

INTRODUCTION TO WILLIAM SAROYAN: AN ARMENIAN TRILOGY by *Dickran Kouymjian*

pub source: William Saroyan: An Armenian Trilogy, edited by Dickran Kouymjian (Fresno, 1986)

The works in this volume are the first to be made available from the unpublished legacy left by William Saroyan. For a decade, from the mid-1930s to the 1940s, he was one of the world's best known writers, a pivotal force in American letters. During his lifetime, Saroyan transformed his immense creative energy into more than fifty volumes. Curiously comfortable in almost every genre, an unusual quality for an American writer, Saroyan distributed his efforts nearly equally among collections of stories, plays, novels, and autobiographical reflections. Yet, concealed behind this impressive published output, there was, according to the author's frequent assertion, just as much unpublished writing waiting to be discovered. This trilogy represents the beginning of the Saroyan legacy.

As a writer and personality, who cultivated attention in the first half of his career in order to avoid it in the last half, Saroyan always attracted a loyal group of readers and admirers. How else is one to explain that in the four years since his death, eleven volumes have been devoted to him: four of his own works, including the final memoir *Births*, five critical or biographical studies, and two special issues of literary quarterlies?

Hundreds of manuscripts remain unpublished, including drama, fiction, journals, diaries, dreambooks, and a voluminous and fetching correspondence. If individually their value does not surpass his most acclaimed works, neither does it fall below them. Saroyan often said that all his writing was done by the same person in the same way; he seldom recognized one work as being better than another.

The three plays offered here were written during the last ten years of

William Saroyan's career, and they address a special concern of the writer: his ethnic origin. Their order is based on the progressive earnestness with which they treat the problem of being forced to live in exile. During Saroyan's lifetime little was said about the effect of national background on his writing; scant attention was given to his sensitivity to it, even though it is manifest in the earlier stories and later memoirs. Intimately familiar with the richness and foibles of one particular minority, he used the Armenians to show that behind the often unique peculiarities of any one nation there resides a universal humanity.

In these plays, by using exclusively Armenian characters engaged in conflicts special to them, Saroyan went beyond the marginal or indirect treatment of ethnicity found in many of his first stories, even those of *My Name Is Aram*, in which problems experienced because of nationality seem incidental compared to broader human questions. Central to these plays is the Armenian diaspora: the separation from native land, birthplace, home, and nation. Through an often profound discussion of the particularities of the dilemma he inherited by the accident of his Armenian birth, Saroyan examines the universal pain and paradox of the exile in a world where not only Armenian, Jew, and Gypsy, but Cambodian, Vietnamese, Palestinian, and Pole are synonyms for refugee and alien.

In semi-exile in Paris after 1959, but firmly rerooted in Fresno, California, his birthplace, from 1963 on, Saroyan, in search of an autobiography, wrote one work after another about his remembered past. Ten books appeared in a score of years, garnished with a continuous seasoning of stories and three volumes of plays: *Sam, the Highest Jumper of Them All, or The London Comedy* (1961), *The Dogs, or The Paris Comedy and Two Other Plays* (1969), *Assassinations and Jim, Sam and Anna* (1979).

In spite of the prolific publication of memoirs, often slices from his profuse journals (a month here, a month there), playwriting occupied

him at least as much. In later years, Saroyan regarded theater as a more direct vehicle for communicating ideas and reflections than story or essay. It was the immediacy of speech that appealed to him. He was always considered a master of dialogue, and those who spent time with him knew he was a remarkable and overwhelming talker.

Not surprisingly, Saroyan regularly wrote plays, often several at the same time, always rapidly and in quantities that threaten credulity; for example he wrote more than fifteen in the spring and summer of 1975. They are all unknown. He submitted few for publication or performance, nor did he circulate them among close friends; instead, he carefully preserved them for their future resurrection.

The long letter addressed to the fifteen critics who panned his *Sam, the Highest Jumper of Them All*, (printed in the introduction to the edition), underscores Saroyan's constant disappointment with those who failed to understand his plays. "I write plays and you write criticism... There are fifteen of you and one of me. I say *Sam* is a good play. I am sorry you say it isn't. One of us is obviously mistake. Knowing the paltry little I know, I cannot believe it is me." While discouraged by the judgment of critics supposedly able to discern originality and seriousness of purpose, Saroyan was encouraged during the 1950s and 60s by European playwrights who used surrealistic, existential, and absurdist techniques similar to those he had used two decades earlier. Saroyan wrote his plays for posterity, as he said many times, perhaps nowhere more concisely than in a letter of March 7, 1975, to Gerald Pollinger, his London agent:

I write at least one new large play a year and quite a few shorter plays. I send them nowhere because it is a waste of time, with the situation what it is in the theatre -- Broadway is in the real estate and high finance business, off-Broadway is a lot of cliques, the university theatres are kids who can't do anything with half the skill required, and so I let the new plays accumulate.

The Armenian plays were part of Saroyan's perpetual investigation of self and of the fate of modern man; they were especially important in his constant preoccupation with identity. The role Armenians play in William Saroyan's writing has been reexamined recently by David Calonne in *William Saroyan: My Real Work Is Being* (1983), and more insistently argued by James Tashjian in the introduction to *My Name Is Saroyan* (1983). The recent biographies by his son Aram, *William Saroyan* (1983), and by Larry Lee and Barry Gifford, *Saroyan* (1984), with their preoccupation with Saroyan the man rather than the writer, also offer in passing some "Armenian" insights. Rather than repeat information accessible to ardent followers of Saroyan, I prefer to supplement what is already available with unpublished testimony dating from the seventies, when these plays were written, in order to establish a personal context for them.

Saroyan frequently and happily emphasized the importance of his early Fresno years - 1916 to 1926. He had returned to his birthplace with his mother, sisters, and brother after five years in the Fred Finch Orphanage in Oakland, California. A decade later, at eighteen, he abandoned Fresno for San Francisco. Nevertheless, the experience remained vital to him. On March 4, 1974, he wrote in his journal:

During those ten solid years of living in Fresno I made my life, I forged my soul... I recognised and accepted my character, and I made my decision about the kind of life I was going to live, or at any rate try to live. And therefore these ten years were surely as important as any other ten years of my life, and possibly the most important... And what was the essential of the years in Fresno: they were the years of Armenia, pure and simple: and I mean that they were the years of the Saroyan tribe of the people of the highland city of Bitlis near Lake Van and Mount Ararat, who wrenched themselves loose from their roots going back centuries and traveled by mule and horse and ship and train to California, and down to Fresno. They were most of all the years of self -- of this particular member of the Saroyan tribe, this last born of

Armenak and Takoohi.

Except for William, the “Californian,” the Saroyan children were born in historical Armenia, Cozette and Zabel in Bitlis, Henry in Erzeroum. Both his parents were from Bitlis, both from the Saroyan clan. In Armenian Fresno, the surroundings were old-country family and friends. *My Name Is Aram* is the famous retelling of that world. But we are still uncertain just when Saroyan started using the theater to talk about Armenians. The dates and contents of too many works with suggestive titles remain unknown: plays such as “The Armenian Play (or Opera),” “The Saroyans,” or the intriguing “Ouzenk, Chouzenk, Hai Yenk” (literally “Whether We Like It or Not, We Are Armenian”), a play to be performed in Armenian, and according to his friend, artist Varaz Samuelian, one written in an Armenian phonetically spelled with English letters. For the moment, these and others remain provocative items in inventory lists of unpublished Saroyan.

The earliest of the plays that I know of, predominately about or peopled with Armenians, is “Is There Going to Be a Wedding?” written in the first half of 1970. Saroyan presented me with a copy in December 1980, inscribed as “one more Armenian, Fresno, Saroyan play -- to read, enjoy, study, and some day produce and perform....” Its forty-one scenes depict the future writer in conflict with family from his pre-teens to age fourteen, but in anticipation of his flight, four years hence. Besides “Willie.” the main characters are his brother, Henry; Uncles Aram, the materialistic and pragmatic lawyer, and Mihran, the idealistic and intellectual tailor; Mother Takoohi; other family members and a couple of Armenian priests. In vivid language spiced with American vulgarisms, the play exposes the opposing forces contesting for Saroyan’s young soul. But in it the playwright is more interested in the personalities of relatives with whom he interacted as an adolescent than in the purely Armenian dimension of the environment.

In the following year, 1971, an engaged Saroyan pursued his inner quest

in Armenians, the first play of the trilogy, by combining remembrances of youth and heated discussions about the biting sorrow of loss associated with the national tragedy of his people, with the remarkable continuity of communal life played out before a backdrop of hopelessness. Soon other plays were to follow, each usually treating a single facet of the Armenian predicament. In 1975, during the March and April leading up to the 60th commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, Saroyan was preoccupied with general world indifference to the plight of his people. On March 3 he made a personal note to write “All about the Armenians, a book.” During these two months, he created no fewer than six works about Armenians for the theater: “Turks in the World,” “The Istanbul Comedy,” “The Jew” (about Saroyan’s incognito visit to a Paris synagogue), Bitlis, “Home to Hayastan,” and “Mihr.” Of these Bitlisis the most serious, a personal psycho-drama, a coming to terms with one of the badges of Saroyan’s self-definition.

Saroyan wrote *Haratch*, the longest of these Armenian plays, and the most elevated in style and provocative in ideas, less than two years before his death. It was the last major statement he made on his own ethnicity, though it was not the last play in which Armenians were to figure. Exactly a year later, in July, 1980, at the request of Vienna’s English Theatre, Saroyan composed “Tales of the Vienna Streets” a whimsical but serious comedy which takes place in a café in the Austrian capital. Thomas Quinn Curtiss, in a pre-view of the play *International Herald Tribune*, July 31, 1981), describes the café owner thus: “Its [the café’s] generous, inquisitive proprietor is a displaced Armenian who, like Saroyan himself, often utters rousing tributes to his beloved homeland, the greatest of his people and their literature.” In what may have been Saroyan’s last play, the conversation and ideas are broadly universal, the major characters, archetypes of humanity. The play deserves quick publication, but it does not focus directly, or at least solely, on the Armenian dilemma and, therefore, is not included in this volume.

Armenians, Bitlis, and Haratch fit comfortably together for reasons other than the common ethnic origin of their characters. The setting of each is exile. *Armenians*, takes place in 1921 just after the national tragedy when the possibility of return to Armenia seemed a matter of time. Four decades later, the exiled Saroyan actually travels to Bitlis in the play *Bitlis*, and confronts the impossibility of return. In *Haratch*, the problem of exile is posed differently: How is one to adjust to its permanence? However, a central theme in all the plays is something worse than exile, something that Saroyan addressed directly only at the end of his life -- genocide. Genocide, the willful murder of a nation, a word invented since World War II, is what Armenians suffered in 1915. It created the diaspora, emptying Armenia of its indigenous population and scattering everywhere those who survived. It is the unspoken calamity underlying these works. How curious that Saroyan, willing and able to render into story or play any subject, was unable to write directly about the Armenian Genocide, about the mass murder and deportations ordered by the Young Turks or even the massacres carried out earlier under Sultan Abdul Hamid in 1894-6 and in 1909. It was precisely to escape future massacres that Saroyan's own family fled to America.

The first plays talk about the Genocide, yet never uttering its name. Even the word massacre is missing. In *Armenians* we read, "They all died. They were all killed...I lost them all." But how? In *Bitlis* we are only told that "...all of Bitlis was made bereft of its real inhabitants, the Armenians." Again we ask, how? In the same play Saroyan himself says, "I really don't know what happened in the first place, a thousand times in the first place." These polite euphemisms are the closest allusions to the event.

Only in *Haratch* -- written four years after *Bitlis*, years during which Armenian violence against the symbols of the Turkish state compelled remembrance of what had happened in 1915 -- did Saroyan boldly state the facts of genocide he knew so well. A few lines from the play are enough to show the change in language. "How have we had our revenge

for the two million Armenians killed by the Turks?” (Zohrab, p. 142). “We refuse to forget the crime of genocide inflicted upon us by Turkey,” (Saroyan, p. 159).

Whether directly invoked in the last play or indirectly understood in the earlier ones, the Genocide is the genesis of the two major themes in the trilogy: exile, and the survival of a dispersed nation denied the right of repatriation.

The plays follow chronologically. They reveal, through Saroyan’s uncanny ability to recreate voices from the past, how the Genocide was perceived at its inception, during this own youth in Fresno thousands of miles away from Armenia; half a century later in Bitlis, Turkish-occupied Armenia; and today, when diverse Armenians from around the world meet by chance in Paris. A perpetual dialogue that begins in Armenians among the uneducated farmers, unsophisticated clergy, and professional men and continues, unended, in Haratch with first-and-second generation professors, poets, and journalists. In 1921, those in the diaspora wonder about the fate of their brothers surviving under desperate conditions in the tiny remnant of Armenia that had arisen from the ashes of genocide in 1918 as a “free and independent” Republic. Two years later, it was metamorphosized by force into a Bolshevik Republic, an aftereffect of the Russian Revolution. In 1979 in Haratch a second-generation intellectual from that same Soviet Armenian Republic sits in the offices of an Armenian newspaper in the West and discusses with his diasporic counterparts the continuing effects of the Genocide and the question of return. Between them -- the Diaspora and the Soviet Republic -- lies geographic Armenia empty of Armenians. Around them is a world that, if no longer ignorant of the forgotten Genocide, is certainly indifferent to it. Bitlis is the link between the desperation of the post-Genocide period and the present, between the hopeful idealism of a time of hopelessness and the energetic realism of today. It is the test of an agonizing quest for a postulated return pitted against the confusion of a real one. Saroyan, the individual Armenian, lives out the search for the

mythic Bitlis, the place that in his mind defined most of his character. Its prevalence is connected to Saroyan's personal identification with its customs, geography, and special dialect. For him, Bitlis is Armenia.

In William Saroyan's final will article three says in part: "I direct that my ashes be delivered to the trustees of the WILLIAM SAROYAN FOUNDATION and that, if possible, one-half (1/2) of my ashes be delivered by the trustees to an appropriate location in Armenia, as determined in the absolute discretion of the trustees." In personal conversations and in earlier versions of the will, Saroyan asked that one-half of his ashes be scattered or deposited in Bitlis once Bitlis again becomes Armenian. He wanted his heart in the Armenian highlands. A year after his death, half of his cremated remains were permanently dignified at the pantheon of greats in Erevan, the capital of Armenia.

Every play of this constructed trilogy, while dealing with the general theme of forced national exile, has its own particular environment, its own context in Saroyan's life. The circumstances of composition and the background of each, as separate preludes to the plays, will be presented below.

ARMENIANS

The earliest of the plays and the only one of the three to have been produced was written in Fresno in twenty-one days, from November 10 to November 30, 1971. In the following year, Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, Primate of the Armenian Diocese of North America, asked Saroyan for an original play on the Armenians that could be produced in the diocesan cathedral in New York City. In 1974 Saroyan sent Armenians for its premier presentation.

The production was assigned to Ed Setrakian, an actor and director who had staged *The Time of Your Life* for the Diocese in 1964. By special arrangement with Actor's Equity he put together a cast of professionals for six performances in the Kavookjian Auditorium on October 22, 23,

24, 29, 30, 31, 1974. The audiences were enthusiastic, and New York critics praised the play, its director, and the actors; as a result it was presented four more times in November. In the *Village Voice*, Arthur Sainer said, "Exciting theatre....Under....Setrakian's direction, Armenians is alive....The air is filled with exhortations of such dimension that no adequate response seems available." In the *New York Daily News*, Patricia O'Haire wrote, the characters "are so beautifully drawn, so honest and so lifelike that they are universal." Saroyan did not see the actual production. According to Ed Setrakian, he passed through New York during its preparation, arranged to meet with the cast, and in his usual egregious way, acted out each of the parts. Setrakian adds that Saroyan sent a two-page description identifying each character, but this document has since been lost. Nevertheless, in the letter of March 7, 1975, to his agent, already cited above, Saroyan comments: "This one was done at the cathedral for a limited run, and judging from tapes I asked to have, the thing was done real stupidly, and yet in spite of that the audience and the critics like it. So there we are...." After listening to the tape recording on November 30, 1974, he wrote the following on his copy of the script now in the Bancroft Library: "Sat. 1230-2 PM. Listened to the tape -- stupid and all wrong, good God." Five years later, on Christmas Eve, 1980, in Fresno, he discussed the staging with me more specifically: "Setrakian's production of *The Armenians* was off base. He had them get too shrill, a bogus trick. Armenians are not shrill. [Elia] Kazan also has everybody jumping up and down; tricks, [he] uses lots of tricks." Saroyan's plays, despite their apparent simplicity, are extremely difficult to mount successfully. It was never easy to satisfy him either.

Saroyan referred to *Armenians* (also called *The Armenians*) as a play in twenty-one scenes, even though the uninterrupted action takes place in only two settings. The Setrakian production was, wisely and with the author's blessing, divided into two acts; I have followed that division. The twenty-one scenes of *Armenians*, the seven of *Bitlis*, and the thirty of *Haratch* -- exactly equal to the number of pages in each of the original

typescripts -- originated from the process used by Saroyan to write these and all other plays. There is evidence that his earlier plays may have been written in the same way. Each was composed a page a day on as many consecutive days as needed; Saroyan's single spaced, marginless pages contain 700 to 800 words. The ritual was unvarying; Saroyan never skipped a day, and never spent more than twenty to thirty minutes on a page. He composed at the typewriter without benefit of drafts, outlines, or notes. The intensity of his creation was aided only by reflection in the course of routine activities during the twenty-four hours between sessions. The first draft was always the final one, and none was rewritten.

The action in the original scenes one through seven (Act One) takes place in the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church in Fresno, still on the corner of Ventura and M Street in the heart of what was once the "Armenian town" of Saroyan's youth. He called it the "Red Brick Church" because of the building material used to erect it in 1914. Act Two, scenes eight through twenty-one, takes place just across Ventura in the Armenian Patriotic Club, called until recent years the Asbarez Club after the Armenian newspaper of that name moved to Los Angeles in 1974. Already twenty years earlier, in the novel *Rock Wagram* (1951), Saroyan has the movie actor-hero pay a sentimental visit to "The Asbarez Building" in search of the natural warmth of his childhood. The modest landmark was torn down in the early 1980s to make way for a new Holiday Inn, which now faces Holy Trinity on one side and, across M Street, the rebaptized William Saroyan Theatre on the other.

The *dramatis personae* are in two groups, a genteel middle-class represented by three clergymen and a doctor trained at Harvard, and a collection of men from major cities of historic Armenia: Bitlis, Moush, Van, Kharpert/Harpoot, Erzeroum, Dikranagert/Diyarbakir. Two of the clerics, Father Kasparian, of the Red Brick Church, and Reverend Knadjian, of the First Armenian Presbyterian Church, already appear in secondary roles in Saroyan's "Is There Going to Be a Wedding?" They,

like Reverend Papazian, Minister by inference of the Pilgrim Armenian Congregational Church, are based on historical figures. Saroyan wrote from memory of those he had observed; like ancient Greek and Armenian historians, he created imagined dialogue faithful to each. Vardan vardapet Kasparian came to Fresno in 1912 from Bursa Turkey, to take charge of Holy Trinity. He remained its spiritual leader for more than twenty years; eventually he attained the rank of archbishop and the post of Primate of the Armenian Church of California. He officiated at the consecration of the “Red Brick Church” in 1914. M.J. Knadjian was Reverend of the First Armenian Presbyterian Church, Saroyan’s church, from 1912 to 1922; the original structure on Fulton Street at Santa Clara was built in 1901 and used until 1941. Saroyan describes how he nearly bought the building, still standing today, in a chapter devoted to it and Rev. Knadjian in *Places Where I’ve Done Time* (1972). Manaseh G. Papazian (1865-1943) was born in Beredjik, Cilician Armenia. After studying at Yale Divinity and Andover, he returned to Ottoman Turkey with his new American wife to serve in the neighboring city of Aintab. From 1914 to 1940 he as pastor of Pilgrim Armenian Congregational Church. The first building on Van Ness and Inyo Streets was used from 1910 to 1921. Not only in Armenians, but in all three plays the characters are consistently modeled on actual people.

In Armenians, the mixture of guarded respect and cavalier skepticism toward the clergy is consistent with Saroyan’s own attitude toward the church, the only strong Armenian institution in the early diaspora. The first settlers, those who came before World War I, were closely linked to Protestant American missionary activity in Eastern Anatolia. Later refugees were more often tied to the mother church. Then as now Armenian Protestants were more willing to accept Americanization, while Apostolics struggled to preserve language and national sentiment. Saroyan was officially a Protestant; his father had been a sometimes minister of the Presbyterian Church. Though later wary of organized religion, young Saroyan attended church. “Sundays in Fresno were both pleasant and boring for me. Most of the time I hated going to The First

Armenian Presbyterian Sunday School, but I went just the same, because it was the rule of the family. I didn't mind too much, because it was possible to have fun there too. Everything was in English, of course, except the major part of Reverend Knadjian's sermon, but we didn't stay for that very often," ("Sunday Is a Hell of a Day," p.18).

On special occasions -- mainly funerals and weddings -- he also attended the Apostolic "red brick church," which was, like First Presbyterian, near to his house. Close proximity and identification are responsible for the authentic portraits of the clergy in Armenians and Haratch.

Armenians was motivated by an inner archaeology, a search through memory to recall and then resuscitate forgotten personalities. The catalyst for writing it was the approach of November 29. Until recently the date has been a source of antagonism in the diaspora between fervent supporters of the nationalist Armenian Republic, for whom it represents the disastrous loss of independence, and those who unconditionally defend the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, for whom it is the national holiday, the beginning of Soviet Armenia. Saroyan always had difficulty with state authority, and though he loved his visits to Soviet Armenia and was loved and worshipped there, he never gracefully accepted Russian tutelage, as is clear in the play.

The action of Armenians takes place neither in 1922, as indicated in the original manuscript, nor in 1920, as Saroyan stated in his Program Note of October, 1974. Consistency with the historical events described demands the year 1921, since in the play the "seat of the government" has fallen to the Russians for the second time. The "free and independent" Republic lasted from May 28, 1918, to November 29, 1920. The government of the majority Dashnak Party, under extreme duress, turned over power to the Communists in exchange for a guarantee of protection from the Nationalist Turkish army that had already invaded and was determined to complete the annihilation started in 1915. So the first seizure of Armenia by the Bolsheviks was in late 1920. Three months later, in February, a general uprising, provoked by

dissatisfaction with the new leaders, drove the Communists out of Erevan. But in early April, 1921, the Bolsheviks reentered the capital; by July the revolt was crushed throughout the country and the “Russians” -- in reality Armenian Communists supported by the Red Army -- were back in the “chair of government” for the second time.

The question troubling those in the Patriotic Club is how to help their brothers thousand of miles away in Armenia. Interwoven with it is another, more elusive, but more immediate problem announced near the beginning of the play: How is one to preserve the Armenian nation, its language and customs, here in America? Despite the humor that saturates the play, these problems were as serious and unresolved then as they are today. Is it better to demonstrate the defiant national spirit by striving to become totally, one hundred percent, American, or by obstinately to remain as Armenian as possible? In 1921 the idea of return was concrete to the adult generation, but for the youth the force of public school, English, and new and “progressive” American ways were all-consuming.

The either/or dilemma of ethnic identity was more painful in Fresno than elsewhere from the 1920s to the 1940s. No other city in the United States has been more closely associated with the Armenians. At the time of the play, they numbered about 15,000 there, the largest concentration in America. Today, the more than 40,000 Armenians in the San Joaquin Valley represent some eight percent of the area’s population, still by proportion the highest density in the U.S. A recent centennial exhibit and film documentary, *Strangers in a Promised Land*, on the first Armenian settlement in Fresno (1881-1981) showed a people’s achievement in an environment of vicious discrimination. No Armenian escaped the bigotry; reaction to it varied, but many took the easier path of assimilation to avoid the added injury of racism after the devastations of genocide.

Saroyan characteristically chose the hard path. Though he was

successfully “integrated” into American life, he never suffered the loss of ethnic identity so often coupled with “assimilation.” He has written about growing up Armenian in Fresno many times, usually with humor, often with aggressive disdain toward the establishment. Pertinent to and contemporary with these plays is a little-known radio interview Saroyan accorded to Charles Amirkhonian for the Pacifica stations, KPFA in Berkeley and KFCF in Fresno, and broadcast on February 17, 1976. In an hour-long monologue he reminisced about “Growing Up in Fresno,” the title of the program. In the following passage Saroyan directly discusses the problem of ethnic attitudes:

The question comes up: didn't Fresno have a tremendous limit of spirit and mind, and certain kind of obvious and foolish and mistaken sense of superiority, based upon wealth and class and so on? Well, of course it did, but that is human, and that is everywhere. Well, weren't the Armenian people in Fresno belittled and considered inferior? Yes, they were, by some people, but not by everybody. Well, wasn't it actually universally established in the mind, if you could call it that, of the town and the region, that the Armenian was something else, as the saying is? Yes, that was true, too. Well, what effect did that have on me? Well, it had little effect. I think it had a good effect. It certainly made it necessary for me to acknowledge to myself first that I am who I am -- and Armenian -- and not somebody who does not wish to be an Armenian, but somebody who accepts that he is an Armenian in an atmosphere where the Armenian is disliked; at the very least, we can put it that way. And that I must make known to anybody who dislikes Armenians that I am one of them. I am an Armenian.

In Armenians, the ethnic debate is conducted by juxtaposition of characters rather than by sustained arguments (these would be developed later in *Haratch*). Various problems are posed, but few are settled. This was Saroyan's way: by formulating a question clearly the reader was compelled to understand its dimensions, after which he was nudged toward, if not its solution, at least its resolution. However, some

problems persisted, often because the questions of Saroyan's youth remained the same when he wrote the play: unanswered and, until now, unanswerable. "Why does God give the Armenian so little to thank him for?" Why should surviving victims of genocide feel guilty because they survived when nearly everybody else did not? The voice of the people, common farmer and laborer, is more eloquently heard in this play than the others: "We can stop mourning, but we cannot forget." The orderly politeness of middle class, Anglo-Saxon comportment is directly challenged by the powerful: "The people...refuse to be polite about indestructible Armenia."

BITLIS

Bitlis is the story of a voyage, a passage to the town of the same name that Saroyan made in 1964. Of the plays in the trilogy, it is the most personal. It was written on seven successive mornings starting Sunday, March 23, and ending Saturday, March 29, 1975, an average of twenty-eight minutes spent on each of its seven pages and a total compositional time of three and one-half hours. He had publicly declared eleven years earlier that he would write a play describing his trip; he had, after all, prepared a lifetime to go to Bitlis. Why did Bitlis need eleven years of gestation before it could be spat out whole in less than four hours? What conjunction of events in March 1975 provoked or inspired Saroyan to do it then?

Two answers are easily suggested. Other, less tangible ones become apparent only when Saroyan's earlier associations with the city of Bitlis are made clear and his preoccupations of the moment are examined. Let us begin with the easy answers.

First, 1975 was particularly creative for Saroyan, especially for theatrical works which were written with journalistic rapidity. During three months, thirteen weeks from Sunday, February 16 to Saturday, May 17, Saroyan wrote plays every single morning, producing at least seventeen. Writing had become an obsession. Each was in one act, each was seven

pages long (his seven scenes), and each was begun on a Sunday morning. Bitlis was the ninth. The eighth, "The Human Head," a spoof on psychoanalysis, was written on the same mornings, but a half hour earlier.

Sixteen of these plays remain in manuscript. Bitlis was first published in the special Saroyan issue of the quarterly Ararat (Spring 1984) by permission of the estate of William Saroyan. It was among the "Armenian plays," as he called them. There are only two settings: the action of the first six pages of the typescript takes place in a restaurant, while the last moments of the play unfold in a Chevrolet, as Saroyan and his friends drive away from Bitlis toward other cities of historic Armenia.

A second reply to why the play was written when it was is also apparent. If four years earlier the approach of November 29 had been motivation enough to write Armenians, in the spring of 1975, the approach of April 24, the day the Genocide began sixty years before, was an occasion for writing Bitlis. Saroyan had a fetish about dates; his birthday, August 31, was the most important in his personal calendar. Projects were started or finished on chosen days, such as the unpublished autobiographical "Fifty-Fifty," begun the day after his fiftieth birthday and finished a year later on August 31, 1959. Bitlis became part of his contemplation of April 24th, 1975.

Once again, to write this play Saroyan engaged in psychic archaeology in order to penetrate the world of recollections. In March, 1975, he struggled to remember and make sense of his visit to Bitlis -- a confusing experience from the recent past.

Though Saroyan was born in Fresno, when with close friends he always said, he was from Bitlis. That is, in the Armenian fashion, he proclaimed himself a "Bitlistsi," using the suffix -tsi/-etsi which renders "of" of "from" when added to a place name. The attachment was strong, a

source of pride. The ancestral hometown of his parents and grandparents as far back as memory was his, too.

In Armenia, regional pride was as strong as in any country. Bitlis had its own Armenian dialect, which William Saroyan spoke (though he never learned to read Armenian). Its inhabitants were famous for distinctive character traits: pride, scorn, and toughness. To write about Bitlis was a serious affair, one that evoked a past full of the wild escapades of crazy relatives, but also a past haunted with melancholy, pain, and loss. More than anything else, Bitlis was the place of Armenak, his father who dies when Saroyan was three, and who, at thirty-six, was an unfulfilled farmer, minister, and poet. His longing to see and to find Bitlis was inseparable from a lifelong search for his father.

Though he had never seen Bitlis, it was vivid in his mind through the precise and repeated descriptions of his mother, uncles, and especially maternal grandmother, Lucintak. He had read and owned the pitiful account of Grace H. Knapp, *The Tragedy of Bitlis*, published in 1919 shortly after the massacres. He had himself written about the mountain city just west of Lake Van, its river, its hills, and its adjacent villages, more than once. In the 1942 story, "The Man Who Knew My Father as a Boy in Bitlis," these themes are tied together. Places mentioned in it, like the nearby village of Gultik and the fountain at Tsapergor, are in later works. "Hayastan and Charentz," written in 1954, begins: "Two things sent me to Hayastan (i.e. Armenia) in the spring of 1935 when I was twenty-six years old: a writer's restlessness, and a son's need to see his father's birthplace." A little further he continues: "I was not unaware that in reaching Soviet Armenia I would not be reaching my father's Armenia, or his city, Bitlis. It was enough at that time to reach the general vicinity of my father's birthplace, and to be in a nation named Armenia, inhabited by Armenians." Is not the phrase "enough at that time" a clear indication, as early as 1954, of a future pilgrimage to Bitlis?

Another story about his father, "Armenak of Bitlis" (1968), remarkably has nothing concrete about Bitlis in it. What had happened in between the detailed descriptions of the 1954 story and the failure to describe in 1968? In the spring of 1964 Saroyan went to Bitlis. He confessed however, he was unable to put it in writing until later. Some months after the trip, on September 22, 1964 he wrote to his traveling companion Bedros Zorian: "It was a grand tour, one of the most important pieces of travel and exploration I have ever made, but very very difficult for me to write about...And so, I have no immediate plans to even try to write about it." In *Haratch*, he says as one of his own characters, "I did get to Bitlis a good thirteen or fourteen years ago... When I got back to Fresno I didn't know where to start, and in the end the only thing I wrote was a kind of poem called Bitlis, but it does not really tell what is in my heart to tell, which I don't really know how to tell." Had Saroyan's usually sharp memory faltered? Or was the experience so unsettling he repressed it? Why did he fail to mention the play Bitlis instead of referring to "a kind of poem?" The poem "Bitlis" and a fifty-two page manuscript of the same name written in 1969 -- neither of which I have seen -- are registered among his unpublished works. The latter, which begins "Bitlis is a city," and ends "I was glad to be leaving Bitlis," was probably the work completed in the summer of 1967 in Paris and mentioned in an inscription from one of Saroyan's books: "September 19, 1967...during July and August the following works were wrought...6. Bitlis, a kind of free examination of a place, and a visit to it." Saroyan was disoriented by the visit; not only are there no references to it in a work like *Places Where I've Done Time* (1972), but he failed to speak of it in a long interview of May 1975, just two months after the play was written. In a January 21, 1977 letter to Zorian, he says "Why did I not write about our great 1964 tour of Anatolia, of Armenia and our visits to all of our magnificent places? I wrote a kind of poem called Bitlis which I shall have published some day, but I believe I was unable to write a full book because I knew I would become angry about our story and there are already so many of us who have written out of such anger." Had he actually forgotten or repressed the writing of the

play until the last year of his life? Perhaps some day, in addition to the insights into Bitlis itself, his journals will help explain this phenomenon better.

Apart from this feverish writing mood and the arrival of the sixtieth commemoration of the Genocide, what else compelled him to write *Bitlis in March 1975*? I have pointed out elsewhere that Saroyan was struck by Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat*, originally a three-part *New Yorker* "Profile" in February of that same year. The dimensions of Arlen's literary as well as his actual voyage to Armenia in search of his father and inherited ethnicity often echoed Saroyan's own emotional saga. In this suggestive and penetrating book, and the personal search it describes, Saroyan played an important role; at moments he even served as surrogate father. An entire section is devoted to Arlen's visit with him in Fresno, and it was the senior writer who told him to go to Armenia. The reading of *Passage to Ararat*, simultaneously a quest for the real and the symbolic Armenia, inspired Saroyan to describe his own search, his own passage. On October 24, 1975, after Saroyan returned to Fresno, he wrote the following to James Tashjian, editor of *The Armenian Review*: "What he [Arlen] has done to *Passage to Ararat* could not have been done by anybody else in the whole world or in all of the dimensions and channels of sequential time -- it had to be Dickran Kouyoumdjian's [Arlen senior's real name] puzzled some with a totally different personality, style, talent, and aspiration: we are all of us lucky it happened, for these things need luck," (*The Armenian Review*, September, 1981, p. 337).

Saroyan set out for Bitlis in April, 1964. On the first of May he arrived in Istanbul via Israel and Cyprus. Upon his arrival he met Bedros Zobian, co-editor and publisher of the Armenian daily *Marmara*. Saroyan told him of his plans to go to Bitlis. Zobian says he asked how he would go; Saroyan said, by taxi. He reminded Saroyan that it was about a 1000 miles from Istanbul and offered to accompany him. Zobian, his friend Ara Altounian, a business man and industrialist, and

Saroyan left the capital for Bitlis by car on May 9, 1964. They returned to Istanbul sixteen days later on the 25th. Zobjian's detailed reportage for Marmara began to appear even before their return. Because of Saroyan's popularity -- some have said he is the most famous Armenian of all time -- the articles were reprinted or mentioned in Armenian papers throughout the diaspora. In contrast to Saroyan's literary version of the trip, below is a circumstantial summary of Zobjian's chronicle based on articles appearing in Haratch of Paris on May 20, 22, 27, 28, 29, 1964, and a recent detailed letter from him.

The trio drove straight to Ankara, then north to the Black Sea coastal cities of Samsun, Giresun, and Trebizond, places with important Armenian communities before the deportations of 1915. Moving south toward the interior of eastern Anatolia (historic Armenia), they went to Erzeroum and Van, the city and lake, spending the afternoon admiring the famous tenth century Armenian church on the nearby island of Aghtamar. Saroyan was doubly please, because in Van he was told an official reception would be waiting for him at Bitlis. From Tatvan on the opposite side of the lake, where they were lodged, they headed toward Bitlis. The closed they got, the more nervous and excited Saroyan became. According to Zobjian, Saroyan said, "Nothing can stop me from entering Bitlis tomorrow" (that is, Sunday May 17). As they approached, Saroyan insisted on driving the car into Bitlis. He excused himself for perspiring so much; he remarked on how hard his heart was beating.

On the outskirts of the city, Saroyan was greeted with bouquets of freshly picked wildflowers from the mountains of Bitlis. Once in the city, he said he needed no guide because hew knew it all by heart from the many times the city was described in his childhood. He shouted: "Bitlis, Bitlis, Bitlis." as they walked to the district of Tsapergor, he rejoiced in saying, "I know all of this. I know the old trees. I am a Bitlistsi! My father walked on these roads." He met the mayor; he smoked a cigarette made from Bitlis tobacco. An old man guided him to the vestiges of a stone house he insisted belonged to Saroyan's own

family. He was photographed before the ruined hearth. “It’s a good place to live forever, the people are good, the flowers good. It’s an unforgettable day.”

Saroyan and his entourage walked around town for two hours, then went up to the massive fort that dominates the city. There a performing bear put his paw on Saroyan’s shoulder. He judged that a good omen. The bear danced, while he announced, “I’m going to write a play with the title ‘Bitlis.’” He hugged various villagers who came to meet him. It was the most wonderful day of his life, he said. They went to the fountain where he drank deeply. “It’s good water. See this city, it’s a great city.”

After the day in Bitlis they returned to Tatvan and the following day left for Moush, Diyarbekir, and Elazig-Kharpert (Harput), because so many of his friends in Fresno were originally from that city. In Erzeroum, Saroyan proposed a new play, “The Istanbul Comedy,” modeled on his earlier “The London,” “The Paris,” and “The Moscow” comedies. Fikret Otyam, a well known Turkish journalist from the popular daily Cumhuriyet, guaranteed it would premier simultaneously in seven or eight cities in Turkey if Saroyan gave permission. All proceeds, he added, would go toward equipment for Turkish grammar schools. Saroyan said, “I’ll go to Paris, think about my experience for six months, and write the play in six days, so help me God.” This “scoop” was first published in Marmara on May 24.

Before reaching Istanbul they visited Antakya, Iskenderun, Adana, the medieval Armenian castle of Yilan Kalesi, Mersin, Antalya, Izmir, and Pamukkale. Saroyan remained in Istanbul until June 1, meeting with the Turkish press. The Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Archbishop Shnork Kaloustian, invited him to lunch. It took him some years to live up to his promises, but in the end, in addition to writing the promised Bitlis, three weeks earlier in March 1975, he also wrote “The Istanbul Comedy” in seven days. It is an hilarious play, but at the same time a rude condemnation of the discrimination practices against the Armenian

remnant living in modern Turkey; one would be hard pressed to imagine what Turkish theatrical group would have courage enough to produce it with Armenian-Turkish relations as they are today.

William Saroyan went to Bitlis in search of his roots long before Michael Arlen found Ararat or Alex Haley, Africa. He did not find Armenia or Armenians, but exactly what he must have know he would find: Kurds, who strangely resembled certain of his relatives. He say Bitlis, the river, the fortress; he walked up and down its sharply inclined streets; visited the area that supposedly had been inhabited by the Saroyans, and saw the hearth of what was said to be his father's house. The ninety-one year old Armenian still living in the town knew nothing about the Saroyan family; his only wish was to leave for Beirut to die among Armenians. Zobian says Saroyan combined elements from an older Armenian in Moush and an Armenian father and son from the village of Gultik. Saroyan was overwhelmed, thrilled, confused, perplexed.

Which Bitlis is the real one? That of his forefathers? The one in Saroyan's mind? The one of today? The real Bitlis is both the same and different from the Bitlis of Saroyan's creative imagination. To sort it all out he needed time; he took eleven years. In the play, some problems are resolved, others suspended, but through it Saroyan consolidated and reestablished his claim on Bitlis, and, therefore, the Armenian claim to the homeland. He did this by willful, existential choice: "I choose to love Bitlis and to believe that it is ours. Of course I choose. I have no choice but to choose. But since I do choose, that is it, is it not, that is the truth of it, I love Bitlis, I believe it is ours, it is mine" (Bitlis, p. 107).

On May 25, 1975 in Paris, shortly after Bitlis was written, Saroyan gave a long interview to the poet Garig Basmadjian subsequently published in the Saroyan issue of Ararat (Spring, 1984, pp. 36-7). Though the play is not alluded to, Saroyan reflects on Bitlis and about being Armenian.

GB: Is your Armenian background the best element of your literary output?

WS: Yes, yes, in the sense of my being anything. That is: what usage do you make of your identity? What usage do you make of the accident of what you are?...

GB: Were you ever an American?

WS: Always.

GB: You are always an American, and you were always an Armenian. Let's talk a little about this duality.

WS: Definitely....We are a product of two things well-known and established by everybody. The inherited and the environmental. I am an American by environment. I am an Armenian, that's who I am. I was born an Armenian. But you put me in California, that's my home. So somebody told me "What does California mean to you?" I said, to be perfectly honest, it's my native land. I have a very deep attachment to it.

He says "As much as to Hayastan?" Yes, as much as to Hayastan, as much as to Bitlis. In an allegorical rather than sentimental sense, Bitlis is supreme. But this is another dimension of experience. This is almost a dream. This is almost beyond anything that we need try to measure in terms of the reasonable, because, remember, Bitlis has become a kind of monument of our loss. And I have a feeling about regaining, which is almost psychopathic. I wrote a book called Tracy's Tiger [1951] in which the theme of regaining the lost is made, insane, obsessive. This son-of-a-bitch tries to bring back the past, and that is madness. But in regard to Bitlis I know it's beyond any further expectation. I was there ten years ago. I didn't want to leave. But it's not ours. It is ours but other people occupy it. I did long for the day when it would be ours and I'd go there. I would go there. Go there and live there. I would settle down there and die there, and put the bones with the other Saroyans that have died there for maybe who knows. Forever. Our bones are there. We are there, as far as memory of our old timers goes; Saroyannere hos en, ouskitz ekan? [The Saroyans are here, where did they come from?].

“Forever” said Saroyan. An alternate title for the play was precisely “Bitlis Forever or Never.” Saroyan was fond of paradox, insisting on it as a way to begin to see problems clearly. In Bitlis the problem of loss and return is resolved. Midway through, Bedros says, “Is this the only Bitlis?....When you put up a new house on land of your own is not the land and the house Bitlis?” (p.107) Later, the argument is consolidated. Bedros: “...Our story does not really permit us anything like common simple gladness about our country.” This is further rationalized in the final dialogue by Ara: “...We do not need the childish support of a geographical country to enjoy being who we are....And who really cares or needs to know why an Armenian happens to be sad, going away from Bitlis...an Armenian is sad because of far, far better reasons than geography and arrival and departure....[But it] saddens me...and makes me break into song, so sing with me about eating bread and drinking wine, that’s all” (p.112).

There is neither optimism nor pessimism in this ending, just as there is neither at the end of Armenians. In the latter, since the problem is not one that Fresno Armenians can solve, they decide to get on with living. In Bitlis, since the dilemma is beyond control, the decision is to enjoy rather than grieve.

Saroyan’s return to the mythical Bitlis had been accomplished. The old myth was destroyed; a new one was created.

HARATCH

Haratch, the last sustained treatment of an Armenian theme by Saroyan, is as once the longest, densest, and most serious of the three plays. Haratch, which, as the play explains, means “forward,” is an Armenian daily in Paris founded in 1925 by Schavarch Missakian. Since his death in 1957, Missakian’s daughter, Arpik, has been editor and publisher. With offices at 83 Rue d’Hauteville in the tenth arrondissement, the paper has always been located in what used to be the center of Armenian life in the city. Living close by, Saroyan was fond of dropping in a

Haratch, which like Samuelian's bookstore on Rue Monsieur-le-Prince in the Latin Quarter, was and is a gathering place for Armenian writers and intellectuals to exchange news and just talk.

In 1958, after six years of living on the Pacific, Saroyan left his Malibu house. Two years later he bought a flat in the ninth arrondissement of Paris not far from the Opera. Three years after that, in 1963, he also restructured roots in Fresno, buying a modest tract house, and later the one next door. Perhaps this resettling in Fresno where, as is Paris, he was once more in an Armenian milieu, inspired Saroyan and drove him to Bitlis the following spring. During the last decades of his life, he alternated between these places with no fixed pattern, through spring and summer were his preferred Paris seasons.

If Saroyan's life in Paris was not totally reclusive, neither was it similar to that of other expatriate American writers. He did not seek the notoriety of a Hemingway or a Gertrude Stein. He never learned much French either. He did write an occasional column for the International Herald Tribune and his works were translated into French. Yet he loved Paris and walked its streets endlessly, as much as any American writer had ever done. He savored Parisian life, especially that of its central quarter, developing a fine sense of the habits of the average Frenchman. He would have been pleased by the plaque put on the façade of his 74 Rue Taitbout walkup this year commemorating his long residence in the city.

During the season in Paris, he associated with old friends and relatives passing through. The more permanent friendships were predominantly with Armenians, usually unpretentious ones rather than community notables. He was never much attracted to the affluent or members of the establishment. His life was given over to reflection and writing, interspersed with travel.

In Rock Wagram, Saroyan uses a newspaper office to talk about the

destiny of Armenians. While in Fresno, during an impetuous visit to the presses of *Asbarez*, the hero, Arak Vagramian (Rock), is reminded that his dead father once worked for the paper. Poetically, the underlying meaning of the paper is explained: "Rock looked at everything in the place, for a man is the vagrant parts of many men scattered and left desolate in many places, in rooms and in machinery, at tables and within walls" (p.99). "You have come here to remember your father," says Krikorian, the editor, quickly toasting the raki "the Armenians, whoever they are, and to their language, whose majesty we all know, lost as it may be forever" (p.101). The short scene fuses father and fatherland while invoking the newspaper as the bearer of the word in a language unsung by the youth of its users.

If church hall and coffee house-patriotic club are the proper settings to discuss the problems in Armenians, the ideas put forward in *Haratch* command an ambiance at once more elevated and literate, a place for the dissemination, if not the creation, of ideas. At the same time it is a place of relaxed intimacy. "Armenians are never so at home as when they are in an editorial office," we are told near the end of *Haratch* (p.177).

A permutation is evident in Saroyan's choice of characters. Only a token gesture is made to the anonymous masses -- the farmers and workers that appear in *Armenians* -- through an octogenarian from Bitlis, who is able to intrude only because he is a writer of the experiences of his youth. Mesrob Ter-Krikorian was his real name; now deceased, he was probably the person mentioned by Saroyan in the earlier *Basmadjian* interview: "I love that crazy Bitlistsian, you remember him, don't you? What a wonderful man, eighty-seven years old." The simple clergy of the first play are abandoned in *Haratch* for Bishop Stepan, modeled on the Archbishop of Paris, Seroppe Manougian, who, for more than twenty years until his death in 1984 was head of the Armenian Church in Europe./ Not only was he a close acquaintance, but the Bishop's niece, Abigail Sarkisian, a nurse at the Veteran's Hospital in Fresno, was a dear friend who attended Saroyan during his final illness.

Among the other interlocutors are journalists and writers. Two -- Arpik of Haratch and, from Soviet Armenia, Hrachia (Hovannissian) of Sovetakan grakanoutiwn (Soviet Literature) -- are editors, like Bedros Zobian in Bitlis. The others are regular contributors to Haratch: Zulal (Zoulal) Kazandjian, poet and teacher at the Armenian Mekhitarist College in Sèvres; Anoushavan Kapikian, custom bootmaker by profession and at eight-seven still a habitue at Haratch; and Zohrab Mouradian, a tailor now aged sixty-seven, also a regular at Haratch.

Of the remaining characters, two are young Americans: Khachig Tölölyan, the figure who expresses the most militant ideas in the play, a professor of literature at Wesleyan College -- born in Aleppo, raised in Beirut, educated in New England -- and his Armenian-American companion, Sylvia, a real estate investment analyst -- born in Beirut, raised in Washington and Los Angeles -- whose real name is Sylvia Siranoosh Missirlian. During Tölölyan's summer visits to Paris he wrote regularly for Haratch while using the offices as headquarters; to this day he remains a regular contributor. Finally, there is Saroyan himself -- Bitlistsi, Armenian, American, writer, and Parisian.

Every one of the characters is real and keeps his or her name in the play except for the bishop and "the man from Bitlis." The tailor Agamian, with whom Hrachia stayed, was probably Etvart Aghamian, though another close friend of Saroyan's, Krikor Atamian, was also a tailor. Bringing them all together at the same time in the offices of Haratch is theatrical and imaginary. However, Saroyan had met most of them there, and say the others regularly, like Bishop Manougian and Hrachia Hovannissian, neither of whom, according to Madame Missakian, had ever visited the Rue d'Hauteville offices. Whether Saroyan actually discussed the many topics in the play with the characters in it can only be confirmed or denied by them after reading the words he put into each of their mouths.

Haratch was written in Paris on thirty consecutive afternoons from June 23 to July 22, 1979, less than two years before Saroyan's death. During the same thirty days he wrote his essay-memoir *Births*, published posthumously in 1983. A comparison of the two texts shows no resemblance in either subject or style, except for casual references to Armenians in *Births* (surprisingly few compared to the companion volume *Obituaries*). Saroyan worked on the memoir first, starting about noon, then turned to the play, a more serious and cohesive work. The lighter *Births* served as a warm-up for Haratch, much like the more humorous "The Human Head" did for *Bitlis* in March 1975. As with *Bitlis* and *Births*, only a few minutes each day were consecrated to Haratch, an average twenty-two and one-half to be precise, which we know because as usual the starting and quitting time was typed at the top and bottom of each page. For the curious, the indications are retained in the printed text of *Births*. As are with all the late plays, no acts were designated in the manuscript, just a scene for each page. However, there are natural breaks, one at the start of page ten of the original, when Sylvia asks, "What is it exactly that Armenians want?" Another begins on page twenty-three when Zulal begins a discussion of poetry. These divide the whole into roughly three equal segments, designated in this edition as acts. Act One functions as a general introduction presenting a variety of questions, some of which are intensely debated in Act two, while the final section, by a gradual decrescendo resolves certain of them and holds others in suspension.

The central action in Haratch is talk, dialogue, the liberal exchange of ideas. The subject is being Armenian. What is it to be Armenian today? To be an Armenian living outside Armenia? There are other questions, too, including some of the same found in *Armenians* and *Bitlis*. None is haphazardly considered, as they were occasionally in the other two works. Rather, Saroyan has chosen individuals from diverse components of the nation -- diasporan as well as Soviet Armenian writers, old-time survivors and youthful intellectuals, poets, a high-ranking clergyman, European and American Armenians, and the great writer-personality,

William Saroyan -- all able to articulate complex problems.

Saroyan by Saroyan: this is something notable. In none of his early successes, or in *Armenians*, does Saroyan appear as a character. But in the intimate 'Is There Going to be a Wedding?': and in *Bitlis* and *Haratch* Saroyan takes the stage. In these plays the writer creates a different dynamic, one that attracts deeper interest in the lines he gives himself. Few playwrights have done this. Indeed, a separate study of Saroyan's "Saroyan plays" exploring this technique would be intriguing. The earliest use of the method must be in "An Imaginary Character Named Saroyan," a play I have not seen, but that he talked about on several occasions. His very last theatrical effort, "Warsaw Visitor," written in 1980 less than a year before his death, also features the writer as principal character, as does his shorter play of 1975, "Dreams of Reality."

In *Haratch* Saroyan is certainly the main character, the animator of the dialogue. As I have suggested in another essay, Saroyan functions in it as Socrates did in the dialogues of Plato. What else is *Haratch* than a modern Socratic dialogue? Furthermore, by its amplitude and specific intrinsic elements, I believe it is consciously modeled on Plato's *Symposium*, with "being Armenian" substituted for "love" as its subject. And as wine was used at the banquet that inspired the *Symposium*, so whiskey, the drink of modern writers, serves amidst the printing presses to expand the imagination and loosen the tongue.

Haratch is a play of ideas. A summary of them would fall beyond the capacity of this introduction. Certain universal ones are basic to Saroyan's position on the perennial matters debated by Armenians and other minorities who have suffered forced exile. Much of the argument is again rendered through paradox. Saroyan described the Armenian paradox a few days before starting on *Bitlis* in a tribute of March 18, 1975, for the 50th anniversary volume of *Haratch*. "But what is the Armenian paradox? It is that against all probabilities we have not only

survived history, we have flourished...We have flourished with heartening effectiveness in our fragmented Soviet Armenia, with both the protection and permission of our Russian brothers and friends, and we have flourished equally forcefully and effectively all over the world, without leave of anybody's protection or permission. That is the Armenian paradox" (Haratch 50, Paris, 1976, p.384). As we see in this example, Saroyan juxtaposes conflicting and contradictory views, as though by merely stating them they would become reconciled. In a world of questions, paradoxes, and complexity, where one argument sounds as reasonable as another, Saroyan insists that each person's destiny is determined by his or her own decisions.

Saroyan again articulates an existential world view. For him, being is becoming: by consciously choosing at each moment to do or to be one thing or another you determine what you eventually become. Choosing one's environment, which for Saroyan encompasses one's self-definition, predicates who you are much more than heredity, the accident of birth. How else is one to explain the following dialogue in the very middle of the play? Saroyan asks, "Who is an Armenian?" Zulal replies, "An Armenian is a Turk who says I am an Armenian. It is a decision open to all people, and only Armenians have ever wanted to be Armenians, everybody else has not made a decision but has gone right on being whatever it was he believed he was, anyhow. You have got to choose to be an Armenian, you have got to want to be an Armenian" (pp.153-4). Making the choice requires knowledge of the once-glorious past, as well as the anxiety of exile, of foreignness, of being a victim of genocide.

So that no one should imagine he believed there was any special virtue in being or claiming to be Armenian, Saroyan stressed the point in these plays and elsewhere. Dr. Jivelekian, "While I am not prepared to remark that there really is nothing special about being an Armenian, I also cannot say that fact alone permits any of us to believe we are entitled to anything anybody else is not entitled to" (Armenians, p.69). Saroyan put

into Haratchhis famous corollary to the axiom: Hrachia. "I am sure we have all read it in at least two or three books...everybody is an Armenian, is that not so, Saroyan, did you not say so somewhere?" Saroyan. "Oh, yes, I did, but I was informed that a Jewish writer had said the same thing a year or two before I had done so -- or was it a month or two. He said and how right he was: Everybody is a Jew. In other words, everybody is everybody else" (p.169). In Saroyan's system we are incapable of escaping each other's destiny; as human beings we share the totality of all experience.

It is precisely this philosophy of choice that allowed Saroyan to escape the paradox that Bitlis was his, yet not his, that it was Armenian, yet not. In Bitlis he suggests that, in addition to the geographic entity west of Lake Van, there is a Bitlis of the spirit actualized wherever a man of Bitlis establishes his roots and lives his life. Bitlis is the symbol of Armenia, the loss of the geographical nation, and the recreation of the diasporic one. Indisputably, this is a message of hope for Saroyan, a suggestion that Armenia can exist away from the ancestral lands as long as there exists a community of individuals consciously choosing it to be.

The theme of a resurrected Armenia is already present in Armenians: Man from Moush, "We are Armenians, and even though we are eight thousand miles away from where we were born, we are still in Armenia, we are still there, and this very place, this patriotic coffee house, is Armenia: (p.80). In Haratch, the native of Soviet Armenia on a visit to the diaspora says of the newspaper office: "...I am home, I am in Armenia in this place" (p.162). During the moment of the play, Haratch is Armenia; wherever Armenians come together they reestablish Armenia. The very coming together, by choice, in exile, is the redeeming experience of the nation. The struggle to remain Armenian is its own noble reward.

The diaspora may be anarchic and divisive, but it is a law unto itself. It allows a national existence without land, without war; in Michael

Arlen's words, it allows "the capacity of a people for proceeding beyond nationhood," without inheriting "territory, and pride in property, or to be connected to collective dreams of quite impossible grandeur and savagery, fertility and hatred" (Passage to Ararat, pp.291-2). Whether there is agreement or not, unity or disunity, hope or futility, the important thing is the collective celebration of identity, the assembly and discussion, the Socratic arrival at truth through dialogue. "Who shall remember us if we don't? Who shall remember the Armenians if they don't remember themselves?" Saroyan asks near the end of the play (p. 179). Constant choice, the continuity of the experiential, is the source of the collective health of the nation and the psychological well being of its individual members.

When Haratch is over, one senses a resolution absent in the previous plays. As the individual recognizes his or her role in, and accepts responsibility for, the act of self and community creation, the solution of problems for both the I and the we can have said to have begun.

This trilogy of plays about Armenians exposes William Saroyan's affinity to ancestral origins differently from either the early Armenian stories, which are usually descriptive rather than analytic, or novels like *Rock Wagram*. They are perhaps even more revealing of a commitment to things Armenian than the already published correspondence with Armenian writers and editors or his various prefaces for books by others about Armenians. The grace of art, and the transformational magic of theater, achieved in these plays through Saroyan's absolute command of dramatic dialogue, make the eloquently complex and universal statements about that part of his personal heritage still hardly known and poorly understood even by those close to him. For critic and biographer, the circumstance of genocide and exile, the exotic facts of Armenian history, are more difficult to negotiate than the more popular currency of social and psychological analysis. Aram Saroyan, for instance, in both the biographical memoir *Last Rites* and the biography *William Saroyan*, interprets his father's emotional problems exclusively

through a Freudian examination of the consequences of Armenak's death on his three year-old son, followed by five years' residency in an orphanage. No one who has read Saroyan can ignore the importance of the loss of father to the writer. But who has yet spoken of or tried to measure the effects of loss of fatherland on Saroyan's life and work? This deprivation, caused by the trauma of the Genocide, has disturbed every Armenian writer of the century, just as the Holocaust has not escaped the conscience of any contemporary Jewish writer. Certainly its effect on Saroyan was deep and constant, the source of many of his most characteristic traits and attitudes. *Armenians*, *Bitlis*, and *Haratch* display the power of national environment on the artist, his imagination, and, by extrapolation, his creative urges. Until the internal landscape of these plays is grasped, studied, and appreciated, any biography of Saroyan will be perforce incomplete.

Outside the public's eye, in the last decade of a half century of writing, Saroyan, with his pervasive literary humor and bonhomie, was able through these plays to engage seriously the disorienting dilemmas associated with living in an unwanted diaspora. While the accumulated frustration of national exile caused by a terrifying genocide -- one nearly forgotten and even denied by its perpetrators -- drove some to the desperation of violence, it motivated Saroyan to demand of himself clarifications of this confounding experience, clarifications articulated through art. He tries to show in the plays that the agonizing frustration of endlessly waiting for a better, more just future can only be overcome with the freedom gained by the willful affirmation of each individual to be a conscious part of the disinherited collectivity.

Finally, one may ask whether these at times metaphysical plays were intended for the stage or were just essays in dialogue form? There is no doubt in the case of *Armenians* considering Saroyan's personal initiative in offering the play and preparing program notes for the premier. But what about *Bitlis* and especially *Haratch*? Not only do they totally lack stage directions, like all the later plays, but there is hardly any action:

everyone is sitting around talking. Some critics were bewildered by *The Time of Your Life*, claiming that nothing happened even though the stage was peopled with singers, dancers, and an endless procession of minor figures. Saroyan was against theater dependent on excessive stage action, emotionality, and hyper-dramatic endings. He found violence a bogus trick for capturing audience attention, and said so publicly numerous times. Yet these works should not deceive by the ease of their language or their humor; they are serious dramas whose purpose is to portray universal experience through individual manifestations of it. Saroyan wanted his characters to talk about vital things, intelligently, and compassionately, or at least interestingly, to each other and thereby to the audience and to the world.

These plays are not just dialogues, intellectual exercises, or Saroyan's journals put in dramatic form. They are theatrical pieces intended for the stage. Like everyone of his plays, they are a challenge to the skill of the most talented directors because of the problems and paradoxes they seek to unravel. Their intensity and brilliance is not defined by action or plot, but by language and idea. Their message is universal and enduring.