan elaborates the role of the artist in an absurd world thus:

> And so it is that the artist becomes not the conscience of his times, but the guardian and witness of his world, condemned to endure in the role of a seer and, especially, of a clairvoyant — a calling which attests that in the emptiness there is no Man, but lost subjectivities, oozing disgust, at least indifference, towards one another, chained to the one hundred and one year's curse of freedom.[88] Be they a hero of a novel or theatre, humans do not correspond to their own essence, and whether French or black, homosexual or criminal, prostitute or vagrant, it is our own essence that they all present to us. It is now that human freedom is realized on the plane of nothingness, and art arrives at its sensitive expression, emancipated from all kinds of social enchantment and somnific ideals. A scoundrel is the one who beautifies the human and his fate, who in the love of pleasure or morality martyrizes truth, meaning, that which forms the double nature of the human creature — the happy or miserable victim of reality, but also the demigod who tries to reach a hyperreality. (53)

As the above passage indicates, the idea of art as the existentialist witnessing of the tragedy of the absurd universe informs Oshagan's conception of the writer-intellectual as independent from social and moral systems of valuation. He develops this notion in the series and *performs* it as a publicist. As for the "negative side" of the existentialist critique, it necessitates for Oshagan a break from 19th century and earlier realist, romantic and Platonist attempts to ground meaning, whether in a transcendental or immanent grounding. His critique of Armenian literature relies on and demands such a break.

**Language and The Absurd**

As Vahé Oshagan's aforementioned series itself already specifies, postwar cultural transformations in Europe cannot be explained by existentialism alone. Similarly, the problematic of the possibility of art in the face of the absurd in Oshagan's criticism is not limited to strictly existentialist terminology and figures. An instance of this is

[88] This is an allusion to a novel by Hagop Oshagan (1883-1948), Vahé Oshagan's father, a founding figure of Western and Diaspora Armenian literature and literary criticism as well as to Plato.

Oshagan's essay on Samuel Beckett,[89] which relegates absurdist existentialist motifs into the background and focuses on language as *the* site where meaning is necessarily caught and thwarted. Oshagan writes in the opening paragraph:

> In the beginning there was silence. In the end there was silence again, with a difference – for the second, there is the taste of the rotting corpse in the mouth. It is the language, the hermesian pedestal, the pasteboard throne hanging over abysses where now morbid symbols of word and meaning try to crawl and live. But to no avail – tragic and fatal, the meaninglessness of life pressures the brain from inside and outside; with the morning light and the night darkness despair permeates inside the human. Life is impossible in the world and everything, without having started to even live, human or object, already rots… "The only and great sin," adds Beckett, "is the sin of having come to the world. (2)[90]

Towards the end of the passage above, Oshagan claims that "everything … rots." How can such a claim be made with any certainty when language is "the taste of the rotting corpse in the mouth," as the beginning of the passage states? The motif of 'rotting', thus, is the locus of the circular paradox constitutive of the discourse claiming language to be the site of the absurd. This discourse, moreover, aims to displace Christian theology by intertextually evoking motifs from it, as is the case with the formulation "in the beginning there was" and the citation from Beckett alluding to the notion of original sin. These elements mark the emergence of a mystical discourse in Oshagan, which becomes more explicit in the section "White Silence". There, Oshagan writes: "The true Beckett has gone beyond the absurd and has felt the first touch of the cold breath of the white, great silence. His life and work are the evidence for this." (4-5) The trope of the 'beyond' is a

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[89] The essay "Samuel Beckett" appears in the January–February 1970 edition of the periodical *Young Armenian* and is occasioned by Beckett receiving the Nobel Prize in 1969. The text, containing a photo of Beckett, another one from a performance of the play *En Attendant Godot* and a brief chronology of Beckett's life and main publications up to 1961, is an important addition to the *Pakin* essay from January 1963 ("American and European contemporary literature – 6") where Oshagan expresses his thoughts about Beckett within the context of a discussion of contemporary European literature. As for the periodical *Young Armenian*, it was an independent and rather progressive platform, published in Beirut from 1969 to 1974, overall putting out 100 volumes.

[90] Oshagan continues by expressing his utter wonder regarding the Nobel Prize committee's decision to award a prize to Beckett given the latter's uncompromising and cruel depiction of human degradation.

well-known and common trope in Christian mysticism. Scholars have written a lot about the tropes of mysticism abounding in Beckett's work.[91] Shira Wolosky, in particular, argues that Beckett's work conceives of language as "no longer a mere instrument for its own surpassing, but the very framework defining mystical conduct and goals." (4)[92]

Oshagan's essay on Beckett is not just aware of the circular paradox of using language to undermine language, but thrives on it. An example is the synesthesia in the formulation "the first touch of the cold breath of the white, great silence," which disrupts basic empirical categories of language by triangulating tactile, visual, spatial and auditory absences. The result is no ordinary figuration or image but a non-image, a figure of a negative sublime. Language here is conceived as a representing machine; any practice to undermine it has to be thought and read obliquely as inscription. Paradoxically, the discursive practice of using language to undermine it, instead of leading to paralysis, is highly generative. As I shall gradually demonstrate, Oshagan's early writings grow

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[91] See, for instance, "'Perfection Is Not Of This World': Samuel Beckett and Mysticism" (*Mystics Quarterly*, 30.½ (March/June, 2004); 28-55) by Chris Ackerley. Compiling biography and readings from a range of works by Beckett, Ackerley argues that Beckett's attitude towards religion is that of "complex agnosticism" (29) which struggled with metaphysical and Christian dualism, and tried to overcome the latter by way of a tripartite mode of thinking that partially adhered to the spiritual journey as a negative theology. See also "Madness and Mysticism In Beckett's *Not I*" (*Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, 55:1, 91-101) by James Acheson.

[92] Here is the most relevant paragraph from Wolosky's work cited above: "Despite the accidental and even repressed position of language in the [Western mystical] tradition, Beckett suggests how language establishes the very terms for the ideals that require transcendence of language. From this point of view, language is no longer a mere instrument for its own surpassing, but the every framework defining mystical conduct and goals. The basic terms of value within mystical discourse turn out to be inextricably linked to language terms, which serve as generative tropes or figures representing the very states mysticism posits: differentiation versus unity, temporal sequence versus eternal wholeness, materiality versus spiritual essence. In each pair, language acts as trope or image for the first terms, and a silence beyond language represents the second. This doubling recurs in Beckett. But Beckett's work asserts the primacy of language as a figure within this schema, not its subordinate status as a means through it. And his work brings into question the metaphysical hierarchy such language tropes reenacts." ("Introduction: Beyond Inexpressibility," *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford UP, 1995). 4.) Beckett's earlier literary critical publications, on Joyce and Proust, respectively, also dwell on the problematic of the limit of language. Lastly, Linda Ben-Zvi and Elena Nájera write about the link between Beckett and Mauthner; Nájera in particular contrasts the latter's mysticism with that of Wittgenstein.

within precisely such a paradoxical literary space. Later, when his texts suggest love to be the answer to the absurdity of the world, notably by invoking the 11th century Armenian mystic poet Gregory of Narek, there seems to be an even more deeply paradoxical attempt to speculate about the 'beyond' instead of merely implying it.

Lastly, despite his admiration for Beckett, Oshagan nevertheless does offer a careful criticism of his work. Oshagan writes: "there is still the possibility of refusing, the freedom of rebelling. If God is dead, it does not mean that the Human is dead. The people of Beckett lack this stubborn, inexplicable zealousness." (4) In other words, Oshagan criticizes Beckett's literature as short selling the possibility of hopelessly rebelling in the face of the absurd as a paradoxical way of actualizing the human. As a self-conscious and self-proclaimed Armenian-language diaspora writer, Oshagan sometimes views the struggle of Western Armenians forced into exile as a hopeless, un-heroic attempt to rebel in the face of this absurd tragedy.[93] His literature, therefore, is an attempt to realize this freedom, as well as offer it to his readers as a reminder and encouragement to live freely.

**Myth and The Absurd**

In Oshagan's criticism, the problematic of the possibility of art in an absurd universe, in addition to being elaborated through existentialism and language, is formulated also through literary form. This is not surprising given the problematic of form in Oshagan's interpretation of existentialism pointed out above. Moreover, in the "Samuel Beckett" essay Oshagan writes: "Theatre, novel, short story, tragedy, comedy, description, psychological analysis? It is superfluous to search for a model because

[93] Already in the 1970s, Oshagan in Beirut participated in public discussions with other Armenian intellectuals, debating the nature of the Armenian diaspora. These debates were summarized and at times critiqued in the press, particularly in *Young Armenian* and *Spyurk*.

Beckett creates outside of them." (3-4) This implies that, for Oshagan, one way art actualizes freedom is through breaking away from inherited artistic conventions. Yet, despite conceiving art as transgressive, in his literary criticism Oshagan seems to approve of one inherited literary form — that of the epic.[94]

In September 1962, Oshagan published in *Pakin* an essay titled "William Faulkner." As already mentioned, this text appeared between the fourth and fifth installments of the series discussed above and was occasioned by Faulkner's passing.[95] In it, Oshagan describes Faulkner as a "novelist-poet-writer of epic." (57)[96] He further claims that, hailing from the South, which, unlike the North, has suffered a defeat, and by writing about the South's bittersweet decline and imminent disappearance, Faulkner arrives at fundamental truths about human destiny. (60)[97] Over numerous volumes, he

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[94] In a volume on the genre, Paul Merchant defines the epic as in an intimate relation with history and exceeding the ordinary particularly through what is oftentimes referred to as "epic journey" or "epic struggle" and involves the figure of the epic hero. (*The Epic*, "Introduction," (Routledge, 1971). 1-4)

[95] The editors of *Pakin* announced Faulkner's passing in the previous number of the journal.

[96] Here is the opening paragraph of the essay, immediately after which Oshagan qualifies Faulkner as "novelist-poet-writer of epic" [վիպասան-բանաստեղծ-դիւցազներգակ]: "There can be no doubt that it was the greatest American novelist who died last month. The novelist not in its new clothes, French production, 'an absolute consciousness and an objective world,' nor in the classical meaning of the novelist who from the evolution of the course and clash of individual and collective lives steals a few canvases with the vain and proud hope to understand and especially master them. But, in a different sense, namely, by injecting into the novelistic reality a poetic fever and kindness, and, still more, throwing these two into the spur of epic storms, exceedingly human and inhuman at the same time." (57)

[97] Vahé Oshagan describes the dominant myths of the North and the South and even sees similarities between the latter and the Armenians: "America until now has waged eight wars in the course of its history and has come out victorious from all of them. It has fought for the sake of high moral principles and has succeeded to keep unshaken its material prosperity. America has also become the strongest power in the world, without wanting it…. All of this has gradually built, of course in the North, the myth of an America, in which they have eventually started to believe… The American represents a proud, innocent, victorious, optimistic, prosperous and intelligent character promenading in the universe, the perfect blend of virtue and power. This is the myth.
But the South has another myth. The South was defeated in the 1865 civil war, has suffered from its disgrace; stranded in powerlessness and with a ferocity that is close to ours, Armenians' ferocity; it has identified pride with revenge, has rejected the reality of being defeated without being able to forget it, and has entirely thrown itself into the revitalization of a mythic and lost world by means of art as well as the everyday. Suffering has given it the love of and obedience to nature, love of humans, has given faith in a few virtues. The man of the South is dominated by religion [կրօնասէր] and has a pious, not envious, courageous, personable, and proud character. The South is poor, too, meaning

recreates more intensely the South struck by tragedy, in all its contradiction, in its deep feeling of guilt for what it has done to the African-Americans.[98] By doing so, Faulkner reveals the truth of the natural harmony achieved over the moral chaos of life by those who are capable of love and pity, have the courage to endure tragedy, die for the sake of something greater, and are humble and proud at the same time. (61-2)

As the above summary indicates, Oshagan reads Faulkner's epic as an intensifying depiction of a lost world. However, in the series Oshagan discusses the "negative side" of existentialism as exposing the meaninglessness of inherited values. In this sense, existentialist critique demythologizes and therefore, one would expect, rejects the epic. And so when Oshagan endorses the epic in literature, he does so in a demythologizing manner, under the condition that the epic serve to witness the tragic

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arduous and tough, a bit lazy and quite a drinker, cheerful and careless. (* [Vahé Oshagan's footnote]* It was in 1922 that 12 critics from the South published the famous *I'll Take My Stand* (Clarification of Positions) manifesto, which was a declaration of war against the North's Technology and the dogma of Progress stating this: There is a deadly fight between Technology and living, ordinary actuality… the ideal society is that which admits that the human is a frail being and the subject of Nature.) This is how the two parts oppose each other, irreconcilable and uncompromising with their worldviews – the South in the spur of instinctive forces, with a particular tendency towards tragedy, noble and artistic; the North resourceful and rational [*իմացապաշտ*], non-tragic (the *happy-endings* of films and books already testify to this) rich and self-confident, venal and immoral, the spoiled son of fate … (**) ([Vahé Oshagan's footnote]** To give an idea of the intensity of the antagonism, lets recall the following: On April 21, 1950, Mr. Donald Davidson, during a lecture delivered in Mississippi State College, challenged [*ասպարէզ կը կարդար* [sic?]] social scientists to explain why Faulkner could not have been born in the North, why he could have been born only in the state of Mississippi and nowhere else….) The result of this situation, it must be observed, is the North's unaccepting attitude towards Faulkner, especially when we note that the literary work of Faulkner to its last comma bursts out soaked in the South's psychology; it is its values that tear the fake smile of the happy society, strip the human from his social made-up meaning and throw him into the arms of destiny, into the arms of nature." (60)

[98] To draw attention to the nuances of Oshagan's idea of intensification at the heart of literary myth-making, here I cite the paragraph that mentions it: "Thus, Faulkner stands in the death agony of the South, that South which survives with a longing for an aristocratic past and crime and in its twilight seems even more passionate and breathless, and takes the only action that can save not only his country but also his personal past which becomes the same with his land – he recreates it with his literature, more powerful and metaphysical, more savage and fatal than had been the inhabitants during the time of his great grand-father. And to make sure that his country is perfect first of all for him, he created an entire imaginative province in Mississippi and named it Yoknapatawpha, which in reality corresponded to precise and historical places in Northern Mississippi (the Lafayette County)." (61)

absurdity of human existence. Therefore, Oshagan's meditations on myth re-appropriate the epic, by way of Faulkner, as a form of inscribing the absurd.

Epic demythologization is peculiar to Oshagan's approach and tone particularly when writing about Armenian literature. His essays on late-19th and 20th century Armenian and non-Armenian writers like Krikor Zohrab, Yerukhan, Hagop Oshagan[99], Aksel Bakounts, Shahan Shahnour, Paruyr Sevak, Victor Hugo and others, systematically evaluate the effects that public myths created around these authors have on the reception of their literature. For example, when writing about Shahan Shahnour (1903-1974), Oshagan interrogates the conditions under which this Paris-based Western Armenian writer was mythologized as the rebel in the imagination of the Armenian public. ("Beyond Shahnour," *Young Armenian*, November 2, 1974) In another article "Shahnour and Us,"[100] Oshagan points out how, like a few other Western Armenian writers, Shahnour also created a myth around himself which went beyond and obfuscated his work.

This attempt at demythologization partially explains the provocative rhetoric adopted by Oshagan in his literary criticism, self-consciously lashing out at the sensibilities of his readers.[101] A case in point is the essay "Zohrab and Yerukhan", published in *Pakin* in April 1965, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian

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[99] The links between Vahé Oshagan's works and those of Hagop Oshagan, especially when it comes to literary myth-making, are extremely significant. I will address this topic in a separate article. An interesting essay on this question in Hagop Oshagan's work is Nanor Kebranian's " 'Beyond "the Armenian": Literature, Revolution, Ideology and Hagop Oshagan's Haji Murat." *Journal of the Society of Armenian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 117–146.

[100] I have not been able to confirm when and in which press this essay was published; my guess is that it was published in the newspapry *Aztag* daily around 1975. *Aztag* is the official newspaper of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Lebanon. It was founded in 1927 and is active to this day.

[101] In a more expanded version of this essay, I will also look at Oshagan's endorsement of literary terrorism in his essays and its practice in his literary works as a more radical form of demythologization.

Catastrophe and therefore a highly symbolic date for its readership. This article, which assesses the works of the Istanbul Armenian writers Krikor Zohrab (1861-1915) and Yerukhan (1870-1915), who were among the intellectuals murdered in 1915, provocatively states that from a literary point of view, Armenians did not lose much with their murder. Regarding Zohrab, who is especially revered among Armenians, the opening two sentences of the essay say it all: "It was death that brought somewhat closer these opposing persons and literary temperaments. But Zohrab's literary temperament had already started to die when they killed him and Western Armenian literature did not lose much with his disappearance." (15) As for Yerukhan, Oshagan claims that he produced mediocre literature but having lived longer probably would have been able to overcome his mediocrity. (17)

Oshagan's critical reflections on myth and literature further include his analysis of the work of Eastern Armenian writer Aksel Bakounts (1899-1937) who, like so many Armenian and other (pre-)Soviet intellectuals, fell victim to Stalin's Great Purge. Oshagan analyzes Bakounts' work in three articles and alludes to him throughout his literary criticism. In the first article, titled "Last scene…" (*Pakin*, January 1980) Oshagan admires and discusses his work in general terms, claiming that Bakounts' writings about Armenian village life are the most authentic, while his literary aesthetics keep him away from social and political urges. In terms of form and sensibility, his literature is superb, and because Bakounts is influenced by a literary style that was created 50 years prior, his literature is free from the illnesses of contemporary literature. For all that, Bakounts' literature, for Oshagan, is not realist and has an epic quality. It reflects on the life-giving force of the imagination, which, Oshagan speculates, might have been the key to the

survival of the Armenian people in the face of grave tragedies. Yet, for some reason his writings do not touch upon the core tragedy of human existence — a profound reality that, Oshagan further claims, goes beyond language and nation.

The second article that Oshagan published on Bakounts, titled "A few notes about 'The seed sower of black fallow fields,' " (*Pakin*, February 1980) appeared a month after the first one. It contains far more nuanced reflections on the epic and its link to the imagination and life, which was touched upon only obliquely in the previous article. This article analyzes Bakounts' novella of the same name published in 1932.[102] According to Oshagan, through symbols and allegory, the novella meditates on the capacity of myth, particularly the ancient Armenian pagan myth of Vahagn, to effectuate a passage from death to life, a truth that has not changed despite the advent of Christianity and later, Communism. (44-45) Oshagan here relies on a Campbellian conception of myth, which in its turn is very much influenced by Jung. In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949), when discussing myths as inscribing the rite of passage of the hero, Joseph Campbell writes: "Within the soul, within the body social, there must be — if we are to experience long survival — a continuous "recurrence of birth" (*palingenesia*) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death." (15) In Bakounts' novella, the realization of such a rebirth is made possible by perceiving the world from the point of view of "clay" which unifies everything into a cycle. Bakounts' fiction, arguably striving to occupy the vantage

[102] In the beginning of this essay, Oshagan mentions two other works of prose by Bakounts, "Badi of Vandoonts" (I am not sure as to how to better translate this title.) which also touch upon the theme of revolution. In contrast to what Soviet critics argue, these three short stories for Oshagan do not praise the Communist revolution. As for the Bakounts' short story "The seed sower of black fallow fields," it tells the story of a villager named Seth, a seed sower who is killed during the Communist takeover of the first Republic of Armenia in 1920. After the establishment of Communist order, artists from the city come to Seth's village and bring a new curtain for the community building that used to be a church. The curtain contains an image of a seed sower. The villagers soon believe that it is their Seth depicted on the curtain and make a mythical figure out of him.

point of the eternal clay, also meditates on the role of the artist in creating myths and the necessity of a people in making the myths come alive. Bakounts' literary, mythical mysticism, his attempt to see through the essence of myth and its creation, allow him to not dwell on human tragedy because death is conceived as part of the cycle of life. (45-46) Thus, Oshagan reads Bakounts' literary work as reflecting on myth's ability to mediate between life and death, allowing humans to go on in the face of death.

Oshagan had one last essay devoted to Bakounts, published in 1986 in *Asbarez*,[103] six years after his first two articles appeared. While the essay from February 1980 focused on reading Bakounts' 1932 novella "The seed sower of black fallow fields" from his "mature years" (see first paragraph), in this latest essay on Bakounts Oshagan turns his attention to the 1926 novella "The Alpine Violet."[104] Oshagan sees this novella as marking the beginning of Bakounts' short career as a writer and claims that "whatever he wrote [afterwards] finds its true meaning by falling under the light of that one, tiny short story" (first paragraph). Then, Oshagan argues that this short story contains Bakounts' literary manifesto in an allegorical form. In the rest of the essay, in three parts, Oshagan develops his allegorical reading of the novella, reiterates that Bakounts' perception of literature is epic (first essay, paragraph 6) and describes its atemporal, objective qualities,

[103] *Asbarez* (Ասպարէզ, "Arena") is a California-based Armenian and English language newspaper published since 1908 by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Vahé Oshagan was a regular contributor to the newspaper's Armenian-language section, writing for its 'Literary Chronicle' column. Oshagan's three-part essay on Bakounts is titled "A Few Notes on A. Bakounts' Alpine Violet" and appeared in *Asbarez* on August 30, September 6 and September 13, 1986 respectively.

[104] Bakounts' "Alpine Violet" describes an archeologist, an artist and their guide visiting Kaqavaberd, an abandoned medieval Armenian castle built high up on the mountains. Below the walls of Kaqavaberd the only flower that grows is the alpine violet. The beetle swinging on the flower and steeped in its pollen experiences the world as a beautiful orchard. The visitors spend some time observing and drawing the castle while the guide calmly accompanies them. Soon, they come across a peasant hut. The artist notices the beauty of the woman living in it and hastily draws her, remembering another beautiful woman far away. The visitor's drink tea made by the peasant woman while her small boy is around. After they leave, the ploughman returns and feeling jealous hits the woman, his wife, with a cane. The wife goes outside and sobs silently.

where humans and nature are put on the same plane and the reader's imagination is asked to step in and fill the scant descriptions with meaning (last paragraph of the first essay). The second essay discusses how Bakounts' literature differs from that of his contemporaries, distancing his work from the literary establishment developing in the early years of Soviet Armenia. Finally, the last paragraph of the second essay captures Oshagan's allegorical, symbolic reading of "The Alpine Violet" by claiming that in the short story the guide, who also acts as a guard, is the figure of the artist. The third part of the essay, which addresses the third part of Bakounts' short story, addresses the link between love, suffering and art, and the extent to which art can capture life. While for Oshagan, Bakounts' art modestly accepts that it can hardly keep up with life, the unifying epic perspective afforded by its objective storytelling does point to a profound love underlying existence and to the artist as the one who can express it.

**Vahé Oshagan The Writer**

I will organize the subsequent analysis according to broadly defined literary genres – works of prose and theatre. Yet, the reader will soon understand that in each case, Oshagan's texts struggle with received genre conventions. My hope is to demonstrate that the terms of this struggle strongly echo the problematic of the possibility of art in an absurd universe.

**The Emergence of the Problematic of the Absurd in Oshagan's Early Prose**

Analyzing all of Oshagan's works of prose in one essay would be both impossible and unfairly reductive. Instead, here, I will to point out how the key motifs playing out in Oshagan's criticism and works of theatre emerge in his works of prose. Overall, I have

collected some 45 short stories by Vahé Oshagan written from 1945 up to late the 1990s, scattered in the diaspora press, some of them unpublished and most of them collected into the following volumes *The Fugitive* (1987), *Around the trap* (1988) and *Generations* (1995).[105] There are also three novels — *Bridge*, *The Inoculation*, *Promontory* — of which only the middle one has been published.

I have been able to find two short stories that Oshagan has published in the 1940s, "*Birater*[106] Hagop" (1945) and "The Café"[107] (1946), both appearing in the Cairo-based journal *Husaber*[108]. From 1950s, I have also found two short stories published in the 1950s, "Night" (1955) and "Curtain" (1958), both appearing in the Beirut-based journal *Agos*[109] (See Appendix C for synopses of each story).

Oshagan's earliest prose — "*Birater* Hagop" and "The Café" — is distinctly pre-absurdist. "The Café" is driven by plot and contains few thick descriptions of the mental, embodied experience of characters. Only indirect overtones of the absurd and the tragic, mixed with some comedy, can be read in it. "*Birater* Hagop" contains thick descriptions; this relatively longer text describes only a single evening, yet the narrative perspective

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[105] Among the works of prose that I have found during my three visits to Oshagan's archive in his home in Radnor, Philadelphia is the 80-page-long text "Station No. 4" ("Կայարան թիւ 4") (1968), which could be considered as a novella and as far as I know, is unpublished. Part of it is published in *Ahegan* (1968, Year 3. No. 3-4, p 69-78). There are still other short stories, some entirely in English, which I have not been able to scan, even though during our visits, my sister and I have been able to enter them into our database.

[106] *Birater* is the Armenian descriptive for a person of Christian protestant faith.

[107] This text is signed as "Vahé" but given the stylistic and thematic similarities with the text "*Birater* Hagop" (both texts have a distanced, perceptive, precise narrative voice and are set up in Palestine corresponding to a period when V. Oshagan was living and working as a manual laborer in Jerusalem) I take it to be authored by Vahé Oshagan. I do not know why Vahé Oshagan would sign his writing only by his first name; my speculation is that perhaps with it he wanted to distance himself from his father who published a text right after this short story in the same journal.

[108] *Husaber* is a Cairo-based newspaper established by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun) beginning in 1915. Along with covering community and political topics, the newspaper also publishes works by notable Armenian writers.

[109] *Agos* is a Beirut-based literary, critical periodical published by the student association of the Hamazagayin Armenian College between 1944 and 1960.

created by these descriptions is not formulated as witnessing the absurd. Additionally, the short story "Night" is arguably the first of its kind in Oshagan's works of prose, treating of the national revolutionary struggle of the Armenian people. Such works of prose by Oshagan are largely plot driven, contain relevant symbolism, and later ones will contain political and ideological content. Only with the short story "Curtain" do distinct absurdist concerns, formulated in existentialist terms, emerge in Oshagan's prose.

"Curtain" tells the story of Philip, a 55-year-old successful politician and the president of an unspecified country who, after signing a historic accord with an enemy state's leader, experiences personal freedom but is unable to share his elation with Maria, his wife. Little by little the reader learns that Philip married her thirty years ago for her sizable dowry, even though she understands little of who he really is and what he does. She has nervous breakdowns and headaches which Philip has had to endure. The couple has no children. Philip gets drunk the same night, makes unreciprocated sexual advances towards Maria and probably ends up having a heart attack. It is not clear whether he dies, though, an ambiguity that gives hope. The plot of the story shocks the reader into realizing the struggles that humans go through to create meaning in life, while ultimately failing to do so and being lonely. Remarkably, Philip keeps searching for meaning up to the edge, until he faces death. This tenacity echoes Oshagan the critic's reading of Beckett's characters who, accordingly, do not sufficiently rebel and paradoxically strive for freedom.

In addition to plot, the short story "Curtain" invokes the problematic of the absurd by deploying existentialist tropes. Earlier in the story, when the narrative presents fragments from Philip's stream of consciousness, it describes a crowd's eye in Philip's

consciousness, (3) echoing the existentialist concern with seeking confirmation from others. Later on, when Philip returns home, the mirrors in his residence are prominently described as helping Philip connect with himself. (2, 9) Moreover, when he steps outside into the balcony, there is an unexplained, un-specified man that is possibly watching him from across the street, though Philip is not sure. (12) The mirror and the mysterious stranger watching, both existentialist tropes for the external eye, represent the form of consciousness for Oshagan the critic.

A later, as far as I know unpublished, short story entitled "Father and Son" (1967) also lends itself to an absurdist existentialist reading but differently than the short story "Curtain." "Father and Son" is about a middle-aged couple, Reverend Hagop and Azniv, and their six-year-old son Hovsep who dies at the end of the first part of the story. In part two, the couple returns home after their son's funeral. The text describes the couple's mental and embodied experience during their son's illness and when mourning his loss. What makes this story distinctly absurdist is first of all the plot element of the death of an innocent child — a tragedy that does not obey any moral rationale[110] and stands for the

[110] In the 1971 *Young Armenian* essay on Samuel Beckett, in an section titled "In the Snare of Words," Oshagan writes: "His [Beckett's] place is not great in Western literature. He does not reach the giants — Joyce, Malraux, Faulkner, Sartre, Kazantzakis and so on. The work of these greats contains such powerful intensity that inevitably one is infected with dread and delight form their world's quality of the human. After all, a writer who catches in his snare of words the sorrow of a father returning from the funeral of his son and throws that affect in the philosophical shimmering of the entire human destiny has a more powerful intellectuality than the one who, leaning only on his brain and nerves and feeding off from himself, tries to reach the mysterious frontiers of human intellectuality but stays incapable of closing the eyes of a dead beggar. Not everyone must agree with this opinion, but along the gray and meaningless human destiny there is also the positive, undeniable fact of struggle which thrusts the human against the court verdict, with his fake teeth pressed, defeated but not kneeling, examining the wretched and enormous searchlight of his furious despair, looking in the empty skull of the universe for a thing that does not even have a name. Nothing heroic. In 1970 we accept that across the board we are all Beckettian characters; we have nothing to do in this bald world, only to wait and to soliloquize; but, there is still the possibility of refusing, the freedom of rebelling. If God is dead, it does not mean that the Human is dead. The people of Beckett lack this stubborn, inexplicable zealousness" (4). Somewhere in Oshagan's critical essays there is also a reference to Dostoevsky in

absurdity of the universe. This absurd narrative strand is complemented by another: while Azniv is more pragmatically grounded on her faith and relies on her husband's prayers, merely hearing whose voice gives her comfort, (13) Hagop has a difficult time finding the words when faced with such a loss, of entering into the sermonizing mode with which he is so familiar.[111]

In part two, Reverend Hagop continues to wait. Since he is so attached to religious texts and sermonizing, gaining deep sense of security from them, he waits for words to emerge and help him live through this difficult moment. No words come to the Reverend. He walks into their son's room where Azniv is crying while leaning on his bed. The narrative shifts and takes Azniv's perspective who asks Hagop to pray. (12) He is having a difficult time to even pray, feels tired, wishes the Bible were with him, and bursts into tears. They cry, hugging each other. Then Hagop falls asleep. (12-15) Such an arbitrary ending reinforces the absurd in the short story. Just like with Philip in the short story "Curtain," Hagop's long-winded attempt to make sense of his loss is subverted by an absurd element which fuels the search for meaning without itself having any meaning.

While Oshagan's shorter works of prose present characters that live inauthentic lives with tragic consequences, his longer works further develop this plot by telling stories of characters waking up to the deeper truth of existence. The long-form prose of the novel allows enough space to elaborate on this transformation. An example is the

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relation to the death of an innocent child. I shall find the precise reference in a more revised version of this essay.

[111] For example, when Azniv sees their son in his last breath, she cries for Hagop to do something, to run for the doctor; meanwhile Hagop stands perplexed: "… from his furious faith and unbridled-bursting and unending love, from sermons and advice over the years what was left aside from powerless, clingy tension…. When the emotion also dissolved into darkness around, the reverend, completely emptied from love and prayer, defeated and abandoned continued to stay there and wait." (5) Here, the existentialist trope of human abandonment in a meaningless universe is couched in the protagonist waiting for his habitual, religiously inflected meaning to arrive.

unpublished novella "Station No. 4" (1968). In it, Harutiun, a young Armenian storeowner in Lebanon, when faced with danger and slightly aroused, feels the radical alterity of life.[112] He experiences this when two fighters break into his shop, ran havoc in it, wake him up from his nap and wound his arm. The narrative then states that, without understanding exactly what is happening to him, Harutiun's consciousness received the existence of the armed driver like a revelation, explosion and violation.[113] The narrative then adds that he was "… [a]nother person from that point on, human and natural like everyone else." (21) Finally, when everyone leaves the store, Harutiun is left in the following state:

> His back came to the wall and at that moment he felt so lonely that the store felt unreal, not even as his store any more but as another place that was familiar to him, where at the time he had met a cowardly, soft, unreal man who in the evening barely having closed the door behind the plump, sweaty and talkative female customers would take refuge in the kitchen, get to the front of the mirror and would arouse himself until cumming. But this loneliness was different — in this one there was an invitation, an impulse, an escape to the outside. He did not understand what had happened. And the need for human presence was so strong that he was not able to resist and headed towards the door. (23)

The above passage presents Harutiun going through an existentialist awakening of seeing reality, including his previous inauthentic self, from a radical point of externality. Even though he does not quite understand it, he is sufficiently aware of it to feel the need, out of fear and/or love, to be with other humans.

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[112] This passage is particularly relevant: "The anxiety-ridden consciousness of his lonliness poured into him and for the first time in his life Harutiun felt, through a haze, the cold reality of the living life's tattered mixing inside or outside humans? This is life – other and to the other, from outside." (13) The context is important, too: seeing that the fight between the driver and the boss of the taxi company is escalating, Harutiun shouts for the three female customers, one of whose breasts is very close to Harutiun and arouses him, and Samira to leave the shop, feeling the approaching of danger.

[113] Here is the relevant passage: "And the policeman having not yet arrived, Harutiun, carried by the whirling of his immense disturbance and rebellion, came face to face, for only a confused instant, with irresistible, tragic impossibility which is the human tearing naked living of life. It was something like a revelation this unpostponable and absurd explosion which as a tear from rape threw into his consciousness the existence of the chauffeur. He felt so sweetly the bodily pain that a joyfulness resembling love filled his essence. He did not understand what had happened; he only knew in a very turbid way that he was not the same person anymore." (20-21)

In *Bridge*,[114] a number of characters experience awakening. It mainly tells the story of an elderly couple, Stépan and his wife, Sirvart, their three children, Sargis, Apo and Alis. The structure of the novel — temporally and, in the case of Apo and Alis, spatially — brings the plot lines associated with the characters into one focus. The oldest sibling, Sargis, like Harutiun from "Station No. 4," is deeply enchanted by the capitalist worshipping of money, lack of which has become his obsession, the source of his inferiority complex which also affects his sexuality and injects with fear his relation with women.[115] The narrative deepens his character by alluding to formative, rather traumatic, events from his childhood, while making him go through a suspenseful period of waiting for a lucrative but illegal pharmaceutical deal to take place. At the end of the novel, when the illicit business transaction is successful and he has all the money that he wanted, he feels no satisfaction and no attachment to the world of which he has been a part.[116] There

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[114] This unpublished novel, 122 type-written pages, the handwritten title of which is hard to read, is signed "January 3, 1973" and was revised by Oshagan some fifteen years later, the revised copy bearing the signature "San Francisco 1988." The second version of the novel is a Xerox copy of the manuscript of the earlier manuscript with minimal copy-editing touches apparently made by Oshagan himself. The pagination is almost identical, except that for the second version, Oshagan has added a final 123th page, on which is stated a date and time: "1972, August 14, afternoon 20 past 4." This addition has implications on the reading of the novel, on which I hope to elaborate on another occasion. Below this is the word "End" and the authorial signature bearing the date of the first manuscript: "Vahé Oshagan 3 January, 1973, Beirut." Meanwhile, the first page of Version B has its own place and date: "San Francisco 1988;" the same page has the title *Bridge* in clear typewritten form.

[115] Here is a relevant passage: "… [Sargis] remembered how he had started taking cold showers to fortify his nerves when returning home in the morning from the Arab nurse, forcedly smoking the bitter cigarette in the colorless taxi and remembering her idiotic look frozen on the ceiling what will we do tonight? tucking her swollen coarse hairy legs, lets go out but he would curl by her, hugging the body filled with straw and repeating for the last two months lets lie next to each other here … there is nothing outside but knowing that it was not for that reason that involuntary anxiety into which he would fall when approaching the womankind I need to earn make money to be a man repeating and looking for the smell of hospital in her hair so that he would forget this shapeless thing all bones and flesh which was called Sargis…" (25)

[116] This is the relevant passage: "Sargis went back into the pharmacy. He felt so strange that for a moment he was not able to realize where he was, what he was doing here. Without being aware of it he sat at the chair put for the customers. A shiver passed through his back. The pharmacy had become very cold and the thing to do was to go fix the device but he did not have the strength to get up from his place and find the device and thought about going outside and looking for a new place.

is hope, nonetheless, in the ambiguity of him waiting with which the narrative ends, a common existentialist trope for Oshagan's.

As for Apo, Sargis' younger brother, he is trapped in the romantic ideology of the martyr fighting for his nation and guarding its highest ideals. When his sister Alis confronts him, his idealist worldview is shattered and the reader is left with the vague hope that he will wake up from it. (See especially pages 110-114.) Among the three siblings, Alis is the one that is the most awake. Even though she is the youngest of the siblings, her consciousness seems to be the most mature, in the sense that she is able to avoid being trapped in inauthentic modes of living. (See especially pages 43-54.) As such, she has the least sense of positive/positivist identity and is able to grasp her freedom beyond what is imposed from external and internal forces.

The narrative of *Bridge* is minimal when it comes to the mother but quite detailed regarding the father, Stépan. Stépan wakes up from his own romantic nationalism after being tortured and is filled with compassion towards the world. As a father figure, he continues being a strong influence on his children. Apo imitates his mythic image as a warrior for the nation. Sargis feels unconscious pressure to steal money and give it to his father to help him. Finally, Alis' mind is constantly preoccupied with her father's advice to be compassionate and to stay pure.

Other plot elements serve occasions and means by which the characters confront life, whether waking up to its profound truth or not. In *Station No. 4*, it is the abortion that

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Restless, foreign, he felt the bundle of money and realized now that it was the thousand golds. But he felt nothing.

Outside the driver was still talking surely with the same ardour and life was being built and given to others, carried over the bodies of others. His father's image came before his eyes and went. For a second he thought about slowly standing up, opening the door, going outside and leaving in whatever direaction and running, escaping, hiding, not being visible to himself, getting lost, not being….

Without will, defeated, he waited." (122)

a teenage Arab girl is on her way to have with the money from the father, Harutiun. In the case of *Bridge*, it is Alis going for an abortion; the father is her Greek officemate whom she hardly loves. In both cases, one of the parties is non-Armenian. By this and other ways, Oshagan situates the plot of the novel within the social, gender and ethnic divisions of the Armenians in Lebanon. What makes these novels radical is their uncompromising impulse to address universal themes, such as the nature of life and consciousness, by transcending the socio-political sensitivities of its Armenian and non-Armenian characters.

**Oshagan's Meta-allegorical Prose**

On July 19, 1975, Oshagan published a text in the newspaper *Aztag* titled "Perspective [1]" ("Տեսանկիւն [1]"[117]). As far as I know, this is the first highly allegorical text published by him. If this is the case, then "Perspective [1]" marks the advent of a new stage in Oshagan's prose. "Perspective [1]" is tells the story of Hayrabed and his three sons, who live in an Armenian village in Lebanon. Hayrabed believes that true fatherland and identity consist in constant escape and searching. This is why he thinks that his villagers hardly live their lives, given the soporific security that they find among themselves. By contrast, he sends his three sons away, hoping that with their experience of exile they will understand and embrace the deeper truth about fatherland and identity. However, all of his sons come back. Hayrabed is disappointed that they did

[117] I add '1' in brackets at the end of the title because in the same year, Oshagan published anther text in *Aztag* with the title "Perspective - 2" ("Տեսանկիւն - 2") One of a kind, "Perspective -2" juxtaposes a work of literary criticism, analyzing the poetry of Abraham Alikian, and a short story with absurdist overtones.

not break the law of the father to create new life and recalls how in his youth he also was not able to resist the feeling of homesickness and returned.

"Perspective [1]" has allegorical qualities. Its narrative does not provide any detailed character descriptions; instead, they function as archetypes. Moreover, their names are symbolic. The name of the middle son, Avetis, means 'good news', ironically, and is from the Bible. Hayrabed literally means 'chief father'. It is clear that he represents a father figure; his three sons returning after exile stand for the failure to live authentically through transgression and transplantation. What makes this short story meta-allegorical is the fact that the interpretation of the allegory accompanies the narrative itself.

The short story "Lighthouse"[118] takes up the father and son thematics and develops a more nuanced meta-allegorical meditation on identity. It is about Serob and his son, Garabed, who live inside an unspecified lighthouse at a "cracked lip of a promontory." (99) The lighthouse, an orienting guide, stands for identity. Father and son live together after Serob's wife's mysterious disappearance. Serob has a paradoxical attachment to the lighthouse. He protects it and insists it to be always lit while pitying those who search for roots (100) and knowing that the lighthouse does not really help anyone. (101) Approaching his forties, Garabed grows weary and uncomfortable from resembling to his father. When he insists on leaving, Serob protests by stating in an irrational manner that because he is Garabed's father, Garabed's place is in the lighthouse. (102-103)

[118] It is published in the volume *The Fugitive* in 1987; its authorial signature is "Philadelphia, 7 September 1976."

Garabed does not listen to his father and leaves. He marries a rich Armenian woman, Arusiak, has two daughters and is happy. However, on the evening of the tenth anniversary of their marriage, after a pleasant and lustful diner, the couple has a car accident. Arusiak dies; Garabed survives but loses his eyesight. After recovering physically, he leaves his home in deep anger. In a short while, Serob recognizes him seated in a park. They talk in a hotel lobby, surrounded by elderly, somnambulant people. That night, Serob meditates on the encounter with his son thus:

> In this giant, meaningless universe there must have been some possibility of identity, but no one could help him. His father, for instance, had entrusted him with the lighthouse and left without saying a word. There was no need to be verbose, they understood each other by means of the silent pain, nameless suffering beyond words, - at least that is what he thought. It was above the mind, an identity found by going through pain; it passed from one to another, but without being given and taken, in a secret manner. His son? – He didn't want to think about him, the smart, happy, lively son, who, for all that, did not have identity. And then, which idiot has said that the words father and son have meaning, deep, deep meaning. A human being had no ties with another. (109-110)

Appearing at the end of the passage above, the figure of secret gives a mystical interpretation of the absurdity of life. It does so in the context of the problematic of transgenerational survival of identity. The main idea thus expressed is that identity is formed and sustained across generations through struggle. One comes across this idea in other texts by Oshagan.[119] Like "Perspective [1]," the short story "Lighthouse" is meta-allegorical, since the protagonist and the narrator, at places indistinguishable from each other, provide the key of the allegory.

Serob and Garabed walk to the lighthouse, the day after they met again.[120] Despite the storm, Garabed rushes inside it and closes the door behind. His father is left outside in

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[119] It is noteworthy that the short story "Rendezvous" (1980), the last one in the volume *The Fugitive* (1987), revolves around a mother and daughter. Additionally, Oshagan's novels, particularly *Bridge*, have strong and peculiar female characters.

[120] Here is how the text presents Serob when he sees the lighthouse again: "Now the lighthouse was being seen from far, the wind was dashing from the sea and was throwing left and right on the walls

the storm and, even though Garabed hears his pleas to open the door, he does not let him in. Serob feels that he has underestimated his son's hatred towards him, even though he thinks that hatred is conducive to life. (109) He is taken by the storm. Here we have an explicit patricidal narrative which is only mildly implied in the short story "Perspective [1]" discussed previously. Moreover, after closing himself off in the lighthouse, Garabed breaks its mirrors with a hammer in an attempt to destroy the past (116-117). Lying inside the lighthouse, Garabed thinks that the next day he must start over by fixing the light. All things considered, "Lighthouse" is a meta-allegorical meditation on the complex and oftentimes violent ways in which identity forms and survives across generations.

"Bed of Garden (Armenian Fantasy)," (authorial signature: 1976), also from the volume *The Fugitive*, is another meta-allegorical short story meditating on identity from the perspective of the problematic of the absurd. It does so by exploring the way Armenian and Turkish identities have been shaped by a protracted encounter with each other. The text opens with a long-winded, sarcastic description of a wind sweeping through a city and trapping the living beings into thinking that there is meaning in the universe. It then mentions Hagop who stands up to the wind, wants to escape the absurd by giving meaning to his life, and moves to the edge of a passage. (89)[121] At its opening

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and the pavement the fragile mass of the rain. Serob closed his eyes; this is what he had loved, before the open window of the lighthouse, at that intense moment of the storm, beyond meaning and pleasure, feeling a sign, a kind of an invitation beyond the world and life, for truths found beyond. / He took refuge at the entrance of a door, pulled the boy to him, put the bags down and took a deep breath. The water was running over his wrinkles, his white hair had stuck to his forehead, his strength was pouring back into him with each move; it is now that life will open its secret flower, at this moment, time having stopped and the boy caught inside… if there was happiness in life, it must have been this. Only one thing was missing, he knew tragedy. Where was it? Where?" (110-111)

[121] This is the relevant passage: "It was for escaping from its [the absurd's] fear that Hagop little by little moved towards the edge of the passage, trying to collect pieces of clothes, strips of breeze, blades of light so that he can cover his nakedness, not of his body but of his essence. At a distant edge

he finds Mehmet, lying on the ground, happy and sleepy, face and hands in the muddy earth,[122] not to glean a mysterious meaning about it, the narrative specifies, but to absorb the raw living into his existence. As we can see, the narrative establishes a contrast between Hagop and Mehmet: the former is open to the problematic of the absurd, the latter is not.

Mehmet is a student from the suburbs of Bursa who came to Philadelphia to study, and fell ill.[123] A neighboring woman took care of him, then they started living together and he forgot about his studies and parents, until one day his mother sent him a letter asking to return before his sick father dies. A few letters later, he tossed away a black letter probably bearing the news of his father's passing, and burst out against his companion, beat her, broke objects in their home and ran outside. He is neither good nor evil and knows desire and pure emptiness after its satisfaction, the narrative comments. It is in these circumstances that Mehmet meets Hagop, who helps him to find employment. Hagop, however, is a self-enclosed, experienced man, and never becomes close with Mehmet. (91) He explains to Mehmet that to be born he needs to speak a language without words, to be able to talk to the ghosts and ask them why they do not leave him alone, to try to reach to the pain of all of humanity, like Armenians did during their history. Mehmet does not understand. Hagop insists that at least the caricature of that pain needs to be sought, that there is no identity — "human identity is in the simulacrum

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from which was expelled, exiled Mehmet, who was a different person — a flat, small head with vertical nape of the neck reaching all the way to the top of the skull, a short neck, narrow forehead, a gaze descending in folds, thick, female lips, thin nostrils, full, hairy body." (88-89)

[122] It is noteworthy that in his 1980 essay, Oshagan does not fail to note the symbolic element in Bakounts' story "The seed sower of black fallow fields" in which Seth, the seed sower, dies during the Communist takeover of Armenia with his face in mud, symbolizing, for Oshagan, the return to clay, the cycle of life which incorporates death.

[123] Vahé Oshagan's father, Hagop Oshagan (1883-1948) was born in the village of Sölöz, near Bursa and Istanbul. Thus, in Vahé Oshagan's exploration of the father-son dynamics, one can read autobiographical overtones.

of the human image in the mirror meant to deceive" (92) — but loneliness in which one needs to endure for a little bit, create life and cultivate culture. He adds that Mehmet is not capable of suffering and has nothing to say by sitting in the emptiness. (92-93) Meanwhile, Hagop keeps moving, changing places, looking for something that is lost. (93) Clearly, Hagop stands for Armenian culture going through modernity while being threatened by the violent experience of Ottoman Turkish colonial domination.

Then a fire breaks out in the passage. Mehmet uses this as an opportunity to beat and rob Hagop, who, as a result, is once again on the road. This episode could be interpreted as referring to the Armenian Catastrophe taking place under the cover of World War I and scattering surviving Armenians around the globe. At the exit of the passage, when he turns back and sees Mehmet sleeping on the ground, Hagop realizes that in his life he has encountered not only many travelers like himself, but also almost animal-like, slowly moving entities like Mehmet whom he has left behind. He understands that Mehmet could not fatally wound him, that he has been coming from afar and is going far away, collecting, creating and going beyond life. He looks at Mehmet for the second time and realizes that the young man is "the archetype of all of his enemies, a kind of living appearance of that irrational, cruel and degrading anti-law, whose giant, swaying shadow had fallen from one end of the universe to the other and now was sprawled there, at the end of a dead-end." (94) Hagop then understands that life is a deadly struggle between him and Mehmet, that he would have to fight against compromise and hatred wherever he would meet Mehmet, and that his is a struggle for symbols in the face of "the sterile womb of the fairy-tales."[124] (95) Hagop walks outside,

[124] The word 'fairy-tale' (հէքեաթ) is used quite often by Oshagan in this and other texts. Usually, it is deployed in a sarcastic mode, criticizing the genre among Armenians, as a way of to wake them up

thinking that he has more important things to do and will not return, although, he vaguely feels that he will come back. (95) With this ending, "Bed of Garden (Armenian Fantasy)" suggests that in their post-catastrophic diasporic journey, Armenians will be haunted by their past and are even in danger of going through it again.

**Oshagan's Metahistoriographic Theatre**

Theatre as an art form is within Oshagan's critical purview from an early date. Already the series "European and American contemporary literature" (*Pakin*, 1962-1963) and "Samuel Beckett" (*Young Armenian*, 1970), through which we traced the problematic of art in the face of a tragically absurd universe, rely significantly on evaluating works of theatre in making their assessments. In particular, in the abovementioned series, Oshagan situates the development of the New Theatre (alternatively referring to it as the anti-Theatre or the Theatre of the Absurd), with that of the New Novel (or the anti-Novel), as the defining avant-garde movement of postwar Europe. Over the years, Oshagan kept a steady critical relation with theatre. The five theatre reviews which he published in the Beirut-based Armenian daily *Aztag*[125] in the mid-1970s, and the four more in *Asbarez*[126]

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from their 19th century romanticist sleep. The style of Oshagan's texts bearing this genre description echo tale elements in the rhythm and detachedness of language, but also mix shocking language and overly-meandering remarks to eventually subvert the genre. It is also noteworthy that Oshagan uses the French term 'fantasy' instead of trying to find an equivalent in the Armenian language. The word *heqiat* (*հեքիաթ*) is perhaps unsatisfactory for him for these reasons.

[125] These *Aztag* theatre reviews are: "'The traveler without luggage' (Remark)" (publication date to be further researched), a discussion of Jean Anouilh's *The traveler without luggage* (1937), written on the occasion of its performance by the Beirut-based Gaspar Ipekian theatre group, directed by Zh. Sargsian; "Albee, Pinter and Theatre 67" (May, 1974), a discussion of the Beirut-based Armenian theatre group "Theatre 67" and its performances *The Zoo Story* and another play by Harold Pinter; "Theatre and Politics" (May, 1975), a discussion of the performance of the play *The Trial of Soghomon Tehlirian* in Bourj Hamoud, one of Beirut's Armenian neighborhoods, by the Gaspar Ipekian theatre group; this play is about the acquittal by a German court of a survivor of the Armenian Genocide who assassinates one of its key organizers, Talaat Pasha, in Berlin in 1921; "About Theatre" (1975[?]), a discussion of the 1975 performance of Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by an Armenian theatre group in Beirut; and "Impression" (Dec. 1973), a discussion of the performance of

in the 1980s, are proof of this. Oshagan's rhetoric in these theatre texts, especially the *Aztag* reviews, adopts a strategic pattern. He opens them by making broad theoretical remarks about the nature of theatre, pointing out its cultural and political importance in reflecting and shaping the quality of a community's collective being. Without reducing theatre to only one of its myriad aspects, Oshagan emphasizes the freedom from the everyday that it can potentially give to its audience, a theme that echoes his existentialist criticism. Then, he discusses the particular play that has been recently performed and ends the review by critically assessing the performance. Throughout these reviews, he endorses the idea of a national theatre but only one which is conceived with artistic terms and goals that take into account the issues affecting not just Armenians but humanity in general. This is Oshagan's way of reconciling the particular with the universal.

From his numerous literary works, at least seven texts by Oshagan can be categorized as works of theatre, including radio-sketches which I treat as a sub-genre of theatre.[127] I have argued above that freedom and language are the two main figures with

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Hagop Baronian's renowned play "The Oriental Dentist" (1868) by the theatre group "Theatre 67," directed by Varujan Khtshian. As we can see, two of these theatre reviews are on Armenian and three on European plays.

[126] The *Asbarez* threatre-related texts are: "Towards the Experimental Theatre," Parts 1 and 2 (dateline May 26 and May 31, 1986, San Francisco, respectively), a discussion of the performance of Beirut-born, Los Angeles-based Armenian playwright Vahé Berberian prefigured by theoretical remarks on experimental theatre particularly in the Armenian diaspora; and "Theatre Issues," Parts 1 and 2 (July 5 and July 10, 1987, San Francisco, respectively), a discussion of the history of Western Armenian theatre from its 19th century development in the Ottoman Empire to its transformations in the Armenian diaspora. The last two articles have been published also in the Paris-based Armenian-langauge daily *Haratch*, (August 13 and 14, 1987 respectively) a phenomenon that is common in the Armenian diaspora press.

[127] Here is the list of these seven texts: "Those who die" («Մեռնողներ»), *Agos*, Beirut, 1955 (author's signature: Beirut, 1953); "The Dysfunctional Elevator: *Radio-sketch* for six voices. Two durations," («Խանգարուած վերելակը. Ռատիօ-պէէչ վեց ձայնի համար. Երկու ժամանակ»), *Crossroads*, Beirut, 1971 (author's signature: November 1962); "Diaspora (a play) Three Generations – 14 Voices 1900-2000" («Սփիւռք (ներկայացում մը) Երեք Սերունդ – 14 Ձայն 1900-2000»), *Generations: Writings of Prose* (Սերունդներ. Արձակ Գրութիւններ), Beirut, Lebanon, 1995 (author's signature: San Francisco, May 1987); "Avarayr 80" («Ավարայր 80»), *Around the Trap* (Թակարդին շուրջը), New York, 1988; "The Terrorist" (A play with two scenes)" («Ահաբեկիչը (Թատերախաղ երկու Տեսարանով)»), *Haratch*,

which Oshagan's early criticism formulates the problematic of the possibility of art in an absurd universe. In the first play by Oshagan, "Those Who Die"[128] (1953), these figures are central. This play itself meditates on the relationship between life, violence, history and art through the prism of a fictionalized episode in which Turkish raiders destroy an Armenian monastery.[129] The main idea that it experiments with is that life is lived inauthentically (elaborated as lack of absolute freedom) unless it involves the liminal experience of approaching and facing death. Religion and art are only substitutes and at best secondary, illusionary means leading towards the realization of the value of this profound experience. While the absurd as a problematic is not explicitly stated, it is implicit in the play's recognition of the radical alterity of the past.

To understand this and the kind of theatre that the play imagines, let us read the "Illustration" in its beginning. Here it is in my translation:

Illustration

> This play is written to be read on the radio. It is even possible to perform on a stage. With a certain wager.
>
> There are voices of three qualities.

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Paris, 1993; *Embrace* (*Հաւքույր*), Sydney, Australia, 1996; *Identity* (*Ինքնութիւն*), Antelias, Lebanon, 1996.

128 "Those who die," Act 1, *Agos* 3-4 (March-April), Act 2, 5-6-7 (May-June-July), 1955, Beirut (author's signature: Beirut, 1953). *Agos* was a Beirut-based literary periodical published from 1944 to 1960 by the Armenian College (Hay Djemaran).

129 Here is my synopsis of the play. In Act I, Turkish raiders break into a remote, unspecified, medieval Armenian monastery, destroying and killing all on their way. A young monk runs to an elderly cleric who is copying manuscripts in his cell and informs that the raiders have broken into the monastery. The cleric is irritated for being disturbed and offers his thoughts about life, how it is beyond movement, and that the monk is afraid to keep his appointment with it. The cleric asks the monk to leave. The violence continues; someone rings the church bells; the cleric is in his cell continuing to copy manuscripts, while meditating about life. Then, the monk runs by the raiders back into the building of the cells; the raiders pursue him to the second floor. In Act II, the cleric jumps up in the middle of his writing, furious, and grabs his sword, and is ready to die, waiting. Meanwhile, the raiders pursue the monk as the latter tries to get to the door of the cleric's cell; the monk is killed without reaching to the cleric's door behind which the latter is waiting, sword in hand. The cleric keeps waiting. But the raiders leave, probably thinking that there is no one else there; the cleric bends over; his life had no value, he was not able to fully face death. He is of no interest any more and the stage is free for the audience, for 'us.'

> First there is the loudspeaker – the metal that imitates its master, but without self-interest, not to be found in Armenian literature, the inner voice of all fake talents when they are frank with themselves, in rare moments. It describes reality, similar to the speaker of the 9 o'clock news.
>
> Then the reciter. It is present in the place of action and tells, advices, gives opinion. He can be a young Indian ambassador or the Armenian writer from the year 2000. The outside eye that watches from inside. It is a human voice, therefore, but is indifferent, only wanting to be for the sake of truth. The backgammon, were it to suddenly start talking and telling why the dice rolled a double six and master Artin and so on.
>
> There is one last hue. There are the groups standing on both sides of a human situation. The first group is inside the situation, is the voice of its inner life, in the event when it is accepted that there is an inner life and its voice can have a meaning apart from a superfluous, futile intervention. Immediate, urgent. That voice of the accused to which the court does not listen. And when it listens, it is probably too late or it will not understand.
>
> The second group is about the elements comprising the situation. It describes the surrounding, gets emotional, lives and gives life, as the gala reporters say.
>
> Of course the two groups often crisscross each other and the borders are not too clear, similar to the borders of inner and outer worlds. Therefore, all of this is in an approximate fashion and is subordinate to a fundamental need — to the expression of the act of living — to its one tragic naked moment. The rest is the writer's pretense. (22-23)

Accordingly, "Those Who Die" refuses to have *an* actor playing *a* character, opting instead for multiple voices, while even this act of complex presentation is critically exposed by the meta-discourse of the "Illustration." Thus, the complex framework of the play — involving a Reciter, a Loudspeaker, groups and the absent presence of the characters of the play — problematizes the seamless representation of history in writing and theatrical performance. In Act 1, Scene 2, there is even an explicit refusal to follow theatrical conventions when it comes to representing the past:

> Loudspeaker: The actors of this play are dead. And so they are invisible. And because the so-called human barely and almost only once succeeds to live, he and only he has the right to stage his "I-am-this," body voice and movement. The author's right and accident occurs only once and is deadly. And so no other human, no other body voice movement has either the right or the ability, in the 20th century, to feign the cleric who was seated there copying a manuscript, nor the monk who opened the door and glided inside. The formidable uproar of the outside looked inside and the monk did not know how it closed the door and now silence. Silence. (24)

The above passage recognizes the radical alterity of the past by first stating that the actors of the play are dead. In this way, the play problematizes the ability of (theatrical) fiction

to capture (historical) truth, which makes "Those Who Die" an anti-play. Nevertheless, the work recognizes the profound need to relate to the past by pointing to the "author's right" to spring into it and make art out of it. This act is formulated as an "accident [which] occurs only once and is deadly." In other words, while artistic ways of relating to the past involve contingency, their most profound possibility lies in conjuring the past on the basis of a liminal experience between life and death. In this play, such a liminal experience is expressed through the figures of freedom and, in a less developed manner, language. The latter is mentioned by way of the elderly cleric who, having copied manuscripts for a long time, comes to the conclusion that to live life authentically one needs to go beyond ordinariness and secondary substitutes like language.

As for freedom, it is most explicitly addressed in Act 2, Scene 11 of the play. There, the cleric is behind the closed door of his cell, waiting for the marauders to break in at any moment. He is ready to wage a hopeless fight with them and to die at their hands. Here is that moment in my translation:

"Those who die"
SCENE 11
*The two groups once again at the corners.*

Group 2: What can the human do with his freedom?
Group 1: To dash, to attack, to kill.
Group 2: No. Every action is a choice which kills freedom.
Group 1: To stay motionless, to wait, to do nothing.
Group 2: Again action which chooses and kills.
Group 1: To jump down the window. To choose death but freely. To feel falling in the air but freely. To feel the blow of the stone but freely.
Group 2: That is, an action that chooses.
Group 1: To laugh, to shout, to sing, to pray?
Group 1[sic?]: No.
Group 1: Then what, what?
Group 2: To understand, but not with mind, body but with fury, which little by little is going to spread in and around him, which is going to explain that it is not possible, it is not possible. (38)

Accordingly, at stake is being absolutely free, formulated as making no choices, going *beyond* the logic and order of choice, beyond conscious decision-making, beyond the categories of mind and body. The passage above calls this "fury." This figure of absolute freedom recurs towards the end of the play, in Act 2, Scene 12. This time it pertains to the young monk who is being chased by marauders and is feverishly looking for the door of the elderly cleric's cell. Here is that passage: "To become smaller, to become smaller towards a center which is inside or outside the person since the fundamental is not to obey any impulse, but this condensing, closing around and inside a point, having reached to the threshold of the last door, contracted, crushed, absolutely freed from all possibilities of freedom." (39) We saw Oshagan evoking such a radical possibility of freedom in his literary criticism, when, for instance, critiquing Beckett for not giving his characters the freedom to hopelessly rebel against the absurdity of life.

The fact that Oshagan started publishing the play in the March-April, 1955 edition of the literary journal *Agos* makes it even more radical as April 1955 marks the 40$^{th}$ anniversary of the Armenian Catastrophe. Given this context, the play's recognition of the radical alterity of the past and its reinscription of absolute freedom testifies to Oshagan's desire to overcome the heavy burden of the past while keeping in touch with it.

The link between language and the problematic of the possibility of art in an absurd universe is most explicitly treated in Oshagan's 1962 play "The Dysfunctional Elevator: *Radio-sketch* for six voices. Two durations." The play evokes the historical figures of Mesrop Mashtots and Koriun. Mashtots is the 4$^{th}$-5$^{th}$ century Armenian linguist, theologian who spearheaded the creation of the Armenian letters around the year

of 405. His disciple Koriun is best known for Mashtots' biography, *The Life of Mashtots*, the first original book in Armenian. Towards the end the play, an irritated Mashtots says:

> Words, words… they choked me. The letters, one by one, are magnificent… pure music. But when they come together and create word and treading on you rise to dance… and when the words are arranged next to each other there is no more air left to breath (he is silent) and the ideas curling over the laps of these words… you think your lover is waiting for you and suddenly an ugly, old whore with a disgusting makeup smiles to you, with saliva running, itching… (He is silent.) Oh, how I was deceived, betrayed!" (8)

This passage captures so much of what I will call Oshagan's literary mysticism. The grotesque and provocative image of language being a "whore" is at the heart of this discourse. Language, written or spoken, is only a secondary substitute to a deeper truth beyond it. To Koriun's reaction that Mashtots is pessimistic while being recognized as one of the greatest contributors to the Armenian culture, Mashtots responds:

> I am not that sure about this. (He is silent.) The future of Armenians worries me Koriun. To put so much passion in forgetting the old religion, to cling to the new one, to letter and literature, to the visible with so much zeal… I don't know.
> Koriun: But… letter and literature are magnificent things.
> Mashtots: Only if one does not fall victim to them.
> Koriun: Victim?
> Mashtots: Language was means for me, like mirror, to live beyond it… here! (8)

What is beyond language, we might ask? In Oshagan's discourse, like in the excerpts above, at stake is life, even its essence. The "here!" and the implied 'now!' announced by Mashtots is another formulation of this mystical stand - life, unlike language, needs to be lived without deferral that is language. Later, Mashtots adds: "Time is silence, virgin and pregnant silence. Woe to the one who fills it with words and letters." (10) This brings us full circle: language - words - is a decadent substitute; silence, beyond language, is "virgin and pregnant."

Mashtots is irritated because a few minutes before a broadcaster on the radio station of Vagharshapat, the seat of the Holy See of the Armenian Church, announced, in

a “hysterical” (1,2) tone, the beginning of a program commemorating the 30th anniversary of the invention of the Armenian alphabet as well as and especially celebrating its “ingenious and incomparable” (1) creator. This last bit makes Mashtots lose patience and shout at Koriun to turn the radio off.

In an uneasy conversation that ensues, Mashtots is disappointed that Armenians are losing touch with life soon after their minds are given the chance to liberate themselves through the letters that he has created. Their pagan songs, myths and prayers are dying; they are afraid of death and have started counting the years. Armenians are falling into the trap of external, objective time, of that which is true and grounded on rationality, which may even give rise to a false problematic of the absurd when: “... when humans start thinking, measuring and analyzing their existence, understanding that life is devoid of meaning without ever knowing why this is not important... ”(9) “The Dysfunctional Elevator” is dated by the author as completed in November 1962. Already by this early date, he formulates a literary mysticism as a way out of the problematic of the possibility of art in an absurd universe.

Mashtots continues to elaborate on the consequences of this situation: “The brave, splendid and fiery imagination, turned into a blind, deaf and mute beggar, will be dragged about under the walls of our kitchens…” (9) Accordingly, rationalization stifles the imagination. Literature, fiction, feeds off the latter. It is not surprising, then, that among the voices which comprise the radio-sketch “The Dysfunctional Elevator,” Voice 1 is the voice of the imagination, which Oshagan formulates, again unsurprisingly, in existentialist terms thus: “The secret whisper of a prompter, through the dust. A consciousness addressed to no one, disinterested. A *phenomenological* presence.” (3)

"The Dysfunctional Elevator" presents itself as an artistic act of historical existentialist witnessing of an originary crisis by setting up an unequal binary: Mashtots is the artist, a creator of a script, and, unlike Koriun, he is not entangled in its rationalizing, instrumentalizing logic. Mashtots knows how to disentangle from language's entanglements, while Koriun, especially by writing Mashtots' laudatory biography - the first original book in Armenian - seems forever trapped. In addition to Koriun, Mashtots has another, but this time more equal, foil: Vartan Mamigonian. Oshagan presents the Armenian military leader as a mystic figure, ready to sacrifice his life in a hopeless act of rebellion and on his way to acquiring the mystic wisdom that Mashtots has.

For Oshagan, the event of the invention of the Armenian script, which subsequently becomes the substrate of the culture, is *analogous* to a mystical experience — *both inscribe a paradoxical necessity of creating and/or using language to transcend it*. This need for transcendence exposes the positivist logic of the archive at the heart of contemporary historiography. Literature exploits it when, at the end of "The Dysfunctional Elevator", Oshagan's Mashtots' burns his papers.

"Avarayr 80" (1988) is Oshagan's third historical fictional work. There, the year is 451 AD and the historical moment chosen by Oshagan is the eve of the Battle of Avarayr between the Sassanid Persians and the Armenians — led by the same Vardan Mamikonian whom we saw already at the end of the play "The Dysfunctional Elevator" — a battle which, according to historians, preserved the right for Armenians to continue practicing Christianity. The main contemporary source is the historian Yeghishé, who apparently witnessed the battle and authored the book *History of Vardan and the*

*Armenian War.* In the play "Avarayr 80," the historian Yeghishé summons prominent figures into his office and interviews them on their views regarding the events that are about take place. A journalist is present with a sound recorder and a photograph.

"Avarayr 80" does not have any of the complex arrangements that we see in the earlier plays by Oshagan. Subtitled as a "Historical Fantasy," the play's two-page introduction opens thus: "This is a theatrical text, but is not a play — the time has come to separate theatre from play and to feel theatre's seriousness behind its appearance as play. This writing is a fantasy but is not a pastime."[130] (179) It then makes brief remarks about the historical situation of the period leading to the Battle of Avarayr and ends thus:

> The writing that follows is an imaginary portrayal of these days in April 451 and tries to go beyond the conclusions made by historians and reach at much more hidden folds which could have influenced the decisions of the actors of the day as well as the conception of Yegishé's book. This writing neither negates nor confirms the interpretations of Abeghian, Adonts and other philologists.[131] (181)

As we can see, the above passage situates historical fiction — "historical fantasy" — in the non-positivist discursive space of neither confirming nor negating the conclusions of positivist historians.

Scene 1 of "Avarayr 80" consists of Yeghishé receiving Bedros, a journalist around 20 years-old armed with an audio recorder and a photograph, into his office and laying out for him his plans for the interviews that Yeghishé has set up with the following people: the representative of the Catholicos of the Armenian Church, friar Barsegh; the governor of Armenia, Vasak Siuny, appointed by the ruler of Sassanid Persia; the head of the Armenian military, Vardan Mamikonian; a representative of the university students,

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[130] Here, as elsewhere in Oshagan's texts, the author uses the English/French term 'fantasy' by transcribing it in Armenian.

[131] This excerpt refers to important philologists and historians Manuk Abeghian (1865-1944) and Nicolas Adonts (1871-1942).

Miss Dzvik Zavarian, who is a party member. This last meeting does not take place; Yeghishé speculates that this is due to the conservatism of the political party system among Armenians (218) — a tongue-in-cheek criticism by Oshagan of Armenian political life.

In their opening conversation, Yeghishé acknowledges the increasing power of journalists in shaping public opinion; Bedros replies that he will not speak as "[s]peaking always means taking a side" (185) but will act merely as a silent instrument. Yeghishé approves of Bedros' statements and begins speaking; Bedros turns on the recorder. Below, I cite Yeghishé introductory statement in its entirety to help contextualize the work:

> Yeghishé — ... Let me clarify to you the program of my work this morning. First I must give you the analysis of the present state of our country. Political analysis. But only you must know this, you, the Witness of History, in capital letters. You must keep on your film whatever I say and is said in this room and must make it available only after my death – in a month, a year, twenty, it is not clear. That is the charm of death, behind every corner and second, you can come nose to nose with it, who chases whom? Two lovers look for each other, punishment or reward, beyond every meaning absurd absurd...!
> (He falls silent and looks for the effect of his speech on Bedros' face but which expresses nothing. He rubs his forehead and continues.)
> Yeghishé — Whatever happens here is for the future, for the historian and artists of the year of 2000. Because the generations preceding us like idiots mercilessly cut the pagan roots of our nation and now we have to start everything from the beginning, something like genocide has taken place, only the religious can be so fanatical, barbaric. Every definition is lost. I am asking you — what does it mean to be Armenian in the year of 451. It means to be someone hung from the air, cut from the soil of culture, rootless, a fish thrown outside the sea. That is why we translate like mad everything that our hands can reach; we are naked, naked. Not the people — it has still kept the old and finds the way to walk with the new, but the intelligentsia, the writers. We do not have culture; we are vulnerable; this is why the danger coming from the Persians is so great. (He falls silent again, having reached to the edge of the idea, but is freed from the difficulty of speaking. He is motionless for a moment and then:) I am coming to the second part of my program. That new culture which we must create is in need of strong foundations. Literature must be those foundations. The letters are there, the words are there but there is no literature. Translation is a work of the lazy, a work of the tardy, hurried, half-literate man. But it is good that we have an alphabet. Its true; our letters are something like flying butterflies but they are ours; but there is no link between our language and our letters yet and to our letters still misses experience, seriousness, depth, a sort of authenticity. The letters do not know each other, have not lived together, have not suffered in the writer's imagination, have not become used to the language, to the Armenian. And this behold must be my work. You know that in the past hundred years no writer or poet was born in Armenia, people who would love writing for its looks, form, identity, love language because it is so intimate that they reject the presence of another language, even or

> especially for translators. Khorenatsi has a bit of that emotional, almost mystic link. But Mashtots, he was one of a kind. Did you get to know Mashtots? (Bedros moves his head, negating.)
> Yeghishé — You must have been ten years old when he died. I know for sure that the need for Armenian letters for him was solely a personal, strictly intimate, secret need which for all that was not that much linked to a whole slew of political and social causes which people here and there had already put out in the university and in history books... (He is silent. He takes out the pack of cigarette, pulls one out but does not light up. He looks at Bedros who, completely ignoring him, examines his nails. He puts back into the pack the cigarette.)
> Yeghishé — So, given this situation, I must write a book about the war or the battle. A book of the witness, author, actor and director at the same time and you shall see how the eye, body, mind and all five thousand senses of the writer work. But — and this is a big but — this solely literary work [is] for me, for my personal interest; I, Yeghishé, a writer, I need to undertake a great work to once and for all conquer our new letters, our orphan language. Do you understand, Bedros, what a man tying the entire meaning of his existence, justification, value, the taste of life, smell means? It is this that I must do, but not now, no, later, much later, in solitude. (185-186)

From Yeghishé's opening statement three elements stand out as key. First, after the adoption of Christianity around the year of 301, Armenians have no proper culture. Second, to create a new culture for Armenians, "strong foundations" are needed — "Literature must be those foundations." Mashtots has created the Armenian alphabet, but a literature based on them does not exist yet. Third, Yeghishé must fill this gap by writing a book in Armenian on the upcoming battle. In the rest of the play, the various interviewees present and defend their perspectives to help Yeghishé write his book.

As we can see from the above passage, "Avarayr 80" is framed as a work that meditates on the relationship between language and literary mythmaking. Oshagan touches upon this issue in his literary criticism. To recall, in Faulkner's work, Oshagan saw myths as having the capacity to rise up to the absurd tragedy of the universe by monumentalizing the lost past. In Bakounts' work, Oshagan read myths as mediating the absurd passage from life to death. In contrast to the works by Faulkner and Bakounts, "Avarayr 80" explicitly reflects on the powers of myths. With it, Oshagan suggests that myths not only help humans survive in an absurd universe but also constitute a cultural

space in which the future of a collectivity arrives. Thus, in "Avarayr 80," Oshagan's concern is not so much with the difficulties of relating to the past but the capacity of inherited collective myths to predetermine the future. The latter Oshagan sees both as a positive force and a threat. If inherited myths are not critically reflected upon, then they can constrict the transgressive, creative forces of life. This is Mashtots' (from the radio-sketch "The Dysfunctional Elevator") and Yeghishé's, as well as the clerical's (from the play "Those who die") concern.

As we can see, all of the three theatrical works discussed above problematize the various aspects of relating to the past. "Those Who Die" meditates on loss and freedom. "The Dysfunctional Elevator" adds to the consideration language. "Avarayr 80" reflects on the collective dimension of literary mythmaking. Given this, it is more accurate to describe these texts as works of metahistorical fiction. Moreover, in reflecting on the representation of the past, they all rely heavily on anachronism. To bring an example, Scene 1 of "Avarayr 80" opens with two paragraphs describing Yeghishé "office," mentioning a writing machine and a telephone which rings throughout the subsequent interviews. (183) Anachronism is one of the demythologizing instruments Oshagan uses to create the distance from which to reflect on the past while constantly reminding the reader about the dangers of seamlessly representing it, as (realist) historical fiction has tended to do.

"The Unction" is arguably the most complex of Oshagan's meta-mythic works. Even though strictly speaking it is not a metahistoriographic work, given its format and themes, it is best to be analyzed after the three theatre pieces discussed above. Appearing in the volume *Around the Trap* (1988), it tells the story of three young Armenians

committing sacrilege in an Armenian church in Philadelphia, USA, to test the vitality of the myths (in this case, Christianity) that dominate Armenian life.

The strong meta-mythic quality of "The Unction" is revealed through Jacques' views. An Armenian from France, a passionate communist and the leader of the group, Jacques is convinced that the church for Armenians is only a means to form a nation that has become passive and ossified (74), and hopes to awaken Armenians through a revolutionary act of sacrilege (54). If the church goers properly resist then the group will apologize and clean everything; if not, they will burn the church and will not escape from police, as running away would mean being afraid, he states. (55) For Jacques, this is how they are going to celebrate the birth of the Diaspora. (57)

As for the sacrilege itself, Jacques wants to carry it out by disrupting the senses: first the ear, by playing jazz and acting without speaking, then the eye, by wearing black masks and kissing in Church. This way, moribund auditory and visual illusions, he claims, will be destroyed by the illusion that the parishioners will create with their imaginations. (71-73) Furthermore, by not seeing their eyes, the parishioners "will feel imprisoned inside" the intruders' "secret gaze, cannot turn … [them] into object, [and] are powerless before …[them]." (74) By not revealing their Armenianness, Jacques further speculates, the intruders will be the anti-Armenian, i.e. the "god's scourge, the enemy, the true Other, the punishment…" (74) But not the enemy in the ordinary sense, as he later specifies, adding that his intentions are pure and honest. (84)

When asked about his insistence for Bruce and Sona, his two accomplices, to kiss in the church, Jacques sees this act as a way to disrupt Armenian sexuality. For him, sexuality has to do with kissing, touching, silence and involves the mouth. With their

repressed sexuality, Armenians secretly fetishize the mouth (93) and consequently suppress their language by making it sacred and using it for empty speeches and moralizing, instead of turning it into a language of intimacy, used for the expression of what is vital. Sexuality, with its dangerously subversive and individuating power, needs to be invoked to fight against the stagnating moral ties that make up the Armenian community. (92-96)

Remarkably, "The Unction" grounds its discourse of sacrilege on the problematic of the absurd. Accordingly, early on the revolutionaries agree that even though there is no meaning in the world, "…[p]eople need meaning, which they cannot find just by themselves, and the likes of [them, the revolutionaries] must give it to them." (69-70) Yet, unlike other meta-allegorical works by Oshagan, "The Unction," has an added layer. Instead of inventing meta-allegorical narratives to witness the tragic truth of absurd existence, "The Unction" takes a living myth (e.g. Christianity, allegorical in its nature) and makes a theme of its subjection to symbolic violence. In this way, the text gives the reader an externality from which to reflect upon this very act of symbolic violence. The ending of "The Unction" is highly significant in this respect. The church goers and the priest endure the sacrilege, which even reinforces the latter's wavering faith and gives him optimism that his grandchild, whose father is American, will carry on the Armenian identity. Through such an ambiguous ending, Oshagan suggests that myths are more resilient that we might think and treating them with violence is not the best approach.

In the readings above, I have qualified Oshagan's prose as meta-allegorical, metahistoriographic and meta-mythic. Together, these works constitute dynamically linked attempts to not only tacitly inscribe the absurd in explicitly or implicitly diasporic

Armenian contexts, but to also reflect on these inscriptions. Because of this, one can qualify Oshagan's fiction as meta-diasporic and add that besides being reflective, it is also generative of a diasporic discourse. In the readings that follow, I point to some recurring insights that Oshagan's later prose offers to these reflections.

Before doing so, however, I should state that allegory, as a mode of oblique storytelling, is necessitated by the problematic of the absurd given the impossibility of directly representing it. Given Oshagan's critical attitudes towards 19th century literature, it should be noted that he could not have wanted to revive symbolism in this manner. Instead, while symbolist literature tried to ground the symbol in extra-linguistic ideals, Oshagan's allegorical narratives, at least the early ones, are grounded on the absurd. The writer's task is to witness human tragedy by approaching this groundlessness through a singular work. Seen from this perspective, Oshagan's literature can be distinguished from that of Krikor Beledian. In the chapter that follows, I argue that for Beledian the groundlessness of figurative language (e.g. allegorical, metaphoric or metonymic) is not conditioned by the existentialist absurd but by unrepresentable catastrophes that demand a different conception of language and culture.

**Absolute Love as a Response to the Absurd in Oshagan's Later Prose**

During the 1980s and 1990s, Oshagan's prose increasingly relies on the figure and theme of love. This is not surprising, given the ambiguous ending of "The Unction". Even though in the works of prose from this period love takes numerous forms and addresses a whole slew of related issues, what seems common is the attempt to think of love, i.e. the human capacity of and need for attachment, as a response to living in an

absurd universe. Language, in this context, is conceived as an auto-effacing vehicle that makes possible overcoming the absurd in the name of love.

The earliest work of prose by Oshagan that most explicitly ties the theme of love with language is a two-part article entitled "Loves" (both from 26 July 1987).[132] Part 1 is a meta-allegorical narrative about the life of the Armenian language in the diaspora. Part 2 is a literary-critical reflection on the history of the Armenian language.[133] In part 1, a writer, a carpenter and a philologist all love a beautiful and refined Armenian woman discreetly living in San Francisco, who stands for the Armenian language.[134] Each man loves her in his own way and in each case creates a unique identity. The philologist loves the language but is entrapped in the quicksand of words and is unable to go beyond. The carpenter loves the language without being aware of it. (In part 2, Oshagan has a paragraph on the ordinary people, who, according to him, relate to language in a manner similar to the carpenter.) The poet, who realizes that language is the cast of the consciousness, loves her in an attempt to go beyond her. Here, Oshagan distinguishes two cases. Gregory of Narek, the 10th century Armenian mystic theologian, most likely strives

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[132] Oshagan included these two articles in the volume *Literary Chronicle of Selected Articles appearing in the newspaper* Asbarez *in the 1985–1988 period* (*Գրական Քրոնիկ: Հատընտիր յօդուածներու՝ լոյս տեսած Լոս Անճելըսի Ասպարէզ թերթին մէջ* 1985–1988 *շրջանին*). He selected and arranged some 124 articles for this volume and even wrote an introduction, but did not publish it. Currently, I am working with the Oshagan family and Marc Nichanian to publish this volume. As for Oshagan's decision to classify this text as 'literary' by putting it in the respective section of the volume, one should not be surprised since for Oshagan fiction, marked by the imaginary, is more capable of approaching truth, including historical truth, than philology, philosophy and history proper. Furthermore, it can be argued that Vahé Oshagan self-consciously inherited this idea from Hagop Oshagan.

[133] The text "Perspective -2" (*Aztag*, 1975?) is Oshagan's first such hybrid text that I know of. There, the two parts — the literary criticism and the work of fiction — are more neatly separated. The thematic affinities bring the two texts together.

[134] The allegorical story of "Loves" maps rather neatly onto Oshagan's analysis of Bakounts' story "The Alpine Violet". There, too, according to Oshagan, there are three figures (four, but the realist painter and the philologist in Bakount's short story are two sides of the same coin for Oshagan): the artist, the peasant and the philologist/documentarian. Of course, the difference is that "Loves" is meta-allegorical.

to go beyond language by becoming the same with words, his only life, so much so that the imagined life of the words even expulses god out of the picture. The second case is Siamanto, the late 19th and early 20th century Istanbul-based Armenian poet, who sees the Armenian language as weapon, a wall and the abode of the Ideal against destruction.

In part 2 of "Loves", Oshagan synthesizes the abovementioned two cases by arguing that language can erase temporal and spatial distances. He writes that "these two [temporal and spatial distances] also breath, sleep and live in language and that it suffices to enter into language with absolute nudity and sincerity [*Հարազատութեամբ*] for History and geography to disappear and for us to feel, imagine the presence of our nation inside us, across centuries." ("Loves," Part 1) Throughout the two articles, Oshagan brings examples from 12th, 16th and 17th centuries Armenian texts to substantiate his argument. In this manner, he regards the Armenian language as an indirect, even secret, means for collective union, even communion, across time and space. In other words, even though the past and Armenians dispersed across the globe are not directly and positively accessible, one still feels oneself to be in touch with them when using Armenian. In this way language is the vehicle of love.

Another meta-allegorical short story entitled "The Lover (Contemporary Tale)", the first text in the volume *Around the Trap* (1988), meditates in even more explicit terms on poetry's privileged relationship with language. In it, a poet, significantly called Mesrop, and young a woman, Shushan, who prostitutes herself to support her family, fall in love. Despite her father's threats, Mesrop refuses to leave her, arguing that by loving her he makes her alive, free and cherished. (10) In the end, when they ran away from her family, Mesrop tells this to Shushan: "I am your master and servant... from this point on

we will make each other live; nobody besides me will be able to command or exploit you. From this point on you must be free and beautiful, eternally young." (14)

A third short work of prose, a late, as far as I know unpublished, text entitled "The Lovers of Bogogno" (1998), once again reflects on the way love and the absurd are mediated through language. The elderly lovers of this story prefer to see each other only a few days in a year and nourish their love through images and memories of each other. Paradoxically, the figures of photographic image and personal memory make love possible while being only substitutes. Unlike the texts "Loves" (1987) and "The Lover (Contemporary Tale)" (1988), "The Lovers of Bogogno" (1998), by not having any artist characters, tacitly suggests that only artists can overcome this paradox by creating a work that is simultaneously mediative (representational) and moves beyond it.

Oshagan's only published novel *The Inoculation* (1995) [135] once again invokes love as a response to the absurd but does so by conceiving it as the unconditional devotion to the ideal of Armenian culture. Written in a less existentialist and more conventionally realist style and in the wake of the unexpected independence of the Republic of Armenia, it tells the story of young Lebanese-Armenian siblings traveling to the newly-independent Armenia. Once there, one of them, Hagop, volunteers to fight in the ongoing war against Azerbaijan and dies a heroic death at the battlefront. Arminé, his lover, reflects on his death in the following manner:

> But realize that he [Hagop] will stay with his fellow fighters for as long as there is Armenia on the face of the world. I have been left alone despite family and numerous friends. The reason is strange – his memory fills my person so much that inside me, neither in time nor in consciousness, there is left no place for another human being... I am like someone who is permanently enchanted, charmed... And this is not love, Zaruhi; please do not misunderstand your brother, or me, I beg of you. Love ties humans together. This one liberates the human from his essence, from his love and even his person.... (instl. 124)

[135] Պաաաաաաաղ, *Haratch*, Paris, September-December, 1995.

According to Arminé, Hagop adheres to the moral law of unconditional, liberating love for which Armenia stands, and which overcomes death in a tragic universe. In the face of the violence of the war, and despite the loss of her beloved, Arminé refuses to hate the other and opts for love.

In reflecting on the significance of Armenian culture, *The Inoculation* stages an encounter between the diaspora and post-Soviet Armenia. This interaction is conceived as potentializing and generative — hence, the title of the novel, the inoculation. Yet, by offering an inclusive global Armenian vision, Oshagan is taking a marginal position. This is so because after the unexpected independence of Armenia, the Armenian intelligentsia was in a highly polarized state. The majority of them, both in the diaspora and in Armenia, saw in the newly independent Armenia the confirmation of the futility of the idea of diaspora and either directed all of their efforts to the support of Armenia or, those in the diaspora, planned to move there. On the other hand, a minority of intellectuals in the diaspora did not see much significance in the independence of Armenia for the Armenian diaspora. Thus, Oshagan's discourse tries to bring together spheres of Armenian culture that seem to be at odds with one another. The novel does so by conceiving diaspora and nation not as mutually exclusive but as complementary forms of life.

## CHAPTER 3

## Writing the Past from Diaspora: A Reading *The Palimpsest Man* by Krikor Beledian

> "Le désastre, souci de l'infime, souveraineté de l'accidentel. Cela nous fait reconnaître que l'oubli n'est pas négatif ou que le négatif ne vient pas après l'affirmation (affirmation niée), mais est en rapport avec ce qu'il y a de plus ancien, ce qui viendrait du fond des âges sans jamais avoir été donné." Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture Du Désastre*, p. 11.
>
> "The disaster: stress upon minutiae, sovereignty of the accidental. This causes us to acknowledge that forgetfulness is not negative or that the negative does not come after affirmation (affirmation negated), but exists in relation to the most ancient, to what would seem to come from furthest back in time immemorial without ever having been given." Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock. 3-4.

The theoretical approach developed in the introduction of this dissertation has neither the pretension nor the ability to exhaust the richness of the works which it reads. When it comes to Krikor Beledian's[136] *The Palimpsest Man* (Կրկնագիր Մարդը, 2015) this could not be truer. To recall, in the introduction I argued that diaspora Armenian culture emerges most particularly and properly as a post-national and post-catastrophic formation. Throughout the subsequent chapters, I explored the forms and the implications of the various kinds of diasporic inscriptions. The reading that follows hopes to demonstrate that *The Palimpsest Man* is at the forefront of such diasporic emergence.

[136] We already came across Beledian in the introduction of this dissertation, where I read from his poetry. Born in 1945 in Beirut, and residing in Paris since 1967, Beledian has Ph.D.s in Philosophy and Comparative Literature from the University of Paris V. Actively publishing and lecturing to this day, he has authored numerous works of poetry, criticism and some eight volumes of novels.

To let the reader follow the subsequent analysis, I begin with a brief synopsis of the work. An unnamed Armenian youth from Beirut is a university student in Paris in the second half of the 1970s. His professor of ethnography assigns an auto-anthropological exercise. The student dines in a traditional French restaurant on the Seine and decides to write about it. There he meets Joaquin who is from Mexico and is a scholar in the ethnography research institute of the *Musée de l'Homme*. Joaquin asks the student to help with writing his scholarly autobiography. The student hesitates to take the offer. He mentions it to an elderly mentor, a Paris-based diasporic Armenian writer Mr. Ghevond, who urges him to do it. The student eventually agrees and Joaquin offers him a desk in his office, which they share with Laurence, Joaquin's assistant. [137]

To write the book, the student, having had some experience in journalism, asks personal questions to Joaquin. Despite the latter's elusiveness, causing a great deal of anxiety to the student, the reader gradually learns that Joaquin was born in a well-to-do landowners family and had an indigenous woman, named Juanita, as a nanny. Later Joaquin realized that his father, Don Pedro, had forbidden Juanita to transmit any native languages or myths to Joaquin. As a university student, Joaquin became interested in anthropology and local Mexican languages, and discovered the indigenous communities by traveling in the countryside. Around the same time, student protests demanding social reform erupted in Mexico. The Mexican state retaliated violently, leading to the 1968 massacre of Tlatelolco in Mexico City when the police opened fire on the protestors, killing hundreds of them and cracking down on the movement. Joaquin escaped from being murdered, went underground, and, despite his conservative father's rage, was

[137] There is a autobiographical element to this. From 1974 to 1976, Beledian worked as a secretary in the Americalogy Institute of *Musée de l'Homme* (*Pakin*, No. 1-2, 2016, 15).

helped by the latter to acquire a passport under a different name, with the help of which he fled from Mexico. Once in Paris, he began frequenting high-class circles, made a name for himself as an orator and, years later and with Laurence's help, secured a researcher's position in the *Musée de l'Homme*. With time, the student comes to realize that Laurence and Joaquin had been lovers, that she still loves him and had seduced the student both as a substitute for and as a means to stay close to Joaquin.

Joaquin considers himself to be one of the last survivors of the Aztec catastrophe brought about by Hernán Cortés and the Spaniards. Over the years, he has developed a hypothesis to decipher the Aztec pictograms. For him, the Aztec system of writing, unlike the Indo-European phonetic systems of writing, uses images, symbols and voices without privileging one over the other. These conversations lead the student and Joaquin to the work of Koriun, a 5$^{th}$ century Christian Armenian scribe. Koriun was the student of Mesrop Mashtots — an Armenian monk who is considered to be the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, a phonetic system of writing which is used to this day — and wrote the first original book in the new alphabet, a kind of hagio-biography of Mashtots.

Eventually, Joaquin accepts a three-year-long visiting professorship in the US and prepares to leave. Laurence breaks the news to the student and informs him that she and Joaquin want the student to complete the manuscript in three months so that she can take it to Joaquin in Texas. The student is astonished by these developments. After struggling to make progress on the manuscript, he writes a letter to Joaquin, which he never sends. In it, in addition to explaining why he is unable to write the autobiography, he thanks Joaquin for estranging him from Armenian culture to such an extent that now he is a writer.

**The Fictional Space Carved by *The Palimpsest Man***

The first text that the reader of *The Palimpsest Man* comes across is the "In Place of a Preface." Unlike the rest of the chapters, it is not numbered and has a different font, which give it a different status. At first glance, this text can appear as a non-fictional preface to Beledian's work of fiction. Yet, reading on, it soon turns out to be the preface of Joaquin's scholarly autobiography. Having moved from Mexico and of Aztec descent, Joaquin is an ethnographer in the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris. He asks an Armenian university student, the narrator of *The Palimpsest Man*, to write his scholarly autobiography. The subsequent chapters of *The Palimpsest Man* expose the meta-fictional status of the "In Place of a Preface" not only by making amply clear that it is written by someone other than the autobiographer, but also by exploring through fiction the textual and rhetorical difficulties (ultimately, the impossibilities) encountered in composing it.

In addition to this, the brief Chapter 29, towards the end of the work, opens by *quoting* and commenting on the first paragraph of (what will/has become) the "In Place of a Preface." Thus, this text marks both the beginning and the end of *The Palimpsest Man* and, in doing so, destabilizes their linear logic. The last chapter, Chapter 32, completes the loop opened by the "In Place of a Preface." Signed "Paris, 2010-2015" in the last line of the last chapter — the latter date being the year when the book was actually published — *The Palimpsest Man* provokes a further destabilization of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction in a paradoxical manner: the more non-fictional it seems, i.e. the more it corresponds with the 'real' world, the more radically fictional it

becomes. Ultimately, by setting up a meta-narrative of failing to ghost write an anthropologist's scholarly autobiography, *The Palimpsest Man* interrogates truth claims made by the discourses of contemporary anthropology and autobiography.

The narrator of *The Palimpsest Man* is the student writing years after the events in question.[138] Oftentimes, it is not clear whether it is the narrator or his younger self, the student, who is narrating; in such cases, I use the 'narrator/student' formula. He looks for the right words to adequately describe the past. After every such approximation, he is filled with hope that he has captured it. But his anxieties continue, the absent past returns, and the narrator launches into a new journey of remembering. This explains why the writing oftentimes returns to an episode, theme or a question that has already been treated before. Towards the end of *The Palimpsest Man*, the reader is hinted that the narrator has understood and accepted the past's essential evasiveness and its eternal return. Understanding and accepting this means becoming a writer, Beledian ultimately suggests.

**Towards a Diasporic Historical Fiction**

From its formation in the beginning of the 19th century, modern European historical fiction has shown keen interest in capturing the 'spirit' of the past while oftentimes acknowledging the supremacy of the discourse of history when it comes to discerning the factuality and causality of past events. The key historical novels from this

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[138] The 32 chapters each contain some 15 fragments in average and are delivered across 594 pages. They also contain numerous references to the seven other volumes of prose which Beledian has already published. These are: *Thresholds* (Aleppo, 1997), *The Hit* (Beirut, 1998), *Sign* (Glendale, 2000), *The Image* (Glendale, 2003), *The Name Under My Tongue* (Paris, 2003), *Two* (Glendale, 2006), *Inversion* (Yerevan, 2012). The preoccupations of *The Palimpsest Man* in many ways echo those of the previous volumes of prose by Beledian; they, too, are concerned with witnessing, historical discourse, the inscription of untellable catastrophe, etc. To my knowledge, Marc Nichanian is the only critic who has penned an essay which reads the first six volumes of Beledian's prose together. See his *Image Story History* Volume 2. Other than him, Raffi Ajemian and Hagop Gulludjian have published essays and reviews on them.

period — e.g. Scott's *Waverley* (1814), Manzoni's *Betrothed* (1827) — were particularly interested in expressing a national collective experience, oftentimes serving as rallying calls for national unity. These developments are true for the Armenians, too. Even though the vast majority of them lived within the Ottoman and Russian Empires, their intellectual centers in Europe (particularly in Venice and Vienna, where the Armenian Catholic Mekhitarist order was active since the beginning of the 18th century) exposed them to the latest literary and intellectual movements in the West. As a result, by mid-19th century, Armenians started translating and later writing their own historical novels. Most of them aimed at raising national awareness among Armenians by conjuring heroic episodes from their long and uneasy past.[139]

A century later, modernist literature distances itself from modern historical fiction. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is an outstanding example of this.[140] It is with postwar crisis of representation and the advent of post-structuralism and postmodernism, however, that the genre conventions of historical fiction are put under the greatest pressure. Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) and Umberto

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[139] See "An Overview From the Eighteenth To The Beginning of The Twentieth Century," in *The Heritage of Armenian Literature Volume III From The Eighteenth Century to Modern Times* , eds. Agop J. Hacikyan, Edward S. Franchuk, Nourhan Ouzounian. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2005. This text is particularly useful in outlining the pre-national-awakening hardships suffered by Armenians at the crossroads of the endless Ottoman and Persian wars, the role of the intellectual movements both within but also significant outside these imperial spaces, and the decisive impact of modern nationalism in shaping Armenian collective consciousness of the time. The last section of the text provides an overview of the historical novels written in Armenian in the 19th and 20th centuries, in Eastern and Western Armenian, the two literary vernaculars created by the Armenians. Hagop Gulludjian is cited its contributor.

[140] See Jerome de Groot's *The Historical Novel* (Routledge, 2010) both for a general overview of the development of the genre and the significance of Woolf's *Orlando* to it. See also Avrom Fleishman's *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Johns Hopkins U Press, 1971) and of course Georg Lukács' *The Historical Novel* (1937) for its innovative ways of linking, through a Marxist analytic, the genre to accompanying socio-political forces.

Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) are just a few from an array of formidable works that inscribe and enable this transformation.[141]

*The Palimpsest Man* can hardly be categorized as a historical novel given its setting that is largely contemporaneous with the author. Only Chapter 26 invokes the 4-5th century figures of Mesrop Mashtots and Koriun. To recall, Mashtots (362-440) was an Armenian linguist and theologian known for having spearheaded the creation of the Armenian alphabet around 405 AD. Koriun was one of Mashtots' pupils who after the teacher's death wrote *The Life Of Mashtots: The Story of the Life and Death of the Blessed Man St. Mashtots Vardapet Our Translator*.[142] Nevertheless, by situating a historical fictional chapter within a work of fiction set in our times, *The Palimpsest Man* explores the discursive links between the past and the present and in doing so displaces the conventions of modern Western and Western Armenian national historical fiction. While these displacements echo postmodern attitudes, their singularity lies in writing a post-national and post-catastrophic diasporic historiographic meta-fiction.[143]

The historiographical meta-fictional gestures of Chapter 26 include meta-narrative frames (474, 478, 481, 501), more or less conspicuous anachronisms (482, 485) as well as allusions to the writer's personal memories (478, 480), including episodes from the student's interactions with Joaquin, which incorporate elements from Aztec civilization

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[141] For a specific discussion linking this crisis of representation to historiography, see, for instance, Hayden White's "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (1982). There, White explores the repressed narratological and aesthetizing qualities of modern historiography, which, he argues, give rise to a seemingly apolitical, realist notion of history. See also Marc Nichanian's *The Historiographic Perversion* (2009) for an analysis of the links between modern, state induced genocidal catastrophe and the crisis of historiographical representation.

[142] Classical Armenian title: «**Վարք Մաշտոցի Պատմութիւն Վարուց եւ մահուան նորա երանելւոյ սրբոյն Մաշտոցի վարդապետի մերոյ թարգմանչի**». It is translated from Old Armenian (Grapar) by Bedros Norehad (Yerevan, 1981) and is considered as the first book authored in the Armenian alphabet.

[143] The phrase "historiographic metafiction" is Linda Hutcheon's. See her "Historiographic Metafiction Parody and the Intertextuality of History" *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. O'Donnell, P., and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. 3-32.

(474, 495, 499, 504). I cite the prelude to the chapter, which deploys a number of these gestures:

> …And now let us do ethnography…
> it is difficult to abandon history; read it at times as one preliminary version of ethnography; they both pertain to absent things, even if Mashtots, Ashtishat and Amida seem to provide trustworthy foothold.[144]
> …And so let us also talk like the elderly women of Armenia.
>
> You always search for the traces of a dead. The textologist behind the recently invented parchment protector searches for another entirely lost original manuscript. Things have an inner side; they are not what they seem.
>
> You copy, with more or less accuracy, the palimpsest, whatever you succeed to decipher from it. The handwriting is old, torn and worn out; it is necessary to guess whatever is effaced, to fill in the holes left by a worm. You will go blind, mother would say, when she would see you leaning over a "useless" book. All books were useless for her, if they did not cure our illnesses. (473)

The passage above begins by acknowledging the persistence of the past. It then sees history and ethnography as not so much capturing the past that is absent, but as forms of reaction to the past as absence. The rest of the passage affirms this last point by indicating that the narrator is highly sensitive of the a priori incompleteness of any historical and ethnographic archive. This is done with references to a medieval palimpsestic parchment as having a lost inner side as well as to islands of indecipherable texts and holes. Thus, from the beginning, Chapter 26 is framed as a reflection on the condition of possibility of historiography. Lastly, the passage ends by turning to the narrator's personal memories. Going blind from reading can be read as at once personal and figurative way of inscribing the incompleteness of the archive. The more one desires an archive, the more one is blind to the catastrophic lack of archive underlying this desire.

[144] Ashtishat was a town in the ancient Armenian province of Daron; it was a major site of pre-Christian religion and for that reason became the site where Christian temples were erected soon after the Kingdom of Armenia adopted Christianity in 301. Amida is another town in ancient Armenia.

As for the nine sections that follow, I will begin by pointing to the opening of the first section — "And the great absent one, regarding whom I speak, Mashtots" (474) — as well as to the opening paragraph-fragment of the second section:

> There is neither the soul-image [*հոգեկարը*], nor the portrait [*կենդանագիրը*, literally "the living writing"]. Of course the sound-image [*ձայնակարը*] has not reached. After all it is exhausting to endlessly rummage through memories to imagine them. The man of letter has always spoken. While the prophets do not have image or grave. (478)

The above excerpts further develop the insight of the incompleteness of archive by linking it with visual and auditory absences as well as by suggesting that prophets are those who are aware of this incompleteness.

As we already saw in the prelude cited above, Chapter 26 imagines a scene in which the narrator is working on deciphering a palimpsestic manuscript. Later, in the beginning of the third section, the he cites from the 'False' or 'Little' Koriun. While this source actually exists, Chapter 26 invents the citations from it.[145] Moreover, the eighth section of the chapter imagines the narrator finding a neglected letter in Mashtots' handwriting addressed to Koriun. And finally, the last, ninth, section of the chapter, once again deciphers a palimpsestic writing supposedly from the *Menologium*, a service book of the Eastern Orthodox Church, mentions it and comments that it is not clear whether Koriun or Mashtots wrote them. (507-8) All in all, *The Palimpsest Man* inscribes the impossibility of a complete archive through these figures of archival loss, which serve as opportunities for fictionalization.

Chapter 26 writes a diasporic historical fiction not just through what might be viewed as formal historiographical meta-fictional gestures but also by interrogating the

[145] According to the eminent Armenian linguist and philologist Hrachia Acharian, 'Little' Koriun is a 6-7th century invention meant to justify a heavily edited version of Koriun's original text. (*The Sources [Pertaining to] St. Mesrop's and the Invention of the Letters and their Examination*, Paris, 1907, 5, 26.)

Armenian discourse of national myth. It inscribes the persistence of the national myth by reflecting on specific discursive moments in the way Mashtots has been erected as a national father figure starting with Koriun's *The Life of Mashtots* and extending all the way to 19th and 20th centuries' historiographic and philological traditions that accompany and inform the discourses of modern Armenian nationhood. The scenes of this chapter allude to and, crucially, challenge the way Mashtots is represented in Koriun's *The Life of Mashtots*.

Accordingly, starting explicitly from section two, Chapter 26 presents the narrator as attempting to imagine Mashtots' human side (478) against the sanctification to which he has been subjected to by Koriun, the Armenian Church, and by Armenian in general, for instance, by Maria, the narrator's French-Armenian girlfriend. (479) The rest of the section describes the young Mashtots being infatuated by a peasant girl. Throughout the fragments that follow, sensual and embodied descriptions abound in the scenes involving Mashtots and Koriun. These, too, are modes in which the narrator self-consciously challenges the sanctified figure of Mashtots.

In addition to striving to expose Mashtots' human side, the narrator also takes issue with the way Mashtots' death has been appropriated.[146] For example, from the end of section three, the narrator imagines Mashtots falling ill and imploring god and seeing a cross-like sign while in his death agony. The following fragment then accuses Koriun for objectifying Mashtots' death by having the pretense of seeing it from outside: "A bad

[146] Earlier in *The Palimpsest Man*, in Chapter 13, when discussing what kind of a person Mashtots was with Joaquin, the student recalls visiting Mashtot's grave in the village of Oshagan, in Soviet Armenia, which has become a sanctuary but little has remained from the 5th century; he compares this tracelessness with those of the Armenians who perished on the death marches in 1915; the student's parents were survivors, to whom he periodically alludes throughout the book. (241)

fabricator, master falsifier, sharp psychologist, Koriun would immediately jump, he would watch the scene from outside… from above the room in which the blessed one had deceased…" (486) The following fragment then comments on the previous one:

> something that is a mistake, this way the death agony was being surpassed, made sublime, became a beautiful moment, the death agony of the man around whom had gathered, and who at that moment perhaps no longer mastered his mind, the one that had mastered the verbal ruled over the voice, to almost subdue that many-headed and diabolic monster which endlessly changed appearance and name … (486-487)

The narrator then imagines Mashtots' death agony from Mashtots' perspective. He is carried away by images coming from some depth, talks to god and, being on his way back to life, sees things as transparent, "since the one crossing the border between day and night abandons his memory to oblivion and death is a kind of powerful void in language." (487) Meanwhile, those around him treat death not as "an excellent miracle but an explicit given, a reality, an experience…" (487) In challenging the way Mashtots has been appropriated over the centuries, the narrator also protests against the way Mashtots is turned into a "victim of analogy" (488) in *The Life of Mashtots*. This starts particularly with section four where Mashtots accuses Koriun of excessive effusiveness which conceals the former. (488) Finally, in section seven, the narrator once again states that by evoking Mashtots he is striving to undo him as a paragon. (501)

At the end of section five, the narrator returns to the problematic of the appropriation of Mashtots' death. He claims that it belongs to no one, not even to Mashtots, just as he has never been his, has been in exodus from himself and has entered "inside the anxiety of freedom," (493) adding that "in the beginning there is the sovereignty of a person and with the sovereignty of a person the possibility of anxiety; if you want to be a free person, soul and body, mind and language, you ought to be anxious, be alarmed until death, truth is that simple." (493) A renowned person like Mashtots, the

narrator continues, does not have personality, and so it is a "mistake, [a] lie" to believe that his self ascends to Koriun, a reference to *The Life of Mashtots*; therefore, Mashtots does not have death. (494) Meanwhile, his death will become a date and celebration, his body will be dragged around, a monument built on his corpse imprisoning him in a sanctuary, "just as he has closed the cave of myth by sticking a large parchment page on it" by inventing the letters. (494) The last comment shows that at stake are not only the appropriation of Mashtots' death by the Armenian national myth but also the invention of the Armenian alphabet.

The rest of the fragment is ambiguous. The narrator notes that Mashtots in his deathbed gives up and accepts for Koriun, who does not know much, to write the details pertaining to his life and that, deep inside, even Koriun "is sure that the essential cannot be transmitted." (494) The narrator's ambiguous attitude is revealed when, on the one hand, he develops his meditation on Koriun as a scribe who naïvely believes that translating Mashtots' experience into writing is possible and that it is not worth going through the trouble of experiencing things oneself. On the other hand, the narrator states that scribes nevertheless are significant since it is through their generations that the word of god has been transmitted. (494) The fragment ends with the narrator imagining Mashtots looking at Koriun, an inexperienced man who despite being a good orator, understands little of revelation and can merely transmit the traces left on the road from Mashtot's life. Mashtots then accepts his destiny and the narrator closes the fragment thus: "… a historical novel perhaps begins with a mistake, if this Mashtots-worshipping ever begins or has an end…" (495) Thus, the inscription of the incompleteness of the

archive takes the form of a necessary mistake that can *only* be speculated about ("perhaps") since beginning and end are problematic.

The fragments discussed above formulate the impossibility of narrating death and the event of the invention of the Armenian alphabet in terms of the impossibility of archive. Lastly and significantly, the narrator, at the end of the fifth section, ties these discursive problematics with the historical novel as a form, genre and tradition. Here, death operates through a number of contexts: there is Mashtots' death, appropriated by Koriun, the tracelessness of which the narrator compares with the graveless Armenians perishing during the 1915 Catastrophe. There is also the loss induced by the invention and imposition of the alphabet as a writing system in a society largely driven by oral myths.

To further interrogate the national myth created around Mashtots, Chapter 26 elaborates on the event of the nature of the invention of the letters by Mashtots. Section six opens with a fragment where Mashtots criticizes Koriun for being enchanted by the letters, by appearances, relying on faith and afraid to experience time and life filled with searing obstacles, and as a result transporting himself and Mashtots into empty eternity. Koriun does not understand that "[a]ll living things have face, two faces, under side and upper side, full and empty. / Flowers, songs / *in xochitl in cuicatl*." (495) The reference to flowers and songs, through their Latinized Nahuatl translations, is a reference from Aztec pictograms and is frequently mentioned by Joaquin. The next two fragments reiterate the criticism against Koriun for analogizing Mashtots and this time explain it with Koriun's desire for a moralizing narration. To this Mashtots counters with a mystical discourse of disappearance that avoids such attempts to be captured: "The direction signs of life are

appearance and never theory. // He [Koriun] is charmed by traces when I do not cease from striving towards disappearance." (496) In the Armenian, the words 'appearance' (*տեսք*, *tesq*) and 'theory' (*տեսություն*, *tesutyun*) have *tes* (*տես*) as a common root from which the verb 'to look' or 'to see' (*տեսնել*, *tesnel*) is derived. The exploitation of this morphologico-semantic overlap inextricably intertwines the early medieval Armenian Christian discourse of mysticism with postwar Western anthropological theory. Here, mystical disappearance challenges the Western theoretical desire for capturing loss.

In the next fragment, Mashtots further admonishes Koriun for being incapable of understanding that the letters were invented not to educate, reform or advance but *to order the world,* especially the Armenians' disorderly and savage world, since the letters definitively separate the human from the divine and bring down what is above, creating a spiritual [*հոգեկան*] spring, understood as "a permanent spiritual hunger" that once and for all frees from "inebriating homesickness." (496) Mashtots adds that he invented the alphabet not as a means to happiness; that instead of myth, a kind of euthanasia, he created the letters "to lie, to tell the truth, to separate one from the other, to talk to the world, with the Above and Below, to detach, to refuse history; to even forget the letters." (496) By contrast, when Koriun writes, he is verbose, more or less nihilistic, "has faith but is never spiritual." (496) "He does not have the inner space. He writes to not think. He will never know what it means to become nameless." (497)

The figure of "hunger" from the aforementioned passages reveals the duality of appearance/none-appearance which is governed by a lack in the Mashtots/narrator's conception of the nature of language. The essential duality of language lies in, one the one hand, being a system governed by laws, which are systematized by the newly

invented alphabet. One the other hand, language always escapes this system. Such a paradoxical and uncontainable conception of language translates awareness of catastrophe as traceless loss, as the other of archive and historiography. The narrator's Mashtots is aware of this. Various motifs, for example, namelessness in the quotation above, effectuate this translation within *The Palimpsest Man*.

The next fragment imagines Koriun as suffering from a disease of witnessing. Accordingly, Koriun is proud that he has followed the saint, Mashtots, everywhere. Including even when the latter invented the alphabet, claiming that he witnessed it, too. Koriun has been acting like a spy, mimicking Mashtots' gestures, taking note of his every whim, words, every paper on which he wrote, the food that he ate, his meetings, thinking that "whatever is seen from outside is the mirror of the inside, of the inner chaos, emotions, tremors, images, [that] whatever is expressed corresponded with essence, and there he was an observing eye, a mobile camera, a loyal pen." (497-498) Koriun further believes that if he added up all the moments along an imaginary line of chronology he would be able to capture Mashtots' multidimensional life in its phases, always claiming that he has seen, touched Mashtots, had communion with him, that his book is the result of this and that he is a trustworthy, self-oblivious witness who spoke by sacrificing himself, erasing his 'I' so that the character could speak for himself "just as it had happened for the first time, as if for the first time, as if singular, which every reader owed to copy." (498) Nevertheless, deep inside Koriun knew that all the archives about Mashtots were insufficient and that the loss was great; the more he thought, the more he was convinced that what he had accumulated did not save anything from erasure, that "death's ignominious singularity coupled with its neutrality was impossible to carry

either with lamenting or with mourning." (498) Above, Koriun is described as being torn between two opposing views. He believes but also doubts to be able to capture the essence of Mashtots' life in writing.

The fragment ends thus: "Mashtots was right when he would say: "my son, history is a catastrophe, you have to learn to live with it; we do not have anything besides it; never think of bequeathing. Already it is going to be repeated, for ever and ever." (498) The last expression of the quotation is in Classical Armenian and comes from the end of he Lord's Prayer. This way, the narrator's Mashtots anachronistically expresses the contemporary notion of history as catastrophe, invoking the motif of eternal return of the past through Christian idioms.

As the fragments continue, section six shifts focus away from the problematic of appropriating the event of the invention of the Armenian letters or that of Mashtots' death to the writer of the biography, Koriun. This way the relationship between Koriun and Mashtots is brought to the fore and further problematized. It is also here that the text begins drawing more explicit parallels between the Mashtots/Koriun and Joaquin/student pairs.

Accordingly, in the next fragment the narrator wonders as to when Koriun started writing *The Life of Mashtots*, quotes from it the precise year of Mashtots' death, and wonders why would Koriun want this kind of precision. (498) The narrator then adds that such a biography had to be posthumous so that the dead could be sanctified, his myth and renown manipulated, *but that this is something that the student/narrator is unable to do for Joaquin.* (498-499) This contrast between the Mashtots/Koriun and Joaquin/student pairs, organized around the problematization of the possibility of writing death, is

developed further when the narrator states that of course Koriun had started writing before Mashtots' death. Here the narrator recalls Mr. Ghevond's words, that to wait for our loved ones to die, so that we can write about them, is to desire them. That when they live next to us we are obliged to stop at their threshold, to not penetrate into their secret, "to adopt an aesthetic bashfulness" (499). Mr. Ghevond, the narrator recounts, continues thus:

> … and beyond all of these negative affirmations there is something else that is the case, this time undeniable, un-negatable; they become absent from us, disappear when we transport them somewhere else, transform them over there on a fragment where it is possible to speak with them; that is, it is possible to give place to their speech, to love them in language… The past closes time and has not the master already done the closing? *Depende*, Joaquin would say, for us the origin is the future, the lost our invention, *nada más*, no less and no more. (499)

The passage above weaves Mr. Ghevond's voice with that of the narrator and then Joaquin. The latter's imagined commentary ("would say") invoke the peculiar temporality of catastrophe: since catastrophe cannot be directly grasped in the present (this is why it is "undeniable, un-negatable"), the operation of its absent presence is always to come, to be formed, futured in the interpretations that are brought forth. This brief dialogue between the student and Joaquin, recalled by the narrator and inflected through Mr. Ghevond, is one form in which *The Palimpsest Man* writes the impossibility of writing catastrophe. As we can see, this gesture is performed across three knots, (three strands, as I will argue later, each of each inscribe a catastrophe): Mr. Ghevond, Mashtots, Joaquin are evoked to generate an interpretation of and around catastrophe.

The next one-paragraph fragment continues to meditate on the nature of the link between Koriun and Mashtots in a way that echoes the student/narrator's own obsession while working on Joaquin's autobiography. Here is the fragment:

> He has started to write when his soul has entirely invaded him. Do you understand what it means to say entirely? There is no single breathe for you, no single void. He is the one alive, you nothing. But what is dreadful at the same time is that the one alive is impossible without you and you, inspecting over him, are like an animal tearing its prey or a god eating a human sacrifice. Thus you would want to write, but you do not allow yourself, people will see it as a crude rape, but this here is not important; without that circumvolution, overthrowing, my work would be fruitless; there is no Mashtots without Koriun. (499)

While earlier Koriun was seen as dependent on Mashtots, the inverse is claimed in the passage above. Similarly, in earlier chapters, the narrator has described the student as being entirely consumed by Joaquin during the months in which he worked on the latter's autobiography. However, this relationship of dominance, as the narrator meditates both on the student's and Koriun's cases, has an equally domineering reciprocal dimension. The problematic of impossible archive lurks behind these meditations. In the face of it, the narrator does not want to commit violence by obfuscating his inability to capture Joaquin's life in writing, even though, as is the case with Mashtots, *The Life of Mashtots* by Koriun is the closest trace of it.

The subsequent fragment is formally interesting. It begins by describing Koriun from a third person point of view and ends in first person, as if Koriun himself is speaking. This way Koriun's and the narrator's voices merge, as if the narrator is experimenting with identifying with Koriun to gain some insight into his earlier experience as the student writing Joaquin's autobiography.

> The feeling, soon ruining and dissolving the wavering confidence, every time when he would write, that he was setting foot like our Lord into Hell, resurrected Mashtots. He believed, no matter what he did, it turned into a matter of faith, that he was behind every single letter, watched over the straight copying of every single word, his only freedom, his only personally sovereign decision was in their choice, and when he raised his gaze into the air, in the lightening of a blink of an eye he met his gaze, like during those early days when he would say the sound and taught them how to write the character, and then how to link one to the other, he dictated some word and requested for them to spell out, repeat, write and his gaze moved from fear to joy. He turned us into speakers of Armenian, really. Now when writing, it is as if I, Koriun, am conversing with him. (500)

The phrase "personally sovereign" in this fragment, translating the word անձնիշխան (*andznishkhan*) we first encounter in the fifth section of Chapter 26 (page 493), which I have already cited above. There, to recall, the narrator leveraged the notion of personal sovereignty to counter the appropriation of Mashtots' death by national ideology. There, Beledian suggests subverting national ideology with the figure of a free and anxious person. In the passage above, Koriun's absent presence is re-inscribed by being thought of as having some personal sovereignty as a scribe in his choice of words, which is also a source of anxiety.[147] In both cases, the notion of personal sovereignty has an anti-ideological subversive function while conferring a sense of responsibility to those who have it.

Finally, the last fragment of the section, again imagining Koriun, is extremely important in the way it complicates the thought of loss:

> He knew from day one, he was not an idiot, that the voice, his voice is not possible to copy in our style and by our hand. Which scribe has a voice? Since which scribe can conserve the voice between fingers, in the mouth, on the palate, on the tongue, even as spiritual bread and spiritual wine. To write means to lose it like childhood and be left empty-handed, without tolerating that loss, at the same time wanting it. There is an ineffaceable absence, behind which there is another absence. This is the lamentation. A loss and an expectation. The sentence that has been left unperturbed has sprang from this disappeared, second voice. (500)

In the above passage, the problematic of the impossibility of archive is articulated through the figure of the inability to recreate the living human voice, an issue that also concerns the student while writing Joaquin's autobiography, and which I shall address later. The last four sentences of the fragment suggest that this problematic has the form of a double abyss: behind the loss there is an expectation which itself "is another absence."

[147] The idea of a personal sovereignty can also help us understand Beledian the writer's own personal politics of seeking independence from conventional Armenian and non-Armenian institutions.

Such an interpretation of loss is made possibly by the legibility of the Classical Armenian texts, bearing the traces of Mashtots and Koriun, across sixteen centuries.

Section seven reiterates the accusation against Koriun of making a paragon out of Mashtots, bringing Koriun's and Mashtots' voices into one fragment and starting a heated debate between them. Then the narrator adds that he notices only now that Koriun's text begins in first person but soon falls into the eternalizing, monumentalizing trap of the third person plural collective voice. (501-502)[148] The next fragment imagines a conversation between Koriun and Mashtots, in a conventional historical fictional mode, by constructing a verisimilar and embodied scene. What is noteworthy is that Koriun is given the chance to reply to the accusations leveled against him, which he does in the following manner: "… is it not necessary to cover the essential? Without poetic embellishment truth is unbearable, father, burning… consuming" (503). To Mashtots' reaction that no one knows the truth, Koriun adds: "truth, father, is needed… what are we without it; I have to show the truth, since in the language that you founded are both, the certifying and the showing of the truth, thus I must be rebellious and disregard you." (504) Koriun speaks in the next fragments, from which it is clear that he understands the contradictory duality of Mashtots' vision, but insists on writing the latter's biography. The section ends with the narrator's voice addressing Joaquin, formulating the problematic of writerly violence through the motif of eating: "If he can, he will tear the man apart, eat piece by piece. Every writer is a cannibal, *¡claro Señor!*" (504) Clearly, in

[148] In a parenthetical the narrator adds: "every reflection belongs to the after-after-after, it is always late, since in the proper time he has been inattentive; here is what needs to be phenomenologized" (501). The ironic evocation of what needs to be phenomenologized is a passing critique of phenomenology and echoes with earlier chapters of *The Palimpsest Man* in which the student and a Sarah, a professor of philosophy and the student's lover, meditates on the limits of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. A person of the same name is evoked in other volumes by Beledian. Marc Nichanian reads her as the avatar of Sarah Kaufman, the French philosopher. See *Image, Story, History Volume 2 Competitions* (*Պատկեր Պատում՝ Պատմութիւն Հատոր 2 մրցակութիւններ*), 2016.

this section, the narrator imagines Koriun being well aware of the violence that he is committing by writing Mashtots' biography but insists on it, since the truth is "unbearable… burning… consuming." (503)

Section eight of Chapter 26 imagines the narrator finding a tattered sheet in the archives, which turns out to be a letter in Mashtots' handwriting addressed to Koriun. Here is the entire letter in my translation:

> "My Koriun, you want to honour me with a biography; you have the pretense to give life and meaning. Your undertaking is respectable. I have told you on numerous occasions that the hagiographies of the church fathers are the beginning of novelistic storytelling when they pertain to the world. Did you see what happened to the history of Gregory? It became Agathangelos' novel; what does it lack? It has everything: the king, the queen, Khosrovidookht, Hripsimé, the boar, Satan, the Holy spirit, the apparition, the miracles, and many more very sublime and laughable details. And details make the novel, both invented and real.[149]
>
> My Koriun, you know that there is no paragon, that there is no twist and period for me; I hate narration, that passion to bring everything to the tip of the tongue [language]. The great myth fed on all that. Entirely within it can still be confined the flock of the historical novel. The flock, yes, my people, ours, you understand, our most intimate whole, loves the magic of history, a bit like our nobility. Read, study Movses Khorenatsi who has sent his notes to me from Alexandria. As if he did not have anything else to practice aside from genealogy and ethnography [ազգագրութիւն], who, when, what, from where? He too is carried by the fall and the melancholy of the end. He has started writing ethnography [ցեղաբանիլ] - with lamentation. I have once seen with such a joy the Milky Way through my grandmother's fairy tale, when seated on the roof she made the Slayer of dragons descend from Masis. The myth cleansed our lands and souls, gave us refuge in its lap; only it deprived us from growth and fatherhood. But that joy was part of the childish lyricism. While I wanted that power be ours. I plucked, took out from myself all of that and made all of you exiles, essentially homeless. So with the thirty-six letters I dissolved the myth and in its place established the language, that which you had and longed for. We say that it was for the flock that I put forth the prayer, the divine service. For us, for you and me, I put forth our urban language [ասաանիկը]. It is not that big of a deal, I know. It does not weigh much. Especially since it is a means for buying and selling. A currency. Neither miracle, nor sophistry. Now, there is no place left for novelistic storytelling. Now, if you wish, is the time of famine or the time of not existing. Know when I also do not exist. Whatever you will write is in vain. Below letters, nothing. That is what is marvelous. With that, I implore, I order you, cut up the biography and mix it like playing cards, turn it into fragmentary writings, into shreds, dust, with which we will think the non-image, since the letters do not have biography. Be well." (504-506)

[149] Agathangelos is the 4-5th century historian, whose *History of Armenians* gives an account of Armenian King Trdat's conversion into Christianity, which paves the way to the Christianization of the country. Beledian's text above lists main characters and events from this legend.

This letter presents a Mashtots who is aware of the collective and collecting functions reserved to oral myths, and warns against the possible regression into the mythic time with the establishment of the letters. This tension gives rise to the "historical novel" (պատմավէպ *patmavep*), Mashtots claims. Hence, his references to Agathangelos, and especially to Khorenatsi, as disciples of Mashtots and historians who are trapped in the post-mythic temporality of desiring the return of the mythic, and are unable to withstand the potential novelty in the invention of the letters. Unlike the self-fulfilled world created by myth, the world of the letters is that of incompleteness and eternal desire.

One comes across these views in "looking back" ("*Հետադարձ նայվածք*"), a 2011 two-part interview that Beledian did with Yerevan-based literary scholar Siranoush D'voyan. There Beledian claims that the advent of writing transformed the temporality of oral myth, experienced as presence and plenitude, into the temporality of written mythology marked by absence, loss and catastrophe. He claims that written mythology informs the notion of past (3) by writing which the historian operates within the logic of 'ending' and becomes a savior. (5-6) As for the novel, it "establishes the language and language establishes the novel as the factor unifying a dispersed collectivity." (9) The historical novel (*patmavep* պատմավէպ) emerges when the origin becomes uncertain. (11) In this interview, Beledian uses the term *patmavep* which refers both to the modern concept of the 'historical novel' and the ancient Armenian written historiography. The word for 'novel' — *vep* (վէպ)— is the radical that before the advent of the Armenian alphabet and the accompanying written historiography, referred to oral storytelling.[150]

[150] See Hrachia Acharian's *Armenian Dictionary of Radicals* (1926), 333.

Lastly, Mashtots' letter presents a Mashtots who is aware of the appropriating dangers of writing his biography and demands from Koriun to "cut up the biography and shuffle it like playing cards, turn it into fragmentary writings, into shreds, dust, with which we will think the non-image, since the letters do not have biography." (506) In other words, for Mashtots fragmentariness is the form, or rather, the non-form, that most suits biography. The motif of the non-image, to the significance of which I shall return later, is another way of invoking this necessity to go beyond given frames and forms. Interestingly enough, the motif of cutting into pieces and shuffling also is evoked with respect to Joaquin's autobiography.

In addition to merely citing Mashtots' letter found in Koriun's archive, the narrator also comments on it in a paragraph which I cite below:

> As to why Koriun has not attached this letter to the book, it is not clear. It could have been possible to draw father Nerses Akinian's[151] attention to the parchment. Doubtless with it he would emend the entire *Life of Mashtots*, fill in the gaps and put forth the givens of a Koriunian newfound scribe. But now it is too late. The prolific philologist rests in peace in Vienna. I would put forth some hypotheses to the attention of the reader, all of them hypothetical and novelistic [վիպական]. One of this is the following: despite Mashtot's warning, the disciple, like with regards to the letters, continued to think of the biography as a tombstone that had escaped from all catastrophes, unalterable, unbreakable, a novelistic tombstone [վիպաքար] shutting all probable novels. (506)

The above commentary to the found letter by Mashtots to Koriun challenges the Armenian national philological and historiographical tradition that for centuries has erected a fatherly figure out of Mashtots; hence, the reference to the philologist Nerses Akinian. Once inside this meta-philological and meta-historiographical space, the hypothesis of Koriun thinking of biography in a regressive manner "as a tombstone that had escaped from all catastrophes, unalterable, unbreakable, a novelistic stone shutting all

[151] Nerses Akinian (1883-1963), a philologist, textologist, historian and pedagogue, who was a member of the Armenian Catholic Mekhitarist Order in Vienna.

probable novels" (506) amounts to claiming that *The Life of Mashtots* forces a reductive national closure that bars from emergence other "probable novels." (506)

Beledian's text here plays with the connotations and echoes of the word *vep* (վէպ) which denotes 'storytelling' in Classical Armenian and 'novel' in modern Armenian. At the end of the passage, it is neologized to form the word *vipaqar* (վիպաքար) which I render in English as "novelistic tombstone." The neologism վիպաքար echoes the word *vimaqar* (վիմաքար) which means 'stone', but also connotes 'foundation'. Other crucial terms with the root *vep* (վէպ) included in the passage above are patmavep (պատմավէպ) and vipasanutyun (վիպասանութիւն) which I have translated as "historical novel" and "storytelling" respectively. The latter refers to the ancient Armenian oral myth-making tradition which more or less ended by the adoption of Christianity in the beginning of the 4th century and the institution of the Armenian alphabet in the beginning of the 5th century. In the same interview with D'voyan, Beledian states the following: "The historical novel implicitly says that the myth is always necessary, that in a period of catastrophe, disbelief and uncertainty, it is the only stable footing, like the gods and religion at the time. … [T]he historical novel has not yet cut its ties from myth, the archetypes of which, paternal figures, are sacred." (13) To D'voyan's suggestion that diaspora can make the novel independent from myth, Beledian replies that "the myth does not disappear without leaving traces." (13) By contrast, Beledian sees the novel of the Armenian diaspora as generally rejecting continuity and suggests that diaspora authors such as Shahan Shahnour and Zareh Vorpouni attempt to distance themselves from myth. (13) In the light of these insights, the abovementioned morphologico-semantic transitions performed in *The Palimpsest Man* with the word *vep* acquire further

significance. To begin with, they suggest that the survival of mythic oral storytelling as written mythological novel inscribes loss as the foundation of a nation. Second, in *The Palimpsest Man*, Beledian attempts to expose and reflect on such post-catastrophic inscriptions (traces left by the myth) by evoking the figures of Mashtots and Koriun and amounting to a meditation on diaspora.

The idea of Mashtots and Koriun coming to terms is first deployed in section seven of Chapter 26, through a dialogue, and then in section eight, at the end of Mashtots' letter. Section nine meditates how this shapes the relationship between Mashtots and Koriun. Here is the first fragment of section nine:

> Master and disciple once have agreed, oh, with what impossible friendship, that on the general sadness be spread a cover; only for the wise to notice, if they be really keen, that there, with the strategy of a canary, anxiety hums there.
>
> Master and disciple comprise the originary ardent couple. Here finally is something positively given, like letter and paper, like words and silence, like the eye and its very own darkness.
>
> One breath and two bodies, one old and one new, one rational appearance and four members, a mystic monstrosity, an angelic apparition of the spiritual wedding. (507)

The "impossible friendship" between Mashtots and Koriun, which the passage also describes in sensual as well as in Christian mystic terms – "ardent couple," "spiritual wedding" — requires a chain of metaphors, "like letter and paper, like words and silence, like the eye and its very own darkness" — to gestures towards a radical notion of alterity that can hardly be thought of as a "positively given." The radicalness of this notion of alterity lies in thinking of difference not as opposition (in accordance to a positivist logic) but as the other of the same, as the unformulatable but necessary-to-formulate condition of possibility of the same, the non-same.

The impossibility of archive — of reconstructing the past, of witnessing and recapturing its lost truth — is the general problematic from the critical perspective of

which *The Palimpsest Man* displaces philology and historiography. In engaging with the events from the 5th century pertaining to the creation and adoption of the Armenian alphabet and by contrasting it with the Aztec pictograms, the work interrogates the much earlier events formative of Armenian nationhood. In doing so, *The Palimpsest Man* makes a more startling suggestion about the nature and experience of (Armenian) nationhood — the encounter with the other is constitutive of it from the very 'beginning,' so much so that any notion and narrative of beginning is problematic.

The fragment is the form through which these displacements are accomplished. Fragments are shattered pieces that not only will never reconstitute any pre-existent whole but also, at least in Beledian's text, cast doubt on the idea that the latter ever existed. Throughout the above analysis, we came across instances where the fragments addressing the Mashtots/Koriun pair are interspersed with those pertaining to the Joaquin/student pair. These strands speak to each other through topics, motifs and terms as well as through visual, auditory and syntactic echoes. The narrator arrives at new interpretations pertaining to Mashtots/Koriun by way of his earlier experience of being the student tasked with writing Joaquin's autobiography. And the other way around: the narrator interprets his earlier experience as a student tasked with writing Joaquin's autobiography with the help of his interpretation of the Mashtots/Koriun relationship. In other words, the two narrative strands, each of which inscribes an experience of the impossibility of archive, serve to interpret each other. This is the hermeneutics of alterity operative in *The Palimpsest Man*.

**Writing the Impossibility of Archive Across *The Palimpsest Man***

**The Problematic of Voice**

One form in which the problematic of the impossibility of archive operates across *The Palimpsest Man* is the recurring motif of the impossibility of capturing the voice of a living being after their death. This problematic of voice in Chapter 26 is explicitly announced in the beginning of section two, with the narrator stating this:

> There is neither the soul-image [*հոգենկարը*], nor the portrait [*կենդանագիրը*]. Of course the sound-image [*ձայնանկարը*] has not reached. After all it is exhausting to endlessly rummage through memories to imagine them. The man of letter has always spoken. By contrast, the prophets do not have image or grave. (478)

As we can see, the passage understands the unavailability of archive not just in terms of voice, but also in terms of image. To express this, the narrator coins new words in Armenian which above I have translated with a hyphen as "soul-image" (*hogenkar*, *հոգենկար*) and "sound-image" (*dzaynankar*, *ձայնանկար*). I shall return to the issue of the image in the next section of my analysis and here will follow the thread of voice. Following this elaboration of the problematic of the unavailability of archive through the figure of voice, in section three of Chapter 26 we have the narrator imagining Mashtots meditating on the loss brought about by the invention and imposition of the Armenian letters:

> … the loss, yes, my God, I feel the loss of that bird's tongue, of childish sound plays, free, untied repetitions of sounds, which were obliged to obey to no grammar, since they stayed prior to law and order, there where now I shall reach, to the unmixed sound over which that alphabet cut with geometric sharpness and precision is a netting, something spoken by a rational creature, that which carries off the pleasure antecedent to the physiological transformation of sound, unique and final, having forever exhausted the joy… (487)

The passage suggests that growing up our voices change and the absent presence of our childhood voice accompanies us throughout our lives. The passage also implies that an analogous experience of loss of voice occurred when Mashtots invented the alphabet –

the latter gave law and order to the disorderly voices which characterized Armenia in its oral mythic period.

The impossibility of capturing the voice is a major concern for the student, too, when he tries to reproduce Joaquin's voice in the latter's autobiography. This problematic is saliently introduced in Chapter 10. During his conversations with the student, Joaquin repeats that he needs the student to be his. (183, 187) Joaquin defines their relationship thus: "I will speak, you will write, will complete it" (187). At first, the student is hopeful that he will be able to capture Joaquin's voice in writing by simply reproducing his sentences and idiom; then he wonders "how to pass to that inner movement, let's say to that inside sensation that brings the entire human body onto one point and gives momentum to the monologue, in particular, does not cease from repeating" (187). Thus, at stake is capturing what could be paraphrased as the *inner rhythmic pattern* of Joaquin's *embodied way of processing and articulating language*. In the next paragraph, the student, struck by anxious doubt, further wonders:

> ... are you ever going to be able to realize the impossible, to reproduce not what you heard, not even his mode of saying, but the inner space which is called vibrating and living sonorousness, that which it is not sufficient to repeat to contain it? As soon as it appears it has already disappeared,
> the voice, that form of being. (187)

In the above passage, the narrator understands by voice not just the words and the syntax of a speaker, but their singular quality forming in the inner reaches of the body. It is this irreducible singularity that is impossible to capture in writing.[152]

Later, in fragment three of Chapter 20, the narrator recounts that the student, after trying hard to reproduce in writing Joaquin's voice gives up and decides to record

[152] The thread of critique of phenomenology, subtly woven into the fabric of *The Palimpsest Man*, here acquires greater precision: how can phenomenology survive the challenge of capturing loss, of the voice, in this case?

Joaquin's words with a sound recorder. Even then, the student is challenged by Joaquin's disorderly way of talking. In one instance, Joaquin moves from discussing moral laws to Frederic Mompou's *mùsica calada*, to this musical piece's magical ability to link thought and music with a few sounds, according to him, and ends by talking about his mysterious stuttering. Later, sitting in his room in Paris and listening over and over to the sound recording of Joaquin's voice, the student realizes that "…the voice heard from the sound recorder was not that of the speaker, not the one that you heard; it came and covered whatever you heard when Joaquin was here; it distracted you, and now with his absence it had disappeared but had left beyond a shadow, hoarse and whistling, resembling to him a lot but false." (563) Thus, the problematic of the voice in *The Palimpsest Man* is also elaborated against the archiving capabilities of contemporary recording technologies. I will end by citing a passage in which the problematic of the voice is tied to the problematic of the image, both of them informed by the problematic of unavailability of archive. The passage below invokes the student reading *The Life of Mashtots* and translating it on the go for Joaquin. Right before it, the narrator notes that the student has the impression that Mashtots has lost his voice when he has invented the letters.

> the man of letters does not have voice, your Koriun has understood this long time ago,
> Senior Hermes,
> but then… ? does it stay in the image?
> I don't know, perhaps with one he translates the other, in any case, you haven't gone
> outside the image,
> wasn't this so before the invention?
> of course, of course, but he was a voice uplifter [վերձայնող],
> he lifted the voices up, up, deciphered, re-birthed…
> he put space in it, that is, air, !aire!
> you want to say, oh, I see, it is not possible to think without image,
> almost…
> you want to say there is image under the letter as well…
> … in every language, Senior Hermes,
> so he was equivocal [երկիւօս]
> two-faced, two-faced like the gods… (349-350)[153]

[153] Hermes is the nickname that Joaquin has given to the student.

The passage above invites reflection on the event of the 'invention' of the Armenian phonetic script by juxtaposing it with that of the Aztec pictogrammic language of Nahuatl. Unlike the Armenian system which delimits sound units with signs (thus creating letters) and develops a grammar based on this, Nahuatl uses images and hieroglyphs, as well as implied oral narrative evoked by these. Joaquin, trained as a structural linguist and obsessed with deciphering the Aztec pictogrammic system suffering a catastrophe shortly after the arrival of the Spanish, sees Mashtots as the one who by inventing the letters "uplifted" the sounds of the language spoken by the Armenians. The English verb "to uplift" seems particularly appropriate here given its theological resonance. It is crucial to note that in having Joaquin make this claim, Beledian creates the untranslatable neologism *verdzaynel* (վերձայնել). In the next line, the student riffs off this word to interpret what Joaquin just said; he first breaks down *verdzaynel* into *dzayner guh haner ver* (ձայները կը հանէր վեր) "he lifted sounds up," with a hint of "he made sounds" *dzaynerĕ gĕ haner*, then arrives at the phonetically and morphologically proximate verb *vertsanel* (վերծանել) which means 'to decipher' and then, makes one last leap into another, but a less strange, neologism, *vertsnel* (վերծնել), which would denote 'to rebirth' ('to give birth again'). As we can see, Herme's interpretation of Joaquin's claim is carried out through the morphologico-semantic transition from *verdzaynel* to *vertsanel* to *vertsnel*. This neologistic move performs the insight that the invention of the Armenian letters, paradoxically, is indissociably both decipherment and creation. An act that preserves what was before as the new. Moreover, while the Armenian text uses the word *dzayn* (ձայն), in translating it I first used "voice," when referring to Mashtots, and "sound," when referring to the letters. Yet, the

ambivalent Armenian word *dzayn* - refusing to distinguish between 'who' and 'what' - also goes to the core of the problematic: what of Mashtots' voice survives' in Koriun's text?

**The Problematic of Image**

The non-image (*anpatker* անպատկեր) is another major figure which elaborates on the problematic of the impossibility of archive both in Chapter 26 (Mashtots/Koriun) and Chapter 20 (Joaquin/Hermes). In both chapters, Mashtots and Joaquin challenge the notion of image as the transparent and privileged mode of the representation of what there is. As we saw already in Chapter 26, Mashtots refuses to consider images as the ultimate reality, thinks of them as at the cusp of the image and non-image and insists that Koriun understand the image's essential duality. Joaquin, inspired by a two-faced Aztec god, thinks of the non-image by way of rejecting the privileging of the voice over the image, as he believes European phonetic systems of inscription do, and tries to interpret pictograms as operating with sound *and* image without privileging one over the other.

Both Mashtots and Joaquin think of the non-image not as the logical opposite of the image, but as the limit of the image, as its other, its beyond, as that which makes the image possible. The thought of the non-image as the other of image is an important elaboration of the problematic of the impossibility of the archive. One knows that something is lost but cannot know exactly what it is; no image can capture the loss which is always somewhere else than 'in' the image.

At the end of the student's visit to Joaquin's house, the latter, as if suddenly, remembers and invites the student to the basement where poster-size imprints of enlarged

Aztec pictograms are hang. Once in the dimly lit basement filled with shadows, the student, sitted on a rotating chair at the center, notes that these screens depict the pictograms in an increasingly abstract manner, as if striving to reach the "impossible border where images turn into voice thread." (385) Joaquin, standing next to him, defends the hypothesis that somewhere there must have been a room hallowed in a rock under a great palace, a crypt, where the images were kept in the darkness because the Aztecs thought that images were dangerous; they were afraid of images, and must have taken initiative to bury them when the catastrophe, disguised as Spanish conquerors, arrived, and that these originals were probably treated like etalons from which the novice scribes (the *tlacuillo*) learned. (386) Joaquin adds that it is decadent to think of these practical ritual sites as beautiful, that the ancient Aztec scribes did not strive to write beautifully, but "made flourish and live." (387) Early on, on a few occasions, too, he expresses skeptical aversion against what he considers as Eurocentric aestheticism and harbingers of a decadent fall. Joaquin then claims that with these abstracted pictograms it is possible to reach "beyond what you see." (387) He adds that for Aztecs, unlike Europeans, image and voice are not separated. (388) When the student asks, "and you are standing between them, Seneor, at the border of two worlds, no?" Joaquin wonders what he means, moves away to a corner and hesitates to respond, something that he rarely does. The narrator describes this moment thus: "It is as if he has not discovered anything yet, has the need to again and again verify, to neutralize an inner discord, having at once jumped into the temple of pictograms." (388) Then, Joaquin speaks: "… the cut between image and voice… this is not news, it is not even interesting, here too images speak and voices depict… this, dear Hermes, is a metaphor here, with us… / He swallows his word." (388)

Above, Joaquin implies that having privileged voice over image as its condition of possibility and blind spot, the European system of writing if and whenever it attempts to think the essence of image and voice can at most generate metaphors. This suggests that the metaphor is a limit of the mode of thinking/wielding language proper to European phonocentrism. Under the light of this, the neologistic semantic-morphological transitions which I pointed out and analyzed earlier acquire a new significance. They constitute attempts to think beyond metaphor. We shall soon see how, in subsequent commentary, Hermes tries to understand Joaquin's insights regarding the Aztec's non-metaphoric way of linking voice and image.

Regarding Joaquin's resistance against the hegemony of European civilization, throughout *The Palimpsest Man*, there are hints that he is struggling against structural anthropology at its height in the 1970s Paris and dominant in the *Musée de l'Homme*. In Chapter 16, Joaquin attacks the ideas of one of the institute's famous ethnographers, who claims that everything — including the elements comprising the "savage" culture — has structure and that all structures are in one structure. (310) For Joaquin, these claims reek of Platonic idealism. He further despises this famous ethnographer for privileging the phonetic system and not believing that ancient cultures like the Aztecs had advanced writing systems. (310-312) When, in their office, the student inadvertently brings up the notion of *bricolage* and mentions the name of this ethnographer, Joaquin looks around to make sure that no one can overhear them and scolds those anthropologists who believe that writing "is not the image of spoken language but its aid or some counterpart, supplementary part, *su contrapártida*." (312) The latter, for Joaquin, is a kind of Christian eschatological prejudice. (310-312)

These pages strongly suggest Claude Lévi-Strauss as the target of Joaquin's ire.[154] The latter's book *The Savage Mind* (1962) deploys the notion of *bricolage* to theorize the distinction between 'savage' and 'modern' minds. In the opening chapter of the book, entitled "The Science of the Concrete," Lévi-Strauss theorizes *bricolage* as the concrete activity of making do with things. He contrasts the 'savage', who engages in *bricolage*, with the European in the following manner: "the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the 'bricoleur' by inclination or necessity always remains within them." (19) Lévi-Strauss then adds: "This is another way of saying that the engineer works by means of concepts and the 'bricoleur' by means of signs." (19-20) Despite Lévi-Strauss' best intentions and the precautions that he takes, for Joaquin, structural anthropology robs other cultures of the possibility of sovereign agency by projecting over them an analytics of structure — e.g. based on the concept/sign and concrete/abstract oppositions — which privileges voice over image and therefore considers other kinds of writing as backward or lacking.[155] As a result, Aztec pictograms are seen as lacking the representational power of

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[154] In *History of Structuralism, Volume 1: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966* (1992), François Dosse claims that with the decline of the Sartrean existentialism after World War II, the French intellectual scene in the 1950s saw the rise of Claude Lévi-Strauss who inaugurated structural anthropology by borrowing form structural linguistics. Forced to leave France with the break of WWII, Lévi-Strauss met the linguist Roman Jakobson in New York, from whom he borrowed Saussurean-inspired principles of structural linguistics (difference, arbitrary sign) (on which Trubetzkoy had also worked), as well as the anthropologist Franz Boas in Columbia University, whose major contribution was the importation of the concept of the unconscious into anthropological analysis. With the help of the Saussurean conception of the arbitrary sign, empty difference, structuralism privileged the analysis of the relationships over the contents of the related elements. Lévi-Strauss synthesized the above into a social science, innovating it away from psychologism, evolutionism, functionalism and empiricism. (10-16)

[155] It is worth noting that already in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Lévi-Strauss formulates the development of structural anthropological models as a way to explore and appreciate other cultures precisely without judging their differences as inferior or effacing them by reducing them to European cultures. He brings the example of Eskimo dress and houses. Their capacity to protect humans from harsh weather was realized by the Europeans only after the latter understood the theory behind it. (385) This rejoinder does leave structural anthropology vulnerable to a critique from anti-phonocentric grounds. Such a critique was

Western phonetic systems of writing. As for the idea that writing is the image of spoken language, this is Joaquin's way of once again distinguishing the Aztec pictogrammic system of writing from the European phonocentric one. Accordingly, in the Aztec system, writing is the image of the spoken language in a freer, less ordered sense, whereas for Europeans, the image is made subordinate to spoken language through the invention of the phonetic letters which confine visuality to the letter.

**An Archipelago[156] of Elusive Figures**

In *The Palimpsest Man* the figures of voice and image are further associated not only with that of sovereignty but also of namelessness and becoming a writer. Such a figural net makes it impossible to identify a center to Beledian's volume, a site where meaning is located and revealed in some privileged manner, or captured through models of vertical (depth) and/or horizontal (surface) reading. This is what makes *The Palimpsest Man* powerfully post-structuralist and post-modern. Such an uncatergorizable quality is also what I have in mind when developing the notion of diasporic reading in the second chapter of this dissertation. In what follows, I outline this figural net.

In addition to being deployed in Chapter 26 in relation to both Mashtots and Koriun, sovereignty, linked with freedom, is prominently evoked in Chapter 20, at the end and as the finale of the crucial conversation between Hermes and Joaquin in the basement of his home. On that occasion and the only time in the book, Joaquin, stuttering, posing to regain his vivacity and in short anguished sentences, expresses his

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certainly carried out by Derrida in the 1960s and 1970s. It is, furthermore, interesting that *The Palimpsest Man* does not explicit address the Derridean phonologocentric critique while, possibly, implicitly taking its distances from the reiterations of the notion of writing advanced by Derrida.

[156] In choosing the image, metaphor and figure of 'archipelago' I take inspiration from Beledian's volume *Grounds* (Հաստատ, Paris, 1983) whose fragmentary prose-poetic text is imbued with the figure of archipelago.

desire to go beyond European human sciences to be able to "freely… write in pictograms." (389) Here is the passage in its entirety:

> ... *¡hombre!* from inside the multitude of lines that have reached us the task is to find… *descrubrir lo màs* the most fundamental… *importante* of course, I am always after what is lost… why? … but what did you want me to do…? when you find something, you go all the way to the end, if not… you will have no language, this is perhaps the last chance, who knows after this…? as of right now, I describe, haven't you already noticed? I struggle to put them next to each other… don't ask until when…
>
> You do not remember how long the silence has lasted. You hear the dull noise of the breath, especially the shadow of hoarseness hiding there which dissipates the voice climbing up from deep below when the whisper appears;
>
> ... there is no time left, my eyes began getting tired... don't say that I am worried... not at all, now I even feel stronger than before... I am not looking for traces, nor for remnants... must I repeat everything...? I thought you had an understanding ear… I know that you don't, with you one always needs words, sometimes you are discouraging, you don't know how to see, after all you are a legatee of the alphabet… nothing I tell reaches you, *¡claro!* try to imagine what I mean… listen carefully, *¡querido!*, whatever was before our massacres, isn't that the ambition of the scientist? yes, the only thing is that that is a kind of reconstruction, it does not suffice, I just understood that it is not sufficient… there is a last stage, the very last one… when I…
>
> The cough breaks off his mouth and the words, dispersedly, come out like scrawl:
>
> I am able… freely, *más libre* in my turn to write in pictograms. (388-389)

As we can see, Joaquin's yearning to "freely, …[more free,] to write in pictograms in [his] turn" (388) is evoked against the background of the perceived limitations of European human sciences. This is why he cannot share his obsession with the colleagues in the research institute who look down on him,[157] nor does he want to mention it in his autobiography and repeatedly insists that the student not take any notes on it. European disciplines only try to reconstruct the past — something that is not sufficient for Joaquin. Instead, Joaquin yearns to give a new life to the Aztec pictograms in the present and in this way make them survive the catastrophe that has befallen them. The last word of the above excerpt in the original Armenian uses a single verb to refer to the act of writing in pictograms, which could be translated as 'pictogramming.' While in the above translation I chose 'write' to make it more idiomatic, the original's choice of a verb implies an

[157] In Chapters 6, 11 and 12 describe how most Joaquin's coworkers see him as an inferior outsider.

attempt to not separate the act of drawing (visual) from that of writing (textual). This gesture performs Joaquin's critical desire to subvert conventional Western analytical categories.

After recalling this moment of apparent confession by Joaquin, the narrator launches into a series of meta-reflections on the Hermes' memories and impressions at the time when this event took place. When the narrator recalls once again the crucial basement scene, he adds that the student put his hand out towards the poster-size screens of pictograms, taken by a desire to touch them, while the pictograms dissolved into light the more the student approached them.[158] Then, the student pulled his hand back due to the panic in Joaquin's voice. When he tried to catch Joaquin's gaze, the latter had turned his face away saying "the invisible article… *la articulatión*, what meaning does the sign have without…?" (392) As a shiver runs through the student's body, Joaquin turns the lights off, leaving them in the darkness.

As it can be noted, the basement scene, the way the narrator recalls it, is abundantly weaved with motifs of light and darkness. The lamplight in the basement creates shadow effects which give to the enlarged pictograms as well as Joaquin's face ghostly quality. These motifs go to the heart of the matter, as at stake is precisely the problematic of image, of seeing beyond pictograms, the forms and voices that inform it and the world from which them come. Through these motifs Beledian's writing folds onto itself, echoes, deepens a given episode, without falling into the trap of symbolism which ultimately amounts to a reliance on metaphor. As for the idea of an invisible article, of which Joaquin speaks, in this context it can be thought of as the un-

[158] The motif of touch, participating in the inscription of the limits of the phonetic writing system can be read as part of the critique of phenomenology.

representable possibility of linking voice and image *beyond the European phonocentric metaphor*. The diverse figures of non-voice and non-image, which I read earlier, constitute a rich tapestry of such links.

The last fragment of Chapter 20 gives one final commentary on the basement scene. It is brief enough for me to cite it in its entirety below:

> It is as if Joaquin had understood or tried to make you understand that god does not come from the darkest place. That was too easy of a thought. Even someone like Tuvmo would not believe in such a scrawl. It was a positive idea, often pushing the interlocutor in an inciting manner into a speculative exercise; he knew very well what loss means, that is, longing. Was he this way satisfying his passion for science? Perhaps he had realized that to write in pictograms was not sufficient without an *autonomously new* image. Between discovery and creation there was or must have been a gap, where resided the secret, or the transcendental madness of the positive mind." (392)

The passage above suggests that authentic creation is a sovereign act, an event that puts forth its own categories and rules. In doing so, it recalls Joaquin's interpretation of Mashtots' invention of the Armenian letters. The notion of sovereignty here challenges the conventional political understanding of sovereignty marked by and marking statehood, and, thus, gestures towards a post-catastrophic diasporic sovereignty. This is way Joaquin's struggle against Eurocentric structural anthropology arrives at its specific post-structuralist *and* post-colonial articulation. As for Joaquin's secret, true to a post-structuralist and post-colonial spirit, Hermes accepts not deciphering it: by casting, with the deployment of a "perhaps," his views as speculations, he respects the inaccessibility of Joaquin's secret.

Creation as a sovereign act is further linked to the figure of nothing. In Mashtots' never-seen-before letter to Koriun, the figure of nothing is evoked as that which is behind the letters. (505) It is also deployed to interpret the relationship between the Hermes and Joaquin. One such occasion is Chapter 10; there, Joaquin repeatedly states that the

student needs to be his voice while writing Joaquin's autobiography. At first optimistic, the student starts having doubts and reacts thus:

> To find the play of lips, to say "I"… nothing seems as easy as that ordinary position that the speaker unintentionally occupies in the depth of the sentence, at the same time as difficult…! Everything is at your disposal and suddenly, no, you made a mistake, nothing is yours, you are nothing, under your language [tongue] you discover the lack, it is as if you are longing for something that you have never had and which you continue desiring. (185)

The passage above deploys the figure of nothing in two ways: as a negation and as a positive predication — "nothing is yours, you are nothing." Throughout *The Palimpsest Man*, the more the student mobilizes various journalistic and philosophical discursive tools to decisively approach and capture Joaquin's essence, his voice, his imagination, his experience, the more the latter becomes unattainable. This way, the inscription of nothing acquires greater depth and breadth, serving as the vehicle with which the narrator thinks and respects Joaquin's secret and Joaquin as secret.

This paradoxical dynamic of proximity and distance in the relationship between Joaquin and the student is accentuated, for example, in Chapter 22. Here, the student once again urges Joaquin to recount the exact events that preceded the moment when he conceived the hypothesis deciphering the Aztec pictograms. The chapter launches into a series of meta-reflections on the impossibility of narrating the event of the discovery and draws parallels with the event of the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mashtots, problematizing the Christian legend that the tradition weaves around it.[159] The narrator recalls Joaquin's last statement regarding the experience of deciphering the Aztec pictograms: "- I saw, heard, touched" (408) and states that allegedly from that point on

[159] In *Life of Mashtots,* Koriun claims that Mashtots received the alphabet from Christ in a vision while sleeping.

the awe had dissipated and everything was clear to Joaquin.[160] Then, there is this fragment:

> He had fallen silent and you [Hermes] have the impression that intuition empties the word; nothing is there, nothing will be, for the one who does not already know; to say nothing means that what is seen are voices attached to images, their one silent utterance, *¡su música callada!*
>
> I saw (408)

Here, the figure of nothing designates the paradoxical point where the orders of image and voice meet and dissolve each other. There cannot be any communication or transference of this experience unless it is experienced, each time anew. Finally, towards the end of the book, in Chapter 31, where the student writes a letter to Joaquin, he seems to have gotten used to occupying the place of nothing. In the passage below, nothing as a figure is deployed in relation to sovereignty as well as to authorship. There, the student confesses to Joaquin something that he has not admitted even to himself before, something that recurs to him obsessively:

> how once, with the young and immature poet Mgrdich, from the heights, runlets of the Mount Sannine, I had involuntarily given myself to the tumbling descent to the valleys, here and there had slowed down, then down, almost unfathomable, and the image now comes from such distance places, from such unexpected layers that it seems to discover that fear, the dread of standing along at the opening of a valley, free, as if in front of a free space which is not anymore the abyss formed by Laurence's two arms and legs, but a space where it is necessary to be lord-master, sovereign, to oppose an uppermost power, that trembling that I could be an author, that is, nothing, that is… a mask[161] that changes face and expression, a being deprived of density, which usually gives birth to himself, his father, his mother, enters inside their intimacy with a kind of unavowable consanguinity or watches with a crude uncanniness. (585)

The above passage makes the association between the figures of nothing, sovereignty and authorship explicit. It does so by displacing the discourse of parenthood. The text then

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[160] The haptic, once again, is brought up here; makes me think of embodiment as a problematic that *The Palimpsest Man* takes into consideration (again, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas).

[161] Motifs of masks abound in *The Palimpsest Man* – in the research institute, in Joaquin's home, in relation to Laurence, towards the end of the book when the student and Maria walk in Paris and see a mask shop. Through them, *The Palimpsest Man* performs the insight that there are only appearances behind which there is no truth to be discovered.

continues to recount the first encounter between the man and the woman who would later become the narrator's parents, emphasizing a perverse violence in attempting to narrate it and the ultimate impossibility of it.

Lastly, throughout *The Palimpsest Man*, the figures of writer/author, nothing, and sovereignty, among other figures, motifs and themes, converge around the figure of namelessness. In Chapter 26, when elaborating on the relationship between Mashtots and Koriun, the narrator writes the following from Mashtots' point of view regarding Koriun: "He does not have the inner space. He writes to not think. He will never know what it means to become nameless." (497)

Namelessness as a theme is introduced early in *The Palimpsest Man*. It appears in Chapter 5 which recalls the student meeting his friend and elderly mentor Mr. Ghevond, an Armenian writer settled in Paris. The striking significance of this meeting for the plot of the book lies in the fact that during their conversation, Mr. Ghevond convinces the hesitating student to take up Joaquin's offer of writing the latter's autobiography. (71-77) During the same conversation, Mr. Ghevond unexpectedly starts telling that he was sent to the Weimar concentration camp for housing a Jewish girl whom he loved. He then compares his experience in the camp with the Armenian death marches along the Euphrates around 1915 both of which he has survived. He adds that because in the camp he was terrified of suddenly forgetting his memories, he started memorizing them. During the last weeks in 1945, when there was less surveillance, he wrote them down, but was unable to remember the Jewish girl's name.[162] Then he lost the manuscript. Instead of

[162] These biographical details suggest that Mr. Ghevond is modeled after the French-Armenian writer Zareh Vorpouni, whose name I mentioned in passing in a footnote in the introduction. When I brought up this point during one of our conversations while walking in Paris, Beledian remarked that the point is not to fetishize this writer but to try to do something interesting with such evocations.

feeling liberated — since Mr. Ghevond is convinced that writing is forgetting — this loss made both writing and not writing even more difficult for him. (77-80)

Mr. Ghevond is anxious that by writing his memories for the second time, he will erase the traumatic experience of forgetting the Jewish girl's name. This way he will betray the unrepresentable experience of catastrophe which he believes was captured in his first manuscript. The figure of namelessness here inscribes catastrophe by carrying out a meta-fictional reflection — meta-fictional since *The Palimpsest Man* induces the reader to reflect on Mr. Ghevond's difficulties of writing fiction — on the impossibility of metonymically referring to catastrophe. This is another way in which *The Palimpsest Man* problematizes the metaphoricity inherent to thinking.

Namelessness as a theme is significant also with respect to Joaquin. The latter informs to the student, at times apparently not having planned to do so, that after the 1968 Massacre of Tlatelolco in Mexico City, when the government forces opened fire on protesters — he went underground and was able to escape from Mexico with the help of, ironically, his pro-government father and with a fake passport of a different name. His real name is Voz, which significantly translates as "voice" (e.g. p. 592…) and which he insists should not be mentioned in the autobiography that the student is writing, nor should the episode of the escape from Mexico. Once in France, he adopts his new name, Joaquin. In recounting this part of Joaquin's life in Chapter 21, through fragments interspersed with commentary the by narrator, the narrator recalls Joaquin stating the following:

> I was forced to become the man of the fake passport,
> you were sacrificed?
> I changed;
> what do you mean?

> the old name, the previous one, is not his anymore; he has started to notice that he lives with cryptography, inside a secret, no one will believe that now he is someone else, because they have given him another name; more accurately, for the only time in his life he has given birth to himself for the second time, he from himself, has become his own father, his own mother, has adopted a second language; his strong Latin accent gives attractiveness to his person, he knows this too, he has changed language, of course, but has stayed the same, *lo mismo*,
>
> but what does it mean? (397)

The passage overall suggests that once namelessness is achieved, nothing changes because it is the very condition of possibility of change. This realization by the student also amounts to the acknowledgement that Joaquin is a secret, without divulging the latter. Lastly, the passage also implies that the ability to give birth to oneself, in the student's as well as Joaquin's case, is a sovereign act.

Lastly, in addition to Mashtots and Joaquin being suggested to be nameless and Mr. Ghevond being aware of its condition, the narrator of *The Palimpsest Man* is also nameless. Throughout the book, his real 'birth' name is never given. Instead, Joaquin keeps inventing various nicknames for him, the most prominent among them being 'Hermes.' In Greek mythology, Hermes is the messenger god, as well as the god of exchange and commerce. The term 'hermeneutic' evokes 'Hermes.' As the Joaquin/Hermes relationship evolves and Hermes grows accustomed to Joaquin's invitation to interpret and invent, in a letter to Joaquin, he gives Joaquin various nicknames, too. The act of writing this letter, comprising the penultimate chapter of *The Palimpsest Man*, is decisive in making the narrator a writer. The narrator shows awareness of this when towards the end he writes: "when you receive this letter — I hope you will receive it, in all senses of the word — then I will be for you on this side of the image," (592) and thanks Joaquin for giving him that opportunity. (593) Namelessness — becoming a writer "on this side of" representation — and proliferation of nicknames

ultimately amount to the same thing. As the student enters into the space of namelessness, as he takes up the freedom and responsibility implied by it, perhaps then and only then can he write to himself, "[a]nd now you can end the book…" (594) as the last line of *The Palimpsest Man*, followed by a signature of the date.

Above, I claimed that *The Palimpsest Man* opens a space of hermeneutics of alterity by interweaving the Mashtots/Koriun and Joaquin/Hermes narrative strands. With subsequent readings from various parts of the volume, I hoped to demonstrate that, by staging an encounter between the catastrophes pertaining to the Armenian and Aztec cultures with radically different representational traditions, this space inscribes the singular impossibilities of representing catastrophe through positivist and realist literary and historiographical means. Furthermore, in the introduction of this dissertation, I already theorized such inscriptions as limits of representation and developed the notion of incorporation as one from of inscribing the radically unrepresentable alterity of catastrophe. The singular significance of the space of the hermeneutics of alterity generated by *The Palimpsest Man* lies in precisely striving to bring to a surviving language this unthinkable incorporation of catastrophe. Such inscriptions across layers of national mythology and history make *The Palimpsest Man* post-catastrophic and post-national.

When I theorized multilingual incorporation in the introduction, my examples — as well as those of Abraham and Torok — were limited to phonetic languages. The analysis of Torossian's *Stone, Time, Touch* in the subsequent chapter showed how catastrophe can be incorporated into the cinematographic imagery of this bilingual film. The reading of *The Palimpsest Man* takes a different approach. It suggests that one way

to pursue the traces of that which strives to be traceless — incorporated catastrophe — is to try to radically expose the nature of 'its' linguistic milieu by writing the juxtaposition of the latter with a heterogeneous language and writing system. And if this other radically different language has also been struck with catastrophe, then the juxtaposition promises to be all the more fruitful since it may lead to reciprocal exposures of incorporated inscriptions of catastrophe. The latter may mutually enable the survival of both Western Armenian and Nahuatl as post-catastrophic languages.

The performance of this juxtaposition also leads to a renewed notion of translation. I should first note that I do not believe in the possibility of a general ontology or epistemology of translation. Translation from Western Armenian (phonocentric) to Nahuatl (pictogrammic) and vice versa, in the context, circumstances and implications of *The Palimpsest Man*, can be conceived as the reciprocal exposure of the ghostly remains of these two languages that have undergone catastrophe. This encounter is a creative event constitutive of their afterlives, while, to be sure, it is conditioned by European non-post-catastrophic ('normal') languages, such as French and Spanish. Here, however, it is not sufficient to theorize the notion of afterlife merely as the transposition of the intention of a literary work from one linguistic-literary world to another. Walter Benjamin defends such a view in his groundbreaking essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923) by arguing that (literary) translation reveals the striving towards a pure language, which he conceives as the supplemented identity of what languages express through different means. Based on this, Benjamin writes: "The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original." (258) By contrast, it is hard to imagine a way in which the experience of

catastrophe can be transposed from a post-catastrophic (survivor) language to a non-post-catastrophic one, such as French or Spanish. The profound experience of spectrality permeating a post-catastrophic language could be hardly recreated ("expressed," to use Benjamin's term), and would, therefore, be effaced, in a non-post-catastrophic language. One might state the above differently as a question to Benjamin: can the experience of catastrophe of a language be translated into another language without such an experience? Probably not. This is where the profound significance of *The Palimpsest Man*'s juxtaposition of Nahuatl and Western Armenian is revealed. These two post-catastrophic literary languages *are* capable of translating each other's catastrophes. That is to say, in this manner, and perhaps only in this manner, their catastrophes are not effaced. What survives as a result of such a (possible) reciprocal act of translation has to be understood as the afterlife not just of a literary work but also of a post-catastrophic language. The notion of afterlife in this specific context would need to be understood as having complex — i.e. multilingual, non-linear, inscriptive and highly fragmentary — temporalities and far reaching implications.

Given the extremely high discursive stakes of the juxtaposition of two post-catastrophic experiences, *The Palimpsest Man* suggests it to be a personally sovereign act of creation independent of *and not necessarily against* national statehood, analogous to Mashtots' creation of the Armenian alphabet and echoing Joaquin's desire to once again write in Nahuatl pictograms. The palimpsest man — or woman — acquires its deepest significance here as the figure of the diasporic subject. The performance of personal — but not self-centered, in all senses of the term — sovereignty across post-catastrophic, post-national and multilingual juxtapositions would be the promise and the responsibility

of diasporicity to come. Diaspora, then, would have to be conceived as a sovereign cultural-linguistic palimpsest.

# CONCLUSION

I will end this dissertation first with an anecdote and a related observation on the relationship between the contemporary Armenian diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. A few days ago, I had a phone conversation with an Armenian-American entrepreneur whom I have known for quite some time now and who shall remain unnamed. Since this entrepreneur has the reputation of sponsoring diverse kinds of projects related to the Armenians, I had written him and we talked about the possibility of helping an artist friend. Scientifically minded and financially savvy, the activist entrepreneur was quick to tell me on the phone that he thinks it is a waste of time to do anything for the Armenian diaspora as such and that all of the efforts of Armenians should be directed towards supporting the Republic of Armenia. While I profoundly disagreed, I kept a calm voice but ended the conversation sooner rather than later. After the initial wave of my emotional rebellion passed, I realized that part of me was deeply saddened that this energetic person is completely closed off to perceiving any possibility of cultural interaction beyond the purview of conventional national ideology created in the 19$^{th}$ century and denying the legitimacy of a diasporic existence.

My second remark, a contemporary observation, has to do with the newly appointed High Commissioner of Diaspora Affairs of Armenia, Zareh Sinanyan. Born and partially raised in Armenia — with a father from Istanbul who, like my paternal grandparents, had repatriated to Armenia shortly after World War II —, having lived in California for about three decades and having been the mayor of Glendale, he gave probably his first interview as an official in Yerevan a few days ago. The journalist —

who is relatively well-informed when it comes to matters pertaining to the Armenian diaspora — asked about Zareh Sinanyan's priorities as the newly appointed liaison. The latter, while acknowledging the need to better understand the singularities of the various Armenian communities around the world, expounded an Armenia-centered vision of diaspora and situated the idea of (at least potential) repatriation at its core. Whether one should privilege Armenia or consider it as only one of the knots of the global Armenian network seems less important compared to the fact that the discourse adopted by Zareh Sinanyan — as well as by the majority of the official and popular circles in Armenia and the diaspora — seems unable to properly acknowledge and respond to the peculiarity of the Western Armenian diaspora.

In my analysis, I approach the latter by insisting on the dual qualifiers of post-national and post-catastrophic, hoping to thus distinguish the Western Armenian diaspora form other migrant communities, including Eastern Armenian ones in Russia and elsewhere. The inability to acknowledge and work with the peculiarity of the Western Armenian diaspora has made it difficult to realize the need for a robust diasporic discourse that not only accounts for the experience of the former but also provides the tools to facilitate an enriching mode of diasporic existence. I develop the latter with my analysis of the experience of double alterity — 'internal' (catastrophe) and 'external' (other cultures) — at the heart of the diasporic Western Armenian becoming.

Without considering these nuances as the initial stepping stones for the emergence of diasporic life, Armenians in general and the new diaspora commissioner in particular will keep falling into the trap of homogeneous and monolingual modes of identification, and will miss the opportunity to engage to the fullest the possibilities offered by the

diasporic Armenian reality. The notion of multilingual multiculturalism that I advance in my introduction emerges after taking into account these nuances and needs to be embraced not only by the Armenian government, as it orients itself towards the diaspora, but nation-states in general, lest Armenia, and the world, keeps being bogged down by provincial and narrowly national legacies inherited from pre-Soviet and Soviet experiences and the 19th century in general.

Most of the literary and cultural criticism on or around things Armenian either does not engage with the complex legacies of Armenian culture, particularly by failing to address the singularity of the diasporic Western Armenian literary language, or is conventionally and nostalgically nation-centered. Whenever such criticism avoids falling into these traps, it hardly provides sufficient theoretical nuance to account for the unstable and only partially legible aspects of diasporic becoming — the sites where the most transformative opportunities lie hidden. This study, inspired by some of the sharpest diasporic Armenian critical discourses and artistic practices and striving to engage theoretical models that have developed outside the Armenian world, hopes to emphasize the need to conceive diaspora as a space which not only should not be reduced to any prior theoretical configurations but should be treated as a source of new theoretical — as well as cultural, political and economic — emergence. In other words, here, I am not interested in theorizing diaspora but diasporizing theory — as well as culture, economics and politics.

This would entail tracking how the various theoretical discourses that have historically informed our understanding of monolingual, territorial, sovereign modern nationhood — including the disciplines of linguistics, translation studies, history,

philology, ethnography, cultural anthropology, political science and so on — reach their concrete and abstract conceptual and practical limits. It would also imply exploring and exposing, as the various readings in this dissertation demonstrate, the complex and at times highly spectral alterity experiences that each of the highly interconnected domains of culture, politics and economics undergo. We might start by posing the following question. What kind of market logic is in play when a global network of communities invests, with very little understanding or expectation of financial profit, in institutions that ensure the thriving of Western Armenian language under diasporic conditions? In like manner, we might wonder about the new forms of political power that emerge with multilingual diasporic becoming that can hardly be thought with the conceptual tools afforded by the discourses of (national) sovereignty and belonging. In other words, how to think the horizon of diasporic economic and political interest and investment? We might furthermore ask how to redirect such diasporic economic and political emergence towards resolving international conflicts and addressing challenges that require unprecedented levels of cooperation among populations, for instance, when it comes to protecting the environment and achieving sustainable growth in the face of global warming.

Moreover, in response to the abovementioned instances of narrow, naïve and melancholic diasporic pessimism, I feel compelled to first mention what Vahé Oshagan had the habit of writing, and probably also of saying, namely, that the Armenian diaspora(s) are the lungs of Armenia. In other words, it cannot be a matter of either Armenia or diaspora. Such false oppositions should once and for all be put to rest. It is together and in touch with the rest of the world that the two have the greatest potential to

survive and thrive. Beyond such ideological compartmentalization, the task should be to make the diasporic Armenian, the youth in particular, feel thrilled about their multiple heritages and layers of identity, to give them the tools to thrive in and in-between them, as well as to guide them towards a vision with which they can overcome melancholia and enthusiastically cultivate multiple belongings. Armenia and its inhabitants should in their turn become acquainted with and do their best to understand the difference of the diaspora. Given the mutual comprehensibility of Western and Eastern Armenian vernaculars and literary languages and the myriad ties between the two societies, the current moment, and for some decades already, is the best opportunity for the Eastern Armenian culture to overcome the provincializing biases of post-Soviet nation-statehood and become a country that does not merely embody the melancholic Armenian dream of establishing an independent state but goes even beyond towards becoming a dynamic space that harbors and nurtures the best that a nation-state can still offer.

The readings carried out in this dissertation are meant to emphasize the enriching possibilities of diasporic becoming as an antidote to the melancholic pessimism that permeates it. While they uncover the historicity of modern nationhood among Western Armenians — and expose the armatures of national ideology in post-Soviet Armenia and the 'West' — they do not mean to dismiss national mode of belonging. It is unfortunately still the case that in the Middle East and in many other parts of the world, monolingual and repressively homogenizing national ideology — oftentimes with very tenuous ties to democratic practices — is the dominant way of organizing cultural, political and economic life. Ignoring this reality in the name of what may appear as abstract theoretical possibilities would be a grave mistake.

However, ignoring the opportunities of diasporic becoming, in the name of reductive nationhood, is an equally grave mistake. With this dissertation, my hope is to point to the possibility of diasporic culture and culture as diaspora as precisely compatible and enriching national ideological formations. In this manner, this analysis ultimately demands new categories beyond commonplace notions of homeland and exile, including when it comes to the sentimentalities accumulated with and around them. The challenge is to think diaspora as neither exile nor non-exile, as a productive state of profound in-betweenness that inscribes the multi-layered and at times unprecedented complexity of individual and collective human experiences. By orienting established cultural practices and narratives to diasporic becoming, Armenian communities in Armenia and around the world can and should avoid the violence that tends to result from repression of diversity.

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**APPENDIX A: Synopses of Vahé Oshagan's Prose**

1. "*Birater*[163] Hagop," *Husaber*, Cairo, September-October 1945.

Part 1

It is evening; the crowd of manual laborers enters the camp and moves towards the coast where they find refuge around the railway holes, trying to shield themselves from the wind. At the end of the crowd is *Birater* Hagop, a man in his fifties who is frequently bullied. He has been a laborer for three years but others, who do not even know how to hand metal, are promoted while he is not. But, despite all this, *Birater* Hagop has not been broken. He has felt deeper and deeper connection with "his Jesus." He looks forward to talking with Abu Yusuf, a 60-year-old Arab from the village who is ill. *Birater* Hagop talks to him about his pains, his wife for instance, and dreams about Russia where the laborers under Stalin are happy.

The train with laborers from other camps approaches; the laborers rush into it. Abu Yusuf and *Birater* Hagop are having a difficult time climbing on the train. *Birater* Hagop prays, he is afraid to climb; then he asks a laborer who finally pulls him and his friend up. The train, with animal wagons carrying fife-hundred laborers, takes the laborers back to the city. *Birater* Hagop is happy, he is eager to go home, eat and rush to the prayer where the Reverend is going to sermonize and they will pray. *Birater* Hagop is elated, almost happy that he is suffering now and won't suffer in the next life while those who bully him will.

But he is not happy even at home where his children and wife, who is not a believer, gives him a hard time. *Birater* Hagop has to wait outside the door since his wife,

[163] *Birater* is the Armenian descriptive for a person of Christian protestant faith.

a demanding, corpulent woman, is gone visiting some acquaintance. He is angry, wants to break the door and shout that his prayers are much more important. The wife comes thirty minutes later with their two sons, chats with him, opens the door and walks in without looking at him.

Part 2

Their house, in the workers' neighborhood, with pregnant women, children, smells, is dirty, has some impoverished religious iconography and the portrait of Stalin. All that *Birater* Hagop wants is some weakling to listen to his few Christian-Communist ideas which he has learned some tens years ago. Now he is eating, asking where his wife was and being ignored; his wife, Miss Anna, manages the house and has the masculine comportment. *Birater* Hagop and Miss Anna have one thing in common – their miserliness. Twelve-years ago they married on her insistence. *Birater* Hagop feels abused by his wife but does not stand up for himself. Now, he walks to the prayer house carrying the burdensome image of his wife in his mind.

All kinds of *Birater*s are coming to pray; some experienced ones, who have been 'saved' for a decade for instance, have brochures in their pockets, attesting to the wonder of being re-baptized. *Birater* Hagop is afraid from life and feels at ease only in the prayer room. He loves recalling life in Moush to forget his current misery. He believes though that the Red Army will come and save him and people like him and that life won't be this miserable. Reverend Hovsep begins the sermon with a prayer. *Birater* Hagop prays for better days. The Reverend is a classic case, emitting an aura of religiosity, leaving house around the age of 20 to serve God. *Birater* Hagop, meanwhile, is in reverie, remembering his tortured life in Damascus. It is prayer time again and he is hopeful despite the difficult

life. A woman next to him prays. He remembers Anna saying that there is no way *Birater* Hagop will be saved and prays for her to be forgiven. Every time that a woman prays, *Birater* Hagop's mind is carried away by a dream of Anna joining him in prayer and his house becoming a peaceful, joyful place. He is going to live this dream more intensely than his life itself.

2. "The Café," *Husaber*, Cairo, November 1946.

Evening is approaching in Jaffa and the coffee shops are being set up on the pavements mostly for well-to-do Arab merchants, while young manual laborers crowd into the cabarets in the camps, pay to the dancers, get drunk and spend all their money. Three Arabs, two young laborers and an older man, are in one such coffee shop. The old man now is telling the young ones about Ahmed who has died the day before. One of the young men notes that Ahmed was with them, playing cards and frustrated for having lost.

The three notice a Bedouin walking through the city. The Bedouin, tired after a long journey, is wondering why people are crowded in one place and what this city life is about. After the two young men and the older man tacitly agree between each other, the older one pretends to be blind and they start playing cards. The Bedouin, already tempted by the comforts of city life and dreaming to be an *effendi* [sir/mister], approaches the three players. The young man wins but, before letting the other one to sit and play, says that it is enough since the man is old and blind; the other young man also wins, saying no worries the old one is rich. Then they both lose and pause but the inertia of the game is in the air.

The Bedouin is tempted and starts playing, wins a few times and starts losing eight times, until one of the young men shouts 'police,' the three of them stand up and run away. The Bedouin stands in the middle, confused, repeating the words and not understanding what is going on. Soon after, when the Bedouin is gone, the policeman asks the three Arabs how much they won and is happy to learn that they won "120 *ghurush*" [name of the currency]. They all sit in a coffee shop where the old man continues his story of Ahmed who was apparently and possibly accidentally murdered by his wife whom he would bit periodically and whom he visited drunk with some Egyptian guy that night. In the morning, the wife is taken to a mental asylum. Then, the old man curses the misery into which his life is and tells the young men that they do not understand what he means. The old man spits; the three of them continue smoking.

3. "Night," *Agos*, Beirut, February 1955.

It is night in an unspecified village and the single knock on the door wakes up a young man. A moment later, his father, a hairy man, comes down the stairs holding a candle. After a brief of pause, during which time the son incredulously notices that the father is afraid and in the mind of the son the image of his brother lying on the threshold hovers, the father opens the door. The father blows off the candle to save the son from the shame. The son looks from behind the father's shoulder who examines the body, the footsteps on the snow all the way to the hill and takes the older son's body into the house. The young son feels the presence of death, regrets that he will not be able to see his brother in his *fedayi* [freedom fighter] attire talking to him and the family about their struggles, and recalls how two years ago, when he was fifteen, two other *fedayis* came,

talked to his father and older brother and the latter, after sending his wife to the fields, left with the two visitors. The father is a quiet man with sweet but sad eyes.

The father takes the older son's body upstairs into his room, from which the younger son is barred according to tradition. The father returns and starts putting on the younger son the belt with the weapon. The son realizes that it is his older brother's, understands and feels liberated. Then the father goes into his mother's room and holding her walks outside with slow, short steps. She is an elderly, thin, bed-ridden woman in white gown, her hair falling on her face which is mostly bones and skin. The grandmother and the father walk past the young son who feels the importance of the moment and kneels; his grandmother puts her hand on his head. The grandchild is taken back by her smell. Before he knows it, grandmother and father leave. The young son stands up powerful and kind. Father soon returns and sees him off but before doing so asks him to not return until it is over. The son looks around the house for the last time and leaves. The father looks at his steps from behind, rolls a cigarette just as he did when his first son left, soon returns home and goes to bed.

4. "Curtain," *Agos*, Beirut, February 1958.

Philip, the president of an unspecified state which some decades ago was only an obsolete name on the map but now has become an well-organized country, signs a historic accord with its neighboring, erstwhile hostile, country and starts a new era of peace. Philip is in his fifties, short, somewhat plump, bald. As the ceremony continues with pomp rhetoric and as Philip is asked to say a few words, the narrative describes his mind, meandering into his past, the struggles and the decisions which have led him to

become the head of the state despite his modest beginnings. During his speech Philip feels proud of what he has accomplished but more so personally than for the nation which he is leading. Through these fragmentary glimpses into Philip's mind, the reader learns that his mother has died when he was born, that his father had instilled into Philip an inferiority complex, that Philip had married his ugly, fat wife because of her dowry and for the last 30 years had to endure her nervous bouts and inability to understand diplomacy and his job.

After his speech, Philip goes to restroom where he meets his counterpart, the head of the neighboring state, with whom an accord is being signed. Urinating, the two men exchange remarks; the other man, tall, chats about women and how they, the men, are getting older. Philip, who feels above these kinds of conversations, is repulsed but hides his attitude under a well-chiseled diplomatic face.

When the dinner is over, during which people drink but Philip is reserved, he returns home and waits for his wife to come home. He looks into the mirror and, echoing and countering his counterpart's remark in the man's restroom, believes that he is still young and in his prime. Maria, the wife, soon returns and says that she had a headache and had asked the driver to take her outside for a stroll. They talk outside in the balcony and notice a man staring in their direction from a faraway house. Philip tries to communicate to Maria his pride for the historic day, how he feels free and as if his life is starting anew. Maria does not understand, says that he is sleepy and goes to her room to sleep. At first Philips asks her to stay, to share the moment with him since tomorrow would be different but she goes away as she has never understood him. Philip's pride feels wounded for having stooped so low to his wife by asking her to listen to him and

confirm his sense of pride for what has been accomplished. As his wife leaves the balcony, Philip is hurt and prideful. He also goes back inside the house.

Having no one to share his sense of pride over the significance of the day, Philip decides to get drunk. The last two sections of the text describe Philip consuming a lot of alcohol at once, puking, drinking again, hitting the mirror, kneeling, getting aroused, wanting a woman, going to his wife's room, falling on her, being pushed away by Maria who realizes that he is drunk and refuses him, and lying on the floor. Philip makes one last move towards her but is pushed back by a blow that hits his chest, cuts his breath and makes him retreat and fall on the bed while his wife runs outside. When Maria comes back to her room soon after, she sees Philip crying, which echoes an episode from Philip's childhood when the loyal servant, George, cries and mentions Philip's mother to whom he has promised to take care of Philip; meanwhile, as a boy, Philip thinks that his father dislikes him because he was born and his mother died.

The story ends with a page-long coda, describing Philip dragging himself outside the room, falling on a canapé and feeling emptied, both in pain and joy. Before falling asleep, he looks at an image on the wall, his father's, and does not recognize him. The text implies that Philip might be dying at that moment.

5. "The Dysfunctional elevator: Radio-sketch for six voices. Two durations," *Crossroads*, Beirut, 1971.

The opening section of the work, the "First Duration" (16-pages-long), begins with a description of a middle-class Lebanese Armenian soporific, materialist household, in which the family listens to a radio-sketch of the same title. This radio-sketch within

radio-sketch is a dialogue between a boy (Mashtots) and a girl (Shushan). They are talking on a hill and it is raining. The boy wants to escape from his village, to travel, receive education, etc. all the while knowing that it is not to be part of humanity but to free oneself from it. The girl seems to be in love with him; they say farewell, she wants him to write back. The text even mentions Koryun, Shushan's younger brother, who admires Mashtots and wants to follow him. The brief "Interact" returns to the somnambulant family scene and ironizes their general indifference.

"Second Duration" (14-page-long) is a dialogue between Mashtots and Koryun. It opens with an anachronistic introduction: on the radio station of Vagharshapat, where the Holy See of the Armenian Church is, there is a program celebrating the 30th anniversary of the invention of the Armenian letters, praising the inventor Mesrop Mashtots[164]. Mashtots interrupts irritated and asks his disciple Koryun to turn off the radio. During the rest of the dialogue, in which Koryun is presented as a second-rate thinker who does not understand the inner-workings of Mashtots' mind and only functions as a secretary and a copier, Mashtots is worried that with the invention of the alphabet Armenians will be less creative and will fall pray to its system, just as the radio show honoring him has. At the end of this section, as Vardan Mamikonian, the head of Armenian army, approaches, Mashtots asks Koryun to stall him outside while he burns his papers. Vardan Mamikonian enters but is silent. The two walk outside in no hurry while Koryun feels left alone and scared. He remembers Mashtots' words that "everyone needs to find his letters himself to be able to lose them" and suddenly realizes his meagerness.

[164] Mesrop Mashtots (362-440), an Armenian linguist, theologian, statesman and hymnologist who is known especially for having invented the Armenian alphabet in around 405. The most notable source about him is the book "Life of Mashtots" authored by Koryun, Mashtots' disciple.

6. “Station No 4,” 4 May 1968, Vahé Oshagan archive, Philadelphia.

Harutiun leaves the taxi early in the morning in Hamra, a quarter in Beirut, and walks some 100 meters to his store selling products oriented for women. He walks, thinks about the shops and service stores around and enters his store. In front of Harutiun’s store a six-story building is being built. That morning, when Harutiun looks at the construction site from behind the vitrine of his store, it seems that a worker is watching him. Harutiun turns away his gaze confused. He waits enveloped in his store feeling slightly aroused which shall make the day all the more pleasant for him. In the evening, he will enjoy the slight darkness and walk around the store, almost touching the products. In the back of Harutiun’s mind is a doctor’s visit by someone about which the reader does not know much, yet. The old man, his helping hand, is already in the store. They are almost strangers and so different — Harutiun with his unconscious obsessions, the old man used to sitting in the store when it sold only leather products, before Harutiun bought it, and just doing small chores like making coffee, bringing Pepsi and receiving small tips in exchange.

Harutiun feels his store to be his house and would like to tell that to his female customers. Two women past their mid-age and a schoolgirl are in the store. Harutiun talks with one of the women. Then the “stupid” village girl, Samira, enters the store. She was the one, about whom Harutiun was thinking earlier, preparing to do an abortion. Harutiun makes her seat on the back of the store. Crying, Samira tells that the doctor has not taken the money and so no abortion has been done. Meanwhile, there is a fight outside the store and the customers are distracted by it. Seeing that the fight is escalating, Harutiun gets nervous and shouts for the women to leave his store; he does so in

Armenian. The women get out of the store. One of the women's chest brushes against Harutiun, making him feel aroused and think of life as a strange tearing from outside. Harutiun feels safe in the store. He looks into the mirror. There is a room in the back of the store, where he sleeps, his secret lodging. Harutiun enters his back room, lies on the couch, ignoring the knock on the store door and someone calling his name. As Harutiun falls asleep, it is the old man asking him to open the door, who now sits on the one stair outside, wounded from his shoulder, bleeding, bending over.

The old man had gone to separate the fighters and had received a knife wound on his shoulder as a result. He wakes up form the noise of the fighting, goes to the construction site across the street. The same worker helps him bandage his wound. The old man endures the pain that spreads into and occupies his consciousness, while the two of them watch the fight between Yusuf, the big-bodied, sleek-haired head of the taxi services company and another thin driver, named Butros, getting closer to Harutiun's store. The old man leaves the construction worker, even though he wants to the worker something else of importance. Soon the two fighting men break into the store through the vitrine followed by two policemen and a crowd. The old man lights a cigarette and watches.

The fight soon engulfs Harutiun, who feels confronted with a lethal danger. Before the police can intervene, he receives a minor knife wound on his arm. The pain feels sweet and he feels love and being liberated. He becomes a different person. When he is left all alone in the disarrayed store, Harutiun feels the store to be unreal, very lonely and goes outside out of need for human presence.

The old man returns, asks where the village girl is, and when he puts his hand on Harutiun's shoulder, possibly preparing to give him advice about the village girl, Harutiun remembers the bedroom of his orphanage at night, a curtain in the background, an old man hiding in the back of the curtain and him asking the supervisor lady to bring his dad. Remembering this, Harutiun swears to himself that he will not tolerate the old man giving him any advice. Their "cold, merciless" (24) gazes meet; Harutiun just says his name, "Abo**,**" and they go to eat and treat Harutiun's wound. Once in a restaurant, Harutiun is not sure as to how to relate to the old man. Yet, a great clarity has come to him, especially regarding the world and people. He can hardly think as a result. They walk outside the restaurant, and notice the gaze of the same construction worker with a green pullover. The old man asks about the village girl. Harutiun does not know the name of her village, only that it is past Mrooj, another village; but he knows her name. Harutiun takes a taxi. The old man heads for the bus station.

Abo is in a taxi heading towards the village Mrooj, near Bikfaya; it is raining. The he remembers his youth, how Kurds burned his village, something that he did not know at that time. The old man arrives, while talking to his dad in his head, saying that he does this for him, thinks about life and the hope couched in it. He enters a church, the priest leads him to a room where the village girl is seated, with her head clothe, crying. Abo meets her and seems to want to adopt the child for his own reasons; she cries.

Harutiun walks, having something big to tell the world. He stands by cinema Araks and realizes the lack of authenticity, the foreignness of the life saturated with images and people captivated by them. A prostitute approaches him; at first he pays no attention, then wants to have sex her, but finds himself in the crowd. Standing on the

pavement under the strong rain, Harutiun looks at Boorj Hamoud neighborhood's houses without foundation, thinking that its inhabitants [largely Armenian] are also without foundation. He is surprised that he is thinking about such matters, since in the past he would mostly stand outside and, taken by the passionate images of the cinema, watch the women and the city. Harutiun is freed from the spell of the images, the sexual pull from women and perceives the world differently. He feels finally part of it even though without understanding it. Objects around him seem to be alive. He walks and wants to get to the edge of the street; a passerby tells him that he is bleeding. He had forgotten that he was wounded, being somewhere between outside himself and the passerby.

Through a passageway, Harutiun enters a strange courtyard. Smell of urine, neighborhood kids playing, fighting, a young couple upstairs playing jazz and staring outside, and someone selling American t-shirts invade his perception. It still rains; Harutiun gets into a dilapidated car where there is a weird man with bunch of shoes and a mannequin. They have a strange conversation. The man touches Harutiun's wound, the latter's consciousness perceives the world, the man, the strange situation differently. The man smokes, talks to the mannequin, and says semi-absurd things but Harutiun is not taken aback. At the end the man asks if Harutiun has recognized him.

The old man, Abo, and the village girl go to a doctor. The old man says she is her son's bride, something that he has always wanted to say. He feels everything, the young doctor, etc. to be part of the one and same tragic truth. Abo is sure that the girl is fine and that Harutiun is a healthy man, so presumably, the baby is fine. Abo is getting a fever but keeps his course, takes the girl back to the city, determined to finish what he has started before he gets worse.

Back to Harutiun and the strange man: Harutiun wonders where he has seen him. The strange man, offering Harutiun some food, tells a story of a man being afraid to confront his wife cheating on him with a tenant and singing Armenian spirituals with a sweet voice. Harutiun imagines the man to be incapable of hatred, being filled with so much excitement for life, with the miracle and amazement of being human. The strange man reveals that that man was his father. Then, he adds that the house burned down and on that night the man fought with the tenant. Harutiun is expecting something to happen, having taken the strange man seriously. He remembers that in his childhood the camp buildings burned and someone's voice singing Armenian spirituals.

The strange man wants to keep talking, Harutiun wants to leave but the car's door is locked. Harutiun tries to open, hits it with his shoulder while the pain from the other wounded shoulder starts again. The strange man holds the mannequin closer to him and almost starts jerking off. Harutiun notices Armenian letters, sentences and images on the mannequin and a whole under it. Harutiun recalls himself jerking off in the back room of his store, with adult journals and images of his female customers before his mind. He feels impatient and wants to leave, thinking that his time is over and that that life was past. He convinces the strange man to open the car door by sticking a screwdriver into it. Harutiun leaves under the torrent of rain, not wanting to run anymore, victorious.

Abo arrives at Nahri, a camp neighborhood, with Samira, the village girl, and makes her wait in a room. It is raining and the river is rising. Abo goes to find Harutiun and notices that he has changed. Harutiun finally accepts Abo's presence and wisdom. Abo tells that Samira is with him; Harutiun accepts it under a cover of naturalness and says he will come by soon. A transformed man, feeling very secure in this new state,

Harutiun leaves his house with a gun in his pocket. There is a crowd outside; the river is rising from the rain. Harutiun feels strange happiness.

Harutiun witnesses the flood and the crowd running and carrying their belongings around him. He feels free of constraint for the first time in his life. He has the untamable force of the torrent of life in him, affirming the world around him. Harutiun carries Samira to a safe place. Then he walks outside, sees Abo bending over looking for something in the flood. Abo extends his hand twice to Harutiun to help him get out. Harutiun does not pull him out. It is after midnight and Harutiun returns to the courtyard, finds the strange man sleeping in the car hugging the mannequin. Harutiun looks around, makes sure there is no one and twice shoots the strange man from outside by putting the gun on the car's window. He runs away in panic.

7. *Bridge*, January 3, 1973, Vahé Oshagan archive, Philadelphia.

Stépan and Sirvart, a mid-aged couple, are in their home. Sirvart is described from the point of view of Stépan who barely resists hating her. There is talk of Stépan, who is tired and sleepy, taking his medicine. The reader later learns that he is fatally ill. Their daughter, Alis, and her Greek officemate, George, are at work. Alis has decided to get an abortion; the father of the future baby is George. There is a coffee shop nearby, where Apo, Alis' brother, takes a seat. Sargis, the oldest brother, is working in a pharmacy. Alis reminisces about the first time when he met George, remembers how she started feeling different from other girls, having a difficult time fitting in, learning the nature of the male regard, feeling outside, pure, untouched by the pettiness of the world, his father, how she rejected both his and Apo's concealed attempts to control her by first giving her advice,

and in the case of Apo, directing her to act one way or another. She comes to believe that by having an abortion, she will once and for all establish her own freedom, escaping from the deadly forces of inherited values.

In the coffee shop, Apo orders coffee and is calm. His memories take him to his earliest childhood, when they were living in the Zahlé neighborhood, where he became detached and felt that his only destiny was to serve Armenians, inspired by the myth of his father and wanting to make him feel proud. He remembers going to Aleppo to run a secret party errand. His father's brother, Georg, drove him there and they stayed at Georg's lover Jamilé's home. On the way back, Georg said that life does not let one stay where one wants and that one should accept it and not hate people, to stay pure and powerful in that way. Apo remembers how his dad was struggling to make ends meet, coming from work drained from life, how he wanted to see him strong and make him feel proud.

Sargis feels that soon he will be rich and in two months he will be in New York. In general, women feel something creepy about him and run away from him. He remembers his Arab nurse lover. Then he remembers his cousin John, who visits him from the US, through Armenia, and has the air of wealth and power. He also remembers being sickly and fearful as a kid, and how he really wanted to help his father by proudly giving him part of his partially stolen money.

Stépan continues reminiscing. Various keys hanging from his keychain serve as entry points into his world of memories. One is for the get-away place that he has bought two years ago near *Eprat Camp* (Euphrates Camp) where he would go during the summers. He would play on the mandolin left from his mom who died of cancer when he

was 20, remembers his uncle who died of a brain stroke during Christmas when he was ten, his life as a married man, how he grew distant from his wife, his children, how they are like him, feeling outsiders of some kind. Another key is for the storage room under his office. He keeps there his new and old tools and an old motorcycle which he used for the contracting business before buying a car. For him, the world is a sinful, amoral place. From his youth, only a sense of compassion has stayed with him. He has agreed for his son Apo to hide some party related weapons in this storage room.

Alis is in the restroom of her office, thinking of her friends Dikran and Artin. After sleeping with George (the Greek functionary whom she does not tell that she is Armenian) and later with Dikran, Alis feels liberated, authentic, belonging to herself while the image of her father, and the purity that he thinks she has, hovers in her head. She is thinking about her upcoming visit to Cyprus to get the abortion. She gets ready to go down-stairs with George and presciently knows that his brother Apo will be waiting for them.

Apo's past is also evoked with the help of various memory triggers: him joining the ranks of the active fighters of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsutyun*), his complicated relationship with his father. One of his helpers let him know that his sister, Alis, meets some guy, another told him that Alis is planning a trip to Cypress. Apo simplifies matters by bracketing the reality around him. More memories run through his mind: episodes from his party activities, his early childhood, being bullied in school, not wanting to fight, fleeing to his mom, his dad not understanding, how once Apo's friend was wounded, which created a kind of bond of friendship inside him.

Alis leaves the office with George and decides to take the stairs, from the fifth floor, not to delay the meeting with her brother Apo, but to prepare her feelings for it, to make it natural and true. She loves taking the stairs, especially downward, which makes her think of her absolute loneliness in the world. As she descends, all kinds of memories rush to her, associated with the people and activities of each floor. In particular, the fight that she had with Apo when Sargis let him know that her male coworkers referred to her as a "wild cat" after which Apo threatened the owner of the shop. Alis fought tooth and nail with Apo for whom it was a duty to protect the honor of his sister. She criticizes Apo's ideology and devotion to the party as too narrow and stifling. Their dad, meanwhile, was too tired to intervene and Apo wondered why his dad has abandoned him at such a crucial moment. Alis and George exit the building. She realizes that this is the moment when the truth about Apo will be revealed. Either she will jump in his arms or will hate him the rest of her life. She sees Apo and feels happiness. Her hand sneaks into her red bag.

The meeting between Alis and Apo – it is repeatedly made clear that George has an insignificant presence – is first recounted from Apo's point of view whose childhood memories rush in. He orders Alis and George to walk; she tells him to not stick his nose into others' lives. Apo repeats his command and puts his hand on his belt, indicating that he is armed. Then the point of view shifts to Alis. She expresses the hope that Apo will realize that he is taking too far the notions of Armenia. She then tells him that she is holding a weapon in her bag and will not hesitate from shooting. Apo is taken by surprise and tries his best to not lose his silent, tense, all-knowing and idealist posture. Alis adds that she says this out of love towards him. She says that she knows that he is courageous,

but that it is a shame to point a weapon at a girl. Apo makes a move towards George. Alis tells him not to touch the guy. Apo is confused; images of Armenian patriotic heroes run through his mind next to the images of his sister. Alis and George sit in the car. Apo tells them, in somewhat shaky voice, to not to leave. Alis says farewell, having understood that she has managed to shake up Apo from his narrow, pure, ideal world. She imagines Apo as a ruin, standing on the street without identity.

The novel ends with Sargis reminiscing about the wealthy and secure life lead by his current boss Mr. Chilian, who tells personal stories from his life, how he, being born in a wealthy family and financially successful, having not 'wasted' any money on Armenian national charities, women, etc., does not have an heir and is not happy. That all of his relatives wait for his death, that he took Sargis into his pharmacy thinking that he would like the work but that Sargis does not and is there only for the money. The personality and perspective of a rich person fascinates Sargis who has been distanced from the Armenians and prefers being with Arab women, as with Saloua, whom he likes, would consider marrying her and even has promised to return to her after making it big in America. Seated in the customer's chair in the pharmacy, Sargis puts his hand in his pocket, touches the sum of money received from the latest deal, realizes that he feels nothing and waits.

8. "Perspective [1]," *Aztag*, July 19, 1975.

Hayrabed, a man who lives in a village apparently not far from Antelias, Lebanon, feels stifled in the static happiness of living on his land, with people silently feeling that something is off. He sends his sons away to make them understand the true meaning of

life, which consists in exile, absence, leaving home, not coming back, never expecting to arrive anywhere, opening to otherness.

The day wears on while Hayrabed wonders about all of this. He is talking to a slumbering young man who could be any young Armenian in Yerevan, Paris or Beirut, waiting at the curb of the highway of life, thinking that it suffices that he has found an identity. Hayrabed seems to realize that a fatherland is not the state of anxiety-less happiness for those who try to escape from the "epidemic" of loneliness, or the "passport office of those who search for identity." However, he doesn't seem to be entirely sure what the truth is. His father had also sent Hayrabed away, but he was not able to bear missing his fatherland and had come back.

All of his sons return, none of them breaks the law of the father, clearly not having understood the deep truth of life. People continue to live their lives in search of a fatherland, and in doing so they do not really live but only slumber on the surface of life. Not far away, the city swallows humans. His sons live with him in apparent happiness.

9. "The Unction," *Around the Trap,* New York, 1988**,** 37-142.

Three young Armenian revolutionaries — Jacques from France, Sona from Lebanon and Bruce from the USA (East Coast) — masked and wearing black, silently enter an Armenian church in a suburb of Philadelphia during a Sunday morning mass. There are some twenty attendants, mostly elderly people, including the sixty-year-old priest Father Avetis. The intruders commit various kinds of sacrilege. They loudly play jazz music from speakers and intimidate the people. The attendants, Armenians from various communities, some recently arrived to the USA, react with anger. One of them

gets a heart attack. At some point, Sona and Bruce kiss with Jacques watching while smoking a cigarette. Following this, Jacques goes to the altar and strips naked the priest. But when Jacques, having put the crown on the naked priest's head takes out the knife and approaches to cut his beard, Bruce shouts "No" from below, climbs up to the altar, puts back up the priest's underwear, and fights Jacques to not let him cut the priest's beard. Jacques wounds him on the side who before losing consciousness receives anointment (hence the title of the work 'the unction') from the priest saying that he was stronger than his two accomplices.

10. "Avarayr 80: Historical fantasy," *Around the Trap*, New York, Vosketar Press, 1988, 177-238.

The work opens with a handwritten sketch of a modern office, equipped with modern furniture, lighting and electronics, presumably depicting the space where the play takes place. (178) It is followed by an Introduction (179-181) which opens with the following paragraph: "This is a theatrical text, but is not a play – the time has come to separate theatre from play and to feel theatre's seriousness behind its appearance as play. This writing is a fantasy but is not a pastime." (179) Then it mentions that the Battle of Avarayr took place in May 26, 451, and wonders, "who had decorated the historical scene" before it and precedes to explain the historical situation "according to the contemporary historians." (179)

Accordingly, since 428 Armenia is annexed to the Persian Empire and is ruled by appointed *Marzpan*s. Soon, the Persian ruler, Hazkert II, wants all of its subject peoples to adhere to its religion to unify the empire and fight the Byzantines. When Hazkert II

declares for everyone to convert, Armenian leaders are among those who refuse. Hazkert calls the leaders to Tizbon, forces them to convert and sends them back home with the Persian army and religious representatives. From Armenians, Vasak Syuni, the *Marzpan*, and Vardan Mamikonian, the *Sparapet*, the head of the army, go to Tizbon and return converted. Back in Armenia, the Christian priests and the feudal lords revolt. Vasak Syuni and Vardan Mamikonian join, saying they converted only by appearance, and destroy the stationed Persian army. Then, the leaders of the Aghvan people from the north east of Armenia ask help from Armenians to fight and throw out the Persian army. Vardan Mamikonian goes there with an army and wins the Persians. Meanwhile, Armenians ask help from the Byzantines to fight the Persians. At that time, Vasak Syuni breaks his oath to the feudal lords and persecutes those who support Vardan Mamikonian. When the latter returns to Armenia, he forces Vasak Syuni to escape to Syunik, his native land. Revolts begin everywhere. To assuage the situation, Hazkert II issues a new proclamation, giving freedom of worship and promising to forgive the rebels. But Armenians do not want to trust his word.

In response to this, the Persian army enters Armenia and approaches the capital of Artashat. At the end of April, 451, the 66,000 Armenian army headed by Vardan Mamikonian concentrates in the south of the province of Artaz. The Persian general Mushkan Niusvalavurt has some 90,000 men and 12 to 13 elephants. There is still a month before the battle of Avarayr. We owe the information presented above to two important chroniclers. First, Yeghishé, who was probably around 35 years old in 451, participated in the heroic battle wrote his book *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* probably 10 years after. The second, Ghazar Parpetsi, who was around 10 years old at the

time of the Battle of Avarayr and wrote *History of Armenia* probably around 486, 35 years after the events. (180-181) The introduction ends by stating that the work that follows explores the "hidden folds" of historical actors' motivations without negating or confirming the official historical interpretations.

Year: Friday, 20 April, 451, past 9:43 am

Location: Vagharshapat, Armenia's capital, Yegishé's office.

**Scene 1** (183-190): between Yeghishé and Bedros

The first two paragraphs describe Yeghishé's office: a small, simple room with a writing machine and telephone on the table. Yeghishé, a thin, rather short man in his forties, stands on a low pedestal. He talks to his doctor over the telephone, postponing an operation until after the battle. Yeghishé congratulates the doctor for agreeing to participate in the upcoming battle, seeing it as a national and life obligation. (183)

Bedros, around 20-years-old, arrives. He is a journalist and is there to record the interviews and take photos. From the beginning, Yeghishé says that Bedros is going to remember these events years after, adding that journalists are becoming increasingly powerful in shaping people's minds and that no one reads literature these days. To Yeghishé's question, Bedros replies that he will not speak much as "[s]peaking is always taking a side." (185) Yeghishé calls Bedros and his recording machine the Witness of History, and says, as if playing a role, that the recording should be divulged only after his death, which no one knows when will happen and this is the absurdity of life. He adds

that everything that is taking place there is for the future, "for the historian and artists of the year of 2000." (185)

Yeghishé then proceeds to describe the political situation of the country. He explains that since Armenia's the adoption of Christianity as a state religion in 301, and the creation of the Armenian alphabet in 405, the elite of the country does not have a culture, there are a lot of translations but that is not good enough, while the people are pagan in their essence. The alphabet is too fresh, few people feel attached to it. The new culture that needs to be created has to be put on strong foundations; literature is going to be that foundation. In particular, Yeghishé states: "The [Armenian] letters do not know each other, have not lived together, they have not suffered in the imagination of the writer, have not gotten used to the language, to the Armenian. And this, behold, must be my work." (186). Only Khorenatsi[165] and Mashtots, of course, have a real bond with the language. The latter, by the way, adds Yeghishé as if unable to resist expressing his opinion, must have created the alphabet out of a personal, strictly intimate, secret need not too related with the political and social conditions, unlike what people claim is to be the case these days.

Yeghishé continues, describing his conception of the book: "So, given this situation, I am going to write about the war and the battle. A book of a witness, of an author, actor and director at the same time, and you shall see how the eye, the body, the mind, all five thousand senses of the writer operate. But – this is a big but – this solely literary work is first and foremost for me, for my interest, I need to take up a large work to finally occupy our letters, our orphan language. Do you understand, Bedros, what it

[165] Movses Khorenatsi (c. 410-490), a prominent historian and the author of an important book *History of Armenia*.

means for a human being to tie to a book the entire meaning of his existence, justification, value, the taste of his entire life? This is what I am going to do, but not now, no, later, a lot later, in solitude…" (187)

To be able to carry out his project, Yeghishé, who claims that he already has the program of the book in his mind, including the character of the hero, has invited the major actors into his office, to give them the occasion to "tell their truth before they are glued inside history textbooks like dried butterflies." Yeghishé further states: "I am going to give them the gift of eternal life with the help of your equipment. For a quarter of an hour these men are going to really, truly, authentically live — then they are going to fall, tumble into the hole of death, killed." (188, see also p. 192, where Yeghishé states "… I need the honest testimony of heroes, with the condition that they also know what they are doing.") He then explains that Vasak Syuni, a calculating, careful diplomat, is against the war with Persians; Vardan Mamikonian, a charismatic general, is for it; the church is inclined to war, too, but does not trust neither of them as their reputation has been tarnished after their conversion, albeit false, and re-conversation.

**Scene 2** (191-202): between Yeghishé and Friar Barsegh, the representative of the Catholicos, the head of the Armenian Church

Friar Barsegh claims that Armenians and the Armenian Church will win whether Armenians win or lose in the upcoming Battle of Avarayr. He further elaborates that with the battle of Avarayr, Armenians will make Jesus Armenian; it will inject life — "nerve and bone, muscle, enduring masculinity" (194) — into Christianity in contrast to an abstract, theological kind of Christianity which is the subject of the upcoming the Council

of Chalcedon.[166] Like many from the Armenian Church, Friar Barsegh will participate in the battle. Being close to the danger is a form of loving (195), he says, in response to Yeghishé's contention that the Armenian Church is removed from life. By participating in the battle and possibly dying, which Friar Barsegh dreads, he will contribute to the building of the Armenian history. (195) Yeghishé claims, in somewhat ironic tone, that the Armenian Church has already written the history of Armenia up to the year 2000. (193-194) In response to Yeghishé's provocative claim that by approving of the upcoming battle the Armenian Church is merely serving its self-interest, Friar Barsegh argues that the interests of the Armenian Church and the Armenian nation are the same. (198-199)

Friar Barsegh strongly and seriously believes in the uniqueness, difference of the Armenian people and history. It also turns out that he has authored a magisterial work titled "The Armenian thought between Greek and Christian philosophies." (196-197) He adds that the upcoming battle of Avarayr is the victory of the Armenians and the Armenian Church also because Vardan Mamikonian and his supporters will be punished, because it is a smear on the Armenian Church to convert away from it, even if by appearance. He claims that something is wrong when the leaders convert in a week and are ready to be martyrs for the religion from which they converted the next, adding that in this situation honesty is everything and that it is not just the domain of literature as Yeghishé claims. (199) Their punishment is necessary to restore trust to the Armenian

[166] The Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, taking place from October 8 to November 1, 451, at Chalcedon, near Constantinople. Significantly, the Council's judgment on the human and divine nature of Christ was not accepted by some Christian churches including the Armenian Church which became known as Orthodox.

people, because Friar Barsegh claims that he has witnessed its creative strength and that Armenians shall be around in the year 2000, going to mass just like now. (200-201)

At the end of their conversation, Yeghishé doubts whether Armenians will rebel and are ready to fight in the name of Christianity, that all of it resembles to a pagan ritual "of holocaust, bodily sacrifice." (201) This he understands as the body triumphing over the spirit, or rather the soul of body over that which is called spirit, the human against god. (201) Then, Yeghishé tells Friar Barsegh not to worry, because that is not what he is going to write in his book. Friar Barsegh is silent and motionless. Yeghishé ends the exchange by saying that even though their conversation is being recorded, he can easily destroy the cassette as well as the history books that they write, which are propaganda. He adds that the truth is with him, Yeghishé, that he will create their history the way he wants, in his style, changing, at least transforming everything that is told to him into the love for art and the truth of art. While the Armenian Church destroys history, Yeghishé will create literature, more powerful and enduring than history. Friar Barsegh leaves in a somewhat anxious state, without shaking Yeghishé's hand. (201-202)

**Scene 3** (203-220): between Yeghishé and Vasak Syuni, *Marzpan* (appointed governor) of Armenia

Vasak Syuni, an astute politician, likes history and philosophy, understands its importance and translates Plato and Sophocles into Armenian. He thinks that history is an empty cloak that individuals and nations can come and fill with life and time; living simply like vegetation is not history. (204-205) Vasak adds that his generation created Armenia amidst incessant struggle. (205)

Yeghishé tells Vasak that he asked him to come so that Vasak could tell him and the recorder how he would like future generations to understand Armenian history. (205) Yeghishé clarifies that he asks because he is going to write a book about contemporary events, a "novelized, literary history." (206) Yeghishé then asks Vasak to expound his philosophy of governing Armenia and the kind of history that he hopes to give to the Armenians. (207) Vasak replies that he thinks that humans are free and that it is very difficult to control them and that at best he hopes to apply some discipline and law to society, hoping that it will bring some reconciliation between Armenian and Persian laws. (207) He adds that few people understand that the false conversion in Tizbon was a ruse to gain time until Vasak convinces Hazkert II that having a strong, Christian and semi-independent Armenia is the best barrier to the Byzantine expansion. Vasak adds that Armenians should lead a very careful diplomacy not to fall under the hegemony of the Byzantine or Persian Empires. To Yeghishé's question on the value of what he is fighting for, Vasak adds that at stake is the Armenian identity, which he sees as greater than religion, language, alphabet, land, political regimes, etc. adding that he sees in Armenianness a universally human destiny. (208)

Yeghishé says that in his book Vasak's historical portrait is going to be that of the anti-hero, the black background behind Vardan's portrait. Yeghishé explains that with the abandonment of Paganism by Armenians, epic songs were gone too. The era of Christianity has began and he, Yeghishé, is going to create its first epic work, the struggle between the good and evil, modeled after the struggle of the Persian or Indo-European Ahuramazda and Ahriman's. Yeghishé states: "I am going to give to the Armenianness the spark and light up its imagination." (209)

Yeghishé then asks Vasak a theoretical question: what is more important to him, the tangible realization of his life and programs or the opinion that the people of the future will have of him. (210) Vasak replies that both are important and the he demands justice when it comes to being presented before the future generations. (211) Vasak then adds that his conscience is clear with the deeds that he has done during his lifetime and that Yeghishé can go ahead and depict him in whatever false way he wants. (211) To this Yeghishé reacts by stating that it is not a position of a man of politics. Vasak concedes, saying that this is his personal view; publicly, he adds, he doesn't have too much esteem for the Armenians, who are idealist and self-centric. He does not seek national unity but believes that in moments of crisis, Armenians need to unite to prevent a catastrophe. (212)

Vasak then clarifies that he is against the war with Persia not only because Armenians are outnumbered and will most likely lose but also because it is an imposed war. He claims that Armenians need to act preemptively to gain their freedom and to be able to impose their style and law. (213) Vasak adds that to struggle and fight Armenians need to have ideology, program as well as a spirit. To be more active and preemptive, Armenians need to pour out of their borders, towards a Diaspora, to carry Armenianness with them, like the Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans and Persians. Armenia would need these colonies; they would be Armenia's lungs, to breath in the world. Vasak adds that small nations need great ideas and ideals to which their members are ready to sacrifice and that Armenians are doomed if they decide to stay within the slopes of their mountains. Vasak's nephew, Lord Vahé, agrees with Vasak, saying that this outward

movement is dangerous but necessary. (214-215) As for him, Vasak believes that diplomats, like artists, are also born after their death. (216)

Yeghishé urges Vasak to speak his mind, even though the book that Yeghishé will write may depict him differently, because the recording machine will preserve his views for the posterity. (217) Vasak repeats his view that Armenians need to be active and conquering, otherwise they will be an ordinary nation, full of merchants, artisans and artists. Instead, the bar should be put high. (217)

In the middle of their conversation, the representative of the student branch of an unspecified political party, Dzvik Zavarian, "a political science student, smart, energetic," (218) calls and informs that she will not be able to meet with Yeghishé. After hanging the telephone, the latter speculates before Vasak and Bedros that the Central Committee of the political party must have had a meeting and, realizing that it does not have a position regarding the urgent issue at hand, has urged its members to not say anything. Yeghishé criticizes by adding that the party walks with the masses while pretending to be its voice. (218)

Regarding his book, Yeghishé clarifies that in it he is not concerned about what is true or false, but that with his book he strives for the beautiful and, beyond it, towards human tragedy, human truths, mode of thinking as well as the form of the written work itself. (219)

At the end, Vasak agrees to be the anti-hero, if it helps the Armenian nation to survive and become stronger, if only Armenians will be able to draw lessons from their historical experience. Vasak is afraid that they will not, either from death or from Yeghishé's book. Vasak adds: "… if the idea of Armenianness, its power, destiny is

going to stay within the boundaries of a language, a religion, a piece of land and not pass beyond, not go to the four corners of the world, then it all shall be a great pity." (220) Yeghishé adds: "Meaning, the Armenianness as the champion of kindness, beauty and truth in the world… but, Vasak *Marzpan*, that is the message of my book." (220) Vasak replies that they strive towards the same point from two different paths. (220)

**Scene 4** (221-236): between Yeghishé and Vardan Mamikonian

For his book and possibly in life, Yeghishé conceives of Vardan as the opposite image of Vasak. (221) Yeghishé is intimidated by the proximity of his hero, Vardan, confessing that a writer should not get to close to his hero. (223-224) Vardan agrees to have the interview. To exchange ideas absolutely freely, he proposes to talk as if they are not even born, reasoning that to talk as if dead would still leave God's influence. (223) Vardan recalls Mashtots' last moments, who supposedly burnt all of his papers before dying and asked Vardan whether the alphabet created by Mashtots will not be an obstacle to the growth of the Armenian people's memory and imagination and to the development of its essence, then adds by quoting Mashtots: "Do you see this skull? … It will be at once the nest of rationality and the tomb of essence." (223) Vardan does not like the idea of being a hero, rejecting the idea of being a conduit of falsity and deception; that is the kind of literature that Yeghishé intends to write, in his opinion. This is why at first he refuses to be in Yeghishé's book. (224-225) But then Vardan sees Yeghishé's point that by being made a hero, he will empower the Armenians, lighting up their imaginations. Yeghishé claims that it will work out since he knows Armenians have a great yearning for dreaming. (226) When Vardan says that by making him a hero in his book Yeghishé

wants to also grant immortality to himself, and that Yeghishé is not really a patriot, the latter concedes. (227)

Once again, Yeghishé is afraid to get to close to Vardan as a real human being and would prefer the distance afforded by myth (227-228) When asked, Vardan is not exactly sure why he is going to battle; he mentions that some Armenians are rebelling, that his senses have been blunted from war and that he needs a battle to fight for great ideals such as freedom, to participate in something great. (229-230) Vardan adds that he is going to battle to pierce through the disturbing solitude of life and arrive at the point where life and death meet and at which point he shall leap from his solitude. Yeghishé responds to this rather skeptically but then expresses hope that in making this decision Vardan is at least exercising freedom (231)

Vardan's experience of the senseless of life makes him suspect philosophy and intellectual discourses as well as any attempts to create collective sense, be that Armenianness or history. (232) He finds that contemporary Armenian civilization is pressed between the Greek logos, which "threats to sap from Armenians the juice of life, turning it into concept," Christianity coming from Jews "…that will fill us with feelings of sin and crime and poison the clear bursting of life," and finally Persian civilization "which shall alienate us both from the intimacy and pleasure that we find with god and nature." In the face of all this, Armenians should relinquish expectations of peace and happiness and should constantly fight against crude power, crude thought and even against crude Jehovah, struggle being their law and religion, doing so in Armenia, to constantly keep awake in him the consciousness of being human and Armenian. (233)

Vardan expresses these thoughts all the while believing that there is no law or sense, cause or effect in history, to its development. Yeghishé agrees but adds that he still is going to write his book (234) then states: "we [at least Vardan and Yeghishé] steal our lives from those who are not born and from those who are eternally not to be born but especially from those who are born and from those who are crowded at the stop light in a long line waiting to be born ... those who shall read my book, I am going to live in them." (234) Yeghishé then argues that, unlike Vardan, he lives on through the imagination, outside reality, staying replete as word and concept, as a work of art. (235)

Vardan, at the end of their conversation, asks Yeghishé to make him a hero in such a way that the book will provoke the imaginations of the upcoming generations, that the readers will understand the tragedy of being Armenian, and see him full of life, with his limitations. That way, he thinks, Yeghishé would have lied less. (235) Yeghishé disagrees, saying that he serves a different kind of truth. (235) Vardan concludes by telling Yeghishé: "At best, whatever was tale-like in my life, whatever was immortal is going to continue with your writing as myth. (They look into each other's eyes, without blinking) This way we will stay unseparated from one another…." (236)

**Scene 5** (237-238): between Yeghishé and Bedros

During their final conversation, after urging him to take the audio recordings and the photos to the National Museum, Yeghishé and Bedros notably disagree around the following points. First, whether the story/history begins or ends for these characters or for the people. Second, Yeghishé dismisses the need to interview intellectuals, saying that they are not important; Bedros thinks otherwise. To the latter's suggestion to also

interview a revolutionary — in addition to the religious man, the politician and the mystic military leader — Yeghishé expresses the wish to interview a terrorist from the Liberation Army[167] with him he says he has connections. Lastly, Bedros urges Yeghishé to interview the Armenian people, the laborer, the farmer, to which Yeghishé retorts that he can't get along with them, no way, and that Bedros should take care of them. (237-238)

11. *The Inoculation*, *Haratch* daily, Paris, September-December, 1995.

The novel opens on Sunday, 10 am, September 12, 1993. It has been only a few days that Zaruhi and Hagop have arrived for the first time to Armenia from Beirut, where they are born, in the poor, working-class neighborhood of Karantina. Zaruhi is a teacher in an Armenian school in Beirut. Hagop is a computer scientist, as well as an active member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsutyun*), who, during the Lebanese Civil War, has gained some military experience defending the Armenian quarters. Now he is in Armenia to also work with the members of *Dashnaktsutyun* who are active in Armenia, especially in the Artsakh war[168]. Zaruhi and Hagop are staying in their aunt's (mother's sister) apartment on the fourth floor of a building in central Yerevan.

[167] The use of this expression by Yeghishé is among the many and diverse anachronisms that one finds in Oshagan's text. It alludes to an Armenian militant organization with revolutionary Marxist inclinations active in the 1970s and 80s.

[168] During and after the break up of the Soviet Union, Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a war between 1988 and 1994 to gain control over this region. The events of the novel take place when this war is not yet over. It should be also noted that as early as mid-1990s, Vahé Oshagan periodically visited Artsakh and thought in the Artsakh State University.

That morning, without waiting for her brother, Zaruhi walks outside. She is falling in love with the city and the country. She heads to the Saint Sargis church and on the way talks to people to feel part of them. Zaruhi feels transformed during the mass and her love for Armenia grows. After the mass, she meets a handsome middle-aged man with silver hair, with whom she gets a drink. His name is Khachig. He thoughtfully listens to her confessions of love to and for Armenia and its people and at the end says that her feelings towards him are the feelings that Zaruhi has for Armenia.

Afterwards, Zaruhi wanders in the city, and on her way back meets a middle-aged woman, around the same age as her. Her name is Arminé. She seems educated, open-minded and welcoming. As a local, Arminé invites Zaruhi and her brother Hagop to their home to dine with her husband Dikran. Back in the apartment, Zaruhi helps her auntie and writes her impressions in her diary. Yerevan is visible from her window, and has a strong presence in her imagination.

During one of her outings, near a small water pond in a small courtyard, Zaruhi sits on a bench and reads a book that she bought in Beirut, André Malraux's novel *La condition humaine* (1933). Not far from her, a man is seated, reading a newspaper; their glances meet. The next day, wanting to see the same man, Zaruhi visits the same pond and meets him again; they start talking. His name is Krikor. He is an architect; twice divorced and a father of a small boy from his longer first marriage. He is emotionally wounded, self-insulated and presents himself as having no ideals, claiming that it is the only way Armenians who have lived through 70 years of the Soviet regime have survived. Zaruhi, on the other hand, presents her ideals of freedom, expressivity and love which for her come together around the idea of Armenia.

The novel then takes the reader to the evening during which Zaruhi and Hagop visit Arminé and Dikran. The latter is an intellectual who has started a newspaper in Yerevan promoting democratic values. The group debates politics, the past and future of Armenia, its people and their psychology. Arminé and Hagop cannot help but feel a profound, unspoken bond. She starts suspecting that destiny has sent him to make her get out of her shell of a relatively comfortable life and to live a truer life. On the surface, she has all the essentials, but something is missing from her life. The group finally decides to travel to Artsakh the following Monday morning. Zaruhi in the last minute resolutely refuses to go to Artsakh, explaining that she is too much in love with Armenia to be able to leave it.

Next Sunday, Zaruhi goes to mass again in the same church of Saint Sargis and once again meets Khachig, who gives his card and invites her to his home. Zaruhi then walks around the neighborhood and meets Krikor, who is on his way to Vernisaž, a famous Yerevan flea market where, among other things, artists sell their work. On their way through the crowd, the two hold hands. At some point, Krikor buys a famous book by Simon Vratsian, *Republic of Armenia*.[169] The two then visit a local painter Serge, an old friend of Krikor, who gives Krikor the promised portrait that he has painted of him. Zaruhi agrees to go home with Krikor to get some coffee but to also hang and properly look at the painting.

Once in Krikor's apartment, they discuss their differences as Armenians from Armenia and Lebanon, agreeing that the Armenian diaspora and Armenia need to learn about each other more. At some point, Krikor, despite his pessimism, starts taking Zaruhi

[169] Simon Vratsian (1882-1969) was the last prime minister of the first Republic of Armenia which existed between 1918 and 1920. His book *Republic of Armenia* was first published in 1928 in Paris. It gives the pre-history and the history of the Armenian republic.

seriously, even though she is much less experienced with people and sexuality. Meanwhile, Krikor is struggling with the darkness of his past, which has left him without ideals and hope for human goodness. Eventually, the two kiss and spend some time in each other's embrace. Zaruhi expresses her fears in letting go of her control and just following her feelings. Krikor accompanies Zaruhi to her aunt's apartment and at its entrance they agree to meet the next day. Back in her place, Zaruhi meditates about love, her feelings and impressions by writing in her diary. Krikor, too, is occupied with his own impressions, surprised at his emotions and promises himself to be careful not to ruin her life.

The next day, Monday, Sept. 20, 10am, Hagop drives to Arminé and Dikran's apartment in his jeep. They quickly drink coffee and start off to Artsakh. On their way, they meet some local mafia people, which serves as an occasion to briefly talk about the state of Armenian society. In the car, Hagop takes out a volume by Aksel Bakounts. As a result, the travelers converse about literature, language, mythmaking and truth in relation to Armenia. Hagop and Arminé express opposing views: the former is a soldier and believes in bracketing morality and following the rules of war, the latter unconditionally supports life and refuses to define a group as an enemy.

Reach Stepanakert in the evening, without stopping at Shushi[170], Arminé declares that she will follow Hagop towards the frontline as she is a licensed nurse and that this is what she has wanted to do from the beginning. Her husband, Dikran, agrees, knowing that once she sets her mind on something, Arminé will not compromise. Arminé confirms to herself that she wants to look death in the eyes to understand the truth of life. Hagop is astonished by her decision.

[170] Stepanakert is the capital of the region of Artsakh while Shushi is one of its main cities.

Meanwhile, it is Monday, and Zaruhi, after some hesitation, meets Krikor at the pond. They continue their conversation about their identities as Diaspora Armenian and Armenian from the Republic of Armenia. Krikor is pessimistic; Zaruhi is idealistic. As Zaruhi previously had loved the idea of visiting Krikor's country house, which represents idyllic Armenia in her mind, the two drive there. Zaruhi is delighted to learn that the village is situated at the banks of the river Zangu near the ruins of an ancient (Iron Age) Urartian castle; Zaruhi hopes that Krikor will read from Khachatur Abovyan's[171] poem about this river, too. Zaruhi is in a greatly elated mood, she runs around, shouts; Krikor pensively observes; they spend time outside and inside. When Zaruhi is in the kitchen, Krikor remembers the time when his marriage with Elizabeth, his first wife, was falling apart — when he grew distant and was unable to respond to her needs. At some point, Zaruhi and Krikor kiss. Then, wanting to hurt her, Krikor tells her that she is inexperienced and cannot even enjoy her body and that she should go back, being no good for Armenia and that life requires sacrifices. Then, he convinces her to get naked and to just lie with him, so that she can at least have an idea of what real human physical attraction is like. Krikor also remembers his second wife, Sonia, who was Russian and with whom he was married for a much shorter time. Their provocative conversations were about Armenian, Russian, collective and individual cultural and political identity, cultural traits and domination. Lying on the bed, Zaruhi is anxious but does not shun from expressing her feeling of love towards Krikor and greatly enjoys their intimacy. On their way back, in the car Krikor tells her that she should go back to Lebanon, process

[171] Khachatur Abovyan (1809-1848), a founding figure of Eastern Armenian literature, is especially known for authoring the historical novel *Wounds of Armenia* (1841, first published in 1858 in Tiflis, Russian Empire)

what has happened to her during this visit, and then, next year, when she comes back, and when he has had time to also heal, maybe there can be something between them.

In Artsakh, after a restless night Arminé and Hagop set off to the front. The fact that they are going together means passing a point of no return; ideas of truth and sacrifice occupy their imaginations during the journey. As they stop by a small village, the two become even closer. The narrative then takes the reader back to August 11, 1993, a month before their trip, when Hagop and his father Stépan in Lebanon visit another like-minded, patriotic Armenian with grave health problems probably from the civil war. During this symbolically charged episode, there is hint that Zaruhi has fallen in love with someone; there are also descriptions of how Hagop grew attached to the *Dashnaktsutyun* and adopted its worldview since youth. Hagop's friend wishes him good luck in Armenia and regrets that he cannot go with him.

The narrative then returns to Artsakh where Arminé and Hagop agree for her to stay in a small town slightly away from the frontline and help the military as a nurse. But then, in the evening, Arminé insists that she will go to the frontline with Hagop, even though the latter says that she is not psychologically ready for it. That night, the two kiss and sit together embracing one another in great intimacy.

Arminé remembers how his father, Aghasi, a military man, was falsely charged and imprisoned by the Soviet regime and how, when he was in prison for four years, Arminé and her mother, Séda, would visit him. The reader also learns about the denouncements that various officials under the Soviet regime had to carry out to survive and how social bonds deteriorated as a result. During one such visit, her father says that

despite everything she should believe that inside every man there is a kind person to whom she should try to reach out and talk in life.

Arminé's daydreaming in the small town near the frontline ends as Hagop returns in his jeep, with a few friends, and, being the military leader of the group, urgently commands what everyone should do. Arminé, Hagop and some friends then drive to a village closer to the frontline where it becomes clear that they are expecting an assault from multiple directions by an outnumbering group of Azeri soldiers and that everyone needs to be actively involved in repulsing the attack. While Arminé and Hagop's military friends go to the village, Hagop with two other local soldiers takes position at a hill. At some point, the two soldiers leave and he is left alone. Meanwhile, in the village where Arminé is, Sédo, the tall, vigilant and experienced commander, directs the forces to a preemptive attack. The battle begins and Sédo is wounded. Arminé, all this time becoming more and more convinced of the priority of life over hatred, binds his knee wound. Then, in the consternation, she comes across a wounded soldier, who turns out to be a young Azeri man who happens to speak Armenian. At first she is taken aback, but eventually takes him to a save spot and binds his wound. The young soldier, Osman, says that he has not killed any Armenian and that he knew many Armenians in Baku.

In the mean time, Hagop, despite being left alone, attacks the approaching enemy tank and two military vehicles loaded with soldiers. Using his agility, ability to plan and courage, he destroys the tank, drives away the soldiers, but is fatally wounded at the end. Around the same time, Sédo, Arminé and the Armenians inside the village come to his aid and repulse the enemy for good. As they fight their way towards Hagop, Sédo is shot and killed. Arminé is next to him; she wails his loss and promises to keep the life that he

inherited to her forever with her. Soon after, Arminé sees Hagop lying on the side of a hill, and, despite the bullets raining on her, runs to him, grabs him and takes him inside a cave up the hill. At the entrance, a bullet pierces through her pelvis. She notices that Hagop is still alive; they look at each other, exchange a few words and agree that there cannot be any life without love. As Hagop dies, Arminé promises to carry his impulse for life with her forever. The Azeri soldiers are successfully repulsed.

Back in Yerevan, when Zaruhi gets home, she cannot go to bed right away and starts writing in her diary her impressions of the day with Krikor. She remembers how she lost control of her body, how Krikor's harsh words tried to curtail her idealism, that at some point, when he hesitated to kiss her, she doubted his feelings. She meditates about life and love, is impressed by Krikor's reading of Khachatur Abovyan's poem about the Zangu River. Zaruhi recalls that during her conversation about Armenia, she mentioned that Father Mikayel Chamchian in his book on Armenian history from early 19th century already claimed Armenia to be an ideal place. Krikor returns home, is also taken by his impressions of the time spent with Zaruhi. He is less pessimistic and starts to believe that love after all can exist. He is an artist, with the corresponding personality.

It is October 8, 1993 and Arminé is seated in a small hotel in the city of Abovyan.[172] She has come there to recover from her wounds, while her son is with his grandmother, and Dikran has gone to Moscow. Arminé writes a letter to Zaruhi who is in Beirut. In it, she sets out to describe the last days that she spent with Hagop and explain their meaning for both of them. After laying out the details of the battle and the courage with which Hagop fought, Arminé explains that Hagop was not looking to be a hero.

[172] Abovyan, named after the writer Khachatur Abovyan, is a town in Armenia not far away from the capital of Yerevan.

Instead, he was trying to learn the limits of his Armenianness, the morality at the basis of it. She adds that destiny had foreseen bringing them together on the same quest of understanding what it means to be alive, the foundation of which is love. For Arminé everything else that has happened to her since Hagop's death is merely a repetition and echo of this extraordinary experience. She concludes by inviting Zaruhi and her father Stépan to Armenia, adding that she wants to meet the person who has been able to raise a son like Hagop.

It is November 7, 1993, 12:30pm, in Beirut, and Zaruhi and her father Stépan attend the mass given in memory of Hagop and return home. Father and daughter talk about Armenia, and Zaruhi finds the courage to say that she has feelings towards a man in Armenia, that she wants to return there the next year and wants her father to come with her. Stépan is happy that her daughter is becoming a strong woman, asks a few questions about the man, and soon agrees to go to Armenia, thinking and talking about the importance of *roots*. Then, Zaruhi hands over to him Arminé's letter, which he reads in the privacy of his room. Memories of his life in the Karantina quarter in Beirut come to him, his wife having her second miscarriage and two of them praying to God to grant continuity to their family. The narrative also takes the reader into Stépan's childhood, when, at that age of 12, he was deported with his family and saw the ineffable genocidal violence committed against the Armenians. At some point, Stépan describes his consciousness at the time of the endless marches as being divided into two. One part was exhausted and could not continue anymore. The other one hoped and carried the first one on. The point for him about these stories is the law of life which is passed to him through his mother's brother, who in his turn passed it on from Stépan's father who died early on

during the deportations. The law of life is to not hate people, to love life, to be stronger than death, in the face of painful tragedy. Stépan find the same message in Arminé's letter to him and explicitly passes it to his daughter Zaruhi. Stépan tries to make sense of the Armenian Catastrophe, stating that it made Armenians understand the deep truth of life and made them love each other and others more. Armenia represents the place where this kind of love culminates. At some point, Stépan and Zaruhi in their conversations refer to the writer Gostan Zarian (1885-1969) who also propagated the idea of Artsakh being the place of life's truth. The novel ends with Stépan remembering his home in the village of Binkian; he confirms to himself that the meaning of life is to find such a home and that Zaruhi and Armenians should keep alive the idea of inner home. At the end, the two also agree that, even though in Armenia Zaruhi will feel an outsider, at least people there speak Armenian and that this is the beginning of the possibility of having a home. Stépan already imagines how he will feel when he goes to Armenia, embracing the country of which he has dreamed all his life.

## APPENDIX B: Armenian Transliteration System

Table 1: JSAS Transliteration System

TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM

The transliteration system for Armenian used in *JSAS* is a scheme adapted for desktop publishing from the Library of Congress's *Cataloging Service, Bulletin* 121, Spring 1977. It is based on the phonetic values of Classical and Eastern Armenian.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ա | ա | A | a | |
| Բ | բ | B | b | [P p][1] |
| Գ | գ | G | g | [K k][1] |
| Դ | դ | D | d | [T t][1] |
| Ե | ե[2] | E | e | |
| | | Y | y[3] | |
| Զ | զ | Z | z | |
| Է | է | Ē | ē | |
| Ը | ը | Ĕ | ĕ | |
| Թ | թ | T‘ | t‘ | |
| Ժ | ժ | Zh | zh[4] | |
| Ի | ի | I | i | |
| Լ | լ | L | l | |
| Խ | խ | Kh | kh[4] | |
| Ծ | ծ | Ts | ts | [Dz dz][1],[4] |
| Կ | կ | K | k | [G g][1] |
| Հ | հ | H | h | |
| Ձ | ձ | Dz | dz[4] | [Ts ts][1],[4] |
| Ղ | ղ | Gh | gh[4] | |
| Ճ | ճ | Ch | ch | [J j][1] |
| Մ | մ | M | m | |
| Յ | յ[2] | Y | y | |
| | | H | h[5] | |
| Ն | ն | N | n | |
| Շ | շ | Sh | sh[4] | |
| Ո | ո | O | o | |
| Չ | չ | Ch‘ | ch‘ | |
| Պ | պ | P | p | [B b][1] |
| Ջ | ջ | J | j | [Ch ch][1] |
| Ռ | ռ | R | r[6] | |
| Ս | ս | S | s | |
| Վ | վ | V | v | |
| Տ | տ | T | t | [D d][1] |
| Ր | ր | R | r | |
| Ց | ց | Ts‘ | ts‘ | |
| Ւ | ւ | W | w | |
| Ու | ու | U | u | |
| Փ | փ | P‘ | p ‘ | |
| Ք | ք | K‘ | k‘ | |
| Եւ | եւ | Ew | ew | in Classical orthography |
| | և | | | |
| Եվ | եվ | Ev | ev | in Reformed orthography |
| | և | | | |
| Օ | օ | Ō | ō | |
| Ֆ | ֆ | F | f | |

[1] The variant phonetic values of Western Armenian are included in brackets but are intended solely for use in preparing references from Western Armenian forms of names when this may be desirable.

[2] Armenian names ending in -եան (in Classical orthography) or -յան (in Reformed orthography) may be romanized –ian, save for Armenians in Armenia and the other successor states of the Soviet Union. In that case, those names may be romanized –yan, save for common conventions such as Ter Petrossian.

[3] This value is only used when the letter is in the initial position of a name and followed by a vowel in Classical orthography.

[4] The acute accent is placed between the letters representing two different sounds when the combination might otherwise be read as a diagraph (e.g. Դզնունի D’znuni).

[5] This value is used when the letter is in the initial position of a word or of a stem in a compound in Classical orthography.

[6] This derivation from the Library of Congress scheme was necessitated by the needs of desktop publishing.