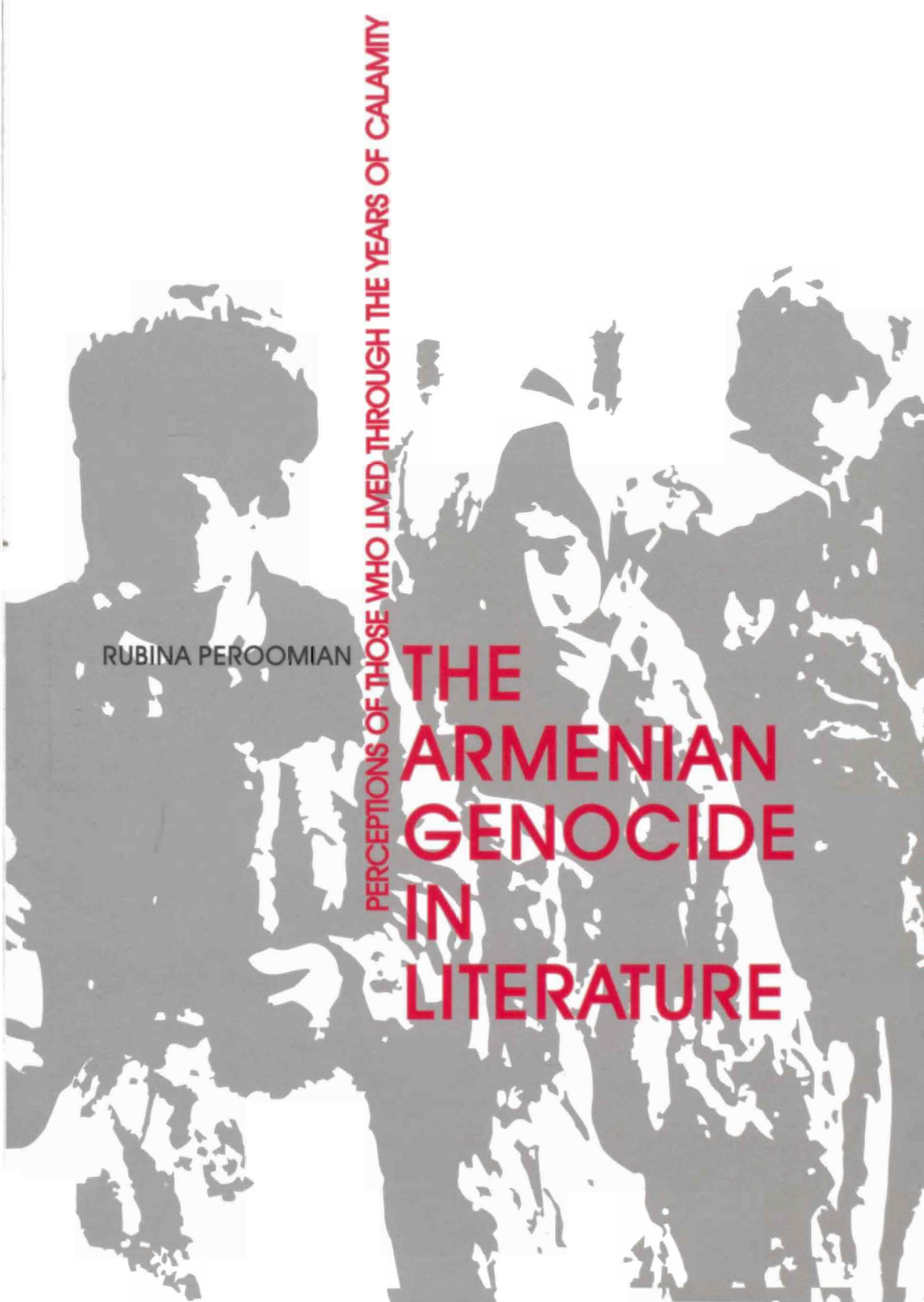

RUBINA PEROOMIAN

THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE IN LITERATURE

PERCEPTIONS OF THOSE WHO LIVED THROUGH THE YEARS OF CALAMITY

Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute
(Research and Studies in Armenian Genocide Series; 2)

The Armenian Genocide in Literature

Perceptions of Those who Lived through The Years of Calamity

Rubina Peroomian

Yerevan, 2012

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A Personal Note in Lieu of a Preface

Why I undertook the study of Genocide literature, and how my life has changed because of it

Why did I choose to study Genocide literature and write about it in preparation for my doctoral degree over a quarter of a century ago?[1] How did my life change after that? These are questions I often ask myself, questions that my close friends and family ask. Couldn't I have chosen a lighter subject for my dissertation? My husband, Neshan, used to say, "Imagine how pleasant and enjoyable your research would have been if you had taken up something like the theme of 'rose and

nightingale' and compared its manifestations in Persian and Armenian poetry."

My research in literary responses to genocide did not stop with the completion of my Ph.D. requirements (1989). It continued with more research, more work and the revision of my dissertation until the eventual publication of *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (1993), and beyond. In fact, the study of the literature of atrocity[2] became a dominant field of research in my academic life; moreover, as my friends and family know for certain, Genocide literature became a part of my life.

Years ago, during a casual conversation among a group of friends, my husband said in a plaintive tone, "If other Armenians have one day of April 24th in a year, everyday is April 24th in our house."[3] My husband's comment shocked me. It made me realize how much I had changed and how deeply the sadness, misery, and gloom emanating from the material I read had penetrated my soul and impacted my disposition, behavior, and family life.

Besides the literature on the Armenian Genocide—memoirs, stories, novels, and poetry—I also personally interviewed many survivors, dedicating long hours and sometimes as many as two or three sessions to those who had a wealth of outpouring memories to recount.[4]

During the first few years of my intense work in preparation for my dissertation, I was immersed in my topic. I lived with it literally day and night; that is, the scenes my interviewees described or those I read during

the day would reappear again and again like horror movies in my dreams. Were they simply "day residues," as Freud had labeled such experiences? But I believe they were more than that. As strange as it may seem, oftentimes I was there; I was a player in those scenes. Inevitably, the nightmares would linger on the next day like a parallel life in a different world that I lived simultaneously with the reality around me, as Carl Jung would explain, compensating for the lack of total immersion in the horrible life stories I adopted as I came into contact with them. Or, better yet, as Calvin Hall, a more recent psychoanalyst, would suggest, perhaps these dreams were just the continuation of my waking thoughts and behavior. I sought out these explanations in the psychoanalytic research material available to me in my university courses, none of them offering me satisfaction. Regardless of whether I would find any possible soothing explanation or not, I was certainly affected by the impact.

"Last night I dreamt of me, a six-year-old girl, separated from my family and driven away with a group of children. That was weeks after we had received orders in our village to take whatever we could and get on the road. We were being deported and sent to an unknown destination. We had walked for many weeks or months. I was too young to be able to count. All I know is that the road was rough, and we were hungry and thirsty and sick. One day my grandmother sat at the edge of the road and with her last strength waved us goodbye, as if saying, 'You go on. I can't continue anymore.' Then we lost my baby brother. He just starved to death. My mother had no

milk in her breast to feed him. Now we had reached the desert, which was called Deir el-Zor, I later learned.[5] *The gendarmes separated us children from the adults. It was so hard for me to let go of my mother. I screamed and cried.... They took us to a small village nearby. It was already dark, but we could see the flames of a big fire in the distance. We could also smell flesh burning. We were so scared. We huddled together and watched the flames until they finally died down. In the darkness of the night we found a narrow stream running nearby. We were so thirsty. We drank the water. It was a little salty and funny tasting. The next morning we looked at each other terrified. Our faces were covered with blood, the blood of our fellow deportees murdered last night...."*

This horrifying dream visited me repeatedly to torture me time and again after I interviewed Hripsimé Zeneyan on April 30, 1980, in her home in Hollywood.[6] I had nightmares like this every now and then. And when I think back today, I come to an astonishing realization. Why is it that I was always in the midst of this gruesome chaos as a little girl? Why is it that I tended to identify myself with female child victims of that harrowing tragedy?

"I am in the desert again with a group of 'survivors' of the death march. My mother and I kept together for months and miraculously survived while other members of our large family perished. We were the toughest. But I am starving now. I cannot go on anymore. I am lying on the desert sand. I have no strength to move. I smell meat cooking nearby. 'Mother, please, go ask some for me,' I plead with my mother. She goes and returns empty-handed. 'O Mother! They didn't give you any?

Remember, Mother, when I die, you eat my flesh alone. Don't share with anyone'...."[7]

Years later, I received an invitation to participate as a female scholar in the field of genocide studies on a panel titled "Connecting Biography and Research."[8] Was there a relation between me, the researcher, and the topic I had chosen for my research? The question was itself a revelation to me. But, of course, there should be a connection, was my first thought. The organizers of this panel, female scholars themselves, thought there was one, and they would bring in their own experience. I began to ponder.

I had never thought about this predilection of mine toward exposing myself to the tragedy others lived. Perhaps there was a psychological reason for it, and perhaps this panel was an opportune time for me to cast a psychoanalytic look into my past to find the answer to that question and delve even deeper, to fathom why this urge to speak out for the victims of genocide and vent my rage against the victimizer the best way I could.

My field of expertise lies in the discipline of literary criticism, and I have used that knowledge to examine the literary responses to extreme cases of violence, particularly against the Armenian people. Was it a catharsis I sought for my own painful past? Would it be logical to see myself a victim/witness of violence and seek out the reason for my academic pursuit in that relationship? My discovery was painful but absolutely revealing.

It was the third day of the New Year in 1944. My younger sister and I were playing with the new toys we had received on New Year's Eve and waiting for our father to return from work. He taught chemistry at a public high school in Tabriz. My father did not come home that night. We learned later that he had been abducted by the Soviet NKVD (*Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del*, The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, i.e. the Soviet secret police that succeeded the Cheka or *Chrezvychaynaya Komissiya*, Extraordinary Commission), targeted as the Armenian nationalist opposition leader in Tabriz in then Soviet-occupied northern Iran.[9] **I was only six years old.**

Needless to say, I was deeply affected by the pain of losing a loving and caring father and by the deprivations of orphanhood. I grew up with the consciousness of belonging to a victim nation. The violence committed against me and my family was not only personal but also collective, a punishment for daring to aspire to a free Armenia and rise against a powerful Soviet Union. That was not long after my people had been punished for their national and human rights aspirations and annihilated by the million in the Ottoman Empire.

This was perhaps the reason for my being drawn to the collective suffering of my people. The seeds that my father had sown in my soul, the upbringing of my mother, and the training I received as an Armenian youth in national institutions resulted in my strong adherence to Armenian national identity and my activism in preserving that identity in the Diaspora. The

leaders and educators of Armenian youth organizations in Tehran, where I grew up, told us about the Turkish atrocities and the loss of Armenian historic lands. We met survivors who, we were told, had miraculously escaped the massacres. Every year, on April 24, during the commemorative events in Tehran, I was a favorite reciter of poems lamenting the victims of the Armenian Genocide with such elegiac pathos that it made the entire audience weep with me.

With my background, I was predisposed to comprehend and absorb the psychology of the literature of atrocity. Today, as I dig deeper in the field of genocide research, I see that I defy what is believed to hold true among researchers in the field. In fact, Jacques Semelin, a Belgian political scientist, tends to prove that researchers psychologically avoid topics "that trigger horror and repulsion." He also questions how, "faced with acts of pure savagery," is it possible to prove "scientific neutrality," while "the compassion felt for the victims leads spontaneously to the condemnation of their torturers?"[10] Well, I plunged into this horror-stricken topic with a vow to contain my emotions and to judge with scholarly detachment and objectivity.

The canons of psychoanalytic criticism would explain that the psychology I introduced into the literary texts I read, however, deeply affected my experience of reading and explication. Indeed, surrounded by the morbid images of victims and victimizers, the only thing that kept me going and helped me maintain my sanity was that I was able to let out the scream of my people and all

the peoples in the world who have fallen victim to callous injustice. My work was to be an outcry against man's inhumanity to man, against the diabolical schemes of men in power, of governments and political parties in power who are able to eliminate or exterminate a group of people, an ethnic minority, a political opposition, just because they think differently, look different, or pray to a different God.

With Siamanto I lived in the burning hell that the Turkish perpetrators ignited in my homeland. With Zapel Esayan I visited the ruins of the burned churches of Adana and saw half-burned corpses piled up. The Turks had set the churches on fire while the Armenians inside were praying to God for mercy. With Aram Antonian I traveled to the shores of the Euphrates and lived the agony of mothers gone mad mourning their dead children.[11] And I tried hard to keep my equilibrium, to analyze the text as a detached critic. I tried to explain the responses of the victims of the catastrophe in their soliloquies addressed to God, their tragic expressions, fragmented speech, and paralysis of diction, in their inability to describe their inexplicable ordeal, their strange conduct stripped of all trace of humanity. I tried to explain the efforts of the survivors to comprehend the cataclysm, to come to terms with the horrifying experience they were destined to endure, to digest it so that survival could be possible. My goal was not to prove the veracity of the Turkish atrocities. I believe that it is duly proven by undeniable facts and documents. In fact, the veracity of the Genocide was and is a given, a point

of departure in my research. I aimed to expose the human dimension of the crime.

And so I tried to understand the collective psyche of the victims and of the victimizers—in the words of the Armenian writer Hagop Oshagan, "What it was that made the Turks so much Turk."[12] I tried to have the victims address today's audience, to tell them their story, tell them the truth that would make the perpetrators' attempts at denial sound even more cynical and preposterous.

Submerged in the reality of the Armenian Genocide as I am, it is, indeed, frustrating and aggravating to see so-called "facts" and "repudiations" thrown in your face with a vicious coldness, with no respect for your people's sufferings, by so-called "objective" Western "historians" and pro-Turkish politicians as well as Turkish diplomats and the "scholars" of the Turkish official line. It is frustrating to hear the trivialization, rationalization, and "contextualization" of the Armenian "massacres" offered by the new generation of Turkish historians. And they speak of reconciliation as a solution to all conflicts and a cure to all historical wounds. When the Turks are not ready to face the past, when injustice still continues to hold so strong a grip upon the Armenian nation, when the crime is not duly recognized, how can there be reconciliation? How can Armenians think of coming to terms with their past and with the unyielding and unremorseful perpetrator of the crime?

Preoccupied with analyzing the responses of others to extreme cases of violence, I had never thought of the

effects of this intense reading on my own psyche. I began to reflect upon my own responses as I was preparing to participate in that unusual panel exploring the connection between a person's, or rather, a female academic's life experience and the doleful topic dealing with extreme cases of violence she has chosen as her field of research. The exercise proved enlightening.

Yes, this inexplicable sadness does not let go of me even in the happiest moments of my life. I feel alone even when I am surrounded by those who love me. The literature of atrocity has been holding me in its grip. After so many years, I am still not comfortable with it. Jack Danielian, a psychoanalyst, suggests that "those witnesses that have progressed beyond knowledge to psychological awareness are at increased risk themselves of acute symptoms and disabling states."[13] Do I need a psychiatrist to reconcile me with my practice (or academic life), perhaps to change my outlook on the everyday life of my present? Israel Charny thought I did.[14] I remember years ago when he was visiting our university (the University of California, Los Angeles, or UCLA), in an intimate conversation with graduate students in our department, I told him about my distress. He said that in Israel they have psychiatrists who are specially trained to help people with problems similar to mine. I have not followed his advice to get help with a psychiatrist. I want to believe that the result that I will produce with my work will cure me of my psychological tumult. I pray for a swift recovery, that is the soon-to-come completion of my work.

To wrap up this personal note, the advocates of reader-response criticism believe in the "dynamic interaction between text and reader." My life is the manifestation of that interaction. Furthermore, as the proponents of the psychoanalytic approach to literature suggest, "individual responses disclose essential psychological characteristics of the individual responding."[15] It was my childhood experience, my family upbringing, and my ensuing personality that drew me toward this particular topic. It is my individual and my social identity, my emotional and intellectual relations to the texts at hand that have become the catalyst between the texts and the interpretive process with which I have engaged them. In other words, as psychoanalysts suggest, my interpretation has put "into language a relation" to the material of my research "that can never be emotionally or ideologically neutral."[16] The result is the interpretively critical language that I have developed.

The result is also the emotionally brittle but strong-willed and determined person that I have become for my people as well as for my family and friends.

Notes

[1] This introspective psychoanalysis was attempted for a presentation on a panel titled "Connecting Biography and Research," as part of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association Congress of May 25–30, 2001. I include it with some modifications in this volume in order to help my readers better understand my perspective and my work.

[2] The term "literature of atrocity" was coined by Lawrence Langer in reference to literature in response to the Jewish Holocaust.

[3] April 24 is the day Armenians commemorate the one-and-a-half million victims of the Genocide of 1915–23 with special events, church masses, candlelight vigils, and somber memorial programs. The day is chosen to mark the date in 1915 when the arrest of the civic and religious leadership took place in Constantinople. In two days, April 23–24, some 600 intellectuals, teachers, and religious and civic leaders of the community were arrested and incarcerated. They were either executed in prison or exiled to be killed on the road. The arrest of notable men continued in Armenian towns and villages throughout the Ottoman Empire.

[4] These interviews were assigned to me as a part of the requirements (which I exceeded in terms of the number of interviews required) to complete the Oral History course offered by Professor Richard G. Hovannisian of the UCLA History Department.

[5] Deir el-Zor was one of the last few stops, "destinations," on the deportation route in the Syrian desert where the scant survivors of the huge numbers in the deportation caravans were gathered to be liquidated. These wretched survivors were either shot by firing squad or, to save bullets, they were dumped in a huge pit, which very often the victims themselves were ordered to dig. Then they were set on fire to burn alive. In other cases the deportees were simply abandoned in the uninhabited desert to wander and eventually perish of thirst, hunger, and disease.

[6] Obviously, my dream was concocted based on the story Mrs. Zeneyan had told me, weeping all along and barely able to maintain her poise and composure during that interview. She was born in Malgara and was deported with her family from that westernmost town in the empire, finally to reach faraway Deir el-Zor after a long and torturous trek. She did not remember her birth date, but said she must have been seven or eight years old when the deportations began.

The children, separated from the remnants of their families, were taken away and sold to Bedouins. In 1919, some children, Hripsimé among them, were rescued by Andranik's troop. Andranik was an Armenian freedom fighter who led many battles against the Turkish army and the Kurdish assaulters of Armenian villages. After the armistice he led one of the Armenian volunteer groups who searched for Armenian children deep inside the Ottoman Empire. These children had been abducted or bought and forcibly converted

to Islam. Hripsimé still bore the tattoos of the Bedouin tribeswomen on her face and arms.

[7] This dream of mine is an echo of an episode described by Aram Antonian in his collection of eyewitness accounts as he had experienced or were described by Naim Bey. See *Mets vochirĕ* (The great crime, 1921) (2nd ed., Beirut: Ghukas Karapetian, 1977). Antonian published an English translation under the title of *The Memoirs of Naim Bey* (1965). For a discussion of this episode, see Rubina Peroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1993), p. 156.

[8] See n. 1 supra.

[9] Ironically, my father, Dr. Baghdasar (Baghdik) Minassian, was negotiating with the Soviet representatives for the safety and security of the Armenian community in Azerbaijan (the north-eastern province of Iran). The meetings with the Soviet representatives were held in that same building.

The Soviets kept my father in the basement of the Cheka building, forbidding him to communicate with the outside world. The next day, my father was taken in a boxcar over the border straight to prison in Yerevan. There he was subjected to repeated torturous interrogations and solitary confinement for six months. After a trial conducted *in absentia* in a court in Moscow, he was found guilty, labeled as an enemy of the people, and exiled to Siberia. After Stalin's death, Georgy Malenkov proclaimed a general amnesty for political prisoners of World War II. My father returned home emaciated and in poor health after spending nearly eleven years in labor camps in the tundra of northern Siberia.

[10] Quoted in Wendy C. Hamblett, "Guilty of Innocence, or, Nobody Remembers the Armenians," *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 7, no. 1 (March 2007), p. 130.

[11] Siamanto (1878–1915) was an Armenian poet who powerfully portrayed the massacres of 1894–96 and the massacres of Cilician Armenians in 1909. He was arrested on April 24, 1915, and murdered on the road to exile. Zapel Esayan (1878–1942) was a novelist whose eyewitness accounts of the Cilician massacres of 1909 are titled *Averaknerun mej* (Amid the ruins, 1919). Aram Antonian (1875–1951) was a writer-survivor whose eyewitness accounts were published in

Ayn sev orerun (In those dark days, 1919) and *Mets vochirĕ* (The great crime, 1921, as referenced in n. 7 supra).

[12] Hagop Oshagan (also spelled Hakob Oshakan) frequently used the word "Turk" as a descriptive, qualifying adjective connoting the negative characteristics of a Turk. See Peroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe* (1993), pp. 197–204, for Oshagan's characterization of the Turk.

[13] Jack Danielian, "A Century of Silence: Terror and the Armenian Genocide," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 70, no. 3 (2010), pp. 245–64 (quotation from p. 247).

[14] Israel Charny, himself a psychologist, is a respected and widely published genocide scholar and the Executive Director of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Jerusalem.

[15] See Murray M. Schwartz and David Willbern, "Literature and Psychology," in *Interrelations of Literature*, ed. Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America, 1982), p. 214.

[16] Ibid., p. 217.

Introduction

I have spent long years studying the Armenian literature of atrocity in order to be able to comprehend and explicate the Genocide, the unprecedented cataclysmic experience of the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire, and the survivor-nation's response to it. I have tried to develop a methodology by which this unique topical genre could be critically approached and analyzed. Embarking on this laborious endeavor, I first focused on the reactions of the first-generation survivor-writers. I intended to track down a paradigm in its ruptures and continuity that would encapsulate the efforts of this generation to conceptualize the Catastrophe in a historical context. My venture into comparative analysis, namely the parallel study of the literary responses of Armenians and Jews to the

Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, respectively, smoothed many obstacles on my way.[1] However, all along, I was cognizant of the fact that literary responses to the Armenian Genocide do not come to an end with the reactions of the first-generation survivor-writers to their own traumatic experience, but continue to emerge in different ways in the works of successive generations. I came to realize that this phenomenon is a strong indication of an old wound not yet healed and a source of pain still unabated. Indeed, there still exists a conscious or subconscious urge to comprehend the traumatic experience of the past for the sake of a healthy future.

The reason why I chose literature, that is, artistic or creative literature, as the site and the main resource for my research, is 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. Literature is a reflection of social life. As Bernard de Voto suggests,

> Literature is affected by all social energies and is frequently the best and sometimes the only place

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[1] This was the essence of my doctoral dissertation submitted in 1989. With changes and additions, my study was later published as a book titled *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1993), under the auspices of the G. E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, as the eighth volume in the Studies in Near Eastern Culture and Society series.

> where their actual working can be examined. It is the most dependable guide to ethics and morals, to the process of change in them, and to the implications of change.[2]

By the same token, in my attempt to discover the inner workings of the impact of the Armenian Genocide on the Armenian collective psyche, I chose not to focus so much on the literary quality of the responses. The aesthetic value or the beauty of the text was a secondary concern in choosing my resources. Isn't it true that, as Lawrence Langer writes concerning the Holocaust literature, "Whatever 'beauty' Holocaust art achieves is soiled by the misery of the theme"? An aesthetic assessment of the text would only prove paradoxical vis-à-vis the theme it encompasses. Furthermore, I did not view the text as an "autotelic artifact," but focused on its status as social realism, on a sort of mimesis with a direct relationship to Armenian life. I view the texts upon which I have chosen to dwell as acts of language which in themselves are signifiers of the persistence of Armenianness or the stressful struggle for its perpetuation.

All this being said and done, there was another reason, perhaps a subconscious impulse, that drove me to choose artistic literature as a resource for understanding the concept of genocide, the why and how of the

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[2] Quoted in Bernard Cohen, *Sociocultural Changes in American Jewish Life as Reflected in Selected Jewish Literature* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), pp. 28–9.

murder and deportation of the Armenian people, the cleansing of the Armenian homeland of its indigenous people, and the impact of it all on the victims and on the perpetrators. I have discussed the intrinsic value of Genocide fiction or symbolic poetry in the understanding of the Armenian Genocide as elucidators of universal truths that lie at the roots of historical facts, putting inconceivable realities into human perspective.[3] Historians may reject the role of artistic literature in assisting readers to grasp the meaning of a historical event. For example, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi declared with dissatisfaction, "The Holocaust has already engendered more historical research than any single event in Jewish history, but I have no doubt whatsoever that its image is being shaped, not at the historian's avail, but in the novelist's crucible."[4] Departure from historiographic methodology may be questionable for some historians, but documents, statistics, and data do not provide the full story. It is not possible to penetrate the world of the Armenian Genocide without reading the memoirs, the artistic literature, and the eyewitness

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[3] See Rubina Peroomian, "How To Read Genocide Literature: The Problematics; The Search for a Canon," *International Network on Holocaust and Genocide* (April 1996), pp. 22-5. I also gave a presentation on the role of artistic literature at a roundtable on "The Armenian Genocide after 95 Years: Recent Developments and Future Prospects for Research" at the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association, San Diego, California, November 18-21, 2010.

[4] Quoted in Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Connecticut, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 51.

accounts. Indeed, it is the artist's creative power that can capture the unthinkable horrors of genocide and bring them down to the level of the reader's imagination. In spite of Yerushalmi's dissatisfaction with the image of the Holocaust being shaped by novelists, in spite of Yehuda Bauer's warning against the Holocaust being understood through the works of imaginative writers and his labeling this kind of understanding as "metaphysical comprehension,"[5] there is an undeniable truth in the power and intensity of the impact that a literary representation of genocide can make and the crucial role it can play. In my study of the Armenian Genocide I relied on that very role, the power of artistic literature.

The study of Armenian Genocide literature thus constitutes the main field of my research and scholarship, the essence of which I present to you with the current volume to be added to my first monograph, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe* (1993), and my second, *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915* (2008).[6] I hope

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

[6] *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915: The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2008) is an exploration of the effects of the Genocide and of the continuing persecutions and pressures on the life and identity of generations of Armenians in Turkey, a fluid denomination comprising those who held on to their Christian faith despite all odds, those who converted to Islam and kept faith with their new religion, and those who pretended faith in Islam and secretly practiced their Christianity (the hidden or crypto Armenians), the