Apocalypse and Revelation in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* and *The Story of the Last Thought*

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Abstract: The article focuses on the notions of apocalypse and revelation as metaphors for trauma and healing. The metaphors are employed by two German speaking authors, Franz Werfel and Edgar Hilsenrath, in their fictional works on the Armenian genocide. The article discusses their respective novels, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* and *The Story of the Last Thought*, as well as their narrative strategies, which are specifically designed to break the silence on the so-called "Turkish lie" and to unravel the blurred history of the "Forgotten Massacre".
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The term "apocalypse" is defined as a cataclysmic event that marks the conclusion of one world and the commencement of a new one, concomitantly ushering in a new generation. Consequently, any apocalypse may be construed as "*incipit vita nova*" (Balotă 2019: 334). However, even in the advent of a new era, the psychological impact of the preceding one remains, as evidenced by Elie Wiesel's assertion that the dilemma confronting genocide survivors is not merely the famous "to be or not to be" posed by Hamlet, but rather the more profound "to be *and* not to be" (Alford 2009: 59). The psychological impact of such experiences is profound, with survivors often grappling with a sense of guilt and shame for their own survival, particularly when considering the tragic loss of others. Each day brings with it a poignant reminder of the lives lost, and survivors must also confront the reality of witnessing evil in its most raw form. This underscores the necessity for any eschatological framework to incorporate elements of theodicy, as it must also address the question of how evil can exist in a world where God seems to tolerate it. This is particularly salient in the context of the Holocaust, where the question of humanity's responsibility and God's presence or absence is paramount, as opposed to the more traditional query of God's existence (Rodriguez 2007: 5). In any case, eschatology demands critical thinking in that it does not make any act of justification as it comes as exoneration, as a defensive response to a discerning verdict. Consequently, literary texts dedicated to genocides, which are perceived by the few survivors

as the extinction of their world, do not seek to convict the guilty. Instead, they function as litanies for the absolution of the survivors. Such texts are collectively termed "apocalyptic literature".

The concept of apocalypse serves as a potent metaphor for a nation's tragedy, the annihilation of ethnic identity, and the revelation of historical truth that requires restoration. This notion is exemplified in two 20th-century novels: Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*[1] (1933) and Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Story of the Last Thought*[2] (1990). The term "truth", as employed in these novels, is a chronicle that must be safeguarded to facilitate the reconstruction of the narrative commonly known as the "Forgotten Slaughter"[3] (Hilsenrath 1989, 17). The two novels propose a paradoxical option for survival in the form of a crude reconstitution, albeit fragmented and ancillary, of a massive and violent ethnic cleansing. It is noteworthy that any apocalypse has a disambiguating effect, in that it does not obscure the truth under the ashes of devastation; on the contrary, it clarifies things while allowing a different vantage point on events. In this sense, Revelation functions as a subsequent stage in the process of de-creation, as it discloses or makes known the facts. In the context of the Armenian Genocide, which is the focal point of both of the aforementioned novels, the term signifies the presentation of historical truth and the education of subsequent generations through the testimony of survivors.

The term "genocide" was first used in print in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew who had fled the Nazis during the Second World War. The term was used in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Berlatsky 2015: 4) to refer to the Holocaust. The term was employed in the dispute over the concept of "state sovereignty" between Lemkin, then a law student, and his professors at the University of Lvov (Savelsberg 2021: 18). Lemkin, cognisant of the state aggression experienced by the Armenian people, found the Berlin trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, an Armenian assassin of Talaat Pasha, one of the primary actors responsible for the genocide, particularly disturbing (Savelsberg 2021: 18). However, it was not until decades of publications, conferences and discussions with legal scholars, activists and politicians that the concept of "genocide" was arrived at. The term was subsequently incorporated into the United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which became part of the International Criminal Law of 1951 and included comprehensive legal definitions of the crime of genocide (Berlatsky 2011: 4). The second article of the Convention enumerates the following acts as constituting genocide:

> Killing members of the group;
> Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
> Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
> Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

[1] *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh* (the original title in German).
[2] *Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken* (the original title in German).
[3] All excerpts from the novels are translated from German into English by the author of this article.

Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." (Berlatsky 2011: 5)

The initial phase of the "Forgotten Slaughter" was instigated during the reign of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II (1894-1896). Concurrently, the Armenian national consciousness began to take shape. This period was characterized by significant political and social upheaval, marked by the gradual dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, with numerous nations and their respective populations seeking independence. Within this context, the Armenian population, situated within the remaining Turkish territory, also aspired to gain autonomy. The annexation of Oriental Armenia by the Russian Empire served to intensify the ideal of gaining the status of an independent nation state. The Armenian Patriarch's intervention in Constantinople, emphasising the necessity of Armenia's recognition, along with the establishment of the first secret political organisations in Armenia, further contributed to the prevailing climate of unrest (Hofmann 2004: 90-115). In 1890, the population of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire stood at four million, comprising both Oriental (Orthodox) and Catholic religious groups. The Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who was keen to focus on Armenian religious identity, recent activism and, in particular, the wealth of this ethnic group, decided to dissolve all criteria of diversity through designing a pogrom (Hofmann 2004: 90-115). Between 1915 and 1916, the Armenians were systematically decimated, and the genocidal process followed a trajectory consistent with an established pattern:

> - conscription of the adult male population prior to and during the first months of the war and their subsequent segregation into the labor battalions and ultimate execution;
> - disarment of the Armenians by demanding that each household turn in weapons and when these did not exist driving the terrified population to purchase and deliver guns to avoid the threatened severe punitive action;
> - arrest and imprisonment of community leaders, including teachers, priests, and intellectuals, and the closure of schools;
> - proclamation through town criers of the decree for deportation, which was to follow within a week. (Hovannisian 2003: 118)

Regardless of the circumstances, the dominant continental political powers appeared to condone this process of ethnic cleansing, as if it were a necessary measure for the professed preservation of a safer world. Due to the perpetual conflicts between the authorities and the Armenians, widely regarded as struggles between Power and Truth, a predominant concept emerged centring on the notion of veracity. This postulation holds that truth cannot be reconstructed in actual fact until all the constituent fragments of personal histories are assembled. Consequently, heroes in Apocalypse fictional narratives are chosen customarily and symbolically as icons of self-sacrifice for the preservation of good and the salvation of humanity.

Fiction about the Armenian Genocide includes works such as Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* (1997), a gripping blend of memoir and documentary, or *Rise of the Euphrates* (1994) by Carol Edgarian. Another commemorative work mixed with fiction is *Efronia, an Armenian Love Story*

(1994), in which a daughter-in-law, Stina Katchadourian, writes a factual history while her son, Herant Katchadourian, translates the 500 pages into English and concocts an imaginary backstory (according to Hovannisian 2004: 163). Such imaginary stories commonly revolve around the same sense of apocalypse, as they attempt to reproduce a world that no longer exists. The annihilation of approximately one million Armenian Christians in 1915-1916 and the organisation of death marches by the Ottoman government to destroy their long-standing presence in Turkey are scientifically documented in books such as *The Great Game of Genocide. Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* by Donald Bloxham (2005). However, due to the political tensions that have persisted since the genocide, the apocalypse as a revelation of historical truth has not actually taken place.

Apocalypse, as already stated, also refers to the end of one generation and the beginning of another. In such reconstituted stories, the Apocalypse occurs in the course of the first generation's life, while the Revelation occurs only with the second generation. It is the mission of the first generation to tell the story and to make it reliable. But what happens to history once it has been converted into a story so as to be comprehended by the next generation? More to the point, what happens to both history and story when transplanted into another culture? These are questions that resonate in both Werfel's and Hilsenrath's fiction.

Werfel's novel was the first in Western literature to focus on the events of the fateful year of 1915, when the Armenian genocide began in Turkey. Bringing the Armenian tragedy to the fore, the Austrian-Bohemian writer's groundbreaking novel has become an emblematic tale of resilience and self-sacrifice and, since it was published on the eve of another catastrophic confrontation, it has often been described as a harbinger of the similarly horrific genocide perpetrated by the Nazis. The protagonist, Gabriel Bagradian, now living in France, decides to return to the Armenian village of his childhood, located on the hills of Musa Dagh ("Moses' Hills" in Turkish). The hero soon finds himself in all sorts of perilous situations, as his people suffer various forms of persecution at the hands of the Ottoman administration. Many of them are threatened and intimidated, while others are killed or deported. But with almost no warning, the villagers of Musa Dagh decide to take retaliatory action. Richard Hovannisian reports that the survivors of Van, Urfa, Musa Dagh and other places later pointed out the places where the Armenians had fought back and defended themselves, dying with a sense of dignity that they had not allowed themselves to be "slaughtered like sheep" (Balakian 2004: 120).

The Story of the Last Thought was symptomatically written by a Holocaust survivor, Edgar Hilsenrath, several decades after the end of the Second World War. The novel tells the story of a village in Anatolia that has been completely destroyed by the Turks. The narrative technique used here is based on an Armenian tale which says that the last thought of a dying man can travel through time and space. Thus, the narrative perspective is allowed to move freely along the course of the Armenian people's history, depicting the protagonist's ancestors as well as the fate of past generations of Armenians living on present-day Turkish soil. The story of the dying man's father

constitutes the main storyline, taking the "thought" (i.e. the narrative focus) from the idyllic childhood of the main character to the torture chambers and the pogrom of 1915.

Both novels revive and reconstruct the world of the ethnic Armenians who were massacred by the Turks between 1915 and 1916 and then again in 1923. These carnages followed that of Adana in 1909, when "in the first forty-eight hours of killing, some two thousand Armenians were dead in the city of Adana alone" (Balakian 2004: 152). At the time of the extermination, the Armenian community had had a long history and deep roots in Turkey, but it had remained a minority. The characters in the novels are survivors who ruminate on the miracle of being alive after the horrific massacre and conclude that they have were allowed to stay alive only to bear witness to the fate of their people and, moreover, to document their history as it really was and not as it was subsequently legitimised. In Franz Werfel's novel, Gabriel even believes that he is a kind of archangel sent on earth by God. His sacred mission, he believes, is to rediscover his old country (Anatolia) and fight for his people:

> Yesterday I had a strong feeling for a moment that a voice in the sky told me that God has a grand plan for me. It was a really strong feeling that left me quickly... The life that I was leading was not the right one. It is so pleasant to imagine yourself capable of being an extraordinary personality, an outstanding particle of dust that is not bound by gravity and is not allowed to exist in this world with no obligation... So God has led me through Awetis and through his will back into the Old Land... (Werfel 1993: 83)

In *The Story of the Last Thought*, the storyteller named Meddah, who is a spirit in the main character's mind, promises Thovma Khatisian that he will not die before finding out the truth: "You will not die in uncertainty" (Hilsenrath 1989: 22). The new generation should discover the truth for only then will their successors be able to turn the last cry of fear into a cry of joy and to welcome death serenely. In *The Poetics of Otherness. War, Trauma and Literature,* Jonathan Hart argues that every discovery is connected symbiotically to *anagnorisis* or recognition, therefore also to misrecognition. "Recognition", he comments, "is a process that includes a moment that involves an apparent, possible, or actual movement from ignorance to knowledge or self-knowledge." (2015: 17)

In like manner, Thovma demands that the storyteller should tell him the story of the last thought so that he may be enlightened. Yet, he indicates that truth is not be attained by one individual only; rather, it will be divulged to and shared with the whole community to which the individual belongs:

> And I'm saying to Meddah in my head: 'Tell me the story of the last thought, so that the waiting time would be filled and renewed, which in fewer splits of seconds would in the end illuminate my head. You promised me that at last.' (Hilsenrath 1989: 22)

The story is told and the truth is revealed only when the silence imposed by the oppressors is broken and the factual report is articulated. However, as the narrator himself laments, this is not the case for the Armenians who fled to America and did not want to tell their story to anyone there, in the New World.

The majority of them preferred to abandon their past identity behind and start a new life so that their children would be protected and history would not repeat itself. (Hovannisian 2004: 121)

Unlike Primo Levi, Hilsenrath makes it clear that he has no intention of demonstrating that the persecutor is worthy of any kind of retribution. Allegedly, what he desires is what his main character declares: simply to break the silence. Thovma Khatisian steps up to the Secretary General's desk and delivers a monologue about how important it is for victims to talk about the past and what it has done to their souls. The whole speech takes place only in his mind as a testimony that has never been told in reality. In Hilsenrath's novel, the hero's soliloquy is a sign of revelation:

> I tell the quiet ones the story of the massacre. I tried to make the quiet ones attentive to how important it is to speak about it. I said: everyone must know. So how should in the future the massacre be prevented when everyone assumes that they knew nothing and hid nothing because they couldn't even imagine such a thing? I speak continuously and in detail. I don't demand anything from my people and I require no punishment of the pursuer. I said: the only thing that I want is to break the silence. (Hilsenrath 1989: 19)

What has come to be known as "the Turkish lie" consists in the argument that the genocide was just retribution for an Armenian conspiracy to kill the Turkish heir to the throne:

> There is an Armenian conspiracy, which fought against humanity, against right and order, against the Moral. But especially against us. (Hilsenrath 1989: 125)

In Werfel's novel, the city of Zeitun is under siege by the Turkish authorities, while in other parts of the country the deportation of Armenians is already under way. The deportees act like captives, although they are not imprisoned. However, as they are forced to leave their homeland, they are paradoxically trapped in the vast unknown void of "elsewhere". The narrator says that they are slowly turning into shadows, into something immaterial, in a way resembling Hilsenrath's archetypal narrator, who is also a translucent and evanescent part of a fictional revelation that never materialises:

> Some have already agreed that the change of domicile is sad. A lost part of your own life remains back there. For everyone it is a big decision to change a city with another one, to change your own domicile with a new one. The typical criminal himself leads his way in captivity back in prison. But he is lawless as a criminal, who benefits from the protection of law. Cast out from one day to another, from their residence, from their work, from the industrious process of creation accumulated in years! Hatred grows. Not ready for being thrown on Asian streets, with a thousand miles of dust, rocks and mud in front of them! In order to know, you must not be found again in an unfamiliar shelter, not eat and drink again at an unfamiliar table. (Werfel 1993: 118)

An example of such immateriality is Thovma's mother, who has no face, but only eyes that reflect an image seen through the eyes of her son, who is still in her womb at the beginning of the evoked story. The reflected image is that of the deported Armenians, but the unborn child is waving and laughing

unsuspectingly because it belongs to the second generation, which is not guilty of any crime, has nothing to do with the terrible event and, what is worse, knows nothing about the history of its own people:

> Where do all this laughable people go? Why does the sun shine when nobody laughs? Why is it so hot? And why are all the people barefoot? Why is there no water? And why are the Zaptiehs hitting people that are not making a stand against them? Isn't it too fast for them? And why do they need to move so fast on that place, where they are put to run about only in circles? And why is my mother now standing still? And why does she all of a sudden fall on her knees? Look out, mother! Be careful, because you can lose sight of me. (Hilsenrath 1989: 11-2)

The Armenian people as a whole is condensed in the protagonists of these two novels. After their deportation, they were banned from many countries and had to choose between the two countries that accepted them, the United States or France, where they had to adapt to new ways of thinking and behaviour. Commenting on this effort to adapt to new cultural contexts, Wartan Khatisian notes that, after all, the change was not so significant for refugee Armenians because the Turks had always considered them different, despicable, suspicious and dirty:

> They don't wash themselves five times a day as the prophet required. They are as dirty as the pig's flesh, which they are eating. (Hilsenrath 1989: 71)

When the story is told by the spirit Meddah, Wartan, Thovma's father, has already been living in America for 16 years. The outbreak of the First World War finds the hero back home after this period of interruption with traditional values. The mudir does not understand why he has returned home, and the protagonist explains that he wants to see his family and then remarry. Moreover, when he left, his father told him so: „Vergiß nie, dass du aus Hayastan stammst." ("Don't you ever forget that you come from Hayastan") (Hilsenrath 1989: 71). When he returns home, he is not as alienated as the hero of Werfel's novel, Gabriel Bagradian, who has benefited from a considerable disenchanting Western education and is now rather detached from other Armenians. His brother, Awetis, on the other hand, has refused to be fully assimilated into European culture and has lived a life of self-imposed segregation:

> Twenty-three years of Europe, Paris! Twenty-three years of total assimilation! They are double and triple. They erase everything. After the death of the old man, the family, redeemed by the local patriotism of the head, flees this oriental corner... The brother, also called Awetis, older than Gabriel by fifteen years, disappears quickly. He returns to Turkey as the co-head of the import house. It is not without reason that he bears his grandfather's first name. He is not drawn to Europe. He is an eccentric addicted to solitude. (Werfel 1993: 15)

Gabriel Bagradian does not want to revisit his ancestors' stories of woe and oppression. He does not want to lose his wife and change his routine though he has inherited the song of his ancestors. He wants to dispel its magic and never succumb to the urge of getting too much engulfed in the tragedy of his nation.

Instead, he prefers to be "a thinker, an abstract man, a man in himself." (Werfel 1993: 16-7) who is no longer affected by past tragedies. On the contrary, Wartan is frightened as he hears the screams of all those tortured and dying before his eyes. The spirit that guides Thovma shows him the sufferings of his father and forces him to confront history through a painful revelation of personal truth. Thovma's recounting of the horrors of the massacre is an act of revelation that turns into a confession. He realizes that his father was an instrument in the hands of the authorities, that he was tortured and almost killed because the Turks assumed it was all a conspiracy by the Armenians. Everything converges into a symphony of grief that "led him to madness because he began to imagine the unimaginable" (Hilsenrath 1989: 139). Although a true hero, Gabriel Bagradian himself is overwhelmed by fear, convinced that he is heading for an undeniable apocalypse. His wife Juliette remarks that he has changed dramatically and is no longer the typical Western man he once was. He has become someone else, and his silence is proof that he is Armenian. He has become an active part of this apocalypse and is silent because he is waiting for the revelation to come. He is convinced that without the full unfolding of the truth, the process of renewal can never take place. Revelation is described as a cosmic event that will shutter and crush a decaying world:

> Fear? As if of something supernatural! As a child I often imagined that a small star in the sky suddenly grew bigger, swelled, came closer and closer and crushed the Earth... (Werfel 1993: 83)

The hero's reticence is the quietness that succeeds the apocalypse. Similarly, Georg Trakl's poems of the First World War employ metaphors of silence related to four basic conditions: „the innocence of childhood, the holy, detached state of the *unborn* called *Abgeschiedenheit*, the state of the fallen man, and the muteness accompanying the dead" (Lyon 1970: 340). Gabriel Bagradian experiences all types of silence that Trakl's poems record under the verdict of "the unredeemed silent state of the damned" (Lyon 1970: 340).

To sum up, the wounds of the "forgotten genocide" could have been partially healed by breaking up the individual and collective silence. Thus, the apocalypse would have meant more than destruction and catastrophe, and would have brought about an unforeseen elucidation, for the reason that the truth could have been exposed at long last. Instead, the struggle between power and truth allowed history to leak out into an ambiguous consensus, with the survivors forced to lead double lives. The "Turkish lie" has constantly hovered over the issue, making it equivocal, and the typical Armenian, now a Western man, has persisted in his reserve. In reality, the silence has not been broken. In fiction, however, silence is broken in these two novels dedicated to the Armenians and their unfortunate history of repression and slaughter. The only true witness left is to be found in the realm of fiction, for it is only there that language can express the truth and create, sometimes recreate, the factual.

In Werfel's novel, therefore, there is no revelation, whereas in Hilsenrath's novel the question of whether the truth will be found remains unanswered, as the narrative takes place entirely within the mind of Thovma.

Both novels, it can be argued, share the notion that history is at risk of losing its material form, and that the repercussions of malevolent actions will remain veiled due to the absence of witnesses, evidence, verbal communication, and the breakdown of intergenerational lines of dialogue within a community. The lives of the survivors are in danger of being forgotten, and the fact that the revelation does not take place at all leads to the conclusion that history will stop at once, and all those who need to be remembered will fade into the shadows. The next generation will not find the truth, nor will the generation that follows. The customary process of cultural memory will be brought to a halt, and life will be rebuilt under the guidance of human technologies that will work with uncertainty and hazard. It is an apocalyptic view of history that both Hilsenrath and Werfel fight against in their novels, which are set against the backdrop of the ashes of a lost generation.

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