

Marc Nichanian

## Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century, volume 1, The National Revolution

Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, 2002. xii + 378 pages, index, an appendix with extensive translations by G. M. Goshgarian and Ishkhan Jinbashian. ISBN: 1-903656-09-5 (paper), \$30.

The publication of Marc Nichanian's work in book form has been long overdue for English readers.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Nichanian has published extensively in French and Armenian over the years, but in *Writers of Disaster* we now have some of his most important thinking in English. And, as we say in English, it is *none too soon*.

When we say in English that someone has arrived "none too soon," we mean that they are both overdue and early. On the one hand, they have long been expected, we have been needing them for a while, they have arrived just in the nick of time; on the other hand, they have appeared suddenly, they have surprised us, they have arrived ready for anything, in anticipation. "None too soon" is a good phrase here because, in *Writers of Disaster*, Nichanian calls for a kind of thinking that is both long overdue, having existed in the work of a few early-twentieth-century Armenian writers, and early, that work never having been read as seriously as it should have been, perhaps not even by those early-twentieth-century writers themselves. "None too soon" is a good phrase here because in this book Nicha-

nian calls on us to think about the past in a new, as yet unimagined way. He calls for a new kind of thinking about the past, the Armenian past, and in particular the catastrophe or catastrophes that took place between 1895 and 1937.

*Writers of Disaster* challenges, presses, and unsettles its readers in many ways. I will not take the time to discuss all of its specific challenges: the parallel between the Ottoman Catastrophe and Stalinism, 1915 and 1937; the account of antagonisms between Western and Eastern Armenians; the uncompromising critique of quotidian, nationalist politics; and the emphasis on four writers who stood dramatically, if at times fleetingly, against all forms of nationalism, Turkish as well as Soviet as well as Armenian. Instead, I would like to bring into relief a more fundamental challenge of this book, a deeper unsettlement that in many ways makes all its other challenges possible in the first place: *Writers of Disaster* calls on its readers to think in a new way about what has come to be called the Genocide. With all the thinking that has been done about the Genocide, with all the political and cultural and emotional work to which it has been subjected, it seems absurd that anyone could call for a new kind of thought about that disastrous event. But Nichanian's call is not so absurd once we recognize that he is not calling for a new kind of thought about the *Genocide* at all; rather, he is calling for a new kind of thought about what he calls the Catastrophe. What is more, this new kind of thought is also, paradoxically, an old kind of thought, since he sees traces of it in early-twentieth-century Armenian literature. So it is this difference, between Genocide and Catastrophe, and this new kind of thought, which is also an old kind of thought, a thought at once surprising and overdue, that I will discuss here.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the participants in two symposiums where I presented earlier versions of this review: one at the Glendale (California) Public Library in June 2002 (thanks especially to Isgouhi Kassakhian, Director of Alumni Center Management at the UCLA Alumni Association), and another at Columbia University in December 2002 sponsored by the Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures.

Consider this passage from the introduction to *Writers of Disaster*:

The history of the Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century has been sealed by an event that requires no immediate qualification: the total extermination of the Western Armenians, those who lived in the Ottoman Empire. This event bears a name in Armenian, a name among others, a name that did not really prevail in popular consciousness and henceforth in everyday language, a name which is still waiting for its full understanding. This name is *Aghed*, which means Catastrophe, like Shoah in Hebrew...

For all that, we do not know yet why *Aghed*, translated as Catastrophe, is not only the proper name of the event, but also an orienting concept, which should allow a possible approach through the luxurious forest of a literature that developed in the Armenian language simultaneously in Tbilisi and Constantinople, Paris and Yerevan, Beirut and Los Angeles. Then we have first to free this event, the Catastrophe, from everything that weighs against its comprehension, in particular from the ballast that historical and political approaches always introduced into it. It is a question of liberating the Catastrophe of everything that transforms it into an object, an instance, or a fact, that gives a delusory *meaning* to it. (pp. 10–12)

When Nichanian writes that the Catastrophe “sealed” the history of the Armenians, I would say that he is invoking two senses of that word: Armenian history has been closed, sealed up, put away, by traditional, empiricist understandings of the Catastrophe; but also, the seal that covers over this history calls to be broken open, read, and interpreted. We are called upon here to understand the horrific events that

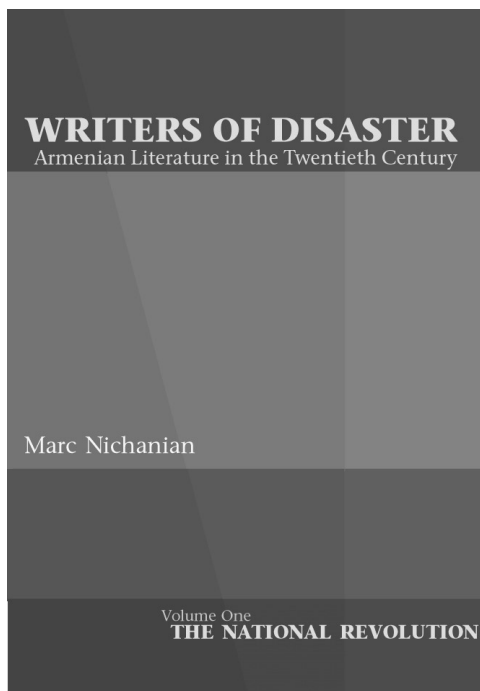
unfolded between 1895 and 1917, as well as their aftermath, not only as historical or political facts. Indeed, it is the persistent, twentieth-century understanding of this “total extermination” as simply a historical or political fact that we must open up, unseal, and challenge. Nichanian’s representation of this challenge intrigues me: We are called upon to “free this event, the Catastrophe,” to “liberate” it from traditional historical and political approaches. What is this opening, this practice of freedom and liberation that is not a traditional history or a politics? Is it another kind of history and politics, a new kind of history and politics that is also an old kind of history and politics, a kind of history and politics for which writers such as Essayan and Charents were killed, a kind that died with them?

What happens when we break the seal of Armenian history? Beyond even the material facts of violence and bloodshed, Nichanian suggests, there exists an even more devastating catastrophe, a more fundamental violence that we have yet to confront. In the early twentieth century, Nichanian argues, Zabel Essayan tried to confront this more fundamental violence, and she may be able to show us the way even today. Particularly in her novel *Among the Ruins*, Essayan wrote of what she experienced in Cilicia in 1909 as a member of a delegation sent to Adana by the Armenian patriarchate of Constantinople. By emphasizing again and again that what she saw was in some deep sense unrepresentable and ungraspable, Essayan tells not just of massacres, but also of a will to eliminate an entire people, as well as a will to eliminate the act of elimination itself, so as to withdraw from the people their very ability to mourn their losses. It is this will, Nichanian explains, that Essayan calls the Catastrophe.

What made these events catastrophic, then, was that the loss of life was accompanied by the loss of mourning. What does this mean, the loss of mourning? Since the dead were not acknowledged as dead, since the massacres were denied as massacres, from the very beginning the people were prohibited from mourning. Not only were people murdered on a devastating scale, but also mournful representations of those murders were blocked, interdicted. If one of the central features of our humanity is our ability to mourn the loss of life, to give meaning to that loss through mourning, then the prohibition on mourning becomes even more catastrophic than the loss of life itself, since it goes beyond the extermination of individual lives to the extermination of our humanity. Extreme violence coupled with a denial of the very extremeness of that violence produces a kind of limit experience, an experience of the limits of all representation.

Let me quote from Essayan's *Among the Ruins*, some of which is translated in the appendix of Nichanian's book (and let me say as an all-too-brief aside, that this work of translation and republication is itself a work of mourning given to us by Nichanian's book).

When I saw for the first time these pale orphans with their haggard appearances, gathered together by the hundreds, I was unable—despite superhuman efforts—to grasp the totality of their misfortune, and still today I cannot. Particular details and images (*patkerner*) come to mind, certainly, but never have I been able to take account of the infinite (*ansahmaneli*), bloody history that each of these children represents. For a long time I was incapable of attending to any one of them in particular. I heard a confused, uncertain, indefinite (*ansahmaneli*) tragic ululation, expressed by



the totality of these still childish, still distracted gazes that had not yet understood what had happened. This bloodbath, this stream of spilled blood, this despair of a humanity driven mad, caught between fire and blade, all this remained beyond my imagination, and I believe this was the case for everyone involved. . . . Indeed, it is not possible to grasp or to perceive straightaway the terrible reality. This latter is beyond the limits of human imagination. (pp. 205, 206)

So the survivors, these children, are stricken, their language is shattered, their imagination is rent asunder, and Essayan says that she is closest to their experience when she too finds herself stricken, shattered, beyond the limits of human understanding. As Nichanian shows, Essayan paradoxically names the unnameable; she tenuously puts into language the shattering of language. But she does so not to put language back together, not to master this experience, not even to document it as factual proof. She gives herself over to the

indefinable not to define it, but rather to signal its indefinableness, to mark its limit, to bear witness to its extremity. This is the Catastrophe, in two senses: the Catastrophe is the violence that is beyond all comprehension, and the Catastrophe is the barely comprehensible name Essayan gives to this incomprehensible violence. She does the profound work of putting into language the limits of comprehension.

It is for this reason that Nichanian repeatedly calls Essayan a modern-day Antigone, Sophocles's figure who was entombed alive by her uncle Creon for defying his edict against mourning the death of her brother. For Antigone, a state that strikes down bodies as well as the very possibility of giving meaning to the stricken is a state that takes law beyond the human, that enacts an inhuman law. She thus teaches us that humanity itself is sustained by mourning, and in her living entombment she exemplifies a certain resistance to inhumanity. Antigone, and Essayan as Antigone, seem to represent for

claims that while Armenians have constantly reminded ourselves of the loss of life, we have rarely confronted the loss of mourning. Indeed, in the tragic deaths of all the writers Nichanian discusses in his book, in their sacrifice to a range of nationalist ideals, and in the nationalist polemics of the last eighty years, we can see not just a passive refusal to confront the loss of mourning, he argues, but rather an active repression of that loss, a compulsive, anxious entombment of mourning itself. And thus, in a sense, the Catastrophe can be said to have continued, can be said to be continuing, until we make this difficult confrontation with the loss of mourning. We can, Nichanian suggests, be said to have mimicked Creon himself in our efforts to make definitive political and juridical sense of the Catastrophe, in our compulsion to prove the Catastrophe happened.

Take, for instance, the discourse of Genocide, so familiar to Armenians in the diaspora. Coined after World War II in the tradition of positive law and positivist

historiography, the word "Genocide" names a particular way of thinking about catastrophe. Elsewhere, Nichanian has called it an "ominous and disgusting" word, not just because it names an ominous and disgusting event, but also because, in the way Armenians have used it, we have sought

to prove something that is beyond comprehension; we have tried to document something that Essayan so profoundly shows is essentially, deeply unimaginable. The result is that we have forgotten

## Nichanian claims that while Armenians have constantly reminded ourselves of the loss of life, we have rarely confronted the loss of mourning.

Nichanian the opening of the seal that has been set on Armenian history and politics. Might the work of mourning we see in Antigone and Essayan, or in Essayan as Antigone, be the kind of politics that is not a politics, the kind of history that is not a history, the very "freedom" and "liberation" to which Nichanian refers in his introduction?

This brings us to the most unsettling aspect of *Writers of Disaster*. Nichanian

<sup>2</sup> "Between Genocide and Catastrophe," David Kazanjian and Marc Nichanian, in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003), p. 128.

what Essayan, among others, showed us was the central feature of the Catastrophe. To quote her, it is “beyond the limits of human imagination.” Thus this word itself, Genocide, in the way it has been used, denies the catastrophic character of the Catastrophe, foreclosing our ability to mourn by suppressing the withdrawal of mourning from the stricken.

“Genocide,” in this usage, has become an example of what it describes. It is not simply a word we use to represent an event we can know. Rather, it has become a word that represents us in our use of it, repressing what is most catastrophic about the event it names. How can such a word have such a performative effect? How can “Genocide” do such a thing, act in such a way? This is one of the most profound challenges with which Nichanian presents us. Long after Essayan wrote of the Catastrophe as unnamable, this word “Genocide” has emerged to name, with utter, sometimes desperate confidence, the unnamable. Nichanian calls on us to consider how this has happened, and, thus, to reread Essayan, or even to allow *Among the Ruins* to read us.

What would it mean to begin to think not just the Genocide, but also the Catastrophe, to both read Essayan and allow *Among the Ruins* to read us? As I have said, Nichanian emphasizes that such thinking is yet to come, and so could never be laid out programatically ahead of time. We need to read and reread *Writers of Disaster*, and the writers of disaster of which Nichanian writes, to find traces of such thinking. But I did find extremely compelling one clue Nichanian gives us about this thinking of Catastrophe.

In his interpretation of Charents’s poem “Requiem Æternam in Memory of Komitas,” Nichanian finds an essential foreignness, a foundational alienation in Armenian identity. Komitas was an in-

fluent priest, musician, and ethnographer who was deported from Constantinople in 1915 only to be returned to the city shortly after, with his mental health in tatters. He was institutionalized for the rest of his life; he died in Paris in 1935, and in 1936 his ashes were taken to Soviet Armenia. Charents wrote “Requiem Æternam” in 1936 to mark this movement of Komitas’s ashes.

“Requiem Æternam” has all too often been read as a triumphal ode to national identity, forged out of loss, as a kind of celebration of Komitas’s return to his homeland. But by reminding us that Komitas never really existed in the place to which he was “returned,” Nichanian offers a counterintuitive reading. The beginning of the poem Nichanian translates as follows:

*For us you are the song of the homeland  
Come back to the fatherland.  
Suffering has stamped a cruel seal  
On your countenance. (p. 55)*

What does it mean to figure Komitas as “the song of the homeland” returning to the “fatherland”? As Nichanian argues, the word “homeland,” or “*Hayreni*” is used to qualify the familial, paternal home, the village of one’s ancestors, one’s native soil, the place where one grew up. It refers, then, to one’s homeland in the local sense of the term, very close to the German *heimlich*.” (pp. 54–55) Komitas’s ashes, like the song of the homeland, thus paradoxically never lived in the fatherland; they must come, crumbling, after death, in mourning, for the first time, to the fatherland. Writes Nichanian,

[Komitas] becomes that which has wandered for centuries, bearing the original song within him. The fact that his body has come back from a foreign place... helps Charents portray Armenian song as something that has been foreign to itself for centuries,

or even, perhaps, throughout its existence, from the very first moment it was proffered. It had never attained fulfillment. Perpetually exiled, perpetually wandering from place to place, it had never heard itself, had never passed from mouth to ear in the plenitude of a fatherland. Nowhere else does... Charents come so close to the Western Armenians and their fate, the madness of their fate. (pp. 55–56)

We can see here that the “cruel seal” suffering has stamped on the countenance of Komitas is not a legible record of Genocide; it is not a fact entombed in a transparent coffin, stuffed and preserved like Lenin’s body. It is rather a kind of fragile, crumbling, broken, illegible seal, set as it is not on a preserved body, but on ashes themselves. This is the seal we encountered earlier, in Nichanian’s introduction, in the sentence, “The history of the Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century has been sealed by an event that requires no immediate qualification.” This is the seal that covers over history, but also calls to be broken open, read, and interpreted. Once the seal is opened, read, and interpreted, Nichanian suggests, we face not a triumphant national unity, not a preserved substance, not an empirical object. Rather, we face a crumbling face that is strange to us.

At the beginning of *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud also urges that we look into this strange, crumbling face. He expresses astonishment that the apparently Egyptian origin of the name “Moses” has not led biblical scholars to suggest that Moses could have been Egyptian. Writes Freud: “Possibly the notion that the man Moses might have been anything but a He-

brew seemed too monstrous.”<sup>3</sup> *Moses and Monotheism* could be read as a narration of the monstrous possibility that the foundation of Judaism is other than Jewish. That is, rather than purging the monstrous possibility that Moses was radically other, Freud scandalously proposes narrating that possibility. As always, Freud insists on the provisional character of his effort, and thus leaves open the possibility, indeed the necessity of other, future narrations. So Freud calls on us to narrate and renarrate a foundational strangeness, thus invoking a paradoxical and open-ended practice.

How does Freud’s practice speak to us here? If to be “Armenian” has largely become to understand the Catastrophe as “Genocide,” then would re-calling the Catastrophe as Catastrophe be a confrontation with the monstrous possibility that the “Genocide” is anything but “Armenian,” that Armenians are anything but “Armenian”? What would this confrontation entail? If we acknowledge a fundamental lack of homogeneity to Armenian culture, a perpetual permeability of Armenian language and so-called national identity to this foreignness, to other influences, other worlds, and other identities, might we begin to embrace our strangeness to ourselves? Might we begin to mourn not a lost, hermetic greatness, but rather precisely an attachment to hermetic and homogeneous ideas of national identity? Might this mourning be the very paradoxical and open-ended practice of which Charents and Freud write? Might we hear in Komitas’s suffering, as well as the suffering of Essayan, Charents, and the others of which Nichanian writes, the challenge of Antigone’s entombed sacrifice?

At times in his work, Nichanian seems to despair of this possibility. It is too far off, too difficult for us to do. But at other times, if rarely, he is hopeful: at one point

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), vol. 23, p. 9.

he writes that the work of authors such as Charents and Essayan “inspire[s] me with the hope that perhaps we can still escape the war of propaganda, the encounter with the atavistic enemy and the real or imagined executioner; that we can still find a possible way toward intelligibility; that one day we will be able to overcome nationalistic visions of the world.” (p. 98) Perhaps more often than Nichanian, I too find myself hopeful about this thought of the Catastrophe. Here is my hope. That the horizon of the Catastrophe will be an opening of Armenianness to the otherness within and around us, a link to the struggles of others. That we will mourn the Catastrophe by mourning with others who also face the denial of their own losses, who also face the loss of their own mourning. These days, with the United States unleashing its military might around the globe at a regular and regularly brutal clip, and with domestic policy marching steadily to the right, there is no shortage of such losses. Indeed, we do not have to look too far to see that this work has already begun in the contemporary Armenian diaspora itself: for example, in the music and music videos of System of a Down; in Charles Gary’s lifelong

struggle for social justice; in the humor and relentlessness of Atom Egoyan’s films *Next of Kin* and *Calendar*; in Arlene Avakian’s memoir *Lion Woman’s Legacy*; and in a brilliant short film by Tina Bastajian called *Pinched Cheeks and Slurs in a Language that Avoids Her*.

So in English we might very well call Nichanian’s new kind of thinking a thinking that comes “none too soon,” because he argues that this new kind of thinking is, paradoxically, at once too late and too soon for us. That is, Nichanian suggests that we should have begun to think this new way about the Catastrophe long ago, we should have been able to listen to early-twentieth-century Armenian writers such as Essayan rather than letting them be killed for their thinking. But Nichanian also suggests that right now we cannot quite imagine what it would mean to think the Genocide as Catastrophe. We need, Nichanian writes in his introduction, “a comprehension that takes account of the catastrophe, or rather, that finally develops *on the horizon of the Catastrophe*.” (p. 19) So here we have *Writers of Disaster*, and none too soon.

*David Kazanjian*