

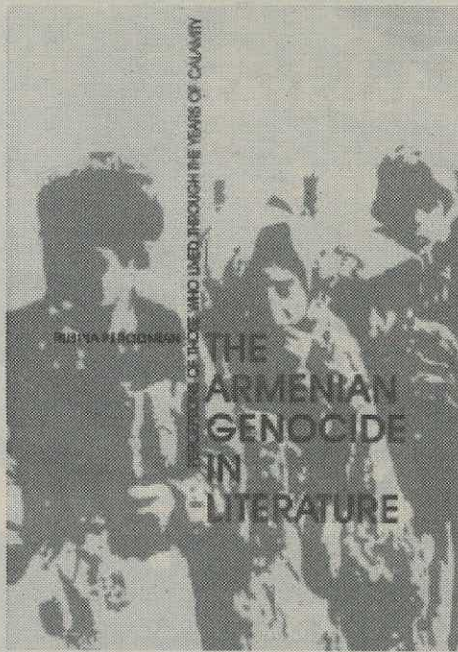
Book Review

Working Through the Past to Embrace the Future

The Armenian Genocide in Literature: Perceptions of Those Who Lived Through the Calamity, Rubina Perroomian, Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2012.

BY MURIEL MIRAK-WEISSBACH

Reading Rubina Perroomian's new book is not easy, nor is it pleasant. But it is necessary, and highly rewarding. This, her third volume on the subject, deals with the reflections in literature of the Armenian Genocide. Her first book on the theme was *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (1993) and the second was *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915: The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature* (2008, just republished with a foreword by Richard Hovannisian). Her aim is not to prove that the Genocide occurred; that has already been documented by historians. Rather, her powerful work, which she characterizes as "an outcry against man's inhumanity to man" (p. xiv), aims to "expose the human dimension of the crime" (p. xv) and, in so doing, to help second and third generation Armenians deal psychologically with the trauma passed down to them from their forefathers. She includes herself most directly in this category. At the tender age of six, she suffered the loss of her father, a chemistry teacher in Tabriz, who was whisked away one night by the Soviet NKVD as a leader of the Armenian nationalist opposition. It was that experience which contributed to her decision to learn about the tragedy that had struck the Armenian people. And reading through the voluminous literature was a painful experience which left its mark on her psyche. "I want to believe," she writes, "that the result that I will produce with my work



Above: The book jacket; Right: Dr. Rubina Perroomian

will cure me of my psychological tumult. I pray for a swift recovery, that is the soon-to-come completion of my work" (p. xvi).

Why literature? one might ask. The author explains that she chose this focus "because I believe literary art to be the form of cultural representation that provides the place where the making and remaking of the relationship of the self and the social can be recognized" (p. 2). It is her hope that, in completing her task with an upcoming volume, she will achieve her "lifelong endeavor to shed light on this unspeakable and unforgettable collective trauma that is transformed into the struggle to confront the past, to liberate the generations of survivors of their debilitating victim psychology, and to survive as a proud, forward-looking, and free nation" (p. 6).

As she examines the novels, poetry, and



memoirs and tells us about their authors, she is also sketching a history of the Armenian experience. Thus, in dealing with the legacy of the first generation, she shows how, following the Hamidian massacres of 1894-96, the 1908 Young Turk revolution generated hope in possible cohabitation, only to be dashed by the 1909 Adana massacres. After hitting a "dead end," that hope turned into a response articulated in the "language of violence." When, in 1915, the unthinkable occurred, it signified for Armenians the loss of their homeland, which even the brief episode of Armenian independence could not recover; and the transformation into a Soviet republic only finalized the loss by erecting an iron curtain between Armenians living there and those who had found refuge abroad.

The central theme dominating the literature thereafter was the question of national and ethnic identity: how should Armenians preserve their identity? How should they deal with the pressures of assimilation? In this context, Perroomian highlights the role played by *Hairenik* (founded in 1922) and other publications in keeping the memory of the homeland alive. Especially in the 1920s and 1930s, *Hairenik* educated the new generation about its past by issuing biographies and memoirs. Among the authors of such writing were, in addition to established names from before 1915 and the later "orphans of the desert," also ordinary people who simply wrote down their recollections.

This literature of the survivors, which described the atrocities often in brutal detail, raised the fundamental question, "why?" — why had it occurred? The literary responses include concentration on the perpetrator, often characterized as "the Turk," and, understandably, also the search for a violent reaction. Armed resistance appeared as a means of wreaking vengeance, or, as in the works of Shahan Natalie, as an attempt to restore the nation's honor. One of the most painful responses encountered in the works of Natalie and also Vahan Tekeyan, for example, is the existential despair of the victim, who even goes so far as to doubt the existence of God, or who challenges God for

having permitted such injustice. Alternatively, the victim may turn despondent and even blame himself. Summarizing the spectrum of psychological reactions, Perroomian writes, "In their futile search for an answer or for the meaning of what happened, they turned to God, practiced catechized, anatomized, defied, expressed doubt in His oneness or even in the very existence. These writers became introspective, seeking the source of calamity in the Armenian psyche whose fears and weaknesses they pinpointed as internalized the tragedy. In a state of frustration, they preached vengeance" (p. 1).

Turning to the "orphan generation," the author reviews the abundant accounts by those robbed of their families in the Genocide; these are the street children of Damascus, reduced to filthy beggars, or little ones fortunate enough to be housed in primitive conditions in the orphanage of Aleppo or Constantinople. Again, Perroomian delves into the psychological dimensions of the tragedy. In the autobiographical work of Musegh Ishkhan, who was orphaned by the genocide at the age of one and five, Perroomian identifies the victim's apparent detachment from the horrifying events. The memory of these traumatic experiences however returns in nightmares, in what psychologists call "hypermnesia." Another psychological phenomenon observed in victims who experienced the trauma of losing their mothers is the "separation anxiety disorder" (p. 1), whereby the victim experiences profound fears of separation from loved ones. In literary response, such emotions are expressed in the yearning for the homeland, or for the mother.

This generation of writers also related their despair could lead to total psychological breakdown, self-destructive tendencies, the annihilation of the moral order, as in

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works of Vazgan Shushanian. "The Turkish atrocity did not end with the destruction and murder alone," she writes; "it completely subverted the survivors' world of moral order and robbed them of their ability to conduct normal human relationships" (pp. 170-171). Thus, Shushanian took up the theme of incest, while he and others also treated unconventional brother-sister relationships. Often men who had suffered the humiliation of deportation and witnessed the rapes and murders of female relatives tended to view all women as "sisters." As for the identity dilemma, the "orphan generation" of writers offered two different approaches: either assimilation or a flight into the past.

In her third chapter Prof. Peroomian considers in detail the plethora of personal memoirs produced over the past thirty years, the "stories of blood and tears" (p. 232). The twelve authors she considers in depth were motivated often by a sense of duty to set the record straight; John Minassian, for example, had been told by targeted Armenians that, if he survived, he had an "obligation to tell the whole world how it happened and why..." (p. 243). Others, like Dirouhi Kouymjian and Bertha (Berjouhi) Nakshian K'etchian, were urged by their children to record their experiences. Often their children were engaged in the second generation's efforts to fight denial, and the survivors thus saw their eye-witness testimonies as an effective tool in that effort. A few survivors, like Hrant Sarian, had even kept diaries which only decades later appeared in print. Significantly, it was the act of putting their recollections into words on a page that served a quasi-therapeutic function, "exorcising the trauma" (p. 336). Many survivors carried the burden

Country and of the extended family members. Then come the accounts of the slaughter: how the men were taken away and killed, how the deportation orders came, how townspeople were herded like cattle into the death marches, how women in despair chose suicide rather than slavery while others were abducted, how women clinging to the bodies of their starved children went insane, and so on. All the stories are different, yet they all bear similarities, and Peroomian points out that "these commonalities testify to the **truth** of the Genocide" (p. 330). Furthermore, the detailed descriptions of the Armenian homeland prior to 1915 provide precious testimony to the extensive civilian infrastructure of Armenian communities, with schools, churches, agricultural and industrial activity.

The "happy ending" — if one can dare to call it that — appeared for the few lucky ones in the form of survival, considered a "miracle," and migration to America, which they experienced as "a dream come true." In these stories, the figure of "the good Turk" may appear, the discreet individual who intervened despite all odds and perceivable danger to save Armenians.

In her final remarks, "in lieu of a conclusion," the author speaks with bold candor of her own experience with the subject. "I tried to study the Armenian literature of atrocity," she writes, "as much as I could, to read as many stories as my nerves could tolerate. No, it is not easy to read these stories. These macabre scenes of cold-blooded murder and rape, starving children, and unspeakable orgies of Turkish officers feasting on Armenian maidens, can leave the reader depressed and bewildered for a long time" (p. 394). Although her readers encounter the stories at a certain distance, so to speak once removed from the totality of the narratives, still the emotional and psychological impact is weighty

Genocide, as a monument erected to the memory of that Genocide, to the Armenian aspiration to become a nation again, not a nation of victims but one with a tragic past that has been acknowledged and duly redressed. That is the way to resolve the burden of the past in order to make national survival and perpetuation possible" (pp. 394-395).

We can only be grateful to Rubina Peroomian for having assumed the painful task and the burden of working through the extensive literature of atrocity and facing the emotional

and psychological challenge it represents has succeeded in mediating the struggle Armenian authors to deal with the Genocide and in transmitting the substance and tenor of their struggle, with courage, honesty, and a special quality of insight accessible only to those who have engaged in the same struggle on a personal level. Thus, in completing her book the reader is neither depressed nor overwhelmed, but, on the contrary, experiences a certain sense of therapeutic relief, and hopes for the future.