

Associations between *Book of Lamentations* by Grigor Narekatsi and Byzantine Mystic Literature



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Book of Lamentations by Grigor Narekatsi is a poem of long philosophical meditations on the interrelations between the microcosm and macrocosm, i.e. between a human being and the cosmos, between Man and God. According to the Bible, man is the very image of God: is capable of reason and is a Creator. However, though endowed with reason, man lives but a short life and perishes like an animal devoid of such power, while even the most pious person never knows whether he will have a second life, or whether only the transient earthly life is predestined for him. This has long since been a vexing question for mankind, a challenging question posed by the best works of literature, and

framed in Shakespeare's masterpiece as: "To be or not to be". Obviously, it is non-existence that brings about human tragedy which is beyond national, religious or class differences and which will be as long as mankind exists. And it is that very age-long anguished cry that Grigor Narekatsi voices on behalf of all people: whether young or old, rich or poor, common or noble, men or women, saints or sinners, clergy or laymen.

Contemporary with Grigor Narekatsi, in Byzantine literature too there were mystics, among whom Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) stands out as an ecclesiastical writer, philosopher and mystic. Being an innovator in Byzantine literature in both developing fresh ideas and contributing to poetic art, Symeon the New Theologian refutes church hierarchy in his creative work, considering that holiness and communion with God should be achieved without intermediaries. The poet greatly relies on the spoken language of his time to shape his thoughts:

Over 50 hymns from the pen of Symeon the New Theologian have survived until the present day. The exact time of creation of the hymns not being definite, it is calculated by specialists to be between 980-1005, in particular, most of them are dated at the year 1003 and after.

Part of the hymns are shaped as polemics, however the greater part of them reflect the poet's contemplations. The impression is that the poet actually converses with God. In the preface to the French translation of the hymns it is stressed that the poet has his own individual style which does not specifically echo any other author's, though in more general terms, it is felt that he is under the influence of *On the Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite and is familiar with the lexicon of *Joseph and Barlaam*

(Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1969:79).

The close examination of the hymns reveals common features between the works of Symeon the New Theologian and *Book of Lamentations* by Grigor Narekatsi. It should be emphasized at once, however, that the similarity that the two authors share is not due to any reciprocal influence. In particular, Narekatsi could not possibly have come under the direct influence of Symeon the New Theologian in his creative work as by the year 1003, when the main part of Symeon the New Theologian's hymns had not been composed yet, Narekatsi's poem was completed, the author himself being already dead. Scholars, for example, date hymn 21 at the year 1003 (Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1969:75). Moreover, Symeon the New Theologian did not arrange his hymns in numerical order during his lifetime and by the year 1003 he had not yet introduced them to the literary world. This noble task was accomplished by his pupil Niketas after the master's death, i.e. after 1022.

The great poets created their works independently of each other. Nevertheless, the works of both are unique manifestations of Eastern Christian mysticism, both poets had similar intellectual backgrounds and were products of comparable literary milieus, hence – the common features shared by them. The French scholar and expert on Byzantine studies, Charles Diehl explains Armenian and Byzantine literary connections in the following way: “Dans l'histoire de l'art chrétien de l'Orient, l'Armenien occupe une place importante. Par sa situation géographique entre l'Orient persan et la Byzance hellénique, elle était naturellement appelée à jouer un rôle d'intermédiaire entre ces deux mondes. C'est ainsi qu'elle a eu une grande part dans la formation de l'art byzantin” (Diehl 1938:20).

In the actual fact, it is in the light of such mutual influence that the mysticism of Narekatsi and that of Symeon the New Theologian are alike. Symeon the New Theologian too unceasingly turns to God, he too speaks not only for himself but also on behalf of all mankind:

*Pourtant je vais dire à tous
ce que tu m'accordes d'exprimer:
O race entière des hommes,
des rois et des princes,
riches et pauvres,
moins et gens du monde,
et tout ce qui parle sur terre,
écoutez-moi maintenant
raconter la grandeur
de l'amour de Dieu pour les hommes!*
(Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1971:317).

From the very beginning the hymns are permeated with the glorification of God on the one hand, and self-flagellation on the other. In the first part of the second hymn the poet asks God: Comment as-tu daigné me faire membre de ton corps, moi l'impur, le prodigue, le prostitué? (Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1969:177). However, he aspires to be unified with the divine, mixing his blood with God's, to become divine himself. In

this aspiration the poet implores God not to abandon him – moi misérable, pauvre, étranger (Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1969:179).

In the fourth hymn Symeon the New Theologian thus conceives of the only way of reunion with God:

*Quitte le monde entier et ceux qui sont dans le monde,
attaché – toi seulement à la bienheureuse affliction,
pleure seulement sur tes mauvaises actions
puisque ce sont elles qui t'ont séparé
du Créateur de tout, le Christ, et de ses saints*
(Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1969:191).

In his opinion, human life seems but a brief instant – having come into the world yesterday, man has to leave it tomorrow. Anyhow, man wants to live a divine life here, on earth.

Like Grigor Narekatsi, Symeon the New Theologian looks into the problem of body and soul, stressing the dualism and contradiction enclosed therein. Real life is all the way at man's heels, and the poet is well aware of this. He knows also that human passions grow overwhelmingly and deprive man of life, turning into dragons, poisonous snakes tearing his soul apart; fame gnaws man from within – it digs its fangs into the faithful heart, and then it is too hard to save the soul, free it from the dangers that come from the body (Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1969:247-249). It is remarkable that Symeon the New Theologian mentions the name of Christ much more frequently than Narekatsi, and like the latter he queries:

*Qui m'a guidé et entraîné vers ces biens,
qui m'a relevé du fond de la tromperie du monde?
Qui m'a séparé de mon père, de mes frères, de mes amis,
de mes parents, des plaisirs et de la joie du monde?
Qui m'a montré le chemin de la pénitence et de la douleur
d'où j'ai découvert le jour qui n'a pas de fin?*
(Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1971:85).

Unceasingly referring to Heaven, Soul and divinity, Symeon the New Theologian is still conscious of the earthly life, and he does not fail to notice that the earth is mother as well as grave to mankind. The same thought can be found in Narekatsi's works. Centuries later it is more precisely phrased by Nerses Mokatsi – Armenian poet having lived at the end of the XVI and in the first quarter of XVII centuries – in his tagh entitled *Discord between Heaven and Earth*:

*Դուք այլ ցածացէք մանկտիք,
Ու զլուխ դրէք ի գետնի.
Քան զերկինքն ի՞նչ բարձր կայ,
Որ զլուխ եղիր ի գետնի,
Այսօր վրան կու քայլենք,
Վաղն մտնունք ներքև գետնի* (Mokatsi 1975:42-43).

Just as Narekatsi does, the Byzantine mystic too considers that both the spiritual and the bodily aspects are central to man's being and that serving the flesh only is

insufficient, if not inhuman inasmuch as the neglect of one side means lack of perfection in life and of harmony between body and soul.

Man should see with the physical, as well as with the spiritual eye – the absence of either is the gravest of the evils, it is already equal to being somewhat partly dead:

*Si tu vois le soleil sensible
et pas le soleil spirituel,
tu es vraiment à demi mort*

(Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1971:219).

In these hymns we can see analogies identical to those suggested by Narekatsi: human sins are compared to sea sand, and those whose faith is not firm are depicted as infected with the sins of Sodom. Eznik Koghbatsi calls life a war. Symeon the New Theologian chooses similar phrasing:

La vie, c'est un combat pour tous les hommes

(Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1971:237).

For Grigor Narekatsi the promised divine future is vague, he does not know for certain what awaits us after death, but he portrays what is destined for the body: to decay and lose its beauty, to turn into a lifeless stump or ashes, into a miserable apparition, worthless individual, insensitive idol, a lantern blown out, voiceless throat, a devastated heart and a dumb tongue...

Depicting the awesome perishing of the human body in this way, Grigor Narekatsi (prayer 55, E) time after time turns to God: *my body is laced with sin and my inclinations toward the worldly* (Narekatsi 2001:397).

This anxiety is shared by Symeon the New Theologian, who expresses the conviction that the imagination of each of us conjures up our individual vision of hell and infernal torments, but none of us can ever be certain what they are really like. Neither can we imagine what promised heavenly bliss is.¹ On the other hand, as an ordinary layman, the poet definitely cares for worldly goods, fame, wealth and leisure (Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1971:251).

The image of spiritual death created by Symeon the New Theologian in the hymns is comparable to that conjured up by Narekatsi, and while Narekatsi suggests the analogy between spiritual death and shipwreck, with the sinking ship symbolizing the lost soul, Symeon the New Theologian draws another parallel for the same thought. He compares his soul with a burning lantern whose light goes out despite being fully charged with oil and with the wick being in its place, because suddenly a rat (or one of the like) appears and turns the lantern over, drinks the oil up and devours the wick. The poet explicates his symbols: the lantern blowing out is the poet himself, the burning lantern stands for his soul, the oil is his virtue, and the wick is his thoughts (Hymn 30).

The more careful reading of the hymns by Symeon the New Theologian reveals a number of shared features not only between them and Narekatsi's Lamentations, but also between the former and the works of Armenian scribes and philosophers of earlier and later periods. Among such associations is the profound development by the Byzantine mystic of the well-known aphorism of Eghishe: It is better to be blind in the eye than in the mind. Another case in point is the interpretation of the biblical statement recurrent in

Christian literature that God created man in his own image. Symeon the New Theologian (as well as Armenian authors) explains that the likeness of the images of God and man is not on the physical plane as God is immortal, being a spirit. And this is whence the philosopher poet's skepticism comes: How could the incorporeal creator having no human mouth breathe anything into man? How could that something become the immortal spirit of man? How could human bodies, nerves, skin, hair, eyes, ears, lips and tongues appear from that immaterial spirit? (Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1971:395).

Similarly, Hovhan Vorotnetsi warns us against understanding the phrase in his own image literally as God has no material body: *Ձի վկայէ գիրն Աստուածաշունչ զմարդն պատկեր Աստուծոյ, զի Աստուած ոչ է մարմին, յայտ է հոգի է պատկեր Աստուծոյ և թէ ոչ է եութեամբ և գոյութեամբ հոգի, զհարդ աւտ Մովսէս, թէ արար Աստուած ի պատկեր իւր, ընդ պատկերի Աստուծոյ արար զնա, յայտ է, թէ ճշմարտապէս հոգի* (Manuscript N6573:252).

Another Armenian author explicating the spiritual resemblance between the divine and the human is Grigor Tatevatsi. In his book of sermons Tatevatsi asserts that the divine soul is as clear and immaculate as light. So is human soul, yet when the latter is enclosed in the human body, it starts to lose its divine purity by fading and darkening under the weight of human sins: *Ձի հոգիս մեր ի ստեղծիլն պատկեր է Աստուծոյ և մաքուր որպէս զլոյս. իսկ ի մարմինն միատրեալ խաւարի և սևանայ մեղօք, զի ցանկութեամբ ծնողաց ծնանի; Եւ դարձեալ հեշտանայ և ուսանի զմարմնական մեղս և յայնժամ առաւել տգեղանայ որպէս զպատկեր թագաւորի՝ յաղբն և ի տիղմն շաղախենն* (Tatevatsi 1741:391-392).

Symeon the New Theologian observes great controversy between what the Gospel demands of man and human behaviour in real life. Namely, in the Gospel we read the following demand in the name of Christ: *He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me [...] He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.*²

Both Narekatsi and Symeon the New Theologian claim that man unfortunately cannot satisfy that demand inasmuch as he loves the real human being more than Christ. Moreover, people become the slaves of other real people, give their miserable souls away, and their bodies sink into sin as worthless vessels (Syméon le Nouveau Théologien 1971:479).

Apparently, the examples suffice to illustrate the point, and therefore let us try to look at the grounds in which such statements are rooted. The study of the historical context shows that the roots can be traced back to the shared literary heritage of the earlier periods with which Armenian scribes in general, and Grigor Narekatsi in particular, were equally familiar. In this respect noteworthy is Narekatsi's modest statement that he is constantly involved in reading, i.e. in assimilating the literary and philosophical values of the past: *Եւ ինձ տառապելոյս օգնեա աղօթիւք, որ յարածամ դեզերիմ յընթեռնուլն, իսկ գործ և ոչ փոքր ինչ ժամանակ սահմանեալ որոշեմ* (Narekatsi 1840:423).

Narekatsi also speaks about having used the works of pagan philosophers in *Lamentations*, considering it, however, unnecessary to mention their names in his

essentially lyric *Lamentations*.

Among the authors with whose works Grigor Narekatsi was familiar (the same can be said about Symeon the New Theologian too) are Plato, Aristotle, Philo of Alexandria, Plotinus, Porphyry, David the Invincible and others. We can infer that he was also familiar with *On the Celestial Hierarchy* and other works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the translation of which into Armenian was done by the representatives of the Hellenophile School. It is also worth mentioning that Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran) holds a large number of copies of the works by the philosophers referred to above, which testifies to the fact that they were part of the cultural background of medieval Armenian literature.³

We have compared the Armenian translated version of *On the Celestial Hierarchy* by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite with the French translation of the Greek text and are convinced that they are identical (Manuscript N21:1-50b; Denys l'Areopagite 1970). This, therefore, allows us to think that the Byzantine and Armenian literatures of the X century in a certain sense made use of the same sources. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that knowing also all the Armenian sources very well, Grigor Narekatsi looks on the issues that he is concerned with from the Armenian standpoint, putting his national literature in the forefront, and on the basis of the latter making such an enormous contribution to the cultural inheritance of mankind.

The scholar and expert on Narekatsi's creative work, M. Mkryan rightly thinks that with his *Book of Lamentations* the poet reached such fullness in portraying emotional experience that to reveal its significance is preserved for posterity (Mkryan 1955:169). Another philologist, G.Abgaryan, in his remarkably profound investigation of Narekatsi's *Tagh of Resurrection* (*Տաղ յարմբեան*), mentions that both the taghs and *Lamentations* still contain a large number of questions, to decipher which special investigation should be carried out (Abgaryan 1974:48). This assertion is confirmed by the data from manuscripts.

Illustrative of the above is manuscript N7703 of the Matenadaran, written by the scribe Grigor Vardapet (Archimandrite) in 1750, the place of compilation of which is unknown. A collection of texts representative of Armenian verbal art, dating from different historical periods and of diverse thematic scope, the manuscript comprises the songs of Arakel Syunetsi, Arakel Vardapet, Nerses Mokatsi, Sargis Klissetsi, Frik, unknown authors, one recipe, puzzles by Nerses Shnorhali, pieces of religious, ethical and dogmatic character, sermons, excerpts describing the customs of various nations, a psychological investigation into the causes of sadness (*Ընդեր են տրտում մարդիկ*) and other texts. In this attractive variety there is an anonymous piece without a title. This important documentary material representing the medieval philosophical thought, and hence deserving to be made widely available, has not yet received scholarly attention. Placed on pages 106a-109b, it starts with the following proposition: *Արդ եթէ կամիս հասու լինիլ վարդապետական շնորհաց և գովութեան ամենայն իրաց եւ գովասանական ներբողական բանից...* and includes brief and simple commentaries on common medieval symbols. These commentaries are highly important since without such knowledge it is impossible to penetrate the purport of profound medieval texts, and

interpret their explicit and implicit meaning. Let us bring an example to illustrate the point.

Grigor Narekatsi had a talent unmatched by any other poet in the skilful use of medieval symbols, and often such elements are so naturally fused with the fabric of his texts that they seem quite contemporary and congenial to modern perception. However, the more attentive reader experiences the mesmerizing power of ancient symbolism when it is viewed from the angle of fresh figurative thinking.

Interestingly enough, in the Matenadaran manuscript referred to above, both pagan and Christian symbols are used side by side, and the commentaries of the unknown author can serve as a key to the last stanza of the song dedicated to Vardavar (Feast of the Transfiguration) by Grigor Narekatsi:

Աստղունքդ ամեն շուրջ առին
Դէմ լուսնին՝ գունդ-գունդ բոլորին.
Գունդ-գունդ խաչածել գնդակ,
Յարինուած երկնից շրջանակ (Narekatsi 1981:119).

The immediate impression of the verse is of a rhymed wordplay – *spherical balls* (Գունդ-գունդ խաչածել գնդակ), whether based on a figurative abstraction of celestial bodies or a poetic image. Yet, one should not forget about the authorship of the song and the rewarding experience of delving into the meaning of Narekatsi's writings. As for the meaning of the symbolic image above, Narekatsi's Commentary on the Song of Songs proves helpful here. First, the poet quotes a passage from the Song of Songs: “Պատգամաորութիւն քո դրախտ նոննեաց՝ հանդերձ պտղովք մրգաբերաց՝ կիպրոս հանդերձ նարդոսիվ: Նարդոս եւ քրքում, խունկեղեզն ու կինամոն՝ հանդերձ ամենայն ծառք Լիբանանու՝ զմոռոս, հալուէ, հանդերձ ամենայն գլխատր խնկօք: Աղբեր բորաստանաց և ակն ջրոյ կենդանոյ՝ բիխեալ ի Լիբանանէ: Արի՛ հիսիսի, եւ եկ հարաւ, շնչեա ի պարտեզ իմ, և բորեցիս խունկք իմ” (Song of Songs, 4:13-16). Further, he comments on his method, noticing that if he interpreted the passage verbatim, his listeners would feel bored, while he chooses to and can express briefly what others explicate in detail having devoted his life to the pursuit of wisdom. To conclude, Narekatsi quotes the aphoristic saying of the Apostle: Պսոտի հոգւոյն այս է. սէր, խնդութիւն, խաղաղութիւն (Narekatsi 1840:308). It is clear from what has been said above that Narekatsi believes in brevity in expression, and it is for that reason that his interpretation is characterized by remarkably profound insight. In the song devoted to the Feast of Transfiguration he did reduce the expression of his thought to its minimum, but in Narekatsi's time his imagery was comprehensible to the scholarly people. As for today's readers, they gain access to the meaning of the image through the unknown author's explications of the medieval symbols: ...արդ գկուսածին մարմինն ասէ, որ գնդածէ ի խաչին կարմրափայտ և կայլակնացնցուղ արեան շիքք հեղան... Therein, Jesus Christ crucified on a wooden cross is described as red with spherical drops of blood spurting out from his body. The Son of God on the cross is portrayed by means of the symbolic image: գունդ-գունդ խաչածել գնդակ, յարինուած երկնից շրջանակ. An identical image of Christ can be found in some of the medieval miniatures.

Another aspect of *Book of Lamentations* deserving scholarly attention and special investigation is its associations with foreign sources, which will add to the understanding of the Armenian poet's role and high merit in world literature. It should also be remembered that the distinguishing features of the periods of colossal in its scope Armenian Renaissance have already been defined on scientific bases, and that Grigor Narekatsi's work relates to the concept of Early Renaissance – a phenomenon characteristic of European Renaissance as well. Such an accurate classification of Armenian Renaissance creates more extensive grounds for the generalized perception of Narekatsi's poetical individuality in the context of medieval Armenian literature.

Notes:

1. In a poem by Lukianos Karnetsi entitled *Տաղ որ կոչի յերկր/նային արքայութեան* kept as manuscript N 10036 (pp. 20a-20b) in Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran) an interesting vision of heaven can be found. The description of heaven is remarkable for the way the scenes borrowed from real life are fused with the images of assemblies of angels, beauteous virgin saints, as well as of Jesus Christ greeting the pure soul entering heaven. The trees in heaven are so lavishly depicted that it seems the poet describes a real garden full of common and familiar fruit trees. Below are several stanzas from the poem:

*Մէյրերի զանազան պտղալի ծառերը
Թեթևի ճուղեր յիրակէն բռներ՝
Մերկեֆիլներ, տանձեր, խաղողներ, մուռեր,
Պատուական համեղ մուրքեր կան անուշ:
Երևեցաւ թագուհին պայծառ փառքերով,
Գլուխը թագազարդ կերպ-կերպ գոհարով,
Լոյս յերեսին սրբոտիկ սրբունանք սիրով
Մոտեցան ինձի հետ խօսեցան անուշ:
Գինովցայ սիրալեր սիրոյ խօսքերեն
Շարժեցաւ, վառեցաւ իմ սիրտս նորէն,
Գտաւ նկիանոս զվարդ սրբերեն
Իրեն մեկ սիրելի սիրական անուշ:*

2. See also Manuscript N 215, p. 30a (Matthew 10:37, 39), Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts.
3. In his "Library of Ancient Armenian Translations (IV-XIIIcc.)", G. Zarbanalyan mentions the titles of Aristotle's works translated into Armenian, adding that in the Library of Ancient Manuscripts in Echmiadzin two books are mistakenly ascribed to Aristotle – On Souls and On Activities, which cannot be found in the Greek original from the Stagirite's pen. However, we could also assume that the reference is to Aristotle's On the Soul, in which case the record found in the library is accurate (Zarbanalyan 1889:322).

References:

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**Գրիգոր Նարեկացու Մատեանը
և
Սիմեոն Նոր Աստվածաբանի հիմները
(գրական աղբյուրներ)**

10-րդ դարի հանձարեղ բանաստեղծ Գրիգոր Նարեկացու «Մատեան ողբերգութեան» երկը և 11-րդ դարի բյուզանդական գրականության նշանավոր միստիկ բանաստեղծ Սիմեոն Նոր Աստվածաբանի հիմներն ունեն զարմանալի նմանություններ: Հոդվածի մեջ առաջին անգամ մատնացույց են արվում այդ նմանությունները և հիմնավորվում է, որ Նարեկացին չէր կարող օգտվել Սիմեոն Նոր Աստվածաբանից: Երկու բանաստեղծները ստեղծագործել են իրարից անկախ՝ ներկայացնելով քրիստոնեական միստիկական մտածողության բարձրագույն մակարդակ: Հոդվածագիրը, հենվելով Մաշտոցի անվան Մատենադարանի թիվ 7703 ձեռագրում պահպանված ներբողական խորհրդանիշների մեկնության վրա, նորովի է մեկնաբանում Գրիգոր Նարեկացու «Տաղ Վարդավառի» քերթվածի վերջին տունը: