

## ARSHILE GORKY: THE SEEDS OF MEMORY

MOSSES ZIRANI (Lebanon, Beirut)\*

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Arshile Gorky, christened as Vostanik Atoyan, was born in Khorgom village near the city of Van in Western Armenia. In 1910, he moved with his family to Aygestan district of the city, where he continued his education.

Arshile Gorky's creative path can be divided into three phases: "Purity", "Torments" and "Maturity". The first period coincides with his life as a child growing up in his hometown, in the environment of innocence and purity, unaware of any hardships of life. Having barely crossed into adolescence, Gorky lived through and felt on his own skin the horrors and barbarities of the Genocide, from which his family suffered heavily. When he arrived in the United States in his very young years, he inevitably faced the harsh experience of adapting to a new environment, to the life he had to live from that time on against his will. Despite the grim reality, he unwaveringly continued his creative journey. Later on, in order to detach himself from the day-to-day worries, he returned to his roots and found refuge in reminiscences. Here is where, upon turning the "memory" into a fertile ground for creativity, he revived his past in his own time. As a result, his newer creations communicate methods of expression and messages, not yet manifested in the history of art in his time.

Gorky's life was untimely interrupted, yet he was a prolific artist, and his creations, often rueful, speak of regeneration, like Prometheus' liver...

On July 21, 1948, Arshile Gorky hanged himself, ending his life path on his own will.

**Key words:** Arshile Gorky, USA, Trinity, memories, Purity, Torment, Maturity, plow.

### Introduction

Gorky's desire to penetrate the profoundness of truth within the depths of man's existence comes from his naturalist forefathers' belief towards man and from his conviction, that reaching infinity or even coming close to it necessitates fusion of nature's and man's inner essences.



His search for truth reaches back to his ethnic self-awareness and self-appreciation. And by the will of fate, the resulting psyche and its implications were the reflections of his memory rather than his daily life and environment.

To perfect and explain his memories comprehensively, he fell back on his subconscious and, while unwrapping the inner folds of this subconscious on the canvas, as an inner necessity, he applied the 'automatism' method.

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\* Doctor of Arts, m.herkelian@gmail.com. The article was submitted on 04.04.2024, reviewed on 03.05.2024, accepted for publication on 03.06.2024.

The artist's bitter life played a critical role in the formation of his artistry, be it in the make-up, quality or disposition.

Gorky, christened as Vostanik Atoyan, was born in Khorgom village near the city of Van in Western Armenia. Presently, Khorgom with its beautiful gardens, holy tree and half buried stone phallus is submerged in the waters of Lake Van.

His sister Satenik testifies that, in his early years, Vostanik used to make miniature statues of soldiers out of clay as well as to draw trees, animals and flowers on eggs or sand on the lake shore. In 1910, they move to Aygestan district of the city, where he continues his education learning the Classical Armenian Language Krapar and gets introduced to Armenian miniature painting.

In the vicinity of Van city, Vostanik's mother's birthplace – Vostan city – was located with the Surb Nshan (Holy Sign) Monastery of Charahan, Lake Van, the ruins of the capital of ancient Armenian Urartu Kingdom Tushpa with its renowned Semiramis water passage, Aghtamar Island with its St. Cross Cathedral and various other cultivated and natural beauties, amidst which Vostanik passed his childhood. In his early youth, Vostanik joins the Heroic Battle of Van waged against the Turks in April-May 1915. The same year the family retreats to Yerevan, where he continued studying miniature painting and woodcarving. In 1918, he witnesses the independence of Armenia.

In 1919, two months after his mother dies of starvation, he leaves for Tiflis, therefrom via Batumi, then Athens, on February 26, 1920, reaches America, where he settles for good. His father had long before settled in the USA.

After attending the Providence Art School for one year he moves to his sister Akabi's residence. There he starts working in a leather factory, yet after only two months he was dismissed for... drawing on wooden shoe frames: his inner creative drive was too strong for him to control it. Because of his proven virtues in painting, in 1924 he was invited to Boston's New School of Design as an assistant instructor. In 1926, Gorky moves to New York, where he works in the Grand Central School of Art as a full-time faculty member.

In 1930 he rents his second workshop in Greenwich Village, New York, where scores of other poor artists lived and created. To provide jobs for them, the American government decided to beautify the public buildings. Gorky takes advantage of this plan and in August 1935, he starts to paint the ten murals for New Ark Airport, eight of which have been lost because of the negligence of the airport authorities [4, p. 217].

From then on, Gorky continues to participate in group and individual exhibitions, which make him well-known. In his productive years, misfortunes recur, leading him to a pessimistic and hopeless state.

In January 1946, in the State of Connecticut, Arshile Gorky's workshop catches fire and around forty of his pictures perish. One month after this unfortunate accident, the artist undergoes cancer surgery. On June 26, 1948, as a result of a car accident, Gorky's right hand loses its flexibility. Adversities of life seemed to pursue him.

### The Equilateral Triangle and the Trinity

According to old Indians, man is able to unite with god's self if he can perfect and equate his mind, soul and body. They presented god's idea by the 'equilateral triangle' concept. Arshile Gorky is among those unique artists who, when creating, have their mind, soul and hand perform in unison by the Almighty's power.

Christianity teaches that God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The pagans also had their trinities which, even though were separate gods, supplemented each other. The main and important quality of all gods lies in their creative power. Though man, as a simple artist, can't create life, he comes closest to God's being through his artistry.

Arshile Gorky as a creative artist has his personal triangle, the angles of which, though a separate creative force each, together constitute a trinity and supplement each other. He says, *"I believe that I am a product of three ideas. The first is 'Makrutyun' (Purity). The second is 'Tanjank' (Torment) and the third is 'Hasunutyun' (Maturity). That is I see my life as an artist as having gone through three main experiences. The first is simplicity, the time of purity. The next is the time of confusion caused from the ordeal of the search for truth. The last is mastering extreme complexity. This last is fruition. And if one understands these three ideas as not being so strictly demarcated, thinks of them as interacting and flowing into one another constantly, then one understands"* [1, p. 26].

Gorky's biography asserts that the extreme purity comes from one's birthplace and roots. In his teenage years his innocent belief clashes with life's harsh temptations, which intensify even more in his adulthood. Here, the soul is destroyed, the mind ravished, which crystallizes into a chaotic inner world; yet the body endures, the passion for life, as well as the craving to return to the past, is multiplied. Incalculable old and uncorrupted explode inside him, which violently push each other, rush from darkness to enlightenment. Here, the feelings are transformed in the artist's ego and ejaculate, like in a slow motion picture, to perpetuate on canvases as cherished memories and contemporaneous sanctity.

### The Climax of Memory

The artist christens himself *"bitter"* because his art is born as a result of torture and agony. The harsher Gorky's life grew, the more sublime became his memories. Though these memories rest on immeasurable contradictions, maturity outshines all, like a seed about to burst open in warm spring soil.

So this is where his nostalgic self-gratification is transformed to revitalized illusion that Gorky used to live as abstracted reality. And this is where the artist's dialogue starts with eternity. The unveiling of the nostalgic inadequacy and the climax of vision lead him to aesthetical confession, and thus the absolute reality is born as mystical feelings.

Without the evaluation of his memories we cannot justly appraise and assess Gorky's art. He says, *"After so many tribulations and experiences man's memory*

*clings to the sweetest reminiscences*". His artist friend, Jacob Kainen testifies, "*He also told me to trust my subconscious above all... Later, I was to realize that in the thirties Gorky wanted to retain the structural inevitability of the masters, while at the same time surrendering more and more openly to his racial memories and his troubled unconscious*" [3, p. 96].

"*Memories*". This is one of the key words in Gorky's art, because his tortured recollections and the ever increasing flow of his bitter emotions, after being tempered in eternal existence, manifest as color and line, light and shade. And its non-ending dimensions with non-interfered, inborn, clear emotions are manifested in his creations which don't tolerate boundary and restraint.

His abstracted figures and characters, after being fecundated in the past, overpass the present, blossom in the inane and unlimited future. This is why Gorky not only remained loyal to "*the memory is the seed of the artist*" principle, but he also probed his own subconscious to reach his racial roots to relive his forefathers' life... in the US. Although his intuitions originate from the reminiscences of his birthplace, they clash with America's rush life. This, in addition to his 'eastern mentality of longing for the past', are transformed to vision and, as seeds of memory, are actualized on virgin canvases. So this is why his "*The Artist and His Mother*" twin canvases are considered by many as icons. And this is why Gorky's art is entrenched in ritual and commands a sense of respect and awe to the viewer. His upsurge and overflow are neither a matter of chance nor can be considered as flickering impressions. His hereditary characteristics, after being tempered in heavy labor, are born with agony as life's sincere and charming beauty. The deeper and greater is Gorky's wound, the more tragic and refined is his created beauty. His compellingly inherited wounds of an artist are old and full of pus. It is due to his infinite tortures that his soul is refined and changed to strength and beauty.

### **"The Song of the Plow"**

Study his works, as "*Vana Tanjank*" (Vannic Agony) "*Hishoghutyun*" (Memory), "*Agony*" (last painting), and you will notice the pure and innocent feelings of an artist mixed with his complex psyche. Also in this respect, "*The Plow and the Song*" is very significant. Would an artist be able to feel and comprehend fully the tortured self and the lust for life, exhibited in his works, if he hadn't lived in a rural atmosphere, where the Armenian plowman sang, "*What is this life without the plow*". Gorky created his masterpiece with this simplicity and sincere mentality. In a letter dated April 22, 1944, and addressed to his sister Vartoush Atoyan, he says, "*I need Armenian song and poetry for inspiration when I paint*". Also in December 1944, in another letter addressed to Vartoush, he says, "*Beloved ones, write me and tell me of the mountains and valleys. Sing of Van. Sing of apricots and wheat fields, of plows. Sing of songs*". This artistic genius, mostly nurtured in his nationalistic and cultural values, wanted to revitalize his "*The Plow and the Song*" through tradition, rejuvenate his past, so that he could live and effectuate the full extent of it.

The Armenian popular songs are cultural gems, in which the songs devoted to the plow, like “Horovel”, or “Kaghhan” songs, constitute an important part in quality and quantity. One song in this series is called “Gutani Erk [The Song of the Plow]”, to which “*The Plow and the Song*” is dedicated. Here, the plowman sings sincerely and with awe, “*Dzig tu, kashi ay yeza / Ara ho, ho, ara ho / Lutzd mashi, ay yeza, / Ara ho, ho, ara ho*”, which means: “Pull, drag, oh ox! Hey-ho, ho, hey-ho, / Wear off your yoke, oh ox! Hey-ho, ho, hey-ho” [5, p. 169].

It's not a matter of coincidence that on tombstones of master plowmen they carved pictures of plows in their memory. Gorky used to love the Armenian 'gutan' and its varieties. He used to tell his sister Satenig that one of his longings was to have a carving of an Armenian 'gutan' on his tombstone, the samples of which he had prepared as toys for his other sister's son Karlen Mouradian. In his December 1944 letter to his sister Vartoush he says, “*I have been occupied in drawing the Armenian plows which we used in our Adoian fields near our house. Recall I have carved one from wood which I will send to Karlen. You cannot imagine the fertility of forms that leap our Armenian plows – the plows our ancestors used for thousands of years in toil and gaiety and hardship and poetry. The Armenian man from Khorgom demands a plow as his apt tombstone. I smell the apricots hot on our orchard trees and they move for me in dances of old. And the songs, our ancient songs of the Armenian people, our suffering people. This I am painting, and I am convinced you will appreciate it. So many shapes, so many shapes and ideas, happily a sacred treasure to which I have been entrusted the key*” [1, p. 32].

Here Gorky clearly shows the source of his artistic riches, whose key is trusted to him. And that miraculous key is his unbetraying memory (Hishoghutyun). And in this way, Gorky's love towards the plow is closely linked to land's fertility, nature, revival, life's rejuvenation and perpetuation.

The works of Gorky are ever flowing emotions, which are born during psychical journeys either in the deep inner world of thought or in the higher circles of the Universe. The further his psychic journeys go in opposite directions, the closer they come together at a later time, the same way as two hands (like those of a clock) that veer from the same point.

Gorky's psychic creations have always been drenched in everlasting torture, and they are so explicit that titles are unnecessary in explaining the agony and torment in his works. In this respect poignant is “*The Liver is the Cock's Comb*”, whose godfather is Andre Breton. What did Breton want to tell us with this exteriorly meaningless expression? What did he see on this canvas? Where was the profundity and, after all, what was communicated to Breton to call it “*The Liver is the Cock's Comb*”. If Breton was not familiar with the Armenian beliefs and mythology, he was surely well informed of Greek legends. In a book devoted to Gorky and speaking about this work, Julian Levy says, “*The liver which the Greeks thought to be the seat of the soul, is seen erect, proudly touched by rays of the rising sun as the cock crows*” [2].

Apparently, Breton treated the subject deeper than this and, most probably, he referred to the great suffering of Prometheus, which was a result of his idealism and devoted humanism – a humanism, for which Prometheus was not afraid to sacrifice even the seat of his soul, the liver, which also symbolizes rebirth and rejuvenation. And the word 'cock' which is usually comprised of the words 'to sing' and 'crow' meant 'quarrelsome' and 'struggle' according to the old Greeks.

The cockfight was commonplace in the old world, where the cock symbolized pride. For the sake of humanism and human dignity, Prometheus proudly bore his long sufferings which he got rid of due to Heracles, who killed the gigantic eagle which pecked the liver of Prometheus every day. Gorky, a man of great pride and integrity, had a life full of agony like that of Prometheus', and its bitterness was the reason to reach to its past with the help of memory, to alleviate the burden of his tortured soul. Yet, Prometheus was well aware of his immortality, was waiting for his redeemer and was eventually saved from his tortures, while Arshile Gorky was not a Titan, he was unable to withstand his unendurable sufferings and... found salvation in death.

On July 21, 1948, he hanged himself in an abandoned shed, ending his life on his own will. On the nearby wooden crate, there was his message: "Goodbye My Loves". Gorky's life was interrupted untimely, however, he was a prolific artist, and his creations, often rueful, speak of regeneration, like Prometheus' liver...

Gorky, like the Armenian Middle Age miniaturists, actualized the condition of alertness due to the fear of extinction and psychic strangling. He also effectuated the unsteady future, the evading of men from vile actions, nature's and life's unmutated glorification, his crisis of 'to be or not to be' pursuit, and the irreconcilability of all nature's and life's flawless reverence, the sense of life's beauty and the unrestrained spirit of sustenance.

Arshile Gorky, through the subconscious, searched himself to reach his racial roots, his truth which was coalesced with epic ideology.

### Conclusion

Arshile Gorky's creative path can be divided into three phases: "Purity", "Torment" and "Maturity". The first period coincides with the artist's childhood, when he was growing up in his hometown – a period of innocence, purity, and unawareness of the hardships of life. Having barely crossed into adolescence, Gorky lived through, and felt on his own skin, the horrors and barbarities of the Genocide, from which he suffered heavily. When he arrived in the United States in his very young years, he inevitably faced the harsh experience of adapting to a new environment, to the life he had to live from that time on against his will. Despite the grim reality, he unwaveringly continued his creative journey. Later on, in order to detach himself from the day-to-day concerns, he turned to his roots and found refuge in reminiscences. Here is where, upon turning the "memory" into a fertile ground of

creativity, he revived his past in his own time. As a result, in his new creations he came to methods of expression previously not manifested in the history of art.

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## ԱՐՇԻԼ ԳՈՐԿԻ. ՀԻՇՈՂՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՍԵՐՄԵՐ

ՄՈՎԱՆԵՍ ԾԻՐԱՆԻ (Լիբանան, Բեյրութ)\*

**Հղման համար.** Ծիրանի, Մովսես: «Արշիլ Գորկի. հիշողության սերմեր»: *Արվեստագիտական հանդես*, N1 (2024): 136-144. DOI:10.54503/2579-2830-2024.1(11)-136

Առաջանի անունով, Ոստանիկ Ադոյեան, Արշիլ Կորքին ծնած է Արեւմտահայաստանի Խորհրդով գիւղը որ կը գտնուէր Վանայ լիճի ափին: Ան իր մօրը եւ երկու քոյրերուն հետ 1910-ին կը փոխադրուի Վան քաղաքի Այգեստան հայաշատ թաղամասը, ուր կը սորուի նաեւ՝ Գրաբար եւ կը ծանօթանայ հայկական մանրանկարչութեան:

Ան իր ստեղծագործական կեանքը կը բաժնէ երեք շրջաններու, «Մաքրութիւն», «Տանջանք» եւ «Հասունութիւն»: Առաջինը իր ծննդավայրին մէջ ապրած մանկական ժամանակաշրջանն է, ուր երեխաները կ'ըլլան անմեղ, մաքուր ու յաճախ նոյնիսկ անհաղորդ կեանքի դժուարութիւններուն: Պատանեկան շրջանին հագիւ աչքերը բացած, Կորքի իր մորթին վրայ զգաց ցեղասպանութեան արհաւիրքն ու խժոժութիւնները ու... տառապեցաւ: Իսկ երբ արդէն երիտասարդ՝ հասաւ ԱՄՆ, նախ՝ զարնուելով ու յարմարուելով տիրող դաժան իրականութեան, ստեղծագործական կեանքը ակամայ շարունակեց դժուարին պայմաններու տակ: Յետոյ խուսափելու համար տանջալից առօրեայէն, սկսաւ վերադառնալ իր արմատներուն ու ապաստանիլ յիշողութեան մէջ: Հոս է, որ ան ստեղծագործական սերմի վերածելով «յիշողութիւնը», վերակենդանացուց իր անցեալը իր ժամանակին մէջ: Ու տուաւ այնպիսի ստեղծագործութիւններ, որոնք նոր խօսք եւ նոր արտայայտչաձեւ հաղորդեցին արուեստի պատմութեան:

Կ'ունենայ տառապալից ստեղծագործական կեանք մը եւ որովհետեւ վերջին տարիներուն իր տառապանքները նման էին Պրոմէթէասի շարունակուող ու վերանորագուող չարչարանքներուն, ան ինքզինք կը կախէ, կամովին վերջ տալով իր կեանքին...

\* Արվեստագիտության թեկնածու, m.herkelian@gmail.com, հոդվածը ներկայացնելու օրը՝ 04.04.2024, գրախոսելու օրը՝ 03.05.2024, տպագրության ընդունելու օրը՝ 03.06.2024.

**Բանալի բաներ՝** Արշիլ Գորկի, ԱՄՆ, Երրորդություն, հիշողություններ, մարրություն, տանջանք, հասունություն, գութան:

## АРШИЛ ГОРКИ: СЕМЕНА ПАМЯТИ

МОВСЕС ЦИРАНИ (Ливан, Бейрут)\*

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Аршил Горки (настоящее имя Востаник Атоян), родился в 1904 году в селе Хоргом провинции Ван Западной Армении.

Творческий путь Аршила Горки можно условно разделить на три этапа: «Чистота», «Муки», «Зрелость». Первый период совпадает с его жизнью ребенком в родном городе, в атмосфере невинности и чистоты, неведения о тяготах жизни. Едва переступив порог отрочества, Горки пережил и почувствовал на собственной шкуре ужасы и зверства Геноцида, не пощадившего его семью.

Переехав совсем юным в Соединенные Штаты, он неизбежно столкнулся с жестокими сторонами адаптации к новой действительности, к жизни, выпавшей на его долю не по его воле. Невзирая на мрачную действительность, он был настойчив в своих творческих исканиях. Со временем, чтоб отгородить себя от каждодневных треволнений, он мысленно обратился к своим корням и обрел душевный покой в воспоминаниях. Именно тогда, превратив «память» в плодородную почву для творчества, он оживил прошлое в современной ему реальности. В результате поисков, в своих новых работах он пришел к выразительным средствам, не наблюдавшимся до этого в истории искусства.

Жизнь Аршила Горки прервалась безвременно, но его творения, нередко печальные, говорят о восстановлении... как печень Прометея...

21-го июля 1948 года Аршил Горки повесился, завершив жизненный путь по собственной воле.

**Ключевые слова:** Аршил Горки, США, Троица, воспоминания, чистота, муки, зрелость.

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\* Кандидат искусствоведения, m.herkelian@gmail.com, статья представлена 04.04.2024, рецензирована 03.05.2024, принята к публикации 03.06.2024.





“The Plow and the Song”, 1947, Oil on burlap, 52 1/8x64 1/4 in. Collection of Milton A. Gordon, New York. Memory through tradition, rejuvenate his past, so that he could live and effectuate the full extent of it

How My Mother’s Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life, 1944, 40x45, Oil on canvas, Seattle Art Museum



Agony, 1947, Oil on canvas, 40x50, The Museum of Modern Art

The Liver Is the Cock’s Comb, 1944, Oil on canvas, 72x98, Collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery



Artist and His Mother, 1926-1936, Oil on canvas, 60x50, Whitney Museum of American Art