

## Critics' Forum

### Literature

#### **The Curse of History: *The Daydreaming Boy***

By Hovig Tchalian

Perhaps the best way of inaugurating our series on art and literature in the Armenian Diaspora is by looking back.

In April of 2004, Riverhead Books published *The Daydreaming Boy*, the second book by Micheline Aharonian Marcom, a Saudi-born Armenian writer raised in Los Angeles. The book went on to garner critical acclaim, winning Best Book of the Year honors from the Los Angeles Times as well as the San Francisco Chronicle. Marcom's first novel, *Three Apples Feel from Heaven*, first published in 2001, had also won praise from critics and readers alike. The author is reportedly planning a trilogy, of which these two novels make up the first and second installment, respectively.

Marcom's two novels depict the various aftermaths of the Armenian Genocide – its toll on lives, relationships, and the psyche of a scattered nation. As such, the novels portray in fiction what would normally be doomed to fail in fact, the attempt to reverse the unmentionable event itself, to start over. This gesture of looking back, then, provides the most appropriate metaphor with which to begin this article and this series.

The later of the two novels, *The Daydreaming Boy*, tells the fictional story of Vahe, an orphan and survivor of the Genocide transplanted to Lebanon. The story leads us through various events in his life in 1960's Beirut while moving us in and out of his daydreams and wild hallucinations. We catch glimpses of his slowly disintegrating marriage to a woman named Juliana, the relentless memories of his brutal youth at the orphanage, and his own self-destructive desires.

The story opens as the orphans land on the shores of the Mediterranean:

We are naked like Adam and the blue wide band now becomes what it is, the long sea rises before us, the notfish become what they too are, so that we see: water; white-capped waves stretched out into infinity; but not salt, warm, sad. Clothes stripped and bodies for the sun and sea and we run like the djinn, thousands of boys running to the Mediterranean, saying, we thirst, we thirst and we drink the water and we laugh and gag, a gaggle of orphans loaded onto the boxcars at Eregli and unloaded in the Lebanon by the sea's edge.

The novel seems to move back as far back as the historical imagination will allow, to the Biblical Eden. But Marcom invokes the moment just after the Fall, after Adam's recognition of his own nakedness. As such, the fleeting innocence in the scene is quickly dispelled in the profane reference to the children as "djinn," Arabic for demons. Marcom will later remind us of this scene in describing the children of Vahe's orphanage as "Adams in the wasteland, eating the bread made from the sweat of their brow" (87). The

word “notfish,” which seems to be Marcom’s own, will also be echoed ominously throughout the novel: when Vahe grows up and finds himself in a loveless marriage, he will “notlisten” to his wife, and while answering her say that “it is not me listening” (7-8).

Marcom folds many other elements of this first scene skillfully back into the novel. She repeatedly evokes the Mediterranean described in the novel’s first scene, as an emblem of both loss and renewal: though occasionally in the novel people will look hopefully out of their windows at the sea, Vahe will suggest more enigmatically that “the sea has always been a solace, his haven, and she is sadder than you know and dangerous; beautiful” (72).

We discover quickly that the “wide band” of the Mediterranean has already closed in on Vahe’s childhood friend, Vostanig, who we are told drowned himself in it. Later still, Vahe’s own search for his past will echo the “thirst” of the children in the first scene. He will describe himself as unable to quench his thirst, and yet unable to end his life in the sea inside himself. He will eventually die at gunpoint while looking longingly at the Mediterranean.

As this brief overview suggests, Marcom’s novel is full of moments that are poignant and yet brutal, so graphic that they are sometimes difficult to read. Reading the novel, in fact, produces the peculiar feeling of having lived through much of what is being described in it. That feeling is surely a testament to Marcom’s writing ability, of her ability to describe in fiction what is difficult to confront in fact. But it is equally a testament to the enormity of the Genocide itself, whose shadow falls across every page of the novel. To draw a perhaps inappropriate analogy, we might consider how much of the laughter produced by an “ethnic joke” told among members of the same community has to do with the teller’s gift and how much is the result of the uncanny sense of recognition produced by the joke itself.

The novel alludes to this strange commingling of fact and fiction in its final pages. Vahe asks a question that the reader of the novel, the historian of the Genocide, and the enemy of Genocide recognition might all ask, though for different reasons. Addressing the “invisible history stories” told in his own tale, Vahe asks: “how do I know something occurred, if I myself have not been witness to it?” (200). The curse of the novel, and this one in particular, is that in returning to the tragic events it describes, it must come perilously close to recreating their brutality. About a third of the way through the novel, we see Vahe and the rest of the orphans walking in file on the long trek to the orphanage after landing on the shores of the Mediterranean. This is clearly a new beginning of sorts, at least in Vahe’s memory: “My memory begins here,” he says. “I can pinpoint the beginning of what I remember” (65). But the “new beginning” follows a recollection of another sort immediately preceding it, of Vahe’s mother, whose husband was killed mercilessly on another long trek, the one through Der-el-Zor, and who later gave up Vahe for money.

Perhaps the two most brutal moments in the novel grow out of this strange juxtaposition of scenes and the inability, both Vahe's and the novel's, to re-imagine or re-invent the past. We find out that Vahe is the product of his mother's rape by a Turkish soldier, which sends Vahe into fits of violence and the repeated desire to kill her. (We have been told earlier that Vahe and his wife are unable to bear children.) This brutality culminates in one of the last scenes in the novel, in which Vahe rapes a servant girl, described in terms identical to his mother's rape by the soldier. Vahe's final babblings tell a disturbing tale: "The sooth flesh I required to get a little bit of it back, a small immeasurable ineffable return: inside that girl's flesh I was (say it!—Says): home" (205-6).

The impossibility of starting over is a favorite theme of modern literature and criticism. And its application to an event such as the Genocide is a reasonable one. Despite that fact, however, and though Marcom's novel represents much more than a literary exercise, the novel's attempt to rescue the Genocide from history proves ultimately less than gratifying. The novel remains trapped in the irony of its own enterprise: the fictional retelling of historical events not yet accepted as fact simply redoubles the difficulty of the effort. The novel ends fittingly, just as the Lebanese Civil War begins, in effect as history intrudes to push Vahe's adopted country to the brink of destruction. We are left as readers to ponder the larger fate of the Diasporan communities created by the Genocide, whose attempts at starting over create the possibility of yet other homelands to leave behind. This kernel of historical truth alone survives Marcom's novel—we might even say despite it.

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