Title: Re-membering Armenian Literature in the Soviet Borderlands

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Abstract: This article focuses on Armenian literature during the Soviet period and engages with the varied responses of Armenian writers to the Soviet imperialism from its periphery, with a particular eye to poets like Hovhannes Shiraz and Eghishé Charents, who, despite the censor's unrelenting efforts to silence national discourse and remembrance of the Armenian Genocide, sought to rekindle the Armenian sense of self. This article also attempts to highlight the poetic sensitivity and daringness of those Armenian literati, such as Derenik Demirchian, Gurgen Mahari, and Kostan Zarian, who believed it was their duty to faithfully depict the current historical moment, even in the face of its inhumanity, as under Stalin, in order to preserve and re-member their nation's past. Although a nation with millennia of literary history, Armenian literature remains virtually unknown outside the small group of Armenian speakers within the country and in its diaspora. This article hopes to shed some light on twentieth-century Armenian literary development and in the process counter the continued monopoly of Russian literature on Soviet and post- Soviet literary discourse by expanding its imaginative territory.

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Re-membering Armenian Literature in the Soviet Borderlands

Those lamps I set ablaze long ago inside,
to keep terror at bay, today still provide
a tiny ray of hope (a small glow of pride).
—Eghishé Charents

In 1952, the Armenian Soviet poet and Stalin Medal recipient, Silva Kaputikian, gave a speech to the Armenian writers' contest. Recalling her zealous praise of Stalin in that speech forty-five years later, Kaputikian asked herself, "Could it be that my words were sincere?" Her response: "Yes, much to my shame and misfortune, they were."[1] The Sovietization of Armenia had attempted to suppress the past, for "a nation without a past was much easier to rule and assimilate or Russify."[2] Nationalistic themes in literature had no place in a new regime which demanded socialist realism in literature and art. The Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934 organized by Soviet Communist Party leader and close Stalin ally, Andrei Zhdanov, determinedly underscored the differences between form and content, with the latter reigning supreme. At the Congress, Karl Radek characterized the new agenda as a calling: "The point at issue is whether we have our own highroad, or whether this highroad is indicated by experiments abroad."[3] This so-called "highroad" left no room for deviation from officialdom.

The Soviet Union undertook great measures to dominate its constituent "republics," but the most coercive measure was the cloak of pseudo-autonomy inherent in that word. Irina Ghaplanyan observes the extent to which discussion of national identity was (dis)allowed in Armenia: "The most defining element of Soviet nationality policies as that they were not based on a principle of 'all or nothing'."[4] One need only look at Lenin's policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), literally, "putting down roots," aimed at promoting local cultures and languages to create the illusion that each republic was a distinct ethnic group and nation.[5] Because of this evasiveness,

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1 Silva Kaputikian, *Ejer pak gzrotsnerits* [Pages from closed drawers] (Yerevan: Apolon, 1997), 14. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Armenian and Russian are mine. [Մի՞թե անկեղծ են եղել այս խոսքերը, [. . .] Համոթ եւ ի դժպախտություն ինձ, անկեղծ են եղել…]

2 Rubina Peroomian, "Historical Memory: Threading the Contemporary Literature of Armenia," in *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, ed. Richard Hovhannisyan (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007): 97-119; 98.

3 Karl Radek, "Contemporary World and Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art," Marxists Internet Archive, accessed 10 October 10 2018, https://www.marxists.org/archive/radek/1934/sovietwritercongress.htm#s7

4 Irina Ghaplanyan, *Post-Soviet Armenia: The New National Elite and the New National Narrative* (NY: Routledge, 2018), 94, eBook.

5 According to Ghaplanyan, *Post-Soviet Armenia*, chap. 3, while nationalistic expression was censored, rudimentary cultural expression was nonetheless allowed.

Nancy Condee refers to the Soviet Union as the "anti-imperialist empire."[6] But the violent repression of native political expressions in Armenia proved the "indigenization" policy a mere façade. The decades-long Soviet censorship of collective memory and national narrative was devastatingly effective.[7] Armenian literature from the Soviet period highlights the dynamic tension between the Armenian borderland and the omnipresent Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee.[8] Many Soviet Armenian writers believed a work only had merit if it presented a critique of its time. The task of the poet, therefore, was to instruct the people rather than delight, to awaken their spirits and call them to action, and perhaps more importantly, to give them a ray of hope in trying times.

My current task is to portray the differing responses of the Armenian intelligentsia to empire, and to demonstrate how Soviet-era Armenian poets created a cultural and literary memory of the lived, re-membered, and re-imagined past. Despite the anti-Western and restrictionist sentiments of the Communist Party, Soviet Armenian literature was international and intersectional, for the writers worked with their own and others' experiences of subjugation and the long history of colonization of Armenia by foreign powers, whether the Ottoman, Persian, or newly-formed Soviet Empire.[9] Armenian writers educated in Europe, Russia, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, India, and the United States, but living in the Soviet Republic of Armenia, brought ideas from all over the world into their writing, despite the watchful eye of the Soviet censor. Armenian literature of the Soviet period engages with world literature, but its aim was survival, and its purpose catharsis.

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[6] See Nancy Condee, "The anti-imperialist empire and after: In dialogue with Gayatri Spivak's 'Are you postcolonial?'" *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 829-831. JSTOR.

[7] For a more comprehensive picture of the power relations between Russia and Armenia across three centuries, see *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Modern Times*, ed. Agop J. Hacikyan et al., vol. 3 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

[8] See Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands* (New York: Routledge, 2018), eBook, for a compelling critique of the colonial matrix of power in the Soviet borderlands, and Annus's justifications for the phrase, "Soviet borderlands" as an ideological term referring to non-Russian nations that were governed by the Politburo.

[9] The concept, "Soviet colonialism," is not new and has been used as a substitute descriptor for "Soviet occupation." For the usage of the term, see David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-194* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Eric D. Weitz, "Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 1-29; Dominic Lieven, "The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as Imperial Polities," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995): 607-36; Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Marko Pavlyshyn, "Ukraininian Literature and the Erotics of Postcolonialism: Some Modest Propositions," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 17, no. 1-2 (June 1993), 110-26; John Comaroff, "Humanity, Ethnicity, Nationality: Conceptual and Comparative Perspectives on the U.S.S.R," *Theory and Society* 20, no. 5 (October 1991), 661-87. See also Gayatri Spivak's talk at AATSEEL in 2005 which raises questions about postcolonial approaches to Soviet studies, and elicits a variety of responses. Gayatri Spivak, et al., "Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space." *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006), 828–836.

The late nineteenth-century divisions of Armenia's territory between the Russian and Ottoman empires remained unchanged as the Russian-Turkish courtship evolved into a Soviet-Turkish alliance. Consequentially, the 1915 Genocide narrative burning in the hearts of many survivors was not only silenced in Turkey, but in Soviet Armenia as well. Armenians were stripped of their right to remember on both fronts, and with several organizations devoted to censoring all publications, deviating from the Soviet line was an audacious task. Goskomizdat (The State Committee for Publishing) censored poetry and fiction, shutting down "anomalies" not conforming to official ideology. Textbooks, and all other published materials, were devoid of any mention of the Genocide, or as the Armenians call it, the *Mets eghern* (Great Calamity).[10]

The Octobrist Poetry: An Introduction

In the early days of the Republic, Armenian poets sang the praises of Communism, Lenin, and Stalin, sometimes referring to these leaders as "our fathers."[11] Drunk with hope, people could not see the exploitation and fraud inherent in the system.[12] In his 18 September 1919 letter to Maxim Gorky, Lenin wrote, "The intellectual strength of the workers and peasants grows in the struggle to overturn the bourgeoisie and their accomplices, those 'little' intellectuals, the lackeys of capitalism, who think they are the brains of the nation. The thing is they are not the brains of the nation. They're its s---."[13] The relationship between Westernized literati and the State was clearly not one of amity.

The antipathy the State expanded under Stalin "[who] hated intellectuals too, but he cared about what we call creative writing and had an uneasy feel for it. His famous and much-mocked remark, 'writers are the engineers of the human soul,' is not just a grandiose fatuity: it is a

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[10] In the early 1920s, Armenia was a political tool for the Soviet Union, which used Armenian territories as "rewards" for Turkey. See Irina Ghaplanyan, *Post-Soviet Armenia: The New National Elite and the New National Narrative* (NY: Routledge, 2018), especially the section, "Soviet-Turkish Courtship" where the author discusses the specific regions that were awarded to Turkey and Azerbaijan. Important to this discussion are the Treaties of Kars (1921) and Moscow (1921).

[11] On Soviet idolatry, see Levon Abrahamian, *Armenian Identity in a Changing World* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2006).

[12] Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (NY: Random House, 2002), 191-120, eBook, recounts an anecdote that shows, as he says, the "hypnotic power of mass ideology": during the Great Purges, two men who know each other, meet in the streets of Moscow, and one tells another, "If only someone would tell Stalin!" The two men were Ilya Ehrenburg and Boris Pasternak.

[13] V.I. Lenin, "Polnoe sobranie sochinenii Tom 51, Pis'ma : sentiabr' 1919 god" [Complete works Vol. 51, Letters: September 1919], https://leninism.su/works/91-tom-51/299-pisma-sentybr-1919.html. **[deleted text]** [Интеллектуальные силы рабочих и крестьян растут и крепнут в борьбе за свержение буржуазии и ее пособников, интеллигентиков, лакеев капитала, мнящих себя мозгом нации. На деле это не мозг, а г…]

description of what he wanted writers to be under his rule."[14] Azat Vshtuni was one such "poet-engineer" whose poem "Diktator" (Dictator, 1925) encourages worker solidarity with such lines as: "break the throne, / Choose the path of new life."[15] This new life demanded, as Vshtuni says, the recognition that a new truth had been brought to the "blacksmith's shop," and that "October [of 1917] brought its new word."[16] Early Soviet Armenian literature seldom shows trajectories that do not emanate from Moscow. It bears the stamp of Communist ideology and centralized statehood.

Hence, the "new truth" manifested itself in a genre of poetry that flourished in the newly-formed Republic. Driven by emancipatory hopes, women writers also joined the movement, not only as socialists, but as feminists who advocated for equality both in the economic and domestic spheres. In her poem, "Kleopatra" (Cleopatra, 1940), Silva Kaputikian chooses a powerful female figure as her spokesperson: "Come to me kings, though *I* am the king of kings, / I am the station on your path, the beginning of the new, / I am the sage, the eternity, / Me—a servant, a ruler, me—undefeatable, *and* woman."[17] Speaking the truth of the simple worker and castigating social inequality were the writer's imperatives in the Octobrist Poetry. Some of these poems also appeared in the official newspaper of the Communist Party, *Pravda* (meaning "truth"). Even under Stalin, the poets sang Lenin's praises, their first "father" of "truth." Vshtuni's poem, "Lenin" (1926) depicts Lenin as a divinity who whispers in the ears of the fighters for equality, emboldening them, as a spiritual guide who appears "Where there's sweat and tear, / Where there's deprivation and sorrow."[18] Similarly, Gurgen Mahari, a Genocide survivor and poet, depicts Lenin as the captain of the ship. "A Man with a capital letter," writes Mahari in his poem, "Lenini ardzani mot" (By Lenin's statue, 1927?), "Who wrote his name on the banner of the century."[19] When not about Lenin, poems were about the farmer, plow in hand, singing laborer's songs while working on a state-owned farm, or a sovkhoz.

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[14] Amis, *Koba*, 19.

[15] Azat Vshtuni, *Yerker* [Works], vol. 1 (Yerevan: Haypethrat, 1960), lines 92-3. [Վոր վաղը թիկնաթոռըս ջարդեմ, / Հարթեմ ուղին նոր կյանքի:]

[16] *Ibid.*, lines 52, 54. [Հոկտեմբերը դարբնում ե նոր դար [. . .] / Հոկտեմբերը իր կանչն ե փոռում.]

[17] Silva Kaputikian, *Girs Mnay Hishatakogh* [My work for remembrance], (Antilias, Lebanon: Press of the Armenian Catholicossate of Cilicia, 1996), lines 36-9.
[Եկե՛ք, արքա՛յք, եւ սակայն ե՛ս եմ արքան արքայից,
Ես կայա՛նն եմ ձեր ճամփի, բայց եւ սկի՛զբ եմ նորից,
Ես հավերժի խորհու՛րդն եմ ես, հավե՛րժն եմ անմեկին,
Ես՝ եւ ստրուկ, եւ տիրո՛ղ, ես՝ անվախճան, եւ ես՝ կի՛ն...]

[18] Azat Vshtuni, *Yerker*, lines 3-4. [Այնտեղ, ուր մարդու քրտինքն ե հոսում, / ուր վոր զրկանք կա ու վիշտ:]

[19] Gurgen Mahari, *Yerker* [Works] (Yerevan: Armenian SSR Publisher, 1954), lines 9, 4. [Ահա մարդը, ընկեր: (9) Նա դարերի ճակատին իր անունը գրեց: (4)]

The Soviet Empire, though a closed system, was nonetheless interested in linguistic and literary exchange, especially, but not exclusively, within its borders. Hamo Sahian, for example, engages with Robert Burns in "Robert Bernsi tsaghikeh" (The flower of Robert Burns, 1945), as he recounts the bucolic images of the Scottish poet's verses: "Let no flower be victim of another's foot, / And no carnation beheaded in vain, / I've lived in posterity through my song, / And in those bright-burning flowers all along."[20] Despite the Communist Party's anti-Western stance, such conversations were occasionally permitted in order to spread the *novaya pravda* ("new truth"). Kaputikian writes her poem, "Rainisi shirmaqare Rigayum" (Rainis' tombstone in Riga, 1947) about the Latvian poet whose poetry about his exile, native land, and Latvia's failed revolution stirred the hearts of Latvians. The date of the poem is significant, for at that point, it had only been three years since Latvia's re-annexation into the empire. Kaputikian's poem is not directed specifically to Rainis, but as she writes, "I, Armenia's daughter and poet, / My country's changing song on my lips, / I want to tell you, Latvia, / The brotherly word of my people."[21] This "word" advises the living to put aside past events and focus on building a brotherhood of people. A fervent believer in the Communist cause, Kaputikian continued to spread the "new truth." In order to pacify the rebellious Balkars north of Georgia, she wrote another poem during Brezhnev's rule. The poem, "Balkar banastekhts Kaysin Kulievin" (To the Balkar poet, Qaysin Quli, 1971), opens with Kaputikian claiming unfamiliarity with Balkaria (then, Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous SSR), where the speaker reminds Quli of the latter's greatness as a poet and his influence on his people: "Kind toward kind ones, alert toward enemies**,** / Praying to love, a lover of light, / The country is as big as its spirit, / And the poet, the peak of its soul."[22] The Kremlin exploited poets' influence over their people, turning conformity with its literati into conformity to empire.[23]

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[20] Hamo Sahian, *Hayastane yergeri mej* [Armenia in literature] (Yervan: Haypethrat, 1962), lines 37-40.
[Թող էլ ոչ մի ծաղիկ խոփին զոհ չգնա
Եւ էլ ոչ մի մեխակ չգլխատվի
Գալիք սերունդներին թող իմ երգը մնա
Ծաղիկների մասին պայծառաչվի...]
[21] Silva Kaputikian, *Girs*, lines 9-12.
[Ես՝ Հայաստան երկրի դուստր և բանաստեղծ,
Արդեն երգի փոխվող մտածումը շուրթիս,
Ուզում եմ քեզ, Լա՛տվիա, ես այս պահին ասել
Եղբայրության խոսքը ժողովրդիս։]
[22] *Ibid*., lines 29-32.
[Լավի դեմ՝ մանուկ, չարի դեմ՝ սթափ,
Սիրուն՝ աղոթող, լույսին՝ խնկարկու
Երկիրը մեծ է ոգու՛ մեծությամբ,
Իսկ բանաստեղծը բարձունքն է ոգու...]
[23] Ronald G. Suny and Joe Stork's article, "What Happened in Soviet Armenia?" *Middle East Report* 153 (1988), 37–40, discusses the violent demonstrations in Armenia due to the Nagorno-Karabagh events of 1988, and the ways in which these demonstrations did not stop until the Kremlin asked writers Silva Kaputikian and Zori Balayan to pacify the masses with their words.

The “Octobrist truth” rang across every corner of the Soviet Empire, in every school and parade, on posters, in books, and newspapers. The poets joined the choir, looking forward to a promising tomorrow. Some of these poets whose lives and education began in Soviet Armenia knew the necessary truths. Lenin’s All-Union Pioneer Organization (founded in 1922) with its impressively funded summer camps was an all-powerful machine of indoctrination that persisted in Armenia until 1990. Children, ages 7-9, were called *hoktemberik* (little Octobrist) and teenagers were called pioneers. Their slogan was the Russian phrase, “Vsegda gotov!” meaning, “Always ready!” As Epp Annus puts it, “One did not really have to be always ready to serve one’s ‘great Soviet homeland,’ but one had to be always ready to express loudly one’s willingness to do so.”[24] Among the willing were some Armenian poets who grew up in the system, feeding the machine with their verses. Mahari’s poem, “Hoktemberik” (Little Octobrist, 1925) calls on the youth: “Wake up, my dear, my Little Octobrist, / The spring flower of our new day.”[25] There are also countless folk poems glorifying the Soviet leaders that young and old recited from memory. Here’s a popular Armenian Soviet folk poem, “Grandpa Lenin died / Left us the future / Children, grow up! / Build Communism!”[26] Post-Soviet Armenian youth growing up in the 1990s gave this poem a derisive edge: “Grandpa Lenin died, / Left his finger in his butt.”[27]

Asymmetries between New and Old Worlds

The air of dissidence, however, was not exclusively a post-Soviet phenomenon. Already in the late 1920s, Armenian poets, burning with desire to speak their own truths, turned to national subjects. The memory of the Genocide burst into verses, autobiographies, and historical novels. Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian reflecting on the plight of a people on the threshold write: “The sharp sword of the proletarian revolution drew a red line through that terrifying time, and whatever remained on *that* side of the line became the ancient past for those standing on *this* side, a past that was distant and unintelligible, the reflection of the dark years, the haziness of centuries.”[28] In a subversive act of remembrance, Armenian writers resurrected pre-Soviet authors like Hovhannes Tumanian, Khachatur

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[24] Epp Annus, *Soviet*, 48.

[25] Gurgen Mahari, *Yerker*, lines 13-4. [Զարթիր իմ անու՛շ, իմ հոկտեմբերի՛կ, / Մեր լա՛վ օրերի դու գարնան ծաղիկ,]

[26] [Լենին պապին մեռել է՝
Մեզ էլ ավանդ թողել է՝
Երեխաներ՝ մեծացեք՝
Կոմունիզմը կառուցեք:]

[27] [Լենին պապին մեռել է՝ / Մատը ծակը թողել է:] These lines comprised a playground rhyme often recited in 1990s Post-Soviet Armenia during my childhood and were often used in the same way as “Eeenie meenie miney moe” in the US.

[28] Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian, trans., “Introduction,” in *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishé Charents* (New York: Ashod Press, 1985), 42.

Abovian, and Raffi, who were and are still considered the voices of national conscience. Inspired by this, Mahari wrote “Arnakheghd varder” (Bloody roses, 1929) about the massacres in Van and Mush: “Opened the roses / Like painful wounds / Roses of that year / Wounds on our skin.”[29] The concluding verses of the poem are especially poignant in their emphatic repetition: “The past is with us! / The past is with us! / The past is with us!” along with the last stanza, “And the steeds galloped apace, / And the plains are quiet, / The fields are painting / One bloody spring.”[30] Perhaps realizing the gravity of speaking about a forbidden subject, Mahari later wrote in *Mankutiun ev patanekutiun* (Childhood and adolescence, 1929-1930):

> The pen screeches in a quiet study room, and on a piece of paper appears the line, “Fatherland.” Then I write a five-stanza poem, the last line of which reads, “To live and die on your soil.” After I finished writing the poem, I felt grandiose, larger than life, that if I could put an altar in front of me right at that moment, I would pray to my own self . . . That stupid poem . . . [31]

At first, it seems Mahari regrets feeling heightened emotions for his native land, but the following sentence indicates that he did not consider the line to be “stupid” at all. The claim, “After that I wrote many good and bad poems, but my heart never again allowed itself to tremble with such emotion”[32] begs the question: *Why?* We know that he wrote the poem after reading Raffi’s historical novel, *Khente* (The fool), written in 1880, though not published in Soviet Armenia until 1982.[33] Mahari was inspired by Raffi’s protagonist, who

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[29] Gurgen Mahari, *Yerker*, lines 1-4.
[Վերքերի պե՛ս բացվեցին
Այն տարվա վարդերը,
Այն տարվա վարդերը
Վերքեր էին։]
[30] *Ibid*., 121-2, 125-8. [Պատմությունը մեզ հե՛տ է, / Պատմությունը մեզ հե՛տ է, / Պատմությունը մեզ հե՛տ է,],
[Ու դոփում են ձիերը,
Ու լուռ է անծայր դաշտը,
Դաշտերը բուրում են դեռ
Արնոտ մի գարուն։]
[31] *Ibid*., 452. [Սերտարանի լռության մեջ ճռճռում է գրիչը, եւ թղթի վրա դուրս է գալիս մի բառ,— «Հայրենիք»։ Հետո գրում եմ հինգ տուն բանաստեղծություն, որի վերջին տողն է. —«Գրկիդ մեջ պառկեմ ու մեռնեմ...»։ Երբ վերջացրի բանաստեղծությունը, մեծ, շատ մեծ մարդ թվացի իմ աչքին, այնքան մեծ, որ եթե հնար լիներ, ծունը կդնեի իմ առաջ եւ աղոթքի ու պառաբանության խոսքեր կասեի։ Հիմար այդ բանաստեղծությունը...]
[32] *Ibid*. [Դրանից հետո ես շատ լավ ու վատ երգեր գրեցի, բայց երբեք, երբեք իմ սիրտը չլցվեց վսեմ այդ զգացմունքով եւ դողով։]
[33] For more on the Armenian historical novel, see *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Modern Times*, eds. Agop J. Hacikyan et al., Vol 3 (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2005), especially the section, “Nineteenth-Century Armenian Historical Fiction.” The editors, in the “Overview,” 85, note that Raffi’s *Khente* (The fool) was so influential that the typist of the novel ran off to volunteer as a guerilla fighter in defense of Turkish-Armenian rights.

pretends to be a fool to seem unthreatening to authorities so that he can transport bread to the impoverished and besieged Western Armenians during the 1877 Russo-Turkish war. The exhaustion of being a Soviet fool had caught up with Mahari, for the poet knew that his people were no longer touched by “official” performances of the poet. The poets at this time wavered in what Homi Bhabha called the *in-between*, “a space of cultural and interpretive undecidability produced in the ‘present’ of the colonial moment.”[34] The people wanted their right to remember in this very moment; they wanted their poets to give words to their wounds. The poets spoke, and paid the price—some, with their lives. Mahari was arrested during the Stalinist purges in 1937, and sentenced to imprisonment in Siberia until 1954, the year after Stalin’s death.

The whole country of Armenia was in a state of mourning during the Great Purge of 1936-1938. No other group was more afflicted by it than the intelligentsia, but poets like Derenik Demirchian, Kostan Zarian, Charents, and others kept testing the patience of the great terrorizers. Inspired by Nikolai Gogol’s *Revizor* (*The Inspector General*, 1836), a comedy that satirizes Imperial Russia’s civil servants, Demirchian wrote his satirical play, *Napoleon Korkotian* in 1934 to expose the corruption of those overseeing the administration of the sovkhozes. Bearing in mind the blade that constantly hung over the literati’s heads at this time, [deleted text] the fact that Demirchian sent this work to the Soviet publisher at all is incredible. One of the characters, Baregham, the director of “Enthusiastic Sovkhoz” is waiting for a call and later an inspection from Napoleon Korkotian, who is described in the dramatis personae as the “supreme leader.” It turns out that Korkotian himself is stealing livestock from the sovkhoz, but Baregham chooses not to notice it. A worker who questions the fact that there are missing animals is told by Baregham to “ignore those issues. Otherwise your life will become a moot point.”[35] The workers, however, do not quite understand how this could continue. Another worker, Mkho, informs Baregham that he saw Napoleon shoot an “innocent sheep” with his gun because it was “misbehaving.” Then he adds, “The supreme leader says that one ought to make an honest animal out of a beast. But isn’t it necessary that you first ought to be honest yourself?” Baregham’s indifferent response somewhat satisfies the simple farmer, “Let them die. It’s fine. They’ll keep dying until they can’t die anymore.”[36] The missing numbers create bureaucratic discrepancies, but Baregham has a solution to this as well, “Put those in the ‘internal folder’”[37]

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[34] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 328, eBook.
[35] Derenik. *Yerkeri zhoghovatsu* [Collection of works], vol. 11 (Yerevan: Armenian SSR Publisher, 1985), 107. [Դու խնդիրներին մի նայիր: [. . . .] Նայեցիր՝ մթանը կմնաս:]
[36] *Ibid*., 111. [ՄԽՈ. Էդ թռչելը չեմ իմանում, մենակ հասկանում եմ, որ հարբած եկել էր ֆերման ու ինչ ա եզը պոզահարում էր, ատրճանակով սպանեց ազնիվ եզան: Դե հիմի, ընզադը, ինքը միշտ ասում ա, թե անասուններին պետք ա ազնվացնենք, ախր անասուն ազնվացնողը ինքն էլ պիտի ազնիվ ըլի, չէ՞:
ԲԱՐԵՂԱՄ. Ոչինչ, երակ է, կսատկեն, կսատկեն, վերջը կդադարեն սատկելուց:]
[37] *Ibid*., 123. [Դու այնտեղ հաշվապահական լեզվով ձեւակերպիր «ներքին» մատյանում]

he says. The play ends with a dispute between Baregham and Napoleon, the former telling the latter, “If Marx ever knew you, he’d call you a pig.”[38] The censor, unsurprisingly, denied this work publication though it was copied and circulated in manuscript.

An earlier draft of *Napoleon Korkotian* was even more daring before Demirchian’s significant revisions. This version takes place in Moscow, at a meeting between Alexander I of Russia, a French ambassador, a Russian general, and an Armenian philosopher who are the masked actors in a play within a play (performed by farmers) that Baregham, Napoleon Korkotian, and other farmers are watching in the audience. Both Baregham and Napoleon are infuriated by the “stupid play” and its mockery of the homogenizing vision of the “Soviet man.” An interesting exchange takes place between the farmers/actors and Napoleon who now joined them on stage, and is frantically running after them:

> NAPOLEON: I will imprison you! House arrest! Where are they?
> KHOREN [farmer]: But why? Could it be that you don’t like art?
> NAPOLEON: This is not true art!
> KHOREN: What’s your definition of “true art”?
> NAPOLEON: It doesn’t imitate life!
> KHOREN: More reason not to be offended by it, Mr. Director.
> BAREGHAM: Hmm . . . there is something “true” about it . . .
> [. . .]
> NAPOLEON: Blasphemy! Lies! All lies! This performance is a lie! Life is not like this!
> FARMERS: It is, it is like this, Director Korkotian. [*Laughter.*]
> NAPOLEON: I come from life! I know the facts of life!
> ALEXANDER: [*Peeks from behind the door*.] That means you’re the lie; you’re on stage, and we’re in life.[39]

Undiscouraged by the grim prospects of publishing the play, Demirchian continued his explorations in the realm of the carnivalesque as a technique

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[38] *Ibid*., 145. [Մարքսը, որ ինքը տեսներ ձեզ, կասեր՝ խո՛զ։]

[39] *Ibid*., 52**5-26**. [ՆԱՊՈԼԵՈՆ. Ուղղիչ տուն նստացնել կտամ դրանց, ու՞ր են։
ԽՈՐԵՆ. Ախր ինչու՞, դուք մի՞թե չեք սիրում գեղարվեստ։
ՆԱՊՈԼԵՈՆ. Դա իսկական գեղարվեստ չէ։
ԽՈՐԵՆ. Ապա ինչպես եք ուզում որ լինի գեղարվեստը։
ՆԱՊՈԼԵՈՆ. Այստեղ ո՛չ մի իսկական կյանք չկա։
ԽՈՐԵՆ. Ավելի լավ, ինչու՞ եք նեղանում, Ընկեր դիրեկտոր…
ԲԱՐԵՂԱՄ. Ո՛չ, այստեղ իսկական են տվել…
[. . .]
ՆԱՊՈԼԵՈՆ. Ձրպարտություն է, սուտ է այս ներկայացումը բեմի վրա։ Կյանքը այսպես չէ։
ԲԱՆՎՈՐՆԵՐ. Էդպես է, Էդպես է կյանքը, ընկեր Կորկոտյան։ (*Ծիծաղ*)։
ՆԱՊՈԼԵՈՆ. Սուտ է, ասում եմ ձեզ, դուք զրպարտում եք բեմի վրա։ Ես կյանքիցն եմ գալիս, ես գիտեմ կյանքի փաստերը։
ԱԼԵՔՍԱՆԴՐ. (*Դռնից ներս նայելով*) Ուրեմն դուք եք սուտ, որովհետեւ դուք բեմի վրա եք, իսկ մենք՝ կյանքում։ (*Ծիծաղ*)։]

to expose the corruptions within this state-owned collectivist system, which Merle Fainsod has called “neo-serfdom.”[40] Even though his works continuously displeased the authorities, Demirchian continued to speak his truth from the margins of the empire.[41]

Others, however, disgusted by the façade of pseudo-autonomy and the constant threats, decided to self-exile, though they continued to glorify Armenia in their works outside Soviet borders. Many Armenian writers had connections with foreign writers, and consequently, new translations of Twain, London, Shakespeare, Hugo, Melville, and others appeared in Armenia. In order to experience the freedom of the word, Kostan Zarian, a poet educated in Paris, left Soviet Armenia several times. A professor of Comparative European Literature in Yerevan and later in New York, at Columbia University, a translator, and editor of several journals, Zarian was interested in the connection between the artist and the society in which he lived and tried to portray this phenomenon in his works long before Jean-Paul Sartre popularized the term *littérature engagée* in 1945. Kostan Zarian lived the life of an émigré, and it is not in vain that Lawrence Durrell dedicated a piece to Zarian entitled, “Constant Zarian—Triple Exile” (1952). Although Zarian kept returning to Soviet Armenia, his stays were brief, as with other poets who would quickly become disillusioned with the regime’s heavy censorship.

Most notable is Zarian’s *Erkirner ev astvatsner* (Countries and gods, 1936) trilogy, first published in the journal *Hayreniq* (Fatherland) in Boston. The first book is called *Ispania* and the second, *Miatsial nahangner* (United States).[42] The latter is a fascinating account of the author’s cross-country journey written in a succinct, but supple style, filled with philosophical monologues and dialogues. In the section, “Harlem,” Zarian wonders about an African American man sitting in the corner of a café, writing on a piece of paper. There is a dispute taking place a few tables down, replete with racist language. Zarian describes his encounter,

> He had the face of a poet. He was busily writing something down, but I’m sure he heard everything the incensed customer said about his people. He raised his head, and our eyes met, and at that moment, [. . .] I felt guilty for the white race. Felt shame, as if I committed the most horrendous crime. Upon leaving, I walked up to him, and shook his hand firmly. I could not say anything, and he said nothing. [. . .] He

[40] See Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).
[41] Relevant to this discussion of the relationship between subjects of empire and speech is Gayatri Spivak’s influential essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” accessed 18 October 2018. **http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%20CanTheSubalternSpeak.pdf**
[42] No one knows what became of the third book, *Hayreniq,* but we do know that the work existed since Zarian talks about its editing process in his correspondences with the editor of the journal.

simply, and with dignity, pressed my hand, and continued to write. [. . .] After this incidence, his eyes were walking with me in Harlem.[43]

Zarian felt as if he and the man shared something as oppressed people, and that he understood another's plight, in another hemisphere.

The 1930s was a time of daring and mourning. In the censored literature, one hears the powerful voices of *dissidentia*. Eghishé Charents, considered by many as one of the best Armenian poets, resurrected the painful past, and clandestinely circulated his writings. After witnessing the atrocities during the Genocide in the city of Van, Charents, inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, wrote the poem, *Danteakan araspel* (Dantean legend, 1916) on national themes. He returned to the topic of Genocide in "Mahvan tesil" (Vision of death, 1933), inspired by the *Inferno*, where the speaker descends to hell to encounter all the national and literary heroes and is emboldened by their patriotism. Charents, whose friends had either been killed or exiled, considered the Cheka's unrelenting censorship and purges a betrayal of the Armenian Republic, and responded fervently through his verse. Such nationalistic feelings reached a crescendo in "Es im anush Hayastani arevaham barn em sirum" (I love the sun-baked taste of the Armenian word, 1933), a poem familiar to Armenians worldwide:

I love the sun-baked taste of the Armenian word,
The lament of our ancient lutes,
The bend of blood-red flowering roses in the accents,
The lilt of Nayirian steps still danced by girls.
I love the arch of skies, the faceted waters
Running through its syllables; the mountain
Weather, the meanest hut that bred this tongue,
I love the thousand-year-old city stones.
Wherever I go, I won't forget its mournful music,
Its steel-forged letters turned to prayers.
However sharp its wounds, and drained of blood,
Or orphaned, for my homesick heart there is no other balm. [44]

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[43] Kostan Zarian, *Erkirner ev astvacner: Miatsial Nahangner* (Yerevan: Sarkis Khachents, 2002), 164. [[. . .] մտավորական դեմքով [. . .] Ինչ-որ բան էր գրում եւ անշուշտ լսում էր մեր բարեկամի ասածները: Գլուխը վեր բարձրացրեց եւ նայեց : Աչքերը հանդիպեցին աչքերիս: Եւ չնայած որ ես այդ վիճաբանության չէի մասնակցում եւ ավելի շուտ բարեկամ էի սեւերին, ես ինձ զգացի մեղավոր ամբողջ ձերմակ ցեղի համար: Ամոթ զգացի, կարծես մեծ մի ոճիր էի գործել: Դուրս գնալու ժամանակ մոտեցա եւ սեւամորթի ձեռքը սեղմեցի: Ոչինչ չկարողացա ասել, եւ նա էլ ոչինչ չասաց: Պարզ կերպով, արժանապատվությունով լեցված [. . .] ձեռքս սեղմեց եւ շարունակեց գրել: Այդ դեպքից ի վեր սեւամորթերին նայելու ժամանակ այդ աչքերը աչքերիս մեջն են: Եւ ահա հետս ման են գալիս Հարլեմում:]

[44] Eghishé Charents, "Es im anush Hayastani arevaham barn em sirum," in *Anthology of Armenian Poetry*, trans. and ed. Diana Der Hovhannesian and Marzbed Margossian (New York, 1978): 198-9, lines 1-12. I've made a few changes to Der Hovhannesian and Margossian's translation.

If in the early 1920s Charents endorsed the new regime, standing on the threshold of two worlds, one a painful memory, another a terrifying present, a decade later, like Kostan Zarian, he reflected on the role of the poet in difficult times, and on the poet's relationship and duty to his suffering nation.

We see Charents' internal *perestroika* embodied in his verse. The critic Samvel Mkrtchyan calls Charents "a man of contrasts" who wavered between his devotion to the empire and its ideology, and his people and history. "Like Hugh MacDiarmid," Mkrtchyan writes, "he was a communist prone to nationalism, which is unnatural."[45] His poetry resists categorization, and his fight against strictly defined parameters within a controlled environment is one of its defining characteristics. The following lines from Charents' "Rubaiyats of 1926" capture his inner discord: "'Blend in,' you said, 'invisibly,' / 'No,' he said, 'drink fire actively.' / 'Be reconciled,' you said, 'peacefully.' / 'No, dominate' he said. 'Change all willfully'."[46] Charents restlessly sought a Russian translator for his rubaiyats, but for a long time was unsuccessful. In his February 4, 1934 correspondence with Alexander Katov, a Russian poet, Charents presses the former on the account of his

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[Ես իմ անուշ Հայաստանի արևահամ բառն եմ սիրում,
Մեր հին սազի ողբանվագ, լացակումած լարն եմ սիրում,
Արնանման ծաղիկների ու վարդերի բույրը վառման
Ու նահրյան աղջիկների հեզաճկուն պարն եմ սիրում:

Սիրում եմ մեր երկինքը մուգ, ջրերը ջինջ, լիճը լուսե,
Արևն ամռան ու ձմեռվա վիշապաձայն բուքը վսեմ,
Մթում կորած խրճիթների անհյուրընկալ պատերը սև
Ու հնամյա քաղաքների հազարամյա քարն եմ սիրում:

[. . .]

Իմ կարոտած սրտի համար ոչ մի ուրիչ հեքիաթ չկա,
Նարեկացու, Քուչակի պես լուսապսակ ճակատ չկա,
Աշխարհ անցիր, Արարատի նման ճերմակ գագաթ չկա,
Ինչպես անհաս փառքի ճամփա՝ ես իմ Մասիս սարն եմ սիրում:]

[45] Samvel Mkrtchyan, "Preface," in *Yeghishé Charents: Selected Poems* (S&H Project, 2014), 7. https://issuu.com/jassamvel/docs/charents_for_issuu

[46] Charents, *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishé Charents*, trans. Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian (New York: Ashod Press, 1985), 24.

unwillingness to translate the rubaiyats into Russian despite Katov's praise.[47] Katov's reluctance is unsurprising considering Charents' fiery verse. In his poems dedicated to all the purged Armenian poets in the Ottoman and Soviet empires, Charents always puts the poets on a pedestal, and urges them to keep speaking through their verse, because, what is their crime, but "pouring out wretched loathsome songs, / guilty only of love of home" ("To the Memory of N.S." 1937)?[48] His friends dead and his family in danger, Charents looked for ways to get his verse to the public. When several of his works were denied publication, Charents tried to plead with Anastas Mikoyan, a member of the Politburo, who, ironically, would later oversee Charents' execution, and after Stalin's death, praise the poet's works. Charents was considered an unreliable fool whose jests had to be cut short. On a charge of anti-Soviet sentiments, Charents was arrested and imprisoned in 1937. Perhaps his most touching poems were written behind bars, a poem "Adonis" (1937) dedicated to his daughter, Anahid,[49] and another, for his friend and poet, Avetik Isahakian, written on a handkerchief, 54 days before Charents' death:

> The heart of your nation
> beats in your words.
> Oh, for such a song
> affectionate and small
> that would endure
> inscribed on my walls,
> so that generations to come
> could say with a smile
> my warmest poem
> was for you (in your style). ("For Avedik Isahakian")[50]

On November 27, 1937 Charents received the ultimate censorship—death. Nevertheless, his work survives as a mockery of Stalin's demand that poets serve as engineers of the human soul. Charents left behind a rich body of work (that is still resurfacing) and an undaunted spirit that gave wings to generations of future Armenian writers.

The Ones Saved by War

The Great Purge renewed the pangs of a nation that within a few decades had witnessed several human cataclysms. The community of memory had become unstoppable in remembering the past, and the political climate in

[47] *Ibid*., 120.
[48] *Ibid*., lines 23-4.
[49] Charents was deeply concerned about the future of the younger generation. He writes in his *Diary*, "May our existence, and therefore our poetry, not waver long 'on the boundary of two worlds.' May the life we seek be realized quickly when, as the last and senior poet of the past [Hovhannes Tumanian] devoutly desired, 'Live children, but not as we did'" (50). I have only revised the last part of the translation. Tumanian's phrase is, [Ապրե՛ք, երեխե՛ք,. Բայց մեզ պես չապրեք:]
[50] Charents, *Across*, lines 11-20.

Moscow had become more tolerant toward patriotic works during the Second World War, as poets were encouraged to sustain the morale of the people.[51] In Soviet Armenia the war was referred to as *Hayrenakan paterazm* (Patriotic War) since Stalin's wartime policy demanded patriotism for the Soviet Union and its protection against enemies, foreign and domestic.[52] But as Peroomian maintains, "Patriotism . . . was diverted toward love for Armenia, and even more dangerously, toward the Armenian past and into a nostalgic recourse into the glories of historic Armenia."[53] Writers undertook the subject of Armenia's independence in historical novels which brought patriotic themes into stark relief. Although many writers seized the opportunity to publish their works, and refused to be tools for the empire, this did not give the topic of the Genocide the "green light." Hovhannes Shiraz's 8000-line poem, *Hayots danteakan* (Armenian Dantesque), written in 1941, was denied publication until 1990. It is the story of an Armenian singer and composer, Komitas, who after witnessing the slaughters of 1915, loses his mind. "What is Dante's inferno in comparison to the *Eghern*?"[54] Shiraz asks. The images are so gruesome that even "Byron, great as he was, cried out" and "Distant-hearted Goethe's brow clouded over, / As if his own ancestors marched through his bowels, / Like Byron, Heine cried, / Narekatsi his mustache chewed."[55] Shiraz, the son of a father murdered in 1915, pours his heart into every couplet; each word rings as a cry of horror. Such works resisted imperial instrumentation.

Armenian literature after 1945 is especially grim, given the added trauma of the war. Death and decay grappled with hope throughout post-war poetry. Kaputikian in her "Quatrains" from 1946 writes, "We say 'death'—we say and don't believe it, / 'No, there is death'—we confirm and don't deny it. / ('There is, though not for me. For you, for her, for him,') / 'It'll come for

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[51] Azat Vshtuni's poem, "*Hay martikneri khosqe*" (The word of the Armenian soldier, 1943) was written especially for this purpose. The soldier's "word" is directed to the Armenian poet whose spirit walks with the soldier, reminding him of the brave deeds of Armenian heroes who protected their fatherland from enemies. Of course, "fatherland" now (supposedly) referred to the Soviet Empire.

[52] Although the Armenian words for "fatherland" (*hayreniq*) and "Armenia" (*Hayastan*) have different roots (*hayr* and *hay*, respectively), they are, somewhat, homonymous, a linguistic construction which the central government used for its advantage. Armenians were fighting for their *hayreniq* which they were supposed to think was the Soviet Union, but when anti-establishment poets glorified *hayreniq*, they meant, *Hayastan*. Both sides were aware of the language games they were playing.

[53] Rubina Peroomian, "Historical," 102.

[54] Hovhannes Shiraz, *Hayots danteakan* (Yerevan: Soviet Writer, 1990), line 20.12.45. [Եղեռնի դեմ դժոխք չէ դժոխքն անգամ Դանթեի:]

[55] *Ibid*., 20.12.66, 69-71. [Եւ մեծ Բայրոնը ճիչով արտասվեց,
[. . .]
Սառնասիրտ Գյոթեն ամպեց հառաչով,
Ասես յուր պապերն անցան յուր միջով...
Հայնեն արտասվեց Բայրոնի նման,
Բեղերն էր կրծում սուրբ Նարեկացին...]

me too'—we say . . . . and don't believe it."[56] The poets thought to have done their "job" during the war, received accolades and state prizes from Stalin. However, many were still condemned and denied publication due to their anti-Soviet stance, even after Stalin's death, which, nonetheless, marked the beginning of a relatively terror-free period that lasted two decades. But the poets were disappointed again in the period of de-Stalinization, for not even during Khrushchev's Thaw were they granted the publication of their memoirs, which would have shed light on the gulags and their inhumane practices.

The Poetics of Folly

After Khrushchev, Armenian literature took another blow when Brezhnev came to power in 1964. Many writers adopted satire as their main genre of critique. Armenian samizdat ("self-publishing") copied and circulated dissident literature, including the memoirs of those returned from exile.[57] The character of the fool flourished again as a function of speaking truth to power. Paruyr Sevak's poetry, for instance, is severely critical of the regime and is influenced by Stepan Zorian who in 1933 raised the question of vaudeville, of "laughter, that sharp weapon."[58] Sevak's poem, "Kloune" (The clown, 1972) is a perfect example of the literature of folly. "I've decided to make you laugh today,"[59] writes Sevak, but then he lists all the "clowning" he won't be doing despite the audience's expectations of ordinary foolishness. Then comes the revelation:

> I'll make you believe,
> Make you believe, while I make myself grieve,
> Tomorrow they will, all of them receive—
> Respectfully and orderly,
> The prisoners at the zoo
> (Snakes and what not, the elephants too)
> No matter their rank
> Medals they will get,
> "For what task?" you ask.
> "For mere patience," I say.
> [. . .]

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[56] Silva Kaputikian, *Girs*, 1.1-4.
[Ասում ենք «մահ»—ասում ու չենք հավատում.
«Ո՛չ, մահը կա՛»—ասում ու չենք հավատում.
(«Կա, բայց ո՛չ ինձ, այլ քե՛զ համար, կամ նրա՛»),
«Ի՛նձ էլ կգա»—ասում ... ու չե՛նք հավատում...]

[57] Mahari's *Tsaghkats pshalarer* (Barbed wire in bloom), a story of the author's impressions of the gulags, was published in Beirut in 1971, and circulated through samizdat in Armenia. There was also an increased interest in the 1970s in Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.

[58] Stepan Zorian, *Yerkeri zhoghovatsu* [Collection of works], vol. 10 (Yerevan: Haypethrat, 1964), 504. [ծիծաղը, այդ հզոր զենքը]

[59] Paruyr Sevak, *Yerker* [Works] (Yerevan: Parberakan, 1990), line 1. [Վճռել եմ այսօր ձեզ զվարճացնել...]

I really do hope you did believe me,
Let me then utter a few words and sighs,
To make you believe, and make myself grieve,
About truth-telling in fact,
Ordinary it is . . .
People, stop overreacting!
It has become . . . it has become...
As ordinary as . . . piss![60]

Sevak felt as if lying had become as easy as performing bodily functions. Thus, performance itself was put on trial in hope of answering the question, *cui bono*? What was tricky, however, was that the men in power, whether Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev or their minions in uniform, had much at stake in the artist's performance. Sevak was one such artist who considered it his moral imperative to speak against coercive practices that reformulated and controlled speech.

For Mikhail Bakhtin, who considers the speaker in discourse as a moral agent, "The enormous significance of the motif of the speaking person is obvious in the realm of ethical and legal thought and discourse."[61] Even though Bakhtin specifically has in mind Dostoevsky's characters, the Armenian poets' treatment of the poetic word as an identifier of truth and falsehood, qualified the poets as moral agents in the eyes of the people. In its endeavor to differentiate moral and immoral principles, Sevak's poetic voice, as an ethical "speaking person[a]" concerns itself not only with the present, but also with the question of "what ought to be." In Sevak's verse,

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[60] *Ibid*., 30-40, 49-55.
[Ես այսօր պիտի ձեզ հավատացնեմ,
Ձե՛զ հավատացնեմ - ի՛նձ վստահեցնեմ,
Որ հենց վաղվանից,
Պատվով ու հարգով,
Բանտարկյալները գազանանոցի
(Փղից սկսած ու հասած օձին),
Առա՛նց, խտրության ու տարբերության,
Բոլո՛րը պիտի ստանան կարգով
Համապատասխան շքանշաններ
Եվ... ինչի՞ համար.
Լոկ համբերությա՛ն...
[. . .]
Հույս ունեմ, որ դուք
Ինձ հավատացիք,
Ուստի թույլ տվեք՝ շարունակելով՝
Ձ՛եզ հավատացնել - ի՛նձ վիատեցնել,
Որ ճշմարտություն իսկույն ասելը
Դարձել է մի բան՝ այնքա՛ն հասարակ,
Որքան... ներեցե՛ք... որքան... միզելը։]
[61] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Mikhail Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 349.

current events and discourse of “officialdom” undergo reformulation in an attempt to underscore the limitations of such discourse. Such a position required license to speak, which Sevak embraced by playing the role of fool since the 1940s. In his autobiography, *Antsiale nerkayatsats* (The past performed, 1965) Sevak remembers the many disappointments that molded him into the poet he is: “Life and reality were unhealthy. And that was most notable in the world of art. [. . .] The word of the artist was analogous to an algebraic formula. [. . .] What I understood in those years was that to think one thing and say another for me had become the most immoral act.”[62] Sevak was premature in considering himself lucky to have escaped the fate of some of his perished poet friends. The mysterious circumstances of his death in 1972 prove the necessary but dangerous function the poet played on the literary stage in this corner of the empire.[63]

On the Carnivalesque Reversals

Brezhnev’s death in 1982 marked yet another turning point in Armenian literature, an air of freedom unbreathed for the past sixty years. Perhaps regretful that he didn’t speak enough of his own truth, Gevorg Emin writes in his poem, “Banasteghtsi khostovananqe” (The confession of the poet, 1985): “Do you know how we would live? / Do you know how we would love? / Do you know how we would write? / Had we a second life to live.”[64] As if relieved from their chains, but still in disbelief, Armenian writers quickly published the literature that had long awaited its spotlight. Upon the empire’s fall, Armenians elected a writer and translator of ancient languages as their president. Levon Ter-Petrosian, a scholar who spent his life in the cold rooms of Matendaran Museum, exploring old and dusty manuscripts, was elected president of the newly independent Republic of Armenia in November of 1991. The following year, Ter-Petrosian published his book, *Ancient Armenian Translations*, which covers thirteen centuries of works in translation, including the Bible. It was truly a story in the carnivalesque, a reversal of order where the poet—the fool, if you will—becomes the ruler, but as with many reversals, the wheel turns, and the roles change again.

The poetic attunement to the process of decolonization in independent Armenia does not have the same verve and daring as the poetry written before 1990. This is perhaps due to the fact that, after Ter-Petrosian,

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[62] Paruyr Sevak, *Yerker*, 17. [Այդ տարիներին ես հասկացա, որ մի բան մտածել և այլ բան ասելը անբարոյականության վատթարագույն տեսակն է, ինչպես որ հարկադրաբար սիրելն էլ վատթարագույն շնականությունն է:]

[63] Among the mysterious deaths during Brezhnev’s purges was that of Mushegh Galshoyan, who in 1965 organized the first ever Genocide memorial in Yerevan.

[64] Gevorg Emin, *Yerkeri zhoxovatsu* [Collection of works] (Yerevan: Soviet Writer, 1985), lines 17-20.
[Գիտե՞ս, ինչպե՞ս մենք կապրեինք,
Գիտե՞ս, ինչպե՞ս կսիրեինք,
Գիտե՞ս, ինչպե՞ս կգրեինք,
Թե…երկրորդ կյա՞նք ունենայինք…]

external Soviet supervision in Armenia was replaced by a new version of imperial domination, now by the Russian Federation. There came yet another wave of erasure in contemporary Armenian history and literature as a result of being subject to the hegemony of the growing oligarchy that flourished under Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sargsian, the past two presidents of Armenia whose Russian puppet politics raised many eyebrows, especially in the Armenian diaspora. Armenian poets were censoring themselves to avoid any clashes with their rulers, while instead turning their attention to publishing dissident literature from the Soviet period. The 2018 Velvet Revolution, organized by the "people's man," Nikol Pashinian (currently Armenia's Prime Minister) to overthrow the nation's ruling oligarchy, intensified dissident feelings and discourse, and gave voice to repressed political opinions in Armenia, once again turning the political wheel. The poem set to music, "Im qayle" (My step, 2018) which Pashinian recited at the Republic Square in Yerevan, on August 17, 2018, raises the old question of what is truth and recounts Armenia's struggles against its false prophets. The poem is one of hope, of taking a step toward a better tomorrow:

> True, I have lost battles, and many,
> And seen the laugher of lies,
> But my will is stronger than stones,
> My soul knows not to belie
>
> [. . .]
> I'm not alone! Not alone! Not alone!
> I'm taking a step, my step with you,
> A sweet path that we are taking,
> To new life, to victory with you.[65]

Re-membering After Empire: Thoughts in Closing

As Harsha Ram notes, the postcolonial debate in Russian literary studies has focused on Russian literature and the ways in which Russian writers had brought down the empire. But Ram criticizes the "neglect of the non-Russian literary and intellectual traditions of the former Soviet Union."[66] As influential as Russian dissident writers were in bringing about the fall of the Soviet Union, Armenian poets, like those in other border nations writing in the

[65] I recorded his recitation live from the Republic Square in Yerevan, Armenia during his speech on 17 August 2018, lines 5-8, 33-6.
[Ես պարտվել եմ, պարտվել եմ քանիցս,
Եւ տեսել քմծիծաղը ստի,
Բայց իմ կամքը ամուր է քարից էլ,
Իմ ոգին հանձնվել չգիտի։
[. . .]
Եւ մենակ չե՛մ, մենակ չե՛մ, մենակ չե՛մ։
Քայլում եմ, քայլում եմ, քայլու՛մ,
Սա պատվով քաղցրացած ճանապարհ է,
Սա ծնունդ հաղթանակ է մի նոր։]

[66] Harsha Ram, "Between 1917 and 1947: Postcoloniality in Russia and Eurasia," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 831-33; 832. JSTOR.

periphery played a significant role by exposing the nefarious acts of the central government. Franz Fanon captures this phenomenon in *The Wretched of the Earth*: the colonized "fought as best they could with the weapons they possessed at the time, and if their struggle did not reverberate throughout the international arena, the reason should be attributed not so much to a lack of heroism but to a fundamentally different international situation."[67] Of course, as Fanon says, each generation had a mission to fulfill. Thus, the responses of the Armenian poets to empire as a colonized and postcolonized people vary between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary. The more interesting cases, however, are not the proponents of either of the two extremes but a literature on the threshold, words wavering between old worlds and new in times when poets, like fools, dared to speak their truths against despots and nudniks. They wrote of the trauma of losing their family members and friends who perished in the Genocide of 1915 and in Stalin's purges, resurrecting ghosts that restlessly rang the bells of conscience. Whatever the means, by re-membering the past, the poets were re-membering their identity as an oppressed people who would not give up. The memory of the past is still being recited, collected, and remembered. As such, Soviet Armenian literature is still giving us new windows into the heart of those times.

[67] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004), 145-46.

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