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How to Read Genocide Literature

The Problematics, the Search for a Guideline or a Canon*

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Much has been written and spoken in recent years about Armenian genocide literature, a unique body of artistic creations triggered by a traumatic collective experience without precedent in the history of the Armenian people. Albeit late, Armenian scholars, including myself, have turned their attention to the study of this genre. Concentrating on the works of first-generation survivor-writers, such as Zapel Esayen, Suren Partevian, Hagop Oshagan, Aram Antonian, Vahan Tekeyan, and ones who fell victim to that atrocity they described so well, such as Siamanto and Varuzhan, I have tried to fathom the depth of the wound and to find answers to questions arising from these works. I have analysed the treatment of key recurring themes such as self-criticism or internalization of catastrophe, the inability or unwillingness to grasp the reality of events, the image of the Turk, the manifestation of self-defence, and the role and duality of God. Through this typology of genocide literature, I have tried to reveal the victims' and survivors' perception of the catastrophe and its psychological impact on future generations. In the knowledge that the unique Armenian experience has strong grounds for comparison with Jewish sufferings, I have ventured into the scholarship on Jewish Holocaust literature, and incorporated the comparative dimension in my work.

In this paper, I address a different set of questions to the texts, as well as to the critics and potential readers, Armenian and non-Armenian alike. These questions, I contend, will lead to a better understanding of genocide literature and, more importantly, of the facts of the Event itself, and I base my contention on the hypothesis that the genocide literature is a means to explain the genocide. I express, *imprimis*, my indebtedness to Alvin Rosenfeld's *A Double Dying* (1982),¹ which inspired some of the key insights in this paper.

Why read Armenian genocide literature? Is there anything to gain by reading it, or to lose by not reading it? When does genocide literature stop being a fictional artistic creation and become an historical recording of events? Can literature contribute to our finding of the truth of the Armenian genocide?

Many readers, consciously or unconsciously, avoid Armenian genocide literature because of its depressing and heartrending nature. When mere survival in today's world involves such intense and consuming struggle, why engulf ourselves in the sufferings of others who came before us and deny ourselves a lighter, more comfortable, literary diversion? A romanticised answer to this question would be that we Armenians owe it to our martyrs to read about their sufferings, their ordeal, their doleful victimisation. But sentimentalism aside, as Kafka says, we should choose that which asks more of us than we are willing to give. 'We must have those books,' he writes, 'which come upon us like ill-fortune and distress us deeply like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.'²

Books such as Hagop Oshagan's *Kaiserakan Haghterjutium* (Imperial Song of Triumph) and *Mnatsoriat* (Remnants), Aram Antonian's *Ain Sev Orerun* (In Those Dark Days) and *Mets Vochire* (The Great Crime),

and Zapel Esayan's *Averakneru Mech* (Amidst the Ruins) do to us just what Kafka suggests. However, these books are neither readily available, nor accessible, to non-Armenian readers and, in some cases, to Armenian readers as well. Besides, can an ordinary reading of these books bring the reader to the fundamentals of the Armenian genocide, to grasp its meaning and its expression in literature? Here the critic can play a role as mediator or facilitator. Is it not true that the most fundamental role of the critic is to introduce readers to a particular work or body of literature or, as Lawrence Langer states, 'to lead readers back to the literature under discussion'.³ However, beyond this basic function, critics must devise guidelines to help the reader to comprehend and appreciate genocide literature; but the question is, whether or not the conventional approach, adopting canons and inquiries of a particular school of literary criticism, such as the structuralist, formalist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, and feminist can work to explain the enormity of Armenian suffering and Turkish atrocity? Can a search for the expression of class struggle, covert psychological drives, gender differences, or the deconstruction of sophisticated metaphors and complex grammatical structures help the critic to fulfil this difficult task? Clearly, an appropriate critical method has yet to be devised.

Despite its rejection of old literary forms, the literature of atrocity is still based upon form and language. However, very often the forms have been revolutionised, taboos obliterated. When Ghevond Meloyan writes explicitly of the rape of a Turkish soldier by an Armenian *fedayee* troop as an unprecedented act of vengeance, or when Vahe Oshagan describes an Armenian 'terrorist' stripping the priest during the church mass, while his accomplices put up an obscene kissing scene before the eyes of dumfounded parishioners, these authors intend a firm negation of the tradition. At the same time, they are expressing a strong outcry against the tragic lot of the nation. Their writing both reverses literary norms and rebels against the fate of their people. This reversal is itself a unique response to the genocide and, as we will see, becomes a technique in genocide literary expression.

Descriptions of harrowing scenes of brutality and powerful eye-witness accounts are abundant in Armenian genocide literature—Aram Antonian's account of the execution of a young boy in the concentration camp, Hagop Oshagan's depiction of the slow and torturous beheading of a man while his wife is forced to watch. These images can provoke nightmares. Yet these works cannot have their full impact on the reader without familiarity with the entire context of the atrocities. In the same vein, Siamanto's *Mahon Tesil* (The Vision of Death) cannot have its full impact unless the reader is aware of the poet's tragic fate in the atrocities he ventured to depict. Here the critic's role is the building of an historical context, adding to what Rosenfeld calls the reader's 'interpretive frame of reference' to complete the narrative of the atrocity.⁴ When placed in context, Armenian genocide literature approaches the realm of factual narrative.

Here, as a point of comparison with the Jewish experience, we can cite the enormous contribution of Jewish scholarship to understanding Holocaust literature. For example, Anne Frank's diary exerts its greatest power when the reader realises the little girl's fate in Auschwitz. Rosenfeld asserts that the diary alone, without Ernst Schnebel's *Anne Frank: A Profile in Courage*, is not the same.⁵

The critic tries to help the 'reality' of the tragedy to come across as clearly and thoroughly as possible. Since the reality is human loss and suffering, as well as the victimisation of humanism in a man-made catastrophe, and since the norms of artistic creation have also fallen victim to that catastrophe, no tool or method developed in all the schools of criticism combined can work. For the Holocaust, Rosenfeld writes, "'reality' underwent so radical a distortion as to disarm and render no longer trustworthy the normal cognitive and expressive powers. As a result, reason seemed to give way to madness, as language did time and again to silence. When those thresholds dissolve, literature—a product of the composed mind and senses—is reduced to screams and whimpers'.⁶

Examples of this transformation are abundant in the literature of the Ar-

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menian genocide. Many times the author helplessly halts the narrative, witnessing the painful disruption of the paradigm of literary forms. Language becomes inadequate. Metaphors, similes, and symbols cannot do justice to the realistic representation of the reality at hand. The writer is incapacitated. Art is strangled, rendered inarticulate before it is born; the outcome is silence or fragmentation, as in Siamanto's *Mahvan Tesil*:

Massacre! massacre! massacre!
 In the cities and outside the cities in our land.
 And the barbarians, with booty and blood,
 Return leaving the dead and the dying.
 Flocks of ravens hover above.
 Bloody is their mouth; they chortle like drunks...
 Listen! Listen! Listen!
 The sound of storm in the waves of the sea...
 O! close your windows and your eyes too,
 Massacre! massacre! massacre!

Siamanto cries helplessly, unable to find meaning, or even metaphor, in the catastrophic event.⁷

Others demonstrate the same dilemma by spelling it out in prose. Zapel Esayan confesses, 'What I saw is beyond all imagination... It is difficult for me to present the entire picture. Words are incapable of expressing the dreadful and unspeakable sight that my eyes witnessed.' Nonetheless, she persists in recording the 'confused and perplexed expressions' of the survivors of the Cilician massacres, 'their sighs and tears, the incoherent words' that they stutter, 'saying nothing of the reality'.⁸ Suren Partevian laments his inability to find 'words accurate enough, dramatic and tragic enough, to describe the depressing, suffocating scenes of misery.' In another instance, 'This is the first time that I discover so brutally the impotence of the painful struggle of my pen, the inadequacy of all meanings of the word to capture the scenes around me...the horrifying reality that crushes my soul'.⁹

Similarly, in Jewish Holocaust literature, Khaem Kaplan laments over and over again, 'It's beyond my pen to describe the destruction'.¹⁰ Abraham Lewin, writing in the Warsaw ghetto concedes, 'It is hard for the tongue to admit such words, for the mind to comprehend their meaning, to write them down on paper'.¹¹ As Samuel Beckett writes, 'There is nothing to express, no power to express...together with the obligation to express'.¹²

Despite the incapacitating effect of witnessing catastrophe, as Beckett suggests, there is still both the paradoxical urge and the obligation to express what one sees. Rosenfeld calls this the 'phenomenology' of Holocaust literature, which he expounds as a 'contradiction between the impossibility, but also the necessity of writing'.¹³ In a broader context, I suggest, this tendency can be seen as the phenomenology of the literature of atrocity.

Writers of atrocity attempt to recreate the dark,

inexplicable side of human nature. Through the act of language and the creation of art out of atrocity, they eternalise their morbid experience. In so doing, they seek a more or less cathartic deliverance and the securing of their own survival. Some genocide writers have thus triumphed over death, and exemplified the human spirit of survival, making a new beginning possible.

However, in other instances the undeniable outcome is the triumph of silence over language and death over survival. Some critics and writers reject the possibility of literature of atrocity, and find the term self-contradictory, the undertaking immoral. 'There is no poetry after Auschwitz,' Paul Celan declares. According to Michael Wyschogrod, 'Art takes the sting out of suffering...It is therefore forbidden to make fiction of the holocaust...Any attempt to transform the holocaust into art demeans the holocaust and must result in poor art'.¹⁴ Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Weisel finds the attempt to create Holocaust literature an act of irreverence toward the event itself: 'Auschwitz negates any form of literature,' he writes. 'A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel...The very attempt to write such a novel is blasphemy'.¹⁵ It is as if by recasting the Holocaust as fiction, a writer is denying its reality and dishonouring all those who suffered and died.

Hagop Oshagan did not deny the possibility of creating art out of the Armenian genocide, but he struggled throughout his life to find the right approach to it, and his unfinished novel *Mnatsordats* speaks of his inability to forge art of such great suffering and horror. Likewise, Suren Partevian tried in vain to find the strength and inspiration to create 'the great elegy, the splendid epic poem...the divine and eternal "Book of Blood"' (Armenian) that would embody his idealised response to the Catastrophe.¹⁶ The contemporary poet Grigor Beledian does not think it feasible to write poetry with the pre-genocide norms, traditions, and spirit: 'The Catastrophe closed the chapter on poetry' (Armenian), he declares, echoing Celan.¹⁷

In spite of these doubts, none of the writers mentioned have stopped writing about the Holocaust or the Armenian genocide. Some used that same attitude of repudiation to develop techniques for writing post-genocide or post-Holocaust poetry. In the case of Paul Celan, the technique consists of the denial of, ironical allusions to, and reversal of, traditional concepts from the Bible and other established works.¹⁸

With Shahen Shahnur and Zareh Vorbuni, the two post-genocide Armenian writers, the technique consists of touch-up and repair, according to Marc Nichanian. By trying to repair the wound, these authors try to make up for the destruction and to reinstate the obliterated canons. Both writers' novels, *Nahanj Arants Ergi* (Retreat Without Song, 1929) and *Sovorakan Or me* (An Ordinary Day, 1956), symbolise the search for a post-genocide novel.

Likewise, Grigor Beledian's technique consists of reversal and refutation. He keeps the language, the words and, at the same time, rebels against them. He refutes and negates the pre-genocide connotations of words and concepts with a negative prefix, as in poetry/anti-poetry, language/anti-language, meaning/anti-meaning. In his collection of poems entitled *Vayrer* (Locus), in which this prefix is frequently used, Beledian talks about anti-matiere. However, it is significant that he moves from meaning to anti-meaning and not to meaninglessness; similarly, from language to anti-language and not to speechlessness or silence. The author desires to remain in the world of meaning and language, in spite of negating them.¹⁹ In his critical work, in an analysis of Nikoghais Sarafian, Beledian strives to find the traditionalism of the perception of the end or terminus. His reference is, of course, to the Catastrophe, or more precisely to the eschatology of the Catastrophe.

As with Jewish writers and the Holocaust, writing about the Armenian genocide has become more than a vocation or a calling for Armenian writers. It is an affliction, a predicament. The Jewish writer asks, 'how to write about the Holocaust, yet how not to write about it?' Avoidance and denial are overcome, and the urge to write about it becomes an affliction that absorbs the writer. Art is born, albeit fragmented or incomplete, which then casts its spell over the reader. The reverse of the question is: 'how to read genocide literature, yet how not to read it?'

What is the value of genocide literature in the realm of hard facts? We know that historical facts conveyed by historians are less affected by the author's imagination than Armenian genocide narratives such as eye-witness accounts, memoirs, and novels. However, historians are not immune to artistic imagination and pictorialisation. In the Armenian classical era, the boundary between the two genres of history and artistic creation was almost non-existent. Classical Armenian historiography is primarily an artistic representation of historical facts, a form of literary art. Therefore, the issue is not the existence but the extent or essence of 'digressions.' In other words, as James E. Young puts it, 'In what way do historians fictionalize and novelists historicize?'²⁰

In posing this question I do not favour one approach or the other; neither do I equate scientific historical discourse with subjective representations of an event. I simply wish to demonstrate the intrinsic value of genocide fiction to a complete understanding of the Armenian genocide. Just as historical knowledge of the event is essential for a clear interpretation of genocide fiction or symbolic poetry, genocide literature reveals the universal truths that lie at the roots of historical fact and puts inconceivable realities into human perspective. Thus the two genres are mutually complementary and indispensable aids to our grasp of the meaning of atrocity.

Today, when we look back on the Armenian genocide, the distance of eighty years has dulled our perceptions and colored our judgement. In order to be able to absorb the meaning of the Armenian genocide as both a terminus and a beginning for the Armenian people and the Armenian art, in order to make it work as the touchstone of our national consciousness in the Diaspora, we must read and write about it. We owe it not only to our martyrs but to ourselves to liberate our psychological, emotional, and creative responses to the Catastrophe. Our word may not be the last on genocide; others have suffered and will continue to suffer as survivors of other world atrocities. Nevertheless, our outcry against genocide should continue to echo, as Armenians and citizens of the world, in the endless struggle to perpetuate both humanity and humanism. □

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Notes:

- 1 Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying, Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, second edition, (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988).
- 2 Ibid., p. 18.
- 3 Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1975), p. xiii.
- 4 Rosenfeld, p. 24.
- 5 As mentioned in Ibid., p. 17.
- 6 Ibid., p. 28.
- 7 See Rubina Peroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe, A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press, Issued under the auspices of the G. E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Los Angeles), p. 78.
- 8 Ibid., p. 94.
- 9 Ibid., p. 125.
- 10 cited in Rosenfeld, p. 7.
- 11 See Lawrence I. Langer ed., *Art From the Ashes, A Holocaust Anthology*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 3.
- 12 cited in Rosenfeld, p. 8.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., p. 14.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Peroomian, pp. 136, 138.
- 17 Grigor Beledian, *Vayrer* (locus) (Paris, 1983), p. 149.
- 18 Rosenfeld, p. 30.
- 19 Beledian, p. 121.
- 20 James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust, Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988) p. 6.