

# SOME RECENT LITERARY EXCURSIONS INTO ARMENIAN HISTORY AND TRADITION

DR. INGRID SEMAAN

## 1

Students of European and American literature have now and then encountered the figure of the Armenian in their reading. Who can forget the intriguing Armenian that haunts the alleys and squares of Schiller's Venice; or the bomber pilot Yossarian of *Catch 22*; or the people of Musa Dagh in Franz Werfel's novel;<sup>1</sup> or the Byzantine general Narses who, together with his imperial patrons, stands at the center of a whole tradition of historical romance writing?

During the last few years, we have been hearing quite often about the former Soviet Republic of Armenia and all the problems that plague that part of the world. In a similar manner, Armenia and the Armenians have not been forgotten by novelists who are writing now. Naturally, Narses keeps appearing in popular historical novels; the great general and trusted adviser and friend of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora in Gillian Bradshaw's novel *The Bearkeeper's Daughter* (1987) is perhaps the most recent addition to this list.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, however, recent novelists have turned to figures and events less well known outside of Armenian tradition, or to the very painful collective experiences of the Armenians. Some novels try to cover whole periods of Armenian history and tradition. I cannot claim that in my reading for this paper I have exhausted the whole subject. All the books<sup>3</sup> I will discuss on the following pages I picked up at random on my way to university during the course of one semester. I had to wait quite a bit of time for connecting trains, but fortunately there was a bookshop in one of the stations. It was interesting to see how popular this figure of the Armenian and his tradition still is; of yet greater interest to me is the fact that these very varied books, when examined together, provide a type of commentary on Armenian history from the mythical

beginnings up to the last decades of the twentieth century.

From time immemorial, Mt. Ararat and the adjacent regions have fascinated the imagination of a great part of mankind. Is it true, as tradition has it, that Mt. Ararat is the very mountain on which Noah's Ark came to rest after the waters of the Flood had abated? Is it true that pieces of the Ark can still be found somewhere in the ice on the slopes of the mountain? For about a century and a half, these questions have motivated many a seeker after the truth who has wanted to verify them with his or her own eyes, to undertake an expedition to climb Mt. Ararat.<sup>4</sup> These actual alpinists have recently also been joined by fictional ones as we shall see.

Armenian tradition tells that it was high on the slopes of the mountain that Noah settled down in the little village of Ahora, or Arghuri. It was there that he made a sacrifice, built an altar, saw the rainbow, and planted his first vineyard--and we may surmise that the first post-Flood intoxication was brought about by grapes grown on these hallowed slopes, "grapes delicious to eat, but which Heaven, in memory of that fault they had betrayed" Noah into, "had forbidden to be made into wine"<sup>5</sup> -- a commandment not always respected by the people of Noah's mountain.

Getting to Mt. Ararat has always been difficult and dangerous, but there has been great merit in the mind of the Western pilgrim, especially of recent times, of having conquered the mountain and having brought away a piece of the Ark. The faithful Armenian Christians did not need any tangible proof of their living tradition associated with the mountain. For many centuries, the Armenian Church devoutly believed "that no mortal foot can profane the summit of the Holy Mountain."<sup>6</sup> Their conviction was based on the legend of St. Jacob that tells how the pious monk wanted to see Noah's Ark which tradition placed on the mountain top, despite omens and admonitions from his fellow brothers. Nevertheless, he set out on his quest; but whenever he had climbed part of the way, he would fall asleep, and when he awoke, he was at the foot of the mountain again. Finally, God allowed him to climb up to the Ark just for once. He made his ascent, returned with a beam from the Ark, and a little above the village of Ahora he built the monastery called after him where the relic was to be kept.

In the case of the holy man, the mountain did not strike back; but in local lore it was quite well known that the good monks of St. Jacob and the people of Noah's hamlet had always been living at the edge of the precipice, for they really existed on land that was under a curse. Armenian legends told that it was in the Ahora Gorge, not far from the village, that the haughty Prince Ardavazd came to an ungodly end, and thus his father's curse was fulfilled. One day, the prince might return and pass on the evil spell. Similar ideas we find also in Kurdish tradition. Yasar Kemal has revived the legends clustered around an angry Mt. Ararat in his *Agri Dagı Efsanesi* (1970). No one should dare the mountain, for none of those who had set out to reach the summit has ever



returned. The enmity between man and the mountain reaches back to the mists of the beginning of time. Ancient man saw that the fountain at the top of the mountain reached to the center of the earth; he climbed down and returned with the stolen fire; the fire that came from the heart of Ararat. The thief ran down the slopes of the mountain and almost reached its foot when the mountain woke up from its slumber, grabbed the offender, and turned him and the fire in his hand to stone.

Perhaps it was on account of one of these curses when on June 20, 1840 (old style), the mountain shook and destroyed the village of Ahora and the monastery that St. Jacob had built. This ancient village had been such a pleasant and picturesque place; then came disaster.

Toward sunset ... the sudden shock of an earthquake, accompanied by a subterranean roar, and followed by a terrific blast of wind, threw down the houses of Arghuri, and at the same moment detached enormous masses of rock with their superjacent ice from the cliffs that surround the chasm. A shower of falling rocks overwhelmed in an instant the village, the monastery, and a Kurdish encampment on the pastures above. Not a soul survived to tell the tale.<sup>7</sup>

Trembling mountains and Kurdish tales and legends from Armenian hagiography for a long time did keep mountain climbers away, but they could not ward off the enlightened travelers of the 19th century. Thus on September 27, 1829, Dr. Friedrich Parrot, professor of natural sciences at the University of Dorpat in Estonia and experienced alpinist to boot, reached the peak; the curse of the mountain did not turn him to stone. Instead, he returned to tell his tale: *Reise zum Ararat* (1834). In 1845, the English version was published.

Since then, there have been many others who left the mementoes of their success or failure behind, for the mountain did sometimes wake up and strike back at all this puny human presumption. In recent times, the mountain has become somewhat of a tourist attraction, that is, if the political climate that rules eastern Anatolia allows it, and Turkish national fervor is not too excited by the demands of the Kurdish freedom fighters who have found shelter on the slopes and in the caves of the mountain. Mt. Ararat, especially since the end of the Second World War, has also frequently attracted American alpinists.<sup>8</sup> In many instances, these are religious men and women who believe in the word-for-word truth of any account in the Bible. Because of Mt. Ararat's geographical proximity to the border with the then Soviet Union, a number of military men from the U. S. A. had the chance to visit and explore, within reasonable and proper limits to be sure, this remote yet very crucial corner of the NATO sphere of interest.

From this American presence, the two escaped German youths in Horst Kanitz's *Flucht! Kurs Ararat* (1960; rpt. 1990) are to benefit greatly. The boys had been drafted during the last days of the war into the German army and in summer of 1945 fell into the hands of the Red Army who interned them with

many other prisoners of war somewhere in Armenia. This does not break the spirit of the youngsters, and, with the help of God and that of a couple of friendly Armenian women, they manage to escape through the vast labyrinth of subterranean tunnels and mines and shafts and caves that lies under the regions of Armenia and Mt. Ararat. The mountain and its benevolent spirit, the old Armenian shepherd Hamuleith (or is he an old Tartar? The author is not always so sure about the ethnic identity of far-away peoples) shelter the boys but bring death and destruction to their Soviet enemies. The young Germans are eventually rescued by a group of American scientists who are looking for pieces of Noah's Ark.

2

One of the most interesting scientist Ark-seekers is the American moon-walker James Benson Irwin of the Apollo 15 Project.<sup>9</sup> It is this explorer who served as model for Julian Barnes's astronaut Spike Tiggler, the protagonist of Chapter IX, "Project Ararat", in the "novel" *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989).

Back in the summer of 1974, according to the novel, Spike was on one of his walks on the moon as he felt the desire to play football. It seems he had anticipated this urge and had brought a ball with him. After he had indulged himself and contemplated the earth as seen from the moon, a voice spoke to him and charged him to go and look for Noah's Ark. And since Spike was not too well versed in Biblical lore and his knowledge of geography was a bit faulty, the voice continued with further instructions: he would find the ship on Mt. Ararat, a mountain in modern Turkey. Back on earth, the experience was to haunt him and change his whole way of life.

He gave up his job with NASA, bought a Bible, turned into an expert fundraiser, and organized an expedition obedient to the voice, to God's commandment, to bring back to America whatever was left of Noah's Ark. Project Apollo was to be superseded by Project Ararat. The Rev. Lance Gibson, another Billy Graham, blessed the expedition; Spike was joined by a traveling companion, Dr. Jimmy Fullgood; and so he set out for Mt. Ararat in June 1977.

So much for the background. But Spike has not really oriented himself about the strategic importance of the mountain to the peoples of the region, and he innocently tries to gain the sympathy of everybody he meets by handing out to them pictures of a smiling Jimmy Carter and his happy family.

Spike and Jimmy Fullgood approach the mountain first from the south east and do not find even one stick. Then they try the north, well aware of the hostile Soviet eyes under whose scrutiny they climb. Nothing happens, but Spike can show off his knowledge of history when they are awed by a deep dark gorge. There, he points, is the site of a monastery that housed once real monks and everything. Then in 1840, a fierce earthquake shook the mountain like a dog



would toss a rat. The quake was so strong that the little church was ruined, and the village that was located a little down the mountain was hit as well. He cannot remember the name of the place, but he recalls that it starts with an "A"; anyhow, all the people of this place got killed, either right away or soon after. All this went to show you, Jimmy Fullgood reflects thereupon, that God wanted to let those nogood Soviets know, even at a time when they were still only Russians or whatever, that He has no use for them!

So much for God's intervention in modern history. The Ark they did not find, but Spike again indulged himself and played football--this time on Mt. Ararat.

Has the voice on the moon encouraged a mad goose chase? Perhaps; yet Spike vows he will return on another expedition; then, during the last day of their search, the two men find the remains of a human being in a cave not far from the site of Noah's village Ahora. Have they accidentally come across Noah's tomb and thus made the archeological find of the ages? So close to Ahora -- they must have found the bones of Noah ... at least those of Mrs. Noah -- the mountaineers speculate. On second thought, it would be better to keep quiet, smuggle a few odd little bones out of Turkey and have them subjected to the Carbon 14 Test. The result shatters the hopes of the two men.

The reader of Barnes's novel by now is well aware that those odd little bones once belonged to an intrepid Victorian mountain-climbing spinster, one Miss Amanda Fergusson, whose quest the novelist has already described in Chapter VI which is dedicated to "The Mountain".

In the fall of 1839, together with her companion Miss Logan, Amanda left Dublin to make a pilgrimage to the monastery dedicated to St. Jacob and to Noah's hometown, the one that begins with with the letter "A". Her aim was to intercede on the holy ground of the mountain with God for the sinful and doubting soul of her late father. That misguided man had believed that the account of the Flood as recorded in Genesis was just another fairy tale.

Yet the further east she journeys, the more she forgets her objective; she comes to hate and curse the very place that promised redemption before. The Armenian priests and their supposed relics of the Ark disgust her. When the ladies reach Ahora on June 19, 1840, she can find only fault with everything and everybody.

In preparation for her pilgrimage, Miss Fergusson had read Dr. Parrot's account of how he had climbed Mt. Ararat eleven years before. The professor had enjoyed the simple way of life of the villagers and their company. He had thought very highly of the old monks and had appreciated the good wine made from the grapes of Noah's vines. On the other hand, Miss Fergusson (the tract-reading Protestant lady from Dublin is made of much firmer moral stuff) is disgusted: the buildings of the village remind her of a bunch of piglets snuggling up to a mother sow; everybody and everything is papist, or at least is decrepit and smells; the priest is a great womanizer since he has committed the mortal

sin and touched the elbow of the lady. When she is offered a glass of the local wine as a gesture of hospitality, her wrath knows no bounds. This was blasphemy! Didn't these people know that God had forbidden them to ferment the holy grapes from Noah's vine? And now this monk wanted to taint her too! This insult is simply too much, and she rudely storms out of the hospitable walls of St. Jacob and adds her curse to that of the wicked Armenian prince, of Mt. Ararat, of God Himself. The next day, the mountain and God oblige the Protestant lady.

By then, Miss Fergusson and her companions, Miss Logan and a wise Kurdish guide, have already left those two nests of iniquity far behind as they strive to reach the mountain top.

They are not to get there. As they are relaxing late in the afternoon of June 20, the mountain shakes and explodes. Miss Fergusson from her vantage point and with the help of her field glasses watches with gloating and great satisfaction how the village and the monastery disappear from the surface of the earth. It is a sight reserved for her eyes, and so she neither shares with the myopic Miss Logan nor with us what she sees. God has cleansed the Holy Mountain from sin, and Miss Fergusson approves.

It is only natural that Miss Fergusson who has experienced the *mysterium tremendum* and has seen God's immediate positive response to her wish is no longer fit for the mundane world of Dublin; thus she stumbles and falls and asks to be allowed to die in a small cave on the slopes of the Holy Mountain. There her mortal remains rested till that moon-walker Spike Tiggler thought he had found the bones of perhaps Mrs. Noah.

Miss Logan, for her part, on the way down the mountain passes the completely destroyed monastery and the few rocks that are left of Ahora. The inhabitants have all been killed, but the vines, the cause of the blasphemy, God has ironically preserved, Miss Logan, a woman grown wise, reflects.

The cursed ground of Ahora, the anger of Mt. Ararat--these are also themes in Kurdish tradition. The bard of Yasar Kemal's book sings about the raging and devouring mountain; how once it granted refuge to an outcast and how the mountain became so outraged at human wickedness and cruelty that it turned against itself, tore off part of its own north flank and hurled it at those living on its slopes. Every living creature that belonged to fifteen villages came that day to an ungodly end. When that happened, the outcast looked up as he ran; like Miss Fergusson he saw that there was nothing left of the villages. No one can resist the anger of this mountain; it will hold and keep what it desires, the Kurds know.

3

This will be the fate of the most recent fictional quester to Mt. Ararat: Tigor whom we meet in the novel by Peter Stephan Jungk that is called after the protagonist.



The call to depart on his grand quest to become the long awaited savior who will reach on behalf of his Armenian friends in Soviet Armenia the summit of Mt. Ararat and there reclaim for them the sacred wood of the Ark happens relatively late in Tigor's life. For a long time, Tigor, professor of mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania, is completely unaware of the very existence of both Mt. Ararat and the Armenians. Then, one day in the late 1980s, while attending a scientific congress in his hometown Trieste, he suddenly knows that he has to change his way of life. He walks out of the lecture and his job, lives for a while like Thoreau in the woods, drifts from one place to the next, and eventually ends up as stagehand in a second-rate theater house in Paris. Before he becomes completely unhinged, he collapses one night, and in a nightmare vision he undertakes a journey to Massis, the Mother of the World. The conscious man would not know where to find that place on the map. Enter Dr. Chabanian. The physician who looks after the unconscious stagehand interprets the mumbling of Tigor and encourages him to take this visionary journey seriously and translate it into action.

When Tigor accidentally discovers in a bookshop Johann Jacob von Parrot's [sic] *Reise zum Ararat* (1834) and André Parrot's *Déluge et arche de Noé* (1952), he himself is convinced of his call to action and adventure. Tigor, listening to Dr. Chabanian as he tells about the sad history of Armenia, is strangely moved. To become more convinced of the significance of such a quest, he is sent by the doctor to the tomb of King Levon V, the last king of Armenia, in the church of St. Denis in Paris. When his uncle dies, Tigor's last link with the West is severed. He takes the first flight to Yerevan.

He is already expected there by the leaders of the local cultural elite, one Johann Wolfgang Oganessian and his twin brother; the Parisian physician has announced Tigor as a person with a high mission. There is no doubt in the minds of this Yerevan group that Tigor is the chosen one, the one with the mission they themselves cannot accomplish. During an outing to the monastery Khorvirap, in sight of the mountain, he is charged by the elders of the community with the task to reclaim the sacred relics found on Mt. Ararat and thus bring new life to Armenia, the land of Hayastan.

Before he realizes it, the drifter Tigor has accepted the charge and prepares himself for the journey. Towards the end of summer, he will cross over to the land which was once called Hayastan, and he will ascend the Mother of all Mountains. In the meantime, he lives in a room in Hotel Armenia, teaches English and mathematics to the children of Haghtanak School, and during his free time he is initiated into Armenian history. The high point during these few months constitutes the visit to Yerevan by the alpinist astronaut James Benson Irwin whose fictionalized double Spike Tiggler we have already met. The experience of meeting the seeker of the Ark draws Tigor even closer to the mountain.

It might yet be possible that the astronaut will reach the summit and the

Ark in the service of the greater glory of the people of Hayastan before Tigor. The latter, now possessed by the idea of his "Armenian" destiny, is not bothered by his possible failure as he is driven through "Arzach! Arzach! Arzach!" shouting crowds of patriotic Yerevanlis who are totally unaware of the great destiny awaiting him. When a few days later he finally gets to Dogubayazit, the last station of the alpinists before the mountain, his conviction of the sacredness of his mission, however, is sadly shaken when he is accosted by a whole swarm of prospective Western conquerors of the Holy Mountain. Once he has left the town behind, he becomes aware of the power the mountain has over him. This feeling of oneness gets shattered when he falls into the hands of a band of Kurds who badly maul and almost to kill him. But the mountain provides the see-ker with a protector and guide; ironically it is the gang leader of the Peshmerga fighters who a moment ago wanted Tigor's life.

And the Kurd promises to guide Tigor up to the site of the Ark; first though they have to climb down into a frightening icy gorge and continue their quest under the glacier through a vast icy labyrinth that seemingly leads into the heart of the mountain. Then, ahead of them, there is "the town of Ahora!" the freedomfighter shouts with enthusiasm. The earthquake happened exactly a century and a half before the two of them get to the ruins of the village, he instructs the professor of mathematics who really has very little knowledge of history.

Down in the huge vault under masses of ice, Tigor has his final revelation. Once back in Yerevan when his friends wanted to convince him of his grand mission and reminisced about the glory that was once Hayastan, they evoked the memory of Tigranes the Great. Tigor was struck by the similarity between his own strictly Latin-rooted name and that of this Armenian king of kings of antiquity. Nobody else noticed, and so Tigor kept quiet and for a while pondered that insight in his heart. Now, in the rubble of what was once Ahora, again he is confronted by a message from antiquity. In front of him there is the empty base of what must have once been a huge monument. He can make out the dates, B.C. 140-55, and an inscription in Armenian letters. There is also a map with many wavy lines and a square in the upper right corner. Tigor, overcome with awe, remains kneeling for quite a while in front of the stone. He knows the meaning of the letters and the dates on the base of the monument. They are the name and dates of Emperor Tigranes II. The map, more than likely, shows the location of the Ark.

Tigor's physical quest on one level is a journey into his past and into his soul and prepares him for his death, and that aspect of the novel is successful. His excursions into Armenian history and even into an Armenian identity, leave the reader dissatisfied. Why did his personal quest take him to the god-forsaken ruins of Ahora? Wouldn't the ruins of Tigranocerta be the more appropriate venue for the confrontation of Tigor with the memento of his almost namesake? What is the relationship between the king of kings and this modern dropout? What is the significance of his mission? And the fate of modern Ar-



menia? The novel raises these issues, but in the final analysis nothing does really seem to matter: another madman, another quester, has left his bones on the mountain that a future Ararat-walker might perhaps mistake for those of Mrs. Noah. The Peshmerga man abandons his charge since his own Kurdish allegiance demands of him to do some more serious killing that day, and Tigor's Armenian friends by now, more than likely, have forgotten their savior and his mission and have joined the "Arzach! Arzach! Arzach" shouting masses that Tigor saw crowding the squares of Yerevan. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

4

Once upon a time, Tigranes the Great conquered the whole Middle East and from Tigranocerta, the fabulous city he had built himself, he ruled an Armenian empire that stretched from the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea, from the Caucasus Mountains to Palestine. The city was destroyed by the Roman legions; the country did not have a great chance of survival; and the king himself was betrayed by his sons.

One of them, another Tigranes, we meet in John Maddox Roberts's novel *SPQR* (1990). This younger Tigranes is one of the shadier figures in Armenian history, and the novelist has not made any attempt to improve the image of his antagonist.

Decius Caecilius Metellus the Younger who tells the tale, now a high ranking official, recalls what life was like back in the late fall of 70 B. C. when he was a young public security man in a crime-ridden Rome. Superficially there seems to be no connection between the cases of theft, murder, fraud, gang wars, arson, crooked land deals, piracy and treason, to name just a few, that are happening in his district. Since he is a conscientious and intelligent young man of great integrity, he soon begins to see that he too might be pulled into a huge international web of criminal intrigue and corruption compared to which the Watergates and Irangates of our time are paltry affairs. He thinks that his investigations should show that the guilty parties are found in the gutter, yet the more Decius pokes there, the more he is sure that the heart of Roman corruption has its seat in the highest circles of Roman society. Strangely enough, every crime that comes his way sooner or later seems to involve Mithridates of Pontus, in 70 B.C. state enemy No. 1 of Rome: the potentate who challenged Roman supremacy in the East, who had badly defeated Marcus Aurelius Cotta, the Roman consul, at Chalcedon a few years before, and who now in 70 B. C. is hiding at the court of his son-in-law, no other than Tigranes the Great of Armenia, in Tigranocerta from the avenging Roman legions who are commanded by General Lucullus. As if all this is not enough, the fellow has more than the legendary nine lives of a cat and now is corrupting the lives of the good moral Roman citizens in their very own hometown.

One day Lucius is invited to an illustrious party; Cicero, Caesar, and Pom-

pey the "inspector" knows very well, but he has yet to be introduced to a dandified chubby-cheeked young Hellene. It turns out to be the young Tigranes, supposedly on a state visit. He gives himself the air of an ardent friend of Rome, though his father's kingdom is virtually at war with Lucullus on account of Mithridates. It is obvious that back home in Tigranocerta things between the two Tigranes's are not what they should be. Decius at first dismisses the chubby-cheeked prince as a nonentity; nevertheless, soon enough it becomes evident to him that the crimes that are upsetting Roman life are all directly leading back to this young Armenian and not so much to his grandfather Mithridates.

Treason is in the air, and Tigranes has come to the city to join in the Roman poker game for power. It is an unscrupulous pokering for political and military control, so corrupt that it will take honest Decius quite some time to realize who the players and what the stakes are. The objective is to discredit Lucullus at all cost, provoke him into declaring by himself war on Tigranes the Great without the necessary consent of the Roman Senate. The obvious beneficiary will be the strong man Pompey, soon to be known as "the Great", with chubby-cheeked Tigranes as faithful dependent. Controlling every move of all the players is, however, the Armenian prince; once his goal is reached and his father deposed and he on the throne, he will no longer be satisfied with the role of an obscure Oriental princeling beholden to his Roman patrons.

The novel depicts the prince as truly a man of many talents: he is an expert instigator of the lowest and filthiest crimes, a liar and traitor, a potential patriot and regicide, an expert at controlling the pokering for power. For the time being, the Pompey of the novel needs his assistance, though in a moment of truth he dismisses Tigranes as an ingratiating slimy Armenian princeling.

The novel does not show whether realpolitik or poetic justice will triumph in the end. Decius has the moral satisfaction to have unraveled and comprehended this huge web of treason and corruption, but he cannot do anything about it. He is thrown into jail. At the trial the two power bosses Pompey and Crassus grant him, Decius confronts them with the truth whereupon they laugh at him. As far as they are concerned, he is the guilty party; they might even condemn him to be crucified--but Decius's clan would not stand for that, and so he is merely banished.

To find out about the fate of the prince and his Roman patrons, we have to turn to history books.

Lucullus did make the fatal blunder and declared war on Tigranes the Great, destroyed the fabulous city and defeated the king, but his career was in decline, and the outraged Senate recalled him. Pompey had played his hand wisely; he became commander-in-chief of the eastern regions of the empire. He benefited from the help of the younger Tigranes and defeated the latter's father in 66 B. C. Success had made Pompey generous and just, for a moment at least, and he returned in a grand gesture the crown to the deposed old ruler and took



the young traitor prisoner. The princeling was led in triumph through the streets of Rome and was later killed as he tried to escape from his Roman dungeon. Poetic justice, after all, determined the end of this intrigue guided by real-politik.

5

The affairs of the more recent and much smaller kingdom of Cilician Armenia have also found their way into modern fiction. In Robert Shea's long historical novel in two parts, *The Saracen: Land of the Infidel* and *The Saracen: The Holy War* (1989), we are introduced to Prince Hethum. He was to become Hethum II (1289-1305) of Cilician Armenia, but his kingship is outside the scope of the novel.

The novel opens in the year 1263. Baybars I, the Mameluke sultan of Egypt and Syria who has been in power for three years, has already defeated the Mongols at Ayn Jalut in Palestine; but this was merely one battle in a long war, and now, three years later, Hulagu Khan is threatening to overrun the whole world of Islam. This time the Khan is not only relying on brute strength and military strategy. In the novel, he has sent two emissaries to Europe to convince the king of France, the Guelfs and Ghibellines, as well as the popes Urban IV and Clement IV of the political and strategical wisdom for them to join with this new power from the East in order to destroy together with him once and for all the archenemy of Christendom: Islam. Most of the European powers do not need much convincing to participate in a new crusade. The Staufen rulers of Sicily have traditionally been the exception to the general consensus (we think of the friendship of Emperor Frederic II and Saladin) and therefore Baybars has sent his envoy, the Mameluke fighter Daoud, to the court of Manfred of Sicily to see that the grand Mongol-Christian alliance is foiled. Daoud is actually a young noble Briton whose crusading parents were murdered in Palestine. The boy was sold as slave to Baybars who liked the lad and handed him over to the Mamelukes to become a member in that brotherhood. Now he is traveling under the assumed identity of the merchant David of Trebizond. Manfred and David cannot stem the tide of popular enthusiasm, and the novel shows how both are slain in 1266 during the Battle of Benevent -- but so are also the envoys that Hulagu Khan has sent. Baybars's prayers are answered, for the alliance between Christian Europe and the Mongol hordes comes to naught-- it would really not be in the political interest of the king of France.

That the two Mongol envoys in the novel, Noyon John Khagan and Philip Uzbek Bagaden, travel in the company of a group of ten Armenian body guards surprises their hosts in Italy. All of the Armenians are the sons of noble families, and Prince Hethum, their future king, is their leader. There is nothing unusual in this arrangement, we are told. First of all, the Armenians are Christians and can pass as Europeans as far as looks are concerned. Another reason

is the fact that the Armenians are not a subject people but an ally of the Mongols. The novel, however, does not elaborate on the historical background of this Armenian-Mongol alliance that came into being under Hethum I and that this alliance was one of the reasons for the terrible massacre of Armenians after Baybars on May 12, 1268, had won another battle against the Mongols and stormed Antioch. Hethum, now no longer king, on a visit in 1307 to the court of the Mongol emir Bilarghu at Anavarza was murdered together with his nephew and his whole entourage.

The ten Armenian nobles of the novel are a sullen lot, hardly capable of a smile, at the same time they are brave fighters (though their methods of fighting are savage) and several of them are killed while defending their charges. Throughout the novel, they and their prince remain marginal figures, though the French and Italian nobles and princes of the church are very much concerned not to spoil their mood. But there is one closeup of Prince Hethum. We see him at the verge of being killed in a tavern brawl by Sordello, a very unsavory Venetian mercenary, on account of a prostitute. He is a handsome chap, easily angered, though not at all vengeful and bloodthirsty. He certainly is not a good judge of people, for later Sordello gloatingly tells that he wormed himself into Hethum's confidence by treating the prince lavishly in the "best" taverns and bordellos of Umbria; in this manner the prince and the mercenary became close friends. Hethum survives the Battle of Benevent, and we see no more of him in the novel.

The historical Hethum did not have the strength of character to lead his country through difficult times; his rule was plagued by the traditional external enemies of Armenia as well as by the jealousies of evil and scheming family members. Against such threats, few of the rulers of the royal houses of Cilician Armenia had a chance. Eventually the kingdom of Cilician Armenia was destroyed by the Mameluke sultan of Egypt, and its last king, Levon V, was taken prisoner in 1375. The family of the king vanished; he, however, was ransomed and died as exile in Paris. There, many centuries later, as we have seen, his place of burial was visited by Tigor when he was preparing himself for his Armenian quest.

6

For a long time, the royal houses of Cilician Armenia and the house of Lusignan of Cyprus maintained close alliances, often cemented by marriage; the marriage of Isabel, sister of Hethum II to Henry II of Cyprus, is just one case in point. There were also the "Latin exiles",<sup>10</sup> those five short-lived Armenian kings of a side-line of the Cypriot Lusignans that ruled the country after 1342. It is then not surprising that after the sad fate of Levon V the claim to the title of the Armenian crown passed to the Cypriot Lusignans.

The last queen and king of this tradition, Carlotta (1458-1460) and her



half-brother James II the Bastard (1460-1473), we meet in the third volume of Dorothy Dunn's trilogy, *The House of Niccolo: Race of Scorpions* (1989; the other volumes are: *Niccolo Rising*, 1986; and *The Spring of the Ram*, 1987). Both royals are vehemently claiming the title "Dei gratia Jerusalem, Cypri et Armeniae rex illustrissimus". All there is left of the kingdoms of Jerusalem and Armenia is the empty title; yet in their savage fight for the title and the crown of Cyprus these last offsprings of the house of Lusignan d'Outre-Mer do their royal Armenian ancestors, including Hethum II and his brothers, all honor.

Nicolaas, the very cunning and successful picaro and mercenary hero of the trilogy, in 1461 on the urging of Emperor David has left the besieged city of Trebizond. On his way back to his hometown Brügge, he rescues Queen Carlotta somewhere in northern Italy from a band of thieves. She is on her way to the court of Savoy, her husband's family, and to other European houses as well, to find help to raise a mercenary army, even to call for a new crusade, to liberate Cyprus from a heretic and usurper, namely her bastard brother. James, son of John II (1432-1458) of Cyprus and Marietta of Patras, in 1460 together with a group of Mamelukes sent to him by the sultan of Egypt has gained power over the greater part of the island. The towns of Famagusta and Kyrenia and the castle of Hilarion are now the only Cypriot possessions left to Carlotta. To regain her royal dower, the queen would sell her soul.

She thinks that she has convinced the wily Nicolaas and his mercenary group to fight on her side, and he seems to oblige her. In the meantime, however, he has sold himself and the services of his group to the Bastard. Carlotta cannot organize any meaningful help, and her Genoese allies are not able to defend the three remaining strongholds on the island. When in 1464 Famagusta falls to James and his Mameluke and Venetian allies, she and Genoa have lost; nevertheless through her the claim to the title "Dei gratia ... Armeniae rex illustrissimus" is passed on to the house of Savoy.

In these intrigues and bloody feuds, Nicolaas has opted for the stronger side of the king. He could never feel much sympathy for Carlotta who treated him no better and no worse than James has. But there is a grand royal aspect to the young monarch; and he might become a charismatic leader, Nicolaas thinks, and therefore he should have a chance. Nicolaas is also aware of many unfavorable traits in the young monarch, characteristics that are traditionally associated with the most decadent rulers of Byzantium. Most of these shortcomings could be excused because of the king's youth. The novel does not show if Nicolaas's feeling proves to be correct, since it ends shortly after the fall of Famagusta.

7

Famagusta, Akanthos, the kingdom of Pester John and an almost legendary Armenia of which there exists only one very imprecise map -- all these are on the itinerary of Don Tomas Safont, the modern-day jet set traveler through

space and time of Joan Peruicho's novel *Llibre de Cavalliers* (1957).

Following a mysterious call to adventure, Tomas finds himself simultaneously involved in the oil producing and trouble-ridden Middle East of the 20th century and the decaying Byzantine empire of the late Middle Ages. The medieval Tomas comes to represent the pure interests of the most illustrious and most beloved sovereign of the kingdom of Aragon, most likely a double of "el Just", king James II of Aragon of history (1291-1327), who also expressed great mercantile and crusading interest in Armenia; thus Tomas defeats the fleets of Genoa and Venice alike. In the process, he also dethrones the usurper Dimas, despot of Akanthos. The latter, through his marriage to Princess Maria Manzanhos, has become guardian of her niece, Princess Blanca de Salona, the only child of the late king of Armenia. True to romance tradition, she is held captive by her evil uncle who lusts after her throne. Tomas naturally has all the qualifications to rescue this lovely and pious fairy tale princess and gains access to the palace by pretending to be Blanca's botany teacher. The young couple escape and sail to Armenia where she is given a royal welcome by her loyal subjects. At the end of the novel, we see the apotheosis of the beloved queen of Armenia, a kingdom of dreams and adventures. On a somewhat less exalted level, the flags of Armenia and Aragon are hoisted together proclaiming a new and hopefully long-lasting alliance; and Tomas, the time traveler, returns from his beautiful dream kingdom to modern Spain. From this world, the princess and her country have vanished.

8

Many readers in the West have first read about the Armenian genocide in Franz Werfel's novel *Die Vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh* (1933). More recently, other novels as well have depicted the fate of the Armenians at the hands of Ottoman and Young Turks alike. For instance, James Clavell in *Noble House* (1981) lets the heroine Casey Tcholak briefly tell her business partners what happened to her family in Turkey during World War One.

When we read the title of Edgar Hilsenrath's novel *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* (1989) -- the fairy tale of the last thought -- it looks as if we might again be transported back to an Armenian kingdom of dreams and adventures. This expectation will already be shattered on the first page. The persona who tells the story is Meddah, an Oriental teller of tales, but the world that he recreates is that of the stark reality of the genocide. In this nightmare world, most of the people of the village of Yedi Su, like most of the Armenians who lived in Turkey at that time, die violently.

It is written in the tale that the last thought of the conscious mind of a dying person will exist for all eternity here on earth in a state of *illo tempore*. Thus, one day in 1988 while waiting at the deathbed of one Thovma Khatisian, Meddah the story teller and the "shadow" of this same Thovma set out



together for the Anatolian city of Bakir where they perch on the Bab-i-Seadet, the Gate of Bliss. The point in time they have chosen as goal for their traveling is August 1915 as the process of ethnic cleansing is soon to be successfully concluded by the Turks. The three hanged Armenian "traitors" suspended from this Gate of Bliss that the visitors see right away are to become in Hilsenrath's novel the new emblem for the city of Bakir. The first Armenian was found guilty of treason because he once received a bottle of vodka from his sister who lived in Russia, and he forgot to drink it; the second Armenian once got a letter from his grandmother who also lived in Russia, and he kept the letter; the third was an Armenian priest who was caught by the civil authorities as he was preaching to his congregation. For such treasonable involvements, these men were strung up to serve as exempla to the rest of the Armenian population of Bakir.

Throughout the novel, these hanged men will stay in the foreground of the picture of Armenian history and traditions that Meddah paints for the inquiring shadow of Thovma. Yet the book opens to the inquiring shadow a much wider world than what he can make out through the gate that leads into the city of Bakir. Meddah turns out to be a very informed and entertaining social historian who introduces his audience to the traditions and history of Armenia, the way life once upon a time used to be.

Meddah also tells how the city was being emptied of Armenians; he shows how they were driven to their death; how Thovma was ripped out of his mother's womb by a "helpful" police officer and how the mother was left in the ditch to bleed to death. The baby was rescued by a kind Turkish couple and taken to an orphanage. Then at the end of the month of Ramadan of 1915, Bakir had been made *armenierrein*, cleansed of all Armenians. The city had changed completely. The market places were almost empty, the streets and alleys had become quiet. They smelled different. The town had grown colorless, and colorless was also the yellow sun.

This regenerated Bakir is ruled by prejudice and fear, by a Mudir who is convinced that the whole of Turkey and the rest of the world will soon fall victim to a universal Armenian conspiracy. To prove his point, he has trapped and brainwashed the elder Khatisian, at the time an inoffensive young poet, through fear into confessing to be the driving force behind this grand plot. At the center of the novel is the Mudir and the mock trial that he sets up for his chosen scapegoat. Thovma's father does lose his dignity, and he does betray what is sacred to him; nevertheless he is allowed to escape from his dungeon. He survives and manages to get to Europe, and there one day during the next war he is approached by a group of Jewish elders who have come to ask him to help their families who are dying in concentration camps. Since he has Swiss papers, he can travel to Poland, but there his passport is stolen, and so he unwittingly helps another hapless person to escape with his life. Since Khatisian now no longer has any proof of identity and can easily be mistaken for a Jew, he, too,

ends up in the concentration camp among the people whom he tried to help and shares their fate.

Hilsenrath's book, which is first and foremost about the Armenian genocide, has assumed other dimensions as well, for the fate of the Armenians at the hands of the Turks prefigures not only that of the Jews at the hands of Hitler and his henchmen, it comes to stand for all the genocides that this world has seen. We should also remember that Edgar Hilsenrath was born into a Jewish family in Leipzig in 1926 and experienced the fate of many other Jews of his generation but managed to survive the camp.

The traditions of a people and the body of the individual "they" may kill, but not hope and the human spirit. This is the message of the novel that reaches us through the trials and death camps. At the end of the tale, the last thoughts of all the murdered Jews assemble like huge swarms of migratory birds as they congregate on the chimneys of the death camps. These disembodied spirits will fly east and settle in the city of their dreams; part of their journey they will make in the company of the shadows of the murdered Armenians who will fly towards a benevolent Mt. Ararat. Wherever Thovma looks on the slopes and plains of Mt. Ararat, he sees the last thoughts of the slain Armenians. They are sitting in every flower, on every blade of grass, on the buds of all the trees, while some more adventurous and politically inclined ones are planning to fill with their presence the omissions made by Turkish politicians and historians in their records.

"Bir varmish, bir yokmush, bir varmish...Once upon a time there was a man, there was no one, there was ...," as Meddah would say.



## REFERENCES

1. Friedrich von Schiller, *Der Geisterseher*, Jena, 1786-1798. For the English translation see: *The Armenian*, or *The Ghost Seer*, London, 1800; Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*, New York, 1961; and Franz Werfel, *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh*, Berlin, 1933.
2. The history of this great general can be read in the second volume of Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, London, 1776. For the German reader, Felix Dahn's still very popular *Ein Kampf um Rom*, 1876, is perhaps still the best introduction. We also meet Narses in Robert Graves's *Count Belisarius*, 1938; in Harold Lamb's novel *Theodora and the Emperor*, 1952; and more recently in Gillian Bradshaw's *The Bearkeeper's Daughter*, Boston, 1987, trans. into German in 1990.
3. The following is the list of books discussed in this paper: Yasar Kemal, *Agri Dagi Efsanesi*, 1970; trans. into German, Zurich, 1981; Horst Kanitz, *Flucht! -- Kurs Ararat*, Wuppertal, 1960, rpt. 1990; Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, London, 1989; trans. into German, Zurich 1990; Peter Stephan Jungk, *Tigor*, Frankfurt, 1991; John Maddox Roberts *SPQR*, New York, 1990; trans. into German, Munich, 1992; Robert Shea, *The Saracen: Land of the Infidel and The Saracen: The Holy War*, Glasgow, 1989; trans. into German, Munich, 1993; Dorothy Dunnett, *The House of Niccolo: Race of Scorpions*, London, 1990; trans. into German, Hamburg, 1992; Joan Peruchio, *Llibre de Cavalleries*, Barcelona, 1957; trans. into German, Munich, 1991; and Edgar Hilsenrath, *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken*, Munich, 1989.
4. Tim F. LaHaye and John D. Morris, *The Ark on Ararat*, New York, 1976; and Charles Berlitz, *The Lost Ship of Noah in Search of the Ark at Ararat*, New York, 1981, provide a good survey of these seekers of the Ark.
5. James Bryce, *Transcaucasia and Ararat*, London, 1877, p. 240.
6. The Armenian monks had told the story of St. Jacob and his relic so often and had embellished it so that a rich tradition grew up around the holy man. This tradition has also been amply documented by the travelers to Ararat throughout the centuries. For instance, Faustus of Byzantium chronicled it, in 1255 Guillaume de Ruysbroeck followed suit, Vincent of Beauvais in 1259, Sir John Mandeville at about 1360, and Sir John Chardin in the early 17th century. See also LaHaye and Morris, p. 18.
7. Bryce, p. 241.
8. See LaHaye and Morris, *passim*.
9. The astronaut Irwin tells especially in his book *More Than an Ark on Ararat*, New York, 1984, about his experiences on the mountain.
10. The essays in T. S. R. Boase, ed., *The Cilician Kingdom of Armenia*, Edinburgh, 1978, provide good background information on this period in history.

I. S.

ԳՐԱԿԱՆ ԿԱՐԳ ՄԸ ԱՐԴԻ ԹԱՓԱՌՈՒՄՆԵՐ  
ՀԱՅՈՑ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹԵԱՆ  
ԵՒ

ԱՒԱՆԴՈՒԹԻՒՆՆԵՐՈՒՆ ՄԷՋ

(ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ)

ԴՈԿՏ. ԻՆԿՐԻՏ ՍԸՄԱԱՆ

Վաղուց է որ հայն ու անոր պատմությունը միթե են ծառայած արեւմտեան կարգ մը գրողներու ստեղծագործութիւններուն, որոնք, սակայն, միշտ չէ որ հասած են սեղանին ոչ թէ պարզ հայ ընթերցողին՝ այլ նոյնիսկ հայ գրականագէտին: Ներկայ յօդուածով Դոկտ. Սըմաան ա՛յս է որ կը կատարէ, եւ հայուն կը ներկայացնէ արեւմտեան գրականութենէն տասնեակ մը վէպեր, որոնց մէկ մասը գրուած է գերմաներէնով, իսկ մնացեալը՝ նախ այլ լեզուով եւ ապա թարգմանուած՝ գերմաներէնի: Յօդուածագիրը բոլորին ալ կը մատչի իր մայրենի լեզուին՝ գերմաներէնի միջոցով: Ինչ որ կը կատարուի հոս սակայն՝ գրականագիտական մէկ դրսեւորումը չէ տուեալ գործերուն՝ այլ լոկ մէկ ներկայացումն անոնց: Անշուշտ հետաքրքրական պիտի ըլլար աւելի խորունկ վերբերում մը ունենալ այս վէպերուն հանդէպ, քանի որ անոնք յաճախ կ'ենթադրուին գրուած ըլլալ գոհացում տալու հետաքրքրութեանն ու ընթերցասիրութեանը արեւմտեան ընթերցողին, ահա թէ ինչո՞ւ համար յաճախ այն գրողներուն երեւակայութիւնն է որ "կը ստեղծէ" դէպքերը, միջավայրը, տիպարները, որոնք միշտ չէ որ կը թուին ըլլալ հայկական: Դոկտ. Սըմաան հրապարակ կը քաշէ ամերիկացի Կիլիըն Պրետշոյի *Արջապահին Աղջիկը* (թրգմ.՝ 1990-ին) վէպը, որուն միջոցով ծառայեն բիզանդական գահի հայազգի թագուհի Թէոտորան եւ անոր մօրեղբայրը՝ Ներսէս Պատրիկը, քիրտ գրող Եասէր Քեմալի *Աղըր Լերան (Արարատի) Առասպելը* (թրգմ.՝ 1981-ին), Գերման Հորսթ Քանցի *Flucht! - Kurst Ararat* (1960 եւ 1990), անգլիացի Ժիլիըն Պարնէսի *Աշխարհի Պատմութիւնը Տասնուկէս Գլուխի Մէջը* (թրգմ.՝ 1990-ին), եւ գերման Փեթեր Սթեֆան Եունքի *Թիկորը* (1991)՝ բոլորն ալ նուաճուած Արարատ լերան նուաճումին, ապա՝ ամերիկացի Շոն Մետոքս Բապըրցի *Էս. Փի. Ջիւ. Ար.*ը (Սենսթօնս փոփոլուսքուէ ռոմանոս=Ծերակոյտը եւ Հոովմի ժողովուրդը, կը



Աշանակէ փոքր շահ, բայց արագ եկամուտ) (թրգմ.՝ 1952-ին)՝ Տիգրան Մեծի կայսրութեան եւ անոր անկումին մասին, իրլանտացի Ռապըթ Օփի երկու հատորները՝ *Սարակինոսը՝ Անհաւատին Եկիրը* եւ *Սարակինոսը՝ Սրբազան Պատերազմը* (թրգմ.՝ 1993-ին)՝ Կիլիկիոյ Հեթումեան իշխանին մասին, անգլիացի Տորոթի Տըննէթի *Նիքոլայի Տոհմը-Կտրիններու Մրցանքը* (թրգմ.՝ 1992-ին)՝ Կիլիկեան Թագաւորութեան անկումին մասին, սպանացի Խուան Փերուշոյի *Llibre de Cavalleries* (թրգմ.՝ 1991-ին)՝ Կիլիկեան Թագաւորութեան անկումէն ետք Լուսինեաններու կեանքին եւ արկածալից վերիվայրումներուն մասին, եւ Էտկար Հիլսենրաթի *Das Maichen vom Letzten Gedanken* (1989)՝ հայկական տասնհինգի եւ անոր հերոսացումներուն մասին:

Ամփոփ՝ այլ հետաքրքրական աշխատանք մըն է ներկայացուածը եւ գուցէ առաջին ալ փորձը, որ կը միտի հայ ընթերցողին բերել աշխարհ մը իրեն անծանօթ իրականութիւններու, դատումներու, մատչումներու եւ եզրակացութիւններու:

