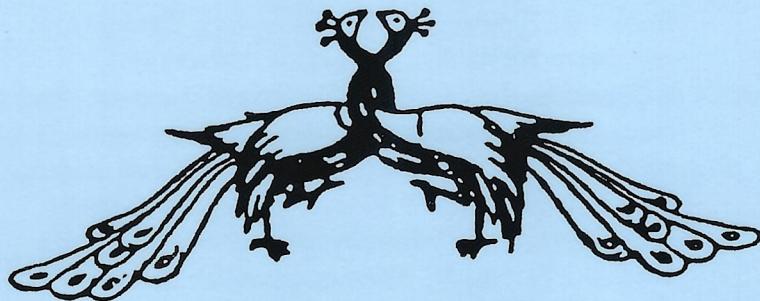


VOLUME 18, NUMBER 2

(DECEMBER 2009)

**JOURNAL
OF THE
SOCIETY FOR
ARMENIAN STUDIES**



HELENE PILIBOSIAN. *History's Twists: The Armenians*. Watertown, MA: Ohan Press, 2008. Pp. x + 93.

Mihran Manoukian's *Sails of Nostalgia* (1996), the well-chosen painting adorning the cover, speaks of Pilibosian's proclivity to "share the artist's ascension/to an unknown haven" ("Sails of Nostalgia by Manoukian," p. 78). The semi-abstract sailboat leads the way, and the nostalgic journey into that unknown haven, which must have existed in the past, begins: A quest for peace and equilibrium in an existence that rose from a chaotic mix of two worlds always in conflict with each other, contradicting each other and refusing to reach a synthesis. Helene Pilibosian is a product of history's twist, an identity of a survivor with her umbilical cord still attached to that idyllic parental village she has never seen, ". . . their birth village swallowed/by the history of Armenia" ("Wisdom Jam," p. 39), a village, a homeland where suddenly the hands of tyrants destroyed everything and hurled away the survivors like the shrapnel of a huge explosion. These stories are her stories too, and she keeps on telling them to the world: "My mouth is dry/with stories of the desert/of Der-el-Zor so long ago" ("Grandparent Herbs," p. 7).

Beginning with her first book of poems, *Carvings from an Heirloom* (1983), Pilibosian lives and guides the reader to live the beauty, the primitive simplicity, the authenticity, the pride, the love, the pains, the customs, the hard work, the joys, the fears, the superstitions, the religious fervor, and the unfulfilled hope for the future of the "Anatolian Village—1913" (also the title of her first poem in that volume), the birthplace of her ancestors. She paints the peaceful life in that typical Armenian village in complex metaphors and a masterful artistic expression: the wheat grinding, the fruit drying, the bread baking, a tranquility nonetheless with "the delayed suspense of tomorrow" (*Carvings from an Heirloom*, p. 3). In another poem, she describes a generation of survivors having taken refuge in America, working hard in factories, stores, and hospitals, then going through "The Great Depression" when "Some had frostbite of psyche/from more overtime than work" ("A Bit of Self," *Carvings*, p. 39). This is the world into which she was born, "[b]ut a bit of myself/had caught upon the edge/of a tree in that older orchard/a tree calcified/with it into the statue/of a poem" (*Carvings*, p. 39), and the makeup of her sensitive soul, the

source of her being, AND the root of the dichotomy she had to cope with all her life, the dichotomy that is so beautifully reflected in her poems.

After *Carvings from an Heirloom* and *At Quarter Past Reality* (1998), *History's Twists: The Armenians* is fresh evidence of an endless grapple with history, affirming and confirming her relationship or the dialog of the self with the Armenian past—the collective historical memory—in the context of American present.

What sets Pilbosian's poetry apart from other ethnic American texts is the omnipresent yearning for the place of origin, in this case the origin of her ancestors. Her focus explains a specific historical background, a forbidden homeland, and a denied genocidal process of emptying that homeland, which are key characteristics to most Armenian-American literature. In particular, they stand as the root/source of Pilbosian's vibrant, rich, and colorful metaphors and images: Armenian letters are the "39 swords," "39 favors" "of Armenian words" ("The 39 Letters," p. 24). Armenian life in the Diaspora is thin, unassuming, inconspicuous but strong and unremitting as rills made of steel:

The rills of steel wove new lives
into a diaphanous spider web
of international diaspora.
It catches no-one,
only shows silver treads
in the tranquil moonlight ("Grandparent Herbs," p. 8).

Pilibosian dedicates the book to her mentors and begins the volume with the confession of her futile attempt to refuse that deep submergence into the folds of Armenian history that her teacher offered ("A Factual Fact"). The Armenian in her is a strong presence. Her poetry, even in verses with no apparent relation with that aspect of her being, flows like beads of a pearl necklace, each bead as a token of her understanding and acknowledgement of that sentiment: her "Armenian shoddy," her worship of the Alphabet as divinity, her religion, as "the will of my parents,/my children's wishing well,/.../my call, not my calling" ("Triptych," p. 6).

In "History's Twist," the poem that gave the volume its title, she tries to define her identity in relation to Armenian history, tradition, culture, the horrors of "The Turkish sword," and the suppressive "Soviet Union hammer" (p. 10). At the same time, "Ideas on the Peg" is an affirmation of the influence of her gender and the American factor shaping her identity:

My castle of being is here,
American by repair,
Armenian by necessity
or by life's glare,
a hoary history,
blessing of Boston for me
and a final ring for women (pp. 49-50).

Beyond her sharp focus on identity and language, Armenia, before and after independence, is a novel and recurrent theme as well as a physical presence in this collection of poems. The series of Nazeli verses speak of that relationship which began with the Earthquake of 1988. "Earthquake Monument" is an unusual poem in the form of a monument, in which she makes an uncommon turn to prose that physically resembles the base or pedestal of the monument, a base that spiritually rises above the initial shock and personal involvement in the relief work of the survivors, to launch a future of renewal and repair. Then comes independence: "Statues of idealogues were crushed/and mixed with soil of United Nations/the homeland knot a newer fruit" (p. 31). But the new developments puzzle her. Do they have the tools to play the game they are playing? She contemplates a physical contact with Armenia freed of the shackles of Stalin, Khrushchev's "reform," and "Gorbachev's new wording/melting the iron with new demands" ("I Chose the Poetic," p. 32). But her initial physical contact is "a handful of soil" (p. 29) and an amber necklace that someone brought her as a souvenir. These souvenirs were the signifiers for the entire history of the nation, from past kings and queens to the present and for all the sentiments they aroused, congealed in amber ("Souvenir").

Helene Pilbosian's poetry falls under the category known today as ethnic American literature. The field is new, and since it is not possible or plausible yet to define an ethnic literary canon, it is not with any canonicity that her poetry should be judged. Its classification within that field, however, can be based on the predominance of ethnic identity, a significant element in ethnic writing, as hyphenated American in general and Armenian-American in particular, historically grounded in Western Armenia and regionally inflected in the birth village of her parents.¹

Remarkably, multiculturalism is a new phenomenon in America, less than 40 years old compared to almost two centuries of white male American literature. Pilbosian, a first generation Armenian-American, has secured her unique place in the new realm. Because of the brevity of the entry entrusted to me in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature* on Armenian American literature, I only mentioned Helene Pilbosian as a name among American born writers and poets who write in English but whose literature is deeply rooted in their ethnic heritage. "Or, as William Saroyan has characterized, it is 'the English tongue, the American soul, and the Armenian spirit'"² that surge in these writers, in this case, in Pilbosian's poetry.

With her poems, Pilbosian builds a monument of memory, a symbol of remembrance of the Armenian past, yet, as a product of the culture, the edu-

¹ See Paul Lauter, "Introduction," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2005), vol. 1, p. xlviii.

² Rubina Peroomian, "Armenian American Literature," in *Ibid.*, pp. 190-204.

cation and civilization, and the lifestyle of America, she adroitly sails in the most sophisticated bumps and turns of the language and poetic art.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

RUBINA PEROOMIAN