

*Confronting
the Armenian
Genocide*

*Looking
Backward,
Moving Forward*

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editor*



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New Directions in Literary Responses to the Armenian Genocide

Rubina Peroomian

To Conceptualize the Catastrophe

The history of the Armenian people is replete with persecutions and massacres, traumatic collective experiences that have triggered the last cries of the victims and the urge in the survivors to comprehend and give meaning to the cataclysm so that life may continue. Armenian literature is a repository of echoes of these responses to catastrophe. These are not reactions in a vacuum but are shaped and reshaped through time by multiple layers of influences such as Judeo-Christian teachings, cultural determinants, historical archetypes, as well as evolving national ideals and political aspirations.¹ Within this context, literary responses to genocide are the amalgamation and the echo of all these factors, and, at the same time, they surmount all responses in scope, depth, and intensity, as the Armenian Genocide culminates all catastrophes in the history of the Armenian people in terms of its eschatological nature and impact. Hence arises the grouping of the literature of genocide as a topical genre of Armenian literature, paradoxically, whether the genocide is a literary theme or only a hidden motif.

The Armenian diasporan post-genocide literature, therefore, to a large extent embodies the attempts to conceptualize the Catastrophe (*Aghet*) or Great Crime (*Eghern*), to come to terms with its impact, to reconcile with its undying memory, or to vent rage and frustration against the denial by the perpetrator and the indifference of the world. Nearly all Armenian diasporan literature relates in one way or another to the Armenian Genocide. Diaspora is regarded as the offspring of the Genocide:

Children of massacre,
children of destruction,
children of dispersion,
oh, my Diaspora...
someone was calling
in my dream.²

These lines are a poetic rendering by Diana Der Hovanessian of the make-up of the interrelationship between the Diaspora and the Genocide. But the Genocide is more than a physical source of being. It is an end and a beginning. In a study of North American Armenian literature, Lorne Shirinian writes: “1915 functions as a symbol through which Armenians have knowledge of themselves and see themselves. Having survived genocide, not only do they have to believe in themselves, but they have to convince others of their existence. Armenian diasporan literature is an expression of this necessity.”³

Now, at the beginning of a new millennium, as the Catastrophe slips into the past century, as factual memories are fading, and as generations of Armenians are growing more and more aloof from the wounds of the past and weary of the image of a victim people, is there a reason for the continuation of genocide literature? And if there still exists a milieu open to its development, what direction will these literary responses take? Will they follow the same paradigm? Or is there a change in the making that can result in new directions? Certainly, historical documents will still be discovered, and new historical texts will continue to shed light on the Catastrophe, affirming the truth and the reality of the crime. And political and civic organizations will undoubtedly keep on striving for world recognition of the Armenian Genocide. At the same time, new conceptualizations in the literary representations of the Genocide will enrich the topical genre and, together with the responses of the past generations of survivors, will play an important role in the process of nation building.

On the Scope of the New Literary Responses

The Armenian Genocide has generated a plethora of literature, both prose and poetry, but writers have aspired in vain to write, and critics are still awaiting, the novel of novels—one that encompasses the Genocide in its entirety. It has not materialized. The fact is that

the most successful novel of this kind, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933), was written by a non-Armenian, Franz Werfel. And now there is a promising more recent novel, one that won the 1989 Alfred Döblin Award, given by the Günter Grass Foundation, one with a different scope and a different approach, *The Story of the Last Thought*, by another non-Armenian, Edgar Hilsenrath.⁴ Despite the success and importance of these novels, they are not the awaited masterpieces of literature on the Armenian Genocide. Yet, I cannot point to any work by an Armenian author in any genre that is nearly as thorough a representation and as popular as these, except perhaps Paruyr Sevak's *Anlreli zangakatun* [Immutably Tolling Bell Tower]. Leonardo Alishan writes: "There is no proper genre for giving an artistic expression to the genocide. The novel comes closest but that too does not suffice. The particular bears witness to the general. But though this witness tells the truth and nothing but the truth, it fails to tell the whole truth."⁵ My contention is that one has to live the hell in order to be able to create its representation in art; yet even such representation will be a mimesis, according to Platonic logic, one step removed from the Truth of the unthinkable reality of genocide.

Elie Wiesel has said that only one who has been there has the right to speak, and Alvin Rosenfeld asserts that "the best portrayals of 'life' in Nazi concentration camps are produced by those who themselves experienced the meaninglessness of the two categories of life and death."⁶ The generation with firsthand experience of the Armenian Catastrophe did not succeed in creating that masterpiece. The most talented writers and poets were massacred at the outset. The attempts of the surviving few, such as Hagop Oshagan and Aram Andonian, did not bear fruit.⁷ It is thus unreasonable to hope that succeeding generations of Armenian writers would be able to reach that pinnacle.

Materialization of the Novel of the Armenian Genocide is unlikely. Still, I believe that the next generations of Armenian literati—some obsessed with the Genocide, others only now discovering the traumatic past, the cause of the unspoken pain in the family, and still others finding the freedom to entertain the topic as they choose—have strong potentials. With the distance of time and space in their favor, with a deeper knowledge of history, and with a talent for grasping the poetics of violence, they have favorable possibilities to be able to confront the Genocide. They may accomplish the impera-

tive, the preponderant component of the totality of literary responses to the Genocide. Their work is likely to encompass the echoes of the nation's collective psyche shaped by the violence, the pain of dispersion, the wounds of self-accusation, the search for identity or the struggle to cope with a dual identity, the effects of the past, and present role of the perpetrators and world bystanders.

The Functionality of Genocide Literature

Let us briefly consider the functionality of literary responses to catastrophe. This is based on an assumption accepted by many sociologists and literary critics that fiction is socially conscious. In this connection Melvin J. Vincent writes: "Fiction and drama make possible an imaginative penetration into human character and social events. When presented with consummate literary skill, this offers a more precise and deeper insight into both human character and events and their significance."⁸

The fictionalized Armenian Genocide provides that deep insight into the Catastrophe with a potential impact that works in two distinct dimensions. The internal dimension is built upon the responses of the victims and survivors, coming across from within the text. It accounts for the cathartic quality and therapeutic effect that such artistic expressions exert upon the author and the reader as well. It also works as an essential fuel to keep the fire burning in the soul, to keep alive the Armenian consciousness of a colossal injustice awaiting redress, to keep the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide alive and functional. The external dimension deals with the potential impact of such literature on world public awareness, which consequently can help the realization of world recognition of the Armenian Genocide and eventual reparation.

But this is a difficult task to assign to genocide literature. If it is produced with such a goal in mind, it may easily cross the boundary of pure art. It may become tendentious art, identified with a political cause, or, at best, a desperate protest against denial. The Turkish government's stance and its tacit acceptance by the world are detrimental influences. Alishan spells out the end result: "The artist is caught between serving his art and convincing people of his own people's collective catastrophe. He plays both the role of the detached artist and the passionate propagandist. Consequently, there is a chaotic confusion of genres and roles, resulting in a frustrated failure."⁹

Anne Frank did not need to convince the world that the Holocaust happened. Yet her work in the simple form of a diary has had a powerful impact. For some, it is the only source of information on the genocide of the Jews. Published in English translation in 1952, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, as Alvin Rosenfeld attests, was the first to penetrate the American consciousness and shape the American, or rather the universal, reception of the Holocaust. Then came the Broadway production (1955) and the full-length film (1959) of the *Diary*. Part of the success of the book, the play, and the film was the subtlety of the subject: not too harsh, not too Jewish, not too disturbing.¹⁰ Then came Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, with an impact surpassing Anne Frank's *Diary*. This was a completely new approach to the Jewish tragedy, one that portrayed not the victimization of the Jews, but the confrontation of good and evil, the good German and the evil German, the savior and the executioner, and the conclusion was not a depressing one but a happy reunion of survivors, now mostly affluent people. This is a new direction in Jewish responses, or rather a new representation of the Holocaust that incidentally has drawn much criticism but one that the public can readily grasp.

What does the public know about the Armenian Genocide?

The Paradigm of Responses

The survivors of the Armenian Genocide, scattered around the world, and in particular those who reached America, did not in most cases speak of their horrible experience, especially to their children. For many, there was this inexplicable shame, the shame of having survived while other members of the family had suffered gruesome death. Then, there was this inner compulsion to leave everything behind and live in the New World integrated in the society like everyone else, fearing that, if they told their stories, it would set them apart. There was also the burden of daily struggle for survival in a new, unfamiliar environment. The prejudice of mainstream society against newcomers contributed to that conduct, and, on top of it all, there was the desire to spare their children, to protect them against the paralyzing memory with which they had to live. Whatever the reasons, their response to the genocide was silence. It needed an Edgar Hilsenrath to write in his novel, *The Story of the Last Thought*:

I told the silence the story of the genocide. I made the silence aware of how important it is that it should be spoken of in public. I said: “Everyone ought to know!” For how will genocide be prevented in future if everyone declares they knew nothing about it, and they did nothing to prevent it because they couldn’t even imagine such a thing.¹¹

For some, this period of silence was never broken. It was only after their death that their children discovered, through fragmented memorabilia, the tremendous burden of memory that weighed so heavily upon their parents and caused their special, unfathomable, sometimes peculiar behavior. Virginia Haroutounian’s *Orphan in the Sands* (1995) is the story of the author’s mother, who only in the final days of her life shared with her daughter her terrible ordeal during and after the Genocide. It is the story of the daughter, who resented her mother’s strange behavior and strove all her life to adjust to it only to learn in the end that it was the Genocide and its aftereffects that had ruined her mother’s and her own life.

David Kherdian speaks of the same experience:

Why have I waited until your death
 to know the earth you were turning
 was Armenia, the color of the fence
 your homage to Adana, and your other
 complaints over my own complaints
 were addressed to your homesickness
 brought on by my English.¹²

In another poem, Kherdian describes his father, who “always carried a different/look and smell into the house when he/returned from the coffee houses in Racine”:

Years later, reading the solemn and bittersweet
 stories of our Armenian writer in California,
 who visited as a paperboy coffeehouses in
 Fresno, I came to understand that in these
 cafes were contained the suffering and
 shattered hopes of my orphaned people.¹³

The burden of tragic memories had been transmitted indirectly yet effectively, for it fit perfectly into the family atmosphere and father-and-son relationship experienced by the generation born to the survivors of the Genocide.

Other survivors were able to overcome all the inhibitions and communicate their ordeal, pass on the memory, even put it in writing and publish it for everyone to know. With the politicization of the Diaspora in the late 1960s, these survivors gradually acquired a certain status: they became primary sources of information and their memoirs were welcome additions to genocide literature. It is significant that even today, when this generation is almost gone, the memoirs keep appearing. They are being written by the second, even the third, generation. In some cases, the author is simply reproducing what was left in writing by the survivor. Hovhannes Mugrditchian's diary is an example. The diary, whose English version is published by his son as *To Armenians with Love: The Memoirs of a Patriot*, begins with stories of Turkish rape and persecution of Armenians even before Hovhannes was born. It then continues with the author's childhood memories in Cilicia and the tragic events leading up to and including the deportations and massacres of 1915, the resettlement of the survivors in their Cilician towns and villages after World War I, and finally their irreversible exodus in 1921. This is followed by life in the United States, repatriation to Soviet Armenia, and eventual return to America.¹⁴

In other cases, the raw material, survivor testimonies, is elaborated and embellished to become the response of the new generation to the memory of their parents, to the genocide of their people. Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* (1997) is an example of a well-written melange of memoir-documentation. It is an attractive source of reference for non-Armenians and new-generation Armenians. It is, as the author himself puts it, a "polyphonic, multilayered memoir" in which "personal discovery and history merge."¹⁵ *Efronia, An Armenian Love Story* (1994) is another example. Here, Efronia Katchadourian's memoirs of some 500 pages were translated into English by her son and turned into a nicely-wrought piece of imaginative literature by her non-Armenian daughter-in-law, Stina Katchadourian.¹⁶ In *Rise the Euphrates* (1994), Carol Edgarian skillfully blends the facts of the Armenian Genocide and the traumatic experience of the survivor generation with the attractions and multiple opportunities and fun that American culture can offer a third-generation Armenian teenager.¹⁷ It is clearly manifest in Edgarian's work that no matter how deeply assimilated with the culture and lifestyle of the mainstream, no matter how aloof from the Armenian

past, this American-born generation still carries traces of the wounds of the Genocide.

The success of these memoirs or other sub-genres of genocide literature in prose and poetry can be attributed to the fact that they are being produced within the conventions of American culture. They are palatable to the American taste and acceptance of horror stories. The second and third generation poet or writer has mastered the criteria. As Arpiné Konyalian Grenier puts it, the new writer “faces the tragedy, accepts it, mourns it and transcends it.” Later she adds, however: “It is tricky and slippery to face emotion and express it in unadulterated fashion.”¹⁸ It is indeed a challenging task, for it is sometimes impossible not to succumb to the waves of irrepressible emotion.

Leonardo Alishan has never been able to transcend, or rather he has never tried to transcend, the tragedy that was his grandmother’s, the tragedy that became his fate at the age of nine. His strongest literary creations are about his “Granny” and “bearing witness to her agony.” He shares her agony; he is a part of it: “I try to be a spectator of that tragedy which culminated in a London hospital room in 1978 where Granny saw Turkish horsemen around her bed before she died. But, alas, I am not the spectator. I am a character caught in that play which never, never, never reaches its equilibrium.”¹⁹ Alishan is still gripped by the nightmare of genocide. His Granny, “Gayane, the living martyr,” as he defines her, still governs his life and his emotions. She is a constant presence in his dreams, in his waking thoughts. It is through his grandmother, as it is the case of most second- or third-generation writers, that Alishan sees the Armenian suffering, the Genocide:

In the center of my dream
 there is a church of stone in Van
 sealed from outside
 exhaling screams and smoke from the inside,
 its congregation of Armenian folk
 replacing the candles with their flesh.
 There is a church in my dream
 made with the bones of dead gods,
 babies and parrots’ prayers;
 always, all night, in flames

but never burning to the ground.

And in the church burns a statue of Mary

With my Granny's face, wax dripping down her eyes
drop by drop, on the skin of my dreams.²⁰

The memory of the Armenian Genocide, even though not at peak intensity and not as devastating as it was for the first-generation survivors, has been transmitted to subsequent generations and is still now inspiring literary creations. The topoi associated with the Genocide appear as fragmented images imposing themselves upon everyday life in the New World. Many of Peter Balakian's poems in *Sad Days of Light* (1983) illustrate this duality. Through a commingling of images past and present, Balakian registers the replay of the tragedy of 1915 in his grandmother's mind.²¹

These responses are definitely different from the immediate reactions of those who experienced the Genocide. Indeed, the Armenian poets and writers of the 1920s and the 1930s attempted to recapture in art the hell through which they themselves had lived, the horrifying experience of an entire people half-murdered, half-eradicated from their homeland and cast into foreign lands. They tried to find the source of the evil in the character of the Turk, the victimizer. They tried to explain the Catastrophe, laud the spirit of self-defense, chastise the cowards and their lowly, despicable means of survival. They tried to interpret the calamity as a twist in the relationship between man and God; they even defied God, casting doubt on His existence or His oneness. Hagop Oshagan, Aram Andonian, Vahan Tekeyan, and Shahan Natali, among others, produced the best examples of these themes.

The next generation, the orphans of the desert who began their adult life in the Diaspora, strove to cope with the new situation in alien lands. They expressed the pain of orphanhood, took refuge in the world of dreams. For their misfortune, they blamed the past generation Armenian literati and the values and traditions they had transmitted to them. The artistic expressions of Vazken Shushanian, Shahan Shahnur, Shavarsh Narduni, and Nigoghayos Sarafian embody this predicament. Others, like Aram Haigaz and Hamasdegh, buried their powerful nostalgia in the fictionalized and mythified Old World they recreated.

Quest for Self-Identity with the Genocide at Its Core

The *Aghet* is now sliding into the past, leaving increasingly foggy memory, but the questions still persist: Why did it happen? Why did the world let it happen? Why this terrible injustice? These are questions that have no answers and cause frustration and anxiety. Justice has not been rendered, and the Armenians cannot put their dead to rest. One and a half million souls seem to haunt them, demanding action. There are two other underlying reasons that Armenians are still so obsessed with the Genocide and that the subject keeps surfacing in their literature, reflecting the way they think and perceive the world. One is the denial of the crime by the perpetrators and their use of intrigue to secure allies and distort history. And perpetrators always find excuses. “Where do they find them?” asks the storyteller’s shadow in *The Story of the Last Thought*. “In their fears,” replies the storyteller.²² “In their fears!” No explanation could be as expressive as this one word—“fears.” Then, there is also the vague image of a lost homeland that kindles a sense of deprivation even in the most integrated or acculturated Armenian in the Diaspora, a homeland never seen but still somewhere in the unconscious. This phenomenon has grown deeper under the influence of the general trend in the United States in the 1960s and the 1970s to search for one’s roots, a sense of belonging, and an identity connected to the past, to history, and to the other members of the group. American culture of the time facilitated group affiliation and identification. The Armenian past was obviously associated with the massacres and deportations, a captive homeland swept clean of its indigenous people, and a decimated family. The modern responses to genocide were thus shaped by looking back to that historical source of self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-identity. It does not matter whether the individual Armenian has lost family members in the death marches. All are survivors of genocide. “We are children of DerZor,” writes Diana Der Hovanessian:

Even though your mother was a baby
in Worcester, and safe
and your father a young soldier
in Mourad’s mountains
and you a generation from being born,
.....
even without a single

relative who lived to march,

lived past the march.

We are children of DerZor.²³

Coinciding with the trend of searching for one's roots in America, the widespread commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 1965 and the heightened political activism of the Diaspora played a pivotal role in sensitizing the new generation, in directing attention to the unhealed wound. This was a beginning for the new diasporan reality, which called for a stronger commitment to the cause, to national ideology. It kindled self-consciousness and self-recognition among a stratum of youth who were now thoroughly immersed in the mainstream culture yet still searching for the source of their own particularity.

The echoes of this search reverberate both in the works of immigrant writers and of those born in America. Among the second-generation survivor-writers in the United States, Peter Najarian stands out with his *Voyages* (1971), in which the painful reconciliation between the past and the present and the constant references to the Genocide speak of the struggle to find one's identity and adjust to the adopted country. The quest for self-identity takes imaginative literature along different paths; yet the Genocide and the reconstruction of the memory of it remain at the core, the leitmotif. Najarian's *Daughters of Memory* (1986) and Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* are examples in which the Armenian component is gradually pulled out of a nebulous memory hole to become an important dimension in the self-identity of diasporan Armenians.

Vahé Oshagan, an emigrant from the Middle East, portrays the assimilated, alienated generation in America against a backdrop of national traditions, a past, and roots beckoning the generation, demanding action, be it in the most unconventional way, for example, by staging shockingly scandalous scenes and even generally unacceptable political violence.²⁴

The pain and frustration resulting from the struggle to adjust to one's dual identity as well as the search for an ideal image of a diasporan Armenian echo in almost the entire literary output of Hakob Karapents. His characters are ordinary Armenians in the New World. In one of his stories, "Voreve teghits minchev aystegh" [From Any Place to Here, 1970], Karapents describes his protagonist: "An Armenian like any other Armenian. He was young and old like any

other Armenian, because he had suffered.... He lived his life passively, without will or effort, like the survivor of a catastrophe.”²⁵ Nubar Agishian and Benjamin Noorigian are other immigrant writers who develop an array of characters caught in the turmoil of dual identity and intermarriages leading to assimilation.²⁶

Then come the newer poets and writers, all emigrants from Middle Eastern countries—Vrej Armen, Boghos Kupelian, Vahé Berberian, Vehanush Tekian, and Ishkhan Jinbashian—who write in Armenian and whose artistic creations portray the painful transition, the make-up of the new diasporan Armenian. The hardship of dislocation, the memory of the dead family, have become a part of the Armenian legacy and are transmitted from generation to generation. How they have responded to their Armenian heritage depends on that linkage, whether they love and cherish it and live stranded within it, or hate it, run away and try to free themselves from it. In all cases, the response is an act of desperation.

The intensity of this struggle for an Armenian identity does not necessarily exist to the same degree in other diasporan communities. In some cases, this struggle is only that of the intellectual elite, and the wound of the Genocide bleeds through the literary works they produce. Sevda Sevan’s novel, *Rodosto, Rodosto* (written in Bulgarian, 1981), permeates the Bulgarian Armenian poetess-writer’s motivation to capture the impact of genocide on the mental state of its survivors and the perpetrators’ perception of the event, as well as their unchanged attitude toward the few remaining Armenians.²⁷

In a recent poem, “Voghjoyn kez nor dar” [Greetings to You, New Century, 1999], Iranian-Armenian poet, Varand, hails the New Century with hope and expectations for the deliverance of the nation. And, significantly, the source of his chagrin and the tears he sheds is the continued captivity of his homeland, symbolized by Mount Ararat. “For the star-reaching captive did not return home yet,” he reasons, and the crime against the nation remains unresolved: “For the righteous blood boiling in my veins is the blood I shed on the roads to Deir el-Zor.”²⁸ Azat Matian, another Iranian-Armenian poet, uplifted by a young woman singing the famous song “Krunk” [Crane] during a vigil at the Genocide monument, writes the poem “April 24, 1996 (to Gariné for singing Krunk).” He expresses his bewilderment with unanswered questions and fading memories. He struggles to come out of this hopelessness:

Where are we
and bound for where?

.....

Who are we
and heading for what?
Hating, hating this endless pain
and one another

.....

and believe again
in the eternal life of my stricken race.²⁹

Hilda Kalfayan-Panossian, a native of Constantinople residing in France, laments the loss of the Armenian language in the Diaspora (*Spiurk*). She sees the Diaspora as a bleeding wound: “Spiurk is my pain/like an agony that never ends/unable to speak/and yet full of hope.” Spiurk for her is the site of “demolition and disintegration,” the outcome of the Genocide that obliterated all rules and regulations, effaced order and value in the life of Armenians thrust in the Diaspora, caught in a prolonged agony.³⁰

For all intents and purposes, the new response has stemmed from the attempt to confront the Genocide in order to grasp its historical and psychological impact, to enhance the fading memory or to construct one to which to relate and identify. And the constructed reality can be an imagined one. Hilsenrath’s *The Story of the Last Thought* sets a perfect example. It constructs brick by brick the reality of Thovma Khatisian’s family history, “from the little idyllic mountain village to the torture chambers of the Turkish rulers.”³¹ Khatisian’s family was wiped out completely during the Genocide. As a young boy, he was raised in a Turkish family. Dagmar Lorenz notes in his review of this novel, Khatisian had a choice of self-identities: Turkish, Swiss, or Armenian. “The last was for him the hardest to attain, since he had to reconstruct or even construct an entire biography and national history. Yet he chooses to become a survivor of the massacres and a witness.”³² Thovma’s inquiries led him to patch together his own story, albeit an imagined reality. And, one day, he says, “I had a genuine family history. I knew my roots. I had a father and a mother again, and I had many relatives. I also had a name with a tradition, one that I could pass on to my children and grandchildren.”³³

Indeed, nowhere in Armenian or non-Armenian-language creative writing, particularly in the genre of the novel, has the theme of the search of survivors' self-identity been so masterfully laid out and so naturally developed as in Hilsenrath's *The Story of the Last Thought*. And this is so, despite the fact that, contrary to others, it is constructed around a purely fictitious and imaginative setting. I am not aware of any survivor story of the Armenian Genocide that covers so much ground and treats such a vast array of issues pertaining to the atrocities, the victimization, the survival, the pain of losing one's home, family, and identity, of being thrown into an unknown world helpless and alone, and then, above all, of being denied truth and justice. And all this is crafted in a breathtaking narrative against a rich background of Armenian and Turkish affairs, customs, traditions, morés, beliefs, superstitions, and folklore. Hilsenrath is compelling as he interweaves imagination, dream, and reality in the thoughts of Thovma Khatisian at the end of the long and torturous road that is called "life." His last thoughts, as those of all Armenian survivors, fly back to Mount Ararat, to *Hayastan*. Perhaps, their thoughts never left these places. Perhaps, Armenians never left these places.

The dead Armenians whisper, Hilsenrath suggests, and "when Armenians whisper at night, the Turks have nightmares,"³⁴ because in every Armenian's dream "Anahit, the mother of Armenia," will find Hayk, "her lost son." It is significant that toward the end of the novel the storyteller calls Thovma by the name of Hayk to invoke "the first of the Armenians," and Thovma's mother is named Anahit. Hayk "will be fruitful and have many descendants. And the children of Hayk and their children's children, will people this land, which was always meant for them." Finally, as with the last thought of Thovma Khatisian, the last thoughts of all Armenian survivors, before they draw their last breath, "will fly back into the gaps in the Turkish history books."³⁵

A Mutual Ground for New Directions

New directions in the responses to the Armenian Genocide were generated in the Diaspora, particularly in America. In fact, in recent years the increasing fragmentation and particularization of American culture, the prevailing theory of multiculturalism, and the political atmosphere have played as the catalyst and booster of the new Armenian-American response to the past, to history, to genocide.

These new directions will certainly influence the literary output in the Republic of Armenia. That is one of the goods, the commodities if you will, that we shall see crossing the Diaspora-Armenia bridge to reach the thinkers and the ordinary citizens of Armenia. Literature will become one of the major footings of mutual awareness and eventual unification. This will come about, as Vahé Oshagan puts it, from "the strong attachment of all poets to the national ethos." One important reason, Oshagan continues, "is that throughout the past centuries, the Armenian literary elite has always been involved with national ideology, i.e. survival of the nation and the preservation of the culture. This in itself is a political ideal, and all poets, diasporan or Armenia-based, have been and are committed to it."³⁶ Sooner or later, the "Armenia-based" literati will rid themselves of the constraints of the Soviet era and its lingering ideologies; the forced detachment from the Armenian past and the Genocide in particular will be lifted off the intellectual atmosphere as it is lifted off the political atmosphere; interest in addressing these issues will increase; and Armenia will join the Diaspora in responding to the past, to history, to the Genocide.

There was a time when government policy dictated the need to forget, to cease writing about the harrowing experience of the past, and to move ahead. It was even planted in people's minds that writing about the Genocide was masochism. This dictum hovered over Soviet Armenia for decades and penetrated certain segments in the Diaspora. Such mentality is gradually losing ground, although there are still persons among the leadership of Armenia who believe that the Armenian Question should be the concern and cause solely of the diasporan Armenians. In any event, judging by the present state of Armenian-Turkish political affairs and the Armenia-Diaspora relationship, there is plausible cause to predict that literary responses to the Genocide will continue as an important intellectual endeavor both in Armenia and the Diaspora. These responses will serve to build and enhance the monument of the Armenian collective memory, but more important they will become a vehicle through which to find a way to overcome the Catastrophe and make national survival possible.

Throughout this literary analysis in pursuit of new directions in literary responses to Genocide, two thoughts are underscored: First, a just resolution of the Armenian Question is viewed as a condition

for national survival, and genocide literature is treated as an important avenue to reach that resolution. Second, literary representations of the Genocide are suggested as important factors in the nation-building process. These thoughts may seem irrelevant to the main thrust of the subject and may even impart political overtones to this discourse. But they result, I contend, from delving into the characteristics and attributes of genocide literature. In fact, these thoughts are the underlying *raison d'être* of this literary analysis. In order for these thoughts to materialize, however, there should be a commonality or at least a parallelism between the genocide literature produced in Armenia and in the Diaspora. The diasporan literature relates to the Genocide by nature and by circumstance. What about the Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian literature?

Despite Soviet restrictions and censorship, the Genocide did not cease to occupy the minds of Soviet Armenians, be it as a painful memory secretly transmitted from generation to generation, be it as a covert leitmotif in literature, or be it as innocent reminiscences of native village or hometown. Eghishe Charents, Gurgen Mahari, Khachik Dashtents set the example. The fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide was a turning point in the evolution of political thought in Soviet Armenia, as it was in the Diaspora. On the morning of April 24, 1965, for the first time in Soviet Armenian history, an enormous crowd took to the streets in Erevan and marched in commemoration of the victims of the Genocide, demanding the return of their ancestral lands and calling for a just solution of the Armenian Question. Silva Kaputikyan, a poetess-writer and participant in these demonstrations, reminisces about the event:

They were going
 To claim their orphaned dead and orphaned tombs,
 To kneel and kiss the orphaned sacraments
 Of Maruta Monastery,
 To bring back the land
 And pull out of it the Lightening Sword,
 To bring back the rock and bring out Kurkik Djalali
 To say that we are able to saddle our father's dragon-slaying horse,
 To say that we are the owners, the lords of the House of Sasun
 And the cause of Sasun.
 The month was April,
 And the day was right.³⁷

After that day, nothing was the same. The Khrushchev thaw was succeeded by the Brezhnev restrictions and renewed censorship; yet masterpieces like Paruyr Sevak's *Anreli zangakatun*, Mushegh Galshoyan's "Tsirani poghe" [The Purple Horn], and Hrand Matevosyan's "Metsamor" (the name of a district in Armenia), as well as Gevorg Emin's poems of rage and tears for the victims, were produced. The Soviet Armenian dissident literature prepared the ground for the Karabagh movement in 1988, a nationalistic uprising calling for the unification of Karabagh (an adjacent Armenian enclave in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan) with Armenia. Parenthetically, it should be noted here that dissidence in Soviet Armenia did not have the same meaning as in Moscow or other parts of the Soviet Union. Whereas Soviet dissidents fought against the Communist regime, the Armenian dissident movement was patriotic, sensitive to the past, to history, to the Genocide, and to the lands lost to Turkey.

Rediscovering the past, writing about the Genocide, and dealing with previously forbidden historical subjects in literature, however, have not gained momentum in today's relatively free atmosphere, while historical research in these areas has come a long way. Rare are the voices like that of the young poet Ludvik Turyan, who expresses disillusion and at the same time the aspiration for justice for all of mankind. In his poem "Justice," Turyan begins by treating Justice like a toy, when he knew little about the fate of his people and about Justice that was denied to them:

Justice, if you had been given to me
as a toy when I was a child,
I am sure I would have broken you
to bits to find what made you tick.

Shattered at the thought that there is no Justice in the world, he continues with a pessimistic note. He sees no light at the end of the tunnel:

What healer
you could have been, had you arrived
centuries ago
.....
But Justice, our globe is aging, aging,
You are, too, and I am afraid you may die
of old age before you really arrive.³⁸

The independence of Armenia since 1991 has provided unprecedented freedom for the literati but paradoxically has brought about, especially in the first years, a socioeconomic atmosphere quite unfavorable for artistic endeavors. "There are no literary impulses and directions. In this freedom, we have grown tired of freedom," asserts Abgar Apinyan in an editorial in *Nor Dar* [New Century].³⁹ He suggests a collective and conscious effort to revive literary activities and above all to learn about the conventions that govern the diasporan literature. I would say that the stimulus is there; however, most Armenian writers and poets have chosen other avenues to express their suppressed feelings. Other previously forbidden topics are at center stage in literary creations.

Sporadically, we hear voices that sing the song of the orphaned lands of Armenia and the calamity that befell the nation. These creations are mostly in the genre of lamentation. Gurgen Gabrielyan, a poet of Artsakh (Karabagh), compares the value and significance of land, of homeland, to those of the mother, and writes:

I remember so well the Catastrophe
 And the Golgotha of our people,
 The blood-soaked plough
 I remember so well.
 And in all my life
 My heart is full
 With the grief
 And the gloom of Armenians.

Robert Esayan, a younger poet of Artsakh, searches in history, in the destruction of his people in Western Armenia, for the source of the present plight in Karabagh and the carnage that went on for years at the hands of the Turkic Azeris. He laments the pain of the nation:

At the tombs and dreams plundered
 our pain has been made a theatre
 for the world to stage a play,
 a play pregnant with the final destruction.

Esayan then looks to God for an answer to his supplications:

My arms that are the closed windows of heaven,
 will they open again oh God, to my soul's dawn,

or...is that life of dream
yet another illusion, all decked in splendour?⁴⁰

In a poem dedicated to the sixteen hundredth anniversary of the creation of the Armenian alphabet, Ruben Vardanyan paints with sullen darkness and morbid metaphors the landscape of Armenian history and the Armenian Genocide. In the voice of Mesrop Mashtots, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, he laments the calamity and appeals to God for mercy and guidance. The poem ends with a portrayal of current bleak situation, the exodus of Armenians, the white massacre (*spitak jard*), and the homeland becoming increasingly bereft of her beloved sons and daughters.

Silva Kaputikyan, whose mother and grandmother were refugees from Van, remembers their ordeal and that of her people in “Hin karote” [The Old Yearning, 1992].⁴¹ The poem captures Kaputikyan’s preoccupation with the fate and the unresolved cause of the Armenian people. In her imagination, three generations—her grandmother, her mother, and herself—walk together through life as girls of the same age harboring the same yearnings, the same unfulfilled dreams, the same shattered hope for return to the ancestral home. Kaputikyan implies that national pain and aspirations do not diminish with the succession of generations.

Hovik Hovyan’s collection of poems, *Aregakn ardar* [The Righteous Sun] opens with a piece called “Anapat” [Desert], a reference to the Syrian deserts where the Armenian survivors of massacres and deportations met their death. The poet imagines himself as a piece of bone, one of the millions scattered on the desert sand, blown about by the wind. His life is empty and meaningless since he is unable to shake the indifference of the world: “The empty caravan is passing/The golden bell is not ringing./My cry is still asleep in silence/In the dragging camel’s lazy ear.”⁴²

The theme of genocide, if entertained at all in the poetry of Armenia, is within the framework of old responses. Only in a few cases, when the atrocities against the Armenians of Azerbaijan and Karabagh are lamented, is a new accent added: a thread is passed through history to link these pogroms to the Genocide, and the new Azeri perpetrator is identified with the Turk of yesteryear. New voices are rare, and they are heard in the most unexpected contexts and conceptualizations. An expressive example in prose is Aghasi Ayvazyan’s “Antun turke” [The Homeless Turk]. In this imaginative

interaction with the Turk, the nation's resentment and rage pour out. Fate brings the Armenian and the Turkish wanderers together under a freeway overpass in Pasadena, where the homeless hang out. The Armenian blames the Turk for their plight: "You Turks, if you had not invaded Armenia from Central Asia, or wherever you came from...if you had not driven my grandfather out of his home in Bitlis or Kars or wherever...if you had not slaughtered the children and the old...I could welcome you in my house in Bitlis or wherever. We could drink wine together." Surprisingly, the Turk accepts the blame and does not object, but the outcome is an impasse. The rapprochement, despite the similar conditions and fate that drew the Armenian and the Turk together, is fruitless.⁴³

Another example, this one in poetry, of such an innovative voice in literary responses to genocide in Armenia is Henrik Edoyan's "Hey, Turkish Poets." The author addresses the Turk, and, at the same time, he intimates the importance of the role of literati, in this case the Turkish intellectuals at the time of the Genocide. Edoyan believes that they could make a difference and prevent the atrocities. The first stanza sets the pattern:

If one of you, just one, had spoken up
 "Why kill this trembling kid,
 his slaughtered parents were enough,"
 We might have raised a glass together
 if not a monument.

The poem continues in the same mood, reproaching Turkish poets for not speaking out when "innocent girls," children, women, old men, "the old gods who walked and worked this land" were being killed, when "manuscripts [were] soaked in blood again." And if they had taken sides and said, "'Let's not kill the genuine poets/at least not them.'/You too could have been the real thing." Turkish poets have remained silent, and their silence is deemed as complicity, unbefitting a real artist, as Edoyan sees it.⁴⁴ The Armenian poet's attempted dialogue can be considered not only as a call to account but also as an invitation to today's Turkish men of letters to assume their indispensable role in society, to take a stand and to act. I wonder if Edoyan has read Nazim Hikmet's poetry of rage and admonishment, but, on the other hand, he was but a voice in the wilderness.⁴⁵

In the literary works of a larger dimension, Berj Zeytuntsyan's *Verjin arevagale* [The Last Dawn] stands alone. This historical novel, with Grigor Zohrap (Krikor Zohrab) as its protagonist, embodies the author's perception of the Genocide. The general title of the book is *Vark metsats* [Life of the Great Ones], but the narrative is a selective, arbitrary, and often not very convincing portrayal of Zohrap's character, views, and activities. It is neither a novel, as identified in the title page, nor a true-to-life biography. Nonetheless, it is an effort to add a voice to the literature of the Armenian Genocide.⁴⁶

Literary works on the themes of Armenian suffering, and especially the inflicted injustice, may be few in Armenia because of the lingering effects of the past restrictions. However, taking into consideration the current efforts to enhance national themes in education and to broaden involvement in the struggle for a just solution of the Armenian cause, one can presume that the inclination to address these issues will increase and that genocide literature will soon form an independent corpus and find new directions.

It is my belief that, although historians will continue their research and new documents will shed more light on the issue, it is primarily the literary representations that will shape the understanding of the Armenian Genocide of future generations, that will pass the memory on to them and will shape their commitment to the cause. Indeed, it is the artist's creative power that can capture the unthinkable horrors of the Genocide and bring them down into the frame of the reader's comprehension. Notwithstanding Yehuda Bauer's warning against the Holocaust being understood through the works of imaginative writers and his labeling that kind of understanding a "metaphysical comprehension," the power and intensity of the impact that a literary representation of genocide can make is profound and the role it can play is important.⁴⁷

Paraphrasing Emil Fackenheim's words, I conclude with this thought: to renew the past for present life has always been an essential obligation of the historians, the philosophers, and, I may add, the literati as well, and never before has this task been so essential and so difficult.⁴⁸ Therefore, I submit that future responses to the Armenian Genocide, be they fragmented and incoherent, as an imposition of the theme itself, will stand as a monument to the Armenian aspiration to revived nationhood. They will provide the needed dialogue between history and literature to place the Armenian Geno-

cide within the ongoing saga of a living people, to find a way to resolve the tragedy, and to ensure national survival and evolution.

Notes

1. For an analysis of paradigms of responses to collective sufferings in national catastrophes through time, see Rubina Peroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experiences* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).
2. Diana Der Hovanessian, *About Time* (New York: Ashot Press, 1987), from a poem titled "Diaspora," p. 22 (quotation marks by the author).
3. Lorne Shirinian, *Armenian-North American Literature, A Critical Introduction: Genocide, Diaspora, and Symbols* (Lewiston, Canada: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 60.
4. Edgar Hilsenrath is a survivor of the Holocaust and a well-known novelist in Germany. *The Story of the Last Thought* was first published in German in 1989 as *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken*. The English translation is by Hugh Young (London: Scribners, 1990, and Sphere Books, 1991). Citations in this chapter are to the 1991 edition. A short paragraph on the back cover of that edition explains the scope of the work:

The story is that of the best-forgotten crime of the century; the holocaust of the Armenian people by the Turks in 1915. Yet here it is both history and fable, told in a sequence of beautifully written conversations and stories, polished by exotic myth and vivid imagery. It takes the Armenian Thovma Khatisian back to the past to see the atrocities as his forebears saw them, tracing his father's life from an idyllic mountain village to the torture chambers of the Turkish rulers, delving far back into Armenian history, vividly recreating the folklore, legends and traditions of an early Christian people.
5. Leonardo Alishan, "An Exercise on a Genre for Genocide and Exorcism," in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* (London: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 352.
6. See David Roskies, "The Holocaust According to Literary Critics," *Prooftext* 1 (May 1981): 209-16.
7. In this article, the transliteration of the names of Armenian authors depends on the dialect and preference of the writer; hence, Hagop Oshagan (Western Armenian) but Hakob Karapents (Eastern Armenian). The names of contemporary writers in Armenia are transliterated according to the system adopted in Soviet Armenia; hence, Kaputikyan, rather than Kaputikian.
8. See Bernard Cohen, *Sociocultural Changes in American Jewish Life as Reflected in Selected Jewish Literature* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), p. 32.
9. Alishan, "An Exercise," pp. 352-53.
10. See Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," in Alvin H. Rosenfeld, ed., *Thinking about the Holocaust after Half a Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 141-44.
11. Hilsenrath, *The Story of the Last Thought*, p. 14.
12. David Kherdian, "For My Father," in a collection of poems titled *Homage to Adana* (Fresno, CA: The Giligia Press, 1970), pages are not numbered. This and the poem quoted next are examples of many that resonate the ineffaceable, tormenting memory of the Genocide indirectly transmitted to the author through his father.
13. David Kherdian, "My Father." The reference to "our Armenian writer in California" is to William Saroyan.

14. Hovhannes Mugrditchian, *To Armenians with Love: The Memoirs of a Patriot* (Hobe Sound, FL: Paul Mart, 1996).
15. Quotation from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 12, 1998, p. B7.
16. Stina Katchadourian, *Efronia, An Armenian Love Story* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994). For a brief analysis of this work, see the review by Rubina Peroomian, *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 7 (1994): 205-08.
17. Carol Edgarian, *Rise the Euphrates* (New York: Random Books, 1994).
18. Arpiné Konyalian Grenier, "The Apprentice in Exile: Toward an Armenian-American Poetics," *Aspora* 1:1 (Fall 1993): 17-32 (quotations, 26-27).
19. Alishan, "An Exercise," p. 352.
20. From an unpublished poem, "ECCE HOMO."
21. For an analysis of these images in "The History of Armenia," see Shirinian, *Armenian-North American Literature*, pp. 110-15.
22. Hilsenrath, *The Story of the Last Thought*, p. 345.
23. Part 2 of the three-part poem, "Tryptich." The quoted part is titled "Why Sand Scorches Armenians." See Der Hovanessian, *About Time*, p. 14.
24. "Odzum" (Consecration, 1988) and "Telefone" (The Telephone, 1988) are two examples in which Oshagan illustrates how a shocking event in the life of the Armenian community (in "Odzum," an act of sacrilege deliberately staged in an Armenian church by three youths belonging to an extremist terrorist group, and in "Telefone," the news of the suicide mission of an Armenian youth group against the Turkish Embassy in Lisbon) may stir generally indifferent, largely assimilated American Armenians.
25. Hakob Karapents, "Voreve teghits minchev aystegh" [From Any Place to Here] in the collection of stories titled *Antsanot hoginer* [Unfamiliar Souls] (Beirut: Atlas Press, 1970), pp. 152-53.
26. For a brief thematic analysis of works by these authors, see Rubina Peroomian, "The Transformation of Armenianness in the Formation of Armenian-American Identity," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 6 (1992-93): 119-45.
27. A chapter of this novel, translated by M. Terzian into Armenian, is published in *Otaralezu hay groghner* [Armenian Writers Writing in Foreign Languages] (Erevan: Erevan State University, 1989), pp. 404-56.
28. Varand, "Voghjoyn kez, Nor Dar" [Greetings to You, New Century], *Nor Dar* 2 (1999): 232.
29. Azat Matian, "April 24, 1996 (to Gariné for singing Krunk)," trans. Vahé Oshagan, *RAFT* 10 (1996): 55-57.
30. Hilda Kalfayan-Panossian, "The Wake," trans. Vahé Oshagan, *RAFT* 9 (1995): 15-16.
31. From the back cover of the book.
32. For Dagmar C.G. Lorenz's book review, "Hilsenrath's Other Genocide," see the *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 7 (n.d.), quotation, p. 3.
33. Hilsenrath, *The Story of the Last Thought*, p. 16.
34. Ibid., p. 462.
35. Ibid., pp. 464-65.
36. I concur with Oshagan that the Armenian literati have always been committed to a national ideology. That commitment has echoed down through time and has given Armenian literature its defining character. It has assumed the mission of national survival and perpetuation and will undoubtedly continue in this manner regardless of new trends or approaches in literary criticism. There is little need, therefore, for Oshagan to offer the apology that "this may seem slightly outdated at a time when Western poetry has abandoned the notion of a mission and has become an expres-

sion of total independence and purely personal vision." See *RAFT* 8 (1994): 3-4.

37. Silva Kaputikyan, *Ejer pak gzrotsnerits* [Pages from Locked Drawers] (Erevan: Apolon Press, 1997), p. 678. There are a few references here to the Armenian national epic "David of Sasun." David used the ancestral Lightening Sword to fight and slay the enemy. Kurkik Jalali is the legendary horse belonging to this family of Armenian epic heroes. According to an Armenian legend, after fighting against injustice and all the evil in the world, David's son, Pokr Mher, was imprisoned in a cave, and one day this last figure of the epic will ride his horse back to the world to set the Armenians free. "The House of Sasun" here has a more general sense than the region of Sasun. It is a reference to Armenia.

38. Ludvik Turyan, "Justice," trans. Diana Der-Hovanessian, *RAFT* 11 (1997): 45-46.

39. Abgar Apinyan, "Mer nor grakan kyanki herankari masin" [About the Future of Our New Literary Life], *Nor Dar*, no. 3-4 (1996): 3-4.

40. Robert Esayan, "Hesitation," trans. Vahé Oshagan, *RAFT* 10 (1996): 42-43.

41. Kaputikyan, *Ejer pak gzrotsnerits*, p. 658.

42. Hovik Hoveyan, *Aregakn ardar* [The Righteous Sun] (Erevan: Nairi Press, 1997), pp. 3-4. This is the fourth volume of Hoveyan's poetry. The theme of genocide is not entertained in the fifth and final volume, *Taparakan areve* [The Wandering Sun] (Erevan: Nairi Press, 1999).

43. Aghasi Ayvazyan, "Antun turke" [The Homeless Turk], *Nor Dar*, no. 2 (1999): 58-60.

44. Henrik Edoyan, "Hey, Turkish Poets," trans. Diana Der Hovanessian, *RAFT* 6 (1992): 11.

45. Nazim Hikmet (1902-1963), a Turkish Marxist writer-poet, a rebellious soul against oppression, also speaks about the Armenian massacres. In the poem "Evening Walk," written in 1950 (or "Evening Stroll" in a 1954 publication of Hikmet's poems by another translator), he has this to say:

The grocer Karabet's lights are on.
This Armenian citizen has not forgiven
the slaughter of his father in Kurdish mountains.
But he loves you,
because you also won't forgive
those who blackened the name of the Turkish
people.

As with most of Hikmet's writings, this poem is also autobiographical, and he himself is his addressee (the "you" throughout the poem). See *Selected Poems of Nazim Hikmet*, trans. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (New York: Persea Books, 1975), p. 60.

46. Berj Zeytuntsyan, *Verjin arevagale* [The Last Dawn] (Erevan: "Arevik" Press, 1989). Grigor Zohrap (Krikor Zohrab) was a writer, political activist, and Armenian deputy in the Ottoman Parliament who was arrested in 1915 and murdered on the way to exile.

47. James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 7.

48. See Michael L. Morgan, "To Seize Memory, History and Identity in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought," in Rosenfeld, *Thinking about the Holocaust*, p. 172.