

Critics' Forum  
Literature: A Debate

***The Daydreaming Boy: A Postscript***

By Hovig Tchalian

In last week's article, the first in the Critics' Forum series, I wrote about Micheline Aharonian Marcom's 2004 novel, *The Daydreaming Boy*.

The novel tells the fictional story of Vahe, an orphan and survivor of the Genocide transplanted to Lebanon. I suggested in the article that the novel's story allowed us a glimpse into the central character's destructive desires, fueled in part by the memories of his brutal youth.

I also acknowledged in the article the difficulty of addressing the issues from within the fictional form. Part of that difficulty, I argued, revolved around the central irony of inadvertently repeating the very brutality the novel depicted.

Given the relentless brutality of the novel's fictional account, then, and the larger, unimaginable brutality of the Genocide itself, the question to ask of the novel, and indeed of Marcom, is simply – why? Why write a novel that reads like the diary of a madman?

I will let the author answer that question on her own terms, as she has in numerous interviews, in which she has consistently invoked the integrity of the story and the fictional form itself. I will offer instead several reasons why the novel may be considered largely a failed experiment.

First, the story makes for less than compelling fiction. The experiment in the form almost entirely overpowers the novel itself. What is more, the experiment itself, represented in part by Vahe's disjointed, erratic ramblings, is nothing new. We can compare the prose representing Vahe's musings to the more genteel exploits of Eliot's anti-hero, J. Alfred Prufrock, as well as to James Joyce's brilliant if difficult novelistic experiment, *Finnegan's Wake*, both published early in the last century, the former in 1917, the latter in 1939.

As such, the novel comes off as repetitive instead of stimulating. Not only does it repeat earlier modernist experiments, it also repeats its own conceits in a number of places, with little apparent purpose or much in the way of genuine originality or insight. A central image in the novel, for instance, is Jumba, the ape Vahe befriends in the Beirut zoo, the *Jardin Zoologique*. Like Vahe's other relationships, this one is clearly based on violence and brutality. We see Vahe offering the ape some of his cigarettes, but only after the ape has allowed him to burn his skin in exchange. We realize in reading about the exchange how self-hatred is at the root of this relationship and so many others in the novel. In short, we realize how the violence Vahe inflicts on other creatures is a form of self-destruction, how he has become little more than the beast he at once despises and cares for.

The image sheds considerable light on the violent after-effects of the Genocide. And this is an important achievement of Marcom's. And yet, the novel stretches and strains to make that point, embedding often less than subtle pointers to it in its jarring shifts in language and meaning, in the relationship between its characters, in the short glimpses of the Genocide narrative – in short, in every imaginable facet of the prose and the larger story it tells.

I am surprised, quite honestly, by the effusive praise the book received – “beautiful,” and “dazzling,” proclaimed the Los Angeles Times; “ethereal” and “unsettling,” declared the San Francisco Chronicle. I found the novel's style instead to be for the most part contrived and too deliberate, far too involved in its own sense of experimentation to effectively serve the purposes of either effective prose or convincing polemic. The novel stands as an interesting, in parts compelling, experiment gone awry.

*The Daydreaming Boy* leaves us, in the end, with little more than the personal and historical irony of its own undeclared subject, the Genocide itself. The dilemma of the Genocide and its ultimate place in history, both personal and political, lends the novel its true center, its heart and its soul.

### **In Defense of the “Notreadable”**

By Ara Oshagan

For some books, the writing is done for the writing, not for the reading.

That is, they are written such that the process of writing itself reveals something to the author about itself. The words on paper act as a mirror or attempt to act as a mirror, with little thought or quarter given to the reader. For these books, the end result is not the book itself but the actual process of writing. The fact that they are published is purely incidental, really.

Micheline Aharonian Marcom's “Daydreaming Boy” is one such novel. Or perhaps, more precisely, it is a novel with this idea at its core. As Marcom says “I am responsible only to my characters and my text.” It is repetitive, it is obsessive, it invents new words, on one page the actual font size decreases like a funnel, it's hard to tell what is actually happening, what is not, and in the end it seems nothing at all has happened. It is a maddening, hard-to-follow, self-possessed book. Readability is not its concern.

Its concern is form, in other words, how to write about what cannot be written about, in other words, how to make fiction closer to life, in other words, how to approach. Perhaps even how to approach the approach. Its topic, of course, is the Genocide, the Catastrophe (as Marc Nichanian refers to it), the Unimaginable and its aftermath.

The Catastrophe is not simply another story. It is an unimaginable story, a kind of black hole of experience that is untouchable—especially now after three generations. So, the

fundamental problem of Art becomes how to approach it. This perhaps is also the *only* issue that can be addressed—not actually ever touching it, but simply reflecting on how to approach it. How to write about the Unimaginable and Unwritable? The only viable answer has to do with the medium itself. That is, “how to approach” is about form. It is not about the story. Or the story’s corollary: readability. It is about construction.

A work of Art about the Catastrophe must be hyper-aware of this issue.

And Marcom is. She attempts to bend, twist, recast, reconfigure, re-imagine the form to be able to begin this approach, to somehow elicit from the medium the ability to encompass that black hole. How do you reach scarcely into the black hole but not fall in? How do you imagine the Unimaginable?

Books or works of Art that do not realize this issue are doing something different than addressing the Catastrophe. They are telling the story of a story that cannot be told. So what are they doing? Perhaps they are political or polemical or archival works. Perhaps they are complicated memoirs of some sort. Typically, they retreat into the personal-family narrative. They say, “I am going to tell my grandmother’s story and that will also be about the Catastrophe.” The Unimaginable cannot be simply told, events cannot simply be strung together (no matter how eloquently) to tell the Untellable. The grandmother’s story in and of itself is not enough. The Catastrophe is not about personal horrors.

Ironically, “Daydreaming” is more about the Catastrophe than Marcom’s earlier one, “Three Apples Fell from Heaven” which is ostensibly directly about the Catastrophe. “Three Apples” has no real issue with form, it is not concerned in a serious way with “how to approach.” In “Daydreaming,” Marcom has the courage and the elastic and formidable grasp of the English language to attempt this experiment in form, in twisting and turning language itself, to attempt to create a means by which one can approach the Unapproachable.

My one wish: that Marcom should have started her trilogy (which moves from the Ottoman Empire to Beirut to Los Angeles) backwards. Faulkner after writing his second novel, “A Soldier’s Pay,” said that he now understood something about language. Hagop Oshagan, after his second or third book, said I have now learned which way to hold a pencil. If you begin with the Unimaginable, where do you go after that?

“Daydreaming Boy” is a challenge to read—to keep the thread of the novel together, to attempt to grasp the amorphousness of the text and events. But it is well worth it. Once you do away with the presumption that it is written for you to read.

If Marcom continues on this trajectory, her work will certainly make an impact on American literature. She could also become the best fiction writer in English-language Armenian literature since William Saroyan.

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