

BOOK REVIEW

Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire. *Marc Nichanian*. Translated by *G. M. Goshgarian* and *Jeff Fort*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. Pp. vi+406.

This is a unique study of Varuzhan's poetry accomplished against a rich historical, philological, and philosophical backdrop built upon Schelling's concept that "the basic law of every figuration of the gods is the law of beauty" (1) and his "idealist matrix . . . that governs the relationship between art and religion" (105).¹ According to Nichanian, it is only through mourning that we can maintain relationship with the ancient gods, the dead gods: "art is essentially the space in which the mourning of (mythological) religion can find expression" (4). His step-by-step analysis of the nineteenth-century development of European philology and Orientalism, as well as of Nietzsche's principles (and misinterpretations thereof), which were quite popular among European-educated Armenian writers, elucidates the emergence of the concept of a nation, the advent of the figure of the native, philological nationalism, and autoethnography, always in terms of the aesthetic principle.

Attempting to build "the genealogy of Varuzhan's poetic work" (49), Nichanian naturally turns to *Mehian*, the movement and the periodical that gave the poet a voice and that served as a forum for the movement's aims and mission as elaborated by its founders, Constant Zarian, Hagop Oshagan (Kufejian), and Daniel Varuzhan (translations of relevant texts from *Mehian* are offered in appendix B). Nichanian regards *Mehian* as an emancipatory movement that advocated a return to the people to address

1. A word about this translation of the French original (Geneva: Métis, 2007): it is so masterful one can easily forget that it is a translation.

the disaster resulting from their subjugation—their alienation from themselves and from the center, the land, the religion—a movement built on the late nineteenth-century ethnographic movement (appendix A provides the English translation of pertinent excerpts from nineteenth-century studies in Armenian philology and ethnography).

With erudite clarity, Nichanian charts the background of European social, political, and literary (philological) movements, beginning with Schelling's lectures on the philosophy of art (1802–3), and places the corresponding Western Armenian reality in that context. Against this background, he examines *Mehian's* manifesto and its four imperatives (principally authored by Zarian), “in all their apparent naiveté,” to show the objective of the nationalization of literature (that is, endowing it with a national character) and the concomitant “aestheticizing erection” of art and literature to measure themselves against religion (23–25). This is important because the manifesto was followed closely and impacted post-1914 Armenian literature but of course with various interpretations in application.

In part 1, “The Seal of Silence,” Nichanian traces the sources of the concept of the nationalization of literature that he equates with the “rediscovery of the Armenian soul” as intended by the movement to mean returning to the sources, unearthing the treasures of popular culture, introducing them into literary language, and bringing them into literature. The movement thus acknowledged the seal of silence pressed upon the previously scorned popular culture. Nichanian calls this an ethnographic project, partially initiated by Srantsian's discovery of the Armenian epic, *Sasna Tsrer* (51). There is an intrinsic value to this rich and complex study of the birth and development of Armenian philology and its important phase of returning to the people (“the native”). Nichanian critiques the players and their contributions and challenges Soviet-Armenian scholarship for its biased or negligent approach to Armenian reality (Eastern and Western). In this context, he dismantles a persistent understanding of the “nationalistic discourse,” that is, the modernization of the language, and critiques its contributors, such as Abovian and his writing in the Kanaker dialect. Reading Abovian's preface to his novel *Verk Hayastani* (wounds of Armenia), however, Nichanian discovers the emergence of the native, the philological personage that he believes “animated all the philological practices of the nineteenth century and presided over the emergence of the . . . ‘national literatures’” (40), ending the “mutism” of the people's language and making possible the community's relationship with itself in its language.

Returning to Varuzhan (appendix C offers translations of the poet's relevant works), Nichanian catches the moment when the ability to mourn was reestablished in the aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution (1908), after the enthusiasm had subsided. That is the mourning of the native who had been rendered incapable of representing himself or mourning the

native disaster. It is toward the end of this analytical work that Nichanian provides a full definition of the concept of the native as understood by philological Orientalism: “the living ruin, the inhabitant of chaos, an integral part of the nothingness of the fatherland” (205), invented in “the drive to constitute the ‘national’” (206). From here stems the nineteenth-century trend of racialization that reverberated in *Mehian*’s manifesto but was pushed to extremes in Zarian’s later works to sound like a racist ideology based on a twisted understanding of Nietzsche’s Aryanism (221, 282). Zarian demeaned and victimized the aesthetic principle initially pursued by *Mehian*.

In chapter 3, Nichanian steps back and takes up Edward Said’s critique of European philology’s understanding of Orientalism. This chapter in itself can be considered an independent study of the birth and development of philology embedded in a rich understanding of European philosophical history and of the warp and weft of the Armenian language and literature—as production, idea, structure, as the expression of the Armenian people, and as Armenian philology in its progression and belated entrance into European philology.

The reader is cautioned at the outset not to see the *Mehian* movement as an invitation to return to paganism but to see Varuzhan’s project of poetic paganism as beautifully reflected in his own poetry. Nichanian returns to this idea in part 2, in a profound reading of Varuzhan’s works. He traces Varuzhan’s first mention of “poetic paganism” and his initiation of the theme of sacrifice and the poet as an object of self-sacrifice (110). Varuzhan’s poetry is indeed a showcase of the aestheticization of the Western Armenian literary language—one of the goals of the *Mehian* movement. Nichanian calls it the “sublimation and transubstantiation of the popular idiom into a literary language” (127). He identifies three aspects of the “aesthetic principle” in Varuzhan’s poetry. One of them, “representation of the Catastrophe,” has failed, according to Nichanian, because what has thus far been produced in plethora is testimonial literature—the logical matrix of which Varuzhan established (141). Testimony fails to represent the image, the “un-imageable,” the “unimaginable,” as Varuzhan himself showed in many ways in “To the Ashes of Cilicia” (“the reign of the image is closed”), and as Zabel Esayan confessed to the impossibility of representing the whole image in her monumental representation and mourning of the Cilician Catastrophe (135–36).

Nichanian’s intricate style and torrential flow of thoughts can be a challenge even to the informed reader. It is almost impossible to grasp the content in one reading. Aside from the issues he discusses, analyzes, and explicates, he raises important questions that can shake one’s assumptions regarding the course of Armenian literature in its effort to represent the Catastrophe. He is a philosopher, a literary critic par excellence, and a thinker who guides the reader through the obscure depths of Western

Armenian philology to see the challenges of confronting disaster, the relation between art and religion, the mourning of the end of religion, and art as “an heir to religion,” preserving “some of religion’s essential figures and operations” (162). This can be an aspect of Varuzhan’s “poetic paganism” as well as his understanding of the aesthetic principle that Nichanian attests is embodied in the exaltation of Vahagn: “Vahagn is the religious name of the aesthetic principle” (191).

In various formulations throughout his study, Nichanian reiterates the concept of art as the mourning of religion. In the last chapter, he suggests a double meaning for mourning as both “mournful memory and the catastrophic default of mourning itself.” He explains that “art in its essence” is “the mourning of the Immortals” (200)—thus Varuzhan’s return to the fathers and the gods and his poetic image of himself and of “the performative offering of language as a last sacrifice” (217). Varuzhan could have opened the enigma of mourning’s double meaning and brought back catastrophic mourning to liberate mourning from philology.

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