

## Critics' Forum

### Literature

#### **Curious Sightings: Armenian Papers**

By Hovig Tchalian

This week's article looks at a collection of poems neither new nor recently re-published but nonetheless relevant. I refer to a curious collection of poems published by the American man of letters, Harry Mathews. The collection bears the even more curious title, *Armenian Papers: Poems 1954-1984*.

Mathews is a quintessentially American poet born in New York in 1930 who emigrated to Europe in the early 1950's and, after living in various countries, finally settled in France. At the time, he had already become associated with the New York school of poets, which included the likes of John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch.

In 1972, Mathews became a member of the French intellectual group, Oulipo, composed of mathematicians, poets and thinkers interested in exploring the boundaries of form. The groups had previously included other great minds, including the Italian philosopher, Italo Calvino.

Over the years, Mathews has published a variety of literary works—novels, poems, and experimental pieces. The poems and some prose poetry are collected in *Armenian Papers*. The curiosity of the collection in this particular case lies in two elements: the content of the work; but equally, its effect on the reader, particularly the Armenian reader.

First, a look at the content. The collection brings together disparate pieces, many of a consciously enigmatic nature. The quietly disturbing poem, "Deathless, Lifeless," describes the aftermath of a passing, then moves to what appears to be a nature scene, in the process expanding the description outward:

Where did we  
First separate?  
Descending with difficulty from gulley to gulley  
To break at the start? Here is that country,  
The blue sky dives,  
Steps up, and emerges at the bus,  
Under oaks.  
The cloudy hag swept through the black trunks—  
Lagged too much in her cloaked legs,  
You, with stone legs.

The speaker is mindful of a "first" separation, a false "start," as though that smaller parting looked forward ominously to this infinitely larger one. The search acts as a willful un-forgetting of the separation that has already arrived and a mourning of what could have been.

The anthology is full of such descriptions of loss and forgetting, all framed in the context of the larger experiment with thought, language and form signaled by Mathews' membership in Oulipo. A brief poem entitled "Of Course" (it is worth noting that the "title" appears underneath the poem itself) sums up Mathews' style, what can only be called a series of experiments in sensibility:

I could hardly expect you to love me if I couldn't make up my mind about you.  
If I thought love was pointless, how could I fail to repulse you?  
I wouldn't expect your support if I derided beauty as skin-deep.  
If I was a jerk, why would your intelligence tolerate it?

Who wants to fly his rocket ship through solid rock?  
Who cares for strolling on the unpaved void of night?  
Who takes icicles to bed in winter? Who likes his ice cream boiled?  
Nobody wants that kind of world. Please agree.

The simple, almost simplistic, series of questions in the poem culminates in a final plea, to a lover, a reader, or perhaps a higher being.

These various experiments culminate in the collection of poems that give the volume its name, *Armenian Papers*. The collection is named after the group of lost Armenian medieval poems on which they are based, discovered in Italian and "translated" by the poet into English. As the *Philadelphia City Paper's* Justin Coffin puts it, "Mathews' adaptation is an attempt to rehabilitate the original work he has never seen. The chance of success is perhaps a little better than the typewriting monkey's banging out *King Lear*, but Mathews' inevitable failure stands on its own."

The failure, in this case, is almost pre-determined, a part of the game Mathews plays with the poems and with himself, very much in line with the rest of the volume. The theme is brought out clearly in the poems, which together tell a tale of a man introduced into a village community and enamored of a married woman named Sirvan. The love story touches on the same issues of love and loss mentioned earlier but with the added layer of identity issues, generated primarily by the context of translation—across languages, across cultures.

The very first poem ends with these lines, which could just as easily have come from a modern European novel: "As I looked around me, I saw among others what I myself was feeling, a pride familiar (as in one's own family), and this has probably withstood the failure of the sacrifice, the desolation of the city, the years of massacre and captivity." The description perfectly encapsulates the poems' feeling of identity ("family," or what we might today call "nationality") created, paradoxically, in a moment of isolation.

The final mention of massacre and captivity binds together the moment being described with its future history—ours—and both Armenian and non-Armenian readers. It is a line of thought picked up again by the speaker of the fifth poem: "When I sit in the darkness

of never-harvested firs, the fruit over smokeless charcoal seethes so faint you can hear a butterfly's flapping, or a wren as [it] hops up the crannies of a wall: the wall my father rebouldered, in the last summer of our life together, truncated by a Settler's ax." The blow of the ax finds its echo several pages later, in these words that complete the eighteenth poem: "You will know our powers for what they are: nothing more than a recognition of helplessness in the face of a destiny that does not exist." If the poet had written the words himself, he might have added, "please agree."

This series of poetic exercises begs the question—why Armenian poems? And why these? We might imagine that Mathews chose these particular poems for one of many reasons—the sense of enigma of words written long ago; or perhaps the strange novelty of a foreign language.

For the Armenian reader, perhaps, coming across a volume like this one presents the curious sensation of a satisfying "sighting"—akin to noticing an Armenian last name in the otherwise anonymous list of credits that scroll by at the end of a film. But what remains of that satisfaction when we come to realize the exact nature of the poems and their origin—medieval Italian poems thought to have been written originally in Armenian?

Considering the answer to this question bring us to the second curiosity I mentioned earlier—the reaction of the Armenian reader to the volume, or more accurately, the relationship among the various parties in the curious triangle created by that same reader, an American writer, and a series of enigmatic poems of mysterious origin. It also brings the Armenian reader to the uneasy realization that his estranged relationship to the poems is finally curiously akin to the distant relationship of the American poet to his own material—a curious distance, a sighting and no more.

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