

“A PICAYUNE FRAGMENT OF THE POSSIBLE TOTAL”: STONE ALLEGORIES IN SAROYAN’S LIFE-WRITING

“UN FRAGMENTO INSIGNIFICANTE DEL POSIBLE TOTAL: ALEGORÍAS DE PIEDRA EN LA ESCRITURA AUTOBIOGRÁFICA DE WILLIAM SAROYAN

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175

Abstract

This article explores William Saroyan’s notion that life can only be grasped as a fragment of the Absolute, and that any attempt to understand one’s existence is by definition a frustrated project. By applying Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s theory of the fragment, the mark of the ‘incompletable incompleting’ (1978), I will read Saroyan’s formless autobiographical experiments (ranging from 1952 to the late 1970s) as the author’s failure to endow his elusive identity with a stable meaning and order. The culmination of his concern with fragmentation finds its best expression in the finding of a stone, an *objet trouvé* which operates either as the transcendentalist symbol of the recovery of the totality or else as a negative allegory in the sense adumbrated by Walter Benjamin, i.e., a concept which allows the author to revisit and interrogate history as the landscape of death and decline. Steeped in the mythical aura of Armenia as the country of stones, Saroyan’s petrified fragment can only be interpreted not as a vehicle of unity and fulfilment but as a reminder of tragedy, dispersion, and the failure to coalesce, all of them inevitably linked with the writer’s diasporic consciousness.

Keywords: William Saroyan, life-writing, autobiography, theory of the Romantic fragment, Armenian-American identity.

Resumen

La escritura autobiográfica de William Saroyan comprende una serie de experimentos que comienzan en 1952 y continúan hasta los setenta. A través de una lectura de su filosofía, este artículo explora la idea posromántica de que la vida solo puede ser concebida como un fragmento del Absoluto, y de que cualquier intento de dotarla de sentido es un proyecto inconcluso. Aplicando la teoría del fragmento que caracteriza la epistemología romántica según Lacoue-Labarthe y Nancy (1978), me propongo examinar este discurso autobiográfico como el intento fallido de dotar de un patrón estable a la identidad de un sujeto definido por la fractura y el azar. La preocupación de Saroyan por la fragmentariedad encuentra su mejor expresión en el hallazgo fortuito de un guijarro o una roca, una imagen ambivalente que opera como el símbolo transcendentalista de la unidad con el Absoluto o como una alegoría en el sentido vislumbrado por Walter Benjamin, esto es, un objeto que posibilita interrogar la historia como catástrofe. En consonancia con el sobrenombre de Armenia como el país de las piedras, solo cabe interpretar el fragmento como un testigo de la tragedia y la diseminación, temas inevitablemente asociados con la conciencia diaspórica del escritor.

Palabras clave: William Saroyan, memorias, autobiografía, teoría del fragmento romántico, identidad armenio-americana.

1. Introduction

In 1959, harrowed by a sense of foreboding at a stage when his creativity was losing steam, William Saroyan undertook a journey that he firmly believed was going to be his last. Forgotten, if not despised, by the critical establishment, and harassed by the onerous weight of debts at a time when all he got was rejection slips from mainstream publishers, the writer envisioned a voyage across the Atlantic that operated as a paradoxical reversal of his father's exile from Bitlis to America, to meet, like his progenitor, his death. The literary outcome of this journey is one of his most celebrated memoirs, *Not Dying* (1963). Conceived as a makeshift diary-project comprising all the days of July 1959, the book is a self-narrative of decline and a formless declaration of his ideas about knowledge, life and art. In what follows, I intend to examine how Saroyan's self-narratives, a collection of ten titles—from his first memoirs entitled *The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills* (1952) to *Obituaries* (1979)¹—map an existential terrain largely made of fragmentation.

In addressing this aspect, I am referring not only to a writing style that remains essentially formless—"aphasic and metonymic" in the words of William Boelhower (1988: 274)—but to an epistemological linchpin that can be traced back to the

Romantic imagination: a condition of brokenness, incompleteness and ruin that can only be accounted for as part of an indissoluble relation to the System or the Absolute. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's arguments on the poetics of the fragment (1978) will prove essential to grasping Saroyan's never-ending writing project, one that is conceived as a concerted effort to provide a guide to something as perpetually fleeting as the writer's protean identity. "Is identity a fraudulence?" (Saroyan 1976: 14), Saroyan asks. "[B]oth inherited and acquired identity in its very nature is helplessly fraudulent, but there we are, aren't we?" (14). Notwithstanding this caveat, his countless conscientious attempts at encapsulating his self-image into writing are a sure indication that he can only aspire to bring together "the ragbag, bobtail, odds and ends" of memory (Saroyan 1978: 25), the harvest seemingly amounting to an almost total absence of meaning. At its best, Saroyan admits, his memoirs reveal something that is "only partly true, and true only part of the whole, and each part is a paltry part, so let's get that part of the paltry part straight at the outset" (1979: 126), i.e., a preposterous collection of scraps that may nonetheless reveal a figment of truth. If, as Louis A. Renza puts it, the autobiographical task is profoundly (and intentionally) marked by a "fragmented narrative appearance" (1977: 10), Saroyan's life writings increasingly become a sort of "hupomnemata" in the Foucauldian sense (1997). They can be understood as an accumulating archive of multifarious fragments that does not provide a narrative of the self but a makeshift scaffold that will allow the writer to return and recollect, and in doing so, discern part of his disaggregated identity.

Saroyan's undeterred autobiographical impulse has been explained from a variety of standpoints. David Stephen Calonne identifies the author's decision to maneuver his writing "from the creation of works [in]to the creation of self" as the driving force of a project that seeks to understand "the radical disjunction of Self and World" (1983: 142, 143). Water Shear (1995) interprets Saroyan's memoirs as part of his struggle against obliteration and chance whereas Nona Balakian (1998) sees it as the result of a growing fusion of the man and the artist. In the author's words, "[t]he very thing I was after as a writer was to be in my writing precisely who I was in my life" (Saroyan 1964: 112). Yet no attempt has ever been made to trace out the logic of Saroyan's memoirs in connection with the Romantic theory of the fragment. My ultimate goal is to show that, if the writer's autobiographical discourse is segmented into a congeries of loose pieces that follow no overarching design, it is not only because it seeks to reflect the self's mystifying life as faithfully as possible but also to the extent that it aspires to build up a story of life as art. Art must be understood here as aesthetic Absolute. In the writer's own words, "[t] here is no point in glancing at the past, in summoning it up, in re-examining it, except on behalf of the art—that is the meaningful real" (Saroyan 1952: 49). In

the following pages, I will discuss how the logic of post-Kantian fragmentation accounts for the ways in which the subject, unable to blend his atomistic individuality, and thereby restore his sense of belonging, into the Absolute, will counteract the impact of nihilism through its own aesthetic presentation. The belief that the Self's being can be erected as a work of art does not imply the recovery of the totality. Far from it, it reveals the contours of an ever-shifting gravitational point which will become peripheral the instant it is located. Saroyan's strategy seeks to underline the insufficiency of the fragment (his living recollections) to complete the ensemble. Moreover, paradoxically enough, it aims to deploy a rhetoric that, contrary to sidestepping incompleteness, redirects our attention to the individual fragment, for it is its disjointedness, fragility and instability that generate a meaning. In tune with Adorno's ideas (1997), in Saroyan's self-narratives, the whole ceases to take center stage, and all our attention as readers is engaged, time and again, in what is fractured.

178

Peter Bürger's discussion of Walter Benjamin (1984) as an allegorist will help to clarify how the finding of a fragment triggers a self-posed meaning, away from the object itself and its original function, which may serve as a locus to interrogate history and identity. In Benjamin's view, an allegory is by definition a fragment which, instead of insisting on totality as the symbol does, accentuates despair and loss and interrogates progress. Much unlike the classicist who conceives his work as an organic unit heralding fulfilment and redemption, the avant-gardiste culls parts from the life-totally and turns them into emblems of a vision of history in decline, a death mask of "a petrified, primordial landscape" (Benjamin in Bürger 1984: 69). In this regard, I will focus my attention upon Saroyan's stone-fragment, an object that epitomizes the inherent uprooting of the diasporic Armenian-American subject. In choosing the fragment both as the vehicle (his ideal of "formlessness", a hybrid genre that allowed him to write about himself)² and the tenor (the stone as the emblem of his hybrid identity), Saroyan carves out a unstable space which does not only challenge the illusion of beginning, climax and denouement in telling one's life, the faux demands of the biographical *telos*, but also problematizes a diasporic writer's position in the narration of the nation. If allegory is "in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things" (Benjamin 2019: 188), Saroyan's landscape is fundamentally a landscape filled with debris. Thus, in order to maneuver through the intricate scaffolding of Saroyan's *episteme*, the article is divided into two sections: (i) Life and Memory, and (ii) Stone-Finding. Saroyan's view oscillates between his deep-rooted conviction of the impossibility of knowledge and his hope that memory and writing may establish a new order, albeit fragmentary, to what essentially, and inevitably, remains "a shambles" (1996: 14).

2. Life and Memory: Unsatisfied Fragments in the Search for the Grand Book

Memoirs constitute a system of fragments.
Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*.

In an early piece of writing entitled “Genesis” (1935), a spoof not only “of the scientific theory of the creation of the Universe”, as James H. Tashjian rightly observes in one of his expanded notes to the collection (Saroyan 1984: 368), but of the Bible as well, Saroyan recounts the story of the creation of the world. In the beginning a Great Void, ruled by motionlessness and an eternal silence, dominated the cosmos. Shortly afterwards, “small fragments” started to leap nervously out of it. This unprecedented movement brought silence to a halt by unleashing a commotion of noises and “one holy error after another” (Saroyan 1984: 182). Fragments joined themselves to larger bodies, breathing came about, life and change ensued, and God’s only begotten Son, a man partially blind, came into being. His birth was the result of the incongruity of two forces: a molecule fell in love with an electron, resulting in a dialectic of opposing forces—the first was governed by the spirit and the second by matter—that caused “in each of the early lovers a deep sense of frustration” (183). This feeling of sadness sparked the birth of the Word, or the articulation of language. Reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s idea (1983) that man is the impossible synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, the story reveals Saroyan’s conviction that the Absolute is inevitably fragmented, and that the link that united each of the fragments to the whole is irremediably lost. The answer to the question he raises, “What brotherhood relates each subtle fragment to the subtler whole?”, can only revalidate his permanent sense of frustration in discovering that “[w]e have broken everlasting now into small units of sadness: the second, the minute, the hour, the week, the month, the year, and eternity” (Saroyan 1936: 124). Not surprisingly, in Saroyan’s view, “[w]e are an accident” (1989: 227), and all we can aspire to be at most “is a picayune fragment of the possible total” (223).

Saroyan’s belief in the rigmorole of phenomenal reality—the idea that the relation between language and subject is irredeemably fractured—appears early in his work. In the opening chapter of *The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills* (1952), the narrator reminisces about how music contributed to his growth as an artist early in his childhood. While riding a bicycle as a telegraph messenger, a tune frequently came into his mind, “a song which was not whole, which never in fact became whole” (Saroyan 1952: 20). This fragment of a song, however, always aspired to complete itself but inexorably failed to reach completion, not on account of its

musical notes and rhythms but of its words: “And here perhaps lies the clue to the failure of this form to fulfil itself —its involvement in words” (20). Unlike sounds which reach their goal without any help, “words must be *driven* to their ends” (20, emphasis in original), making knowledge partial or impossible. In other words, “[t]he *real* story can never be told. It is untellable. The real (as real) is inaccessible” (43, emphasis in original), for we “are slow things, and truth is swift, it is instantaneous, it is both always and now, it is complete and we aren’t” (1996: 206). It comes “in an instant and [is] gone, leaving me with the rest of my life to puzzle it out” (206).

The fragmentary nature of our life attests to the fact that, in Saroyan’s philosophy, “the whole universe is a distortion, a tearing to pieces of things that were perhaps once whole” (1978: 126). Walter Shear has observed that, if there is a recurrent principle that rules Saroyan’s memoirs, it is arbitrariness since chapters provide neither a chronology nor a sequential narrative (1995: 177). Saroyan’s first autobiographical installment, *The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills*, anchored in the conviction that life is “an essay at art” (1952: 178), narrates, through a random collection of objects and incidentals, his growth as a writer. *Days of Life and Death* (1970) is based upon scraps of observation (which the author calls “details”) aiming to bring together the most banal episodes (a basil plant just bought, a newspaper headline read in the bathroom, problems with the plumber, weather changes, a flâneur’s ramblings in Paris, etc.) in order to save them from oblivion, for the journal-keeper has now discovered that the only incontestable truth is to be found in “every day’s confusion” (Saroyan 1970: 111). *Obituaries* (1979) consists of 135 fragments of a similar length (around 80 lines) that follow *Variety*’s 1976 necrology list. The catalog displays a jumble of names which serve as a lame excuse to give vent to memories of the past, rambling discussions and non-sequiturs. *Places Where I’ve Done Time* (1972) and *Chance Meetings* (1978) are made up of disconnected vignettes of everyday life, the first choosing a list of places and the second a group of people and snatches of conversation to frame episodic memories that follow one another like loose pieces of an incomplete mosaic.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1988) hold the view that the fragment is the key philosophical concept of Jena Romanticism, the core of eidaesthetics³ that permeated the post-Kantian Romantic project insofar as it offered an artistic solution to an epistemological question: How can we know what is beyond our noetic self-awareness? Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) had already established the limits of knowledge of the world. The result was an unbridgeable gap, a hiatus between the subject’s speculation of the Absolute and the impossibility of its presentation or visibility. The fragment solved, at least aesthetically, the

subject’s nostalgia for a totality. A fragment must not be merely understood as a broken-off bit of a lost object. It is not only *das Bruchstück*, the remnant *trouvé* of something that existed before, but something that is grasped as complete in itself, albeit in its jaggedness. In Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s words, it can only be properly understood as “the exergue of the total, infinite work” (1988: 48). As such, it draws out a finished completion—elsewhere, in the realm of transcendental imagination—despite its evident incompleteness. To put it more simply, it contains, like a seed, an embryonic idea of the System of which it constantly provides a mirror-like reflection, thereby enabling, in Novalis’s words, “the presentation of the unrepresentable” (in Sanford 2016: 26), a strategy that allows a makeshift way out of this philosophical impasse. Thus, the fragment sets forth the same logic of the ruin: it recalls and obliterates the past, paradoxically binding evocation and substitution together (Wasser 2016: 28). Thomas McFarland argues that its incompleteness entails the (fleeting) hope that one can recompose the original unity by finding and bringing together its “*membra disiecta*” (1981: 28).

Despite the meaninglessness of phenomenal reality, a giant-sized jigsaw whose pieces cannot be put back in place —“There is no dispelling of yesterday’s confusion, and no seeing through today’s” (Saroyan 1970: 111)—Saroyan still harbors the hope of finding the connection of his life with the Absolute, for the fragment is built upon the exigency of completion. His autobiographies are primarily conceived as trial-and-error exercises at deciphering “the lost and revealed Book”, a series of hit-and-miss attempts to write about All (Saroyan 1996: 84). Writing one’s life amounts to “having the same happen again; only this time as part of a whole” (84). The author’s unflagging efforts over forty years to “understand the whole thing in all of its parts” (Saroyan 1970: 111) are doomed to failure from the outset, for it is impossible to write without leaving things out. Life-writing is inherently fragmentary: it is based upon memory, and memory is selective, “follows no rules”, “works its own wheel, and stops where it will, entirely without reference to the last stop, and with no connection with the rest” (Saroyan 1978: 124-126). In the long run, to remember is not a far cry from inventing (15).

In other words, how can a self that is by definition “moving and transitory” aim towards “the Intelligence-of-All” (Saroyan 1989: 227)? “How do you pick and choose? All is all, isn’t it?” (Saroyan 1996: 156). In his bid to provide an answer to this conundrum, he stacks up a welter of memories that range from his childhood at the orphanage, horse races, trivial aspects about a character in an unidentified story, a Native American’s death on a New Mexico reservation, and a long etcetera. In short, he cobbles random details together, like the tiny white flowers in a lawn,

or the passing of a white butterfly he remembers watching one July morning in 1911 when he was only three:

Now that I want to write about All [...] I still don't know how, I don't know where to start, and you have surely looked at these white flowers that grow in lawns? Well, what about them? I can't leave them out, can I? But if I try to put them in, I don't know *where* to put them in, and I don't know what they are called either. I am not asking for help. I am just letting you know what a difficult thing it is for a man to write about All. (Saroyan 1996: 155, emphasis in original)

Fully aware of the futility of his task, not only does the writer acknowledge his failure to inscribe the Absolute in his writing, thus revalidating the “impossibility of closure and totalization” towards which any autobiographical text aspires (de Man 1979: 922), but he also creates a palimpsest where a plethora of concurring memories compete to carve out a space. The result is even more deliberately fragmented, a conglomerate of scattered nuggets that reveal neither a grand design nor a form containing the truth. Rather than achieving his goal of recovering an order of the self, the particular, with its erratic nature and garbled language, has effaced the vision of the whole. Despite the writer's longings for order and the completion of the self, the quest proves to be futile: “The order I found was the order of disorder. The self that came to me, was not my own” (Saroyan 1952: 171). In Audrey Wasser's words, incompleteness brings forth “the threat of formlessness or chaos” (2016: 33), a possibility that was never dismissed by Romanticism. Thus, if “the fragments infinitize the completion of their own system”, the result foreshadows “the absence of the whole” (33).

Yet, paradoxical as it seems, certain fragments may emanate a complete meaning. As James Olney holds in his extensive work on autobiography, autobiographies merge self-knowledge and cosmology together, for the comprehension of one's personal experiences requires the finding of an object, myth or metaphor which allows the self to grasp “the unknown through the known” (1972: 31). In other words, the discovery of this object bridges the gap between a constantly challenged, time-bound self and the quest for a (permanent) meaning. It is through the contemplation of stones that Saroyan creates the ideal fragment that allows him to satisfy his need for order, thus temporarily accomplishing the process of self-restoration which Paul de Man (1979) deems as inevitable in every autobiographical work: the recovery of the fragments enables the subject, if not to achieve, at least to scratch the surface of closure.

3. Stone-Finding

3.1. The Logic of the Fragment: Pebbles as Mirrors of the Infinite

The miscellaneous objects of the world, however, that interest me are fragmentary, broken off in the sequence of time, and of no continuity [...] and after a while [...] a part of the continuity of life itself: yours or mine [...] It is all One.

William Saroyan, “Tiger”.

Saroyan’s fascination with pebbles evinces not only an awareness of the fragmentary nature of human life but also a hope for unification with the Absolute. Tony Tanner (1963) has provided an account of the genealogy of the metaphor from Margaret Fuller to Sherwood Anderson, tracing its origin back to Transcendentalism. Tanner finds the key to interpreting the ubiquitousness of the image in Emerson’s conviction that Plato’s approach to knowledge relied upon two sources or vases, “one of ether and one of pigment”, the first alluding to a transmateral reality and the second to “low, concrete facts” (1963: 41). In his quest for tangible signs evoking a mystical presence, Emerson discovers the “truth-speaking pebble”, an incontestable piece of evidence of the relation of fragments to an otherworldly reality, the Over-Soul (in Windolph 2007: 19). While holding the pebble in his hand, Emerson interprets the “manufactory” that “eddies around” it through “endless ages” (in Windolph 2007: 19) as unmistakable proof of unseen agential forces. Rather than a mute empirical signifier, the pebble becomes the eyewitness of a metaphysical dimension through which we can commune, though partially, with the Infinite. As Christopher J. Windolph argues, Emerson’s answer to the mystery of the stone is not to be found in geology, or in any other science, but in “look[ing] up” (2007: 19), for it is just an instrument of one of the axes of knowledge, one that prioritizes a vertical-otherworldly projection rather than a horizontal-worldly approach. The pebble emerges then as the epitome of the Romantic fragment: the image of its brokenness adumbrates the belief in a superior design which orchestrates everything back into its place.

It is interesting to note at this point that Paul Valéry’s “Eupalinos” (1956), an aesthetic treatise in the guise of a Socratic dialogue, interprets the trope from a totally different standpoint. Apropos of the beautifully crafted object he has come across, the philosopher observes: “Thou resembles nothing and yet thou art not shapeless” (1956: 114). The question is whether the pebble can be viewed as a piece of art because of its singular shape. Socrates concludes that, despite the fact that it appeals to the eye, it cannot be regarded as such, for its perfection is merely accidental, the sum total of aimless forces of nature, whereas the defining condition of the aesthetic artefact —like that of the Greek temples built up by Eupalinos, a

synthesis of formation, order and stability— is the conscious activity of the human mind and the human hand. In short, the pebble is the result of one of the modes of production, “chance”, just like a line scratched, without thinking, on a wall (101), and not the outcome of man’s intended action. Accordingly, it cannot be regarded as an artwork, for art must “cut across this nature and this chance”, imposing “an act of thought” (126), whereas nature lacks both a model and an aim, and is unable to distinguish the details from the whole.⁴

While Saroyan’s admiration of the *objet trouvé* partially resonates with the Emersonian conviction that the most insignificant entity bespeaks Nature’s invisible order, it nevertheless underscores accident as its ruling principle, thus invalidating Kant’s view of the aesthetic object as “purposiveness without a purpose” (2007: 57) on which Valéry’s ideas seem to be grounded. A pebble mirrors life’s haphazard, unpredictable course for “[t]here is a constant flux, a continuous procedure of change and surprise, which at best is far more appealing than art, for this is the stuff from which art is to be made, from which art is to be continuously enlarged and renewed” (Saroyan 1978: 56). In Saroyan’s view,

184

The sea is in men, and pebbles are in them, too. The sea is a tiresome talker whose remarks its rocks have written with careless joy and careful accident [...] Every one of the sea’s pebbles says ‘this’ in one way or another. It is incredible how this one word can be so unrepetitious, so variable, so freshly meaningful, and so satisfying. (1948)

Not surprisingly, Saroyan ruminates over the discovery, on one of his strolls in Paris, of the art machine, a gadget made of a metal finger that randomly produces art abstractions, an entanglement of lines that always comes up as new, after pressing one button and choosing a number of pieces of chalk. The anecdote perfectly illustrates that art cannot but be the result of haphazard activity, for human experience, its true basis, is erratic, fragmented and shorn of balance. The basis of writing must be utterly unforeseeable: “You can never predict what the stuff is going to be; you work and wait for it” (Saroyan 1996: 35) for a writer’s true goal is to achieve “a thing without a form” (75).

“Preposterously simple and profoundly mysterious” (Saroyan 1968: 9), the essential contradiction of pebbles is the result of combining their eternally broken, unfinished nature with a call for a definite form. “[M]ade accidentally, inevitably, haphazardly, without plan, without beginning or end, without intention”, they evoke, through their “sameness and infinite variety” (Saroyan 1968: 8), “the unity of all matter”, thereby becoming “eyes shining through eternity” (Saroyan 1936: 148). The paradox is, once more, the corollary of the fragmentary imperative: being shoved and tossed about, they emerge as “marks of time” (Saroyan 1968: 7) that, paradoxically, mirror the undividedness of the Absolute. Albeit not entirely

static, they have reached a form which is the consequence of having been excised and eroded through the action of the wave motions. This form is both unique and not alien to, or disassociated from, the picture of the whole; and yet it is the memory of their rupture, their aspiration towards a form and their blanket denial of it that give them their ontological being. In Saroyan’s episteme, stone-fragments voice a condition that is not closed off by any organicist whole but defined by its transient nature. It is for this reason that they operate as the analogue of human life: “A pebble is not unlike a face”, and watching a number of them is like being “in the presence of a congregation of people” (Saroyan 1968: 7), for life is nothing but a collection of fleeting moments—the word that the pebbles repeat over and over again before the vastness of the sea—that resist being included in any order.

3.2. Rocks: History as a Cross-Stone

The dead, all who were now without shape and substance, clamored within him [...] The rocks, he sang in Armenian, are weeping [...] Many times, he believed, he had walked among those boulders, those great solid rocks in the valleys of the old country.

William Saroyan, *Inhale and Exhale*.

185

In 1973, after chasing Saroyan for four or five years, Ara Güler, the celebrated Armenian-Turkish photographer, succeeds in taking a batch of snapshots of the writer in his Paris apartment on 74 Rue Taitbout (Güler 2011: 188). The pictures show a prematurely aged-looking man with a sapper’s mustache posing on his balcony beside his collection of rocks. In one photo, taken at a slightly high angle, the writer holds one of them, his frowning eyes revealing, in the author’s own words, that he has “made a fiasco of [his] life”, but at least discovered “the right material to work with” (Saroyan 1989: 3). As a matter of fact, his rock collection was an obsession that started early in his life: not only pebbles but also driftwood filled up jars in every nook and cranny of his myriad houses. Actor Edward Hagopian recounts an episode he shared with the writer while roaming about Père Lachaise Cemetery in search of the tombstone of General Antranik, the revered father of the Armenian Liberation Movement. Driven by an unaccountable zest, Saroyan started to pick up odd bits of stone around the commander’s tomb that he immediately pocketed. For the author, Hagopian interprets, stones “were nuggets of everlasting time”, a tangible atom revealing a hidden grand design (1987: 120).

Leif Weatherby (2017) has argued that the German Romantics’ early fervor for geology was prompted by the belief that the science provided the perfect rationale and terminology to spell out the connection between the fragment and the search for an order. Despite the fact that the shards that the geologist collected were

characterized by a plurality of shapes, the indeterminacy of their form did not preclude the scientist's attempt to classify them into a hypothetical system which, integrating their contingent formation and internal structure, showed a sense of finality beyond chaos. Fragments, Weatherby argues, have no complete form; yet they are "neither accidental nor motivated, neither merely constructed nor totally arbitrary" (2017: 414). It is in the space between these two extremes—chaos and purpose—that they gain their meaning.

In Saroyan's memoirs, this logic of fragmentation oscillating between hope for unity and dispersal finds its best expression in the futile search for a homeland. As he expresses in *Chance Meetings*, we "are willing exiles that nevertheless deeply long for a place [we] know [we will] never see again" (Saroyan 1978: 84). In a letter to Sean O'Faolain dated November 21, 1946, the writer does not hesitate to acknowledge the importance of his ethnic origins: "Do I feel more Armenian than American? I certainly do [...] You can't move out of your heritage but you can move out of your environment" (1997: 29). Saroyan's memory is, using James Olney's classification of memory types (1998), mostly spatial or archaeological. Fresno, California, becomes the place that articulates the memory of the living. The other narrative—that of the dead—lurks in those sites where one can continually return for digging into the past. Armenia—the elusive totality, a historic country broken up into the western provinces (now Eastern Anatolia, Turkey) and Azerbaijan⁵—can be partially brought forth by the sight of a barren, rocky landscape, or evoked by the accidental encounter of a stone, an *objet trouvé*, which becomes a keepsake of the homeland, a decision that the author traces back to the proverbial saying:

"Hayastan, Karastan" [...] Hayastan means the country of the Hais, pronounced Higs, the country of the Armenians, as they came to be inaccurately named [...] Karastan means the country of stones. Thus, the people and the stones, they are together, they are the same. (Saroyan 1989: 157)

Hamlet Petrosyan claims that it was the Armenian nationalist movement that made the crumbling temple and the cross-stone a symbol of their identity, "depicting 'Mother Armenia' as perpetually mourning over her ruins" (2001: 50). The most basic of all Armenian images, the rock, is no doubt Mt. Ararat, which, as Margaret Bedrosian holds, "does not move, yet mobilizes the deepest yearnings of the Armenians", a beacon that guides those in exile (1991: 3). Bearing in mind that diasporic consciousness is a subjective condition prompted by repeated acts of memory that revolve around "the histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossessions" (Cho 2007: 14) in an urge to resist assimilation and forgetting, Saroyan's allegory of the stone fragment allows the markers of the self (ethnicity and homeland) to coalesce together.

In a chapter of *Here Comes, There Goes You Know Who* (1989), precisely entitled “The Stones”, the narrator recounts his discovery of them near the source of the Aras river, the border limit between Turkey and Armenia, during his second trip to the old country in 1960: “Suddenly each of the stones was a human being and very dear to me; faceless but true and proud as living human beings can never be proud, nameless, unknown, gathered together in hard silence” (Saroyan 1989: 56). The author’s impulse is to pick up these stones and carry them with him. The three people who come to his mind are his uncle Aram, his grandmother Lucy, and his cousin Hoosik, all of them dead at the time. John Frow argues that, although a stone belongs to a non-human world, it may turn, “by a familiar paradox, into a quasi-subject in its own right” (2001: 285), thereby conjuring “a dream of immortality, of inherence and persistence beyond all change” (273). This process of transferring the memory of the dead into the materiality of stones also reveals what Carol Bardenstein calls the diasporic subject’s “fixation on particular metonymic fragments of the homeland” (2007: 23). Rocks become the saturated repositories of the memory of the past, an allegory of the nameless deprived of a voice, for their story has been omitted from history. In contradistinction, the author himself thinks back to the three rock-carved portraits of the presidents on the Mount Rushmore Memorial Monument (he deliberately excludes the last head to be added in 1939, Theodore Roosevelt’s controversial portrait), a shrine of democracy erected to historicize the national American identity. Following the imperative to resurrect the subjugated past that haunts the present, Saroyan opposes the progressive history of the nation’s pedagogy (the colossal monument was precisely erected in the Black Hills, a sacred land for the Lakotas)⁶ to the silenced history of oppression and suffering of Armenians, dispossessed of a territory and forced to live in dispersal. In moving from the ethnic to the non-ethnic he is breaking up, once more, the continuum of American culture:

There are a million stones in that little country, the whole country no bigger than a Texas ranch, and every one of the stones is flesh and blood. The silent, faceless, raging stones of the Armenians, who actually aren’t even Armenians, although they have never figured out how to make sense of that, because if they aren’t Armenians, what are they? They are stones, a nation of stones, they’ve got more dead than they’ve got living, but the dead and the living are both stones. (Saroyan 1989: 76)

Another episode of this rock-collecting obsession is included in the diary entry dated November 10, 1968 from *Days of Life and Death and Escape to the Moon* (1970). Back to Fresno, in one of his drives through the countryside, he reaches a dry riverbed where he starts looking among the boulders on the banks for a sculptured rock. Soon he spots one, lifts it up and carries it back to the road where he parked the car. Driving back to Piedra (the symbolic echoes of the name are noted by Saroyan himself) he thinks of the bygone days he enjoyed as a child

swimming in the racing waters of the Kings River together with his cousins, some of them “lately gone, one by heart attack in the desert, the other by suicide, on the other side of the river” (Saroyan 1970: 64-65). The recollection of the dead unleashes some other memories over which broods the shadow of the Armenian genocide: after a dip in the river the bathers would go to the railroad tracks of the spook Santa Fe line to watch the train dump “a load of lost souls” [i.e. rocks] “into the river, right there at the weir” (65). If all artworks are, in the words of Adorno, “similar to those pitiful allegories in graveyards, the broken-off stelae” (1997: 126), Saroyan finds in these stones not only an indelible emblem of cultural memory but a *facies hippocratica*. Immediately the rock he carries morphs into a cross-stone or *khachkar*, an allegory of the dead. “What did I want with that rock? Was it a tombstone?” (Saroyan 1970: 65), he asks himself while recalling those voices, now irremediably lost in the flotsam and jetsam of his present reality.

4. Conclusion

188

Saroyan’s conviction that writing is by definition autobiographical accounts for his indefatigable search for a design that lends cogency to a blurred past and an evanescent present. However, his dawning recognition that any effort to restore some order into “the untranslated and chaotic page of the world” through life writing (Saroyan 1936: 93) is a project *manqué* does not preclude an endless series of formless experiments that enable him to embrace, at least for a moment, what is elusive. Not in vain, the idea of composing “a whole book” containing “all experience, all error, all truth, brought together” before “the words of it blur and blend and finally disappear” (Saroyan 1996: 204, 206) inspires every single self-narration. My purpose has been not only to prove that this longing for the revelation of the secret entails a deep-rooted belief that one’s life is but a fragment—“incomplete, impossible to complete, flawed, vulnerable, sickly” (Saroyan 1966: 61)—of the Absolute: coupled with it is also the pipe dream that one can discover, in the jotting down of diary notes, “an order of self” that is “deeply meaningful” and “entire”, “a part of a larger entirety after another, into infinity” (61). The metaphysics of Romanticism, as Wasser contends, is based on the alternation between the hope of unifying the loose pieces into an organic form and the hovering threat of chaos and dispersal. Sometimes, Saroyan concludes, using the metaphor of car-driving to illustrate life’s journey, our attention is diverted “away from the total into the particular” (62), and we clumsily begin to lose sight of the destination, deeply absorbed by the mishmash of numbers and signs. Rather than a stable repository of self-identity, his autobiographies sketch out a subject that is

constantly effaced, closer to alterity and errancy; a locus, in short, defined by erasure and fragmentary inscription.

I have also argued that Saroyan’s obsession with fragmentation also evinces a concern with his diasporic identity, one inevitably marked by dissemination and dissolution. In tune with Benjamin’s concept of the allegory as the site where transience and eternity collide, Saroyan’s stone-allegories allow him to find a material object, analogous to the divided nation, which wavers between its perpetually fragmented nature and the endlessly deferred promise of the historical homeland. Notwithstanding the narrated self’s yearning for an organic whole that integrates identity, memory and nation, the quest for completion remains perpetually unaccomplished, pushed to some endless centrifugal dynamics that forces the writer to start afresh when he believes he has finished. “Trying is all we really have”, Saroyan pithily remarks (1978: 3), “When the tallying is done, the rest is ash, dust, and the slag heaps of error and loss” (3).

Notes

1. The list comprises the following titles: *The Bicycle Rider on Beverly Hills* (1952), *Here Comes, There Goes, You Know Who* (1962), *Not Dying* (1963), *Short Drive, Sweet Chariot* (1966), *Letters from 74 Rue Taitbout* (1968), *Days of Life and Death and Escape to the Moon* (1970), *Places Where I’ve Done Time* (1972), *Sons Come and Go, Mothers Hang in Forever* (1976), *Chance Meetings* (1978) and *Obituaries* (1979).

2. “Between the essay and the short story, [...] it seemed to me there existed a form or formlessness which would permit me to write” (Saroyan 1950: 24).

3. A term coined by the authors, a compound of *eidōs* (idea) and aesthetics.

4. From another standpoint, Jean Paul Sartre’s protagonist of *La Nausée* (2007), Antoine Roquentin, experiences his first feeling of existential nausea when he holds the pebble on the beach. The thingness of the thing, the object that is “flat and dry” on one side and “damp and muddy on the other”

(2007: 2), embodies the “being-in-itself”, opaque and lacking self-consciousness, against which the incompleteness and imperfection of the “being-for-itself”, or the Self, is clearly silhouetted. It is the Self alone that is able to detach from itself and cause “nothingness” to emerge. As Prendergast contends, Sartre’s stone, like Camus’ adaptation of the Sisyphus myth, condenses the existentialist conflict derived from the struggle between “desire for meaning” and “the world’s resistance to that meaning” (2017: 601).

5. The historical homeland included the provinces of Erzurum, Hakkari, Van, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Kharpüt and Sivas.

6. The Lakotas’ fight to preserve Paha Sapa, the center of their universe, against the invasion of gold prospectors is one of the infamous chapters of American history. The decision to build the National Memorial Monument on Mount Rushmore is no less reprehensible.

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190

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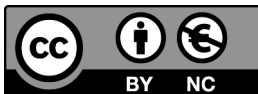
“A picayune fragment of the possible total”

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