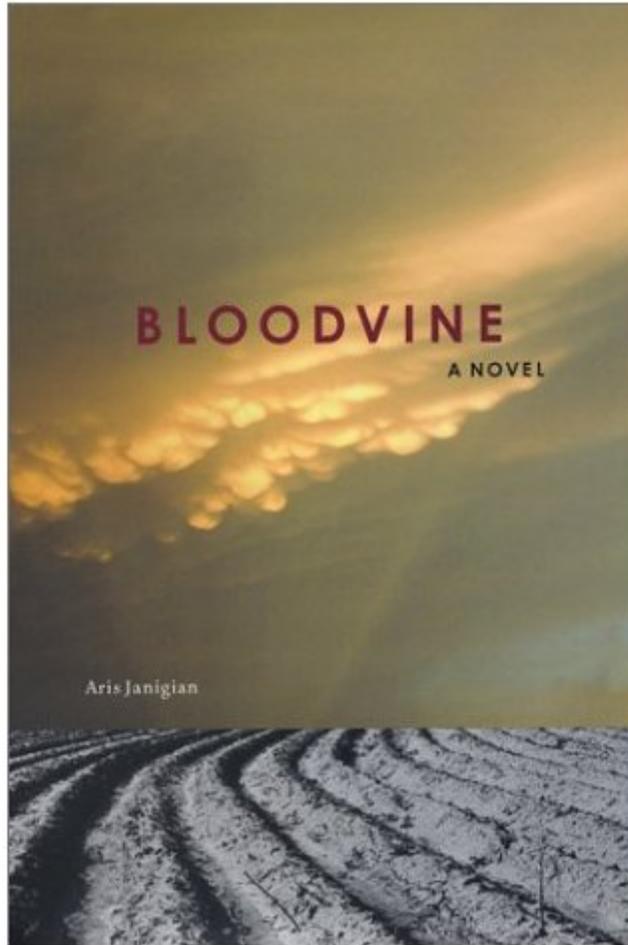


Critics' Forum

Literature

**The Authentic in Fiction: Aris Janigian's *Bloodvine***

By Hovig Tchalian



After several articles on topical subjects, I would like to discuss a novel published before the advent of Critics' Forum – Aris Janigian's *Bloodvine* (Heyday, 2003; Great Valley Books, 2005; all page references are to the later edition). Perhaps the nearly four years that have passed since its publication will help provide some perspective on the novel.

Reviews at the time of publication ranged from the lukewarm—*Booklist* noting the author's "obviously heartfelt effort"—to the overblown—the *San Francisco Chronicle* comparing Janigian to William Saroyan. Ironically, the novel was also a finalist for Stanford University's William Saroyan International Prize for Writing, in the category of fiction, in 2005. A close look at *Bloodvine* reveals a good first effort but one whose flaws and missteps say as much about the current state of English-language Armenian literature as they do about the novel itself.

The premise of *Bloodvine* originates in autobiography. Janigian's father, nearing death, calls his son to his native Fresno and tells him the story of the rift (the novel later calls it a "*kehn*") between him and his brother, a subject that to that point the father has avoided bringing up with his son. In the book's prologue, Janigian maintains that his father's deathbed confession drove him to investigate the matter and write about it, albeit in fictional form.

The characterization of the work as fiction is a critical one. The novel is certainly a fictional retelling of the feud that took place between two brothers, now named Andy (Antranik) Demerjian and Abe (Abraham) Voskijian, in and around 1950's Fresno. But it also harbors what might be called more "historical" ambitions. Perhaps as a result, the reader feels the need both to connect with the novel and judge it by the yardstick of its own ambitions, ones that, unfortunately, it is not quite able to live up to.

The first few pages of *Bloodvine* make it clear that the novel's fate is intertwined with the history of the Genocide. We learn early on that Andy and Abe are actually half-brothers. Abe's father, a gentleman in his community, is killed by Turkish soldiers. His mother escapes the pogroms and makes her way to Fresno, where she meets another immigrant, Yervant. Andy is the first of two children and the only son the mother bears with her second husband. Yervant turns out to be quite a volatile man, prone to pathological behavior and fits of violence, most of which he directs toward his wife's first-born son, Abe. We also find out that Yervant's father (Andy's grandfather), Jonig, may have been an "*agha*," a Turkish sympathizer who saved himself and his family by betraying the whereabouts of other Armenians.

The novel's central storyline turns on this seminal event. Abe marries Zabel, and together they have three children. Andy marries much later in the novel and continues until then to live with Abe's family on land that her mother has willed to her two sons. This uncomfortable living arrangement eventually precipitates the feud between the brothers, which the novel makes clear is also instigated by Abe's wife, Zabel. The larger issue at stake is what Zabel refers to as the family's bad luck, or "*pakht*," and which she is certain has revealed itself in the family's disastrous harvests and business dealings. Zabel attributes their collective *pakht* to Andy, the ill-begotten son, and through him to Yervant, and through Yervant to his father and what we might call his "original sin" (92-3). From Zabel's perspective, the fact that Andy is a "cripple" (one of his legs is shorter than the other) may be explained biologically—he had polio as a child—but must be understood genealogically—he is the descendant of a traitor.

The impetus behind this genealogical perspective is the novel's own worldview. In the prologue, Janigian characterizes his novel as "old-fashioned," which no doubt it is. But its emphasis on the relationships between fathers and sons and the propagation of sin, treachery and violence also suggests a profoundly biblical perspective.

The brothers' story, in fact, concludes in an act of betrayal reminiscent of the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau. A few years after Andy signs his half of the land over to Abe to help secure a GI loan, on a handshake, Abe kicks Andy off the land, denying him what Andy feels is his birthright, just as in the biblical story, Jacob tricks his older brother, Esau, into signing over his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. Jacob will later also trick his father (who bears the name of one of the brothers in the novel, Abraham) into giving him his blessing. In the biblical story, Jacob is his mother Rebecca's favorite, as in the novel the maternal Zabel (Abe's pet name for her is "Ma") prefers Abe.

This somewhat weighty purpose intrudes itself into the novel at various points—we are subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, made to remember that the scenery of Fresno and the surrounding valleys is imbued with a larger, almost metaphorical, character signifying the mysterious connection between land and blood suggested in the novel's title.

The book's very first scene, in fact, makes this point quite explicitly. A bishop and a priest are on their way to visit the Voskijians, in order to "exorcise" their land of the curse Zabel is convinced has befallen it. As they near their destination, the bishop looks out of the car window at the grapevines and remarks (8):

But in the old country . . . I don't remember the vines growing this way, that is, strung up like criminals on wires. No, we had bush vines and they grew everywhere wild. There was a bitter-skin grape, obsidian black. I recall ruby-color grapes that took the shape of teardrops.

The very land itself, it seems, is a symbol of its people's apparent fate, bearing its fruits in the shape of tears. And just in case we miss that metaphorical point, the bishop adds a little further on (8):

"[T]he vines in Armenia date back from the time of our Lord. Just imagine, brother, the pestilence, the flood and fire, the drought and terrible earthquake they've endured. They," he said in a survivor's emotional voice, "have proven as resilient as the Armenian people themselves."

The larger point, however, is somewhat more intriguing—the suggestion of a kind of fall from grace, from an edenic homeland that cannot be recreated anywhere else, as the bishop once again makes clear (9):

He traced the Sierras with a finger. "Their Mount Ararat, this. And these canals," he swept his hand over the dry one they drove across, "their Mother River, Arax. What no book will tell you is these poor, desperate people have tried to resurrect the homeland here, brother, to make natural what is alien. But what cheap copies! Our Ararat would swallow in one gulp all the mountains in America combined."

Ironically, later in the novel, Andy's wife Kareen, an Armenian born in Egypt, will compare the same expanse of land unflatteringly to her own birthplace, Alexandria (167). Janigian does more than suggest the simple nostalgia for homeland or home in this passage; he captures something of the tragic desire for return that seems to propagate itself endlessly, hopelessly, in the immigrant experience.

The other side of that desire, the novel seems to suggest, is the kind of hatred born of betrayal, a product of an *agha's* actions as much as a result of the Genocide as such. That hatred turns to self-hatred in the brothers' story, culminating in the final act of betrayal captured in the title. We can hear its whispers even early on, in the bishop's repeated reference to the priest as "brother" (as in the two extended quotations above). To the novel's credit, the tension between brotherly love and a hatred born of blind allegiance to land is never quite resolved. Even at the very end of the novel, before he "betrays" his brother Andy, Abe tells him, "brothers is one thing, this land's another" (252). But after the event, Andy declares to himself, "your life has changed, Andy. In a matter of minutes, thirty years of brotherhood is pulverized. Over what? Over a piece of dirt" (265).

Janigian is at his most lyrical when describing the land the brothers are fighting over and the wider landscape of the San Joaquin Valley, sometimes in ominous detail (270):

Patches of black clouds lay in the green foothills[,] while above them, white clouds, soft and fleshy, folded themselves into pockets. Still higher in the sky, the clouds traveled slowly in great caravans heavy with their charges, towing their bulky shadows along with them.

In other instances, Janigian displays a keen eye for detail, such as in this early scene, describing Abe walking into his house, during the bishop's exorcism (12):

"He is cleansing the house of evil spirits," the wife whispered.  
*Evil spirits?* Abe bowed his head and crossed his arms over his stomach.  
"Shhh," she said, as though Abe's puzzlement was audible.

The paradoxical phrase about Abe's puzzlement shows Janigian at his best, allowing us to understand something about Zabel's state of mind and the near absurdity of the scene taking place.

But even such details, and the moving descriptions of the landscape, when repeated in various ways throughout the novel, seem less lyrical than repetitive. Janigian spends a good deal of time describing the mundane details of farming life, punctuated by the "crude" speech of farmers, barhops, family members. But we are often left to wonder for what purpose.

Unfortunately, even the biblical parallels made at the beginning and at the end of the novel are never developed in a clear and compelling way, and the novel eventually loses

its hold on the story and its details and seems more confined than liberated by its promising premise. The logic of that premise unwinds itself slowly, inevitably, with only occasional glimpses of depth or complexity, until nearly everything in the novel seems either weighed down by its ponderous purpose or adrift in uneven, sometimes inconsequential, prose. As a result, the novel begins to plod along a little less than halfway through, as though hoping to generate momentum through the various descriptions themselves.

The descriptions that proliferate in the novel, therefore, often get the better of the story. Many of the book's less successful moments are a result of Janigian giving in a little too much to his penchant for metaphor and comparison. In the crucial moment after Abe threatens Andy and asks him to leave their land for good, Andy considers what it means, and we are told: "when a man is in the clutch of such unknowns, time thickens, time turns into a beehive, palpable and agonizingly porous" (265). The phrases here are awkward and oddly misplaced. Why should time be a "beehive," and why are we to imagine that it is "porous"?

In other instances, it is difficult to see what purpose a comparison serves at all. When Andy is confused by the reaction of a prostitute he meets, we read the following simile: "This was like giving a photograph to a blind man and getting upset that he didn't appreciate it. Even after he told you he was blind, even after you saw that he lived among the blind, in a blind world." (43). In yet other cases, the description could simply benefit from more or better editing, such as when we see Andy making his early morning drive to work the land (262):

The fog was all around him, and though he moved, there was no sense of distance covered, as though he were churning in place, ~~like the toy car rides at the circus.~~ The whiteness of the fog made him vaguely dizzy, and gnats of light swarmed in the periphery of his vision, and he could only guess how far he'd come, ~~which caused him to wonder how well he knew those roads after all.~~

Janigian crafts the description well, giving us a sense of Andy's mood, not only at this moment but more generally. But the passage also exhibits the writer's occasional inability to exhibit restraint and his tendency of saying *too* much.

An additional result of these inconsistencies is that the thrust of the story is sometimes overwhelmed by details, so that even the subtler ones are not given their due. A perfect example is an interesting parallel between the descriptions of two very different characters, Abe and the prostitute mentioned earlier. Both are described as agitated and nervous, barely able to sit still. When Andy and Abe sit on the porch early in the novel, we see that "Abe pulled up a chair and sat on the edge, as if he might soon have to leave" (19). A few pages later, we see Andy reluctantly visiting a whorehouse. The woman he meets there, once she finds out Andy only wants some company, is described in almost

identical terms as Abe: we are told that “she sat on the edge, like she might have to go at any second,” presumably to talk with more promising clients (42).

The descriptions together form a kind of word picture, a visible symbol of “displacement,” of people whose itinerant nature has made them unable to sit still in their own seats—Abe as a second-generation farmer struggling to survive and the prostitute as someone moving restlessly from one client to the next. The parallel phrasing imagines a fate shared by two people from entirely different walks of life. For a brief moment, the “immigrant experience” belongs to the local as much as to the Armenian.

But perhaps this is reading too much into an otherwise accidental parallel. Unfortunately, without the novelist’s sure hand guiding us, we are left to ponder the coincidence on our own. The effect carries through the entire novel. Perhaps we are meant to see the metaphorical grafting of old vines to new, ancient land to modern, as a different representation of the family itself—Abe’s family having been “grafted” unnaturally to Andy’s by way of Yervant’s marriage. The issue of birthright in the biblical parallels seems to point here. Andy’s given name, for instance, is Antranik (“first-born,” in Armenian). And although he is not his mother’s first-born son, the fact that he is his father’s eldest seems to compel him, despite himself, to live up to his name and form a family of his own. Numerous parallels such as these exist. But very few of them are tied together or developed convincingly.

The most glaring example here is the final “betrayal” in the novel, when Abe walks up to Andy, shotgun by his side, and seems to threaten him into leaving their land for good (264):

“You’ve got nothing left here,” Abe says. “It’s over.” There is a certain hysteria in his voice, a kind of panic.

There’s Andy, looking down the barrel of a shotgun. . . .

“All right, Abe,” Andy says.

Abe drops the gun to his side, slowly, like he might lift it up again. Andy doesn’t know if he’s shivering from the cold or the uncanniness of it all or both. Already he knows, even before he’s out of harm’s way, that nothing will ever match this moment.

This long-anticipated “moment” in the novel, when it arrives, is oddly devoid of significance, symbolic or otherwise, or a compelling connection to the themes of home or birthright. Fixated as it is on the mundane fact of the shotgun itself, the passage comes across as neither epic nor even particularly profound, descending instead into melodrama, a simple spat between two brothers. The passage *tells* us that this is indeed a momentous event but fails to show us that it is so.

Later in the novel, Abe will get his comeuppance of sorts, losing his sanity for a time and, some weeks later, spilling his blood on a vine after crashing his tractor into the post holding it up, which leads to his death. That post, it turns out, is the same one next to

which Abe threatened his brother. The symbolic point is made, but far too late to generate thematic or dramatic tension.

Aris Janigian's *Bloodvine* represents a strong first effort and a promising start to a writing career. But the novel's flaws also say as much about the future of English-language Armenian literature as they do about Janigian's own career. The concerns mentioned above are not insurmountable. The novel's only unforgivable offense, in fact, is its characterization of Zabel and her mother, Angel. With their connivances, superstitions and constant stream of *akhhs*, they are little more than caricatures.

This final point brings us full circle, back to the issue we started with—the novel's status as fiction. We can now recast that statement as the novel's view of its own "authenticity," in other words, its relationship to the diasporan Armenian experience in all its complexity, from the historical Genocide to the fictional spirits haunting Angel's memory. A final excerpt from the novel related to this point will help us conclude.

A third of the way through the novel, the brothers meet with an attorney named Saroyan, who turns out to be a "distant cousin" of "this writer Saroyan" (89). When the three sit down in his office, the attorney suggests that his more famous relative is only interested in talking about "Armenians, old-time Armenian things that only an *odar* would be interested in. What the hell do I need to hear about Armenians?," the attorney laments. "I've got them barking in my ear every day" (89). The irony of the statement is deepened by our sense of the anonymous identity of those "Armenians"—the ones inhabiting the novel's fictional world as well as the attorney's office in it—as much as of the unnamed "*odar*."

Perhaps it is entirely fitting, then, that *Bloodvine* has been compared to William Saroyan's works and been nominated for an award named after him. Saroyan's legacy, far more than Angel's spirits, haunts the novel and beckons to the reader, from somewhere between the *odar* world and the Armenian.

All Rights Reserved: Critics Forum, 2006

**Hovig Tchalian** holds a PhD in English literature from UCLA. He has edited several journals and also published articles of his own.

You can reach him or any of the other contributors to Critics' Forum at [comments@criticsforum.org](mailto:comments@criticsforum.org). This and all other articles published in this series are available online at [www.criticsforum.org](http://www.criticsforum.org). To sign up for a weekly electronic version of new articles, go to [www.criticsforum.org/join](http://www.criticsforum.org/join). Critics' Forum is a group created to discuss issues relating to Armenian art and culture in the Diaspora.