

The Novel “Ararat”: the Way to Salvation



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The novel “Ararat” was written by the American writer Elgin Groseclose who was born on November 25, 1899 in Waukomis, OK, and died after a stroke, April 4, 1983. Groseclose performed refugee work in the Soviet Caucasus during the 1920’s, which served as the basis of his novel “Ararat”, winner of two awards: the 1939 National Book Award and the 1940 Foundation for Literature Award.

The main concern of Elgin Groseclose in the novel “Ararat” is to try to find the answer to one basic question: “Upon what does survival depend?” (p.xiii) How does it happen that some nations survive, while others disappear? How did the Jews, the Nestorians, the Ainu survive? Does it

depend on the will of God? “Can we say that God, for some purpose inscrutable to man, has willed the preservation of certain ones, certain communities, certain cultures, while permitting others to perish?” (p. xiii) To answer this riddle he dares to turn to the Armenians: to those who have been through the flood, those who have descended the mountain after the receding waters, “who have seen nations come and go, kings arise and fall, and the plow follow the sword.” (p. xii)

“Ararat” is a novel about a small community of Armenians which survives the bloodshed organized by Abdul Hamid, and which under the guidance of an American missionary, Amos Lyle, finds refuge in a plain called Bartzan, not far from Kars, on the bank of the Araxes, just at the foot of Ararat. They live and prosper here for more than ten years, but then the community gradually dies. The moneylender of the community goes to America to have a larger and safer perspective of development, and the mayor of the community, who is a member of Dashnak party, is invited to Erivan to have a vaster arena of activities. The missionary’s ministry, which lasted for 25 years, comes to an end, and he, together with 12-year-old Sirani, an orphan, moves to Kars. There he goes on with his work as a missionary, gathers homeless children from all over Armenia and takes care of them with the scarce means provided by the missionary board and some occasional individuals.

Paul Markov, a captain of the Russian Imperial Army, who flees from the wrath of the red revolution, sees two orphans at a railway station on his way to America. Filled with compassion for them, he takes them on the train, where a man advises him to take the children to Amos Lyle. Doing so Markov finds himself under the roof of the missionary and his daughter Sirani. The appalling condition of the children, who are left

to Amos Lyle to take care of, makes Markov sell the treasures which he obtained as loot when he was fighting with the Mensheviks, and buy flour for the children. He comes back to Bartzan, and then, one day he realizes that he cannot leave the place any longer. A restless searcher of his unique place under the sun, he feels that something turns upside down in his soul. Captured by the love he feels for Sirani and the spell of Ararat, he founds a city of children, providing home and security for 4,000 children, and afterwards, when the Turks invade the country, leads them to Ararat as Noah did once.

This is the plot of the novel in brief, but much more may be found in the story than that.

"Ararat" embraces a considerably long span of time and area. The story is initially set in the small town of Dilijan, in the Ottoman Empire in 1895, during the reign of Abdul Hamid, then the setting expands to include the neighbouring countries: Persia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Armenia, and, through the memories of Amos Lyle, America. The gallery of the characters is varied and vivid: besides Amos Lyle, Sirani and Paul Markov, referred to earlier, we come across Armenians, Turkish officials, beys, Russian aristocrats, Bolsheviks, soldiers, a Georgian, a bloody mob of Tartars, etc. The political situation and social life of each of these countries are depicted in every detail and with great mastery, as well as genuine concern. Especially vivid are the descriptions of the massacre of Armenians in Dilijan, the life and spirit of the Turkish *harem*, the socialist revolution in Russia, the reflections of Karim Agha, the vast plains in Texas, and the political situation in newly independent Armenia. Against this diverse background two generations of Armenians stubbornly go about their everyday life, which, though outwardly trivial, is as significant and symbolic as the most serious happenings in the wide world.

And the world at this particular time (around World War I) is "black and yawning". (p. xi) It is impatient to quench its thirst for power. The Turks make every effort to wipe out the Armenian race from the face of the world, the Germans strive for "a place in the sun" (p. 231), the Russians go as far as to destroy all the foundations with the promise of starting everything anew, the Tartars in Azerbaijan too partake in this total chaos. What's the matter with the world? Is this the end?

No, this is not the end yet. This is just another brief moment in the long history of the human will.

The earth was created and given to man by God's Will. Yet, man misunderstood God's purpose. He pays tribute only to those affairs that are Caesar's. He ignores his Creator's Will, and acts in the name of his own ego, his invincible will. "All this lust for blood and lust for power, this rebellion, this disorder, arose from the exercise of will!" (p. 230) There is no softness, remorse, or love in the mechanism of the universe: it operates by its own law and logic – "beautifully or fantastically or horribly, as one sees it – but with that same contempt for human hopes or desires or fears as a locomotive on a track." (p. 230)

In the name of this will Abdul Hamid resolves that the Armenian question is to be solved, once and for all, as Turks are still masters of Turkey. Male Armenians are

gathered at a wall and shot dead, then soldiers are released "to partake of the loot and rape of the Armenian quarter, for which the massacre is the signal." (p. 30)

Hashim Farouk, one of the executioners of the Armenians, explains the hatred of Turks to Armenians with these words: "They have become superior to their background, superior to their government. They have placed themselves under the protection of European powers, rather than trust to Turkish justice and equity, and so have given these powers excuse for interference with domestic affairs. But a larger reason than all is because they divide the Turanian peoples like a wedge. Some day all Turanians will be united, as all Russians, or all Americans are. ... Then we shall have pan-Islam. But not until all Armenians are eliminated, for they lie directly between Turkey and Azerbaijan". (p. 131)

The credo of the Russian crowds in 1917 is again their will. The revolutionaries compare the Russian Proletariat with Prometheus who "has brought the fire to the altar of Russia, and feeds the flames of Russian culture". (p. 229) Coming to power, the proletariats are shaking off their chains and asserting their 'godly' nature, and they assert their godliness by the strength of their will, by the "assertion of their invincible will." (p.230) In the name of this will time-honored order, moral and spiritual values are being overthrown. Does not history repeat itself? Did not Tsar Peter erect his new capital in the name of the same invincible will? Did not the kaiser want a "place in the sun" at the instigation of the German will to power? The kaiser, the tsar exalted *I will* to a creed, religion, and universal destiny. *I will* became the cultural and intellectual basis of European civilization. Though in name it worshipped God, in fact it worshipped the will of the ego. Are not all the elaborate philosophical concepts of the great thinkers simple falsifications of true values? For all ideas are in their nature variations of the same play on the same word *will*.

Thus, man has fallen in destructive love with his own ego, neglecting the will of his creator. Hence come all his misfortunes. Man's will has turned the vast area described in the novel into chaos and desolation. The most solid foundations are overwhelmed. Life devours itself, its own creation.

Describing the world as a bloody whirlpool of national and political aspirations, Elgin Groseclose suggests his own way to salvation. Princess Irina Sabayeva and the life in the Turkish harem give a hint of this way to the reader. Yet, to fully develop his ideas, the writer presents the long odyssey of the Armenian community, Amos Lyle and Paul Markov, gathering all these restless souls at the foot of Ararat, a mountain the sight of which makes one feel the presence of the Lord and His eternal promise, "The promise given unto Noah, and again to all his children through our Lord Jesus – that we are God's children, the creatures of His love, over whom He is continually watchful, whom He will no more destroy, but redeem to everlasting salvation. All faith, indeed, all mystery, comes to focus on Ararat, for it was here that God first covenanted with man. By that act the Omnipotent limited His omnipotence, the Eternal took cognizance of the ephemeral, divinity was joined with humanity, and man lifted up to God." (p115)

Amos Lyle preaches this way of salvation throughout the whole narrative. He

ardently and tirelessly shows the road that leads to reunion with our Creator. Some people pay heed to his fervent words (the Armenian community at the beginning of the novel and Stepan Markov) while others do not understand, or rather do not want to understand them (Haig, Garabed Khansourian). Still others think him crazy, at the same time feeling unable not to admire his craziness (Paul Markov). The actions of the novel develop dramatically, bringing all the main characters to a situation when they either should perish or be saved. Yet, what is to be saved and who is to be saved? What are the elements of Armenian culture that deserve to be saved? What is the Armenian spirit that is worth saving? And Elgin Groseclose, through Amos Lyle, wrestles with his problems until he seems to arrive at a final resolution.

"What, after all, does any culture, or any institution of human devising, produce that is more wonderful, more sublime, than human beings? And how better to cultivate this product than by holy, devoted, kindly family life? Is that not the one institution, of all institutions, that is worth preserving? And what gift has the Armenian nation given to the world finer than its men and women, its children, and the homes that shelter them?" (p. 145) And Amos Lyle goes on ministering to individuals and devotes himself to the preservation of all that is good "in the childhood of Armenia." (145)

Markov, Amos Lyle and Sirani build a city of children. Their will is contrasted to the will of those who speaking in the name of humanity lead humanity to destruction. They are devoted to the goal of giving 4000 orphans a start in life. They feel as happy and satisfied as Faust did when he took the sound of chains for the sound of creative work, and thinking that that was the great moment, was ready to utter the fatal words.

For a very short time the Armenians too have the feeling that they have at last come to a point when they can live a life full of infinite sweetness, purity and innocence. Amos Lyle is absorbed in his endless soul-searching discourses and prayers with the Lord. Markov's restless mind is at last at peace. All of them are happy and blissful, for they make others happy and safe. But happiness is not of this world. The Turkish thirst for Armenian blood is never satisfied. They again trespass the border and advance through Armenia spreading death, wreckage and destruction. Another flood for Armenians is at hand, a flood of human blood.

There does not seem any hope for salvation for the 4, 000 children of the city. Yet, as in the days of Noah, Amos Lyle and Markov direct their eyes to the great mountain, which accompanied them through all their endeavors, as an inexplicable and sublime entity, alive with its divine spirit and ancient promise, and safe with its sacred loneliness.

This is where the mysterious, the incomprehensible secret of survival lies, this is the way to salvation which "is a mutual product, the union of the Will of God and the will of man in joint enterprise. God holds forth His sanctuary, but of their own will must men enter into its peace." (p. 449) There *is* a guiding intelligence, a supreme will, ceaselessly functioning in this world, "evolving its own plan for all the creatures of this world" (p. 448), either sinful or innocent. Man crawls unconsciously and helplessly to this Will. And he will find salvation if he gets response from the greater Will toward which his

own will forever gropes, either consciously or subconsciously. And if man wants to be granted a response, he must first empty his self, he must purify his thoughts, discard all the limitations of the elaborated human desire, and walk to the great mountain as a pure child, in love and in harmony, for in love are the Will of God and the will of man united, in love is the understanding from which all harmony proceeds, and in love is the sanctuary and salvation which all men desire.

References:

1. Elgin Groseclose, Ararat, Carrick & Evans, 1939

«Արարատ» վեպը. փրկության ուղին

Հոդվածում Ամերիկացի գրող Էլզին Գրոսքլոսի «Արարատ» վեպի թարգմանիչը փորձում է մեկնաբանել վեպի հիմնական գաղափարը՝ ինչը և ով է փրկվում այնպիսի մի իրավիճակում, երբ աշխարհը դառնում է Սողոմ և Գոմոր: